



WORLD SUMMIT ON MEDIA FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

JUNE 14-18, 2010

KARLSTAD, SWEDEN

***Media Education: A tool for learning, creativity  
and democracy***

***(Seminar on Friday June 18 )***

***Gianna Cappello***

***University of Palermo, Italy***

***MED – Italian Association for Media Education***

***gianna.cappello@unipa.it***

# The contribution of ME

- I want to argue here that Media Education (ME) can give a special contribution in helping people to find ways of constructing a new sense of citizenship in a media-saturated world.
- Through ME, education (school in particular) will have the chance to open itself to society and media culture, and fill the gap between formal schooling and children's lived, media-bound experience.

# The contribution of ME

- In order to do that, I'm going to argue that we need to redefine the way in which the media are usually meant to be part of the schooling process:
  1. It is about teaching *technical AND cultural-critical* competences
  2. *It is about educating WITH the media* (the media as teaching aids), but also *educating TO the media* (the media as an object of critical study and creative use)
- The risk is that of promoting a merely instrumental/vocational vision of the media which does not ask teachers nor students to have a *thicker* knowledge of the complex functions the media play in contemporary society, especially in children's culture

# The contribution of ME

- I'm further going to argue that we need to work towards two other important directions. The first one:
  1. *Public policies are necessary in order to make access to digital media as pervasive as possible.* In other words, there should be more public spaces where people from all kinds of social and economic backgrounds are given some basic digital literacy and encouraged to familiarize, access and use digital with little or no cost.

# The contribution of ME

- The second direction:
- *Education as a whole should be redefined according to a ME, multi-contextual and lifelong-learning perspective. People (of all ages) should have the chance to take advantage – through education in all contexts: formal, informal, non formal – of media's potentialities in terms of socialization, self-expression, communication.*

# Children and the media

- In order understand how ME can fully deploy its potential, we need to look at three aspects concerning children's culture and everyday life.
  1. The changing role of formal education, i.e. school
  2. The recent developments in audience research
  3. The rapid (albeit uneven because of the digital divide) affirmation of ICTs in children's everyday life

# The challenges to school

- Over the last decades the socializing/educating function of schooling has been questioned by other more informal (often more effective) educating contexts: peer and sub-cultural groups, social movements and above all the media.
- The success of the media as fundamental shapers of youth's identities and sociality has challenged school in several ways.
- They have questioned a piagetian vulgate of learning which implies:
  1. a supremacy of alphabetical learning over "lighter" forms of it which *multi-sensorially* interpellate different forms of intelligence [Gardner 1993], that is...
  2. an exclusive preference towards the logical/rational side of learning (*abstraction-oriented*) and the confinement of the affective/physical side (*immersion-oriented*) to the early years of childhood, to certain disciplines, to laboratorial activities. etc.
- By questioning the supremacy of abstract forms of learning, the media require the adoption of an epistemological and methodological pluralism (new forms of knowledge-building, of mediation with students, of teaching approaches, of settings)

# Recent developments in audience research

- The field of media studies has traditionally adopted a behaviouristic stimulus-response approach that defines children as passive victims of media manipulations according to a linear model of media consumption:  
*Exposition → Identification → Behaviour reproduction → Gratification*
- Since the late '80, however, this deterministic model has been questioned by a more complex and multidimensional paradigm that argues that media texts decoding is much more active, complex, diversified and context-bound; it is a *social practice*
- This approach too, however, has some limitations, the most important being “cultural populism”
- I think that ME can help overcome cultural populism: while not denying the *pleasurable/active* side of media consumption, it can contribute to children’s broader understanding of their investments with media, enhancing their capacity to interact with them in a more reflexive way [Buckingham 2003].

# Children and ICTs

- ICTs are producing important changes in everyday life.
  1. They have increased people's access to information through sophisticated systems of data storage (CDs, DVDs, i-pods, etc.) and circulation (Internet and Intranet).
  2. They have de-materialized spatial-temporal boundaries creating new forms of relationships and communications .
  3. They have contributed to the globalization process, they have made the world more inter-dependent than ever increasing the free circulation of people, ideas, cultures (and also commodities and finances).
- These changes, however, have also produced “unintended, perverse effects”.
- The access to information, for example, has created new forms of exclusion, poverty and disenfranchisement (i.e. the digital divide) that intertwine with older forms of inequality;
- It has also led to an “overload of information”

# ICTs at school

- Despite these “perverse effects”, among politicians, media professionals and educators there seems to dominate a sort of *techno-utopism*, i. e. an instrumental progressivism that collapses innovation with the mere technological infrastructuring of schools.
- It is a view that brackets out the historical dimension of ITCs, *abstractly* identifying them with social change and “modernization”, glossing over the conditions, the conjunctures, the specific uses and interests which *concretely* lead to certain innovations rather than others.
- In fact ICTs (as all media) are neither mere tools for communication and information, nor simply teaching/learning aids. They are indeed “philosophical devices” that shape people’s life, transforming the spatial-temporal organization of social life as well as the ways in which people relate to reality, to themselves, to others

# ICTs at school

- Therefore it is not simply a question of having *physical* access to technology, of cabling all schools, of “giving each student a laptop”, as a popular slogan claims.
- More radically, education should enhance people’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.



**WORLD SUMMIT ON MEDIA FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

**JUNE 14-18 2010**

**KARLSTAD SWEDEN**

***Creativity and critical thinking skills in Media Education***

***(Seminar on Tuesday, June 15 )***

***Gianna Cappello***

***University of Palermo, Italy***

***MED – Italian Association for Media Education***

***[gianna.cappello@unipa.it](mailto:gianna.cappello@unipa.it)***

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- I want to argue here that media educators should strive to find a balance between critical analysis and practical media production activities.
- Media educators have recently come up with questioning the traditional dichotomy (typical of cognitive psychology) between the *cognitive* processes activated by critical analysis (for example, textual analysis) and the *affective/physical* processes originated by practical activity (such as videoproduction), with a clear preference for the former over the latter.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- Media educators have come to recognize that in order for critical analysis to be pedagogically relevant to students, it must be *situated* within their lived experience.
- It is just like the teaching of formal grammar: if it is to be meaningful for students, it needs to *applied to real texts in real contexts, and explored in practical ways*.
- In this sense, media production activities are similar to “a flight simulator for everyday life” [Silverstone 1999]. Just like with play, students may work in team, share and negotiate hypothesis, choices and solutions, imagine and arrange settings, plots, dialogues and characters and while doing that they learn how to interpret and cope with reality.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- Critical analysis and classroom media production activities should no longer be separate, they should in fact dialectically feed each other as a reflexive practice/a practical reflection.
- If you take them in isolation, they can't but fail, at least from a pedagogical point of view: critical analysis would amount to a merely abstract academic rhetoric far apart from students' lived experience and media productions would simply be a self-referential and subjective play removed from the study of the broader social, economic and cultural issues that are at stake with the media.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- This balance should be taken care of in all four areas of study of ME: *Production, Language, Representation and Audience* [Buckingham 2003].
- Quite often the practical, hands-on use of media technology is the most direct, challenging, motivating and effective way of exploring these areas.
- It is a question of *reading* the media through analysis but also *writing* them through creativity employing the whole range of media technologies available.
- Let's briefly look at these areas.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- In studying *Production*, the students are required to reflect on the economic aspects of the media, on how the increasing concentration of media affects the access to media. They will also reflect on the professional roles and modes which make the media machine run.
- As for the activities, the students could be asked, for example, to identify the companies that own their favourite magazines or produce their favourite television shows; they could study how different media target different audiences; they could reflect on how property (public or private) affects the output of television channels.
- Moreover, since, as I said, ME is about *reading* and *writing* the media, students should be asked to make their own magazines or videos in order to understand and experience in a *lived* manner the methods, the limits and constraints, the aims and interests conditioning media production.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- In studying *Language* issues, the students must identify the codes and conventions of media languages (their “grammar and syntax”) and reflect on how they create and convey meaning.
- As for the activities, students could learn how to make textual analyses of images in advertising and understand how the use of colour, sound, special effects, editing etc. contribute to create a certain brand image.
- Here again, the practical experience of production is very important. Students already make and exchange everyday tons of personal media productions (SMSs, MMSs, blogs, videos, etc.), yet they seldom reflect on the many linguistic choices they unthinkingly make while doing that: one of the aims of ME is precisely to encourage students to be more reflexive upon such choices and their consequences.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- The notion of *Representation* is one of the founding principles of ME: it expresses the idea that media do not “reflect” reality but rather “reproduce” it according to certain ideologies, values, stereotypes.
- Media representations inevitably give a particular – mediated – version of reality; they appear realistic when in fact they might be far away from reality.
- In studying media representations, the students could be asked to identify the female stereotypes presented in a soap opera, a pop music video or a TV commercial spot.
- Once again, hands-on activities are quite important in studying these issues that by nature tend to be quite abstract and difficult to cope with in a classroom. Students could be asked for example to produce contrasting representations of a person, a place, a situation, following certain ideological interests and motivations, and targeting a certain audience.

# ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- Audience research has recently questioned traditional assumptions about audiences showing that they are more active and diversified in their media uses/interpretations.
- Because of this complexity, the media industry has developed quite sophisticated techniques and strategies in order to target and attract particular portions of media audiences.
- The study of how that is attained is indeed one of the main objectives of ME: students could begin analysing how different audiences are addressed by different media texts.
- Again, that will be better done if they are given the possibility to make their own productions addressing different kinds of audiences so that they are enabled to reflect upon their own being part of an audience, their own being targeted and measured as “fans” by those who make their favourite media products.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- As seen, the balance between critical analysis and practical activity is very important in ME. It leads teachers to learn to step back and let students lead the way both because often they have far larger technical skills and also –more importantly – because production is precisely about students expressing and experiencing their own personal creativity.
- Teachers must learn to locate their intervention at the *meta* level of mediation, assistance and scaffolding, rather than in terms of transmitting some disciplinary knowledge to students: teaching *how* to learn and not what to learn.
- Teachers must help student integrate production work with broader the broader issues the activity is intended to explore.

## ***Creativity and critical thinking skills in ME***

- In the context of ME, media production should not be an end in itself.
- Of course, ME should enable students to “express” themselves creatively or artistically, and to use media to communicate; but it is not primarily a matter of training them in technical skills.
- In the context of ME, production must be accompanied by systematic reflection and self-evaluation; students must be constantly encouraged to make informed decisions and choices about what they are doing... that is the how you contribute to the construction of a critical citizenship in contemporary society!