

Zeitschrift: Studies in Communication Sciences : journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research; Università della Svizzera italiana, Faculty of Communication Sciences

Band: 3 (2003)

Heft: [1]: New media in education

Artikel: Archives as living lessons : the New Media Juke Box

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-823719>

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ARCHIVES AS LIVING LESSONS - THE NEW MEDIA JUKE BOX

Theoretical framework

Before comprehending the potential of the new media in an educational setting, we need to understand the meaning of *learning*, *learning to learn* and the kind of cognitive processes lying behind. For my theoretical background, I chose two authors that worked with these concepts. They are David Ausubel (1998) and Joseph Novak (1977, 1984, 2001). For these two authors, *meaningful learning* depends on three important elements: the prior knowledge of the learner about a certain topic, the meaningful subject¹ that has to be taught and the choice of the learner to use or to do not use the *meaningful learning* approach. If the learner decides not to use the *meaningful learning* approach, this means that he/she will (probably) apply the so-called *rote learning* approach, a practice through which he/she tends to memorize information and, unfortunately, to forget the new information very quickly². Located in an arbitrary way somewhere, the information will soon loose its importance. But if the learner decides to approach a *meaningful learning* way of studying, this will produce radical changes in the way the neuronal networks elaborate the new information, combining it with the prior knowledge of the learner. A third author, Richard Mayer (2001) also deals with the concept of *meaningful learning*. His main research area is the field of cog-

¹ For *meaningful subject*, I intend the way to structure content to be taught in a meaningful way. From my point of view we could transform contents to be taught in a new and engaging way, using for example multimedia language.

² The authors point out that this is a very common way of studying, and for this reason they elaborated such theory.

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*nitive theory of multimedia learning.*³ Because I think that through new media tools we are able to represent knowledge in a multimedia way, combining words, images and sounds through a brand new *mise en scène* of contents, Mayer's theory is essential in an operational way.

This theoretical background guides my research, which deals with *archives and learning with the new media*. For *archive* I mean the *factual media artefacts*⁴ that have been produced by the mass media, such as newspaper, radio and television companies.

My aim is to verify the effectiveness of the reusability of some factual media artefacts in a university setting, through the prototype called the New Media Juke Box (NMJB), developed and tried out last year at the University of Lugano, referring to the theories of Ausubel and Novak and considering the cognitive theory of multimedia learning of Mayer (2001) in a *media education context* (Rivoltella, 2001)⁵. Behind this theoretical background there is a new professional figure that develops competences: *the multimedia instructional designer*.

The New Media Juke Box tool

In our communication society, archives are considered the deposits of our memory, even if it is a mediated way to record reality and a particular way to represent information. An archive is also a potential database of facts, that could be related each other in a meaningful way. An *archive* is also a place that contains collected objects. Very often these objects hide meanings and memories that need to be discovered and reinterpreted.

Each day collect mass-media archives a great amount of hours of programmes or articles containing information, which are produced, published, exploited once and then stored in archives (almost) forever. Now, the hypothesis are to take some pieces of information, de-contextualise them from the mass media flux and remodel them for an educational environment, such as a university course about institutional communication for the first-year students of Communication Sciences. During the

³ The central hypothesis of Mayer is that students learn better from words and pictures than from words alone.

⁴ For *factual artefacts*, I mean information and media artefacts dealing with contemporary events that are portrayed by the mass media.

⁵ The *media education* is a new discipline that combines Communication Sciences and Education Sciences.

last academic year we created the NMJB⁶, which was used and explored by about 170 students (see www.lu.unisi.ch/icef/). It is a thematic database, containing about 200 TV news video clips, from broadcast to short documentaries and newspaper articles, concerning 22 nationally and internationally known institutions. Shifting this kind of factual content 'from home to the classroom' means adding them a new meaning. This experience increases knowledge about how to use factual media artefacts coming from our everyday experience. We had to create a new *scenario*. Our reference archive is the Swiss Radio and Television Archive (RTSI).⁷ The main objectives of the course are summarized in two points:

- to present some general concepts about institutions, institutional management and communication;
- to provide the liveliest possible picture of real institutions.

The first point was pursued through classroom lectures, frontal explanations, discussions and examples. In order to have a feedback from the students, each week they had to fill in a feedback form on the course website, composed of two elements: a synthesis of the lecture (five keywords and a ten-line text) and the assessment of the lecture and of the materials used in it.

The second point was developed into a set of 22 *multimedia case studies*, each presenting a single institution (such as the UNO, Amnesty International, CERN, etc.) through a collection of digital documents (texts, audio and video clips, websites). They could be accessed online in a password-protected area of the course website.

By the end of the course, students had to perform: (1) an extensive analysis, i.e. analysing three documents for each institution in a selection of 17 out of 22 (the selection was up to the student); (2) an intensive analysis, i.e. of a whole case study and all its multimedia documents. The results of the two analyses were to be submitted in the form of a written report.

Our experience showed that, beyond the benefits of major organiza-

⁶ At the construction of the New Media Juke Box collaborated Luca Botturi (for the technological aspects), Sabrina Rozalen (for the pedagogical ones) and Terry Inglese (for the idea of the tool to develop, the realization of the contract between the two institutions USI-RTSI, the collecting and choosing of the media artefacts from the RTSI archive).

⁷ A special contract was signed with this body for accessing and selecting some broadcasted media artefacts, for digitalizing them and designing thematic collections that we integrated in the course of Prof. E. Poglia *The institution in the framework of society*.

tional efforts for creating a steady collaboration between a TV company and a University, the practice of re-using media objects increases their value: the media artefacts become digital, multimedia educational objects, with *a potential added value* to educational environments.

On the other hand, media companies understand that with the increasing penetration of new media, television and radio companies can cooperate with universities and research centres. Copyright considerations forced us to protect the NMJB collection with a password and led us to reflect on this issue. The exploitation of media artefacts were in our case directed by a mutual agreement negotiated with RTSI.

Positive outcomes

The main result, in terms of learning outcomes, was the connection between *theory*, proposed by the professor during the lectures, and *practice*, triggered by the different combination of multimedia information sources. This was appreciated by the students because the collection of multimedia artefacts as learning tools provided a direct look on real institutions, even if they were mediated by mass media. In more detail, student's feedback pointed out that the collection enriched the theoretical lessons, creating a shift from an unstructured way of watching TV, listening to the radio or looking for information on the internet or in newspapers to a re-contextualisation in a higher educational setting like a university course.

Critical remarks

In order to enhance the re-contextualization effect on multimedia elements, and so to improve the overall learning quality, we are planning to remodel the NMJB for the next academic year. We wish to propose a more structured way of using the NMJB tool, with some guidelines, to avoid the fragmented approach that students pointed out. We wish to give the students concrete goals. From a multimedia authoring view, we will work more to narrow down the selection of multimedia documents, for example, choosing more concrete documentaries or newspaper articles, proposing examples of summaries of the institutions, in order to give students the opportunity to carry out research in a more focused way.

Next steps

The multimedia instructional designer is confronted with such new forms of structuring content for educational purposes. The instruments to check the results after the course remodelling will be interviews and the transfer of the theoretical framework on the written works of the students.

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