

# UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH MEDIA LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

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Teachers experience an enormous range of unique challenges and enjoy particular kinds of satisfactions when they bring popular music, TV commercials, a soap opera or a movie scene into the classroom. Several typical types of classroom activity are commonly used in media literacy education: content analysis, textual analysis, case study, simulation, practical activities and production. Of course, just watching a film, reading a work of contemporary fiction or listening to popular music in school does not constitute media literacy. The critical dimension of media literacy depends on students' ability to collectively reflect on their own interpretations and investigate how meanings have been constructed, with appreciation for the full range of social, cultural and political contexts in which such meanings circulate.

The stories that teachers share about "what works" vary enormously from region to region, as Bazalgette, Bevort and Savino (1992) have described through an analysis of international case studies in media education. The social intimacy in schools, the ritualistic and cyclic quality of activities, the well-defined rules which all are expected to understand and obey all require the use of adaptive strategies on the part of both students and teachers (Jackson, 1990). The institutional limitations of schooling force teachers to discover the particular kinds of strategies that will be

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effective in order to accomplish this work. As a result, how teachers use popular culture in the classroom will depend on their judgments about what is possible within the unique and complex institutional settings in which they work.

A review of the case study literature reveals three themes that surface repeatedly in teachers' reflections about their uses of media and popular culture in the classroom: 1) changes in the quality of student communication; 2) the increased need for collaboration with other adults (inside and outside the school); and 3) the sometimes subversive interface between teachers, their colleagues, and school leaders about issues concerning the appropriateness of the content of popular culture texts for use in school. These themes, which are not generally acknowledged by media education theorists, provide some powerful insights on the real-world pleasures and tensions that teachers experience in the areas in which learning and teaching about media and popular culture must take place.

## IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

Because students spend nearly eight hours with mass media (viewing nearly three hours of television per day), they are highly knowledgeable about the minutiae of popular culture. Many are familiar with the details of musicians' new recordings, celebrity fashion trends, athletes' legal troubles, the upcoming films of new directors, and even the box office grosses of new films or the ratings of popular television programming. Teachers who use popular culture to motivate students find that, as expected, students are indeed more talkative when video, film and popular music are connected to classroom lessons, as Stevens (2001, 550) writes:

*...[T]his lesson benefited from the inclusion of popular culture clips. Students' demeanors were visibly transformed as the movie clips were introduced, leading to a higher level of engagement that was maintained throughout the lesson. While the topic could have been explored without the inclusion of the clips, the lesson took on dynamic dimensions as students engaged in discussions and writing responses.*

As students activate prior knowledge, they take pleasure in learning. Since many have specific information, ideas, questions, and theories to share, teachers can more easily step into the role of facilitating inquiry.

When I have observed teachers in the initial phases of using media texts in the classroom, it is clear that the high levels of student knowledge and interest can be unnerving to many teachers, their professional colleagues and their supervisors. Sometimes the classroom descends into a cacophony of excited comments, laughter, and side conversations as a teacher uses a video clip of professional wrestling to compare and contrast the role of entertainment warriors in contemporary society to that of ancient Rome. Students have a lot to say about professional wrestling and they want to say it.

In some schools, classrooms that are too noisy may attract unwanted attention from colleagues and supervisors; in these settings, teachers must work especially hard when using popular culture texts to manage student discourse in an acceptably structured and orderly fashion. In other settings, there is a higher comfort level with the dynamism of student engagement.

Teachers report that student-to-student communication is also enhanced through the study of popular texts (Sommer, 2000). Students may be more likely to listen carefully to the contributions of others in the classroom, because in sharing interpretations, they actively discover the diversity of plausible alternative readings and recognize the "constructedness" of meaning-making. These particular concepts may be difficult to explore when reading works from the traditional literary canon, where students have considerably less prior knowledge or expertise. And Wei (2002) urges us not to neglect the importance of the powerful emotional context of film viewing, which can enhance meaningful learning, even while creating a certain amount of unpredictability in the classroom.

However, in classrooms where teachers are motivated primarily by an interest in exposing the oppressive aspects of media culture by emphasizing its negative influence on cultural identity formation, patterns of student-teacher communication can become more problematic. In all educational settings, students quickly learn "what counts" as interesting and appropriate, what can be said and how to say it (Williamson, 1981). In literature, for example, students' independent responses to texts quite quickly begin to conform to the critical perspectives in which their teachers have been trained (Applebee, 1996). When media education is seen as a covert (or overt) means of political activism or a way for teachers to control children's media use habits to mitigate potentially harmful effects, students can perceive this as "an invasion of privacy and a manifestation of teachers' prejudices" (Buckingham, 1992, 106). Some students may even discover the pleasure of resisting the teacher's interpretive stance about popular culture not because they disagree with the

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teacher's political stance, but simply because they enjoy challenging the teacher's power. This can be particularly frustrating for teachers.

In an email, a high school teacher once shared her experiences teaching media literacy by describing how difficult it was to get students to talk about media – she explained that, in her class, most were sullen and silent and only two or three students spoke at all. Not knowing the teacher or the setting, I could only imagine the situation as students struggled to guess “what the teacher wanted.” The silences in the classroom suggested that students simply did not comprehend the discourse or had already discovered what kinds of comments were not acceptable. Perhaps these students had not yet learned to conform their perspectives about the media to those of the teacher; only those who could play the game using a particular discourse stance towards popular culture felt comfortable enough to participate.

### INCREASED NEED FOR ADULT COLLABORATION

As teachers explore the use of popular culture in the classroom, they frequently incorporate various types of media production into course assignments, including the construction of dramatic scenes, documentaries, public service announcements, short newscasts, graphic arts projects, music videos, web sites and other types of media work. While there has been considerable debate in the United States about whether or not media production must be central to media literacy education and whether educators should make use of the resources of professional media organizations (Hobbs, 1998a), scholars reviewing the first generation of media education internationally report that in many countries, new practices for using media and popular culture in the schools depend greatly upon outside support of one kind or another, either from independent agencies, government, or media industries themselves. A UNESCO-sponsored colloquy drew up a list of many different types of collaboration between educators, government agencies, non-profit organizations and media organizations which could be valuable (Bazalgette, Bevort & Savino, 1992). While there are some media educators who scoff at enlisting media professionals in supporting (and paying for) this work, there are many examples of successful collaboration that results in measurable, direct benefits for students, teachers, parents and communities.

In local practice, teachers often discover that student media productions, especially when designed to be integrated into one of the core subject areas such as language arts or social studies, are more

manageably accomplished through a collaborative effort involving other educators inside the building, media professionals in the community, or parents and community volunteers (Hobbs, 1998b). Feree (2001, 19) describes how teachers working together as a team inspired a sense of shared ownership that students appreciated:

The two teachers worked enthusiastically with these young adolescents, sharing their pleasure and sense of accomplishment without controlling the proceedings. They encouraged, monitored, and provided guidance as needed. This wasn't student-centered practice as much as learning-centered practice. Student-teacher conversations took place daily as participants reviewed progress to date and worked through the steps of the unit.

Such practices depend on excellent management skills on the part of the teacher, as well as high levels of support from school leaders. For example, Feree goes on to describe how students needed to practice their scenes by rehearsing in any space that they could find available – indeed, casts often asked to “borrow” the teachers’ lounge to rehearse. Zill (2002) describes an increasingly common approach to media production in K-12 classrooms, one that relies on the enthusiastic support of media professionals in the local community to support, organize and provide resources to enhance both the quality of the learning experience and the quality of the student-generated media productions.

## FLYING BELOW THE RADAR SCREEN—OR NOT

Educators have long recognized that teaching with and about media and popular culture is both subversive and conservative (Postman, 1969). But teachers can and do use film, television, and music in the classroom in sometimes inappropriate ways, including to substitute for poor preparation, to reward students for good behavior, or to prop up students who lack print literacy skills (Hobbs, 1993). School districts have adopted materials-use policies to minimize the possibility of parental disapproval and to encourage teachers to reflect carefully on their specific educational goals when using contemporary media forms in the classroom (Zirkel, 1999). Across the nation, school districts have instituted policies that place substantial limits on teachers’ use of popular films, television programs and music. Some districts have a “controversial learning resources” policy that defined such materials as those “not included in the approved learning resources of the district and which are subject to disagreement as to appropriateness because they relate to controversial issues or present material in a manner or context which is itself controversial” (Zirkel, 1999, 70).

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To my knowledge, research has not yet examined or evaluated the range of district-level policies (and actual implementation of these policies) which now define the appropriate uses of film, video, or popular media in the classroom. Some school districts have highly restrictive policies, as in the example described by Stevens (2001), who reports that to use a clip from a PG-rated film with middle-school students, district policy required permission slips from all students' parents for the viewing of the clips. In other districts, teachers report that requirements may include: submitting video clips for principal's approval twenty days before screening or providing copies of videos to be used to a district-level administrator for approval at the beginning of each semester. In my own work with teachers, they have reported that in some schools, principals communicate their disapproval of district-level policies and do not require teachers to adhere to materials-use policies; in other communities, principals establish and enforce even more stringent informal policies (including prohibiting the use of videotape or popular music) than district-level policies proscribe.

Veteran teachers are aware that the (perceived) misuse of film, video or popular media can have profound and often unimagined career consequences. In one recent case, a high school history teacher used films to help stimulate discussion about his selected themes of fascism, socialism, feudalism, democracy, and individual freedom. Although he had sent home permission slips at the beginning of the year for his students to watch R-rated movies, he cautioned them about the graphic realism of a particular film and asked students after the opening 15 to 20-minute segment whether they wanted to continue viewing the video. He also told students who felt uncomfortable or embarrassed that they could put their heads down or be excused to do an alternate assignment in the library.

Although the school district's policy about controversial materials had been published and placed in each school's library, the school principal had not included it in the school's teacher handbook, nor had it been mentioned at faculty meetings or in memoranda to staff members. But when the parent of one of the students in the class complained about the video, the principal discussed the matter with the history teacher, viewed portions of the video with both assistant principals, and concluded with them that administrative approval should have been obtained. The district subsequently provided the teacher with the notice and hearing required under state law for teacher termination, charging him with "neglect of duty, insubordination, and/or other ... just cause." The Colorado Supreme Court upheld the district's decision to terminate the teacher in a 1998 ruling (Zirkel, 1999, 73).

Younger teachers often discover from their teaching colleagues the opprobrium that may result in some schools when controversial but popular media materials are used in the classroom. For example, when one young urban teacher asked students to bring in multiple copies of popular song lyrics for a classroom activity, he was stunned when another teacher discovered an extra copy of a student's selected song lyric in the nearby Xerox machine. His colleague vented her disgust at the idea of the use of such a song lyric in the classroom. The printed lyric, full of negative references to women and descriptions of painful sexual practices, was offensive to both of them, but as a novice teacher, he hadn't imagined that his students would challenge his authority by selecting such material for the class assignment. He writes: "I never imagined that anyone would be so bold or sneaky or just plain comatose to bring in something this overtly foul. ...I had to go back and change my libertarian tune: You know what, guys? As it turns out, any song is not okay" (Michie, 1999, 100). Not surprisingly, this teacher felt stung as much by the colleague's negative reaction to the printed lyric as by his student's selection of it.

Teachers who are determined to use popular culture in the classroom may develop elaborate strategies to "fly below the radar screen," finding creative ways to use media and popular culture texts in the classroom without attracting the attention from colleagues or supervisors that could call these materials into question. For example, Callahan (2001) reports on a teacher who developed a high school elective course entitled "Media and Culture" who ordered copies of his book selection for students (*We the Media* by Hazen & Winokur, 1997) as a workbook instead of as a textbook to avoid having to get the book approved through the district's curriculum materials committee.

Feree (2001, 23) describes how cultural factors may influence perceptions of whether or not contemporary media and controversial social issues are appropriate in particular classrooms. In describing a British teacher who involved her students in scripting and producing soap operas with 12-year olds, she writes: "Their soap operas contained provocative topics, not only of unemployment, racism, and theft, but also of teen relations, pregnancy, and abortion...I was surprised that [the teacher] censured nothing and wondered if teachers in the United States would be comfortable allowing students to dramatize teen pregnancy and drugs." Scholars who champion the use of popular culture rarely (if ever) refer to the genuine risks that some teachers take when their curriculum choices do not reflect the normative values of the communities in which they work.

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## RECONCILING THE MULTIPLE REALITIES OF MEDIA EDUCATION

There is no shortage of theories about the promise of media and popular culture in education, but as Bazalgette, Bevort and Savino (1992, 3) point out, "the realities of teaching and learning are harder to define and share." In reviewing accounts of practice of media education in more than a dozen countries, they emphasize that what is institutionally appropriate in one setting may not be so in another. It has been argued that such enormous diversity of philosophies and approaches towards classroom implementation of media literacy, like Solomon's beard, is a prime source of strength for the future of the field (Hobbs, 1998a). However, those who include popular culture into the classroom must be responsive to what Masterman (1985, 24) has identified as the central objective: to "develop in pupils enough self-confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgments to media texts *which they will encounter in the future*" (italics in original). Teachers must design learning experiences that help students, as quickly as possible, to stand on their own two feet.

Media literacy privileges students' ability to collectively reflect on their own interpretations and investigate how meanings are constructed through both analysis and practical production work. But the institutional nature of schooling proscribes a relationship between teacher and student that may encourage students to "play the game" and offer only those contributions deemed acceptable to the teacher's world view and expectations. The institutional nature of schooling may demand that teachers adapt and modify this work to fit with the normative values of school culture and community values. As a result, teachers may encounter situations and experiences in using popular culture in the classroom that are not described in the scholarly academic literature, whose voices "demand that the repertoire of acceptable cultural objects be expanded" (Giroux & Aronowitz, 1991, 182).

The use of media and popular culture in the real-world arenas of classrooms is not for the faint of heart. Such work vitally depends on the courage and perseverance of the individual teachers who care about this work and recognize its value for students. While being inspired and motivated by a wide range of different understandings about the role of the mass media and popular culture in society, it is these dedicated professionals who, collectively, have the imagination and creativity to translate the possibilities of media education into meaningful educational realities for the students in their classrooms.



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