Introduction

It is an exciting time to be a teacher. For only the second time in human history, the very nature of what it means to be literate is shifting, and that shift is being played out in schools and libraries across the world.

The first shift, ignited by the invention of the printing press, was about *who* should be literate. The new capacity for mass production challenged the idea of literacy as the province of a select elite and revealed the power that the ability to read and write gave to those who possessed it. That revelation was so compelling that Church officials persecuted printers, fearing that their authority would be undermined if everyone could read (and interpret) the Bible for themselves, and in early America it was against the law to teach slaves to read. Eventually, such resistance gave way to the requirements of democracy, which made clear that if the power to govern was to transfer from monarchs to an educated electorate, then virtually everyone needed to be literate.

Today we are witnessing a second historical shift. Instead of raising questions about *who* should be literate, it requires us to ask, "*What does it mean* to be literate?" Like the first shift, the second has been prompted by changes in technology. Widespread availability of digital and interactive communication technologies provides access to nearly unlimited information and global audiences. This has irrevocably altered the very nature of education and the basic skills needed to function as an informed citizen, productive worker, effective parent, and lifelong learner. This book is about what it means to be literate in today's complicated media environment and how teachers can use media literacy education to engage students and prepare them to thrive in the ever-shifting terrain of the digital world.

In architecture, triangles make very strong structures. So it is with our approach to media literacy education, which rests on a three-sided foundation: it is literacy based, inquiry based, and curriculum driven. We advocate for this approach to media literacy education because we believe that it has unparalleled potential to meet the most pressing needs in our schools while also preparing students for their most essential roles in a democratic society.

EXPANDING TRADITIONAL LITERACY

Today, even "traditional" print sources, such as textbooks and newspapers, routinely mesh text, images, and sometimes sound. In this environment, literacy skills that are limited to decoding, analyzing, and writing in print aren't enough to earn a student the full benefits of being literate.

Neither is doing the same old things with high-tech innovations. Like influential educational philosopher Paulo Freire, we think of literacy as the broad set of skills and habits that enable one to engage thoughtfully with the community and the world (see, for example, Freire, 1973; Freire & Macedo, 1987). So media literacy isn't about automatically championing new technologies; rather, it is a way to help students who live in a technology-dependent world regain the power that traditional literacy once enabled.

The realities of participatory digital culture mean that every student needs to develop higher-order thinking skills. It isn't just a workforce preparation issue. Without the ability to think critically, evaluate and synthesize the information they access, solve problems both independently and collaboratively, and communicate their understanding effectively to others, students will quickly be overwhelmed. And without reflection, students have the power of new media technologies in their hands without the ethical grounding to use them well and wisely.

For us, this new reality is why the questions "What does it mean to be literate?" and "How can those literacy skills be developed?" form the core of media literacy pedagogy. The resulting approach is deeply grounded in critical thinking and established literacy practice; it expands conventional routines to accommodate a wider range of content and formats, but does not seek to replace traditional literacy or pit print against screens in a misguided and futile competition.

A literacy framework allows us to step outside a "media as the problem" paradigm without sacrificing the skeptical eye that we want students to bring to the media they encounter. It enables us to value students' existing knowledge, skills, and talents while challenging them to take responsibility for their own learning and develop evermore sophisticated "filters."

BEYOND ADVERTISING AND PROTECTION

Those who think of media literacy education as primarily about teaching students to analyze advertising or to protect themselves from the (presumed) harmful effects of playing video games, going online, or watching TV and movies will find something different here. To borrow from an iconic marketing phrase—this is not your father's media literacy.[1]

Some concerns about harmful media influences certainly have merit, but they are not a viable foundation for literacy-based media literacy education in schools. It does not make pedagogical sense to approach education from the perspective of protecting children from harmful content; educators don't teach children to read in order to protect them from bad books, and though we recall days of junior library cards and locked stacks that kept adult materials away

from children, we have never encountered a teacher who taught lessons about "book safety." Those types of protectionist strategies cannot work to make students skilled readers of books, and they will not produce skilled readers of other media.

In fact, approaching media literacy education with the primary goal of inoculating children against harmful media content is incompatible with the constructivist pedagogies that are at the core of this book. As author James Baldwin put it, "The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions . . ." (1998, p. 678). Educators cannot tell students what to think about media and teach them to think for themselves at the same time. Moreover, doing so risks alienating students, turning them into cynics every time broad indictments of media contradict their own experience.

More recently, master teacher and author of *Never Work Harder Than Your Students & Other Principles of Great Teaching,* Robyn Jackson, noted,

> Constructivist theory argues that meaningful learning happens when students try to make sense out of the world by filtering new information through their own existing knowledge, concepts, rules, hypotheses, and associations from personal experiences. Our job is to help our students find their own voices and develop their own understanding of the subject matter. (2009, p. 174)

As constructivist educators, we heartily agree. Children are more engaged and more likely to remember what they have learned when they grapple with material and figure out things *for themselves* than when they are simply told what media mean or what the effects of particular media are.

Media literacy education embraces constructivist pedagogy because it provides the necessary foundation for authentic inquiry in a way that drill and practice, strictly scripted curricula, or didactic instruction cannot. The resulting teaching methods have a substantial track record of engaging all kinds of students, placing the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge—as well as higher-order thinking skills—firmly within their grasp.

A CURRICULUM-DRIVEN APPROACH

Ours is a broad vision, and we are fully aware of the practical concerns about how to implement media literacy education in classrooms already pressed for time and resources. That is why we take a curriculum-driven approach in which media literacy is integrated into existing core content.

Pioneered by Project Look Sharp, this approach asks teachers to identify places in their own curriculum where media literacy methods could improve instruction, student engagement, and/or student performance and then develop customized lessons that address those needs. Because these activities combine media literacy skills with core content, effective use of instructional time is maximized, and in many cases lessons take up no more class time than before media literacy was introduced.

The integration of media literacy into existing curricula does not negate the need for specialized media literacy electives. There will always be a place for classes or activities offering advanced or specialized training in media analysis and media production to interested students. But media literacy education cannot succeed if it is exclusively relegated to elective courses any more than traditional literacy would be effective if it was taught only as a curriculum enhancement.

MEDIA LITERACY AND EDUCATION STANDARDS

Curriculum-driven media literacy education is an especially promising strategy for schools seeking to address the requirements of state and national standards. In fact, a cursory look at some of the current standards makes it difficult to see how they could be achieved *without* integrating media literacy into standard coursework or without teachers who are trained in media literacy pedagogies.

Consider, for example, this "Anchor Standard" from the Common Core English Language Arts Standards (2010; http://corestandards.org): "Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formations, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words" (Reading, K–5). This standard would be impossible to meet without expanding traditional literacy in exactly the ways that media literacy education suggests.

The National Council for the Social Studies recognized media literacy as being so core to its curriculum standards that in 2009 it adopted a detailed position statement acknowledging that

> 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. ("Rationale")

Like the 2007 ISTE *National Educational Technology Standards for Students (NETS)*, which recognizes that new media technologies bring more than a need to know how to click on the correct button or insert the proper command code, many standards recognize that basic literacy requires "critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making."[2] Even the Common Core State Standards Initiative's *Standards for Mathematical Practice* (2010b) feature problem solving and using evidence to "construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others" (Introduction, #3). And the "Overview" from the *National Science Standards* (CSMEE, 1996) couldn't be more clear when it says, "Inquiry is central to science learning" and goes on to explain that students should be able to ask questions, make careful observations, communicate ideas to others, "identify their assumptions, use critical and logical thinking, and consider alternative explanations" (p. 2).

It is no coincidence that as you read this book, you will see these same goals embedded in descriptions of media literacy. Although the specific phrase *media*

literacy is infrequently used in state and national standards documents, the *skills* described in those documents—the interpretation and evaluation of a variety of documents through careful observation and close readings; the use of reason, logical inference, and evidence to assess the validity of arguments; the ability to collaborate effectively with diverse partners and clearly communicate one's ideas; and the ability to apply all of those to many types of media—are the bread and butter of media literacy education. For more on the links between media literacy and educational standards, see the companion website.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

The grounding of media literacy in inquiry, literacy, and education is embodied in the *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States*, a foundational document developed by the National Association for Media Literacy Education[3] (NAMLE) in 2007 (see Appendix A). Reflecting the wealth of experience, knowledge, and wide range of disciplines of its many co-authors, the *Core Principles* reflect contributions from education, psychology, communications, media arts, feminist film theory, cultural studies, multicultural education, public health, commercial and independent media production, preK–16 teaching, and education settings outside of schools. The resulting synthesis, like media literacy education itself, is inherently interdisciplinary.

We draw on this rich intellectual heritage to consciously use media literacy education in the service of creating a culture of inquiry. We explore what educators can do to nurture lifelong learners who are curious, skeptical, respectful, and open-minded and who have the ability to share ideas in the context of the mediated environment in which they live. And because these attributes defy the constraints of "silos" so often constructed around subject areas or academic disciplines, they provide an opportunity for schools to use media literacy to strengthen their overall curriculum by fostering cooperation among all teachers, with media literacy providing the common thread linking one class or topic to another.

MEETING CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS OF EDUCATORS

Some veteran educators may decide to ignore media literacy, assuming that it is just another passing fad and that if they wait it out, it will eventually go away. But while the types of media that we expect students to analyze and create are certainly likely to change over the coming years, as long as media continue to play a significant role in society, there will be a significant, universal need for media literacy education.

The educational needs that media literacy can address are substantial. An inquiry-based approach to media literacy education is an excellent way for schools to

- integrate 21st-century skills,[4] including the abilities to think independently, work collaboratively, problem-solve, and reflect on one's own work.

- teach the higher-order critical thinking skills needed in today's work-places and communities—and do so even in the context of mandatory rote testing.
- address the explosion of media technologies in an educational context that respects media use as part of students' culture outside school and bridges schoolwork with students' real-world experiences.
- address the convergence of media technologies by focusing on long-term skills and knowledge that apply across technologies and types of media messages.
- expand literacy instruction by transforming rather than adding to class time, an essential strategy for a curriculum already overburdened with objectives and material to cover.
- improve educational outcomes by engaging students on their cultural territory and addressing their interests, as well as accommodating a broad range of learning strengths, skill levels, and degrees of fluency with English.
- integrate the teaching of skills and content.

It is, of course, possible to teach critical thinking without using media literacy approaches, and some schools have excelled at that task for many years. However, students—especially young students—do not automatically translate skills from one area to another, so they won't necessarily think critically about *media* unless we specifically teach them how to do so. And by teaching students to analyze *all* types of media, including media that they create, we avoid unintentionally conveying the message that they only need to think critically about some media forms and content some of the time.

Many education texts talk about the need to excite students about learning. We also want to excite teachers about teaching. In recent years, too many calls for educational reform have resorted to teacher bashing, blaming those who provide instruction for the system's failures. We categorically reject that approach. Successful media literacy education requires highly competent and skilled teachers. We offer the strategies described in these pages with great respect for the job that teachers do and hope that our work inspires and supports the efforts of educators in the way that so many classroom teachers have inspired us.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Like traditional print literacy, media literacy is a skill set that applies to every subject area and all forms of mass media. So, in contrast to what one might find in a communications course, this book does not divide chapters by type of media but instead focuses on literacy skills that apply across all media formats. The emphasis on teaching, rather than on media formats and impacts, is reflected in the organization of the book:

- Chapters 1–3 look at what we mean by media literacy education.
- Chapters 4–7 lay out the pedagogy and practice for achieving that vision.

- Chapters 8–9 examine how to determine whether or not media literacy approaches are effective, as well as the challenges and benefits of media literacy education.

Also, to meet the needs of media literacy's multiple audiences, we have integrated a variety of resources that are not typical of all textbooks:

Reflection Boxes

Because everyone interprets media through the lens of their own experience, it is impossible to arrive at a clear analysis of media documents without awareness of what each person brings to the task. In media literacy, the basic epistemological question, "How do I know what I know?" morphs into queries like "What are my (or the media document's) sources of information?""Why do I think those sources are reliable?" and "What do I learn about myself from my response to this message?"

For educators, self-reflection is vitally important not only because it is essential for critical inquiry but also because what you believe influences how and what you teach.[5] So we have incorporated reflection boxes at selected points in the text. These are intended for you, the reader. You might pause as you are reading to think about the questions we have posed, or you might reflect on them later, perhaps talking about them with your classmates or colleagues. It is possible to teach media literacy without taking time for self-reflection, but you will be much more effective if you engage in this important part of being a media literacy educator.

Voices From the Field

Occasionally we want to share stories from classrooms—both our own and others'. We share these stories in Voices From the Field boxes.

Definitions

One consequence of the fact that every person interprets media through the lens of her or his own experience is that sometimes we think we have shared meaning even when we don't. In other words, we assume that everyone understands particular words or symbols or messages the way that we understand them, even though this is not always true. For example, in this book we use the following definitions:

- *Document* describes any media example under examination. In our usage, a YouTube video is a document. So is a song, poster, web page, video game, magazine cover, letter to the editor, podcast, sitcom, phone app, blog entry, etc.
- *Text* refers to words contained in a media document (e.g., a typical web or newspaper page may include text, graphics, and images).
- *Print* refers to a hard copy of words on paper (as in "That book is still in print.").

Throughout the book, we take care to define other terms that may have multiple meanings or may be unfamiliar to most readers. There is also a glossary on the companion website.

Activities and Lesson Plans

There are many activity ideas scattered throughout the book, as well as examples of complete lesson plans in Chapter 7. To help you find those that are most relevant to your work, there is a comprehensive Lesson Idea Grid on the book's website. Some readers will be tempted to go straight to those activity ideas and skip the rest of the book. We urge you to resist that temptation and join us for a more substantial and rewarding intellectual journey.

Our hope is that by the time you finish reading this book, you'll not only know how *we* have taught media literacy, you'll also know how to integrate media literacy into *your own* unique teaching situations. So, when we describe activities, we have taken great care to provide more than step-by-step instructions. We also explain how the things that we suggest help students develop "skills of expression" and/or "habits of inquiry"—the essence of media literacy. We pay special attention to the methods used to conduct the activity, because in many cases, altering what the teacher does—even a little bit—can make the difference between encouraging or inhibiting critical inquiry. You will understand these annotations more readily and have a better idea of how to implement an activity effectively if you read the entire book rather than going directly to the lesson ideas.

In addition, because our approach is curriculum driven and based on integrating media literacy into existing core content, we invite teachers to adapt activities and lesson plans to meet their own needs. To develop effective adaptations, educators need to understand not only how to do the discrete steps of a lesson but also why specific components are included and how they reflect an inquiry-based approach to media literacy.

Companion Website

We have included all of the curriculum materials referenced in this book (lesson plans, video clips, PowerPoint slides, handouts, etc.) on a special password-protected website (http://TGML.info). Throughout the book, when a resource is referenced that is available on the website, you will see a cursor icon. We will also be adding to these materials over time, and we invite feedback and additional suggestions from readers.

References to NAMLE's Core Principles

Sometimes you will notice the letters CP followed by a number (e.g., [CP1.1]). These are references to specific items in the NAMLE *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States* document (in Appendix A). These references provide signposts to help educators link theory and practice. In addition to serving as a tool for those who want a deeper understanding of the Core Principles, they also draw attention to the foundations that underlie our approach to media literacy.

Endnotes

In contrast to a standard citation method, we use endnotes to expand on the main text. Sometimes you will find an extended discussion of an ongoing debate in the field of media literacy, including explanations of our take on issues that have been historically significant. This is intended primarily for people who are veterans in the field. It will help situate our work in the context of existing media literacy initiatives.

We also use endnotes to suggest additional resources and activity ideas. These extensions will help the reader pursue an interest in a particular topic that is germane to media literacy but is beyond the scope of this book's capacity to give it detailed attention. Rather than reinvent the wheel, we point readers to others who have already done high-quality, in-depth work on the topic.

CREATING A CULTURE OF INQUIRY

One of the most exciting things about media literacy education for both students and educators is that it applies not only to our school and work lives but also to our personal lives. When parents talk with us (as educators) about the media literacy lessons their children have been learning in school, they are often amazed at how excited and empowered their children are by the information and ideas they have acquired. Sometimes parents describe things that they themselves have learned about media from their children; others tell us that their families cannot watch television or movies the way they used to because their children are pointing out ways in which the messages have been constructed. This "trickle-up" effect is a powerful way to connect school and home environments, and it reinforces the importance of media literacy for people of all ages.

Finally, as you read this book, we invite you to think about the development of your own "culture of inquiry" and to get in the habit of asking your own questions of all media by starting with the media document you hold in your hands: this book.