



The National Association for Media Literacy Education's
Journal of Media Literacy Education 4:3 (2012) 266-271

Voices from the Field Media Literacy Education Program Evaluators: What's the Job Description, Again?

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Abstract

School program evaluation researchers confront overlapping questions concerning our roles in the field. In the quest for “good” data and “The Truth,” am I a shrewd researcher before all else? In the interest of establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships with my school partners, am I first a gracious school guest, prepared to sacrifice research integrity for the sake of goodwill? Or, for the sake of students, am I foremost an advocate for the intervention, pressing an agenda I firmly believe in? As an ingénue who recently turned toward the field of media literacy education (MLE), which had long attracted me but did not square with my “Associate Professor of Psychology” title or graduate training, I grapple with these questions.

Keywords: media literacy, research, intervention, program evaluation, K-12, middle school

The undercurrent of my scholarship has always concerned the ways in which adolescents negotiate identity in shifting, often contradictory contexts. The media universe—and particularly advertising media—embodies such elements: shifts, contradictions, and “razzle dazzle” at best. I had long wondered how adolescents make sense of these media messages, particularly those promoting junk food and beverages, often in the same contexts as fashion marketing. Given the escalating alarms over child obesity, I resolved to address my evolving questions about whether critical viewing skills might help to moderate the insidious effects of these ostensibly opposing but equally problematic sets of commercial messages. In spring 2011, I implemented an advertising literacy program in two local middle schools as part of my ongoing attempt to address these questions. The intervention included discussion, activities, homework, and presentations designed to illuminate the similarities (e.g., styling and packaging) and contradictions (e.g., supermodels and thin celebrities indulging in hamburgers; a fast food giant sponsoring a fashion show) between food and fashion advertising. Learning objectives were provided for each session and moved from knowledge of media literacy concepts to developing media literacy skills, culminating in the synthesis and creation of a media product. These were challenging aims within the ultimate parameters of six-to-seven sessions. And the

challenges of managing my multiple roles just added to the complexity.

By serendipity, I met MLE pioneer Renee Hobbs a few years ago, thanks to my student researcher who was enrolled in an undergraduate class taught by Hobbs’ protégé, Kelly Mendoza. I had earlier found inspiration in Hobbs’ work, given her expertise in school-based MLE (e.g., Hobbs 2004). Hobbs bolstered my enthusiasm by introducing me to other important scholars and encouraging me to submit my work for presentation at NAMLE. My attendance at the 2011 NAMLE Conference (“Global Visions/Local Connections: Voices in Media Literacy Education”) provided opportunity for camaraderie and motivation from kindred spirits. Facilitators fostered communication among practitioners, scholars, and other involved citizens; this energy reminded me of why I pursued an academic career in the first place, and yet affirmed my ongoing struggle with school-based research. My

Note: For assistance in addressing my questions, I called upon two notable, veteran MLE program researchers whose cogent bodies of work suggest that they have successfully wrestled with similar issues. Erica Austin, Ph.D. (Washington State University), and Erica Scharrer, Ph.D. (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), were happy to indulge my requests for individual phone interviews, and I am grateful to them for allowing me to share my evolving reflections—significantly informed by them—with you.

session moderator, Lynda Bergsma, suggested that I speak openly with others in the field about my research issues, especially given my methodologically “isolated” status on campus. Her suggestion prompted the current reflection.

The Researcher

Erica Scharrer knows that, in efficacy studies, the control group is essential. So, what can we do in the likely event that we will encounter barriers to this crucial component of experimental design? Rather than surrendering research agendas, or sacrificing long-term school partnerships, this quandary catalyzed Scharrer’s change in direction. Trained as a quantitative researcher, Scharrer found her methodological skills to be increasingly ill-suited to her research settings, particularly given small sample sizes. Over time, she has made room for qualitative approaches, allowing for mixed methodologies through which she can now attempt to decipher, rather than “control,” the “noise” in the field (Scharrer 2005, 2006).

Control group challenges have many sources. Perhaps the participant numbers are far too low to allow for a control, as was the case in my school year 2010-2011 (SY 10-11) fieldwork. Or perhaps the conflict arises from within the researcher, who questions her role. As Scharrer noted, if the MLE program evaluator believes in the efficacy of her “treatment,” it can feel unethical to withhold treatment from other students. Yet, in order for the research findings to be truly scientific and “publishable,” the use of a control group is wise. Scharrer proposes the use of a rotating control group, so that everyone ultimately has a turn (Erica Scharrer, pers. comm.).

Like many school employees, my partnering suburban school staff was familiar with research methods and understood the purpose of “control.” Yet the two middle school principals exchanged glances whenever I referred to a “control group.” This reaction came despite my manic plan to provide an *alternative* MLE program for the “control group” (a “placebo”) not focused on my “special treatment” of juxtaposed food/beverage and fashion marketing literacy. This design not only promised more rigorous control, but also spared me the quandary noted by Scharrer. Of course, anyone who has stepped foot in a school knows that classrooms full of lively youth could never be “controlled.” In this context, however, methodological control refers to those programmatic factors that the researcher can actually attempt to “control” as part of

the *design*, even in a natural setting. The principals’ hesitation was not due to the exclusion of some students from the program opportunity, but rather because the design made the venture sound like an experiment. From researcher perspective, this was clearly the point. From school district perspective, however, there would be no “experimenting” on kids. No ethical person could question that stance.

Ultimately, my original design would have overwhelmed my resources, so I compromised and suggested that we invite the eighth graders to participate in the “pilot program” with the caveat that we would randomly select twenty-five who would participate. We would regard the remaining students as “survey-only,” while taking care not to use the terms “experimental” and “control.” As it turned out, we ultimately had only eighteen participants altogether (rather than the target fifty), and an additional two opted for the “survey-only” condition. The school principals, in their usual supportive efforts, stated that they would attempt to solicit additional students for the survey-only sample. However, due to an apparent lack of interest, and my own hesitation about over-stepping my boundaries given the generous efforts already made by the school staff, no further students were found for the “control.” So, in my case, “control” was long lost.

In contrast, Erica Austin secures large samples through many collaborations and connections with state agencies and individuals who are already well-connected with the schools. As such, control groups are not a pressing barrier to her ability to make confident claims (see, e.g., Austin, Chen, and Grube 2006; Austin, Chen, Pinkleton, and Johnson 2006). However, Austin raised another issue in the challenge to maintain research integrity in these studies. Who will facilitate the MLE lessons, the researchers or the school teachers? The benefit of researcher facilitation is that they dutifully administer the program in a prescribed, standardized way. Benefits of teacher facilitation include that they not only have the pedagogical expertise and grounding in their school settings, but that they are the professionals who ideally would administer the program in the future. Seasoned teachers, however, may understandably desire tailoring lessons to their own preferences. While respecting this practice, the MLE program evaluator must somehow communicate the importance of research fidelity. Yet, this is another area in which we researchers might need to yield some “control.”

However, we program researchers must also

yield scientifically legitimate results in order to suggest changes in practice or policy. Thus, we generally feel compelled to use the experimental method, which has been the gold standard of efficacy studies. In order to resolve these issues, the three of us independently expressed the need for sustained, respectful and reciprocal relationships with our school partners. In such a relational context, we could explain the need for mutually beneficial, meticulous research. This brings me to the next quandary.

The Faithful School Partner

Scharrer is satisfied with the strong relationships she has established with her partnering schools. She credits the fact that these schools, near her university, have been “on board” since the beginning. That is, school administrators and their teams all “buy in” to the promise of the interventions. Furthermore, parents are also invested. These ideal connections, however, are not simply attributable to luck. She considers her research a form of community service as well as service learning for her undergraduate student program facilitators; thus, everyone benefits (Cooks and Scharrer 2006).

Austin’s experience resonated with mine. For Austin, some years looked bleak in terms of securing a school partner. She has worked with a wide range of schools and has observed that some are understandably protective of students and hesitant about engaging in research if they are not certain that the school will actually benefit from the investigation. With many schools, finding a person who will advocate for you and the program is key to moving forward. This process depends to some extent on whether there is a clearly defined hierarchy and chain of command, or whether administrative leaders promote more autonomous decision-making on the part of their teachers and staff. Regardless of school structure, Austin reaffirmed that “success comes from persistence and relationship building” (Erica Austin, pers. comm.; see also Dinella, 2009). Scharrer, Austin, and I easily converged on this point.

Yet we cannot sidestep the constraints. Schools are pressured to perform at certain levels in multiple domains. They are frequently assessed, or preparing for formalized assessment. Consequently, many teachers sensibly believe that they cannot luxuriate in “experiments.” Thus, we researchers must make the program fit. The match can be achieved by making explicit which academic standards are met by the curriculum, or tailoring the program so that it meets

standards (and other needs) while retaining the “effective ingredients” to which we are committed. Scharrer and Austin have consistently followed this strategy. I, too, independently came to these assumptions, given my knowledge of the constraints of public schools.

Like most organizations, schools are dynamic organisms, ebbing and flowing to their own needs and exigencies. Sometimes a research agenda simply does not fit, and this can happen on any given day. During our SY 10-11 programming, my research team encountered snow days, unexpected field trips and assemblies, and other setbacks. These events disrupted our carefully designed, short-term program. But this is the reality of the school situation. And if a curriculum cannot withstand the vicissitudes of the school day in order to be effective, then perhaps it is not worth consideration.

On the other hand, can we sidestep the other matter: if we do not garner “good” data, then is the enterprise in vain? I hope not, because such futility would mean that I have wasted the past decade of my academic career as I have persisted in partnering with schools in the midst of many disruptions in my data gathering and little “control” over the research setting. I have witnessed the benefits, as anecdotal as they might be. Full disclosure, however: I also have yet to amass publishable data.

With their school partners, both Austin and Scharrer are straightforward about the requirements for sound research and data integrity. Working with schools that have welcomed their interventions, they communicate the importance of establishing sound evidence to support the continuation of such programs. They do not skirt the issues; there is nothing ignoble in pursuing excellent methodology to yield information regarding best practices. I intuited this much in speaking to my partnering principals on these terms, and they respected my concerns. One cannot, however, talk a snowstorm out of appearing, or ask for a “time out” from the school calendar.

Despite the flawed process, our eighth grade participants were engaged and enlightened. Their post-test responses suggested less internalization of media body ideals and more skepticism of food, beverage, and fashion advertising. The care I took to maintain the partnership benefited the students, both the eighth graders and their collegiate facilitators.

The Student/Intervention Advocate

I have an ambivalent relationship with our institutional review board (IRB). The IRB role in

research settings is essential, as the members ensure that investigators adhere to high ethical standards when working with human participants. Such expectations include special protection of minors and fairly obtained consent. I am grateful that my youth-focused research has been vetted by others according to ethical standards. However, I have frequently had my goals derailed by IRB members who are unfamiliar with the field, both academically and literally (i.e., school settings). Through Scharrer and Austin, I glimpsed difficulties encountered by other school researchers.

Austin noted that a particular dilemma for MLE researchers regards the very media we include as curricular texts through which students can develop critical viewing habits. These media are sometimes prohibited by the IRB. In her case, the protested images concerned tobacco and alcohol advertising. This censoring creates an ironic problem for us. Though we appreciate sensitive media appraisal, we cannot create effective programs with ineffective texts. Furthermore, we believe in “in vivo” experiments, wherein our students face real-world media (albeit “tempered” at our own discretion) within a student-empowering condition. These situations assist in the transfer of learning, an aim of MLE (Hobbs 2004). IRB scrutiny has occasionally frustrated Austin, but she has effectively negotiated proposals that would not significantly compromise her objectives. Her strategies have included the presentation of similar studies, and allowance for plenty of lead/turnaround time.

I have been fortunate in having my media successfully pass through the critical gaze of board members, although not easily so. My steepest hurdle has been the inability to negotiate an acceptable informed consent process. Despite the schools’ recommendations and my inclinations, my IRB rarely yields approval of more accommodating informed consent procedures.

For SY 10-11 programming, my IRB required parent informational meetings in order for students to qualify for participation. Given parents’ busy schedules, one can imagine how this mandate impacted the number of returned consent forms. Furthermore, this directive might have penalized students whose parents could not attend for whatever reason, and it possibly undermined the judgment of school officials. Last fall, as I began SY 11-12 programming at a new site, members of my partnering urban school staff laughed when I mentioned mandatory parent meetings. Unless we intended to provide transportation for the few parents who had the time to attend, we would have no participants. Given

my previous experience with field research in urban schools, I was unsurprised by this reaction. I strongly urged my IRB to consider my revised proposal to conduct the MLE program evaluation for the urban school *without* the mandatory meetings. Fortunately, they conceded—with minor compromises. I was pleased with this gesture of respect for school officials who know the circumstances of their students and their families.

As she explained during our interview last fall, Scharrer has had a different experience, though perhaps as distressing. On one hand, she is grateful that her institution allows for a departmental review process, which overcomes some of the barriers discussed above. Though the review is rigorous, it allows for individual consideration of circumstances and flexibility. The process sounds ideal. On the other hand, Scharrer’s school partners are permissive regarding her curricular media, and she wonders whether there is too much accommodation when it comes to the images she proposes to share with students. She appreciates the lack of censorship, but would perhaps feel more reassured if there were some degree of protest. Neither school staff nor parents seemed especially concerned that the students would view violent (albeit relatively tame) images. They rationalized that the students often saw as much. Scharrer’s unease, however, stemmed from the apparent acceptance of this “reality.” Why does pervasive violence seem okay, when objectified bodies (in my curriculum), and alcohol/tobacco consumption (in Austin’s case), do not? The same rationalization would seem to work in all three cases, as they are all areas for concern. Perhaps the marketing emphasis is problematic, as in the curricular focus I share with Austin. Austin did mention that an additional IRB concern was the potential for further harm should her research lead to marketing exploitation. Austin confronts these issues directly through her insightful investigations into the paradoxical/desirability effects of media literacy intervention using her Message Interpretation Process model (see, e.g., Austin, Pinkleton, and Funabiki 2007).

Ultimately, many MLE scholars and practitioners do not advocate censorship so much as student empowerment and fostering the cognitive and psychosocial potential of youth (Bergsma 2004; Center for Media Studies 2001). As student advocates, we intend to test programs that we believe to be worthwhile. Yet, believing in our intervention might be a methodological misdemeanor. Such investment has

traditionally been prohibited, and to admit it aloud conveys chutzpah at best, recklessness at worst. After all, “double-blind” experiments are used in treatment trials for good reason. And, should the experiment police ask us to produce our “objective experimenter” cards, I suspect that none of us could produce one. Furthermore, few of us would care to procure such badge of empirical “legitimacy.”

Designed, on Board, and Officially Approved. Now What?

This question encapsulates a “void” in our research, where, at least in reporting, we seem to move from methodological plan to results, with the periodic cursory description of the “intervention” somewhere in between. Doubtlessly, some of this curtailing comes from complying with word count limitations. As suggested throughout this essay, however, this “gap” represents an important layer of information. How do we actually implement our programs outside of a laboratory, how do we train our facilitators, what is the pedagogical philosophy, and, ultimately, how do we make this “work”?

I did not pursue these questions with Scharrer and Austin, because I have found that they have established transparent processes through which I could trace their research process from conceptualization to program design and implementation to analysis. I will briefly address undergraduate facilitator training, however, because it relates to my role as a student advocate.

Scharrer and I both involve undergraduate students as program facilitators in our work. Because program facilitation represents an integral part of a course she teaches, Scharrer is uniquely situated to document her students’ training as effective MLE instructors. I, too, have attempted to record my detailed undergraduate training sessions. Upon recommendation by Renee Hobbs, I have instituted a parallel process wherein the future facilitators are trained using the very curriculum that they will implement with their middle school counterparts (Renee Hobbs, pers. comm.). This process is rewarding and empowering; my students have found the curriculum engaging and challenging, and they have been eager to promote similar excitement and enlightenment for our eighth graders. In turn, the middle school participants relate well to the college students, and both groups seem delighted by what they accomplish. I agree with Scharrer, as one of her most important concerns is “ensuring that the students—both groups—have a quality experience” (Erica Scharrer

pers. comm.). There is mutual learning taking place, and increased confidence for these emerging citizens (for more on this topic, see Cooks and Scharrer 2007).

Lessons Learned

There is no tidy ending, of course; no clear job description. No clear prescription for prioritizing one role over another. Complex research matches a complex world. I have often despaired. But somehow I manage to regain the transcendent sense of purpose when I strike a balance in all three roles. This happened when I reconnected with my urban school partner for SY 11-12, and coordinated with an energetic new teacher who was thrilled to “experiment,” (given my clearly outlined objectives and standards) and embraced well-trained student researchers. She was so impressed with the program that, as of this writing, she intends to integrate the experimental module into her regular media arts curriculum. My SY 10-11 fieldwork, the conversations with Scharrer and Austin, and the synergy of the NAMLE community undoubtedly contributed to a more successful global experience and ultimately restored my motivation. This re-ignition is needed to continue balancing my multiple roles as a MLE program evaluator and the many hats of a college professor.

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