

The App Library project: technology and media education for teens

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Abstract:

The lives of young people today are strongly affected by information and communication technologies (ICTs). Used effectively, ICTs can complement school and other, further education, support psycho-social development and contribute to social inclusion. To support these processes of teenagers (13-18 y.o.) especially those who come from modest families, County Library "Alexandru D. Xenopol" Arad (Romania) implemented a new kind of library service focused on digital media education and promotion of the use of free software. The paper presents experiences obtained through this "App Library" project, which was funded by the EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) Public library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP). Through the project the library aims to give young people knowledge and practical skills in using digital media; to develop their critical thinking skills and enable them to express themselves online properly and effectively. During the first six months of service provision, over 100 teenagers attended library after-school training sessions. The trainees learnt how to verify and critically assess information, how to create multimedia content online and how to communicate effectively in social networks. Workshops were based on free software like Ubuntu Linux, LibreOffice Writer and Impress, GIMP and OpenShot. The paper details the experience of this project, explores lessons learnt, and suggest that the "App Library" experience offers a model for other libraries interested in media literacy training for young people, and in using free software and Creative Commons to support youth education, both as low cost solutions and as an applied example of critical thinking.

Keywords: media education, critical thinking, user generated content, creative commons, free and open source software

Introduction

Even after more than twenty five years since Ceausescu dictatorial regime's fall, media education and critical thinking still have little support in the Romanian Education System. This is a sad legacy that unfortunately has deeper roots all the way to Romanian culture, religion and historical background. In this context, it is hard to change people's mind-sets and to show them how mass media manipulates,

how to be aware of prejudices and why it is important to verify and evaluate information. For young people, media educations and critical thinking can open the doors to independence and maturity. This kind of learning can take place in any educational environment – including the public library. Media literacy has become even more important in today’s technological environment, in which people access so much information online. This is why a New Media Education Course for youth is a very constructive library service.

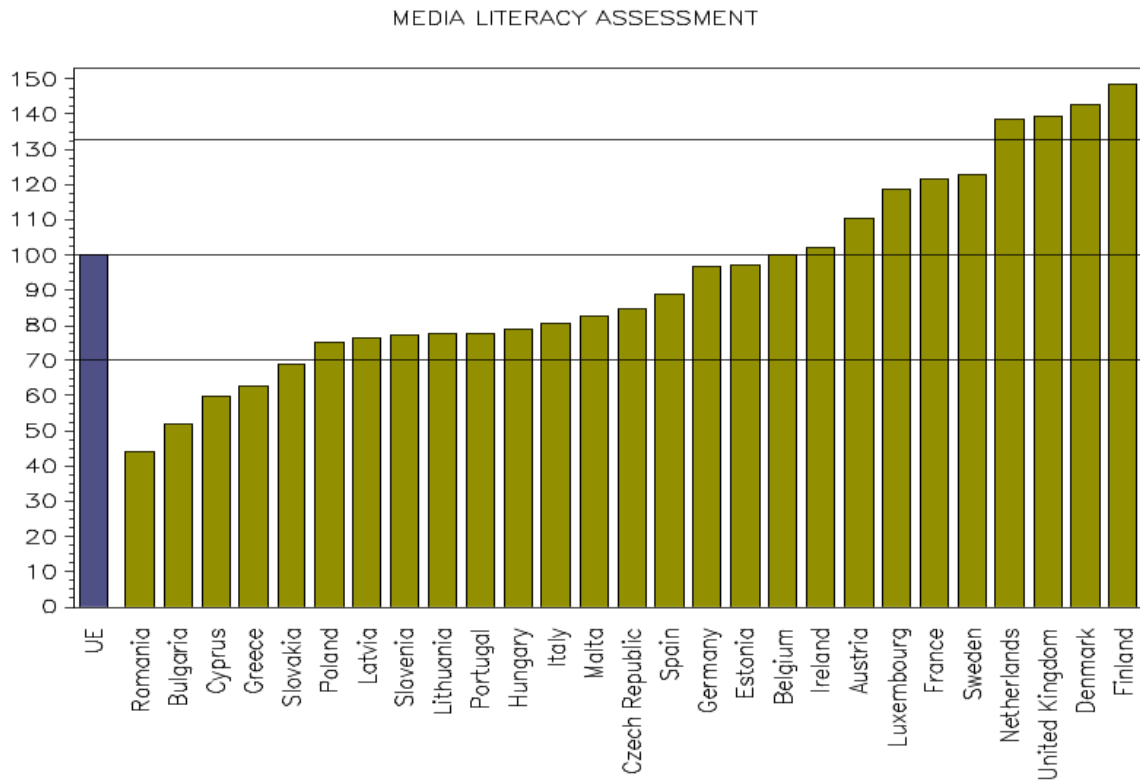
This article presents the experience of County Library “Alexandru D. Xenopol” Arad in implementing a Media Education Course and Workshop for teenagers aged between 13 and 18. The training focused on new media and new technologies.

We provide evidence and data about the almost total absence of media education in Romania. We describe how we created and implemented the new media education service, and we provide a short narrative report about our achievements. We conclude with some general observations about our project, and point to the library’s strategy building on the foundation of App Library project and sustaining it in future.

Context

Media literacy and media education are fields not well or clearly represented in the Education System of Romania. This contention is supported by a number of recent studies (as shown below), and by the general trend of the official education policies.

In the 2009 Report “Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels” commissioned by the European Commission DG Information Society and Media, Romania obtained a score of just over 40 points from 150 maximum, the smallest score in the report.



This study had a methodological objective “to offer an understanding of the way in which media literacy in the EU could be measured”¹ using mostly preexisting data. This overall quantitative assessment involved two kinds of criteria: individual competences - “individual capacity to exercise certain skills (including *inter alia* cognitive processing, analysis, communication, etc.)”², and environmental factors - “a set of contextual factors (affecting Individual Competences) that impact the broad span of media literacy, including informational availability, media policy, education and the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the media community”³, all defined within the study framework (Annex B).

Another report from 2011 made by ActiveWatch⁴ within the MEDEANet project⁵ ends with the following conclusion:

“No policy strategy exists for media and learning, as defined in this report, to be embedded into formal education. As it has become clear from our research, so far, only ICT competences are taken into consideration in education policy documents. Media education as an object of study is available at high school level, as an optional course and embedded into the Social Studies curriculum (12th grade). Teachers’ training programmes focus mainly on information and communication technologies. Apart from the ActiveWatch programme for teacher training, we have not identified any other similar programmes to develop teachers’ media literacy. Non-formal media education is available sporadically mainly for high school youngsters, less for younger ages, and almost not at all for adult learning.”⁶

The same report but from 2013 has a more positive conclusion, showing that in the last years media education gained some acceptance in the Romanian society but not at an official level still having no formal definition in official education policy papers:

“The school curriculum study showed a fairly good presence of media and learning recommendations embedded in the various school curricula. Moreover it appears that the additional curriculum – with no explicit media and learning objectives and suggestions - is flexible enough for the teachers to include media education activities in the classroom. Yet the teachers’ initial and in-service training contains only a few media literacy - learning outcomes. The focus stays on ICT and e-learning skills and the future policy keeps the trend. One reason that not much media education - and not even media-based learning - happens in the classroom is that teachers lack the training and hence the confidence. This assumption is reinforced by feedback we have received from teachers over many years. Furthermore the teachers confident enough to innovate with new media-based teaching and learning methods are hampered by a lack of institutional support.”⁷

¹ [1] p. 11

² [1] p. 7

³ [1] p. 7

⁴ ActiveWatch is “a Romanian human rights organization that fights for free communication in the public interest. ActiveWatch is engaged in a large array of activities, with an emphasis on human rights monitoring, advocacy, direct intervention, education and media research and collaborates on an on-going basis with local and international NGOs.”[2] p. 66

⁵ MEDEANet is “a 3-year network project funded under KA3 of the Lifelong Learning Programme, running from January 2012 to December 2014. MEDEANet aims to promote media-based learning to organisations and practitioners through local training and networking events, online resources and knowledge sharing.” [2] p. 7

⁶ [2] p. 73

⁷ [3] p. 106

Implementation

In February 2014 our library applied with the App Library project in the EIFL-PLIP⁸ Call for Proposal. In the initial application, our project involved a new library service implementing non-formal ICT education for teenagers focused on learning to use content creation software, communicating and publishing online and learning about free software and Creative Commons. EIFL-PLIP staff suggested integrating this kind of service within the context of media education. We realized the need and the importance of media education for our local youth community so we recreated our project as a new Course and Workshop of Media Education. In May 2014 we were among the 10 winners of EIFL-PLIP grant and starting from June we implemented our project.

The new library service developed in the App Library project consists of an after-school Course and Workshop of media education for teens using Android tablets, Ubuntu laptops and free software.

The main objectives are:

- To search, verify and critically assess information and media resources;
- To conceive and to produce new media resources using new technologies;
- To publish content online and to communicate efficiently and safely using new technologies.

Almost all sessions include activities such as presentations, demonstrations, offline and online exercises, energizers etc. The goal, from the point of view of the participant, is to choose a subject or theme and to make a final media product that has a clear message, respects copyright law and is publicly available online. To achieve this goal the participants must search, verify and evaluate information on the Web, learn how to use text, presentation, image and video editing software and learn how to publish online. At the end, each participant receives a bilingual (Romanian and English) certification of their acquired competences.

The implementation of our new service of Media Education Course and Workshop had to take into account the availability and the receptiveness of our target group. We divided the activities into 8 sessions, each 2 hours long, once per week after school classes. This way the participants are not overwhelmed by too much information delivered at once and their personal time is spent at their own pace.

The structure of the workshop is as follows:

- 3 sessions of basic media education: to understand notions like media education, ICT and new technologies; to develop skills for searching, verifying and evaluating information; to know how to publish media content online.
- 3 session of software learning: how to edit an article, a presentation, a collage and a video in LibreOffice Writer - text processing program, LibreOffice Impress - presentation editor, GIMP - photo editor and OpenShot - video editor
- 2 workshops sessions focused on developing the final product.

In order to manage the course exercises and resources, the user files and data and the user log-ins, we implemented a dedicated server side infrastructure. We used two existing desktop computers that were upgraded for web server use with more memory and storage.

⁸ EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) is a not-for-profit organization that works with libraries to enable access to knowledge in developing and transition economy countries in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe and Latin America. PLIP (Public Library Innovation Programme) aims to help public libraries to use information and communication technology to create new library services covering needs for community development: agriculture, health, economic development, education, social inclusion etc. (<http://www.eifl.net/>)

In order to manage all the Course and Workshop sessions we installed and configured our first elearning platform, using Moodle software. Now this platform is hosting only the Media education Course, but in the near future we are planning to offer new online courses. In order to manage all user files and data we installed and configured the ownCloud software server for file storage and synchronization. For user accounts we created a Single SignOn service using OpenLDAP software and enabling LDAP log-in in our Ubuntu laptops and our Moodle and Owncloud installations.

The IT infrastructure that we developed in-house for the App Library project is not intended to replace or to compete with other professional and commercial solutions, but to offer a quick and affordable basis on which a medium-sized library like ours can develop new services using industry standard technology, and online community support for installing, configuring and administrating the software. (All software was installed following official or trusted documentation made available for and by the online community of free and open source users.)

Achievements

From 21 September 2014 to 15 June 2015 we worked with more than 200 high-school teenagers from 8 schools from Arad city: “Elena Ghiba Birta” National Collegium Arad, “Moise Nicoara” National Collegium Arad, “Sabin Dragoi” Arts Lyceum Arad, “Aurel Vlaicu” Technical Collegium Arad, Technological Collegium of Food Industry Arad, “Caius Iacob” Technological Lyceum of Electronics and Automation Arad, “Preparandia – Dimitrie Tichindeal” National Collegium Arad and “Vasile Goldis” National Collegium Arad.

As of 25'th of May we are preparing a survey of our target audience. The purpos of this is to report the changes that occurred as a result of our new service. We are trying to quantify the skills needed:

- to search effectively information on the Internet and in other languages than Romanian;
- to design and produce digital content/media resources;
- to publish digital content/media resources online;
- to use more than the personal computer;
- to use more than one operating system;
- to use free and open source software;
- to use Creative Commons licensed content.

We have 85 short videos, 40 presentations, 30 digital photo collages and 10 articles. All these can be found at <http://bibliotecaarad.ro/applib> or the project Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/bibliotecadeaplicatii>

We managed to develop a strong partnership with the schools involved, with Arad School Inspectorate and a fertile professional relationship with the 3 teachers involved in the project.

Conclusions

Preliminary evaluations were very positive and revealed that media education is very important because complements the education received in school, is beneficial to the development of personality and supports better integration into the socio-cultural context dependent on new technologies.

At the end of our project, the general conclusion is that all teenagers involved, who previously had poor or no media literacy and critical thinking skills, became aware of the importance of media education, free software and Creative Commons and developed a strong practical basis on how information must be search, verified and critically assessed. Also, all participants considered that the media Education Course and Workshop was much more interesting and practical than the ICT classes they attend to in school.

There is a need of a more comprehensive impact evaluation of this course on our users – how they apply media skills and what difference it makes in their lives (apply critical thinking in regard to media; understand concepts like digital freedom and openness specific to the use of new technology and the Internet; communicate competently online; protect their online identity; reduce software piracy by using free software; link knowledge gained at school with new media and technologies improve their school results; use new technologies to earn an income).

In the near future our library will make the Media Education Course and Workshop a permanent service. We want to offer other non-formal education services that will be built on the foundation laid out by the App Library project, like: media education for teachers, programming for primary school children and follow up course and workshop for the participants of the App Library project.

We also want to establish a partnership with other institutions and organizations that are active in the media education field, for example an NGO like ActiveWatch who can provide guidance in constructing a better curricula for media education in public libraries.

Our final goal is to make our library the project coordinator in developing a media education curriculum specifically designed for public libraries and for providing training and support for those Romanian libraries that want to implement a media education course. This will be achieved by applying to other grant programmes.

All these objectives are part of our library management strategy and we also have full support from our local authorities.

Acknowledgments

We would like to show our gratitude to the EIFL-PLIP team for inspiring us and supporting the implementation of the project.

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