Achronos: Reflections on Timeless Time, Media and Communication

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Abstract

Our conception of time is likely to change when we move from traditional human-to-human communication (HHC) to computer-mediated human communication (CMHC). In the former, space and time were united. In the latter, technology has created mediacy (*välillisyys*), mediation (*välitteisyys*) and the communication delay (*viive*). The faster the communication and the more efficient the technology at our disposal, the less time we seem to have to react and to think about our reactions, replies and answers. The emerging network society will break down the biological or social rhythmicity of the traditional notion of lifecycle, but so far no alternative sequence has managed to replace the old notion. The information and communication technology revolution has compressed time and space into a new 'world *oikoumene*', strongly oriented towards the future, while past societies were mostly space-bound or time-bound. This is likely to lead to a radically new space–time framework for modern society.

Network-based education and learning materials can be analysed through Deleuze's three syntheses of time that coexist. The syntheses are compared to the multidimensional conceptual framework of principles of planning and assessing network-based learning materials, as drafted by Mononen-Aaltonen & Tella (2000). The writer launches the concept of *achronos* to describe timeless time or time without time represented by the network society. The writer finishes with an argument of media education consisting of things that take time and cautions against not respecting the old saying "Take your time".

Keywords: time; mediacy; mediation; communication delay; *achronos*; media education; network-based learning (NBL).

"Modern man thinks he loses something—time—when he does not do things quickly. Yet he does not know what to do with the time he gains—except kill it." (Erich Fromm)

1 THE DEMAND FOR TIMELESS TIME

At its most typical, human-to-human communication (HHC) has been and still is real-time face-to-face communication, *hic et nunc* communication, often characterised by the notion of synchrony (Greek συν = with, χρονος = time). Synchrony is related to immediacy, i.e., to immediate communication.

But then the emergence of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) created mediacy (*välillisyys*), mediation (*välitteisyys*) and the communication delay (*viive*). The concept of asynchrony was born, in which the moment of sending a message distanced from the moment of reception. True, even some earlier technologies—traditional mail, couriers—had already made people wait: sending a letter and receiving one were often separated by a long temporal pause. Now, modern digital technologies—telephony, multimedia conferencing, e-mail, integrated distributed learning environments (IDLEs)—have made the traditional opposition even more complex: telephony and multimedia conferencing are mostly synchronous and take place in real time, while e-mail and IDLEs are fundamentally asynchronous: the action enabled by them takes place in different times as seen by the users. At their best, these telematic means can give new opportunities for students to study and communicate in more convenient places and at more convenient times, leading to what Boyd (1987) calls discursive and physical flexibility that are directly related to epistemological viewpoints. In the same way, one of the original arguments presented by the Socrates & Youth Technical Assistance Office (1995) in favour of open and distance learning (ODL), was the idea of using new tools and methods to improve the flexibility and feasibility of learning in terms of space, time, choice of content, or teaching resources and to improve access to educational systems from a distance. The important point, however,

is that these modern information and communication technologies also contain some salient features that are likely to have a deep-going impact on our sense of time and on our ways of relating ourselves to time and, finally, to the highly sensitive nexus of time and place.

In traditional communication, space and time, "the fundamental, material dimensions of human life" (Castells 1996, 376) have been united and, we could add, in an unmediated way[1]. Urry (1985; based on Fernback 1997, 36) argues that space and time are social constructs whose very existence depends on the interactivity between presence and absence. In literature research, Bakhtin (1981, 84) speaks about *chronotope* (literally, "time space") when referring to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. To Bakhtin, *chronotope* expresses the inseparability of space and time, time being the fourth dimension of space. Kant defined space and time as indispensable forms of any cognition, beginning with elementary perceptions and representations (cited in Bakhtin 1981, 85). In their six-dimensional model of direct and mediated communication, Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen (1998, 83–90[2]) consider time as one crucial dimension, whose form, function and modality change when we move from human-to-human communication (HHC) to computer-mediated human communication (CMHC). Giddens (1991, 20) is

[1] Heidegger, among other philosophers, problematises the unquestioned ontology of time, e.g. *"Aikaisemmin ei ole kysytty eikä tutkittu sitä, mistä aika saa tämän erityisen ontologisen funktionsa, millä oikeudella jokin sellainen kuin aika toimii tällaisena kriteerinä ja onko tässä naiivissa ontologisessa ajan soveltamisessa lisäksi ilmaistu sen todella mahdollinen ontologinen relevanssi. 'Aika' on juuri tavallisen aikakäsityksen horisontissa ikään kuin 'itsestään' saanut tämän 'itsestäänselvän' ontologisen funktionsa ja pitänyt sen tähän päivään asti*" [Earlier it has not been asked nor researched from where time gets this special ontological function of its own, what authorises something like time to act as this kind of criterion and whether this naïve ontological application of time also expresses its really feasible ontological relevance. In an ordinary framework of the conception of time, 'time' has somehow got this 'self-evident' ontological function and kept it until today.] (Heidegger 2000, 39).

[2] http://www.helsinki.fi/~tella/mep7p70.html

one of the very first to write about the separation of time and space, in which the condition for the articulation of social relations could cross wide spans of time–space, up to and including global systems. In teaching in general, and in distance education or in open and distance learning in particular, many of the new technological tools and applications are likely to break down the old established practice of teaching the same thing to everybody at the same time (Tella 1997, 25). Giddens further argues (1991, 25) that some early media, like newspapers, already contributed to complete the separation of space from time. Giddens' thinking was to lead to the present mantra-like slogan of the independence of time, space and location or to the removal of the constraints of distance, time and location, as expressed by, among others, Negroponte (1995) or Gell & Cochrane (1996).[1] Although the traditional mass media showed the way, it is mostly the digital media that have enabled the use of the temporal communication delay thus created.

And at the same time, it is exactly the tension between the technological "delay-less delay", i.e., the rapidity or even instantaneousity of communication, on the one hand, and the psychological expectancy of "no communication delay accepted", on the other, that have suddenly made us face new unprecedented challenges. In practical terms, what this has led to can be illustrated by several phenomena. For instance, mobile telephony very often implies that one has to be or is expected to be accessible on the phone all the time. We all attend meetings in which one or several participants see to their business, often in a loud voice, without even realising how much they disturb the meeting itself. Another example is e-

[1] Paradoxically, some of the latest developments point in the opposite direction. Korhonen (2000, C16), for instance, argues that personal navigation, one of the top initiatives in the recent Finnish information society strategy and strictly based on rapidly developing mobile telephony, will underline the commitment to place (*sidonnaisuus paikkaan*): the portable telephone will help pinpoint its user within a few metres' radius. This will change our ideas of having access to tailored information, but it will also be of help to people lost or in danger, as the rescuers will be able to locate the telephone user fast and efficiently.

mail communication: as technology itself makes it easy and fast to send a number of messages via e-mail, its users tend to grow more and more impatient if their messages are not answered almost immediately, without any real delay. Many e-mail users recognise and feel the unwritten need to answer quickly or at least as soon as possible. The effect of a growing number of unanswered e-mails is equally felt as stresful by many. In the implicit need for answering without any delay (*viipeettömyyden vaade*) lies a threat: human beings' behaviour is traditionally characterised by hesitation, indecision, reflection, deliberation or procrastination and prevarication (in a positive sense). And, as Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen point out (1998, 85), "proper dialogue always takes time, it needs time for reflection, it needs time for things to grow and develop, it calls for that kind of speed and rate that the communicators see as good".

Now we are about to face a situation where human resources and technology become incompatible, because technology is too efficient and leaves no space for a human being to breathe, to be alone, to think, but just compels him or her to act like a hamster on a treadmill. The faster the communication and the more efficient the technology at our disposal, the less time we have to react, to reflect, and to think about what we would really like to say or should say to people who contact us via a telematic means. One could argue that the "basic human right" to be slow, to be reflective is now being threatened, as, for example, the unanswered e-mail on the screen creates a need for an immediate reply. But does everyone answer incoming e-mails at once? Hardly, but one who does not might still feel that he or she is likely to be taken for a Luddite opposing technology—or taken for a really sane individual for that matter. Analysing time as well as the pressures born from the "delay-less" delays made possible by latest information and communication technologies are worth both pondering on as well as further analysis. In this analysis, it is good to understand how human be-

ings relate themselves to time in general. This is what will be analysed in the following chapters.

"Don't count the days, make the days count."

2 CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TIME

2.1 Cultural Time

Time can be analysed in a legion of ways. It can be divided into cultural and psychological time, for instance (Bruneau 1990; DeVito 1997; also Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen 1998, 85).

Cultural time consists of technical time, formal time and informal time. Most Western cultures divide time into seconds, hours, days, months, etc. In some other cultures, the phases of the moon or the change of the seasons might be more important. Inuits in Greenland, for instance, have 13 seasons instead of four. They have four different winters, depending on the thickness of the sea ice. Finns used to observe nature in the same way. People went collecting berries or mushrooms, when it was that time of the year. It was not—and could not have been—planned according to our notion of a weekly or monthly calendar. Most of us would still find it odd to hear somebody say in June that he or she would be going to collect blueberries on August 2, starting at 10.15 am. In several African countries, the future lies behind us, while the past is in front of us. Think of a person rowing and you have an idea of the African notion of the tenses: while rowing, your "future" is behind your back and you need to turn your head to see where you are going. Your recent past, on the other hand, is clearly in front of you.

Formal time units are arbitrary albeit often very permanent, and often exclusively defined by the culture for its convenience. The position of the Leap Day is a good example. The Roman

leader Caesar ordered it to be celebrated on February 24, to which Finland, as one of the last countries in the world, stuck until the year 2000, when the Leap Day was changed to be added to the end of February, i.e., to become February 29th.

Informal time is often more important to individual people and their communication. "Soon", "immediately" or "tomorrow" have surprisingly different meanings in different people's—and peoples'—minds (cf. e.g., DeVito 1997, 164). For instance, Beckett's "*En attendant Godot*" (in Finnish "*Huomenna hän tulee*" ["Tomorrow he will come"]) has in fact changed into a European (or, perhaps, even global) metaphor for endless delay and hopeless ungrounded waiting and lingering. In the area of modern technologies, videoconferencing is a good example whose use sharpens the different cultural interpretations of time. One of the crucial elements in discord can even be the degree of importance different people from different cultures attach to the times fixed for videoconferencing, even if these times have been set together.

Another way of dividing time is to talk about monochronism and polychronism (e.g., Hall & Hall 1987; Table 1).

Monochronic people, like Scandinavians and North-Americans, prefer to do one thing at a time. For instance, they do not book several meetings at the same time. Time is compartmentalised: there's time for everything and everything has its time. Polychronic people, represented by South Americans or Southern Europeans, tend to do several things at the same time or in parallel time segments. They do not think it odd to answer their phones while having a videoconference with foreign partners, or talk to a passing student by leaving the other videoconference partners to simply wait for this episode to finish.

Table 1. Monochronic and Polychronic People (DeVito 1997, 166; cf. also Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen 1998, 87).

The Monochronic Person	The Polychronic Person
• does one thing at a time	• does several things at one time
• treats time schedules and plans very seriously; they may only be broken for the most serious of reasons	• treats time schedules and plans as useful (not sacred); they may be broken for a variety of causes
• considers the job the most important part of one's life, ahead of even family	• considers the family and interpersonal relationships more important than the job
• considers privacy extremely important, seldom borrows or lends to others, works independently	• is actively involved with others, works in the presence of and with lots of people at the same time

These different outlooks on time and on its significance naturally have an impact on teaching and communication in general and on network-based learning practices in particular. Monochronic people like to work on their own, according to their own timetables, while polychronics search active contact with others and like to work together or simultaneously with a number of people. Could the difference be bigger than between a Finn and an Italian when they try to be alone: the Finn is likely to go roam in a forest; the Italian goes to the nearest *piazza* to join dozens or hundreds of other people.

2.2 Psychological Time

Psychological time refers to the concept of appropriateness, the ways of taking others into consideration (promptness or lateness in responding to letters or e-mails, returning telephone calls, etc.), and to politeness, which some researchers (e.g., Krasch 1993) regard as the core issues of multicultural communication. DeVito (1997, 167) suggests that the appropriateness of time could be analysed by using scales like interest vs. disinterest, organised vs. disorganised, considerate vs. inconsiderate and sociable vs. unsociable. These dimensions also imply the power and degree of imposition and play a major role in computer-mediated communication. They should also

be taken into account when time is being structured or restructured in using an integrated distributed learning environment, for instance, especially if the group includes members representing different time conceptions. A challenging issue would also be to think how network-based learning materials could best accommodate the variations of people's cultural and psychological time.

"Nature, Time and Patience are the three great physicians."
(Bulgarian proverb)

3 TIME, COMPUTERS, AND THE INTERNET

How about time and computers? The computer thinks in nanoseconds, in thousands of microseconds, as Kumar (1995, 11) has put it, making us wonder whether this will equally affect our conception of cultural time. Computers have also been compared to clocks (e.g., Rifkin 1987; Jones 1997; also Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen 1998, 89), establishing a new set of accelerated temporal demands on human behaviour.

How about time and the Internet? Castells (1996, 446) has suggested that the network society will break down the rhythmicity—whether biological or social—associated with the traditional notion of lifecycle, but so far no alternative sequence has managed to replace the old notion. He further characterises the time conception of the new network society as simultaneous and timeless, and he comes to the conclusion that it is a culture at the same time as the eternal and as the ephemeral. Eternal refers to reaching back and forth to the whole sequence of cultural expressions; ephemeral because each sequencing depends on the context. (Castells 1996, 461–462; also Castells 1997, 125)

Kumar's interpretation (1995, 10) is somewhat different. He argues that the information technology revolution has compressed

time and space into a new 'world *oikoumene*'[1], which is strongly oriented towards the future, while past societies were mostly space-bound or time-bound. If this is so, it is likely to lead to a radically new space–time framework for our post-modern society.

"You can't have a better tomorrow if you are thinking about yesterday all the time." (Charles F. Kettering)

4 TIME *VIS-À-VIS* PRINCIPLES OF PLANNING AND ASSESSING NETWORK-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIALS

As teaching on the web and network-based learning are steadily gaining ground, it has become important to conceptualise new sets of criteria that can be used to plan and to assess the teaching–studying–learning paradigm and especially network-based learning materials. In the following, time will be discussed in the context of Deleuze's (1994, 70–71, 79–80, 88–89; cited in Murphy 1998) three syntheses of time that coexist. It will then be compared to the multidimensional conceptual framework of principles of planning and assessing network-based learning materials, as drafted by Mononen-Aaltonen & Tella (2000) and Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen (2000, in this volume).

4.1 Deleuze's First Synthesis of Time

Deleuze's first synthesis of time is "the passive synthesis of the living present that contracts all of the past and the future, allowing time to pass unidirectionally; from this perspective, the past and future are modalities always contained in the conditioned present, which alone exists" (Murphy 1998, 218).

[1] Cf. Greek οικος (a house, abode, dwelling; any place to live in).

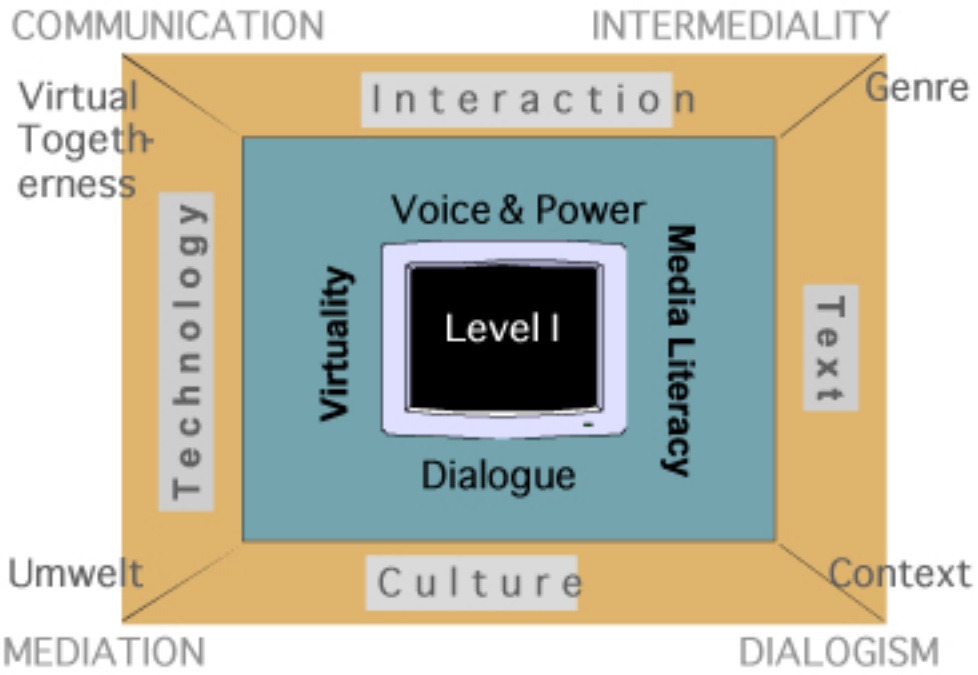

Figure 1. Level I of the Multidimensional Model for Principles of Planning and Assessing Network-Based Education and Learning Materials (Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen 2000).

In Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen's (2000) conceptual framework of principles of planning and assessment, Level I, i.e., the "hands-on" or "on-line" level, working at the computers (or using mobile telephony, for instance) concretely represents something that takes place in a limited present. This level can well be contrasted with Deleuze's first synthesis of time: the past and the future are incorporated into the present that advances unidirectionally. A decision made at present will affect the direction as well as how the action is about to take. This synthesis of time can be described as the level of an on-line learning or action environment: everything happens here and now.

4.2 Deleuze's Second Synthesis of Time

Deleuze's second synthesis of time is "the active synthesis of the pure past, the memory that represents the old past and the current representation of that past; the pure past is the past that is *a priori*, that was never present and is necessary to found the past as memory" (Murphy 1998, 218). As Murphy argues (1998, 218), there's a surprising link between Deleuze, Bergson and the concept of virtuality, because Deleuze's second synthesis of time is partly based on Bergson's intensive theory of memory, according to which the past should be regarded as a virtual space into which "we project ourselves in order to find the appropriate level of the past that we seek" (Murphy 1998, 218). This process of reflection is inevitably and intrinsically complex and multi-layered, as "each level of the past contains the whole of the past, in virtual coexistence but at different degrees of dilation and intensity" (Murphy 1998, 218). At this point, the interpretations of Bergson, Deleuze and Bohm converge: "Each moment of time is a projection" (Bohm 1986, 189–191). The moments of the past are fragments of an intensive subspace or prespace that determine the structure of time itself (Murphy 1998, 218).

In Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen's conceptual framework (2000), Level II is representative of Deleuze's second synthesis to some extent. The level could be described as one of tutoring, guidance or support, in which, in terms of cybernetics, support is given and at the same time feedback is received from the process itself. The level spontaneously integrates the roles of a tutor, a teacher or a knowing parent.

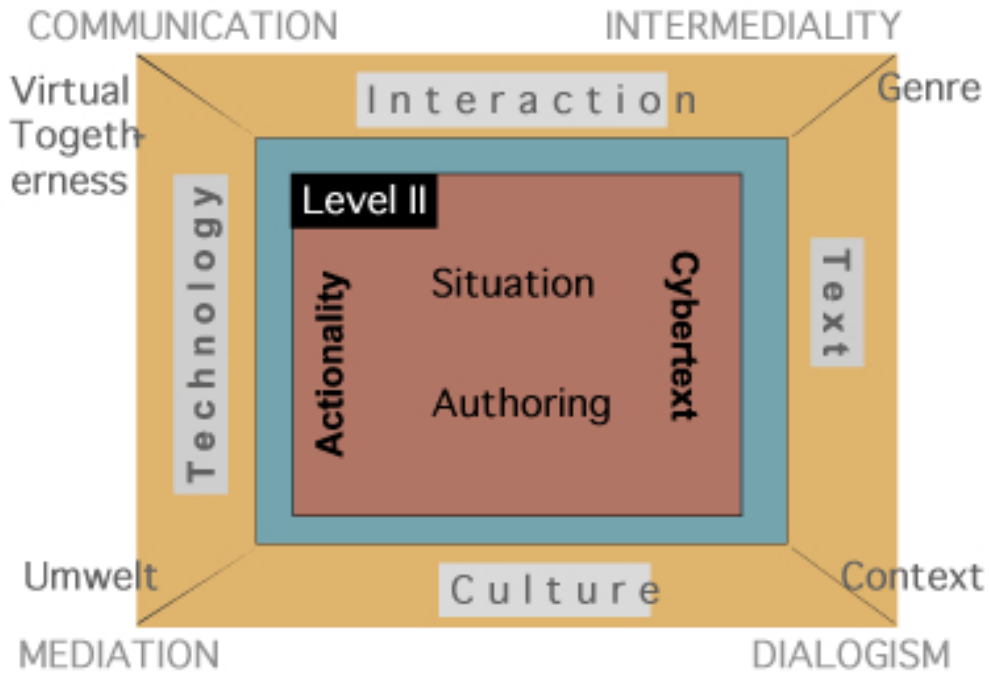

Figure 2. Level II of the Multidimensional Model for Principles of Planning and Assessing Network-Based Education and Learning Materials (Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen 2000).

According to the theory of the intensive memory, tutors, teachers and parents bring with them, to the studying process, the past and its different representations, reflections of the past, instructions, support, cues and practices. Those who are being guided or tutored cannot experience these reflections themselves, from the past, that affect their tutors' or teachers' behaviour, preferences and attitudes. The present is supported by the projections of the past, which the tutor, the teacher or the parent brings up and through which the present tense gets a deeper meaning. If working on the web is compared to working in a virtual space, then these projections represent the subspace or the prespace of the past.

4.3 Deleuze's Third Synthesis of Time

Deleuze's third synthesis of time is "the static synthesis of the pure and empty form of time that displaces the relations between the others to create the future" (Murphy 1998, 218). Like the pure past, this synthesis is a conditioning, not conditioned, time concept, "capable of breaking the repetitive symmetry between living present and pure past" (Murphy 1998, 188).

In Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen's conceptual framework (2000), the upper levels (III-VI) could be seen as representations of Deleuze's third synthesis of time. Time at these levels is virtual but significant. Time has been distanced from space, as for example telepresence, virtual togetherness or *atopos* point out. The past, the present and the future are incorporated into each other; the present is about to become present-future (*nykytuleva*), which partly leans itself on the time dimensions of an individual's own world of experience. In cybertext and in ergodic literature (cf. e.g., Aarseth 1997), readers—the users of the text—modify the text simultaneously, as the text represents itself to another reader at another time in a format of different textuality.

"We are embodied time, and so are our societies, made out of history." (Castells 1996, 429)

5 TIME, CULTURE, TECHNOLOGY, HUMAN BEINGS

Communication, mediacy and mediation can be seen as independent of time, place and location, but yet the individual communicator is inevitably bound to one time and place, though not necessarily to those apparently perceived by the recipients. Time in literature, art and science is always eternal. Culture's time, on the other hand, can be argued to be the present (Bibler 1991, 298; translated by Marja Mononen-Aaltonen): "[C]ulture's time is always the present, that is today, where all past and future cultures communicate and

are participants of the dialogue. … Discussion in a culture always goes on today, but—always—through centuries."

Technology and culture are in constant interplay between each other. As the saying goes: which was first, technology or culture? Without one, there cannot be the other, though it is argued that the context for human development is always a culture, not any single technology. Still, it is technology that promotes human beings' development and their culture. Penny (1995, 1), for instance, draws the close parallelism between technology and culture by writing that "[i]t would be difficult to refute the suggestion that technological change has been the major force for cultural change for at least a century". If distancing ourselves from space has led, as Mononen-Aaltonen has eloquently argued (1998), to *atopos*, a place without a location, then **separation from time might lead us to *achronos*, to time without time**. We might be tied or imprisoned by time, but imprisonment may look like freedom to some, especially if it is regarded from a different place and especially if space and time do not count any more.

Timeless time, as Castells (1996, 464) chose to call this phenomenon, is aptly put; it summarises some of the threats we are facing in an information and communication society unless we realise and learn how to use technology wisely and in a humane way. In addition, as Tella (1998, viii) has argued, it should be borne in mind that **media education is not about technology; it is about media, education, human-to-human interaction, dialogic communication, culture, arts**. **Media education is about things that take time**. We should learn again how to respect the old saying "Take your time". Technology comes second, but yet at its best it helps us strive for our first *credo*.

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