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Empowering Digital Creativity Developing Critical Knowledge Through a University Blog, Social Media and Podcasts

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ABSTRACT: *Most Reports depict young people among the major users of Internet and social media. Assuming the hypothesis that digital media can have a strategic role in empowering youth's creativity, we might consider them not only as consumers but as active creators. High education can support the development of a creative thinking to generate and extend ideas, to suggest hypotheses, to apply critical imagination, and to look for innovative outcomes. Since 2012, the master's degree in journalism, public and corporate communication of the University of Bologna promotes Laboratories involving the students in different communication activities also in collaboration with other institutional and social actors. In this paper we focus on the last edition of the Laboratory in Digital Communication and Social Media Management, where students make up a web editorial office. An average of 70 students takes part to the Laboratory. Everyone is called to contribute to the management of the Compassunibo blog, the official blog of the master's degree, a space for report, articles, news and storytelling, as well as to manage the official social network profiles. Through our participant observation and the thematic analysis of contents we reflect on how a teaching method based on 'pro-activity' can improve digital creativity and foster a critical awareness on professional ICT skills. The analysis starts from the output produced by the students using digital platforms as WordPress for blogging, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter for content marketing on social media, and Spotify for podcasting. Students act like content creators who learn by doing, sharing abilities and experiences with others. They gain awareness of the gatekeeper's role about news and social issues that they propose to a community of readers made up particularly by their peers. At the same time, they have the role to build and reinforce the community's bonds. Creating digital contents allows them to develop skills such as sources searching, frame analysis and interpretation, web writing and search engine optimization (SEO). Using the social media and podcast in a professional way they learn to practice new forms of digital literacy. Overall, this learning experience in Laboratory allows students not only to get technical communication skills but also to develop a greater and mature awareness to cooperate effectively in a team, and an immediate portfolio for their future job.*

KEYWORDS: *Digital literacy, digital skills, social media, blogging, creativity empowerment*

Introduction

Most recent statistics show that young people are among the most active users exposed to access new digital devices and platforms. The Agcom Report (2018) concerning Italian use of news shows that there is a migration from traditional media to new algorithmic sources, especially among young people. The Reuters Digital News Report (2020) observes that the 72% of the Italian range 18-24 years old use smartphone to search for and to read news. According Audiweb (2020), 99.5% of young people from 18-24 years old use digital devices. 83.8% of them is daily connected and the 75.4% is connected via smartphone, declaring to spent over 3 and half hours online. This massive presence of digital devices in the daily life of young people needs a reflection from different perspectives. Among the strategic priorities listed in the EU Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 we find the development of basic and advanced digital skills, and the increasing of the digital literacy. The Digital Competence Framework 2.0 (Vuorikari et al., 2016) identifies the key components of digital competence in 5 areas: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem solving.

But what is meant by digital literacy? We are used to see young people with digital tools always in hands, we define them as digital natives and as a generation 'always on' because of the massive use of social media, app and other ICT tools, but this easy access to the tools does not necessarily mean that they are digital literate (Livingstone, 2009). As Danah Boyd states considering the example of social media,

[...] it's important to realize that most teens are engaging with social media without any deep understanding of the underlying dynamics or structure. Just because they understood to use technology does not mean that they understand the information ecology that surrounds it. Most teens don't have scaffolding for thinking about the information practice (Boyd, 2009)

Then, we need to overcome a functional definition of digital literacy that considers only a minimal set of skills that enable the user to run with tools. Buckingham (2015) proposes a definition of digital literacy as a discipline that aims to train digital literate individuals, people who can compares range of sources, and sorts authoritative from non-authoritative, and relevant from irrelevant, documents. People able to evaluate and use information critically if they must transform it into knowledge. But which factors can influence this idealized rational search for information? As an example, we know that unintentional and indirect information have strong influence as much the intentional one, and that the criteria of the authoritative judgment are related to broader social, political, economic forces, included the inequalities in the socialization opportunities. Digital literacy is closely related to media literacy: as Cappello, Fellini, Hobbs (2011) argue in their proposal for a global media education, we must consider young people as active meaning-makers. In

this sense, digital literacy is not simply having a material access to technology, cabling all schools, or giving tablet or laptop to students. To take full advantage of the digital media for education, we need to make students interact more (self-) reflexively with media, learning to get, select, process, and create information on their own, generating critical knowledge, playing an active role in the construction of the reality, triggering a self-reflexive process of social inclusion and cohesion. This can be considered as creative use of digital technology.

Our reflection assumes that digital creativity and digital literacy are strongly connected when we refer to the social frame of the education. In a sociological perspective, we can assume that gaining skills is a social process, «involving people, objects and their significant, as well as their distribution in terms of space, environment, technologies, different languages, different forms of expression» (Lalli 2010, 10). If we consider students as proactive subjects, education is not limited to the transmission of knowledge, but a sharing process where also earlier knowledge is integrated and processed by interaction, where all participants produce meaningful information. As we already said, the access is not a sufficient condition: we need methods and approaches fostering a critical, conscious, and creative empowerment. How high education can support the development of a creative thinker? One of the possible directions is involving students in projects and workshops where they can actively use digital media, developing reflexive approaches as a prerequisite for using them also as resources for learning. The first challenges are the awareness about the invisible constraints of the digital platforms' affordances as well the capacity to face the more complex identification of the sources and their power in terms of agenda setting and framing (McCombs, Shaw, 1972). As an attempt towards this, we propose one example of a formal training laboratory at the University realized with participatory and informal workshop's methods directly engaging the students.

1. Practical laboratories as learning environments

Since 2004, the master's degree in Journalism, Public and Corporate Communication of the University of Bologna promotes several Laboratories and workshops involving the students in different communication activities also in collaboration with other institutional and social actors. In this paper we focus on the last edition of the Laboratory in Digital Communication and Social Media Management, where students make up a digital newsroom. Organized in different teams, all of them experiment the participation to weekly meetings, the setting of the editorial plan, as well as the web content management, from the idea to the publication and online dissemination. 75 students take part to the Laboratory. Everyone is called to contribute to the management of the *Compassunibo blog*, the official blog of the master's degree, a space for

report, articles, interviews, news, and storytelling, as well as to manage the official social network profiles and to produce podcasts.

Many scholars have explored these multimedia contexts as a space for learning by-doing and developing technical and soft skills. O'Donnell (2006) reflects on the advantages that blogs as a cybercultural practice can supply new ways of doing conversation, building relationship and critical thinking. Hodgson and Wong (2011) pursued the hypothesis to use blogs for journalism students based on peer-assisted learning; Larrondo et al. (2020) underline as multimedia projects based on virtual collaboration can help students to make experience of the professional responsibility in the communication field, as well as to know routine aspects of online content production and dissemination strategies via social media; they allow them to hone their ability to approach subjects from creative, innovative perspectives, and go beyond what they know about media as digital natives. Bazzarin and Lalli (2011; 2012), describing two laboratorial practices reflected on the benefits of taking part in online communities; producing, sharing and promoting content, students become aware of the agenda's role of information, enhancing a collective definition of topics that deserve to be treated as public problems. They can use digital media in a strategic way to be involved in the public debate as informed citizens.

One of the basic ideas of our Laboratory is a proactive peer-to-peer learning context, where each student acts like a professional who learns by doing, sharing abilities and experiences interacting and building relationships, developing a «supportive culture of peer-assisted learning» (Hodgson, Wong, 2011). This creates a flexible and dynamic teamwork environment where both students and teachers take part in the construction of every stage of the journey, from planning to implementation. The need for an active participation and a proactive responsibility in the same teamwork gives the opportunity to mutual recognition for an organizational culture: the participants make up a community – though temporarily - whose brand equity depends upon their activity and their problem-solving actions. Furthermore, the debate and the content production provide the possibility to rethink intersubjectively meanings and perspectives on their professional world as well as on the implications of the agenda setting and framing functions in selecting the issues.

2. Methodology

Our analysis is based on the direct observation that we conducted during six months and half (from 1 November 2020 to 15 May 2021), and on the thematic analysis of 181 blog posts, 99 Instagram posts and 40 podcast episodes produced and published in this period by the 75 students who took part to the Laboratory. The observation took place in all the meetings with students, in online chat discussions, in daily communications

individually or by groups. As concerns the content, we detected and aggregated the topics and the formats found by students.

3. Case study

The students were divided into 10 working thematic sub-groups, mostly chosen by them. Around each theme the group simulated and experimented the organization and working practices of a newsroom, to create dossiers, insights, and information contents on those topics. The groups were: interviews, events, culture, Europe, online education, youth conditions, work and occupation, sport, media and information, environment, and sustainability.

In autonomy, distinct roles have been defined and distributed within each group: secretariat and spokesperson for the team, editors, social media managers and representatives of multimedia projects (videos and podcasts), and web analysts. To coordinate activities and allow everyone to take part even remotely, we used technological platforms such as Microsoft Teams for meetings and daily chat, and Google Drive for managing the editorial plan and sharing files. Each group then activated its own virtual room for its own internal coordination and communication.

From November 2020 to May 2021, 20 two-hours general meetings were held. The first meetings aimed at an 'educational agreement', allowing students to know the context and familiarize themselves with the proposed proactive methods and the master's social platforms. The tutor and the teacher presented and discussed the activities of the Laboratory, illustrated the training goals, and shared the available tools. The students also met four professionals specialized in web marketing and visual journalism to ask them questions on their experiences. In the other meetings students were the true protagonists: they exposed their proposals, shared news ideas, negotiated the weekly agenda of topics, discussed on communication strategies directed to the different audience for each platform.

3.1 Blog: students as gatekeepers and critical thinkers

Published in the academic year 2012/13, the Compassunibo blog is the official blog of the master's degree course. Content and objectives are designed by the students, since it represents an information space on topics related to the areas of the course of study (institutional, political, and social communication, marketing and advertising, genders studies, information and media studies, sustainability, etc.); it is also a diary of events held in the Department such as seminars, conferences, and lectures; the blog was also born with the aim of enhancing the projects and the experiences of the students, for example research and thesis, international mobility projects, internship experiences and graduate work paths. Overall, the central idea has always been to build a community

open to discussion, composed of students, teachers, researchers, and people interested in communication. From a training point of view, the blog stands for a real opportunity of learning by doing (Williams, Jacobs, 2011). On the one hand, students get useful skills to work in digital communication and journalism, concerning for example the routines of a digital newsroom, such as the newsworthiness criteria, the selection of the sources, the capacity to understand and communicate the data, to make interviews, to design and manage an editorial plan, to write for the web, to curate Search Engine Optimization, to choose the image suitable for each article (Larrondo et al., 2021). On the other hand, in a cooperative learning environment, they gain soft skills for critical thinking, ability to understand, analyze and represent events and problems, attitude to collaborate in team-working. The challenge is to support a learning experience based on the ability to share knowledge and practices.

Since November 2020 to 15th of May 2021, students published 181 blog articles, with an average of 30 articles per month. Reflecting on the content elaborated by students, we can group the blog post by three macro thematic categories:

- Social issues of collective interest: climate change, sustainable challenges, gender gap, violence against women, European policies, youth employment, cultural resources, sport, youth hardships, especially connected to the experience of pandemic. The consequences and the effects of the pandemic in different social sector have been the *leitmotif* of many articles. For example, students have proposed reflections on the critical issues and limits of online teaching in schools and universities; they have carried out small surveys within cultural sectors (cinema, museums, theatres, musical events), or with references to the world of sport (e.g. gyms, sport centers, sky resorts). Addressing these issues meant asking questions, search for data and correct sources in a contemporary complex media landscape, build a network of contacts made up of professionals with whom to enter in dialogue, adapting languages, styles, and adapt ways of communicating and interacting in each situation. At the same time, in addition to collecting information for the articles, they also had to reflect on the visual representation of the topics, selecting images and videos to tell the theme, and to support their ideas.
- Issues from academic program, selected for critical reflection: several aspects related to marketing, advertising, technology, and new media, as well as journalism and public communication. In many articles students present case histories to analyze strategies, showing strengths and weaknesses, also to explain the social impact of some technologies that have become part of everyone's daily life. Furthermore, we find articles where they try to share instructions with readers on how to use some platforms according to different contexts. This type of contents is a stimulus for a critical and conscious use, overcoming the supposed standard

technicalities that often prevail. Here digital literacy is a crucial challenge, because students must explore how online media content are made, which codes, languages, affordances and models are imposed, and spread. Writing these blog articles represents another opportunity as well: to act as a critical learner and an active citizen.

- Reporting and storytelling about academic and civic events: the students become reporters. Once again this meant integrating the experimentation and use of technical equipment (e.g., microphone, camera, video-editing programs) with the development of creative skills. They acquire the ability to select events of interest to the community, to re-elaborate speeches and interventions, to summarize, to formulate questions and criticize what has been heard.

In addition to these thematic categories, we observe that a very recurring content on the blog and one of the most followed and appreciated formats by the readers is represented by interviews. Students learn another typical multistep journalistic practice, and moreover they could talk to people they would hardly meet in their daily lives. They must first make a choice, selecting authoritative and competent people on a subject, or people who can share testimonies that are important to their readers. Then, they must look for material and resources useful to get to know a theme or a person better, necessary to prepare a list of questions. Students learn to listen, to build a direct dialogue with a person who may also have different ideas from their own, they learn to improvise. The next step is to write the interview, when they face the complex responsibility to consider both their self-represented audience and the interviewed person.

3.2 Social media: experiencing digital storytelling

A social team has been created within each work group. Students take turns as social media managers and digital content creators. For each platform they develop an editorial plan following a multi-channel communication strategy and animating the institutional social channels with daily content. In this paper we focus only on the management of Instagram, although the daily activity of the Laboratory also works with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Telegram. Instagram represents, in fact, not only a space to give visibility to blog content and podcasts, but a channel to practice forms of digital storytelling. As concerns the analysis of the posts we have a twofold perspective, the content, and the experience. In the observed months, 99 posts have been published in the feed, 4 videos on IGTV and many daily IG stories.

Next to content created to promote university events (es. Open days), students have designed content set addressed to a community composed mainly of young followers (28% were aged 18-24; 55% were aged 25-34)¹.

¹ Last update 15 May 2021.

Assuming students as gatekeepers we can identify four macro-categories of contents in the visual storytelling projects.

- 'Agenda Europa', a weekly column aimed at promoting active European citizenship among young people. Students create image carousel, texts and infographics to share opportunities, information about EU Institutions, special projects aimed at young people and international mobility experiences made by other students.
- 'Green Corner', a true *peer-to-peer dissemination* experiment focused on environmental issues and sustainability made by carousel, Instagram stories with quiz-stickers and informative captions.
- 'Discovery SMA', a weekly column where students explore and present the museum collections of the University of Bologna by virtual tour, video-interviews and images, contributing to the University's mission of public engagement.
- 'Secrets of Bologna', when students tell some of the symbolic places of the city of Bologna through photos and captions full of historical information, aimed at focusing attention also on curiosities and secrets; the goal of this weekly column is to introduce the city to prospect students and increase the knowledge of current students.

Considering the students' experience, we can identify some strengths: opportunity to practice the management of visual storytelling projects; the awareness about the technical constraints of the platform; the ethical management of the peer-to-peer dissemination; the critical reflection on the practical interaction within the Instagram community.

As for example, students become conscious of the social media dynamics and reflect on the polarization of information and the rule of algorithms. They also try to elaborate texts suitable for the public of the specific platform, exercise web writing, choose the right tone of voice, seek accessible language that is proper to the context of the social network, promote engagement through effective call to action, moderate and check comments and reactions. This activity has been also an exercise in promoting their blogging work, as well the shared issues and the equity brand of the digital newsroom.

3.3 Podcasts: sharing voices and ideas on Spotify

Another area of multimedia production explored and experimented by students is podcasting. There are different experiences of universities that use and disseminate podcasts with educational purpose (Lazzari, 2009; Rajic, 2013; Mooney, 2019):

In higher education podcasting has evolved from unidirectional platform for delivery academic lectures into an interactive, generative medium for engaged, experiential student learning and socio-constructivist co-creation (Mooney, 2019, 3).

As for Instagram, also for podcasting we can mainly focus on the content and on the experience represented by the task of planning, implementation and dissemination in a platform combining old and new media. Students did the planning of 4 different formats (WeeklyCompass, ConversAction, Bussole, and Moda & Digital Media) and a collaborative playlist.

WeeklyCompass is a weekly format, consisting of 5-minute episodes released every Monday morning. It is a weekly agenda of news, events, and opportunities from the Department. ConversAction is a bimonthly format of 15/20 minutes dedicated to interviews. In each episode the students interview a professional from different sectors to explore a particular professional field or discuss a current issue. Bussole is a monthly format of 20/30 minutes where students explore current topics chosen by them through a talk among several people (e.g. sustainability goals, gender-based violence, social effects of pandemic, gamification, and active citizenship, etc.). Fashion & Digital Media is a bimonthly format with 30-minute episodes where students interview other students of the Fashion & Digital Media course to analyze together best practices and case histories in the field of fashion marketing and communication. Overall, in six months, they released a total of 40 episodes. Next to these formats, on Spotify they also proposed the launch of a collaborative playlist. Every two weeks students promote on social media channels a keyword called 'playword', inviting people to share songs inspired by it. In the analyzed period 8 playwords were launched to create a collaborative music playlist bottom-up. The keywords chosen were union, distance, change, hearth, disobedience, care, trust, and roots.

The podcasting experience also proved to be positive for the empowerment of students' digital creativity, team organization, and critical thinking. Thanks to their working groups, they took care of planning, implementation and dissemination steps.

In general, the podcasting experience allows students to develop skills in four different areas: a) technical skills related to the use of recording and editing tools; b) a whole series of skills that we can summarize in communication abilities concerning the agenda setting of events and news, the choice of topics for a specific target, the search for reliable and authoritative sources, the content analysis, the presentation of case histories, the sharing of their critical opinions; c) expressive skills such as writing a track, telling social issues and topics with storytelling formats, applying the sound components of a text appropriately (timbre, intonation, intensity, pause), using a specific language, listening to oneself and evaluating the effectiveness of a recording; d) social skills such as working in a team and collaborating to achieve a common goal, contacting professionals and interviewing them, evaluating different contexts and last but not least, giving solutions to problems.

Conclusion

Acting from the perspective of the producers, students has been encouraged to ask critical questions about the news-making process, about the platforms 2.0 that they daily use and about the relationship with the audience. The participant observation of the editorial board meetings as well as the daily review and checking of articles encourages us to reflect on two aspects that we consider relevant for the digital creativity empowerment.

First, the proactive training environment invites students to position themselves as professionally workers and issues-gatekeepers. At the beginning they are unfaithful because of the usual experience of the individual performance requested for the formal assessments (the exams). Thus, they expect more lectures and compulsory ready-made tasks to obtain the credits in their career, than an opportunity to learn by doing and committing themselves. However, step by step many of them show confidence in the participatory activities, actively engaging themselves. Gaining legitimacy for a proactive method has been a hard task both for teachers and students. Faced with the common expectation of learning communication techniques, students have had to overcome the belief in the need of an easy toolkit constituted of ready-made rules, to discover that the big challenge was assuming a problem-solving attitude.

Second, one great obstacle strictly connected to the conventional way of academic performance is represented by the difficulty to manage team working and to believe in its effectiveness. But our observation shows the strongest outcome of the Laboratory experience: the progressive ability to practice the peer-to-peer support supplying pro-active creativity. The interactive exchange between all students has been a progressive experience we acquired, even during the general meetings. If in some case directed, all the Laboratory activities have been based on debate and discussion during the meetings and the chat line, with the class, the workshop sub-groups and individual students.

Overall, most students reported in a final meeting that the Laboratory supplied skills and experiences that might contribute to an immediate portfolio of works for their future job hunting (O'Donnell, 2006; Bazzarin, Lalli, 2011).

Finally, what have we learnt? We need a new perspective for digital creativity and critical digital literacy, to overcome the mere idea of evaluating individual performance skills: an arduous work to combine formal and informal education within an environment where students and teachers are always facing too many individualized constraints. One of the most difficult challenges - in a social landscape where competitive meritocracy prevails - is building together a common sense of belonging to an interactional frame, such as a community of students and teachers, though temporary, contrasting the idea that only individualism unleashes excellence, when it really ends up socially creative cues. Working with

our students helped us to realize that is crucial to intercept their enthusiasm and listen to their wish to know, think and act. For this purpose, we must go beyond the mere computation of credits hours and average grades, to engage ourselves in new challenges, together with them.

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