

Chapter 5

How to Use Parody and Humour to Teach Digital Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption digital literacy needs a practical approach and actions, this chapter presents an initiative that intends to develop digital skills in a very creative way. Considering the challenge educators (for instance, teachers or librarians) face to promote digital literacy skills especially to young people in a very engaging way, some training was developed to create a possible answer to that problem. This chapter discusses the impact of that initiative that highlights the potential of humour and parody that we can find on digital media to teach digital literacy. According to some attendants, this approach was creative, engaging and built in their minds alternative paths to explore digital literacy and critical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Long time ago, I was a Secondary School Teacher and once, as a reward for having finished the activity very quickly, I gave students a satirical newspaper. These 13-14 years old young people were reading, among others, about politics – something they were not clearly used to do. Because the newspaper content was ‘fake news’, these pupils realised that to be able to understand the parody they had to know about real news. All of the sudden, they were talking to each other and giggling about an event or about what a politician had said.

Comedy is a form of expression intrinsic to human being allowing people to criticise, mock, capture attention. It has several functions besides ‘only’ fun. According to Pergher et al (2005), humour influences for instance the level of apprehension and memorization of information, this is why advertising use this strategy very often. So, can we look at parody as one more way to learn and think about reality?

That was the question I have put to myself. Having a background as researcher on the field of media education, I was wondering whether videos, cartoons and other satirical pieces about digital media – and there are a lot on this topic – could be used to create awareness about different topics of digital literacy. Furthermore, I realised how much they liked everything that was related to parody.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3417-4.ch005

At the same time, this could be an interesting suggestion of how to explore and encourage young people to learn critical thinking skills – an important dimension of the concept of digital literacy. This is why on several occasions, running workshops for teachers and libraries, I tried to encourage them to use humour to engage students and try to improve their digital skills.

This chapter contextualizes these initiatives and assesses the impact of those experiences based on the perspective of some attendants. This can be considered as an action research project and it tries to provide some suggestions to a problem that research has been shown: sometimes, in the conceptual discussion of the Digital Literacy discussion – within the relation to other concepts, such as Media Literacy, Media Education or Information Literacy – there is a bigger focus on theoretical models and approaches than on a practical development and implementation. It does not mean the discussion of the concept is not necessary at all. Having been part of several academic meetings and others more institutional, promoted for instance by Council of Europe or UNESCO, within the interaction with other delegates very often we came to the same conclusion: it is very complex when someone goes to the field and tries to develop a strategy of digital literacy.

Having said that, it is important to reinforce that theoretical framework. Actually, it is fundamental to light your path. This is why the chapter starts with a literature review of the concept of digital literacy, mentioning at the end some advantages and limitations of this concept.

DISCUSSING THE CONCEPT OF DIGITAL LITERACY

The Digital Literacy notion is not new, dating back to at least the 80's (Buckingham, 2008). It is a plural concept (Papaioannou, 2011), polysemic (Junge & Hadjivassiliou, 2007) and evolving (Rosado & Bélisle, 2006), and intersects with other areas or other literacies that are nearby (Pérez Tornero, 2004a, 2004b, Buckingham, 2008). Some authors, like Lankshear & Knobel (2006; 2008), suggested that we should use the plural, 'digital literacies', to highlight this diversity.

This is one of the reasons why there is a lack of consensus around this concept, potentially generator of mistakes and leading to very different strategies, taking into account the starting point and the goals established by different institutions. It is therefore important to deepen different actors' understanding about the fundamentals and the dimensions in which the digital literacy tries to operate, as well as the field and their agents.

Traditionally, literacy is linked to basic operations such as reading, writing and counting. Several authors (such as Buckingham, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Livingstone, 2004; Pérez Tornero, 2004a, 2004b) have alluded to the importance of 'literacy' linked to other areas, for example, digital literacy, information literacy and computer literacy. In other languages, it appears sometimes the word 'alphabetization' (Gutiérrez, 2003; Reia-Baptista, 2007), concepts that refer etymologically to basic skills: knowledge of 'letters' or 'alphabet'. We could say about someone who cannot write be illiterate. The very fact of being literate refers to a control which has several levels, from a more elementary, which involves knowing how to draw letters, to the possibility of understanding its meaning and the handle with proficiency, or even power to create new meanings.

This lexical enrichment is associated with the increasing importance that technologies have acquired. The rapid development of new digital media such as the Internet, mobile devices, video games, and their convergence have brought concerns about the way people, especially the youngest, deal with different ways to communicate, assimilate and appropriate the information.

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