Chapter 15
Teaching Digital and Media Literacy as Cross-Cultural Communication

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ABSTRACT
As technology increasingly becomes a part of our day-to-day lives in the United States and throughout the globe, there is a greater push for students to develop the digital and media literacy skills necessary for the twenty-first century. In the United States, students learning these skills often come from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The diversity of the U.S. is one of its greatest strengths, but with this diversity come cultural differences in access to technology and how it is used across different cultural contexts. This chapter analyzes the constructs of digital and media literacy, the ways in which culture can be defined and how that can affect the intersectional identities performed in the social and participatory world of Web 2.0. It also examines access to technology and how technology is used for communication and accessing information in Russia, Germany, and Azerbaijan, and how approaching digital and media literacy through the lens of cross-cultural communication can help teachers to better meet the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION
Digital literacy and media literacy, and digital literacy in particular, have recently become a major area of focus in education. Much emphasis is placed on working with students to become both digitally and media literate, and many teaching positions list as a requirement that instructors have a background in technology. Yet, in educational settings, there is a tendency to focus on the development of discrete skills, providing physical access to technology in a given educational institution (e.g. SMART Boards, Wi-Fi networks, computer labs, laptop carts, and 1:1 iPad programs) and using learning management systems (e.g. Blackboard, Moodle) in the classroom. Emphasis is often placed on the use of technology in the classroom rather than on teaching students the various ways to access information, communicate,
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and produce content, and in what contexts a given format or medium is appropriate. Developing digital
literacies can often take the form of learning to use given programs or devices rather than focusing on
conceptual dimension of use (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008).

Compounding this is a lack of consensus on what digital literacy is. Since Gilster’s (1997) seminal
Digital Literacy, there has been a seemingly endless revision to the definition due to constantly evolving
technology which often outpaces any discussion of what digital literacy actually entails. In it, Gilster
described digital literacy as the mastery of a set of core competencies necessary to access, understand,
and use information from a variety of formats using a network of computers. Gilster noted that shifting
in technology meant that digital literacy was ultimately the ability to remain aware of these shifts and
to find ways to access information and communicate about issues and seek help from the network of
people also connected to these computer networks.

Later, Bawden (2001) expanded on this broad definition of digital literacy and attempted to define
literacy in terms of specific skills. Of these, he included the ability to accumulate information from
diverse and reliable sources; analyze and evaluate the validity of retrieved information; understand
content in with non-sequential and incomplete information; interact with both digital tools and more
traditional tools; use networks of people to share ideas and access missing information; and publishing,
communicating, and accessing information.

More recently, Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) viewed digital literacy through the lens of 21st
century skills, and listed three areas of skills: information, media, and technology; learning and innova-
tion skills; and life and career skills. As a precursor to these skills, information literacy, media literacy,
and information communicative technologies must first be achieved. Additional skills within these skill
sets include the what was termed the “Four Cs of 21st century learning: creativity and innovation, criti-
cal thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration skills as part of learning and
innovation skills, and the ability to adapt, lead, be proactive, and communicate effectively fall under the
umbrella of career skills. Aviram & Eshet-Alkalai (2010) approached digital literacy as focused on discrete
and practical skills. They included photo-visual literacy, the ability to analyze visual representations of
information; reproduction literacy, the ability to use technology to create a piece of work using informa-
tion accessed digitally; branching literacy, the ability to search for and access information in a non-linear
way; information literacy, the ability to access, evaluate, and assess both digital and traditional informa-
tion; and socio-emotional literacy, or connecting with others online and navigating those interactions.

In today’s world, Digital literacy and media literacy are inevitably linked. Whereas in the past televi-
sion and newspapers were the primary source of media consumption, today media is accessed primarily
through the Internet in some form or fashion – watching YouTube videos on a smartphone, opening up
a news app, or reading an article (or maybe just the headline) a Facebook friend has posted. Media does
not exist in a vacuum, and we employ a variety of tools to access it. In many cultures, social media is
increasingly the way media is accessed.

Media literacy is intrinsically tied to digital literacy in today’s increasingly digital world since media is
increasingly accessed through digital means. With digital tools that allow for content to be more quickly
and easily produced, the ability to analyze and evaluate media has become increasingly important as
media moves away from its traditional print and audiovisual formats. Just as digital literacy evolves as
new digital tools and competencies appear, how media literacy is defined is changing (Livingstone, 2010).

Following Livingstone (2003), media literacy can be defined as ability to access, analyze, evaluate,
and produce media in and across different networks, platforms, and mediums). Media literacy is cultural,
critical, and creative – that is, understanding, evaluating, and analyzing media involves cultural and