

ONE-FRAME MOVIE. SMARTPHONES AND MOVIES FOR DIGITAL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG TEENS AND PRE-TEENS

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Abstract

While the penetration of personal digital devices and of the Internet comes closer and closer to 100% for young people, both research and reports from the practice seem to indicate that so-called “digital natives” are often digitally illiterate. How to design effective digital media literacy development programs for teenagers? This paper documents the efforts of the *One-frame Movie* program, active in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland since 2014. Based on critical literacy and creativity, this program developed 4 digital literacy ateliers that pivot on “impossible challenges” related to film language and cinema, in order to create a positive and supportive environment in which to transform smartphones from dumb Internet terminals into powerful creative tools.

Keywords: digital literacy, visual literacy, film language, cinema, smartphones.

1 “DIGITAL NATIVES” AND DIGITAL LITERACY

Both direct experience and recent studies provide evidence that more and more teenagers everywhere own and make extensive use of smartphones and other digital devices [1]. This is also true in Switzerland, a country with high digital penetration where all teenagers from 12 to 19 years old own a personal smartphone and 99% own a laptop, while 97% enjoy 24/7 Internet access [2]. According to recent studies [2] [3] [4], teenagers mainly use digital devices and the Internet in their free or leisure time, for texting/chatting, watching videos and using social media apps. In particular, according to [2], YouTube is the single most used online service among teenagers.

These always-connected young people can of course be described as “digital natives”, i.e., people that have lived all their life in a digitally interconnected world. Nonetheless, research suggests that, despite their extended use of connected screens, being a “digital native” does not automatically mean that they have sound digital skills nor that they display particularly aware or effective digital and online practices [5]. Moreover, young people’s shallow digital skills seldom transfer from leisure activities to learning or, later, to the profession [6]. In one word, digital natives do not seem to be *digitally literate*. The well-known increase in cases connected with “digital problems” – including screen addiction, cyberbullying, sexting, child use of pornography, grooming, identity theft, piracy, etc. – seem to emphasize this conclusion.

Defining digital literacy is not an easy task. Historically, scholars and practitioners have identified different approaches to *media literacy* education [7] [8]. Today’s *digital literacy* approaches refer to those models, which can be extended to embrace digital communications and devices [9]. Hobbs [10] defines media and digital literacy as “a constellation of life skills that are necessary for full participation in our media-saturated, information-rich society” (p. vii), which include critically analysing messages, creating content in a variety of forms, making responsible choices, activating reflective practices and taking socially relevant actions. Other digital literacy models, such as DigComp by the European Commission [11], CRISS [12] or the JISC model [13], mention similar items, focusing on digital media languages, communication, content production and creativity, managing online identities and relationships, and digital citizenship.

How can digital literacy be approached and taught, so that young people develop effective digital skills? The media education tradition (cf. [7] [8] [9] [14]) identifies 4 teaching approaches, which are still relevant today:

1. The *protective* or *preventive approach* focuses on keeping children safe from bad or inappropriate content or situations, mainly limiting access or reinforcing adult control. This approach is implemented in safe Internet programs, or in programs specifically aimed at preventing cyberbullying or internet piracy, etc.

2. The *critical literacy approach* comprises a large sets of practices aimed at making children able to critically “read” and understand media content in terms of message, language, production, and ideology. This includes newspapers, television, radio and other mass media, as well as online and personal media. To a certain extent, it crosses over with information literacy development.
3. The *engagement approach* prompts children or young people to use the media to get involved as first-line actors in their community, promoting relevant causes or trying to make a difference on issues they care about. This approach focuses on digital citizenship, and provides room for addressing delicate issues connected with identities and relationships online.
4. The *creative approach* is based on using digital media as creative tool, either expressively or vocationally. This approach is the closest to computer and programming skills, as it basically exploits digital media as production tools.

With digital tools, differently from traditional media, we can identify a fifth approach, which we can label

5. The *geek approach*, i.e., learning the inner workings and to technically handle digital tools. This approach is often combined with the development of computer and programming skills, also in relationship with computational thinking [15].

Of course, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and can blend into a multi-faceted and rich media and digital literacy development environment – which is exactly the case with the *One-frame Movie* (OFM) program.

2 THE ONE-FRAME MOVIE APPROACH

Locarno is a small town in Ticino, a canton in the Italian-speaking region in Switzerland. Nicely surrounded by the Alps and quietly laying on the coast of lake Maggiore, it hosts the Locarno Festival, the major Swiss film event, which takes place every year in the first two weeks of August (www.pardo.ch). Locarno is also home of the Dipartimento formazione e apprendimento of the Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana (SUPSI-DFA), the only Italian-speaking university of teacher education in the country.

OFM started in 2014 as a project of SUPSI-DFA, with the support of the City of Locarno and of the non-profit Fondazione Rivapiana, in order to tackle the challenge of digital and media literacy education leveraging on creativity, and moving beyond the mainstream “safety first” approach, which is often invoked on the media as necessary to prevent dangerous situations online – even before actually understanding the potential and correct use of digital media. The lively and stimulating environment of Locarno Festival was the perfect scenario in which to embed the program, so that reference to film languages was taken as “entry point” in the digital world, and is still a key feature of OFM.

The development of OFM moved from the consideration that, as mentioned before, digital natives are usually digital illiterates. Nonetheless, most of them have smartphones in their pockets, i.e. computers, with memory and computing power that were simply unthinkable even a decade ago, and which are potentially connected to the Internet 24/7. Such devices as usually limited to texting and online video viewing. What prevents young people from taking full advantage of their devices in order to express their creativity and make something of which they can be proud? A positive answer to this question would show a path to let young people move towards more aware, effective and exciting digital practices.

The so-called generation gap [5] was also taken into consideration as a central assumption: while they are not necessarily poorly skilled, adults are in any case “digital immigrants”, and they experience technology differently. Educators cannot pretend to teach young people how to use digital devices, but can accompany them in their own discovery of the digital world. Adults can bring in their views and skills while at the same time listening and trying to “get into the shoes” of teenagers, pushing them to move beyond what is common to achieve something exceptional out of their everyday digital tools.

In the terms outlined above, OFM blends the critical literacy and creativity approaches. It is based on the assumption that actual ownership of digital devices is best promoted by the joint work on challenging and intriguing projects, in a creative dialogue that combines practical and physical artwork with digital media, sharing with peers and presenting to a real audience.

3 FOUR ATELIERS FOR DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

The OFM approach was not defined as a theoretical statement, but emerged as the underpinned consistent framework that binds together to 4 digital and media literacy development ateliers developed in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017. Each atelier consists of a 4-full-day set of activities (i.e., between 30 and 40 hours of work) for groups of 10 to 20 young people of age between 10 and 14.

The ateliers were designed for intensive summer-camp-like delivery, and each one was tested and fine-tuned as parallel program in two subsequent editions of the Locarno Festival. As a general strategy, all ateliers promote a BYOD (Bring-Your-Own-Device) strategy with smartphones, even if some key passages (like photo or movie editing) are done on portable computers, and some semi-professional equipment (e.g. microphones) were used to enhance the quality of final products. Whenever possible, the ateliers use free and open source apps and programs, like GIMP! and Audacity.

Ateliers pivot around an *impossible challenge*, and establish a connection between some element of film language (e.g., the soundtrack, or characters, or visual narratives) and digital media. Also, they propose the development of interdisciplinary projects.

The overall atelier structure includes four key elements: challenge, experimenting, masterpieces, and sharing, consistently with regional school curricula. Some details are presented in Table 1: each element has a specific role (described under “aim”) and is developed through a mix of different working modes. The following sub-sections present the four ateliers, each implementing the OFM approach and the overall structure discussed above.

Table 1. Key elements of the OFM Ateliers structure (duration is expressed in days)

<i>Element</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Aim</i>	<i>Modes</i>
Challenge	0.5	Presenting the central challenge that makes sense of the whole atelier	Introductory video, analysis of film clips, etc.
Experimenting	2	Learning about the media languages and digital technologies at stake through a hands-on approach	Small collaborative projects, already with visible products; analysis of real (commercial/professional) products.
Masterpieces	1	Designing and developing the key product of the atelier, which will be then presented to a real audience	Project work with regular sharing with the whole group.
Sharing	0.5	Presenting the masterpieces to a real audience and learning from their feedback and reactions	Première/exhibition/presentation to a real audience, either physically or online

3.1 One-frame Movie

The first atelier, *One-frame Movie* (which gave name to the whole program), was born with the idea of raising awareness on the fact that a picture is not just “what we see”, but a narration, a message that can be purposely created and used. The central challenge is shooting a whole film, i.e. a full story, with only one frame, i.e., a single picture and a title.

The training part includes getting insights on how pictures convey meaning (thanks to critical visual literacy tools), on what makes a story a compelling narration, and on developing attention to catch the stories which we live by everyday. This is accomplished also thanks to the discussion of the work of professional photographers. Additionally, it focuses on wording the title of the participants’ one-frame movies, which is what “hooks” the interpretation of the audience and sets the story in motion.

Realizing the masterpieces – individual one-frame movies (see a sample in Figure 1) – requires an interdisciplinary work on visual literacy, narrative, language, and technical skills in using a camera and doing basic picture editing (with the free and open source software GIMP!).

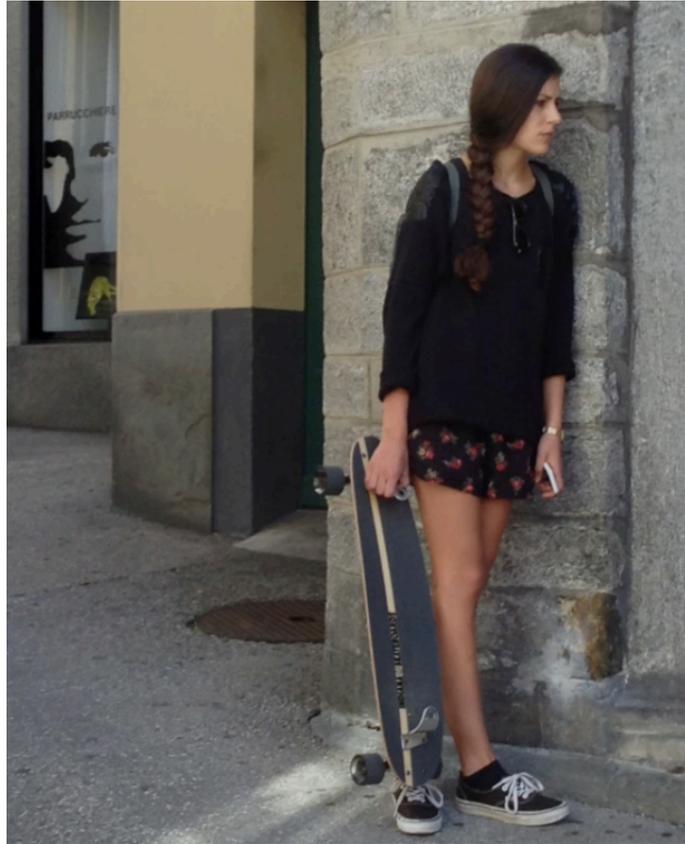


Figure 1. One-frame Movie masterpiece sample, originally titled "Waiting for my film to begin".

3.2 Sound Score

The second atelier works on sound (both music and noises –soundtrack and foley art in the movies) and on how it gives feelings and life to pictures, and is titled *Sound Score*. When we think of what makes a good movie, sound is often the forgotten medium in our mainly visual world. Nonetheless, it still maintains its unaltered communicative and emotional power, which is indeed strongly used both as a narrative element and in commercial and informative communications. The central challenge is re-creating the full soundtrack of a 1-minute excerpt of a real movie starting from scratch, i.e., using just a microphone and a sound recorder (and not downloading a cool song from YouTube).

The training part devotes a lot of space to active listening, including exercises from the Yoga tradition and Murray Schafer's soundscape studies, which were adapted by the Italian designer and educator Bruno Munari [16] [17] [18] [19]. It then provides insights on the work of noisemakers and foley artists (again, thanks to the discussion of actual soundtracks), along with the basics on sound recording and editing – in this case with the open source software Audacity and/or with GarageBand and iMovie.

Masterpieces are here brand-new original re-sonorizations of 1 to 2 minutes excerpts of classic movies (e.g. *King Kong* or *The Untouchables*), which is also an opportunity to let young people get curious about the history of cinema and classic films.

3.3 Selfie Awareness

Selfie Awareness, the third atelier, tackles a complex challenge, i.e., selfies and the representation of people in digital pictures. It promotes a critical stance and challenges common media beauty stereotypes, in particular in relationship with the feminine body. The central challenge is here creating a photographic portrait of another participant that shows a central but invisible feature of her/his personality (like "brave", "loyal", "sincere", "creative", etc.).

The training moves here from famous actors and singers, to dive then backwards in time thanks to art history, in order to appreciate how the notion of "beauty" has changed over time and how it changes in different cultures. The practice of (self-)portraits is then put in the middle, thanks to engaging exercises with the camera, also taken from the work of Bruno Munari [18], and with a field project of

portrait collection of passers-by. This work leaves great space to discuss the reliability of the information conveyed by pictures in the media, and on privacy and copyright good practices.

The development of the masterpieces (see figure 2 for a sample) involves in-studio photo shooting, photo editing, and takes a good deal of discussion both in order to identify the personal features to be represented, and on how they can be visually represented.



Figure 2. Selfie Awareness masterpiece sample, titled "Shy Marija".

3.4 Music Clip

The fourth atelier is titled *Music Clip*, and focuses on the specific genre of music video-clips, one of the most common among teenagers. The central challenge is creating an original video-clip for a (new) song in 3 days, shooting only with smartphones. In our case we selected four songs from four young local bands, which had no video-clips. The "real audience" element was here reinforced, as the actual musicians came and presented their songs, and then viewed the première of the video-clips, as real clients.

Differently from the other ateliers, *Music Clip* explores a defined genre, and delves into its inner workings. This is done by analyzing the different types and structures of music video-clips, which is of course an opportunity to let teenagers meet different types of music and visual styles. The technical training focuses on video shooting and editing, and on how to design a shooting session.

The masterpieces are of course the video-clips (a frame from one of the participants' products is shown in Figure 3), and their development requires visual and technical skills, along with a good deal of interdisciplinary teamwork.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOKS

In August 2014, during the second week of Locarno Festival, the first OFM atelier was offered, with 15 participants. In August of the following three years (2015 to 2017), 2 ateliers were proposed each year, for a total of about 30 to 40 participants every year, about 20% of them returning from the previous year.

During the school year, the same formats were tested and adapted with teachers within a regular lower secondary school setting, confronted with more or less rigid class schedules, disciplinary curricula and evaluation constraints, so that the activities and materials could also be used in formal teaching and learning contexts.

In order to enhance school-compliance, in 2017/18 efforts were made in order to explicitly link the four ateliers with official school curricula.



Figure 3. A frame from a Music Clip masterpiece video-clip.

The full documentation of the four ateliers is currently available in Italian under a Creative Commons licence at www.oneframemovie.supsi.ch, along with all the related learning materials (slides, worksheets, videos, sample materials, etc.).

Starting in 2018, OFM will become a part of the official Locarno Festival Kids Program. While this will imply a change in its format, it will offer a stable venue to continue develop the One-frame Movie approach, i.e., transforming smartphones and personal digital devices from “dumb terminals” of an Internet inhabited by contents made by others, into powerful creative tools, which can give everyone an opportunity to find their voice in the digital world.

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