

PRESENTATION OF A COOPERATIVE ENGINEERING PROJECT FOR TRANSFERRING THE DIDACTIC INSTITUTION OF FREE TEXT IN ORDINARY CLASSROOMS

PRESENTACIÓN DE UN PROYECTO DE INGENIERÍA COOPERATIVA PARA TRANSFERIR LA INSTITUCIÓN DIDÁCTICA DEL TEXTO LIBRE A LA SALA DE CLASES

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Resumen

Este estudio explora la ingeniería cooperativa aplicada a las prácticas de expresión escrita en las escuelas primarias francesas, centrándose específicamente en el método de «texto libre» del enfoque educativo Freinet. La ingeniería cooperativa, tal como la definen Sensevy y Bloor (2020), consiste en que educadores e investigadores diseñen, apliquen y perfeccionen en colaboración una secuencia didáctica. Este método no pretende innovar per se, sino tender puentes entre los modelos teóricos y la aplicación práctica en el aula, reconociendo las variaciones en las prácticas docentes. La investigación examina la transferibilidad del modelo de texto libre a entornos escolares convencionales para mejorar las habilidades de escritura de los alumnos y fomentar la colaboración entre ellos. Tras presentar el contexto y el modelo, el estudio describe el proceso colectivo cooperativo con profesores que buscan estrategias eficaces para la producción de textos. Además, aborda los retos a los que se enfrentan los profesores a la hora de adaptar sus métodos y replantearse la organización del aula. Mediante datos de observación, entrevistas y documentación multimedia, este estudio pretende establecer las condiciones para integrar con éxito el texto libre en las aulas tradicionales...

Palabras clave: Didáctica, escuelas primarias, ingeniería cooperativa, escritura, enfoque educativo Freinet.

Abstract

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RECIBIDO: 04.07.2024 ACEPTADO: 27.11.2024 DOI: 10.4151/07189729-Vol.63-lss.3-Art.1609 This study explores cooperative engineering applied to writing practices in French primary schools, with a specific focus on the 'free text' method of the Freinet educational approach. Cooperative engineering, as defined by Sensevy and Bloor (2020), consists of educators and researchers collaboratively designing, implementing and refining a teaching sequence. This method is not intended to innovate per se, but to bridge the gap between theoretical models and practical application in the classroom, recognising variations in teaching practices. The research examines the transferability of the free text model to conventional school settings to improve students' writing skills and foster collaboration between students. After introducing the context and the model, the study describes the collective cooperative process with teachers seeking effective strategies for text production. In addition, it addresses the challenges that teachers face in adapting their methods and rethinking classroom organisation. Through observational data, interviews and multimedia documentation, this study aims to establish the conditions for successfully integrating free text into traditional classrooms.

Keywords: Didactics, Primary Schools, cooperative engineering, written, Freinet educational approach.

This contribution presents a work of cooperative engineering focusing on a particular practice of written work in primary schools¹ in France. What is cooperative engineering?

"Cooperative engineering refers to a methodological process in which a collective of teachers and researchers engage in a joint action to codesign, implement, and reimplement a teaching sequence on a particular topic" (Sensevy & Bloor, 2020, p. 1).

Said engineering is not a response to an order placed by the institution to promote an "innovation", but rather aims to study the possible dialectic between a didactic institution model and its implementation process in existing classes, while keeping in mind that "not all practices are equal" (Chevallard, 1982, p. 38). Indeed, we'll try to show that it's difficult to produce what we call a correct practice of *free text*.

The first part presents the context of our research which consists of studying, for many years, a didactic institution (Sensevy, 1998) that is key to the Freinet School educational system²: *free text* (Freinet, 1947). We have developed a model of this practice (X) so as to experiment its transferability to mainstream schools. In the second part of this contribution, we present the start of the cooperative collective construction process with a view to implementing an experiment transferring the practice of *free text*. This collective was born from a demand among school teachers³ seeking to resolve their students' difficulties in writing texts, and wanting to develop cooperation between students. In the third part, we explain our approach to the following problem: how can we help teachers experienced in a conventional teaching method to gradually appropriate a *correct practice* of *free text*? This question implies thought on the conditions under which these teacher's know-how, their understanding of class organisation, their teaching habits, etc. are reconsidered. In the fourth part, we discuss the difficulties these teachers experience perceiving learning periods in a different light. Finally, in the fifth part, we underline the main issues we have worked on cooperatively by progressively building practices that needed to be both understood and transformed (CDpE, 2019).

Our aim is therefore to study the conditions for introducing free text into an ordinary classroom in the form of didactic engineering. We documented this survey using regular in situ observations, through photographic and video recordings, through internal cooperative collective interviews on various aspects of teaching practices in relation with students' actions.

¹ In France, primary schools are divided into three nursery sections (3 to 6 years) and five elementary school levels (6 to 11 years): CP-CE1-CE2-CM1-CM2.

² This experimental private school (made public in 1991) was created in Vence (French department Alpes-Maritimes) in 1934 by pedagogues Élise and Célestin Freinet.

³ In the city of Nancy (French department Meurthe-et-Moselle) in France.

1. Free text: the source practice

What is referred to as *free text* in Élise and Célestin Freinet's educational system is a key didactic institution for multiple reasons.

But let us start by explaining what we mean by "didactic institution". First, when one individual transfers knowledge to another learning individual, whenever they act in conjunction, such as in this type of transaction, didactics comes into play in the relationship between them. Didactics is what occurs between counterparts as regards something to learn. It is in this sense that we must refer to the science of didactics. As for the syntagm "didactic institution", it indicates the manner in which the teacher's intent to educate affects the institutional reality of practices in his/her class. This is what Sensevy calls "institutional work" (1998). Thus, in the school form of child socialisation (XX), institutional work consists, during knowledge practices for which the teacher is responsible, in ensuring pupils incorporate a specific power to act within a legitimized social grouping" (Douglas, 1986, p. 76). In such a context, as specified by Sensevy (1998, p. 19) "institutional work is learning".

Addressing the *free text* teaching method raises the issue of a *reference practice*. *Free text* is both a teaching practice and a learning practice: it is a didactic institution. Given that this institution is unique to the didactic system developed by Élise and Célestin Freinet, we must precisely understand how it was naturalised in the Freinet School. This practice was therefore the subject of an *in situ* clinical and ethno-didactic survey for around twenty years. We briefly present the main results.

First, we argue that *free text* is a *princeps* institution in the logic of Freinet pedagogy. For this, we must provide reasons and indicate implications. *Free text* is primarily a writing practice. It is the first effectuation of what Élise and Célestin Freinet call *free expression*: "the first principle of our pedagogy: free expression"⁵. This principle guides the teacher's action and requires precise techniques to become a reality. The freedom to write, freedom in writing, is the first technique of this first principle.

Next comes the question of organising its concrete possibility. A student going to class in the morning knows that he/she may sit down to write, since *priority of text* is established in the class. The organisation of a personal *workspace* is what allows the student to decide to write upon arriving at school. In the morning, writing serves as a link between family and social life

⁴ Borrowed from Bourdieu, this concept was studied by Sensevy in the doctoral thesis he defended in 1994 at Université de Provence.

⁵ Freinet, C. (October 1934). Free expression through printing at school. *L'Éducateur Prolétarien, 10th year,* 2, 28-29. [Online]: https://www.icem-pedagogie-freinet.org/node/44566

and school life. Writing is an individual act of creation that materialises the student's thoughts. It is the most important part of school life.

Once the text has been written, the student has the teacher read it and flag any spelling mistakes which the student must think about and correct; this is the practice of *self-correction*. After this, the students gather together and all texts written in the morning are read aloud to the class by the author, this is the time for the *reading of texts*. Oral exchanges are then held between each author and the class regarding each text, before the students ultimately agree, with the teacher's participation, on the choice of one of the texts. This text is then copied on the board and worked on once more by the whole class and the text's author in a cooperative manner in order to improve its formulation. With the author's consent, the *finalized* text is printed to be included in the next issue of the *school newspaper*, which is socially disseminated.

This process, of which we have studied all aspects, is for us the source practice - since the science of the object studied is here the science of a practice - for every attempt to practice *free text* in other places than the Freinet School, which implies the ability to develop a correct representation of the practice and a sufficiently appropriate implementation.

2. Building a cooperative collective

The Freinet free text method is generally applied in classes in which the teacher adheres to the Freinet movement⁶. This method is applied in a range of manners depending on the class, without reference to what we consider the source practice. We prepared a research project to study how this source practice might be translated in ordinary classes practicing conventional pedagogy. The project's implementation started in 2019 in elementary classes in the city of Nancy.

We presented the project to academic authorities for dissemination to teachers potentially interested in participating in the city of Nancy. We initially met with eight teachers who stated that they wanted to develop writing work in their class.

The collective was comprised of two learning science researchers, eight school teachers, the three Freinet School teachers, two other teachers with experience in this practice and said

⁶ The Freinet Movement was built from the French pedagogical association referred to by Freinet in 1927 as "L'imprimerie à l'école" (IE, or printing at school), and renamed "the Cooperative Institute of the Modern School" in 1947. (Institut coopération de l'école moderne, ICEM). National associations also developed in many countries and these pedagogical associations federated in 1957 under the International Federation of Modern School Movements (Fédération internationale des mouvements de l'école moderne, FIMEM).

⁷ Below, we will refer to each teacher using a letter: Ms J.; Ms L.; etc.

teachers' two trainers. The survey also included presentations during research seminars held by a collective we are members of: Collectif Didactique pour Enseigner (CDpE)⁸.

Our working hypothesis, as researchers, was that we needed to avoid applicationism: we did not want to present teachers with a best practice model that they would then need to apply. Therein lies the didactic problem. The didactician seeks to create conditions in which students are able to apply a survey activity of the same type as that carried out by the connoisseur to problems: « In a nutshell, the notion of learning game is a way of modeling what the teacher and the student jointly do in order for the student to learn something. The notion of epistemic game is a way of modeling this something, i.e., what has to be learned » (Sensevy, 2019a, p. 3).

We wanted to determine how teachers with no knowledge of the didactic institution of *free text* might approach the source practice through their own research, albeit in coordination with other members of a collective. We therefore chose to apply a methodology that we call *the ignorant schoolmaster approach*, in reference to Jacotot and Rancière (1991): we must impart these teachers with knowledge of the didactic practice as if we had no knowledge of it, and these teachers must instruct their students to practice *free text* without themselves having knowledge of such a practice.

The research question on which we agreed was: what will happen if the teacher asks his/her students to write a text in a book reserved for this practice? What problems and difficulties will arise? Our collective was comprised of preparatory classes, elementary classes and middle classes, however, three of the classes were made up of three levels with CP-CE1-CE2 students. We proposed that the teachers experiment with this situation over a few sessions. The key for us was to succeed in introducing an "engineering dialogue" with individuals who were not used to working with researchers.

3. The life of cooperative engineering

We observed that we needed to find a methodology to survey the teacher's effective practices, by prohibiting ourselves from presenting what would be a model to be applied, while remembering to help them to gradually approach reference practices. To do so, the first bottom-up methodology phase was to attempt to understand each teacher's effective practice according to their classes' specific conditions. We agreed to first visit the classes to observe their activity. As an initial approach, we chose to adopt a judgment-free, floating observation method, taking a few notes in a field notebook. We tried to familiarise ourselves with the style

⁸ See: https://www.cread-bretagne.fr/seminaire/action-collectif-didactique-pour-enseigner/

⁹ The Collectif Didactique pour Enseigner views this as a dialogue about and involving knowledge as the heart of the cooperation process between teachers and researchers.

of each teacher and the diversity of students. The source practice would need to be adapted to each of the classes' particular conditions and we did not know how this could be done. Each teacher experimented with implementing the project based on their working habits, the characteristics of each class, and the aspects they considered to be priorities in the manner of approaching this practice.

In the Joint Action Theory in Didactics, the first phase of cooperative engineering is usually joint action on *knowledge itself*, which is considered vital in order to understand the culture that this knowledge crystallizes and to establish an engineering dialogue (Sensevy & Bloor, 2020). In our project, we could not perform such action for two reasons: the first was that the *free text* is in a complex relationship to knowledge, and the second that we did not want to risk restricting teachers to applicationism. According to a scholastic approach, we could indeed reduce *free text* to the simple practice of student writing, and therefore to the challenge of mastering language, and in this case, we could discuss the knowledge at play in the production of written work for each class level¹⁰. But this is not the primary meaning of *free text* for the student, since the aim is for the student to appropriate this practice as a place to express his/her relation to the world, and the teacher can never know which knowledge the student will use when writing.

Every institution - like France's National Education - is "a dramatization of inequality" (Rancière, 1991, p. 105). However, to conduct our survey, we needed to understand which difficulties each teacher faced in terms of relation to the production of written work, both as part of his/her teaching habits and as part of student practices. This is what Dewey (1938, p. 67-69) calls an "indeterminate situation" and constitutes the intellectual desire to be involved in a survey: why can I not succeed in making my students write more and better? It appears to us that each teacher in our collective expressed such a desire to investigate their teaching practices in order to improve their students' relation to writing and alleviate their concerns in this field. As Dewey explains, one can only escape an embarrassing situation by turning to other situations and seeking the means to find a better balance. The aim of these teachers was therefore to experiment with new ways of acting and thinking.

For this reason, during this first phase of the survey, we needed to work with the teachers to attempt to determine what the issue was with their teaching practice. To uncover this issue, we needed to give the least possible information on the practice of *free text*. This approach enabled us to not be seen by the teachers as researchers watching over them. In fact, the Joint Action Theory in Didactics applies a principle of symmetry to describe the actions and relations

¹⁰ In the Classical form of Schooling, students are alienated from what Sensevy calls the *question-response-task* form, which confines the student's epistemic activity to answering the teacher's questions and completing tasks (Vincent & Sensevy, 2019).

between the members of a cooperative engineering collective. This principle of symmetry implies that there is no *a priori* division of work between the engineering members: "Teachers and researcher participate in what is called an epistemic cooperative relationship, which postulates striving for an epistemic symmetry in the engineering dialogue" (Sensevy & Bloor, 2020, p. 2).

Each member of the collective is considered to have a specific understanding of cooperative engineering work, with said work drawing its strength from the pooling of these different understandings.

In agreement with teachers, we decided that the first phase of this practice would consist of establishing a very broad framework: i) ask students to write a text; ii) ask teachers to intervene as little as possible. We could then start our thought process based on the effects produced in this new (very sober) form of didactic transaction. Relying on Dewey's work, we took the gamble that by progressively moving forward with the survey through a series of intermediate meanings, we could ultimately reach a meaning of written work that would more clearly match the issue at hand.

4. A new didactic institution experience

The first collective meeting was held on Wednesday, 9 December 2020, from 9.30 a.m. to 12 p.m. We took stock of our visits to the classes three months later:

Ms J., CE2

5 work meetings, including 2 (filmed) class sessions followed by a short interview, and 4 feedback interviews on the evolution of the practice.

Ms A., CP-CE1-CE2

3 work meetings, including 1 (filmed) class session followed by a short interview, and 2 interviews on the practice.

Ms F., CP-CE1-CE2

3 work meetings, including 1 (filmed) class session followed by a short interview, and 2 interviews on the practice.

Ms L., CP-CE1-CE2

3 work meetings, including 1 (filmed) class session followed by a short interview, and 2 interviews on the practice.

Ms F., CM2

9 work meetings, including 4 (filmed) class sessions followed by a short interview, and 5 feedback interviews on the evolution of the practice.

Ms C., CP

4 work meetings, including 1 (filmed) class sessions followed by a short interview, and 3 feedback interviews on the evolution of the practice.

During the first weeks and months of the experiment, the main difficulty expressed by teachers concerned the timetable:

Ms J. "For me, taking part in this cooperating engineering on the introduction of the free text institution in elementary classes in an ordinary milieu raised many questions. The first concerned time. How could *free text* be incorporated into the class timetable? How often? At what time during the day? In the first year of the experiment, I started by scheduling a free text period of one hour every week at the end of the afternoon. It was difficult for me to consider shaking up my entire timetable".

Ms F. "In addition to writing, *free text* provides an opportunity to address all the notions required to master written expression, this is an aspect that I had not initially thought of. And this was the main thought process behind putting my entire teaching organisation into question: *free text* is not additional work to be fit into a timetable, but rather the base of almost all language-related learning addressed in class! What a difference! I had to completely rethink my usual way of operating".

Engineering dialogue was gradually introduced: in cooperative engineering, to cooperate towards problem solving, each member of the collective shares their point of view with the other members, enabling the others to see and understand their arguments based on his/her experience and practice. According to the principle of symmetry, this requires that each member acknowledge each others' equality of intelligence - which is materialised in the cooperative activity at play - and demonstrate empathy, forcing them to come out of their shells to meet with another individual, because the words of one has the same value as the words of another (CDpE, 2024); this is the type of relation that we can consider emancipating:

"The problem is not to create scholars. It is to raise up whose who believe themselves inferior in intelligence, to make them leave the stamp where they are stagnating — not the swamp of ignorance, but the swamp of self-contempt, or contempt *in and of itself*, for the reasonable creature. It is to make emancipated and emancipating men" (Rancière, 1991, p. 101-102).

Over the following months, the regular presence of researchers in the classes during *free text* sessions enabled them to observe joint work in a more equipped manner, and to collect photographic and videographic data and conduct interviews. We also introduced collective work meetings during which we jointly analysed the evolution of practices, highlighted the main difficulties encountered and the solutions adopted. We invited connoisseurs of the practice of *free text* to some meetings to hold discussions with the teachers of the experimenting classes.

Ms A. "Very quickly, difficulties appeared such as, for example, managing the different autonomy levels of students when writing and, more particularly, the writing of 6-year-old students who had never written and children who are not able to write. [...] The youngest wrote sentences with the words they knew, and then observed, listened, imitated and repeated what the older students were doing".

Ms J. "It was during a collective meeting during which I was able to meet and speak with colleagues having practiced the Freinet School educational method, as well as with colleagues teaching in schools also experimenting with the practice of *free text* in their classes, that I actually realised the importance of regularly practicing *free text*. This realisation, combined with the students' motivation and progress and new discussions with members of the *free text* work collective, encouraged me to further adjust my timetable.

Long months of experimentation for teachers working to reorganise their class, and many trips by researchers to visit these different classes, gradually resulted in the development of a common language and culture.

Ms A. "Successfully introducing *free text* among CP students and higher level students struggling with writing means first overcoming the idea that we have nothing to write because we don't yet have the tools. This gamble has paid off! Writing is accessible to all, the desire the share one's text is indeed present, this work is enhanced by peers".

Ms J. "Work meetings with all collective members were very useful. During these meetings, we shared our respective experiences, jointly analysed how our practices have evolved, highlighted the main difficulties encountered and the solutions considered. These enabled me to gain important knowledge in order to implement the *free text* practice in my class, they encouraged me to question my own method and to make more time for this practice".

Ms L. "One of the first advantages of this approach is that it places the writing student, who appears to be alone in front of their paper, in a collective perspective. At every

point, the writer knows that he/she is part of a group in which each of the members is potentially encountering similar issues to his/her own. While the person writing is often alone, this solitude is not absolute: it is a surrounded solitude. The work carried out is not confined to interaction with the page. Each individual's page is naturally open to be seen by others, while allowing each individual the freedom of solidarity if they so wish".

We found that the main obstacle encountered by teachers related to the dominant concept of a timetable in class, which is a spatial notion with fixed time periods, which makes it difficult to free up time to practice *free text* since this practice requires a large volume of hours and necessarily encroaches on time that is meant to be devoted to learning spelling and grammar among other things. For teachers, one of the obstacles is of an epistemological nature: how can we convince individuals that students' practice of *free text* is equivalent to conventional learning sessions and therefore can substitute them?

The teachers' initial formulation of the problem hides a lack of questioning on what could be a time for the student. The *free text* method requires that the class recognise personal time for the student, during which the teacher's action becomes entirely different from what he/she may be used to in conventional teaching in which the "time of the object" is supreme (Sensevy, 2011; 2019b). With *free text*, students are no longer subjected to an exercise that occupies an alienating didactic period. The time reserved for *free text* also incorporates time for family and social life into the class, thereby contributing towards offering the student with a better time continuity experience, and "free text must truly be free. This means that we write when we have something to say, when we feel the need to express, through a pen and through drawing, what boils within us" (Freinet, 1947, p. 13). The student experiments with a epistemic logic that ranges from their experience, to the writing of their experience, to cooperation with others on this written work, to the oral presentation of their writing to others and its constructive criticism, to its cooperative rewriting and social dissemination.

5. Towards the correct practice of free text?

During the first months of this experiment, teachers were hesitant to rebuild their role in joint action with students. The teachers all had the same habit of frequently intervening in their students' work and continuing to guide the activity rather than allowing students to conduct their own research. The learned habit of guiding a lesson was hard to lose. We studied the progressive and effective implementation of this project for transferring the practice of *free text* by examining the concrete reality of various practices in the collective's classes in terms of their accomplishment, their transformations, their weaknesses or shortcomings. Let us take the example of the teacher's acceptance of what we call "investigation work" (Dewey, 1938;

Sensevy, 2011) by students. This acceptance constitutes a profound transformation of their teaching method, which we can illustrate by what Freinet refers to as "trial and error" (Freinet, 1950; 1966):

Ms L. "The opening-up of the page is completed with the opening of another space, which appears to be directly collective: the board - black or white - is introduced as a place of trial and error, that every student can use to *try at the board*. Thus, the board used provides two advantages for the common good: on the one hand, it publicly manifests that everyone is allowed to not instantly know, that a relative uncertainty as to language is a common occurrence; and on the other, it asserts that use of the board tool is not exclusive to the teacher. Even on the board, which is often seen as a place of confirmation of the rule and of the teacher's authority, quiet uncertain voices are also welcome. Hesitation is legitimate. The relation to writing has a chance of overcoming inhibitions. And, since trial and error is public, the search for the correct spelling, the right word or the appropriate expression is a collective effort. Whoever thinks they can help the trying person is invited to do so".



Fig. 1 Ms L.'s class

Fig. 2 Ms A.'s classFig.

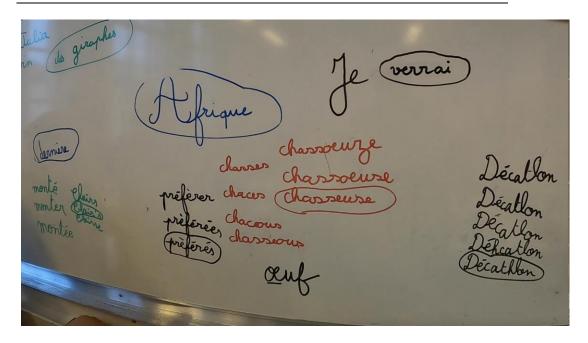


Fig. 3 Ms L.'s classFig.

Ms L. "Thus, free text acts as a creator of community and commonality. Group working habits are quickly introduced. Students are quick to accept that group compositions can be changed. Every student is a partner. While free text evidently does not resolve all individual difficulties, it does help to distance every individual from their own problems, to take a step back from them, to see them as episodes of the great adventure that all of society experiences in their relation to language. Writing is not the problem of just one individual, it is shared by all. Learning is not only a matter of individual trajectories, it is the result of collective dynamics".

These quotations show how teachers tried to understand the nature of *free text*, given that for Freinet this didactic institution is fundamentally a social institution, and a social institution of collective emancipation.

This effort to understand the practice of *free text* in the process of transforming a teaching practice can be seen as the action of people "who make themselves capable of what they weren't capable of » (Rancière, 2016, p. 117).

But before concluding, we must emphasize that it should be highlighted that one of the challenges faced by such a project is the hierarchical French National Education system, and the more or less favourable opinion of inspectors regarding continued cooperation between teachers and researchers. In our experience, some inspectors were open and acted as facilitators, while others were indifferent or even reluctant. Similarly, the relation between the collective's teachers and their colleagues (not involved in cooperative engineering) was either

constructive or strained. The cooperative construction of the engineering sometimes faced obstacles in the form of certain individuals, including among student parents. Furthermore, the lack of institutional recognition (by the inspectorate and by the university) of the teachers' work may become a factor of discouragement. In particular, material means are lacking, along with time available for research. Teachers insisted on the fact that it was difficult for them to change their class organisation under institutional supervision that is often not very encouraging or can be contradicting when the inspectorate becomes involved in issuing an opinion on the practice of free text, that is often restrictive and of no relevance..

6. Conclusion

We have attempted to study the conditions for introducing *free text* into an ordinary classroom in the form of didactic engineering. As a provisional conclusion to this continuing research, we propose speculation on the possibility of reproducing this type of didactic transfer, the possibility for those practicians who are also trainers to training teachers of becoming themselves capable of transferring their experience of *free text*, and lastly, of the possibility, in addition to the practice of *free text*, of transforming other aspects of their practice by incorporating new didactic institutions from the Freinet School system.

At this stage, cooperative engineering has enabled at least three things: first the gradual implementation of a correct practice of *free text* in four classes, with the ability to discuss the practice in a relatively well-equipped manner; next to highlight the issue of a didactic period, a central issue when reconstructing the scholastic form of education; and, third, to experiment with research engineering in which teachers and researchers work together according to the principle of symmetry; this experience resulted in joint communication during the third International Joint Action Theory in Didactics Congress in Brest in November 2023.

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