

Chapter 26

Media Literacy Facilitation as Service Learning and Public Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers insights from a 15-year partnership between a public university and local K-12 schools to explore how the facilitation of media literacy education (MLE) programs by university students can offer rewarding outcomes for both research and learning. The MLE program that serves as the case study for this chapter takes place at local elementary schools each spring in conjunction with an undergraduate communication course and includes interactive media analysis discussions as well as a culminating creative production activity. Reflections and written feedback from participating graduate, undergraduate, and elementary students emphasize the strengths of this pedagogical model for collaboration and learning while also acknowledging the practical constraints of such a partnership. By detailing the institutional-level support, instructional design, and practical implementation of this MLE program, the chapter enumerates the benefits and challenges of engaged research and service learning for advancing media literacy goals.

INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement and service-learning initiatives that connect members of higher education institutions with K-12 students can be productive spaces of learning and resource sharing. Research on the outcomes for college students has shown that participation in service-learning is meaningful for “attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance” (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011, p. 175). In addition to the benefits for college students,

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these partnerships have much to offer community members and media scholars interested in fostering critical thinking about media systems and messages (Scharrer & Cooks, 2006). Service-learning in K-12 schools has been used, for example, to promote media literacy among youth while simultaneously enriching college courses on media violence (Scharrer & Cooks, 2006), journalism (Clark, 2013), and media theory (Paradise, 2011).

Though the connections supported by campus-community partnerships can be constructive, they also pose unique challenges. As these institutions come into contact, project stakeholders multiply and existing structures rearrange. Professors witness their students take on the role of instructors and mentors; undergraduate, graduate, and K-12 students become participants in knowledge creation; and new understandings of and relationships to media are formed. This chapter reflects on the potentials for learning and research that emerge from these arrangements by offering insights from a 15-year partnership between a public university and local K-12 schools where a media literacy education (MLE) program is offered.

In the year 2000, the second author of this chapter, together with faculty colleagues, departmental graduate students, and undergraduate students enrolled in select classes, began an outreach program that connected the university department to nearby public schools. Although the particular configurations of faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, and schools have changed over the years—with some dropping out and others newly coming in—the program has taken place annually with the exception of a sabbatical leave and parental leave since that time. The goal continues to be to sustain a long-term, reciprocal partnership between university and community.

The MLE program that serves as the case study for this chapter is adapted each year to be responsive to the stakeholders at both the university (i.e., the lead faculty member, graduate students, and undergraduate students) and the K-12 schools (i.e., administration, teachers, and students). Each year's iteration of the program therefore builds upon the research and pedagogical lessons from previous years while also incorporating the concerns of present participants. This chapter draws on student reflections from two recent iterations of this MLE program in 2015 and 2017¹. The 2015 iteration of the program centered on advertising literacy and commercial culture for fourth and sixth grade students while the 2017 iteration of the program interrogated media violence with only sixth grade students. Both programs were facilitated by graduate and undergraduate students studying communication at a large public university in the United States.

This chapter interrogates the challenges and rewards of sustained campus-community partnerships through a review of the program design and institutional structures that support this form of engaged research. Furthermore, through thematic analysis of graduate, undergraduate, and K-12 student reflections, this chapter explores how participants conceive of the benefits of the MLE program. This chapter will thereby enumerate the pedagogical benefits of such a program for service-learning in higher education and demonstrate the potentials and barriers for engaged scholarship on MLE.

BACKGROUND

A MLE service-learning initiative requires consideration of instructional design at multiple levels. Firstly, stakeholders must design a program that results in mutually beneficial outcomes for both the university and the K-12 participants. Secondly, the conceptualization of MLE must be made explicit so the curriculum design can foster such literacy. Together, the civic engagement and service-learning framework

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