Chapter 8
Teaching Media Literacy From a Cultural Studies Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines an approach to teaching media literacy from the perspective of cultural studies. It argues that this perspective is especially well-equipped to meet the challenges and demands of media literacy in the twenty-first century, and as such would be of use to scholars in multiple disciplines. Briefly, the course examines the various ways that media shape public culture by analyzing histories of propaganda, public relations, and news framing. In addition, students consider the role of social media in their lives through a focus on the variety of ways in which media shape messages. The chapter describes the logic of the course, key readings, and primary assignments geared toward synthesis of media concepts, democracy, and culture.

INTRODUCTION

Recent events and cultural discussions about the role of media in United States and European politics have amplified conversations about the necessity of media literacy as a component of higher education. At the broad, political level, western democracies have been plagued by problems of "fake news," echo chambers, and the widespread manipulation of media for propagandistic purposes. Information networks have become exponentially crowded, and the typical citizen is ill-equipped to navigate this complex environment marked by a blend of news, entertainment, and social media. As Viner (2016) argues, the social media-driven news environment blurs lines "between truth and falsehood, fact and rumor, kindness and cruelty; between the…connected and the alienated; between the open platform of the web…and the gated enclosures of Facebook and other social networks; between an informed public and a misguided mob." At the personal level, humans are more connected than ever, and media has become for most a primary interface with the world. Educators grapple with the inability of students to disconnect from the mediated world for any extended period of time, and of course this is a condition not unique to students (Lang, 2017; Purcell et al., 2012). The average American spends over 10 hours each day involved with

some kind of media, typically a mix between social media, television, radio, newspapers, films, and video games (Howard, 2016). It would be impossible for future historians or sociologists to study the current time period without giving primary attention to the omnipresence of social and traditional media.

Media literacy education, then, is of utmost importance in contemporary culture. It is clear that universities (and, likely, primary and secondary schools) should invest in media and information literacy courses in order to prepare students to be both citizens and workers in contemporary society. Indeed, there are a number of texts geared toward the research and pedagogy of media, and interest in the subject spans a broad range of scholarly fields (e.g., Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012; Silverblatt, Ferry, & Finan, 2009). One challenge for educators is defining the scope and direction of media literacy education, which can have emphases including digital literacy, concerns about privacy and data online, media production, the role and use of media in pedagogy, and engagement in civic life (De Abreu, Mihailidis, Lee, Melki, & McDougall, 2017). U.S. culture tends to frame education in neoliberal terms where skills are valuable insofar as they contribute to economic success, but media literacy is not primarily concerned with teaching technical skills (Giroux, 2014). Rather, it is more accurately aimed at developing a broad understanding of the role of media in social life (De Abreu & Mihailidis, 2013). Some key questions emerge in defining the course: what exactly is media literacy, and what are best practices in teaching it? What should students learn about the subject, and how can educators both provide a basic vocabulary for understanding media and instill an ethos of media critique that prepares students for life after college? There are no simple answers to these questions, and the multifaceted nature of the mediated environment ensures a variety of equally valid and important pedagogical perspectives.

Media literacy is a key site of overlap in the relationship between language, culture, and democracy. It provides a way to consider how societal debates and norms are constructed, portrayed, and challenged in the mediated world. As such, it stretches across a broad range of scholarly areas and academic disciplines, and students in the liberal arts model of education can and should examine it from multiple perspectives (Silverblatt, Ferry, & Finan, 2009). Most likely, though, "Media Literacy" classes will appear in communication and/or media studies departments, and this essay will discuss a course suitable for such a department. Specifically, it will outline an approach to teaching media literacy from a cultural studies perspective, focusing on theories that inform the course, the material examined and created by students, and the strategies used to illustrate key concepts. The essay is organized as the course is structured—into three discrete units that each function as different ways to examine the everyday impacts of media—in order to best walk the reader through its various entailments. Media literacy draws from a number of fields and traditions, including political science, history, economics, public relations, anthropology, and psychology, in addition to rhetoric, media, and cultural studies (De Abreu & Mihailidis, 2013). The essay will thus begin with the theoretical assumptions that underpin a media literacy course in the cultural studies tradition.

BACKGROUND: PHILOSOPHY OF THE COURSE

Cultural studies, at its core, is concerned with the everyday, or the lived, felt experiences of individuals and groups in the ordinary flow of daily life (Williams, 1989). The heuristic of the everyday is a useful one in thinking about the role of media literacy education. What, after all, is more everyday than media usage? What, in our current historical moment, is more normal than social media? This notion of the banality of social media and media generally can be broken down to more specific concerns. First, if much

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