The Practice of Media Education:
International Research on Six European Countries

Alberto Parola
Faculty of Education, University of Turin, Turin, ITALY
Maria Ranieri
Faculty of Education, University of Florence, Florence, ITALY

Abstract[1]

This paper presents and discusses the results of OnAir, a European project on Media Education funded by the European Commission. This two-year project aimed at collecting, documenting, and developing media education practices across Europe, especially in Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. In particular, the paper focuses on the role of documentation in improving teachers' practical knowledge and highlights the challenging aspects at stake in this process. The analysis of collected data reveals that documentation of media education practices is often poor both in terms of information about instructional practices and in teacher reflection on their actions. Stronger collaboration between teachers and researchers may be needed to support the kind of careful documentation that leads to effective practice. The development of adequate tools that teachers can easily use during their own activities may also facilitate improved levels of documentation.

Keywords: media literacy, media education, instructional practices, documentation, assessment, World Summit

Introduction

Over the last ten years the European Union (EC) has promoted several initiatives in order to encourage the development of digital and media literacy in the EU Member States (Celot and Tornero 2008). Groups of experts were formed to define actions, surveys were carried out, and a set of recommendations were published. For example, in December 2006 the European Parliament (EP) and the Council released two recommendations. In the *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (2006/962/EC), a new framework for key competences was outlined and digital competence was included among the competences for lifelong learning. Here digital competence is defined as involving "the confident and critical use of Information Society Technology (IST) for work, leisure and communication. It is underpinned by basic skills in ICT: the use of computers to retrieve, assess, store, produce, present and exchange information, and to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet" (European Parliament 2006, L. 394/16). At the same time, the EP published the *Recommendation on the Protection of Minors and Human Dignity* (European Parliament 2006), where the follow-ing aspects are emphasized: the need for teacher training on media literacy; the inclusion of media literacy in the curriculum to enhance children's capacity of self-protection; and promote responsible attitudes among all users.

At the same time a variety of impressive research projects for a better understanding of the impact of digital media on the life of minors were implemented. One of the most important is the research project EU Kids Online (http://www.eukidsonline.net), which focuses on the relationship between the media and minors both in terms of protection as well as empowerment. As a matter of fact, digital media introduce risks (exposure to dangerous or scarcely reliable content; connections with strangers, privacy, cyberbullying and cyberstalking; illegal downloading, gambling etc.), but also offer opportunities, such as accessing information resources, participating in social networks and interest groups, exchanging information; forms of civic engagement and content creation activities (Staksrud et al. 2009; Hasebrink et al. 2008).

Other research areas also deserve further development, particularly on the pedagogical-educational and assessment levels (Ceretti et al. 2006; Trinchero

2008). There is a need to promote greater pedagogical awareness among educators and teachers regarding the aims and ways of implementing media education (ME) through the elaboration of appropriate educational models to develop students' media and digital competences. This dimension has recently been highlighted by various scholars (Calvani 2010; Jacquinot 2009), who underline the need to define more clear teaching and evaluation models within the field of media literacy education.

The research study here presented stems from the wide framework we have outlined above and was carried out within the OnAir European project [http://www.onair.medmediaeducation.it/]. In this paper, we introduce the overall aims and structure of the project and discuss its main results related to the documentation of ME practices and the promotion of media competences. Indeed, documentation stands as a key step towards a better understanding of teaching practices in ME and their development. However, as we shall see, due to lack of time, research skills, and experience, in several situations during the project teachers were not able to effectively document their own work in the classroom. As we show in this paper, teachers may not have the habit of taking notes on their activities and of engaging in reflective writing about their practice. Little attention is devoted to the evaluation of learning processes, suggesting that teachers may not be able to effectively improve their work in the pedagogy of media education itself.

How can these challenging situations be tackled? How can teachers and educators be supported in the crucial activity of documenting ME practices? We shall explore these questions at the end of the paper. Let us first focus on the overall context of the research project and its main results.

The Research Context: Aims, Partners, and Structure

The OnAir project was funded by the European Commission within the Life Long Learning Program 2008/2010. It was promoted by the Faculty of Communication of the University La Sapienza (Rome, Italy) and by MED, the Italian Association of Media Education. Other partners were: INFOREF (Belgium), Zinev Art Technologies (Bulgaria), Pixel (Italy), Easy Technology (Italy), Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania), WSinf (Poland), ActiveWatch-Media Monitoring Agency (Romania).

The partners were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (1) preference to active organizations in countries that have recently joined the European Union, particularly Eastern European countries (in order to enhance European integration, the EU tends to favour projects with considerable participation by eastern countries); (2) non-profit organizations (universities, agencies, associations) working within the media and education field able to involve schools, school principals, teachers and pupils; and (3) past experience in research on media and media literacy education. The role played by the Italian agency Pixel, which has been working in European project design and management for years, was crucial in building the partnership. This organization was responsible for the preliminary contacts between the partners and for the ensuing organizational coordination.

This partnership has two characteristics worth mentioning. First of all, it involves Eastern European countries where ME does not have a long tradition, but various extremely interesting initiatives are starting up in the sector. An example is the *ActiveWatch-Media Monitoring Agency,* a human rights organization that advocates for free communication in the public interest and, among other things, engages in developing media consumers' critical sense towards media messages.

Secondly, one of the promoters of the project is MED, the Italian Association of Media Education, a non-profit organization established in 1996 in Rome, which involves academics, media professionals and a number of teachers with the aim of promoting research, study, and experimentation in the field of media education, media studies, and pedagogy. The work carried out by MED in these past fifteen years has provided the basis for the very conception of the project, whose aims can be summarised theoretically, developmentally, and in terms of the educational program itself. *On a theoretical level*, researchers consider media educational practices as research objects, reflecting on pedagogical models and teaching instruments used in the field of ME, and defining tools for the documentation and evaluation of practices. *On a developmental level,* MED aims to improve teachers and schools' attitudes towards research and experimentation through the promotion of already existing ME practices and involving teachers in the design and development of new ME materials. Finally, *on a training level*, the aim is to foster teachers' capacities of "exploiting" the potential of digital media, mainly for the appeal they have on new generations: with and through new media, teachers should be able to

motivate younger generations in rediscovering and in appreciating the importance of writing abilities and of the ability needed to become aware users of media.

The structure of the study was organised in two main research areas, one focusing on sociological aspects (Cappello and Cortoni 2011) and the other on pedagogical issues and practices (Parola and Ranieri 2010, 2011; see also Hobbs 2011). Here we shall focus on the educational aspects of the research, which was managed by Italian researchers and supported by the teachers and students of the schools involved in the project.

The pedagogical research was articulated into three main phases and for each phase specific tools and materials were developed as shown in Table 1.

ME Practices, Trends and Perspectives

The first phase of this project involved the collection of already existing ME practices, involved all partners (except the firm which dealt with the overall management of the project), and required a common understanding of the theoretical and methodological background and specific procedures.

We shared a media competencies framework on which to base the choice of ME practices. Based on the previous theoretical work carried out by MED's researchers (Ceretti et al. 2006), four main areas were identified: (1) reading the media: the ability to read media and decode media languages; (2) writing the media: the capacity of producing media texts and of using digital instruments for creative purposes; (3) critical understanding and evaluation of the media: the complex attitude of observing media contents and objects from a distance; (4) media consumption awareness: the capacity of creating awareness as to choices in the consumption of media understanding the explicit and implicit media messages in different situations.

After having clarified concepts and terms, a second step was to create a methodological tool to gather information on teaching practices and document the underlying processes. The tool, called the Case Study Form, was developed by MED researchers and then shared and discussed with partners. The form was divided into a general section which included title, abstract, topic, areas of competence, and media used; and an analytical section which included a description of objectives and purposes, teaching methods, documentation and evaluation strategies, results, challenges, lesson learnt, transferability, future development and the context of the experience.

Table 1 - Overview of the OnAir Research Process

Phase 1 – Collection, Analysis and Evaluation of ME Practices

The aim of this phase was to identify, collect, document, and evaluate ME practices and experiences carried out in the national contexts of the countries involved in the project. The purpose was twofold: on one hand, analyzing all the collected practices, to discover trends in ME practices with a focus on media skills/competences and pedagogical issues, and reflect on a possible agenda for future research; on the other hand, the aim was to enhance teachers' work, by selecting and disseminating significant ME experiences carried out in schools through the creation of an online database. To accomplish these complex objectives partners shared a common media competence framework, a set of indicators to collect information on ME practices and criteria to evaluate them.

Phase 2 – Designing and Developing Online ME Teaching Materials

The purpose of this phase was to plan and develop ME modules, taking into consideration the results of the analysis of practices collected in the previous phase. Eight modules were created regarding different media competence areas and based on the instructional principles derived from the experiential learning cycle (Pfeiffer & Jones 1985). Each module included a description of the teaching/learning processes, teaching tools and materials, and a short video-presentation where teachers involved in the project presented the structure of the activities.

Phase 3 - Testing ME Teaching Materials and Practices

In each country, a pilot group of teachers tested the teaching materials which were created in phase 2 in order to evaluate theory quality and effectiveness. The experimentation was supported by a team of researchers, who provided methodological tools (e.g., questionnaires, guidelines for interviews and focus groups, evaluation forms, observation forms, etc.) and guidelines. The purpose was to define possible criteria to evaluate and validate ME practices as well as to provide guidelines for the development of effective ME actions.

A third step in the process was to define explicit criteria for the selection of practices to be documented. The criteria taken into consideration were the pertinence to the context (i.e., the school and formal learning); the target addressed (i.e., students aged 6-16); and the media competences considered in the project (i.e., reading and writing media, critical understanding and evaluation of the media, media consumption awareness). Finally, we placed a priority to experiences and projects with good documentation of planning, development, and materials used.

After having shared concepts, tools, and selection criteria, the partners also defined a strategy to search for ME practices that could potentially be included in the collection. Each partner had the task to collect fifty ME practices developed in its country. This was an ambitious goal that could not be achieved by randomly selecting a sample of schools and asking them to fill in the Case Study Form. As it is commonly known, ME in European schools is not widespread, so in order to find experienced teachers in the field each partner had to consult not only schools but also multiple national databases and associations. When cooperating teachers were found, each partner checked whether the ME experience was consistent with the criteria mentioned above.

The next step was to show teachers how to complete the Case Study Form to document their work and to start collecting information. The process was coordinated by partners within the individual countries. Teachers were asked to fill in the form by providing as much information as possible and writing down their reflections. Moreover, they were required to produce 'pieces of evidence' of their courses such as students' products, logbooks, photos or video documenting meaningful situations (e.g., interaction among students during a discussion group or students' reactions to external inputs coming from the teachers or experts).

The teachers found the task of documenting their work using an online form quite demanding for several reasons. Indeed, as seen above, the form included a number of items requiring a large amount of information. As a result, the practice of documentation was time consuming, and time is a precious and scarce resource for teachers. Moreover, teachers are not used to taking precise notes about their work. Whether we like it or not, the activity of writing about teaching practices seems to pertain more to researchers rather than to teachers themselves.

For all these reasons, teachers played alternative roles in the project as both researchers and as informants. As researchers, teachers documented their own practices, generally as independent work done alone by filling in the form. Teachers who were unable to complete the form served as informants as the information they provided to researchers was input into the online form.

At the end of the process more than 300 ME practices were collected in the six partner countries. These materials were published in English on the online database of the OnAir portal [http://www.onair.medmediaeducation.it/] which is freely accessible. Figure 1 shows an example of a completed database entry. Database fields included: name of author(s), teaching methods, media skills, media, media issues, curriculum/subject area, partner who uploaded the file, abstract, full description, and space for comments from external persons.
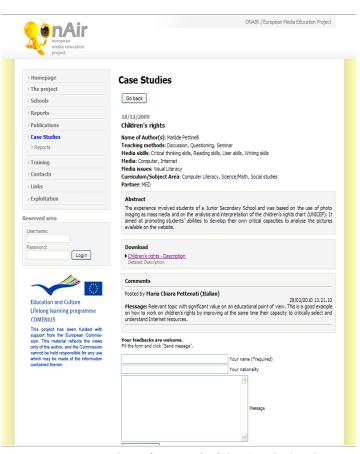

Figure 1. A screenshot of a record of the OnAir data base (http://www.onair.medmediaeducation.it/casestudies.aspx)

The practices collected in this way underwent a quantitative analysis through a long and complex encoding procedure, and they were also analysed, discussed, and assessed by expert teachers on the basis of a common set of indicators (for a full analysis of the results see Parola & Ranieri 2011).

Some trends emerged from the quantitative analysis. We first examined the range of competencies that were identified most frequently. Among the typical objectives of the media education practices, the most frequent ones are related to media writing and reading skills, while skills related to media consumption are the least frequent ones, irrespective of the specific national contexts. On one hand, these results seem to suggest that teachers apply media education practices when they are combined with the development of skills that are more easily referable to the traditional curriculum. On the other hand, they could be also indicative of the difficulty teachers may experience when structuring teaching activities designed to foster increased awareness of media consumption. If this is a difficulty, it could be overcome by developing more tools to address teachers' lack of familiarity with this area. It may be a challenge for teachers when addressing ME within the school context because topics such as exploration of mass media, popular culture, home media, and use of technology may not seem to be "appropriate" topics for discussion.

A second point that deserves attention is the fact that the so-called digital media are clearly prevalent: computers and Web 1.0/2.0 seem to dominate school media practices. In order to reflect on this point and its implications we should also mention another element related to the large number of media education practices oriented at media production, which is probably a consequence of the proliferation of user-friendly digital tools for media creation. At the same time, it should also be pointed out that classic media education topics, like analysis of stereotypes and of representation or the study of media like cinema, are almost completely lacking from among the collection of lesson plans collected in this study.

We believe that the prevalence of media education activities oriented towards production accompanied by the almost total absence of attention towards the classic issues posed in ME should make us reflect. Considered on its own, the first point could, to a certain extent, be interpreted positively. It could mean that the idea of ME as totally and exclusively oriented to the critical analysis and understanding of media has been completely surpassed. For a long time it was believed that the main objective of ME was to demystify the ideological dimensions of media representations, thus developing critical sense. This preference for critical analysis led to a substantial devaluation of "production-creation" activities, because they were considered of no pedagogical value. As Cappello (2010, n.p.) explains, "Animated by a general Frankfurtian suspicion of the deceptive pleasures of popular culture, media educators have long believed that any kind of media production in the classroom was a form of 'technicism', of 'cultural reproduction', of 'deference and conformity' to dominant media practices."

This view has been widely criticized by several scholars (Cappello 2009, 2010; Livingstone and Haddon 2008; Buckingham 2003). According to the new approaches to ME, the risk of 'technicism' still lingers on, but media creation cannot be reduced to just using devices and technological tools. Media have a symbolic value that play a crucial role in the lives of young people and children by providing them with opportunities for creative self-expression and play (Cappello 2010). It is in light of this argument that the presence of a high number of media production activities can be interpreted positively.

However, this same fact accompanied by the lack of attention for classic topics like analysis of representations raises some doubts. It seems as though media education practices within the school context have all been limited to "practical production." But practical production on its own is not enough. It is only by joining theory to practice, critical analysis to media production, that the dangers - which are still lurking - of limiting activities to simple technical training can be avoided.

For example, among the collected practices we found some product-oriented experiences where the final production was brilliant in terms of technical performance but there were no traces of student contribution. In this case, it seems that the concern to create technically impressive products prevailed over the attention towards the quality of learning processes and students' participation. Another example where the production activity can be trivial is when the ability of writing digital texts is reduced to the mere ability of using software to edit online texts. Among the practices we collected in the OnAir project we found some projects on digital writing where the emphasis was on learning how to use the technical functionalities of social software such as blogs or wikis rather than understanding the rhetoric

that characterizes these software and how media languages can be mastered.

Two more elements stand out in the data collected. The first one regards the scarce attention given to documentation of media education activities carried out in class. We know that documentation is far from being simple and that it presents the teacher with a real challenge: how can a teaching experience be described? How can a multidimensional and complex activity like teaching be translated into words? As Castoldi (2010) observes, finding appropriate answers to these questions constitutes a challenge that comes up in relation to any practical knowledge, and media education knowledge is practical knowledge. At the same time, if it is deemed necessary to enhance and improve research around practices, documentation becomes inevitable, especially in the perspective pursued in this study and inspired by research-action. And yet, the documentation field is still weak. We have noticed such a weakness on different occasions. In the phase of collecting practices and case studies, the structured form was deemed too analytical, requiring too many words and details. We had quite a bit of difficulty in recovering the number of forms we required and we also had to prepare a shorter version. In the analysis phase we very often found that teachers had not documented the experience and, presumably, had not analyzed it either. After all, even information in the forms about the critical issues that emerged during the process of the activity is not much.

Let us finally consider assessment. Most of the collected experiences did not plan any tools explicitly and consciously aimed at assessing students' learning. We are all interested in carrying out learning activities that are effective, but few of us focus on the problem of assessment and the construction of adequate tools. As Bisogno (1995, p. 94) reminds us to consider documentation as "knowing what was done to be able to do," we ask to consider assessment as "evaluating carefully what was done to be able to do better." Below we present some findings in our assessment of the best instructional practices in critical competence, civic journalism, digital citizenship, creativity in media production, and community building.

Examples of Good Practice

The evaluation process was managed at the local level by each partner within a national context and involved expert teachers not directly involved in the documentation activity. Teachers discussed the practices according to a common set of pre-defined criteria

ranging from the educational objectives to the feasibility of the experience, from the accuracy of the documentation to the quality of the production. Other criteria could have been taken into consideration. However, the significance of the initiative lies in having directly involved the teachers in the evaluation process and in having made the evaluation criteria explicit. In each country partners identified and contacted about 15-20 experienced teachers. In Italy, for example, we involved supervisor teachers working at the Faculty of Education of the University of Florence and the Faculty of Education of the University of Turin. A first meeting was organized to explain the objectives of the activity and the expected results, and to provide teachers with all the documentation about the ME practices and an evaluation grid. Each teacher analyzed and evaluated the practice individually. About fifteen days later, another meeting was organised where teachers discussed the practices they analysed in small groups and compared their evaluations. During the analysis of concrete practices they also discussed the criteria suggested for the evaluation. The aim of the group discussions was to negotiate a shared view on the evaluation judgments, and to analyze the strong and weak points of the ME practices.

At the end of the evaluation process almost all the evaluators agreed that documenting, analyzing, evaluating, and disseminating teaching practices, especially in new domains such as those related to ME, is fundamental. Due to lack of time, teachers are not used to sharing their experiences with colleagues and reflecting on their own practices in order to improve them.

Among the analyzed practices, some proved to be particularly relevant regarding both the topic dealt with and the teaching approach followed (see also Bruni 2010). We addressed four themes: (a) critical competence, civic journalism, and digital citizenship; (b) creativity and media production; (c) media education and curriculum; and (d) media education and community building.

Critical competence, civic journalism, and digital citizenship

Two Italian practices were focused on topics related to critical thinking and civic journalism, e.g. "From Digital Naïf to (partially) Critical Surfers" by Marco Guastavigna, aiming at promoting students' cultural competence and awareness regarding the Net, and "The Historical Newspaper - Asti 1861" by Patrizia Vajola and Carla Cavallotto, focusing on the creation of a

newspaper about news related to an imaginary day of a symbolic date of the past. These projects are detailed below.

The first project was carried out in autumn 2009 in a vocational school in Turin (i.e., the IIS Beccari) involving one class of students aged 13 - 14. Having realized that his students were ingenuous about the use of Facebook and YouTube, Mr. Guastavigna decided to involve them in a media literacy education process to teach an aware and critical use of these social media. In particular, the project focused on issues such as the presence of advertising within social networks, the risks of posting personal information, the implications of sharing images, video, and media products in general, the existence of an etiquette to be followed online, and the opposition to cyberbullying.

In the introductory phase, audiovisual materials on the subject were shown to the pupils. Some of these materials were borrowed from campaigns by the social network itself. Students were then asked to find more examples through navigation and management of their profiles, and to analyze Facebook's and YouTube's terms of use. The additional material they found was then shared and analysed in class. At the end of the process students realized that they had been totally unprepared in terms of ethical and social implications of media use.

The second project was carried out in the IIS Vittorio Alfieri in Asti by Patrizia Vayola and Carla Cavalletto. This experience is based on the creation and production of a newspaper, involving students aged 17 – 18 from vocational and high school institutes in the design and production of an imaginary issue of a historical journal, dating back to a specific year in Italian history (i.e. 1861, which represents the symbolic year of the Italian unification), and written following the stylistic and linguistic strategies of today's journalism. The workshop laboratory on the study of the Italian Risorgimento allowed students to look into various types of newspaper texts with the aim of developing writing skills for passing the high school leaving examination, which requires students to compose essays or other short written texts.

Many features of this activity rendered it an effective ME practice, including the following:
• accessing both analogical and digital sources
• using different modes and techniques of group work
• the creation of an editing staff
• the realization of a product that could be disseminated locally

• an attempt to go beyond the traditional school report style and connect with the demands of narrative journalism;
• the transition from the dummy to the actual layout
• the opportunity provided to the students to implement their knowledge and enable them to become protagonists in the construction of their knowledge by adding consistent integrative information
• the possibility of working on vocabulary by creating clear and accessible messages and eliminating the trivial use of language
• the opportunity to work on the acquisitions of both disciplinary and transversal competences.

As stated by the teachers who designed and developed the learning experience, it also increased mutual respect among students and empowered at-risk students or students with learning difficulties. These students were given the opportunity to raise their self-esteem thanks to the improvement of their ability and skills.

Creativity and media production

Production and creativity are some of the key words of the project "Literature in Virtual Dimension - Interdisciplinary Contest," promoted and managed by Corina Oprescu and other teachers of the Zinca Golescu College in Pitesti (Romania) for five years. This is a competition for students from 9th to 12th grade, and open to the participation of young people by involving organizations in the area. The aim is to produce multimedia educational materials on literature through an interdisciplinary approach based on various communication tools. The media outputs range from web pages to video clips, magazines, or photo reports. Students are guided through various steps, from the organization of the groups to the development of a work plan, from the search for information to the design of a multimedia product, up to the implementation through specific software. In the final event, all products are officially presented by the working group, and submitted for evaluation by an application committee composed of teachers and professionals. The organisers believe that the competitive context, coupled with the collaborative mode of production, is an added value to stimulate and engage young people, who can build on their skills and expertise.

Media education and the curriculum

The issue of the relationship between ME and the curriculum has been much debated. As is widely known, there are several approaches to the issue. Here

we focus on two projects: an optional course carried out in Romania entitled "Teaching Competence in Mass Media," and an interdisciplinary course in Bulgaria entitled "Media in High School Education: Opportunities and Challenges." The first course (35 hours), managed by Lavinia Rizoiu, was delivered in Pitesti, Romania during the 2008/2009 school year to the students of the Zinca Golescu upper secondary school who were 17-18 years old. It focused on traditional ME topics, covering different areas: from the identification of the types of messages to their critical analysis, from knowledge of production techniques to the identification of stereotypes and prejudices, from the creation of media texts to democratic participation. The instructional practices of textual analysis, brainstorming, simulations, role-playing, and production activities in groups were used. A fair level of technical knowledge was noted among pupils, who worked on photographic and video production, developing a critical attitude and an awareness of ethics.

The second project, coordinated by Elena Sayanova, was aimed at the implementation of ME into the curriculum. It took place between 2005 and 2008 in Stoychev Nicola High School in Razlog (Bulgaria) , involving more than 100 classes, with the availability of specific funding, albeit insignificant. The initial stages of the project were addressed to teachers. Teachers received special training and worked both on how to integrate the ME programmes and on the methodologies to be adopted. Through well-coordinated work, it was possible to achieve an interdisciplinary learning experience that explored connections between music, physics, ICT, social studies, languages, and literature designed for students and media literacy skills--acquisition of citizenship. The activities that were proposed during the course ranged from writing newspaper articles to analyzing online communication and video games, from investigation of stereotypes to risk behaviours related to the use of media products. The biggest challenge in the project was the strong initial resistance by teachers, but thanks to teacher training and good coordination the project finally worked.

Media education and community building

The project, "Event Art or How to Avoid Tags" was managed by Vincent Meessen, a teacher from Saint Luc Secondary Institute in Liege, Belgium. It can be considered a good example of using media to promote socialization and make students aged 18-19 reflect on the importance of taking care of school spaces, which

are often wasted areas where youth practice the production of graffiti tags. With this aim in mind students are asked to select a topic of interest from newspapers, look into it more thoroughly via Internet search and ultimately achieve a personal artistic work, to be exposed for the entire school year in the canteen premises. Figure 2 shows an example of student produced work. According to participating teachers, the impact on schools is indisputable, as the project has produced increased respect for the school environment and has led to the end of tagging.

Figure 2: An example of students' work

The only prerequisite is the willingness to solve the problem of protecting structures while allowing students' freedom of expression, rather than using repressive methods, less costly in terms of money, but also less productive. Pupils, in fact, are characterized as being hypersensitive, thrill seekers, idealists who want to be distinguished from their peers, young people who want to express themselves and lead independent lives. Incidents of vandalism are a symptom of a profound inability to communicate, except through elementary forms, as provocative as the tag. This project, therefore, aims at giving a voice to students, making them aware of their membership in society and in the school community, which are ready to listen and provide the students with the necessary tools and space to express themselves.

Final Considerations

It's an exciting time for media education in Europe. Several initiatives have been launched and a number of national and international research studies on digital media and new generations have been realized pushing to shift the protective paradigm to one focused on children empowerment.

In this context, the teaching profession becomes important in the present day for two reasons. First, in many situations the teacher represents the unique point of reference for many children and young people because they spend most of the day at school. Moreover, the teacher should recognize talents in a world that seems to be split on two sides: the educational and protective school environment on one hand, and the rich and extremely seductive media environment 'outside'. One of the priorities of his/her profession asks the teacher to identify the students' critical thinking attitudes such as intellectual curiosity, flexibility, ability to think and operate in a systematic way, the ability to analyze, the value-based approach to knowledge, self-esteem and, also, the ability to trust in other people.

Although teachers play a fundamental role, professional practice in the media education field is still unstable. The creative range of good practices documented through the OnAir project and described in this paper show that in schools it is possible to carry out sustainable, relevant, interdisciplinary media education courses focused on specific media competences (and not on generic technological abilities). "The Historical Newspaper – Asti 1861" experience, for example, is an excellent example of "sustainable" media education, where using few resources and good planning a significant course of instruction occurred. The tasks corresponded to the school level, the course proved to be quite complex regarding media skills development (reading, writing, and critical thinking) and important challenges for future schools emerged (as, for example, collaboration between different types of schools: normal and vocational). The "From Digital Naïf to (partially) Critical Surfers" project produced fundamentally important results, not only for ME as such, but also regarding acquiring useful abilities and competences in all fields of life. And yet again, the "Literature in a Virtual Dimension. Interdisciplinary Contest" experience, focusing on competition and creativity, enhances the interdisciplinary perspective (literature, media, art), while the "Event Art, or How to Avoid Tags" project tends to develop critical thinking towards the media through graphic productions, using also current

political events. While from the "Media Education at High School – Opportunities and Challenges" project we can infer how the students worked hard in a series of editorial tasks, as though they were already working in the media sector (the press, radio, TV, the web, etc.). Similarly, the "Competence into Mass Media" project is clearly focussed on activities aimed at familiarising with the media and at developing knowledge and competences in this sector, which could come in handy in the pupils' professional future. Very briefly, these are the positive aspects, but there are also some gray areas. More specifically, the common critical elements on which the scientific community should deeply reflect are those related to documentation and evaluation of practices. As a matter of fact, when present, the first element almost always supports the narration of activities (in and out of the school) and gives little importance to the media educational process underway. While the second element, which is almost always present, is carried out as though ME experiences were intrinsically educational and do not need further elaboration because of the belief, for example, that critical thought can develop naturally after media-related activities. Unfortunately, we have no doubts that this is not so, precisely because given that competences need time to consolidate, each one has to be developed and monitored gradually. Moreover, judging from our experience, it seems that ME activities, though well-rooted in most teachers' daily teaching, are still considered as "leisure activities" which can be managed and controlled by teachers in the classroom, but not as regards the transferability and the evaluation of the experience. Table 2 presents a summary of the strong and weak points of the media education practices found in this study.

Table 2: Strong & Weak Elements of ME Practices Analyzed

Strong Points	Weak Points
Relevance of learning aims and purposes, often related to social life, citizenship and so on	Learning objectives not clearly defined: they were often indicated in general and ambiguous terms
Original and innovative ideas	Low attention to document and evaluate the learning process
Emphasis on learning by doing, cooperative learning and critical thinking	Level of students' participation not always clear (one recurrent question was: "Are you sure that the product has been really realized by the students?").

So, a lot of work still has to be done regarding documentation and evaluation. We believe there are three key points that have to be kept in mind when tackling this challenge. First of all, greater collaboration between researchers and teachers is necessary: shared field work not only improves action and research, but is also useful to develop teachers' specific research competences that can be put to use in future situations. Secondly, researchers should not underestimate the need to improve teachers' knowledge; consequently, much greater attention should be paid to the design and implementation of tools that support and facilitate documentation and reflective evaluation by teachers. These are both quite complex activities that could be rendered easier if ready-made and easy-to-use tools were available.

Thirdly, documentation methods other than writing ought to be considered, for example video documentation which offers quite a few advantages. More information can be gathered; subjects can be seen in action, more than once and the video can be stopped; it can be commented alone or in a group; several voices can be heard at the same time, not just the teacher's but also the students' voices; in a nutshell video documentation can enrich our knowledge of reality in order to understand more today and improve in future.

[1] Even though this paper has been jointly conceived by Alberto Parola and Maria Ranieri, Alberto Parola edited the following sections: The research context and Final considerations , and Maria Ranieri edited the Introduction, ME practices. Trends and Perspectives, ME Practices: some examples of "good practices".

References

Bisogno, Paolo. 1995. *Il futuro della memoria – Elementi per una teoria della documentazione*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Bruni, Isabella. 2010. "The Practice of Media Education. Topics, Issues, and Examples." In *Media Education in Action. A Research Study in Six European Countries*, edited by Alberto Parola and Maria Ranieri, 153-66. Firenze: Firenze University Press.

Buckingham, David. 2003. *Media Education. Literacy, Learning and Contemporary culture*. London: Polity Press-Blackwell Publishing.

Calvani, Antonio. 2010. "Dove va la Media Education? Riflessioni sull'identità della M. E. nella società contemporanea." *Media Education. Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche 1* (1): 13-25.

Cappello, Gianna. 2009. *Nascosti nella Luce. Media, Minori e Media Education*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Cappello, Gianna. 2010. "Beyond the critical vs. creative debate. New challenges for media education in the digital age." *Form@re*, 70, September 30. http://formare.erickson.it/wordpress/en/2010/analisi-critica-vs-produzione-creativa-le-nuove-sfide-della-media-education-nell%E2%80%99era-digitale.

Cappello, Gianna and Ida Cortoni. 2011. "Crescere e insegnare nella società in rete." *Media Education. Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche*. Special Issue on the European Project OnAir 1 (1): 17 – 32.

Castoldi, Mario. 2010. *Didattica Generale*. Milano: Mondadori.

Celot, Paolo and José Manuel Perez Tornero. 2008. *Media Literacy in Europa. Leggere, scrivere e partecipare nell'era mediatica*. Roma: Eurilink, Eurispes.

Ceretti, Filippo, Damiano Felini, and Roberto Giannatelli, eds. 2006. *Primi Passi nella Media Education*. Trento: Erickson.

Hasebrink, Uwe, Sonia Livingstone, and Leslie Haddon, eds. 2008. *Comparing Children's Online Opportunities and Risks Across Europe: Cross-national Comparisons for EU Kids Online*. London: EU Kids Online.

Hobbs, Renée. 2011. "Un'istantanea multinazionale sulla ME in sei paesi europei." *Media Education. Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche*. Special Issue on the European Project OnAir 1 (1): 53 – 70.

Jacquinot, Geneviève. 2009. "De quelques repérages pour la recherche en education aux médias." In *EuroMeduc. L'éducation aux medias en Europe. Controverses, défis et perspectives*, edited by Paul Verniers, 143-51. Bruxelles: EuroMeduc.

Kirkpatrick, Donald L. 1994. *Evaluating Training Programs*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Livingstone, Sonia and Leslie Haddon, eds. 2009. *Kids Online. Opportunities and Risks for Children*. Bristol: Polity Press.

Mantovani, Susanna, ed. 1998. *La ricerca sul campo in educazione. I metodi qualitativi*. Milano: Mondadori.

Parola, Alberto and Maria Ranieri. 2010. *Media Education in Action. A Research Study in Six European Countries*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.

Parola, Alberto and Maria Ranieri. 2011. "Agire la media education. Modelli, strumenti, buone pratiche." *Media Education. Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche*. Special Issue on the European Project OnAir 1 (1): 33 – 51.

Pfeiffer, J. William and J John E. Jones, eds. 1985. *A Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training*. San Diego: University Associates.

Staksrud, Elisabeth, Sonia Livingstone, Leslie Haddon, and Kjartan Ólafsson. 2009. *What Do We Know About Children's Use of Online Technologies?. A Report on Data Availability and Research Gaps in Europe (2nd edition)*. London: EU Kids Online.

Trinchero, Roberto. 2002. *Manuale di Ricerca Educativa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Trinchero, Roberto. 2008. "Valutare la competenza mediale." In *Territori Mediaeducativi*, edited by Alberto Parola 327-37. Erickson: Trento.

Trinchero, Roberto. 2010. "Developing and Assessing Media Competence." In *Media Education in Action. A Research Study in Six European Countries*, edited by Alberto Parola and Maria Ranieri, 37-54. Firenze: Firenze University Press.