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Passive Dupes, Code Breakers, or Savvy Users

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Passive Dupes, Code Breakers, or Savvy Users

Theorizing Media Literacy Education in English Language Arts

RENEE HOBBS AND MICHAEL ROBBGRIECO

Dear reader: Before we begin, it’s time for some self-reflection. How many movies do you watch in a weekend? How many hours do you spend in front of a screen of one sort or the other? How much of your waking activity is spent in using online media? Reading a newspaper? Reading a book? Listening to music? Watching TV shows or playing videogames? What role does pleasure play in these activities? How much of these activities support the escape function, providing a relief from the stress of daily life? How much supports your social interaction with the people who matter in your life? How much empowers you to act in relation to your work, your colleagues, and your community? How much informs your money and health decisions? Do you sometimes judge your life in relation to characters you see in the media? How much emphasis do you place on critical analysis when you read, listen, watch and view? How much time do you spend creating messages? How does your own use of mass media and popular culture shape the way you teach? How do your attitudes about newspapers, television, the Internet, videogames, and movies shape the way you teach?

In English language arts, educators who incorporate media texts, tools, and technologies have many different motives and purposes for doing so. Educators’ perspectives often reflect an amalgam of theories from media studies scholarship and theories in the humanities. Each theory positions the user or audience in relationship to authorship, power, agency, and pleasure, and each theory suggests a particular approach to teaching and learning. In this chapter, we explore four theoretical perspectives about the role of mass media and communication on individuals and society, looking at the implication of these ideas on the shape of educators’ instructional practices. As you read, we encourage you to position yourself, your students, their parents, and your colleagues among the theories as you consider how they may inform educational practice.

Media Literacy and the Digital Revolution

One longstanding goal of media literacy educators has been to develop “critical approaches which can apply to any text” (Masterman, 1985, p. xiv). These include strategic use of concepts like author, audience, message, meaning, representation, reality, purpose, subtext, and tone to understand the meaning-making process involving all kinds of texts, especially those that are meaningful to children and young people (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2007).

But in the United States, the debate about how to give media literacy a meaningful place in elementary and secondary schools is still a robust and open issue, given the dominance of print literacy, the conservative nature of schooling and the institutional structures that control it. In the United States, media literacy education has become more visible in English language arts instruction through standards documents and curriculum materials (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009).

Today, there are many flavors of media literacy in English education, each corresponding to a different set of theoretical perspectives about the relationship between media, children and culture. The flavors reflect four types of general theoretical approaches which frame discussions of mass media and audiences: media effects, critical studies, media rhetoric, and cultural studies. Conceptualizations of audiences from each of these theoretical perspectives interact with institutional discourses about youth and adolescence, which together inform the various approaches to media literacy and media literacy education (Pette & Giroux, 1997; Livingstone, 2008; Scharrer, 2007).

Since the early 20th century, scholars in both education and communication have paid particular attention to children and adolescents based on a common view of the important and extensive role that mass media play in
socialization, identity formation, and expression. Within each perspective, notions of audiences as more and less powerful in their relationships to mass media have evolved and fluctuated over time. Positioned in part by ideas from discourses in media studies, education and the humanities, media literacy educators see our students’ relationships to media in diverse ways—from passive victims of media influence, to cultural dupes of dominant ideologies, to code breakers learning the symbol systems of mediated culture, to active users who construct their own meanings and social identities from the symbolic resources of popular mass media.

Within the term “media literacy,” the notion of literacy suggests the necessity of this ability for participation in contemporary society while expanding the traditional typographic notion of literacy to include reading and writing across a wide range of genres and forms (Hobbs, 1998). However, literacy has also meant an appreciation of the “best” a culture has to offer (as in “literary” literacy), and literacy has been critiqued as a means of deepening social divisions rather than working towards overcoming them through greater civic and cultural participation (Livingstone, 2008).

English language arts educators are motivated to help students develop media literacy for diverse purposes: (a) to nurture students own authentic voices in composition; (b) to motivate learning by building on existing knowledge of popular culture; (c) to help young people understand and challenge dominant mass media power through critical thinking and social activism; (d) to develop marketable skills in using technology to access information and create effective messages; and (e) to develop strategies for managing one’s own exposure to and processing of media messages in order to actively control media influence (Hobbs, 2004, 2007). Each of these purposes proceeds from particular views of children, media, teaching and learning. Each perspective also reflects theoretical conceptualizations of audiences from media effects, semiotics, critical and cultural studies.

Let’s explore four of the theoretical perspectives that have informed approaches to media literacy and media literacy education with children and adolescents, considering their implications for K–12 educational practice. As you read, examine your own experience and knowledge to consider the questions: How do you and other stakeholders in education, from students and parents to other teachers, understand yourselves and students as media users in relation to authorship, power, agency, and pleasure? What purposes in teaching and learning can each of these theories be usefully put? What is omitted from each media theory that is important for teaching and learning?

**Countering Negative Effects: Protecting the Vulnerable Audience**

Media shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Media effects approaches assume that media influence the behavior, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals in measurable, predictive ways (Bryant & Zillmann, 1994). As McLeod, Kosicki, and Pan (1991) point out, “there is a clear theoretical commitment, symbolized by the term ‘effect’ itself, to a predominant flow of influence from the media and its messages to the audience” (p. 236).

Cultivation theory, social cognitive theory, and uses and gratifications theories provide the foundation and current bases for discussions of media and adolescence from the media effects perspective (Bryant & Zillmann, 1994). Each of these theories work within the social scientific paradigm seeking to explain audience relationships to media in terms of media content, media exposure and individual differences, which predict behavior, attitudes and beliefs. Both cultivation and social cognitive theories posit the possibilities of powerful media effects on the attitudes and behavior of individuals. These theories have been used to address children and adolescent audiences as particularly vulnerable to media influence, which has informed approaches to media literacy as a means of managing one’s own media exposure and processing in hopes of protecting young people from potentially harmful media effects.

Educators using this theoretical frame have developed innovative approaches to media literacy education: advertising and the representation of aggression and violence are common themes. In one project, Scharrer (2006) found that a 5-hour media literacy program helped Grade 6 students consider the ethical issues raised by rewarded violence, violence that goes unpunished, and violence perpetrated by likeable characters. Learning about the lack of consequences depicted in televised violence encouraged children to see media creators as irresponsible, believing that that they should portray realistic consequences more frequently. Lesson plans for elementary school students focus on how food advertising is constructed and how it influences attitudes and behaviors (Project Look Sharp, 2009); for middle school students, the focus is on how alcohol and tobacco advertisers manipulate people to “make you want the product” (New Mexico Media Literacy Project, 2006).

In this view, audiences are vulnerable to negative media messages and media users must gain knowledge and skills in order to resist media influence and attain a critical distance from the overwhelming symbolic environment of media. It’s been claimed that this theoretical framework presents a deficit model of learners. But advocates for this position say it is responsive to the real needs of parents and educators as they see children’s active imitation and uncritical acceptance of the values presented in mass media and popular culture.

**Demystification and Resistance: Tools for the Dominated Audience**

While media effects theories conceptualize media audiences as passive individuals, critical studies conceive of passive audiences at a macro-level of analysis as constructed by the media they consume. Adorno and Horkheimer (1972)
to theorize the audience of mass media as passive dupes of the culture industries. The mass audience consumes the products of the culture industries, which reproduce power relations in favor of those who control the means of production. In this Marxist formulation, the mass audience finds the products of the culture industry (movies, music, and the like) both irresistible and inescapable. Theorized as a monolithic mass, the audience cannot help but delight in seeing itself reproduced in the endless variation of representations in capitalist mass production.

Taken as the audience’s own culture, these media products alienate the masses from the means of production of their own culture. The products of mass media suppress critical thinking on the part of the audience by producing a spectacular demand for automatic cognitive processing. Audiences may like the pleasures of feeling superior to mass media and popular culture. It makes them feel like experts. But critical theorists scorn this pleasure, positing that it produces a false consciousness in the mass audience (Bourdieu, 1993). The entertained masses rarely think to question the political economy and social relations that media texts produce by gratifying their audiences.

At the college level, media literacy courses using this theoretical position often include an awareness of, and concern for, issues of ideology and power, including issues of ownership and control, alternative media, and media activism and reform movements. When these issues are valued by instructors, the focus of the pedagogy may become topic-centered, not learner-centered. Course syllabi underline just how much students need to know: the student must understand in detail the financial structure of media organizations, including who owns and controls the media, how media profits are made, who pays for content, and how economic considerations affect content (Duran, Yousman, Walsh, & Longshore, 2008).

Learning resistance can take many forms. One of the most popular is a form of counterpropaganda, offered as an alternative to replace students’ existing uncritical perspective. In the videos distributed by the Media Education Foundation, video documentaries display experts offering their compelling critical readings of media texts including news programs, ads, and children’s movies. Lesson plans encourage learners to identify stakeholders in public policy debates about media and join various advocacy groups.

In this approach, audiences are capable of resisting dominant discourses only through oppositional meaning-making by experts. Assuming that corporate media institutions perpetuate injustices, students are encouraged to identify sexist, racist, hetero-normative, and class-biased media messages and representations, and to create their own media messages to counter these representations (Kellner & Share, 2005). Students can also become “critical” through pursuing information and entertainment produced by independent and diverse sources.

In one Grade 4 classroom, teachers showed students examples of culture jamming, where advertising is disrupted through the use of speech bubbles which are used to promote an alternative reading or critical perspective. Students looked at fashion ads with speech bubbles reading, “I am hideously deformed” and health care ads with bubbles asking, “Why doesn’t the government ensure our health?” Teachers showed students examples of outdoor ads that had been altered with speech bubbles, but also informed students that defacing outdoor advertising in this way is illegal. Then, students created their own projects, creating speech bubbles in response to magazine imagery (Ganier, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinard, 2009). Although most student-created responses were humorous and not critical in nature, the researchers consider this an important step towards creating citizens who can “disrupt, contest and transform media apparatuses” (Semali, 2003, p. 275).

This approach unabashedly assumes a social justice agenda from a liberal, pluralist point of view, which students inhabit in order to recognize and challenge the corporate media agenda, which privileges some groups and marginalizes others. Without addressing power in such ways, media studies can become a game of learning vocabulary to describe and demystify the functions of media without asking questions about who media serve and to what ends. By involving students in social activism through creating their own media representations and supporting independent media, and by inhabiting a particular point of view, critical media literacy educators may avoid the empty language game of demystifying media. However, contrary to the rhetoric of empowerment that often accompanies such efforts, students are seldom offered the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge of media and communication to strengthen and explore their own cultural positions and interests. Instead, this approach asserts a particular ideological position that students must take up.

The discourse of resistance in critical theory also contains another form of elitism, which sometimes devalues the mind-numbing content of popular cultural tastes in mass media and reveres high art as intellectually stimulating. A trace of this elitism is alive and well for many media educators who seek to develop cultural appreciation of critically-acclaimed or sophisticated popular media texts. Whereas once Adorno might have scoffed at media educators that proposed teaching Bob Dylan instead of Dylan Thomas, now, some media educators take up a similar view in choosing Bob Dylan over Spongebob Squarepants for study in the context of English education. As we have shown, critical media literacy approaches often work from the same deficit model of learners as approaches informed by media effects perspectives (Schartter, 2007; Bragg, 2007).

Media literacy educators work from a position within critical theory in a more student-centered way when they encourage students to tackle the questions, “Who is telling the story?” and “What is omitted from the message?” (Hobs, 2007). But the issue of teacher agency remains an inherent problematic embedded in this theoretical position. Conceptualizations of audience from critical theory perspectives clearly translate into specified roles for teacher and learner in the classroom. The English teacher inhabits
the role of enlightened critic who must snap her class of cultural dupes out of false consciousness constructed by their passive relationships with media; a neat trick, simply performed (supposedly) by sharing some expert knowledge about the semiotic production of ideology and its base in the political economy of media institutions. However, this version of becoming critical often amounts to students playing a language game to gain caché with the teacher (Buckingham, 2003) as adolescents learn to “talk posh” about popular media (p. 110). There are dangers to an approach to media literacy that is positioned as counterpropaganda: much of it can become little more than a “superficial exercise in ‘guessing what’s in teacher’s mind’” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 162).

The Rhetoric of Communication: Tools for the Code-Breaking Audience

Scholars in the humanities have long recognized the importance of language and other symbol systems as a structuring tool for human thought and action. People have been debating whether media emancipate us or are forms of social control for 2,500 years, beginning with the transition from oral to written culture (Provencal, 2004). The argument goes back to ancient times, with questions like these: How does our use of symbol systems like language and images shape social relationships? What is gained and what is lost with the strategic use of language and other symbols as tools for expression, persuasion and advocacy? How can symbol systems be used to express, distort or misrepresent our sense of personal identity, the value of social relationships, and our understanding of reality?

During the 20th century, the rise of structuralism and poststructuralism created renewed interest in these questions, exploring the relationship between language and other symbol systems as they relate to perception, cognition and meaning-making. Scholars working across a number of disciplines explored these issues in literature (Richards, Barthes), art history (Gombrich, Arnhelm), linguistics (deSaussure, Peirce, Whorf, Ong), speech (Burke), developmental psychology (Bruner, Gardner), and film (Balazs).

In the field of communications, Marshall McLuhan was perhaps the foremost scholar within this tradition. A professor of literature with a specialty in British literature, he examined how changes in symbol systems of the electric age reshaped the nature of perception, knowledge, culture and values. In his view, electronic media disrupted the linear thought processes characteristic of Gutenberg man and replaced it with the simultaneous perception of electronic media man, just as phonetic literacy was a break boundary between oral culture and literate culture (McLuhan, 1964). Because new media create new environments, children grow up with a different set of skills, orientations, and ideas. For them, the perceptual environment of television influences “what kinds of facts are privileged as important and what type of stimuli are ignored or overlooked” (Fishman, 2006, p. 750). McLuhan’s approach was based on the power of metaphor as a playful means to gain insight on human experience. His most famous aphorism, “the medium is the message” called attention to the complex relationship between form and content. He wanted to explore the difference between reading a newspaper and watching a television news show, to consider how “the content of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 32). In this view, the effects of media are unnoticed because we focus on content and take the medium for granted. By practicing an inquiry approach to media, McLuhan theorized that we might shift our perspectives on our environs in order to assess what is gained and lost through our uses of media technologies—in order to ultimately act more strategically about our media use.

Often considered the grandfather of the media literacy movement, McLuhan created a media literacy syllabus for Grade 11 students under the rubric of a new approach to language and literature (Marchand, 1989), emphasizing the practice of interpretation not through an expert transmission model, but through student-centered practices of probing, deconstruction and close reading, using the media of communication as the text of study. Terms like genre, language, audience, message, medium, meaning, form, content, and context are central in this approach to critical analysis.

In the context of English education, media literacy educators aim to help students acquire a meta-language for analyzing their own responses to media texts. In the context of English education, students engaged in media literacy develop the ability to generalize about media texts, support assertions with evidence, appreciate context, develop more abstract ideas, and make reflexive judgments (Hobbs, 2007). This is most effective when students relate critical analysis to their own preferences as media users and audience members.

In exploring the language of media, visual designers have taken the canons of classical rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory) as a tool for analyzing the elements of visual and graphic design. In one media literacy textbook, students study how camera angles, transitions, camera movement are used in structuring a narrative, recognizing how point of view and tone are conveyed through skillful arrangement of visual and sound elements (Moses, 2008). Media literacy textbooks also use Barthes’ notions of connotative and denotative meanings to help students develop an understanding about how media messages relate to cultural contexts of language and image use (Silverblatt, 2000). Core concepts in media literacy offer a way to compare how messages and their effects change when embodied in different media, which English educators often explore in comparing TV news to print, or the same narrative in a movie based on a book.

Critics contend that when formal analysis is emphasized over content, media literacy education can become formulaic, failing to incorporate critical perspectives on media institutions and ideologies (Lewis & Jhally, 1998); there is too much focus on the “what” of media languages and too
little on the “who” and “what for.” For English educators, a focus on identifying the many stylistic devices of film, photographic style, shot framing, advertising tactics, and types of interactivity may hark back to the debates between the Greeks about the aims of rhetoric. Does a focus on the medium itself come to trivialize and debase the power of language, the quest for truth and the search for meaning through the themes and concepts central to the humanities: ethics, identity, relationships and human values? Again, in the study of media rhetoric and semiotics, there are risks of learning becoming an empty language game of labeling functions and meaning-making devices. However, McLuhan and Barthes each saw their theoretical explorations of form and meaning as a way to heighten consciousness and inform strategic action around the uses of media and cultural power. English teachers who link studies of media grammar to decisions in students’ own media production and consumption choices work towards embodying this vision.

**Voice and Identity Play: Tools for the Powerful Audience**

Audiences do creative work in the practice of meaning-making. Some scholars see critical theory as failing to consider the “multiple sets of discursive competencies” that media fans access “by virtue of more complex and contradictory places within the social formation” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 34). The American cultural studies tradition views critical and critical cultural perspectives as over-emphasizing the power of dominant media. Instead, readers of media texts are flexible and fluid in the reading, reception, and meaning-making process.

The study of media fandom has contributed to this argument. For example, in interviews with media fans about their favorite childhood television shows, Jenkins discusses how, typically, “The same person would shift between progressiver and reactionary modes of thinking in the course of a single conversation, celebrating childhood resistance in one breath and demanding the regulation of childish pleasures in the next” (1992, p. 35). For Jenkins, media fans are cultural nomads who constantly move between various texts and identity positions to find and work on meanings to meet their social and personal needs and interests. This flexibility has made fans a model of the active audience for theorists working with the idea that culture is produced by the people from the bottom up as well as from the top down by powerful institutions like mass media.

There is significant experimentation underway in the use of technology to promote literacy, as English educators are using digital tools like blogs, wiki, and video to promote reading comprehension and composition skills (Kinszer & Leander, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Ironically, just as media literacy educators in the United States have begun the field’s coalescence through the articulation of a shared set of key concepts and core principles developed primarily in relationship to mass media and popular culture (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2007), the Internet now stands at the center of the culture as a potentially decentralizing structure, obscuring and challenging the dominance of mass media corporations in popular culture. As the means to create and disseminate media messages extend to masses of connected users, media literacy educators must now consider how to help students participate with mass and digital media in addition to understanding and resisting its influence.

Media literacy educators use digital technology in cultivating student agency and voice in creating media, but the routines of school culture may interfere with these goals. Ratale and Korhonen (2008) developed a digital media production practice for Grade 5 students in Finland. In the 32-hour workshop, children experiment with software that enables them to create role-plays, storyboards, movies and animations on screen using drag and drop commands. They select from a themed library of resources including characters, sounds, backgrounds, and props. While students demonstrated high levels of creativity, the project was time-consuming. Teachers said, “There is never enough time. You always have to take it somewhere. Now it has been collected from here and there. Fifth grade is quite a demanding class. So even if you wished, it would not be possible to endlessly spend time with this” (p. 11).

Because it is associated with play, many children in the United States see the Internet primarily as an entertainment vehicle and not as a tool for learning (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2009). In many schools, digital media production stands as a real challenge to the traditional curriculum. Its novelty as an in-school activity can make it difficult to create organic connections between “school learning,” “everyday life” and digital media. Talk about mass media, entertainment and popular culture in the English language arts classroom can also be perceived suspiciously by students, as children ask, “What does this have to do with school?” The strong framing of knowledge by the traditional school curriculum and the school’s everyday order means “that children accept the truth of school knowledge as being within the logical space of the school world rather than having any relevance to life outside the school world” (Ratale & Korhonen, 2008, p. x).

Voice and identity play, as compelling as they are for supporting the creative development of children and young people, may run into difficulty in the context of K–12 teaching and learning, which is most often centered upon the decontextualized structure of the transmission model.

As we have shown, the notion of media audiences as powerful creators of meanings and culture presents new challenges and opportunities for integrating media literacy in English. The theory can be easily misappropriated to support a focus on tool acquisition at the expense of an emphasis on critical thinking about purposes and consequences of media use. English educators who support digital participation and interaction play an important role in helping students reflect on and share their online experiences. Such reflection on their new media use helps students to construct knowledge around the effective navigation and
manipulation of information and media they find. By sharing experiences, students discuss ethics and their emerging skills for collaboration and collective action.

Conclusion

In the absence of survey research, it is difficult to know whether, at the K–12 practice level, English language arts educators include much more media literacy than the standard practices: an introduction to the difference between fact and opinion when reading a newspaper article, identifying persuasive strategies used in advertising, and instructional approaches to literary adaptation based on “read the book, watch the movie.” These basic practices of media literacy education have been passed on generationally (from teacher to student who becomes teacher) since the beginning of the 20th century, beginning with early explorations in the use of film in English education and interest in language and propaganda (RobbGrieco, 2009). When done as part of tradition and routine, they are likely to have little relevance and even less value to promote critical thinking and the robust development of communication skills.

However, because of our daily contact with children and young people, most English language arts educators do have an implicit or articulated philosophy about what matters when it comes to the inclusion of media texts, tools and technologies. As part of our job, educators see (more or less directly) how media and technology shape the experience of childhood and adolescence every day, in some many small (and some large) ways. We hear students using the catchphrases of popular songs in their own small talk, see how hairstyles and fashion change in relationship to the latest celebrity, and notice how students perk up when the talk turns to athletes, musicians, or the latest cell phone or videogame.

That’s why we invited you, dear reader, to reflect on the nature of your own relationship with media and technology after considering the dynamic role these resources play in the lives of children and teens. Teacher educators can not assume that pre-service English teachers will integrate media and popular culture into their teaching plans even if they consider themselves “digital natives” and are interested in student-centered pedagogy, as research shows that new teachers are most likely to teach in the traditional ways they experienced as students (RobbGrieco, 2009). We believe that a theoretical foundation for educators’ understandings of students as media users will provide useful support and bolster courage and conviction for teachers’ efforts to integrate media literacy into English.

We see value in all four of the theoretical positions described in this chapter, even as we recognize the pitfalls and limitations of each. As media users, children and teens are still subject to mass media influence from within their own communities online and from the (still) powerful culture industries in digital, print, and broadcast media. While children and young people themselves create more and more media content, questioning and understanding the ideological role of the cultural industries in shaping their tastes and values is as important as ever in order to afford young people the means to both resist and participate in dominant discourses as well as the means to transform them. As active audiences and users, children and adolescents both reproduce and exceed the preferred meanings of dominant ideology in their media use, but can always use help doing so in more reflective and strategic ways by engaging critical thinking. Furthermore, media literacy education should challenge students to confront issues of social justice in media representation and participation, building from the student’s own social identifications and interests.

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