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Book review: Elementary schoolers, meet media literacy: How teachers can bring economics, media, and marketing to life

Rachel Guldin

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Book review:

Wasserman, J., & Loveland, D. W. (2020). *Elementary schoolers, meet media literacy: How teachers can bring economics, media, and marketing to life*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Written for elementary school teachers new to or unfamiliar with media literacy, *Elementary Schoolers, Meet Media Literacy* is meant to be a manual to prepare teachers to introduce economic and financial literacy concepts to young students. The authors aim to give students “media, economic, and financial skills [...] to make better choices in the future as they continue to be lifelong consumers of products and information” (p. 6).

As intended, the book is a manual. Each chapter is focused on a central theme or idea, beginning with marketing (Chapter 2), progressing to classical economics (Chapter 3) and behavioral economics (Chapters 4 and 5), and ending with marketing, consumerism, and persuasion (Chapters 6-10). Individual chapters employ casual and conversational language to describe various economic, financial, and marketing concepts. Throughout these explanations, embedded “See Lesson” notes indicate a relevant lesson is available at the end of the chapter. In this regard, the organization is clever and useful: it allows the teacher to engage with the bigger conceptual picture before attending to the nitty gritty of suggested classroom lessons and exercises. Every chapter concludes with an Accompanying Lesson Appendix that keeps the lessons organized and easily accessible, and the book’s glossary provides additional at-a-glance support for teachers as they learn and explore the material.

To the authors’ credit, their explanations are straight-forward, digestible, and user friendly for even those reluctant to discuss economics, marketing, and finances with young students. The organization of the book itself supports teacher preparation and promotes understanding the material before teaching it. The accompanying lessons use an instructional format the authors call a “fusion lesson,” which begins with introductory questions, moves to interactive learning activity, concludes with questions and discussion prompts, and then applies newly learned ideas to homework. The lessons reflect the authors’ position, as alluded to in the preface and Chapter 1, to view teachers as the professionals best suited to plan, modify, and teach to meet their students’ learning needs.

However, the book takes an extremely narrow view of what media literacy is, can, or should be. It is probably more accurate to call it a marketing manual that employs advertising media as examples, not a media literacy education text. This approach does a disservice to both students and teachers, as it assumes that children need to be protected from being harmed or duped by media. In Chapter 8, the authors write that media literacy teachers must understand marketing to go on “prevent defense” (p. 102). This defensive position does not support student agency as media users *and* media makers. Elementary school students can—and do—make media every day. For example, smartphone apps that children use, like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, make production easier and more accessible than ever. Focusing on students as media consumers only and neglecting to engage with the productive aspect of media literacy beyond creating a few pretend ads is a major gap in the book’s approach.

Media literacy is a rich, diverse, and evolving field of scholarship. Yet this text fails to cite or employ scholarship from the pillars of the field, such as W. James Potter’s (2004a, 2004b) cognitive theory of media literacy, Renee Hobbs’ (2017, 2021) engagement-driven approach that encourages production and criticism, Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share’s (2005, 2007) critical orientation that foregrounds social justice, or Antonio López’s (2014, 2020) ecomedia literacy

that reconnects the tools and technology we use back to the planet we inhabit. Marshall McLuhan appears in two sentences in Chapter 9 that, predictably, only state his most famous quote. There are no mentions of media literacy organizations, like National Association for Media Literacy Education, Center for Media Literacy, Media Literacy Now, or Action Coalition for Media Education. Instead, the ten-entry bibliography references newspaper articles, press releases, and books about marketing. Beyond an assurance that the lessons were created with the elementary classroom in mind, there is no indication of research, educational theory, standards, or other markers that many teachers and administrators look for when making curricular and instructional decisions. By not putting down roots in the well-established field of media literacy education research, the text feels disconnected from media literacy and reads more like consumer literacy how-to.

A few essential concepts that are generally included in media literacy education are missing or so deeply buried that they are functionally absent from the manual. For example, semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, is often a driving force in media literacy education. In this book, however, signs and symbols are addressed almost solely in the context of logos and marketing. Representation—often addressed through gender, race, age, and class—are brought up as consumer demographics that marketers use to target niche audiences. (Chapter 6 endnotes indicate that the authors believe teaching about race and class, referred to as ‘income,’ is important but leave it up to the discretion of individual teachers. The included lesson on “Seeing Race” briefly engages generic differences between people.) Only in Chapter 9 do concepts akin to reception theory, fact and opinion, bias, subjectivity, rhetorical appeals, and persuasion get briefly addressed. And while including social and environmental justice in media education is not yet standard but increasingly part of the national conversation about what media literacy education needs to address, this text does not engage at all with this growing area.

Economics, marketing, and finance are all parts of media literacy. As a scholar who uses critical political economy in her work, I am first in line to champion the inclusion of economics in media literacy education. In fact, I think media literacy education that does not include economics is incomplete. However, this book positions finance and marketing as the primary parts of media literacy in the context of consumerism: “With media literacy, the focus is turned around and our student-consumer takes the active role” (p. 10). This position is unwavering through the book with the role of “consumer” at the forefront of student identity. This reflects an underlying neoliberal ideology: students are viewed primarily as consumers, not community members or citizens. Critical and acritical media literacy scholars alike assert the importance of media literacy in supporting democratic aims, like critical thinking and participation in civic and political life. It is not often these ends are entirely ignored. One might rebut that “Students *are* seen as consumers, so they should understand that!” And I would agree; but media literacy education can and should help students understand that they are *more* than consumers.

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