Ask, Don't Tell:
Pedagogy for Media Literacy Education in the Next Decade

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NAMLE was founded (as the Alliance for a Media Literate America) ten years ago with a mission "to expand and improve the practice of media literacy education in the United States." There have been many successes since then, and some disappointments. The expansion of media literacy education into schools has fallen into the latter category, with modest and growing numbers of teachers and library media specialists on board, but far short of the organization's vision of universal media literacy education in the U.S.

There are varied and complex reasons for the slow embrace of media literacy education by U.S. schools. Some obvious explanations include overt political resistance, narrow focus on high stakes testing mandates, continuing lack of access to media technologies, and lack of professional development and preservice training. This essay explores a few of the less obvious reasons.

First, We Have to Talk About Education

Media literacy is a quirky thing. Despite decades of scholarship on how to teach media literacy and NAMLE's name change that added the word "education," media literacy conferences don't sound like education conferences. Attendees are more likely to hear hallway conversations about media effects than effective teaching strategies. Conversations about rubrics, or curriculum scope and sequence are relatively rare. Often political objectives are articulated more clearly than learning objectives.

These conversations inspire the "choir," but they have generated only modest success in promoting the widespread adoption of media literacy education in U.S. schools. Those of us who see media literacy as essential to democracy, health, and wellbeing in the 21st century can't be satisfied with that status quo. So we find ourselves asking the same question we asked ten

years ago when AMLA was founded: How do we make universal media literacy education in U.S. schools a reality? I suggest that the answer lies in living up to our ideals and changing the way we talk about what we do.

Language Matters

Media literacy advocates would have a better chance of appealing to educators if we were less insular in the way we describe our work. To reach teachers, administrators, librarians, and other support staff we need to enter their conversations and address their concerns. If the best we have to offer is the occasional ad analysis activity, film deconstruction, isolated unit on analyzing and producing news, or even cyber safety lessons, we will remain forever marginal.

Luckily, we have much, much more to offer. We have a framework and specific teaching techniques that can infuse critical thinking into every aspect of school life. When we take an inquiry-based approach, media literacy educators offer exactly the kind of higher order thinking skills called for in nearly every set of education standards in the country.[1]

After all, what are they referring to if not media literacy when the Anchor Standards of the *Common Core English Language Arts Standards* (corestandards. org) say that students must be able to "Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media"? Who is better equipped than a media literacy educator to help students meet the needs of a multimedia age which, according to a 2009 position statement by the National Council for the Social Studies "requires new skills for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and distributing messages within a digital, global, and democratic society" (socialstudies.org/positions/medialiteracy)? Even the 1996 National Science Standards sound a lot like media literacy when they declare that "Inquiry is central to science learning," explaining that students

should be able to ask questions, make careful observations, communicate ideas to others, "identify their assumptions, use critical and logical thinking, and consider alternative explanations" (2)

Media literacy education offers processes for inquiry and reflection that apply to both analysis and communication. And we have ways to provide higher order thinking skills that remain relevant even as technologies change. And while organizations like Common Core and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills spar over the relative importance of skills and content, curriculum-driven media literacy education provides practical, classroom-tested ways to integrate the two (see, for example any of Project Look Sharp's Curriculum Kits at www.projectlooksharp.org).

So our lack of success isn't because media literacy is outside the scope of today's major educational concerns. But we limit ourselves when what we show educators are a few tried and true individual media literacy lessons. Instead, we need to zoom out and refocus in order to situate media literacy in a bigger picture.

The way we talk about things influences the way we think about them, and the way that other people respond (or not) to what we say. Much of media literacy has drawn its language from the field of communications. We talk about things like "production values" and how "audiences negotiate meaning." This language is both useful and logical for people focusing on media, but to succeed in schools, we need to also use language and framing that are more familiar and inviting to teachers.

Consider, for example, how teachers might respond if, rather than describing media literacy with a definition about accessing, analyzing, understanding, and producing media, we said, "media literacy education is about teaching students to ask – and find answers to – important questions." This phrasing puts teaching and students, rather than media, at the center of the discourse.

It isn't about abandoning attention to media. It is precisely because our culture surrounds us with media that we need to extend traditional literacy skills beyond reading, writing, and discussing printed texts. And students, especially young students, don't automatically apply skills learned in one situation to another, so if we want students to analyze non-print as well as print media, we have to explicitly teach them to do so.

Rather, framing media literacy education around asking and answering questions draws attention to the inquiry and problem solving skills so commonly mentioned in education standards. And it shifts our task from making sure that students are media literate, to seeing that students are literate in a media world. Since literacy is the foundation of all education, emphasizing the "literacy" aspects of media literacy is much more likely to open the proverbial castle doors than narrow attention to [largely] screen-based media.

A case in point is Ellen Galinsky's brilliant work, *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (Harper Studio 2010). In the book, Galinsky scatters short references to media use and media effects. Readers who focus on these references as the frame for media literacy relegate media literacy to a worthy but minor part of a larger picture. But when media literacy is framed as inquiry or critical thinking, now it is the fifth of the seven essential life skills that Galinsky enumerates; media literacy is central to what children need.

In fact, when we think of ourselves as engaging in inquiry and literacy, rather than on a narrow conception of media interpretation or media production, it is easy to place media literacy across the curriculum. We can even show that media literacy techniques are exactly what bestselling education author Mike Schmokler (2011) labels "authentic literacy." Ironically, Schmokler's focus is clearly print and he might normally be cast as an opponent of adding media literacy to the curriculum. And certainly media literacy educators would insist on expanding literacy skills to all media. But when we frame media as inquiry and literacy, both Schmokler and media literacy education advocates suggest that teaching should concentrate on engaging students in deep and purposeful reading, meaningful discussion, and thoughtful and effective writing for a variety of target audiences and purposes.

Implications for Practice

There is nothing new about calling for inquiry-based media literacy education. Notably, Len Masterman did it in 1985 (*Teaching the Media*) citing the work of Paulo Freire as a model. The Ontario Ministry of Education echoed Masterman in 1989 (*Media Literacy Resource Guide*), Kathleen Tyner reaffirmed the call in 1998 (*Literacy in a Digital World*) and there have been several others then and since. But their ideal hasn't consistently translated into practice and people often seem to mean very different things when they talk about inquiry. So let me be clear about what I mean.

In inquiry-based practice, students learn to use relevant questions to evaluate and analyze media messages and to reflect on the media they create. They routinely ask questions of all media, not just media with which they disagree. They effectively engage in respectful discussion and remain open to changing their minds as they take in new information and hear others' perspectives. To get students to that place, teachers model media analysis by using questions to lead deep readings. In fact, in *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy* (2011), Cyndy Scheibe and I suggest that during a decoding discussion, about eighty percent of what a teacher says should be in the form of a question (and we provide examples of what that looks like in practice).

NAMLE took an important step in supporting inquiry-based practice and reaching out to teachers with the adoption of the *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States* (2007). It is no accident that the document is about media literacy education (not just media literacy) and that the majority of its content consists of "Implications for Practice." One subtle, but important contribution was its grid of "Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages."[2]

Key Questions

Key Questions are significant to inquiry-based practice because critical thinking isn't just about asking questions – it is about asking important questions. So, for example, NAMLE's Key Questions avoid shallow book report prompts such as "What was your favorite part?" (which in today's culture often contributes to an overly self-absorbed world view, as if the only thing important about a book would be what you liked). Instead it provides questions that help students examine why an author, illustrator, or publisher made particular choices, what the book's impact might be, or why its messages might be important and to whom.

Such questions are so important to media literacy education that nearly every major media literacy organization across the globe has developed or adopted their own question set. NAMLE has borrowed from many of those, but tweaked them in ways that make them particularly useful for teachers.

Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages		
Authors & Audiences	Authorship	Who made this message?
	Purpose	Why was this made? Who is the target audience (and how do you know)?
	Economics	Who paid for this?
	Impact	Who might benefit from this message? Who might be harmed by it? Why might this message matter to me?
	Response	What kinds of actions might I take in response to this message?
Messages & Meanings	Content	What is this about (and what makes you think that)? What ideas, values, information and/or points of view are overt? implied? What is left out of this message that might be important to know?
	Techniques	What techniques are used? Why were those techniques used? How do they communicate the message?
	Interpretations	How might different people understand this message differently? What is my interpretation of this and what do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation?
Representations & Reality	Context	When was this made? Where or how was this shared with the public?
	Credibility	Is this fact, opinion or something else? How credible is this (and what makes you think that)? What are the sources of the information, ideas or assertions?

From NAMLE's Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the U.S., April 2007 www.namle.net/core-principles

For example, the document is literally and conceptually centered around categories of questions rather than any specific question. That's why there are multiple sample questions for each category. Categories offer teachers flexibility that single questions can't. That flexibility is essential to teaching because learners and learning situations vary. So, for instance, when analyzing an ad, a first grade teacher might teach her students to ask the concrete and developmentally appropriate, "What does this want me to do?" instead of the more abstract "Why was this made?"

Also, the Key Questions include enough categories to provide ways to do inquiry in all kinds of subject areas and at all grade levels. For some, this has been a point of contention. Even people who understand the use of categories have sometimes initially balked at the prospect of teaching ten of them. It's a lot to cover in a workshop. But, of course, that is a greater concern for trainers (who might have very limited contact hours) than for teachers who can gradually introduce different categories of questions over the course of many weeks.

Without all of the categories, essential tools for deep reading are missing. For example, the widely used "Five Key Questions" from the Center for Media Literacy[3] leave out questions about credibility that are absolutely central to lessons on news literacy or using the Internet for research. And they only indirectly ask about benefits and harms that are central to using media literacy to explore social justice issues.

Perhaps most importantly, the NAMLE Key Questions include a category about Content. From a developmental perspective, best practice might necessitate starting with a Content question such as, "What is this?" or "What is this about?" as a first step to deeper inquiry.

In addition, Content questions provide vital links to specific curriculum areas. When an English teacher asks about the actions of a protagonist or a science teacher asks what a textbook means by the term "theory," those are Content questions. They are part of the process of inquiry-based analysis and by including them in the grid. NAMLE helps teachers see themselves as media literacy educators and helps them see Content questions as just one type of many important categories of questions to ask.

Challenges to "Traditional" Media Literacy

Clearly media literacy educators have developed useful tools, yet even in the face of increasing pressure to equip students for life in a multimedia world, there is

hesitancy and confusion about using what we offer. In part this stems from our own inconsistency in practicing what we preach.

In hundreds of media literacy lessons, workshops, conferences, and presentations over the past two decades, I've observed (both in my own and in others' practice) many instances of a disconnect between what we say in support of inquiry and the teaching methods we actually use. In fact, inquiry-based practice challenges some very ingrained habits. Here are just a few ways that we actually undermine, rather than promote inquiry:

We pose questions that aren't really questions. We choose to analyze media texts about which we feel passionate and because we are emotionally invested in a particular interpretation we leave little room for students to arrive at their own conclusions. We may phrase our sentences in the form of a question, but there really is no doubt about the answer.

Or we begin by outlining what we describe as unassailable truths about the nature of media, such as "all media are constructed." Often that list includes the notion that "most media are made for profit and power." Putting aside for the moment the fact that in a user-generated, interactive media world this may not be precisely accurate, the statement takes away the power of a question like "Why was this message sent?" because it pre-determines the answer.[4] If our earlier statement about the nature of media was true, then chances are that the message under examination must have been sent to gain profit or power.

To stay true to our inquiry goals, media literacy educators need to consciously construct questions that are "productive" (providing students with opportunities to create, analyze, or evaluate) rather than "re-productive" (eliciting recall and repetition of what the teacher said). As researchers Tienken, Goldberg, and DiRocco (2009) found, this is easier said than done. In their classroom observations, even veteran teachers asked three times more re-productive than productive questions. Inquiry-based media literacy education methods could help teachers do better.

We settle for too few questions. We stop after asking a single prompt, assuming that the answer provides everything that a student would need to know. But that assumption is often based on the erroneous premise that students automatically understand

all the implications inherent in particular questions and answers. For example, we approach advertising with a great deal of skepticism because we know that advertisers are motivated primarily by their own need to sell, not our best interest. But students don't always make the leaps that we expect, and our assumptions about media messages aren't always correct. So rather than "one and done," we need to get in the habit of teaching students to ask strings of questions.

We settle for too few answers. Critical thinking requires being open to complexity. We oversimplify when we ask a question like "Why was this created?" and are satisfied with a single answer. We need to start phrasing things in the plural: "What are all the possible reasons that this was created?"

We settle for questions that are too easy. We teach students to spot production techniques, and how those techniques relate to message and target audience, but we don't always explore why messages matter. We avoid discussions of who gains and who is disadvantaged by particular types of messages, especially related to issues that make us uncomfortable.

We do policy in place of education. We want mass media to do a better job of serving the public interest. We want our students to want media to do a better job. But teachers can't be held accountable for the quality of media and there is no way to measure student performance when the goal slips from helping students become critical thinkers and reflective communicators to creating a desire for or actual media reform. As Core Principle 2.10 acknowledges, "While media literacy education (MLE) may result in students wanting to change or reform media, MLE itself is not focused on changing media, but rather on changing educational practice and increasing students' knowledge and skills."

Like the Core Principles, we can recognize that "as a literacy, MLE may have political consequences, but it is not a political movement; it is an educational discipline" (2.9). This isn't about withdrawing support for media reform, but rather, recognizing that media reform and media literacy education are two different things. If media literacy education is perceived as requiring adherence to particular political views, rather than as a method that helps students formulate their own well-reasoned political views, media literacy will never be widely adopted in U.S. schools.

We tell instead of ask. We take the role of sage-on-the-stage in order to tell students what media mean (especially when we have found a media interpretation that we find especially compelling and that we think our students have missed). In doing so, we unintentionally operate under the banking model of education so deservedly criticized by Paulo Freire. This practice, however well intentioned, ultimately undermines the development of exactly the independent thinking we say we want media literacy to produce.

As Robyn Jackson, the author of *Never Work Harder Than Your Students & Other Principles of Great Teaching* noted, "meaningful learning happens when students try to make sense out of the world by filtering new information through their own existing knowledge, concepts, rules, hypotheses, and associations from personal experiences. Our job is to help our students find their own voices and develop their own understanding of the subject matter." (p. 174)

Occasionally sharing pieces of cultural criticism can be an effective way to expose students to ideas they aren't likely to encounter in mainstream media. But when we repeatedly do the analysis for students by sharing our own or other's interpretations of media, students stop engaging in the inquiry process for themselves. They know they don't have to because they know that we will eventually supply the "right" answer.

So for example, rather than lecturing about how sexist an ad or song or film is, an inquiry-based media literacy approach would do what a Women's Studies professor would do and ask, "How does looking through a gendered lens influence the way I look at this?" Or, "Who benefits and who is harmed when we portray women or men in certain ways?" This isn't a criticism of popular cultural critics who have addressed sexism in media (Jean Kilbourne, Sut Jhally, Byron Hurt, and Jackson Katz come to mind); it's about the way their films are used by teachers. Rather than saying "Look at all of these sexist messages you missed before," inquiry-based educators would ask, "What are the messages about women and men here?" followed by "What else do you notice?" And they would keep asking until all

the possibilities have been exhausted and students have learned to ask and interpret for themselves.

As Kathleen Tyner (1998) so aptly summarized, if the central goal of media literacy education is to have students think for themselves, then "to tell students what to think about media, no matter how subtly, would be inherently counterproductive." (148) In other words, ask, don't tell.

These practices persist in no small measure because we are loathe to criticize friends and allies and not so much because anyone is making a case that they are the best way to teach. But no field can survive, let alone thrive without dialogue about methods, objectives, and the ways in which new ideas and circumstances influence what we do. It is relatively easy to criticize those with whom we adamantly disagree or dislike. We also need to create space for frank conversations about our weaknesses with those whom we respect and admire. It is through those conversations that we improve.

As was referenced at the beginning of this piece, improvement is no minor thing - it is a core component of NAMLE's mission. We need to understand that challenges to current practice or pedagogy are not a sign of disrespect, but rather, an acknowledgement that one's work is important enough to grapple with. Though it won't be easy, we can and must demand more of ourselves. To move forward, we must celebrate our successes, but we must also be willing to engage in dialogue, even when it is uncomfortable.

What's Next

Framing media literacy education as both literacy and inquiry opens a door to a world of ongoing educational conversations from which media literacy educators have been heretofore largely absent. Through that door are dozens of other "rooms" to explore. At NAMLE conferences over the next decade, here are some sessions I'd like to see:

Media Literacy and the Brain - A look at how media literacy education's attention to meaning making and the novelty inherent in rich media documents relate to theories of brain-based education popularized by people like Eric Jensen (*Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, 1998) and Renate and Geoffrey Caine (*Making Connections: Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, 1991).

Media Literacy Education: A Way to Reach Every Student – A demonstration of the ways in which media literacy education's integration of multiple means of expression provide opportunities for Differentiated Instruction (as described by Carol Ann Tomlinson in The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of all Learners, 1999)

Using Media Literacy Education to Bridge School and Home – A look at how media literacy education fits into ASCD's Whole Child Initiative.

And that's just for starters. How about "Using Media Literacy as an Assessment Tool" (not assessing media literacy, but rather, using media literacy education methods to assess core content and skills)? Or "Media Literacy Scope and Sequence: Using Jay McTighe's and Grant Wiggins' Understanding by Design to Create a District-Wide Approach to Media Literacy Integration"?

For some readers, the names cited in these sessions will be wholly unfamiliar. And that's a big source of our challenge. For the last decade, we have been mingling at a very large party. We have started conversations and were happy when a few people came over to our small circle and joined in. But there are many more educators at the party who are engrossed in their own interesting discussions. If we want to reach them, we need to move out of our own click and join in their conversations.

In 1998, Renee Hobbs summarized seven major debates in media literacy. Many of those debates have now been settled.[5] Ten years from now the major fault lines may very well be between those who look at media literacy as being primarily about analyzing and making media and those who look at media literacy as literacy.

If media literacy remains narrowly focused on analyzing advertising or other artifacts of mass media culture, it will remain marginalized. But we have a promising alternative. By fully embracing an inquiry- and literacy-based identity, media literacy education can fulfill its promise to provide people with "the habits of inquiry and skills of expression they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators, and active citizens in today's world."[6]

Endnotes

[1] For example, the 2007 ISTE *National Educational Technology Standards for Students* recognizes that basic literacy requires "critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making." These Standards identify six skill areas that substantially overlap with the goals of media literacy education: 1) Creativity and Innovation; 2) Communication and Collaboration; 3) Research and Information Fluency; 4) Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Decision Making; 5) Digital Citizenship; and 6) Technology Operations and Concepts. Details about these areas are available at: iste.org/standards/nets-for-students.

[2] For an in-depth discussion of the Key Questions grid, see Chapter 3 of Scheibe C. and Rogow F. (2011 – forthcoming) *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World*. Los Angeles, CA: Corwin.

[3] The Center for Media Literacy's *Media Lit Kit* (2003) poses the following Key Questions: 1. Who created this message? 2. What techniques are used to attract my attention? 3. How might different people understand this message differently from me? 4. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message? 5.Why was this messages sent? (medialit.org/medialitkit)

[4] The phrasing here is borrowed from the Center for Media Literacy's *Media Lit Kit* not to single out CML's work; they are hardly alone in using this framing. Rather, it is important to look at their phrasing because CML has been so important to the development and growth of media literacy education in the U.S. and because their work is more widely used and cited in the U.S. than anyone else.

[5] For example, in our user-generated content world, few media literacy educators are still arguing about whether or not media literacy needs to include production.

[6] National Association for Media Literacy Education. (2007, November). *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States*. Retrieved June 2011 from http://namle.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/NAMLE-CPMLE-w-questions2.pdf

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