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Media Literacy in Teacher Education: A Good Fit across the Curriculum

Jessica Meehan, Brandi Ray, Amanda Walker, Sunny Wells, and Gretchen Schwarz

Baylor University

Voices in the Field

Abstract

Current and former doctoral students share how their participation in a graduate course entitled "Media Literacy across the Curriculum" inspired their own interest in media literacy and enabled them to integrate media literacy concepts and instructional practices into coursework for pre-service teachers.

Keywords: media literacy, teacher preparation, instruction, curriculum, higher education, education

Support for media literacy education has grown significantly in recent years with teachers and teacher educators alike advocating for its inclusion in programs and curricula. Torres and Mercado (2006) presented media literacy education as helping new teachers give voice to all people. Stein and Prewett (2009) argued for media literacy education in social studies. Morrell (2011) explained that English language arts teachers needed to be able to help secondary students to analyze and create texts of all kinds, including in popular media forms such as music and video. Domine (2011) even offered media literacy education as a framework for teacher education, noting that the "multidimensional nature of media literacy education renders it a meaningful framework with which to conceptualize the pursuit of technological proficiency, promote pedagogical excellence, and to magnify the democratic ideals and purposes of public education in the United States" (194). While scholars have argued that media literacy in teacher education is critical, undergraduate teacher preparation programs rarely include media literacy especially in elementary programs.

There are multiple reasons for the slow growth of media literacy in teacher education. Primary among them are external pressures, such as preparing for accreditation, that leave little time for educators to consider innovations such as media literacy. For example, the CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) standards emphasize traditional subject area knowledge, like that captured in the Common Core Standards, and while technology standards are listed in Standard 1.5 of the *CAEP Standards*, media literacy is not addressed. Moreover, the CAEP process is so labor intensive and outcomes-focused that many teacher educators may lack the time or incentive to explore media literacy.

In addition, while teachers seek to connect media literacy to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the standards themselves do not explicitly discuss media literacy. Drew (2012), for example, examines how the CCSS do not consider the changing nature of 21st century literacies fully. Furthermore, a plethora of terms have proliferated in the literature, from visual literacy to multimodal composition to transmedia literacies and, although interconnected, the many terms remain confusing for educators. The lack of communication in the university across disciplines studying media literacy can also be problematic. Collectively, these causes inhibit the integration of media literacy in teacher education. However, media

literacy education can be incorporated across the current teacher education curriculum with little disruption to core content areas and many possible benefits for pedagogy.

In this article, the authors share examples of how media literacy education has been integrated into teacher education courses within one program at a medium-sized private university in a large southern state. Current and former doctoral students share how their participation in a graduate course entitled *Media Literacy across the Curriculum* inspired their own interest in media literacy. Each author was then a doctoral student teaching assigned undergraduate courses in teacher education. The first taught an introductory course. The next two taught a social foundations course, Social Issues in Education. The final author taught within secondary social studies preparation. Although the general curriculum for doctoral teaching assistants is prescribed, they have some room to add and change content. Each author created and implemented media literacy in her own way, reflecting the many possibilities that exist within teacher education.

Media Literacy in the Course "Introduction to Secondary Education"

Many young people today enter college with dreams of becoming teachers. Often, however, future teachers are not connected to actual students in a school until late in their course work. By then, some are left feeling helpless and disillusioned by the challenges they observe in the school environment. Standardized testing, benchmark checks, data-driven decisions, the lack of time to collaborate, and funding shortfalls often leave these students feeling unsure of the difference they are going to be able to make in the field. To prevent disillusionment, pre-service teachers must have an early opportunity to begin thinking critically about the realities of schooling in order to develop authentic perspectives and strategies that will enable them to advocate for students and schools once in the field. Media literacy is one strategy that offers a way for pre-service teachers to connect their curricula with their students and standards in new and engaging ways.

Secondary education majors at our university take a course called "Introduction to Secondary Education" during their freshman year. The semester begins with a brief introduction of various topics including adolescent development, assessment, multicultural education, and lesson planning. Then pre-service teachers are paired with two students in an urban middle school for tutoring focused on reading comprehension skills. Pre-service teachers are required to plan a mini lesson for their middle school students as part of their tutoring experience. In order to make their lesson relevant, we engage students in using media literacy education as a strategy. As Thoman and Jolls (2004), note learning in middle school happens through the use of the cell phone, Internet, and video games, as well as TV and books, necessitating that teachers augment their definitions of literacy. Early in the semester, we explain digital and media literacy competencies and the key questions that can be used when students read and analyze diverse media messages. In our course, we employ a combination of core concepts and questions disseminated by The Center for Media Literacy (CML) in their *MediaLit Kit* (available online @ <http://www.medialit.org/>) and The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE). Table 1 shows some of these key questions:

In employing these questions, pre-service teachers might watch a video about school reform and ask who made the message, for whom, and whose voices were left out. After guided practice in class, students are then challenged integrate these questions and concepts within their own tutoring activities in reading. Typically, the pre-service teachers begin with standard media literacy activities (e.g., deconstructing advertisements, analyzing magazines, and evaluating newspaper articles). They might then continue by teaching their students various persuasive elements used in media. Eventually, pre-service teachers may ask their own students to create products, such as commercials or magazine covers, for a pop or sports star so that they can apply the persuasive techniques they are studying. They begin to use media literacy questions in selecting teaching materials on the Internet and even texts they wish to use, as well.

Table 1

Some Media Literacy Questions

- ✓ **Authorship:** Who made this message?
- ✓ **Purpose:** Why was this made? Who is the target audience (and how do you know)?
- ✓ **Economics:** Who paid for this?
- ✓ **Impact:** Who might benefit from this message? Who might be harmed by it? Why might this message matter to me?
- ✓ **Content:** What is this about (and what makes you think that)? What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied? What is left out of this message that might be important to know?
- ✓ **Technique:** What techniques are used? Why are those techniques used? How do they communicate the message?
- ✓ **Credibility:** Is this fact, opinion, or something else? How credible is this (and what makes you think that)? What are the sources of the information, ideas or assertions?

Adapted from: National Association for Media Literacy Education (ND), Core Principles of Media Literacy Education, www.namle.net/publications/core-principles/

Over the semester, pre-service teachers themselves begin to think critically about various issues in education and curriculum design. They may begin to challenge things they are seeing and hearing during their time in the field within this inner-city middle school and begin building a foundation for advocacy as future professional educators. In addition to learning critical techniques for analyzing and evaluating a range of media texts, students need to be prepared to do this work in diverse school settings.

Integrating Media Literacy into the Course, "Social Issues in Education"

Teacher education programs have the responsibility to prepare teachers for diverse school settings and to meet the needs of a variety of students. As Gay (2000) argues, pre-service teachers need to be prepared for diverse classrooms in order to achieve democratic and inclusive classrooms. The media far too often under-represent ethnic minorities and have a tendency to apply stereotypes and ignore structural inequalities. According to Cortes (2000), multicultural education is taught through the media: "That enveloping media multicultural curriculum guarantees that school educators do not have the power to decide *if* multicultural education will occur. It will...through the media, even if not in schools. Rather, school educators can only decide *whether or not* they will consciously participate and *how* they will participate in the inevitable process of teaching and learning about diversity" (p. xvi).

"Social Issues in Education" which is taken by juniors and seniors is designed to prepare pre-service teachers to work with diverse populations and to stimulate critical thinking on the issues of race or class as they pertain to education. Media literacy serves in the development of critical thinking skills, offering a tool to examine and to unpack diversity issues as they are represented in the media and conveyed in students' experiences. For example, when discussing the topic of gender, students were asked to reflect on their ideas, concepts, and views regarding traditional gender roles. They brainstormed common gender stereotypes and developed long lists of societal norms including, but not limited to "Boys are good at math and science" or "Girls like to wear pink and play with dolls." Once these norms were generated, the class engaged in a discussion of how and where these ideas originated. Inevitably, one of the predominate sources that students

cited was the media. Students then employed the key questions described earlier to engage in a guided practice analyzing and evaluating gender across media texts. Together, the instructor and the students critically examined books, magazines, commercials, and school curricula with an intentional focus on gender.

Following the guided practice, students participated in an independent assignment in which they visited a store or other public venue that they were familiar with. However, they were asked to visit this location with a new critical lens. Students took snap shots of advertisements, products, and other aspects of the store's environment that either perpetuated or broke gender norms. Students often returned to class invigorated by the assignment and eager to discuss their discoveries. Empowered by the critical experience of examining gender in a particular environment, the students then explored media texts that contained a counter culture narrative, a more personal story that is not typical, and not the usual, dominant mass media account.

Pre-service teachers also explored media and literature that did not adhere to conventional gender norms. An example of one of these books is *The Paper Bag Princess* written by Robert Munsch. In this storybook, gender roles are reversed where the princess does not wear a cute, pink dress and the couple does not live happily ever after. Instead, the princess saves the prince from a dragon using her wit and intelligence, choosing to live independently from the prince. By employing media literacy questions to examine popular texts, pre-service teachers discover that, indeed, people are not all the same. Their future students will not all fit into any one mold (gender, race, language, etc.) either but they still deserve respect and care.

In addition to examining issues of gender and diversity in the media, pre-service teachers are asked to consider these issues in curricular materials and media that are produced and supplied by corporate sponsorship. For example, they may look specifically at state adopted textbooks and curricular resources distributed by M&M and Oreo. In addition to asking questions of audience, authorship, messages, meanings, representations, and reality, pre-service teachers are prompted to consider other aspects of curricular choices. For example, what elements should be considered when selecting classroom materials and curriculum? How effective are the materials in aiding student learning? What, if any, precautions should be taken when including corporate sponsored curriculum? Moreover, they engage in consideration of how corporate sponsorship of curriculum may promote advertising of sponsored products within the schools and discuss the pros and cons of such partnerships. Corporations are often willing to provide support to schools in the form of book covers, score boards for athletics, news updates, and rewards for literacy or honor roll in exchange for advertising. Advertising can take the form of a logo on the merchandise or free products when students meet certain goals. Some corporations even pay for ad space in hallways and on buses. Educators must consider the benefits and drawbacks of accepting commercial sponsorship and examine how accepting corporate funding may shape their school environment. In this way, this course uses media literacy education to encourage intentional and reflective practice in the classroom as well as prepare future teachers to be advocates and teacher leaders.

Teaching Media Literacy in the Secondary Social Studies Practicum

In another example of media literacy education in our Teacher Education program, pre-service teachers in their junior year practicum/methods course are introduced to the concept of pedagogical content knowledge while being concurrently placed in secondary social studies classrooms for the first time. In the course, pre-service teachers are asked to design and teach lessons for middle school and/or high school students with the cooperation of a mentor teacher. In their lessons, they must critically analyze social studies curriculum issues and apply constructivist pedagogical methods with an underlying rationale of teaching for democratic citizenship.

Within the social studies methods course, we apply media literacy techniques explicitly to aid students in searching for lesson plan ideas, various available curriculum, and class materials. The National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) key questions and core principles serve as an entry point for analysis

of curricular choices. We not only apply these questions to lesson plans, textbooks, and curriculum units, but also to materials such as, movies, videos, and children’s literature. Critical media content analysis is a valuable aspect of the course and, by utilizing media literacy skills, pre-service teachers begin to discern the possible limitations of a range of curricular materials and other media sources, ultimately exploring the perspectives that are represented or not represented within them. For example, we deconstruct media and curricular sources regarding perceptions of Africa that may be presented in a world history or world geography course. Then, we discuss how young teachers might counteract stereotypes or misrepresentations through the lesson plans they create, helping their students develop critical perspectives that foster democratic citizenship. Highlighting the actual *process* of interrogating curriculum sources serves as a model for how pre-service teachers might incorporate media literacy within their burgeoning pedagogical practice.

Many of the goals of media literacy education are parallel to social studies skills and content as laid out by the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS, 2010). The processes of analyzing historical, political, sociological, and geographical sources and data outlined by NCSS are similar to the NAMLE questioning process. While we do not explicitly require students to write a media literacy lesson, many of my social studies teacher candidates choose to apply what they have learned from critical media analysis in their lessons. Over the past two years, since we have embedded media literacy within the course, several of the teacher candidates have created and taught various content-rich lessons that include key media literacy concepts, as shown in Table 1. The lessons range from content analysis to critical consideration of the role of the media in the wider political and economic climate, and demonstrate how the goals and process of media literacy and social studies are aligned.

Table 2

Examples of Critical Media Literacy Activities Developed by Pre-Service Teachers for Social Studies

History: 10th grade students were asked to challenge their perceptions and stereotypes of Muslims and the Arab world by analyzing various photos.

U.S. History: 11th graders were provided with written and media sources regarding the “credibility gap” in the Vietnam War and then asked to apply and discuss the concept and the role of media in the U.S. wars in the last decade.

Economics: 12th grade students, within the context of market structures, students were asked to consider the effects of the consolidation of media sources upon the economic market, access to information, and how that would impact their own life.

Conclusion

Requiring an entire course in media literacy in undergraduate teacher education may not be feasible at many colleges and universities with teacher preparation programs. However, one way to promote media literacy in teacher education is to spread, share, and demonstrate lessons that fit into the traditional curriculum and coursework that pre-service teachers are already required to take. In this way, media literacy is positioned as an instructional or pedagogical strategy for teaching and learning across subject areas, not as a separate subject.

Beyond the examples shared in this article, one might consider how, in a child or adolescent psychology course, students could examine the impact of food commercials on children or the impact of

movies on teen body image. In a children's literature course, students could engage in a critical examination of popular films and stories, such as those produced and disseminated by Disney. A science education class could explore the teaching videos supplied by Mobil Exxon, examining the perspectives embedded in the curricula (the "shadow curriculum" in Brown, 2005). A math education course could study the statistics of polling or the presentation of data in commercials. In order to fully extend the possibilities of media literacy education across content areas, teacher educators who already advocate for media literacy need to seek collaboration with their teacher education colleagues and share lesson ideas.

Media literacy remains perhaps the most important addition to current teacher education, even if it must be "slipped in" with the rest of the curriculum. In a mediated world swirling with ideas, opinions, alleged facts, and arguments, both future teachers and their future students need to be encouraged to examine their sources, reflect on their own assumptions, become aware of their own media habits, and as Thoman (1999) said, "challenge and question . . . *be conscious* about what's going on around us—and not be passive and vulnerable" (p. 50).

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