

Media Education in Castelo Branco (Portugal): empowering youth to become media literate citizens

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Nowadays almost all knowledge comes to us through media, both printed and digital media. But media messages aren't a mirror of reality. They are constructions of that reality and the citizens must know how to analyze these messages critically, and how to produce messages using media. The school has an important role in this objective. So, Media Education is more urgent than ever.

In the last few years, the European Union made a big effort in the field. The main aim is to reach the Media Literacy levels of countries like Australia, New Zealand or Canada. In 2004 the European Network of researchers in the area was established and that was called Media-Educ. In 2006 the EU published the European Charter of Media Literacy, which defends the integration of Media Education in all curricula and teacher training in the field. In the late 2007, after a on-line public opinion poll with the objective of identifying good practices on Media Education, the European Commission published a document which advises all member-states to insert Media Education in the curricula at all levels, the teacher training in the field, and the need for defining standards to assess the Media Literacy level of the European citizens (European Commission, 2007).

A research based on school newspapers

To develop our research in the field, we thought that we could work with school newspapers either printed or on-line. And we did that because new media didn't replace older media (Lievrow and Livingstone, 2006). We also did that because "newspapers are an important resource to develop critical sense, reflexive styles and habits and creativity, respect for diversity of opinions and an interest in up-to-date news" (Pinto, 1991).

In Portugal, since 1991 there is a National Contest of School Newspapers promoted by the daily newspaper Público (2005) and the Ministry of Education. Every year around four hundred contestants participate in either with paper or on-line editions. Thirdly, our option had in mind that teachers and students need help in the production of school newspapers.

So we developed the Multimedia CD-Rom "Let's produce school newspapers" *i*) to help students (5th to 9th grades) to improve school newspapers; *ii*) to contribute to integrate Media Literacy in the European curricula; *iii*) *c*) to help to training and motivate teachers and students for the pedagogical use of newspapers and ICT in the classroom; *iv*) to develop abilities in students which will encourage them to be critical and reflecting consumers and producers of media messages.

The CD-Rom encompasses traditional media (school newspaper) with new media (CD-Rom, online newspapers). It explains the phases of a newspaper production and the different types of news; it motivates pupils to search information and to assess the work developed and it puts forward activities related to the school environment. In summary it motivates pupils to produce newspapers, to read and write critically and to become better

citizens. It is inserted in the philosophy of criticizing media through media. The CD-Rom also motivates students to search information and to assess the work developed, presents activities related to school and the community environment, and encourages students to use the Internet, for instance using search engines and e-books.

The CD-Rom has been validated by multimedia specialists, by media researchers and journalists. Afterwards, in the academic year of 2005-2006, the CD-Rom was tested with 104 students from 4 classes (2 from the 6th grade, 1 from the 7th grade and 1 from the 8th grade). The activities took place in Portuguese classes which took place in the IT Room, with group-work activities to produce the newspaper contents. These classes were audio and video recorded. We used direct observation and field notes were also taken.

Research results

After analyzing data we can outline four major result categories. So, before only a few students used to participate in the school newspapers, mainly students from the classes of the teachers that integrated the school newspaper production team. After, and for the first time, the two schools had about 50 students in the school newspaper team, producing content (text and photographs) for the newspaper.

Secondly, before the students participated mainly with class work chosen by teachers, so they didn't write for an audience outside the classroom or school. After, the students participated mainly with news stories expressly written to be published in the school newspaper.

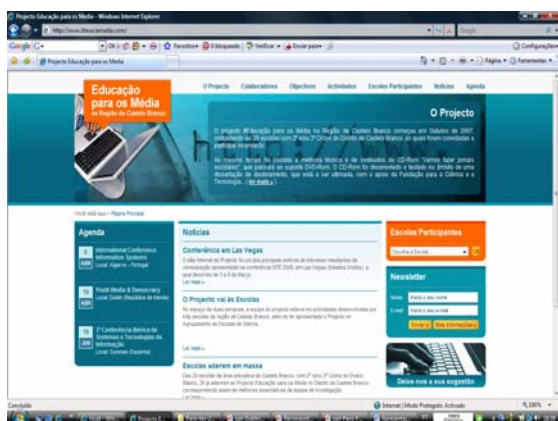
Thirdly, before the students' contributions (apart from class work) were articles about subject matters, other school activities (i.e. study trips) and important dates like the Father's Day, Mother's Day, St. Valentine's Day, and so on. After the subjects of the news stories written by the children were different because the students had chosen the subjects, or negotiated them with the teachers. The main subjects were animal protection, sports, music, and also subjects related to school life (i. e. the school bar schedule, the bad quality of the food in the school bar and so on).

Finally, before most students and teachers lacked journalism experience. But, after, in the teachers' opinions, the students improved their knowledge about journalism (i.e. different journalistic genres like news, report, interview, opinion article, and so on), but also about copyright.

Media Education in Castelo Branco region

The results were quite interesting. So, in October 2007, a three year scientific research project started. It was founded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT). The CD-Rom "Let's produce school newspapers" was the research starting point. Researchers from several Portuguese and foreign universities, a newspaper and a software enterprise joined us. The designed activities included field work with 29 groups of schools from Castelo Branco region, in order to produce school newspapers in the schools that do not have them yet, as well as the improvement of existing ones.

The website of the Project (www.literaciamedia.com) has an English version and underlines mostly the essential news to be developed during the three years of the Project, the Project team and the vast number of people that are collaborating within the Project. During the first months the news were mainly about the visits to schools and the presentation of papers in international conferences as well as the partnerships (i.e. Media Smart).



Project Website

From now on it will be a means to get in touch with the newspapers produced in schools by students and teachers, having also a fundamental role – to enlarge the relationships among the researchers, and the teachers of the participating schools. Besides the support of members of the project in schools whenever necessary the objective is to take advantage of new technologies. All the doubts and problems that may arise may be solved through the creation of a forum in the project website that may prevent travelling around the region and a waste of time.

Although authors as Breda (2005) and Gonçalves (2007) considering that it is too soon to what they call “ciber derive” of the school newspapers as they estimate that the number of schools that edit a school newspaper does not reach more than 10 per cent, we decided to create tools so that students and teachers could produce on-line school newspapers on a regular basis, even without expertise in the field.



Template for on-line newspapers production

We created a platform, to be available to all participating schools during the first semester of this school year. In that platform each school can produce one or more newspaper, with different editions of each one. The platform content can also be in various formats such as text, images, audio, video, as well as files with more than one format, i.e. multimedia. Finally, the platform has a system that allows news to be visualised in PDA cell phones.

Conclusion

Children and young people must be prepared to use media in a World where the new concept of literacy implies the use and interaction with media either digital and/or traditional. That's why we developed the project "Media Education in Castelo Branco Region".

The media resources of the project "Media Education in Castelo Branco Region" were developed between October 2007 and June 2008 and are available to the schools since October 2008. The goal is that students and teachers use these resources in the production of school newspapers either printed or online. The Project will finish in September 2010 with a final assessment made by international experts in the field.

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