

A long way? Introducing digitized historical newspapers in school, a case study from Finland

Author

Inés Matres García del Pino
Faculty of Arts / Department of Ethnology
University of Helsinki
Ines.Matres@helsinki.fi
orcid.org/0000-0002-4544-4946

Abstract

During 2016/17 two Finnish newspapers, from their first issue to their last, were made available to schools in eastern Finland through the digital collections of the National Library of Finland (<http://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi>). This paper presents the case study of one upper-secondary class making use of these materials. Before having access to these newspapers, the teachers in the school in question had little awareness of what this digital library contained. The initial research questions of this paper are whether digitised historical newspapers can be used by school communities, and what practices they enable. Subsequently, the paper explores how these practices relate to teachers' habits and to the wider concept of literacy, that is, the knowledge and skills students can acquire using these materials. To examine the significance of historical newspapers in the context of their use today, I rely on the concept of 'practice' defined by cultural theorist Andreas Reckwitz as the "use of things that 'mould' activities, understandings and knowledge".

To correctly assess practice, I approached this research through ethnographic methods, constructing the inquiry with participants in the research: teachers, students and the people involved in facilitating the materials. During 2016, I conducted eight in-depth interviews with teachers about their habits, organized a focus group with further 15 teachers to brainstorm activities using historical newspapers, and observed a class of 17-18-year-old students whose literature teacher decided to implement the materials right away. Observing the students' work, hearing their presentations, motivations, and opinions about the materials showed how students explored the historical background of their existing personal, school-related and even professional interests. In addition to the students' projects, I also collected their newspaper clippings and logs of their searches in the digital library. These digital research assets revealed how the digital library that contains the historical newspapers influenced the students' *freedom* to choose a topic to investigate and their capacity to *go deep* in their research.

The findings of this case study build upon, and extend, previous research about how digitized historical sources contribute in upper-secondary education. The way students used historical newspapers and accounts of teachers in interviews revealed similarities with activities using present-day newspapers, already a popular material in Finnish schools. Additionally, both the historicity and the form of presentation of newspapers in a digital library confer unique attributes upon these materials: they allow students to explore the historical background of their research interests, discover change across time, verbalize their research ideas in a concrete manner, and train their skills in distant and close reading to manage large amounts of digital content. In addition to these positive attributes that connect with learning goals set by teachers, students also tested the limits of these materials. The lack of metadata in articles or images, the absence of colour in materials that originally have it, or the need for students to be mindful

of how language has changed since the publication of the newspapers are constrains that distinguish digital libraries from resources, such as web browsers and news sites, that are more familiar to students. Being aware of these positive and negative affordances, common to digital libraries containing historical newspapers and other historical sources, can support teachers in providing their students effective guidelines when using this kind of materials.

This use case demonstrates that digitized historical sources in education can do more than enable students to “follow the steps of contemporary historians”, as research has previously established. In addition to fitting in history curriculum, these newspapers occupy a place between history and media education. The objective of media education in school –regardless of the technological underpinnings of a single medium, which change rapidly in this digital age– aims at enabling students to reflect on the processes of media production and consumption. The contribution of digitized historical newspapers to this subject is acquainting students with processes of media preservation and heritage. However, it could still be a long way until teachers adopt these aspects in their plans. It is necessary to acknowledge the trajectory and agents involved in the work of introducing newspapers in education, since the 1960s. This task not only consisted of facilitating access to newspapers, but also developing teaching plans and a common understanding of media education in schools.

In addition to uncovering an aspect of digital cultural heritage that is relevant for the school community today, this paper raises awareness among the cultural heritage community, especially national libraries, about the diversity in the uses and users of their collections, especially in a time when the large-scale digitization of special collections is generalizing access to materials traditionally considered for academic research.

Keywords: newspapers in education, historical newspapers, digital libraries, upper-secondary school, case study, national libraries.

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