

NCSS Position Statement on Media Literacy

Media Literacy

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"In the twenty-first century, participatory media education and civic education are inextricable" (Rheingold, 2008, p. 103)

This position statement focuses on the critical role of media literacy in the social studies curriculum. The statement addresses the following questions. First, why and how has media literacy taken on a significantly more important role in preparing citizens for democratic life? Second, how is media literacy defined, and what are some of its essential concepts? Finally, what is required to teach media literacy and what are some examples of classroom activities?

Rationale

The 21st century world is media saturated, technologically dependent, and globally connected. We live in a multimedia age where the majority of information people receive comes less often from print sources and more typically from highly constructed visual images, complex sound arrangements, and multiple media formats. The multimedia age requires new skills for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and distributing messages within a digital, global, and democratic society. The acquisition and application of critical analysis and media production skills are part of what constitutes media literacy. The Internet and the everyday use of social networking technologies, together with the expansive growth of corporate entertainment media and the integration of popular culture, also require us as social studies educators to link participatory media literacy with civic education.

The ubiquitous and mobile nature of information and communication technologies has resulted in a world far different from that of those of us whose childhood was once surrounded by large box televisions, rotary dial telephones, and transistor radios. What was once characterized as a digital divide has transformed into a digital disconnect. Outside of the classroom young people regularly engage with music and videos via MP3 players, constantly text their friends with their cell phones, check the latest videos on YouTube, and even upload ones themselves. But, upon entering the classroom they are expected to disengage from this interpersonal, producer-oriented, digital world. If we hope to make learning relevant and meaningful for students in the 21st century, social studies classrooms need to reflect this digital world so as to better enable young people to interact with ideas, information, and other people for academic and civic purposes. Jenkins (2006, p. 259) suggested that media educators help young people "to think of themselves as cultural producers and participants and not simply as consumers, critical or otherwise." Likewise, social studies educators should provide young people with the awareness and abilities to critically question and create new media and technology, and the digital, democratic experiences, necessary to become active participants in the shaping of democracy.

Most children born in the United States in this millennium have never known a time without the Internet, cellular phones, or television.¹ Practically every US household has at least one television set² and about one third of young children live in homes where the TV is on "always" or "most of the time" (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003, p. 4). Before most children are six years of age, they spend about two hours per day with screen media,³ something that doubles by age eight, and before they are 18 they spend approximately 6 hours daily with all types of media (Rideout, Roberts & Foehr, 2005).⁴ It is also estimated that nearly all young children in the US, "have products—clothes, toys, and the like—based on characters from TV shows or movies" (Rideout et al., 2003, p. 4). In the conclusion to the Kaiser Family Foundation's national study of media usage of 8-18 year-olds, the authors assert, "Without question, this generation truly is the media generation, devoting more than a quarter of each day to media" (Rideout, Roberts & Foehr, 2005, p. 39).

These changes in society and the experiences the students bring into the classroom challenge social studies teachers to change both how and what we teach. One reaction is to fear these changes and try to protect our students from things we don't understand or appreciate. Such an approach is neither helpful nor pedagogically sound. Another response is to take advantage instructionally of the wealth of experiences that young people have making media choices by respecting those choices when consistent with democratic principles.

Whether we like it or not, this media culture is our students' culture. Our job is to prepare them to be able to critically participate as active citizens with the abilities to intelligently and compassionately shape democracy in this new millennium. Media literacy offers us the framework to build upon their entertainment and social experiences with media so as to provide our students with meaningful academic, civic, and public experiences that are critical and empowering.

The influential role media play in organizing, shaping, and disseminating information, ideas, and values is creating a powerful public pedagogy (Giroux, 1999; Luke, 1997) that is influencing young people's thinking about citizenship and social responsibility. Today's predominant storytellers are enormous transnational corporations that are appropriating public and private spaces. Less than ten corporations own the majority of the world's media, creating a small group of wealthy individuals with tremendous power to decide who and what will be represented and what lessons will be taught (McChesney, 2003). When a small group of people has the power to create and disseminate enormous amounts of information, the diversity of ideas shrinks as the potential for abuse increases. Since young people overly rely upon commercial venues for information, the 21st century social studies teacher should guide students to explore different sources of information such as independent blogs, open source sites, wikis, podcasts, and numerous new resources that offer alternatives to corporate media. Teaching students to think critically about the content and the form of mediated messages is an essential requirement for social studies education in this millennium. Sometimes, as Marshall McLuhan (1997) stated, "the medium is the message."

Media literacy, also referred to as media education or media studies, has become institutionalized in many countries around the world. Canada, Australia, and Great Britain have taught media literacy for several decades, while the US, the world's leading producer of media, is far behind. In the name of participatory democracy, this neglect can no longer continue. Changes in technology, media, and society require the development of new pedagogy to empower students to adequately read media messages and produce media themselves in order to be active participants in the contemporary democratic society (Kellner & Share, 2007). Social studies teachers should be asking themselves: What do young people need to learn to best enable them to participate in this democratic culture, while navigating their way through the emerging media environment?

Purpose/Definition

Media literacy is a pedagogical approach promoting the use of diverse types of media and information communication technology (from crayons to webcams) to question the roles of media and society and the multiple meanings of all types of messages. Analysis of media content is combined with inquiry into the medium. This approach is analytical and skill-based. Thus media literacy integrates the process of critical inquiry with the creation of media as students examine, create, and disseminate their own alternative images, sounds, and thoughts.

Media literacy includes the skills of accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and distributing messages as well as the cultural competencies and social skills associated with a growing participatory culture. This participatory culture is characterized not simply by "individual expression" but also by "community involvement," requiring "social skills developed through collaboration and networking." (Jenkins et al, 2007, p. 4). Media literacy also includes analysis of ideology and power as students learn how media are used to position audiences and frame public opinion.

Implementation of Media Literacy within a Social Studies Context

Finally, what is required to teach media literacy and what are some examples of classroom activities?

Teaching media literacy requires movement in two directions: a horizontal expansion and a vertical deepening. The horizontal motion entails broadening the definition of what is considered acceptable text to include multiple ways people read, write, view, and create information and messages. This more inclusive notion of "legitimate texts" includes popular culture, advertising, photographs, maps, text (SMS) messages, movies, video games, Internet, all sorts of hand-held devices and information communication technologies (ICTs) as well as print. Along with analysis, media literacy involves production as students learn to create messages with different media and technology. Students should be presenting their research and learning through interactive multimedia presentations, as Internet blogs, videos, podcasts, etc.

Teaching media literacy also requires a vertical movement to help students deepen their questioning of the relationships between information, knowledge, and power. Meanings are not only created inside someone's head; they are always dependent on historical, social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which the text is both created and received. In addition, people negotiate meanings similarly or differently depending on the experiences, values, feelings, and many other influences shaping their group and individual identities.

Media literacy skills are embedded throughout the NCSS curriculum standards such as identifying symbols, examining the environment, analyzing primary resources, considering economic concepts in a market economy, and exploring government and the role of media. The ability to differentiate between primary and secondary sources or distinguish fact from fiction is now intimately connected to the ability to analyze and create media.

Media education built on critical inquiry encourages students to ask probing questions such as:

1. What social, cultural, historical, and political contexts are shaping the message and the meaning I am making of it?
2. How and why was the message constructed?
3. How could different people understand this information differently?
4. Whose perspective, values and ideology are represented and whose are missing?
5. Who or what group benefits and/or is hurt by this message?

The following are examples of media literacy activities in social studies classrooms:

- Students compare and contrast the benefits and limitations of different types of maps before creating their own maps highlighting different geographic regions.
- Students analyze newspaper articles about historic events that affected their community and collaboratively create a wiki to share their findings.
- Students produce a video about their community with original interviews and share their video online as an active form of public civic participation.
- Students study the electoral process through analyzing mainstream media coverage of presidential campaigns and then create their own public awareness campaign about civic participation for youth.

In the 21st century, media literacy is an imperative for participatory democracy because new information/communication technologies and a market-based media culture have significantly reshaped the world. The better we can prepare our students to critically question the information and media they are seeing, hearing, and using, the more likely they are to make informed decisions and to participate as citizens who can shape democracy for the public good.

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1. While all people born in this millennium have been alive since the invention of the Internet, cellular phones and television, this does not mean that everyone can access this technology. Since approximately one third (about two billion) of the world's population still live without electricity, it is important to remember that billions of people are being left behind the so-called technological revolution. ♦
 2. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 98.3% of all US households had at least one television set in 1998. Statistics are available online at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/statab/sec18.pdf> ♦
 3. This data is based on random telephone interviews in 2003 with 1,065 parents of children between six months and six years of age. "Screen media" refers to watching TV, watching videos/DVDs, using a computer and playing video games. This research was reported in the Kaiser Family Foundation Zero to Six study (Rideout, Vandewater and Wartella, 2003). ♦
 4. The number of hours spent with media is based on questionnaires from a 2004 national sample of 2,032 students between 8 and 18 years of age, as well as 694 media-use diaries, as reported in the Kaiser Family Foundation Generation M study (Rideout, Roberts and Foehr, 2005). ♦