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Media Literacies: A Critical Introduction (2012)

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Media Literacies: A Critical Introduction by Michael Hoechsmann and Stuart R. Poyntz. (2012). Wiley-Blackwell Publishing: Malden, NJ.

In *Media Literacies: A Critical Introduction*, the authors, Hoechsmann and Poyntz make obvious the overwhelming need for re-imagining media literacy education when they ask: “Who would have thought it possible even ten years ago to write a book on a machine that unites all the functionalities of a typewriter, a fax machine, a library archive, a bookstore, a telephone, a stereo, a television, a deck of cards, a photo album, a recording studio, and a video editing suite into a sleek and portable package?” (ix). The rapidity at which technologies develop, the constant engagement with these technologies, and in turn, the ways in which these technologies create mediated spaces, relationships and realities, make the discussions within this text crucial to any pedagogical conversation. If, as the authors declare, “we have adopted cyber skins” (ix), what does this mean for formalized education? It is this very question that Hoechsmann and Poyntz explore within this text.

The authors move from the assumption that television and other media forms have become part of our cultural understandings and belong in the school curriculum. It is from this theoretical foundation that the authors trace the history of media literacy and consider the new challenges that arise in a convergence culture (Jenkins 2006). The text is divided into eight chapters, beginning with a discussion of the relevance of media literacy education, and ending with a plea for its inclusion within educational spaces. Using two models, media literacy 1.0 and 2.0, the authors outline the pedagogical responses to these two media eras and consider the ways in which their co-existence continues to hold them in dynamic tension. Peppered throughout the chapters are “sidebars,” or what the authors refer to

as hypertext; these act as a space for particular issues to be further explored by a variety of scholars in the field. The first chapter seeks to define what is meant by media literacy. Chapters two and three make the case for media literacy education in institutional spaces through a discussion of children’s relationships to media, and the subsequent ubiquitous pedagogical role it plays in the lives of youth. Chapters four and five discuss Media 1.0, first in relation to a holistic model for media literacy education and then specifically in relation to youth media production. Chapter six focuses on new digital literacies, while chapter seven addresses seven conceptual problematics within the Media 2.0 model. The closing chapter leaves the reader to consider the ways in which media literacy education intersects with critical citizenship. The authors have created a refreshing text that unfolds the history, theory, and pedagogical implications of our ever-changing mediated lives. Even in the spaces in which I was left with questions of the text, they remain those that provoke my own thinking about media literacy and education.

In defining media as text and technology, Hoechsmann and Poyntz recognize the way in which media literacy has long faced the problem of developing a mode of analysis that speaks across various technologies, texts, and institutions. The authors do not dismiss the continued relevance of the critiques offered in the 1.0 era; however, the rapid evolution of technologies, and the introduction of the Internet demand a different response of media literacy education than those that focus on the eye and the ear of the viewer. In a convergence culture, media literacy educators need to consider the ways in which people are interacting with and producing their own media. Unlike some celebratory discussions in media literacy education, that focus on the agenic practices of youth media producers, the authors recognize that engaging with and participating

in media do not ensure criticality; this remains the role of the media literacy educator. Instead, the authors argue for a dynamic relationship between 1.0 and 2.0. Media literacy education, according to the authors, is the work of empowering young people through meaningful and critical participation (5). As a media literacy educator, such grandiose theoretical statements about pedagogy leave me frustrated—how is that we define “meaningful critical participation”? Who gets to decide whether a youth that produces a website outlining current fashions, or a youth that produces a site critiquing environmental issues in the fashion industry, exemplifies meaningful critical participation? I am not suggesting the authors answer this question, or that any educator should be the decider of “good criticality,” rather I worry when words like *meaningful*, *critical*, and *moral* (14) are used as simple answers to complex pedagogical questions.

In chapter two, the authors consider the way in which children’s lives have changed as a result living a “partially simulated life” (17). In particular, the authors outline children’s mediated lives in order to further explore the questions asked in chapter one: In a world of digital natives and digital immigrants, what is the role of the media literacy educator who may never know as much as their students? If, as Hoechsmann and Poyntz state, “everything in our lives has become mediated” (18), what does that mean for education? What follows in this chapter is integral for all educators to read—or for anyone that doubts the relevance of media literacy education. Although there are spaces in this chapter where an educator may feel overwhelmed by the permeation and proliferation of media in children’s lives, the authors clarify that it is not the role of the educator to be expert in the technology, rather to continue to engage with the concepts surrounding media.

To add credence to the rationale for media literacy education in formal educational spaces, the authors use their third chapter to highlight the ways in which media is already a site of instruction for children and youth, a form of public pedagogy. Instead of focusing on the negative, all-consuming effects of media or alternately celebrating its tremendous potential, Hoechsmann and Poyntz declare that discussions of structure and agency need to be brought into media literacy education.

Both chapters four and five are primers for media 1.0. Chapter four calls for a blend of earlier adopted conceptual approaches with one that weaves in analysis of producers, texts and audiences with broader discussions of culture. This chapter teases out

this holistic approach, drawing well on pedagogical examples and asking salient questions in the process. As an example, the authors explain the ways in which students might use a coding frame to look at who is typically used as an “expert” on the news. Examples such as these make this text a useful resource for those interested in both the theories of media literacy education and the ways in which they might be taken up in the classroom; theory is made tangible through these pedagogical discussions. Similarly, Sarah Bragg’s sidebar in chapter five engages practical issues related to media literacy education. In this, Bragg challenges the way that many teachers require students to hand in writing pieces to explain or supplement their creative products. This, she points out, recenters writing and fetishizes the final product rather than the process. The modernist, linear focus of such assignments ignores the ways in which the learning is in the creativity and problem solving of production. Throughout the book, conversations such as these were extremely beneficial for thinking about my own practice. In the rest of this chapter, Hoechsmann and Poyntz situate production as an inseparable component in media literacy. Although the authors discussion of “imitation” and “pleasure” left me wanting more examples and complexity, the highlight of this chapter is the author’s recognition that youth are not free floating agents able to make whatever sense they want of media. This complex discussion of “youth voice” is a refreshing addition to pedagogical conversations of youth video production in which voice is often uncomplicatedly celebrated.

Chapter six is an essential addition to any text on media literacies in the current context—“Literacies: New and Digital.” The chapter begins with a discussion of what it means to be literate today, focusing on modern communication and new digital media. A fleeting reference at the beginning of the chapter compares teaching digital natives to teaching farming to students in an agricultural community, when the teacher knows nothing of growing food. While this example reifies the essentialized, binaried understanding of tech savvy youth and their technologically ignorant teachers, I think this gets to the crux of the point the authors are making about media literacy education. While students may know how to grow a vegetable, they *may* have never considered the political, social, economic, or environmental tetherings to that vegetable; this is the role of the pedagogue. Chapter seven continues this discussion surrounding the role schools and institutional learning environments play in this era, focusing on

seven conceptual problematics at the core of media 2.0. Within each of the seven concepts, the authors offer ideas and resources for educators to foster young people's meaningful engagement with contemporary spaces.

Hoechsmann and Poyntz make a strong case for media literacy to assume a more central role in the school curricula worldwide. Throughout this text, the authors challenge the reader to consider the ways that media literacy education might foster students modes of thinking, judging and acting. Finally, in placing theory into conversation with practice, they have offered a way for this to be realized.

Notes

In order to maintain professional ethical standards, I would like to state clearly that I have worked with Dr. Stuart Poyntz through my doctoral program.

References

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press.