Show What You Can Do with Media

The Media Literacy Portfolio

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Abstract By media literacy we understand a wide range of abilities, which are not taught as an individual subject but which are, in principle, included in all subjects at all levels of teaching and in all types of schools. The difficulty of such 'cross-sectional tasks' is that quality and quantity of engagement with them is nowhere explicitly documented and assessed. The development of the portfolio was initially motivated by the wish to provide pupils with a possibility to document their individual achievements in a suitable way. This instrument can play an important role in the development of teaching media literacy within schools because a vital prerequisite for an attractive portfolio are interesting school activities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers as well as representatives from the fields of business and politics are of the opinion that media literacy is an indispensable qualification which is vital for coping with the demands of the information and media society. However, when you talk to them individually, the term 'media literacy' often means completely different things to them.

At present, promoting media literacy is probably one of the most frequently cited educational goals throughout the Federal Republic of Germany. It is precisely the comprehensive initiatives to equip all schools with multimedia computers and internet connections which are committed to meeting this pedagogical goal.

Within the foreseeable future, when the schools are adequately equipped, and advanced teacher training is sufficiently effective for the use of the New Media, in particular, to be gaining in importance across a broad spectrum, the question is also going to be asked: How media-competent are our pupils?

Formal proof of the standard methods of grading and certification is not possible. In North-Rhine-Westphalia there is not a separate subject which is aimed at teaching media literacy. As a result, it is not possible to award a grade which provides information about the pupils' achievements in this subject. Instead, the recommendation is to see the subject matter of media training, i.e. all teaching aimed at promoting media competence, as being, as a matter of principle, the task of all types of schools, age-ranges and subjects.

However, if, ideally, inter-related media topics are regularly taught at a school and relate to different subjects, these still do not lead to a grade: the success or failure of the efforts, the commitment shown, the knowledge and methods which have been acquired, are, to a certain extent, reflected in the subject grades and consequently in the school reports, and perhaps the school report can include an additional comment. Nevertheless, it is true that outsiders will not be able to ascertain the degree of existing media literacy.

An additional problem of 'proof' arises as a result of the fact that apart from lessons or voluntary school events there are other opportunities for pupils to acquire and deepen their media competence. This may be in the form of practical training, or courses which they can attend outside school, or – as quite frequently happens – taking an active interest in a topic or subject during their leisure time.

It is by introducing a portfolio in media literacy that we see a good opportunity to provide information about the media literacy which pupils have acquired.

2. FROM A PEDAGOGICAL VIEWPOINT

The term 'portfolio' generally refers to a 'structured file of documents' which can be 'presented' on specific occasions. The term is frequently used in the world of finance where, for example, shareholders list document stocks and shares in a portfolio. However, artists also combine some of their selected works into a portfolio in order to demonstrate the breadth of their artistic abilities. Our concept of a portfolio in media literacy is based on just such an artist's portfolio, in that pupils should be able to show interested parties which media they have prepared themselves or to what extent they were involved in the preparation of these.

Yet simply compiling a list of their own results is insufficient when it comes to documenting something as complex as media literacy. And the concept of a portfolio also includes additional pedagogical possibilities which we wished to take into account in what we were developing. Two of our examples will show that portfolios can be more than mere files.

2.1 Example 1: The European portfolio for languages

How should language skills be documented so that they can be understood throughout Europe, and so that they can also be comparable? Experts on the European Council have been working on this since the beginning of the 1990s. It did not prove possible to create the required transparency in respect of school reports and grades, firstly because the grades and the way they are interpreted differ from one country to another, and secondly because grades also only relate to aspects which are taught or tested as part of the teaching process. Skills which have been acquired outside school, for example within the family, during practical courses, or during stays abroad, as well as intercultural experiences, were not recorded.

The European Portfolio for Languages, which was presented for the first time in 1997, was intended to create this transparency. Following an initial evaluation phase, the portfolio (in the version used in North-Rhine-Westphalia) consists of 3 parts:

- The *language passport* contains the documentation of language competency at the end of a course of training in secondary level I or II.
- In the *language biography* the pupils themselves describe an individual assessment of their abilities and intercultural experiences.
- In the *dossier* they collect examples of their own personal achievements, e.g. especially successful class-papers and class-work.

One important element which describes achievements in the field of languages is the six levels of competency which have been agreed throughout Europe as frames of reference. On the basis of this frame, the teachers assess the pupils' performance at pre-determined times (Christ 1997).

In addition to the practical importance of the portfolio, especially as documentation – agreed upon throughout Europe – of language knowledge and skills, it is the pedagogical functions of the portfolio which are seen as being of special importance, for instance:

- the portfolio for languages is increasingly seen as an instrument which motivates both young and adult learners to orientate themselves towards several languages, and to learn foreign languages throughout and as part of their lives.

- by means of the portfolio, learners are motivated to follow their own learning processes and to become aware of the progress they are making before they document this progress.
- reflecting on their own learning increases the learners' independence and self-responsibility.

The developers are assuming that the portfolio can serve as a tool for quality development and quality assurance provided that at regular intervals it forms a part of lessons (Gerling and Thümann 1998).

2.2 Example 2: The portfolio as an alternative to grades

No grades are awarded in the 'Bielefelder Oberstufenkolleg'. Instead, the collegiates can provide proof of their achievements in their courses. At the end of the course, it is only a matter of deciding between 'passed' or 'not passed'. Within the framework of a competition called 'Qualität schulische Arbeit' (= quality of schoolwork), the aim is to introduce experiences by including portfolios in the marking of work. In those portfolio courses which have already been set up, the collegiates document not only proof of their achievements, they also record brief self-evaluations and the comments of those who teach them. 'Achievement files' are introduced which overlap courses, and in the final stage, each collegiate is responsible for keeping an overall performance file.

The portfolio concept is considered to have a great deal of potential, for example when it comes to a changed, democratic approach to pupils' performance. It is precisely in schools which practise open, differentiated teaching, during which individual profiles can be built up, that assessment of performance using the portfolio system can provide the necessary flexibility. On the one hand the learner has a wider choice of material from which to learn, and on the other, there are the learner's own checks and assessment of his or her learning progress which act as a correcting influence, as well as an obligation to meet certain standard requirements. This encourages a positive attitude towards achievement (Oberstufenkolleg Bielefeld 2000).

Just as in the example of the language portfolio, the 'achievement portfolio' also offers advantages such as:

- communication between teacher and learner about achievement is simplified
- the pupil's own reflection on learning and achievement is stimulated
- the pupil has a better awareness of his or her own abilities, deficits and development
- the files make the course more easily comprehensible and easier to reflect on, and further steps can be planned on this basis.

Although the kinds of motivation to make use of portfolios are so different, they also show how the wide spectrum of pedagogical possibilities makes the development of a portfolio in media literacy worthwhile.

3. A PORTFOLIO IN MEDIA LITERACY

The initiators of the portfolio in media literacy were the principals – one female, one male – at two high schools in which ‘media’ is included as an important aspect of their school programme. It was their idea to develop a portfolio by means of which their pupils could demonstrate their specific skills. The Bertelsmann Foundation, which sponsors media activities in one of the schools, was just as interested as the Ministry for Schools, Science and Research, which commissioned the State Institute for Schools and Further Education to participate in developing the portfolio. The advantages of development a portfolio to prove media literacy were immediately obvious, but it was the details which were the problem:

3.1 Defining the term ‘media literacy’

The term ‘media literacy’ is often used in a variety of ways, and so it was first necessary to define it. Only when that had been done was it necessary to define competencies.

- Which basic abilities, skills, knowledge, methods form part of media literacy?
- Which media are involved?
- How is it possible to establish whether pupils have these competencies?

The first step was to set up an orientation framework as a general system of reference; this framework consists of five areas of responsibility. These include both forms of activity-orientated analysis of media:

1. the selection and use of what the media have to offer
2. designing your own media work.

In terms of content, both forms include knowledge and analytical abilities in connection

3. with the creative opportunities on which the various kinds of media are based,
4. with the pre-conditions for use and the effects of media, and
5. with economic, social, technical, political conditions which are connected with the production and dissemination of media.

In practical schoolwork, an experiment has already produced positive results with this orientation framework (MSWWF des Landes NRW 1998, Tulodziecki et al. 1995). Instead of proof of appropriate competencies on the

part of the learners, the first stage is for them to list the (media) events in which they have taken part.

3.2 Agreeing on minimum requirements

Media literacy is not taught as a subject, there are no specified inner structures, catalogues of content, or any procedure which is built up in important sectors. Knowledge relating to media education can be developed using different media and topics and then transferred to other subject matters.

- How is it possible to ensure that, in spite of a lack of obligatory content material in lessons in respect of media, a wide range of content is offered and different methods of dealing with content in lessons are employed or are expressed in the documented proof?
- How is it possible to ensure that all the knowledge and achievements relevant for media literacy which are demonstrated in the portfolio make themselves felt?

The orientation framework presented above can be used in a flexible fashion: unnecessary restrictions are avoided, and instead relevant knowledge can be classified according to the five areas of responsibility. What is being called for as proof of media literacy is that all areas of responsibility must be dealt with in the course of time, and that this takes place using the example of different kinds of media. In this meaning, subjects offered at school are to be documented by the teachers in the form of brief descriptions which allow for classification.

3.3 Planning flexible design

There is a wide range of opportunities for pupils to acquire media literacy. These may be available in compulsory school courses, but also in elective courses or voluntary study-groups. In addition, it should be possible to document extra-curricular activities in the portfolio, whether these activities are 'organised' in external courses or carried out on the learners' own initiative, such as the self-guided learning of a computer programming language in order to solve a specific problem.

- How can extra-curricular opportunities and the results of the learners' own initiative be appropriately documented?

These project forms are also to be used by so-called 'external suppliers'. Pupils, too, should be able to fill in a project form by themselves if they have acquired relevant skills by themselves.

3.4 Ensuring that individual work is recognised

Media education should be taught in an activity-orientated way. This means that media work both in and out of school must be more project-related than other lessons. Pupils will frequently meet in groups and carry out different partial tasks in order to find the solution to a more complex task; in doing this, they will deal more intensively with individual problems than their fellow students, use special tools, or design a specific medium. Increasingly, they will first organise the tasks by themselves so that the organisation itself only provides a framework, and the important learning processes each take place in the groups with the setting of different, individual emphases.

- How is it possible to ensure that the individual contributions of the learners – often produced with a great deal of commitment – are suitably documented?

The learners will prepare their own results forms for the individual project descriptions, and they will use these forms – with reference to the official description – to describe their own personal contribution within the framework of the project. They should collect those results which they have come to, or to which they have made a major contribution, in their file.

3.5 Assessing technical abilities and skills

In order to work with media, to prepare your own media or to make use of media-supported methods, you need technical abilities, skills in dealing with equipment and technical systems, hardware and software or computer-supported tools. Although from a pedagogical point of view media education is less a matter of detailed technical knowledge which can be used at once (in any case, technical knowledge is soon out of date), such knowledge can be very interesting and helpful for outsiders, for example those companies which offer apprenticeships. They provide information on whether the owner of a portfolio is accustomed to using more complex technical systems, whether he has worked with certain types of software, and how intensively he has worked with these

- Which technical skills and knowledge of the use of media are important for thorough media literacy and should be listed specifically?
- How can this knowledge be assessed?
- Who is responsible for carrying out the assessments?

Within the framework of their personal project documentation, the learners should also state how intensively they have worked with technical media. In doing this, they should grade themselves according to a four-level scale with the grades of ‘observer’, ‘beginner’, ‘advanced’ or ‘professional’

and record this in the documentation. The learners will be given brief texts to help them assess themselves according to these levels. The learners' own description of their work on the project, and their own assessment can be read by the teacher or supervisor, and added to if necessary.

3.6 Ensuring comprehensibility and readability

The portfolio becomes the property of the pupils, and should be binding. For outsiders the details should be comprehensible, interesting, meaningful and reliable. It should be possible to understand the important information quickly.

- What must the documentation look like so that it is easily comprehensible, easy to read, and informative for third parties who were not involved in the preparation process?
- Should the portfolio provide for additional comments on the owner's work, achievement and social behaviour?
- Should a summary of the assessment be provided?

The individual project reports with the relevant individual results forms are again condensed down to the important details: the first overview contains what has been dealt with, in each case with the topic, reference to the range of tasks, types of media, and individual points of emphasis; the second contains a list of the technical media and the details of which levels of literacy were achieved in which projects.

A further summary of the assessment is not carried out. Any special efforts or commitment can be seen by means of additional information in the first overview relating to whether the projects in which the learners took part involved in-school, extra-curricular, compulsory or voluntary work. However, the descriptions provided by the learners themselves, or additional comments by the instructors, should provide evidence of competencies such as reliability and the ability to cooperate.

3.7 Avoiding unnecessary additional work

The preparation and keeping of the portfolio is not intend to be an unnecessary burden on the pupils, or the teachers or 'suppliers'.

- How can the amount of work involved in the use of the portfolio be kept within limits?

Using a standardised design for the documents, with many opportunities to tick off possible answers, is intended to reduce amount of work involved. However, only an evaluation process will produce reliable information on whether these measures are sufficient.

4. THE CONSTITUENT PARTS OF THE MEDIA LITERACY PORTFOLIO

Taking all these considerations into account, the media literacy portfolio consists of the following constituent parts:

1. Information for the pupils in the form of a booklet with information on what the portfolio is intended to achieve, and how they can use it.
2. Information for the teachers, on a separate DIN A4 leaflet, explaining the general purpose of the portfolio and the specific details of the project.
3. Several project forms which are filled in by the in-school or external suppliers with the official details of the relevant project.
4. Several results forms in which the learners describe their individual results in respect of the relevant project and also provide their own assessment of their knowledge and skills with reference to the technical media which they have used.
5. An overview of all projects (activities) in which the learners have taken part; this is added to each time a project is completed.
6. An overview of the results with a list of possible technical media from the fields of photography, audio, video and computers, as well as different software and computer programming systems. This is where details of the levels of literacy which have been achieved, and the numbers of the projects in which they were acquired, are entered. However, it is also possible to designate other systems and to record the results which have been achieved.
7. A file for storing the project and results forms, but also any certificates which may have been acquired.
8. The media box for the collecting of personal results. The owner decides which products are shown here.

4.1 Additional expectations

The aim of the test is to optimise as quickly as possible this draft of the portfolio of media literacy for pupils at secondary levels I and II and to make it 'ready for use'. The focus is on aspects such as comprehensibility, content, extent, design, and ease of use. If the portfolio is well-received in principle, we expect impulses for media education in school on all levels.

We believe that it is an attractive tool with which pupils can present the results of their own work and their own media literacy, can design their own paths of learning and plan specific further steps, can talk about their achievements and assess these, and can also demonstrate increased

willingness to achieve results. Teachers can feel motivated by the portfolio to reflect on what they are doing about media education and how to extend this.

Schools may conclude that they need qualified, comprehensive teaching, not only to improve the pupils' opportunities to produce a comprehensive portfolio but also because it can have a positive effect on the quality of schoolwork and the attractiveness of the school. There are opportunities to support media education in schools through advanced teacher training and via the field of media education on the NRW education server learn:line.

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