

*Towards a more effective Media and Information Literacy Education
through the School Library as a Learning Commons*

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Luisa Marquardt¹

The contribution aims at exploring how the school library, rethought as a learning environment or a learning commons, properly designed for learning, can implement and foster media and information literacy education more effectively. The issue of rethinking school libraries towards a more effective educational role, both in reading and in media and information literacy education, has lead IFLA and IASL to start a new project to revise radically and develop new guidelines for school libraries, where the contribution of ICT, new media etc. is also taken in account. The two organizations are working very closely (via e-mail and Skype; a joint face-to face workshop will be held next August) in order to have the guidelines ready to be (hopefully) released in Lyon, next year. Let's know concentrate on our topic and see how ICT and media education can be implemented through a "rethought" school library.

Investments in culture, education and research in Europe are negatively affected by factors like the current economic crisis in most of European countries, with an increasing trend in the unemployment rate and the working class pauperisation, while a strong investment in those sectors – culture, education and research - could be a key to overcome the crisis itself. The way the austerity measures are interpreted by most of countries has lead to dramatic financial cuts in those sectors,² and most of European countries are still struggling to overcome the crisis and become competitive economies.³

¹ Luisa Marquardt (e-mail address: luisa.marquardt@uniroma3.it, webpage: <https://formazione.uniroma3.it/docente/lmarquardt/>) teaches Library and Information Science at the Faculty of Education, "Roma Tre" University, Rome, Italy. She is Director Europe for IASL (2009-2012; 2012-2015); Elected Member of IFLA - School Libraries Section; Member of the IASL-IFLA Joint Committee; Chair of the National Standing Committee on School Libraries and Member of the Observatory on Library Professions of the Italian Library Association (AIB); Member of the Ministerial Committee on School Libraries for the National Project "Biblioteche21" (<http://www.biblioteche21.it>); Director of "Biblioteca Statuario", a small but active community library in Rome (<http://bibliostatuario.wordpress.com>). Co-Chair, with Donatella Lombello, of the 38th IASL Annual Conference (Padua-Abano Terme, Sep. 1-4, 2009 (proceedings published by IASL, 2009; Initiator and Chair of EMMILE – European Meeting on Media and Information Literacy Education Chair (Milan, February 27-29, 2012; proceedings in print) and Co-Chair of OPAM 40th Conference (online proceedings are available at URL: <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B2h1gRbiiQmESkZNVdNBRUZPS2M/edit>; Co-Editor, with Dianne Oberg, of the IFLA Publication n.° 148 *Global Perspectives on School Libraries: Projects and Practices*, Berlin, DeGruyter Saur, 2011.

² See, e.g., two of the twelve main messages underlined by the Commission of the European Communities:

“11. Public spending on education as a percentage of GDP has stagnated since 2000 and the volume of private spending, which plays such an important role in the US, especially in higher education, has hardly changed. **The EU member states would need to invest on average over 10.000 euro more per student per year (or almost 200 billion euro a year) in higher education to reach the levels of the US.**

12. The economic crisis has affected people differently depending on their level of education, with a stronger impact on those with low educational attainment. Low-skilled males have experienced the most severe downturn in their employment prospects.”, COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, *Commission staff working document “Progress towards the Common European Objectives in Education and Training. Indicators and benchmarks 2010/2011”*. s.l., Commission of the European Communities, s.a., p. 7, retrieved at URL:

<http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/report10/report_en.pdf>, March, 20, 2013.

³ The Creative Europe Framework Programme was specifically launched to fund cultural and creative sectors and support them in facing the globalization challenges and the digital shift (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Creative Europe - A new framework programme for the cultural and creative sectors (2014-2020)*, Brussels, European Commission, 2011, available in PDF format at URL: <http://ec.europa.eu/culture/creative-europe/documents/communication_en.pdf>.); nevertheless it risks a 30% cut, as denounced by the “We are more”

What is still mainly underestimated or misunderstood is that a competitive economy is based on a creative and inclusive society, made of creative and self-directed citizens. In this perspective, education and school instruction can definitely play a crucial role as a learning environment for all. The school should re-locate itself at the heart of the community and the social fabric as an educational environment for all (OECD, 2006; *Contemporary...*, 2008). An educational task more challenging nowadays than in the past, due to the peculiarities of our societies – multiform, complex, fluid, multicultural, interconnected – and the labour market. There is a need to raise aware, active, self-directed citizens, who are able to orienteer and re-orienteer themselves in such a complexity, who are able to interact and collaborate in settings more and more multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual, citizens who are able to appreciate the variety of expressions of creativity, make use of information in a competent, creative, wise, ethical way, citizens who are able to play an active role in the different dimensions - personal, social, cultural, professional - of life. An interview-based survey was carried out in September 2011 to a sample of 500 CEOs of companies/firms etc. with a minimum of 10 employees. It clearly shows that enterprises that aim at competing in the global arena need «multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural and multi-locational teams. If students have demonstrated they can work with other cultures and teams, that's a big plus» (The British Council - Think Global, 2011, p. 1). Furthermore, increasing creativity and innovation can be crucial to the development across Europe (both at an individual country level and at Europe as whole).

Our children have to be educated and trained to become active, flexible, creative and responsible citizens, who are able to find their way in life, act and work in such a complexity, face ongoing changes, and fulfil themselves: an effective media and information literacy education is crucial. Digital natives show a confidence in using the increasing variety of digital tools; they develop and have their own ways of using ICT, media, social networks etc. They are multitasking, visual, collaborative; they expect 24/7 services and prompt feed-back; they prefer intuitive and visual means of communication; they like learning by doing. The social dimension of the web and the features of the so-called "2.0 Generation" cannot be ignored by education systems.

Schools and universities – and their libraries as well - should take in account the characteristics of a generation who is unaware of a time "before Internet" and "after Internet". They should develop and implement curricula that engage pupils and students, and create a "third space", where their personal "backpack" (of knowledge, experiences, emotions, feeling etc.) can be fruitfully merged with the curricular needs and offer. The creation of a "third space" (a concept from the sociologist Ray Oldenburg) is needed in order to prevent the risk for the curricular activities to be totally disconnected from the personal dimension. Furthermore, digital migrants (as most of adults are), who are resisting to change, constitute an actual obstacle and represent a gap factor between the school and the digital natives (Prensky, 2005): a "third space" could be helpful to those digital migrants, too.

According to Carol Kuhlthau's theories, the school library can act as a vital "third space", if it is able to overcome the traditional model of the library as an information provider, still existing in most of school and academic libraries that focuses on "information", rather than on "learning", on different learning and teaching styles and methodologies. Library spaces and services should evolve from an "information commons" into a "learning commons" to meet new (and old) learning and teaching needs and outcomes: cooperation between school teachers and school librarians/information specialists is fundamental. School librarians/information specialists should be educated and (re)trained to act as a teaching partner.

The Europe2020 strategy and, in particular, one of its core actions "Digital Agenda for Europe" aim at realizing a "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth". In order to achieve that challenging goal, education

systems are expected to deliver an effective ICT education to enhance the digital competences⁴ level across the population. On average, 2/3 (64%) of the European (EU27) population showed some degree of computer skills (64%). While it didn't increase in Sweden, Greece and Germany, it increased very much in others: for instance, France showed the highest rate (11,6%) compared to the average of Europe (EU27) as a whole 3.9% and the average of most of countries (around 6%). Nevertheless, the average computer skills rate remains inadequate and doesn't meet the labour market's needs.⁵ Furthermore, ICT education is still mainly delivered as a separate subject, even though it is increasing embedded in the curriculum.⁶ While an increasing number of media labs and digital interactive boards have been well spreading, the way ICT education is usually delivered across Europe does not involve the school library.

There are some interesting exceptions like, for instance, the establishment of the "RBE – Rede de Bibliotecas Escolares" (1996), and its ongoing development in an integrated perspective with public libraries. The school library as a learning environment, networking, co-working, resource sharing, information literacy education at different level (pupils, professionals, parents), reading promotion, recurrent education and training of professionals, assessment and evaluation measures are some of the features of the Portuguese ministerial programme.⁷ A similar integrated programme is implemented in Croatia, where school librarians are well trained in ICT and support both pupils and teaching staff. Furthermore, many school library projects are particularly addressed to children with special needs.⁸

New education and information needs (from pupils, teachers, parents) and ever changing learning styles can be better met by the school library rethought as a "learning commons". This emerging model is based on an economic model – the commons - that calls for the community (local, school etc.) to be co-responsible in its implementation (Ostrom, 1990) and aims at gaining a general and shared benefit – the commons – through an active participation of the members of that community (Olson, 1971). In a lifelong learning perspective, the school library role can be redesigned towards a knowledge centre, where knowledge is co-constructed. The transition from the concept of library services/library or information commons to a learning commons reflects the shift from the information society to the knowledge or learning society and the need for effective media and information literacy education.

The learning commons is developed through a flexible, dynamic, systemic approach to meet the learning communities demands. It expands and enriches the learning experience in a collaborative way, because enables students and teachers to overcome the schoolroom borders and co-work, with the school librarian, in stimulating physical and virtual places. The school library, with its spaces, resources, programs traditionally intended to implement the curriculum, has the natural conditions to become a *learning commons* (OSLA, 2010). The peculiarity of a learning commons is being designed, planned, implemented and assessed to meet the educational goals, and lets the curriculum meet what usually happens during informal and spontaneous interactions outside the classroom (Kuhlthau-Maniotes-Caspari, 2007) or universitaria. This transition is seen rather as a "revolution" than an evolution (Loertscher, 2011; Loertscher-Koechlin-Zwaan, 2008; Koechlin-Loertscher, 2010; Loertscher-Marcoux, 2010).

⁴ According to COM (2005)548 final, p. 16, a digital competent person is who makes use of information and IST (Information Society Technology) in a confident and critical way in his/her different dimensions of life, applying a set of intertwined ICT, computer, networking and communicating skills.

⁵ COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, *Commission staff working document* [...], cited, p. 103.

⁶ EDUCATION, AUDIOVISUAL AND CULTURE EXECUTIVE AGENCY (EACEA) - EURYDICE, *Key Data on Learning and Innovation through ICT at School in Europe 2011*, Brussels, EACEA, 2011. Available in PDF format at URL:

<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/129en.pdf>.

⁷ RBE Programme, <http://www.rbe.min-edu.pt/np4/home>

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Several theories on learning and learning spaces contribute to develop the learning commons. For instance, according to constructivism, knowledge as a result of a co-construction process different actors are actively involved and interact in specific settings (both physical and virtual). Learning by doing, inferring and making connections (Dewey, Montessori, Malaguzzi and pedagogical activism); the multidimensionality of mind and culturalism (Bruner, 1964), the plurality of minds and the transformational approach (Gardner, 1991, p. 34), Popper's inquiry method, the guided inquiry based approach (Kuhlthau-Maniotes-Caspari, 2007) are only some of theories that justify the implementation of a learning commons at school.

Some practical examples of "learning commons", the learning-centred library spaces, services and programs, that can contribute to positive students' learning outcomes and effective media and information education, are presented here: two are from primary school, and two from high school.

- The MI Library (New City School, St. Louis, Missouri, a primary school established in 1901 by the local community⁹), opened in 2005, after a radical renovation due to the need of updating and adapting the school library to the Multiple Intelligences theory (Howard Gardner) adopted by that school since 1988. The space and the collection are equipped and arranged to foster all of the different intelligences, including the bodily-kinesthetic one.



MI Library, New City School
<http://www.newcityschool.org/>



- The Primary School in Welsbrg (Bozen, Italy) has had a new building since 2005. Learning and teaching activities dramatically changed and had a shift towards a collaborative learning and co-working thanks to the learning commons. This is an effective model of schooling at the library.

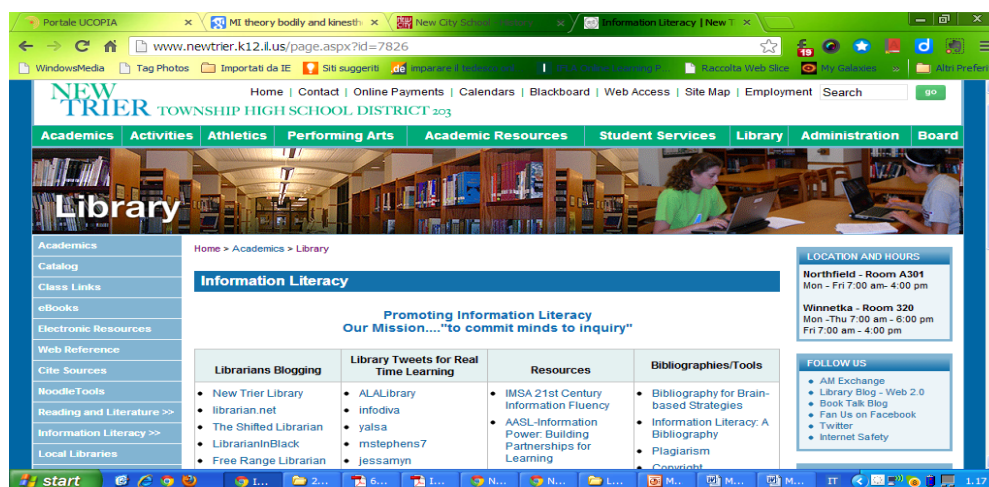


Grundschule Welsberg, Bozen



⁹ See brief history at URL: <http://www.newcityschool.org/History_619.aspx>.

- The New Trier Township High School was established in 1901. The school library was radically turned into a learning commons to accommodate the different learning and teaching styles. Information literacy education is a core part of the library programme.¹⁰



- In Hawthorn (Melbourne, Australia), an outstanding avant-guard building, eco-compliant and sustainable, is the new site of the school library (opened in 2011) of the Bialik College, a school mainly addressed to the Jewish community. The new library, designed by Ron Unger Architects, has opened just in time to celebrate (in 2012) the 70th anniversary of the school. The Bialik Librart is designed as a future learning environment, whose motto “Explore, Discover, Learn” expresses well the active learning approach (Feighan, 2011; Jerassi, 2011).¹¹

Digital literacy education can be enhanced through gaming, too. Gaming can have a positive impact on learning, and stimulate creativity, strategic thinking and co-working, competences that are furthermore required by the labour market. There is an increasing interest in gaming at different levels (for instance, both in school and adult education) and in different contexts (academic and work, e.g.). New gaming tools and software, and their pedagogical implications towards a better digital literacy, an active participation and co-operation, are currently developed and explored by several projects, like “Magical”¹² and many others.¹³ The library as a learning commons should accommodate this type of learning and teaching experience, too, which requires specific school teachers and librarians’ education and training.

Students’ learning benefits from a close collaboration between school teachers and librarians and becomes more meaningful and effective when it takes place thanks to a professionally run school library (staff, space, furniture, equipment, collection), set up in a project and network perspective. Imagination, creativity, wellness with oneself and with others are greatly stimulated by such a welcoming and information-rich environment.

¹⁰ <http://www.newtrier.k12.il.us/page.aspx?id=7826>

¹¹ <http://www.bialik.vic.edu.au/learning/libraries/libraries/200/default.aspx>

¹² The EU Project MAGICAL (<http://www.magical-project.net/>) is developing MAGOS, a “collaborative game-authoring environment for learners and educators” that aims at getting students and their teachers involved in an active and cooperative way, and providing education community with an open-source software, including resources and tools that will help them in implementing collaborative game making. Once completed the beta testing phase, MAGOS will be released to the entire education community.

¹³ See, e.g., the list available at URL: <http://www.magical-project.net/?q=links>.

Reflective skills, a more competent usage of information, media and information literacy can be acquired through the school library programmes, services and activities.

Furthermore: professional development, cultural events, parents' corner and much more can be developed by the school library as a learning commons, in a LLL (lifelong learning) perspective.