

Available online at www.jmle.org

The National Association for Media Literacy Education's
Journal of Media Literacy Education 3:1 (2011) 8 - 10

The Coming of Age of Media Literacy

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A decade into a new millennium marks a coming of age for media literacy education (MLE). Born from teaching the critical analysis of media texts, MLE has evolved into helping individuals of all ages “develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s world” (NAMLE 2007b, 1). This broadened scope and purpose of MLE was quickened by rapid evolution of communications technologies over the past several decades. In its infancy, the foci of study were print and electronic media texts. However, in its current post-digital stage of adolescence, MLE includes texting, gaming, blogging, and tweeting. Like an awkward teenager trying to locate his place in the world, MLE struggles to gain prominence as a discipline. Although it has gained entry into K–12 schooling in the United States (Hobbs 2005), standards and methods for its implementation vary considerably across all 50 states (Kaiser Family Foundation 2003). Even at the postsecondary level, media literacy lacks a common understanding and foundation for what, where, how, and among whom it is taught (Mihailidis 2008; Silverblatt, Baker, Tyner, and Stuhlman 2002). On the verge of adulthood in the United States, MLE is caught in a tense relationship with its siblings: technology and schooling. In this dysfunctional family of sorts, technology receives far more attention than it deserves, schooling is continuously blamed for the ills of society, and MLE is perpetually marginalized as extra-curricular.

Technology as Favored Child

In the U.S., the term technology is often assumed to mean exclusively computers or digital devices. The original denotation of technology was “method” or “know-how” for the purpose of solving technical problems and not necessarily to advance knowledge (Domine 2009). The economic imperative in the United States privileges the technical and industrial emphasis

on education—as evidenced by the National Educational Technology Plan that outlines technology-driven educational reform (rather than educationally-driven uses of technology) (USDOE 2010). In U.S. schools, technological proficiency is a separate subject area tested both at state and national levels. The digital-centric definition of technology ignores the fundamental principle that most messages are mediated by some form of technology. While one cannot achieve media literacy without acquiring some level of technological proficiency, technical skills are not enough. Regardless of what medium or technology we choose (whether low-tech or high-tech), our success as media literacy educators will ultimately be measured by our own ability (or lack thereof) to think critically and communicate effectively.

In contrast to technological literacy, media literacy encompasses a variety of technologies through which learners access, analyze, evaluate, produce, and communicate information. As educators we must consistently widen the definition of technology to refer to ways of seeing the world and to be inclusive (rather than exclusive) in our uses of media forms and their associated devices. In other words, it is insufficient for media literacy educators to simply critique texts—we must lead the field through our own lived examples of technological proficiency.

Ultimately, we must recognize and acknowledge that the primary challenges of education in the United States are not technical, but rather social, political and economic in nature. Despite the recent trajectory towards “career-readiness” the reality is that for every high-tech job created, there are five low-skill, minimum wage jobs created (Hodgkinson 2008). Furthermore, we see local cities increasingly segregated along economic and racial lines; therefore, our understanding of others who are different from our selves is much more likely to be mediated through TV, film, or the internet and less likely to occur authentically through face to face interaction (Hodgkinson 2003). These challenges beckon for

media literacy education—not just within the four walls of the classroom, but in every home, community center and workplace.

The Abuse of Schooling

In the United States, schooling is arguably the most abused child in the institutional family. While the acquisition of literacy has been the role of schooling in the United States, mass media have surpassed schools as a dominant agent of socialization. Technology has rapidly evolved, yet schools remain the same bureaucratic institutions—maintaining a delivery model of instruction based on an agrarian calendar, discrete subject areas, and an age-level grading system. MLE clashes with schooling as it refuses to belong to one discipline and therefore cannot be bureaucratized. As a cross-disciplinary field of study, MLE helps students and teachers better understand and communicate their understanding of any subject area—including math, science, technology, social studies, and language arts. More than half of all students in the United States are already considered digital content creators (Lenhart and Madden 2005) only not in the school classroom.

MLE also clashes with schooling in part because it challenges the traditional delivery model of schooling through social constructivism and asserts that although media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors, ultimately people use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings (National Association for Media Literacy Education 2007a). Production of mediated messages is an essential component of media literacy and requires students to be deeply engaged in Dewey-like settings that are characterized by curricular experiences that are authentic and relevant—not just to students' lives but also to the needs of society for which students are preparing to enter (Dewey 1916). The promise of schooling is that it is inherently a highly social activity. The perpetuation of democracy depends upon this sociality of young people and their ability to master the art and science of civil dissent, debate and deliberation (Parker 2003). One could argue that the absence of MLE (critical analysis and creative media production) in schools jeopardizes the very social and political democratic purposes for which public schools were designed.

Ushering MLE into Adulthood

The corporatization of America (Sandlin and McLaren 2010) provides fertile ground for perpetuating the sibling rivalry among MLE, technology and school-

ing. Yet the three find common ground in the shared struggle between the democratic ideal of participatory citizenship and the bureaucratic realities of government. Schools have traditionally been resistant to the implementation of new technologies, yet in the post-digital age have yielded to the top-down push from government and corporations to produce technology-driven curriculum. MLE will most likely remain in the margins because of its interest in overcoming the very bureaucracy of its existence through the critical questioning of authorship, ownership, motive, and ultimately leveraging communications technology to give voice to the disempowered. MLE is already a major influence in driving democratic practices among young people in the United States and even worldwide, providing young people a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and empowerment individually and collectively (Asthana 2006). From this perspective, MLE is synonymous with democratic education.

Ushering the field of MLE into adulthood ultimately requires that we as educators widen our focus to include an increase in our own technological proficiency level as well as an expansion of our understanding of technology as a way of seeing and mediating the world. MLE also requires us to more deeply understand the interplay of the democratic purposes and bureaucratic constraints of schooling in the United States and to ultimately move beyond merely consuming information to the creation and sharing of information in ways that are socially meaningful and civically responsible.

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