Using Social Media Tools for Promoting Critical Literacy Skills in the Classroom

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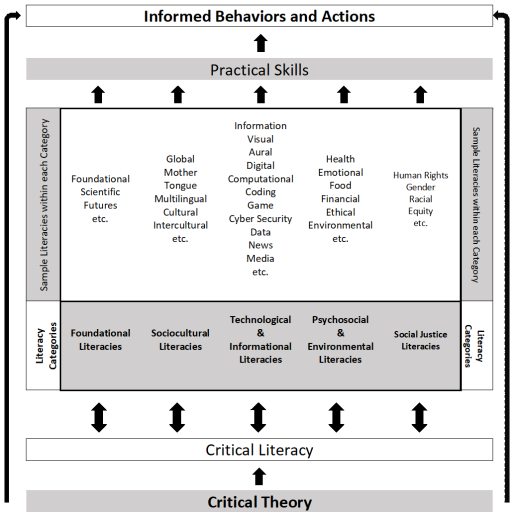
Abstract: Technological and informational literacies, as described in the critical literacies advancement model are essential skills in today's technology-dependent society. In this paper, we illustrate how educators, by using social media (especially memes), can help students develop these and other literacies and thinking skills. These skills can lead to informed decision-making and actions that can advance equity and social justice and the ideals of global citizenship. The paper also discusses possibilities to foster student interest, enhance engagement, creativity, consumer consciousness, and emotional intelligence while creating opportunities for meaningful, challenging learning that invites dialog on difficult topics such as issues related to race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, nationality, immigration status, family structure and so on.

Keywords: critical thinking, critical literacy, digital literacies, critical literacies advancement model (CLAM), global citizenship

There is a wide range of critical skills needed for individuals to function and thrive as well as to help them make informed decisions and take appropriate actions in today's dynamic, interconnected, globalized society. In our technologically dependent world, which depends on tools such as the internet and other digital innovations, there are multiple non-traditional literacies required for being a successful, critical-thinking, global citizen. One such set of literacies, as categorized by the critical literacies advancement model (see Figure 1, Robinson, 2020) are *technological and informational literaices*, of which digital literacies are a component. Without digital literacies, it is becoming increasingly challenging to navigate the hi-tech world (Wilson & Johnson, 2014) in which we must live, learn, and work. Digital literacies (note the use of the plurality of the term as it encompasses a broad range of literacies) as described by Leu et al. (2004) in trying to contextualize new literacies emerging from the prevalence of the internet and other digital innovations, represent the multiplicity of skills needed for managing information and communication in the rapidly changing and increasingly digital world.

As the benefit of using digital technologies and computer-related skills increases in educational environments (de Paula et al., 2018), educators are capitalizing on these technologies in the classroom, often in unique ways, such as through gaming. Not surprisingly, there is increasing evidence that video games can promote critical skills associated with scientific literacy (National Research Council, 2011), resulting in an increase in the need for game literacy, another *Technological and Informational* literacy listed in the CLAM (Robinson, 2020). Still, although technology use in educational environments is not new, it continues to provide innovative opportunities for educators to increase engagement and to connect with their students in ways that can help optimize their teaching and learning experiences. Teaching and learning in the 21st century continue to be greatly influenced by digital technological advancements, which can provide relatively easily accessible communication tools such as social media.

Figure 1. *Critical Literacies Advancement Model*



Social media is a widespread technological tool that Bosman and Zagenczyk (2011) describe as a "phenomenon focused on connecting, sharing, and collaborating" (p. 3), illustrating various educational opportunities for using it in the classroom. Especially with the increase in popularity of online learning in K-12 and postsecondary education, social media provides opportunities for unique communicative methods; designing learning using social media can increase active participation, demonstrate value for students in the learning process, and provide a hybrid learning environment that can support many 21st century skills (Casey, 2013). Through social media, creating and sharing memes (a humorous image, video, piece of text that is copied usually with slight variations spread rapidly and widely across the internet) has become a seemingly ubiquitous cultural practice in today's society. This has given rise to *meme-ing* being described as a significant new literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). We define memes using the definition that Gatherer (1998) offers upon which he built from Benzon's (1996) definition, suggesting that a meme is "an observable cultural phenomenon, such as a behavior, artefact, or an objective piece of information, which is copied, imitated or leaned, and thus may be replicated within a cultural system" (Gatherer, 1998, p. 32). Additionally, we acknowledge that social media (including memes) are already used in teaching (Purnama, 2017) and in research (Veletsianos, 2013).

Various scholars have highlighted several practices as ways to incorporate memes into the classroom, such as for promoting mathematical discourse (Bini & Robutti, 2019), for teaching rhetoric (Beach & Dredger, 2017), as a means of preparing for final examinations (Underwood & Kararo, 2020), for explaining social and conceptual influences of student understanding about complex socio-scientific issues (Yoon, 2008), for promoting critical thinking in terms of political science (Wells, 2018), and for argumentation and engagement in the ESL classroom (Navera et al., 2019) in an effort to teach critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is widely accepted as a key skill for tertiary level learning (Vardi, 2013) as well as for workplace readiness (Fulham & Scott, 2014). We argue that using memes to promote critical thinking—that is higher order thinking--is directly related to critical theory and to critical literacy which provide the foundation of Robinson's (2020) critical literacies advancement model.

Literature Review

The critical literacies advancement model (CLAM) is a framework that organizes critical dimensions of literacy into five categories and it helps us to consider how the development of these individual and even categorical grouping of non-traditional literacies is interconnected. The model illustrates how this development can help promote positive social change, and although it does not provide an exhaustive list, the categories therein are broad so additional literacies could be subsumed under each. These categories include functional and global literacies, sociocultural literacies, human and social justice literacies, psychosocial and environmental literacies, and technological and information literacies. As Robinson (2020) argues, the development and application of interconnected non-traditional literacies in the context of today's globalized world, through critical thinking, which provides the learner with skills to offer social critique, can lead to increased understandings and informed actions and behaviors which can lead to the development of global citizens who promote equity and social justice. For the purposes of this paper, we focus specifically on the importance of technological and information literacies in the digital age.

Technological and Information Literacies and Today's Classroom

The CLAM specifies examples of some *technological and information literacies*, including information, aural, visual, computational, game, cyber security, media, coding, news literacy, and so on. These skills are highly adaptable skills that help us to leverage technical skill sets to be able to navigate technologies and interpret associated information. As we consider digital literacy as a meta-literacy, other emergent literacies come to mind, such as computer, multimedia, network, and web literacy. Digital literacy(ies) is not a new concept and we have seen the term evolve to take on broader meanings and conceptualizations. In light of the speed with which technological advancements occur, it is fair to assume that new technologies in the 21st century and beyond will likely influence further evolution of the definition and its use as well as likely re-shape the way we think about and navigate digital competencies. Further, scholars (see Bawden & Robinson, 2002; Kope, 2006; Martin, 2006; Williams & Minnian, 2007) have attempted to differentiate between digital literacy and other information-related literacies and while the CLAM groups these in one category it allows for them to be distinguished while drawing reference to their interconnectedness with each other in the same category and other literacies outside of the category.

We adopt the definition that suggests that digital literacy refers to the ability to use and produce digital media, information processing and retrieval, participation in a social network for knowledge creation and sharing, as well as wide range of other computing skills (UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education, 2011). Therefore, digital literacy is essential to acquiring and developing a wide variety of other skills and literacies. As suggested in the CLAM, there is interdependence and connection between digital literacies and other categories of literacies, further purporting that the development of skills in one literacy area may encourage and support the development of other literacy skills in the same or other categories (Robinson, 2020).

In centering on technological and informational literacies with more attention on social media usage in the classroom through the use of *meme-ing* as a new literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), there is an opportunity for educators to help students develop their critical thinking skills (Wells, 2018). Further, given the popularity of social media platforms (for example, there are over one billion registered accounts on Facebook alone), which is only expected to increase (Clement, 2020), and the ease with which educators and their learners alike can create memes relevant to current or historical events and a wide range of curricular content, this is a great tool for leveraging its potential to enhance the overall teaching and learning process. Social media and memes can not only enhance content delivery, collaboration and communication, and student engagement and interaction, but also help extend the scope of learning beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom.

Discussion and Implications

Regardless of how much we try to keep up with revolutionary technology such as new apps, platforms, and devices, this may prove difficult. Further, it is important to consider that digital literacies are not simply about learning these technological skills or figuring out how to use the features of the newest iPhone or tablet, or even how to apply these in our teaching and learning opportunities. In contemplating how to get started with incorporating social media into teaching and learning, note that it does not require that educators stay abreast of all the newest innovations, but it requires commitment to have some familiarity with the general trends to stay connected and relevant to their learners' practices and needs. This will prove useful as educators seek to effectively integrate social media in their classrooms. As we usher in new styles of teaching and learning, social media and memes, in particular can foster just-in-time teaching-related strategies and help personalize and customize collaborative learning opportunities for every learner in an increasingly connected world.

The use of social media and memes in the classroom also provides an opportunity for researchers to further explore their use, effectiveness, and significance in the classroom to help increase research-informed practices. Admittedly, it can be a challenge to incorporate social media into classrooms, especially considering issues of accessibility, cyber security, and even creating guidelines to ensure appropriateness and digital citizenship. Nevertheless, there are currently resources available to support educators who seek to use social media and memes, in particular to help supplement their teaching and learning experiences. Various social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, for example, have dedicated blogs and publications to help guide the process (see *Facebook for Educators and Community Leaders Guide*; *Using Instagram in an Educational Context*; *The Educator's Guide to Instagram and Other Photo Sharing Apps* and so on). Moreover, there are free digital resources (https://imgflip.com/memegenerator) that one can use to create and customize resizable text to images to create one's own meme.

As educators gain more confidence and comfort with utilizing social media and humor in the classroom, they will find innovative ways through memes to foster student interest, enhance engagement, creativity, consumer consciousness and emotional intelligence. This can lead to innovative teaching and learning endeavors but also to developing critical thinking skills. Additionally, this will also allow for students and teachers to join in meaningful, challenging learning that invites dialog on topics that they might tend to avoid such as issues related to race,

ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, nationality, immigration status, family structure and so on. Ultimately, social media usage in the classroom can open the door for increasing critical thinking, critical literacy skills and furthering the development of other critical literacies. These developments can then lead to informed decisions and actions that have the potential to advance equity and social justice to lead to the ideals of global citizenship.

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