

What is media literacy, and why is it important?

Media Literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms.

Or

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.

The word "literacy" usually describes the ability to read and write. Reading literacy and media literacy have a lot in common. Reading starts with recognizing letters. Pretty soon, readers can identify words -- and, most importantly, understand what those words mean. Readers then become writers. With more experience, readers and writers develop strong literacy skills.

Media literacy focuses on unpacking hidden power messages in the media and learning to resist the messages (Alvermann and Hagood 2000; Share 2009). Although wide calls for critical media literacy exist, as well as recommendations for how to teach it, there is little empirical research testing the ability of critical media literacy to educate students about social justice issues. The current study addresses this gap by examining the effectiveness of the implementation of a small-scale critical media literacy curriculum unit focused on gender stereotypes, especially as they pertain to occupations. In this paper, we discuss the results from a field experiment that measured whether students exposed to critical media literacy (CML) curriculum were more likely than students not exposed to believe: that women experience discrimination in the workplace; that the media constructs stereotypical messages about women and men, especially regarding occupations; and that the media influences people's thinking.

Media Literacy

Critical media literacy emerged from the media literacy education (MLE) movement that began in the nineties. Because of the rising importance of popular culture in the lives of young people, MLE's intention was to convince schools to incorporate popular culture media into the classroom and work with students on how to make sense of such media (Hobbs and Frost 2003). MLE scholars and CML scholars share some of the same pedagogical goals. Both groups believe

media literacy instruction should: (1) show how media messages are socially constructed; (2) examine the tools and other methods used to construct the media; (3) understand how different audience groups view messages differently; (4) reveal the values and ideologies embedded within the media; and (5) recognize that media develops particular messages for a reason (Hobb and Frost 2003; Kellner and Share 2007a,b; Hobbs and Jensen 2009; NAMLE 2009). The difference between the two groups is that CML scholars further argue that the main goal of media literacy education should be to expose social injustices created and perpetuated in the media and to help students develop participatory democracy skills that lead to social activism (Giroux 1994; Kellner and Share 2007b; Carr 2009; Kellner and Kim 2010).

In considering the influence of the media on youth, we recognize the need to avoid simplistic notions for how representations sway audiences. Media studies researchers and theorists have pointed out that the link between media production and media consumption is not direct (Hall 1980; Gill 2007). Hall (1980) emphasizes that media producers try to get a specific meaning across through their encoded message, but that individuals decode the message according to their own cultural and personal characteristics; hence media does not always get used the way the producer intends. Furthermore, current media constructions provide audiences the opportunity to actively shape the media. The following are examples: (a) media sharing, which is increasingly prevalent due to new technologies (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013); (b) fandoms, “active producers and manipulators of meanings” that sometimes create their own identities and their own social experiences by appropriating images from popular culture (e.g., “Trekkies”) (Jenkins 1992, 23); and (c) critics, who provide information to producers about what they like and dislike. In TV, for example, audience information influences what shows are kept on the air, and what types of episodes should be produced in the future (Jenkins 1992).

Given the complex interaction between producers and audiences, D’Acci (2004) has called into question the common perception that the media is a representation (or misrepresentation) of reality by pointing out that both media and the social world outside of media are social constructions, and thus could be considered equally fictitious. But acknowledging that the social world and the cultural world of media are both “representations” that mutually influence each other does not diminish the importance of the media in creating and perpetuating damaging master narratives about race, such as the association of black males with violence, and about gender, such as the idea that women and girls are sexual objects to be controlled by men.

Although consumers are not passive acceptors of media information and they have some autonomy, producers do have economic and other power over consumers (Jenkins 1992), and hegemonic messages about sex, gender, and race do negatively influence many consumers (Alvermann and Hagood 2000; D'Acci 2004; Kellner and Share 2007a). In addition to teaching youth how to analyze cultural texts in terms of social injustice, CML calls for social activism, transforming students from passive consumers of media to active participatory-democratic citizens (Jenkins et al 2013; Kellner and Share 2007a,b).

Media literacy is the ability to identify different types of media and understand the messages they're sending. Kids take in a huge amount of information from a wide array of sources, far beyond the traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines) of most parents' youth. There are text messages, memes, viral videos, social media, video games, advertising, and more. But all media shares one thing: Someone created it. And it was created for a reason. Understanding that reason is the basis of media literacy

- **Learn to think critically.** As kids evaluate media, they decide whether the messages make sense, why certain information was included, what wasn't included, and what the key ideas are. They learn to use examples to support their opinions. Then they can make up their own minds about the information based on knowledge they already have.
- **Become a smart consumer of products and information.** Media literacy helps kids learn how to determine whether something is credible. It also helps them determine the "persuasive intent" of advertising and resist the techniques marketers use to sell products.
- **Recognize point of view.** Every creator has a perspective. Identifying an author's point of view helps kids appreciate different perspectives. It also helps put information in the context of what they already know -- or think they know.
- **Create media responsibly.** Recognizing your own point of view, saying what you want to say how you want to say it, and understanding that your messages have an impact is key to effective communication.
- **Identify the role of media in our culture.** From celebrity gossip to magazine covers to memes, media is telling us something, shaping our understanding of the world, and even compelling us to act or think in certain ways.

The representation of gender in media has long been a subject of fascination as well as critical analysis and change management for those advancing and practicing media literacy. In this issue of *Connections*, we highlight two organizations addressing these issues worldwide. *Promundo*, founded in Brazil in 1997, promotes gender equality and violence prevention by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. *The Global Media Monitoring Project*(GMMP) teams with more than 100 countries to keep accurate data on gender representation in the news.