

Chapter 6

Media Literacy Education

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ABSTRACT

In order to prepare students for the information age, educational leaders have a responsibility to establish and maintain school environments where media literacy is valued, encouraged and understood. The implementation of media literacy should be an integrated approach and involve all stakeholders in the school community.

Although curricula predominantly focus on reading and writing, educators should have a responsibility to reach beyond basic learning skills and should include the development of the complete individual. This requires an understanding of how children grow, develop and interact, and how their social, cultural and educational environment influences them.

Media literacy education offers educators a vehicle by which they can promote and foster social responsibility. It prepares students for the technological world in which they are required to be active participants and contributing producers of knowledge. Technology allows students to explore the various methods of communicating their ideas, expertise and opinions with others in a participatory culture; it is therefore important for student to develop analytical skills that will help them create, interact and engage effectively in a socialized network. The challenge for educators is to understand the cultural needs of students in today's technologically advanced society and to incorporate media literacy programs as an integral part of education. In order to achieve these goals, teachers should be encouraged to attend seminars and hands-on workshops and more importantly, practical resources should be developed and made available for their use in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Media, in its various forms, has evolved rapidly in the last few decades and is playing an increasingly prominent role in all aspects of our lives – social, cultural, industrial and political. These advancements in technology, and especially the strides made by Internet communication, have also played a major role in the lives of students and youth, and have both increased and altered their perceptions of society (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). Unlike the written venues of newspapers, the audio venues of radio, and even the audio and visual influences of television, the Internet has greatly increased the volume of accessible information and the speed at which it can be accessed. Its influence has altered and shaped our perception of information and events, and its authoritarian presence has replaced individual interpretation and use of imagination with visual reality. This ‘reality’ is deeply embedded in the social lives of children and youth, as teenagers and children spend an average of 6 ½ hours a day consuming electronic media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). Hence, the problem lies in the fact that the information available can be overwhelming, and young people lack the knowledge and experience to sift through and analyze what is relevant. The Internet is a wonderful source of information, but young people need the tools and guidelines to effectively organize and analyze various sources of information in order to differentiate between what is worth analyzing and internalizing, and what should be discarded. Furthermore, they need guidance with the various ways of communicating responsibly with others on-line.

The need for media literacy education can easily be justified by analyzing the life style of many young people today. With easy access to the Internet, email and text messaging, as well as popular web sites such as Facebook and MySpace, it is generally believe that a great number of young people function in isolation, and have

become disengaged and disconnected from their school, families, peer groups and communities. Encouraging young minds to participate actively and responsibly in their society should include incorporating their talents and personal interests into positive learning experiences and opportunities. It is therefore important to initiate programs and initiatives that will motivate and encourage students to actively participate outside of their ‘nests’ or comfort zones and expose them to real life situations.

In this chapter, I will discuss and define the various concepts of media literacy education and their implications. Secondly, I will explain the reasons for the need of media literacy education and the benefits it provides for a positive and participatory learning environment. Finally, I will explore the various critiques of media literacy education and offer some insight into possible solutions over this debate.

THE EVOLUTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND CONCEPTS OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

Media literacy is not a new concept but it has been redefined and altered over time. Seymour Papert, a mathematician and educator, first introduced the concept of using computers to teach children in classrooms in the 1960’s. He believed that computers would offer many opportunities for children and could revolutionize the way they learn (Armstrong & Casement, 1998). Over the following few decades, as schools witnessed a decline in student achievement, a new approach of ‘back to the basics’ reemerged, and the computer and its software programs were implemented as a convenient tool to improve student test scores through drill and practice (ibid). In the 1980’s, when the CD-ROM emerged, the computer was recognized as a valuable tool for research and information, and many schools incorporated

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