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Book Review

The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World

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The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World, by Cyndy L. Scheibe and Faith Rogow (2011). Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA

Cyndy Scheibe and Faith Rogow have been engines within the American media literacy movement for more than twenty years. Although they have worked together with NAMLE and Project Look Sharp, this is their first book together, and it might be the only media literacy book that teachers ever need. There are media literacy textbooks and books on media literacy pedagogy, but what Scheibe and Rogow have provided is a one-stop shop for teachers who are interested in an inquiry-based, curriculum-driven handbook that states the case for media literacy, how to implement it and how to measure its effectiveness.

The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World has an easy-going, fluid style that almost disguises the sheer amount of information it includes. The authors have taught in classrooms, workshops and have developed media literacy curriculum for decades--they know the field well and are aware of the challenges and obstacles facing media literacy education and provide the reader with tools to overcome them.

Rogow and Scheibe begin by describing how the definition of literacy itself has expanded to include media productions. In fact, "the very nature

of what it means to be literate is shifting," (p. 1) they explain. With the average American consuming eleven hours of electronic media daily, it would seem likely that media literacy education would compel a protectionist approach. They argue, however, that this approach alone does not involve critical thinking by the student or any personal analysis whatsoever. Alternatively, Rogow and Scheibe's pedagogical goals do not include telling students what to think about media, but rather encourage helping them come to their own conclusions. This curriculum-driven approach gives their book credibility for educators while avoiding a cynical, protectionist or preachy tone. Critical thinking by students is their ultimate goal.

The NAMLE Key Questions (NAMLE, 2007) get quite a bit of attention in this book. Although there are varying definitions of media literacy and different "keys" used to analyze media, the NAMLE Key Questions serve as an excellent umbrella for teachers who are just starting to discover the skill. Rogow and Scheibe take those questions one step further with an outstanding section called "Notes on Using the Key Questions." Their coaching on how teachers can best deliver these questions to students is non-intimidating and

user-friendly. Rogow and Scheibe are not “sage on the stage” professors; they are genuinely interested in teachers adopting these materials and suggestions in a practical and useful way.

Their section on decoding media in the classroom was more comprehensive than anything I have seen in fifteen years of studying media literacy. It includes lists of questions and sample exchanges with students that are both surprising and enlightening—students often display a sharpness and savvy that rival comments one might hear in a graduate course. When one student might see Native Americans encountering European settlers in Jonathan Warm Day’s “The Last Supper”, students during a media decoding describe the settlers as “Scary..they’re only shown in black silhouettes and there’s all that red that might represent blood in some way” (page 81). A teacher evaluation for decoding is also included, which would inspire any teacher to prompt in a deeper way.

I have been fortunate to run several media literacy workshops with current teachers and their response to the framework is often the same--they understand that media literacy is an important skill, but there simply isn’t enough time in their school day to include it. Rogow and Scheibe have addressed this issue by dedicating an entire chapter to the implementation of media literacy across the curriculum. In this curriculum-driven approach, media literacy can be included in all classes. Teachers are encouraged to replace generic examples with media-related ones. Students are encouraged to apply the Key Questions to their own work and collaborate with web technology. Assignments are modeled in multiple media formats. The possibilities are endless for creative teachers; Rogow and Scheibe provide an excellent starting point. They argue that “when media literacy is approached in the same way you would implement multicultural education – as a pedagogy rather than a separate content area...it does not necessarily require more time than other ways of teaching” (p. 202).

The authors recognize that inquiry-based media literacy education can be seen as a threatening paradigm shift, because in a vibrant, media literacy-based classroom, the teacher is not

necessarily the “expert” but more of a facilitator. In exchange, however, teachers are rewarded with increased student engagement and an opportunity to practice media literacy themselves. In a time when well-educated adults routinely share false information online, education about website credibility could not be more important. The examples provided in this handbook—from an official-looking website on Martin Luther King Jr. actually operated by a white supremacist group to the hoax website for the Pacific Northwest Tree octopus—are enough to raise the eyebrows of the most cynical web consumer.

Although the authors do list some common missteps taken by teachers when adopting a media literacy mindset, they seem to overlook one obvious misconception. With the increased adoption of one-to-one technology in schools, some teachers feel that the simple presence of technology in the classroom means they are teaching media literacy. Teachers are very anxious to have iPads in their classroom but have no idea how to use them effectively once the tools arrive. Proponents of media literacy must help educators realize that there is more to media literacy education than simply having educational technology in the classroom. The book could focus more intently on digital citizenship and on online behavior, emerging online identities, and the role these play in the formation of media literacy skills. Most of the web content consumed by students is user-generated—what does that mean for media literacy skills? How do the concepts of audience and meaning change when one is constructing an online identity? As proponents of media literacy we know the Key Questions and Core Principles still apply; but the sheer pervasiveness of user generated content and social network identities in today’s online experience would suggest its analysis be larger part of the handbook.

Any media literacy enthusiast knows that the form of the message defines its content, and a book about using media in the classroom is limited by its form. The authors have overcome this print obstacle by including access to a companion website that is ideal for teachers, one unlike any other media literacy handbook I have seen. Many media literacy

textbooks have companion websites containing teacher and student resources. What separates this site, however, is the frequent updates and the connection to Ithaca College's Project Look Sharp for further materials. The site for *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy* is for teachers, by teachers. Every illustration, chart, graph or resource included on the website is marked with a cursor throughout the book so the reader knows exactly where to find electronic versions for easy use in the classroom.

What's most refreshing about this handbook is the spirit in which it is written. It does not portray media productions as items from which we much protect our children. Rather, it encourages inquiry-

driven analysis of the media that surround us to encourage critical thinking skills. The book does not merely tell teachers that media literacy is important; it shares example after example from decades of classroom and workshop experience. Most of all, it give teachers practical tools that they can apply directly to their classrooms regardless of age or subject matter being taught. Any enthusiastic reader of "The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy" will find themselves with the ultimate media literacy toolkit, ready to facilitate and engage their students in building this most necessary twenty-first century survival skill.

References

National Association for Media Literacy Education (2007). Key questions of media literacy education. Retrieved from:http://namle.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/KeyQuestionsEnglish_2014.pdf)