



## Language Arts with a Focus on Media: Facilitating Students' Entry in the World of Literacy

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### Abstract

This paper briefly describes the function of media literacy in the classroom. Beginning with the notion that language is socially constructed, the paper focuses on how it is possible to incorporate a field that is familiar and accessible to all, in our teaching. Furthermore, the advantages of studying the media are outlined and supported by existing studies. Teachers who strive to show sensitivity to their students ought to include texts that are central to their students' lives.

**Keywords:** Media, literacy, Language, mass media, Popular culture

Without going into an extensive discussion about history, it is obvious that power struggles have existed and persisted over the centuries. There have been many who have dedicated their lives to bringing about change yet it is "his"-tory that prevails. "He" who belongs to the dominant group in society. By virtue of having similar backgrounds, colour, religion, gender and experiences, a portion of the population has acquired a self-proclaimed right to exert its influence on all aspects of our existence. The reality as well as the danger of this situation has become more apparent with the major changes that have occurred in the world over the last few decades. The increase in migration, technological advances and globalization allows for the power of such self-serving individuals to become more widespread and result in the oppression and indoctrination of many more individuals and societies. These are the stories that must be emphasized if we are to learn from the past and make a difference for the future. Equity and social justice have become part of our vocabulary but as educators we are obligated to take on more than a politician's approach of talking about such terms. We must take action, even if that type of action involves taking risks.

Teaching and learning are primarily social practices. As education is part of the larger social framework which involves social beings with competing interests and goals, teachers might find themselves in a tug of war between governing bodies and students. It is essential however to bear in mind that students ought to be our main focus and their personalities, experiences and needs must guide our actions. We must exhibit flexibility in our teaching practice so as to ensure that our students find meaning in what they are exposed to in the classroom. They will find pleasure in learning that is relevant to their life in the past, present and future. That must be the concern of the classroom teacher who shall critically examine the demands placed on them by those who set the standards and select the teaching material themselves, before they can pass on such skills to their students.

"Literacy is the cornerstone of all learning and success in school...and cannot be viewed as merely a subject to be learned in school, as it impacts on all aspects of learning, both in the classroom and in the world beyond" (Pollishuke & Schwartz, 2005). Due to its cross-curricular significance, literacy has been a topic that has brought about much debate all over the world. Scholars from many fields are questioning instructional approaches and attempt to discover some "magical" method to "solve" student reading and writing problems (Luke, 1998). Unfortunately, as it is evident through the on-going debates, the answers are not simple as we cannot rely on a "one size fits all" approach to literacy. Literacy extends beyond reading and includes writing, listening and talking about text. Furthermore, different curricular approaches and their accompanying textbooks, assessment tools and classroom practices shape literacy differently. The way that literacies are shaped could have uneven benefits for some children and continue to favour already advantaged groups (Luke, 1998). Traditional practices have focused on transmitting the information that has been deemed as valuable by certain members of society to future generations. Rather than confronting a diverse student population with the obviously difficult task of making sense out of meaningless writing, educators who truly strive to create an inclusive classroom can begin to examine what their students have been exposed to, what they are currently facing as well as consider what their future will demand. Looking ahead is necessary as it is our ultimate goal. We are aiming at providing students with tools that will assist them in achieving long-term personal and professional goals. As part of the wider community, schools must have a realistic view of textual practices that can enable people to alter their material circumstances rather than focus on "pitches" to promote one strategy or another (Luke, 1998).

As part of our effort to level the playing field, I suggest incorporating media literacy in our classroom. Regardless of class or background every child is currently exposed to the media in one way or another. This enables teachers to create lessons that can be appreciated by all. I have discussed the social construction of literacy at length, possibly too much

for the scope of this paper, yet it has been a topic that has interested me since the beginning of my teaching career and led to my familiarity with media literacy. My own teaching experiences as well as the current literature, although limited in my opinion, have highlighted the value of using mass media and popular culture in the classroom. Furthermore, as there has been little public enthusiasm for its use among educators, leaders and parents (Hobbs, 2004), I found it necessary to emphasize the reasons for my belief that media literacy is beneficial.

Reading in the classroom those products of popular culture about which students already have some knowledge increases students' confidence and in turn their motivation. Familiar and interesting texts are able to transform the students into a community of learners where critical discussions can occur and experiences can be shared with equal membership in the community (Martin, 2003). Moreover, as media texts are central to the lives of students, it must be addressed critically in the classroom to ensure that students are capable of evaluating the messages that the media are sending (Martin, 2003) and hopefully to "gain liberation from oppressive ideologies" (Freire, 1970) and increase social action. Finally, providing such opportunities in the classroom prepares students to be critical thinkers in the outside world. This may very well be the key to bridging both worlds (Martin, 2003).

While teaching English abroad, I watched students' interest and progress increase as I integrated popular songs, magazines and films into my lessons. This opened the door for studying the language as well as bridging about enlightening conversations amongst the students that extended beyond the scope of ESL instruction. It was truly rewarding to see how these discussions strengthened the bond between the students in my classes who came from different social and ethnic backgrounds as well as broadened their views of our society. Although I stumbled upon this form of instruction as I sought to engage my students in the difficult task of learning a foreign language in their native country where the only context they had for the use of the language was related to the various forms of media, it has come to my attention that a body of 25 years of scholarship and theory exists on the subject (Hobbs, 2004).

In the 1980s when the realization that the media was here to stay had finally set in, incorporating popular culture in the curriculum became more common. Walsh (2006) indicated that initially a "suck them in" approach was employed, by which teachers used songs, movies or magazines to gain students' attention before moving on to the classical studies. Later on, training students to cultivate a critical view on media products was attempted (Thoman, 1990). Educators were compelled to become responsive to what Masterman (1985, 24) had identified as the central role for media education: the ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to the world of everyday life. Students were directed to question what was represented in media texts and whose "reality" was being portrayed. During this stage, researchers began to focus on the sociopolitical analysis of mass media (Brown, 1991; Hobbs, 1994) yet schools seldom moved to such a paradigm shift of media education.

Although the curriculum was eventually amended to contain an element of media education, the goals of media education are far from being met. Issues of conceptualization and application have hindered its progression in our educational system (Chen, 2007). Views on media literacy typically follow two incompatible perspectives: the cultural studies approach and the inoculation approach (Scharrer, 2002/2003). Although the cultural studies approach emphasizes students' experiences with the media and the pleasure it offers, the inoculation approach that highlights the negative aspects of the media, continues to dominate the field of media education. Furthermore, a lack of consensus on how to design and deliver media education curriculum and how to assess such programs (Christ & Potter, 1998) continue to obstruct our view of the benefits that could be acquired through systematic studies of media.

"Reading" media requires the same types of skills as reading print texts (Martin, 2003). According to Rosenblatt's transactional theory, (1995), the meaning of any text does not lie in the print but in the readers' interaction with the words. Readers bring their own experiences to the text and it is these that influence the understanding they build on the words. It is therefore easier to understand why media texts have a role in the teaching of reading. What holds true for a poem or a novel is also true for an ad, a television show or a movie (Hong, 2002). It is by helping students become aware of their active use of literacy skills through interaction with popular culture that will enable them to transfer these skills to school literacy learning (Hong, 2002). When students in an urban high school in California for example, were exposed to Hip-hop music in the classroom, they displayed an understanding of imagery, metaphor, irony and tone that had not been apparent with the mere use of traditional texts. Furthermore, this group of students who often resisted traditional learning material took part in consciousness-raising discussions, essays and research projects (Morrelle & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

In another study, Shelley Hong Xu (2002), worked with teachers to examine how the integration of popular culture in literacy instruction affected student learning. The lessons with student popular culture included both print and non-print texts, taught literacy skills and engaged students. The teachers learned that popular culture did have a place in teaching as they would be in a better position for preparing students for life during which they would "read" and "write" both print and non-print texts that exist in modern society (Hong, 2002). These studies indicate that there are educators who acknowledge that there is a deeper meaning and purpose to education than merely passing down a common body of knowledge from generation to generation. As a result of our rapidly changing society we must aim at altering our practices if we are to prepare students for the real world, yet questions have been raised regarding the effect that media literacy has on students.

Opponent of using media in the classroom insist that it has the effect of “dumbing down” public education (Hobbs, 2004) and insist that popular culture texts are often “too transparent or too thin to support much discussion or debate...When they are brought into the classroom...there may be little to sustain conversation” (Applebee, 1996). Such doubts might result from the confusion about whether the goal of education is to teach inert information or to teach thinking (Martin, 2003). I choose the latter and thus insist that when students find true meaning in what they are learning, when they are stimulated by their experiences in school and when these lessons can lead to a true awareness of issues facing society then media literacy obviously does have a very significant place in the classroom. Furthermore, we can hope that by broadening students’ perceptions of the power-relations and the propaganda that are part of our social reality, the next generation will be better able to cope with inequality and discrimination than we have thus far. Obviously there will always be those that oppose such attempts – those who have too much to lose if our children became exposed to “too much information” and they will try to criticize teachers for using media literacy as a propagandizing tool (Hobbs, 2004) but we must keep in mind the benefits it could hold for its acceptance in our educational system. And this shall result through the bottom-up effort of individual teachers. Media literacy education depends on the courage and determination of teachers who are motivated to incorporate mass media and popular culture into their lessons (Hobbs, 2004). Teachers must work together to share their findings with colleagues, to support and train others in using media and to gain the parents’ approval, perhaps through workshops and more importantly through their children’s achievements.

As reading and writing are primarily socially situated, such acts require that the participants be affiliated with the school-based, literacy-related practices (Gee, 1990). An environment that reflects the lived experiences of all its members is welcoming and inspiring. Since the members of our classrooms – the students – are all surrounded and influenced by the media in their daily lives, discovering that their lessons include such familiar texts can allow them to gain more of a sense of community in the classroom which in turn can lead to more meaningful learning. As teachers who strive to show sensitivity to the needs of our students, I believe we have an obligation to include popular culture into our teaching practice even if that entails moving beyond our own comfort level. The children who shall enter our classroom are alive, active and inquisitive. How can we expect them to thrive in a class that is cold, dull and lifeless?

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