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Professional Resource:

Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom (2011)

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Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom (2011) by Renee Hobbs
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Digital and Media Literacy is an inspiring book for teachers and educators who wish to use digital media, the mass media and popular culture as resources for fostering students' critical thinking and communication skills. The book hones in on digital media literacy education as a cornerstone for all areas of K-12 curriculum, and underscores the idea that all aspects of education are rooted in effective communication. From this point of departure, the book targets two main areas: first, helping students to develop critical thinking skills; and second, teaching them to be responsible and effective communicators who appreciate the human condition in all its complexity. These are also two important directions that remind educators how to use the pedagogies of digital and media literacy, and to create a meaningful learning environment for preparing today's students to respond intelligently to the ever-changing world of media and technology in a digital era.

The creative strategies, ideas and activities appearing throughout the book are well-aligned with the Common Core Standards, in order to scaffold the following goals: to develop students' independence as self-directed learners (both in terms of comprehension and of critical skills) and to train them to use technology and digital media strategically and capably.

Just as media and technology are integrated in school and life, the use of critical media analysis and production must be integrated across the curriculum in secondary education subjects. Thus the book paves a practical path for teachers and curriculum specialists to infuse digital and media literacy in all academic

disciplines, offering a spectrum of ideas for classroom assignments taken from students' media culture. It coherently offers the potential to "reinvigorate both arts and humanities and the natural and social sciences in Grades 7-12", and shows how to promote student core competencies like *curiosity, asking questions, interpretation, synthesis* and *expression*. For example, "Periodic Propaganda" (in chapter 5) demonstrates how teachers can put these competencies into action through a creative multimedia composition of chemistry and the media. It illustrates how to help students master the periodic table by having them develop an ad campaign for a chemical element. After learning the table, students were asked to reproduce information about the elements using visuals to demonstrate their uses, and to include a persuasive slogan that catches a viewer's attention. Such an assignment reflects hands-on work with digital media and technology that enhances students' appreciation of chemistry, deepens their understanding of scientific thinking and strengthens their communication and problem-solving skills.

The "Why?" video project in chapter 5 is another example that illustrates the distinct tone and sensibility of media composition as a transformative learning practice to promote students' intellectual curiosity. This project allots students a limited time to produce an informative, entertaining or persuasive video for their peers by asking a "why" question and answering it. They experience the combination of structure and freedom, and exercise self-expression and communication skills, and they also gain new knowledge while creating messages, and begin to understand the power of authorship.

At the heart of the book is the idea of being good thinkers and communicators, as Renee Hobbs states in the preface: "Good communicators are open, active listeners. They bring a spirit of goodwill to their

interactions with other human beings, they seek out opportunities to deepen understanding by asking good questions. They're curious and open to getting in over their heads in the search for knowledge."

Despite the utopian nature of this statement, it deals with two major elements of lifelong learning: critical thinking and communication skills. It is hard to imagine a 21st century workplace or job that does not involve media understanding, and the creation, consumption and production of formal and informal critical messages. It is also hard to imagine civic involvement that does not entail these skills, which help students to develop civic capabilities as part of their political socialization (McLeod et al. 2009). Such skills remain important as students become adults, mold their political positions and take part in political discourse and society (Shah et al. 2005; Shah et al. 2007). The five concepts for understanding the news (in the chapter, "What in the World—Teaching With Current Events") point to the contribution of the conceptual framework of news media literacy education to students' civic education. In this sense, it intends to help students to understand journalism's role in the democratic practice of self-governance, and underpin the development of their critical thinking skills. Here again, there are challenging examples of hand-on programs and projects for involving students in the practice of civic engagement, and how to deal with the complex effort of taking action, which help them to turn self-expression into a form of public participation (Rheingold 2008) such as experiencing how journalists think by creating news for their school community, on/off line; exploring controversial current events of local importance which can demonstrate their understanding of choices and consequences by creating online video games about flash mobs; and having students collaborate with professional journalists on joint assignments that clarify how power and influence shape social action.

Digital and Media Literacy also presents a critical and careful view of the potential of participatory culture in today's digital media environment. On the one hand, the Internet provides tremendous opportunities to cultivate a digital citizenship by enabling students to share messages and transmit their own authentic voices about problematic and challenging experiences in their everyday lives. On the other hand, digital technologies reveal the controversial dimensions of on-line communication and the ethical issues and risky behaviors entailed in daily digital life. This emphasizes

that more than ever, teachers are needed to intelligently face this problematic arena, and to challenge students' thinking. In this respect, the book points out that despite the ever-growing number of digital texts that students are creating nowadays (blogs, wikis, cell phones, webcams, video cameras, social networking, etc.), teachers should seek classroom opportunities to screen and discuss the wide variety of student-produced multimedia.

The key concepts of digital media literacy become levers to expand students' understanding of the essence of social power in their society and how it is implicated in their use of online social media. Such insights are crucial for teaching students how to grow up in life and online, to act responsibly as both authors and audiences in maintaining their own values, and to become considerate and effective communicators. These important ideas can be implemented through a responsive teaching approach that promotes and sustains intellectual curiosity, collaboration, and social responsibility.

Hobbs's book is about getting students to experience and practice responsible use of information and technology, and to develop an understanding of human, cultural, and societal issues related to media and technology. That means utilizing teachable moments through dialogue and discussion about mass media and popular culture, and reflecting critically on one's own processes of interpretation of media messages. Teachers have to create inquiry learning in the classroom; they have to encourage students to ask probing questions, undermine assumptions, seek out new ideas and make connections between ideas and actions in the real world. In this way students can experience significant personal growth by recognizing their power and their social responsibilities as communicators.

The importance of developing students' critical thinking skills is mentioned often throughout the book, as an integral part of being digitally and media literate person, but the conceptual knowledge from the philosophical and the psychological roots of the critical thinking field is missing here. This knowledge represents the intellectual foundations that can deepen teachers' and students' understanding of issues such as critical autonomy, critical pedagogy, critical media literacy (Kellner & Share 2005; Feuerstein 2002/2010), and the core concepts addressing the five critical questions presented in "Analyze"(chapter 3). If we seek to move digital media literacy education

away from classroom techniques and tactics and towards reasoning, Socratic dialogue, and critical reflection through the media, teachers must expand their understanding about the essence of the critical thinking field—not just thinking, but thinking which entails self-improvement by means of intellectual standards (Richard 1992). Most teachers have not been trained in decomposing reasoning, constructing or assessing thinking, nor did they experience many intellectual exchanges in their own schooling. Thus, they are not likely to use assumption, inference, or implication in teaching or in their personal reflection, and they are not clear about Socratic questions (i.e., clarification—“What is your main point?”, “Could you explain that further?”; probing assumptions —“What are you assuming?”, “How would you justify taking this for granted?”; probing reasons and evidence—“What led you to that belief?”, “What reasoning led you to that conclusion?”, etc.). Such questions can be raised when they truly understand the interrelated structures implicit in human reasoning, and can help their students to feel comfortable with the kind of internal dialogue that is typical of an intellectually oriented thinker. This also might facilitate students’ attempts to deal with questions that reflect the foundations of critical/reflective thought as applied to the media, such as, “In what ways has the author constructed power/relationships/ values, based on gender/race/class?” or “What do you oppose or object to about representations based on age, dominance, privilege, and so forth, in this text?” In the end, our main mission is to make the students responsible for reformulating knowledge through questions that challenge the mediatization effects on them (regarding truth, relationships, and histories about gender, race, class, identity, and so forth), and to assist them in their learning to take a critical stance toward the media of and on their own.

The idea of organizing the book chapters around the key concepts of digital and media literacy—*Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect* and *Action*—highlights their significance and the epistemological background of media and digital literacy. This construct is effective scaffolding for understanding the interconnected spiral constellation of the five concepts and how to distinguish the different skills, habits of mind, and competences that each one reflects.

It is fascinating to follow the creative and original ways in which the theoretical ideas and concepts are interwoven with practical approaches (including lesson plans) in each chapter, with a companion website offers video clips and discussion related questions offered by experienced teachers. Leaders from the fields of education, technology and library/media are quoted, and various information resources are presented.

Renee Hobbs has compiled a rich and comprehensive repertoire of practical applications and curriculum connections that can support and promote students’ ethical, social, and emotional development and develop their social responsibility in terms of their identity and communication behavior. Thus, the book responds to the proliferation of new media in society, which amplifies the contribution of media and digital literacy to students’ contemporary reality and to their training as thinking people and citizens.

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