

MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS OF YOUNG DETAINEES – TRAINING PROGRAM PILOTED IN ROMANIAN PRISONS

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Abstract: The paper presents comparative results of the pre-test and post-test self-assessment of a training program designed for increasing digital and media literacy competences of Romanian young inmates and for improving the attitudes towards those skills. The educational program has been developed during an Erasmus+ funded international strategic partnership between organizations from five European countries – entitled “Socially Excluded Youth of Media Literacy” (SEMELI) – and has been delivered in incarceration facilities from Romania, Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Latvia, in order to facilitate rehabilitation and community reintegration. Results demonstrate a good efficiency of the training program regarding the development of ICT and media literacy skills of the detainees, but not a significant impact upon their attitudes towards the e-learning environment and the future technically-improved self.

Keywords: media literacy, ICT skills, imprisonment/ incarceration, young detainees, rehabilitation programs.

INTRODUCTION

Changes brought by globalization condition a child to be more and more separated from nature and to turn to a world of technology. This draws with itself the construction of a more homogenous global culture and the loss of certain specific cultural values, making media a significant instrument of social change.

In this context, everyday life requires both young and old people to be informed and it obliges them to develop skills which allow them to identify the relevant meaning, to perceive the right boundaries between objective and media reality, to put to use their critical thinking and select the valuable, authentic and healthy information sources [1]. The key to such specific skills is media literacy.

The concept of media literacy – as defined by the EU Media Literacy Expert Group – “includes all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have critical understanding of the media and interact with it” [2] – and is considered by the European Commission an important tool for empowering citizens, for raising their awareness, for helping to counter the effects of disinformation campaigns and fake news spreading through digital media. From this perspective, we consider media literacy to be vital in the education and rehabilitation of vulnerable groups of

people, as they need to learn how to protect themselves from disinformation and scams [3].

MEDIA LITERACY LEVEL OF PRISONERS

Despite the fact that digital skills and media literacy have become the focus of education curricula and teaching practices in a number of countries, not all people are equally participating in this changing new social landscape. Among the groups of people who get to be socially and educationally marginalized we may include the young offenders who are imprisoned. Most of them come from disadvantaged communities and families to begin with, as poverty, low education levels and unemployment are key factors on the path to committing criminal offenses. The fact that they get to be imprisoned for their deeds only adds to their level of vulnerability, as they stray even further from education and they get stigmatized even more.

Also, apart from the stigma they face from the society, prisoners experience a self-stigma, as they tend to internalize the labels which the society puts on them and to structure a self-identity which implies exclusion and rejection [4]. A person who thinks about oneself as not being good enough will be self-limited in the self-efficacy dimension. Such a person will not be motivated to learn, as he/ she perceives that he/ she will not be able

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to benefit from the results of learning.

Research evidence [5-7] shows that prisoners are less literate than non-offenders, in general, and that they are especially lacking ICT skills. The imprisonment rules worsen their situation, as they are kept away from internet, social media and any media device, so when offenders are released from prison, they are unable to adjust to the modern times demands, they are unable to find a job or cope with everyday living and they easily relapse into old behavioural patterns and reoffend, getting back to prison eventually.

SEMELI – an active initiative for developing media literacy in order to facilitate prisoners' reintegration

Although, in all European countries, media literacy is considered an instrument for social change, the access to such education in the broad society is not uniform. Some countries and communities dispose of more resources than others; some social groups are more prone to develop such a competency, while others remain excluded from this sort of personal development, still struggling to find their way in an overwhelming amount of information, facts, fake news, credible sources, digital apps etc. [8]. Thus, the responsibility for raising the level of media literacy of the vulnerable categories of people is often taken on by NGOs and institutions which are most engaged in handling such people.

Such an initiative has been taken by several organizations – from Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain and Latvia – reunited in an international partnership for an Erasmus+ project: “Socially Excluded Youth of Media Literacy” – the short acronym is SEMELI. The project is aimed at developing and implementing innovative methods and practices to foster inclusion of young offenders and promote to them, while serving their time in prison, socially accepted values through media literacy, thus also raising their current level of digital competency and critical thinking.

Similar initiatives have been developed successfully in other countries and have proven to be effective in some measure to prevent the ex-offenders to return to prisons and to have a better chance of being integrated in the communities they are returning to after liberation. For instance, an example of good practice is the program implemented in the Orleans Parrish Prison from New Orleans, Louisiana (USA), focused on digital literacy acquisition and delivered to incarcerated male adults. The case study (Withers, Jacobs, Castek, Pizzolato, Pendell, Reder, 2015) examines the digital literacy acquisition learning experiences designed to prepare the prisoners for community re-entry and

provides insightful information on the impact of digital learning on the rehabilitative efforts within a correctional facility.

In order to raise the media literacy level of the prisoners from several facilities in the five European countries – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain and Latvia – the partner organizations involved in the project gathered forces to elaborate a training program, based on recycling and updating good practices from all over Europe. The training program was focused on achieving the following outcomes:

- development of personal autonomy of the young detainees (either incarcerated or in probation), through the improvement of the ICT and media literacy competencies, in order to enhance the quality of their post-release life;
- development of the detainees' civic abilities through digital integration;
- increase of the young detainees' level of employability post-incarceration, through the development of digital skills and competencies;
- improvement of communication and interpersonal skills and the development of the detainees' self-esteem through ICT and media literacy.

For achieving those outcomes, the curricula and the content of the training program included four basic elements: digital skills and competencies (ICT skills, software and media applications); media literacy (online games and addictions, publicity in social media, the social media role in personal social contexts, online disinformation and violence, identity forming and psychological influences of the online content, cyber-bullying, sexting etc.); testimonials and approaching influences through existent models and resources; a practical project to foster the newly developed skills and competencies.

The training program started to be implemented in prisons from Greece, Spain, Latvia, Cyprus and Romania this spring and its implementation lasted for a few months, until the beginning of the autumn. In order to demonstrate the impact of the program on the participants, the consortium developed a self-assessment questionnaire to be used before and after the training program. The paper will present the results and conclusions of both pre-test and post-test phases of the research, reflecting the initial level of media literacy competency of prisoners from the Timisoara State Prison (Romania) and, consecutively, the effects of the training program upon the media literacy skills of the same participants.

METHODOLOGY

Goal and assumptions

The goal of the study is to demonstrate the efficiency of a training program especially designed for raising the level of digital and media literacy of adult prisoners.

The assumption is that the level of ICT and media competences will be higher after the inmates will go through the education program compared with the moment prior the training. Also, on the long run, the inmates following the program will have lower rates of recidivism compared with those who maintain the same media literacy competencies when released as when they are incarcerated.

If the training program will prove efficient, the piloting prisons will move to second stage and introduce it in the regular curricula of education programs

available for adult inmates during their serving time in prison. Also, the good practice will have the chance to be transferred and implemented in other prison institutions from all over Europe, due to the promotion made by the partner organizations within the SEMELI project consortium.

Design

The main advantage of the prison studies is that it is a pretty hermetic environment and outside variables are pretty unlikely to appear. Of course, from time to time, influences outside the controlled ones may appear, but usually the inmates' contact with the outside world is limited and, especially, in what concerns the digital environment, which is strictly controlled within the Romanian prisons.

The research has an experimental design, with pre-test and post-test assessments of the ICT and media competences, while in-between tests there will be a training program delivered in order to develop the digital and media literacy competences of the inmates. The program consisted of 20 workshops divided in four unequal parts: digital skills, media literacy, testimonials and role-modeling of success, practical applications.

The same training program will be implemented in several prison institutions from European countries and final results will also be compared among the participating countries.

The assumption was tested with the paired-samples t test.

Participants

The current research has been targeted on male and female adult inmates from one state prison from Romania, namely the one in Timișoara. The initial target group of the program were young detainees (21-35 years old), but in practice the training was delivered to some people over 35 (but below 40) years old. So the age limits were extended, but the focus of the program has remained on young adults, as they are more prone to recidivism and more vulnerable when confronted to the life outside prison.

The questionnaire has been applied to several groups of inmates, while 38 of them have been answered completely (the incomplete ones have been removed from statistic processing).

The structure of the research sample by gender, by age and by level of education may be consulted below (Figs 1-3).

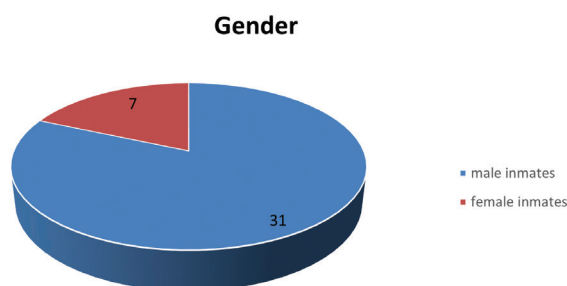


Figure 1. Gender distribution within the research sample.

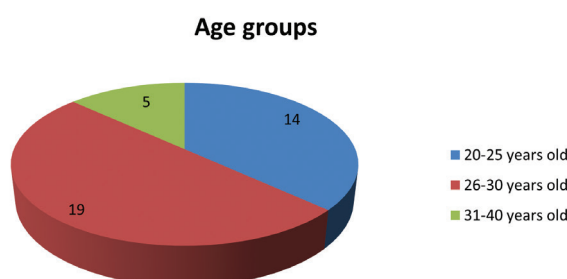


Figure 2. Age group distribution within the research sample.

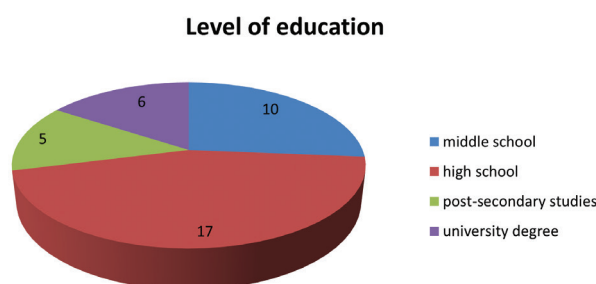


Figure 3. Education level distribution within the research sample.

Instruments

The digital and media literacy competences have been measured using a questionnaire especially conceived for the project. The pre-test questionnaire is

Attending any educational programs during imprisonment

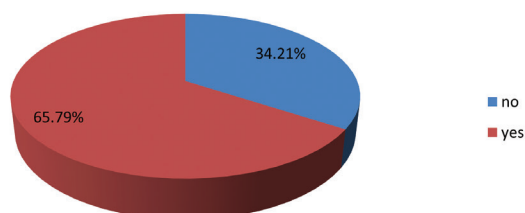


Figure 4. Percentage of inmates which have attended at least one educational program during their time in prison.

Topics of the educational programs attended

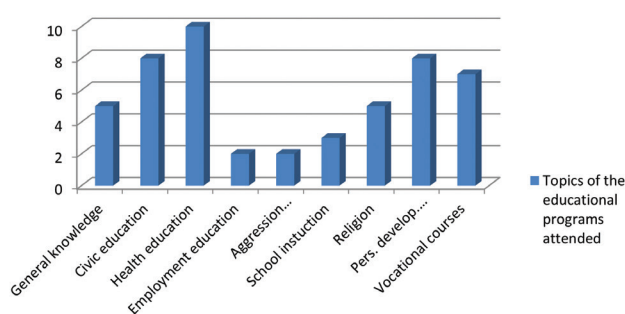


Figure 5. Topics of the educational programs attended by inmates during their time in prison.

The perceived importance of education programs during imprisonment

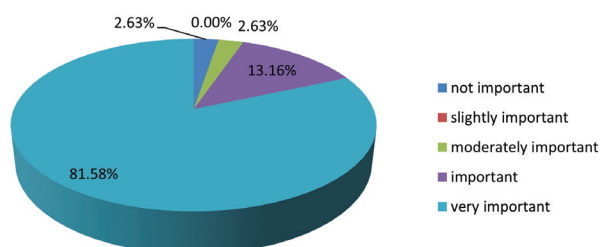


Figure 6. The perceived importance of attending educational programs during imprisonment.

Self-assessed skills

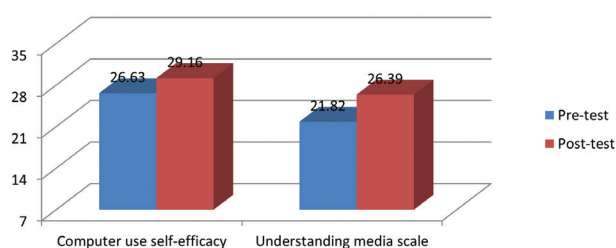


Figure 7. The average scores of the self-assessed computer use and understanding media skills in the pre-test phase and post-test phase.

divided into 3 sections:

1. the first section refers to demographic data: gender, age, level of education;

2. the second section is focused on collecting data related with education programs accessed by the inmates in prison and their motivation to learn and develop;

3. the third section is focused on collecting the self-assessments of the inmates in relation with the ICT and media competences with the help of Likert scales (5-point for competencies and skills and 7-point for attitudes); it is divided into 4 subsections:

a. computer use self-efficacy (7 items);

b. perceived usefulness of e-learning systems (5 items);

c. understanding media scale (6 items);

d. perceived usefulness of future self (4 items).

The post-test questionnaire contains the same sections/ subsections as the pre-test one, plus an extra section which is designed to contain specific information about the training program (organization of activities, impact upon attitudes, liked aspects and aspects which may be improved, suggestions for prison authorities and impact upon the self). Because the program was a pilot one, this section was also used to assess the training program within the project in other terms than impact and fine-tune it in order to provide a better version of it as transferable results. The comparative analysis concerns the data within the third section of the questionnaire, aiming to prove the statistically significant differences between the pre-test phase and the post-test phase.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from both pre-test and post-test allowed a comparative analysis between the starting point and the finishing point of the education program, in order to make assertions regarding the immediate impact of the training program on the competency level of the inmates, but will also be correlated in a longitudinal study with the recidivism coefficient of the group, in order to demonstrate its usefulness on a long term.

Before going over to the comparative analysis, some descriptive data regarding the motivation of the inmates for their personal development and education will be presented below (section 2 of the questionnaire) (Figs 4-6). Also graphic comparisons between pre-test and post-test results for each of the four analyzed factors are presented (Figs 7, 8).

According to the data collected, over 65% of the inmates questioned attended at least one educational program during their time in prison (Fig. 4). The educational programs they attended focus on school instruction, general knowledge, civic education, health education, employment education, religion, aggression management or other personal development thematic courses and vocational courses for learning a new skill/competency (Fig. 5).

In what concerns the perceived importance of educational programs during imprisonment, over 94% of the target group agree that training programs are important or very important (Fig. 6).

These results might be reflections of the obstacles that prisoners are facing in prison due to their lack of education – their work options are limited, their involvement in different activities and projects are limited or they might get conned through elaborate schemes by more educated inmates –, but they may also be explained by the reduced sentence or other benefits they get (work rights, visitation rights etc.) if following education programs in prison. Whatever the

reasons they find education important, the inmates are able to recognize some advantages of attending training programs in prison, which drives with itself a certain level of improvement, because attending and finalizing a program will most likely leave them enriched in certain areas (they will have more knowledge, improved skills, socializing opportunities etc.).

In terms of skills and competencies, the pre-test self-assessments of both digital skills and media literacy of the inmates from the current research seem to be higher than the absolute average of the Likert 5-point scale ($m1 > 21$, $m2 > 20$), pointing out either a tendency of over-estimation on the inmates' part, either an under-estimation of their capabilities on our part (Fig. 7). In order to be able to exclude either option, we organized a focus group with prison educators and trainers, asking them to state their observations regarding the ICT skills and media literacy competences of the inmates they regularly interact with. The results of the focus groups promoted the idea that the prisoners tend to over-estimate themselves or to self-present themselves in a better way in order to obtain better reviews for early liberation.

Still, the post-test measurements regarding the ICT skills and media literacy demonstrated significantly improved results after the training program (Fig. 7, Table 1), thus illustrating the efficacy of the workshops on the self-assessed skill set. From the qualitative feedback received from the young detainees and from the trainers, more than 50% of the topics approached during the workshops were new and appealing for the majority of the inmates, more than 80% of the inmates declared that they felt their skills have improved as a consequence of attending the training programme and

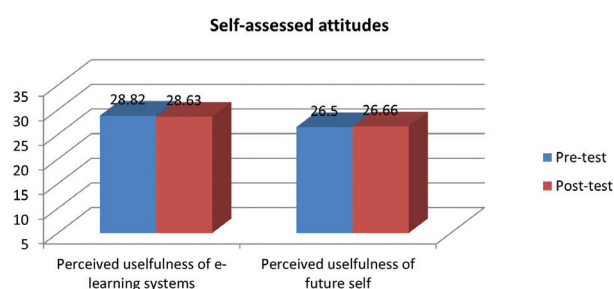


Figure 8. The average scores of the self-assessed attitudes towards the usefulness of e-learning systems and of the future self in the pre-test phase and post-test phase.

Table 1. Paired samples test

		Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Computer use	-2.526	6.358	1.031	-4.616	-.437	-2.450	37	.019
Pair 2	Perceived usefulness of the e-learning systems	.184	5.623	.912	-1.664	2.032	.202	37	.841
Pair 3	Understanding media	-4.579	5.155	.836	-6.273	-2.885	-5.475	37	.000
Pair 4	Perceived usefulness of the future (technologically- improved) self	-.158	3.063	.497	-1.165	.849	-.318	37	.752

all the detainees admitted the training program was useful for them. The long term measurements will tell if these improved skills and competences will be a factor in reducing the recidivism rate.

In terms of attitudes towards the e-learning systems and technology, the pre-test measurement reflects the fact that prisoners perceive a high degree of usefulness of both e-learning systems within the prison educational programs and of the future self if being able to apply technology in their work and everyday life (Fig. 8). Again, this view might be related with the possibility of having a reduced sentence or other benefits the inmates might get if following education programs, but it may also reflect the prisoners' level of awareness regarding the technological trend that our society is following and the need for catching up with ICT skills and media literacy in order to have a good chance to find a job and fit in.

The post-test measurements of these factors though have not demonstrated a significant mean difference compared with the pre-test measurement (Fig. 8, Table 1), so we cannot accurately say if the education program was really effective in this sense or not. It may have occurred that, in the case in which the first measurement was triggered more by the will to conform to a norm or to be better regarded by the legal authorities in the prison, the perspective upon the e-learning systems and the future self got internalized by the time the second measurement has been done. It is also possible that the program had not a significant impact upon the attitudes of the detainees, as it was more focused on the skill set. What is certain at this point is the fact that the education program needs revision on this aspect.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study show a significant improvement of the detainees' self-assessments of the ICT skills and media literacy competencies after the completion of the education program, thus recommending moving forward with this project and implementing this training program in the prisons' curricula, while also extending it to other prisons as well.

In what concerns the attitudes towards ICT education and skill development, most inmates recognize the importance of media literacy education and seem to be already highly motivated for personal development in this respect before the training program, thus the impact of the workshops on the

young detainees on this level is not clear and more research is still needed in this direction.

This interest of the young detainees in pursuing education programs in prison might be triggered by the fact that it's rewarding on multiple levels – also offering them benefits in terms of reducing their sentence, receiving visitation rights or having access to certain facilities or opportunities (work rights, parole rights etc.), but, whatever the reason for which education programs are perceived as being important, the main benefit of this attitude is attending them, as that alone will bring personal growth.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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