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10 Years of Media Literacy Education in K-12 Schools

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When I started working with teachers and students on classroom multimedia productions a little over 10 years ago, I had not yet encountered the term “media literacy”, nor did I realize I had joined a long standing international movement of media literacy educators. Serendipitous exposure to “old-media” texts by [Neil Postman](#) and [Noam Chomsky](#) inspired me to take my new MiniDV camera and computer editing skills to [the progressive elementary school across the street](#), where the teachers and I began developing projects within existing units that exposed students to the decision-making process of media production. We made little to no use of the schools’ dial-up Internet and scrappy PC. Students never saw how the video editor worked because it was at home on my scrappy PC. We had no website to publish to. However, even considering the wealth of digital media many schools possess today, these projects were successful at promoting the ultimate goal still at the core of the work of media literacy educators today: to help students develop the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE, and COMMUNICATE information in a variety of forms.

Over the past 10 years, providing access has occupied much of the time and energy of K-12 schools, as they have scrambled to get online, and move towards one-to-one laptop environments. Since 2001 many school administrators in New York City have succeeded in bringing the potential to empower students as global media researchers, collaborators and publishers to their classrooms. These days, I take for granted that I can walk into any school in my work as a consultant in public schools in the 5 Boroughs and find whatever we need for students to access and create rich media and publish to the web. However, the acquisition of new media brings logistical challenges that schools continue to adjust to, which have often trumped the incorporation of critical media analysis.

Public K-12 schools are not evaluated for how media literate their students become. In my experience, school quality reviews in New York City evaluate “effective use of technology” based on the number of turned-on computers in students’ hands, and whether or not the teachers are using interactive white boards. I have never seen a recommendation from a quality review calling for anything near “the increase of critical analysis of media in its various formats”. After test prep, individual student assessments, quality reviews, and the logistics of equipping themselves with new hardware, there is often little energy left among school administrators and teachers to address the challenges of incorporating robust media literacy education (MLE).

In spite of these growing pains, great work has been done to develop core ideas of the media literacy community into “[Technology Standards](#)”, a “[21st Century Skills Framework](#)”, [The Core Principles of Media Literacy Education](#), and now “[Digital and Media Literacy: a Plan of Action](#)”. The new [Core Common State Standards \(CCSS\)](#) initiative alludes to digital and media literacy as “research and media skills” which are “blended into the Standards as a whole.” Given that prior to this there had been no national mandate for MLE in schools, I see this as a promising improvement that leaves room for our objectives. The next 10 years will challenge schools and media literacy change agents to incorporate the wisdom of the work above into the CCSS within each unique set of circumstances schools face on the ground. If the emergence of the wired school could be seen as the last turning point in K-12 MLE, I see the emergence of the CCSS as the next. Our challenge will be keeping MLE at the table during whole-school curriculum development in the new landscape of digitally equipped schools and the CCSS over the next 10 years.

In addition to the research and scholarship mentioned above, K-12 media literacy practitioners and innovative educators around the country have developed and shared model activities, units and curricula over the

past decade. Through organic online learning networks, and events like the [NAMLE national conference](#) they have demonstrated how to effectively engage kids with media literacy concepts within traditional curricula -- with and without the use of new media. Each successful media literacy unit within a school leaves behind a residue with teachers and students of new ways of seeing, new skills, and new opportunities to engage with their media landscape that pushes the field ahead.

In addition to these positive steps being taken within schools, the explosion of social networks, smart phones and online culture since 2001* has boosted the average educators' comfort with new media, which has increased the capacity to incorporate MLE in schools -- teachers who had trouble logging in to their email a few years ago are now managing Facebook identities. This use of interactive "lean-forward" media outside of school has lowered the barriers of entry to teachers managing digital media projects in their classrooms, and makes conversations around the need to educate students about the influence of new media identity, culture and society a lot easier.

These changes in the complexity of the K-12 digital school environment, have lead to an expansion of the role of media education consultant. We have gone from push-in designers and collaborators on isolated projects to collaborators on school-wide curriculum planning. Because we understand what is required to bring successful MLE to the classroom, we are now called on to work backwards from there, advising on hardware purchasing, staff and curriculum development in order to allow MLE to become part of the school culture. Acknowledgment of this range of needs by school administrators bodes well for the future of MLE in K-12 environments.

Looking ahead to the 2011-2012 school year, and beyond, the need for media literacy for all citizens is easier to see than ever. From this point, there are still some major obstacles to overcome before media literacy education becomes an effective piece of the foundation of schools. By 2021 we need to develop models for various school scenarios that answer the following questions:

- How can schools more clearly distinguish and prioritize: 1) student acquisition of digital media operational skills, 2) critical thinking skills around the way new media communicate, and 3) the role of media in society, culture and identity?

- What fundamental media languages do students need to be able to "read and write" with when they leave school (print, typing, digital editing, basic programming)?
- What should be the K-12 scope and sequence for learning the operational, research and production skills that will empower students to seamlessly incorporate those skills into age-appropriate project-based work?
- If schools are going to establish a baseline of assumptions for innovative curricula development, how will teachers from disparate backgrounds at various stages of their careers learn the technical skills and strategies to manage digital classrooms, as well as the conceptual media literacy to incorporate concepts into their practice?
- How does a school decide what equipment is essential, and where do they get the personnel and budget to acquire it and more importantly keep it working?

Hopefully, building on the past 10 years of progress, we can help K-12 schools address these challenges to develop students' media literacy beyond ACCESS, in order to build the lifelong tools they need to be able to ANALYZE, EVALUATE, and COMMUNICATE information in a variety of forms amidst the ever-swell-ing stream of new media in our society.

**To put the decade of changes in perspective visit [Whitehouse.gov circa 2001*](#) at [Archive.org](#), and compare it to [the current site](#)*