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## **Media Literacy as a Task for School Development**

The teaching of media literacy places greater demands on school, which need to be seen as a new challenge. The aim is not just to learn to use computers and the internet but also to take account of the social, ethical and emotional aspects of media literacy. For the school, this also means acquiring the appropriate equipment and educational tools for introducing new media into everyday school life. In the context of school development, the following shows how the school can adjust to these processes as a learning organisation. In particular, this requires flexibility, vision and commitment.

### **Dimensions of media literacy**

The public and educational discussion of media literacy clearly demonstrates that, with this concept, a new subject has also emerged for school education. Whereas initiatives such as "schools on the network" have rendered the question whether schools should use computers and the internet obsolete or superfluous, the next phase is now being initiated. This is finally concentrating on the more educational aspects, so that media education no longer centres around how to switch a computer on or off, or surf the internet, but focuses on aspects of the integration of new media within education. This allows us to extend the hitherto narrow focus on purely technical or cognitive aspects — e.g. how to search the

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internet — encountered in the above-mentioned discussion of media literacy. In principle, media literacy should also include aspects of media ethics, for example questions relating to content evaluation, as well as cover the social consequences of the use of new media, aesthetic design and the experiential dimension of media. All users of the new media need to acquire appropriate skills to enable them to understand and handle the social, ethical and, of course, political dimensions of these media. What is meant by this is spelt out below.

The use of the term "media literacy" has often been discussed and definitions attempted. In the following, I would like to present a proposal incorporating previous suggestions but also adding some new elements. In this approach, media literacy can be considered in terms of the following central dimensions:

### **Cognitive dimension**

This relates to the knowledge, understanding and analysis of media. The aim with this dimension is to show that media literacy is based upon a knowledge of media and media systems, the understanding and interpretation of the symbols and codes used in media and the analytical examination of media and their contents.

### **Active dimension**

Designing with media, expressing oneself, obtaining information or simply experimenting fall within the active dimension, which designates the skills needed not just to consume media but also to handle and actively shape them as well.

### **Moral dimension**

Media must also be examined and judged from an ethical standpoint. While this presupposes the cognitive dimension, it adds perspectives based on generally accepted conventions, for example human rights. The moral dimension should cover not just media content but also aspects of the production of media (e.g. environmental compatibility), aspects of social compatibility and the impact on communication, interaction and personality.

### **Social dimension**

The cognitive and moral dimensions are developed in the context of social and political action. Where media are concerned, individuals need to have the ability to defend their rights politically and appropriately address the social consequences of media.

### **Emotional dimension**

Alongside the above dimensions, which promote a critical perspective, it should not be forgotten that media also have an entertainment function. Knowing how to handle this properly is an important aspect of using media.

### **Aesthetic dimension**

This dimension complements the others in that it looks at the media as a means of expression and provider of information, with the emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of communication. Media contents need to be designed and specific skills are required to do this.

These six dimensions must be seen in combination, with no individual dimension dominating. Only when it is possible in all educational institutions — from nursery school to university — to teach, and acquire, media literacy can we be sure that today's children and young people will not be the losers in the digital world, but will be able to navigate it autonomously and competently.

### **Media literacy as a task of education**

Media skills are frequently seen as a complement to the traditional skills of reading, writing and arithmetic in order to meet the challenges of the knowledge society. Accordingly, the concept of education is returning to the fore, now oriented to a knowledge society characterised by media. Firstly, education should enable every member of society to act autonomously and competently in a society dominated by media. Autonomous and competent action are the essential conditions for a constructive confrontation with the future challenges of media technology. To ensure that these can be approached critically as well, however, emphasis needs to be placed on the ability to reflect on social developments and on one's own person. Only by constantly looking at society as a whole and asking whether the potential offered by media developments can actually be used by all, and whether social disadvantages and changes will not result, will we be in a position to tackle the adventure of the future with a clear conscience.

The same applies where we ourselves are concerned: even in the media era, we need to be able to ask questions about ourselves and our identity independently of the media and be able to determine ourselves who we are and where we want to go. Putting in place the conditions to do this has to be the task of education and training. Clearly, therefore, the term "media literacy" is quite restricted and is better replaced by the concept of media education. Although the latter includes media literacy, it adds the ability to reflect on the media. A successful media education thus covers both: the competent handling of media and the reflection on media, along with the ability to adapt appropriately to unfamiliar media situations.

## **What does this now mean for school?**

The main brunt here will fall upon the schools, although the demands on universities, in particular teaching training institutions, should not be overlooked. This does not make the work in schools any easier from the educational standpoint, as alongside many other requirements pupils now have to be taught media literacy as well. However, the schools have to meet this challenge!

It is thus an important task to design our education system in such a way as to give everyone access to the new media and the ability to harness media literacy in all the various dimensions outlined above. This can be done by making media available to all children as early as possible in educational institutions in order to give them the opportunity to use media and hence acquire media literacy through experience. However, the use of new media should not be confined to just experience but must also, as a part of education, go hand in hand with reflection on, and with, the media.

This argument is supported by various papers on educational policy, which call for media education as an educational task. In 1995, for example, the Joint Federal/Länder Committee for Educational Planning and Research (BLK) adopted an important document entitled "Orientierungsrahmen Medienerziehung der Schule" (orientation framework for media education in schools). This was followed up by the Standing Conference of Education Ministers of the Länder (KMK) with its paper "Medienpädagogik in der Schule" (media education in schools). There are a number of more recent reports and programmes that clearly indicate that media education is seen as an important task, representing a challenge for media education and indeed education as a whole.

In concrete terms, significant changes are required in school life if the demand for teaching media literacy is to be implemented in school. Firstly, of course, the necessary media infrastructure must be provided to make it possible in the first place to acquire experience in using the new media. It must also be remembered that it is not enough to acquire equipment, since maintenance and staff training are also important factors. Training should of course should not be confined only to the technical aspects, since instruction in how to make sensible use of computers and the internet in class is an essential requirement for tackling specific issues connected with media literacy.

To ensure that this can be appropriately put into practice, two further requirements have to be met: firstly, in-service training is needed to familiarise teachers with the appropriate concepts; secondly, these concepts should incorporate new forms of teaching and learning with new media. The previous demand for "learning with new media" needs to be transformed into "new learning with media". This is intended to show that the teaching of media literacy can no longer proceed following traditional concepts such as e.g. 'media' as a subject or an internet 'driving licence', but needs to be integrated into mainstream classroom activities. It should be guided by principles of constructivist learning, placing students in an active position in the learning process and changing the role of teachers from knowledge provider to adviser.

In my opinion, these processes also call for changes in the structure of time and space in school. The 45-minute class should be replaced by longer working and learning units, since only then is intensive work with new media possible. And of course computers and the internet mean that not all tasks necessarily need to be performed at school or in the classroom. Computers at home and in public institutions, as well as notebooks, provide an opportunity to take seriously the long-standing call for school to be opened and extended towards the community and social life. In addition, cooperative and collaborative learning and working on and with computers is then a practicable proposition.

## **Consequences for school development and school management**

For school management, this change in the educational tasks of schools and the different conditions for teaching represent important tasks. The starting point here must be to regard the school as a learning institution that, while not having to fall in line with the changed conditions and tasks, nevertheless regards these as challenges to be met. It is not necessary to follow every trend, and public pressure from some supposed education politicians should be resisted, e.g. calling for every pupil to be given a laptop. Rather, media literacy can be taught and a media education achieved only through critical reflection on the media themselves. A first important step is therefore to ensure that all members of a school — not just the teaching staff but also pupils and parents — agree on

a school programme in which new media and media education play a part. The programme should be justified not just as a response to a trend but as a serious educational approach. It is also not necessary for changes and innovations to be implemented and supported jointly by all participants from the outset. However, they do need to gain the acceptance of others who still view them critically. A media literacy or education project can thus be undertaken by a small group with the support of the school management. The group must keep a constant critical eye on its own work, but should also have the opportunity to present its work and results to the others.

In addition, training should be provided within the school not just for the group implementing the project but also for other colleagues. Only when the latter too are literate in using and understanding new media will they also accept them in development processes within the school.

In his book *Die Schule als lernendes Unternehmen* (1999), the American educationalist Michael Fullan set out four demands to be met in order to bring about institutional change in schools: the development of personal visions; an ongoing review and questioning of one's own project; the development of experience and ability for change; and the establishment and maintenance of cooperation. In this approach, it is not so important for the school to attempt to develop, in a lengthy process, a common vision for working with new media and teaching media literacy. Rather, it is important for individuals to have such visions, which need to grow together with time in a process of continuous examination and critical review. Not only what we understand by new media is permanently changing — who would have thought seven years ago that schools would be networked or producing their own websites — but also what media literacy is intended to achieve. Only when we understand by media literacy not only a fixed set of abilities and skills but also a methodological knowledge and ability to cope with changing conditions, and to approach them critically and constructively, will we be able to understand the school as a learning institution and also shape it accordingly.

School management must always follow these processes critically, while also ensuring cooperation between all participants. It should encourage the project groups and allow them room to experiment without this interfering with school life. This coordinating function of the school management should not be underestimated in the overall process. The

expectations and demands for change in school in the course of a media literacy project are too high for this to be left to only a few individuals. Further, all members of the school management must themselves take part in this process of change, i.e. work with new media, not just in the administration but also in the communication between all members of a school. For example, part of the training within the school could also make use of new media, enabling participants to dispel their fears and reservations concerning the technology.

According to Michael Fullan (1999, p. 47), change is a journey, not a fixed plan. This emphasises a very important aspect. It is only too easy for an institution such as a school, characterised to a large extent by regulation and supervision, to see its own change as something that can be planned and fixed in advance. However, processes of change in educational institutions — and certainly not only there — must be considered as something dynamic and in a state of flux. It is thus necessary to show flexibility in thought, though without losing a sense of direction. Fullan summarised the necessary characteristics as follows: we need to push for change while at the same time allowing individual learning to mature in its own time; equip ourselves for a journey into uncertainty; see problems as a source of creative solutions; develop a vision without being blinded by it; recognise the value of the individual and the value of the group; link the forces of centralisation and decentralisation; strive for internal cohesion but remain outward-looking; and understand an informed approach to individual change as a way towards systematic change (Fullan 1999, p. 77).

If the school takes this perspective on board, it will, I believe, be well equipped for a future in which media play an important role not only in work and communication processes but also in educational contexts. Teaching pupils media literacy is one goal, making school the ideal place to achieve this is the other. If school cannot offer this, then other institutions in our society — in particular, industry and the media — will take on this task. School would then be relinquishing its central mission, namely to provide education. We should not allow this to happen!

**References:**

Fullan, Michael: *Die Schule als lernendes Unternehmen*, Stuttgart, 1999.

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