

What the Research Says

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Keynote Address, National Media Education Conference

June 24, 2007

My role in this talk is to share with you the highlights of the first-ever Research Summit on Media Literacy Education and offer my own reflections on the dynamic relationship between research and practice. I have spent a lifetime in both worlds, but most of my work has been as a practitioner.

Let me share with you briefly the trajectory of my work in this field. Back in the 1980s, there was no widely understood concept that we now call “media literacy.” At Harvard, I was not allowed to write a dissertation on media literacy --- it just wasn’t considered a scholarly topic. After receiving the doctoral degree, I first got to experiment with media literacy at the Taft Middle School in Boston, where for three years, I explored how to teach media analysis and media production by integrating this work into the language arts and social studies curriculum. In the process, I learned how to teach young people and fell in love with the process of discovery that results from this work.

My work with teachers in Billerica, Massachusetts was my next opportunity to explore the nexus of research and practice. I worked with 30 teachers in a three-year staff development experience. Working so closely with K-12 teachers for 10-12 hours a week led me to fall in love with teachers, and, as many of you know, most of you are people with enormous creativity and responsiveness to the needs of children and young people.

In fact, I met many of the gray-haired people in this room at the Harvard Institute on Media Education in 1993, which was where I first discovered the real value of having a community of learners passionate about media literacy. Thanks to AMLA board members Amy Jensen and Sharon Sellers-Clark and Marilyn Cohen, Research Summit Chair, for continuing to provide us in 2007 with a chance to share our passion with this diverse and dynamic group of practitioners, scholars and advocates.

Let’s be honest. I started in this field motivated by my love/hate relationship with visual media—particularly with the incredible art form made possible through the juxtaposition of image-language-sound in temporal sequence (that’s film and television!)—and by my deep concerns about these media forms as they influence social behavior, especially in shaping attitudes about our communities and the world around us. The genuine and deep social problems of violence and materialism deeply trouble me, and mass media and popular culture play a huge role in both of these. As the parent raising two teenagers, I still have those concerns today.

But I am a constructivist—fundamentally my orientation to the field is around expanding opportunities for all of us to use media and popular culture to create meaningful learning experiences. These learning experiences enable students to make sense of, navigate and critique the complex, intensely-mediated cultural environment and participate fully in contemporary culture by composing and disseminating their own representations of the challenging, beautiful and unique aspects of our precious lived experiences.

That’s why I think media literacy education is an essential life skill--- and it’s been my lifelong mission to ensure that every one of the 70 million kids in American public schools have some exposure to media literacy – in my lifetime. As I get older, you can see why I’ve been so busy. Time is running out!

Most of my work has been directly in the field with teachers, in K-12 settings, working with them to create meaningful learning experiences that incorporate media analysis and media production activities, helping them to become reflective practitioners and advocates for ML in their communities. Only late in my life did I come to a “Research I” university and take up the practice of examining ML using the tools of scholarship.

Research in Media Literacy Education: Why it Matters

So let's talk about research in media literacy education. Many of you have heard me talk about my love-hate relationship with mass media and popular culture. So you can imagine that, similarly, I have a love/hate relationship with research.

What do I hate about research? Researchers seek to prove the obvious—and fail! Researchers develop highly abstract theoretical arguments and then look for examples of how reality conforms to their theories, ignoring most of the complexities of the real world around them in their search for proof of their theory. Werner Von Braun has said that research is what we're doing when we don't know what we're doing.

What do I love about research? First of all, research helps us be reflective practitioners. All those models and abstract theoretical arguments can help us understand how media literacy works, what processes are involved in the “aha” moment --- you know what that is--- and what factors contribute to it. Most important, research helps us move the field forward politically and institutionally to gain visibility and influence to bring ML to more and more children, young people and adults.

When I began my career as a young scholar, there was only one research article on media literacy in the Harvard University library system. For many years, the scholars and university people in the ML movement were a tiny minority. Today, there are more than 50 dissertations published since 1995 on media literacy, hundreds of journal articles, books, and videos, and thousands of websites. So many different fields are applying the concept that no single individual can track it all. There are important and significant works of ML scholarship in education, communication/media studies and public health. But like Kathleen Tyner has said, ML is like the blind men and the elephant.... It's too big a concept for any one of us to grasp its entirety. That's why we need the AMLA.

What We Know and What We Need To Know

Here's what I learned at the Research Summit: There has never been a better time to be passionate and curious about media literacy.

There are many factors now **in place** that are enabling the development of this field. These include:

- increasing diversity of media content, formats and genres (new genres create new opportunities for critical analysis and production)
- access to digital tools for authorship and new forms of distribution and exhibition
- widespread public awareness of need for critical thinking about new forms of online media
- state curriculum standards (now in almost every state)
- new stakeholders--- (raise your hand if this is your first NMEC conference ... and 1/3 or more of the audience raised their hands!)
- recognized instructional practices
- implementation processes & models for teacher education and staff development
- case studies of practice in school and after-school
- graduate programs and coursework
- EVEN sources of funding

Some elements are **emerging** to help move the field forward and enable research to contribute to the improvement of practice. Some of these factors include:

- approaches to document the complex learning processes involved in student media production multiple ways to measure media literacy as both a skill and as a social practice (we used to say, “How can we tell what they're learning from a media production experience?” Now we have some analytic frameworks and methodological approaches that we can use to examine students learning.)
- connecting ML to models and theoretical frameworks from many different disciplines....(which is why, for the grad students in the audience, we don't talk a lot about theory.... The multidisciplinary of the ML community means we read different authors, care about different

theories. Take the Hobbs Pledge: Make sure you probe someone here to find a new theorist to investigate or a new book to read.)

At the Research Summit, we learned that there are still some issues that are **contested**. Some of these include:

- the definitions of ML
- the uses and purposes of media literacy
- the processes/mechanisms by which people acquire ML
- and the “best practices” associated with high quality learning environments.

The AMLA core principles document is designed to push this conversation forward—hooray! As I see it, there are many **new research questions** that are emerging from the increased collaborative work between practitioners and scholars:

- **Distinguishing between short-term and long-term outcomes**
- **Understanding how ML is activated in online environments**
- **Exploring conditions that promote transfer of learning from learning environment to home (where most media use occurs)**
- **Exploring the unintended consequences of media literacy education**
- **Examining the relationship between MLE and social and political activism, citizenship and advocacy**
- **Understanding what teachers need (knowledge, skills, attitudes and resources) in order to provide MLE in different types of school contexts—in urban schools, in private schools**

In light of these emerging questions, I'd like to share with you some of the stories from the latest research that most intrigue me.

Research that Focuses on Outcomes

From my own work, we have learned that when teachers integrate media literacy into high school English, it can improve students' multimedia text analysis skills—these skills can be measured... and ML improves students' reading comprehension, because the process of learning to interrogate a visual or digital text supports the parallel learning process of applying an active, questioning stance towards reading print media, too.

Erica Austin, Lynda Bergsma, Janis Kupersmidt, and Brian Primack have shown us that when ML is incorporated into substance abuse prevention, it can affect the attitudes that are most closely linked to behaviors, making kids less likely to take health risks.

From my point of view, multiple methodologies, theoretical paradigms and measures from public health, communication and education actually increase our confidence in media literacy learning outcomes.

Research that Focuses on Learning Processes

In preparing for this conference, I have reviewed the more than 50 dissertations from students all over the U.S. who have conducted research on media literacy. I was particularly intrigued by the work of Patricia Ryden at Purdue University, whose dissertation, “Playing with Fire” shows us that media literacy videos can affect student learning, but only if they are used in ways that promote critical analysis skill development among students. They can also limit critical thinking when used as a substitute for dynamic classroom discussion.

Srividya Ramasubramanian at Penn State found that ML videos about stereotyping and issues of representation can activate and reinforce students' stereotyping instead of addressing and challenging those stereotypes. That's an intended consequences we need to examine more

closely, instead of just assuming that students perceive the learning experience the same way that we understand it. Another unintended consequence is the possibility that media literacy education may increase student cynicism instead of activate healthy skepticism. For those of us who care about media literacy's contribution to building citizenship skills, we have to look this possibility straight in the eye--- and use research to examine it carefully and with sophistication.

Karon Sherarts, Korina Jocson and Sanjay Asthana, in separate studies presented in this Research Summit, have shown that when students create media, the production process can powerfully bring together the intersections of writing, problem-solving and aesthetic development with interpersonal skills. Most importantly, they have shown what many of us practitioners have known for years: that media production activities, done collaboratively with guidance from skilled adults, can create a huge leap in personal growth and self-understanding that are a vital part of healthy adolescent development.

Finally, I can't even begin to express my excitement about the work of our international colleagues Jiwon Yoon, Wen Xu, Geoff Lealand, and Barry Duncan, just to name a few. The consequences of the globalization of media literacy are profound--- and positive. We see in this work certain nuances in the relationship between media literacy pedagogy and sociocultural context--- and the insights gained from this scholarship has implications for every one of us, wherever we work. As my colleague Pam Steager in Providence has written, media literacy education is a small part of the broader and vitally important efforts to promote global peace.

My thoughts: We must treasure our tradition of respecting diversity—in this case, disciplinary, regional and epistemological diversity. Many kinds of evidence must be used and must “count” as knowledge for us to move this field forward.

Research that Focuses on Policy: The Educational Consequences of Copyright Confusion

With my colleagues Pat Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi, we are interviewing ML educators on their perspectives on how copyright and fair use affect their work. Media literacy educators fundamentally rely on the use of copyrighted materials in their teaching.

Fair use is intended to be a means to balance the rights of users with the rights of owners, by encouraging the widespread and flexible use of cultural products. This is more important than ever with the rise of digital media and user-generated content. But it's always been central to the work of ML educators. In our interviews we are finding that, for most of us, there are a lot of grey areas, a lot of confusion about what constitutes fair use. We're not always sure what we can do with rental movies in the classroom, digitizing TV shows and ads, how many copies we can make of newspaper clippings and editorial cartoons, whether we can incorporate You Tube videos into an assignment, whether we're ask risk if we take digital media artifacts and put them online for students to screen at home.

We're not always sure what students can do when they want to use popular music in their own creative work. Can they use 2 seconds? 10 seconds? 10%? Or can they use the whole work? Can they incorporate images from *Pirates of the Caribbean* in their own social studies projects about world explorers? Can they post their critical analysis of Budweiser beer ads online? Can you get in trouble for making an assignment where students have to re-edit the Romeo and Juliet film with new voice over? Can you--- the teacher---create a clip reel of videos you use in your classroom and share them with other teachers or sell them at a conference? We're just not sure. Raise your hands if you have some of these questions (and every hand in the room goes up.)

This puts ML educators in a state of “copyright confusion,” and this has the potential to diminish the quality of our teaching. But this is a solvable problem. Documentary filmmakers

solved it with a code of practices that helped them understand for themselves the power of the law to support fair use.

With the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, over the next year we will be using a consensus-based process, pioneered by my colleagues Pat Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi at American University. We will be meeting with media literacy educators all over the country next year in order to develop a code of practices for media literacy that represent our best ideas about how copyright and fair use apply to our work. If you would like to participate in our interviews, stop by at the Media Education Lab booth and sign up.

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. Here's some closing thoughts. The future of media literacy--- it's the graduate students! Here are a remarkable collection of individuals from many different scholarly disciplines and from all walks of life. Make sure you meet one of these folks before you leave. It's been the most significant new adventure of my career to work with these amazing, dedicated and brilliant individuals.

I am confident about the future of media literacy education because of the talents of all of you in the room, assembled here. The AMLA is really the heart of the media literacy family--- and we're a global family, that's for certain. Thanks for being part of it!