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Professional Resource:

## *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action* (2010)

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Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action. By Renee Hobbs. Washington, D.C. The Aspen Institute. <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/2010/11/10/digital-media-literacy-plan-action>



Cover courtesy of the Aspen Institute

Renee Hobbs' white paper—*Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*—presents a clear and practical map for coalescing and building on the many digital and media literacy programs around the country which have been developed in schools, libraries, community and non-profit organizations, and businesses.

Hobbs, a media literacy pioneer, professor and founder of the Media Education Lab at Temple University, brings rich experience to this project, enabling her to put forward recommendations which could bring together people in a wide variety of roles to support an inclusive community-education movement. Backed by The Aspen Institute<sup>1</sup> and the Knight Foundation, this report not only offers a significant opportunity to bring together existing digital and media literacy groups, but also aligns state and federal officials, policy makers, and grant-making organizations.

In this 64-page paper, Hobbs defines the essential competencies of digital and media literacy as including not only the foundations of finding and assessing appropriate information but also as creating and sharing messages as well as taking action (contributing ideas locally and nationally, making good health decisions, volunteering to teach others, finding jobs and mates online, and voting, as examples). She introduces ten recommendations for action in four broad categories:

- Support community-level digital and media literacy
- Develop partnerships for teacher education
- Research and assessment
- Parent outreach, national visibility, and stakeholder engagement

Professor Hobbs also provides examples of successful programs and shares proven instructional practices.

Forewarned is forearmed, and Dr. Hobbs highlights some of the major challenges which are likely to get in the way of program implementation. For example, when thinking about digital and media literacy, it is often easier for Americans to focus on technology than on the more complex challenges associated with teaching the skills to utilize technology in a way that enriches individual lives and society as a whole. Writes Hobbs (2010), “Existing paradigms in technology education must be shifted towards a focus on critical thinking and communication skills and away from ‘gee-whiz’ gaping over new technology tools” (xii). And, as is absolutely critical, she works to unite the sometimes divisive split between those who prefer protection, which includes restricting access and content, and those who favor freedom of speech in all circumstances: “We

<sup>1</sup> The full names of these key supporters are The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program (<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/communications-society>) and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (<http://www.knightcomm.org/>).

must consider the balance between protection and empowerment and respond seriously to the genuine risks associated with media and digital technology” (xii).



Renee Hobbs and Charlie Firestone at the roundtable discussion, November 10, 2010. Photo courtesy The Aspen Institute.

This plan is readily available online. If you prefer video to text, Dr. Hobbs provides an engaging ten minute overview as the introduction to the roundtable discussion—hosted by Charlie Firestone, executive director of the Communication and Society Program at The Aspen Institute—designed to kick-start plan implementation at <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/video/digital-media-literacy-plan-action>

### Using this Plan

Hobbs’s report can be used as a springboard for action. It includes proposals for both bottom-up (teachers, librarians, and community activists) and top-down (federal and state government, granting institutions, and major corporations) activity.

I’ll begin with my own bottom-up perspective as a university professor. Here, by way of example, are four ways in which I am putting Hobbs’ ideas into action.

- First, I’ve sent the paper, highlighting recommendation four<sup>2</sup>, to the dean of the School of Communication at Hofstra University, to support his outreach to Hofstra’s School of Education, Health and Human Services and to Hofstra Library professionals already in progress.
- Second, using recommendation one<sup>3</sup>, I’ll now be teaching the skills necessary to “map community resources in digital and media literacy” (Hobbs 2010, 37) in my Mass 11 (*Mass Communications in Contemporary Society*) and my Mass 112 (*Surveying Public Opinion*) classes. At the beginning of each semester, each class will choose

a community to map during their time together. I’m anticipating that some may be local towns on Long Island while others may be virtual communities.

- Even though we know we are not alone, teachers sometimes feel lonely as we—one at a time, day by day, class by class—reinvent education to better suit the Information Age. Everywhere in Hobbs’ paper, there is support and reinforcement for the change from expert in everything (which we never were) to deep-but-limited expertise, shared world-class resources, and robust use of student skills and work. Thus, third, I am heartened. Not something to be dismissed lightly.
- Fourth, I have new resources, used as examples in the paper and listed in the *Portraits of Success* appendix. Some of my students already attend the *Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change* listed there. Among other resources, I’m now thinking about how I can incorporate *Global Kids*, *Globaloria*, the *IFC Media Project*, and *Know the News* into my teaching.

Librarians, teachers, community and media activists—anyone interested in developing programs for or teaching digital and media literacy—can draw on this paper in similar ways: to connect with others, to find resources already in existence, and to bolster applications for funding and development.

Hobbs contends that even if the proposed legislation in this area—the 21st Century Skills Incentive Fund Act and the Healthy Media for Youth Act—is passed, there will not yet be enough sufficient funding for digital and media literacy education. Thus, from the top-down perspective, policy makers can make use of the strong platform and priorities set forth in this paper to create effective legislation and funding. In addition, federal, state, and local officials can support and unite their constituent schools, libraries, community organizations, and businesses in adopting and implementing the tenets of this plan.

<sup>2</sup> Recommendation four is: “Support interdisciplinary bridge building in higher education to integrate core principles of digital and media literacy education into teacher preparation programs” (Hobbs 2010, 40).

<sup>3</sup> Recommendation one reads: “Map existing community resources in digital and media literacy and offer small grants to promote community partnerships to integrate digital and media literacy competencies into existing programs” (Hobbs 2010, p. 37).

## Potential Outcomes: What Are the Chances of Major Change?

There are a number of factors which increase the likelihood that this plan will make a meaningful difference. First, as Hobbs makes clear, there are many committed individuals, organizations, and government agencies already working on digital and media literacy. Second, this is a practical plan, grounded in the real world. Third, the fact that the Aspen Institute and the Knight Foundation have a longstanding and active commitment to this area increases the likelihood that it will remain visible to policy makers and citizens alike. As early as 1992, the Aspen Institute convened a National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, which helped define the media literacy field in the United States and led to the founding of the organization that eventually became the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE).

Hobbs' plan is the second of eight white papers<sup>4</sup> commissioned by the Aspen Communications and Society Program to give legs to the 15 recommendations of the *Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy*. This Commission—working in the tradition of the Hutchins Commission of the 1940s and the Kerner and Carnegie Commissions of the 1960s and charged with “assess[ing] the information needs of communities and recommend[ing] measures to help Americans better meet those needs”—produced a report entitled *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age* with recommendations, which the Aspen Institute published in 2009. While it addresses multiple recommendations, Hobbs' paper is primarily a response to recommendation six addressing the importance of digital and media literacy education.<sup>5</sup>

Charlie Firestone reports that earlier Aspen Institute Communications and Society conferences and white papers have, indeed, initiated both top-down and bottom-up act results. “Our most visible success was from our 1995 *Conference on Telecommunications Policy*, which was an important ingredient to the institution of the e-rate in the 1996 Telecommunications Act Amendments,” he wrote in an email. Turning to bottom-up results, he continued: “More recently, a couple of programs arose out of our convening on *Mobile Media for Civic Engagement*, including a text program to connect parents and teachers in a poor school district.”

## What's Missing from the Plan

While acknowledging the importance of not taking on too much and understanding that this plan was prompted by a recommendation for media literacy education in the United States, I worry about the emphasis on education for *citizens*. My concern lies in two areas. First, there are many living in the United States who are not citizens but who are part of our communities. In order to be productive members of society, they need education. Second, we are so globally interconnected that I would like to see the Aspen-Knight partnership take up, as one of its next steps, a focus on linking U.S. program mapping and needs assessments with the many other digital and media literacy programs and needs around the world.

## Concluding Thoughts: Beware Digital and Media Ignorance

There are many candidates for that which most distinguishes humans from other living creatures. My vote is for our ability to learn collectively on a large scale. In a world that is dominated by human beings and our technology, we face challenges not only to our survival as a species but also to our ability as individuals to create rich daily lives.

I'm writing this review during the 2010 year-end holidays and have just watched my favorite version of *A Christmas Carol* (the 1951 version with Alastair Sim). As I think about this report, I hear the Ghost of Christmas Present intoning over two suffering children at his feet: “This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both...but most of all beware this boy” (Dickens 1843/2004, Stave 3).

Charles Dickens wrote at a time when his society was struggling with the transition from agrarian villages to industrial cities. Widespread textual literacy—the ability to read and write—was a major factor in enabling the increased productivity of the Manufacturing Age. And textual literacy became a prerequisite for participating in society.

<sup>4</sup> The first paper, *Universal Broadband: Targeting Investments to Deliver Broadband Services to All Americans*, was published on October 2, 2010 and the third paper, *Rethinking Public Media: More Local, More Inclusive, More Interactive*, was published on December 8, 2010. Both are readily available online at <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications?program=50>

<sup>5</sup> Recommendation six states: “Integrate digital and media literacy as critical elements for education at all levels through collaboration among federal, state, and local education officials” (Knight 2009, 23).

Now, in the Information Age, our immersion in electronic media means that, to participate in 21st century society, *everyone* should acquire new digital and media literacies. Dr. Hobbs' plan is an important step toward making sure we humans are able to take advantage of the opportunities and the potential for enhanced collaborative learning offered by our communication media.

Note: The cover graphic for Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action was created in part at <http://www.wordle.net/>

## References

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