Ten years of Media Education course in Slovenia

Introduction

There has been a growing scholarly interest in the concept of media, citizenship, and education in the era of globalization (Hall 1999), especially in the context of the expansion of the European Union. Following the above, Slovenia was among the first post-socialist countries of Central-Eastern Europe that introduced and implemented a Media Education course into its educational curriculum.

In Slovenia, Media Education is defined as a process of teaching about media through the media. If Media Education attempts to develop and create critical understanding and active participation in classrooms, Media literacy denotes a larger project that involves not only students in classrooms, but includes parents, teachers, and in short, the general Slovenian public. Different media events, lectures, performances, workshops are continuously organized on a national, regional, and local level in different places, such as public squares, public libraries, and city-halls. In that way, the public is included in an overall process of thinking, negotiating, and understanding the media practices.

From 1996 on, the Media Education course is officially and formally a part of an educational curriculum – from kindergarten to university levels. The course involves an examination of the techniques, technologies and institutions that are a part of media production and consumption, and furthermore, provides the ability to critically analyze media messages, and the recognition of the active roles that audiences play in making meaning from media messages (Curriculum for Media Education, 1997).

However, how successful is the integration of the course into the Slovenian educational system really? Almost ten years after, it seems appropriate and necessary to explore the situation on the ground. On the basis of participant-observation and in-depth interviews, the aim here is to briefly present and critically assess the Media Education project in Slovenia and to offer some creative suggestions for the future.

The development of the Media Education in Slovenia

During the transformation of the education system in Slovenia (1990–1998), the Media Education project received political and public support, and the detailed national program was created by the Media Education Curriculum Research Group. The research group framed the curriculum in a theoretical and practical productive manner. Ultimately, the reason behind the course was to craft such an educational framework that makes it possible for the students to be able to speak independently, politically, and with confidence about the forms and pleasures of a range of different kinds of media texts. This process, the authors argued, necessarily involves and encourages students in becoming more active media agents, citizens, and not merely consumers. Thus, during the transformation processes of political and economic systems, the Slovenian Media Education project did fulfil its **potential for a democratic empowerment and social change** and did **encourage** the **creation of open democratic spaces** of dialogue and discussions. The Media Education textbooks for teachers and students alike have been written and translated. In addition, there has been a supported video-material introduced to the course. At the university level, the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana started to offer a Media Education training course (90 hours) to the students who may want to teach the Media Education course in primary schools. The course covers both the concepts and knowledge of media studies and the pedagogical skills required to teach them effectively. Media Education course teachers are organized in the Slovenian Association of Media Education teachers' that provides grounds for the organization of individual initiatives, project proposals, workshops, and summer schools.

In what follows, two different Media Education models, as integrated into curriculum, are presented and evaluated, based on qualitative research methodologies. First, Media Education as an optional, independent course on the level of primary school is analyzed. In the second model, Media Education as integrated within established courses is described. Media Education here presents a topic within other different courses at the kindergarten level, primary and secondary school curricula alike.

Media Education as an optional, independent couse

The optional Media Education course is a part of a nine-grade primary school system, designed for the last three grades. In that, Media Education is composed of three different one-year independent courses: the Press; Radio; and Television and the Internet. Overall, this adds up to 35 hours per year or one hour per week.

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The *first year* focuses on the topics related to print media. Media Education informs students about how the press functions in a democracy, why it matters that citizens gain information and are exposed to diverse opinions, and why people need to participate in policy decision-making at the community, state and federal levels. Students learn the basic principles of mass media, and the similarities and differences between media messages. After the first year course, our evaluation shows that **students** do indeed **understand** that the **media create and construct the world and do not reflect it**. Furthermore, they are able to comprehend how messages have social, political, aesthetic and economic purposes. They familiarize themselves with the history of media, and the role that the press plays in private and public spheres. At the end of the year, students produce their own newspaper.

The *second year* course explores the medium of radio and its characteristics. Students are invited to create their own radio show and they discover how individuals actively construct and make meaning from messages. According to our evaluations again, they learn successfully about different effects of the mass media. **The most popular topics** discussed in classes include themes such as **media violence**, **media heroes**, and predominant **media stereotypes**.

The *third year* course deals with television and Internet. The students address questions of global imbalance of power, the history of broadcasting, and the concepts such as public television, and global media. In cooperation with local TV stations, students are encouraged to create their own TV show, as imagined. The most popular format chosen among the students was a talk-show. At the end the year, students analyze the media content and write a letter to various editors in which they present their initiatives for change in the television content.

It seems that the advantages of establishing Media Education as an independent course, i.e. as a subject specialty, are considerable. The objectives and goals of Media Education are easier to achieve within a specialized, independent Media Education course, which has its own identity, its own teachers, classrooms and equipment, its own resources. Research shows that in the 2004/2005 school year, approximately 37 percent of Slovenian students in 7th grade chose Media Education course as an optional course.

Indeed, the interviews with the students further show that they are very content. Out of 1230 students currently taking Media Education in primary school, 81% claimed that it is their favorite course because of the topics that are **close to their own life-experiences**. They enjoy practical work, and appreciate research and production work (filming, editing). At the same time, they are interested in visiting media institutions and conducting their own media research.

Media Education's potential – so it seems – comes from its promise of including everyone in class lectures, seminars, projects, and discussions. Students respond positively when they are invited to participate and share from their own media habits and experiences (67%). They appreciate when they need to critically reflect upon their own personal media habits.

Most of the students claim that they find topics of Media Education useful for their everyday life, and future studies. One of the interviewed students in Jesenice says, *"everyone likes this course... not because it is easy, actually, the teacher is very sharp... but because Media Education is so full of concrete examples... It helps me to better understand the media and the world... and my parents..."*

Why do they choose Media Education? Mostly, they say, because they are interested in media, and because they spend a lot of time with the media (86%).When asked what is the most important media topic that they will remember, the students respond that the argument as of how media do not mirror reality (65%). They want to be prepared for the mediated world and they expect to get some knowledge and skills out of

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this course. An important part, not surprisingly, in the selection process of this course is the teacher – if she/he has a good reputation among the students, they also select a course.

The interviews with Media Education teachers themselves show that they are very supportive of the course. They stress the importance of teaching the critical media skills, and feel that the structure and organization of the course fulfills their needs. Most of them use textbooks and video-material, and have finished some kind of Media Education training. The teachers belong to younger generations, and in that, they claim, they are able to understand the children more, since they share the experience of growing up in an increasingly mediated world.

The teachers were, however, critical of the educational authorities on local and national levels. Most of them expressed frustration and anger because they have to **legitimize the course** in front **of the authorities** over and over again. In the words of a Maribor teacher, *"The course has not established itself as a really 'necessary' one... so I am not taken seriously yet...as if teaching history gives you a credibility, and teaching Media Education is something only for fun...No one understands and really supports the course within my school, except the students."* A teacher in Ljubljana claims that, *"My dean has no idea about the importance of this course. He is 65 years old, and does not take media seriously at all. He believes it should not belong to school... so I need to fight back constantly."* Also, the teachers are unsatisfied with the technological equipment – they lack, for example, video cameras for filming. In general, there is a lack of financial support for it – so teachers have limited resources to work with. In the words of a Skofja Loka teacher, *"this is a poor region, and we have little money on the school level... but the Ministry of Education doesn't help us. More and more, they require that we find private, commercial sponsors for our courses... What are we suppose to do? Go to American McDonalds' and ask them to give us money for video-cameras?"* This is a standard response: there is a lack of institutional support for the course, and a lack of moral support from the school authorities. However, the students and parents alike find it very helpful and want more hours of Media Education.

Media Education as a topic within an integrated curriculum

Media Education that takes a form of a theme within other courses starts at a pre-school (level) phase. It was envisioned and developed as an experimental integration of Media Education in 46 carefully selected kindergartens all over Slovenia in 2000. The main aim

of the initiative at this level is to help pre-school children (4-6 years) to **develop an understanding** of the **difference between fiction and non-fiction, ads and news, real and make-believe**.

Our evaluation as of how and if the teaching of media topics on the ground takes place, shows the limited inclusion of media themes. Any type of media activities seems to be rather rare – and according to most of the interviewed teachers, this is because of the lack of resources, un-willingness and ignorance of teachers and educational authorities alike.

In this sense, teachers replace Media Education with teaching through the media. For most of them, media education means using the media. A typical statement of a teacher in Celje represents this view: *"Yes, of course we teach Media Education. We use radio, camera, television, and a video-recorder. Children listen to diverse music... they watch fairy-tales on television... and we use computers sometimes to draw..."* Our evaluation also shows that teachers themselves are not really familiar with Media Education and its main goals. Even more, while discussing media themes and some of the main media theories, most of the teachers show no essential media knowledge. In short, teachers themselves are media illiterate.

Furthermore, at the **primary school level**, Media Education is an **obligatory component** of the **Slovenian language course** from the 5th to 9th grades. The media topics within the Slovenian language course provide information about the characteristics of media texts (genres, media language and media aesthetics). Media Education continues to be an important **part** of a **Civic Education** and **Ethics course** in grades 7 and 8 (Curriculum for Civic Education and ethics course, 1997). The attempt here is to become well informed about ethical issues in different areas of communication: advertising, television, film, print journalism, the Internet.

The research as of how well Media Education is practiced within these two courses shows that media topics are very rarely indeed a part of any lessons (up

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to five percent of the Slovenian language course). The **realization** of **Media Education objectives depends** on **the personal commitment** and **enthusiasm of teachers** themselves. Most of the interviewed teachers feel very alone, without any support or guidelines from educational and school authorities and do not have any necessary training in Media Education. The majority of them are self-taught. They regularly experience fears and difficulties in finding solutions to financial and organizational issues within their courses.

Thus, the main problem in teaching Media Education across curriculum lies in **the lack of a long-term strategy** and **support** for teachers from the educational authorities – there is no serious continuous educational vision, plan, or policy. The Ministry of Education and Sport did not specify any financial support for media equipment, teacher training, material support, etc. A lack of institutional support of teacher instruction for all those teachers who are interested is one of the main problems of Media Education in Slovenia. This reduces the possibility of integrating Media Education across the curriculum into Slovenian schools.

Similarly, the findings show that in secondary school (since there is no Media Education as an independent course available), Media Education has also been integrated into the secondary school curriculum as a compulsory part of the curriculum, such as the Slovenian language, Sociology, Psychology and the History of Art. Thus, the media construction of reality topics is central to the Sociology course. Students also learn about the media institutions, political, economic, social and cultural contexts of the media environments, media persuasion and main media propaganda techniques (Curriculum for Sociology, 1993). According to the National curriculum for the Slovenian language for secondary schools (1993: 10–12), the aims of Media Education within the Slovenian language course are focused on linguistic aspects of media: to examine different media text and style forms, to develop the skills of analyzing the grammar of media language and to understand the basic characteristics of the essential journalistic genres. Students taking Psychology get familiar with the theories of media effects, and the focus is on psychological aspects of media violence and stereotypes (Curriculum for Psychology, 1993). In the History of Art course, students learn how to evaluate different media products and how to produce them (Curriculum for the History of Art, 1993).

Our research shows that Media Education is really very rarely a part of courses in secondary school. For example, textbooks for Slovenian language course do not include any of the proposed and recommended

media topics. Slovenian language teachers themselves are not advocating Media Education as a part of their courses. In the schools visited, there is rarely any media equipment in the Slovenian language classroom. Interviewed Slovenian language teachers claim to have no media knowledge, express no willingness to teach media topics, and generally want to reclaim a high-culture approach in teaching only 'traditional' courses. They see a real danger in the decline of a classical literacy, and they want to encourage traditional reading habits. Most of them agree with a teacher in Ljubljana, who stated that *"students watch too much television, they play too many video-games per day, and they don't read books anymore. The role of education is to encourage readings of high-culture, and not popular culture"*.

In that sense, we recognised two distinctive groups of teachers: the ***'critical users'***, who do follow media/technological developments and recognise that one has to understand the realities of how the media operate in order to become critical citizens; and the ***'protectionists' of high culture***, who see the media and new technologies as a threat to national culture, language, and identity. They see the audience, and students, as part of a mass of passive consumers who

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accept produced commodities in order to achieve false satisfaction.

Conclusion

The research shows that Media Education skills can indeed inspire young people to become more socially interested in increasing their access to diverse sources of information. Media Education is one of the most popular courses in primary schools in Slovenia, and most of the students see it as a positive asset as it raises awareness of the vital importance of being exposed to a rich array of diverse opinions and ideas.

However, it is not enough to include Media Education into the school curriculum. What is needed is an attempt to encourage Media Education to become a lived and well-practiced course, with its strong identity. At the same time, what is needed is an engagement with teachers of the course. An attempt has to be made from the Educational authorities to offer them clearer guidelines and support, since the realization of media education objectives depends on the personal commitment of teachers. For those teachers who are interested, training and workshops should be provided and thus enabling them to teach specialized courses (Butts, 1992). The ultimate objective of the in-service training should not be to transmit specialist information but to hire teachers with enthusiasm for Media Education in order to assist the cross-curricular principle on the road to success (Boeckmann, 1992).

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