

This article was translated in Spanish and published with the following details:
“Diseno de un Programa de Educacion en Medios en la Escuela Primaria Griega”, *Comunicar : Revista Cientifica de Comunicacion y Educacion*, 2007, 28, 75-82.

Implementation and Evaluation of a Media Literacy Training Program for Greek Elementary School Teachers *

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*The research program was handled in collaboration with the University Research Institute of Applied Communication and funded by the University of Athens, Special Account for Research Grants, (Code No. 70/4/4132)

Introduction

(a) Media literacy in Greece in relation to other countries

Although media literacy is a multidisciplinary field which in other countries has been studied since the '60s, in our country professional discussions on the subject began in the middle of the '90s, proceed slowly, and have not yet reached their primary audience, educators.

The actual meaning of *media literacy* or *media education* still remains an open-ended issue. There is not a generally accepted definition, but there is a broad emphasis on the provision of *specialized knowledge*, *awareness* and *rational* processing of media contents and functions, sometimes focusing on *critical evaluation* which, often, also includes *message communication*.

The concept has been given several definitions from the viewpoint of many different approaches and scientific fields. In a relatively recent, special issue of the *Journal of Communication*, devoted on Media Literacy, there appear at least four general definition categories:

Media literacy is:

- (1) The ability to access, analyze and communicate the messages produced by media (National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, Rubin, 1998).
- (2) Knowledge of the functions and effects of media on society (Messaris, 1998).
- (3) The understanding of cultural, financial, political and technological effects on message creation, production and transmission (Lewis & Jhally, 1998).
- (4) Knowledge of the characteristics of media, critical processing of their content and comparison to external reality (Buckingham, 1998, Brown, 1998).

Within the same issue, Rubin (1998) encapsulates all the above definitions in one: *“Media literacy is about understanding the sources and technologies of communication, the codes that are used, the messages*

that are produced and the selection, interpretation and impact of those messages”.

The fundamental technique for all the above to be achieved, is a pedagogy of inquiry (Hobbs, 1998), which is based on *critical evaluation* as well as the formulation and analysis of questions concerning all kinds of *texts* (scenarios) produced by media (printed and electronic, including cinema), as well as the cultivation of students’ critical attitude towards media messages and functions (Buckingham, 1998). The main method which proves to be successful is not the traditional “instruction” either on what media are and their role in our life or which “secret” messages they “attempt” to distribute, but students’ guidance, so that they become competent to answer these questions by themselves. Therefore, the effectiveness of a media literacy program depends on its success to provide the student with the following (Brown, 1998):

- (a) the development of a critical attitude towards all forms of media production (i.e. texts, articles, books, audio and visual material),
- (b) the skills necessary for information filtering, which refers to the ability of the person to select from irrelevant or redundant information only that part which “deserves” processing.
- (c) thorough examination of the meaning and significance of information (including personal significance, that is how relevant the information is to one’s needs and goals),
- (d) the ability to relate the information to one’s already acquired knowledge and to evaluate it accordingly,
- (e) the ability to assess the validity and reliability of the information distributed by the media,
- (f) reliance to one’s personal judgment and acceptance of the pluralism of ideas.

According to Hobbs (1998), the basic purpose of media literacy is that the student understands that knowledge is socially constructed, learns to question textual authority [printed or electronic] and use his or her own knowledge and reasoning, in order to arrive to independent decisions.

It is apparent that the methods and techniques required by media literacy, differ from the traditional methods of teaching in which the educator was trained and has been accustomed to use. This means that educators are in need of an expansion of their training so as to become competent to guide their students in the critical use of media.

Other countries have included media literacy as a main goal, especially in secondary education, since the ‘70s. In Latin America and Europe, media literacy has also been used as an “eradication” strategy against social inequalities stemming from unequal access to information. Similarly in South Africa, media literacy was used to promote the educational reform within the country (Hobbs, 1998).

In most English-speaking countries– England, Scotland, Canada and Australia –, media literacy is incorporated in that part of the school curriculum that is related to the subject of language arts. In 1980, in England, Thatcher’s government included programs of media analysis in the official curriculum of both primary and secondary education. The outcome of this policy was an increase in British students’ ability to watch TV in a critical manner (Buckingham, 1990).

UNESCO has also been influential since the ‘60s. It has been interested in media literacy, because of the prospect of its use as a vehicle to settle

the inequalities among the industrial-developed countries and the "underdeveloped" or developing countries.

The general principles were set in Vienna in April 1999 during an International Conference on media literacy and the digital era. Media literacy should:

- concern all kinds of media, including written texts and graphs, sound, photographs and pictures from whatever technological medium they come from,
- make young people able to acquire an understanding of the media which dominate their community, as well as the way in which they function; moreover, to acquire the necessary skills to operate them and thus, use them in order to communicate with others,
- confirm that people know how to:
 - critically analyze and create "media texts"
 - recognize the message sources, as well as the sources' political, social, commercial and /or cultural context and interests
 - interpret the messages and values conveyed by the media
 - select the media appropriate to convey their own messages or stories and approach the audience at which they aim
 - gain or demand access to media, so as to be able to receive as well as reproduce messages

In the USA, the area of media education is so recent that even the terms "media education" or "media literacy" are subject to debate and are used interchangeably with no distinction. It was only in 1990 that the term "media literacy" was defined as *"the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate several types of messages"*¹. During the last years many educators in more than fifteen American states were trained and finally decided to incorporate media literacy activities in their curricula.

Till today in Greece, the only coordinated effort of a voluntary implementation of "media literacy" programs has been implemented within the framework of consumer's education or health education courses in the context of Thematic Cross Curriculum. In a systematic effort to trace even fragments of media education programs implemented in Greek schools, we only discovered few isolated attempts; usually single classes that mainly worked on advertisements by developing some project outlines that they presented in the classroom, mostly on a school-basis level. However, when the project outline was completed, the "program" was discontinued. In addition to that, none of the relevant institutions in Greece – for example the Pedagogical Institute or the Ministry of Education– have either defined the basic skills that students should develop from a media literacy program or systematically recorded possible implementations of such programs. Most isolated efforts stem from some educators' radical views on media education, since there does not exist any official central plan.

(b) The attitudes of Greek educators

There are several reasons for which we raise the issue of media use (particularly of TV and video) in the context of the school. Interestingly,

¹ National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, 1992

and although 94% of the educators believe that technological media must be incorporated in the educational procedure as a teaching tool, and 90% of the students think that media should be used in the classroom (Marantos, 2001), there exist in our country a general confusion between the use of media in education and media literacy. Although, the introduction of media literacy programs in the context of education of course requires that educators have been familiarized and feel confident with using media in the classroom (i.e. the use of media in education could be seen as is a predecessor of media literacy), it appears that most people still equate the two; they believe that media literacy means learning to use media to support teaching of the curriculum.

Excluding those educators who completely disagree with the use of media either because they feel threatened (that their position and role will be devalued from the introduction of technology in schools) or because they support the view that such a mediatized educational setting would lead to *"languor and voicelessness"* (Diamantaki, Davou, Panoussis, 2001), the remaining could be divided into three broad categories according to their perceptions and understanding of what is implied by the incorporation of media in educational practice (Hobbs, 1998).

In the first category, there are educators who occasionally use educational television or educational video in the form of videotapes in the classroom, in cases where the unit taught corresponds to some already produced and centrally distributed programs. In this way, they believe that they help their students receive "scientific information" within the framework of a "safe" communicative environment. In other words, they use those (limited, indeed) media that the Ministry of Education has provided to schools (Marantos, 2001) as teaching aids.

In the second broad category are those educators (see Diamantaki, Davou and Panoussis, 2001) who occasionally use excerpts of commercial programs (e.g. Greek movies) to support teaching of a particular subject with the purpose to increase their students' interest and attention. For example, an excerpt of a film shot in the volcanic island of Santorini, showing the volcano, can be used in the fifth grade of primary school in the context of teaching geography.

The third group consists of teachers who implement cross thematic curricula programs, and within this context, they use both educational and commercial television (or other media) in order to devise educational material for their students to practice with "critical" approaches of the messages transmitted from different media. These specific activities mostly focus on visual reading and visual analysis, on questioning the validity of messages ("It was said on TV! So what?") and, occasionally, on the production of messages by the students themselves.² Teachers who belong in this group are usually the most "radical" and "holistic" in their approach to the role of media in the school. They consider media as a necessary part of the educational process in 21st century and they adopt the view that the "traditional" school should open its doors to the so-

² As far as we know, there are no published projects or products of such programs based on Greek reality.

called “parallel schools³” or “parallel educational environments”, while students should not merely be trained on how to watch TV or movies, but on how to “read” the messages conveyed by the media, how to analyze them and how to develop a critical attitude towards them (Hobbs, 1998). However, in Greece, few teachers only have such a deep understanding of the meaning and necessity of media literacy.

What is a priority in our country, at the moment, is that teachers (and of course parents) realize that if they want to have a media literate new generation, they themselves must first comprehend what Kahtleen Tyner said in 1994, that “*those messages brought forth by mass media are neither windows to the world nor mirrors of the society, but carefully-made products*”.

Educators, particularly those who work in primary schools, are the basic levers for a change in the way the Greek school faces mass media. For this reason, their further training, as far as the critical analysis of messages and the implementation of media literacy programs are concerned, is a significant step forward. In fact, it is a necessary step, since media literacy is not yet a subject at a university level teacher training.

(c) Media literacy in primary school education

The earlier at school grades a program on media literacy is implemented, the more efficient it becomes. This is supported both by research (e.g. young children watch television more) and by learning theories.

It is well known that children of preschool and school age have a spontaneous tendency, when they take a toy in their hands, to carefully examine it, and then disassemble it (not in order to destroy it, as many might believe, but in order to learn how it functions). When they satisfy this need, and *have comprehended* the toy’s *mechanisms*, they put it together again.

If we replace that toy with any *medium* or *message*, they children would follow a similar, natural procedure: to examine it, decode it, understand how it “works” and then put it back together again, probably taking advantage of that experience in a different way.

The philosophy of a media literacy program could not but correspond to this basic tendency of children. Its aim should not only be to provide the market with professionals of critical thinking, but also to train message consumers on critical reading.

Moreover, such a training program should not aim at making educators learn how to create multimedia tools (which can be very expensive and their quality may be inferior to the ones found in the market), but how to benefit from the use of already existing media or multi-media in the educational process, with the purpose to create consumers of critical thought.

The production of a video by the children for example, which demands technical knowledge (e.g. the use of a montage program) as well as material and technical infrastructure (cameras, saving and production

³ The term “parallel schools” is used by many sociologists today and embraces not only mass media that still play an important role, but also a number of spare time activities that increasingly become independent of the organization and content of school homework. (Koronaïou, 1992)

devices), is very important, but it should come after a media literacy program.

(d) The training intervention

The project we present in this paper is an action-research project. Its main goal was the evaluation of the change indicated on teachers' knowledge and attitudes, after an intervention. The intervention consisted of a media literacy in-service training program, which required the teachers to apply what they learned with their pupils in classroom.

Secondary goals were that the teachers would:

- ✓ Get acquainted with some of the most salient learning and media theories
- ✓ Get acquainted with several media products and the techniques used by media
- ✓ Dismantle and reassemble encoded and messages
- ✓ Exercise themselves on the production of educational material based on the special requirements of a media literacy program.
- ✓ Create a "bank" of information and teaching material which they would be able to use in their classes
- ✓ Promote the goals of a media literacy program in their school

A qualitative research method by use of focus-groups was implemented for the assessment of change in teachers' knowledge and attitudes before and after the intervention.

Method

The purpose of this action research was twofold:

- (a) to provide teachers with a complete and systematic training on the application of a media literacy program in the classroom with their students (intervention) and
 - (b) to assess the possible changes in knowledge and attitudes towards media that occurs after attending a media literacy training course.
- Therefore, we used a design that belongs to the general category of pre- and post-testing, that is we carried out the evaluation before and after the intervention.

(a) Participants

The participants were ten permanent-service teachers who worked in Primary Schools in the Prefecture of Attica and had been previously employed for at least three years. We should note that the qualitative nature of both the intervention and the evaluation of attitude change (through the technique of focus groups) required a small number of participants, that would enable the development of group dynamics and deep learning processes (Entwistle et al., 1979).

(b) Material

Teachers were given material (both printed and audiovisual) created for the purposes of the program according to teaching methods based on student-centered, active-learning approaches which have been proven effective not only for knowledge acquisition but also for the development

of positive attitudes towards the subject of learning (Malone, 1981, Kannas, 1988). In addition to that, participants produced and evaluated their own new material in the course of the program.

(c) Procedure

The project included the evaluation of teachers' attitudes at the beginning (pre-intervention) and at the end of the training (post-intervention). Exploration and evaluation of attitude change were based on data collected through focus groups.

Focus groups are carried out by use of in depth group interviews, during which participants interact with each other while discussing a particular a topic (in our case such topics were: the significance of mass media, educational potentials of students' and method of development of critical perception of messages). When focus groups are used as a methodological tool, the research goal is to detect shared meanings, the development of representations and stereotypes on topics discussed, while the participants (both the teachers and their students) interact with each other as the media literacy program evolves (Morgan, 1997).

There was one focus group conducted before intervention and a second group after the intervention, each one lasting approximately two hours. The intervention program lasted a total of 42 hours, equally divided across fourteen weekly meetings, during the winter term 2004-2005. Both the intervention and its evaluation took place in the premises of the Laboratory for Psychological Applications & Planning.

Results

(a) Pre-intervention focus group

The educational profile of the teachers who participated showed that both teachers with few years' previous employment (three of the participants had worked for 5 years) as well as teachers of more than 16 years' previous employment (three of them) were interested in attending the training program.

In the context of the first focus group, which took place just before the beginning of the training program the participants were asked to describe what, according to their opinion, is a "media literacy program" and how that could be useful in their job at school.

Four of them associated such a program with the innovating activity programs recently implemented at schools (e.g. environmental or health education programs). Four others said that they expected to learn how to use technology, while two said that television has invaded their students' life to such an extent that they cannot compete it (referring to the issue of 'medium superiority' and their inability to convince children to switch it off). In this way, they expected to learn how they could probably decrease its influence (they took medium "influence" for granted and especially that of television).

Then, teachers were asked to signify, with the help of a draft, their own expectations from the seminar they would attend. The majority of the participants signified the meaning of the term mass media according to their personal opinions: television and newspapers. Then there was a follow-up discussion through which it was found out that their

representations, as far as media were concerned, did not include, for the majority of the teachers, magazines, radio, posters, books or cinema. Three of the participants also said that they did not feel comfortable at all, because they did not feel up-to-date with technology and thus, they would prefer to work, during the program, on things that did not demand technical knowledge (one of them declared that he did not have a television set as well as a video or a DVD set at home during the last year, not even a mobile phone).

Those participants (two out of 10) who felt adequately up-to-date with technology (they worked on a computer and had been further trained within the framework of the "information society") thought of the seminar as an experience which would help them produce films with their students or make material by themselves in order to use it as a teaching aid (in other words, they equated *media* with *new technologies*).

None of the participants had ever attended a seminar on media literacy or had been ever taught an equivalent subject or lesson when studying at the university or during other in-service training programs.

One of the first findings deriving from these attitudes as expressed in the focus group, was the variety of representations for the actions and "effects" of media as well as the variety of incentives that urge teachers to participate in such programs. This variety requires a global confrontation of the issue, as far as media actions are concerned, so that all the participants feel that their basic incentive has been met.

This type of exploratory discussions right before the beginning of a training program on the one hand offer trainees the opportunity to share their ideas and worries concerning media influences and develop cohesion and common purposes as a group, and on the other hand they provide the trainer with the opportunity to become informed about the trainees' expectations and adapt the program and methods in a way so that all participants are benefited by the seminar and from each other.

(b) Intervention

The intervention lasted 42 hours. Nine of these hours covered theoretical issues and the remaining 33 were spent on workshops.

- *Theoretical issues covered the following units:*
 1. Theory and implementation of media literacy programs
 2. Special teaching methods
 3. Advertisement and anti-advertisement techniques
- *The workshops consisted of the following units:*
 1. Language: written, oral, symbolic
 - Reading of images
 - Different forms of "language" and the school
 - Dominance of images
 - Images as means of control
 - Images and reality
 - The construction of reality

The main goal of that workshop was the in-depth work on the production and utilization of language, either verbal or visual. Oddly enough, the school, although focused on the teacher's verbal discourse, as the one who spreads knowledge and is the undisputable "mediator" – the "medium" in other words –, rarely spends time on the techniques of verbal discourse and its decoding. This one-way "verbality" in combination

with the "one single truth" of the written text and the prohibition of its questioning (note that in Greece only one school textbook, centrally selected by the Ministry is allowed for each subject) as well as the static character of the pictures usually provided as controlled teaching aids create a form of "reality" quite different from the "reality" provided by "parallel schools" from which students appear to gain extra "knowledge".

The goal of the activities that took place during that workshop hours was to spot the dominant kinds of speech at school and in media, their comparison, contrast, processing and interpretation.

2. Information and products

- What information is and how it is constructed
- Information as a spectacle
- Product and consumer
- Brand name and communication – communication of brands

3. Advertisements

- What it is and why we are interested in it
- Advertisement and media
- The kind and content of the commercial spot
- Set-up models and life-styles

One significant parameter of our everyday life is the products we consume either they are of first need or not. Children, from very young age, are confronted with a shower of advertisements about products they consume directly or indirectly. From these advertisements one can also detect the lifestyle each society wishes to impose. The activities related to that unit which took place in the workshop and were aimed at offering teachers new ideas, so as not only to register the products consumed by children and rely on typical advice, but to help them doubt advertisements and decode them by themselves.

4. The news

- Reporters and the news
- The power of news
- The news as a spectacle

The information systems, the reporters' image and the way a piece of news is presented were introduced and analyzed leading the participants to the production of two broadcasts of few minutes. The broadcast productions were made by small groups of participants and were then presented to the group.

5. Cartoons

- Cartoons and comics
- Cartoons and the school
- Techniques of making cartoons

The structure of cartoon films was studied in this unit. Participants conducted a brief survey on their own pupil's preferences. They emphasized the utilization of cartoon films that children most often watch, so as to be able to develop observation comments, character analysis and then decode the messages presented in a more effective way.

A total of six hours was spent on each one of the topics covered during the workshop: three hours were spent on the implementation of activities and the remaining three on the design and production of instructional material by the participants. The last group meeting was spent on a synopsis of the most important issues covered as well as on the program evaluation from the participants themselves.

(c) Post-intervention focus group

In the context of the second focus group which took place two weeks following intervention, the whole program was evaluated according to the following parameters:

- Content (the themes covered)
- Its experiential character
- Its educative utility for teachers who already work at school
- Utilization of the material given and the material produced in the context of the seminar

As far as the subjects covered, all the participants expressed their wish for a seminar that would last longer, so as to be given the opportunity to study some issues related to media, more in depth.

The cooperative atmosphere, as well as the developing dynamics of group, played a significant role, too. We quote some excerpts of participants own words:

“there was an excellent cooperative atmosphere”

“I felt that I belonged in a creative team in which everybody contributed in his own way by offering his/her ideas on the topics discussed”

“I shared my thoughts, experience, doubts, assumptions, objections or disagreements in a creative way”.

As far as the experiential character of the seminar is concerned, all teachers felt that they had participated in “a lively and interesting seminar” that lacked “the sterile quoting of theories and knowledge”, while focusing on “the real needs of a teacher as well as on the Greek school reality”. The theoretical support was “accurate and thorough without being tiring”. One of the assets pointed out, was the limited number of participants that, in the end, “functioned in favor of communication”.

As far as the utility of the media literacy program, all participants showed an in-depth change in their attitudes towards media that is expressed representatively by what one teacher said:

“At the beginning I was sure that media threat comes from TV and that we can protect ourselves only if we manage to switch it off. Now, however, I got acquainted with techniques and ways so as to transform TV, from an opponent that it was, to an ally. I really look forward to implementing everything I learned with my students”.

Most of the teachers who participated in the program were parents and during the discussion, they referred to the fact that this seminar also helped them as parents while “such a program would be surely interesting to their students’ parents too”. This finding (that a successful media literacy program is useful not only to teachers and their students but to students’ parents too) coincides with what is recorded in the international literature (Hobbs, 1998, Rubin, 1998).

As far as the fourth criterion is concerned (utilization of the material in the teacher’s own classroom) all participants expressed the view that “they were given creative solutions and ideas that can be implemented in the classroom”. Moreover, they stated that they learned how to create material that can be adaptable for younger pupils in first the grades, something that has changed their preexistent view that such programs are based in material that can be used with older children only.

All participants wished that the intervention would be continued, not only in order to provide a chance for more teachers to be trained, but also in order to provide to them support in the application of what they learned in the context of their schools. In fact, they expressed the need to continue to a second, more "advanced" media literacy program that would give them further knowledge, ideas and materials.

Discussion

Both the observation of the teachers while the program progressed, in other words, the observation of the way they interacted and participated in the activities, their interest and vividness, as well as the material derived from analyzing the focus groups before and after the intervention, confirm a series of issues on media literacy discussed in international literature as we raised them in the first part of this paper. Conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1. The belief that all teachers have a common (and usually negative) attitude towards media is false. Teachers (as all citizens) are represented by a variety of attitudes, which even when they are negative, stem from different sources. Moreover, they show different incentives whenever they decide to work on that subject. This means that a training program should take under consideration and incorporate all different attitudes and incentives expressed, from the very beginning. The exploratory discussions, in the form of focus groups when a program starts, give the trainees the ability to share ideas and worries as far as media influences are concerned and to develop group cohesion, as well as a common goal. On the other hand, such discussions give the trainer the opportunity to become informed about trainees' expectations and adapt the program and methods accordingly.
2. In cases where the program is implemented in the form of seminars and workshops, so that the trainees (either teachers or students) have the opportunity to prepare their own material with the help of the trainer's guidance, the familiarity developed with the media content and the construction methods and techniques of media messages, demystifies media as "omnipotent" agents, relieves fears toward technology and thus, renders media as a controlled "tool", that both teachers and students can incorporate in their lives and turn them to their advantage.
3. Working in small groups (up to 10 people) once more proves to be particularly effective. Firstly because it promotes interaction and development of cohesion within the group, as the members are benefited from one another, and secondly, because it enables all the members of the group to participate in a creative way. In our case, because of the limited resources, the whole program was carried out within a small group. However, in the case of more participants or a whole school class, research findings show that such programs are effective when the students split and work in small groups. This was also confirmed both from the program's implementation and from its evaluation.
4. The material derived from analysis of the focus groups indicates that effectiveness is related to the small number of participants. Teachers are highly motivated and wish to be further trained on current issues whenever they have the opportunity to participate in programs, not in a

massive and centrally directed, bureaucratic way, but in flexible small groups of a more limited range, so that their personal needs are covered and each person's abilities are recognized. All the teachers who participated in the program attended all meetings (both theoretical and workshops) and they did not seem eager at all to leave the Lab when the program was completed. They wished we "invited" them back, so as to have the opportunity to tell us about their experience after implementing the program in their schools, while they also wished we organized further, more advanced training programs or seminars.

Among the future goals of the Laboratory for Psychological Applications and Planning is to carry out a follow up of this program, through a focus group that would evaluate long-term outcomes.

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