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Media Education Competitions: An Efficient Strategy For Digital Literacies?

Luis Pereira ^{*}, Ana Jorge ^{**} and Maria José Brites ^{***}

Abstract: In this paper we present results from research in Portugal about competitions in schools that involve digital education (2010-2015). The aim of this study is to discuss its effectiveness as a strategy for developing Media Education. The 16 activities we have collected are mostly targeted at the school population and show an emphasis on media production, a dimension that is often not considered part of formal learning, which is more focused on reading than on writing. The results lead us to raise questions about the importance of non-formal education. Interestingly, most of these initiatives have been designed to take place in the school context and are, in various ways, supported by the Ministry of Education, a situation which blurs the boundaries between formal and non-formal learning. The analysis of the data leads us to this specific recommendation: these initiatives should be formally evaluated in order to understand their real impact on the acquisition of news media education skills.

Keywords: media education, digital literacy, competitions, formal and non-formal education

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Introduction

In a publication by the European Science Foundation, analysing the main challenges media and communication studies face in establishing their research agendas in Europe (Álvares et al., 2014), Media Education was made one of the designated topics for the 2014-2025 decade. Nevertheless, at policy level, we can detect a lack of clarification in some European countries about the role of media education, which is often referred as Media Literacy.

We take the concept of Media Education as “the set of knowledge, skills and competences (and the processes to acquire them) relative to the access, enlightened use, research and critical analysis of the media, as well as the skills to express and communicate through those media” (Pinto, Pereira, S., Pereira, L., & Ferreira, 2011, p. 24).

In our society, learning does not occur only in specially designated places. Because of the amount of educational content available, learning about different topics is no longer confined within the walls of the classroom. We learn from colleagues, we learn by doing or when there is a need and we learn with digital media, which is more and more present in people's lives. Considering there is no clear subject matter within which to learn about media education, all these aspects of non-formal learning make up an important part of this research as it could be a way to promote the goals of media education, i.e. aiming for understanding and learning ‘about’ (Buckingham, 2003) those media.

In Portugal, the context in which this research was developed, mandatory education (i.e. primary and secondary school) still has the main responsibility for “preparing young people to live in a world of powerful images, words and sounds” (UNESCO, 1982). However, the same schools struggle to incorporate and deal with the rapid advance in technologies, while many families feel unable to incorporate yet another task in the set of pressures involved in bringing up young people, possibly aggravated by the economic crisis the country has faced.

In the scope of COST Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies, a comparative study about Media Education in European countries was conducted. The Portuguese report (Costa, Jorge & Pereira, 2013) highlighted several initiatives and a set of non-formal activities stood out, particularly competitions. This is why this article looks into media education competitions in Portugal in relation to forms of non-formal education, questioning whether they can stimulate the development of media education

competencies, something that has been difficult to achieve within formal education.

Different types of education, i.e. formal, non-formal and informal education, have in common the intention to contribute to a learning process whereby there is either a kind of apprenticeship between professor/learning facilitator and student/participant or a more equal, collaborative relationship between the several participants in the given educational environment. This process of learning can take place at school or in daily life, which requires a relevant strategy far beyond formal education (Underwood, Parker & Stone, 2013).

In the 1990s there were important changes and new possibilities for non-formal education. They were promoted by initiatives such as the ‘World Conference on Education for All’, sponsored by the United Nations (with the participation of the United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO). The 1990s were officially recognised to be the decade of ‘Education for All’ and as part of this initiative, important documents and strategies were developed, such as the ‘World Declaration on Education for All’ and the ‘Framework for Action to Meet the Basic Learning Needs’. The objective was to promote an equitable education for different groups of people who had not taken part in formal education.

In the next sections we clarify the nuances of formal, non-formal and informal learning, echoing the multiplicity of new possibilities for gaining access to knowledge that has gone beyond the school walls (Meyers, Erickson & Small, 2013). Next, we look at the elements that make competitions attractive for young people: playfulness, challenge and competition. Finally, we elaborate on the need to measure the impact of initiatives on media education – a challenge that academics and public policy makers are facing in this area.

Formal, non-formal and informal media education

Formal learning is organized and happens in context, structured and sequenced at a school (Smith & Clayton, 2009). This was the most used concept and for many years served as a counterpoint for what was not considered formal education. This means that informal education was seen as everything that was not formal. Informal education is related to the possibility of apprenticeship during the life of the individual; it is more permanent than organized learning and the objectives are focused on daily

life (Smith & Clayton, 2009). “Informal learning is distinguished from the other two by having no authority figure or mediator” (Eshach, 2007, p. 173).

Nowadays, formal education is open to definitions of informal and non-formal apprenticeship; the latter being more structured than the former without, however, the formality of school curricula. For instance, a visit to a museum, as a school activity, can be a non-formal event, even if it is highly structured (Eshach, 2007). For Eshach, the distinction between educational activities (formal, non-formal and informal) should not be based solely on the mere physical space in which they take place, but also on other factors such as motivation, levels of interest and social context.

Non-formal learning, as it happens in school activities, requires a minimum level of organisation, even outside the school system of education. Eshach specifies that “non-formal learning occurs in a planned but highly adaptable manner in institutions, organizations, and situations beyond the spheres of formal or informal education. It shares the characteristic of being mediated with formal education, but the motivation for learning may be wholly intrinsic to the learner” (Eshach, 2007, p. 173).

After these preliminary notes to distinguish and understand the three types of learning, we will now focus on the two that are more relevant for this article: the dynamics between non-formal and formal. Part of this process of learning also implies a certain procedure of certification (such as badges), that are particularly relevant for individuals who have difficulties in accessing or pursuing the formal learning system (Bjornavold, 2009). In fact, historically, there has not always been the opportunity for recognising the acquisition of competences through non-formal education, which has, in fact, some associated benefits: namely, the acknowledgement that apprenticeship, leads to an increase in the self-esteem and confidence of the participants (Smith & Clayton, 2009; Perulli, 2009; Brites, Jorge & Santos, 2015) and the strength of the connections among the participants that foster learning processes (Smith & Clayton, 2009; Perulli, 2009). Henry Jenkins (2010) points to the fluidity of non-formal processes (DIY – Do It Yourself) that allows individuals to be placed between the self and the collective in the core of the creative processes.

Subsequently, the perception that school is the main place to take the responsibility for young people’s digital literacy education has changed and spread to different contexts (Meyers, Erickson & Small, 2013). Activities involved in competitions, such as those on media education, can benefit today from the potentialities of the digital world. Although more fragmented, these possibilities, according to Lankshear and Knobel (2006),

allow new forms of negotiation, work at a high level and the promotion of dialogue.

Non-formal and formal learning processes would gain by being considered complimentary instead of seen as substitutes or exclusionary (Eshach, 2007; Brites, Jorge & Santos, 2015). Activities that are developed outside the formal school schedule are a concrete example. They are well structured, work in the serious context of school and can be labelled as formal and/or non-formal learning processes. These are the main contexts of the activities that we are going to analyse: those that are settled in between the non-formal and formal forms of education.

Gamification of learning

Playfulness is an essential element of informal learning and is also gaining relevance in the context of non-formal and formal learning. The use of videogames is a good example to better understand how learning can occur outside a formal environment, enacting key elements of any contest: playfulness, challenge and competition.

The challenge inherent in digital games causes the player to have a high level of motivation, which can be defined as any satisfaction or anticipation of satisfaction at the outcome of the game, the interest in the content of a game or as contentment obtained by mastering the rules and game requirements (Becta, 2002). One mechanism to keep the player motivated is the ability to customize the game: "giving a child the freedom to choose his game player, select an opponent, or design the game space is likely to stimulate greater interest" (Moore, 2006, p. 6).

In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy* (2003), James Paul Gee argues that when people learn to play video games, they are learning a new literacy. Of course, this is not the way the word 'literacy' is normally used in a formal learning environment: "the ability to read and write" (Gee, 2003, p. 13), but maybe the connection (or the division) between reading/writing and videogames should be discussed. As Johnson (2005, p. 11) says, "historically, videogames have been contrasted with the older conventions of reading".

It is undeniable that the experience of video gaming is more related, at the sensory level, to the cinema film or the theatre than to a book (Zagalo, Branco & Barker, 2004), but when comparing the exercise of reading and gaming Johnson concludes that playing could be even more demanding than reading: "you can still enjoy a book without explicitly concentrating on where the narrative will take you two chapters out, but in game worlds you need that long-term planning as much as you need present-tense focus"

(Johnson, 2005, p. 55). However, this opposition could be questioned, because these two activities complement each other and are not in conflict: “when you have played a video game for a while, something magical happens to the texts associated with it. All of a sudden they seem lucid and clear and readable. You can’t even recall how confusing they seemed in the first place.” (Gee, 2003, p. 103).

The game becomes an attractive activity because of the challenge, the satisfaction and anticipation of satisfaction at the outcome of the game, the interest in the content and rules of a game. For some, the motivation exists while there is challenge, while for others the ultimate motivation is to master the machine (Becta, 2001). On the other hand, customizing the game involves the player (Moore, 2006, p. 6), meeting the non-formal education idea as the game is less structured and possibly understood by participants as a space of freedom and creativity.

Interestingly, the school system has sought to make use of the potential of gaming for learning, although in this process educational games end up losing not only their playful dimension but also the challenging levels representing play found in other games without educational intentionality (Pereira, 2007).

In another context, the idea of skills certification can also be seen in the light of the challenge and playfulness elements. One of the best-known examples of the attempt to certify knowledge are digital badges. These are seen as a possible answer to recognise non-formal or informal learning and, when attached to formal learning, it affects users’ motivation (Ahn, Pellicone, & Butler, 2014). So, the challenge is to earn more badges – which is in line with the gamification of learning.

Assessment and measurement of media education levels

One of the challenges faced by academic research and public policy makers in the area of media education is that of assessment. “While there is a considerable body of professional know-how among specialist teachers in this field, there remains a need for in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of media education” (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 168). This need to certify and make evident the effectiveness of media education programmes should not mean, however, to be captured in an extreme dependency on policies on measurability (O’Neill & Hagen, 2009). But the opposite also has to be avoided: the promotion of more and more media education activities without a proper assessment of their results. On the other hand, it also raises issues at the financial level, concerning the

amount of resources allocated by political institutions and other promoting bodies.

The measurement of media literacy levels, as outputs of media education programmes or as diagnostic assessments to inform a plan of intervention, is not, however, merely a political matter, but also an epistemological and a methodological one. It is also necessary to decide upon areas of inquiry and learner groups, using extensive quantitative comparisons or localized qualitative analyses (Lopes, 2013, p. 85). While quantitative research seeks longitudinal and transnational comparisons, and between populations, a qualitative one tries to capture the specifics of each culture and context. In each case, however, it is particularly difficult to assess the critical skills, as they point to the “identification of purpose, target audience, point of view, construction techniques, and omissions” (Hobbs & Frost, 2003, p. 352).

In fact, even if the issues around the way to assess the results of media education were solved, it is necessary to understand media literacy as an efficient way of using, but not necessarily attacking, the media. In regard to advertising literacy, for example, some studies problematize its efficiency as “defense against advertising” (Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal & Buijzen, 2011). Livingstone & Helsper (2006) found that, although teenagers reveal higher indexes of advertising literacy, compared with young children, the former are less affected by advertising because, at different ages, there are different processes of persuasion working, based on literacy levels, of which the industry is aware. These arguments tend to reinforce the need to combine media education with regulation, especially at the level of commercial communication – Livingstone & Helsper argue. Critical and resistant media audiences are not incompatible with pleasurable relationships with media products.

On the other hand, research responses are often reliant on self-reporting by respondents, and focus on isolated projects which, even if proven efficient, have limited reach (as the case of Media Box and First Light in the UK – Dept. Children, School and Families, 2009, p. 168). “Previous research has taken the form of classroom-based case studies, generally with older students: while these are often very useful for practitioners, they are bound to be tentative and suggestive, rather than robust and conclusive” (Dept. Children, School and Families, 2009, p. 168). This happened in the pilot study conducted in Portugal in 2014, by MILObs – Observatory on Media, Information and Literacy –, commissioned by the body for social communication (GMCS) and School Libraries’ Network (RBE) for Minho University. The pilot study sought to meet the demands of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2007) and aimed to “assess the levels of media

literacy among 12th school year [the last of compulsory schooling] in continental Portugal, based on a survey to sample the students' universe" (Pereira, Pinto, & Moura, 2015, p. 85). The study found that "overall, the results reveal very low levels of media literacy" (Pereira, Pinto, & Moura, 2015, p. 85).

In fact, in Portugal, the assessment of media education programmes is not a common practice for agents in the field (Jorge, Pereira & Costa, 2015), although there are some experimental, academic studies (Lopes, 2013; Carvalho, 2015). The national stakeholders – government bodies from education, regulation and academia) are gathered in the Informal Group for Media Literacy (GILM, acronym in Portuguese) and do not ensure a collection of initiatives nor a sharing of results and evidence.

In a transnational attempt, the European Commission supported a study by EAVI (Celot & Perez-Tornero, 2009; Bulger, 2012) to establish a battery of indicators of media literacy for an experimental assessment, in order to fulfil what had been stated in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2007). Fifty level indicators were created to assess different media literacy dimensions and the study was implemented, with a focus on attitudes more than on practices. However, the study had limitations: only those of the population aged between 16 and 74 were interviewed, and in only some of the original target countries. The transnational, as well as longitudinal, dimension was further compromised by the fact that one of the questions was literally lost in translation, making it impossible for cross-tabulations and further comparisons (Celot & Perez-Tornero, 2009; Bulger, 2012) to be made.

The assessment of media literacy and the efficacy of media education programmes among young(er) children is all the more urgent and challenging, with greater methodological challenges. This task can be more manageable through specific projects, such as competitions, but we should not lose sight of the wider educational action on media competences, nor the specific factors contributing to each national context.

Media literacy competitions in Portugal

Research context: questions, methodology and objectives

In Portugal, Media Education had not had a clear policy until the Recommendations by the European Parliament and Council and has been, since 2009, supported by an Informal Group of Media Literacy, bringing together stakeholders in the field. A Reference Guide on Media Education

was produced by the Education Ministry in 2014 (Pereira et al., 2014) but resources are still scarce, with education programmes by media companies and associations offering a compensatory contribution.

Thus, the main question driving this article is: are media competitions an adequate strategy for developing media education? Additional areas of interest for this report included analysing whether, and in what ways, these competitions respond to other motivations; whether these activities should be considered formal and/or non-formal education; and whether the competitions involve all groups of children and young people, or just sectors of those groups who are already motivated.

In order to seek an answer to these questions, between 2010 and 2015, we gathered a collection of competitions that aimed to promote, in a direct or indirect way, media education in Portugal. For this, we included initiatives: (1) taking place in Portugal, with national or regional reach (local initiatives were thus discarded because there was a risk of not having an extensive sample); (2) targeted at children or at children/adults; (3) being implemented in schools or in other contexts. For this collection of the agents involved, as well of target groups, we used document analysis (notices, advertisements, rule books, or websites of the competitions) and conducted interviews with three of the promoters of the competitions (Media Smart, School Libraries Network (RBE) and General Directorate for Education, Ministry of Education and Science (DGE-MEC)). These interviews sought to understand how the assessment of the initiatives was done by those agents, and were conducted face-to-face or by email, between July and October 2014.

Presentation of results

Sixteen initiatives were collected and considered for this research. The timeline shows that half of them are recent, having been created between 2012-15. More than half of them (9) reached primary schools pupils. Table 1 briefly presents the collected competitions and respective details, with promoters and supporters, audience and start year, organized by the most recent to the longest standing.

It was not possible to gather other details like the number of participants for each of them, mainly for two reasons: either there was no such data available or the promoters contacted were not willing to share that information, especially when non-governmental institutions were involved. Without that information, it is difficult to realize the real scope of the initiatives, while it reveals the lack of assessment we found in the field (Costa, Jorge & Pereira, 2013). Nevertheless, looking at the objectives, it appears that among the 16 selected initiatives there is a small group of three

in which media education is explicit and central and another in which this goal is more circumstantial.

In this group of three where media education is central is 7 Dias, 7 Dicas sobre os Media. In its third edition in 2015, its stated aims were to “foster critical and creative use of media, safer use of the Internet and respect for copyright and foster collaboration among teachers, students, newspapers, radios, televisions and school libraries under the Media Literacy”. The Jornais Escolares competition, sponsored by the project Público na Escola, was also part of this group, as it aimed to “contribute to the development of Media Education” and “promote the use of Information and Communication Technologies in the production of school newspapers”. Included in this first group as well is the SITESTAR.PT competition, which invites participants “to take intellectual and legal responsibility for the work in the competition, thus learning to respect the safety rules, privacy, related rights and property”. Among the strategic objectives, are as follows: “to promote digital media among young people” and encourage them “to use the Internet and its tools to create websites as editors and become active participants in the development of the Internet”. In other competitions, the objectives are related to media education skills, although this is not clearly stated in their documented rules.

There are some projects that focus mainly on the use of ICT or programming, as reflected in the titles Initiation to Programming in Primary School [Iniciação à Programação no 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico] and Programming and Robotics Clubs [Clubes de Programação e Robótica]. The TOPAS Sul intended to help “promote the taste for problem solving, the programming and software development” The Teaching and Learning Project with Interactive Tables – Flipcharts competition [Projeto Ensinar e Aprender com Quadros Interativos – Competição de Flipcharts] encourages teachers to use interactive whiteboards proficiently in their teaching activities. Scratch Challenge – Imagining, Learning and Sharing [Imaginar, Aprender e Partilhar] aims to “promote the integration of digital technologies in the development of literacies”, also encouraging “the development of programming skills and problem solving”. The competition Digital Artists [Artistas Digitais] also proposes to carry out several works with the use of ICT.

There are other competitions mostly geared to the production of content in different formats, such as video. This is the case of the Cineast@s Digital competition, which aims not only to promote the use of ICT in schools but also “to develop the capacity to use manipulation tools and video editing as key tools to stimulate students’ creative capacity”. Still promoting video

production is the competition Videos with Energy [Vídeos com Energia], related to the theme of energy consumption and its social implications.

Creativity is also prompted by an audio format, with Productions Radio NET Station [Produções de Rádio Estação NET] encouraging participants to produce “original and creative works in the radio area” or create podcasts, as in the case of Tell us a Story! – Podcast in Education [Conta-nos uma história! – Podcast na Educação], which aims to “promote ownership of digital technology in the development of literacies”.

Other competitions challenge participants to reflect on aspects of the topic of advertising: the Media Smart competition is a non-profit programme on advertising literacy in different media that challenges participants to make a television campaign on the importance of copyright; the Great © challenges young people to “be part of a project in which they themselves are the creators of protected works, allowing them to see the other side of the work, the creative process, and realize what is the creative work and why it must be protected”. Promoters consider that “when we use the digital world, we must keep in mind the value of creativity and original work”.

Thus, there are competitions that promote the use of different tools and formats: radio, television, newspapers, programming. In many of them, each edition is devoted to a different theme. As expected, students are the target of these initiatives (Table 1), from primary to secondary school; only in one case are higher education students also considered. Teachers appear only on the flipcharts project. This is due to the nature of the promoters: the Ministry of Education (and Science). Also the Network for School Libraries and the National Reading Plan, along with three institutions of higher education, complete the group of public bodies that predominate. However, the associations and charities (DECO, AGECOP, Anpri or APAN) also focus on young people as the target for their initiatives. Only two private companies appear in this list drawn up: Microsoft and Promethean, but they are still associated in partnerships with public authorities in promotion of their initiatives.

Discussion of results: towards a model of assessment

One of the most relevant aspects of the competitions is the encouragement to create, and produce materials or media content, which involves learning by doing and thus blurs the frontiers between formal and non-formal. Even though there was no access to the media outputs produced by participants, considering that the dimension of media literacy more often considered is the

analysis, it is interesting to note that these initiatives are encouraging young people to create content, whether newspapers, videos, radio programmes, campaigns or others. Creating the right context for children to ‘roll up their sleeves’ and produce a tangible result should be seen as a positive aspect of these competitions.

Another positive point to be added is the effective network and partnership established between the promoters, with ERTE-DGE (Ministry of Education) assuming a leading role. This institution publicises many initiatives from other contexts among all the state school communities. According to the interviewee Teresa Pombo (Ministry of Education), the DGE intended to launch in 2015 a “national contest of media education projects that aims to distinguish schools whose work in this area is outstanding”. However, because they are promoted individually and target mostly the school population, these initiatives do not fully fulfil a non-formal learning potential, especially in the case of those focusing on ICT. Therefore, they fall short on involving children and young people’s communities beyond their role as students. On the one hand, the format of competitions favours a concrete production – with a specific format and deadline –, which involves processes of analysis and critical reflection on the media, while the real and genuine participation by the students, and that of the teachers, remains to be assessed.

Furthermore, as acknowledged in an interview, Manuela Botelho, from the Portuguese Association of Advertisers – the organization that promotes Media Smart –, the incentive bonuses, money or resources to schools and participants work as a real motivation to teachers who take on the role of intermediaries. Thus, it is necessary too to wonder whether competitions attract those schools, teachers and students who are already more motivated and trained in media literacy or, on the contrary, the excessive focus on formal education means that the potential inclusion of non-formal education has to be implemented. Moving forward, it would be relevant to contact schools and students to understand, among others, whether there a spontaneous participation or if there is any, a meaningful difference between the programmes oriented towards (critical) media education and those aiming for a more technical knowledge.

Conclusion

Our examination of the potential and limitations of the competitions have shown an attempt to cover a dimension of Media Education not embedded

in the curriculum and allow students to develop diverse media skills through learning by doing. Even though these activities are developed voluntarily, outside the classroom, trying to foster the non-formal education potential, it appears that they are predominantly focused on the school population and directed to be developed in a formal context – they are effective in school but there is no evidence that they can work outside the school. The 20-year-old initiative of Público na Escola, with school newspapers, shows by its duration the appreciation by education agents of a non-formal strategy in association with the formal curricula (for instance with relation to Portuguese course curricula).

Promoted and supported by various organizations these competitions aim to cover some curricular topics focusing on linking their goals with the educational ones. However, it is hard to find ways of measuring the quality of learning that occurs, thus the effectiveness of learning media education through these initiatives. Although we can observe a working partnership between promoters and educational political bodies, there is no effective sharing of good practice neither of transparency about the process of the competitions, with extensive sharing of their results.

The lack of evaluation of competitions seems to be explained by a poor (national) strategy for media education initiatives. Thus, it is advocated that media education can occur at the formal, non-formal and, even if it was not our main concern in this article, the informal level. This dearth of analysis can impede a more inclusive learning process, which would pay attention to how learning is embedded in everyday life, where we can find the media themselves.

In terms of recommendations for the evaluation of the impact of the competitions, we suggest a deeper involvement of the participants in these actions. Furthermore, the fact that the assessment processes involve looking towards critical thinking, connection to the curriculum and fragmentation of the projects may stimulate further action and philosophy in media literacy competitions.

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