

CHAPTER 5

Media Literacy and the K-12 Content Areas

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Educators have diverse and conflicting perspectives about the mass media. Most have a love-hate relationship with the mass media that is complex and multidimensional, and these attitudes and beliefs shape teachers' instructional practices in the classroom. As a result, many approaches to media literacy are emerging simultaneously in the 15,000 school districts in the United States, as educators begin introducing students to instructional practices of media analysis and media production. Media literacy education has been rising in visibility in K-12 schools throughout the 1990s, and while still proportionately small, a growing number of school-based programs are in place at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Defined generally as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms" (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993), media literacy education emphasizes the twin dimensions of analyzing media and creating media (Buckingham, 2003; Kellner, 1995). Drawing upon 15 years of rich tradition in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (see Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992 for review), there has been substantial progress in the United States as educators have developed key concepts and principles that unify the field, formed two national organizations, and held regular conferences (Action Coalition for Media Education [ACME], 2004; Alliance for a Media Literate America [AMLA], 2004).

Media literacy education is being explored by scholars in many different fields (including education, literature, media studies, psychology, and public health) but there is less evidence of implementations occurring in K-12 settings. With more than 1.3 million teachers in U.S. public schools, it is impossible to estimate the extent to which the instructional practices described in this chapter are widespread or rare.

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Given the pressures on educators generated by state testing, differential access to technology, and other significant obstacles, it is reasonable to assume that only a small proportion of American students receive any systematic application of media literacy concepts within the context of subject area instruction (Kubey, 1998).

Many factors may lead a teacher to begin incorporating media analysis and media production activities into the curriculum. Motivations for incorporating media literacy into the curriculum range widely, including efforts to creatively integrate technology (Brooks, 2003; Brunner & Tally, 1999); to motivate and inspire student learning (Hunt, 2001); to minimize exposure to media violence (Levin, 1998); to expand appreciation for social and cultural diversity (Fox, 2002); to reduce the power of U.S. media corporations to control culture (ACME, 2004), to strengthen students' recognition of how film and visual media work as forms of expression and communication (Krueger & Christel, 2001; McCarthy & Ondaatje, 2002); or to enable students to explore the constructed nature of culture, identity, and values (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagoon, 1999; Pacatte, 2000). Others view media literacy as a response to the postmodern condition of education and society (Giroux & Simon, 1989), a method of promoting critical thinking (Considine & Haley, 1999), or an application of constructivist principles of education (Tyner, 1998). Still others see media literacy as a dimension of critical pedagogical theory (Giroux & Simon, 1989; Kellner, 1995). These differences in motivations lie at the heart of some of the arguments and debates that have characterized the media literacy movement's growth and development in the 1990s (Hobbs, 1998). Is the diversity of perspectives now in place among content-area practitioners a source of strength and vitality, or has it polarized and paralyzed the development of the field?

To address this question, this chapter reviews ongoing educational initiatives in media literacy documented in the emerging body of case study and practitioner literature and identifies those (few) empirical studies that have measured the effects of media literacy instruction on students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, with particular focus on health education, social studies, English language arts, communication arts, and the fine and performing arts. These subject areas have been identified as having the most frequent reference to media literacy in state curriculum documents (Kubey & Baker, 1999). From this, recommendations are presented that may help scholars and practitioners to develop this emerging field by exploring questions deserving of further research.

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information from newspapers, the Internet, and television, studying cartoons, ads, pamphlets, and other resources that provide primary source information about historical and current events. But while these texts are common to the work of social studies educators, less is known about *how* materials are used. Do social studies teachers encourage students to reflect upon the ways in which media genres, forms, and representations shape message content? Do social studies educators help students to understand that media texts do not offer transparent reflections of events or people, but interpretations, presented with varying degrees of reliability and power? According to Scholes (1998):

The point is not to pretend to offer students some magic talisman that will enable them to tell truth from falsehood in the media, but rather help them understand "mediation" (the pouring of raw data through the sieve of any particular media) as a textual process that requires interpretation. (p. 140)

While little is known about the presence (or absence) of critical discourse concerning the constructed nature of the message forms, secondary social studies teachers have long been among the most prominent users of audiovisual material in the classroom (Martorella, 1997). While at one time TV and films were a motivational treat for students, historical fiction films (including often popular, mass culture fare) and nonfiction documentaries are now common resources in American classrooms (Cuban, 1986). Some teachers even design their curriculum around the screening of specific films (Duvall, n.d.). Other teachers bring in material they have taped off the air from television news or documentary programs. At conferences, audiovisual and multimedia materials are widely available for sale and occasionally educators may attend a seminar or workshop that demonstrates active viewing procedures, including innovative approaches to note-taking, the use of library research and reading, critical analysis of visual images, or follow-up activities involving oral presentation or role-playing.

To many social studies educators, the focus is on content and knowledge acquisition, with an emphasis on the mastery of key ideas, facts, names, and dates (Loewen, 1995). Media history and content related to media issues may come into the curriculum, for example, when learning about the freedoms protected by the Bill of Rights or when studying the changes in the American presidential election system. But since many social studies teachers avoid discussion about controversial issues and as many as half of these teachers lack a BA or MA in history or even a major with "some history" in it (Loewen, 1995), media issues

(when they are included at all) tend to be predictable. Media violence and the role of TV in presidential elections are the usual topics in a content-focused social studies program, and there are a number of videos, curriculum materials, and other resources that teachers may use to promote media literacy when exploring these issues.

But other social studies educators emphasize instructional strategies that promote critical thinking skills, not rote content-area learning, which is precisely why professional organizations in the social studies are urging that media literacy education be integrated into social studies curriculum frameworks, viewing it as a strategy for bringing principles of constructivism to the traditionalist's classroom (Considine & Haley, 1999). For example, in Texas, social studies skills are defined broadly in state standards as the ability to apply critical thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of print and nonprint sources (Texas Education Agency, 1998a). When media literacy is integrated as a method of inquiry for the social studies, specific objectives for student performance may include: 1) identifying ways that social scientists analyze limited evidence; 2) locating and using primary and secondary sources, including media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts; and 3) analyzing information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing and contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions (Texas Education Agency, 1998b).

In Oyster River, New Hampshire, a social studies teacher used newsmagazines in a current events activity around the time of the 1996 presidential election. The class examined a *Time* magazine issue featuring the furrowed face of Bob Dole, analyzing the editorial position offered by the visual dimensions of the photo, including the use of color, contrast, facial expression, and lighting. Additional activities included tracking a candidate's issues, slogans, and sound bites and seeing how the media covered these. As a class, students kept track of how much time the media spent reporting on who was ahead and behind in the polls (the "horse-race" style coverage) as compared with providing information on candidates' policies on controversial issues (Hobbs, 1998c). It is hoped that many social studies educators engage in instructional practices like these in the context of a presidential election. But given the enormous diversity of potential interactive technology tools and media texts available to social studies educators and the lack of research on how these resources are used, we have little knowledge of the instructional processes that teachers draw upon when they employ media and technology in the classroom.

Of course, this is no surprise to a classroom teacher: as students activate prior knowledge, they take pleasure in learning. As many have specific information, ideas, questions, and theories to share, teachers can more easily step into the role of facilitating inquiry (Sommer, 2001). For many teachers, the use of popular culture in the classroom is valuable primarily for its motivational function; it is possible that some teachers do not use popular culture texts to promote critical thinking per se. As a result, some scholars fear that talking about media and popular culture “dumbs down” the curriculum and that replacing literature with popular culture impoverishes the quality of classroom discourse (Applebee, 1996).

In recent years, these fears have been partially alleviated by the work of Robert Scholes from Brown University, the current president of the Modern Language Association, whose work on the Pacesetter English program helped bring media literacy into the Advanced Placement curriculum in high school English (Scholes, 1998). In this program, English educators are urged to incorporate a wide range of texts beyond the traditional literary canon, including film, television, advertising, the Internet, and popular media (College Board, 2000).

Finally, an increasingly prominent method of instruction in English education emphasizes the use of media and technology tools for *representing ideas in verbal, visual, or graphic forms* for the purpose of self-expression and communication. Educational technology specialists, who emphasize the need for students to have opportunities to use visual and electronic tools to create as well as analyze media texts, support English teachers in these efforts. This alliance is finding considerable support in school districts and in national professional organizations. For example, in 2003, the Board of Directors of the National Council of Teachers of English approved a resolution stating that they will: (1) encourage preservice, in-service, and staff development programs that will focus on new literacies, multimedia composition, and an expanded conceptualization of literacy; (2) encourage research and develop models of district, school, and classroom policies that would promote multimedia composition; and (3) encourage integrating multimedia composition in English language arts curriculum and teacher education, and in refining related standards at local, state, and national levels (NCTE, 2003). This resolution provides further evidence that, among mainstream K-12 educators, the concept of literacy is being broadened to include multimedia forms of expression and communication alongside print media.

Little empirical work has been conducted to measure the impact of media literacy on the development of students' academic skill development. Preliminary evidence shows that media analysis and media pro-

duction activities may affect the growth of literacy skills for older adolescents. In some high schools, media literacy has been shown to create an instructional context that measurably strengthens students' critical thinking skills (Quin & McMahon, 1995) and a recent evaluation of a year-long program integrating media literacy into Grade 11 English showed statistically significant increases in students' reading comprehension strategies and writing skills compared with a matched control group that received no media literacy instruction (Hobbs & Frost, 2003). Further research is needed to understand how media literacy education affects the differential development of speaking, listening, writing, and reading among high- and low-ability students, in particular. It will also be necessary to determine whether and how family media use habits (including reading, computer use, and viewing behaviors) interact with classroom instructional practices to promote the development of critical thinking skills.

Fine and Performing Arts

The media arts are now often included along with the visual arts, music, dance, and drama in both secondary and university education programs. The media arts—defined as art that is produced using some combination of technology or incorporating media objects as an essential component of the work—includes narrative, documentary, and experimental films; videos and digital products; and installation art that uses media and computer-generated and displayed art (McCarthy & Ondaatje, 2002). While it is not common for drama, music, visual arts, or dance teachers to engage in formal media analysis activities, many use video production to record performances, and some teachers even weave the key concepts of media literacy into their existing arts curriculum. In some high schools, media arts are positioned as one of the many tools for self-expression and creativity; in other schools, media arts courses are housed within a technology program. This may have an impact on the instruction provided to students. Some high school media arts programs rely on graphic design and media professionals for staffing. In these programs, the curriculum (even though housed in the arts program) may revolve around the mastery of specific technology tools (i.e., learning to use Photoshop for graphic design, Adobe Premiere for video editing, and Reason for music composition and sound). Other media arts education programs sniff at the technology and commercial-sector focus of such programs and instead bring the artist-in-residency model into schools, involving practicing artists from the community on short-term media projects with a small group of youth.

cialists in K-12 schools (Market Data Retrieval, 2003). Simple one-camera studios are not uncommon in the library/media centers of some newly built elementary schools, where students make daily or weekly newscasts. Journalism education and media production at the high school level have long been approached as a preprofessional skill leading to a career (Blanchard & Christ, 1993).

Not surprisingly, at the same time that many high school journalism programs have been eliminated or have struggled for survival since the 1980s, video production facilities have expanded to include more than half of American high schools, with a variety of elective courses offered to students. Often these courses are part of a vocational education or nonacademic track, designed as electives or for noncollege bound students. In high school, students can learn how to operate media production equipment, including cameras, switching and sound equipment, and editing and image manipulation software. These courses often (overtly or covertly) draw from the pool of students with low grade point averages (GPAs) or learning disabilities, racial minorities, or students of low socioeconomic status (Hobbs, 1994). Of course, many schools have ambitious, outstanding programs with a diverse group of participating boys and girls including high-ability students (with many of these schools now routinely posting their students' work on the Internet). In some communities, high school video production courses are taught by former media professionals, who may or may not emphasize the development of critical thinking about the media, message analysis, or social or political activism (Goldfarb, 2002). Conversely, other districts assign video production classes to teachers who may have little expertise or prior experience with media production, teaching, or classroom management, ensuring a rapid staffing turnover that may limit the effectiveness of programs.

In fact, it is important to note that media literacy educators have long felt ambivalent (and even hostile) about the value of vocationally oriented media production as an end in itself. Masterman (1985, pp. 26-27) notes, "Practical activity does not, in itself, constitute media education," warning about the technician trap—the tendency to see media education as a series of purely technical operations, which can lead to student media production functioning as "busywork, and in its more advanced manifestations, a form of cultural reproduction in which dominant practices become naturalized." According to this view, print and visual media production activities should support the development of critical thinking skills about the media, and an emphasis on vocationalism should be discouraged.

But preprofessional experiences in media production may offer opportunities to explore elements of media analysis, embedded in real-world decision making and consequences. The production of a high school newspaper, still the most common media production activity in American public schools, affords many informal and formal learning experiences that can advance media literacy among students, teachers, and the whole community. Delfino (2004) describes a case where administrators criticized the faculty advisor to a student newspaper for printing a letter to the editor that complained about the texts being used in English classes. It was assumed that the advisor agreed with everything printed in the student newspaper. The criticism demonstrated a lack of understanding of the purpose of letters to the editor, but the complaint served as a vehicle to educate the faculty about the role of the press in a free society, and particularly as to how a newspaper can provide the opportunity for students and community members to air their views and opinions.

There has been some support of K-12 media literacy efforts on the part of university media and communication programs. The National Communication Association (NCA, 1998) has developed educational standards for speaking, listening, and media literacy in elementary and secondary education. Future research should address the role of the university in supporting media literacy education initiatives at the pre-college level. What are the most appropriate forms of support that universities could provide to K-12 educators? Do students who enroll in vocationally oriented communication arts courses in high schools pursue communication majors in college or get entry-level jobs in media fields? Critics charge that vocationally oriented communication arts programs (whether at the secondary or postsecondary level) are outdated and irresponsible, given the highly competitive employment climate in broadcasting and media production fields (Blanchard & Christ, 1993). According to this view, students with broad training in the liberal arts are more likely to be successful media professionals; strong communication and critical thinking skills, coupled with a broad general knowledge base, are deemed more valuable than narrow occupational training using a switcher, sound mixer, or editing or graphics software (Kyker & Curchy, 2004).

Some secondary educators have modified communication arts programs to emphasize this broad humanities focus, instead of a narrow vocational specialization. Some of these schools balance technology skills with a substantial emphasis on critical thinking and an appreciation of the complex processes involved in the communication of mean-

ethical issues in the process. How were they going to represent racial differences? Were they going to perpetuate or challenge stereotypes? These experiences contribute enormously to building critical thinking and communication skills that, according to Jenkins, lead youth to view commercial media content with a more self-conscious perspective.

Misuses of Media in the Classroom

Anyone who visits an American high school and observes classroom activities will see an array of instructional practices involving media and technology that do not appear, on first blush, to be "educational." Some teachers will mistakenly describe any use of media in the classroom as "media literacy." What actually happens in classrooms when teachers use fiction films or documentaries? What attitudes and beliefs are emphasized when teachers use newsmagazines or newspapers? What are students learning when they surf the Internet in a school technology lab? Educators have long recognized that teaching with and about media and popular culture is both subversive *and* conservative, and that technology use in K-12 classrooms can be less innovative and instructionally valuable than suggested by all the hype about the wonders of educational technology (Oppenheimer, 2003). But for all the dynamic, engaged, and effective teaching going on in American schools, teachers can and do use film, television, and music in the classroom in sometimes inappropriate ways—as a substitute for poor preparation, to reward students for good behavior, or to prop up students who lack print literacy skills (Hobbs, 1994). School districts have adopted policies to minimize the possibility of parental disapproval and to encourage teachers to reflect carefully on their specific educational goals when using contemporary media forms in the classroom (Zirkel, 1999). In response to misuses of media, school districts across the nation have instituted policies that limit teachers' use of popular films, television programs, and music. Some districts have a "controversial learning resource" policy that defines such materials as those "not included in the approved learning resources of the district and which are subject to disagreement as to appropriateness because they relate to controversial issues or present material in a manner or context which is itself controversial" (Zirkel, p. 70).

Researchers should examine and evaluate the range of district-level policies (and actual implementation of these policies) that now define the appropriate uses of film, video, or popular media in the classroom. Some school districts have highly restrictive policies, as in the example

described by Stevens (2001), who reports that to use a clip from a PG-rated film with middle-school students, district policy required permission slips from all students' parents. In other districts, teachers report that requirements may include submitting video clips for classroom use for the principal's approval 20 days before screening, or providing copies of videos to be used to a district-level administrator for approval at the beginning of each semester. In some schools, principals communicate their disapproval of district policies and do not require teachers to adhere to video use policies; in other communities, principals establish and enforce even more stringent informal policies (including no use of videotape or popular music) than district-level policies dictate. Research could explore the question of how video and popular culture material is conceptualized as educational fare by teachers who use these materials, how students react to the use of popular culture texts, and how faculty colleagues and school leaders respond when they learn of the use of media "texts" as a component of instruction in the subject areas.

Conclusion

Despite differences in motivations, there is the emergence of some consensus concerning the process of instruction, particularly in the areas of social studies and English language arts, where a richer body of evidence makes it possible to attempt some generalization. The inquiry model seems to be one of the shared practices evident in the work of educators in English language arts and social studies, and less clearly dominant in communication arts education. This four-step inquiry process is a common model:

- encouraging students to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes about the mass media in society and about their media use habits and behaviors in the home;
- helping students learn how to gather information from different source materials, media types and genres, and points of view;
- developing skills of critical thinking to analyze and evaluate messages, and, in particular, learning to subject visual evidence to critical inquiry through close analysis of media "texts";
- creating messages for authentic audiences using a wide range of media production tools.

Through these methods, teachers aim to provide learning experiences in which students reach their own understandings about how to

ingly inexpensive access to computers, digital cameras, and editing software, plus the voluminous resources of the Internet, invite wonder about potential transformations to education that may be happening from innovations occurring outside the K-12 system. Should media literacy education be focused on transforming conservative school cultures that generally resist innovation? On this score, philanthropies have placed their money squarely *outside* the schools, preferring to fund technology or arts-based community programs in youth media and media literacy (Campbell, Hoey, & Perlman, 2001). Although some researchers have begun to evaluate school-based media literacy programs, few studies have been published. One of the challenges faced by most evaluators is the question of conducting research that takes into account the complex real-life characteristics of the school environment. For example, many factors encourage (or discourage) K-12 teachers from implementing curriculum materials in the way that they are intended to be used. While funding agencies place a premium on scientifically evaluated curriculum, teachers rarely (if ever) implement instructional materials according to the teachers' manual. Not only does this limit the validity of research evidence, according to Hollis, Kileen, and Doyon (2003, p. 1), but "much of what might make a curriculum valuable to a teacher, such as the flexibility to teach it in whatever way they want, may be exactly the factor that hinders the ability of a curriculum to achieve its greatest effect." Further research should examine how educators actually use media literacy materials (including videos and lesson plans) in the classroom.

Sadly, many teachers are still teaching more or less the same way as they did when they started in their profession more than 25 years ago. With the average American teacher now aged 46 and likely to stay in education until retirement (Keller & Manzo, 2003), there are still many thousands of schools in the United States where most students get little meaningful time over the course of 12 years of public schooling to engage in critical thinking about media messages or to create messages using technology tools. In many schools, the only meaningful relationship between literacy and technology is the use of word processing software. Most teachers simply have not had the time (or the perceived need) to become fluent in using media tools or the training to understand how to use media texts or media issues to promote critical thinking. By and large, schools of education have not yet discovered media

literacy. Because even young teachers are often not experienced with how to analyze visual or electronic messages, and do not themselves know how to create messages using media and technology, strengthening young people's media literacy skills in the 21st century will continue to be an enormous challenge. If media literacy is to continue to develop as a promising practice in K-12 education, the first generation of innovative educators who have helped integrate media literacy into the context of existing curricula must now begin to create systemic, institutional change that moves beyond the classroom to influence educational leaders and educational institutions.

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