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Voices from the Field: Teaching Media Literacy in Less Than an Hour

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As a trainer and speaker, I am often limited to thirty minutes in a faculty meeting, forty minutes in a keynote, or ninety minutes in a one-time workshop to explain to teachers what we mean by media literacy and what educators can do to integrate media literacy instruction into their classrooms.

That doesn't leave much time to review NAMLE's [Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States \(CPMLE\)](#), let alone explain the nuances of the pedagogy embodied in the six-page document. This poses a challenge because NAMLE's Core Principles serve as the foundation for everything that I present. They are an invaluable guide for inquiry-based media literacy education in a digital world marked by media convergence and Web 2.0 capacity (i.e., the ability to interact and participate).

I rarely have time for a detailed explanation of how the CPMLE shift the focus of the field's debates from "what we believe to be true about media to what we believe to be true about how people learn to think critically,"¹ though I can quickly point out that the document design clearly tilts towards education by following up each of the six Core Principles with a list of implications for practice. I also typically mention the influence of key educational thinkers like Freire and Dewey in the hopes that those present will be familiar enough with their work to recognize the references as a shortcut endorsement of constructivist pedagogy infused with deep critical inquiry.

I skip the definition of media literacy, and go straight to the purpose of teaching media literacy:

*The purpose of media literacy education is to help 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.*²

We can then spend the remainder of the session talking about how to use open-ended questions to develop "habits of inquiry" and how to teach "skills of expression" in ways that help students find their own authentic voice.

I always discuss how to keep critical thinking as the primary agenda, even in instances where there are secondary goals such as reducing youth smoking, teaching video production techniques, rejecting stereotypes, learning the differences between statistical methods, or understanding the Cold War by looking at World War II posters from the U.S. and U.S.S.R. It is this focus on inquiry that distinguishes a media literacy approach from attempts to simply impose a teacher's ideology on students or pass along vocational skills. It is easy to spot this focus on inquiry in the CPMLE. It isn't enough that the very first principle is "Media Literacy Education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create." This principle is followed by specific recommendations for how one creates critical thinkers, including a reminder to require students to apply critical thinking skills to all media (and not just those that the teacher doesn't like), a caution not to let the presentation of works by media critics supplant training students to think for themselves, and a strategy to avoid asking IF there is a bias in a particular message (since all media messages are biased), but rather, to look for "WHAT the substance, source, and significance of a bias might be." (CPMLE 1.3, 1.5, and 1.6, respectively).

No matter how much time I have, how many specific aspects of the CPMLE I can cover, or even how inspiring I can manage to be, the ultimate task of integrating media literacy into the curriculum lies with every individual educator. I can share examples of

how others have achieved success, but there is no such thing as an exact prescription of what will work best in every individual classroom.

Unlike recent education reform efforts that blame teachers for the current inadequacies in U.S. education and de-skill them with scripted curricula, I trust and respect teachers. This isn't an attitude borne of naiveté, but rather, of necessity. In more than two decades of training teachers, I have certainly encountered some people who don't have the talent or aptitude to teach, and others who are so frustrated or alienated that they no longer care. But the vast majority of educators genuinely want their students to thrive, and that is a good thing, because media literacy education is completely reliant on the abilities of highly competent, skilled teachers. For media literacy education training to be effective, it needs to reflect that expectation.

So rather than trying to provide simple step-by-step instructions, my job as a trainer is to provide viable strategies. It is teachers who are in the best position to determine, for themselves, how to best integrate media literacy into their work. So I leave them with the task of thinking about what they wish they could teach better and how they could use media literacy to make those lessons more effective.

Years ago, before I left the room, I would have distributed a handout summarizing "Essential Things to Know about Media." It was my own version of what others have called "Key Concepts."³ I don't do that anymore. It isn't that the Key Concepts are irrelevant. To the contrary, a version is embedded in the very first "Implication for Practice" under NAMLE's very first Core Principle.

In the long run, however, spending lots of time on the Key Concepts, even with engaging and entertaining examples, didn't really help teachers know what to do. After all, I wasn't asking them to change media, I was asking them to change education. So, to help workshop participants tackle the task of figuring out how to integrate media literacy into their teaching and make it their own, I developed a checklist – a tool with which to evaluate the design of the media literacy lessons that they develop. I offer it as an abridged version of NAMLE's CPMLE.

Notes

¹ From the introduction to NAMLE's Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States, <http://www.name.net/core-principles>

² *ibid.*

³ Many people and organizations have created "Key Concepts." Some of the most widely used include those available from the Association for Media Literacy, www.aml.ca/whatis; the Center for Media Literacy, http://www.medialit.org/pdf/mlk/14A_CCKQposter.pdf; and Project Look Sharp, <http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/resources.php>