

Chapter 9

Building Media Literacy in Higher Education: Department Approaches, Undergraduate Certificate, and Engaged Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Through detailed discussion and review of the work done in media literacy in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, including curricular alignment, engaged scholarship, and a media literacy certificate, this chapter shares how faculty, students, and community partners work together to bring media literacy theory and practice to action. The Department of Communication places a high value on media literacy across its programs and curricula and this chapter describes the department's carefully structured approach to media literacy.

INTRODUCTION

With media devices and platforms commanding increasing amounts of time and with issues such as cyberbullying and the proliferation of fake news capturing headlines, calls for media literacy education have been strengthened (CBS News, 2010; Kirby, 2017). Such calls rightly suggest that greater attention should be paid in schools to help equip students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation necessary to comprehend, consider, and critique media texts as well as the media systems within which texts are created and circulated. The primary focus of efforts to strengthen the position of media literacy education

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is on the K-12 classroom, with higher education settings largely absent from the media literacy discourse (Tisdell, 2008). Yet, given the developmental status of emerging adults still in the process of forming their understandings of themselves as well as of the world around them (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014; Zambianchi, 2016), and given the critical role of higher education in developing a broad knowledge base, a capacity for analytical thinking, and a sense of the self as a global citizen, college and university settings have a key role to play in fostering media literacy.

Even in K-12 classrooms where media literacy has its strongest foothold in the United States, media literacy education is still often piecemeal in nature and often developed in isolation. While media literacy scholars believe that it is necessary for young people to learn the skills of critical analysis, there is no formal training process for educators to learn, and subsequently teach, young people the tenets of media literacy (Butler & Ladd, 2016). If media literacy is to be brought to K-12 classrooms, who is qualified to teach it? Teachers and other educators may lack the resources to bring media literacy instruction into an often-crowded curriculum. How can departments and programs in higher education institutions be leaders in the field of media literacy?

This chapter tackles these questions through exploration of the work being done in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst to bring individuals from higher education – faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students – into conversation and collaboration with K-12 students, community members, and other publics around the shared goals of media literacy. The Department of Communication, with nearly 900 undergraduate students, 80 graduate students, and 30 full-time faculty members, places a high value on media literacy across its programs and curricula. The goal of this chapter is to highlight how media literacy is intricately woven into the Department of Communication; we do this through an analysis of the department's carefully structured approach to media literacy, including its multiple examples of engaged scholarship pertaining to media literacy and its undergraduate media literacy certificate program.

MEDIA LITERACY RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A LIMITED FIELD

Given the relative absence of higher education in media literacy discourse, perhaps it is not surprising that there is minimal research on media literacy in higher education. Indeed, most scholarship on the topic observes the dual absence of media literacy in the classroom *and* in research. Yet, scholars from college and university settings have long played an important role in media literacy development in the United States. The field has experienced sporadic growth over multiple decades, with short bursts of published empirical research as well as large gaps of multiple years between publications. This start-stop approach is familiar in its similarity to the growth, in fits and starts, of media literacy as both theory and practice in the United States.

Media literacy, as a topic, was formally codified in the United States at the 1992 meeting of various American scholars who believed that it was time to have a conversation about the influence of media on young people and to formalize its study. The group defined media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, and produce a variety of media¹ (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993). This conversation lagged behind the United Kingdom, for example, which had already developed a codified set of key aspects of media literacy (Bazalgette, 1992) and had delved into explorations of power, pleasure, and critical analysis (Buckingham, 1998) long before the United States. In 1998, the National Communication Association included media literacy in its standards, writing:

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