

Available online at www.jmle.org



The National Association for Media Literacy Education's
Journal of Media Literacy Education 2:1 (2010) 82 - 84

Professional Resource:

The Marketplace of Ideas:

Reform and Resistance in the American University (2010)

Sarah Bordac

University Library, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

Menand, Louis. *The marketplace of ideas*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-393-06275-5

Half of all Americans have some experience in college, and a quarter of people in the United States have a college degree. There are approximately four thousand institutions of higher education in the United States, which are home to over one million students. The most popular major is business, followed by education and health care related studies. Liberal arts degrees are a less popular focus of studies, which can be in part attributed to its lack of professional practicality. Louis Menand, an English professor at Harvard University, presents data and arguments such as this throughout *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* as he makes the case for needed transformation in higher education.

The book consists of four essays on the following topics: the challenge of general education curriculum, the "Humanities Revolution," interdisciplinarity, and homogeneity among faculty. Underlying Menand's book is the assumption that there is an imbalance between the insular worlds inside academia and the public world outside the university. Menand presents a paradox which pits the curriculum that guides students through core or distributed general education curriculum in order to produce well-rounded students prepared for life and graduate school against faculty who are trained and professionally rewarded for their narrow expertise as discipline and subject specialists. Universities have engaged in the rise in interdisciplinary studies, an increased interest in topics of multiculturalism and citizenship, and intentional focus on life-long learning which have increased since the end of World War II, trends which resonate

with the development of the field of media literacy in the late 20th Century. Each of the four sections of the book, reinforce the importance of The Core Principles of Media Literacy Education as a means to develop critical thinking skills which extend well beyond the classroom and to integrate skills and perspectives across disciplines.

Connections between the questions raised by *The Marketplace of Ideas* with media literacy are principled and practical. The liberal arts model promotes democratic ideals and civic responsibility. Menand proposes that connections must be made between the academic and social worlds in terms of production and access to knowledge, which support an informed and engaged democratic society. As Menand writes, "the more information and ideas we produce, and the more people we make them available to, the better our chances of making good decisions" (p. 14). In some ways, media literacy may bridge the divide between academic study and the public world. Menand writes that "interdisciplinary anxiety is a displaced anxiety about the position of privilege that academic professionalism confers on its initiates and about the peculiar position of social disempowerment created by the barrier between academic workers and the larger culture" (p. 123). Bringing together practical production and theoretical frameworks from media literacy are one possible approach to navigating the divide between the two.

In the first section of the book, Menand presents the challenges of the general education curriculum in the university. Liberal education is designed to focus on historical and theoretical knowledge, which form the foundations of self-directed thinking. General education is designed for non-specialists, focus-

ing on skills that are thought to be universally useful. Professional degrees set out to provide practical skills within a standardized model. What skills are universities developing in students, and who teaches them? Is a liberal arts education a useful path for students, or should the emphasis be on professional degrees or vocational education? These questions are similar to the questions presented in the literature on media literacy that grapple with the appropriate emphasis on production skills and theoretically-driven critique and analysis (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 3). Menand suggests that the value of the liberal arts curriculum is perceived to be its necessity as preparation for graduate work, with the bachelors' degree serving as a pre-professional degree tied to an educational system that is designed to produce the next generation of graduate students. This and other statements made throughout the book, raise more questions than they answer. If a liberal arts student does not go on to get a graduate degree, what do they know how to do? As it relates to an interest in university-level media literacy education, what are the roles of media literacy skills in general education or professional education models?

Menand uses the second section of the book to provide a history lesson on general education, with an emphasis on the humanities. General education is a 20th century invention marked by a "Golden Age" (1945-1975) of incredible growth, marked by a 500% increase in undergraduate students and a 900% increase in graduate students (p. 64). After World War II, funding from government agencies for scientific research began a cycle of fiscal dependency in which universities received funding related to research led by faculty, with graduate students both conducting research and taking on teaching responsibility to compensate for faculty research time. "For the first time in the history of American higher education, research, rather than teaching or service, defined the model for the professor" (p. 76).

Interdisciplinarity, the topic of the third essay in the book, is laced with the optimistic view that it is possible to find common ground among disciplines with varying methodologies and foundations. The operational model of today's university remains largely unchanged from the siloed discipline structure that emerged at the end of the 19th Century, with undergraduate education feeding graduate schools, which in turn train people to teach undergraduates. In the 1960s, interdisciplinary programs emerged in response to public distrust of experts and a sense of resistance

from traditional departments for the trending topics related to social changes. The field of media literacy is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on foundations from numerous disciplines including communication, education, and psychology. Menand proposes that the current trend is towards postdisciplinarity, which broadens the focus beyond the university setting and towards the public, deemphasizes the Ph.D. certification, and promotes a mix of methods and intentions for scholarly work.

In the final essay of the book, Menand addresses homogeneity among faculty as a challenge to reform. In the 1970s there began a shift towards professionalizing the Ph.D. The expectations for dissertations began to change from a culminating, final paper to a first draft of a monograph. Upon graduation, the average Ph.D. student has spent nine years in graduate school to pursue this increasingly involved degree process, all the while providing years of cheap teaching labor for undergraduate courses. With the lengthy time required to complete the degree and limited job options upon graduation, the result is self-selecting participation by those who feel they will fit in. Media literacy educators emerge from a number of disciplines and with a variety of academic backgrounds. The field provides a possible model for the coexistence of practical, professional production skills which one might gain through a bachelors or masters program, and the expertise in theoretical and contextual frameworks which would likely result from a doctoral program. Menand argues that this self-selection and sameness among the political perspectives narrows the possibilities of multiple perspectives and increases barriers to entering the academic profession.

The Marketplace of Ideas is an accessible book, packed with research data yet delivered in an easily digestible, personal writing style. The content is heavily humanities-based with some general comments which apply to social sciences and the life sciences. Menand, whose perspective is informed by his participation in the review of undergraduate curriculum at Harvard, provides more than a few provoking statements such as "if every graduate student were required to publish a single peer-reviewed article instead of writing a thesis, the net result would probably be a plus for scholarship" (p. 152), and that in response to the number of Ph.D.s being awarded and steep competition to get the few academic jobs awaiting them upon graduation, that "there should be more PhDs and they

should be much easier to get” (p. 154). Comments such as these provide topics for discussion and debate from both within and outside of higher education.

The book hints at, but does not address, the effectiveness of a liberal arts education on undergraduate learning. While the suggestion that universities have grown dependent on the cheap and available labor of graduate students to teach large undergraduate student bodies is well argued, there is little discussion of the effectiveness of general education instruction and the liberal arts degrees those students receive. He does mention that data about what happens to students, particularly graduate students, after they leave graduate programs is difficult to come by. Do they go on to get professional positions without having earned professional degrees? Are those students at a disadvantage professionally or academically? In what way might media literacy curricula impact outcomes in liberal arts education?

In *The Marketplace of Ideas*, Menand presses readers to recognize the historical context of the current state of higher education in the United States, armed with data and a few provocative suggestions for change, and to consider the possibilities for change. Perhaps Menand’s challenge to the academy will result in considerations for general education skills to include media literacy as a means to draw connections between social and cultural non-academic world and topics covered in higher education. For example, the rise in digital scholarship activity within the academy, might provide a bridge to similar work in non-high education institutions. Academics and non-academics directly or peripherally engaged in higher education should read this book for the historical perspective as well as for the opportunities for transformation it inspires.

References

- Hobbs, Renee and Amy Jensen. 2009. The past, present and future of media literacy education. *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 1(1): 1 - 11.