

Encounter and counter: Critical media literacy in teacher education

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Voices from the Field - Peer-reviewed article

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ABSTRACT

This practitioner article describes the recent implementation of critical media literacy (CML) activities in secondary teacher education at a large university in the Southwestern United States. Preservice teachers in a content area literacy course analyzed a variety of media coverage of events that occurred near their university. Using an analytical framework for approaching texts, images, and messages, preservice teachers practiced critical exploration of media sources and motivations while articulating hidden figures of power and authority behind the dissemination of content for public consumption. Highlighting the pursuit of independent media and the cultivation of intellectual self-defense, this “Voices from the Field” article shares curricular artifacts, along with student responses to media and reflections on their developing pedagogies, to show how future teachers developed CML skills in their preservice coursework.

Keywords: *critical media literacy, teacher education, content area literacy.*

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INTRODUCTION

Critical Media Literacy (CML) is grounded in the work of disrupting normalized knowledge structures (Bhatia, 2018). Haddix et al. (2016) call CML a problematizing power in educative spaces that positions students to assume a “sense of agency and activism and desire to be civically engaged with real issues in the world” (p. 34). Responding to the need for teacher educators to reflect on experiences that are transferrable to their own classroom contexts, I recently facilitated a CML unit with preservice teachers, asking students to explore and respond to media portrayals of current events.

The following question guided my actions: In what ways can pedagogies be enhanced to facilitate critical explorations of media? This “Voices in the Field” article offers a snapshot of future teachers who are developing CML skills by encountering and countering topical examples of manipulative media forces.

CML in teacher education

Aybek (2016) calls for greater inclusion of media literacy across university curricula, particularly for those training to become teachers. Experiences with media, including its production, consumption, and critical analysis, should define teaching in secondary classrooms (Leach, 2017).

Scholarship focusing on CML in teacher education can be reviewed in three categories: critical consumption, creation, and shared power stances (Todorova, 2019).

First, enacting critical media consumption requires teacher educators to help students identify problematic representations of people, facts, places, and history (Friesem, 2018). Recent studies focusing on critical consumption in teacher education present implications across culture and society, impacting preservice teachers’ views on climate change (Damico et al., 2018); democratic processes (Kahne & Boywer, 2017); and community-based violence prevention (Hobbs, 2017).

Second, preservice teachers possess skills of creation that they can integrate with critical perspectives (Erdem & Eristi, 2018) Semerci and Semerci (2017) argue that the ability to produce media in myriad formats and genres is essential for those training to be teachers, defining media literacy as, “society’s knowledge on the functioning of the mass media tools” (p. 13). Media production has proven effective in teacher education for navigating the fake-news landscape (Subramanian,

2017); constructing persuasive rhetoric in online learning environments (Tan et al., 2016); and disrupting harmful conspiracy theory narratives (Harshman, 2017).

Third, CML activities centered around critical consumption and creation within teacher education spaces have the power to democratize learning and disrupt traditional hierarchical notions of power within institutions (Giroux, 2016). Collaboration via media between teacher educators and preservice teachers helps inspire an awareness of external factors regarding how students interact with texts, revealing hidden institutional agendas, replicated power structures, and ideological platforms (Janks, 2019).

In the U.S., all three threads are woven into other comprehensive teacher training programs that range from institutional to independent.

The American Library Association, National Councils of Social Studies and Teachers of English, and The National Writing Project are examples of professional organizations that prioritize media literacy cultivation through conferences, training materials, and publications (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Ithaca College’s Project Look Sharp and the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island are institution-housed programs devoted specifically to the integration of media literacy and teacher training (Leu et al., 2017). Because there are no standardized national curricula or systematic funding for media literacy in higher education, these independent efforts are vital for constructing opportunities for critical professional development (Dharamshi, 2018).

THEORETICAL LENS

This exploration of CML in teacher education draws upon the work of Torres and Mercado (2006), who examine the efforts of corporate media to impact education policy and shape political thought in ways that swell financial profit while reproducing dominant cultural values in society.

By incorporating CML as a core component of teacher education, universities do their part in advancing practices that can cultivate two key aptitudes in students: intellectual self-defense and access to independent, not-for-profit media. This framework can expand our understanding of how preservice teachers develop media literacy skills because it allows for observable participation of specific applications of instructional strategies and aligns with current trends in media literacy literature.

METHOD

Student selection

Content Area Literacy is a required course at our large university in the Southwest U.S. for all secondary teacher candidates and is populated by students from numerous fields. One primary course emphasis is the acknowledgment of our responsibilities as literacy teachers, regardless of subject matter. These interdisciplinary contexts allow for critical, collaborative approaches to media and pedagogy. Four students who comprised one of several class groups were recruited for data collection based on the range of content areas they represented and agreed to be focal participants in the study. The participant group consisted of Trudy, Don, Pete, and Hildy. All names are pseudonyms. Trudy, a social studies major, identified as a Latinx female. Don, an agriculture major, identified as a Caucasian male. Pete, a science major, identified as an African American male. Hildy, a music major, identified as a Latinx female.

Intervention structure

During fall, 2018, I aimed to develop CML skills among preservice teachers by emphasizing access to independent media and intellectual self-defense. Students practiced these two competencies by taking on a variety of media that reported on developments occurring before, during, and following a recent report given by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, who had been offering recommendations to the President regarding future plans for national monuments. One landmark under scrutiny was the nearby Organ Mountain Range. When the Secretary's report was published in the national media, regional entities including community leaders and local citizens identified numerous inaccuracies in the findings and took action to make them public. After these errors in the original report were announced and local officials pushed back, the Secretary ultimately recommended not shrinking the monument's size.

Measures

In interdisciplinary groups, students studied this event by asking analytical questions and exploring motivations and ideologies behind media messages explicit and implicit. To measure the participant group's application of CML, I provided a critical rubric

(Appendix A), inspired by Torres and Mercado (2006) that helped students establish critical perspectives by seeking alternative media and practicing intellectual self-defense. The rubric afforded students roles as critical evaluators of media while also providing a primary source of data to determine how participants were developing pedagogies using CML. In addition to the rubric, group activities and discussions were video-recorded for further analysis. In the following section, I share results of this implementation including participants' writings and commentary.

RESULTS: ESTABLISHING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Seeking independent media

Students crosschecked numerous sources to analyze two mistakes in the report, later detailed in interviews and hearings by state representatives in the U.S. House and Senate. I had groups begin by reading the original report, without alerting them to the mistakes. The participant group identified the first error in the report, which was that the mountain range butted against the U.S.-Mexico border, causing concern for what the Secretary referred to as border security. Trudy pointed out that geographically, the range runs north and south, with its southern border extending perpendicular toward the border, not parallel. She added that the protected lands were established with a five-mile buffer, saying, "That's not right. Look out the window right now. Those mountains are straight east of here and go north and south. Mexico is that way. You can literally just look and see. This isn't accurate."

Secondly, Don found the report's language to be misleading and inaccurate in its description of how current protections prevented officials from facilitating necessary vegetation management and road maintenance in the area. Neglect, the report suggested, had caused roads in the area to become impassible. However, Don described his involvement with an agricultural extension group on campus who accesses the area on a monthly basis. Having just taken soil samples in the area only a week prior, Don responded, "What's in this report isn't true. You can access the whole place if you want. Our crew was just up there and we drove clear up to the base of the trail. People were walking, campsites everywhere." As students looked at other media responses to the report, it became clear that local lawmakers, along with farmers and ranchers, also discredited this account, attesting that current monument

provisions allow for routine, year-round upkeep and that drivers experience complete access throughout the territory.

After deconstructing the report and reviewing multiple platforms that featured the original story, participants determined that mainstream media such as Fox News and CNN ran brief, noncritical summaries of the report originally published by corporate outlets like the Associated Press. Trudy noted that alternative sources such as regional National Public Radio affiliates and local newspapers were more likely to question the report's findings or feature vocal perspectives offering contradictory assessments. Hildy pointed out that independent sources such as our university's public television station were also among the first to broadcast viewpoints of those protesting the report. Pete argued in his critical rubric that mainstream media appeared to act as a servant messenger for a federal official who turned out to be incorrect on several points, writing, "Today's news is all soundbites. I would've never known about this. It's out there. You just have to know where to look. But who has the time? Corporations know this and take advantage of it through media."

Participants expressed concern that mainstream media was delivering the report and accompanying press releases with little factual inquiry, inhibiting transparency of government activity. Pete was adamant that the report misrepresented geographical details in order to further a pro-business agenda on issues such as energy and immigration. Without independent perspectives, Pete argued that the report had no context for a wider audience unfamiliar with the region, adding, "I didn't like how a national monument, created for the people, was used as a political tool. They thought people wouldn't notice or didn't care. I don't know what's worse."

Subsequent class meetings allowed for further exploration of additional factors being publicized less in mainstream media. Participants commented in their rubrics on the Secretary's support of the Administration's planned expansion of the oil and gas industry's access to federal public land and investigated how his report on national monuments matched those objectives. Pete, who is interested in environmental issues, wrote, "This area symbolizes the state's history, our way of life. Having it misrepresented for political purposes is unacceptable. Part of what we emphasize in science is eco-literacy. Drilling here would be a travesty for short unsustainable gain." In response to her rubric's question about unseen benefits, Hildy wrote, "Look at what this guy was saying about this place before he

supposedly toured it. It's the same as the report. Did he even come here? Mainstream media helped push made-up facts."

Intellectual self-defense

The group expressed a sense of fulfillment in their writing at having constructed collaborative learning around an issue that was important to them as stewards of their disciplines. Participants also shared feelings of trepidation that this amount of focus and attention is not easily devoted to general media consumption, let alone a single event. Don wrote in his rubric, "The average adult might feel like they understand an issue when they don't know the half of it. I am a fairly informed person, and I was shocked. Imagine how much gets past our students."

Participants examined several elements that bolstered their level of self-defense, including potential financial and political motives for the Secretary to make particular recommendations; ways in which misinformation was collected and disseminated prior to public approval; and the impact of local officials making their voices heard. Don remarked on his rubric, "The fact they didn't check with farmers is amazing. They're out there every day working the land, knowing exactly what goes on. For them it's more than a piece of ground. Looks like they tried to slip this past them." Asked on her rubric whether this event had received unbiased, independent coverage, Trudy responded, "No way. The problems in what the Secretary said didn't even come out until our newspaper here reported it. And who reads that elsewhere? Think about all the people who believed this report. It's scary."

Pete speculated in his rubric that the report could have been affected by the Secretary's affiliations with various organizations such as the National Rifle Association, Whitefish Energy, and the Puerto Rican Electrical Power Authority – contextual information the group uncovered over the course of several class meetings. Hildy expressed concern with the Secretary's involvement in fundraising events, tax-payer-funded travel, and legislation. Considering possible connections between media power brokers and entities aligned philosophically or financially with political groups, she wrote, "They are so many dots if you take the time to connect them through other sources. It's a good exercise for any event big or small. I think students would really get into this because it's like detective work."

Digging deeper for supplemental coverage powered preservice teachers toward an understanding of how

knowledge can inspire activism. During the group's discussion of a popular student-run radio program on campus, Trudy commented on the value of comprehensive media, asserting, "In civics we talk about being an informed citizen. Part of being in a democracy is pushing back. Sometimes being informed means you know how to push back." The group constructed nuanced timelines stretching backward toward the buildup of the report and forward toward its potential impacts on policy. In their analyses, participants positioned themselves to resist media that is not contextualized with local factors, nor fact-checked for counterfeit information, or that is secretive regarding political motivations and financial interests. During a discussion on teaching with media, Don questioned, "What do we most want high-schoolers to learn, if not to think for themselves?"

Integrating media literacy and teacher education

Modeling resistance for young media consumers is vital to our democratic society and an ideal enterprise in teacher education. The critical rubric helped preservice teachers document their thinking about access and self-defense, while challenging them to consider how activities could translate to their own classrooms. Further implementations and empirical studies prioritizing CML as a primary component can help practitioners and researchers better understand whether preservice teachers are more likely to implement critical explorations of media in their curriculum and instruction. CML helps us move beyond encountering messages, to countering them by considering ideological contexts. We comprehend our current realities in order to shape a better tomorrow. For future teachers, there may be no lesson more valuable.

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APPENDIX A

Critical rubric

Student:

Content area:

Brief description of event:

List of media sources covering event:

PART ONE: Access

Directions: Please mark what best describes the access to independent media you experienced while researching this event. Render a judgment about the event's visibility in *a variety of sources, not just mainstream, for-profit media*.

- R** *Robust* level of access. Event is covered by multiple outlets and alternative sources.
- B** *Basic* level of access. Event appears to have moderate diversity in coverage with a mix of sources.
- U** *Unsatisfactory* level of access to independent, alternative, not-for-profit media coverage.

1. Please explain your evaluation of access with evidence.

2. Describe how you would approach the issue of access in your content area.

PART TWO: Intellectual Self-Defense

1. Do you see problems in the content of this media? Why or why not?

2. Do you feel this event has received unbiased and independent coverage? Why or why not?

3. What information can you find about this media source? Look for author, organization, corporation, affiliations, etc.

4. Are there any potential benefits for this media to have covered this event in a particular way? Look for links in finances, politics, ideologies, etc.

5. Describe potential uses of this event in your content area.
