From top-down education to convergence culture: the rise of a Transmedia Literacy

Matteo Ciastellardi
Politecnico di Milano (Italy)
matteo.ciastellardi@polimi.it

Skills and competencies in the digital age have undergone a process of hybridization and cross-fertilization according to the possibilities to enhance social processes of continuous learning by means of distributed information, fast interpersonal communication, and new portable and wearable devices such as smartphone and tablet. At the same time, the dimension of education has been enhanced by the increasing possibilities to understand and experience new knowledge from several sources and different supports, and the hierarchical model of top-down scholarship suffered the misalignment between cultural environment and the bottom-up emergence of new skills and competencies. In order to define and explain the birth of a different model to approach culture, education, and learning, the present research will focus on the shift from the traditional literacy to an emerging Transmedia Literacy.

In the twentieth century Western art and, partially, literature, have promoted an aesthetics of play and self-reflexivity creating the ideal of an active participation of the receiver/audience - reader, spectator, user - in the production of the text, content, and artefact. Over the past decades, the Internet and the increasing permeation and use of traditional media and new devices have been defining a convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) based on a new epistemological sphere of participation, production, and transmission of knowledge and information. According to this phenomenon, the dimension of literacy has thus moved from a semiotically-measured geometry (De Saussure, 1916; Hjelmslev, 1969) to a deconstruction of contents and channels that gives expression to new products (Derrida, 1974; Landow, 1994; Bolter & Grusin, 1999).

The definition of literacy has been changing rapidly. If we already experienced an information overload before the modern age (Blair, 2010), and a communication revolution in the passage from the "Gutenberg Galaxy" – printed paper, mass distribution – to the "McLuhan Galaxy" - new media, peer distribution - (Castells, 2003), we arrived in the '80s to the model of a Media Literacy.

Media Literacy, defined at the Aspen Institute in 1989 as "ability to access, analyze, communicate, and produce media in a variety of forms", is more than an educative framework devoted to ask people to decode information they experience by different media: people must be able to respond and produce media. Today, gaining Media Literacy skills is becoming more important to understand the emergent cultural patterns of society. Glister, approaching Media Literacy in terms of Digital Literacy, defines this model as "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers [...] (Not) only must you acquire the skill of finding things, you must also acquire the ability to use those things in your life" (Glister, 1997).

During the 1990s critics made radical claims for a narrative revolution based on (new) media assets, in the light of hypertext, gaming, MUDs, and MOOs amongh the others (Douglas, 1992; Landow, 1992; Aarseth, 1997; Murray, 1997; Hayles, 2002), stating that the reader of a media artefact would interact with it and she/he would become the co-author of it. New terms were suggested such as *wreader* (Landow, 1993 and 1997; Rau, 2001) and *interactor* (Douglas, 1996; Murray, 1997).

What has changed is not only the support but also the processes behind the production, the reproduction, and the consumption of contents. What has emerged is a new mindset, an amniotic network constituted by the everyday environment, in which people define their sets of mnestic traces, personal experiences, unconscious patterns, and social relations. One of the research questions of the present research is to shed light on how this educational shift leads people to absorb the external environment through a process of mimesis that represents the osmotic layer dealing with different narrative "peers": family, friends, colleagues/employers, neighbours, accidental/desired connections, networked Identities.

In the production of knowledge, according to this collective/connective consumptions of contents, the articulation of complex social patterns has redefined the possibilities of expression, participation, and definition of narrative lines. From the ability to use and understand media and communications in a variety of contexts, to a model of convergence culture where content fully permeates the audience's lifestyle. This framework, favoring the use of multiple platforms where every element contributes in a unique way to create and explore entities in a narrative universe, we can affirm that we have moved from the perspective of Media Literacy to a more pertinent Transmedia Literacy.

In this sense, Transmedia Culture defines a new cross-networked literacy, decoding and reversing the hierarchical assets of top-down education (traditionally one-to-many). We are not facing a simple adaptation of different narratives from one media to another: different media and languages participate and contribute to the construction of a transmedia environment, where several audiences can express, through various supports, their participation to a long-life learning informal environment, based upon a socio-narrative space.

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