Chapter 4
Media and Information Literacy in a Higher Education Environment:
An Overview and Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The fields of media literacy and information literacy have different histories and developed through different traditions. Despite these differences, each field has come to a convergence over the last decade, which is important to the development of both. The authors advocate for a combined media and information literacy approach and share the commonalities in support of this interdisciplinary model. This includes a discussion of a collaborative approach in the form of the authors' media and information literacy course, including analysis of student survey responses and feedback included in course reflection papers. The chapter concludes with explanations for the lack of similar models in the United States and the reasons for the lack of alliances between the two fields of study in general.

INTRODUCTION

Many well-known theorists, including Sonia Livingstone, Renee Hobbs and Marcus Leaning, support the integration of media literacy and information literacy. This integration also lies at the heart of the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy curriculum. Despite these efforts, the two fields remain largely siloed in higher education. This chapter examines the separate traditions of media literacy and information literacy and provides a rationale for why these two areas should be taught together, delineating the striking commonalities between the two fields. The authors offer a case study for its implementation (including sample assignments and student responses) in the college classroom. The authors also out-

line several reasons as to why media and information literacy are not practiced together, including the persistence of silos in higher education and outdated, stereotypical notions of information literacy (from some traditional communications studies perspectives).

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

'Hotly Contested' Media Literacy

Livingstone (2005) characterized definitions of media literacy as "hotly contested" (p. 8). And in a global context, media literacy has numerous definitions, histories, agendas and trajectories. However even within the United States, media literacy is understood and practiced in widely divergent ways, ranging from purely skills-based approaches to critical cultural perspectives. As Hobbs noted (2010), too often media literacy is taught from either protectionist (emphasizing the dangers of the internet) or empowerment (the collaborative and emancipatory potential of the internet) perspectives. Despite these varied under-standings and practices, some general commonalities have emerged. This is illustrated by the overlap in the Center for Media Literacy's framework, the core principles devised by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), and Hobbs' (2010) ACCRA model. All three pose key questions about the constructed nature of media messages, their purposes and the ability of audiences to interpret them. NAMLE's (2017) definition of media literacy may be the most common ". . . the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication."

Moreover, arguably in the United States in recent years, media literacy has been subsumed by the term digital literacy (whereas just "literacies" is de facto by some UK theorists). Buckingham (2007) noted that although various literacies might be fashionable, (and this has only become even more pro-nounced in the years since he first made this observation, think emotional literacy, financial literacy, and in the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, news literacy), "the application of the term to the point where any analogy to its original meaning (that is, in relation to written language) has been lost. 'Literacy' comes to be used merely as a vague synonym for 'competence', or even 'skill'" (p. 43). The terrain is further complicated by the more recent introduction of terms such as transliteracy and multiliteracy in attempts to provide overarching or comprehensive concepts that transcend disciplinary differences. Belshaw, in an interview with Panke (2015), suggested that such umbrella terms are futile, and astutely observed that "people tend to assume that their favored term includes every other term. So, for example, researchers in the field of media literacy would say that it includes ICT literacy, digital literacy and computer literacy. And the same goes for those in the other fields." Competing definitions aside, Livingstone (2011) phrased it best when she noted, ". . . for those without media literacy - just as for those lacking print literacy in past decades - risk economic, social, psychological and political disadvantage, even exclusion" (p. 31).

Information Literacy: More Than Catalogs and Databases

For so long librarians were, and still are, teaching information literacy as a set of skills that one must attain in order to be information literate (Tewell, 2015). Tewell (2015) wrote the following about the landscape and history of information literacy from the perspective of librarianship:

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