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The New Curricula: How Media Literacy Education Transforms Teaching and Learning

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Voices in the Field

Abstract

As new online and cellular technologies advance, the implications for the traditional textbook model of curricular instruction are profound. The ability to construct, share, collaborate on and publish new instructional materials marks the beginning of a global revolution in curricula development. Research-based media literacy frameworks can be applied to all subjects, and they enable teachers to have confidence that, in employing the frameworks to address academic subjects, themes or projects, students will gain content knowledge. Teaching through media literacy education strategies provides the opportunity to make media literacy central to teaching and learning, since media literacy process skills enable students to become self-directed lifelong learners, capable of addressing any subject. What are characteristics of curricula that use media literacy frameworks? How does such curricula differ from traditionally constructed curricula? And why should administrators and teachers embrace this change? As education is moving from paper-based, face-to-face classwork to technology-enabled curricula that is better, faster and cheaper, educators need new yet proven approaches and curricular resources to delivering effective lessons and outcomes. With media literacy education, this shift is not only possible but also imperative for providing curricula for the globalized classroom.

Keywords*: curricula, globalization, technology, media, literacy*

New economic realities and rapid shifts in labor markets are fundamentally changing education systems around the world; and now, access to high quality education institutions at all levels is globalizing as well (Jolls 2014). Signs of this change—this movement in the U.S. and abroad toward being a global information economy and having education systems to match—are persistent and demand attention, experimentation, and investment.

The growth of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program is a case in point: between December 2009 and December 2014, the number of IB programs offered worldwide grew by 46.35%, with 4972 programs being offered across 3968 schools. A primary school description of the IB tells the story behind this success: "The International Baccalaureate® (IB) Primary Years Program is a curriculum framework designed for students aged 3 to 12. The PYP prepares students to become active, caring, lifelong learners who demonstrate respect for themselves and others and have the capacity to participate in the world around them. It focuses on the development of the whole child as an inquirer, both within and beyond the classroom" (International Baccalaureate 2014, *emphasis added*). These qualities—though timeless in many ways—are now enabled by online and cellular technologies, enabling participation in the global village beyond the classroom, liberating students and teachers alike from the printed page and from the necessity of a total reliance on face-to-face interactions.

This ability to construct, share, collaborate on and publish new instructional materials online marks the beginning of a revolution in curriculum development. In the U.S., adoption of the Common Core State Standards is now driving curriculum development. These standards bring a consistency nation-wide that has long been missing, since standards had previously been developed state-by-state, yet there is a wide divergence in how states, districts, schools, and teachers choose to meet the standards through their instruction. Although

the Common Core still emphasizes the mastery of content knowledge mixed in with the acquisition of process skills that must be practiced over time, the Common Core nevertheless offers an avenue to pursue the ability to standardize, measure and scale educational curricula in a way never possible before. Just as the Common Core is providing a base for standardization, the TIMS, PERLS, and PISA tests represent steps towards more globalized assessments of student attainment, as do the AP (Advanced Placement) and IB exams administered internationally (Jolls 2014).

Certainly, essential questions remain: are we calling for students to learn and to be measured in the right things for the right reasons in the right way, or not? These questions will continue to be debated, and rightly so. Regardless, steps towards a more globalized approach to education may be crude, but these steps are what they are: attempts to deliver education better, faster and cheaper to more and more people. Technology is enabling experiments to identify and capture what society believes that humans need to learn, and also supports attempts to quantify whether society's enormous investment in improving its human capital is being realized (Stewart 2014). "To the extent that public delivery systems embrace market opportunities, investment in new learning tools, and new school formats, will yield improved learning, staffing and facilities productivity and make worldwide access to high-quality, cost-effective learning experiences possible" (Vander Ark 2009).

New philosophies of education are arising to meet these demands. With the advent of the Internet and social media, it is now possible to provide education opportunities that offer a radically different approach from the "factory model" of education in closed classrooms that has long prevailed. Connected learning calls for education to provide youth with opportunities to engage in socially supportive learning that is also personally interesting and relevant, while connecting academics to civic engagement and career opportunities. Additionally, core properties of connected learning experiences are described as "production-centered," using digital tools to create a wide variety of media, knowledge and cultural content, with shared purpose for cross-generational and cross-cultural learning geared toward common goals and problem-solving (Aspen Institute 2014, 31). These characteristics are closely aligned with the skills that citizens need and that employers cite as desirable for workplace readiness, such as professionalism/work ethic, oral and written communications, teamwork/collaboration, and critical thinking/problem solving (Lotto and Barrington 2006).

An example of such a learning environment in action is Learn4Life (Learn4Life 2014), a growing network of California public charter schools which serves a population consisting primarily of high school drop-outs aged 14-23. Students who attend Learn4Life schools are all taught individually in a one-on-one setting, on a personalized track to graduation. No two students are ever alike, and their learning plans are created accordingly primarily through independent study, with an emphasis on teacher guidance in a student-centered approach. Results are highly encouraging: Learn4Life schools boast a 90% graduation rate.

From a technology standpoint, connected learning demands openly networked, online platforms and digital tools that can make learning resources abundant (Aspen Institute 2014, 31). But technology itself must also be addressed: "learners must be equipped—through computational thinking—to understand the difference between human and artificial intelligence, learn how to use abstraction and decomposition when tackling complex tasks and deploy heuristic reasoning to complex problems. The semantic web, big data, modeling technologies and other innovations make new approaches to training learners in complex and systems thinking possible" (NMC Horizon Report, K-12 Preview 2014, 5).

Students are on board with integrating technology into their classrooms: the 2013 Speakup Survey of more than 403,000 K-12 students, parents, educators, and community members reported that students are "looking for a classroom environment that more closely replicates the way they are using digital tools outside of school to support greater communication and collaboration. Furthermore, 53% of students would like for their schools to let them use their own mobile devices within instruction to support their schoolwork, and nearly 50% of virtual high school students say there were interested in what they were learning in school, while only 32% of traditional high school students said the same" (Speakup 2013).

Table 1
Comparing Curriculum Characteristics

CURRICULUM CHARACTERISTICS	
Factory Model	**Networked Model**
Closed classroom experience	Open to world, sharing with others, anytime, anywhere
Teachers delivers prescribed curricular content	Teachers use overarching frameworks to design curricula and lessons, and assigns tasks, sets parameters and guides toward results
Teacher-led focus	Student-led focus with peers
Uniquely authored curriculum	Collaboratively authored curriculum
Individual learning in class setting	Differentiated learning in collaborative setting
Information not timely	Information as of today
Linear, sequential, directive	Modular, interchangeable, explorative
Master content knowledge	Strengthen process skills to advance content knowledge
Focus on facts and content	Focus on facts, content and process
Student artifacts typically written or physically constructed	Student artifacts digitally created, project-based, goal-oriented
Limited distribution physically	Unlimited distribution globally
Assessment by teacher	Assessment by teacher, student, experts, peers, parents and/or others
Assessment limited and untimely	Assessment /feedback 360 degrees and instant if desired
Forced adoption of materials state-wide	Individualized resources meeting standards/local needs
Often not research-based	Research-validated frameworks for inquiry and process
Access limited to print	Easily accessible digitally
Curricula a standardized cookbook emphasizing content	Curricula based on frameworks with varying relevant content
Technology discouraged	Technology essential
Seat-based	Competency-based with measurement, ie., badging, gamification
Silo thinking	Systems thinking
Hands-on deconstruction, limited construction and collaboration	Hands-on, deconstruction, construction, interaction, collaboration
Oriented to understanding	Oriented to understanding, problem solving and action
Student work discarded	Student work archived digitally
Intellectual property taken for granted	Intellectual property valued

To address these widespread sentiments and to address profound changes being called for in the world of education, the Aspen Institute recently released a comprehensive report called "Learner at the Center of a Networked World" (Aspen Institute 2014, 16). The report cites a different approach for students acquiring content knowledge—namely, that "all learners and educators need a sufficient degree of media, digital and social-emotional literacies to learn through multiple media confidently, effectively and safely. Every student must have a chance to learn these vital skills" (Aspen Institute 2014, 36).

This is not to say that content knowledge is unimportant—quite the contrary—but media literacy skills in the global village are needed as the central tools through which to contextualize, acquire and apply content knowledge. Media literacy skills are "constants" used in deconstructing and constructing communication through which to contextualize, acquire and apply content knowledge. Content knowledge is "variable," with an infinite number of subjects. Having media literacy skills, especially being able to use a consistent process of inquiry that is internalized, enhances the ability to communicate and to share ideas through a common vocabulary that transcends subject areas as well as geographic boundaries. Thus, there are no "silos" with this method for teaching and learning because the media literacy skills are cross-curricular and common to all. It is through this process of inquiry that students interrogate, acquire and master content knowledge, but both media literacy skills and content knowledge rest on a continuum of knowledge that can always be expanded and deepened (Jolls 2014).

This means that media literacy skills must be valued, articulated, and taught systematically in ways that are consistent, replicable, measurable, and scalable globally (Jolls 2012). Countries around the world have made media literacy a priority, most notably in Great Britain, where the UK regulatory agency, OfCom, has conducted research and advocated for media literacy; and in Finland, which adopted a national strategy for encouraging media literacy (Good Media Literacy: National Policy Guidelines 2013-2016). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has advanced media literacy education throughout the world through its ongoing commitment to the field.

Media literacy, with its emphasis on critical analysis and media production, lends itself well to designing and organizing new curricular resources utilizing overall frameworks that support connected learning. With this in mind, the following chart compares characteristics of the "old" model for developing and distributing curricula with the emerging model characterized by media literacy education. To wit: Students' exposure and interaction with the outside world was limited to field trips or to visitors, while today, technology allows access to experts as well as powerful images, worlds and sounds connecting students with limitless opportunities for exploring and communicating.

In the past, teachers were the "imparters of wisdom," using set, prescribed curricula while today, teachers utilize frameworks to guide overall curricular goals and directions. They guide students and set the limits and boundaries necessary for students to work together and to learn. This has deep implications for how curricula are constructed. Teachers provided the "window on the world" for students, while today, students explore and discover and learn from their peers as well as the teacher. Curricula from the past was typically uniquely authored by a teacher or author; today, teachers team together to collaboratively author curricula so that there is more continuity between classes.

The emphasis in the past was individual learning and mastery, with students following the teacher in lockstep to acquire concepts; today, students learn collaboratively and yet have more opportunities for differentiated instruction. Since curricula took more time to research, publish and distribute in the past, information was often outdated before arriving at the classroom door; today, information is readily available and sharing is instantaneous. Curricula published in textbooks was necessarily presented in a linear and sequential fashion; technology allows for curricula to be presented in modules that can be interchangeable and dynamic, much like object-oriented software. Also, teachers provided instruction in a directive manner; exploration of a multitude of sources is now easily possible with an emphasis on evaluating the quality of sources.

Emphasis was on content "mastery," since memorizing basic concepts and facts was critical in an environment where information access was more limited. Now, strengthening skills to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and participate with information are critically important in a world where information is easily available. The primarily emphasis of instruction in the past was on facts and content; although facts and content are still highly important (since they represent a particular discipline or information needed for problem-solving), facts and content information are readily accessible. Today, more time is spent on process skills that allow for the ready and effective acquisition and application of content knowledge to projects or problem solving.

Student-produced artifacts in the past were typically written papers or physically constructed projects; today, students are producing digitally-created, project-based, goal-oriented projects. Demonstrations of student learning, such as student artifacts, were typically limited viewing by the teacher or other students and occasionally, parents. Today, these demonstrations of learning can be distributed easily worldwide.

Due primarily to time limits, assessment was limited primarily to the teacher's feedback on students' performance. Today feedback can be quickly obtained from many people, both within and outside the classroom. Assessment data can now be easily collected and used. Because teachers were assessing the work of many students, assessment was more limited and often took much time. Technology is continuing to expand assessment possibilities through software such as "reputation" rating or comments, or badging programs. Also, assessment data can be aggregated or broken down as desired.

States "adopted" and required certain textbooks in each discipline for purchase by school districts. As states loosen regulation, schools will have the option to purchase customized resources so long as these resources meet adopted education standards. Due to (1) the cumbersome and expensive processes needed to support research-based approaches, (2) the uniquely-authored curricula generally available, and (3) the difficulty in easily distributing this knowledge and information to teachers, research-based approaches tend to be hard to find. Using research-validated frameworks that allow for modular curricular construction by a variety of authors allows for a flexible research-validated approach while allowing for an infinite number of variations on how to engage students and promote understanding.

Access to knowledge was limited to face-to-face encounters or print publications; today, face-to-face encounters can connect a multitude of people from anywhere in the world, and information is accessible in multi-media formats that can be published globally. Due to physical limits of print media, distribution of knowledge was limited; today distribution is easily scaled to meet needs and demand. With uniquely authored curricula, presented in a physical text in a linear fashion, curricula presented a standardized "cookbook" that teachers needed to follow day by day. Today, curricula based on research-validated frameworks can be presented in a non-linear, dynamic fashion through a multitude of channels, some involving the teacher, some not.

Technology is often discouraged in today's classrooms, with cellphones and laptops being banned. Such technology will be essential in the future, both as an instructional tool and for student engagement. Completion of student education was judged by the time in seats rather than through measurements of competency, such as completion of "badges" or meeting hurdles presented through games. The increased "gamification" of curricula is a hallmark of new approaches. Each subject that students studied was confined to a class or "silo"; now, with research-based frameworks enabling integration of subjects, students can focus on problem solving that integrates various subjects and encourages a systems-thinking approach.

Because of limited access to technology tools and multi-media production, media literacy instruction has typically been limited to deconstruction activities with limited opportunities for construction (with assignments such as "write a letter to your Congressman" or "write a reflection on the role of branding in your food choices.") Access to multi-media, interactive and collaborative tools allow for a full range of media literacy instruction and collaboration. Primarily because of the classroom isolation of teachers and students, instruction was typically oriented to promoting student understanding. With technology access to the world, instruction can be oriented to both understanding and to problem solving and action. Again, because students and teachers were isolated in their classrooms with few and limited opportunities to share their work, intellectual property and

student work were taken for granted and not valued (typically being thrown out at the end of an assignment). The communications and storage capacities of technology allow for teacher, student and class work to be archived and in cases where the work actively contributes to problem-solving or societal issues, valued appropriately as intellectual property.

This "retooling" of curricula and instruction in the United States is just beginning; and of course, the barriers toward such change are high, including the lack of research and development funds towards such change (Vander Ark 2009). Yet interestingly, the Eighteen Basic Principles of Media Education that Len Masterman, a professor at the University of Nottingham, cited in 1989 echo many of the characteristics of "new curriculum" at a time when the Internet hadn't yet made its appearance. For example, Masterman said, "Media Education is essentially active and participatory, fostering the development of more open and democratic pedagogies. It encourages students to take more responsibility for and control over their own learning, to engage in joint planning of the syllabus, and to take longer-term perspectives on their own learning." Importantly, and related to the construction of curricula, Masterman advised, "Underlying Media Education is a distinctive epistemology. Existing knowledge is not simply transmitted by teachers or 'discovered' by students. It is not an end but a beginning. It is the subject of critical investigations and dialogue out of which new knowledge is actively created by students and teachers" (Masterman 1989).

But before teachers can teach media literacy, they must first understand. Media literacy education is well suited to providing the new type of curricula and instruction required. Because a media literacy approach has been outside the education mainstream, there has been little systematic exploration of how to teach media literacy effectively either in graduate schools of education or in school districts. The Center for Media Literacy has conducted various professional development workshops for pre-K-12, and these workshops have ranged from one-hour introductory overviews of media literacy to five-day intensive trainings, followed by coaching and culminating projects. CML found that some teachers quickly acquire the skills to integrate their curricula with media literacy principles; others need at least one year to make such a transition (Jolls and Grande 2005, 25-30).

Regardless, teachers need time and practice to understand media literacy frameworks, as well as how to apply them and how to teach them. For the first time, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce published a metric for whether states had a 21st Century Teaching Force; the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) based this metric on an analysis. Not a single state's teacher quality policy earned an overall grade of an A, whereas 18 states earned a D or an F. Digital Learning Now! Gave only two states an A- for technology policy, and 14 states received F's (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation 2014, 26-28).

Indeed, CML's longitudinal evaluation of the delivery of its curriculum, *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media*, (Webb & Martin 2009, 430-449) revealed just how important teacher training is. The acquisition of student content knowledge and changes in student attitudes and behaviors in the classes of teachers who were trained in a one-day professional development workshop substantially outshone their peers who delivered the same curricula without training, or who merely administered a pre-post test as a control group. Teachers need training and they need educational resources to do the job. Few, if any, presently teaching in U.S. schools grew up learning through a media literacy lens; and unless professional development is scaled up and delivered in a way that is accessible for the many rather than the few, the likelihood of transforming teaching and learning is greatly diminished.

Hopefully, the same technologies that will transform classroom practice and curricula will also transform professional development for educators. The work of developing tools and measures for teachers to deliver media literacy in a systematic, modular, consistent and research-validated way is an enormous task, given the relatively young state of the field and the challenges of using media in the classrooms. The "new curricula" helps give teachers the resources and guidance that they need to accelerate and to fulfill the global imperative for media literacy education.

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