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Media and Information Literacy: Pedagogy and Possibilities

Alfabetización mediática e informacional: proyecciones didácticas

ABSTRACT

This paper will present an overview of UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Curriculum for Teachers. This overview includes an exploration of key program areas for trainers in order to teach key issues related to MIL and the competences needed for developing programs. These program areas include: a conceptual and organizational framework; production and use of information; media texts and information sources; evaluation and analysis; media audiences; democratic discourse and social participation; approaches for curriculum adaptation, and pedagogical approaches for the classroom (textual analysis, contextual analysis, case study, translation, simulation and production). After introducing these key areas of the program, the paper will conclude by offering recommendations for the successful development, adaptation and implementation of MIL Programs. Main recommendations are: curriculums leaders have to be available for training, support and consultation, promotion of teachers network who are implementing MIL initiatives, inclusion in official papers of educational curriculums, analyzing needs of the students before implementing modules of the curriculum, facilitating online resources for teachers, professionalizing MIL teachers, promoting collaboration between community members (family, teachers, students, other stakeholders), and finally research to identify best practices and new trends to be developed.

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una visión general del Currículum UNESCO de Alfabetización Mediática e Informacional (MIL) para profesores, mostrando las áreas clave y temas relevantes del programa, así como las competencias necesarias para desarrollar estrategias didácticas de alfabetización mediática. Las áreas incluyen: un marco conceptual y organizativo; producción y uso de la información; textos mediáticos y fuentes de información; su evaluación y análisis; audiencias mediáticas; debate y participación social; los modelos de adaptación del currículum, y los modelos pedagógicos a utilizar en el aula (análisis de texto, análisis del contexto, estudios de caso, traducción, simulación y producción). Una vez presentadas las áreas clave del programa, se presenta una serie de recomendaciones para el desarrollo, adaptación e implementación del Currículum UNESCO con éxito. Así se destaca que la importancia de la formación de los líderes; la importancia de los soportes y el asesoramiento; la promoción de redes de profesores implicados; inclusión de la alfabetización en los documentos oficiales educativos; el análisis de las necesidades de los estudiantes antes de la implementación de los módulos en el currículum; la urgencia de facilitar recursos on-line al profesorado; de profesionalizar el profesorado; de promover la colaboración entre los miembros de la comunidad (familias, profesorado, estudiantes, y otros agentes), y finalmente promover la investigación en alfabetización mediática para identificar las mejores prácticas y las nuevas tendencias en el campo de estudio.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Media literacy, information, pedagogy, democracy, technology, critical, curriculum.
Alfabetización mediática, información, pedagogía, democracia, tecnología, crítico, currículum.

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1. Introduction

In 2007, UNESCO's General Conference at its 34th session invited the Director-General to explore new initiatives to further support media and information literacy (MIL), with the overall objective of providing the opportunity for users to make informed judgments about media and information sources and broaden civic participation in the media. In 2011, UNESCO took a significant step in this direction: an MIL curriculum for teachers was introduced which would enable teachers to develop a greater understanding of the role of media, and information technology, in their own lives and in the lives of their students.

The MIL curriculum defines media and information literacy as «the essential competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that allow citizens to engage with media and other information providers effectively, and develop critical thinking and life-long learning skills for socializing and becoming active citizens». MIL is concerned with the process of understanding and using media and other information providers, as well as information and communication technologies. It is concerned with helping teachers and students develop an informed and critical understanding of how various media and technologies operate, how they can be used, how they organize information and create meaning, and how to evaluate the information they present. MIL also involves the ethical use of media, information and technology, as well as participation in democratic and intercultural dialogue. MIL is both a content area and way of teaching and learning; it is not only about the acquisition of technical skills, but the development of a critical framework and approaches.

It is clear that in this information age, we need to embrace an expanded definition of literacy, one that includes print, screen-based and electronic media and information. MIL enables students, in the words of Freire and Macedo (1987), to «read the word and the world»: to understand the word on the page and the image on the screen, and to be able to analyze and assess the information and representations about our world that are conveyed to us through the media. For many educators, access to media and information literacy is a justice issue, as they recognize that print-based literacy will no longer provide students with the competencies needed for life and work today. Many educators recognize that without access to training in MIL, teachers and students will be significantly disadvantaged and disempowered. In the words of one educator from Namibia «We don't want our teachers and students to be left behind».

Several factors support the need for a critical and coherent study of media and information literacy as part of teacher education. These factors include:

• The proliferation of global telecommunications as well as a concentration of media ownership and control (Karppinen, 2009).

• Studies completed in many industrialized countries that indicate young people spend more time involved with the media than they do any with other activity except sleeping (Roberts & Foehr, 2008).

• The need to create a level playing field between those who manufacture information in their own interests, and those who consume it innocently as news or entertainment.(Livingstone, 2002).

• The need to know how young people are interacting and creating projects through media to adapt MIL to their currents needs (Dezuanni & Monroy, 2012).

• A consequent exponential increase in media texts and messages (of varying authority, purpose, currency and accuracy) (Wilson & al., 2011).

• The controls (overt and/or subtle) exerted over access to, and availability of, those texts and messages to citizens (Wilson & al., 2011).

• The recognition of communication rights as a third generation of human rights, which include rights to access and exchange of information, as well as access to those skills and discourses which will enable citizens to interpret, express and produce their own messages and communication (Abbott & Masterman, 1997).

The UNESCO curriculum on Media and Information Literacy is designed to support teachers in the development of critical questions and approaches related to the design, implementation and evaluation of Media and Information Literacy programs for secondary students. The curriculum offers an introductory and flexible syllabus for use in teacher education, one which offers various components of a media and information literacy program that can be selected, developed and adapted to meet the needs and capacities of each individual situation. The curriculum modules focus on such topics as New and Traditional Media, Representation, Media Languages, Audience, News Media and Information Ethics, Advertising, and Information Literacy and Library Skills. Within each module, teachers are provided with learning objectives, pedagogical approaches, and sample activities for working with secondary students.

The curriculum focuses on the theory and practice underpinning media and information literacy and offers a variety of entry points for teachers and students. The curriculum also outlines a number of MIL

goals and related teacher competencies in the areas of: policy development; curriculum and assessment; pedagogy; and teacher professional development. Several key competencies related to pedagogy and curriculum development include:

• Teachers must understand how media and information literacy might be utilized in the school curriculum.

• They must be able to critically assess media texts and information sources in light of the functions attributed to media and other information providers.

• They must acquire the pedagogical skills needed to teach media and information literacy to students.

• They must acquire knowledge about student interactions with, and response to, media as a first step in supporting their media-and information-literacy learning.

• Teachers must understand central concepts, tools of enquiry and structures of the discipline to create learning experiences that make these meaningful for students and prepare them for their role as citizens (Wilson, Grizzle & al., 2011: 29).

These competencies underpin the modules, units and themes in the curriculum, as well the suggested pedagogical approaches and activities found within each module.

2. Core competencies and the curriculum

The acquisition of MIL competencies for teachers is tied to the knowledge and understanding of several key program areas which are worth exploring in detail. These include: an organizing or conceptual framework; possible approaches for curriculum adaptation; pedagogical approaches for the classroom; recommendations for program planning and success. These key areas are described below.

2.1. Organizational framework

In utilizing the MIL curriculum, teacher competencies and curriculum development can be organized around 3 broad program areas which, in effect, represent 3 sides of a MIL «triangle». This MIL triangle (the origins of which can be traced to Eddie Dick and the Scottish Film council) includes the areas of Production, Text and Audience. This triangle can pro-

vide teachers with a framework for the development of curriculum planning (identifying what can be taught) and pedagogical approaches (how it can be taught).

2.1.1. Production and use of media and information

This program area encompasses the ways in which media and information texts are produced, and the political, economic and social contexts of this production. It includes the ways in which media and information technologies can be used, and the roles and responsibilities of media and information providers.

MIL competencies enable individuals to access, organize, and evaluate information, and to produce

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media and information texts. When we consider how texts are produced, we recognize that each medium or information source creates meaning differently using certain «vocabulary», techniques and styles, or codes and conventions. Developing MIL skills enable us not only to decode and understand media texts, but also to appreciate their unique aesthetic qualities, and to understand that each medium, or form, can influence and shape the content and information provided.

Examining the political, economic and social contexts involves an exploration of media ownership and control, as well as the role and functions of media and information providers in democratic societies. MIL also involves an awareness of the right to access information, as well as the importance of using information and technology ethically and responsibly to communicate with others. Today, technology enables individuals to participate in intercultural dialogue as members of a «global village». Within this «village», possibilities for global citizenship can be explored, as res-

ponsible use of media and technology moves users from critical autonomy to critical solidarity as they connect with people from around the world.

2.1.2. Media texts and information sources: evaluation and analysis

This program area focuses on the information, messages and values that are conveyed through various media and information sources. It recognizes the role of human agency in the production of media texts, and the fact that producers –both professional and amateur– have their own priorities and beliefs that can shape the messages and information we receive. Part of being media and information literate means that teachers and students can evaluate what information is

the ways in which meaning can be altered if the context, or elements of it, is changed.

2.1.3. Media audiences: democratic discourse and social participation

This program area addresses the potential political and social effects that can occur as a result of information conveyed through media and information sources, including the legitimization of political ideologies, societal values, and cultural dominance. This program area also emphasizes active citizenship – the right to access information and to participate in democratic discourse. It addresses the importance of international standards within local contexts, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and constitutional guarantees on freedom of expression as well as their limitations (such as hate speech, defamation and privacy rights).

This program area also recognizes the importance of examining and understanding individuals and groups as both target and active audiences. It involves understanding the ways in which audiences are targeted and positioned by media texts, and how media content can organize them into marketable groups. It involves understanding ways of communicating with an intended audience for a particular purpose, and knowing that audiences make use of inter-

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and is not included in media texts, whose voices are heard and whose are missing, who is represented in the media, and in what way. The MIL curriculum provides approaches for analyzing a variety of media and information texts, examining how they are produced, by whom, and for what purposes.

While the curriculum recognizes the need to develop skills for identifying and accessing information, it also recognizes the importance of analyzing the larger context in which information or a single media text exists. A news story is examined for the information and messages being conveyed, for example, but it is also analyzed in terms of the context of the news broadcast in which it appears.

The context is examined for its own construction, for the messages and values conveyed through it, and

pretive strategies as they respond to media and information. MIL recognizes that each person(s) interprets or negotiates messages and information differently based on age, culture, life experiences, values and beliefs, and acknowledges that audiences are capable of accepting certain messages and rejecting others, based on their own personal background, knowledge, and experience.

2.2. Curriculum adaptation

There are several approaches for teaching MIL and for organizing program content which are supported by this curriculum. The MIL curriculum has applications across a number of subject disciplines, and can contribute to a stand – alone or as an integrated program. Teachers may wish to make use of more than

one approach, depending on the needs and interests of their students, as well as local circumstances. Several potential approaches which could be utilized in working with the MIL curriculum are outlined below:

• A medium-based approach involves the study of a particular medium, such as the Internet, television or film. The key elements and characteristics of the medium are explored, including the ways in which the medium itself can influence or shape the content and information being conveyed. This approach also includes an exploration of the role and function of media and technologies in particular social or historical contexts.

• A thematic approach involves exploring a particular theme or topic across several media. A topic such as global citizenship or gender representation can be examined in terms of how effectively it is represented in a variety of media texts and information sources, and for its potential impact on audiences.

• A unit on MIL can be a stand-alone unit within a course. Teachers select a module, topic, or theme and students explore it intensively for two to three weeks.

• Integrating MIL into other areas of the curriculum is a holistic approach that can create authentic learning experiences for students. Because of the pervasiveness of media, information and technology in our society, it is often difficult to explore media and information literacy in isolation: analysis of documentary films is needed in history; media and gender representation should be part of sociology courses. The crucial point here is that all subject areas can benefit from teaching 'about' and not just 'through' the media, otherwise educators neglect the use of important critical tools of MIL (Wilson & Duncan, 2009: 134).

2.3. Pedagogical approaches

An essential recommendation for teaching MIL is that teachers see it not as a form of protection, but as an opportunity for preparing students for their roles as citizens and consumers, and for effective participation in democratic discourse. The experience of MIL should be one that engages students in a process of critical analysis, production and dialogue, rather than a process whose outcome and interpretation is controlled by the teacher.

It is also important in developing teachers' and students' competencies to begin where students are at. Learning about students' understanding and use of media and information technologies is an important starting point that will help to determine the most appropriate pedagogical approach for each classroom.

Within each pedagogical approach, activities in each of the modules should include appropriate scaffolding, so that learning is introduced in a step-by-step manner, with activities increasing in difficulty as students acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for each stage of the learning process. Each module should also include opportunities for meta-cognition, where teachers and students identify and reflect on the skills being used in each module, so that effective strategies can intentionally be applied to other situations. It is assumed that for each module, strategies and activities which engage the learner in analysis and production will also be developed. The curriculum identifies a number of pedagogical approaches for the teaching of MIL. Specific examples of these approaches, as well as strategies for analysis and production, are described below.

2.3.1. Textual analysis

This strategy is based on a detailed analysis of single media or information texts and involves a detailed description of key elements of the text, such as images, sound, font, vocabulary, types of camera angles, colour, etc (Rayner, Wall & Kruger, 2004). Students determine the meaning of a text based on connotations and associations invoked by various elements of the text. Based on an analysis of the «key ingredients» – technical and symbolic– and the messages being conveyed, judgments are also made about the text as a whole.

2.3.2. Contextual analysis

This strategy is based on examining the context for a particular media or information text. For example, student may examine the context of a website, as well as the text of a single news story present on that site; or they may examine the context of a political ad campaign, as well as the information conveyed through a single political advertisement. Examining context also requires consideration of the audience receiving the message, as well as those people responsible for producing it. It examines the importance of context in creating meaning: students explore how meaning changes when an image or piece of information is removed from its context. Student research can involve such topics as who produced a text, the business or industry involved in distributing it, various production roles involved, as well as the marketing and distribution of a particular text. Student work also involves researching and identifying the target audience, and investigating how and why audiences may have accepted or rejected particular texts.

2.3.3. Case study

The strategies used here can vary: students may focus on the production, marketing and consumption of a particular media or information text (often as an extension of contextual analysis); students could also conduct cross-media analysis of a particular issue or topic and its presentation in the media and through various information providers; they could focus on audience analysis through questionnaires, surveys etc., on a particular topic. Case studies can also involve the investigation of a single media company or information provider (such as a major global company or a smaller independent or local organization); the release of a feature film; the launch of a new ad campaign; the location and presentation of information in a library or museum; the role of media and information technology in Internet activism.

2.3.4. Translation

This involves the exploration of a particular issue or topic as it is taken up by or presented in various media forms. This can be done through analysis or production and helps students realize the possibilities and limitations of various media and information sources in conveying the depth and breadth of a complex topic or issue. The analysis here is textual and contextual.

2.3.5. Simulation

Simulation is an effective pedagogical approach to teach (Adcock & al., 2011). This strategy puts students into the position of media producers. This is particularly useful for addressing questions about production – about roles and processes within media industries, and about how producers balance ethical, financial, technical and institutional constraints in their work. For example, students could be required to select the most appropriate sources of information for particular purposes and access, retrieve and store the information. They could also develop search and interrogation strategies as they research and compile information. They could then be required to develop an outline for using the media to convey this information to a particular audience.

2.3.6. Production

Students work individually, or on teams, in the production of an original media or information text. Assignments should initially be small scale and manageable – i.e., a PSA (public service announcement) or an information brochure. Students are required to identify, access, and synthesize information, then choose the medium through which they will be able to communicate their information and message most effectively. Student decision-making will help students reflect their purpose and audience, and on the representation of groups, individuals or events, that, in textual analysis only, may remain quite abstract. The «language» of a particular medium and its impact on meaning can also become more explicit here. Production should be linked to analysis and meta-cognition so that students are encouraged to be conscious of the production decisions they are making and the impact of these decisions. This also provides the opportunity to explore the relationship between intention and results, as well as the meaning that is constructed when various production elements come together (and sometimes in ways that students don't anticipate) (Buckingham, 2003).

3. MIL, differentiated instruction, and assessment

MIL, as stated earlier, it is both a content area and a way of teaching and learning. What is significant about the pedagogical approaches outlined here is that they also illustrate the ways in which MIL contributes to differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is based on the idea that because students differ significantly in their interests, learning styles, abilities and experiences, then pedagogical approaches and resources should vary as well (Ministry of Education, 2005). Differentiated instruction and the MIL curriculum facilitate all types of learners.

This means that teachers provide a variety of instruction/assessment strategies, challenge students at an appropriate level, and use a variety of student groupings to meet students needs (individual, partner, large and small group work). Differentiated Instruction is always aligned with student readiness (current knowledge, skill level and experience), interests (themes, topics and projects), and learning profiles (learning style, intelligence preference, gender and culture) (Ministry of Education, 2005).

The pedagogical approaches in the MIL curriculum recognize that students' learning profiles will vary; students may prefer auditory, visual, tactile, or kinesthetic modes of internalizing, processing, and communicating information. The approaches also recognize that differentiation can occur in terms of the way that content is presented to students, in the processes in which students become involved, and in what students are asked to produce to demonstrate their learning.

The pedagogical approaches and related teacher competencies for MIL also rely on different forms of

assessment: diagnostic, formative, and summative. Simply stated, diagnostic assessment, or assessment for learning, provides teachers with information about students' skills and knowledge before their instruction begins. It is based on this assessment that teachers will adapt the curriculum and develop their plans for instruction. Formative assessment, also referred to as assessment as learning, provides students and teachers with information about the learning while it is in progress. Students and teachers can implement any feedback provided to alter or adjust their learning and teaching strategies as necessary.

Summative assessment, or assessment of learning, is used to summarize learning at a particular point, and provides teachers and student with feedback about a final product, or what students have produced to demonstrate their learning (Ministry of Education, 2010). The curriculum provides opportunities for students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, thinking and inquiry, communication, and application of MIL theory and practice.

4. Recommendations

The fact that media and information literacy programs have largely remained outside of teacher education and training programs at the same time as the media and information sources have come to dominate so many aspects of teachers' and students' lives, speaks to the challenges of moving teacher education into the present, and positioning it to embrace the future. While UNESCO's MIL curriculum marks a significant milestone in identifying and developing a program that is essential for teacher education today, there are several factors which should be considered in order to ensure its success and to maximize its impact.

1) Curriculum leaders need to be available for training, support and consultation, as institutions begin to adapt and implement the curriculum.

2) A subject association or network for teachers (local, national or international) should be established so that teachers who have been working in MIL can continue to collaborate, and teachers new to MIL can find support for their work.

3) There should be a focus on the development of relevant policy documents that will formalize the inclu-

sion of MIL in education for teachers and students, and support ongoing curriculum and teacher profession development.

4) Educators involved in teacher training will need to prioritize areas of the curriculum that will help to develop the necessary competencies for teachers. Identification of these competencies should be made by both the trainers and the teachers receiving the training, as the teachers will be able to recognize their own needs relative to their individual situations. Teachers at the secondary level will also be able to identify those areas that address the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for their students. In other words, decisions about the implementation of the curriculum will have to be made in consultation with teachers working in MIL on a daily basis, with secondary students.

> It is clear that for teachers and students, media and information literacy is a life skill and one that is necessary to make informed decisions, affect change, and wield some degree of power over the decisions we make in our daily lives. It is perhaps in the areas of active citizenship and democratic discourse, in social participation and empowerment, that MIL can make the most significant contributions of all.

5) Teachers need access to resources that are relevant and copyright-cleared for classroom use, including relevant technologies and curriculum materials such as textbooks –on-line or in hard copy– Internet access, and audio-visual materials.

6) Ongoing professional development will be essential in order to address changes and developments in the field, and to respond with appropriate pedagogical strategies.

7) Collaboration between parents, students, teachers, administrators and media professionals is essential so that teachers who have been trained in MIL can share their expertise and experience with the larger community. A diversity of interested partners can provide essential support and resources for the program.

8) Research is required in MIL which focuses on

best practices, models for assessment and evaluation model curricula and student success.

It is commendable that UNESCO has offered this curriculum as a starting point for teacher education in MIL. MIL education should be seen as an essential component of teacher training programs – one that links the development of teacher competencies to helping students explore their media experiences and address their information needs in meaningful, authentic ways.

It is clear that for teachers and students, media and information literacy is a life skill and one that is necessary to make informed decisions, affect change, and wield some degree of power over the decisions we make in our daily lives. It is perhaps in the areas of active citizenship and democratic discourse, in social participation and empowerment, that MIL can make the most significant contributions of all.

The MIL curriculum document is an important step in ensuring a systematic approach to MIL education in schools. Ideally, successful adaption and implementation of the curriculum will result in a 'multiplier' effect, as teachers trained in MIL work with and train colleagues across programs and institutions.

In order for that to take place, the MIL curriculum has to be recognized as a beginning, not an end; as a set of ideas and approaches that outline the possibilities for addressing media and information literacy but that do not exhaust the field. The curriculum is the first step in introducing an essential, relevant program to teacher training institutions and to policy makers who, one hopes will take the necessary steps required to ensure that the important work of MIL continues.

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