

# The Seven Great Debates in the Media literacy Movement

by Renée Hobbs

In recent years, there has been an explosion of educational practices and curriculum resource materials that make use of the broad concept of *media literacy*. Media literacy has been defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993). It is a term used by a growing number of scholars and educators to refer to the process of critically analyzing and learning to create one's own messages in print, audio, video, and multimedia. Its emphasis is on the learning and teaching of these skills through using mass media texts in primarily school-based contexts (Alvarado, Gutch, & Wollen, 1987; Brown, 1991; Hobbs, 1994a; Piette, 1997). Media literacy, though, is a concept whose broad definition and range of applications lead to diverse approaches, creating some intriguing conflicts and tensions. Tyner (1992) has drawn parallels between the emerging media literacy movement in the United States and the parable of the blind men and the elephant, each of whom senses a tiny part of the whole. Educators and scholars with disciplinary backgrounds in media studies, the fine and performing arts, history, psychology and sociology, education, and literary analysis each may vigorously defend one's own understanding of what it means to access, analyze, evaluate, or create media texts without a full awareness of the extent of the complexity, depth, or integrity of various other approaches. Illustrating the antagonism generated by this diversity, at the founding convention of the Cultural Environment Movement in St. Louis in April 1996, Bob McCannon, a leader of the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, noted that, "Whenever media literacy educators get together, they always circle the wagons—and shoot in!"

Does the wide diversity of perspectives among educators serve as a source of strength for the emerging media literacy movement, or does it suggest the essentially problematic nature of recent attempts to define and implement such an expansive and unstable concept as media literacy?

The tensions that are generated when media educators come together may limit the ability of educators to collaborate on projects of significant national or

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regional scope. For example, in 1995, a group of Massachusetts educators, scholars, artists, and activists met to found the Massachusetts Coalition for Media Literacy. In a series of meetings held at public television station WGBH and hosted by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, the conflicts generated by diverse goals, motives, and instructional practices became apparent. Some people were offended by the antimedia (“kill your television”) tone reflected in the comments of some participants. Some academics felt that the remarks of teachers and representatives of nonprofit groups were superficial and not sufficiently informed by theory. Some participants believed the critical educational objective should be to reverse young people’s unhealthy dependence on media messages and persuade them to shift their interest toward the alternative media arts, whereas others understood mass media consumption to be a natural, developmentally normal part of childhood and adolescence.

The diversity of approaches, philosophies, and goals of media education may be the inevitable result of an emerging field, at the intersection of media studies and education. This field is finally beginning to percolate as a result of result experiments in the laboratories of the public schools. Perhaps vigorous great debates are an asset to an educational environment where, too often, fragmented and iconoclastic subcultures exist, with narrowly drawn parameters, competing interests, and intellectual cliques.

In 1996, the National Media Literacy Conference in Los Angeles drew high school English teachers, college professors, screenwriters, advocates for children’s television, public health experts, elementary school teachers, communication policy specialists, video artists and musicians, members of the religious education community, middle-school health teachers, youth advocates, and technology experts for a 3-day conference where a wide range of voices and points of view were heard. Such diversity of perspectives might be the engine that is fueling the growing interest in media literacy, as its open definition and broad terrain serve to bring individuals (largely from outside the academy) together, bound by a common interest in working with young people to create and analyze media critically.

Throughout the world, many efforts to focus, narrow, and define the scope of media literacy have been ongoing throughout the 1980s (Bazalgette, 1992b; Bazalgette, Bevort, & Savino, 1991; Bertelsmann Foundation, 1993, 1994; Quin & McMahon, 1995). As a result of such developments, educators have begun to agree on key concepts that are essential instructional points to be explored whenever media texts are used in the classroom. At the 1993 Media Literacy National Leadership Conference, U.S. educators could not agree on the range of appropriate goals for media education or the scope of appropriate instructional techniques, but they did identify the following concepts, based on models developed by British, Australian, and Canadian educators, that should be included in the analysis of media messages:

- (1) media messages are constructed;
- (2) media messages are produced within economic, social, political, historical and aesthetic contexts;
- (3) the interpretative meaning-making processes involved in message reception consist of an interaction between the reader, the text and the culture;

- (4) media have unique “languages,” characteristics which typify various forms, genres and symbol systems of communication;
- (5) media representations play a role in people’s understanding of social reality. (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 2)

The consensus generated by establishing these key concepts in 1993 led to increased collaborative activity among U.S. media educators, making it possible to hold national-level teacher-education programs featuring a range of scholars and educators from different geographic regions and with different educational backgrounds and areas of expertise (Hobbs, 1994b). An emerging consensus about the definition and basic analytic framework for media education has been concomitant with an increase in the quality of teacher-education programs available throughout the country, as well as an increase in the quantity of resource materials that have been created in the past 5 years.

In this essay I review some of the questions that underlie the still ongoing arguments among the diverse group of educators, activists, and scholars who practice media literacy education with elementary and secondary school students, in and out of the K–12 classroom, in the United States. The seven questions identified here are not the only issues that get debated, of course, but the great debates identified in this paper are foundational, that is, these seven questions define the field of inquiry for practitioners at the present time. As a cluster of issues regarding varying educational philosophies, the “great debates” identified in this paper are essentially framing questions that explicitly or implicitly guide the classroom practices of those educators who teach with and about the media.

### **The Seven Debates**

*Should media literacy education aim to protect children and young people from negative media influences?*

Educators with interests in media literacy can and do embrace a wide variety of aims, motives, goals, and objectives including improving reasoning and communication skills (Brunner & Smith, 1994; Hobbs, 1996); confronting issues of race, class, and gender inequities (Eriksen-Terzian, 1992); improving attitudes towards democracy, citizenship, and political participation (Carnes, 1996; Jospin, 1992; Landa, 1992; Morduchowitz, 1997; Newspaper Association of America, 1995; Sandroni, 1992); reshaping communication policy and media industry practices (Center for Media Education, 1997; Kumar, 1992); the facilitation of personal growth (Mendez & Reyes, 1992); dealing with youth substance abuse and violence prevention (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Gorley, 1997; ONDCP, 1996); enhancing career skills (Freedom Forum, 1994); promoting issues of faith and social justice (Center for Media Literacy, 1993; Mahony, 1992); inspiring awareness of materialism and the commodification of culture (Boihem & Emmanouildes, 1996; Citizens for Media Literacy, 1993); and improving the quality of education (Dichanz, 1995; Hobbs, in 1998c; Piette & Giroux, 1996).

Parents’ concern about the “avalanche of crud” that represents popular culture

has been resuscitated in recent years along with a generalized anxiety about the inability of adults to control children's access to media (Denby, 1996). The protectionist stance that justifies media literacy by noting its power to reduce the negative impact of media on youth is most prevalent among those who do not directly work in school settings (DeGaetano & Bander, 1996). In addition, this position is often exploited simply for its rhetorical value in conveying to parents and community members the relevance of media literacy education in schools.

If children can be taught to deconstruct media texts, the magic mantra goes, then they won't be taken in by the fantasy, seduced by the violence, or manipulated by commercial ploys. Media education, in this scenario, is the pedagogic equivalent of a tetanus shot. (Bazalgette, 1997, p. 72)

Anderson (1983) noted that this approach to media literacy, which he termed *impact mediation*, often organizes content around problem areas like violence, materialism, nutrition and body image, risk-taking behaviors, distortion and bias in reporting, and racial, class, gender, or sexual identity stereotyping. In the United States, many critics, public health officials, and scholars have identified media exposure as a risk factor and media literacy as a protective factor. Recent evidence demonstrates that media literacy education can affect young children's decision-making behaviors about alcohol (Austin & Johnson, 1997).

The claim that media literacy can protect young people from negative media influence is problematic to many educators and scholars, and in Great Britain, this perspective has been particularly derided by scholars who believe that such approaches are elitist and based on poorly grounded social science research (Collins, 1992; Halloran & Jones, 1992; Hart, 1997). Whether or not it is possible for social science research to demonstrate that media literacy education protects young people from negative media influence, these educators oppose the rhetoric of protection on pedagogical grounds. According to this view, the teaching methods that result from educators who see themselves as protecting students are ineffective in the classroom. When media literacy skills are positioned in opposition to media culture, the quality of the instruction is compromised. Many teachers at both the K-12 and university levels have found that students are unresponsive to the idea that they are helpless victims of media influence who need to be rescued from the excesses and evils of their interest in popular culture. Buckingham (1993) suggested that by focusing on the problematic features of the mass media, we neglect young people's emotional engagement with the media, and we may ignore the genuine pleasures they receive, substituting cynicism and superiority instead of promoting real questioning and analysis. Too often, the protectionist stance leads to an instructor-focused classroom, where the teacher tells the student the "facts" about media's negative influence, about the manipulation of messages, and the student listens quietly and takes notes for the test. Such an approach to teaching and learning may cause students to parrot the correct interpretations—the ones the teacher has sanctioned—and, in doing so, media literacy education may lose its authenticity and its relevance to students' lives (Buckingham, 1990; Masterman, 1985; Williamson, 1981).

*Should media production be an essential feature of media literacy education?*

Some educators believe that young people cannot become truly critical consumers of the mass media until they have had experience making photographs, planning and organizing ideas through storyboards, writing scripts and performing in front of a camera, designing their own web pages, or reporting a news story. "The power of technology is unleashed when students can use it in their own hands as authors of their own work and use it for critical inquiry, self-reflection and creative expression" (Goodman, 1996, p. 2). According to this view, media literacy is incomplete unless students get a lot of experience writing as well as reading media texts. In Great Britain, media production work is actively used to assess student skills (Stafford, 1992). In Canada, rubrics for evaluating student-created media productions are available to aid teachers as they include media production activities as part of their expectations for student work (Worsnop, 1996).

Educators have recognized that efforts to include media production in the classroom usually fall into one of two categories: expressive or vocational (Fraser, 1992; Lambert, 1997). Educators who advocate expressive media production work usually emphasize the strengthening of students' creative skills, using the language of empowerment to highlight the benefits that result from discovering one's own voice. Educators who emphasize vocational media production often emphasize the value of collaborative teamwork, the growth of media production as an industry, and the ways in which many nontraditional learners may excel in tasks related to visual thinking, planning, editing, performing, or directing (Lusted, 1991; Stafford, 1992).

Many educators, scholars, and parents, however, have wondered what students are actually learning when they make videos or write news stories (Grahame, 1991). The greatest anxiety about practical work centers around fears that media production can easily be taught as a decontextualized set of tasks that teach students a narrow set of skills, skills that merely reproduce the hierarchy of Hollywood or the news industry. According to this view, teaching media production to children or youth is a bogus type of vocational education that lures students with the claim of learning job skills when, in reality, students are distracted from learning the culturally valued skills of reading and writing. "The great risk with practical work . . . is that students will simply learn to ape the professionals, and that a critical, analytical perspective will be lost" (Stafford, 1990, p. 81). Such critiques have been increasingly leveled at college and university programs in communication (Davies, 1996).

The practical limitations of many production activities preclude their being offered to most elementary- and secondary-school students. For example, video and multimedia production often requires more equipment, classroom time, personnel, and teacher training than is available in many schools. Historically, in some schools, video production has been used as the lowest track in the English or vocational-education curriculum, in what Buckingham (1993) has called, "institutionalized under achievement" (p. 284). In these schools, low-ability students are allowed to "play" with video-based and computer technologies, whereas high-ability students get more traditional print-based education. In many U.S. schools

and in some European schools, media production is the province of the nonreaders or the low-ability or behavior-problem students for whom media production is the last chance before dropping out (Bazalgette, 1993; Bevort & Thierry, 1997; Fraser, 1992; Hobbs, 1994a). Such practices inevitably lead some educators to bypass media production activities in order to place media literacy skills in a more elevated context in the intellectual hierarchy of the schools.

*Should media literacy focus on popular culture texts?*

It may seem obvious that media literacy focuses on the media texts of popular culture, but in the context of elementary and secondary schools, there is considerable debate about the merits and pitfalls of using popular media texts in the classroom (Greenaway, 1997; Hart, 1997). "Schools, at all levels, are constituted to devalue popular culture, including its electronically mediated forms" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 153). Texts from popular culture may challenge and disrupt the routines of the classroom and provide opportunities for teachers and students to discuss epistemological issues relevant to students' growing understanding of the processes involved in learning and communication (Dewing, 1992; Giroux, 1994). According to this argument, the texts of everyday life, when constituted as objects of social knowledge, provide the possibility for combining textual, historical, and ideological analyses in ways that help students and teachers move beyond the limits of traditional disciplines and subject areas.

Other educators, however, wonder how an average parent might respond if his or her 10th-grade son or daughter came home from school talking about a classroom lesson that compared an episode of *The Simpsons* to a Mark Twain short story? In fact, educators have used episodes of *The Simpsons* to study the genres of satire and parody, noting that students' observations about the experience of deconstructing such texts might motivate their interest in literary works (Fraser, 1992; Hobbs, 1998b).

Understanding that information is socially constructed is the major contribution of media literacy. According to some media educators, this and other media literacy concepts can be learned through the analysis of classic works of literature and film just as well as through a close examination of *Beavis and Butthead*. In 1995, at a teacher education program for more than 300 educators in North Carolina, a vigorous debate erupted among participants about whether a soft drink commercial should be used as a study object in the classroom. One teacher pointed out that media literacy skills could be effectively taught using fine contemporary and classic films, photographs in textbooks, and national newspapers like the *New York Times*. Another teacher emphasized the fact that students were exposed to thousands of ads on TV and to hundreds of movies and situation comedies. In his view, students needed practice analyzing the texts that are part of their ordinary viewing experience. A central empirical question, as yet relatively unexplored in the literature, underlies this debate: To what extent do the skills of media literacy transfer from one genre or symbolic form to another?

The popular culture emphasis in media literacy education is largely what distinguishes this form of critical thinking from other related concepts, including infor-

mation literacy, computer literacy, and print literacy (Masterman, 1997; McClure, 1996; Piette, 1997; Tyner, in press). Some educators believe that media literacy must be centrally connected to the popular cultural texts that are at the center of students' first curriculum—their home viewing and personal media consumption experience—if the goal of transferring skills from school to home is a desired outcome.

*Should media literacy have a more explicit political and ideological agenda?*

Educators have claimed that media literacy may serve as a means to achieve a range of progressive political ends, for example, altering the rigid institutional practices of the public schools; stopping the use of commercially sponsored media in schools; increasing advocacy regarding public television, local access, or the alternative media arts; or making changes in broadcast and cable regulation regarding media ownership. Still, other teachers may aim to use media literacy practices as a vehicle to promote social changes in students' attitudes about racism, sexism, violence, or homophobia.

Media teachers often see themselves as “chiseling away at the smug assumptions and neat certainties of capitalism . . . showing how images or films or programs that just looked like light-hearted entertainment were really out to manipulate you ideologically” (Bazalgette, 1992b, p. 141). Because the pedagogy of media literacy invites questions about how messages are constructed, educators rightly note that exploring power dynamics around message production and message consumption creates opportunities for meaningful political and social action. Yet, a number of policy leaders have voiced their fears that, without an explicit connection between media literacy skills and social and political advocacy, media literacy may degenerate into a substitute for action instead of a spur to it (K. Montgomery, personal communication, April 24, 1997).

Other educators see in media literacy the potential for bringing about radical changes to the education system. According to some scholars and educators, the power relations of the classroom can be abolished by changing the content of the curriculum to include topics of study (e.g., popular culture) in which students are the experts and teachers know very little (Giroux, 1994). Media literacy, because it emphasizes a critique of textual authority, invites students to identify the cultural codes that structure an author's work, understand how these codes function as part of a social system, and disrupt the text through alternative interpretations (Scholes, 1987). In this view, media literacy is part of a postmodern political project “that links the creation of critical citizens to the development of a radical democracy” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 188).

Buckingham (1993), though, warned of the risks associated with such efforts:

Students may respond to the propagandist approach of . . . teachers in one or two ways. Either they will choose to play the game in which case they may learn to reproduce the “politically correct” responses without necessarily investigating or questioning their own position. Or they will refuse to do so, in which case they will say things they may or may not believe, in order to annoy the teacher and thereby amuse themselves. (p. 290)

To the dismay of radical educators, media literacy concepts and instructional practices are attractive to people with a wide spectrum of political beliefs. Some conservatives see media education in several ways: as a form of social change that focuses on individual action (Tauzin, 1997); as a means to counter the liberal biases of the press; as a dimension of values or character education; or as an alternative to excessive government regulation of media (Lemish & Lemish, 1997).

Educators who accept Dewey's argument that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform may still believe that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with media literacy education should be understood as independent goals, not simply as a means to other ends. Many teachers do not see themselves as forces for radical social or political change (Cremin, 1990). Instead, teachers generally value the concept of promoting students' critical autonomy, which is the process of internalizing the tools of self-reflection, critical analysis, and communication for one's own purposes and motives (Mendez & Reyes, 1992). The pluralism that underlies this argument invites teachers to maximize the students' potential for discovery and the realization of personal, social, or political action without pushing a specific agenda on students.

According to this view, media education should not be reduced to the reproduction of the teacher's ideas about the media (Masterman, 1997). This goal stands in sharp contrast to the way in which media studies is taught at many U.S. colleges and universities. There is an obvious ideology that underlies even the most basic tenets of media literacy education—teaching students to question textual authority and to use reasoning to reach autonomous decisions. This agenda is radical enough, without adding additional baggage associated with other explicitly formulated political or social change objectives (Lemish & Lemish, 1997). Additional political or social change goals may be unlikely to be accepted in the decentralized, politically divided, and community-centered context of mainstream public education.

*Should media literacy be focused on school-based K–12 educational environments?*

A fair amount of scholarly and popular writing in media literacy makes little reference to schools, children, teachers, or public education (Bianculli, 1992; Messaris, 1996; Silverblatt, 1996; Singer & Singer, 1983). Several educators have pointed out the need for media literacy skills to be developed in the home by parents (Axelrod, 1997). Schools are, paradoxically, both the most radical and the most conservative of social institutions (Maehr & Midgely, 1996), and schools have been notoriously silent on defining an appropriate relationship between the schools' mission and the role of media and information (Sizer, 1995). As mentioned earlier, the diversity of purposes, goals, and outcomes for media literacy education naturally limits the effectiveness of work in schools.

Media literacy initiatives have been most successful in school communities where teachers, parents, and students have a shared, common vision about their love–hate relationship with media culture. The most successful efforts to include media literacy in schools have taken 2 or more years of staff development to build a clearly defined understanding of the concept as it relates to classroom practice



among a substantial number of teachers and school leaders within a school district (Brown, 1991; Hobbs, 1998a; Hobbs & Frost, 1997). Efforts to teach critical viewing skills in the 1970s were largely unsuccessful because the programs were not designed with sensitivity to the realities of existing school cultures, the values of particular communities, or the larger context of U.S. public schools. Anderson (1983) strongly chastised media scholars' tendencies to ignore the realities of school boards, superintendents, teachers, students, and parents. Media literacy programs are often "introduced with the help of outside consultants, are briefly championed by administrators within the school district, and then fade as teachers move to simplify their responsibilities under the pressure of student and parental demands" (Anderson, 1983, p. 327).

Media literacy educators work with an understanding that few school reforms are able to push against the "profound commitment of schools to reproduce the prevailing system of social power" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 181). Are U.S. public schools likely to change within the next 20 years in the fairly dramatic ways that media literacy would require? For example, instead of reading eight classic novels in the 10th grade, how many communities will accept the practice of students reading four books, studying two films, and analyzing a newsmagazine and a web site? In light of the challenges of making change within public education, the best sites to implement media education may be in after-school programs, summer camps, religious education programs, library and prevention programs, community-based organizations, and at home with parental guidance. Such programs have seen exponential growth in the past 5 years, as evidenced by the attendance of large numbers of nonschool educators, representing nearly 40% of the attendees, at two national media literacy education conferences held in North Carolina and Los Angeles in recent years.

However, many educators see the emergence of increasing support for media education in recent curriculum-reform efforts at the state and local levels. Media literacy concepts are now included in the curriculum frameworks in more than 15 states. In Massachusetts, the English language-arts state curriculum identifies media literacy as 1 of the 10 guiding principles for effective instruction. In addition, teacher-education programs for educators in the primary grades and those teaching secondary-level language arts, social studies, health, science, music, and art, although still rare, are growing in number. Ongoing efforts are in place in many U.S. school districts. Interest in media education is even growing among mainstream education organizations and health professionals, including the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Most educators who have begun incorporating media literacy concepts into the curriculum have not been part of an organized, systematic district-wide process. Instead, they have adopted these ideas on their own, learning about the media through reading, course work, staff development programs, or conversations with and observations of colleagues. Such momentum from the bottom up represents an important source of energy for the media literacy movement. Though fragmented and often uneven in quality, this approach may be the only pragmatic way to bring such ideas into the lives of the 57 million children and youth now in U.S. schools.

*Should media literacy be taught as a specialist subject or integrated within the context of existing subjects?*

Virtually every educator recognizes the value of infusing media literacy concepts across the curriculum. Media texts are used to convey content in the teaching of science, social studies, history, the arts, and literature. Rarely, however, are the texts used in the classroom (e.g., books, videotapes, computer programs) considered beyond their function as conveyors of information. Those who put forward the view of media literacy concepts as cross-curricular and integrative note the importance of using texts as objects of inquiry (Kress, 1992) and the value of media analysis and production activities as multidimensional opportunities to examine connections across disciplines and subjects (Bevort & Thierry, 1997; Davison, 1992; Erstad, 1997; Richards, 1992).

For example, one history teacher in high school explored media literacy concepts through an analysis of Asians in media images from 1910 to the present. An English teacher invited students to create marketing campaigns for a book, creating bumper stickers, print ads, video promotions, graphics, radio ads, and other media messages. A ninth-grade science teacher had students conduct a shot-by-shot visual analysis of two different documentaries about the Exxon-Valdez environmental disaster, one produced by Jacques Cousteau and the other produced and distributed by Exxon. In this application of media literacy concepts, the media are not studied formally, but the analysis of media texts and the creation of media messages are emphasized as components of course work in the traditional disciplines. This approach carries with it the potential for students to gain exposure to media analysis and production activities, even though it risks trivializing analysis and production if underqualified teachers engage in the work.

Those who advocate media literacy be taught as a separate subject often come to this position mainly as a pragmatic option, as a result of some experience observing educators, working in schools, and getting close to the realities of classroom practice (Kress, 1992). The experience of watching a teacher doing media literacy badly in the classroom is a harrowing experience, which Lemish and Lemish (1997) have termed “media literacy malpractice” (p. 225). At a conference in Rochester, New York, Cary Bazalgette of the British Film Institute once shared an informal estimate of the impact of media literacy teacher education on the actual practices of teachers. This was based on her experience as a teacher educator. With 100 teachers involved in media education training, 40% will do nothing, 25% will do something moderately well, 10% will do something creatively exceptional, and 25% will do something embarrassing, dangerous, or just a waste of time.

The attempt to integrate media literacy concepts across the curriculum may result in the enhancement and vitality of learning and teaching overall, or it may result in an incoherent presentation of the key concepts, as well as the guarantee that teachers will never have adequate training in media subjects. With media literacy concepts permeating the curriculum, “Media education would always be at the margin of each subject, as a more or less unrelated, unvalued extra” (Kress, 1992, p. 200). When a topic or skill is supposed to be developed across the curriculum, it may end up invisible. Yet, a special elective in media literacy would

invariably be available to only a tiny proportion of the 57 million students now in U.S. schools.

*Should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by media organizations?*

In recent years, an increasing number of media firms have developed programs for teachers regarding the use of technology and media in education, including the practices of media literacy (Kamil, 1996). For example, in some communities, local cable-access providers work directly with educators and students to create videotapes for broadcast to the community. The Newspaper Association of America Foundation has produced curriculum materials to help students critically analyze local newspapers using media literacy concepts. *Cable in the Classroom* magazine frequently highlights the efforts of teachers who make use of media literacy concepts in their teaching, and this magazine is distributed widely to schools by cable operators. *KNOW-TV* is a teacher-education curriculum resource with print and video materials. It helps teachers analyze nonfiction television programming in the classroom and is supported by The Learning Channel. It won the 1995 Golden Cable ACE Award for Public Service Programming. Most well-known is the *Family and Community Critical Viewing Project*, supported by the National Parent-Teacher Association and the National Cable Television Association. It is a parent education workshop tying the key concepts of media literacy to an exploration of the issues of media violence. It now has reached nearly 100,000 parents across the United States. Put together, these efforts represent highly coordinated and extensive teacher-education opportunities for learning about strategies for including the critical analysis of media in schools.

The United States lacks the national-level cultural organizations or governmental agencies, comparable to the British Film Institute or the National Film Board of Canada, that might advocate and provide media education. Even more troubling is the decentralized, poorly organized, and uneven quality of ongoing teacher education. This makes it difficult to develop coordinated, multistate initiatives to provide continuing education to the nearly 3 million teachers working in U.S. schools.

Some advocates and critics note that the cable television and newspaper industries should be applauded for providing educators with access to tools, knowledge, and pedagogical strategies regarding media analysis and production. According to this view, media organizations have a social responsibility to help people develop critical thinking about the media as a consumer skill. Also, the good that media organizations can do by contributing their funding outweighs the potential dangers of using the program as part of a public relations campaign or as a shield against government regulation.

Critics of this position point out that the media industry is cleverly taking advantage of educators who are so underfunded and desperate for materials that they will jump at anything that is provided free of charge. Some believe that media organizations are effectively taking the antimedia stand out of the media literacy movement to serve their own goals, co-opting the media literacy movement and softening it to make sure that public criticism of the media never gets too loud, abrasive, or strident (Cowrie, 1995; Montgomery, 1997).

### Issues for the Future

The future of the media literacy movement will depend on the ability of a diverse assembly of educators with interests in media literacy to develop community-based consensus among themselves. The quality of evidence gathered through practical, school-based media literacy experiences plus theoretical insight from scholarly disciplines will affect the resolution of these great debates. At present, media literacy is still an umbrella concept, with a wide spectrum of different educational philosophies, theories, frameworks, practices, settings, methods, goals, and outcomes. Regarding the questions identified in this essay, it is likely that there are many potentially right answers depending on the specific contexts and environments in which media literacy education takes place.

As usual, a paradox is at work: The diversity of perspectives and approaches of media literacy educators is indeed a source of strength and vitality, reflecting the widespread power, relevance, and appeal of the idea that critical analysis of media texts is an essential life skill in a media-saturated society. Yet, this same dizzying array of perspectives is paralyzing, as the inability to reach consensus drives educators, activists, and scholars into defensiveness and sniping, away from efforts to work together. The history of education is littered with examples of this kind of failure, with its resulting polarization and fragmentation among educators and scholars, so it would not be surprising to predict that the nascent media literacy movement could founder, despite the preponderance of rich ideas and vigorous efforts, shattered by the great debates into small tribes of competing interest groups.

It is much easier to accept various sects, coalitions, and subgroups with educational philosophies different from one's own when all can embrace at least one strongly shared belief. But what could that common vision, belief, or purpose be? At the center of media literacy education must be the *pedagogy of inquiry*, which is the act of asking questions about media texts. The cultivation of an open, questioning, reflective, and critical stance towards symbolic texts should be the center pole of the media literacy umbrella, as it is the concept most likely to ensure its survival.

Shifting the business of schooling toward the analysis and creation of messages, away from the providing of answers and toward the process of asking questions, is essentially a radical act. Teachers must rightly be at the center of this transformation. Too often, though, funders look to support programs that provide direct service to youth, not adults. Even worse, academics and graduate students strive to focus on the student-as-subject, with the teacher standing on the sidelines, an unequal partner, or often, not even recognized as a variable in an experimental design.

One cannot impose real change from above, at least not for long. . . . It is illogical to imagine that we can produce thoughtful and critical thinkers by rote imposition or that we can build strong intellectual understanding by imposing message change from above and pretending that it doesn't matter what the implementers of change think or feel. (Meier, 1995, p. 146)

The future of media literacy depends on the development of long-term, rigorous, and intellectually demanding educational work with classroom teachers as essential, even primary, partners in implementing media literacy in schools.

Those scholars and educators who are designing and implementing teacher education in media literacy need to find opportunities to share their experiences, strategies, and philosophies and to find ways to measure and evaluate the quality of the teaching and learning experiences they provide. *Telemedium*, published quarterly by the National Telemedia Council, now provides the only publishing outlet for educators to share reports of media literacy in K–12 classroom practice. Most media literacy curricula produced by teachers are not even shared within a teacher's school, much less with larger networks of educators at regional or national conferences.

In addition, support for cross-departmental efforts among media studies faculty and education faculty is essential if media literacy is to enjoy the vitality provided by scholars and educators with diverse understandings of what it means to be well educated in a media and information society. Graduate students cannot explore the rich potential connections between the fields of media studies and education if university faculty do not make it possible to do so.

The media literacy movement cannot hope to enter the mainstream of U.S. public school education without a high degree of tolerance and respect for diverse perspectives, philosophies, methods, and instructional strategies. This must be coupled with a consensus to implement a pedagogy of inquiry—to make “asking critical questions about what you watch, see, and read” stand at the center of what it means to be media literate. With these two factors in place, then, scholars and educators can begin to participate in the next two important phases in this emerging field of inquiry.

First, increased efforts are needed to bring the knowledge and skills about media analysis and production to a wider variety of settings, reaching more educators and a larger number of children and youth through coordinated programs, events, and educational experiences. By necessity, these will be community based, but a greater number of multistate and national initiatives are important. Second, it is critical to develop theory and research that predicts, documents, measures, and evaluates the complex processes of learning and teaching about the media with these important audiences. It is only through the creation of new evidence from these two kinds of action that the great debates can ever hope to be resolved.

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