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## **WHAT KIND OF EXPERTISE IS REQUIRED OF TEACHERS OF MEDIA COMPETENCE?**

### **Introduction: the Question and its Presuppositions.**

The question put to us by the organizers of the conference is “What kind of expertise is required of teachers of media competence?” This question, as I understand it, presupposes two things. The first is a clear understanding of what media education is about, since media competence is the objective or product of media education. In my presentation I will indicate, and briefly summarize one of the dominant, and I believe pertinent, definitions of media education, notably the definition according to which media education is the teaching of critical skills. The second is a predicament. The formulation of the question seems to indicate that, whatever definition of media education the organizers have in mind, it is fraught with some difficulties with regard to the teaching of media competence. The formulation implies furthermore that the possession of certain professional qualifications is a condition for overcoming the predicament. I will suggest in my presentation that an informed art of asking and answering questions based on erotetic logic, and a keen awareness of communication theory and practices constitute the essential, but by no means sufficient, conditions for becoming an effective teacher of media competence.

## I. Media Education: A Guiding Definition.

Let me start by providing a pertinent definition of media education in the form of three corollary theses.

1. Media education is not educational technology or educational media that is, teaching *through* or *with* technology or media. To be sure, technological know-how can be, and often is, helpful to support media education. As David Buckingham put it, “the participatory potential of new technologies ... has made it more possible for young people to undertake creative media production, and for teachers to do so with their students (2003, 5). In most universities, particularly in the US, librarians with a background in technology play this important role and are what David Considine terms “natural allies of media education” (2001, 249). Media centers in schools and colleges are usually run by people with a background in media or in instructional technology. Yet, media education should not be confused with technologically mediated education. Such confusion has led to what Steven Goodman (2003) calls “the instrumental wing of the media education field” which has reduced media education to a faster and more efficient method of information delivery (pp.10-11).
2. Media Education is not a body of knowledge that one can impart to students (Quin and McMahon 2001, 311), although any relevant body of knowledge would be helpful, if only as an area of illustration and pedagogical practice. As David Buckingham (p. 147) notes, “few teachers are initially trained in media education and

they therefore tend to approach it from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and with diverse motivations”. The interdisciplinary nature of media education is an important aspect and, as David Considine (2002) convincingly shows, it should be integrated as a major component of media education curricula, but it becomes a liability<sup>1</sup> if media educators do not distinguish between their disciplinary background and field-specific expertise from the expertise required for teaching media competence.

3. Media education is not the teaching **of** the media but the teaching **about** the media.

More precisely, it is the teaching of critical skills for reading and writing the media conceived of as semiotic constructs, that is, systems of signs, each with its own material structure and its grammar<sup>2</sup>. The media include specific sub-systems of signs which James Gee (2003) calls semiotic domains (video games, films, plays, music, etc). Rather than imparting a body of knowledge or teaching technological know-how, the role of teachers of media competence is to help their students make sense of the media by producing “the conditions for understanding a changing world and giving students the power to make informed, critical decisions about their relationships to the media” (Quin and McMahon 2001, 311).

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<sup>1</sup> Renée Hobbs (1998, pp. 25-26)) analyses the pros and cons of integrating media competence concepts across the curriculum. Incoherent presentation of the key concepts, marginalization of media education, and the inadequate training of teachers in media subjects are some of the downsides of integrated media education.

<sup>2</sup> The complexity of the teaching of writing and reading media today is compounded by the fact that students are confronted with the situation in which they have to produce and learn content via multiple forms of representations. This practice is known as multiple literacies competence (see for example W. Kist, 2005) of which Renée Hobbs writes: “... what makes the new vision of literacy so powerful is the application of these skills to messages in a variety of forms” (2001, 167).

The above definition implies the refutation of first, the uncritical attitude adopted by some quarters of media education which have turned critical thinking toward the bashing of the media dogmatically accused of being responsible for society's moral and socio-economic problems, and second, the intellectualist attitude which aims to use critical skills in a purely intellectual and arrogant criticism of the media by autonomous and disembodied individuals. If media competence<sup>3</sup> is understood as it is in the above definition, that is, the capacity of situated persons for engaging with the media for the purpose of making sense of the media for themselves, then media competence educators do not have to be competent in all media formats, nor do they have to possess a body of knowledge, including technological knowledge as prerequisite for teaching. All the essential qualifications<sup>4</sup> they need, as I suggest below, are expertise in **erotetics** and **communication**.

## II. Media Competence Teachers' Expertise: Erotetics

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<sup>3</sup> It might be helpful to clarify here a terminological confusion between two pairs of notions: media competence and media literacy on the one hand, and information competence and information literacy on the other hand. Media competence and media literacy are synonymous. The first term is descriptive whereas the second term is value-oriented. The same comparison holds between information competence and information literacy which constitute the access facet of media competence (Hobbs, 2001) whose other facets are analysis, evaluation, and communication (p. 166). Information literacy competence, according to this definition, is focused on information access.

<sup>4</sup> I will not discuss here the important distinction between the ascription of competence as an officially recognized status and the ascription of competence as a set of individual capacities. I adhere here to the sociological analysis according to which competence oscillates between the two poles (see Rainer Schuetzeichel, 2010).

Some schools of media education in the United States understood early on the importance of questioning and questions to the development of critical thinking skills of the students. They came up with lists of questions designed to help teachers to interpret and make sense of the five core concepts of American media education which have been adopted from Canadian, British and Australian media education theories. Without those questions, the core concepts remain non-contextualized, abstract, and hard to use for some teachers. Thoman and Jolls (2005) explain that “The stumbling block seemed to be the *Five Core Concepts*---no matter how simply they were phrased, no matter how many examples were given, teachers reported that the concepts were difficult to incorporate easily into everyday classroom activities” (p. 187), and they add: “It became clear that the *Concepts* were more useful when they were discovered rather than provided” (Ibid.). This noteworthy conclusion<sup>5</sup> led the authors to propose five core questions that are listed below along with the core concepts:

1. Core concept: all media messages are created.

Key question: who created this message?

2. Core concept: media messages are constructed using creative language with its own rules.

Key question: what creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

3. Core concept: different people experience the same media message differently.

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<sup>5</sup> Problematology, one of the philosophical underpinnings of erotetic logic, conceives of concepts as abstract representations of answers to questions whose formulation is implicit or repressed for various ideological and rhetorical reasons. Concepts are formed during the erotetic process of questioning, discovery and justification (see Michel Meyer 1986, 1988, 1994).

Key question: how might different people understand this message differently from me?

4. Core concept: media have embedded values and points of view.

Key question: what life styles, value, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

5. Core concept: most media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

Key question: why is this message being sent?

Recently, other media educators such as Frank Baker developed these core questions into an expanded list of questions (see [http://www.frankwbaker.com/media\\_messages.htm](http://www.frankwbaker.com/media_messages.htm)).

While this methodological effort is helpful to some extent, its effectiveness is limited due to its insufficient theoretical foundation. The lists of questions keep growing without any clear explanation of their rationale other than the assumption that the number of the contexts in which they are raised is unlimited. The teacher of media competence would benefit from considering some of the epistemological concepts put forth /devised by erotetic logicians, erotetic logic being the logic of questions and answers. This logic, developed by logicians such as Nuel Belnap (1976), Jaakko Hintikka(1978) and their followers, can provide a theoretical and methodological framework within which media competence teachers can define the kinds of questions that are conducive to the students' critical learning (discovery and creativity).

Two kinds of questions have been constructed by erotetic logicians: the **YES or NO-**questions and the **WH-questions**. The first kind comprises questions such as “has

President Bush lied to the American people about the existence of WMD in Iraq?” “Is the Health Care program proposed by the Obama Administration the manifestation of tyrannical power?” “Have you stopped beating your wife?” The second kind includes questions starting with interrogatives such as **what, who, which, where, when, how, why**. Some examples of such questions are “What is the message of this commercial?”, “Who is the intended audience of this message?” “When was the movie X made?” “How was Pernkopf’s Atlas of Human Anatomy made?”<sup>6</sup> etc.

C. J. B. MacMillan and James W. Garrison (1988) write that “Erotetic logic attempts to deal with at least the following two problems: (1) what are the presuppositions of different types of questions, that is, their implications; and (2) what makes a given response a proper answer to a particular question.” A question aims, in principle, at solving the intellectual predicament<sup>7</sup> of the questioner or inquirer, so that even questions coming from teachers and directed to students must be based on the assumption that the students are in an intellectual predicament, that is, in need to solve a problem through a proper answer to their teachers’ questions, and that those questions are questions that they, the students ought to ask. As McMillan and Garrison

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<sup>6</sup> This question is one of the topics for discussion regularly assigned to students in some graduate schools of library and information science in the United States. It is about the ethical and moral attitude libraries and or information professionals should adopt toward the *Atlas of Topographic and Applied Human Anatomy* written by Alfred Pernkopf, former rector of the University of Vienna and Nazi ideologue. Pernkopf had, allegedly, used the bodies of Nazi victims as the basis for the illustrations and paintings included in his book which was hailed at the time as “a masterpiece”, “the pinnacle of color anatomic representations”, “the standard by which all other works are measured” (see Batoma 2008).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of intellectual predicament is a key to understanding the application of erotetic theory to media competence teaching. An intellectual predicament is a situation which involves not only the explicit questions that the inquirer or student needs to ask, but also gaps of knowledge, puzzlement, ignorance, etc. (see Mcmillan and Garrison 1988, p.29). In order to help students relieve or overcome their intellectual predicaments, teachers engage them in erotetic activities by playing the role of coaches.

put it, “The teachers’ actions are logically relevant to the students’ intellectual states with regard to a particular subject matter”.

The question “What is the message of this commercial ?” presupposes or implies the following: first, that a commercial carries a message, which does not go without saying; second, that the students are somewhat interested in the subject matter under consideration; third, that the students’ knowledge of the subject matter and their familiarity with the semiotic domain are part of their background knowledge; fourth, that the students are capable of picking out the proper answer through the pedagogical activity which involves a dialogue between the teacher and the students. The role of the media educator who believes in the inquiry approach is to first explain the essentially erotetic or problematological<sup>8</sup> nature of human communicative activity and second, help students explore different categories of questions by showing their presuppositions and the strategies for identifying those presuppositions and solving the inquirers’ intellectual predicaments. The exploration of **Yes or No** and **WH** questions and their presuppositions would be tremendously useful during the initial phase of shaping coherent media competence curricula, or coaching students during pedagogical activities. It would be theoretically unsound and practically ineffective or counterproductive to attempt to come up with a fixed list of questions. **WH** questions

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<sup>8</sup> Erotetic theory can be traced back to the works of the Romanian writer and philosopher Eugeniu Sperantia (1888-1972) who constructed one of the first theories of interrogatives named Problematology. This theory was later developed and formalized into a logical theory by Belnap, Hintikka and their followers. The philosophic underpinnings of the theory were drawn by several philosophers and communication theorists. The new approach to Problematology, developed by Michel Meyer (1986, 1988), is one of the most extensive and systematic formulations of the philosophical underpinnings of erotetic theory.

such as **what, who (m), when, where, how**, are some of the erotetic categories to start with.

1. **What-Questions**, as suggested above, presuppose the existence of entities (objects, values, ideas) and, as will be shown below, ontological attitudes on the part of the questioners or inquirers
2. **Who-Questions** presuppose the category of **agency** that is, the category of entities responsible for the construction of the semiotic domain or particular messages it conveys, be it a creator, author, producer, addresser, sender, etc.
3. **Whom-Questions** presuppose the existence of a **patient** or **target** or what is known as an **addressee** in communication theory (real or target-addressees as well as pseudo-addressees, receivers who can be target addressees as well as by-standers, over-hearers, etc.)
4. **When-Questions** presuppose **temporality** and **historicity** of the semiotic domains and the messages they convey, which in turn affect the situated reading or construction of the message and its integration in the meaning making process.
5. **Where-Questions** presuppose **space**, whether the concept of space denotes physical, geographic facets, or connotes geopolitical, socio-cultural, symbolic facets. When- and where-Questions have a particularly heuristic value for the discussion of movies.

6. **How-Questions** presuppose both *means* and *manner*: what means (including economic and financial), tools, instruments are used in producing the message related to the semiotic domain; in what manner (cultural, socio-political, ideological, etc.) are they produced.
7. **Why-Questions** presuppose *reasons* for actions, both at the intentional level (aims, objectives) and the causal one. They imply the explanatory and or justifiable nature of semiotic acts.

It is important to underline here that the instantiation or identification of the presupposition of the question, that is, the satisfaction of the desideratum of the question, depends on the *background knowledge* of the students, their *interest* in the subject matter, the nature and complexity of the *semiotic domain* under consideration, and the effectiveness of the *communicative exchange* or dialogue between the student and the teacher. This last condition pertains to the pragmatic level which can be separated from the semantic level only in theory but not in practice for, as suggested above, the semiotic self is situated or, as Ronald Stamper (2000) puts it, meaning making is a semiotic activity that has consequences on individuals' social behavior.

### III. Teachers' Expertise: Communication.

The first level of expertise in communication is *negotiation*. As stated above, both the students and the teachers are situated consumers or makers of media messages. The awareness or self-consciousness of this situatedness entails, on the part of the media

competence students, a strategy of negotiation which requires different types of critical skills based on the facet or aspect of situatedness. Following Stamper (op. cit.), we will consider here four (4) facets: perceptual, cognitive, evaluative, and behavioral<sup>9</sup>.

Teachers or facilitators of media competence can awaken the students' awareness of their situatedness and coach them in their negotiation activities by helping them sharpen their perceptive, cognitive, evaluative, and normative skills through erotetic activities.

**1. Perceptual facet.** This level addresses the media user's capacity for perceiving the reality created by the media. For example, the question "what is the message of commercial x?" implies that the media user a) perceive the message (commercial) as a need or desire created by the media and b) relates his or her own existence to that need. In other words, the need created by the media in the form of a message is an objectification of my own image with which I am urged to identify. The message is an interpellation, and the task of the media educator is not to tell the students how to respond to the interpellation, but to show that how one responds to it impacts one's identity.

**2. Cognitive facet.** At the cognitive level, awareness of the situatedness of the media means that the media does not have the monopoly over truth, for its claim

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<sup>9</sup> Ronald Stamper has adopted these concepts from social psychology to construct/build his organizational semiotics whose objective is twofold: first, address, at the conceptual level, "the general inability to understand information in human terms, and a confusing lack of clarity about that concept" by redefining it in the terms of an extended semiotics; second, at the socio-pragmatic level, "throw light on the functioning of all kinds of social structures at a level of detail and with a degree of precision not achieved by other organizational theories." (op. cit., p. 168).

to truth is relative to epistemic regimes, to larger contexts (socio-political and cultural). Furthermore, the media may count on the uncritical consumption of their intentionally misrepresented reality. The adoption of critical epistemic attitudes (beliefs, expectations) will empower the students to deconstruct the media's strategies.

3. **Behavioral facet.** Situatedness on this level implies deontic attitudes (obligations, permission) toward co-media meaning makers. Are there any ethical or social norms involved in the construction and /or consumption of the media message? Are these norms respected or violated by the media makers or other media users? Here, How-Questions are particularly useful in drawing the attention of the students to the ethical responsibility inherent in their consumption or production of the media.
4. **Evaluative facet.** On this level the students are coached into understanding that the representation of reality by the media is necessarily perspectival, that is, that reality is constructed from a particular set of values, including cultural, ideological or social values. Competent media consumption involves, therefore, an axiological attitude of critically evaluating and comparing competing perspectives of the represented reality.

The second level of expertise in communication, the **dialogical level**, is related to the pedagogical manner in which the teachers of media competence conceive of and manage their relationship with the students. This relationship is based on the difference between the students and their teachers in terms of their **experiences of the media**,

the **heterogeneity** of the meaning making experience which may be based on personal preferences and taste or due to age gap, the **theoretical assumptions**<sup>10</sup> of the media educators, which inform their teaching and which should be made explicit/ spelled out for a true communicative experience to take place. As David Buckingham remarks, “ the argument is not just that the media themselves are different, but also that the ways in which young people engage with them – the modalities of interpretation, engagement, and investment – are also fundamentally changed” (ib., p.160).

The pedagogical relationship can also be defined by the **intersubjective** dimension of communication<sup>11</sup> that teachers may want to establish between themselves and their students. For instance, the media competence teacher may want to acknowledge not having a privileged access to a semiotic domain or message, but be willing to explore the meaning making process together with the students in a communicative experience in which points of views are exchanged, confronted and thereby mutually enriched and enlightened. This pedagogical attitude, based on the principle of communication ethics

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<sup>10</sup> One of these theoretical assumptions is the assumption about the online youth identity. Susan C. Herring (2008) remarks that research on youth and digital media “tend to exoticize their object of study by emphasizing its novelty, radical difference from what came before, and transformative potential” (p. 75). She quotes several authors who describe the Net Generation in the following terms: “They are different as a result of exposure to and use of digital media”; “they are a new generation who, in profound and fundamental ways learn, work, play, communicate, shop, and create communities very differently than their parents”; millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory”. Herring concludes her article by suggesting that “exoticism can be tempered by a shift from a focus on technologies to a focus on young people themselves and their communicative needs as they happen to be expressed through particular media” (p. 86). David Considine has observed that “while more young people have access to the internet and other media than any generation in history, they do not necessarily possess the ethics, the intellectual skills, or the predisposition to critically analyze and evaluate their relationship with these technologies or the information they encounter. Good hand\eye co-ordination and the ability to multitask are not substitutes for critical thing” (quoted by Frank W. Baker 2010, 138-139).

<sup>11</sup> Philosophers such as Francis Jacques (1979, 1982) have thematized this intersubjective dimension of human communication and stressed its ethical implications.

expressed by the idiomatic phrase “unter uns sei gesagt”, is probably what Quin and McMahon refer to as empowerment of the students.

**Conclusion.** What kind of expertise is required of teachers’ of media competence?

Just what kind of expertise is required of teachers of media competence? In my presentation I articulated an answer to that question around a specific theory of media education, notably the critical thinking theory. More specifically, I emphasized the inquiry-based approach to media education. This approach conceives of competent media use as a meaning making process that is based on an inquiry about the nature, the functioning, and the aim or purpose of media messages which are organized in semiotic domains. Consequently, media education is defined as education about the best way to empower media students to carry out that inquiry.

I further suggested that erotetics, the logic of questions and answers, provides a methodological framework and a philosophical foundation that inquiry-based media teachers can exploit to support their pedagogical practices. I proposed, as a starting point, a few examples of erotetic categories that I constructed based on the typology of questions provided by erotetic logic, and I indicated how using these categories can facilitate the determination or deciphering of media messages.

Because the competent media user is not an autonomous and disembodied individual but a situated inquirer, his or her erotetic activities have social, moral and ethical consequences. I provided four levels or facets of the media user’s situatedness and

indicated their implications with regard to the kinds of negotiation in which media users have to engage in order for their meaning making process to be a successful experience. Part of media competence teachers' role is to awaken their students to their situatedness and coach them on how to navigate the negotiation levels presented above. Finally, I introduced an ethical dimension inherent in teaching competence by suggesting that part of media competence teachers' expertise is the capacity and willingness to engage in dialogical communication with their students who, thereby, become co-inquirers and co-media meaning makers. In conclusion, the art of asking questions informed by erotetic logic and a keen awareness of communication theory and practice constitute essential components of media competence teachers' expertise.

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). "Information literacy competency standards for higher education":

[http:// www.ala.org/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/information\\_literacycompetency.cfm](http://www.ala.org/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/information_literacycompetency.cfm)

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