

A manifold strategy for digital media in formal and informal educational contexts

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An Outline

- 1. *Towards a “paradigm,, of ME: some common grounds***
- 2. *Media Education (ME) in Italy: an overview***
- 3. *The missing step: assessment/ evaluation and the role of research action***
- 4. *A manifold strategy***

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- ***Towards a «paradigm» of ME: some common grounds***
 - Protection vs. empowerment – We’ve come to recognize that children need:
 - a. to understand the media,
 - b. to discern and use creatively visual and interactive languages as well as the alphabetical ones,
 - c. to develop critical thinking skills on media representation of world and on mediated interactions,
 - d. to communicate ideas in different formats,
 - e. to be responsible for what they do with technology as users and communicators themselves.
 - Expanded notion of literacy – We’ve observed in the past two or three decades a progressive shift from a notion of literacy as strictly related to alphabetic and written texts to another notion related to all kind of texts, considered from a communicative point of view.
 - Dissatisfaction with a narrow conceptualization of digital education; a need to go beyond a kind of instrumental progressivism/techno-utopism as well as beyond the myth of the digital native – The conceptual separation between “old” media education and “new” digital education is based in superficial arguments about children as “digital natives”. Children are able by themselves to use PCs or smartphones, but they often need an adult’s help in developing second-level media skills: for example, in acquiring a reflective stance

toward one's own media habits and choices, in critically understanding media messages, in interacting with people in a respectful and responsible ways, using different symbol systems to express their own ideas, etc. We need to hold tight to a notion of ME as a *force for strengthening civic imagination and expanding democratic life in the "mediated public sphere"*. The current formulation of ME as DIGITAL education brackets out the *historical dimension* of technological innovation by abstractly identifying it with modernization, glossing over the conditions, the conjunctures and the interests that have led to certain innovations rather than others. We need to counteract this formulation whereby schools are mere factories to train a digitally-skilled workforce and knowledge is a commodity to be measured and offered to the market according to a pseudo-progressive discourse of student-centeredness and creativity, of digital empowerment, job standardization, professionalization, meritocracy, etc.

- Promote critical reading of the media but always in connection with children's lived media experience – If ME is to make a real difference to students' eyes, it needs to establish a strong connection between critical analysis and those media practices where they mostly commit their passion and energy. In the ME classroom these practices must become legitimate object of study, yet they must be also critically interrogated (not stigmatized) and used as a resource to make sense of broader social and cultural issues . By integrating critical analysis and lived media experience through practical work in the classroom, students can investigate their media uses and at the same time learn how to question them.
- We need to counteract a merely instrumental vision of the media; a vision that does not ask the educators nor children to have a “thicker” knowledge of the role the media play in contemporary culture and society. Through ME educators may enhance children's capacity to **acquire, select, process and create information of their own, to generate critical knowledge, playing an active and poietic role in the construction of reality and triggering a process of social inclusion and cohesion → a new sense of active digital citizenship.**

- ***ME in Italy (formal and informal)***
 - Four problems
 - At a general level: instrumental progressivism/technoutopism
 - At a more specific level:
 - Level of contents: not organically linked
 - Level of planning: occasional and fragmentary
 - Level of method: lack of interdisciplinarity; lack of documentation, rigorous assessment and evaluation

 - ***The missing step: documentation/assessment/evaluation and the role of research action***
 - Generally, ME activities are NOT systematically documented, assessed and evaluated. The following figure 1 is an example of a grid with guidelines for doing that.
 - Media educators (both in formal and informal educational contexts) should also be *observers* and *narrators* of the process, building tools for evaluating the effectiveness of the experience and the change (if any) brought about by the activities (testing *before* and

after).

- Evaluation should focus not only on the *knowledge* that the subject has reached, but also on the *overall process*, including the strategies involved, the difficulties and barriers encountered, and how they were overcome.

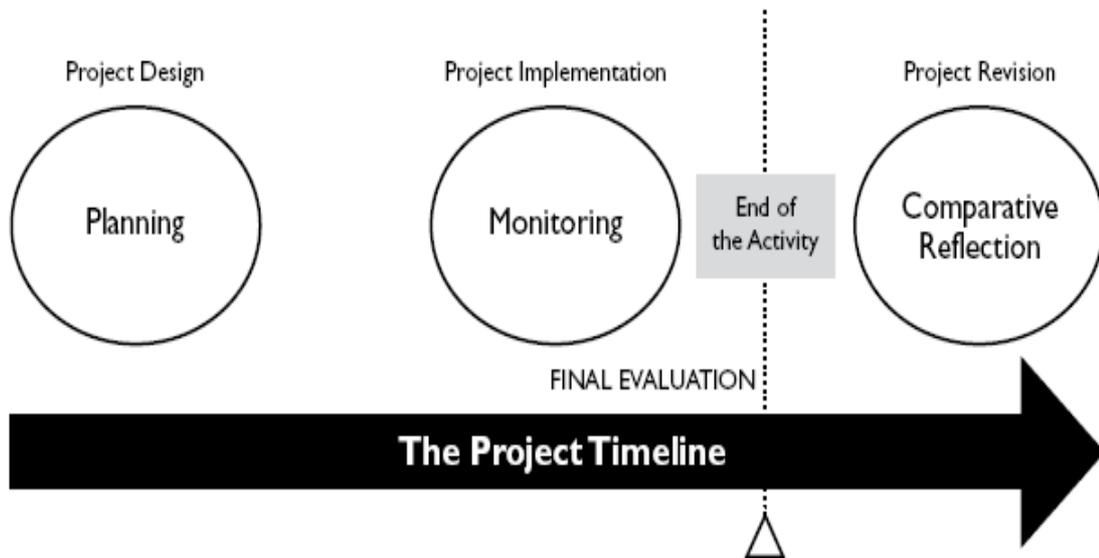
Figure 1

Name	Specify
Place	Specify
Date and time	Specify
Children's age	Specify
No. of children	Specify
Teaching/Learning activities	Describe the main teaching/learning activities during the different stages of the project. To what extent did they reflect the initial plan?
Learning situation	Describe the most relevant episodes with regards to the learning objectives of the project? Why are they relevant?
The achievement of the goals	Do you think that the objectives of the project were reached? If so, to what extent? If no or just in some parts, why?
Children's participation	Did children show any interest towards the media issues treated? If so, to what extent? Did all of them participate in the activities? Specify if participation was high, low or normal. If possible, describe a very meaningful episode about children's participation showing their interest towards the media issue treated during the activities.
Group management	Describe the positive and negative elements about the management of the group, the rules, the routines, the procedures, the rhythm of the activities, the moments of transition. Can you give some examples, focusing on the role played by the media?
Main critical points	Describe the main critical points of the activities. How were they handled?
Overall judgment and "lesson learnt"	Describe your general impressions on the experience. What lesson did you learn?
Your suggestions	Do you have any suggestion on how to improve the activity?
Other	Make other observations, if necessary.
Resources/materials	Photos, videos, grids, etc.

- The evaluation action requires to answer to a number of key questions such as...
 1. *Who evaluates?* (auto and hetero-assessment, triangulation),
 2. *For what purpose?* (initial, formative, summative evaluation),
 3. *What is to be assessed* (products and processes),
 4. *Through which methods and techniques?*
- Generally speaking, an educational project requires that the educator adopt three kinds of behavior in three different moments of the activity:

- at the beginning, the “designer attitude” (imagination and construction);
- during the project development, the “monitor attitude” (guidance and control);
- and lastly a “reflexive attitude” (comparing the distance between the project planned and what was really accomplished) (see fig. 2).

Figure 2



- We can assume that media educators (especially in formal contexts) are used to planning a direct link between learning goals and assessment, yet, most probably, they are NOT used to specifying the goals analytically and to thinking about different and complex tools for individual and group assessment.
- Two key questions must be always kept in mind:
 - Can the project be represented to other colleagues?
 - Is my plan flexible enough to make it adaptable to other contexts?
- Media educators should know “where they are going”: the role of the media within the activities must be well defined and what is to be evaluated at the end of the project must be clearly specified.
- Media educators understand that evaluation pertains not only to the final stage of a learning/teaching process, but it also lies “within the process”.
- Therefore, it is necessary to plan and develop adequate observation tools to be used throughout the whole process.
- After the end of the activities, a phase starts where media educators compare and reflect on the difference between “what was planned” and “what was actually done”.
- Let’s consider two contrasting situations:
 1. There is no difference between the project designed and the project carried out. This means that the media educator has planned a well-structured project, yet it may also means that s/he might not have taken advantage of the (creative) classroom context to undertake new unplanned solutions.

2. There is a difference between the project as designed and the project as carried out: the originally designed project will therefore need both a revision and a justification for the changes made. Yet, that is the real added value of ME activities: the difference between the planned project and the implemented activity provides a valuable learning opportunity because it highlights the potential of ME activities to be unexpected and surprising.

4. A manifold strategy

- The promotion and development of ME depends upon the presence of a series of interdependent elements, and on partnerships between a range of interested parties functioning on an international, national, local level. Any intervention must necessarily take account of the specific factors in play at each level, and the shifting relationships between them.
1. Promote policy interventions – We need clear, coherent and authoritative documents that define media literacy and provide a rationale for its implementation at a national level by those seeking to influence educational policy.
 2. Develop practice/curriculum frameworks – We need more specific documents for implementing practices offering:
 - a. a clear model of learning progression, appropriate to specific curriculum locations;
 - b. details of specific learning outcomes, expressed in terms of skills and competence;
 - c. criteria and procedures for assessment and evaluation;
 - d. and, in some instances, specific attainment targets for given stages.
 3. Provide training for teachers/educators – Well-intended documents and practice frameworks are worthless without trained staff to implement them. Elements of training in media literacy should be included in initial and in-service training programs, and be available as part of teachers'/practitioners' ongoing professional development.
 4. Involve media professionals – Media professionals need to be convinced of their responsibility towards ME, both through their own work and through partnerships with teachers and educators. This can take the form of co-operative projects, visits, placements and work-shadowing, production of teaching materials, screenings and so on. Other bodies that might have a role to play are industry regulatory bodies and relevant government departments.
 5. Involve parents – Many parents express concern about the media to which their children are exposed, and feel relatively powerless to intervene. If parents are to be involved, they too need to be recruited and empowered as active participants, rather than simply being told what they should or should not be doing. Any educational initiatives aimed at parents need to take into account cultural differences, social stratification, prejudices, skills and competence, etc.
 6. Develop teaching materials and resources – Well-designed and professionally produced teaching materials are indeed necessary. They can also serve as a form of training in themselves, particularly where they are supported by appropriate documentation. They should be of high quality, in terms of the research and evaluation that informed their production. They also need to specify the levels of resourcing that are required for effective practice: ME does not have to be a 'high tech' enterprise, yet it should at least reflect the levels of competence

that children have.

7. Create networks – All those involved in ME projects (educators, media producers, parents and children) need on-going opportunities to share experiences and evidence from practice, to exchange resources and collaborate on producing new plans and projects. Networking through associations is crucial to have a powerful voice in national/international debates about educational policy. Such organisations may also sponsor publications written by and for media educators, in-service training events and conferences, etc.
8. Promote international dialogue and exchange – International networks have begun to develop in this field, although their membership is unevenly distributed. There is a need for dialogue and exchange to be sustained on a systematic basis, rather than in the form of one-off conferences taking place occasionally. International exchange will be much less superficial if media educators have more opportunities to visit each other's countries. EU funds supporting this dialogue and exchange are crucial.
9. Promote research and evaluation – ME practices should reflect current theoretical advances in our understanding of children's relationships with media, and the pedagogy of it. There needs to be greater dialogue between researchers and educators who work directly with children (action-research). There is a number of issues that need more systematic and sustained research, such as: the nature of children's learning about the media; the relations between 'conceptual' and 'affective' dimensions of ME; the relations between 'theory' and 'practice'; the assessment and evaluation of ME projects, etc.

All these are interrelated elements within a manifold strategy. If any one of these is absent or weakened, it puts the entire field at risk. For instance, policy documents or curriculum frameworks without practical development may amount to mere empty rhetoric. Conversely, practical development and networking is fairly meaningless if there are no clear curriculum frameworks or policy inspirational documents. Policy, practice/teaching and research must be interconnected: development in each area should support (and be supported by) development in the others.