



## **Critical Media Literacy: Enhance Democratization and Participation**

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### **Abstract**

Internationally, the growing consensus is that to become a successful student, productive employee, and responsible citizen in the 21st century world, individuals need to develop critical media literacy, a proficiency with the increasingly complex information and entertainment media that bombard us on a multi-sensory level, affecting the way we think, feel, and act. Unfortunately, the traditional literacy pedagogies most commonly employed to teach digital and media literacy are inherently reflective of present forms of authority. The author argues that it is socially irresponsible to teach media literacy separate from the concept of critical media literacy. Critical media literacy, with its roots in critical theory and critical race theory, is concerned about students developing skills that will enhance democratization and participation [1].

This paper acknowledges the risk of media literacy becoming the privilege of middle-class and upper-class students, resulting in widening achievement gaps negatively affecting low socioeconomic and minority students. Given this very real risk, the importance of considering processes of social inclusion and exclusion, particularly with respect to class, race, gender, and language and the possibility of increased marginalization as an unintended consequence of school digital and media literacy programs cannot be ignored [2]. In this paper, the author pushes for an understanding of media literacy that includes various forms of mass communication and popular culture, providing the context for students to critically analyze relationships between media and audience, information, influence, and dominance. The author argues that with the recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2010 and the upcoming implementation of the new Smarter Balanced Assessments and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career in 2014, there is a window of opportunity to shift the conversation around media literacy to include critical media literacy given the current policy environment in the United States.

### **1. Introduction**

Analysts, policy makers, and practitioners internationally increasingly recognize that to become a successful student, productive employee, and responsible citizen, individuals need to develop proficiency with the increasingly complex information and entertainment media that surround us, affecting the way we think, feel, and act. As Alvermann & Hagood [3] stated, "Literacy is on the verge of reinventing itself" (p. 193). Nonetheless educational institutions in the US persist in largely overlooking any progress from traditional literacy to digital age literacies, including media literacy, in their teaching and discussions of literacy. "Unlike educators in the Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, many in the US are not informed enough about media literacy to even consider it. And yet, in today's multimedia world, it is insufficient to teach literacy that only addresses traditional concepts of print while ignoring the other major ways we receive, process, and create images and information" [4]. Fortunately, the recent introduction of the new Common Core State Standards creates an opportunity in the US to rectify this concern.

### **2. Media literacy**

Individuals who are media literate possess the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in multiple evolving forms, whether electronic or print, visual or auditory, expository or artistic. "Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media [4, p. 4]. Additionally, It supports students in their use of media language.



Promoters of media literacy tend to emphasize five basic principles for the analysis of media messages: 1) The construction of messages; 2) Messages are representations of reality with embedded values and points of view; 3) Each medium uses a unique set of rules to construct messages; 4) Individuals interpret media messages, creating their own meaning based on personal experience; and 5) Media are driven by profit within economic and political contexts. These five principles and the ways educational institutions choose to teach digital and media literacy are inherently reflective of present forms of authority.

### **3. Inadequacies of media literacy**

The teaching of media literacy, as with the teaching of traditional literacy, is highly political. Present media messages often lack transparency, reflecting the biases and prejudices of dominant groups towards marginalized students. What is communicated and how it is communicated is swayed by the subjectivity and biases of those creating the message as well as the social contexts within which the process occurs. Along with this encoding subjectivity come the multiple readings of the text as diverse audiences in various contexts decode it. Media are consequently not neutral disseminators of information because the nature of the construction and interpretation processes entails bias and social influence.

Becoming a critical user of digital media demands an awareness of the influences of subliminal messages, potential influence of advertisements, and concealed political agendas of media is vital. But the vague, non-partisan stance of non-critical media education waters down the transformative potential for media education to become a powerful tool to strengthen democracy and challenge oppression [4]. Critical media literacy, by contrast, is a mindset and a way of viewing and interacting with media that can provide an essential component of the educational processes needed to sustain democracy and promote inclusiveness.

Moreover, there is the risk of digital and media literacy becoming the privilege of middle-class and upper class students, resulting in a widening of the opportunity gaps often referred to as achievement gaps -- negatively affecting low socioeconomic and minority students. Vasquez & Felderman [5] refer to this as differential access, noting that, social differences produce differential access to the world so that the world is more accessible to some than to others. This is what Wu (2010) refers to when he talks about bandwidth as the new black gold that produces new and diverse forms of inclusion [and exclusion]. (p. 2)

Simply stated, given the potential impact of social inclusion and exclusion, particularly with respect to class, race, gender, and language, the possibility of increased marginalization as an unintended consequence of school digital and media literacy programs cannot be ignored [6].

### **4. A Case for Critical Media Literacy**

In contrast to traditional literacy and media literacy, critical media literacy aims to delve deeply into the sociopolitical and sociocultural issues embedded in all the multiple forms of communication in order to identify the causes of social inequities. "Because messages are created by people who make decisions about what to communicate and how to communicate, all messages are influenced by the subjectivity and biases of those creating the message as well as the social contexts within which the process occurs." [4, p. 12]. From a theoretical perspective critical media literacy may be defined in two distinctive ways: 1) It is emancipatory, or empowering, striving free people from coercive practices, and 2) it understands knowledge constitutes power.

Educators who teach critical media within an emancipatory frame typically focus on creating communities of active readers, viewers, and listeners capable of identifying the various ideological positions that print and nonprint texts offer them. They also focus on teaching people how to make informed decisions about which ideological positions they will attempt to modify. [7, p. 111]



Through employing critical literacy, one questions the construction of knowledge and searches for veiled agendas in communities, school curricula, governmental legislation, corporate policies, and the media [8].

Recognizing that critical literacy and critical thinking are not the same and serve different purposes is essential for the teaching of critical media literacy. The way critical media literacy is characterized differs based on the perspective and frameworks—from students' ability to engage in the analysis of textual print and nonprint, study audiences, and the mapping of subject positions to supporting students engage with popular culture as they uncover codes and practices that work to silence or disempower them as viewers, readers, and learners [3]. In keeping with critical literacy, critical media literacy is a way of approaching, considering, and interacting with the world, not the teaching of specific skills and strategies; “[It] recognizes the connections between power, knowledge, language, and ideology, and recognizes the inequities and injustices surrounding us in order to move toward transformative action and social justice” [8, p. 16].

As an overarching construct, “[c]ritical media literacy challenges the power of the media to present messages as non-problematic and transparent” [4, p. 12]. “From a post modern perspective, critical media literacy pertains to how individuals take up cultural texts differently, depending on their interests and positioning in various social and historical contexts (Sholle & Denski, 1995)” [3, p. 194]. Which can be applied to the literacies that students use both in and out of school.

Currently there is a level of resistance within US institutions to move beyond traditional literacy, the result of a “what gets tested gets taught” mind set that has become particularly entrenched in the US, where high stakes testing and accountability have dominated teaching and learning, especially in the wake of the “No Child Left Behind” policies. As discussed in the next section, however, there is also a window of opportunity that will come with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

## **5. The Common Core State Standards as an Opportunity**

In the US there are significant concerns related to how we compare to other countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), as well as in college and career readiness. In today's technological society, to be ready for college, career, and life necessitates the ability to obtain, understand, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a range of print and nonprint texts in traditional and continuously evolving media forms. Students and citizens need the ability to use technology and digital media deliberately and adeptly,

[with students employing] technology thoughtfully to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use. They tailor their searches online to acquire useful information efficiently, and they integrate what they learn using technology with what they learn offline. They are familiar with the strengths and limitations of various technological tools and mediums and can select and use those best suited to their communication goals.” [9, p. 5]

The release of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects in 2010, and their subsequent adoption by forty-five states, the District of Columbia, and four territories reflect a major education shift in the US. The CCSS, a radical departure from previous generations of standards, are characterized by,

[E]mphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed. Thus, the Standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and



experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards. [10, p. 4]

Students today are expected to conduct research and to produce and consume media in every aspect of today's curriculum. For example the Speaking and Listening Standards for grades 9-10 and 10-12 expect students to "make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest" [10, p. 29]. Such changes call for students not only to understand but to analyze and debate what is said.

## 6. The Imperative/Conclusion

As already stated, critical media literacy is essential for the citizens of a democracy. To recognize its value is one thing, but supporting its use and development is quite another. In order to support students in developing global awareness through classroom, social media, and community settings that reflect divergent cultures and languages, and represent varied perspectives, communication styles, and contexts, there is a need to promote educational practices that support students in developing an awareness of other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and help students effectively communicate with people of varied backgrounds using a range of technical tools and social networking platforms. Empowering students to develop an approach to media that questions the construction of knowledge and searches for veiled agendas.

The newly adopted Common Core State Standards represent an opportunity to include critical media literacy educational programs, helping to transform student learning in the US, empowering students to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media as articulated by Kellner and Share [4]. To be able to more fully participate locally and globally as literate and informed individuals with the skills and knowledge to engage in a networked society to create a better society.

Additionally I am interested in research aimed at identifying how students develop skills that will enhance democratization and participation in a world where technology through collaboration, participation in a global networked learning society, and critical theory "...brings to the fore, more than ever, the role of media like television, popular music, film, and advertising, as the Internet rapidly absorbs these cultural forms and creates ever-evolving cyber-spaces and emergent forms of culture and pedagogy" [11, p. 4].

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