Empowering Future Teachers with Media and Literacy Skills

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Abstract

In the contemporary digital era, proficiency in navigating and critically evaluating information stands as a fundamental requirement for prospective educators. This study delves into the execution of the project titled "Empowering future teachers with media and literacy skills," aimed at fostering media literacy among students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at Aleksandër Moisiu University, Durrës. The project strategically employs dynamic interventions to instill media literacy skills in students, with the primary objective of arming participants with the essential competencies to responsibly navigate the intricate media landscape. Consequently, this contribution aims to foster a more informed and media-savvy society. Key objectives to attain this overarching goal encompass the enhancement of critical thinking, promotion of peer education, creation of valuable educational resources, and community engagement through interactive methodologies. This study investigates the project's impact on participants, drawing insights from the perspectives of 73 students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at UAMD.

Keywords: *future teachers, media literacy, critical thinking, digital environments, education*

1. Introduction

In today's digital media-dominated era, the ability to critically engage with information is paramount. Recognizing the transformative power of media education in shaping individuals' relationships with media, this paper delves into the findings of the "Empowering future teachers with media and literacy skills" project. The project aims to equip future educators with essential media literacy skills, addressing challenges and concerns identified by students, and providing insights into effective teaching strategies.

Drawing on an array of sources, ranging from reports by international organizations like UNESCO (2023) to specialized studies such as Project Information Literacy (Hammons 2020), the profound impact of interpreting, evaluating, and creating media sources on critical thinking skills and digital citizenship is evident. Proficiency in media literacy not only aids in understanding and interpreting information comprehensively but also proves to be an essential component of the curriculum, equipping students for judicious and responsible use of media and information in our swiftly evolving, digitized environment.

This study is centered around the "Empowering future teachers with media and literacy skills" project, specifically tailored for students at the UAMD Faculty of Education. The initiative goes beyond merely enhancing the media education skills of future teachers; it strives to extend its influence to the broader community. By incorporating diverse activities such as seminars, games, discussions, involvement of field experts, professionals, and social media campaigns, the project seeks to foster active learning, collaboration, and creativity. The study probes into the project's objectives, serving as a roadmap for its successful implementation and aligning with the overarching goal of contributing to an informed and media-literate society.

To evaluate the project's effectiveness and impact, two questionnaires have been devised for students at the Faculty of Education, corresponding to two pivotal phases: the initial and final stages of the project. These questionnaires aim to capture students' experiences, perspectives, and suggestions concerning the project's influence on their media literacy and critical thinking skills, as well as the application of these skills in their prospective roles as educators. Through this research, our aim is to comprehend the ways in which the project has shaped participants and contributed to their evolution as discerning and critical consumers of media content, poised to instill these vital skills in their future teaching endeavors.

2. Literature Review

In today's era dominated by digital media, the ability to discern various types of media, assess their credibility, and decipher the underlying intentions behind information dissemination remains of paramount importance. Consequently, media literacy emerges as a critical skill necessary to navigate the complexities of the digital age and critically evaluate information from diverse sources. The surge in media creation accessibility, coupled with the abundance of information and diverse digital content, underscores the urgency of equipping students with robust media literacy skills (Common Sense Media, 2020).

UNESCO actively advocates for the development of Media and Information Literacy (MIL), aiming to enhance critical thinking skills and promote judicious information use. MIL encompasses competencies enabling individuals to effectively engage with information, various media content, and diverse digital technologies. Addressing the challenge of disinformation, UNESCO underscores the essential combined approach of information, critical thinking, and digital competences, as delineated in MIL. This commitment reflects UNESCO's recognition of the transformative potential of media literacy in fostering critical thinking and cultivating responsible digital citizenship. Media education transcends merely deciphering messages; it empowers individuals to actively participate, create, and contribute to the digital discourse (UNESCO, 2023).

Linda Ellerbee, the editor of Nick News, emphasizes that media literacy is not only important but is key to determining whether students become tools of media or adept users of media tools. Media literacy instruction extends beyond nurturing critical thinking; it aspires to cultivate 21st-century skills such as creativity, collaboration, and communication. Teachers play an irreplaceable role in integrating media literacy into education, ensuring that students, the future educators, evolve not only as critical consumers but also as responsible creators of media content, whether educational or otherwise (SCETV, 2020).

The broader objective of media literacy education is to empower individuals to navigate the digital age with confidence, resilience, and a well-informed perspective. Media education serves as a transformative tool, shaping individuals' relationships with the media. Beyond being discerning users, media-literate students develop critical mindsets by actively engaging with information and contributing to the media environment in a constructive manner (SCETV, 2020).

A comprehensive examination of the literature on teaching media literacy introduces the concept of a strategic approach known as "learning for teachers", which emphasizes specific training in media and information literacy. This strategy seeks to integrate information literacy into university curricula, recognizing the essential need to equip students with these crucial skills. While challenges exist, mastering media literacy skills brings about a paradigm shift in perception and practice within the teaching profession. Emphasizing collaboration between professors and university mechanisms, this strategy in media education aims to promote the comprehensive development of students' skills (Harvard Gazette, 2020).

Project Information Literacy contributes an educational report, drawing on lessons learned in critical thinking skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, stressing the significance of sound information and media literacy. Information literacy involves regaining control over news consumption, understanding its structure, and identifying critical nuances in educational resources, including exercises to comprehend the evolution of news over time. Media literacy also

encompasses understanding how images contribute to news coverage and evoke emotional responses, encouraging students to independently and objectively analyze accompanying images. The ability to regain control over the news aligns with the changing dynamics of information consumption, growing increasingly crucial in an ever-evolving digital environment (Hammons 2020).

Media literacy stands as an integral facet of navigating the intricate digital landscape, necessitating critical thinking skills, and information and media literacy. Educational initiatives, such as UNESCO's support for MIL (2023), underscore the importance of instilling these skills in future teachers. As technology continues to evolve, imparting individuals with comprehensive media literacy skills remains indispensable for fostering informed and critical engagement with information. The democratization of media creation and the continuous expansion of digital content mandate a proactive educational approach, emphasizing skill cultivation beyond traditional literacy within educational institutions (Common Sense Media, 2020).

A holistic strategy involves collaborative efforts, acknowledging the shared responsibility of students, professors, and professionals in fostering a media-literate society. As technology continues to shape information engagement, the cultivation of media literacy skills remains an ongoing and dynamic process essential to the digital age (UNESCO, 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and Participants

Participants: The participants in this study comprised 73 students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at Aleksandër Moisiu University, Durrës. Out of these, 44 students were pursuing Bachelor's degrees, while 29 were at the Master's academic level. The distribution of participants based on their academic level is presented in Chart A.
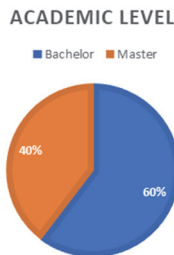

Chart A.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. All participating students were fully informed about the research objectives and provided explicit consent before participating. Anonymity was maintained to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection: Two sets of questionnaires were administered to the participants, marking the initial and final phases of the "Empowering future teachers with media and literacy skills" project. The questionnaires encompassed both closed-ended questions, allowing for quantitative analysis, and open-ended questions, providing qualitative insights.

Closed-Ended Questions: The closed-ended questions aimed to gather quantitative data on specific aspects related to media education. These questions included inquiries about participants' frequency of using social media or the Internet, prior formal training in media literacy, confidence in identifying fake news, methods used to verify information online, and specific topics or skills they wished to learn.

Open-Ended Questions: Open-ended questions were designed to elicit qualitative data, capturing participants' perspectives, challenges, and suggestions regarding media education. These included inquiries about challenges faced by future teachers, concerns about media education, and suggestions for improvement.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data obtained from closed-ended questions were organized and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program. The results were then visually represented through Microsoft Excel graphs for clarity. Qualitative data gathered from open-ended questions were meticulously read, summarized, and presented without repetition.

Limitations of Research Work: Acknowledging the scope of the study, it's important to note that the questionnaires focused exclusively on students from the Faculty of Education at UAMD. As a result, the sample may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives among future teachers. Additionally, there was a gender imbalance among participants, with the majority being female.

3.2   Initial Phase Questionnaire

In this section, responses to the initial phase questionnaire will be examined.
- Questions with alternative selections:
1. How frequently do you utilize social media or the Internet for personal or academic information purposes?
2. Have you undergone formal training in media literacy before?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, rate your confidence in identifying fake news or misinformation online (1 = not at all sure, 5 = very sure).
4. What methods do you typically use to verify the reliability of information found on the Internet?
5. Which specific topics or skills related to media education would you like to explore further in this project?
- Open-ended questions:
1. What challenges or concerns do you anticipate as future teachers regarding media education? (Up to 5 sentences)
2. Is there anything else you wish to share or any questions you have about media literacy? (Up to five sentences)

4. Results

The outcomes related to the frequency of social media or Internet use for personal or academic information purposes are illustrated per student in Chart B.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET FOR INFORMATION

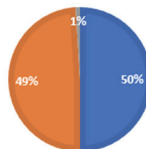■ Every day ■ Several times a week ■ Once a week

1%
49% 50%

Chart B.

Referring to previous participation in a formal training on media education, the results per student are presented in Chart C.

PREVIOUS PARTICIPATION IN A FORMAL TRAINING ON MEDIA EDUCATION
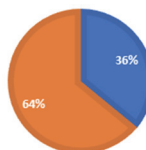
■ Yes ■ Jo

36%
64%

Chart C.

Referring to the data on a scale from 1 to 5, on the certainty of identifying fake news or disinformation on the Internet, the results per student are presented in Chart D.

CERTAINTY OF IDENTIFYING FAKE NEWS
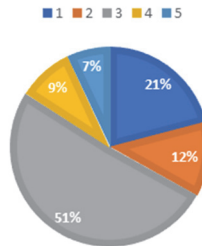
1 2 3 4 5

21%
12%
51%
9%
7%

Chart D.

Referring to the data on the verification of the reliability of information on the Internet, the results per student are presented in Chart E.

VERIFICATION OF THE RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

I compare multiple sources   I consult with other students or professors
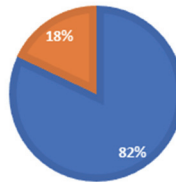
18%
82%

Chart E.

Referring to data on specific topics or skills related to media education that students would like to learn more about during this project, the results per student are presented in Chart F.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

Identification of fake news   Evaluation of reliable sources
Identification of bias   Critical thinking in media literacy
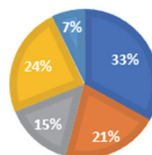Cyber security

7%
33%
24%
15%
21%

Chart F.

Students' Perspectives on Major Challenges, Concerns, and Questions in Media Literacy

Challenges and Concerns:
1. Rapid Technological Changes: Adapting to and incorporating evolving technologies effectively into teaching.
2. Inequalities in Access: Addressing potential disparities in access to digital tools impacting media literacy skills.
3. Methodology Gaps: Lack of strategies for teaching information reliability, critical thinking, and balancing traditional and media literacy.
4. Integration Balancing: Finding the right equilibrium between traditional literacy and media literacy in curriculum design.
5. Online Safety: Promoting responsible online behavior and understanding cybersecurity issues.
6. Curriculum Integration: Integrating media education into subjects without overwhelming existing curricula.
7. Professional Development: Limited availability and effectiveness of programs supporting media literacy skills.
8. Parental Involvement: Strategies for engaging parents in supporting media education and digital citizenship.
9. Ethical Considerations: Addressing ethical concerns related to technology use.
10. Assessment Strategies: Developing meaningful and authentic assessment strategies for media education.

Students' Questions:
1. Integrating Media Literacy: Effectively incorporating media literacy into subject-specific curricula.
2. Classroom Environment: Strategies for fostering open discussions on media literacy issues in the classroom.
3. Resource Availability: Identifying resources for integrating media literacy into teaching.
4. Balancing Teaching Methods: Achieving a balance between traditional and digital teaching approaches.
5. Technology Use: Effective utilization of technology to enhance media literacy skills.
6. Assessment Methods: Developing assessments for both traditional and media literacy skills.
7. Promoting Online Behavior: Strategies for promoting responsible online behavior among students.
8. Parental Involvement: Involving parents in supporting media education and digital citizenship.
9. Parental Resources: Providing parents with resources on media literacy related to their children.
10. Professional Development: Opportunities for continuous professional development in media education.

5. Final Phase Questionnaire

In this section, responses to the final phase questionnaire will be examined.

Questions with Alternatives:
1. How has your preparation in media information changed since the project's inception?
2. Did the project meet your expectations in addressing your media education needs?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident are you in identifying fake news or misinformation now compared to the project's beginning? (1 = not at all sure, 5 = very sure)

Open-ended Questions:
1. Most Useful Aspects: Specific aspects of media education that were most beneficial or informative.
2. Project Improvement Suggestions: Recommendations for enhancing the project or teaching media education in the future.
3. Application of Learning: Opportunities to apply learned media education skills in personal life, teaching, or academic tasks.
4. Additional Comments: Any further reflections or experiences regarding the media education project (up to five sentences).

6. Results

Referring to the changes regarding the preparation of students on media literacy since the beginning of the project, the results per student are presented in Chart G.

IMPACT OF THE PROJECT ON THE PREPARATION OF STUDENTS FOR MEDIA LITERACY

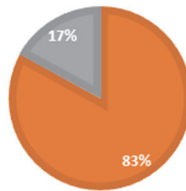■ Significantly improved   ■ Slightly improved

17%

83%

Chart G.

Referring to the fulfillment of students' expectations in terms of addressing their needs for media education during the development of the project, the results per student are presented in Chart H.

FULFILLMENT OF STUDENT EXPECTATIONS FOR MEDIA EDUCATION

■ Exceeded expectations   ■ Lived up to expectations
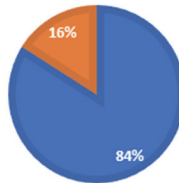
16%

84%

Chart H.

Referring to the confidence that students feel in identifying fake news compared to the beginning of the project, the results per student are presented in Chart I.

CERTAINTY OF IDENTIFYING FAKE NEWS
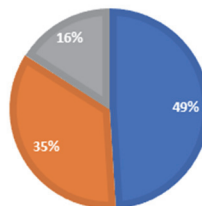
■4 ■5 ■3

16%

49%

35%

Chart I.

- Students' views on the specific aspects of media literacy that were most useful or informative during the

project are as follows:

Understanding how to identify and critically evaluate fake news.

Teaching key media literacy concepts through interactive presentations.

Engaging in games that enhance understanding of media literacy principles.

Gaining knowledge from experts in the field through discussions.

Interaction with professionals in the field of media education.

Participating in or observing social media campaigns that promote media literacy.

Sharing personal experiences and knowledge on social media platforms.

Interact with content and discussions on social media using hashtags related to the project.

Sharing and gaining knowledge from fellow students.

Engaging in the production of materials or campaigns for educational purposes.

Taking media literacy quizzes.

- Students' suggestions for improving the project or the way of teaching media literacy in the future are as follows:

Engaging more students, or future teachers, therefore expands further.

More guests from different fields to provide insights on media education.

Further exploration of ways to integrate media education into the curriculum for future teaching students.

Creating interactive online platforms for discussion and collaborative learning.

Organizing fieldwork as an experiential learning opportunity related to media analysis.

- The areas in which students have applied what they have learned about media literacy are as follows:

In personal life critically evaluating news articles before sharing with others on social media, ensuring personal contribution to a more informed online environment.

Using media literacy skills in course assignments, primarily related to assessing the reliability of sources and identifying possible biases to increase the quality of work.

Integrating media literacy into teaching work by including media literacy activities in the classroom, encouraging students to analyze and question media content.

- Students' experiences related to the media literacy project are as follows:

The media literacy project has positively impacted a deep understanding of the digital environment, providing valuable skills that extend beyond the classroom.

The project significantly contributes to the practice of the teaching profession in the future, to promote media education among students.

The project has contributed to personal growth, encouraging critical engagement with media content and making well-informed decisions in various aspects of everyday life.

The project has increased interest in participating in similar initiatives, promoting media literacy not only within educational settings but also in wider community contexts.

7. Discussion

According to South Carolina Educational Television (2020), media literacy serves as a transformative tool, emphasizing the profound impact of skills on individuals' relationships with the media. In this context, insights derived from students' perspectives within the "Empowering future teachers with media and literacy skills" project offer valuable reflections on the effectiveness and impact of media literacy. Students emphasized the importance of discerning and critically evaluating fake news, underscoring the fundamental role of fostering critical thinking skills within media education. Positive responses to interactive presentations, games, and discussions with experts indicate the efficacy of engaging teaching methods. Interactive learning experiences emerged as pivotal in enhancing students' grasp of media literacy concepts. Participation in social media campaigns and sharing experiences on digital platforms showcase the potential for community engagement in media literacy. However, as emphasized by UNESCO (2023), the evolution of technology necessitates a continuous and dynamic cultivation of media literacy skills to navigate the digital age.

8. Conclusions

The "Empowering future teachers with media and literacy skills" project has equipped students with practical and applicable skills, influencing various facets of their lives. From critically evaluating personal online interactions to

seamlessly integrating media literacy into their academic pursuits, participating students have evolved into active contributors to a more informed and responsible digital environment. Notably, the positive impact extends to the teaching profession, as students apply media literacy skills to their instructional practices. Thus, the project successfully achieves its primary objective of influencing future generations of teachers and students, fostering a culture of media literacy within educational institutions. Moreover, the project contributes to personal growth by encouraging critical engagement with media content, enabling students to make well-informed decisions in their daily lives. The expressed interest in participating in similar initiatives and promoting media literacy in broader community contexts suggests that the project holds potential for impact beyond the academic setting.

9. Recommendations

To amplify the project's impact, efforts should focus on increasing student engagement and participation, potentially through expanded communication strategies and enhanced accessibility of project content to a broader audience. Involving experts from diverse fields and exploring ways to integrate media education into the curriculum for prospective teachers in various disciplines would enrich the learning experience within the Faculty of Education. The creation of interactive online platforms for discussion and collaborative learning can further facilitate student engagement and interaction in media education, fostering a sense of community in virtual spaces. Building upon these findings and recommendations can contribute to the continual improvement and expansion of media education initiatives, promoting critical thinking and responsible media engagement among students and within wider communities.

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