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Digital Humanities as Public History: The 25AprilPTLab project

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PAROLE CHIAVE

Portugal; Contemporary History; Democracy; Digital Humanities; Teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2018, the Center for Social Studies and the 25th of April Documentation Centre, from the University of Coimbra (Portugal) initiated the research project “25AprilPTLab - Interactive Laboratory of the Portuguese Democratic Transition”¹. Funded through the Foundation for Science and Technology (ref. PTDC/COM-CSS/29423/2017), this project aims at creating a digital platform providing historical documents on the Portuguese democratic transition (1958-1982) - the opposition of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship (1958-1974), the revolutionary process (1974-1976) and the building of the new democratic regime (1976-1982).

As a Public History project, the 25AprilPTLab provides crucial information and historical documents for the teaching of the period, as well as for the improvement of democratic consciousness. This paper will present the Portuguese democratic transition as a case of Public History, then the main functionalities of the platform, and finally, it will reflect on the potentialities of the 25AprilPTLab as a Public History project.

1 <https://25aprilptlab.ces.uc.pt/>

2. DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN PORTUGAL: A CASE OF PUBLIC HISTORY

The building of democracy in Portugal through the XX century has been a long and intense process, fundamental to understanding the country nowadays. Portuguese contemporary history is marked by the authoritarian regime founded in 1933 by António de Oliveira Salazar. Inspired by Italian fascism and promoting colonialism and ruralism, this regime was based on a political police, single political party and on the repression of social movements. Political opposition grew in the 1960's, due to the economic difficulties and the colonial wars launched by the regime in Africa. This situation led to the Carnation Revolution on April 25th 1974, a military coup led by officers opposed to colonial wars. With the end of the authoritarian regime, an intense revolutionary process started. The new Constitution of the Portuguese Republic entered into force in April 1976 and Portugal initiated a process of consolidation of democracy and integration into the European Economic Community in 1986.

The democratic transition is indeed fundamental to understand contemporary Portugal. This subject has mobilized several generations of researchers. The opening of documentation centers and archives, in the last years, - among them, the 25th of April Documentation Centre created in 1984 - could allow for better understanding of this crucial period. On the one hand, this period is fundamental to understand contemporary Portugal but on the other hand, there is a crucial need for historical knowledge divulgation. Indeed the recent research hardly passes through society, and particularly within schools. During the preliminary works of our project, we analyzed History textbooks currently used at Portuguese schools. They showed a lack of diversity in the documents presented and the existence of narratives based on simplification and even sometimes wrong construction of historical facts. Additionally, preliminary research showed the inexistence of a digital platform providing documents on this period.

3. THE 25APRILPTLAB PLATFORM

The 25AprilPTLab aims to answer these needs by creating a digital repository of documents allowing school teachers to have access to historical sources on this period². The methodology adopted was Design-based research, as it explores the potential of ICT in education, with a view to solving a real problem and combines research and scientific knowledge with technological development and empirical experience³. The operationalization of the project was organized in three stages: preliminary study, development and evaluation.

2 Réquio, Laranjeiro, e Marie, «25AprilPTLab - Laboratório interativo da transição democrática portuguesa».

3 The Design-Based Research Collective, «Design-Based Research: An Emerging Paradigm for Educational Inquiry».

The development process was iterative and interactive, involving users (teachers), researchers and technological specialists, in order to obtain a higher quality product. Scientific knowledge from preliminary study influenced the development of the technological product, which was tested with users to improve the product and validate the knowledge gained⁴. After preliminary studies and the selection of documents - mainly from the 25th of April Documentation Centre and a pilot version had been tested by teachers in 2021. The final version was published in September 2021. Three sections are available on the platform: the documents repository, pedagogical activities and additional tools.

The first section of the platform is dedicated to the documents repository, center of the project. It is here that users access the historical documents available on the 25AprilPTLab. In order to help the search process, documents are organized according to three different levels of description. The first level allows for a search based on the type of documents (Text, Images, Audios, Videos and Websites). The second level is related to the historical periods of the document, according to a chronology division in four main periods. The third level of classification divided the documents available in 12 thematic issues, so as to facilitate the search and the use of the documents by teachers. The repository offers Open Education Resources (OER), free contents in terms of access, transformation and sharing, which can be altered, expanded and enriched continuously as they are shared and validated by those who access them⁵.

The second section of the platform gathers pedagogical activities created by the research team but mainly by school teachers registered on the platform. These pedagogical activities are created based on the OER available in the platform. These activities are organized by subject and according to the level of the class. Once registered, school teachers are able to save documents, create activities for their own use, as well as to share these activities with the other users. One of the main objectives of the project is the creation of a virtual community, where teachers share activities and contribute with heterogeneous knowledge and experiences, actively participating in the enrichment of the platform and the community⁶.

Finally, the platform offers additional tools in order to foster a better use of the potentialities of the platform. This section provides guides to help school teachers to develop activities based on historical documents. Guides for the use of the platform are also available.

4 Plomp, «Educational design research: An introduction».

5 Paris OER Declaration, «World Open Educational Resources (OER) Congress Unesco».

6 Henri e Pudelko, «Understanding and analysing activity and learning in virtual communities».

4. POTENTIALITIES AS A PROJECT OF PUBLIC HISTORY

The 25AprilPTLab project integrates the major objectives of public history by mobilizing the tools of the Digital Humanities. We will highlight three of its potentialities. Firstly, the platform intends to collect and disseminate historical documents that have been difficult to have access to. The aim is to create a reference base for access to documents on the last years of the Estado Novo, the revolutionary period and the construction of the democratic regime in Portugal using information and communication technologies for this purpose. Digital tools allow the large-scale dissemination of these documents, mainly from the 25th of April Documentation Centre. It is about opening the doors of this center to a wider dissemination of its contents and constituting a tool for the preservation of memory and the critical construction of historical knowledge.

Secondly, the diversification of the documents available over the period is one of the main objectives of the project. The survey of history textbooks showed a strong repetition of the resources presented⁷. This scarcity provides simplifications and truncated interpretations of recent history. Allowing access to new content appears as a means to enrich historical knowledge and to avoid taking advantage of history through politically oriented readings.

Finally, the third potential of this project is related to the enrichment of the activities developed in the classrooms. The availability of historical documents opens the possibilities of educational and interdisciplinary projects in schools, in addition to the discipline of history. Such activities allowed the development of new skills with students, such as reading and interpreting historical documents, the critical ability to reflect, and even to debate. Placing students as researchers in front of historical sources appears as a valuable tool for deepening historical knowledge, promoting the methodologies and rigor of historical investigations, as well as essential skills for broad democratic participation.

However, the commitment of the 25AprilPTLab project to the dissemination of history is not restricted to the creation of the platform. Since its inception, the parallel activities that have been developed point in the same direction. From lectures given in an academic environment to events outside the university space. As part of the project, guided tours have already been carried out in the context of the 25th of April celebrations, lectures in cultural centers and events on cinema and comics.

7 Marie e Réquio, «O 25 de Abril e o ensino da História: O processo revolucionário nos manuais escolares».

The 25AprilPTLab thus seeks to contribute to the erosion of the existing barriers between academia and civil society, disseminating the most recent historical knowledge and, above all, the tools that enable the formation of a conscious and socially engaged collective subject. In short, this project aims to foster collaborative practices and to reinforce the transmission of knowledge not only in the school community but throughout society.

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