Title: Practicing Critical Media Literacy Education: Developing a Community of Inquiry Among Teachers using Popular Culture

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Purpose and Conceptual Framework

In their book, *Teacher Education for Democracy and Social Justice*, Michelli & Keiser (2005) claim that education in the 21st century has abandoned its usual aims of educating critically thoughtful citizens for successful democracy and instead "has become increasingly more technical and instrumental" (p. xvii). Further, as our symposium aims at personal renewal for teachers. Teachers often express frustration, helplessness, and defeatism amid the top-down management strategies that are over-utilized within our public school system. Given that, personal renewal for teachers becomes an even bigger mountain to climb. One antidote to this peril is Critical Media Literacy education. Critical media literacy has the possibility to broaden our thinking beyond the given, the constructed. In other words, media literacy compels us to look anew at the most mundane, that which surrounds us: the media and our popular culture. From there media literacy compels us to accept that the media are constructed and to seek various ways to analyze them, while considering our own beliefs to evaluate for ourselves an ultimate interpretation. Media literacy is formally defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate media in a variety of forms" (Aufderheide, 1997). Therefore, the practice of media literacy can broaden our ways of thinking overall, which thus translates into how we view the world around us. In some ways too, it helps to "detoxify" our minds and hearts from that which marketers suggest we become. The practice of media literacy can be viewed as a first step in the process toward teacher renewal.

Further, as of late, with the growth of Web2.0, authorship has expanded into the hands of everyday people. Thus, there is now more than ever the potential for democratic engagement, self-exploration, and the re-writing of narratives. In this fast-paced environment, teachers need to be especially informed about critically engaging with the media so that they can assist their own students to become better "readers" of media, as well as authors (Flores-Koulish & Deal, 2008). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to present how this author engages in critical media literacy education with graduate students in a required Masters level literacy course and within a course on race, class, and gender in education to show how a community of inquiry achievement practice can be built.

What follows is a literature review explicating critical media literacy education more explicitly. After that, I describe in detail the context within the two courses that I teach critical media literacy. And before elaborating on the discussion within the paper, I describe the methodology I utilized. All of this leads toward answering the following two research questions:

1. How does critical media literacy uniquely operate such that it instills within individuals in community an inquiry stance?
2. What can teacher educators learn from this practice?

Theoretical Framework

Media literacy education is an emerging field in the United States with deeper roots abroad. It is formally defined here as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate media in a variety of ways" (Aufderheide 1993). Through the ability to access media, students become acquainted with a variety of sources, and ideally realize that one media source is too limited for making any particular

conclusion (Semali, 2001). Analysis and evaluation together call for readers of media to look beneath the surface of multimedia, to become visually and audibly literate, and then to make determinations based on complex understandings. Finally, to be fully media literate, it is suggested that students be able to use media to communicate (Pailliotet et al., 2000). That is, students should have opportunities to create media, for this will strengthen their critical viewing abilities (Michie, 1999) much like writing can improve reading. Media literacy honors and validates children's out-of-school literacies (Marsh, 2003), which is critical to maintain student engagement. And finally, given the heavily mediated society in which we live, we believe that media literacy can strengthen students' cognitive capabilities to more critically engage in and read their worlds (Freire 1970).

In my courses, I expose students to media literacy as defined above, while emphasizing a critical perspective. Torres and Mercado (2006, 260) write, "Critical media literacy is founded on the legitimate role of media to serve the public's right to be truly informed, and thereby serve democracy." This approach calls for an understanding of basic media economics, or the acknowledgement of corporate profit-driven motivations for what is produced in our mass media. At the same time, we show how groups like *Free Press* (see www.freepress.net) operate to reform media and transform democracy. Emphasizing the media "communication" component as a necessary aspect of literacy is also tied to the critical perspective to promote opportunities for citizen journalism or media expression. Given today's new media openness, there are multiple prospects for obtaining audiences to make one's message be heard.

Media literacy education is a natural direction for expanding understandings of literacy, and through literacy, the world in which we live becomes the classroom text. Given the multitude of mediated texts that provide today's students with information, literacy for the 21st century must prepare students beyond decoding, basic comprehension (Goodson and Norton-Meier 2003; Turbill 2002), and preparation for high stakes testing. Indeed, Alvermann and Hagood (2000, 203) specifically urged "incorporating critical media literacy in school curricula, and 48 out of 50 state curricula for K -12 students include components of media literacy (Kubey and Baker 1999). In fact, the state of Maryland has its own media literacy curriculum, *Assignment Media Literacy*, which was created and aligned with the state's voluntary curriculum in 2001. However, despite the curricular support and theoretical soundness related to integrating media literacy into K-12 classrooms, media literacy is often overlooked or met with resistance by K-12 teachers due to its controversial potential and/or absence within standardized assessments, etc. (Dyson 1997; Xu 2001; Flores-Koulish and Deal 2006, 2008; Marsh 2006).

Course Contexts

As I indicated earlier, I teach critical media literacy in two classes. One is dedicated primarily to media literacy (called: RE 601 Media Literacy Education), and I also integrate it within a course on race, class, and gender in education (ED 659). I will elaborate on details in this order.

RE 601 Media Literacy Education is a required course for students in our literacy masters program. Most of the students are practicing teachers, and many

teach at the early elementary levels. The educational objectives of the course are described explicitly in the syllabus as follows:

At the completion of the course, the student will be able to:

1. Be familiar with the history of media literacy education, both in a U.S. context and internationally.
2. Begin to understand the complex interactions that take place between reader/viewer and media texts.
3. Appreciate the power of the media to transmit culture.
4. Adopt a wider appreciation for media as text.
5. Begin to integrate media literacy education lessons into existing curriculum.

To accomplish the above objectives, assignments, activities, readings, and screenings have been developed explicitly to help students developmentally 1) become aware of their own media experiences and feelings, 2) understand the historical, contextual, and theoretical bases of media literacy, 3) bear in mind various child developmental issues, and 4) consider options for integrating media literacy into the existing curricula. Thus, throughout the semester we move from media literacy content understanding towards pedagogical content awareness.

Specifically, at the beginning of the semester, to reflect on the impact media has had in their lives, students reflect on their past media consumption and experiences with popular culture within a "media memoir." The purpose of this assignment is for the students to recognize the many influences surrounding media/popular culture consumption, from the media themselves, parental involvement, and their own teachers' reactions (or lack thereof). They read articles on new literacies and critical literacy (e.g., Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood 1999, Vasquez 2004), and we view various media literacy videos (e.g., *TV Smarts for Kids*, *Signal to Noise*). Students in the course conduct teacher research in the form of a

case study related to children's media consumption to provide them with the opportunity to more deeply appreciate at least one of their student's understandings of the media. Additionally, besides deconstructing media texts within the class, they also work in small groups to analyze a popular television show or television commercial and produce an academic paper. Finally, after exposing students to a plethora of media literacy resources (e.g., websites for the Media Awareness Network, NAMLE, ACME, etc.) and practicing its integration with typical curricular content as a final assignment, students integrate media literacy into an existing curriculum, a necessity for our students to view media literacy in an interdisciplinary manner as opposed to an add-on course.

As a framework for analyzing media messages, we expose students early on to key questions in media literacy developed by Hobbs (1998), and we utilize these questions to deconstruct familiar media texts such as current commercials and advertisements in magazines. The class participants use these questions as a framework of analysis for their group television program assignment, and many also integrate the questions within their final curricular units:

1. Who is sending this message and why?
2. What techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in the message?
4. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
5. What is omitted from this message?

We have found that this set of questions is particularly accessible to this population. There is efficiency to their succinctness, yet an open-endedness that allows for our deeper exploration into the critical realm. Further, we work with this set of questions so that the teachers can modify the language for their given student populations.

ED 659 Race, Class, and Gender in Education is a required course for masters' students in our Curriculum and Instruction program. Unlike the literacy course, the entire course is not dedicated to media literacy education. Instead, media become a frame in which we view the important categories of race, class, and gender. The course description is as follows with the elements of media literacy italicized:

> The class will critically examine race, class, and gender in education first by looking at how our views are and have been shaped about these concepts historically, through policies, and socially, thus varied systemic perspectives. We will begin by examining the concept of white privilege. Next, we will see how the concept of deculturalization has helped to perpetuate white privilege, and as well, how social reproduction theory operates such that it systematically limits opportunities and mythologizes meritocracy. *In the past 50 years, the mass media too has strongly impacted the way we view race, class, and gender.* Throughout the class, we will uncover how this has occurred. All of this will work to set up what will feel like a cage, a closed system with impermeability. However, as teachers, we must not give in to this defeatist sentiment. So, from there, *we will enter into possibilities for cracking the system, not from a stance of a denial of racism, sexism, and*

classism, etc., but very much from an open acknowledgement in order to move forward with enhanced possibilities, freedom, and opportunities.

The first line italicized above denotes the practice of media analysis for the teachers themselves. Specifically, through readings and video screenings, the students consider the extent to which the media impact our perceptions of urban schooling, teachers, and communities. Then, after reading about and discussing Murrell's book on identity development, *Race, Culture, and Schooling: Identities of Achievement in Multicultural Urban Schools* we begin the process of moving toward a pedagogical engagement with the media and popular culture for their students. That is, initially, I expose my students to the power of the media to influence our beliefs about race, class, and gender in ways that are often new to them. Then, instead of remaining at a place of hopelessness created by the huge cloud that is media influence, we see that by acknowledging its influence and engaging in analysis (or dialogue) with the media, we have the possibility to become liberated from its power.

Methods and Data Sources

This paper is less empirical, more theoretical. Herein, I re-visit past data from previous studies (Deal, Flores-Koulish, & Sears, 2010; Flores-Koulish & Deal, 2008), examine new data from ED 659, but mostly, I rely on my reflections to move forward an emerging framework of analysis. Reflective field notes and interview data over a multi-year period were analyzed qualitatively to pull out themes related to the students' understandings of the practice of inquiry in popular culture. Thus, I utilized methods and perspectives from naturalistic inquiry and grounded theory within the qualitative paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Charmaz 2000).

My reflections provide an opportunity to engage in a new analytical direction in my work toward a possibility for a partnership-situated professional learning community.

Findings

1. How does critical media literacy uniquely operate such that it instills within individuals in community an inquiry stance?

As an introduction to media literacy in my classes, I apologize to the students. I apologize and tell them that after the class, they will no longer be able to view media and popular culture in the same way as before. In our paper "Media Literacy and Reading Masters' Students" we found that some students frequently described media literacy as eye opening (Flores-Koulish & Deal, 2007). Some students express this sentiment nearly every time I teach it. This semester in fact, a student in the race, class, and gender in education course commented on the discussion board: "Critical Media Literacy has opened my eyes to many things in the media that I never challenged." That comment was typical of other comments in our discussion board this semester for approximately 25 percent of the students.

In another example, a student writes "After our discussions on media literacy, it has really made me think about how important it is to make sure that the students have the correct information and are able to comprehend any information being presented to them through various media." To open one's eyes is a metaphor for thought. This student says that her eyes have been opened earlier in her post, and then continues in this excerpt by discussing how important it is for her to think about what to do with this analytical stance as a teacher.

Taking what is familiar and seeing it in fresh ways is yet another way to describe what it means to be eye opening. Some of the students who take a media literacy class can be so moved that they describe their application of this method of inquiry to that which they previously took for granted, or ignored benignly. Abby writes, "I started thinking about The Little Mermaid. In this movie, Ariel, the main character, had to make a horrible deal with the villain and give up a part of herself, just in an effort to get the prince to like her." They reach back, in part because they teach young children, to see the importance of introducing media literacy early, but perhaps more explicitly, because they become reawakened.

Questions drive this process. And I encourage questioning in my students for their use with their own students. Betsy illustrates the effectiveness of this stance. "I must note that while taking this class, I can see the messages more clearly and I inquire about their relevance or what the media's hidden agenda is. When I watch a movie or TV, African Americans are typically portrayed in a negative light. What does this say to my students about who they are or what they can become? What can I do professionally about these messages in the media?" She demonstrates that she is on the road to pedagogical content knowing for her students.

There is an explicit movement from eye-opening toward an acknowledgement that their eyes opened due to the questions they asked. Jenny states it most explicitly in this passage:

> Asking questions regarding the images with which we are inundated on a daily basis has proven to be the most enlightening. If not for the questions we

> have asked as a learning community or as myself when considering various things in the media, I would have remained unaware of the impact media has had on me and/or other individuals. Without inquiry, I unintentionally end up perpetuating the status quo and letting those in charge of the media control my thinking and behavior, and that is the most dangerous detrimental part. Asking questions is empowering and brings more truth forward than, I'm sure, those producing the images had intended.

Inquiry as stance then becomes a goal to strive for with our students. It can begin with the media and popular culture surrounding us, the familiar, and be transferred to other domains that too are important to interrogate. Freire writes about conscientization in this way, or "reading the world." Once an individual begins this process, like I described media literacy above, it becomes difficult not to be situated within an inquiry stance. Teachers, thus, can promote the questioning of media and popular culture, and bring that same process to other texts. Jim describes this transference in the excerpt following:

> Each and every day, teachers stand up in class and present their students with what they like to think of as the truth. Rarely do we stray from our comfort zones to realize that the content we bring to the classroom comes with its own filter. Not only is the content itself presented with its own filter, but the individual teacher themselves bring their own filter to each subject matter as well. One teacher may take a lesson on history as absolute truth, while another questions the validity of such an account and presents the

same content through a different lens. It is also important to understand that students themselves filter content through their own cultural lens as well. Clearly this student understands the power of inquiry as stance, or the act of discernment.

An art teacher in the race, class, and gender in education class discusses a concept that relates to our symposium's overall aim, albeit in an opposite way than I view the media's impact. She writes, "As an artist, the subject of my work involves popular treatment of women, including Barbie, mermaids and erosion of our bodies. Erosion is a theme that can be said occurs from the outside forces of media and those in control of it." This teacher views the impact of popular culture in such a way that is reductive. I see that instead, we ought to view it as additive. Both perspectives connote power; however, if my focus is what is forwarded, then we can also promote the idea that we should have the power to strip away the layers of influence by the media and popular culture. This is poignant to consider if we wish to move forward as reflective practitioners. In other words, without the opportunity to practice media literacy first, how is it that we can connect the professional with the personal (who you are and what you do) when there are so many layers of popular culture that have impacted us? If the second aim is to have courage in the face of this difficult connection, then we must have the courage to accept how Disney has led us to believe certain things about women. We must have courage to question how it is that advertising impacts all of us, despite our seeming unawareness.

Finally, there is a social element to our popular culture. HBO in fact has had an advertisement they have shown to discuss how their shows become "water cooler conversation" at work. Fans of certain shows share their feelings about characters in conversation, on-line on Facebook fan pages, and in other forums. When considering the theory of Vygotsky, we can also see how crucial this dialogue becomes. For this reason, I find that the assignment that the students in the Media Literacy Education class complete in which they analyze a media text in small groups becomes important such that they value the importance of collaborative analysis. Students will often describe how they hadn't considered certain nuances of a media text until their partner(s) noticed it. These types of discussions also frequently occur in the class when we spend time analyzing magazine advertisements.

What are the implications then for teacher educators? I have found that some of the students I teach critical media literacy to become the most likely to become agents of change in their schools or districts. For example, Jane took the media literacy education class and wrote her final unit for a 1st grade class on their neighborhoods with the project to create a brochure for prospective families who consider their neighborhood. Additionally, she asked the students to consider the implications of building a new shopping center in their town. She facilitated their understanding of the impact on the environment through the cutting down of trees, and by having more cars driving to shop there. Following the class, Jane actually taught this unit to her students, presented a professional development workshop on media literacy to her colleagues, and co-presented with me at an academic

conference related to her integration of this methodology. Clearly, she became a champion, and change agent for critical media literacy.

Conclusion

Critical media literacy education has the potential to promote an inquiry as stance in a professional learning community. Above, I have clearly shown the potential for critical media literacy to become internalized as a process for interrogating what we typically take for granted, the media and our popular culture. I have provided examples of how teachers open their eyes once they become exposed to this analysis. I have also shown examples of how this type of questioning can be transferred to other domains to promote the inquiry stance. Finally, it is in community that I have found a richness of understanding. Promoting the collaborative element within media literacy aims at enhancing the overall understanding, and as well, it models a practice of collective interrogation that can be healthy and productive.

All of this type of engagement, I also claim, is an important first step in moving toward renewal and a "cultivation of self" (Jurow, 2009). In other words, we must acknowledge that which has shaped our identity, and impacts our habits of mind and action, in order to get to begin the process of understanding what lies at the heart of our beliefs and ourselves.

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