

# Connecting to Learn: A Case Study of Media Literacy in the College Classroom

Journalism &amp; Mass Communication Educator

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/10776958261430526

<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jmc>

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## Abstract

Teaching media literacy today means navigating technological change, contested definitions of the field, and engaging students amid constant digital distractions. Such challenges motivated a case study of an undergraduate media literacy course designed using Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The study drew on a survey, focus groups, and reflections to examine students' experiences and perceptions of the course's value. Although students entered with substantial lived media experience, they lacked formal terminology and prior institutional training. Students responded positively to the course's validation of existing knowledge and emphasis on peer discussion. Postcourse reflections showed movement toward deliberate critique and strengthened personal agency.

## Keywords

media literacy, AI literacy, universal design for learning, media pedagogy, higher education

Teaching media literacy in 2026 is complicated. Media technologies, distribution systems, economic structures, and policies are shifting rapidly. At the same time, social

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unrest, environmental crises, and political polarization weigh heavily on both students and instructors. Within higher education, new government mandates, curriculum overhauls, and fraught campus climates add further strain. Faculty also face waning student engagement and omnipresent digital distractions, while debates persist over what “media literacy” means and how it should be taught. Navigating these pressures and distilling a vast, rapidly changing field into a single semester is daunting work for any instructor.

We are three faculty members who teach media literacy at different institutions, and in early 2025, we came together to ask: How do we meet this moment? We teach in varied contexts, including private and public universities, rural and urban settings, online and in person. But we share the same pressing questions we suspect many colleagues do: What do students bring with them into our courses in terms of knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs about media? How can we draw them in and keep them engaged? And most importantly, how can we motivate them to value and practice media literacy well beyond our classrooms?

Buckingham (1990) advocated for integrating popular culture and students’ personal interests into the classroom to bolster engagement with media studies. As media scholars and communication faculty, we value this sentiment and sought to synthesize it with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to create a transformative educational experience. While other media literacy instructors likely employ both Buckingham’s student-centered approach and UDL frameworks, we are unaware of any focused examination or formal documentation of such an implementation for the scholarly community.

This article describes our effort to fill that gap through a case study of a recently redesigned media literacy course taught by Yonty Friesem. Built on UDL (Rose & Meyer, 2002) and transformative education (Morey & Kitano, 1997), the course presented the opportunity for us to evaluate a new teaching framework and to better understand how students think about media literacy. Throughout the semester, we gathered students’ sentiments, documented our own observations and reflections, and reflected on what we learned. We share how that experience reshaped our understanding of what it takes to teach media literacy in a way that not only informs students but also engages and connects them.

## **Media Literacy as a Contested Concept and Practice**

Scholars have debated for decades what media literacy is, how it should be taught, and what outcomes it should achieve (Buckingham, 2003; Friesem & Friesem, 2021; Hobbs, 1998; Potter, 2010). Even among experts, there is little consensus on its scope or boundaries. Hobbs and Tuzel (2015) described how differently educators approach the teaching of media literacy based on their prioritization of diverse domains, such as production, cultural knowledge, or learner engagement. Whether working from a “protectionist” approach that fosters skepticism or an “empowerment” approach that emphasizes agency, educators must first confront basic questions about their position on media literacy (boyd, 2017; Buckingham, 2025). This is further complicated in recent years by the evolution of digital technologies and generative AI, which some

indicate demand an expanded conception of media literacy and new teaching approaches (Long & Magerko, 2020; Morris, 2022).

## Media Literacy in Higher Education

Higher education is not exempt from the definitional and instructional debates about media literacy. Turin and Friesem (2020), for instance, found no consensus among media studies scholars on what domains media literacy encompasses or even what topics would suit an undergraduate paper. Media literacy courses are offered inconsistently across institutions and housed in departments ranging from communication and journalism to library science (Ashley, 2015). Some media literacy courses are required for certain majors, while others function as general education courses, reflecting the field's diffuse footing in the college curriculum. To complicate matters, students seem to arrive at college with uneven media literacy preparation shaped by their prior schooling and experience. De Leyn et al. (2022) found that high school students largely internalize protectionist, risk-focused messaging. DiGiacomo et al. (2023) highlighted how the inconsistency of K–12 media literacy instructional policies across schools, districts, and even states leaves many students with little or no formal media education.

Recent survey data from 1,026 undergraduates at 181 two- and four-year institutions underscore this complexity (Flaherty, 2025). Only one-tenth of students rated their level of media literacy before attending college as very high. Most felt their media literacy improved in college, with one-fourth of current students rating their media literacy as very high. Virtually all students in the survey (98%) indicated that they regularly practice at least some media skills, such as checking the accuracy of the information they encountered. Students agreed that their college could help students improve their media literacy by creating digital media literacy resources and offering peer-to-peer training or a formal course.

## Inclusive Pedagogies in Media Literacy Education

One pedagogical approach well-suited to addressing students' diverse media literacy backgrounds is UDL, an instructional framework intended to make learning accessible and meaningful for all students (Rose & Meyer, 2002). The UDL framework emphasizes three core principles: offering multiple means of engagement (the “why” of learning), multiple means of representation (the “what”), and multiple means of action and expression (the “how”). The framework prioritizes the importance of first helping students understand why a topic matters (relevance) before addressing how and what they will learn (CAST, 2025). Students are more likely to invest effort when they see personal and social values in the subject. In the case of a media literacy course, this means recognizing why media literacy is significant in their own lives and communities.

The second and third UDL principles, representation and action/expression, reinforce this foundation by supporting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2007) and encouraging learners to develop skills through exploration and varied practice. In media literacy instruction, this might include presenting media messages through multiple lenses to

spur discussion, or allowing students to demonstrate their learning through written, recorded, or visual reflections, while maintaining clear academic standards (Polirstok & Lee, 2019). These practices also align with transformative education, which shifts students from passive receivers of knowledge to active participants in their own cognitive, social, and emotional development (Morey & Kitano, 1997). Transformative education calls for diversifying content, instruction, assessment, and classroom dynamics to build inclusive, engaged learning environments. Theoretically, UDL and transformative education create conditions in which students can not only meet course outcomes but also develop agency in their learning. This is seen as an essential step in moving from passive media consumption to informed, critical participation in a media-saturated democratic society (Hobbs, 2017).

Lang (2020, 2021), like many contemporary pedagogical scholars, shifts attention from broad instructional philosophy to the everyday design of classroom experience, encouraging small but impactful techniques that deepen students' connections to course material and to one another. In this way, his work offers practical strategies for enacting the inclusive, growth-oriented commitments of UDL and transformative education within the constraints of a single semester. Similarly, like Buckingham (1993), Yuldasheva (2025) calls for integrating interactive and real-world applications of course content through techniques such as gamification, multimedia resources, and the segmentation of complex tasks. Scullen (2025) suggests that educators participate in a book club to bring their own interests into their practice, replacing the "sage on the stage" model with a more collaborative, peer-to-peer inquiry process.

## **The Case**

This study focused on an undergraduate media literacy course taught by Friesem at an urban, arts-focused, mid-sized college that encourages the faculty to implement transformative education practices (Friesem, 2019). This introductory, 100-level course had no prerequisites, was open to all majors and fulfilled a general education requirement. The 40-person class met once a week for 3 hours over a 15-week semester. Instructor Friesem designed it to integrate UDL principles and transformative education goals, with a strong emphasis on student-centered learning. Built around a "critical questions" approach, the course introduced major media studies theories and invited students to apply them to their own everyday media use. The semester began by focusing on "the why" (as framed in UDL) through topics students recognized as immediately relevant, such as digital nutrition, media addiction, misinformation, cyberbullying, and algorithmic bias.

Each class session combined brief interactive lectures with hands-on activities and multiple small-group discussions to expose students to diverse perspectives. Small-group work aimed to provide a low-stakes space for exchanging ideas, and the flexible classroom space also supported collaboration. Students engaged in varied modes of participation, reflecting UDL's emphasis on multiple means of engagement and formats to help students connect with the course material in ways that suited their own learning styles.

For example, one class session examined the concepts of representation and misrepresentation. Students were placed in small groups and asked to analyze depictions of Americans in popular French graphic novels. The novels were written in French, a language unfamiliar to students, prompting their focus on visual aspects especially. The texts included several insulting or inaccurate portrayals of Americans, allowing students to collectively experience and critique misrepresentation while discussing who holds power in media production, what messages convey, and how audiences are differently affected. Students then created alternative representations (e.g., visually, orally, or textually), and a student from each of the seven groups summarized both their reinterpretation and their cultural explanation for the authors' artistic choices. Being misrepresented as Americans by foreign artists heightened both students' engagement and their insights.

Later in the same class session, students moved back into small groups to reflect on favorite childhood media texts that shaped their identities in relation to gender, race, and ability/disability. Instructor Friesem circulated, asking questions and offering feedback. During the subsequent full-class discussion, students shared voluntarily about their conversations and their applicability to course concepts. By incorporating popular culture, personal reflections, varied modes of expression, and low-stakes collaboration, the session enacted UDL principles to deepen students' conceptual understanding.

Midway through the semester, students formed project teams to explore self-selected topics using a project-based learning approach. Final projects were submitted in formats of students' choosing, such as podcasts, graphic novels, written articles, websites, and videos. This flexibility, central to UDL, enabled students to demonstrate their media literacy learning in ways aligned with their strengths and preferences while meeting shared academic standards. Both the instructor's assessment and students' self-assessment were valued in the final evaluation of projects.

Because this course intentionally incorporated UDL and transformative education while remaining rooted in the realities of an introductory media literacy class, it offered an ideal case through which we could examine students' starting points, their reflections on their growth, and their responses to an intentional pedagogical approach.

## **The Current Project**

We approached this case study with curiosity about how to update and improve our instruction about media literacy in the college classroom and as a chance to reflect on what lessons we might learn and share with other instructors facing similar challenges. To guide our analysis of this case, we developed three guiding questions:

- At the start of the course, what perspectives about media and assessments of their own media literacy did students bring with them?
- How did students respond to the pedagogical approach used in this course, including its emphasis on UDL and transformative education?
- By the end of the semester, how did students reflect on their own media literacy development?

## **Method**

To answer these questions, we used a case study approach. We collected data over the course of the semester from five primary sources: (a) a survey addressing students' media use and their evaluation of their media education background; (b) focus groups exploring students' experience of the course content and pedagogy administered mid-way through the semester; (c) students' written reflections in response to instructor-generated prompts focused on personal media literacy development; (d) students' written responses on institutional course teaching evaluations; and (e) our own observations and reflections.

### **Survey**

On the first day of class, we administered a survey adapted from an Inside Higher Education Youth Voices Flash Survey (Flaherty, 2025) to (a) compare to our sample to determine representativeness and (b) to learn about students' current media use and media literacy history (see Appendix A).

### **Focus Groups**

Susannah Stern and Pamela Morris conducted structured focus groups with all participating class members ( $n = 30$ ) in the sixth week of the semester. Questions centered on students' class experience and the pedagogical strategies employed up to that point (see Appendix B). Pamela Morris returned to the class again in the 13th week, at which point students ( $n = 34$ ) were asked to describe their final class project, including lessons learned from their work (see Appendix B).

### **Written Reflections**

Students were asked to draft written responses to prompts on the first day of class, at the end of the semester in class (see Appendix C).

### **Institutional Course Evaluations**

Students responded to the university's standard course evaluation form. Written responses to relevant questions were analyzed (see Appendix D).

### **Researcher Observations and Reflections**

As data were collected across the semester, all authors constructed memos to document meaningful observations, impressions, and questions raised by our roles as researchers and media literacy instructors at different institutions.

## Analysis

To provide brief contextual information about students' media use and prior media literacy experiences, we generated basic descriptive statistics for the anonymous survey items. To analyze the qualitative data, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis, which is well-suited for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across multiple sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our analysis unfolded in overlapping stages. As data were generated, we began an ongoing practice of conducting immersive readings of all student materials and transcripts to develop a holistic understanding of our case. In parallel, we generated analytic and reflexive memos to create a transparent record of our evolving interpretations, which were used to contextualize and interpret student feedback (Peters & Ragland, 2009).

Susannah Stern and Pamela Morris coded all of the data using descriptive and interpretive labels aligned with our research questions (Merriam, 1998). Because we were aiming for a shared interpretation rather than independent rater scores, we treated analysis as a collaborative process. After coding the data individually, we conducted frequent, structured discussions to compare our coding, discuss points of convergence and divergence, and clarify code definitions. Through these discussions, we clustered related codes into candidate themes, assessed their fit across data sources, and then refined the themes. This approach had the added benefit of strengthening our analytic integrity by allowing us to test interpretations against one another and avoid reliance on any single perspective.

## Protection of Human Subjects

Forty students were enrolled in the course. All students had the option to opt out of any data collection without their instructors' knowledge. To protect confidentiality, all student data were anonymized before being analyzed. The instructor did not know which students participated in focus groups, as they were coordinated and facilitated by Stern and Morris. Audio recordings of focus groups were transcribed, and all identifying information removed. Surveys were anonymous, and the instructor removed any identifiable information in written reflections before their analysis, which was conducted by Stern and Morris. These procedures were intended to gather candid student feedback while maintaining ethical boundaries between the instructor and students, and to ensure that no students felt obligated to participate or as if their responses would impact their standing in the course. The study was reviewed and approved by Columbia College Chicago's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## Results

### *Initial Student Perspectives and Self-Assessments (RQ1)*

Our results rest nearly entirely on the qualitative data we collected over the course of the semester (see Appendices B, C, and D). However, to partially address our first

research question focused on students' initial assessment of their own media literacy and to gain a snapshot of their media use, we also conducted a brief survey on the first day of class (see Appendix A).

We found that most students felt their high schools had done a lackluster job preparing them for today's media environment. The average rating for their high school media education was 1.05 on a scale from 0 (poor) to 3 (excellent). Students indicated during the focus group that their prior media education was largely focused on safety and digital citizenship. One explained, "a big thing was Internet safety . . . like, don't say your real name, don't say where you live, don't say your age, don't talk about you (sic) as a real person."

In terms of their media consumption at the start of the semester, students ( $N = 39$ ) reported relying most heavily on social media (97%), friends and family (69%), and broadcast media (27%) as sources for news. Although nearly all students listed social media as a key news source, only 11.1% said they trusted social media "very much." Traditional news outlets, by contrast, received stronger trust ratings but very low use (for complete data, see Appendix A). Our survey results closely matched those found in the original *Inside Higher Education* Youth Voices Flash Survey of more than 1000 college students at 181 universities in the United States in December 2024 (Flaherty, 2025).

The results discussed hereafter relied solely on qualitative data analysis. In regard to the first research question (RQ1) about students' point of entry at the start of the semester, we analyzed students' responses on the first day to a set of instructor prompts. In this data, two primary themes emerged: defensive framing and informal learning through lived experience.

*Media literacy framed as defense.* Students' initial perspectives on media literacy ranged from having no clear definition to describing it as a set of defensive strategies. When asked on the first day of class to describe their thoughts about media literacy, descriptions varied considerably in terms of accuracy and sophistication. One student acknowledged, "I do not know what media literacy is so I would not know how to form it into my own words." However, those who offered definitions tended to focus on the ability to "decode," "resist manipulation," and "apply critical thinking" to media messages. For example, one student defined media literacy as "knowing the facts about the media and not believing everything you read or come across."

*Confidence Grounded in Lived Experience.* While some students did not have a solid understanding of media literacy as a concept, most arrived with a high degree of perceived media literacy competence, viewing their savvy as an informal expertise developed through years of personal media use. Many students' assessment of their own media literacy was based on the sense that they had taught themselves. A student explained, "I already have very good media literacy from extensive time on the Internet and extreme deep dives and mistakes," while another remarked, "All these things feel like common knowledge because we've lived with [media] our whole lives."

## *Response to Course Design and Instruction (RQ2)*

The second question we explored was “How did students respond to the pedagogical approach used in this course, including its emphasis on UDL and transformative education?” We analyzed mid-semester focus group responses (Appendix B) and end-of-semester institutional course teaching evaluations (Appendix D) to arrive at three interrelated themes: (a) validation of prior knowledge, (b) participation as a pathway to learning, and (c) immediacy and real-world application. Across these themes, students’ comments touch three core UDL concerns. They describe what drew them in (engagement), what made participation more or less available to different students (accessibility), and what counted as deeper learning for them (academic rigor). We use these dimensions to interpret how students experienced the course design.

*Validation of Prior Knowledge.* Most notable in the data was the students’ consistent appreciation for how the instructor acknowledged and built upon their existing media experiences rather than treating them as blank slates. As one student noted in a mid-semester focus group, the professor “really expands on our already existing knowledge, instead of trying to, like spoonfeed us information.” Students felt their lived experience was validated by the instructor’s approach, while they also felt encouraged to expand and deepen their critical frameworks. Another student explained, “For me personally, I feel like it’s hard to teach a digital media literacy course . . . It might be that we already knew this information . . . but it’s really good to know the how and why, and I think [instructor] does a really good job of that.” Student comments indicated that when their lived experiences and prior knowledge were validated, they were more willing to engage in deeper inquiry about media practices and media critique. This pedagogical approach, students signaled, not only captures the UDL principle of accessibility but also represents a shift in the typical power dynamics of a classroom.

*Participation as a Pathway to Learning.* Students identified the conversational, discussion-heavy format of the course as a central strength that facilitated deeper interest. Several students contrasted this course to traditional lecture-based classes. “It’s really beneficial that [instructor] is having a ton of group work, a ton of talk, like a seminar, almost . . . and I think that really helps me personally get more interested in the topic,” one student noted in a focus group. Others appreciated the variety of perspectives that discussions could elicit. Frequent group work and peer interaction created what one student described as a more “digestible” learning experience where “by having casual conversations with your peers and with the professor” they could process information more effectively. Student comments suggested they recognized that the planned in-class social interactions weren’t just a fun add-on, but a primary mechanism to tackle cognitive work. From a UDL standpoint, engagement and rigor appeared to move together. Discussions drew students in, thus allowing for deeper critique. That said, a few students indicated a desire to slow down the pace and focus of interactions, so that discussion could push beyond surface-level engagement and ensure that deeper critical analysis actually transpired.

The intensive social interaction format presented initial challenges for a few students, who noted they'd felt some anxiety related to having to talk to others and make eye contact at the beginning of the semester. For most, however, connecting with other students was a highlight of the class that led to substantial learning. As one student noted in their end-of-semester course evaluation, "Engaging in discussion with my classmates has shown [me] that being media literate is not something you learn how to do . . . It is a skill that one must constantly be practicing." By becoming more familiar with opportunities for engagement and with frequent interaction, even initially hesitant students felt better able to transition from anxiety to active participation.

*Immediacy and Real-World Application.* The relevancy of the course material served as a catalyst for engagement, connecting course concepts to daily digital life. This relevancy was heavily emphasized in students' reflections on the course design and instruction. Class content connected directly with their daily media consumption experiences. As one student explained in a focus group, "almost all the topics are super relevant to anyone that's living in the current age" because "every single topic in this class, it's like, Oh, I know what that is, because I do that thing. I just never put a name to it." This immediacy made the learning feel urgent and practical rather than abstract.

### *End-of-Semester Reflections on Media Literacy (RQ3)*

Our third research question inquired, "By the end of the semester, how did students reflect on their own media literacy development over the semester?" Data analysis of end-of-semester student reflections (Appendix C) and institutional course evaluations (Appendix D) suggested that students' development was characterized by a shift from intuitive media use to a more structured, deliberate, and vocal form of critical engagement. Four themes capture this development.

*From Intuition to Critique.* By the end of the course, many students moved beyond their initial "common knowledge" toward a more intentional and reflective mode of media consumption. Many students indicated they had begun to engage in more reflective thinking about their media use. Some explained their new inclination to "look at everything a little bit more cautiously and carefully" and to "be more skeptical of surface-level content." Questioning motives, sources, and techniques of media message makers was appreciated by many. One explained, "I pay more attention now to what I see in the media. I think more about what the message is and why it's being shown that way." Another student described how she had become "more critical of the media that I agree with, rather than just what I disagree with," demonstrating an expansion of her existing media critique practices. A handful of students articulated their heightened understanding of how media shape perceptions, self-esteem, feelings, self-image, personal identity, and values.

*Finding Words and Gaining Voice.* Several students articulated how the course had provided them with a new vocabulary to think and talk about media. As one student put it,

“Just being provided with the words and background knowledge has newly shaped my way of thinking. For example, knowing the difference between different types of information (misinformation versus disinformation) can now help me to actually identify them.” Another student explained how the terminology she learned in the course and the accompanying concepts empowered her to give voice to her thoughts and knowledge: “I think [now] I can engage in media conversations a lot more readily. I’ve always kind’ve avoided speaking on it because I don’t feel knowledgeable enough to contribute . . . I think I have that confidence now.” The introduction of formal terminology provided students with a new lexicon that transformed their internal thoughts into actionable and communicable knowledge.

*From Awareness to Practice.* Not only did many students develop valuable knowledge and a lexicon to discuss media, they also indicated their belief that they had acquired practical media literacy skills and self-regulation habits to manage their digital lives. Students identified a range of practices they had begun or planned to begin, such as fact-checking, examining sources, setting boundaries for screen time, distinguishing between fake and credible news, and detecting artificial intelligence. A handful of students noted their intention to “check themselves” before overreacting to content they encountered online. One explained “I realized that I can fall into the trap of believing a social media post and feeling emotional over it. Now I know if I am passionate about that post to search up and dive deeper to really fact-check it.” Several students expressed concern that their emotional reactions to content might lead them to share misinformation, and they seemed grateful that the course provided them with techniques to avoid this “irresponsible” practice.

*Media Literacy as Essential and Personal.* Students overwhelmingly agreed that media literacy is important, and that media education is vital. One student explained, “Media is everywhere, and it can change how people think and feel. If people understand how the media works, they can make smarter choices and not get tricked or misled.” Some students focused on how being media literate is empowering. An especially poignant student responded,

Media literacy may be one of the most important skills of our current era, specifically in a time where most things flow in and out from social media, from interacting with friends to the highest forms of government. So understanding your own impact online and being able to analyze media when you are always being faced with it is critical to being a citizen of the world.

Even students who believed that they were already sufficiently media literate before taking the class were adamant about the value of media education. As one student put it,

I think since I am so chronically online, I may not be the best person to take this class, as these were all techniques that I had developed on my own over the years. But I think this is such an important class to take, as so many people might not know the same information

that I do, or it gives students the power to critically analyze the world around them. I really hope that this class becomes mandatory not for some majors but for ALL of them at [school name].

While students frequently mentioned their own growing awareness of media influence, bias, and their developing skillsets in managing media interactions, few students mentioned larger, systemic issues that impact media content and influence. This finding may well be an artifact of the questions asked, which were largely framed in a personal way (“How do you feel . . .”). Nonetheless, it is notable that only a few students highlighted more macro issues involved with our media ecosystem, such as media policy, corporate structures and incentives, policies, and government regulation, or obstacles to media activism.

When questioned what, if anything, might motivate them to continue to increase their media literacy after the course ended, student responses ranged considerably. Some students identified their own general goal to better understand the forces influencing their perceptions and choices and to keep up to date and stay informed. As one student put it, “As algorithms grow more powerful, staying informed is a form of resistance.” Other students were motivated by their desire to spread the word of media literacy and contribute positively to others’ media knowledge. One student captured both of these perspectives simultaneously: “I want to better understand how digital platforms shape our worldview and influence culture and behavior . . . Continued media literacy learning empowers me to think critically, use media responsibly, and help others do the same.”

## **Discussion**

This case study illuminated how students enter the college classroom with varied, active, and complex relationships with media. Formal media education before college was minimal in this study; however, lifelong media experience had taught students both the value of media experiences and the need to be skeptical about how media operate on them and others. Students held in tension their attraction to social media’s pleasures and their skepticism toward its integrity and influence. They tended to view media literacy as the defensive skills they needed to avoid manipulation or hidden influence. The tension positioned students well for the kind of critical inquiry that a course about media literacy invites.

Guided by principles of UDL (Rose & Meyer, 2002), the course examined in this case study was designed to lower barriers to participation, and to make learning more accessible by using different formats for engagement. Students appreciated what this meant in practice: a respect for their incoming knowledge, agency, and choice within the class, and integration of timely and relevant topics. Eliciting students’ informal practices helped students recognize the expertise they held already. It also created a bridge between students’ everyday activities and disciplinary terminology. Indeed, students entered this course fluent in practice, but not in vocabulary. Several students described their satisfaction with being able to put a name to their own practices, as well as those they witnessed or worried about.

Active engagement among peers was a valued component of this media literacy course. Students consistently described connection with their peers and the instructor as central to their learning. They valued opportunities to share media examples and evaluate concepts in small groups where conversations felt informal and grounded in common experiences. Because this mode was established early in the course and used consistently, students explained that it was a space where they could speak their minds and receive social validation and recognition. The emphasis on peer exchange aligns with a “guide on the side” model, in which the instructor facilitates rather than directs. It also reflects the broader ecology of media literacy, where knowledge circulates laterally rather than hierarchically (Morey & Kitano, 1997). For many students, discussions fostered learning by prompting individuals to connect their ideas with others’ and to reflect on the reasons behind their own perspectives.

### *The Challenges of a UDL Approach*

The use of UDL principles in this course helped meet students where they were and invited genuine engagement with media literacy concepts. In practice, this approach revealed the pedagogical power of accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness. Designing for connection and engagement came with trade-offs, however. Some students expressed a desire for more information and lecture-style formats and fewer fast-paced, exploratory conversations. Analysis of student reflections also showed that they focused mainly on foundational media literacy skills (e.g., access, analysis, and evaluation), while fewer mentioned more applied or advanced forms of participatory media literacy such as creation or activism. As faculty, we observed that emphasizing engagement and moving quickly across topics sometimes meant that breadth outweighed depth, and that conceptual precision and extension beyond the practical were occasionally sacrificed. Fostering student voice and interaction inevitably limits time for content coverage, while prioritizing content risks narrowing participation.

Even when a UDL approach is desirable for media literacy instructors, it is not always an option. Instructors must sometimes navigate departmental mandates, large class sizes, limited modalities, and institutional cultures that discourage pedagogical risk-taking. External pressures compound these challenges, as media literacy is frequently politicized and, in some regions, legislated. Pedagogies that rely on instructor autonomy demand time, training, and tolerance for professional risk, particularly when teaching evaluations affect advancement.

For many students, an introductory course may be their only exposure to media literacy, intensifying instructors’ sense of pressure to “cover everything.” Their expectations matter; some students want and expect straightforward “content delivery” rather than open-ended exploration.

This case study relied primarily on student self-reports, an approach well suited to centering student voices in a field where growth in media literacy is not easily captured through standardized measures. We strengthened the analysis by triangulating

these accounts with observations from experienced media literacy instructors. Future research could build on this model by incorporating more systematic instructor observation and peer reflection as complementary tools for assessing both media literacy development and the implementation of UDL.

## **Conclusion**

From our perspective as both researchers and teachers, this case study proved deeply instructive. Our analysis suggests that UDL does not ensure more advanced outcomes for media literacy learning. However, it makes visible what students find meaningful and what instructors must negotiate in balancing accessibility, engagement, and rigor. Collaborating on this analysis clarified not only what we want students to learn, but also what we value as educators. Like many media educators, we share commitments to inclusion, accessibility, and student agency, yet we differ in how we balance content coverage with engagement. Instructors are eager to adopt best practices, but our efforts are shaped, and often constrained, by our departments, institutions, training, and student populations. Through this joint investigation, we recognized the distinctive value that a UDL-informed pedagogy can offer college students who arrive with rich experience and genuine curiosity. At the same time, our observations and reflections made clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching media literacy: Pedagogical choices must reflect the unique contexts, capacities, and priorities of individual instructors. Ultimately, this study highlights both the promise of UDL and the need for continued exploration of how diverse media literacy pedagogies can be adapted and transferred across higher education settings.

This case study also underscores that teaching media literacy in the higher education classroom is likely less about imparting knowledge than about activating it (Ashley, 2015; Buckingham, 1990, 2003; Friesem, 2019; Hobbs, 2017). Students come to class with media experiences, intuitions, and partial literacies that form the foundation for deeper inquiry. Media literacy courses offer distinctive opportunities for transformative learning by inviting students to connect their digital lives with course content. This approach can foster autonomy and active participation beyond traditional lecture models. In this article, we present a case study showing how reflective practice aligned an instructor's teaching philosophy with UDL principles to support that transformation.

The challenge for instructors is to recognize these starting points and create conditions that help students refine and apply their skills in meaningful ways. Effective media literacy teaching builds on students' existing competencies, deepening them into more reflective, empowered, and socially responsive forms of engagement. Future scholarship should explore how such growth unfolds over time, capturing not only what students learn, but how their engagement with media becomes increasingly conscious, intentional, and civically grounded.

Appendix A

Survey Questions Regarding Initial Media Usage and Self-Assessment

This appendix contains the results of relevant questions from a survey of students conducted on the first day of class. They help inform our first research question, “At the start of the course, what perspectives about media and assessments of their own media literacy did students bring with them?” All questions were adapted from the *Inside Higher Education Youth Voices Flash Survey* (Flaherty, 2025).

Table A1. Top Sources for News.

| News source<br>(ordered<br>by most to<br>least) | Social media<br>(Instagram,<br>TikTok,<br>etc.) | Friends and/<br>or family<br>(word of<br>mouth) | Broadcast<br>network TV<br>news (e.g., ABC,<br>NBC, and CBS) | Cable TV/<br>News (e.g.,<br>CNN Fox<br>News MSNBC) | News Apps/news<br>aggregator websites | Opinion<br>podcasts |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Count (N<br>= 36)                               | 35.00                                           | 25.00                                           | 10.00                                                        | 9.00                                               | 9.00                                  | 8.00                |
| Percentage                                      | 97.22                                           | 69.44                                           | 27.78                                                        | 25.00                                              | 25.00                                 | 22.22               |

| News source<br>(ordered by<br>most to least<br>continued. . .) | News<br>podcasts | Newsletters<br>(Substack,<br>etc.) | Newspapers<br>(including<br>newspaper<br>websites) | Radio (online<br>streaming or<br>device) | TV talk<br>shows<br>(cable or<br>broadcast) | Other | None. I don't<br>consume news<br>or regularly<br>pay attention<br>to the news. |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Count (N<br>= 36)                                              | 6.00             | 5.00                               | 5.00                                               | 4.00                                     | 3.00                                        | 3.00  | 2.00                                                                           |
| Percentage                                                     | 16.67            | 13.89                              | 13.89                                              | 11.11                                    | 8.33                                        | 8.33  | 5.56                                                                           |

Note: Survey item: “What are your top sources for news? (Select up to 3).” N = 36.

Table A2. News Media Trust.

| Source               | Mean | Not at all | Not really | Somewhat | Very much |
|----------------------|------|------------|------------|----------|-----------|
| Social media         | 1.64 | 8.3%       | 30.6%      | 50.0%    | 11.1%     |
| Newspaper            | 2.25 | 2.8%       | 38.9%      | 44.4%    | 13.9%     |
| Friends and family   | 1.69 | 5.7%       | 25.7%      | 48.6%    | 20.0%     |
| Cable TV News        | 1.74 | 11.8%      | 20.6%      | 50.0%    | 17.6%     |
| Apps and aggregators | 1.83 | 11.4%      | 17.1%      | 34.3%    | 37.1%     |
| Broadcast TV News    | 1.97 | 0%         | 11.1%      | 52.8%    | 36.1%     |
| Radio                | 1.66 | 11.4%      | 20.0%      | 60.0%    | 8.6%      |
| News podcasts        | 1.80 | 8.6%       | 20.0%      | 54.3%    | 17.1%     |
| Opinion podcasts     | 1.00 | 14.3%      | 17.1%      | 62.9%    | 5.7%      |
| Newsletters          | 1.60 | 34.3%      | 31.4%      | 34.3%    | 0%        |
| TV talk shows        | 1.26 | 20.0%      | 37.1%      | 40.0%    | 2.9%      |
| Magazines            | 1.26 | 25.7%      | 28.6%      | 40.0%    | 5.7%      |

Note: Survey item: “To what extent do you trust the following kinds of media, in general, to deliver news and/or other critical information accurately?” Response choices included: Not at all (0); not really (1); somewhat (2); very much (3). Items ranged from N = 34 to N = 39.

**Table A3.** Current Self-Assessment of Media Literacy.

|                                     | Mean | Very low | Somewhat low | Moderate | Somewhat high | Very high |
|-------------------------------------|------|----------|--------------|----------|---------------|-----------|
| My current level of media literacy. | 2.61 | 0%       | 5.5%         | 36.1%    | 44.4%         | 11.1%     |

*Note:* Survey item: “Media literacy is defined as the ability or skills to critically analyze for accuracy, credibility, or evidence of bias the content created and consumed in various media, including radio and television, the Internet, and social media. With that definition in mind, rate each of the following.” Response options ranged from very low (0) to very high (4). *N* = 36.

**Table A4.** High School Media Literacy Assessment.

|                | Mean | Poor  | So-so | Good  | Excellent |
|----------------|------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|
| My high school | 1.05 | 33.3% | 33.3% | 27.8% | 5.6%      |

*Note:* Survey question: “Rate the job the following are doing in training/helping students to build their media literacy.” Response options included: poor (0) to excellent (3). *N* = 36.

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Guide

Interview Guide (Week 6):

1. What has it been like to study media literacy in this class this semester?
  - What have you found most interesting or intriguing?
  - What have you found least interesting or least meaningful?
  - What have been some of the most memorable discussions you’ve had?
  - Have you found the class to be valuable? If so, how?
2. What do you think is most important for students to learn, know, or understand about the media? Why?
  - What do you wish *you* were learning more about? Why?
  - Are there topics that should receive more or less attention in a class on media literacy? Which and why?
3. How do you think you and other college students learn best, when it comes to studying media? In other words, *how* would you like to learn more about media?
4. Do you think a class on media literacy should be required for all college students? Why or why not?

### Interview Guide (Week 13)

1. How would you teach this media literacy topic to someone else outside of this class?
2. What was the most valuable media literacy takeaway from this class?

## **Appendix C**

### *Reflection Prompts on Media Literacy and Media Education*

First reflection prompts, completed as an in-class writing activity on the first day of semester:

A. Answer the following questions about your goals for this class:

- How would you define media literacy?
- Why does media literacy matter?

Final reflection prompts, completed as an in-class writing activity on the last day of semester:

A. Take a moment to reflect on your own development in media literacy over the semester.

- In what ways do you feel your own personal media literacy has grown, if at all?
- In the grand scheme of life, how important do you think it is to offer media education? Is media literacy a critical skill? Why?

B. What is your motivation to learn more about media after this class, or to become more media literate? Explain.

## **Appendix D**

### *Open-Ended Questions About Media Literacy Development*

The following questions were among those collected from Yonty Friesem's institution in the form of anonymous end-of-semester course evaluations. The instructor was able to add a few course-specific items, included below. Students filled out the evaluation online at a link provided by the institution. Results were not available to the instructor until after grades were submitted.

Relevant Questions:

- As a result of this class, how will you behave differently in the future, if at all, when it comes to your personal media use?

- How have your beliefs about the value of being media literate shifted, if at all, after taking this class?

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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