Chapter 1

Media Literacy in Higher Education Environments: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

In this introductory chapter, the author seeks to establish an easy-to-follow narrative of media literacy implementation in higher education, which would potentially encourage personal experiences and student needs to be considered when individual faculty members seek to enhance existing curricula and courses. This introduction also provides a brief outline of each chapter within the volume and the various ways in which contributing authors illustrate their own incorporation of media literacy principles into existing curriculum at their respective colleges and universities. The author also details her personal journey and experiences with media literacy as a student, professional journalist, and an academician ultimately detailing the pathway to enhancing the curriculum in her current department while highlighting some of her own experiences teaching media literacy in higher education. This chapter also provides key takeaways and tips for adding media literacy to existing courses and department curricula.

INTRODUCTION

As the concept of media literacy and its entry into formal educational settings -- including higher education -- expands, a greater acceptance of formal training in the interpretation of media messages is becoming normalized (Chen, 2007; Duran, Yousman, Walsh, & Longshore, 2008; Hobbs, Ranieri, Markus, Fortuna, Zamora, & Coiro, 2017; Mihailidis, 2006; Schmidt, 2013). As such, the notion that media literacy will become fully accepted in colleges and universities in the United States and around the world is still a very far-reaching, though likely, idea. As noted previously and throughout this volume, media literacy has been defined by an assemblage of scholars whose definitions culminate into a set of skills that allow media audiences and consumers to develop the ability to understand and interpret media messages (Hobbs, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2007). Media literacy is most commonly defined today as

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the ability to access, analyze, produce and act upon media messages (Aufderheide & Firestone 1993; Hobbs, 2010; National Association of Media Literacy Education, 2007; Potter, 2011). Media literacy is also considered a vital 21st century skill necessary for full participation and awareness in society (Mihailidis, 2009; UNESCO, 2015). Several researchers (Cubbage 2016, 2017; Schmidt 2012, 2013; Tisdell, Stuckey, & Thompson, 2007) have advocated the notion of adding media literacy to the higher education curriculum; stating its many benefits, including fostering the increased ability among media consumers to parcel through and make meaning of the various media messages consumed each day. Accordingly, Duran, et al. (2008) conducted an exploratory study on the potential impact of a media literacy course and found that such a course would positively impact students and their ability to understand and retain basic principles of media literacy and media production. They continue by stating that when universities add such a course, it can be instrumental in helping students become “fully media literate” by enabling them to answer media questions about their own consumption and engagement with media. According to Cubbage (2016) several organizations including The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU 2018, https://www.aacu.org), The National Communication Association, (NCA, 2018, 2018, https://www.natcom.org/Tertiary.aspx?id=236&terms=media%20literacy) and the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC, 2018, ACEJMC, 2015, https://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/) have encouraged and supported the idea of adding media literacy to the higher education curriculum.

In light of the varying definitions of the field, as well as the relative uncertainty and lack of uniformity of approach in implementing media literacy in higher education (Chen, 2007; Kubey, 2003a, 2003b; Mihailidis, 2006, 2008), it is widely understood that the ability to implement and change existing curriculum and courses in any university setting involves a complex process of research, queries, department meetings, course design, curriculum changes, administrative support, financial outlay and other processes, and a series of approvals before the first course can be taught. Additionally, when curriculum changes are implemented, there is the issue of media literacy training for educators and an equally challenging question in the face of declining faculty numbers at many colleges and universities -- who will actually teach such courses, if and when they are added? While these questions and issues are being debated at colleges and universities in the United States and around the world, the need for full media literacy training for both students and educators within media studies programs and across the curriculum remains unmet (Christ, 2004; Mihailidis, 2008; Schmidt, 2012; Thoman & Jolls, 2004). Digital technologies, media messages, new media platforms, and media products are becoming increasingly sophisticated and more complex with each passing day, year, and generation. The global citizenry has failed to become fully media literate while the need for such education is continually unabated; despite the call for increased media literacy by several organizations, including NAMLE (National Association for Media Literacy Education, https://namle.net/), UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, https://en.unesco.org/), The Media Literacy Project (http://medialiteracyproject.org/), Media Education Lab (https://mediaeducationlab.com/) and Canada’s Media Smarts (http://mediasmarts.ca/), among not only the college educated, but also among the general citizenry of all societies who are impacted by media and the digital sphere. A strategy for the full expansion of media literacy has yet to take hold.

The introduction of media literacy into the college and university curriculum has taken a multi-pronged approach and its expansion is rather informal and not governed by any particular accrediting body of university-related organizations such as the ACEJMC or others. It is this lack of both governance and strategic approach around the implementation of media literacy which allows university departments, in concert with colleges and schools of communication and media studies, to be slow in their movement.
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