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Teaching media in school: observing and monitoring

Abstract

The teaching of media in school is a very complex activity that requires specific strategies. Often the use of technology is synonymous with innovation in the practice of teaching, as if the media were good in itself. It is useful instead to check whether the introduction of an experience of media education in schools has resulted in real progress in education.

We know that the use of the media in the school changes traditional teaching. Teachers also have to work very well on the organization of this teaching method.

The report presents the experiences of media education in schools analyzed by the method of direct observation and interviews to bring out the meanings, relationship and dynamic behavior of the actors (teachers, pupils).

The grid used for observation focuses on three aspects of the quality of media education: developing critical thinking, collaborating with work groups, and using technology. The model of media education in school can be defined precisely through analysis of teaching practice in the research process.

Keywors: Media education.

Report

Teaching the media at school: observation and monitoring

The media at school

The new millennium social and cultural trends highlight the formation of a real media environment. As a matter of fact media, as instruments, play a leading role in individual and social practices, to the extent that they almost naturally belong to communication, exchange, knowledge building, and involve a wide variety of people every day.
New words that are now widely used have been introduced to describe this recent model of reality: cyber society, network society, information society. Its characteristics largely depend on the media strategies at its basis: the diffusion of new technologies, the convergence of tools and languages.
Globalization is, at the same time, the container and reinforcement of these themes. A container because media are the main actors in all respects: computer networks, direct

broadcast satellites, large communication holdings. They are indeed part and flywheel along the progressive trans-nationalization of production and consumption. Reinforcement because the processes promoted and fed by globalization are the ones enabled and supported by the media.

New opportunities are certainly recognized to individuals by a scene of this kind: greater availability of information, greater opportunities for communication bringing down distance, streamlining and speeding up processes of knowledge production. But it also implies several problems and attention: the risk of a weakening of subjectivity, the relationship between access to information, the right to true information, the protection of interpersonal relations.

It seems hard to exploit these opportunities and minimize the impact of these problems without building a culture which institutions are centred on education as an instrument for rights protection.

This scenario requires a new role of education, alert to cultural sensitivity at all levels and assumptions of action suited to the circumstances.

School is definitely one of the educational agencies that are mainly involved in this change, as they are induced to include, in the curricula of different levels of education, objectives, contents, methods and organizational aspects of Media Education.

The Media Education curriculum urges teachers to develop a training plan, working with media and about media, which would allow students to get to know the media in their various aspects and therefore to go through a more exploratory and creative experience.

There is no denying that in the past school would generally assign a subordinate position to media compared with the leading role of books in education. In fact, media have been used in purely instrumental terms, (media as audiovisual resources) rather than as educational objects (media as a living environment and as an object of critical analysis).

The media curriculum

Media Education activities at school have often been more related to the enthusiasm of individual teachers rather than systematic, organic or integrated with traditional curricular activities. The media curriculum means, instead, specifying an accurate planning, collectively created and shared within a school.

Therefore, developing a media education curriculum means for teachers to be prepared and trained to know the linguistic and expressive characteristics of the different media and gain awareness on how the use of a certain media affects the way of learning and building knowledge, as well as values and life patterns they offer.

Creating a media education curriculum could thus be an opportunity to share a new learning experience with students, which may stimulate curiosity, discovery and creativity, ability to relate and share emotions and feelings with others.

A well designed curriculum is seen as a multidisciplinary project, starting from kindergarten up to secondary school, involving families and other cultural and educational agencies in the area.

The overall objective is to increase students' understanding of the media, how they work and for the interest of whom, how they are organized, how they produce meaning, how they represent reality and how these representations are interpreted and by whom (Masterman, 1985).

The objectives of the curriculum are not only to make students familiarize with the different aspects of the media language, the technologies employed, the singularity in the

production and use of texts or enable them to read them, to understand the meaning, and to produce texts themselves.

In the development of broader communication skills we can consider not only learning the proper use of the different media and to communicate through their language, but also developing a critical attitude which is the aim of any elevating education, sensitive to the value of a person who knows how to actively participate in a competent way in the world where he lives.

Hence, it is also important to stimulate children to activate metacognitive strategies that encourage systematic analysis of the reading and writing process, to understand their own experience as readers and writers, their own thinking processes.

Teaching the media

Teaching the media at school has always collided with the different nature of these two systems: rigorous and formal the first, informal and spontaneous the second. Teachers find it difficult to implement educational experiences of media education for cultural issues, because of shortfalls in training, due to a complex educational organization and little financial resources.

Some pioneer teachers have opened up new ways for teaching the media, but the most effective experiences are those taking place in a well organized school system rather than those conducted by isolated teachers (Di Mele, 2004). The complexity of the school system can accelerate innovations as well as slow them down until they disappear.

All these causes make the media teaching, despite its big growth, an episodic event and addressed to a minority of students.

The use of media at school urges teachers to move from teacher-centred lectures to more open ways of teaching such as collaborative work, learning communities, workshops, problem-solving sessions. Teachers must be able to choose the most appropriate educational model according to the educational goals they seek, they must be able to switch from a direct teaching practice to a new one based on the constructivist approach (Calvani, 2008).

Each new technology introduced at school has created new enthusiasm and great expectations. In fact after the initial moments, a normalization phase begins. For example, some years ago a video projection at school would create great interest among students as they would be attracted by the medium. Today we can see bored students in front of a projection as they are much more interested in their mobile phones. This suggests that technology itself doesn't raise much interest but it's a combination of phenomena defined as *Hawthorne effect*, improvements are then visible until a magnifying glass highlights the latest news, afterwards addiction brings innovation back to routine.

The real added value is then the teacher's teaching, his way of making it a meaningful learning experience. Teachers and schools cannot pursue technological innovation, as the market suggests a new one every week now. Communication tools become obsolete after a few months. It is therefore necessary for teachers to focus on the quality of teaching.

The variables that our research has analyzed then, concern the teacher's teaching action, especially its crucial aspects for media education: 1) knowledge building as a collective phenomenon, 2) development of critical/creative thinking, 3) focus on the media.

The first point stresses the cognitive perspective first and then the constructivist one that the media education has promoted in schools; because of that teachers are encouraged to move from a pure transmission of knowledge to a more cooperative learning process. The teacher does not feel depository of knowledge, but just one of the actors together with colleagues and students.

The second aspect focuses instead on one of the most important goals of media education (Buckingham, 2003), the ability to foster student's self expression with the media and the critical thinking about the media. This is rather controversial because creativity and critical skills require less teacher control and greater autonomy of the students. In particular when it comes to media production and media analysis. The teacher's guide is important to give shape to students' work, for example in making a video, but at the same time it must guarantee a certain expressive autonomy to students.

The third point concerns the characteristics of media: either in hardware (tools) and software (languages). The actual access to the necessary instrumentation and practice of media languages are essential variables in media education. If you learn about photography, it is not the same thing if there is only one camera for 25 students or whether there is a camera every 5 students. So looking at the media as expressive opportunities cannot leave alphabetic aspects of media languages in the background.

Media education in the classroom: The Basics

The cooperation among teachers

Observation on educational setting takes into account some elements of the educational process that are critical to the success of media education experiences. There is not always a best practice available, usually when a new project is introduced in a school, expert technology teachers come in contact with novice teachers. At this stage you can create useful synergies but also block the relations and the achievement of a good result. That is why one of the most interesting moments to observe is the collaborative work between teachers, their ability to integrate skills, to effectively "hold the fort" for each other, to distribute tasks and learn from each other.

Media educators do not always have an easy life in their school work, it can happen that other teachers oppose to their teaching methods or that they demand full support. Often the teacher knows better the students while media educators are more media-oriented. This is the meeting of two cultures which can be a struggle for cultural hegemony. The relationship dynamics are thus indicators of cultural references which are often far apart.

The socialization of students

Teachers' strategies can also design the relationships between students. In fact, a teacher's lecture and a workshop conducted autonomously by students determine different contexts to exchange ideas and collaborate. Media education has often evoked, among its many features, a different quality of relational and cooperative work. The use of media at school has often involved collective intelligence: the network distribution of cognitive skills and therefore relationships, exchange and free initiative has always been positively considered.

Nevertheless, the quality of these relationships is to be tested in the field, as many experiences of media education that were eventually declared as innovative and respectful of free expression for students, were sometimes implemented into non-consistent educational procedures. There is not an ideal way for media education but the teaching-learning process must be flexible and adapted to different requirements: if the teacher needs to show how a camera works, he will use a lecture, but if he wants to motivate students to come up with an idea for their videos he will probably organize a brainstorming session.

Incentives for creativity/critical thinking

Media Education strongly supports the students' creative capacities, in fact the proliferation of communication tools has allowed everyone to find his own ways of expression. Multimedia has assured the diversification of languages and therefore more opportunities to bring out thoughts, ideas, points of view. This aspect of creativity is sometimes disappointing in the experiences of media education because it is not always easy for students to give shape to their own ideas and the results of some products are sometimes conventional and low-creative.

Closely related to creativity, there is also the critical ability. One of the most ambitious objectives of Media Education is to supply students with critical thinking skills. The media, perceived as a threat to the conscience of younger generations, are based on strong emotional impact that completely bypasses reflection and rationality. Critical thinking would thus aim to avoid a modelling effect by the media, to reflect the complexity of communication and reveal hidden messages.

The critical thinking point is rather controversial and complex, both for the need to agree on a common definition of the term, and for the methods applied in education (Buckingham, 2003).

Teachers interested in this issue use teaching methods which guarantee a certain openness to students' actions, should they be right or wrong.

Moreover, there is an aspect that increases the quality of the ability to be critical, it is the reflection on their learning practice. Attentive teachers raise awareness among their students about what they are learning, as metacognition is an important part of critical learning. In a sense, teachers encourage students to observe their views within a broader context of learning: "What am I learning? How am I learning?" (Piette, 1996).

Languages and Technologies

Media are often used as motivating factors for learning at school, teachers hope to better engage students and give them tools to express their ideas. The pedagogical approach in this case is the socio-cultural; it favors the expression of the group of students while the technological medium is given a secondary role. The main objective of the media production is the recovery of personal and social identity as when making a video clip.

Teachers sometimes use the media themselves to relieve students from the complex task of managing technology, for instance we could think of the limited use of multimedia whiteboards. In other cases the lack of technological equipment forces teachers to guide students to the thinking of rather than executive tasks.

The media literacy and the media language may be penalized, students do not learn all about media grammar and syntax because they are concentrated on the meanings to communicate, or because technologies are not available.

The classroom observation

The best type of research that highlights the educational value of media is the observation in the field. Beyond the theories, teachers themselves in their educational settings give life to the media literacy culture. Very often the projects are to be carried out concretely within the complexity of a classroom, the relationship dynamics are then combined with technologies. Education is science and arts: science for the many contributions of

psychological, social, biological sciences, etc.. But it's arts as the teacher must be able to find solutions to current problems, improvising right away.

Media education is an important test for teachers to verify the effectiveness of their teaching. Observation is the best way to analyze not only the final result but also the process itself.

The observation grid

In order to observe the educational experience of media education objectively, a semi-structured grid has been tested. The grid is used to observe the moment of the lesson devoted to media education at school, when teachers and students are in action. The unit of analysis is precisely the class when the group is working in media production, that is when the project aims to the creation of a communicative object such as a video, a website, a podcast.

The grid detects the teachers' behaviour to bring out the teaching strategies and cultures. It should be used directly by a non-participant observer, it has also been used effectively in an indirect manner with video recorded lectures, provided the opportunity then to review the action several times.

The main concepts have been operationalized, and observable indicators, as objective as possible, have been identified for each theoretical concept that describes the media teaching.

The indicators help guiding the observer's attention, he can write brief notes on events regarding the indicators.

concept		indicators	*Explanatory Notes*
1) Relationship between teachers (media expert / classroom teacher)	The class teacher: 1. absent from class 2. irrelevant 3. controls 4. collaborates	They have different roles: They have different tasks: They exchange information:	*The media expert works with the class teacher. Both can take on different roles and tasks. The class teacher may be present or absent.*
2) Socialization of students at work	Teachers' Strategies/ methodologies	1. Lectures 2. Lessons 3. Workshops	*Between lecture (direct explanation of the teacher) and workshops there may be several intermediate formats defined as lessons, in general*

concept		indicators	Explanatory Notes
	Organization of students' work	1. Individual 2. Groups 3. Collective	*Students can work individually, divided into groups, or work all together and simultaneously for the same objective (*Collective*)*
	Operating procedure during activities	1. Spontaneous 2. Led by teacher	*Students can work independently or guided by the teacher*
3) Incentives for creativity / critical thinking	The teacher calls for moments of reflection during activities	1. At the beginning of the lesson 2. During the lesson 3. At the end of the lesson	*The teacher helps students to trace the learning path (metacognition)*
	Thinking practices	1. Written 2. Oral	*Teachers sometimes ask students to keep a logbook of experiences or written record of the work, individually or collectively*
	Level of involvement of students in the activities	1. All 2. Many (> 50% of group) 3. Few (<50% of group) 4. None	*During the activities not all students have an active task*

concept		indicators	*Explanatory Notes*
	How the teacher involves students	1. With questions 2. With action	*Teachers use verbal strategies or operational (games, gestures, etc.) to encourage student participation.*
	Decisions about work	1. Encouraging voluntary initiatives 2. Suggestions 3. Imposition	*Teachers may solve issues about the work to be done in various ways*
	Changes during activities	1. Decided by the teacher 2. Decided with the students	
4) Languages and Technologies	Explanation and / or use of tools	Technological devices used:	*What technological devices are used*
	Explanation and / or use of tools	The tools are used: 1. only by students 2. only by teachers 3. both	
	Explanation and / or use of technical language	1. Oral 2. Print 3. Multimedia	*To explain technology and its languages the teacher uses teacher talk or support materials*

The observation grid was used for descriptive research on experiences of media education, combined with interviews to teachers and students to check afterwards the correspondence between statements and events. Sometimes the viewpoints of the actors involved in the teaching-learning process must be compared, as it is interesting to verify the stated objectives of an educational project and its actual application in the field.

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