

Analyzing the distinction between protectionism and empowerment as perspectives on media literacy education

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ABSTRACT

It has become a common practice to categorize the different perspectives on media education as following either a protectionist approach or an empowerment approach. However, the way scholars write about the distinction between these two approaches can be confusing and sometimes misleading. This article presents an examination into the ways media literacy scholars have characterized the two approaches by using an inductive method that organized those many ideas into nine categories. An analysis of those definitional ideas across the nine groupings reveals that the characteristics most often mentioned (power differential of media/audiences and reactive/proactive stance) were more oriented towards focusing on similarities and that other characteristics less often mentioned (role of instructor, nature of the instruction, and outcome assessment) were more useful in illuminating the differences.

Keywords: *media education, protectionism, empowerment, induction, critical analysis.*



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INTRODUCTION

A great deal has been written about what the purpose of media literacy education should be. Scholars who try to organize all these ideas typically arrange them into two categories, which are usually labeled protectionism and empowerment (e.g., Buckingham, 1998; Crandall, 2016; Friesem, 2018; Hobbs, 2011; Levitt & Denniston, 2014; Mendoza, 2009; Nelson, Powell, Giray, & Ferguson, 2020).

In order to organize all those definitional ideas into meaningful sets and to generate fresh insights into the ways scholars have highlighted what they believe are the key distinctions between these two approaches, an inductive study was conducted to examine all of the articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* from its inception through 2020 and identify the different ways those authors have characterized these two approaches to media education.

The two perspectives on media education

The origin of this distinction can be traced back half a century to the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) argued that much of media education at the time was being controlled by elites who wanted to protect high culture (canonized literature, classical music, etc.) by educating the public to avoid the attraction of popular culture, which those elites regarded as crass entertainment that was a perversion of the ideal of high culture. Then in a subsequent book entitled *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (1973) proposed that media education should empower people by helping them make their own decisions about which media and messages to use and how to interpret meanings in ways that would improve their lives.

These ideas were amplified and elaborated over the next few decades primarily by European cultural scholars who criticized the status quo of media education as being oriented too much towards protectionism and not enough towards empowerment. For example, when Buckingham (1998) wrote about the history of media education in the United Kingdom, he explained that “Past generations of media educators tended to espouse a form of protectionism, seeking to defend students against what were seen as the negative cultural, moral, or ideological influences of the media” (p. 33). He argued that from the 1930s to the 1960s, the purpose of media education “was nothing less than the salvation of the culture – preserving the literary heritage,

language, values, and health of a nation” (p. 34) which he regarded as elitist because self-proclaimed experts were imposing their view of what culture should be on the masses. He argued that those experts created curricula to convince students that the media should be used to elevate the public’s taste so that educated people would be much more attracted to the loftier ideas in classic literature rather than the presumed baser ideas in popular music, radio, film, and television.

This protectionist approach to media education has often been called inoculation (Buckingham 1998; Friesem, 2018; Halloran & Jones, 1992; Kellner & Share, 2007; Masterman, 1980, 1985; Mendoza, 2009) because of the way it uses instruction as a way to build up “antibodies” in the public so people would be likely to reject popular culture rather than be infected by it. For example, Buckingham (1998) explained that by the 1960s media education was characterized by defensiveness, which he characterized as “a process whereby teachers have sought to inoculate or protect students against what are assumed to be the negative effects of the media” (p. 36).

As an alternative to this protectionist perspective on media education, cultural and critical scholars began developing what they called an empowerment perspective to move away from the elitism they perceived in the protectionist approach. Their alternative perspective envisioned using media education to show students how to create a healthy skepticism about the media so that those students would be motivated to challenge the meanings presented by the media and instead to construct their own meanings that would help them live a more fulfilling life. Thus, the empowerment perspective was presented as a proactive way to prepare youth with the tools to help them be successful in meeting the many challenges they would encounter in their engagement with the media, society, and its institutions throughout their lives (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Castells, 1997, 2004, 2012; Thoman & Jolls, 2004).

The idea of empowerment has been a major theme in the work of many cultural scholars over the years (AlNajjar, 2019; Bergsma, 2011; Bergstrom, Flynn, & Craig, 2018; Crandall, 2016; Hobbs, 2011; Kersch & Lesley, 2019; Masterman, 1985, 2010; Pereira & Pinto, 2011; Valtonen, et al, 2019; Wharf Higgins & Begoray, 2012). It was also incorporated into NAMLE’s definition of media literacy, which asserted that the purpose of media education should be to help people become more media literate by learning how to become more critical of the media both as consumers of media

messages and as producers of their own messages (Naiditch, 2013).

Problems with the distinction

As this distinction grew in visibility, several problems became apparent. Its characterization as a debate seemed faulty, and its treatment as mutually exclusive approaches to media education appeared to be too simplistic.

Not a debate. This distinction is often presented as a debate. For example, Hobbs (1998) characterized this difference in educational perspectives as one of the great debates in the media literacy movement. She continued to make this claim more than a decade later when she wrote, “there is a robust ongoing debate about the relative value and limitations of both protectionist and empowerment perspectives in media literacy education” (Hobbs, 2011, p. 422).

At first glance, the way this distinction is treated in the literature may lead readers to regard it as a debate because the writings present a good deal of argumentation. However, those arguments are almost exclusively one-sided, which makes it faulty to characterize it as a debate. The word “debate” implies that there are two sides to an issue and that people on each side of the issue continually respond to the criticism from the other side by providing arguments and evidence to convince listeners that their position on the issue is superior to the other position. While there are many publications by scholars who argue for an empowerment perspective and criticize the protectionist perspective, there is no debate-like response to these criticisms. That is, there are no publications where authors refute the criticisms of the protectionist perspective and fire back criticisms of the empowerment perspective. For example, Hobbs (1998, 2011) who repeatedly characterizes this distinction as a debate does not present any evidence of scholars who favor the protectionist approach either defending their perspective or criticizing the empowerment perspective.

It appears that scholars are now recognizing that the terms used to label the sides in the purported debate suggest more of a complementary relationship between the two perspectives instead of a competitive one that we would expect to see in a debate. Even Hobbs appears to have acknowledged that the two perspectives have been working together in a complementary manner by referring to them as “a two-sided coin with protectionism on one side and empowerment on the other” (Hobbs, 2010), and she later wrote that “in the

heart of every protectionist is a strong desire for students’ voices to be valued through thoughtful interactions in the world, while even the staunchest empowerment advocate has considered the limits and boundaries of appropriateness, comfort, and taboo in children’s media environments” (Hobbs & Moore, 2013, p. 31).

Too simplistic. If scholars who write about this distinction between the two approaches all cited the same characteristic, then the distinction would be clear. However, scholars who write about these approaches have used many characteristics to express their perceptions of the distinction and different scholars typically use different assortments of these characteristics, which can lead readers of this literature to arrive at different decisions about what kinds of instruction fall into which of the two approaches to media education. This is what Turin and Friesem (2020) found when they surveyed 69 instructors teaching media literacy courses in Israel and the United States. The surveyors presented their respondents with a list of 32 titles for prospective final papers in a media literacy course where the authors created some titles to be examples of the protectionist approach while other titles were designed to indicate an empowerment approach. They asked their respondents to rate how relevant each title would be for an acceptable paper in a media literacy course. The authors expected that some of their respondents would rate most of the protectionist-type titles the same (either high, medium, or low), while rating most of the empowerment-type titles the same (opposite of their ratings of the protectionist-type titles). However, this is not what they found. Instead, they found little evidence that a respondent would rate the protectionist-type titles the same (either all high, medium, or low) or rate all empowerment-type titles as being equally important. Furthermore, they found no difference in the rankings that could be attributed to country with “only five out of thirty-two topics reveal significant differences among Israeli and US scholars on a p-value of 0.10” (Turin & Friesem, 2020, p. 132). Instead, they found a great deal of variation in topic ratings that could only be attributed to individual differences across respondents in terms of their interpretations about their meanings for media literacy, protectionism, and empowerment.

Given all the characteristics expressed as differences between the two approaches as well as the findings of the Turin and Friesem study, it is likely that different scholars are using different sets of criteria, which raises several questions. What are all the different

characteristics that scholars have used to draw a distinction between protectionism and empowerment? And, which of these characteristics seem to be the most useful discriminators? It is the purpose of this study to answer these two questions.

METHOD

Procedure

This study used a six-step inductive method to analyze all the articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* from its inception in 2009 through the end of 2020. In the first step, all of the published articles were read to identify each instance of an author mentioning either protectionism or empowerment as a perspective on media education. When a mention was found, the words in that mention were recorded as an entry. Those entries typically included a definition of one or both terms, or they were an argument about how the perspectives were different or the same.

In the second step, each of those entries was analyzed to identify the characteristics the authors were arguing constituted the difference or similarity across the two perspectives. Third, those elements were then grouped together according to the types of characteristics the authors were highlighting. The initial grouping resulted in six categories of characteristics: the author's vision of the purpose of media education, nature of instruction, role of the instructor, outcome assessment, perspective on the media, and perspective on audiences. Notice that these categories were not determined *a priori* in a planning process; instead, they emerged during the analyses.

The fourth step was the most involved because it employed multiple iterations to refine the categories, such that each category included ideas unique from the ideas in the other categories. Furthermore, the set of categories needed to be exhaustive, that is, there were enough categories to include all the ideas that authors were using to describe and distinguish the two perspectives of protectionism and empowerment. This step involved several notable changes in the refinement of categories. One of these changes was to sub-divide several categories into sub-categories where the differences across sub-categories were deemed important. For example, the initial category of nature of instruction was divided into sub-categories of scope, stance, extent, and content. Also, the initial category of outcome assessment was divided into sub-categories of type of measures, timing, and indicators of success.

Another important change that emerged during these iterations was the collapsing of two categories (perspective on the media and perspective on audiences) into one category labeled the power differential between the media and audiences. This was done to reflect the common practice of authors focusing on power when characterizing the media as well as audiences, that is, many authors argued that a distinction between protectionism and empowerment highlighted a power differential. After many iterations of analysis, a nine-category scheme resulted: Power differential, nature of instruction (scope, stance, extent, and content), role of the instructor, and outcome assessment (timing, type, and indicator of success) (Table 1).

In the fifth step, all entries were placed in one and only one of these nine categories.

Then in the sixth and final step, each of the entries within a category were examined in order to determine whether: (a) the two perspectives exhibit a clearly articulated difference, or (b) the two perspectives appear to be different, but the differences are exaggerated or inaccurate and therefore the perspectives are more similar than they are different on that characteristic.

Caveats

It is important to express two caveats. First, the nine-category analytical scheme that is developed in this study is *not* presented as a finding. That is, it is not a product that is presented as the *only* way to analyze differences in the way authors write about different perspectives on media education. Instead, this scheme was developed as a tool to achieve a different purpose for this study, which is to generate some deeper insights into what many scholars have been struggling to do when they categorize perspectives on media education.

The second caveat is that this analysis relies primarily on what scholars have written about the two perspectives in their publications. At times, their meanings are accepted at face value while at other times those meanings are challenged. One reason for those challenges is that almost all of the descriptions about the protectionist perspective were published by scholars who were arguing that the protectionist perspective was faulty in some way, so there were times when they exaggerated differences between the two perspectives. Another reason for challenging the surface meanings presented in some of the writings is that media educators often use alternative terms, which sometimes could be trusted to be synonyms, but other times could not.

Table 1. *Analytical categories used to group ideas expressed about protectionism and empowerment*

Analytical categories	Questions that guide the analysis in each category
<i>Power Differential</i>	
Media vs. individual power	Do authors express a power differential as a way of drawing a distinction between the two perspectives?
<i>Nature of Instruction</i>	
Scope	Does the perspective focus on dealing with one specific vulnerability or with a wide variety of potential vulnerabilities?
Stance	Does the perspective focus on reacting to an existing problem or proactively prepare students to be able to deal successfully with any type of challenge?
Extent	Does the perspective focus on relatively short, self-contained interventions or on longer-term education woven throughout the general curricula?
Content	What should be the focus of the instruction? (beliefs, behaviors, skills, facts, knowledge)
<i>Role of Instructor</i>	Is the instructor regarded more as an expert authority or as a guide?
<i>Outcome Assessment</i>	
Timing	When should outcome measures be taken?
Type	What type of measures should be used to assess outcomes?
Indicators of success	What pattern of findings should be used as standards in determining success?

Table 2. *Analysis of expressed distinction between protectionism and empowerment: similarities and differences*

Categories	Distinction between protectionism and empowerment
Power differential - similar	What initially appears to be a difference from focusing on the labels for the two approaches disappears when the foundational beliefs are examined
Nature of instruction	<p><i>Scope - Difference</i> Protectionist - focuses on students' vulnerability to one particular media effect Empowerment - concerned with all potential media effects</p> <p><i>Stance - Similar</i> What initially appears to be a difference between a proactive and reactive stance disappears when we realize that both are proactive</p> <p><i>Extent - Difference</i> Protectionist - focuses on instruction that offers relatively short, self-contained one-shot experiences Empowerment - focuses on educational experiences that are incorporated into an overall curriculum long term</p> <p><i>Content - Difference</i> Protectionist - focuses on persuading students to change a particular belief Empowerment - focuses on providing students with the means to deal with any challenge from the media</p>
Role of instructor - difference	Protectionist - instructors are experts who determine correct beliefs Empowerment - instructors are guides who show students how to deal with media challenges
Outcome assessment	<p><i>Type - Difference</i> Protectionist - can use Likert scales to measure strength of beliefs Empowerment - needs to observe students performing skills</p> <p><i>Timing - Difference</i> Protectionist - can measure beliefs immediately after delivering a lesson Empowerment - requires continual measurement over the long term to assess a longer arc of skills development</p> <p><i>Indicators of Success - Difference</i> Protectionist - looks for convergence on a sanctioned belief Empowerment - looks for divergence to indicate students' ability to think for themselves</p>

FINDINGS

This presentation of findings follows the format of the nine analytical categories as laid out in Table 1. For each category, an evaluation is made about whether the characteristic was more useful in expressing an important difference across the two approaches or whether it reflected a similarity (Table 2).

Power differential

At first, there appears to be a major difference between the two perspectives in how they view the power of the media in relation to the power of individuals. Critics of the protectionist perspective have argued that protectionists believe that media messages in general are dangerous because the media are very powerful and that the users of the media have much less power, which renders them as victims who need protection (Buckingham 2003; Considine, 1997; Hobbs, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2007). These scholars use this argument as a basis for presenting their alternative, which is an empowerment perspective where media education should be designed to help users achieve their full potential in handling any potential threat from the media by being able to avoid accepting media imposed meanings and instead being able to construct their own meanings.

This characterization, however, is an exaggeration. To illustrate its faulty nature, let's unpack these claims. First there is the claim that protectionists – and all social scientists studying media effects – believe the media exert a powerful influence on all users and that the users are relatively powerless in protecting themselves against this influence. While this claim may have been a fairly accurate characterization of media effects research in the early part of the twentieth century when most media effects researchers were behaviorists, it has not been an accurate characterization of social scientists for more than a half century. Within social sciences generally and media effects research specifically, the idea that the media were powerful and people were powerless was put to rest in 1964 when Berelson and Steiner published *Human behavior: An inventory of scientific findings* in which they presented a detailed review of social science findings about human behavior that showed that there were no powerful media effects, that is, evidence of media effecting everyone the same way. Since that time, media effects researchers have published thousands of studies, which generally show that any media exposure is likely to generate a considerable degree of variation

across people in terms of how they process meaning and how they react to those exposures (Potter, 2018). Therefore, scholars who criticize protectionist scholars or any media effect researcher or educator for believing that the media are generally powerful and that students are generally powerless are making a faulty argument – unless they published their criticism before 1965.

It is also interesting to note that critics of the protectionist approach do not specifically address a power differential in the context of the empowerment approach; however, it is reasonable to conclude that they believe the media do exert some influence on individuals; if they did not believe this, then there would be no basis for advocating empowerment through media education. Also, it is interesting to note that these critics do not address the power of students; however, it is reasonable to conclude that they are arguing that students have the potential to be more powerful but that they typically do not exercise much power over controlling media influence. If this were not their belief, then their arguments that media education should empower students would have no foundation.

In summary, it might at first appear that the two approaches to media education differ in how they regard the power differential. However, this difference is an illusion as the above analysis contends. Both approaches are built on the assumptions that (1) the media have the potential to influence individuals, (2) individuals typically exercise insufficient power in controlling media influence in their everyday lives, and (3) that media education can teach individuals about ways to increase their power and motivate them to exercise greater power.

Nature of instruction

The protectionist perspective is characterized as relying on interventions that are targeted to address specific areas of potential harm while the empowerment perspective is characterized by a more general education approach. These differences across the two perspectives become even more salient on the characteristics of scope, extent, and content, but not so much on the sub-category of stance.

Scope. The two perspectives exhibit a major difference in scope. The protectionist perspective treats student improvement in a narrow manner focusing on one particular vulnerability at a time. Educators who take a protectionist approach identify a particular vulnerability among students. Then they design an intervention to help students overcome that

vulnerability. For example, interventions have been designed and tested to help people alter their false beliefs about stereotypical portrayals of women (Choma, Foster, & Radford, 2007); women in science (Steinke, et al., 2007); racism (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007); violence (Bickham & Slaby, 2012; Byrne, 2009; Scharrer, 2006); bullying (Walsh, Sekarasih, & Scharrer, 2014); substance abuse (Kupersmidt, Scull, & Austin, 2010); alcohol (Chen, 2013); smoking (Banerjee & Greene, 2006); sexual behavior (Pinkleton, et al., 2013); sexual objectification (Reichert, et al., 2007); misleading news (Maksl, et al., 2017; Vraga, et al., 2012); terrorism (Comer, et al., 2008); advertising messages (Buijzen, 2007); nutrition (Evans, et al., 2006; Hindin, Contento, & Gussow, 2004); eating disorders (Coughlin & Kalodner, 2006; Mora, et al., 2015; Raich, Portell, & Pelaez-Fernandez, 2010; Wade, Davidson, & O’Dea, 2003; Wilksch, Durbridge, & Wade, 2008); and body image (Halliwell, et al., 2014; Rabak-Wagenar, Eickhoff-Shemek, & Kelly-Vance, 1998; Wilksch, Tiggemann, & Wade, 2006; Yamamiya, et al., 2005).

In contrast, the empowerment perspective on media literacy education is oriented to achieving goals that are much more general, more expansive, more global, and that will take much longer as well as many more resources to attain. As for ambitiousness, consider how Livingstone (2003) writes about the purpose of media education under an empowerment perspective as repositioning “the media user - from passive to active, from recipient to participant, from consumer to citizen” (Livingstone, 2003).

Stance. On the surface, there appears to be a difference between the approaches on stance (proactive or reactive). Empowerment is typically characterized as taking a proactive stance whereas protectionism takes a reactive stance. It is easy to see how educators operating under an empowerment perspective are clearly proactive; they regard media education as a way to provide students early in life with the full range of tools that they can use throughout their lives to deal with any kind of challenge the media may present to their well-being and happiness. In contrast, educators operating under a protectionist approach typically take a defensive stance as Buckingham (1998) points out. They regard students as vulnerable to the power of the media and attempt to protect students from harm by provided them with specific lessons that help them understand the potential for harm and motivate them to take steps to reduce their vulnerability.

It is tempting to regard empowerment as proactive and protectionism as reactive. But this would be a faulty characterization. While protectionism looks to be reactive in its practice of using perceived vulnerabilities as a motivator in developing particular media literacy lessons, its overall perspective is forward-looking as illustrated by its intent to give students particular tools they can use not only during the interventional lessons but also throughout their lives. Therefore, both perspectives share a similarity of a proactive stance.

Extent. The educational experiences that illustrate the protectionist approach are typically interventions that are often short, self-contained one-shot experiences designed to address one particular vulnerability among students. In contrast, educational experiences that illustrate the empowerment approach are typically longer-term progressions where media educators attempt to integrate them into the overall flow of the full educational curriculum. There are social scientists who also take an extensive view of media education; however, it is rare to see follow-through on this approach. Instead, most of the research conducted by social scientists uses an experiment that tests the effectiveness of an intervention immediately after it was administered. “The intervention approach focuses on microlevel effects on individuals’ thoughts, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors, derived from the tradition of media effects scholarship” (Scharrer, 2007, p. 19). Protectionists identify a particular area (type of message) that they believe from previous research that is causing a particular error (faulty belief) and design a relatively small-scale intervention to alter something in students in a desired direction.

Content. The protectionist perspective typically focuses on a belief that is regarded as being faulty, so the content of the intervention is designed to convince students who hold this belief that (a) their existing belief is faulty and (b) that switching to an alternative belief would be in their best interest. Some lessons also try to translate the belief into action by stimulating motivation to alter behavioral patterns.

In contrast, the empowerment perspective is much more focused on skills and knowledge as the tools that will help students be in a more empowered position to handle any challenge from the media throughout the course of their lives. Masterman (2001) proposed that media education should aim to empower students to become critical and autonomous thinkers. Media literacy can ideally serve to deepen students’ understanding of media content as well as contextualize the social, economic, and historical conditions in which

media messages are created and circulated (Buckingham, 1998; Hobbs 2011; Masterman, 1980, 1985). In order to achieve this much more general and ambitious purpose, empowerment educators try to give students more generalized knowledge that those students can use in a variety of situations in the future. They also try to strengthen students' information processing skills that can be applied across a wide range of challenges.

Role of the instructor

In this analysis, instructor refers to more than the person delivering the media lessons in a classroom. It also refers to parents, siblings, and spokespeople for institutions such as religion, politics, and government. And it refers to people who design or deliver education. Sometimes the designers are the same as the deliverers, such as parents. But other times there is a difference between the deliverer (classroom teacher) and the designers (curriculum experts).

Under the protectionist perspective, the instructor is regarded as an expert who must determine where the problems are with media influence then decide which beliefs need to be promoted and which behaviors should be encouraged as a way of reducing their students' vulnerability. This expert role of the instructor "places the teacher in a role of ultimate power to interpret and deconstruct messages for students" (Buckingham 1998).

The use of instructors as experts has been criticized for being too controlling, and it presents a danger of steering students towards "right" answers rather than educating students to think for themselves (Friesem, 2018, p. 137). Furthermore, endorsing values connotes a "right" and "wrong" way to understand media, and this becomes problematic when teachers present themselves to students as the "hero – who has all the right answers" (Hobbs 2008, p. 9). Therefore, the empowerment approach strives to avoid the elitism that comes with experts making decisions. "Media educators advocate a different pedagogical orientation and instructional techniques, including rejecting the traditional notion of teacher as authority, and the teacher as having the 'right answers'" (Mendoza, 2009, p. 37).

Outcome assessment

Given the differences highlighted in the analyses of the nature of instruction and the role of the instructor above, it should be expected that there should also be important differences in how the effectiveness of

education should be assessed across the two perspectives. This is especially the case with type of measures, timing, and indicators of success.

Type of measure. The protectionist perspective is most oriented to altering beliefs and behavioral patterns. Beliefs can be easily measured with the use of Likert type scales where students indicate the direction (positive and negative) and magnitude (little importance to great importance) of their beliefs. Designers of interventions also use measures of behavior where students report which behaviors they perform and/or which they intend to perform (Potter & Thai, 2019).

Designing adequate measures to assess the success of long-term educational treatments that are intended to empower students is much more challenging, because the empowerment perspective focuses attention much more on the development of skills and knowledge structures over the long term. The measurement of skills requires the observation of students individually as they apply particular skills to particular tasks (see *7 Skills of Media Literacy*, Potter, 2019). Skill development cannot be measured validly with the use of Likert scales or other self-reporting measures, just as athletic skills cannot be measured validly by asking people how fast they think they can run or how accurately they can throw a ball.

The measurement of knowledge is also a considerable challenge because facts are not the same as knowledge. Facts can be validly measured with objective type tests (true-false, multiple choice). But the measurement of knowledge requires students to demonstrate an understanding about how those factual bits of information can be assembled into a useful structure that allows users to personalize those structures to maximize the satisfying of their particular needs. Thus, instructors need to do more than simply present an assortment of facts.

Timing. Because the protectionist perspective favors the use of interventions that are designed to persuade students to hold certain beliefs, researchers typically measure students' beliefs immediately after the intervention is completed. Sometimes they also measure those beliefs again a week or so later to see if the persuasive effect of the intervention was lasting, but this measurement over time is rare (Potter & Thai, 2019). In contrast, because the empowerment perspective favors a longer-term approach, outcome assessments need to be made continually over a much longer arc of instruction lasting from weeks to several years.

Indicator of success. Because the purpose of interventions used in the protectionist approach to education is to persuade students to accept a particular

belief, the assessment of success requires convergence. If all respondents demonstrate acceptance of the expert-determined belief, then the intervention is regarded as being highly successful.

If the empowerment approach is serious about educating students to think for themselves, then the assessment of success must regard convergence as an indicator of failure, not success. That is, as students learn how to increase their ability to think for themselves over time, there should be an increase in divergence across students. Grading student exams becomes much more time intensive when excellence is regarded as divergence, that is, instructors cannot rely on a grading key that highlights one, and only one, answer as the correct one.

DISCUSSION

The most important finding arising from this inductive analysis is that the characteristics (power differential and stance) most mentioned in the literature as the key differences between the protectionist and empowerment approaches to media education are really indicators of similarities rather than differences. It is interesting to note that these two characteristics are most linked to the way these two approaches are labeled. The “protectionist” approach suggests that the media are much more powerful than individual people and that educators need to react to the negative effects being exerted by the media by providing interventions to reduce those effects. In contrast, the “empowerment” approach suggests that educators need to be proactive before students experience negative effects by making them more powerful than the media.

When we set aside the characteristics of power differential and stance and put the spotlight instead on other characteristics, we can see a clearer distinction between the two approaches. This analysis shows that under the protectionist perspective, the role of the instructor is regarded as an expert who targets a particular vulnerability in students, selects a certain set of beliefs as being the most valuable for overcoming that particular vulnerability, and uses instruction as a way to persuade students to accept these beliefs and act on them when dealing with the media. In contrast under the empowerment perspective, the role of the instructor is to provide students with a skills-based and general knowledge type education that will make them better able to handle any kind of a challenge from the media over the long run.

Once we recognize the role of instructor in media education as the primary discriminator between the two perspectives, then the remaining criteria line up as elaborating that key difference. The protectionist perspective has narrower scope, more finite instructional experiences, and a simpler assessment scheme that can be administered immediately after an intervention. In contrast, the empowerment perspective operates from a much broader scope of education where lessons are interwoven throughout all subjects in a general curriculum extending over years and where assessment schemes require much more complexity as they continuously measure how students incorporate new sets of facts into their existing knowledge structures and as they repeatedly observe how students incrementally develop skills through trial and error over years of practice on a full range of topics.

In conclusion, the two approaches to media education are indeed different, but the most salient differences seemed to have been overshadowed by the expressions of differences that are suggested most by the labels of the two categories. That is, when we focus on those labels, we are misled to think that one approach is reactive by trying to protect students from well documented negative media effects, while the other approach is more proactive by trying to help students be more powerful in dealing with all the challenges and opportunities the media will provide throughout one’s future lifetime. These labels obscure the similarities that both approaches are really proactive in the way they want to help students be more powerful in protecting themselves from potentially negative effects. Also, these labels tend to push the most important differences into the background where they are often overlooked. When we keep our focus on the role of the instructor, the nature of instruction, and how effectiveness should be assessed, it is much easier to see profound differences between the two approaches to media education.

These differences raise significant implications moving forward. For example, there is little utility in continuing to treat this difference as a debate and in constructing arguments about which approach is better. Instead, scholarly effort will have much more utility when it is directed toward providing much more detail about how to maximize the value that each of these approaches could provide. For example, researchers using the protectionist approach have created a fairly large literature of media literacy interventions but there is room for improving these designs so that their findings can be much more valuable (Potter & Thai, 2019). The field needs scholars who will contribute

efforts to develop more compelling instructional lessons, better methods of measuring the effectiveness of these studies, and more insightful explanations about how teaching certain beliefs to students can more successfully lead to changes in their behavioral patterns that can make more significant improvements in their interactions with media messages.

Perhaps the most pressing need with media education is for scholars to articulate in much more detail how to make progress using the empowerment approach with its highly ambitious goals for education. Achieving these goals will require an enormous investment to incorporate media education into entire curricula, to alter the way teachers are trained, to shift the focus of public education away from the transmission of facts and toward educating students about how to think for themselves so they can build their own knowledge structures. And most profoundly, it will require all assessment in education to shift away from its fetish on convergence, where all students are required to learn the same things, memorize the same facts, and behave the same ways. If the purpose of the empowerment perspective on media education is really to help students challenge meanings in media messages and instead think for themselves, then divergence of thinking should not just be allowed but be required for excellence.

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