

Chapter 34

Building a “Bridge” Between Theory and Practice: A Case Study Approach to Teaching Critical Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores critical media literacy pedagogy. Using case study method, the author argues that The Washington Informer’s, “Bridge” publication can be used as a practical pedagogical tool to teach students how to analyze and deconstruct media texts, and simultaneously inform students on how to produce alternative, counter-hegemonic media texts. This approach is consistent with literature on critical media literacy that calls for engaged and empowering pedagogy to encourage students to think critically about their roles in creating and maintaining a radical and participatory democracy.

INTRODUCTION

After the economic recession of 2007-2008 in the United States, print newspapers suffered a significant loss in advertising revenue and decline in readership (Pew, 2009). Several news organizations, such as the *Charlotte News-Observer*, consolidated via reduction in salaries and layoffs, while some newspapers completely shut down operations, such as the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (Chen, 2009). In 2009, many print newspapers transitioned to either fully online news, such as the *Ann Arbor News*, or supplemental online news, which helped cut costs in printing and distribution (Chen, 2009). The transition to online news also tapped into a growing audience that largely consumed its news online (Pew Research, 2009). The ethnic press, such as the Black press, was also forced to make adjustments to production and distribution practices (Squires, 2009).

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In 2015, the *Washington Informer*, one of two Black newspapers in Washington, D.C., launched the *Bridge*, a publication written by and for Black millennials. It is distributed monthly, both online and in print. In this chapter, the author conducts a case study of the *Bridge* as a method of teaching critical media literacy in an introductory media writing class. More specifically, in the case study, the author argues that alternative press, like the *Washington Informer*, can be used as a pedagogical tool to teach critical media literacy in core mass communication classrooms. In this chapter, the author makes the claim that teaching critical media literacy via alternative media, specifically the Black press, raises awareness about the political economy of news production, empowers media consumers to be conscious and active media producers, and creates opportunity to create and contribute to counter-hegemonic media practices.

TEACHING CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY –WHAT IS IT?

Potter (2016) defines media literacy as, “a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to process and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter,” (p.24). Potter’s concept of media literacy involves three main components: personal locus, knowledge structures and skills. This definition of media literacy basically explains that media literacy is developed when individuals actively use their goals and drive to seek out information (personal locus) to help develop useful sets of organized memory or knowledge (knowledge structures). This organized knowledge, according to Potter (2016), should exist along a continuum, inclusive of cognitive, emotional, aesthetic and moral dimensions. Potter (2016) argues that the internal drive to seek knowledge coupled with the diverse knowledge structures develop skills to process and interpret meaning in media.

In contrast to Potter’s (2016) concept of media literacy that largely focuses on meaning and interpretation of text, other scholars suggest that media literacy take a critical perspective—one that would focus on engagement with media as texts, and the conditions in which these texts are produced and consumed. Tisdell (2008) states that critical media literacy positions students to become transformative learners. Distribution of power during consumption and production practices is explored as students struggle to create and contribute to a more just society (Tisdell, 2008). Similarly, Kellner and Share (2005) state that critical media literacy is pedagogy that informs students how to analyze media codes and conventions, critique stereotypes, and dominant ideologies in media texts.

Lewis and Jhally (1998) state that teaching critical media literacy should “help people become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers,” (p.109). Here, Lewis and Jhally emphasize the conceptualization of media systems as interlocking political, economic and cultural structures, rather than a myriad of media texts that we can choose to consume. This is an important distinction and component in the understanding of critical media literacy.

Critical media literacy iterates the necessity of teaching individuals how to engage with media *and* how to challenge media institutions (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). In accordance with Lewis and Jhally’s (1998), Kellner and Share (2005) note that critical media literacy should include a variety of pedagogical approaches. These approaches include: the traditionalist/protectionist approach which focuses on media effects, the media literacy movement which focuses on the “reading” and “decoding” of media texts, the media arts approach which focuses on the aesthetic qualities of media in self-expression, and most importantly the empowerment perspective. Kellner and Share (2005) state:

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