New Agendas for Media Literacy

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Let's assume that media education is already embedded in the learning environment in a ubiquitous way. In the past, media educators sought consensus by isolating the theories, pedagogies, key concepts and skill sets. We debated discipline boundaries, integration strategies and the aims and purposes for media education. We worked for universal, networked access. We saw the integration of media education language into standards-based education models and policy documents as a victory for its acceptance and inclusion.

At least by now, most people assume that literacy in a global, mobile, digital world implies more than access to digital tools or the simple mastery of orality and alphabetic texts. And so perhaps what we are really wrestling with here is a different animal entirely, that is, the general malaise and anxiety about the role of free public education in society and our responsibility as media literacy educators to contribute to its redesign and sustainability. In the process, I want to suggest a more open and holistic view of media education as a key support for the redesign of public education.

The Sum of Its Parts

I come from a production background and so my own media learning curve began with media making. Only later did I grasp the complexity of "meaning making." In the 1990s I produced a short documentary about educational practices in schools on the Navajo Nation in Chinle, Arizona. At the time, students there were immersed in bi-lingual learning of their native language of Navajo in a distance education program alongside the traditional English Language Arts curriculum. In an interview with a sixth grade girl who spoke Navajo fluently, I asked her about her English class. She sighed, "Ms. Tyner, why do Anglos always have to *name* everything?"

Initially, I had absolutely no idea what she meant. Bi-lingual speakers likely grasped her frustration immediately, but I had no knowledge of the Navajo language and thought to myself, "What's wrong with teaching vocabulary? Why *not* name things in language learning?" As it turns out, this simple question is deeply profound and philosophical and directed me to explore literacy outside my cultural comfort zone. In particular, I began to think about the way that Western language emphasizes detailed taxonomies and definitions and how these structures and communication strategies are reflected in cultural and social practices. In the words of linguist Gary Witherspoon, a non-Navajo who lived with Navajo people, "Whether on the macro level or on the micro level, Western searches for causation and constitution seem to be mostly of a dissective nature. The most lauded studies and writing are masterpieces of dissection..." (1995,

p.2). The implication here is that this bias toward taxonomies and definitions is reflected most obviously in media educators' penchant for analysis through deconstruction.

In contrast, the Navajo language is rooted in orality and memory and more importantly, its focus is "not on the particle, or the individual, but on the whole and the links, the connections and relationships that unite the parts to the whole. From the Navajo perspective, the fundamental reality is the whole, not the part. In the Western ontological perspective, wholes are considered to be contingent and usually temporary arrangements of the parts. In Navajo ontological perspective, the wholes are the primary reality and the parts are contingent and temporal" (p. 2). In the Navajo language, verbs—not nouns—drive meaning and expression. If I were to ask the translation for a thing like a belt or a bird for example, the response might be "it depends," In order for the translation to make sense in Navajo, the verb reflects the animacy, the shape or the consistency of the object in transition and as it connects to a larger universe or system.

And so the implications of this simple question: "Why do Anglos always have to name everything?" haunts me as I think about potential directions, systems and organizing principles for media education in a global, mobile world of ubiquitous, pervasive and accelerated communication.

Although the link between communication and culture is obvious to media educators, it is still a struggle to think past the assumptions of my own literacy patterns and to engage with the way that literacy reinforces ingrained social norms, power structures and pathways to social capital across cultures. In policy circles, media educators still tend to focus on media education definitions, standards, assessments, key concepts and curricula. These discussions are useful as snapshots of literacy in motion, although occasionally they play out as reiterative and tiresome turf battles. (Why do scholars always have to name everything?) Rarely do they provide media educators with the cultural distance necessary to glimpse the whole array of literacy affordances (and limitations)—the sum of its parts. Instead, the focus on deconstruction, definitions and details may make it even more difficult to engage with the innovative and creative educational practices that connect us to contemporary literacy skills and practices.

The Multiliteracy Mandala

A few years ago, I played with my assumptions about the ontology of media literacy by creating a mandala, the ancient design used to meditate on the nature of the universe—in this case, the universe of literacy. The *Multiliteracy Mandala* plays with domains such as form, content, reception, production and context. The idea owes a lot to the New London Group's ideas about multiliteracy and the way that design elements contribute to meaning. Their graphic includes modes of

meaning that are spatial, visual, gestural, audio and linguistic (New London Group, 1996, p. 83).

In the *Multiliteracy Mandala*, I explored the idea that people engage with literacy through different pathways, e.g., as producers, audience members, distributors, various cultural perspectives and that the more literacy attributes they have at their disposal, the deeper the meaning and the more opportunities they have to use their literacy skills for social capital as they switch discourses in the world outside the text.

The most important element for meaning creation for me is reflected in the contextual elements that frame the mandala's attributes of literacy. In other words, we can deconstruct media endlessly, but will never grasp the deeper meaning of a text without consideration of the overarching historical, economic, cultural and social factors, as well as the environmental context of engagement with a text.

Figure 1: The Mulitliteracy Mandala

[Insert Figure 1]

If only it were that simple! Immediately, people who viewed the Multiliteracy Mandala took intense issue with every attribute and their arrangement. This turned out to be a lot more fun than I expected and so I developed an online version for my students to make their own mandalas. This reinforces old ideas that literacy has multiple pathways and that audiences interpret meaning from texts in different ways. When they contribute their own version of the Mandala, they also critique the relationship between form and content, art and data. They express their amazement and frustration at the fluid and flexible complexity of literacy. As a result, my students also critique the definitions, standards and key concepts presented by scholars, policy makers and advocacy groups and situate these frameworks within broader theoretical, ideological and political contexts.

It is true that I am relying heavily on a Western (Anglo) perspective of deconstruction by "naming everything" in the mandala. However, the emphasis on contextual framing as the overarching principle for literacy attainment is meant to imply a more holistic philosophy for literacy and language learning and its relationship to changing and relative perspectives on the uses of literacy to gain social capital. In the end, the *Multiliteracy Mandala* reinforces the observation of literacy scholar Harvey Graff (1987) that literacy is a labyrinth and that crafting a simple definition of media literacy is an exercise in futility.

In my own practice, I focus on the uses of multiliteracies across the curriculum as a way to design learning environments that layer the social and contextual relevance of media for problem-solving, critical discourse, simulations and project-based learning. As it turns out, I can rely on my students to teach me

about the latest apps and devices. In turn, my students can rely on me to bring lived experience and perspectives on relevant contextual knowledge as we discuss the meaning of texts, artistic movements, audience reception and the uses of literacy. And so we engage in cross-generational understanding and debate. They learn where and how to research and connect the contexts that allow them to deeply analyze a text. I learn about the social uses of new devices, apps and genre and in the process, I also gain understanding of new contexts for meaning.

Literacy for All

Even before the global markets crashed in 2008, public education was pushed to increase its efficiency through lean course offerings, large class sizes, packaged content delivery and standardized assessment. This pressure for change with no clear directive offers both challenges and opportunities for media education. Media educators have been in advocacy mode for so many years that we might overlook the fact that the value of media literacy education is obvious to people with a stake in free public education. I would argue that an expansive view of media education across the curriculum is central to the mission of free public education and that it is not that hard to sell this notion to students, teachers, parents and communities. Accessible rhetoric for the broader public about the affordances and uses of "every day literacies" help to negotiate and anchor media education across the curriculum.

I want to clarify here that "broad" and "accessible" does not mean simplistic. Instead, I mean to imply that it is too early in the transition from print to digital to lock in and organize media education around narrow definitions, key concepts, or digital devices. These may be useful for advocacy, field building and scholarly discourse, but the complexity of media education is its strength. Then again, I have never envisioned media education as a unified and urgent movement. Instead I see it as an essential, yet iterative process of knowledge sharing and social negotiation that no one faction can brand and control for long.

I'm also not saying that an expansive view of media education means that if everything counts, then nothing counts. Rigorous debates about the aims and purposes of media education are still an important topic and boundaries are welcome. For example media education continues to be used in the service of moral panics and protectionist agendas as new forms of media diffuse across societies. In the name of coalition building, we have allowed histrionic agendas to define media education in ways that have little to do with its foundations in critical analysis, autonomous inquiry and individual expression. When positioned as a protectionist strategy, the credibility of media education is marginalized and consensus about its aims and purposes is confused and weakened.

Instead, I see the redesign of a moribund school system as a more rewarding opportunity for media educators to engage learners with common, pervasive and

ubiquitous literacies for learning. I believe that our expertise in media education in both formal and informal learning environments is an asset in this regard. Instead of pushing media education as if it were a discipline, I look for opportunities to integrate multiple literacies into broader design elements like problem-solving, experiential learning, collaborative learning, scenarios, simulations, models and interdisciplinary education.

I am always pleased to find more venues to engage with a wide range of colleagues about media education, especially as it pertains to new media. I am excited about this dynamic *Manifesto for Media Education* and see it as a place to provoke and stimulate dialogues of this type among practitioners across time, distance and circumstances. Viva la *Manifesto*!

References

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