

Chapter 1

Critical Media Literacy as Transformative Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a theoretical framework of critical media literacy (CML) pedagogy and examples of practical implementation in K-12 and teacher education. It begins with a brief discussion of literature indicating the need for educators to use a critical approach to media. The historical trajectory of CML and key concepts are then reviewed. Following this, the myths of “neutrality” and “normalcy” in education and media are challenged. The chapter takes a critical look at information and communication technologies and popular culture, reviewing how they often reinforce and occasionally challenge dominant ideologies. Next, this critical perspective is used to explore how CML interrogates the ways media tend to position viewers, users, and audiences to read and negotiate meanings about race, class, gender, and the multiple identity markers that privilege dominant groups. The subjective and ubiquitous nature of media is highlighted to underscore the transformative potential of CML to use media tools for promoting critical thinking and social justice in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

As new technologies open opportunities for collaboration and media production that is cheaper, easier and more accessible than ever, and as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) spread across the country, now is the time for educators

to explore the transformative potential of critical media literacy (CML). Current pressures for standardization, privatization, and high-stakes testing are driving public education to focus more on global competition rather than on democratic ideals. In this chapter, we propose that CML pedagogy is an important strategy for educators

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to use to strengthen civic engagement and reassert the promise of democracy with an informed and empowered citizenry. Moreover, a CML pedagogy is vital to include in teacher education programs so that pre-service teachers are better prepared to guide their students in critical inquiry *with* and *about* information communication technologies (ICTs) and popular culture.

As Paulo Freire (2010), Howard Zinn (2005), and many others assert, recognizing the political nature of education and literacy is essential for transformative teaching and democracy. CML is a pedagogy that guides teachers and students to think critically about the world around them; it empowers them to act as responsible citizens with the skills and social consciousness to challenge injustice. The development of CML highlights core concepts from cultural studies, critical theory, and new digital literacies (boyd, 2014; Ferguson, 2004; Hall, 1998; Kellner, 1995; Masterman, 2001; Morrell, 2012). CML provides a framework that encourages people to read information critically in multiple formats, to create alternative representations that question hierarchies of power, social norms and injustices, and to become agents of change.

Technology's exponential growth, as well as the convergence of media corporations and new media platforms, are changing society and students to be more mediated and networked than ever (Jenkins, 2006; McChesney, 2000; Prensky, 2010). Facebook, created in 2004, already reports one fifth of the world's population as active users, 829 million of whom use it daily (Facebook, 2014). Millions of American youth walk into their classrooms with pocket-sized devices that provide immediate access to information and entertainment as well as the potential to create and disseminate multimedia messages that can travel the world in seconds. In 2011, Pew researchers reported that 77% of U.S. teens had a cellular device (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, Zickuhr, & Rainie, 2011). A Northwestern study conducted the same year found that 8-18 year-olds in the U.S. spent well

over ten hours a day exposed to various forms of media, such as music, computers, video games, television, film, and print (Rideout, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2011). In 2015, another Pew research study found that 92% of American 13-17 year-olds go online daily, "including 24% who say they go online 'almost constantly'" (Lenhart, 2015). Clearly, these data reflect the need for educators to address the changing relationship between youth and digital media.

CML offers students and educators an opportunity to embrace these changes in society and technology not as threats to education, but rather to rethink teaching and learning as political acts of consciousness raising and empowerment. While the CCSS has its wealth of problems (Brady, 2012; Karp, 2014), it can also be a tool to support educators in moving toward a more critical approach to incorporating literacy across all subjects and encouraging students to participate in their learning *with* and *about* digital tools. The attention of the CCSS to media and technology is movement in the right direction (Moore & Bonilla, 2014); however, *more* use of media and technology does not necessarily beget better learning or critical engagement. Media and technology are not neutral tools. Rather, they are themselves embedded within socio-political contexts, as Stoddard (2014) explains:

Too often, the connection of servers and millions of miles of fiber-optic cables that are the hardware and guts of the Internet are viewed as neutral and free of control. This assumption of neutrality overlooks the many people and software (created by people) that are central to the creation, translation, and routing of information along these fibers or eventually through the air on satellite, Wi-Fi, or cellular networks. (p. 1)

The ubiquity of technology and media demands an educational approach that not only incorporates information communication technology in the learning process, but also teaches how to

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