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CI 5472 Spring 2008
Final Paper
Due May 12, 2008

Media Literacy in America's Schools:
What it Means, Why it's Important, and Where it Fits

Introduction

America is saturated with media. The last 20 years have seen a rapid growth in media due, in part, to an increase in consumer access to cable or digital TV channels, growing competition among media outlets, the expansion and availability of telecommunications, and the explosion of Internet communications and web-based outlets for viewing, creating, and sharing media. Media surrounds us and infiltrates our culture in unique ways: we use it for news, information, entertainment, communication, advertising, and recreation. It plays a significant role in defining and refining our culture. It is an entrenched part of everyday life—willingly or not—for all Americans. Yet there is one unexplored media frontier in America—its classrooms. Even before the advent of the Internet and all its accompanying media, America's classrooms were ill-prepared to teach media studies. As we have moved into the post-modern era, which historically may be characterized by its rapid growth in media, technology, and communications, that ill-preparedness has grown into a chasm—to step into a classroom is to step out of the real world of media saturation and into a world of media antiquity and deficiency. Never before has media been so important in our world. So then, it is critical, imperative even, that students in our schools are taught the skills needed to be media literate for the world they live in.

What is Media Literacy?

In order to make a case for media literacy in our schools, it is important to define what media literacy is. In an article posted on the The Center for Media Literacy website, Hobbs, Worsnop, Andersen, Share, and Sullivan (2007) point out that that media literacy is not simply media bashing, producing media, teaching with CD-ROMs, or looking for political agendas, stereotypes, or misrepresentations. To define media literacy in terms of what it is becomes more complicated. A host of scholars, researchers, analysts, and educators have all ventured to propose various definitions for media literacy. In discussing media literacy, the National Communication Association [NCA] (no date) says, “Being a critical and reflective consumer of communication requires an understanding of how words, images, graphics, and sounds work together in ways that are both subtle and profound.” While this is a good starting point to consider the true essence of media literacy, the definition focuses too simply on examining the individual components of a medium and how they combine to form meaning. There is no emphasis on examining the underlying forces shaping the media or the inherent values portrayed through the media message.

Another definition for media literacy comes from Carole Cox (as cited on www.medialiteracy.com, 2008) in a document for the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Media: “Media literacy refers to composing, comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, and appreciating the language and texts of ... both print and nonprint media.” Shedding more light on what media literacy entails, Cox is specific in noting that media has language and texts in both print and nonprint forms. Further, she

includes scaffolded levels of thinking skills (similar to Bloom's taxonomy) that are necessary for students to be media literate—comprehend, interpret, analyze.

A third definition pulls together nicely the remaining aspects of media literacy. Shepherd (1993) says:

Media literacy is an informed, critical understanding of the mass media. It involves an examination of the techniques, technologies and institutions that are involved in media production, the ability to critically analyze media messages, and a recognition of the roles that audiences play in making meaning from those messages.

Unlike previous descriptions of media literacy, Shepherd includes a study of media messages and the role of the audience in drawing meaning from the messages. In addition to exploring the overt messages included in media, students could also study subtle or underlying messages: biases, embedded cultural beliefs or assumptions, representations of groups or phenomena in stereotypical ways, or even political or social commentary.

Reflecting on these three definitions and keeping in mind an educational context, perhaps an alternate definition can be provided: media literacy entails critical, reflective media production and use in which the user/consumer considers how the component parts and techniques of media combine to form messages and meaning. The media literate consumer possesses skills for understanding, interpreting, and analyzing media conventions and messages in both print and non-print forms. Further, media literacy explores media's role in culture and society, how media users derive meaning from

media, overt and implied media representations, and factors or institutions influencing the media.

Media Literacy as Distinct from Media Studies

If media literacy is a sophisticated set of thinking and analytic skills, then media studies is the vehicle by which these skills are attained. Often the terms are used interchangeably, but that is somewhat misleading. Literate implies a destination, as though once literate, a particular level has been achieved and growth is complete. Studies, on the other hand, entail a more active process of learning and maturation. Therefore, media literacy for students is the end goal of media studies. Chris Worsnop (1994) writes, “ ‘Media study’ occurs when schools or teachers organize specific courses or units to study the media. ‘Media literacy’ is the expected outcome from...media study. The more you learn about...the media, the more media literacy you have.” Specifically, some examples of media studies activities could include learning about media techniques (film, TV, radio, newspaper, advertising, etc.), investigating online media (blogs, vlogs, wikis, podcasts, instant messaging, etc.), studying media laws and regulations, exploring visual media arts, or reviewing media use trends among Americans.

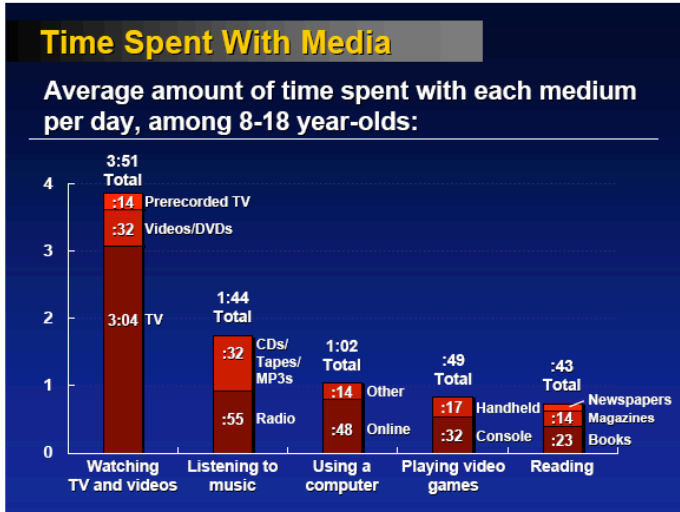
This paper is written with the assumption that the audience understands the term media. It would be an impossible task to list all the types of media that exist, but bear in mind that media takes many forms: print, non-print, high-tech, low-tech, traditional, or digital. Traditional media have been influenced by technology and have adapted to the electronic age; for example, books are available on CD or as e-books, newspapers have print circulation and webpages, TV stations broadcast on air and on the web, and radio

programs can be replayed on the web or downloaded to a digital music player. New media have also developed in the technology age—blogs, vlogs, email, wikis, podcasts, music sharing sites, YouTube, etc. In considering what constitutes media, also note that one genre may have several forms—news media encompasses TV, radio, newspaper, magazines, Internet, blogs, etc. Some less-oft mentioned things also constitute media—concerts, galleries, children’s books and toys, museums, and even fashion. The media encompass a vast range of genres, formats, and audiences.

Reasons for Media Studies in our Schools

The reasons for including media studies in America’s classrooms and curriculum are as vast as the media itself. One of the most significant reasons is the sheer amount of time students spend engaged with media—the statistics, provided below—are staggering. Other reasons include the importance of classroom education reflecting the world in which students live, preparing students to function in a media-saturated society, helping students communicate in new ways, teaching students to engage with and think critically about media, and teaching students to explore how media shapes reality.

As we move through the digital age of media and technology, more and more research has been focused on media use, trends, and theory in American society. The statistics are staggering. In a study of media use by 8-18 year olds, The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that 99% of homes have 1 or more television set, 73% have 3 or more televisions, 86% of homes have computers, and 74% have Internet access (2005, Table 3-A). The study went on to report on media availability in respondents’ bedrooms: 68% have a TV, 49% have videogames, 31% have computers, and 20% have Internet access (KFF, 2005, Table 3-E). Overwhelmingly, young adults in our country have access to at



Source: Rideout, V. *Presentation: Key Finding from New Research on Children's Media Use: Introduction*. Washington, DC: Kaiser Family Foundation, March 9, 2005.

least one form of media on a daily basis in the home. When these results were analyzed by a family's race or ethnicity (white, black, Hispanic), the study found little difference in availability of TV, VCR, radio, and video games; the largest difference among races was related to computer and

Internet availability in the home (KFF, 2005, Table 3-C).

While the availability of TV in homes may not be surprising, the Kaiser Family Foundation study did reveal some eye-opening statistics about the time young people spend with media each day. Media interaction was measured in two ways: exposure to media and use of media. Exposure measures the time spent with each individual medium, while total use measures the actual clock hours per day spent with media (KFF, 2005, p. 36). Exposure time is higher than total use because adolescents are multi-tasking their media use. For example, a student may simultaneously watch TV and surf the web for a total clock time of 1 hour. However, because the youth was engaged in two media activities, each for an hour, that counts as two hours of exposure. What the Kaiser study found is that students spend 8 hours 33minutes per day exposed to media and a daily total media use of 6 hours 21 minutes (2005, Table 5-A). When researchers compared results of the study to results from a similar study conducted in 1999, they found that total media use had not significantly increased in that time: the 1999 study

found a total media use of 6 hours 19 minutes (KFF, 2005, p. 37).

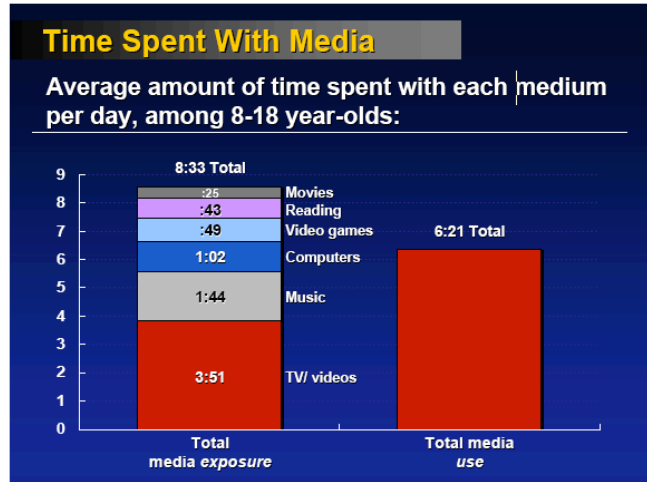
However, exposure to media increased nearly one hour from 1999 to 2005 (KFF, 2005, Table 5-B). This could be the result of increased access to a wider variety of media. Because

the total media use did not increase,

though, this increase in exposure shows that young people are spending more time multi-tasking with their media. The top five activities in which youth engage (by time) are listed as watching television, spending time with parents, spending time with friends, listening to music, and participating in exercise/sports (KFF, 2005, Box 5.1).

Interestingly, 3 of these 5 activities are not inherently media-related; however, young adults often engage in two or more activities at the same time—watching TV with parents or friends, listening to music while exercising, etc.

Undeniably, the Kaiser research demonstrates that young people in this country are spending significant amounts of time consuming media everyday. What the Kaiser study did not address is media creation—there is a difference between passively watching TV and actively composing a blog post. The Kaiser study clearly demonstrates that kids are using media, but what about creating it? A 2007 study finds that 93% of all teenagers use the Internet and 64% of those online are engaging in content creation (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin Macgill, & Smith). The content varies, but some of the activities reported by respondents in the Lenhart et al. (2007) study include sharing artwork,



Source: Rideout, V. *Presentation: Key Finding from New Research on Children's Media Use: Introduction*. Washington, DC: Kaiser Family Foundation, March 9, 2005.

photos, stories, or videos, creating work on others' webpages or blogs, or maintaining their own personal webpages, journals, or blogs.

When considering the data from the Kaiser and Lenhart et al. studies, it seems clear that media is an integrated, embedded, entrenched part of the lives of America's youth and teenagers. The Kaiser study pointed out that students spend nearly 6 ½ hours per day using media—that is roughly the same amount of time as the average school day in America. Kaiser Family Foundation Vice President and director of the Program for the Study of Entertainment Media and Health Vicky Rideout states (2005):

...this generation truly is the media generation, spending nearly a quarter or more than a quarter of every day consuming media messages, surrounded by media in their homes, in their bedrooms and when they leave the home. All of it adding up to a nearly constant stream of incoming media messages. Anything that takes up this much space in young people's lives certainly deserves our full attention.”

Simply the amount of time young people spend with media seems like reason enough to include media studies and media literacy goals in America's schools and curriculum, but there are several other important reasons as well. Curriculum, teaching, and learning need to reflect what is happening outside the classroom walls, outside the school building. Media is overwhelmingly part of the daily lives of students and adults in this country. The classroom should be no different. What message does it send to students about the applicability, the relevance, of classroom learning, if it does not reflect their day-to-day realities? A classroom or school without media use and media studies may lead students to feel that school is disconnected from real life. At a time when schools are under mounting pressures to raise student achievement and graduation rates,

the last thing schools need is for students to feel that school programming is disconnected and disenfranchised from the real world—it could lead to less engaged, less motivated learners, which would ultimately have negative affects on classroom performance, attendance, participation, and, eventually, test scores and graduation rates. Neil Andersen (1992) writes, “We know that students are much more attentive to ideas they recognize as directly relevant to their lives, that their attention spans can increase 400 percent if they perceive a topic to be of personal relevance.” Relevant, meaningful instruction and experiences are critical if we are to engage students in the classroom. Media must be integrated with classroom learning to retain attention and engagement.

Not only is it important for classrooms to reflect reality for the engagement and relevance of student learning, but schools must also prepare students to function in the world beyond the education system. If students are not taught to use media and think about it critically, they will fall behind their peers who are taught how to do this, they will be ill-prepared to function in a media-saturated culture, and they may not have the skills necessary to succeed in college or on the job. Media is a critical part of everyday life and students must be prepared to use it well and think critically about it. Certainly it is impossible to teach students everything about all media, just as it is impossible to teach students everything in a particular content area—history, English, biology, etc.—but schools must provide a foundation upon which students can build in their lives after K-12 education. So it is with media—schools cannot possibly be expected to prepare students for every possible type of media they will encounter in the future, but schools can teach foundational skills necessary to be media literate as students and adults.

In teaching media literacy skills and encouraging students to learn about and use media, they also “...learn to communicate in multimodal ways” (Beach, 2007). Communication is not as simple as speaking or writing. Not all communication is language-based, nor does all communication have a print form. Schools are traditionally focused on studying texts in print form and require students to create texts in print form, but the world is moving toward electronic and non-print texts. Students must learn to be comfortable with these formats and also create in these media. As we learned through the Kaiser study, students often engage with more than one medium at a time. So, too, it is in teaching students to communicate in new ways—just one blog entry may include text, photos, hyperlinks to other media, and video clips. Multi-modal communication is a new frontier and it is important for students to learn to navigate this territory.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to have students engaged with learning or learning will simply not happen. Part of the importance of including media studies in school curriculum is that teachers can help students engage with and evaluate various media texts and formats more fully. Students need to move from consuming media simply as entertainment to thinking critically about the media—they must be taught to investigate media for underlying assumptions, cultural values, representations of a particular phenomena, use of genre-specific techniques, etc. In an LA Times column written as “...a plea for media literacy classes in our nation’s schools” (2003), David Shaw stated, “We live in increasingly complex times, and unless we teach our children how to read about, watch, interpret, understand, and analyze the day’s events, we risk raising a generation of civic illiterates, political ignoramuses and uncritical consumers...”. While Shaw refers to “the day’s events”, presumably news, his sentiment

is no less applicable to media studies in the classroom. Without guidance and education on media exploration and critique, students will simply be consumers of media, rather than critical users of media, illiterate and ignorant to media methods and messages.

A final reason to include media studies in the classroom is that students need to learn how media can shape culture and society. As Beach (2007) points out, “many mass media representations reflect stereotypical representations...Unpacking the ideological assumptions and biases behind these representations provides students with an understanding of how media texts mediate their perceptions of the world.” If a media message is repeated over and over and over again, one may come to believe it is a true representation of reality. Unfortunately, the media does this frequently and the messages often contain erroneous, biased, or stereotyped material. Students must learn to read the subtle, inherent, assumed messages of media when taking in the larger media message. Further, by sheer repetition—with or without bias—media can impact what society sees as important. In this election year, much media has been dedicated to presidential politics and the media has had a significant impact on which issues candidates address on the campaign trail, during debates, or in public addresses. If the media takes hold of an issue and gives it a lot of press or air time, the public begins to believe it is important. Then the public clamors for the candidate to address the issue or make a position statement about it. What may have been a small matter becomes large in the eyes of the media and subsequently the public, who then press the issue with the candidate. David Martinson (2004) argues, “...while the media may not be that successful in telling individuals what to think, it may be influential in telling them what to think about...the media may have considerable power in setting the agenda.”

A Place for Media Studies in the Classroom

Clearly, media studies in the classroom are critical. Just how to get them into the classroom or to figure out who should teach them is not so simple. Media studies has generally been taught by English or language arts teachers, often with a focus on traditional media—film, newspaper, magazine, news outlets, radio, etc. In the new media age of Internet news feeds, YouTube, blogs, text messages, and web forums, the old approach to media studies has not been able to keep up—nor should English teachers be the only instructors expected to address media in their classrooms. More of the same will simply not do when it comes to media education. Media is an entrenched part of everyday life and should be an everyday part of classroom life as well—it is not peripheral to the classroom, it is central. That means media should be used in all classrooms by all students and all teachers regardless of content area. Further, schools and states need to consider comprehensive standards, reforms, and expectations for media to be used in all subjects and all classrooms.

What? All teachers should be teaching media studies? No, not exactly. Media studies and media literacy are related, but distinctly different. Only qualified, well-trained teachers should be teaching comprehensive media studies—that is, leading students through in-depth inquiries of media representations, media ethnography, media techniques, media genres, and critical approaches to media analysis. However, all teachers can incorporate regular use of media into the classroom—teaching lessons that use media from a variety of sources and creating in-class projects and homework that require students to draw on and produce media—which can help steer students toward competence and literacy with media. After all, media literacy does not come strictly from

comprehensive media studies; it develops through both in-depth analysis and study of the media and regular use and production of media.

Certainly, English teachers are in a unique position to teach media studies because of their strong understanding of the impact of text and written word, but media does not exist only in written or print form. Further, to place media studies only within the context of one content area in the curriculum devalues the significance of media in real life. Once again, it is not necessary for all teachers in all content areas to teach comprehensive media studies units, but with proper training, it is possible for media studies to be incorporated into more classrooms. For example, students in health class could explore media messages and body image. Students in social studies could examine media stereotypes about people from other countries, cultures, races, or religions—Irish are laid-back and friendly, Muslims are radical, Africa is poor, Asians are smart, etc. Students in math class could study how statistics are sometimes misrepresented or misconstrued in the media. Students in science could explore how media coverage of climate change has impacted public opinion on the topic or, more simply, they could videotape a science experiment and post it on YouTube to share their lab results with classmates. Students in music class could investigate how electronic media have impacted the music industry. These are just a few examples of media units that could be used in a variety of content areas. An intensive, thorough examination of media studies would still take place in its own classroom—but it is important that this not be a single unit in English or language arts class. An entire course dedicated to media studies is important if schools are to help students become media wise.

It is also important that media education "...[not] be an add-on or afterthought." (Martinson, 2004). If schools are to take media studies and media literacy seriously, then it must be planfully incorporated into the curriculum. In education, unfortunately, new things often end up as add-ons or meet with opposition. Shaw (2003) points out that "...education in America is very structured, resistant to change, and media literacy is not an accepted course in the formal canon, not part of what is known as the K-12 standards." But if schools resist too long, the real losers are the students because they will not be prepared to be thoughtful users and consumers of the media. Change is in order and teachers must embrace media in schools and in their own classrooms. Similarly, administrators and curriculum planners must think creatively and be flexible in adding more media instruction and media use into schools.

Certainly it is easier said than done and schools face many challenges in making media literacy a priority—having qualified teachers, finding time in the schedule, paying for materials and technology, etc.—but that is why it is important for all teachers to address media in their classrooms in some way. Media literacy is ultimately about critical thinking, and that is not a skill only reserved for English class. All teachers must work together to lead students toward media literacy.

In addition to the role schools must take in positioning themselves to address media literacy, states and/or districts must also work to develop media literacy standards—and the standards must be applicable in many classrooms and settings. Many content areas have their own separate lists of standards—one list for English, one list for math, one list for science, etc. This model does not work for media literacy because it is not isolated from other subjects; to the contrary, media literacy skills apply in all subjects

and at all grade levels. Putting standards aside for a moment, the same argument about the applicability of media literacy to all content areas can also be applied to reading. Students need not only know how to read for success in English class—students need to know how to read for success in all classes (and in life beyond school). This is a deep philosophical and practical divide in education that has proven difficult to overcome. There is a deep-seeded tendency to think too narrowly about content areas and ignore the interconnectedness among content areas. However, many educational studies have shown stunning results when schools use a multidisciplinary approach to classroom education. Similarly, an integrated approach to media education stands to be the most effective way to lead students to media literacy. In developing media standards, states and schools must not cast media literacy into its own category or consider it a lone content area. Media literacy transcends any one particular content area and applies to all areas in all schools.

The Minnesota Department of Education has developed a set of Artistic Literacy Standards (2007) that cover six areas: dance, literary arts, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts. An exploration of the standards does not reveal any definition for media arts, but based on the expected outcomes, it seems that media arts is closely related to media literacy. In particular, one of the standards states that students must “Respond to and critique a variety of creations or performances using the artistic foundations” (MDE, 2007). Though this standard is fairly generic—along with the rest of the standards for media arts—it is at least a starting place. The standards are not written for use in any one content area and leave enough room for teachers to customize their classroom instruction while still incorporating the standards. The Minnesota Department of Education also lists

skills for media literacy as a subcategory of Speaking, Listening, and Viewing in the Minnesota Academic Standards for Language Arts K-12 (2003). The high school standards are preceded with this statement: “At the high school level, media literacy should be addressed across content areas and integrated into the curriculum at the discretion of the local district.” (MDE, 2003). This is wonderful! The standards for media literacy are comprehensive, thorough, and specific and provide a good starting point for all classroom teachers, whether embarking on a media studies unit or just planning a lesson in which to incorporate media use.

Conclusion

Media literacy is the ultimate goal of media education, which incorporates both concentrated media studies and everyday classroom use of media. In a society where media is everywhere, it is absolutely crucial that students are taught how to understand, decode, interpret, and analyze media messages so they may be thoughtful, critical media consumers and producers. Further, classroom activity needs to reflect the everyday reality of students’ lives so they are engaged in the learning process; this means incorporating media studies, use, and production in teaching and learning. In teaching students to use and produce media, they are also learning to communicate in new and multi-modal ways, a critical skill in the new media age. To ensure that America’s schoolchildren are media literate requires a concerted, dual-pronged approach: concentrated media studies to examine media representations, techniques, genres, ethnography, and critical approaches in-depth and widespread use of media and media activities in all classrooms by both teachers and students.

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