EDUCATE TO COMMUNICATE: ANALYSIS OF A MEDIA LITERACY EXPERIENCE IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The adoption of a truly compromise on competency-based learning, so fostered today through diverse discursive sources (from legislative to informative), allows any active teacher to see the need to leave behind the conception and the merely instrumental use of digital media. Facing the uncritical employment of the new information and communication technologies, we should start to think about all the practical implications which that brings with it. In this sense, this proposal presents the design and experimentation of a media literacy project that, consisting of an independent subject for 4th of OSE (Obligatory Secondary Education), has been implemented in the 2018-2019 academic year in a private school of Seville (Spain).

In order to justify this project from a theoretical and practical standpoint, its essential didactic aspects are briefly described, paying particular attention to the design of a specific curricula whose contents range from the historical evolution of mass media to the most recent media problems, passing through the ideas of the main theorists of communication. All this has been worked through different active methodologies promoted by the school itself (flipped classroom, based-learning project, e-learning, etc.).

The experimentation itself has been analyzed using the ethnographic research method and the participant observation technique, with a researcher’s diary, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group as data collection tools. From this point, all the information gathered has been processed following the principles of the Grounded Theory, giving rise to a series of results that allow to formulate a double claim of the didactic potential of this proposal, but also a warning about the consequences of inserting a radically new experience in the context of a very traditional school culture.

On the one hand, this project has connected edumatical theory and practice in an alternative way to the curricular transversality that is claimed today, addressing successfully the development of media competence from the development of self-critical thinking, that is, from the invitation to the student to question their own responsibility in the construction of a social reality like the current one, mediated and mediated at the same time. On the other hand, however, there have been many practical problems to be solved, derived from the clash between the innovative nature of this proposal and the requirements of the old but still present paradigm of educational standardization.

Keywords: Media literacy, competence-based learning, critical thinking, experimental curriculum, educational innovation.

1 INTRODUCTION

For young people today (called “Generation Z”, “iGen”, etc.) Internet social networks are one of the most necessary spaces –sometimes even favourite– for building themselves as subjects, socializing and knowing the world. However, this fact forgets the increasingly widespread idea that the different types of current communication formulas, anti-repressive by definition, constitute new media strategies of social control. We could say that teenagers today feed this new paradigm of control by freely accepting (as their parents do, we should say perhaps) the consequences for the social and individual freedoms that they are already bringing with them: cookies, the “Internet of Things” or the phenomenon of Big Data in general, are tools that track our tastes, friendships, decisions and future plans, creating files that we don’t know and with which companies traffic with the objective of influencing our way of consuming. As a final consequence, such manipulation of the surrounding reality evidently affects the personal image that we create to sell ourselves to the rest.

On this socio-cultural background, the experience presented was based on what I think is quite palpable and unfortunately widespread in the school, understood as an institution that must respond to present and future challenges: the media competence is being worked from a purely instrumental and
non-reflective point of view. Inspiring the design of the experience that I am going to talk about, UNESCO’s Media and information literacy curriculum for teachers ([1]) establishes the current teacher must commit to an education capable of contributing to their students a set of tools and knowledge to help them to position themselves in a fair, safe and effective way in our technological societies. The importance of this can be understood thanks to the many projects and scientific texts on media education or media literacy developed in the last ten years ([2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]).

The diagnosis of my own Geography and History class in an educational center in Seville (Spain) (a previous analysis to this one, within the same action research) would facilitate, among other things, a first approximation to the lack of training that school work presents today with media or digital competence. That work allowed me to understand that in my classes I was promoting a partial development of the media competence, so much claimed today from the most diverse discursive sources (legislative, academic, informative, etc.), that is, an exclusively instrumental use, focused on tasks such as the search for information on topics of History or Geography, the realization of tests thanks to web tools, etc., but without a self-critical component that would allow my students to realize the ethical responsibility they have both with themselves and with the other Internet users. This and other ideas (for example, the absence of a work dynamic that transcends all subjects, as it’s claimed by the Spanish Law of Education) would lead me to ask the following question: what results can be extracted from the design and experimentation of a specific space for the development of media competence? This is how the idea of creating a “school research environment” came about.

2 METHODOLOGY

As I proposed to the Director of the school, this experiment would take the form of a new subject for 4th ESO, a level where we can estimate a minimum of intellectual maturity, entitled “Media Observatory”, to be taught during the 2018-2019 academic year, and whose general parameters are briefly described below.

In the first place, the main objectives of the subject would be:

- In line with what has said in the introduction, completing a competency-based learning that is not always directed towards the socio-cultural reality in which students live, for which specific evaluation criteria and learning standards would be established, developing in a transversal manner, not only the media competence, but also the communicative one, through its different dimensions (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, strategic, sociocultural, etc.).
- Implementing an innovative didactics that does not have theoretical or methodological limits, but is coherent with the functioning and school culture of the educational establishment (taking advantage of the pillars promoted by the school itself: flipped classroom, based-learning project, e-learning, etc.), as with the depth of the topics to be discussed.
- Using conceptual elements of contemporary philosophy and sociology, adapted to the educational level, to confront the attitudes, impressions and beliefs of the students regarding a set of cultural phenomena in which they participate.
- From the above, training a critical and self-critical capacity at the same time, aware of the influence exerted by the media of the XXI century, but also the responsibility that each one has regarding them.

Secondly, the curriculum of the subject “Media Observatory” would have a humanistic as well as a scientific approach (if indeed both fields can be distinguished), dividing into three main thematic blocks: 1) history; 2) reflection; and 3) context. Each one of them would be composed by three thematic units (to work one per month), in which several objectives or evaluation criteria would be pursued (to work one per week) around issues such as: the historical evolution of the mass media, the communicational and political thought of a series of fundamental authors, personal information on social networks, the analysis of certain media products or the creation and sharing of new digital content. Through these contents strategies of critical distancing would be worked, not only with respect to the media filter that distorts –when it does not directly construct– the social reality, but also

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1 “From the IRES [Investigación y Renovación Escolar] perspective, the ‘school research environments’ are sets of socio-environmental problems that act as organizers of the curriculum, are relevant to the understanding of reality and integrate, define and specify desirable school knowledge” ([8]). There is a wide bibliography about this method ([9], [10], [11], [12]).
with respect to the individual himself, who, through his actions, nourishes consciously or unconsciously certain devices of *power-communication*. All these elements were actually a synthesis of part of my own previous research experience, and to make them concrete in evaluable learning standards I took as a model the structure of the Real Decreto 1105/2014, of December 26, by which the basic curriculum of Secondary Education is established, in the same way that the design of many of these items would be inspired by the dimensions and indicators of media competence identified by a series of specialists consulted ([[13], [14], [15], [16]]).

Thirdly, the eminently active methodology of the “Media Observatory” would be based on the seminar and flipped classroom formats, although it has a fairly broad range of activities:

- An introductory presentation to each unit by the teacher.
- A brief weekly presentation of one of the authors of the topic by a student.
- A weekly reading of a text fragment of the selected author.
- The preparation of brief essays about some of the main contents of each topic.
- The daily commentary of historical sources and news of the press, and the development of debates, both individual and by teams, around them.
- The visualization and analysis of movie fragments related to the contents of the subject.
- The preparation of a cooperative research work to present in the last topic before the rest of the students of the school.
- The development of an entrepreneurship project about media awareness that was presented to the II Innovation and Entrepreneurship Fair organised by another local school.
- The development and maintenance of a Facebook page (“Media Observatory”) to share both news related to the subject and materials developed by the students themselves.

Fourth, within the evaluation system of the subject the following scales would be established:

- Contributions and participation in class (10 %).
- A monthly test on the contents worked (10 %).
- Weekly follow-up tests of the news (20 %).
- Class group activities (30 %).
- A monthly test of evaluation of the acquired knowledge (30 %).

Finally, the means and necessary resources would be the same as those already used in my subject of Geography and History; basically:

- Interactive Clevertouch screen, iPad, as work tools.
- Global Press, as a tool to follow news updates.
- Aula Planeta, as a platform to host the digital book.
- Socrative, Kahoot, Quizizz..., as digital tools to periodically evaluate the progression of theoretical learning.

The experience of all this would be analyzed from the perspective of the Grounded Theory, through ethnographic methods and the critical analysis of discourse, with the use of the participant observation technique and instruments such as the focus group, questionnaires or a researcher’s diary where I have been recording the development of each session and whose information focuses the analysis that follows².

² The units of information extracted from it have been coded following the criterion “DI-date-order of the fragment on that date”.

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3 RESULTS

3.1 Motivating potential

Thanks to its originality, the experience in general has been quite attractive for the students and I have easily captured their attention. On the one hand, the curriculum designed *ex profeso* around current media issues (censorship, manipulation, disinformation, etc.) is itself an incentive for them (“in her presentation about Andy Warhol, the student began to take control of the methodology and the required level” [DI-18/01/2019-01]). The students have felt especially comfortable expressing their respective attitudes, impressions and beliefs regarding a set of cultural phenomena in which they participate. On the other, this has also contributed to the methodological approach, in line with the methodological pillars of the school as well as very varied, trying to combine routines with activities whose formats try to surprise the students (“each group produces an improvised poster where sells some candidate for the Presidency of the Government. The activity is quite successful, once again, the class flies despite being the last of the week” [DI-18/01/2019-04]).

3.2 Improvisation

The main problems of the subject have to do with the need to improvise and readjust constantly the programming due to the little commitment and the anarchic functioning of certain students (“the student who should have done her presentation a month ago said that it wasn’t prepared yet” [DI-11/01/2019-02]), but also to the rhythm of work of the school. The calendar is altered eventually and many classes are lost (in December, for example, we lost three classes because of a bridge, a musical rehearsal and various activities before the Christmas holidays: something similar happened between February and March, due to a study trip and two classes occupied by examinations of other subjects). One fact, the latter, that should be attributed to its own status as a private school to which parents entrust their children seeking the combination of innovation and tradition in a framework of educational excellence and, at the same time, of what we could call a context of *limitless fun* (“this is a theme park”, as a teacher says). Given this type of circumstances, I chose to turn improvisation into the perfect excuse to design a space where each session would be a different adventure (“improvisation seems to become a surprise factor when conditioning each class to be different” [DI-23/11/2018-04]). The following fragment about what happened in the class of 25/01/2019 reflects this idea perfectly:

*It has been a frantic week and we are all exhausted. I haven’t had time to prepare the class, but during the previous class it occurs to me to look for a video about one of the subjects to deal with in the subject: the fake news. It is a documentary of the 2 of Tve [Televisión Española] that is very clear and interesting (http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/uned/bulos-canal/4943312/). All the students see it with enough interest to judge by their faces. Once the video is finished, I suggest them to write and answer a series of questions that have occurred to me during the visualization. They tell me that they are very tired and that they prefer to do it orally, although I warn them that I will also put positive and negative marks. The majority of students answer correctly. They enjoy the fact of having understood the political implications of such a current issue, although I have to remember the definition of some of the most complex concepts. In general, the class has succeed and led me to the idea that sometimes improvisation overcomes planning [DI-25/01/2019-04].*

3.3 Utility

The students feel comfortable intervening in the debates because, although they have not submitted topics such as privacy, censorship or fake-news to a reflective process, they do know that they are all part of their day to day, so from the first moment they have seen a usefulness in the subject. A fact that confirms in a certain sense the success of competence learning. It is especially interesting when they realise the influence of figures such as Edward Bernays (“what a good class!” [DI-09/11/2018-02], commented on the day in which this author was worked) or that there are debates that never end; for example, one around the question: “do communication practices improve or worsen political practices?” In the latter case, four of the five class groups expressed, through their respective spokespersons, that the communication is harmful because it generates problems such as ideological manipulation, but at the same time it offers some benefits because, through the leaking of certain information committed, it contributes to discover and denounce certain illicit political practices.
3.4 Evaluation

All this makes the rating system go to the background. In an environment in which students feel listened to and concerned about what is being presented to them, the inevitable standardization to assess the evolution of learning seems not to be a concern (“students are excited and relaxed. Such make them lower their guard” [DI-09/11/2018-04]). A fact that, together with the fatigue accumulated throughout the week, taking into account that we had the weekly session at the worst of the possible hours (the last on Friday), however resulted in a lack of generalized commitment that I wanted to reflect on the mid-course grades. It could be said that this evaluative and at the same time disciplinary measure characteristic of the traditional didactic model had an effect: “Against all odds and outraged by the low grades that they had achieved in the 2nd evaluation, they take the work seriously” [DI-05/04/2019-03]). From here, all students without exception would show an ideal attitude, interested and participatory, which would remain practically until the end of the year.

3.5 Difficulties

In parallel to the above, this experience has generated some difficulties of a very diverse nature. On the one hand, the digital media used, well integrated into the daily life of the school, have often met with old methodological inertias or the sloppiness of the students. Thus, for example, the objective of extending the weekly class beyond the established time for the subject has clashed with the fact that it was a subject perceived as very secondary by the students; not even the recourse to platforms such as EdPuzzle (in this case, to receive comments about a video) has been able to overcome that stigma. Another negative aspect is that, composed by radically new and relatively complex topics, the subject required a great mental maturity to place them in the context of the evolution of social media.

Some students have presented difficulties to guide their work or reflections. A fact that has to do with the lack of familiarity with some of the topics or authors treated. Thus, for example, the student who had to present the thought of Noam Chomsky based on one of his works on propaganda, focused exclusively on “the facet as linguist of the author, presenting ideas that have nothing to do with the subject” [DI-30/11/2018-02]. That is why the role of the teacher as counselor is so important today. Finally, a methodological difficulty has been derived from the rejection towards the cooperative project, perhaps due to excessive use in the rest of the subjects. The individual tasks or the group work that we could call short-range work have had much more success. This could be verified at the time of developing a project for a whole month to present it at an Entrepreneurship Fair organized by another school in the same city (“unproductive, demotivation, incomprehension. In the end, teachers have to do half of the project to be able to meet delivery deadlines” [DI-29/03/2019-02]).

4 CONCLUSIONS

The obtained results allow to formulate a double vindication of the didactic potential of the presented proposal, but also a warning about the consequences of implementing a novel experience of this type in the school context. Starting with the latter, it could be said that some questions have arisen that deserve specific attention, derived from the clash between the innovative nature of the proposal and the demands of the old but still present paradigm of educational standardization. By this I mean, for example, the fact that the subject must adjust to a specific qualification system to make average with the rest of the subjects. There is no doubt that the evaluation of competency learning in general is today one of the great challenges that educational systems must face. However, know-how requires even more time than mere knowledge, and the school context of our proposal is not precisely the scenario most prone to slow work rates; yes, on the other hand, to improvisations and constant readjustments in programming due to frequent class losses. A circumstance that undoubtedly acts as an aggravating factor of the lack of commitment of some students, but that, paradoxically, finds in the own evaluating need the best tool to revive the motivation of these. Both this and the realization of the loss of interest in supposedly innovative work formats require us to rethink the course of our experience for the future.

On the other hand, this project has connected educommunicative theory and practice in an alternative way to the curricular transversality that is claimed today, fostering the development of self-critical thinking, that is, the questioning of the responsibility that each one has in the construction of a social reality, like the current one, mediat and at the same time mediated. Despite not having yet the analysis of the progress of student learning (due to the date on which this report had to be completed), the latest observations point to a positive evolution with respect to prior knowledge of the subject. This, together with the attentive and committed attitude that has predominated in the classes,
guaranteed both by the selection of useful content for the students and by the use of a participatory methodology, varied and original for them (which does not necessarily mean innovative), suggests that the media competition has been successfully developed. In any case, what could begin to be considered would be if, in the case that this or another similar subject began to be integrated into the official curriculum of ESO, it would end or not adhering to so many standards that the students could begin to see it as more of the same, limiting its motivation factors.

Finally, it would be opportune to conclude by encouraging all those teachers who have the possibility of establishing an experiment between, on the one hand, the ideas about what media education should be and, on the other hand, the reality that needs to be confronted, to take it finished. Precisely for this reason, the presented project has opted for the didactic dimension and the application in it of certain readjustments based on previous research work. These have allowed each session to become a different adventure, leading to the idea that improvisation can generate better results than planning. In short, this has been just one of the infinite ways of counteracting the excesses of individualism in our culture through strong doses of self-criticism; an isolated spring with many aspects yet to be analyzed, but potentially effective in promoting the necessary conversion of the school into a transmedia counterpower dispositive.

REFERENCES


