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Citizenship Education and Media Pedagogy: Developing Citizenship Skills with Media Environments

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Abstract

The power of media pedagogy support in developing citizenship skills is growing. The offer of actual projects with media - broadly to include books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies, videos, billboards, recorded music, videogames, and the Internet - with the learner's ability to access, analyze, critically, and produce communication in a variety of forms can help educators in all areas of citizenship education, including the Czech educational system.

Media pedagogy - in the context of theory focusing on media teaching and media training (media education) – primarily explores educating the learner’s media literacy, but there are now many aspects of the education of children socialised through the media, including the theory of education by means of media. This paper applies the context of the usage of all media in citizenship education, broadly to include books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies, videos, billboards, recorded music, video games, and the Internet services. Consequently we must note that this approach offers many educational facilities, as well a variety problems and questions. The use of modern mass media citizenship resources allows learners access to a wide range of information, opinions and perspectives from around the world that would otherwise be inaccessible. Furthermore if we reflect the political, social, and economic implications of media messages, the importance of using media in citizenship education effectively and wisely is obvious.

The learner’s media literacy – the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993) - affects the use of media environments as a source of citizenship information. Analysing how the variety of media messages shapes our visions of reality is a central concept in both media literacy and Czech citizenship education. There are now many different teaching practices, especially in the context of project-based learning, and these can be divided into two main areas:

- motivating students to think critically about information presented in any media message in the context citizenship ideas - use media to practice intentional observation, critical thinking and media analysis, and
- producing media messages about a topic to foster creative skills.

There are a variety of practices to apply civic curriculum topics. Media literacy can be incorporated into the use and analysis of existing citizenship media content e.g. using election campaign material to critique, and through the creating new web, print, audio and video messages with civic curriculum topics.

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Teachers can use the learner's own web sites as assessment tools by stimulating students to summarize their knowledge about a topic. They can use media design to express students' opinions and illustrate their understanding of the world: this is considered as a most valuable method to gain experience of how messages are constructed.

In central Europe the 'VideoCulture' research project is well-known as a case study of the potential outcomes and limiting factors in using media production with students. It took place in Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, England and the USA (see Niesyto and Buckingham 2001), and was based on secondary school students producing and then exchanging video films, with the aim of facilitating intercultural encounters. Another very interesting Czech-Germany project named 'PGD - Perspektiven im Diskurs' (2008) started in 2007, using methods for prenatal diagnosis of genetic diseases by the analysis of amplified DNA sequences as a current citizenship and ethical topic. Secondary school students discussed practice and moral aspects of this method, and then produced and exchanged their own video films to show their opinions about this complex theme. We should note that there are radically different approaches of applying prenatal diagnosis in the Czech Republic when compared to Germany, where this method is in principle prohibited.

Generally most Czech citizenship educational projects are approached without explicit media literacy goals, but often using media tools. The variety of projects influences some schools in their pursuits to improve the community participation of pupils e.g. 'Projekt Občan' (Polechová, 1998). 'Připraveni pro život' (Stará & Šiška, 2003), cooperation involving the school, parents and the community e.g. 'Začít spolu' (Krejčová & Kargerová, 2003). Most of them were taken from international educational projects, and their adaptation and use have been supported by international and/or national non-governmental organizations. Media education is a common part of school curriculum in many European countries, but it is a novelty at Czech schools. Currently citizenship teachers do not know often how media literacy should be structured in the context of civic topics, but there are a range projects used in training teachers, such as 'Understanding the Media', which received several million crowns in subsidies from the European Social Fund and the Czech Education Ministry.

Czech media and citizenship education has a unique project 'The One World in Schools', which has been developed in the context of the 'One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival' (2008). The background of the One World organizers is not in film, but in humanitarian and human rights activities carried out by the Czech NGO People in Need. One World has strong educational and outreach programmes and organises hundreds of documentary film screenings in primary and secondary schools, followed by discussions on human rights topics over the last years. There are now more than 2200 schools involved in the 'One World in Schools project', which represents one third of all schools in the Czech Republic. In 2007 One World was awarded UNESCO special mention for its contribution to human rights and peace education, the first film festival ever to receive this prize. The favourable reactions of students, teachers, and experts are evidence of the positive impact the project has had on citizenship education.

In the context of media and citizenship educations all teachers have to use media as a standard didactical tool by providing information about the topic through a variety of different media sources. From the methodological point of view, we can find a wide range of activities that educators should be able to realise (Hobbs, 1998; Belinha, 2007; Mašek, 2002):

- connect students to community engagement, finding collaborative possibilities for projects with community institutions (eg libraries, museums galleries etc);
- involve students in creating media messages, having students contact community information service agencies and local community TV, newspapers, and magazines;
- encourage students to think critically about the information presented in any media message in the context of citizenship ideas e.g. analyse and discuss a controversial magazine or newspaper in small groups;
- stimulate student interest in a new citizenship topic through a fascinating or familiar story, hypertext website, video or a short book etc.;
- explore ways how students are already familiar with a topic through the media, through examples of popular media messages that demonstrate what they might already know;
- analyse political, economic, social and cultural backgrounds of media institutions, detecting how they are formed by history, economy, policy and community;
- stimulate student interest in active participation in media campaigns e.g. those activating public opinion towards specific public and policy questions, or encourage students to create their own media campaigns on social issues etc.;
- discuss the role that the media may have played in the history of the citizenship topic, and/or across different cultures;
- develop a sense of message credibility by teaching how to recognize the purposes behind the production of media messages, and media constructions of political events such as presidential campaigns, war and conflicts etc.

The activities and general ideas described above are selected examples, but should inspire all citizenship educators to meet the needs of their class or curricular area. In conclusion, I highlight a variety of aspects of civic education which are determined by media literacy and education with media. The use of (mass) media as a standard pedagogical tool, by providing information about a topic through a variety of different media sources, is a sophisticated task for all civic education teachers. Media literacy education began with an emphasis on protection from the medium of film, but the model of citizenship and mass media education emphasizes the political, social, and economic implications of media messages and calls attention to the importance of using media effectively, wisely and knowledgeable.

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