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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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The impact of mediated communication on children's identity and citizenship

Jan Masek

Západočeská Univerzita (Czech Republic)

Children's perception of the world, their experiences, values and attitudes have become increasingly determined by technical communication. This paper discusses 'media-mediated communication' as a term that refers to the communication between different participants separated in space and/or time, mediated by and interconnected by media. Media systems such as computers, TV, HDTV, radio, (video)phone, print, film, video, and other cyberspace activities include a wide variety of technical systems enabling people to communicate with each other. For example, 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC) is a generic term now commonly used for communication through computers and networks (Dills, 1998). It is indisputable that all these systems provide the 'virtual experience' of interaction with a machine (Swartz, 1996).¹

This paper is primarily interested in discussing the impact of mediated communication and the broader notion of virtual experience on children's identity and citizenship. In practice, there are many original formulations of these essential concepts, but as Delgado-Moreira (1997) notes '... doing qualitative research, however, we discover that clear words (such as citizenship and identity) in reality comprise a complex network of behaviour, emotions and history.'

The modelling of the impact of media on children's identity, national identity and citizenship - in relation to behaviour, emotions and cultural consciousness in general - is the main purpose of this article. Analysing and detecting the main aspects of this problem need to be perceived at both the behavioural and the educational technological science level. Drawing on theoretical considerations of very complicated and complex problems, the author explores only the basic 'technology features' of this relationship. In a technology education context, we discover many questions: are there some common factors in media messages which influence the child's attitudes, values and knowledge formation? If so, what are they? How can they contribute to the formation of cultural identity and cross-cultural communication?

The context of this debate depends on the educational analyses of a complex of various factors, from which I shall consider the some basic aspects of mediated communication in relation to children's identity and citizenship educational environments:

Using media with high level of the reality simulation: multimedial, interactive, emotional and social aspects of 'virtual communication'

Three main dimensions can be identified:

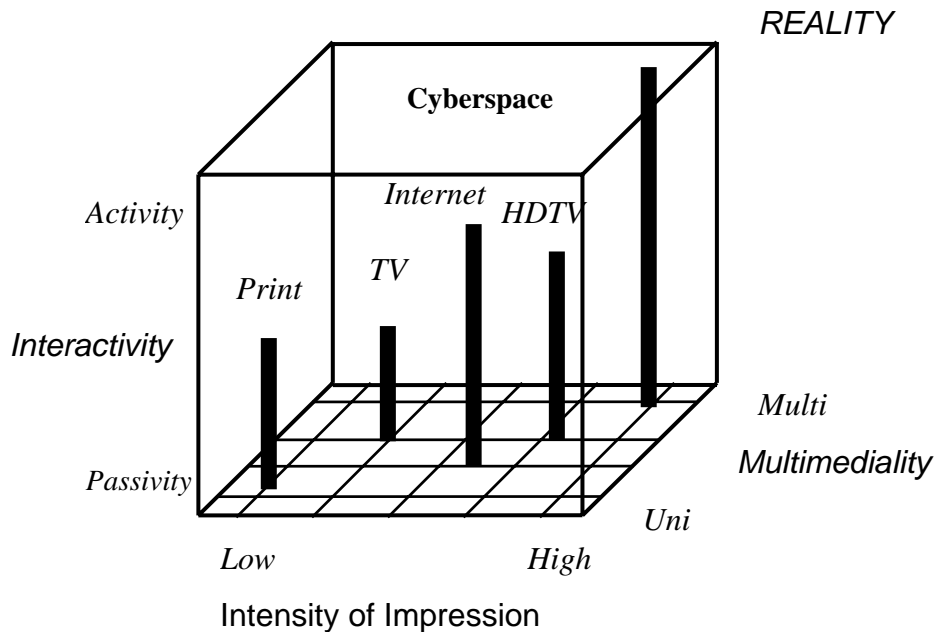
- the intensity of impression, which indicates the degree of stimulation of the recipient's impressions and experience that is transmitted through the particular type

¹ Note that we need to diversify the term 'virtual reality' to mean a hardware and software configuration that simulates alternative realities (Merrill et al., 1992) and the term 'experience' as interaction with other people without the mediation of a machine.

of medium. It describes the intensity of emotional impact, and depends on the quality of the medium's expression;

- multimediality, characterised in a multi-sensory context as the functional integration of the elements of text, pictures, motion pictures, audio, (3D) audiovisuals and tactile messages;
- interactivity, best described as stimulation towards an active response and the student giving feedback.

Figure 1 Estimated model of the attributes of some selected media influencing on children's behavior



The model that is inferred from this (see Figure 1) categorises selected media systems according to their relationship to a 'reality' that is abstracted from the media content. Based upon this paradigm and comparing especially the systems with higher level of multimediality (such as TV, HDTV, the Internet and 'virtual reality'), the weak position of the impression given by the web is clear. On the other hand the web provides multi-format (hypermedia, audio, video, text, photo, globality) information in a way which is unmatched by any other combination of media. The limitations of these considerations are evident, but they allow the deduction of a didactic quality of media communication - especially cyberspace, HDTV and the web - in citizenship education. However it is imperative to also utilise the role of 'lower' media such as print media or audio messages in collaborative learning environments.

Creating the content with the features reflecting emotional and social aspects of human being

Designing of the 'citizenship content' should reflect the 'feel' of the message, such as how 'funny' or 'pretty' it is, and other aesthetic-affective dimensions. The emotional impact of the message is also supported by evidence of originality and creativity in the design. In general, it can be assumed that human identity may be fostered especially by the following media features:

- the aesthetic and affective aspects of the media content;
- content stimulation of social and group activities;
- originality and creativity of 'audio-visual-tactile' design; and
- the ability of the resource to maintain the user's attention e.g. use of humour.

It is evident that within the context of mediated communication, all types of mediated activities are not automatically equivalent to physical affective contact and mental connectedness. However, we can assume that certain types of technologies, especially on-line discussions, GroupWare and mediated 'face-to-face' systems, can foster social and group features of interaction directly and help to develop the child's identity.

The social aspects of 'time dependent' and non interactive (mass) media in the educational citizenship environment

The use of television programmes, radio, audio and video and so on as 'time dependent' media has significance in both the classroom and in home activities. These activities have two important goals: teaching and entertainment. To correct mass media influence on moral or social education, we must identify the key factors that influence children (both positively and negatively). There is a need create a 'social environment' which includes all the main educators (Masek, 1997) to help children

- understand basic concepts and terms;
- find basic features of a culture awareness;
- explain and specify moral categories etc.

The effectiveness of the citizenship education and learning derived from any source (movie lesson, television programme, animation, film, song) is strengthened by all the activities of the educational environment and especially those of experts, teachers, parents, relatives and other persons who are cognisant of the effects of the 'messages'.

Community impact on the process of creating, selecting and interpreting media messages

There are cultural, political and ideological community aspects of media messages; we must include in media analysis the historical, cultural, ideological and political constraints (Crawford, 2000) which impinge on

- the process of creating the media – the influence of the powerful community interest groups;
- the basis of the selection of the media type and message structure to achieve the desired communication effect;

- the media interpretation process (based on level of recipient's and the teacher's accomplishment).

Accessing, distributing and evaluating media products in the global dimension

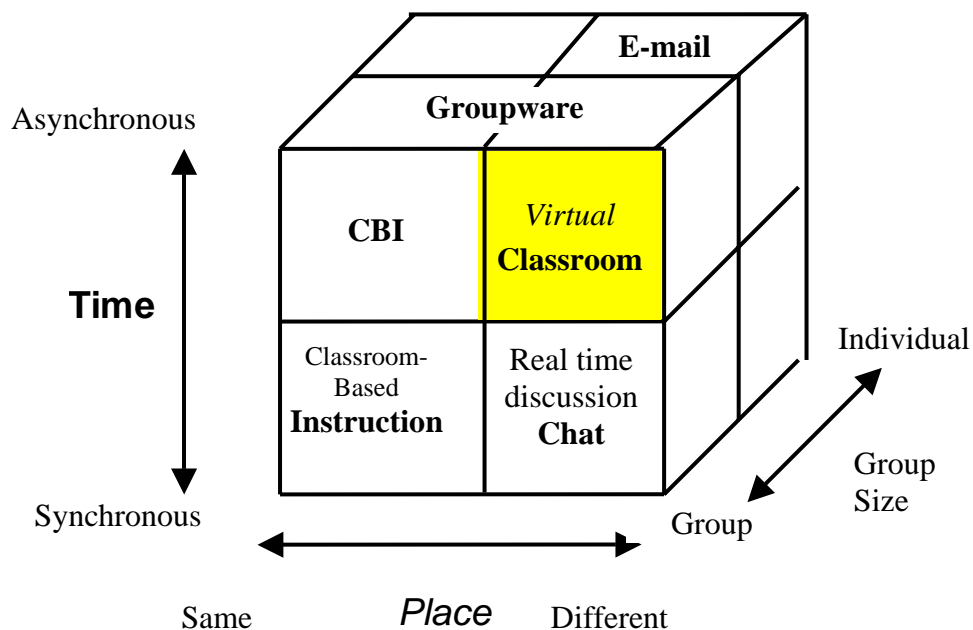
The web has distinctive attributes that permit designing of unique learning activities which stimulate the child's individuality;

- it can dissolve the artificial wall between the classroom and the 'real world' (Hackbarth, 1997, p. 193) '... students can find original materials and collect first-hand information themselves.' It may be some children's first contact with the 'outside' world and much of the content on the web cannot be found in other formats;
- it provides an easy mechanism for students to make their work public - the web allows the work of an individual to be shared with the world;
- users can examine the work of others, which enables global comparisons and collaborations;
- it allows on-line global meetings and the distribution of materials electronically - it is a flexible resource (a hypermedium) that students are likely to encounter and rely on in the workplace and which provides an easy way to create and distribute multimedia materials.

In general, the web creates a 'virtual culture' and in the context of education fosters:

- community building and networking. It serves as an environment for students to engage in a wide range of discussion topics with their peers and with leading authorities in their field: it creates a broader audience for students' work than the instructor can. It is a virtual community (McLellan, 1997).
- the creation of the virtual classroom¹ (Hiltz, 1997) (see Figure 2) as an environment where the web and media online resources are used to facilitate collaborative learning among students, between students and instructors, and between the classroom and a wider academic and non-academic community e.g. cultural and policy authorities.

¹ Virtual classes (based on the Web-based communication) can incorporate the best senses of 'interactivity' and may expand to include some of those 'real time' and an effect of 'proximal space' for all participants e.g. videoconferencing. As WBL advances, we may expect to see sites where teachers hold online 'live virtual office hours' and provide 3D, stereo, mediated 'face-to-face' communication about homework etc.

Figure 2 Virtual classroom in the space-time context of communication

The importance of virtual cross-cultural communication in the citizenship education

To be aware of citizenship and of other, different, cultures students can identify through the internet and the mass media:

- the human language and vocabulary specifics of local communication - students must be respectful of local norms, and have sufficient understanding to work within them;
- differences in national cultures and educational environments, e.g. differences of presentation style and teaching which depending on political systems, religions, ethnics etc.

In practice, it is better if the learner can explore sites designed for a particular context and its culture than sites offering cross-cultural participation, which reflect cultural differences in their design and maintenance. For example, the message put up by a school, a department and a regional culture centre that is targeted for local use, is particularly valuable educationally for citizenship education. We must be aware that the messages made 'for the world' will be mounted, especially by those wishing to sell their presence internationally, but without careful analysis of cross-cultural needs and differences (e.g. international web-superficiality of advertisements for Coca-Cola, Marlboro cigarettes etc.).

Supporting the balance between the asynchronous and synchronous communication

Communication environments that allow asynchronous discussions – for example, through E-mail, list servers, and bulletin board systems - provide learners with more time to reflect on their own ideas and encourage them towards more critical thinking, because they control the pace of the interaction. These support independence from more traditional synchronous systems, such as the telephone and other time-dependent communication media. This model of communication, carried out in a well-reasoned, non-spontaneous environment, predominates in web-based education today, especially at post-secondary level (Shotsberger, 2000). On the other hand, synchronous communication provides dialogues in which participants interact with others at the same time, although usually from different places. The shared time of communication and the familiarity of the dialogue appears more human, and enhances responsiveness. It is very important to develop the identity of individuals. Shotsberger wrote (1997, p. 105) ‘... [web-based instruction] design should ensure that all participants have access to a wide range of communications options, both synchronous and asynchronous, that can be used in large group, small-group, and one-one settings’.

As we look towards the future of mediated communication, and as communication systems develop, the hope is that we will seek to foster more of those human moments in virtual on-line communicating experiences. It can be said that assurance provided by synchronous communication offers a real hope of enhancing the media effect on a child’s behaviour.

Communicating with the ‘freedom’ of exploring in the ‘open’ and non-linear hierarchy structured messages

Cognitive development requires stimulating learning environments, in which students are active participants in the planning and evaluation of citizenship instruction. In the sense of active ‘liberty’ we can use many technologies (Masek, 1996), such as electronic databases, hypertext and hypermedia systems, semantic networking software and video applications. Although different in form and application, each of these uses of educational technology provides an important context in which the student may access, discover and construct cultural knowledge through an active and self or group-directed learning process. Natural exploration by means of the ‘open’ and non-linear hierarchy of communicated messages strongly assists the improvement of students’ community understanding and their ability to construct their own meanings for their experiences, based on what they currently know.

A preliminary investigation of media impact on children’s identity

This section of the paper examines children's control of mediated communication at school and in home activities from the perspective of a group of 14 to 15 year olds. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate young people’s attitudes to and abilities to control media activities. Five groups of students from public schools in two Czech cities - Plzen and Sokolov - were chosen, making a total of 104 respondents, and with a trial to ensure an approximately representative range of educational backgrounds. Two groups of 51 respondents were from a *gymnazium*, a lower secondary level of educational system for talented students, and the other 53 learners were educated at *Zakladni skola*, a common level of lower secondary education (a basic school). The questions were conceived in an open and semi-structured way, with the objective of detecting the social

background of the respondents (analogous to the model of questions given in the CiCe outline for interviewing children and young people). The questionnaire aimed to discover:

- how respondents are influenced by their social environment in undertaking media activities;
- how they become aware of the cultural provenance of media messages;
- what media they use;
- the context of media use in identifying and communicating with other citizens from different countries.

It should be noted that the main purpose of this preliminary research was to distinguish relevant tendencies in this complex investigation that could be used in future, more detailed research.

The following points emerged:

- the dominance of US-message detection (69%) over Czech (23%), other European (6%) and non-European world regions (2%). Films (including television and video) appeared to exercise more influence (80%) than other types of message, although about half of the respondents mentioned other types of media - computer programmes, games and web sites. Generally the teenagers seemed unaware of the state/cultural background of media messages - only 58% answered the question about the message's origin.
- the responses to the questions about the influence of the social environment on media use showed that most respondents (93%) tended to discuss media with friends, 58% talked with their parents, 35% with siblings and other relatives, 18% with their teachers and only 3% said they talked to no-one. 52% of the students tended to solve technical/software problems singly or with only service instructions; 45% discussed such problems with friends, 32% with parents, 24% with other relatives, and 25% with teachers.²
- a large majority of the respondents (87%) described TV news and TV documentaries as the most important examples of media programmes and media communication. Computer programmes and the web were regarded as most important by only 12%. The possibility of communication with other citizens from foreign countries was mentioned by only 13%.

A quantitative analysis of student's use of selected types of 'modern' media identified a tendency to use mostly classical media – radio 96%, CD and tape-recorders 92%, and TV 97%. In the future it seems likely that the diversity of media especially computer systems (currently 78%), the internet (54%), and E-mail (33%) will rise, as has the huge increase in the use of mobile telephones (64%) among school children.

² Note, the teacher's support capabilities to develop media skills of learners are very limited by the variety of technical (computer) systems in Czech schools – this applies particularly to the Zakladni skola.

Conclusion

All of these media, including the web, are vibrant with information that will help form children's cultural, moral and national identity, and offer an enormous variety of virtual experiences. There is no doubt that the media (especially those related to cyberspace and the web) allow the interaction of many aspects of citizenship education and increase moral and cultural consciousness. However, such awareness is likely to be shallow because such mediated communication presents problematic factors when compared to with 'real' and face-to-face communication activities. Richard Louv (1991), who interviewed children across the United States about their relationship with nature, found that although today's youth tend to have more knowledge about global ecological problems, they also tend to have relatively little direct contact with nature. They appear to have exchanged actual physical contact with nature for a virtual understanding of nature.

To conclude, it appears that mediated communication in citizenship education is most commonly at the 'superficial' level. We should view these virtual experiences as just one of the facilities available for citizenship education: we cannot elevate it over other means of communication. Excessive use of mediated communication can lead to a dissipation of the communication potential of all media, including the web. Social, multi-cultural, moral and citizenship education is what we hope to contribute to.

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