

# Digital Media in Religious Education

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## 1. Introduction

The 'information age' has changed the instructional approaches in the classroom for all courses taught in school, including religious education (RE). Neither teacher is the transmitter of information nor transmission of information is the main aim of religious education. The „content of RE cannot be ‚offered‘ as simple information, it is necessary to take initiatives from the pupils' life experiences, to create opportunities for activation and questioning, not to offer ready answers and views, but instead to offer opportunities for research and discovery by the pupils themselves."<sup>1</sup> Pupils are already members of the „Information Society". The ‚big bang‘ of information is part of their daily experience, and the internet provides immediate access to huge amounts of information, which they can have access to constantly – at a ‚click‘ – through computers, iphones, smartphones, tablets, laptops, iPads, handhelds etc. This article discusses the use of digital media in RE. Though written within a Christian-Orthodox frame of reference, its basic considerations are not restricted to this frame.

## 2. Religious Education in schools today

The teaching of RE in school responds to the humanistic aim of education studied „as cultural expression, as course in history, as contemporary presence in the world"<sup>2</sup>. This means that Religious Education as one of the courses taught in schools is more than facts, dates, names, doctrines presented in the classroom by the teacher.<sup>3</sup> It aims to help the pupils think on religion; so as to become conscious of their responsibility to the society and freely decide to play their role in it, e. g., fight prejudice, encourage an attitude of tolerance and respect towards the ‚other‘, develop environmental consciousness,<sup>4</sup> and help them form attitudes such as self-consciousness, empathy, solidarity, feel of justice. The above skills include their improvement as human beings, as ‚person‘<sup>5</sup> as a whole. This is connected with the aims of holistic education that „the ‚learning outcomes‘ of RE should be more than ‚knowledge‘; they

2 Ibid.

3 *Boojamra, John*: Foundations for Orthodox Christian Education, Crestwood/NY 1989, 9.

4 *Watson, Brenta*: The Effective Teaching of Religious Education, Longman, UK, 1993, 50–51.

5 *Elias, John*: Psychology and Religious Education, Malabar/USA, 1983, 8f.

1 *Government Paper*: Interdisciplinary Curricula. Vol. II, 313/13-03-2003, 2003, 3867

should involve the pupils so as to inform, form and transform them into becoming a better person"<sup>6</sup>. Hence, RE is more than information transfer to the pupils; it should help pupils process the information to develop „critical thinking skills, providing them also the freedom to think and question"<sup>7</sup>.

It is also important that the content of RE takes into consideration and be connected with the pupils' interests and personal experiences because then it attracts their attention and they „realize that their daily experiences are closely related with those taught in RE in school, hence connecting theory and practice."<sup>8</sup> Therefore during the teaching of RE it is indispensable the active participation of each pupil and their personal spiritual experience.<sup>9</sup>

RE can help the pupils understand the role that religion holds in their daily life because „the context within which the pupils live and grow, should be a basic element of a contemporary RE in school"<sup>10</sup>. Such an instruction of this course in order to attract the pupils' interest, should be connected with the context (family, school, society)<sup>11</sup> in which the pupils live; this means that it has a student-centered orientation, that is, it focuses on the pupils, while taking into consideration anything connected with them: personal experiences, cog-

nitive-developmental skills, needs, interests etc.<sup>12</sup>

The world is changing rapidly and RE should adapt to these changes. The need of adaptation of RE to the ongoing technological changes demands its constant transformation.<sup>13</sup> In this context the teaching of RE in school is becoming increasingly difficult. How can the content and aims of RE respond to the pupils' reality?<sup>14</sup> Challenges, faced by today's pupils, are totally different from those only a few years ago as well as their experiences within the social context of educational needs and expectations. Those are the pupils that RE addresses to today. Thus, RE should be a course ‚open' which responds to the pupils' aspirations, and goes beyond formalities, dogmatism, ethnocentricity, and lack of understanding other religious traditions.<sup>15</sup> According to the constructivist approach „personal identity is constructed and produced within the historical, cultural and social contexts. It emphasizes the fragmentary, dialectic and constructive nature of identity"<sup>16</sup>.

The content of the course refers to the revealed truth of God<sup>17</sup> and the understanding and interpretation of religious facts and truths of faith and thus, it cannot be modified.<sup>18</sup> What can change is the medium / tool of transmission of

6 *Groome, Thomas*: *Sharing Faith. A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry. The Way of Shared Praxis*, San Francisco 1991, 2.

7 *Vrame, Antony*: *Teaching Orthodox Christianity Today. Challenges to Methodologies*. In: *Aikonen, Risto/Aleksandrov, Andrian* (Eds.): *Methods of Teaching in Religious Education. Learning by Heart or by Experience?* Proceedings of the Conference held in Sofia, Bulgaria, 17–21/Jun/ 2014 (2015) 15–25, 18.

8 *Koptsis, Alexandros*: *Religious meanings and their experiential instruction*, Thessaloniki 2008, 127.

9 *Vasilopoulos, Christos*: *School Religious Education*, Thessaloniki 2008, 149.

10 *Ibid.*, 53.

11 *Koptsis, Alexandros*: *Religious Education in contemporary elementary school*, Thessaloniki 2006, 18.

12 *Tsagkas, Ioannis*: *The role of religious education teacher in ‚e-learning' and on the internet*. In: *Proceedings from the meeting „Religious Education in modern school"*, Athens 2006, 107.

13 *Markantonis, Nikolaos*: *Teaching of Religion courses*, Athens 1988, 11.

14 *Fragkos, Konstantinos*: *Aims of Religious Education and Pedagogy*. In: *Koinonia* 3 (1981) 280.

15 *Mouzelis, Nikolaos*: *Teaching Religious Education*. In: *To Vima* (newspaper) 16–10–1995, 6.

16 *Gross, Zehavit/Rutland, Suzanne*: *Intergenerational Challenges in Australian Jewish School Education*, In: *Religious Education* 109 (2014) 143–161, 157.

17 *Michailidis, Agisilaos*: *Difficulties of religious education teacher today in and out of the school*. In: *Koinonia* 3 (1978) 179f.

18 *Fragkos* 1981 [Fn. 14], 280.

these truths – the message of God –, depending on the circumstances<sup>19</sup> and, thus, contribute to the renewal of RE teaching.<sup>20</sup> This instructional renewal, should, among others, include new instructional approaches, which would attract the interest of the pupils and promote the interaction among them and the content of RE.<sup>21</sup> Especially nowadays, emphasis is placed on the connection between personal experiences and visual representations. As a result the use of digital interactive audiovisual media render instruction more realistic, attractive<sup>22</sup> and interesting since it connects the content of RE with the daily lives of the pupils, their interests, their needs, their emotions and their experience.

### 3. Religious Education in the Information Society

Information society demands the pupils to be equipped with skills that will render them capable to live and work in it.<sup>23</sup> These skills concern

- access to the ICT (e.g. cell phones, computers, tablets, laptops, iPhones, GPS etc.) and
- handling of computer software and applications such as educational software,
- finding and exploiting digital material,
- use of the Internet.

The integration of ICT as a course in schools offers knowledge which familiarizes the pupils with technology and its use in RE, hence ICT tools have been proved very important for the

improvement in education and teaching in the classrooms. The integration of computers in education as a ‚pedagogical tool‘ can help to upgrade the quality of classroom instruction (methods & approaches). The potentialities of ICT can be exploited didactically in RE and contribute to the creation of a teaching approach where the pupils collaborate, discover and learn by doing.<sup>24</sup>

In order that the instruction of RE can respond successfully to the demands of information society has to be modified itself, by widening the aims, goals and learning outcomes, reforming its content, renewing its teaching methods, selecting and using teaching media / tools that will render it a contemporary course.

Taken the circumstances for the implementation of digital media in the classroom it is necessary to examine the way they should be integrated in RE so as to achieve the best possible learning outcomes.

Which would be the best way to integrate ICT into the teaching procedure? Apparently the technological achievements are just media that help the instructional approach. They should not be used as a substitute for the various activities taken place in the classroom. The integration of ICT in classroom can concern: research and collection of information, expression and cultivation of written speech, multiple representation of information, practice-consolidation-reinforcement, cognitive processes and change of pupils' attitudes towards knowledge acquisition.

It is generally accepted that only integrating ICT into the teaching procedure does not add pedagogical value or enhance learning. Because then technology becomes the center of

19 Michailidis 1978 [Fn. 17] 179f.

20 Terezis, Christos/Koustourakis, Gerasimos: Methodological Preface to Religious Education Teaching, Athens 1996, 16.

21 Markantonis 1988 [Fn. 13], 15.

22 Zefkilis, Aristarchos: Visual mediums of Teaching, Athens 1969, 31f.

23 Mpikos, Konstantinos: Pedagogical issues set by the Information and Communication Technology, Thessaloniki 2012, 160.

24 Tsagkas, Ioannis: The role of religious education teacher in ‚e-learning‘ and on the internet. In: Proceedings from the meeting „Religious Education in modern school“, Athens 2006, 109–113, 111.

attention instead of the expected learning outcomes. ICT are just teaching tools and their contribution to the effective teaching and learning is due to the fruitful exploitation of their special characteristics: „the use of computers [...] can be proved very useful for the pupil to understand better meanings and procedures“, „the use of computer as a visual material [...] motivates the pupils and attracts their attention“<sup>25</sup>.

#### 4. ICT in the Curricula of RE

Updating of education is a main concern of the Ministry of Education in every country. To this purpose the school books are regularly renewed, new Curricula are written and new instructional approaches are suggested with the use of ICT, also in RE. Under the new requirements of the Information Society the implementation of ICT in the teaching of all courses should consist a basic element in modern curricula.

It is expected that this will help the pupils understand that religion is not strange in their lives but refers to life itself.<sup>26</sup> *Ronald Goldman* supported that „religion is a way of life, thus starting point and ultimate purpose for RE should be the pupils' needs“. He believed that religion can be connected with every course taught in school and he suggested a ‚Process Model‘ of curriculum that encourages flexibility in expected learning outcomes, rich content, variety of evaluation strategies and methodologies. *Michael Grimmit* argues that „RE should be experience-centered and allow pupils to explore, reflect, discuss and collaborate“<sup>27</sup>. Thus,

the curricula with the implementation of ICT in classroom promote in the pupils meaningful learning, active involvement in their learning procedure, collaboration, critical thinking and self-engagement. *Gross and Rutland* support that „pupils like it better when they are directly involved with tasks and when they are taught in informal settings and not in the classroom“. Hence „informal, experiential and interactive learning are the most meaningful approaches for RE to transmit the religious knowledge and identity“<sup>28</sup>. And, as *Jean Twenge* wrote, „pupils like doing things themselves/being involved actively themselves, they want to know why they are doing this, to feel a personal impact, to understand the deeper meaning behind the task so as to involve with energy and passion with it. Thus, when teachers incorporate ICT in their teaching they facilitate their pupils' learning“<sup>29</sup>.

Furthermore, the last decades is promoted the interdisciplinary approach for all school courses (e.g. RE, History, Language, Visual Arts, Music, Geography etc.) and is suggested the adoption of new teaching models that integrate ICT. RE teachers should act as facilitators and create a student-centered environment that would provide freedom and encourage their pupils to explore, reflect, discuss and integrate the experience.<sup>30</sup>

Science and technology dominate in the daily lives of the young pupils while more and more job positions demand technical knowledge and computer skills. RE should also take into consideration what the pupils will face in the labor market of the Information Society.<sup>31</sup>

25 *Government paper* 2003 [Fn. 1], 3736.

26 *Goldman, Ronald*: Readiness for religion. A Basis for Developmental, Religious Education, London 1978, 70.

27 *Lovat, Terence*: What is this thing Called Religious Education, in: Social Science Press, Australia 1989,

19–21.

28 *Gross/Rutland* 2014 [Fn. 16], 157.

29 *Twenge, Jean*: Generational Changes and their Impact in the Classroom. Teaching Generation Me. In: *Medical Education* 43 (2009) 398–405.

30 *Lovat* 1989 [Fn. 27], 25.

31 *Goldman* 1978 [Fn. 26], 173.

Children and pubers are attracted by computers and consider that they offer them many more possibilities for learning. New technological tools consist as a part of the pupils' daily environment and are characterized by three basic trends:

- transition from printed to visual culture,
- multiplicity of the media available to the pupils,
- transition from one-way to interactive media.<sup>32</sup>

Digital material with ICT can offer the best way for the teaching e.g. of the Bible texts. The digital material presented with ICT can renew the teaching approach/methods of RE and possibly help the pupils to express a great interest for active participation in the teaching procedure. Thus it is absolutely necessary to find ways to bridge the gap between technology and religion.<sup>33</sup>

## 5. Characteristics of teaching with ICT in RE

„The use of ICT in the teaching procedure demands a new way of approach of teaching and new skills and abilities on the side of the religious education teacher. This should be supported by the state providing the schools with technological equipment and the teachers with lifelong training on ICTs, so as to use them constructively in RE“<sup>34</sup>.

Therefore, one of the basic issues is considered the way that religious education tea-

chers will use ICT and integrate them in RE teaching promoting a new „pedagogic strategy“.<sup>35</sup>

So, the new technological tools will not be just added in the previous teaching and learning approaches. In order to be effective pedagogically the new teaching models/approaches should promote the critical thinking and active engagement of the pupils with activities that integrate the use of ICTs. On the other hand, the pupils have to understand the role of ICTs, as a tool to search and find information but also to evaluate it, thus constructing their knowledge, using them as a tool to „learn how to learn“.<sup>36</sup>

The implementation of ICT in schools and in the instruction include: Recognizing the problem, developing digital content for RE (educational software, digital learning objects, e-books), equipping the schools with computers and other peripherals (beamers, interactive boards, printers, cameras etc.), connecting the schools with the Internet.

ICT and the accompanying digital material are considered the best way to present the information. As with the first, the second are presented in a way attractive, impressive, interactive, pleasant and comprehensive through graphics, hypertexts, videos, images, and music and thus, contribute effectively in RE, as they offer new ways for presenting the material, renewal of the teaching techniques and models, provide possibility to work at their own rate, create new opportunities for communication and collaboration among pupils thus creating a powerful and flexible learning environment. In such a teaching environment is promoted discovery learning, collaboration, activation

32 Vryzas, Konstantinos/Tsitouridou, Melpomeni: Children and Pubers towards the ‚old‘ and the ‚new‘ media. In: Proceedings from the 3rd Conference of ETPE „ICT in Education“, 29/9/2002, Vol. II, Athens 2002, 107–118, 107.

33 Kincaid, Michael: How to improve learning in Religious Education, London 1991, vii.

34 Zogopoulos, Eythimios: New Technologies and Communication Media in Educational Procedure, Athens 2001, 245.

35 Mitropoulou, Vasiliki: Digital Scenario with ICT in the Instruction of Religious Education. In: Koukoura, D./Skaltsis, P./Mitropoulou V. (Eds): Formation of Love and Freedom, Thessaloniki 2012, 243–270, 245.

36 Ibid.

and socialization of the pupils and their critical thinking.<sup>37</sup>

A modern teaching approach that promotes the collaboration among pupils with the integration of ICTs refers to the instruction with digital scenarios which are expected to serve better the holistic approach in learning, connect technology with the cognitive subjects in school, the environment and the social context (experiences) and culture.<sup>38</sup>

An important concern of school education would be to promote activities which would provide to the pupils the possibility to understand the role of ICTs and use them effectively. Thus, in the classrooms are promoted activities (with handhelds, interactive boards, tablets, rubrics etc.) which aim to familiarize the pupils with the computers so as to use them as tools to learn how to learn.

What is demanded by the religious education teachers is a wide range of rich digital material with accompanying guidelines for its use, which, on one hand would exploit the possibilities of the technologies and, at the same time, would release the potentialities of the teachers for innovative teaching procedures.

The content of RE is visual and icons and songs and practice hold an important role in it. Jesus used various media in a visual way so that He could render His teaching understood by the simple people of His time (e.g. the healing of the blind man with clay).

The integration of ICT reveals better the visual character of RE and the possibilities it offers for its teaching, which can present innovations in scenarios, teaching approaches, and open educational practices.

The digital material used in RE in Greece can be categorized into the following:

- Educational software in RE. They aim to provide the pupils „with an integrated, rich, dynamic, and adaptive learning environment, which would increase the learning potential of the pupils“.<sup>39</sup> They have a specific content enriched with audiovisual material and exercises for practice which can be used for a specific content of the Religion school books.<sup>40</sup>
- Digital material in e-books of Religion school books. These e-books are in HTML form and their texts are enriched with interactive digital material (activities, problems, images, maps etc.) rendering the texts multimodal. The material is linked on the books' texts with hyperlinks at certain points that demand clarifications, additions, explanations and offers additional material for comments, connections, observations which promote the pupils' critical thinking and evaluation skills.<sup>41</sup>
- Digital learning objects on the panhellenic learning object repository (Photodentro). Learning objects are any digital material which can be used and re-used autonomously in the teaching of multiple contents with the use of ICT providing interactivity e.g. experiments, simulations, webquests, images, pictures, edugames, maps, quiz etc. Each learning object is accompanied by a record containing metadata. They are uploaded on the Panhellenic Learning Object Repository (Photodentro) and are easily accessible for download and use in RE.<sup>42</sup>

37 *Mitropoulou, Vasiliki*: Educational Software in the Instruction of Religious Education, Thessaloniki 2008, 174.

38 *Mitropoulou* 2012 [Fn. 35], 247.

39 *Mikropoulos, Tasos*: Educational Software, Athens 2000, 10.

40 *Mitropoulou, Vasiliki*: ICT in the Instruction of Religious Education, Thessaloniki 2015, 130.

41 *Kapaniaris, Alenandros/Papadimitriou Eleni*: Digital Literacy in Digital School, Thessaloniki 2013, 31.

42 *Mitropoulou* 2015 [Fn. 40], 111.

## 6. Conclusion

New technologies are just equipment and can contribute to the effectiveness of teaching, if they are used in the right way and with the relevant frequency". This means that their value lies in the correct use of their "characteristics which differ from the traditional educational media" as well as their use in the classroom by the teacher.<sup>43</sup> ICT demands that the pupils are involved actively in the teaching procedure of RE, as the personal involvement demands more active cognitive processes which contribute to

the better imprint of the information in the memory.<sup>44</sup>

However, what is considered of primary importance is how the teachers will integrate computers and the digital material into their teaching approach, implementing a new „pedagogical strategy". The potentiality of RE is increased when the teacher uses the ICT in an effective way to transmit the truths of faith using modern teaching methods.<sup>45</sup> Otherwise there will be the risk „to teach yesterday's religion to the pupils of tomorrow."<sup>46</sup>

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43 Government Paper 2003 [Fn. 1].

44 Sarno, Ronald: Media in Religious Education, Birmingham 1987, 12

45 Ibid., 12f.

46 Vasilopoulos, Christos: Instruction of Religious Education, Thessaloniki 2003, 50.