

## **MEDIA LITERACY AS A DIMENSION OF GLOBAL LITERACY**

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Media literacy aims to respond to the complex relationship that people have with media, popular culture and the technologies of communication. Media literacy is often defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (Aufderheide and Firestone, 1993). Most scholars and practitioners in media literacy conceptualize it by emphasizing three elements: (1) a personal focus on accessing and using media; (2) the process of critically analyzing and evaluating the content, form and contexts of media messages and media systems and institutions; and (3) the ability to compose or create messages using digital, visual and electronic tools for purposes of self-expression, communication and advocacy.

In informal settings like museums, technology centers, and libraries, media literacy projects often target particular groups and provide enrichment programs or access to digital technologies. This work helps young people develop communication skills in working together with mutual respect, often on a subject that is relevant to the community or neighborhood setting. In schools, media literacy is often incorporated within mother tongue instruction, citizenship or health, with more formal lessons and activities in media analysis and media production.

Because of the rapidly changing nature of our global cultural environment and the role of literacy in enhancing personal, social and cultural development, the concept of literacy is now expanding to include digital, visual and electronic media and popular culture. This paper explores these questions: Why is media literacy important? What instructional models can be used in informal and formal educational settings to promote media literacy? What approaches to teacher education are used in various settings? And how does media literacy impact the development of print literacy competencies?

### **Rationales for Media Literacy**

Generally, media literacy is justified by recognizing the vital role of information in the development of democracy, cultural participation and active citizenship. Media literacy is also justified by acknowledging the sheer quantity of media exposure in the lives of children and youth, where entertainment and popular culture messages serve as an agent of socialization. Concerns about global workforce development also drive an interest in media literacy, where digital communication tools are beginning to be used to engage the literacy development of under-employed or unemployed youth. Media literacy is increasingly a part of literacy education in both informal and formal settings.

Why is media literacy important? The creation of a public sphere greatly depends upon an engaged citizenry, whose members are interested, willing and able to access information, evaluate it, and make decisions in a collaborative fashion in order to participate in civic and cultural life. In many nations, citizens function as spectators, watching from the sidelines but not actively positioning themselves as actors on the political stage. Media literacy contributes to active citizenship by encouraging a careful focus on the critical analysis of news, journalism and entertainment media messages. Among children and youth, this includes cultivating an interest in current events, emphasizing that all messages have a point of view that reflects the motives and purposes of various authors and agencies involved in the creation and distribution of ideas. It involves the process of learning to participate in various discourse communities to accomplish specific community-oriented goals and to acquire the habits of mind and pragmatic knowledge and skills associated with advocacy and civic engagement. Around the world, media literacy contributes to the process of democratization (Asthana, 2006).

Why is media literacy important? Adolescents all over the world now spend more and more time consuming entertainment media, including television, the Internet, popular music, movies, and videogames, with media consumption estimated between 6 - 8 hours per day for children ages 8 to 18 in the United States and other developed nations in Europe and Asia (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). When children are young, they experience television and other mass media as part of family life. Such passive exposure occurs because children, all over the world, do not always choose the programs they watch (Calvert & Jordan, 2002). Programs watched by adults form a context for children's daily life experiences and affect the development of their tastes in program preferences. The prominence of advertising for beauty products and action-adventure genres which feature high levels of violence and stereotypical villains, victims and heroes has contributed to concerns about the effects of media exposure on materialism and aggressive behavior. In many nations around the world, global changes in film and television distribution systems have massively expanded the range of programming choices available, intensifying the recognition that media have meaningful effects on values, attitudes and beliefs, learning, and social behavior (Carlsson, 2006). Media literacy can help parents and caregivers become more responsible about the appropriate use of media, popular culture and technology in the home.

That mass media and popular culture play a role in socialization is undeniable, although only a few textbooks on human development or adolescence acknowledge this fact and most do not examine the issue in depth. As children move into adolescence, many pay attention the lives of famous athletes, celebrities and musicians that they encounter through TV shows, the Internet, movies, music, and popular magazines. Because adolescents use characters from entertainment media and popular culture that are partially like themselves to address their own personal identity dilemmas, watching films and TV programs and interacting in online entertainment environments can give teens vicarious and real opportunities to rehearse what to say and do in new situations. Scholars have long acknowledged that television and mass media serve as a teacher of social issues, playing the role of cultural storyteller (Bruner 1986). While the Internet has significantly increased the potential for active participation in forms of storytelling like videogaming

and fan fiction, they also create “an environment of bewildering choices, not all of which can be seen as harmless” (Frau-Meigs, 2006, p. 22).

Because children and teenagers have differential access to informational inputs including extended parents, family members, education, and other resources, they differ in the level of reliance on television, Internet and mass media presentations for their understanding of their personal identity and the social world. Media literacy helps children and young people recognize how values are presented in the mass media and how to evaluate the differences in quality, relevance, and usefulness among the ever-expanding array of entertainment and information choices.

Why is media literacy important? Knowledge workers now rely on the Internet and computing tools for many of the tasks involved in using, manipulating and creating information. Other types of workers also require increasingly sophisticated information processing and communication skills. Visual, electronic and digital media and technologies of communication (as new forms of ‘text’) are emerging as the dominant representational systems for literacy in the context of both school and daily life. Children and young people around the world read billboard advertising, popular magazines, and use cell phones, text messaging, and social networking software as an ordinary part of their social interactions with peers and family. Schools are making increasing use of digital tools for learning and emphasize not just tool usage but the development of broader communication skills. In and out of school, formal and informal literacy experiences are increasingly digital and mediated; as a result, scholars are beginning to re-conceptualize literacy to include the ability to use oral communication and digital tools as well as print media for expression and communication (Kinzer & Leander, 2003). Especially in the context of reaching underserved youth from poor and minority backgrounds, media literacy can enhance motivation and engagement that are important for the development of literacy skills.

These three different rationales, which appeal to different groups and constituencies, explain why media literacy has attracted more attention over the past ten years (Buckingham, 2003). Next, I review the instructional models used to develop the media literacy skills of children and youth, including some of the approaches used for teacher education. Evidence concerning the effectiveness of media literacy on knowledge, attitudes and behaviors is then presented, with a particular focus on the impact of media literacy on the development of print literacy skills.

### **Instructional Approaches for Media Literacy**

Media literacy educators rely on a toolkit that consists of conceptual principles and instructional models that guide their work, including key concepts, a focus on critical inquiry, the instructional method of close analysis or deconstruction, formal and informal media production activities, and discussion (Mullins and Linder, 2006; Schwartz & Brown, 2005). While there is considerable ongoing debate about whether media literacy should be integrated into mother tongue instruction or be integrated in various subject areas, both approaches have been used successfully in school settings (Hobbs, 2007; Kist,

2004) and these same approaches have been modified for use in non-school settings for youth, including after school programs, technology centers, and summer programs (Jeffers & Streit, 2003). Some of these instructional practices have been used in youth media production programs developed by NGOs in countries such as Somalia, Ghana, and Kyrgyzstan (Asthana, 2006).

*Key concepts.* Building upon and integrating ideas from the fields of communication, media studies, literary theory and semiotics, the key concepts have emerged (albeit with slightly different formulations in various nations) to synthesize the key theoretical concepts of media literacy education. These concepts include the following ideas:

1. Understanding that all messages are constructions, created by authors for specific purposes and making use of specific production practices and construction techniques (the principle of non-transparency);
2. Recognizing that audiences are active in the meaning-making process as they make connections between the text and their own lived experiences;
3. Appreciating that different forms and genres of communication make use of specific codes, conventions and symbolic forms;
4. Understanding how values and ideologies are conveyed in media messages in ways that represent certain world views and may shape people's perceptions of social reality;
5. Knowing that media messages, media industries and technologies of communication exist within a larger cultural, historical, political, economic and regulatory framework.

These concepts serve as the theoretical underpinning of media literacy and generally help educators in both school and informal settings focus their aims and goals (Schwartz & Brown, 2005).

*Critical questions.* The core pedagogy of media literacy reflects a belief about teaching and learning that is rooted in the work of scholars like John Dewey and Paolo Freire, who viewed students as active participants in the construction of knowledge through action and reflection. In media literacy, educators use students' pre-existing interests in mass media, technology and popular culture to ask questions about the message content, form, audience, purpose and cultural impact or importance. New information, issues and ideas are introduced and students are encouraged to ask questions, gather information, share ideas, and reflect upon their own experience and new knowledge. Termed "the empowerment spiral," this process of increasing levels of awareness, analysis, reflection and action is a central pedagogy of media literacy education (Thoman & Jolls, 2005). However, as I will show below, it is also a challenging practice to implement without appropriate support for teacher education and training.

*Close analysis.* One of the most well-established instructional processes of media literacy is the practice of close analysis. Stemming from traditional literary analysis, a specific media text (i.e., a newspaper article, photo, film scene, commercial, or other artifact) is analyzed through a discussion-based activity. As the Center for Media Literacy (2005, p.

1) explains, “Any media message can be used for a close analysis but commercials are often good choices because they are short and tightly packed with powerful words and images, music and sounds.” In school settings, it is also common to use close analysis to analyze a news story or compare and contrast a scene in a novel with its film adaptation counterpart. Common instructional practices for close analysis include multiple readings of a print text (or multiple screenings of an audio-visual text). This practice is paired with questions and discussion. Close analysis permits an exploration of the key concepts through the process of slowing down and making the ‘reading’ process public and shared. This process helps readers gain awareness of how meaning is constructed through interpretation; through this process, they also gain confidence in their own skills as interpreters of messages.

*Reflection on media consumption choices.* Another common media literacy activity is the “media diary” or “media fast” project. In this activity, students may keep a diary of their daily media choices and technology use for some pre-determined period of time (usually no more than one week). Some instructors ask students to fast from consuming one media form or genre, inviting students to give up these messages temporarily so that, through absence, they may reflect upon the pleasures and functions it serves in daily life. Discussion and writing are generally used to reflect on the experience of documenting one’s media consumption or participating in a media fast. These activities are designed to deepen students’ awareness of the extent to which many types of entertainment media and information technologies are woven into the communication environment and the fabric of daily routines.

*Media production.* In the United States, most non-school settings where media literacy occurs emphasize media production (NAMAC, 2003). A large number of programs are designed with the goal of engaging school dropouts or unemployed youth with high-interest literacy and technology skills in order to discourage the cycle of poverty in rural poor and urban neighborhoods. This component of media literacy generates high levels of enthusiasm among students, who are often eager to create music videos, love stories, or action-adventure narratives featuring themselves and their peers. While sometimes dismissed by educators, researchers have shown that students’ uses of popular media formats frequently display a clear understanding of media languages and conventions, and a form of ironic distance which is at least potentially ‘critical’ (Buckingham, 2003). Similarly, many students enjoy making ‘mashups’ or remixes of existing media content in ways that alters, transforms, or provides ironic or critical commentary on existing cultural products. These practices, when implemented with an opportunity for debriefing and discussion, support the development of critical thinking skills.

A body of scholarship is emerging which documents both the rewards and challenges associated with youth media production. Practitioners have described dramatic changes in students’ level of critical thinking, self-awareness, and confidence. They also report challenges associated with managing groups of students involved in media production tasks which require significant levels of collaboration when there is limited access to technology, different levels of expertise among students, and other challenges.

While media literacy is still a relatively unfamiliar and new endeavor for many, the implementation of instructional practices such as close analysis, reflection on media consumption, and media production activities can be accomplished effectively only when educators have the training and skills that enable them to use these approaches well. In the next section, I explore how teacher education is provided in both formal and informal settings.

### **Approaches to Teacher Education**

In many nations, teacher education in media literacy has used informal and formal approaches based on the types of expertise available. For example, in countries like Great Britain, Australia, Italy, Canada and the United States, there are a growing number of experienced teacher educators who offer consultation, workshops, mentoring, partnerships, seminars and summer institutes for educators. These countries also have membership associations at the state, provincial or national level to support networking and collaboration among those with interests in media literacy education. In some nations, media literacy is supported by the expertise of media artists, media and technology professionals, and leaders of NGOs. In other cases, the government supports programs which brings people together to explore media literacy. For example, in Finland the year 2004 was dedicated to film and media education. Many workshops, festivals and projects were supported financially by the Finnish Ministry of Education, which contributed to new initiatives (Lemmen, 2005).

In both formal and informal settings, it is still typical for media literacy programs to rely on the enthusiasm of the individual teacher, who teach it as a “hobby subject.” Few training institutions offer the subject at all either in terms of content subjects (in communication studies) or of methodologically-oriented training (in education). For example, teachers in Australia generally obtain training and information from informal sources, including “community groups working in that area, organizations of interested teachers, and a wide variety of short courses” (Kress, 2003, p. 199). This parallels the types of approaches that are used in the United States, Holland, Italy, Great Britain and other nations. The following approaches are generally used for teacher education in both formal and informal settings.

*Self-taught.* In most cases in both developed and developing nations, educators who implement media literacy programs are largely self-taught, with no formal educational training in this area. These educators may have read books about media studies or media literacy; perhaps they have taught themselves how to use software for the design and production of multimedia. In most countries, neither classroom teachers nor youth service workers receive any basic initiation in media analysis or media production practices and most rely on their own background knowledge, independent study and interest in the topic. Even in England, where media literacy is the most well-established of any of nations, a high proportion of British media teachers have little or no formal training, even when teachers are teaching A-level courses in Media Studies. (Buckingham, 2006). As a result, among self-taught teachers, it is common to see media studies concepts being

didactically taught without any of the reflexivity or responsiveness mandated by the pedagogy of media literacy, like the use of the critical questions or the empowerment spiral described above.

*Staff development training.* The dominant practice for training in media literacy is the conference workshop, staff development program or short course, often available to educators or youth service workers in after-school, half-day, day-long or multiple day formats. In this model, educators and youth service workers are offered an introduction to media literacy, where various approaches to media analysis and/or production are modeled and discussed. Sometimes these short courses focus on a particular theme like popular music, media violence, film narrative, children's media use, or Internet website evaluation. This model is more effective in conveying approaches to close analysis but not as effective for media production (Kirwan, Learmonth, Sayer & Williams, 2003).

*Curriculum-based approaches.* In this model, educators are offered curriculum materials, videos or other resources that can be used for media literacy education. For example, a curriculum called "Hidden Heroes" offers a model for youth media educators to use in implementing a media production activity where participants find and interview local heroes in their community, write a script and ultimately produce a short video featuring these individuals (Just Think, 2001). In Maryland USA, the Department of Education was able to offer "Assignment: Media Literacy," media literacy curriculum materials (in print and video formats) to several thousands of teachers in the state as the result of a private-public partnership between the government and a television production firm, the Discovery Channel (Hobbs, 2004). By embedding the key concepts of media literacy into the existing state curriculum framework, curriculum materials help teachers to use some of the instructional methods of media literacy but may not contribute to broader conceptual understanding.

*Mentoring and partnerships.* A small number scholars and advocates with interests in media literacy have been involved in long-term collaborations with particular school programs or NGOs, providing an array of staff development services, mentoring and evaluation (Hobbs, 1998). This approach provides an on-ramp for teachers to acquire skills in teaching media analysis and supervising media production by offering in-classroom, real-time support from more experienced mentors or partners. Among the most labor-intensive methods, this is also one that yields consistent results.

*University coursework.* In part because of its interdisciplinary position between the fields of education and communication/media studies, media literacy has had a particularly difficult time in establishing itself in higher education. Until recently, only a handful of universities and colleges around the world have offered formal undergraduate or graduate-level coursework in this area. However, there have been an increased number of courses offered in both communication and education programs (Keen, 2003) and as new PhDs with interests and expertise in media literacy enter the field, growth in this area is anticipated over the next ten years.

It is beyond the scope of this report to examine the strengths and weaknesses of these various approaches to teacher education in media literacy. Each approach is dependent upon the availability of expertise available, and as a result, the implementation of teacher education for media literacy in most countries is geographically uneven. Staff training for both school and non-school settings is affected by such differences. For example, in Italy, there are more opportunities available in Milan and Rome than in other cities (Felini, 2007). As a result of differential access to expertise, decisions about implementing teacher education are often made by default or convenience. In the next section, I review the evidence based concerning some effects of media literacy.

### **Effects of Media Literacy Education**

For television viewing and other media consumption experience to contribute to human growth and development, instead of just a means of killing time, the experience must be made more complex and more integrated with one's life goals (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). They write, "Schools would be well advised to embark on formal instruction in the grammatical and rhetorical forms of film and television in order to help students to learn to process media in more critical and complex ways," noting that a public well-educated in the nuances of visual media will both demand better quality and be less open to manipulation (p 214). Since 1990, there has been a rapid growth in the emergence of media literacy programs worldwide and a growing body of scholarship exists to document the influence of these programs on the lives of children and youth.

Due to space constraints, this report cannot review the volume of scholarship concerning the effects of media literacy education on children and youth. Much of this evidence examines media literacy as an intervention for health outcomes, including substance abuse prevention, nutrition, and body image. There is a growing consensus that media literacy does seem to affect the motivation and engagement of young people, the quality of student-teacher relationships, the impact of media literacy on reading comprehension and analysis skills, and media literacy's contribution to citizenship skills. Evidence for these claims is reviewed below.

*Increased motivation and engagement.* Pointing to the importance of activating students' prior knowledge, teachers report that learning motivation and achievement are increased when media literacy is used with adolescents (Hobbs, 2007). Similarly, researchers report that children's writing about media characters, superheroes and television programs in the context of media literacy education demonstrated evidence of high levels of motivation and engagement (Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999). Media literacy has also been used among second-language teachers as a means to engage learners, who have discovered that, in the classroom, the use of video, news media and popular culture texts are perceived by language learners as intrinsically interesting (Mackey, 2002). The experience of talking about video news stories, for example, as a means to develop language skills was understood as a form of play (Gruba, 2006). Because it makes transformative use of media and popular culture texts that are pleurably experienced in the home, teachers believe that media literacy helps engage young people in learning

tasks. As yet, few studies of media literacy's impact on motivation have examined the students' point of view, however.

*Quality of student teacher relationships.* In part because of the increasingly fragmented digital media culture, students' lived experiences with media, popular culture, and technology are often worlds apart from that of adults. In many nations, adolescents have their own music, their own television programs, and they are far more likely to use the Internet for entertainment than adults. Today, the generation gap between teachers and adolescents is complicated by constructions of identity that are embedded in differential access to technology and interest in popular culture (Alvermann, 2002). Because students bring their media consumption and technology proficiencies into the context of media literacy education, some authors have pointed to a reduction in the traditional hierarchical relationships between students and teachers (Kellner & Share, 2005).

*Text comprehension and analysis skills.* Just as literary scholars have begun to use the word 'text' to refer to all symbolic expression that is used in the sharing of meaning, media literacy educators want to subject all forms of media and popular culture to the critical lenses traditionally used in literature, cultural studies, and sociology. As literary critic Robert Scholes has explained, the special mystical privileges we have accorded to literature cannot be sustained. In *The Rise and Fall of English*, Scholes (1998) rejects the idea of a canon of privileged texts and instead reconstructs the discipline of English around the notion of textuality. He connects the theory of composition and the theory of literature and recognizes the shared stance of students and teachers as practitioners of reading and writing—especially as reading and writing now occur with all the forms, genres, symbol systems and technologies that are part of our cultural heritage and our contemporary culture. Media literacy is recognized, fundamentally, as the process of critical reading, analysis and composition.

Case studies provide emerging evidence of the value of this approach. For example, Sefton-Green and Buckingham (1994) undertook a close analysis of one adolescent's critical writing, tracing how he gradually developed the ability to generalize about the texts he was discussing, to support his assertions with evidence, and to sustain more abstract arguments. In this case, he was able not merely to apply or illustrate theories or concepts, but also to make reflexive judgments about them (for example, by questioning the notion of 'stereotyping'). This youth's gradual mastery of terminology and linguistic structures reflected a developing control over thought processes. Similarly, Bruce (in press) observed teenagers as they collaborated in creating a video, and documented their use of compositional practices that parallel (and extend) the writing process.

Empirical work has also demonstrated that media literacy education increases students' literacy skills, specifically their reading comprehension and analysis skills. Hobbs (2007) used a quasi-experimental design to compare 17-year old students in two demographically-matched schools, one of which had implemented a media literacy program. She found statistically significant improvements in reading comprehension, understanding of television news, and listening skills. In addition, students in the media literacy class were better able to identify the purpose, target audience, point of view and

omissions present in a print newsmagazine article, TV news segment, and an advertisement. Media literacy education improves students' ability to make sense of and analyze messages, going beyond the superficial level of meaning-making to probe more deeply at intentionality and authorship.

*Citizenship skills.* In school settings, citizenship goals for media literacy are often expressed defensively, as in this example from a British school: "Media education has to be included within citizenship or contribute towards it because the easily led or unwary citizen is disempowered" (Kirwan, Learmonth, Sayer & Williams, 2003). By contrast, in informal settings, citizenship goals are generally presented around the themes of personal and civic empowerment, emphasizing that through critical analysis and creation of media, it is possible to contribute to changes that can improve one's neighborhood, community, nation and world. Despite volumes of rhetoric about the potential of media literacy to build citizenship skills, there is only preliminary evidence exists to demonstrate how media literacy may contribute to the attitudes, knowledge, values and behaviors associated with citizenship. Goodman (2003) found that students in an informal media literacy program gained a sense of personal responsibility for the welfare of their communities. In one school setting, adolescents dramatically increased their use of news media Girls, in particular, gained more skepticism about politicians while increasing their political efficacy (Hobbs, 2007).

### *Conclusion*

Internet users are beginning to reflect on the "mechanisms of representation of the world implicit in Internet technology and content and the subtle ways in which these mechanisms both amplified and reduced personal control (Bakarddjieva, p. 112).

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