

Literacy Expanded: The Role of Media Literacy in Teacher Education

By Gretchen Schwarz

Messages of the mass media saturate our culture from glitzy billboards to multiple TV sets blaring in restaurants. Americans use video games, radios, CD players, and cell phones; they subscribe to magazines and newspapers, rent videos, attend movies, and surf the Net. The mass media, especially in the past century, have expanded notions of literacy and the ways people learn. Tyner (1998), for example, notes that “there are many literacies—in the broadest sense, oral, print, and electronic modes—there are several continuums of literacy that should count” (p. 38). A growing number of scholars discuss multiple literacies and the idea that traditional reading and writing, while essential, no longer suffice for today’s students. (See, for example Morris & Tchudi, *The New Literacy: Moving beyond the 3 R’s*, and Myers, *Changing our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy*.) Bales (1989) adds:

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Though mass culture is only about 150 years old, the true nature of its effects on society in general are just beginning to be studied. Yet many sociologists are willing to elevate the media to co-equal status with the family, the church, and the school as the primary institutions that affect both cognitive learning and the teaching of social and moral values. (p. 4)

Given the power of emerging literacies, teacher educators need to pay attention. Teacher education

needs media literacy as an essential tool and an essential topic in the new millennium. Following is a discussion of what media literacy is, a rationale for incorporating it into teacher education, examples of media literacy across the teacher education curriculum, and a summary of the benefits of media literacy for educators and their students.

What Is Media Literacy?

The best, short definition of media literacy is “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, [evaluate], and produce information for specific outcomes” (Aufderheide, 1992, p. v). Understanding and using the means of communication are abilities basic to life in the Information Age. Thus, media literacy includes diverse skills in reading and writing and speaking, using the computer, and decoding visual and even musical presentations of information. But media literacy goes beyond the how-to level. Robinson (1996) explains: “Media literacy education teaches ways to analyze the carefully constructed codes and conventions of media and how it affects one’s understanding of his or her world” (p. 1). The media, after all, influence how we talk, what we buy, for whom we vote, how we perceive others, and why we behave as we do. Thoman (1999) summarizes: Media literacy is “the ability to create personal meaning from verbal and visual symbols we take in every day through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and, of course, advertising. It’s the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to *be conscious* about what’s going on around us — and not be passive and vulnerable” (p. 50).

As a growing number of parents, educators, media creators, and politicians become concerned about the effects of media on young people, it is time to recognize the importance of critical thinking about that media, to become conscious as Thoman says. Just as traditional literacy has empowered people economically, politically, and culturally, so media literacy can further empower today’s American citizens. Media literacy is not a rejection of TV or e-mail. It is a set of skills and attitudes, knowledge and insights. Media literacy enables us to ask questions, to challenge assumptions, to make choices, to both critique and appreciate the media.

Why Include Media Literacy in Teacher Education?

Media literacy merits a place in teacher education because it encourages critical thinking in a media-dominated age, both for young people and for their teachers; it offers new ways of engaging students in learning; and it makes connections—among students, between school and life, between educators and others. To understand our own culture as well as others, how different children learn, what is going on in all subject areas, what education is for, teachers need media literacy. Teachers must also be able to model media literacy for their students.

Although teacher education programs now include educational technology,

there are indications that media literacy built on critical inquiry is not yet widespread. For instance, Tyner (1992) maintains, "There is a desperate need for pre-service teacher training that teaches about media. Students in university education departments, many of whom grew up in a saturated media environment, are clamouring for it" (p. 175). In addition to knowing how to create web pages or knowing where to acquire relevant films, future teachers need to know how to evaluate educational software, who owns most of the mass media, how TV violence affects children, and much more. Media and technology should be tools, not the end of education; teachers should ask questions and make policy decisions.

As the technology changes and grows, more issues emerge. For example: Do digitally manipulated images create a dangerous cynicism? Could the information glut desensitize children to other human beings? How do computer monitors affect the eyesight of growing children? How are other cultures affected by the import of Hollywood images? Many more questions, both broad and narrow, need asking. The Commission on Media, as reported in the newsletter, *Media Matters* (1999), celebrates the increased recognition of media literacy in publications like *Educational Leadership* and *The New York Times* and in states like Minnesota and Texas which are including media literacy in their education standards. However, the Commission also recognizes "the need for more formal professional development for inservice teachers and the development of media literacy curriculum at colleges of education" (p.1). In fact, media literacy can be integrated across the teacher education curriculum.

How Does Media Literacy Fit throughout Teacher Education?

Subject-oriented methods courses are logical venues for media literacy. Communication, language, society, and all human endeavors are affected by mass media. Media literacy is both subject and method in language arts, for example, and is a major part of the national *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996), which include the ability to read and understand a "wide range of print and nonprint texts." Understanding and using all forms of communication is basic to language arts. Media literacy can sensitize students to methods of propaganda, challenge stereotypes in literature—print and nonprint—nurture a greater appreciation of the power of language, and promote reading, writing, and disciplined inquiry, as well. Students in English or language arts methods courses can find useful classroom ideas like the one suggested by Curry-Tash (1998) for secondary students. "TV commercials can be integrated into a unit on persuasion and fused with either George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1946) or Frederick Pohl's *The Space Merchants* (1952)." Curry-Tash notes that "Media as an instructional tool places a premium on the lived, cultural knowledge of students and offers teachers a means of honoring students, while still pushing them towards academic success" (p. 46). Comparisons of novels and their filmed versions, practice in good methods of research—which

means more than merely downloading information from the Net—analysis of symbolism on TV, and research into the many issues of media literacy, from intellectual property rights to censorship, are other rich possibilities for the English language arts teacher. Moreover, students can demonstrate their understanding of various classroom subjects through a variety of media, videotaping a scene from a play or building a web site for book reviews, for instance. Media literacy can be done across the grade levels, too. Media literacy is essential as one of the multiple literacies in language arts today.

Social studies is another area of the curriculum in which media literacy has a prominent place. The media have a tremendous impact on American society, politically, economically, and culturally. In particular, social studies teachers—and their teacher educators—can teach media literacy to improve citizenship, preparing students for active engagement in democracy and working against the growing political cynicism that weakens our republic. Hamot, Shively, and VanFossen (1997) suggest that media literacy in social studies allows future teachers to “uncover hidden assumptions, to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, to recognize biases, to separate fact from opinion, and ultimately, to determine the strength of the mass medium’s message. Translated into classroom practice, teachers could engage students in a critical dialogue concerning the message of the mass medium...” (pp. 5-6).

Social studies teachers can introduce young people to a variety of news sources, including “alternative” sources; can have students compare news from multiple sources; can ask students to deconstruct or analyze stories on TV “news magazines” like *60 Minutes*; can teach good research techniques including interviewing; and can even debate the effects of the media, using excellent sources like *Mass Media* (1994) from the Greenhaven Press Opposing Viewpoints Series (San Diego, CA). *Mass Media* includes essays from a variety of writers who discuss topics from media bias to media regulation. Students can also create their own local cable news programs. Other important social studies media literacy topics include materialism and overconsumption in capitalist societies, history according to the movies and TV, and the economics of advertising. The media are not simply an entertaining way to avoid the usual classroom lectures. Critical thinking with and about the media should be a central concern of social studies methods courses.

Media literacy fits into other methods courses, as well, even if to a lesser extent. Media literacy has a growing role in health education as TV, in particular, affects the amount of exercise children are getting, exposes them to violence and sexual behavior without consequences, and introduces the young to smoking and drinking habits. In science education, the relation of consumerism/ advertising and the environment is a major concern. In addition, science students can examine the ways the media portray and mediate the natural world. Ferrington and Anderson-Inman (1996), for example, point out: “Science films use a variety of specialized techniques including animation, time-lapse, and high-speed cinematography. Learning

about these techniques not only enhances a student's understanding about scientific principles, but also provides practice with media deconstruction skills that can then be transferred to other formal and informal learning experiences" (p. 668). Media literacy overlaps many of the concerns of visual literacy, the focus of art education, inquiring into how colors affect emotions, for example. In mathematics education, the interpretation and impact of polls and the working of statistics are important topics. Again, in every subject area software is being developed—some of which is useful and some not. Media literacy can, in short, play a very useful role in methods courses across the curriculum.

Child and adolescent psychology courses in teacher education should include media literacy as researchers become aware of the impact of the media on child development. In *Failure to Connect* (1998), for instance, Healy examines the use of computers related to the child's developing brain. She warns: "Much of the glitzy new machinery is either misused or underused once it arrives at school; not only do machines sit idle because of lack of technical support or teacher preparation, but poor implementation of software turns learning time into trivial game-playing.... We lack both substantive research and guidelines on how to use new technology in the most constructive way for children..." (p. 22). Research leads Healy to conclude that computers may not be at all appropriate for the mental growth of children under the age of seven, and then, should be used with care. Time in front of a computer screen can deprive young children of the natural play activities and interaction with adults that is necessary for language and other kinds of development. In *Endangered Minds* (1990) Healy researches the effects of other media, particularly television, on children's thinking abilities. Future teachers need to be aware of such research.

Similarly, media literacy is a major concern in adolescent psychology. Strasburger (1995), for example, presents research on the effects of media violence, and the connections between the media and drug use, teen nutrition, and adolescent sexuality. An adolescent psychology course could be made really meaningful to future teachers if they would do field research on the media. Interviewing and/or surveying adolescents to discover their television viewing habits, their involvement with zines (homemade, specialized magazines), or their reactions to MTV would give new teachers significant insight into today's adolescents. Moreover, future secondary teachers can in their psychology courses read and discuss such research as Hersch's study *A Tribe Apart* (1998). Hersch connects the media to other factors that alienate today's young people. She observes: "Technology and the media create a world without boundaries. For adolescents there is available a dizzying array of lifestyle choices, at the same time that home and community fail to provide a balancing sense of security.... The most stunning change for adolescents today is their aloneness...more isolated and more unsupervised than other generations" (p. 19). In an era in which children grow up with TV and the VCR, cell phones and personal computers, media literacy is key to understanding and guiding the psychological, cognitive and affective, growth of our young.

In other teacher preparation courses—in the foundations of education, field experiences, and courses introducing professional issues—media literacy is also relevant. In various social foundations or introduction to education courses, for example, major topics include equity and social justice in American education. Much of how Americans perceive one another and related socio-political issues are affected, if not determined, by the media. In *Channel Surfing: Racism, the Media, and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (1997), Giroux argues that the media encourage anti-democratic sentiments, especially in the way adolescents are portrayed:

Demonized or trivialized, young people are portrayed in Hollywood films as either a social menace or as groveling dimwits patterned after the anti-intellectual histrionics of stars such as Jim Carrey and Chris Farley. If not demonized, youth are either commodified themselves or constructed as consuming subjects. In some cases, this commodification of youth pushes ethical boundaries: for example, the world of media advertising parades prurient images of youth across high-gloss magazines, appropriating the seedy world of drug abuse to produce an aesthetic that has been termed “heroin chic.”(p. 2)

Educational foundations courses serve as excellent meeting places for future educators to examine the issues Giroux presents, like stereotyping in the media, and other issues including the co-opting of the classroom by business interests like Channel One, the growing political power of media monopolies, and the media portrayal of teachers and schooling itself.

In an early field observation course, or during a student teaching seminar, media literacy can clarify misconceptions and continue to encourage thought on the role of teachers in the schools and the goals of education. For example, in the early field experience course which I teach for future secondary teachers, I assign students to watch and analyze a “teacher film” such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Stand and Deliver*, or *Mr. Holland's Opus*. In class discussion we evaluate how realistic these portrayals are and what messages about schools and children are offered, especially in the light of the real school experience in which these preservice teachers are involved. Important questions emerge: Is a good teacher one who battles alone like the teacher in so many Hollywood teacher stories? How are administrators portrayed? To what extent should teachers be involved with the personal lives of their students? Are schools all violent places? Future teachers need to challenge the stories of schooling told by the mass media as they work out their own educational philosophies.

Today's teacher must take on many roles. In addition to instructor, facilitator, coach, mentor, and sometimes counselor and nurse, as well, a teacher should also be prepared to collaborate with parents, administrators, and the public and to advocate, when appropriate, school change. Media literacy offers future teachers new opportunities for reaching out and working for school improvement. Media literacy offers a subject about which teachers can connect to the home, whether in

newsletters explaining media literacy lessons, in discussion at open house, or through media literacy workshops for families. Thus, media literacy is an appropriate topic in any education course, like a student teaching seminar focusing on outreach. Many parents have concerns about the media and will welcome information such as the positive media suggestions offered in *The Family New Media Guide* (1997) by William Kilpatrick and Gregory and Suzanne Wolfe. Teachers can share other resources such as *Screen Smarts: A Family Guide to Media Literacy* (1996) by Gloria DeGaetano and Kathleen Bander and *Plugged-In Parent: What You Should Know about Kids and Computers* (1998) by Steve Bennett. These books are well researched, accessible, and practical, offering teachers useful classroom ideas, too. Knowledgeable teachers can also share information about organizations like Family Choice TV, a grassroots group of more than 300,000 who offer parents resource materials, workshops, and community activities. Media literate teachers can gain access to media workers in the community, as well, bringing media professionals and organizations into the classroom. Local radio and TV station announcers, PBS programmers, newspaper reporters and editors, PR professionals, and film makers are excellent resources across the curriculum, and they can come to a new appreciation of the school, too. Media literacy is a subject which can create new connections among the stakeholders in schools.

What Are the Benefits of Media Literacy for Teachers and Their Students?

Gerbner (1996) maintains that the media now tell the formative stories of our culture, the stories once told by families, churches, schools, and communities. Perhaps, the most important stories teacher education programs must prepare future teachers to tell is their *own* stories. If future teachers are to take control of their own professional lives, to affect educational policy, to do what they know is best for their own students, and to make schools better places, they are going to have to become effective in communicating the real—complex, situated, and often ambiguous—ongoing story of American schooling. That the media have created untrue or misleading stories about American education is supported by such research as *The Manufactured Crisis* (1995) in which Berliner and Biddle detail the popular myth of decline and dearth of standards. Politicians and others have regularly distorted the stories of the schools to suit their own agendas. That most new teachers bring with them into teaching a great deal of idealism and altruism as well as knowledge and skills is the story that should be nurtured and supported.

Media literacy that enables teachers to articulate their ideas and experiences for the public in a variety of media can only strengthen their professional resolve and effectiveness. Furthermore, the real diversity of teacher voices needs to be heard in the ongoing educational conversation of a pluralistic society. Thus, teacher candidates can practice making presentations on technology needs to school boards and

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the PTA. In methods and field experience courses, future teachers can learn how to get their stories to the local newspaper, TV and radio stations, and to homes and businesses, illustrating what students are learning, how the schools are succeeding, and how the public can support the schools. In brief, teachers can become agents of change, not just subjects of others' reforms, and for this they need expanded literacies.

The ultimate beneficiaries of media literacy in teacher education are the nation's children. Teachers who are critical thinkers and good communicators, who challenge the status quo when needed, who are both skilled and thoughtful in the uses of technology across disciplines, who understand their own culture and others—are teachers who can help their students achieve the same goals in their own lives. Considine (1995) offers the following benefits of media literacy, benefits which should matter to new teachers:

1. Media literacy is interdisciplinary and easy to integrate into key elements of the existing/emerging curriculum.
2. Media literacy is inquiry based and consistent with reflective teaching and critical thinking.
3. Media literacy includes hands-on experiential learning and is consistent with learning styles research.
4. Media literacy works well in teams and groups, fostering cooperative learning.
5. Media literacy has been successful in appealing to at-risk students and in improving retention rates.
6. Media literacy is compatible with SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) and fosters employment opportunities.
7. Media literacy connects the curriculum of the classroom to the curriculum of the living room. (p. 41)

Conclusion

Media literacy is an avenue through which expanded literacies can be included in the nation's schools at all levels. It can serve to enliven and to connect teacher education courses, from methods courses and educational psychology to foundations courses and student teaching. Media literacy promotes critical thinking, reflection on social issues, understanding of subject areas and children, and teacher professionalism. It gives voice to educators. As Davies (1996) declares, "media literacy contains within it the seeds for making teachers better teachers" (p. 170). Meaningful teacher education programs must attend to media literacy.

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