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Media Literacy Education: On the Move

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In 2005, several colleagues and I were awarded a five-year grant to create the Center of Excellence for the Advancement of New Literacies in Middle Grades at the College of Charleston. From 2006-2011, we have worked collaboratively with over 200 middle school teachers in underperforming local schools to assist them in stimulating their content area instruction with media literacy, and specifically with new literacies practices that include three components: (1) a broadened definition of reading and of text, which includes both print and non-print sources, and is built upon developing literacies that address reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and designing, (2) a sociocultural perspective of literacy that builds upon connections between learners' interests, identities, and texts they choose, and (3) uses of pop culture and digital technologies salient to learners' lives. In this essay, I take a brief retrospective analysis of where we've been over the past several years and where we are heading for the future of media literacy education in schools.

Historically speaking...since 2004

Little did we know that much of today's literacy practices involving pop culture and digital tools and devices, and ultimately the current needs in media literacy education, would be predicated on creations founded in 2004. Some of these tools include shifts in thinking about how people communicate online, such as using social networking sites such as Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter and video and photo sharing on YouTube and Flickr. Some of the devices include entertainment storage (like the iterations of iPod), the creation of smartphones (to include text messaging, email, video and photo capabilities), and ereaders/etables (such as the Kindle, Nook, and iPad). In just a few short years since opening our Center the world of literacy has wholly changed: print and non-print texts sit side by side and users seamlessly move from one to another, whether that is on a digital screen or on paper. These rapid

changes have affected teachers' perceptions of how they must approach their content and how they must prepare their students for literacies relevant to their lives.

Moving from singular to plural

When we began our work in 2006, most teachers viewed text as words on a page and literacy as the process of developing reading and writing skills. This isn't uncommon among learners of all ages (see Darwin 2006 and Jacobs 2008 for info on teachers and see Lenhart et al. 2008 for info on adolescents). Although the teachers we worked with during the first two years recognized the value of speaking, listening, and viewing, these faculties were subordinated to developing reading and writing of printed texts (Hagood, Provost, Skinner, and Egelson 2008).

Through our work in sharing the importance of viewing and interpreting non-print texts as both multimodal and intertextual, teachers have begun to incorporate non-print materials as texts to read into their classroom instruction. For example, Skinner and Hagood (2008) illustrated how two different English Language Learners used digital storytelling software, photographs, music, and audio recording to construct narratives of themselves as proficient literacy users. In these spaces with digital texts these English Language Learners had opportunities to develop their proficiencies with literacy tools and to reflect upon their identities in their literacy practices. As teachers became more adept at using digital tools and non-print sources they began to view them as texts, enabling them to teach students about them as part of a repertoire of texts that are read, written, viewed, listened to, and designed (Hagood in press-B).

Consequently, we no longer needed to spend valuable instructional time in professional development getting teachers to buy into the import of teaching using an expanded definition of text and of literacy (Hagood, forthcoming-A). Teachers now see the value of

the plurality of texts. When teachers build instruction on a multiplicitous view of literacy that targets the acquisition of print skills and other affordances, such as visual and iconic texts, students have opportunities to develop deeper content knowledge.

Moving from individual to collective

Jenkins (2006) describes contemporary media as part of “participatory culture,” which “shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement” (4). To Jenkins, participatory culture most integrally involves social and collaborative media literacy practices that build on the following: affiliations (such as social networking sites), expressions (such as creations of mash ups or fan fiction writing), collaborative problem solving (such as teamwork for distributed knowledge/learning), and circulation (ways to shape the flow of knowledge through media). A move to participatory culture in schools is difficult when the educational system at large has been established to hone the skills of individuals as assessed through high stakes year-end standardized tests. However, such a move is necessary if educators value the current uses of Web 2.0 technologies for collaborative endeavors. As we found, when teachers are given opportunities to engage in participatory culture themselves—such as in the sharing of distributed knowledge and various expertise about digital tools—they are more likely to include it in their instruction (Hagood, forthcoming-A).

Moving from “Put that away” to “Bring it to class!”

The biggest change that we have seen in our work with developing media literacy is teachers’ perceptions of digital tools in the classroom. When we began our work with teachers, they were reticent to use technologies in their instruction that reflected students’ interests (e.g., text messaging, discussion boards, blogging) for fear of losing some control of students’ attention or of violating some school policies. However, over time, we have seen teachers embrace technologies as they capitalized on using school technologies available. Bolstered by their new knowledge but frustrated by the lack of technology for all students, many teachers researched their school policies and learned that there were not explicit policies related to student-owned technologies at school. They then implemented their own BYOT (Bring your own technology) policies in their classrooms. Teachers explained that as technologies have become more affordable more students have access to their own devices (such as smartphones, e-read-

ers, handheld devices such as the iTouch). They found that providing opportunities to use them in class aided in students’ engagement with and attention to assignments (Hagood, forthcoming-B).

Moving on: Directions for the future of media literacy

Media literacy has come a long way in just a few years. More and more schools are beginning to see the value in developing students’ literacies by connecting content area standards to students’ interests, which include pop culture and digital tools. However, Jenkins (2006) noted that “youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new” (19). With Jenkins’s idea in mind, the future of media literacy development must include both the development of traditional skills of reading and writing combined with the new literacies practices involving speaking, viewing, listening, and designing. Also, it is not enough for educators to just include these new literacies in their instruction. To truly develop media literacy, educators must actively and explicitly explore with students how to ethically and responsibly use these texts to hone their skills as critical thinkers and to develop themselves as active citizens.

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