

Editorial

The third age of the media

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My idea is that media entered their "third age".

In the first age media are tools: "means" of communication, supports, vehicles, channels through which messages can pass in order to go beyond the limits of speaker's and listeners' physical presence (Meyrowitz, 1985). Amplifiers of our sensory organs - according to the famous image of McLuhan (1964) - media represent, at this stage of their social existence, an option, not a need: we can decide whether to use them or not. So we have the illusion of control: from a pedagogical point of view, considering media as instruments is a calming idea.

Starting from the 80s of the last Century, the media "grow". Their second age considers them as environments. The media live this change in two ways. First, they become environments because they leave their designated places (like the cinema, or the living room in the house) and invade the urban space. Screens literally spread off: they populate railway stations, public transport stops, the frontline of the buildings. Today *Blade runner*'s urban landscape seems less imaginary: our ecosystem, the urban landscape we are moving in, is increasingly *made of* media. But the media become an environment also because the Learning Management Systems made their appearance and spread in the 80s of the last century: learning environments, in fact, are "places" where sharing contents, obtaining services, meeting people. The same happens to Web portals, Web communities, company intranets, *Facebook*. Pedagogically, the environment is more pervasive, but you can still decide whether to enter or not, or to leave when you want.

Today we are in the third age, where media become a connective tissue. The media are today, for us and for our societies, as a skin (de Kerkhove, 1995), they are a kind of nervous system, or better they are the synapses that allow us to build up this nervous system together with other people. Of course, you can always turn everything off, isolate yourself, renounce luddistically to technology, but it is an increasingly difficult option. The media "cross us" and the educational systems and services can not pretend not to know this.

Teach and learn languages

One of the main topics for those who want to innovate in training contexts today is to consider the importance of languages. Plural languages, because the alphabet, the language of speech and writing, is important but not the only one existing. There are languages of the body, of music, material languages, iconic ones, languages of cultures, finally media languages. Educating people to the use of these languages means posing the problem of how to use them both considering reading and production.

Knowing how to read different languages with which cultural forms are built around us, is essential for socialization but also to keep one's point of view free: a careful and conscious reading has always been a tool for the exercise of critical thinking and this is crucial for citizenship.

However languages, as well as being read, also need to be produced, or better used to produce messages. Here we have to consider different dimensions. The semiotic dimension: to produce messages it is necessary to know languages operation, their grammar and their syntax. The expressive dimension: it is not enough to know languages, it is necessary to know how to use them in a creative way, with imagination, in order to produce contents that are beautiful as well as meaningful. Finally, the ethical dimension. The representation has its limits: there are things that can not be represented and that can not be published. This demands the responsibility of those who produce.

Teacher's competences

What skills do we need to own as teachers? Faced with this challenges, teachers often feel uncomfortable. In fact, they think not to be up to it, imagining their students know more. On this issue, it is necessary to be clear. Research shows that the real problem using media in the classroom is not so much referred to teachers' delay, their "digital immigrant" gap compared to "native" students. The problem is different: teachers' difficulty to use media in the classroom the same way they do outside it. Teachers know *WhatsApp*, and use it: but aren't able to imagine how it could become an educational tool. The threshold of the class is like a boundary between worlds: it is hard to think what is outside can be brought inside.

Here, rather than technical training for using instruments, teachers need to develop a media culture, or better, a new teaching culture hosting media in a natural way. To achieve this goal, they need to understand that there is a continuity between their practices inside and outside the school, accepting to bring into the classroom what usually they practice outside.

References

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