A History of Media Literacy

Television became a part of education in the U.S. during the decade following the Second World War, but critical viewing was the last thing from the minds of its early proponents. As the first wave of the baby boom hit the classroom in the 1950s, video was recognized as a means of increasing teacher productivity. By simply eliminating the need for duplicate presentations, video was credited with reductions in labor of up to 70 percent.[xiv] It was also recognized as a powerful tool for observation and evaluation.[xv] Concurrent advances in computer and telecommunications industries prompted more elaborate speculation. While in residence at New York's Fordham University during the late 1960s, Marshall McLuhan attracted a quasi-religious following based on his vision of a global telecommunications network designed on biological (and therefore "natural") principles that would undermine all hierarchical structures. At the core of McLuhan's program lay a concept of media as "information without content" that defined international turmoil as the result of failed communication rather than ideological confrontation.[xvi]

This idealistic vision of new technology fit perfectly into 1960s educational reformism, while also complimenting U.S. cultural policy. In a domestic atmosphere of desegregation, urban renewal, and other liberal initiatives, efforts were made to eliminate the biases inherent in traditional schooling. As a means of de-emphasizing differences of race, gender, and class, theories of educational formalism were introduced into much instruction to stress the structure of learning over culturally specific content. Educators uncritically seized upon photographic media as tools for directly engaging student experience. They developed concepts of "visual literacy" to compete with what some viewed as oppressive print-oriented paradigms.[xvii] As one educational textbook of the era explained, many students "demonstrate a lack of proficiency and lack of interest in reading and writing. Can we really expect proficiency when interest is absent? To what purpose do we force students through traditional subjects in traditional curricula?"[xviii] Within this movement, many teachers adapted photography and video equipment to teach subjects ranging from social studies to English composition.

With the economic downturns of the 1980s and the ascendancy of the Reagan/Bush government came sweeping indictments of liberal programs. Supply-side analysts blamed schools for the nation's inability to compete in world markets, while ironically arguing for reductions in federal education and cultural budgets. Because they often required expensive equipment, media programs were terminated in the name of cost reduction, as renewed emphasis was placed on a "back to basics" curriculum. This did not mean that television disappeared from the classroom, only that it's more complicated, hands-on, applications were replaced by simple viewing.

The type of media that survived the reform movements of the early 1980s differed greatly from its utopian predecessors. Stripped of any remnant of formalist ideology, video was reduced to its utilitarian function as a labor-saving device. This redefinition of “television as teacher” paralleled distinct shifts in the production and distribution. These were outgrowths of large scale changes in the film and television industry brought about by the emergence of affordable consumer video cassette equipment. For the viewer, home recording and tape rental

allowed hitherto unknown control over what was watched. The same was true in the classroom. For the instructional media industry, the hitherto costly process of copying 16mm films was quickly supplanted by inexpensive high speed video duplication. The entire concept of educational media products began to change, as films could be mass produced on a national scale (in effect "published") like books. Market expansion in this type of video was exponential. So profound was the technological change that 16mm film processing labs from coast to coast went out of business over night.

Although the shape of education was changed forever, computers didn't become a serious part of K-12 schooling until the 1990s, with the broad-based distribution of personal computers in the home, the development of network technology, and the popular advocacy of computers in education by such public figures as Al Gore and Bill Gates. Like cable television, the internet was touted as a means of bringing the outside world into the classroom, while connecting students to resources hitherto unimagined. In its early stages of implementation, school computerization was also regarded as a means of leveling the cultural differences among students—much as "visual literacy" had been promoted. These attitudes fit well within the progressive belief that digital media could deliver a world of great equity and freedom. From this perspective, public education should be seen as an extremely important means of redressing technological inequities, and their inherent relationships with race, gender, geography and social class. Not only can schools serves as places to provide access and instruction to digital media, but they can structure that experience of these media through progressive pedagogies that critically engage technologies and that foster equity and student agency. Is the current craze for computers-in-the classroom simply an extension of this historical faith in educational mechanization, or it some thing more?

The business interests who have the most to gain in this matter assert that fundamental structural changes and paradigm shifts are occurring that necessitate new technological approaches to schooling. This could be dismissed as simple self-interestedness were it not that high tech corporations increasingly have a role in educational policy discussions. Meanwhile, parents exposed to an endless barrage of effusive media reports and advertising about the "information society" and the need for "digital literacy" are petrified at the idea of their kids missing out. So it's a double whammy. As parents pressure schools to adopt technology, schools are becoming institutional customers for educational products and venues for promotions targeted at students. It's like an entrepreneurial dream come true. Fortunately, there are limits to ways that K-12 schools can tolerate change. Given their role as day-care for underage youth, the fundamental structure of schools and the school day will not change significantly. Since elementary and secondary schools are also primarily regarded as a site for general academic or vocational education, the fundamental balance in curriculum among humanities, science, and math offerings will similarly resist significant change. This stability is further buttressed by the decentralized governance of schools at the level of the local school district and the high degree of political scrutiny that communities afford to educational issues.This raises the crucial issue of computer competency or what has been termed "digital literacy."

Contrary to the popular notion of young people as "naturally" computer-savvy, a need exists to instill critical sensibilities toward digital media much like those offered by television and film oriented media literacy programs. Partly informed by critical pedagogy and cultural studies, the digital literacy movement (as opposed to its older "market research" counterpart) is an

amalgam of reader response theories and institutional analyses. While acknowledging the persuasive properties of images, practitioners of digital literacy emphasize ways that viewers use media in individualized ways. Moreover, because Web surfers and computer game players can recognize the artifice of representation they need not always be fooled by it. The concept of literacy is central in this pedagogy, as explained by Cary Bazalgette, “every medium can be thought of as a language. Every medium has its own way of organizing meaning, and we all learn to ‘read’ it, bringing our own understandings to it, and extending our own experience through it.”[xix]

The digital literacy movement holds political significance. Not only can it help viewers to “decode” complex sign systems, but it also can connect theory and practice—often by attempting to literally explain (or demonstrate) complex theories to young people. By doing this it diplomatically reconciles opposing concepts of the viewing subject. The digital literacy movement argues that our abilities to mediate dominant readings and spectator positioning can be improved with study and that these skills can be taught to children regardless of age or grade level. One can teach young people to use digital tools for their own ends by actively interpreting how they function and then choosing how to utilize them. Put another way, the movement proposes to begin identifying strategies for contextual reading, thereby suggesting changes to the "institutional structures" that condition spoken and interpretive norms.[xx] This is done by encouraging viewers to look beyond specific texts by asking critical questions like "Who is communicating and why?," "How is it produced?," "Who receives it and what sense do they make of it?"

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[i] Bureau of Labor Statistics, “American Time Use Summary,” *News*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2005).

[ii] Elizabeth Thomas and Tessa Jolls, *Media Literacy: A National Priority for a Changing World*. Internet reference.

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p. 10.

[v] “Trivium,” in *Wikipedia*, Jan. 22, 2022.

[vi] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984). p. 44.

[vii] *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 67.

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 25.

[x] *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pp. 24-25.

[xi] *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 72.

[xii] *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* pp. 72-73.

[xiii] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1977) p. 20.

[xiv] Robert M. Diamond, "Single Room Television," in *A Guide to Instructional Media*, ed. Robert M. Diamond (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 3.

[xv] John M. Hofstrand, "Television and Classroom Observation," in *A Guide to Instructional Media*, p. 149.

[xvi] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 23.

[xvii] The terms "visual literacy" and "media literacy" have been employed in a variety of differing contexts during the past two decades. The formalist media literacy of the 1970s should not be confused with the critical media literacy movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

[xviii] Linda R. Burnett and Frederick Goldman, *Need Johnny Read? Practical Methods to Enrich Humanities Courses Using Films and Film Studies* (Dayton: Pflaum, 1971), p. xv.

[xix] Cary Bazalgette, as quoted in Ben Moore, "Media Education," in David Lusted, ed., *The Media Studies Book* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 172.

[xx] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980).