Chapter 1
Understanding Online Learners’ Media Literacy for Effective Training of Online Instructors

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ABSTRACT
The increase in online courses offered in higher education, the reliance on highly developed academic literacy skills to learn course content, the complex nature of media literacy, the negotiation of multiple technologies, and the corresponding media literacy together can be quite challenging for online learners. Most research conducted on academic literacies has focused primarily on academic reading and writing practices rather than on media literacy. This chapter discusses an investigation of media literacy in an online course, the experience learners had with this literacy and online tasks. The chapter discusses results of data from the online learners and instructor, which showed the instructor required different media literacy proficiency than what the online learners possessed prior to beginning the online course. Finally, the chapter presents implications the study findings have for online instructors’ effective development, design, and delivery of online courses and development of online learners’ media literacy.

INTRODUCTION
With the introduction of online courses to education, it was imagined that this form of education would be a means of providing access to education to everyone (Khan, 2012). This was especially thought to be true with the introduction of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which are online courses that are free and available to everyone. In addition to making education accessible to everyone, online courses were thought to provide an opportunity for autonomous learning. For example, this was the idea behind the free online public schools for K12 students in Pennsylvania (see http://www.pacyber.org/). The flexibility of the online course schedule for the students allows them to be able to participate in other activities while taking classes. Moreover, learning in an online context allows learners a safe space for learning. For example, English as Second Language (ESL) students in face-to-face university classes
may feel uncomfortable taking part in class discussions because of their oral proficiency skills. Threaded discussions in an online course allow these learners more time to process the content and respond to the content that better reflects their understanding of the material. So, accessibility, flexibility, and comfort are three of the many benefits of online education.

However, in addition to the benefits of online education, there are many challenges. For example, because of the increase in online courses being offered in academic contexts, the reliance on highly developed academic literacy skills to learn course content, the complex nature of multiple literacies, the negotiation of multiple technologies and the corresponding media literacy can be quite challenging for online learners (Leu, Everett-Cacopardo, Zawilinski, McVerry, O’Byrne, 2012; Wolfe, 2000). Moreover, as online instructors, we may think our online learners are more digitally literate than they are because they are millennials or generation Z and learned with technology from a very young age (Prensky, 2001; Scott, 2016). While our online learners may have a certain level of technological savvy that surpasses our own, they may not possess the media literacy skills needed to be successful in online courses. This is exemplified to some degree from examining the data collected from what happens in an Internet minute (Desjardins, 2017). From this analysis, one can see the variety of technology that is used for non-academic purposes, such as e-commerce, email, and social media. A further examination of media literacy in an academic context leads us to consider the work of Nicholas Carr (2008; 2010; 2017). He has argued that reading online decreases our ability to read carefully and with discernment, the kind of critical reading required when reading academically. Consequently, it is necessary to shed light on how our online learners develop these media literacy practices in our online courses. This will increase our understanding as online instructors of the academic socialization experiences they go through in the online learning community which, more and more, is part of the students’ educational experiences. Additionally, the media literacy expectations in our courses are important considerations when effectively designing and delivering them.

BACKGROUND

Media Literacy of Online Learners

Most research conducted on the academic literacies of online learners has focused primarily on academic reading and academic writing practices rather than on the multiple literacies of online learners, such as media literacy, which is predominant in online courses. Media literacy is:

a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy (accessed from the Center for Media Literacy).

Moreover, because of the complex nature of multiple literacies in online courses, negotiating the ever-changing online context can be quite challenging, particularly for online learners. However, continual updated research that examines the ever-changing technology and specific aspects of media literacy online learners encounter and are required to make sense of in online contexts is needed. Knowing the media literacy our online learners encounter in our courses is an important consideration for effectively
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