Reading the Image

Re-Thinking The Design Of Learning Pedagogies Through Image-Based Learning Initiatives To Contribute Positively Towards A Student’s Sense Of Educational Achievement.

Ian Attard
Senior lecturer in Media Studies at MCAST (Malta) and current Doctorate researcher at Bournemouth University (UK)

Abstract: This review investigates the ‘Reading the Image’ concept, which aims to facilitate students’ learning capabilities. Moreover, this review focuses on how media can facilitate the process of how students engage with their academic learning syllabi and propose alternative opportunities to improve a student’s perspective of educational accomplishment. This review is written from the perspective of a Media lecturer and practitioner, who in the past years introduced various Media-based initiatives to help supporting Higher Education (HE) students to complete their studies and use their learning product as a tool to facilitate learning.

The following article provides a review of literature that revolves around areas that are internal and external to a student’s sense of good educational achievement. Key themes of this literature focus mainly on how Creative Media production can be utilized effectively to help students surpass challenges that are central to what impacts one’s own evaluation of good educational achievement. This review outlines various examples on how visual ethnography can be a successful learning tool as outlined in the case study called ‘Il-Barri’ (The Bull, 2014), the work of Ms. Vanessa Vella, a HE alumni student.

To date a lot of resources have been invested in order to help students become better achievers in education. Generally, learning initiatives focus on developing strategies on how a student can achieve higher grades in education notwithstanding the internal and external challenges that a student faces in order to learn. Initiatives include, amongst many others, new strategies that focus on improving classroom participation, individual attention and new methods to help students improve learning performance.

Differently to other studies, ‘Reading the Image’ focuses on the internal and external challenges that hinder students from developing a better sense of good educational achievement. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the boundaries between the current fields of enquiry that relate towards the improvement of student’s ability to perform well in education, by maximising a student’s ability to develop a better sense of educational achievement through the use of contemporary means of communication.

The concept of ‘Reading the Image’ delves on the learning engagement of secondary school students in Malta, in preparation for their exams called the Matriculation and Secondary Examination Certificate (MATSEC). In the first part of this article various ideas will be proposed to seek direction on how media can help students engage with learning during the preparatory stages of the MATSEC examination process. The second part of this article will exemplify how media can offer an alternative route for conventional oral and written examination processes.

‘Reading the Image’ aims to investigate how Media can help re-building what is valued as ‘good education’ in Malta by educators, policy makers, learners and parents. Emphasis will be placed on how Media can help educators to direct students to contextualize their learning experience through their own identity and to engage with the subject curricula using Media as an alternative form of a learning process which a traditional type of education might lack to offer.

1. Introduction

Concerns about educational achievement of youths between 11 and 15 years of age, has been in the spotlight for many years in Malta. In the past years, educational policy in Malta, has thrived to identify different methods of how schools should disseminate knowledge for the benefit of students’ long-term education. This priority culminates at a specific stage of a student’s learning experience, when he/she is progressing from secondary to post-secondary level.

The current Maltese educational system encourages students to sit for the MATSEC exams, which take place during the final stages of a student’s secondary school term. The student’s future and his/her options for further educational advancement solely depend on the amount of examination passes and their subsequent grades obtained in the MATSEC system. Given that a student’s educational achievement, at
this stage, is the result of the obtained success in this examination process, it can present stress-related pressures pushing students to misinterpret their own sense of educational achievement. The false definition of a student’s sense of educational achievement is the product of what Malta’s educational system values as ‘good education’.

Many projects have been developed aiming to help students become better achievers in education. The majority of such learning initiatives focus on how a student can achieve higher grades in education. In ‘Reading the Image’, instead of prioritizing the students’ ability to achieve higher grades, the study will focus on the internal and external factors that hinder students from developing a better sense of good educational achievement.

One of the main themes of this study is to evaluate the ‘educational habitat’ in which learning takes place. It is important to point out that the most dominant education systems in Malta are spearheaded by the State. Government Policy on schooling is arguably one of the most challenging educational dichotomies/contradictions between the correct application of schooling methods and learning theories that suggest best learning environments for a student to achieve a better sense of educational achievement. Bourdieu argues that schooling should offer deeper learning opportunities to learners and to allow learners to be immersed in knowledge and to take ownership. “… one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality.” [1] A number of studies have been explored for new learning strategies based on theories that promote the inclusion of a learner’s own life experience into the field of knowledge.

An educational reform in Finland, is proposing a radical shift in the educational system that encourages learners to identify with knowledge through their own life experiences. Such learning platforms are based on transversal competences and theories of practice. According to Ms. Irmeli Hallinen, head of curriculum development in Finland, teaching should not be based on teaching subjects in isolation, such as Maths, Sciences or Languages, but to push for transversal skills and to provide value in education not only in teaching a student the ability to acquire knowledge and skills but to bring value in education by involving a learner in social phenomenological projects to motivate learning based on real-life contexts. Hallinen states that the ability to secure knowledge in one specific subject is not enough in today’s society. She asserts that nowadays students must be able to apply their skills and knowledge to a multitude of real-life contexts. ‘School is surrounded by the World of change… It is great if you’re good in Math or Music, but it’s not good enough.’ [2]

Teaching and learning by cases can be considered as a learning method that can help to create value in education based on the individual’s identity and motivation. ‘Reading the Image’ is a visual ethnographic learning case that focuses on this dichotomy by designing and creating learning experiences that encourage students to communicate knowledge using the image as a communicating tool of knowledge comprehension and use media as a catalyst of transversal competence for learners to communicate in this day and age. Miller states that learning by cases should be defined by the principles of action and practice that are accessible within the world that a student is familiar with so as to maximise learning opportunities. Miller asks ‘…is thinking valued and made visible? Is there student input? How will I know they understand?’ [3].

In response to the above questions, the following chapter is a review of commentary on how students can maximise their learning potentials through learning by ‘case’ as a type of ‘signature pedagogy’ a stepping stone towards establishing a learning alternative that can allow a student to engage with learning and express knowledge by working on potential creative image-based projects.

2. Visual Ethnographic learning, ‘Reading the Image’

This research recognises Media as a potential tool to help learning. The implications of Media used as a learning tool should be analysed through its potential to facilitate learning by encouraging reading, writing, interpreting and to induce knowledge dialogue between peers. Sarah Pink argues that Media can be seen not only as a means of communication but also as a means of communication that help maximising learning potentials. Media can help a learner to explore how one can show full potential in communicating knowledge by making visual meaning out of learning, using communication tools that are contemporary to him/her. Since Media is a ‘modern language’ it can allow learners to make use of their own senses and experiences by learning through their own identity and place in the world, ‘The theory of place and place-making, and outline the significance of memory and imagination in the ethnographic process.’ [4]

It is very important to point out how ‘Reading the Image’ will contribute towards helping a learner with a good sense of educational achievement by keeping in mind what changes are taking place in a worldwide scenario. Creativity is a tool that impacts the educational world at large, as Ken Robinson’s
Ted Talk, entitled ‘Bring on the Learning Revolution’ argues how creativity is a key factor to engage students with mixed abilities to learn and to make this world more dynamic. He states that the “… world is suffering from a crisis of human resources.” [5]. If creativity is key to improve education and human resources, to better facilitate our learning environments, how can we make sure we formulate a sustainable creative teaching route that combats such a crisis? Robinson stresses the importance of how education should empower students to understand the world around them, by making more effective use of the world they exist in. This educational empowerment can be achieved by embracing more effectively a learner’s own experiential resources such as memory, talent and emotion. “… they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens.” [6] Furthermore, Robinson encourages as well that every learning contributor, i.e. educator, parent, administrator and policymaker, can impact such a change in three steps “… critique of the way things are… a vision of how they should be… a theory of change…” [7].

Education has a very important role in helping society towards a sustainable future. In order to achieve sustainability, it is important to promote learners with a good sense of educational achievement, by first examining current educational parameters and secondly to search for creative solutions that facilitate life-long learning for the benefit of not only the present but also for a longer term in a learner's life experience. Moreover, in searching to establish unique creative methods to engage students with learning, one needs to consider the relationship between Media and Education. So can Visual Ethnography qualify as a learning method that enhances better learning opportunities? My personal experience working as a Media lecturer in HE has granted me many opportunities to experiment with how Creative Media production can allow learners to express knowledge through a long-term type of a reflexive process. This process allows students to explore learning outcomes using Creative Media as tools to express knowledge.

Pink explains that ‘Ethnographic practice tends to include participant observation, ethnographic interviewing and a range of other participatory research techniques that are often developed and adopted in context and as appropriate to the needs and possibilities offered by specific research projects.’ [8].

In 2014, I designed a Creative Media practical exercise as a learning case, to promote Maltese literacy amongst secondary school students in preparation for their MATSEC examinations. In one such learning case, entitled ‘Il-Barri’ (The Bull, 2014), HE students were to create an audio-visual production based on their own interpretation of a classical Maltese poem. Students were asked to primarily engage with a poem’s context then applies Creative Media tools and techniques and refer to the socio and cultural aspects of the classical written text of the particular poem and translate it into a ‘present’ visual text. Students had to explore a classical text through a self-reflexive process in order to understand and express knowledge through a work of art. The project aimed to take a step forward in addressing level 6 Maltese language learning outcomes such as linguistics, comprehension and expression.

Different from the original text the student deliberately chose to represent the bull as a helpless human being.

Education has a very important role in helping society towards a sustainable future. In order to achieve sustainability, it is important to promote learners with a good sense of educational achievement, by first examining current educational parameters and secondly to search for creative solutions that facilitate life-long learning for the benefit of not only the present but also for a longer term in a learner's life experience. Moreover, in searching to establish unique creative methods to engage students with learning, one needs to consider the relationship between Media and Education. So can Visual Ethnography qualify as a learning method that enhances better learning opportunities? My personal experience working as a Media lecturer in HE has granted me many opportunities to experiment with how Creative Media production can allow learners to express knowledge through a long-term type of a reflexive process. This process allows students to explore learning outcomes using Creative Media as tools to express knowledge.

Pink explains that ‘Ethnographic practice tends to include participant observation, ethnographic interviewing and a range of other participatory research techniques that are often developed and adopted in context and as appropriate to the needs and possibilities offered by specific research projects.’ [8].

In 2014, I designed a Creative Media practical exercise as a learning case, to promote Maltese literacy amongst secondary school students in preparation for their MATSEC examinations. In one such learning case, entitled ‘Il-Barri’ (The Bull, 2014), HE students were to create an audio-visual production based on their own interpretation of a classical Maltese poem. Students were asked to primarily engage with a poem’s context then applies Creative Media tools and techniques and refer to the socio and cultural aspects of the classical written text of the particular poem and translate it into a ‘present’ visual text. Students had to explore a classical text through a self-reflexive process in order to understand and express knowledge through a work of art. The project aimed to take a step forward in addressing level 6 Maltese language learning outcomes such as linguistics, comprehension and expression.

Different from the original text the student deliberately chose to represent the bull as a helpless human being.

Education has a very important role in helping society towards a sustainable future. In order to achieve sustainability, it is important to promote learners with a good sense of educational achievement, by first examining current educational parameters and secondly to search for creative solutions that facilitate life-long learning for the benefit of not only the present but also for a longer term in a learner's life experience. Moreover, in searching to establish unique creative methods to engage students with learning, one needs to consider the relationship between Media and Education. So can Visual Ethnography qualify as a learning method that enhances better learning opportunities? My personal experience working as a Media lecturer in HE has granted me many opportunities to experiment with how Creative Media production can allow learners to express knowledge through a long-term type of a reflexive process. This process allows students to explore learning outcomes using Creative Media as tools to express knowledge.

Figure 1: In the original poem by George Pisani, ‘Il-Barri’ (the bull) is presented as a symbol of human atrocities.

Figure 2: The student chose the colour red to capture the emotion of the poem’s introduction, ‘Il-Barri’. This colour was never mentioned in the original text. Through reflection the student could engage with knowledge and use colour to represent her learning.

Pink explains that ‘Ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process through which understanding, knowing and academic knowledge are produced… Exploration of and reflection on new routes to knowledge.’ [9]. In accordance with this statement,
can media qualify as a hands-on learning route to further enhance learning and expression of knowledge? ‘...innovative methods have been developed by ethnographers to provide routes into understanding other people’s lives, experiences, values, social worlds and more to go beyond the classic observation approach.’ [10].

Visual Ethnography works in tandem with participatory methods, and it involves visual ethnographers (in this project’s case, the learner) to participate in learning how human beings interact with knowledge on a personal level. Initial thoughts about such learning initiatives might sound as structure-less and without a determined bearing as Pasi Sahlberg, a school reform and educational practices expert, critically argues. Sahlberg poses a question whether non-written work should be considered as academic, and of high standards. He states that although public opinion is a necessity in one’s academic work, it needs to be structured and to follow a critical pathology. He asserts that if students’ work needs to be taken seriously by the public, words need to be spoken out assertively.

‘Academic writing is an important skill that all graduate students should master. Yet if students are serious about influencing public opinion and advocating for education reforms, we believe they should hone their opinion-writing skills as well. The ability to express an opinion clearly and effectively draws on critical-thinking, speaking, writing, and reading skills — and every graduate student should have these skills by the time they graduate.’ [11].

This model on standards in education, raises a discussion about which type of direction fits best learning and assessment methods that clearly speak out ‘good education’. Should such argument just boil down to the distinguishing factors between inclusive practices/pedagogies and academic principles? In order to arrive to such conclusions on education standards, it is imperative to find a good balance between the quality of a student’s learning product and the learner’s ability to deliver it. By putting the learner at the centre of what defines ‘good education’ one should explore what challenges a learner’s own sense of educational achievement, keeping in mind the social and political factors that impacts directly a student’s ability to show acquired learning.

3. Policy (What is ‘good education’?)

Policy in education is a reality and should be seen as an overall challenge that impacts a learner’s own sense and believe of what is ‘good educational achievement’. A policy overview will help this paper to establish the parameters of learning and how such a Creative Media initiative will integrate within these parameters. ‘Reading the Image’ can be seen as learning initiatives that move away from conventional classroom-based learning practices and to seek to establish new ways to help students express their own identities. So how is ‘good sense of educational achievement’ impacted by the current educational policy? It is important to establish compatibility of this emphasis of learning with the educational structure that surrounds it. As a pedagogical concept ‘Reading the Image’ can work towards widening participation in education.

O’Neill and Bhagat describe that educational projects that promote such an approach have been welcomed in the UK social and political landscapes as these attract learning methods that give the students opportunities to participate on projects that promote an inclusive approach and blurs prejudiced detachments of students with social, class, gender, sexuality and other issues that could involve students to work on projects without any personal frontiers.

‘It is true that widening participation has often proclaimed an inclusive agenda and seen its remit as facilitating the participation of all under-represented groups including: age, disability, gender, geographical location/isolation, race and sexuality.’ [12].

In the case of the project ‘Il-Barri’ students from a HE Institution were asked to evaluate established classical texts (Maltese poetry) that have been part of the secondary school Maltese language curriculum for years. Since the project has been re-adapted in the moving image by the same HE students, the project has shed new light on the meaning of the classical poem through original use of Creative Media application and personal involvement with the text. Consequently, referring to Sahlberg’s perspectives given earlier in this paper, in which student’s work should effectively draw on critical-thinking, speaking, writing, and reading skills, it becomes evident, in the case of ‘Il-Barri’ that a learner can utilise alternative formats to express knowledge besides the conventional written method.
abstract notions of society and culture through sound and vision.

However, can this work qualify as academic? If this study is calling for a cultural change/alternative modi operandi in the Education system of Malta, one need to evaluate how widening partnership projects, such as ‘Reading the Image’, learning and assessment in secondary schools might be impacted by a policy that is greatly determined by the socio-economic and political aspects of the Nation. In a bold statement Bourdieu draws attention towards the role of a student within an Education system-and argues that a student is a product of a cultural policy that is exercised by an Educational Institution. He organizes students in accordance to the category of cultural code at both conscious and sub-conscious levels. ‘…in a society that where the handing on of culture is monopolised by a school… to transmit the unconscious or, to be more precise, to produce individuals equipped with the system of unconscious… master-patterns that constitute their culture.’ [13].

Defining how and who can benefit from widening partnerships in education, necessitates this study to ask whether the ‘one-time’ examination type of assessment encourages learners to maximise their full learning potentials. Young stipulates factors of the selection of knowledge and assessment in education institution. Factors that need to be explored include as well Government policies pressures, such as whether the current Maltese education system is well appointed to fill in the gaps to supply candidates for the required labour market. According to Young, ‘…pupils in secondary schools are ‘swinging on science’ [14]. Young reiterates on how it is unfair on a student to design a learning pedagogy that fits exactly the needs of the market. So choosing the right educational pathway for a student is challenging in its own right since society is a major key player in establishing what is ‘good education’. ‘What ‘does’ and ‘does not’ count as science depends on the social meaning given to science, which will vary not only historically and cross-culturally but within societies…’ [15].

Another educational implication that seems to be influential in the measures that qualify what is ‘good education’ is the school’s commitment towards raising the school-leaving age. Young implies that; ‘The implications of this change stem from the obvious if neglected fact that length of educational career is probably the single most important determinant of pupils’ curricular experience.’ [16]. So what and who decides how a curriculum should be shaped and implemented is important and is to be taken in diligent consideration?

These are issues that affect the course content and contribute towards a students’ lack of ability to define correctly ‘good education’. Hence, a student is restricted to evaluate his/her own definition of educational achievement since this is socially biased and not based on his/her own interpretation of learning. In the case of written one-time examinations, these issues funnel a student into a point of no return that unfortunately might result in a student’s inability to demonstrate his/her own learning achievement, since this notion is frequently determined by what the society assumes as ‘good education’.

In response to the above observations, the learning case adopted, ‘Reading the Image’, sets out to stimulate various educational objectives. One of the main aims is to enable learners to re-create ‘knowledge’ in a medium that is contemporary to them such as Creative Media. In the case of the project ‘Il-Barri’ the student did not only seek to master the discipline of media making, but also the project helped the student to engage with knowledge by positioning it within the framework of an educational ideology that is continuously shaped by the external factors such as the ones that have been exemplified above. The project ‘Il-Barri’ shows how the student successfully managed to portray classical poetry visually, through the use of various Media language elements including colour, casting, cinematography, symbolism, costume, sound, editing and all other aspects that the mise en scene can offer. Every element was effectively utilised by the student to engage within the curriculum critically using the Media tools at her disposal.

Figure 4: In the project ‘Il-Barri’ society is represented as one antagonist. Media gave the student the flexibility to go beyond the conceptual realm of the original text and express knowledge by carefully choosing her cast, costume, location, camera language and lighting.

O’Neill and Bhagat discuss how a practical-based body of work can have all the potential outcomes for a student to succeed in education. The so-called
‘non-traditional’ method of proofing knowledge, like a reflective journal or a portfolio, could be considered not only capable to allow students to project their own technical knowledge but it gives a student the opportunity to demonstrate his/her learning based on his/her own ‘cultural capital’ [17]. i.e. identity, experience and personality. ‘…a process which selects applicants based on work that demonstrates ‘talent’, ‘creativity, ‘achievement’ and ‘potential’, and does not recognise these attributes to be rather, a reflection of privileged ‘cultural capital’. [18].

In the learning project ‘Il-Barri’, the student managed to achieve a confident idea of her learning progress spread on the duration of a semester (16 weeks). This process of learning activities helped the student to rationalise her own sense of learning achievement by using a creative medium of her choice to communicate knowledge. Such an initiative helps to destroy barriers between the notions of who is the ‘Prestigious Learner’ [19]. from that of a student with diverse (non-mainstream) knowledge intake abilities.

Figure 5: Student in action, working on set of her production.

4. The Learning Case.

As Bourdieu’s theory is open towards an education that promotes a deeper sense of learning, it is very important for the scope of this study to highlight other educational models, which are not necessarily based on written examinations, and can support such way of schooling. Different from a conventional learning examination, ‘Reading the Image’ does not focus on a student’s ability to justify knowledge but looks out for influences of other educational models that support a learner to be more immersed in knowledge and to take ownership of it. It can be understood that a student can achieve a higher grade of sense of educational achievement, if a learning pedagogy manages to integrate learning with a student’s own Habitus [20].

Early methods of education that support such integration go back to 500B.C. in China as the Confucian education model already challenged the more classical classroom-based pedagogy. For quite some time Malta’s secondary school structure has been in-line with a westernised teaching practice model, with its distinguishing factors being teacher-centred classes consisting of large-number of students, passive learning with low-level of active participation, and teacher-led written learning. Confucianism does promote the process of memorisation and study, however, sustained with the importance of integrating knowledge with a learner’s own reflexivity.

‘Reading the Image’ focuses on learning as a case that briefs the student about the learning outcomes that are expected to be achieved in a given syllabus and to give directions on how they can be achieved through the development of a short moving image project. In this type of learning case students are encouraged to explore learning through their own identity. As Sharf states, ‘…understanding comes in a dramatic flash of insight and that insight is gained through intense and focused struggle with the case.’

In the essays ‘Thinking with Cases’ [21]. Confucianism is discussed through various reflections and can present to this research a gateway into the exploration of education models that are pro to the idea of maximising learning through the individual’s self-consciousness. ‘The essays in this volume trace the process whereby the project of thinking with cases in China came to self-consciousness over the succeeding millennium through the production of texts that gradually acquired a systematic and public character. [22]. Identifying Confucianism in projects such as ‘Reading the Image’ can help in the assessment of the various teaching techniques, such as in the learning case ‘Il-Barri’, in which the teaching model is determined by a teaching-and-thinking-by-case approach.

In the project ‘Il-Barri’, the student’s learning case was assigned to enable HE students to produce Maltese literacy content for secondary school students to be able to identify/engage with classical Maltese poetry through the use of contemporary tools of Media communication. HE students were briefed to primarily select a classical Maltese poem of their choice, research and identify with the original context of the poem, pitch an original interpretation of the poem to Maltese literacy experts, produce it in the moving image and present it to a specific target audience.
The results were very interesting with the end visual product lending itself into fora of discussions in classrooms between teachers and secondary school students who questioned the visual writer’s interpretation of the classical written poem. Different levels of critical evaluation prompted students to engage with the contemporary visual interpretation of the original text. Moreover, the visual interpretation provoked a forum of analysis and discussion that helped students to open a dialogue with classical literature through the Creative Media production.

‘Reading the Image’, just like in the learning case ‘Il-Barri’, sets out to create a learning experience that is defined by principles of action and practice. According to Miller, this can only be considered as an effective measure of teaching if learners are encouraged to engage with knowledge through real-life experiences. Miller documents her own teaching experiences based on action-type learning. She emphasizes on the importance of making knowledge meaningful and that the amount of content should never override the importance of allowing learners to relate with knowledge through themselves. Miller asks; ‘How does this lesson fit with what children love doing? ... is thinking valued and made visible? Is there student input? How will I know they understand?’ [23].

The emphasis on the importance of making knowledge meaningful, suggests questions on how ‘Reading the Image’ should not be limited at reaching students through the importance of engaging with learning, but it should also emphasise the fact that if learning is a ‘priority’ then the captioned pedagogy should support this principle. ‘Once we define our beliefs, align our practices, and know our children and the curriculum, we can create purposeful lessons at any time that make sense and meet our children’s needs precisely.’ [24].

Good cases for teaching can be found everywhere, however it is imperative to find methods that can better enhance interactivity between learners and knowledge. Since nowadays learners are constantly bombarded by new media technology, the case of learning through written and oral formats might be counterproductive. A learning case, such as ‘Reading the Image’ has the potential to facilitate the requirements of a student to engage with knowledge using tools that are contemporary with a learner. Moreover, the project can prioritise how Media can support a student in processing knowledge through a language that he/she is very accustomed to, the ‘Social Personage’.

In the works of Sarah Pink, one can examine how significant developments in the student’s ability to engage with learning in today’s generation, is highly contributed towards the incorporation of creativity within a classroom. As the media (Web 2.0) is becoming ever so present in everyone’s life, ‘Reading the Image’ should be examined in the light of how Creative Media production can support a learner’s sense of own educational achievement.

Earlier in this essay it was reviewed the importance of bringing a student’s own self-experience within the equation of learning. Creative Media can have a powerful presence in this process of allowing a learner to engage with knowledge. As Pink points out that the incorporation of creativity in curricula might bridge the paradigm between a learner’s everyday life and knowledge. Pink states that ‘… everyday life is a content of human creativity, innovation and change, and a site where processes towards a sustainable future might be initiated and nurtured.’ [25].

5. Transversal Skills and Competences

Creative Media can also offer an array of different areas where a student’s learning opportunities can expand in terms of skills and knowledge. In the final part of this review it is important to state how Creative Media can have a direct impact on the traditional notion of ‘westernized education’, in which teaching may even become more global. According to Hallinen, ‘School is surrounded by the word of change.’ [26]. As already outlined, the notion of being good at one specific subject (Westernised concept of ‘good education’) is simply not enough in the changing world and students must be able to apply their skills and knowledge to a multitude of contexts that allow them to achieve a learning experience based on transversal skills and competences. ‘We need to make sense of the world around us…, to feel valued and as important members of our society.’ [27].

Teaching can become more global, according to Hallinen, by going away from conventional isolated subject learning and prepare students, even from a young age, to contextualise their learning in real-life events. How can Media be a tool to help such type of learning convergence? Can Media be an asset tool to break down the dominance of traditional subjects such as languages and sciences and bring in a more phenomenological approach in classrooms? Can the learning case ‘Reading the Image’ offer this possibility of shift in education? ‘The school can help students to make sense of the world around us by giving students the tools to experience and learn how to be part of a society.’ [28].
Sarah Pink shares a common believe to that of Hallinen in seeing the everyday life as a 'site' of learning opportunities for learners to explore their identities by being active researchers of life. ‘...to rethink the everyday and activism as sites with the potential for change, from a perspective that attends to the environments and activities through which life is lived, and with the recognition that she or he is also right in the middle of this world.’ [29].

Media can join these two educational aspects as stated above, social activism and practical knowledge. These two aspects were addressed in the making of the project ‘Il-Barri’.

Differently from the current examination-based learning processes, the project ‘Il-Barri’, gave students the opportunity to work in teams and critically explore a classical Maltese text from their point of view. Students were requested to problem solve a linguistic barrier from the original text to the present screen-based media by developing a unique visual language based on seeking meaning from contemporary real-life oriented contexts. In the case of ‘Il-Barri’ the student saw a potential in a classical Maltese poem and responded by interpreting the subject matter in a way she understood it to be and how she intended to communicate it to the world. As Pink puts it, ‘...a world of social and environmental realities and imaginings…’ [30]. Such a learning strategy found in the project ‘Il-Barri’ can be seen as in line with Pink and Hallinen’s views. ‘Reading the Image’ takes into account many aspects from the project ‘Il-Barri’ and aims to give secondary school students the opportunity to converse with knowledge through their own life experiences. As Pink puts it, learning projects with such aim ‘... invites us to consider place on two levels. First to understand these technologies and representations as potential constituents of mediated elements of place and second, to contemplate how they engage users in the making of places that put the human subject in the centre.’ [31].

6. Conclusion

As discussed in the above, ‘Reading the Image’ is an initiative to propose new pedagogies for learners to experiment with Media and to explore new ways of how to express knowledge by acquiring transversal competences that are relevant to today’s way of life.

In line with the visual project ‘Il-Barri’ being used as the selected case study, ‘Reading the Image’ can build on theoretical resources and academic discussions, in order to propose an alternative learning pedagogy for secondary school students in preparation towards qualifying for HE.

This study gave a general overview on how Media can be considered as an alternative tool to help a learner engage with knowledge using tools of communication that are contemporary to him/her. From the above literature review one can see how learning initiatives, such as ‘Reading the Image’ can help developing teaching methods to diminish internal and external challenges that might hinder students from developing a better sense of good educational achievement.

By bridging the boundaries between the current fields of enquiry that relate to the improvement of a student’s ability to perform well in education, with maximising a student’s ability to develop a better sense of educational achievement through the use of contemporary means of communication, this study aims to propose a number of alternative learning methods that can help a learner to communicate knowledge.

The above review of topics that emanate from the areas of study, informs this educational research with a responsive-type of learning strategy that can eventually be proposed as an effective learning alternative to examination-based conventional practices. ‘Reading the Image’ will further develop the learning strategies that are fit for contemporary secondary school students helping them to improve their sense of educational achievement.

You can watch the short learning film ‘Il-Barri’ and other similar projects by following this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INyOCztUmz0&list=PLwb0FamE9-z-2HyMQaFTo48Osh48ni7n&index=33

7. References


