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Introduction

Media Education (ME) has come a long way. Today, it can no longer be considered a field of study reserved for semiotic and communication researchers. Nor can it be regarded as a privileged practice of those teachers, who for some reason consider media of fundamental importance. On one hand, ME is now part of the agenda of international organizations, from UNESCO to the European Union. These organizations consider ME and the development of media competences a necessary requisite to fully exercise citizenship in the current contemporary society. On the other, educational practices based on the media and technologies are becoming more widespread in school, even though such practices are conducted with variable degrees of awareness and teachers are not supported by adequate training.

Faced with these booming practices and initiatives, some research areas deserve further development, particularly on the pedagogical-educational and assessment levels¹. In a way, what we are talking about is promoting greater pedagogical awareness among educators and teachers regarding the aims and ways of implementing ME through the elaboration of appropriate educational models to develop students' media and digital competences. This dimension has recently been highlighted by various writers². For example, Jacquinot observes: «[...] too often we

¹ Ceretti F., Felini D., Giannatelli R. (Eds.), *Primi passi nella Media Education*, Erickson, Trento 2006; and Trincherò R., *Valutare la competenza mediale*, in A. Parola (Ed.), *Territori mediaeducativi*, Erickson, Trento 2008, pp. 327-337.

² Calvani A., *Dove va la Media Education? Riflessioni sull'identità della M. E. nella società contemporanea*, «Media Education. Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche», 1, 1, 2010, pp.13-25; and Jacquinot G., *De quelques repérages pour la recherche en éducation aux médias*, in P. Verniers (Ed.), *EuroMeduc. L'éducation aux médias en Europe. Controverses, défis et perspectives*, EuroMeduc, Bruxelles 2009, pp. 143-151.

forget to work on educational theories or concepts that are at the root of media education problems, and in schools, on the pedagogical methods used by media education experts»³. The (undesirable) side effects of this scarce awareness of theories and methods are interventions often based on implicit assumptions which are not discussed or are not very clear: «Actions are taken, (so-called good) practices are catalogued, policies are developed and assessments are made, but most of the times the theories that inspire them are not made clear»⁴, and – we add – nor are the relative assessment criteria.

At the same time, the quantity and quality of research on ME practices need to be enhanced, both to assess their effectiveness and for training purposes, with the perspective of fostering critical attitudes among teachers on the «reflective practitioner» model outlined by Schön⁵. Assessment and research on/of practices cannot obviously neglect a reflection on theories and criteria. There is therefore an inseparable connection between research on practices and definition of models and pedagogical-didactic theories: reflection on practices has to come to terms with the theoretical models and related assessment criteria. At the same time, theoretical models have to be tested by what emerges from the practice. The theory-practice, reflection-action circuit, so dear to pedagogical tradition from Dewey onwards, is still a key epistemological means to develop practices oriented towards the creation of awareness and knowledge, and for a theory that is able to satisfy the needs and expectations of practitioners. Apart from being productive on the heuristic level, this approach is also productive – as everybody knows - on the training level: the practitioner who reflects on his action explaining views, expectations and action plans is trained while he makes research and makes research while he is trained.

Research Context and Challenges

The research study here presented and carried out within the European project «On Air»⁶, stems from the wide framework we have outlined above and constitutes an attempt at considering media educational practices as research objects, reflecting on pedagogical models and teaching instruments

³ Jacquinot G., *op. cit.*, 2009, p.145.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.147.

⁵ Schön D. A., *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, New York 1983; it. ed. *Il professionista riflessivo. Per una nuova epistemologia della pratica*, Dedalo, Bari 1993.

⁶ The project was funded by the European Commission within the Life Long Learning Program 2008/2010. It was promoted by the Faculty of Communication of the University La Sapienza (Rome, Italy) and by the Italian Association of Media Education (MED). Other partners were: INFOREF (Belgium), Zinev Art Technologies (Bulgaria), Pixel (Italy), Easy Technology (Italy), Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania), WSinf (Poland), ActiveWatch-Media Monitoring Agency (Romania).

used in the field of ME, and defining tools for the documentation and assessment of practices. At the same time, we aimed to develop and test learning tools and activities for ME.

These are ambitious goals, which have been pursued in a complex context. The research study was, in fact, carried out in six European countries, Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Romania all characterized by different traditions and experiences in the ME field.

The first issue regarded conceptual definitions: how to define the concept of media competence? How are the meaning areas of this concept represented? We submitted and shared a conceptual model elaborated in other studies by MED researchers⁷ and structured in four main areas that are functional for the development of active citizenship: reader, writer, user, critical thinker (media citizenship still has a long way to go).

The definition we adopted is based on this model. It is, however, necessary to agree on the value and meaning we give to the concept of definition. A definition, first of all, accomplishes a conventional function: it allows people to agree on the meaning of words and consequently to understand each other. A definition also has the function of making people «think things through». A definition, however, is not eternal. In the history of ideas, all concepts have undergone semantic transformations, some of which are quite significant. Just think of the very concept of communication. As everybody knows, the original meaning of this term is to make common to many, to share, to let somebody share in something (from Latin *communis* = which belongs to everybody), but today's use of the term «communication» has, at least in part, departed from its original meaning. Let's consider, for example, mass media, which are called means of communication, and yet they are the emblem of impersonality, and so the opposite of «sharing, letting somebody share in something»⁸.

So, the definition of media competence adopted in this study does not claim to be complete and is open to any future enhancement and development.

A second issue regarded the diversity of national experiences. When it came to collecting media education teaching practices in the single countries, in some realities it was harder to identify relevant practices, projects and experiences than in others, because of a more recent tradition in the ME field.

Finally, a third issue was the need to balance flexibility and rigour. Both in the planning and experimental phases of the ME programmes, working tools inspired by a common theoretical and methodological framework, but adapted to the local needs and contexts, were prepared and shared. In

⁷ Ceretti et. al, *op. cit.*, 2006.

⁸ Morcellini M., Fatelli G., *Le scienze della comunicazione. Modelli e percorsi disciplinari*, NIS, Roma 1994.

other words, we tried to define a common implementation protocol with the aim of restricting, so to speak, the research areas and the possible tools of intervention and, at the same time, giving partners the possibility to re-elaborate and reinterpret the shared tools.

Research Structure

The overall study was divided into two main research areas, one focusing on sociological aspects and dimensions and the other on pedagogical issues and practices. Here we shall focus on the educational side of the research, while referring to other works for sociological analyzes⁹.

The pedagogical research was articulated into three main phases, i.e. (1) Analysis of case studies; (2) Designing and developing ME teaching materials and modules; and (3) Testing ME teaching materials and practices.

1. Analysis of case studies

This first phase of the research consisted of identifying, collecting and documenting ME practices and experiences carried out in the national contexts of the countries involved in the project. The purpose was twofold: on one hand, analyzing all the collected practices to discover possible trends in ME practices with a focus on media skills/competences and pedagogical issues; on the other hand, the aim was to valorise teachers' work, by selecting and disseminating significant ME experiences carried out in schools.

Obviously, each of the above objectives led to the definition of appropriate methods and procedures and to the development of specific working tools which will be explained in details later in the book.

The activity was carried out from June 2009 to February 2010, and was coordinated by Italian Association of Media Education (MED) with the contributions of all the partners.

The research process involved the following steps:

- Start up: creation of working tools and contacts with the schools;
- Findings and Descriptions: collection of ME practices and experiences and publication on the On Air portal;
- Evaluation and Dissemination: organization of two national workshops in each country and evaluation of the collected practices;
- Analysis and Elaboration: systematically coding of the collected

⁹ Cf. *Transnational Research on Media Education*, edited by the research team of the Faculty of Communication of the University La Sapienza (Rome, Italy) with the support of all the partners. The document is available on the following URL: http://www.onair.medmediaeducation.it/userfiles/European_research_on_Media_Education.pdf; and also Cortoni I., *Young Digizen? New cultural challenges in media education*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2010.

practices and statistical analysis of the data and information obtained in relation to four main perspectives: national contexts, media skills/competences areas, media used, and pedagogical issues.

MED provided guidelines and forms to be used during the research and carried out the final analysis of all the collected practices. Each partner had to collect about 50 ME practices, grounding on a common format available on the On Air web portal. At the end of this activity, 309 experiences were published online, 161 of which analytically described and 148 shortly presented.

A key instrument for practices' description and documentation was the «Case Study Form», which is a comprehensive tool asking for specification on various areas such as: title, abstract, topic, media skills' areas, and media used, teaching methods, evaluation strategies, results, challenges, transferability, future development, and context of the experience.

The collected practices were submitted to an encoding procedure and then statistically analysed to discover the main ME practices' trends and issues in the six European countries involved in project.

Furthermore, as already stated, each partner organized two national workshops, involving expert teachers and educators, with the purpose of discussing and evaluating the practices collected on the basis of a set of common criteria. Through this procedure a more qualitative analysis of the practices was carried out and their strong and weak points were highlighted.

2. Designing and developing ME teaching materials and modules

The purpose of this phase was to plan and develop eight ME modules regarding four media competence areas¹⁰: (1) reading the media: the ability to read media and decode media languages; (2) write the media: the capacity of producing the media text and to use digital instruments for creative purposes; (3) critical understanding and evaluating the media: entails the complex attitude to observe media contents and objects with a distance; (4) media consumption awareness: the capacity of creating awareness as to choices in the consumption of media understanding their explicit and implicit messages in different situations.

The activity of developing teaching materials took place from June 2009 to February 2010 and again was coordinated by MED with partners' support.

The research process involved the following steps:

- Start up: brainstorming among partners on possible topics to develop and involvement of teachers and schools in the research;

¹⁰ Ceretti et al., *op. cit.*, 2006.

- Planning: planning of the educational materials;
- Development: implementation of the teaching materials;
- Reviewing and evaluation: partners' mutual reviewing and evaluation of planned and developed products through a web forum;
- Revision: products' revision on the basis of partners' feedback.

MED developed the guidelines and forms to support the activity, and also produced a final summary report. Every partner contributed through planning and creation of ME materials. While each partner focused on a specific media competence area, the single educational material could also refer to other media competences in a transversal way.

The choice of topics for addressing was partially influenced by the emerging results of the practices that were under analysis and examination.

At the end of the design and development phase, eight educational modules were implemented and uploaded on the project's web portal¹¹.

3. Testing ME teaching materials and practices

The last research phase focused on the experimentation of the eight ME modules with two purposes: first, we wanted to define and try a common testing protocol, possibly re-usable or transferable to other contexts; second, we wanted to test the effectiveness and the quality of educational processes promoted with the ME modules.

These surely were ambitious purposes, particularly considering that, as previously noticed, the testing activity was carried out in a multicultural context, which required a long process of sharing meanings, imposed a flexible attitude, and required a work on the base of open and easily re-defined schemes. At the same time, as we were speaking of «testing», «validity», «effectiveness», and «quality», some keywords of educational research came out, demanding to a clear and rigorous explanation of purposes, theoretical-methodological arguments, procedures and work tools.

In this way, trying to conciliate flexibility and strictness, variety (in terms of involved points of view and situations) and uniformity (in terms of common research protocols), we set up an heuristic methodology that focused on ideas which belong to research-action traditions, trying at the same time to grow the inter-subjectivity of procedures through the spur of dialogical exchanges, documentative practices, and peer reviewing activities in a common and fixed framework.

The activity, still coordinated by MED, took place from March 2010 to July 2010. All the partners collaborated in the process.

¹¹ Cf. <http://www.onair.medmediaeducation.it>.

The activities planned for this phase was structured as follows:

- Definition and sharing of a testing protocol: in this first phase, partners discussed and shared the global research plan, its purposes, methods, procedures, and tools. MED suggested the use of some tools, that were adopted by partners and adapted to their specific contexts;
- Testing of ME modules: the eight ME modules were tested in the countries involved in the project; researchers and teachers took part at the test; the number of people involved in the project varied from one country to another, in a range that went from a minimum of 15/20 to a maximum of 50 students;
- Peer reviewing: the whole process was constantly attended by peer reviewing activities, conducted by participant researchers and also some teachers; peer reviewing activities were carried out through a web forum or videoconferencing. The aims of the meetings were: (1) to take stock of the situation, presenting the state of the works; (2) to analyze critical points and to evaluate possible solutions; (3) to underline positive elements and to evaluate the possibility to exploit them in other situations; (4) to examine and adapt purposes, methods, and procedures, based on emerging needs, but in a common framework; (5) to know students' point of view about the ongoing experience; (6) to know teachers' point of view about the ongoing experience; (7) to learn about the point of view of other actors involved in the experience; (8) to examine the products created by students; (9) to analyze and compare results achieved in the different national contexts;
- Summary of results and dissemination: the activities concluded with a summary report on the results emerged at national level.

This book

This book presents and discusses the research products and results of the pedagogical study carried out within the On Air project. It is structured in two parts, one dedicated to the overall theoretical framework of the study and the other focusing on its main results in terms of findings and products.

Chapter 1, titled *In Search of a Definition of Media Competence*, introduces the topic of media competence trying to define this complex notion and providing a common ground for the overall research.

Chapter 2, titled *Developing and Assessing Media Competence*, focuses on principles to design ME courses and elaborate methods and tools to evaluate media competences. These principles inspired the planning and developing of the eight ME modules created in the project. The chapter is completed by a box containing a short presentation of the eight modules.

Chapter 3, titled *Research on Media Education. Issues, Models and Tools*, deals with research issues and approaches, and attempts to outline a

framework to undertake research activities in ME. Special focus is placed on the increasingly popular concept of «good practice», which is interpreted as a fruitful theoretical notion for the development of professional knowledge, provided that clear and well founded validation procedures were defined.

Chapter 4, titled *Media Education Practices. Emerging Trends and Issues*, presents and summarizes the main results emerged from the quantitative analysis of ME practices. Methods and procedures are explained and findings described and analyzed. Some early conclusions are drawn with the awareness that further work will be needed in the future to fully exploit the informative potential of all the collected practices.

Chapter 5, titled *The Practice of Media Education. Topics, Issues and Examples of «Good Practices»*, adds further insight on ME practices. Starting with the analysis of five main ME topics, it focuses on «good practices» dealing with these five topics and resulted from practices' evaluation carried out within the On Air project.

Chapter 6, titled «*To be or not to be...digital teens?»*. *A Study on the Development of Critical Thinking Skills of Adolescents*, gets to the heart of the research on the ME modules and present the findings of the testing of one of the module focused on critical thinking skills and Internet information credibility. After the introduction of the rationale which motivated the work, the chapter analyzes the testing results ending with the conclusion that, despite the emphasis on digital natives, students are not born, but rather become Internet users.

Chapter 7, titled «*My You Tube» between Consumption Awareness and Online Identity Building*, still focuses on findings related to the testing of the ME modules. In particular, it concerns a ME activity aimed at developing students' awareness on media consumption. Through an activity centred on You Tube students gradually discover their personal media preferences and develop more sophisticated competences of media fruition.

Chapter 8, titled *Open Digital Resources for Media Education. The Web Portal of the On Air Project*, winds up the book by providing an overview on all the online products created within the project and now freely available online. The Open Educational Resource philosophy inspired this final choice of publishing all the project contents in an open mode to promote knowledge sharing and support democratizing approaches to knowledge building and research processes.

Note

This book was jointly conceived by Alberto Parola and Maria Ranieri, however Alberto Parola wrote Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 (sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.3), and Boxes n. 1 and n. 3, while Maria Ranieri wrote part of Chapter 3 (sections 1, 5, 5.1 and 5.2), Chapter 4, Chapter 6 and Box 2. Both authors jointly wrote the Introduction and the Conclusion.

Other authors contributed in the book. In particular, Roberto Trincherio wrote Chapter 2, Isabella Bruni Chapter 5, Beate Weyland and Paolo Carboni Chapter 7, and finally Alessia Rosa Chapter 8.

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Mario Morcelli was the Scientific Director and Alberto Parola was the creator of the project.

Alberto Parola and Maria Ranieri coordinated the pedagogical research carried out within On Air, and Ida Cortoni the sociological research.

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