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Voices from the Field

## What *Dirty Dancing* Taught Me About Media Literacy Education

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### Abstract

The author reflects on her youthful viewing of *Dirty Dancing* on video against her parents' wishes as one example of the ineffectiveness of a protectionist approach to media. She offers ideas on how she and her students (pre-service and in-service educators) think through how to navigate selection of materials for effective media literacy education. Concern over material selection is not new. Just as educators have done with print media, we, together with our students, must consider student needs and interests as we view and create media materials that both reflect and inspire critical interaction with media.

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As an instructor of pre-service and in-service elementary and middle school teachers, I am often met with questions about what a teacher might "get in trouble" for talking about with kids, and concern about whether and how to include media in the classroom. When such questions arise, we talk about logistics (e.g. whether one can use an excerpt of a film instead of the whole film; what requires parent permission) but we also get into deeper questions, such as: "How pervasive are media for kids today compared to one's own childhood?" "What is considered 'appropriate,' by whom, and why?" "Do context and meaningful conversation matter?" My students and I write brief media autobiographies, noting the media that mattered for us as children and as adults. We watch portions of *The Merchants of Cool* (Goodman 2001), *Tough Guise* (Jhally 1999), and/or *Miss Representation* (Newsom 2011), and think about both the positive and negative influences of media on our own lives. We then consider how we can create our own media and how we can give our students opportunities to make their voices heard as well. Part of my obligation to my students is not simply to pique their interest in media literacy but also to help them begin to think through the ways they will navigate selection of resources in their given settings. If my students' attempts to explore media literacy with their own students are thwarted by concern over how to select materials (or guide their students in doing so), then I have accomplished little.

When I hear adults talk about simply shielding children from media, I see it as impossible, more so now than ever. I often look back in amusement to 1987 (a far less media pervasive time), the year *Dirty Dancing* was released in theaters. I was barely nine years old. I was absolutely enthralled by everything about this movie: The music, the dancing, Patrick Swayze, and perhaps most importantly the fact that my parents forbade my little sister Erin and me from seeing it. When the film was released to video, we did what I am sure millions of other girls did across the nation. We went to a friend's house (where conveniently no such ban existed) for a slumber party, and we probably wore out the tape re-watching the moment when Johnny (Swayze) jumps off the stage at the end. And no girl of my generation will forget the line at the beginning of that scene: "Nobody puts Baby in a corner."

The soundtrack continues to play in my head as I write this more than 20 years later. The fact is that my mother never stood a chance of keeping me from seeing that movie, not because I was a particularly rebellious kid, but because I was a kid. Certainly there are significant themes in that movie that are not appropriate for a girl of ten or so to watch. While much of what I saw escaped my understanding at the time, I got the gist of things well enough to know it certainly was too mature for me. In light of the fact that I and millions of other young people saw that

movie or its equivalent for them and their respective generations, it does not seem possible that we will be able to protect our own children or even our students from all that we would like. As Hobbs (2010) notes, "Rather than viewing empowerment and protection as an either-or proposition, they must be seen as two sides of the same coin (ix)." Therefore, while as educators we will surely work to support our students in making decisions about what media with which they will choose to interact and how, we must also prepare them for the challenge of responding thoughtfully to media they do encounter, whether they view that media as positive or negative or both. We must work with students to implement NAMLE's "Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages" such as "Who made this message?" and "What kinds of actions might I take in response to this message?" (NAMLE 2007). Finally, we need to facilitate students' understanding that media literacy need not be confined to their lives in school. For example, I can enjoy the clever dialogue in my favorite old movie while simultaneously actively rejecting the patriarchal messages embedded throughout.

Even if I thought there were a way to protect my daughter or my P-12 students from mediated messages, I am not convinced this would be the best course of action. By no means am I saying I will not attempt to shield my daughter from things for which she may not be ready in the same way that I would not offer a first grader Stephen King's *It* were she seeking a book on clowns. Still, it would be naïve at best to assume I could keep her forever from viewing things that send the "wrong" message. Goodness knows I am certainly not fond of the messages about gender and relationships bursting from the screen at that slumber party so long ago; in my case, however, attempts to censor this potentially harmful content inadvertently led to my viewing it without guidance. Had I been taught to ask those "Key Questions" (NAMLE 2007), however, I could have considered and responded to these messages in a more thoughtful and meaningful way than simply trying to ignore the portions of the film that made me uncomfortable. The same often holds true for our students. There will come a time when young people will need to discern the messages with which they are bombarded, to what extent they will accept these messages, and how they will choose to respond.

Buckingham (2003) counters Neil Postman's popular but problematic assertion that media are inherently negative forces in our society that we must work to avoid. Further, Buckingham sheds light on the

flaws embedded in such a narrow view of media, culture, and schooling, pointing out that Postman's argument:

Rests on a set of assumptions about childhood and about the media that are highly questionable. Ultimately, Postman's position is that of technological determinist: technology is seen to produce social (and indeed psychological) change, irrespective of how it is used, or the representations it makes available. (19)

This set of assumptions (which are not exclusive to Postman) would have us believe that all non-print media are to be avoided within and outside school walls. This would tragically prohibit educators' ability to facilitate students' deeper understandings of media. Moreover, it would silence the very children whom such scholars and activists wish to protect. Indeed, if one does not understand how to use media to share one's own ideas, s/he is seriously disadvantaged in a society full of increasingly savvy consumers and creators of media.

Ultimately, children must decide for themselves what is right and wrong—*Gossip Girl* and *True Blood* are a far cry from *Blossom* and *The Wonder Years* (not to imply that these were wholly positive for the entire audience), and we have to prepare children to be critical consumers and creators of media. If young people have few opportunities to think critically, they will not be prepared for the moral and intellectual decision-making that is required in our media pervasive culture. For me as a child, "media" meant movies, music, television, and print media. Today media are pervasive. There are few moments without the opportunity and/or obligation to be "connected" in some way. Students need to thoughtfully consider when they will "unplug," when they will choose to consume media and for what purpose, and how they will respond. Minimally, students of all ages need an understanding of media literacy that goes beyond the notion of protection and/or avoidance. Once they have reached their own conclusions, they need to be able to harness the power of media to make their voices heard.

It is true that never before have children had such frequent access to media, but this need not be frightening. With media literacy education, children can not only think critically about their media consumption and the messages therein, but they can also create and share media of their own like never before. There is much to be gained, for example, if we as educators can walk the fine line that allows us to advocate for social equity in our classrooms but avoid the urge to condemn specific media forms or texts based

on our own personal experiences. Instead we should empower our students with the tools to reach their own conclusions and create the messages that have meaning for them personally. Buckingham (2003) warned: In our diverse, rapidly changing, multicultural societies, we need to be sensitive to the ways in which social differences (of class, ethnicity, gender and age) shape our experiences of the media; and we should beware of assuming that we know what the emotional and ideological significance of any media text might be for anyone else. (121)

A key part of fostering such decision-making is helping our students to know the “Key Questions” (NAMLE 2007). The Center for Media Literacy (<http://www.medialit.org>) also offers resources that facilitate inquiry rather than censorship. Condemnation of media can alienate us from our students with whom we are aiming to connect. After all, there is little that labels a teacher as out of touch more readily than taking a “kids these days” attitude toward the music, movies, books, blogs, or podcasts that our students may enjoy. Why not incorporate popular cultural texts where we can rather than pretend as though we can successfully tell them to avoid them? Life is more complex than that, and it is not responsible of us to pretend as though we will be able to make these decisions for our students about what is and is not acceptable. Our best hope is to equip students with the tools to decide for themselves using a well-informed media literate approach.

Students can and will reach their own conclusions about the issues they encounter in print and non-print media. The more opportunities we give them to think critically about important social issues through media—with both analysis and creation—the more prepared our students will be to use the “lens of their own experience” (Rogow 2005, 285) to effectively come to informed conclusions about the issues they will encounter. Rogow further states:

When we provide students with the skills to analyze for themselves, we must be prepared to accept the possibility that they may come to conclusions that differ from our own—evidence-based conclusions to be sure, but not automatic echoes of our own perspectives or ideology. (285)

The protectionist approach, which is essentially censorship-driven, prevents the opportunity to encounter any real issues in school (though it certainly will not keep them from encountering these issues in life). This would be a tragic loss of opportunity to engage our students in the very topics that they are eager to explore.

Stevens’ (2001) article, “South Park and Society,” exhibits effectively the varied forms this inquiry opportunity can take while adeptly navigating difficulties with what it means to be “school-appropriate.” From song lyric analysis to identifying stereotypical imagery in their favorite TV shows, Stevens shows some effective and engaging ways to integrate media literacy into existing learning objectives. She also highlights a significant flaw in the protectionist view of media:

To teach using only print trade books and textbooks not only denies the dynamic multiliteracies that students engage in regularly outside of school, but also shirks our overall responsibility to prepare our students for their future worlds, as difficult as it may be for us to conceive of these worlds. (549)

We do indeed have a responsibility to equip our students with the tools to read various texts (print and non-print) effectively, and to “write” not only print-based messages effectively, but also to produce a variety of media in order to convey their own ideas to the world in the most effective way(s) possible. Media literacy educators should acknowledge that, as noted above, children today have an incredible opportunity to share their ideas with others across many different forms relatively easily. From filmmaking to blogging, from music composition to graphic design, more media forms are available to our students than ever before. To miss out on this because we as teachers fear leaving the perceived comfort of print media—certainly print media face challenges as well (ALA 2012)—means we will simply not have a part in the conversation. Our students are already deeply enmeshed in conversations about and through media. The question is, “Will we support their thinking as we do in other areas of curriculum, or will we choose to leave them on their own to navigate this increasingly complex terrain?”

The concerns with media literacy education and censorship are not new concerns. Library media specialists and classroom teachers have been addressing these concerns for years, and the

American Library Association's "Library Bill of Rights" (2012) also applies to media literacy curriculum. If there is educational value in a work as a whole for our students, then we should not discard it based on one portion. The visual images of some forms of media bring an added dimension of decision making to this issue and require creative approaches. For example, a high school teacher who feels a documentary on the Rwanda genocide contains important information but is also concerned about the violence depicted therein will no doubt have difficult decisions to make about whether to assign the film as a required text, whether to use all or a portion thereof, or perhaps even use a written transcript of the film only. But it is worth our effort in making these decisions to have our students actively engaged in a time when the test-driven climate of schooling frequently asks them to subscribe to the banking model of education that Freire (1970) showed to be largely ineffective long ago. Further, total avoidance of media is a decision as well, though a less thoughtful one, on the part of a teacher.

I am not advocating that we ask high school students to collectively watch the latest sexually provocative music video (or *Dirty Dancing* for that matter) in order to learn to interact with, respond to, and create media. As the "Core Principles of Media Literacy Education" (NAMLE 2007) suggest, we can and must move beyond analysis to facilitate students' critical engagement with texts toward their own moral decision-making. Students can then use the ideas at which they arrive to take action, whether that action is political action and/or the creation of media that share their own perspectives. Teachers can indeed model these essential practices for and with students using various media or portions thereof. Through providing children with choices between a few pre-selected possibilities that are both relevant and age-appropriate for group viewing at school (or through providing clear guidelines for students' self-selection of media for in-school work), students can learn to apply media literacy in their daily lives. Listening, reading, viewing, or otherwise interacting with media will be an essential part of this practice for us as media literacy educators. In other words, media literacy education is next to impossible without in-school access to media. There is a place for media literacy in schools that addresses real issues, and it may lie somewhere between *South Park* and *Sesame Street*, depending upon our student populations. Wherever we find that home for media literacy in our classrooms, we

can be sure that no matter the age of our students, it will be useful the next time they encounter a text and have to make decisions on their own—be it a Disney film, a teen magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, a textbook segment on Christopher Columbus, or as in my case, a movie they are not given parental permission to see.

Certainly educators will face challenges, but no worse than we have with print text, with the likes of the *Harry Potter* series and *Charlotte's Web*. Charlotte does die, Harry does grow up (even magic could not stop it) and Baby does emerge from the corner in *Dirty Dancing*. Incidentally, I feel fortunate I never bought the forbidden summer love affair narrative told through that film, at least, not before I was old enough to know what a summer love affair actually was. My resistance to the dominant narrative stems from my parents encouraging me to thoughtfully interact with media representations. One important lesson I do take from *Dirty Dancing* and my own experiences surrounding that text is this: Children do not stay babies forever. For my part, both as a parent and an educator, I am convinced it is counterproductive to pretend otherwise.

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