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Newspapers in Lifelong Learning Settings

Οι Εφημερίδες στο Πλαίσιο της Δια Βίου Μάθησης

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Abstract

In modern society newspapers can be considered as communication and media resources offering massive amount of information that can be used in terms of informal learning. Many researchers often express the belief that newspapers as a source of information can influence the wider public in terms of ideology, policy and culture. Moreover, certain types of newspapers' texts, such as the main articles, the illustrations and the political caricatures, can influence educational procedures and perceptions of the past. This pilot study investigates the students' attitudes towards newspapers, online or in print. The outcomes of the current study were encouraging and imply that the informative objects in newspapers could constitute a valid repository of educational material in lifelong learning scenario.

Περίληψη

Η αξία των εφημερίδων για το ευρύ κοινό αναγνωρίζεται και επισημαίνεται συχνά από πολλούς ερευνητές, οι οποίοι τονίζουν ότι οι εφημερίδες παράγουν ιδεολογία, πολιτική και πολιτισμό. Στη σύγχρονη κοινωνία οι εφημερίδες θεωρούνται μέσο επικοινωνίας που παρέχουν πλήθος πληροφοριών και μπορούν να χρησιμοποιηθούν στο πλαίσιο της άτυπης μάθησης, καθότι, ορισμένα φυσικά αντικείμενα όπως τα κυρίως άρθρα των εφημερίδων, οι εικονογραφήσεις και οι πολιτικές γελοιογραφίες επιδρούν τόσο στην εκπαίδευση όσο και σε αντιλήψεις σχετικά με το παρελθόν. Ο στόχος αυτής της πιλοτικής έρευνας ήταν η διερεύνηση των απόψεων των φοιτητών όσον αφορά τις έντυπες και τις διαδικτυακές εφημερίδες. Τα αποτελέσματα της έρευνας ήταν ενθαρρυντικά και υποδηλώνουν ότι τα πληροφοριακά αντικείμενα των εφημερίδων μπορούν να αποτελέσουν ένα σημαντικό απόθεμα εκπαιδευτικού υλικού στο πλαίσιο της δια βίου μάθησης.

Key-words: newspapers, informal learning

1. Introduction

Society of the early 21st century is characterized by a rapid and non-stop technological evolution. The technological achievements have an important effect on the way we work and, to a great extent, on the way people learn, as human knowledge and capabilities must constantly be renewed and enhanced (Grohmann *et al.*, 2005).

Although learning occurs in a wide variety of contexts (Visser, 1999), it has a personal and individual character, allowing each one to learn in his/her own unique way (Pange, 2005). Additionally, the widespread use of Internet offers the opportunity to access a massive amount of information which needs to be analyzed, organized and decoded. Consequently, educational needs have changed. People, more than ever, are aware of the value of informal learning and new educational practices are applied using online learning resources. In parallel with formal education, other forms of learning need to be considered, such as informal learning, distance learning, self directed learning and lifelong learning practices.

In particular, informal learning is *“the spontaneous, unstructured learning that goes on daily in the home and neighborhood, behind the school and on the play field, in the workplace, marketplace, library and museum, and through the various mass media”* (Coombs, 1985: 92). It *“should no longer be regarded as an inferior form of learning whose main purpose is to act as the precursor of formal learning”* (Coffield, 2000). Thus, in terms of informal learning the learner sets the process of learning according to the available means and resources.

In modern society, newspapers can be considered as media resources and therefore informal learning resources. In particular, the use and the study of newspapers, historical or not, as primary and multidimensional sources produce significant information on all sciences. Especially historical newspapers of the 18th and 19th century provide interesting data about the social and political history, the cultural activities and the educational framework per geographic regions and populations. Early newspapers can also be considered as valuable sources of information on the history of sciences and medicine. Articles that focus on the latest scientific discoveries of the period examined constitute useful archival elements for historians who study the advancement of health sciences (Mallinson, et al., 2003; Nelson, 2003; Zochert, 1974). Accordingly, newspapers contribute in the field of literature and other humanity studies (Chatzibasileioy, 2000). The literary columns of a newspaper include short stories, poems, novels, philological letters and other types of literature. In many cases unpublished texts of distinguished writers are being located and examined by the specialists (Polatidoy, 2004). Regarding the science of archeology, geography and geology, researchers and scientists study newspaper articles that describe relative activities, discoveries and facts. For archaeologists the most important articles are considered those that report the localization of ancient objects during the conduction of an excavation or other work of public character (Sofronidoy, 2002), while the geologists focus their interest in news about earthquakes, explosions of volcanoes and other descriptions of natural phenomena (Walters, 1998).

Unquestionably, the electronic management and provision of newspapers' data, whether they are online or digitalized versions of paleotype ones, can make the content of newspapers more accessible, highlight their rich content and convert them into navigatable sources of information. In addition, accessing electronically the content of a newspaper strengthens the possibility of exchanging information, promotes change and innovation in searching and collecting knowledge, and, most importantly, moves towards the creation of a coherent, engaging, accessible culture of lifelong learning (Hargreaves, 2004).

How Internet is being used to access material that could facilitate the educational practice is a very interesting research area. New, still unexploited, resources need to be found in order to enhance the educational procedure in terms of formal or informal learning. The aim of this pilot study was to investigate the students' attitudes towards online and in print newspapers with the intent to assert whether informative objects in

newspapers could constitute a valid repository of educational material in lifelong learning settings. The study investigated reading habits, content preferences and self-reported attitudes towards newspapers with no intention to cause and measure any behavioural change.

2. Materials and Methods

The current pilot study took place at the Laboratory of New Technologies and Distance Learning, of the Department of Early Childhood Education, at the University of Ioannina, during the spring semester of the academic year 2010-2011.

A random sample of the department's undergraduate students answered a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards online and print newspapers, their content and the information searched.

The sample consisted of fifty two (52) students, from which forty nine (49) females and three (3) males. This is due to the fact that the majority of Preschool Education Department students are females. As some questionnaires contained invalid information or not answered at all, the actual number of questionnaires utilized was forty five (45) in total. The age of the students was $\bar{x} = 21 \pm 2$ years.

The research instrument is a questionnaire designed for the purpose of this project. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one, composed by 5 questions, aimed to collect general data about the participants, such as age, occupation, sex, computer ownership and Internet access. Section two, composed by 5 questions, aimed to gather information on students' attitudes and habits towards online and print newspapers. In particular, students were firstly asked whether they read online/print newspapers and if so to indicate which ones they usually prefer. The following question referred to their interests, thus the kind of information that they usually choose to read in a newspaper and the type of elements that catch their attention. Additionally, they were asked to express their opinion on the validity of the content and, finally, to specify in which context they exploit the retrieved information. This part of the questionnaire was composed mainly of open questions. This decision was based on the principle that open questions would lead to a more direct, not oriented and, thus, vaster range of opinions, taking into consideration the fact that newspapers enclose social, cultural and political beliefs.

3. Results

The data collected were encoded and analyzed with MS Excel 2007. The results of the pilot study showed that 9% of the students were working during their studies. The majority (95.6%) of the participants of the study owned a personal computer, and 78% had an Internet connection at home.

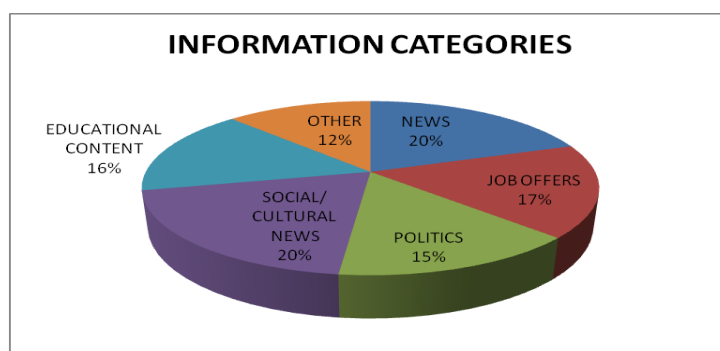
Concerning the students' attitudes towards newspapers, the results of the pilot study pointed out that the majority of the participants, i.e. the 68.9%, read newspapers often either online or in print, while 31.1% of them do not read newspapers at all. The 42% of the students who read newspapers prefer the print ones, while 22.6% of them have a preference towards online newspapers.

Moreover, students were asked to specify the title of the newspapers that they prefer and usually read, either online or in print. The results revealed a preference for general purpose newspapers of nationwide circulation. Local newspapers were mentioned mostly when the interest was oriented in local advertisements (for example searching for accommodation or a job). It is worth mentioning, that a small percentage of the sample, i.e. 7.8%, indicated blogs as online newspapers. This

finding suggests that these students confused the term of online newspaper with online forms of social network. An online newspaper may contain a blog in order to offer an open dialogue for specific issues. Blogs, though, often publish “hot” topics of political and social issues but frequently differ from online newspapers in terms of information reliability, source and author authenticity.

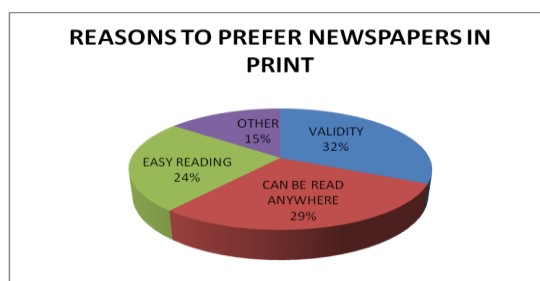
The 60% of the students considered the information retrieved from online newspapers as reliable as that from newspapers in print. It is important to highlight that 46.7% of the students that do not read online newspapers considered the information provided online as reliable as the information in print.

Students were asked to indicate the kind of information that they prefer to read in newspapers. Students replied with one or more answers. The results indicated that the categories of information that students seek in a newspaper, ordered by frequency, are the following: (i) daily news (timeliness) (20%), (ii) social and cultural news (20%), (iii) job offers (18%), (iv) educational content (16%) and (v) political reports (15%). In the category “others” were clustered answers like sports, weather forecasts, science and technological advances (Graph 1).



Graph 1: Information categories

Students who affirmed reading newspapers were asked to state the reasons why they favor to read newspapers in print. The results indicated that the reasons why students prefer print newspapers, ordered by frequency, are the following: (i) the validity of information (32%), (ii) the fact that an Internet connection is not required and they could be read anytime, anyplace (29%), and (iii) the fact that online newspapers are more wearing to read, especially is small sized screens, compared to papers in print, (24%). Answers like the feeling of the paper and keeping of archives, were included in the category “others”, as they presented small frequency (Graph 2).



Graph 2: Reasons to prefer newspapers in print

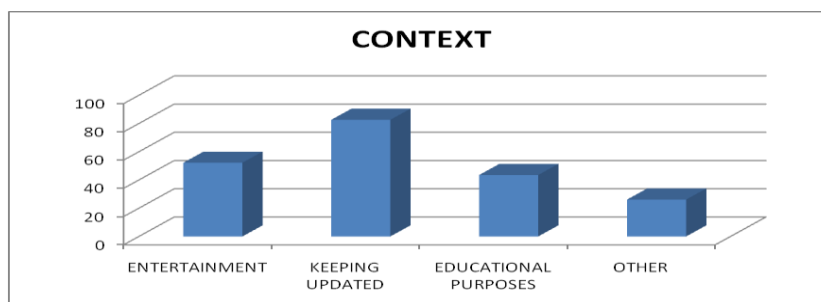
Likewise, students who stated that they read newspapers were asked to indicate the reasons why they prefer to read online newspapers. The outcomes pointed out that the

reasons why they choose online newspapers, ordered by frequency, are the following: (i) the retrieval of needed information in a quick and easy way (30%) , (ii) the continuous update of information (23%), (iii) the validity of information provided (20%), (iv) the lack of cost (11%), and (v) the multilateral information, as one can access many newspapers and read different opinions and analysis of a matter (7%). Answers like the use of multimedia and having access to previous issues were included in the category “others”, as they presented small frequency (Graph 3).



Graph 3: Reasons to prefer online newspapers

Finally, students were asked to specify the context in which they exploit the information retrieved from the newspapers. The categories that extracted, ordered by frequency, are the following: (i) keeping updated (82.6%), (ii) entertainment (43.5%), and (iii) educational purposes (52.2%). Answers with small frequency were clustered in the category “others” (Graph 4).



Graph 4: Context in which students exploit the information retrieved from the newspapers

4. Discussion

The present pilot study has aimed to investigate students’ attitudes towards pluralistic primary resources of information, thus online and print newspapers, in order to be exploited as educational source of information in lifelong learning settings. The results were encouraging as they indicated that an important percentage of the participants read newspapers, either online or in print, in order to get informed about a variety of subjects and that they consider online newspapers as reliable as the print ones.

It is worth mentioning that, as underlined by previous studies (Toki *et al.*, 2009; Pange *et al.*, 2006), students of the Department of Early Childhood Education often present some difficulties in ICT use, due to the nature of their studies. In addition, newspapers include mostly economical and political issues and less education related articles or other information of general interest that could be utilized to design activities in kindergarten. Nevertheless, the outlines of the pilot study regarding the

use of online and in print newspapers highlighted the fact that students of the Department are sensitive and keen to read newspapers in order to get informed on political, social, cultural and other issues.

Furthermore, it is interesting that even though few of the participants explicitly declared to use newspapers to retrieve educational material, many of them consider newspapers, online or in print, as a significant resource of information. Regarding the online newspapers, that are not yet very popular in Greece, students' accentuated the fact that they can easily and gratuitous access different annotations of the same event, in order to confront and analyze all details, and form their own knowledge. This is a main characteristic of informal learning. Similar results have been revealed by a recent research in Greece showing positive influences of informal sources on students' learning and highlighting the importance of print media (Halkia and Mantzouridis, 2005). Reading newspapers is a habit (Bentley, 2000), which can enhance informal learning.

Newspapers are a very important source of information. The outlines of the study lead to the conclusion that the use of print, online or digitized versions of paleotype newspapers, still unexploited on the Internet, might provide, with the proper elaboration, organization and presentation of information, a significant repository of educational material that could be retrievable by several users simultaneously.

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