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Editorial

30 September 2010 | Gianna Cappello and Maria Ranieri

One of the dominant themes in the current debate on the aims and fields of intervention of contemporary Media Education undoubtedly regards the concept of media literacy and its relation with similar notions such as digital literacy and information literacy. These expressions are not new, but recently they have received great attention from international organisms (e.g., UNESCO and the European Union) and from the academic world. The rapid evolution of information and communication technologies together with the emergence of new forms of expression and cultural production, of «new literacies» (Gee, 2003), have stimulated a growing interest in redefining the forms of literacies which are necessary today in order to participate actively in the knowledge society (Jenkins et al., 2006). At the same time, international organisms have been taking various legislative measures intended to enhance the development of new forms of literacies related to the media. As an example of initiatives promoted on a European level in the last five years, we can mention the several occasions the Union spoke about the necessity of interventions oriented at empowering European citizens with digital and media literacy (Celot e Tornero, 2008; Ranieri, 2010) and the renewal and extension of the European framework of basic skills by introducing digital competence among those fundamental for life (European Union, Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council 2006/962/EC). From these initiatives media literacy seems to emerge as the ability to develop cultural, critical and creative competences whereas digital literacy has to do with the capacity of using digital media to retrieve, assess, produce, and exchange information, and communicate in collaborative networks to participate in the so-called «knowledge economy», or the «information society». In particular, as regards digital literacy, scholars have more and more underlined the complex nature of this concept resulting from the integration between dimensions which involve engaging cognitive processes and ethical awareness (see Calvani, Fini and Ranieri, 2010 and also in this magazine Calvani, Fini and Ranieri, 2009: <http://formare.erickson.it/wordpress/?p=67>).

Whatever the differences between these concepts, another interesting open question regards their relationships with the concept of media education. In this case there seems to be a growing recognition that media education can be defined as the process of teaching and learning about/with the media, whereas media literacy is the outcome of it, that is the competence in reading and writing the media acquired through that process (Buckingham, 2003; Cappello 2009).

All together these elements have rekindled the debate around the following questions: what is meant by the concept of media literacy? Is it different from or does it coincide with other literacies such as digital or information literacy? How does it relate with the concept of media education? Why foster the development of media literacy? How can this competence be promoted and what tools can assess it?

Most of these questions were at the core of the countless sessions and round tables which took place in Karlstad (Sweden) in June 2010 at the World Summit on Media for Children and Youth (<http://www.wskarlstad2010.se>). With the intention of enhancing, at least, part of what came to light on these topics during the summit, we have invited some of the speakers to gather their own reflections on media literacy and on its collocation within formal curricula and within educational policies, giving particular attention to their national contexts.

This issue has therefore been realized thanks to the collaboration of the scholars who have accepted our invitation. It starts with a contribution by Renee Hobbs entitled Empowerment and Protection: Complimentary Strategies for Digital and Media Literacy in the United States, where the American scholar, founder of the Media Education Lab at the School of Communications and Theater of Temple University (Philadelphia, U. S. A.), introduces an articulate definition of the concept of digital and media literacy and shows how an education dedicated to fostering these competences is the gateway not only to the empowerment of citizens, but also to their protection. Far from stigmatized views of media and protectionist ideas, Hobbs shows clearly how media literacy education should play a key role in fostering the development of an active and responsible approach towards the media and sums up what is currently going on in North America.

Josè Manuel Pérez Tornero, Oralia Paredes and Núria Simelio propose two interesting contributions. The first one offers a well synthesized overview of the past and current EU policies on media and digital literacy, offering new ideas and insights to the debate about the conceptual and methodological differences and similarities between the two. The second contribution describes the history and current situation of media literacy in Spain. Unsurprisingly, it is a situation quite similar to the Italian one, that is the actors implied (education, regulators, industry, civil society) are aware of the importance of media literacy, yet all actions are generally uncoordinated and lack planning. Differently from Italy, however, media literacy seems to have entered the political and public agenda in a much more clear-cut way. In fact, a recent Law (Ley General de la Comunicación Audiovisual, 2010) officially recognizes the necessity that «Public authorities and providers of audiovisual communication services should contribute to Citizens' Media Literacy» (art. 6). It also requires that the National Council of Audiovisual (established by the same law) produces «an annual report of media literacy levels, using the indicators used by the European Commission and/or other indicators that the Council considers appropriate» (art. 6f).

Sol-Britt Arnolds-Granlund, researcher at the Faculty of Education of the Åbo Akademi University (Vasa, Finland), presents an article entitled Media Literacy in the Finnish, Nordic and European Perspective, where she focuses on the meanings attributed to media literacy in the Finnish context and on its integration within the school curricula, giving a brief, but comprehensive picture of the Nordic approach towards media education.

The issue concludes with two contributions by the editors. Gianna Cappello writes about the necessity that media education activities in the classroom integrate critical media analysis with creative media production as a way to reduce the gap between formal education and the out-of-school lived experience of the students. Through this combination media education (and education as a whole) can be more pedagogically effective in that students can explore and «play» with the «pleasures» of their media daily practices and at the same time understand the conditions under which such pleasures are socially constructed.

Finally, Maria Ranieri with an article titled «One is not born, but rather becomes an internet user!» A media education activity for the Italian junior

secondary school focuses on the issue of Internet credibility and youth, and introduces an educational experience aiming at promoting students' critical understanding about digital media, especially the Internet, in a junior secondary school in Italy.

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ISSN: 1825-7321 Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Trento n 1086 del 16/05/2001