

Chapter 17

“You’re a Winner”: An Exploratory Study of the Influence of Exposure on Teachers’ Awareness of Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service teachers who use the Internet both for course preparation and student resources need to be aware of and also help their future students understand the influences under which the Internet operates. In this paper, the authors explore pre-service teachers’ awareness of Internet hegemonies and investigate whether and how this awareness changes after a classroom lesson, activity, and practice focused on media literacy. Qualitative methods were chosen to deeply explore the teacher education students’ ideas about, perceptions of, and process for considering the issues raised. Seventy teacher education students participated, and the data indicate that even brief exposure to media literacy principles might make a difference in the ways that teachers perceive and use computer-based media. Implications and suggestions for teacher education are noted and proposals for further research included.

INTRODUCTION

Kara, a visiting student from a former Soviet Republic, was extremely excited. She ran breathless into the office of Ms. Preuss, her faculty liaison at the American school where she was studying,

exclaiming that something wonderful had happened and asking Ms. Preuss to come quickly to help. Intrigued, Ms. Preuss followed Kara down the hall to the pay phone. Kara excitedly explained that she had won \$10,000 instantly from a Web site she was checking and she was calling to claim

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her prize. She couldn’t understand what the person on the phone was saying, though, and she needed Ms. Preuss to listen and help. After two minutes listening to the person on the phone, Ms. Preuss concluded that it was a common Internet ploy - Kara would supposedly be *entered* into a drawing *if* she gave the person on the phone her personal information and answered questions about her interests and habits. When the flashing box with “You’re a Winner!” flashed up on her computer screen, Kara didn’t have the knowledge or skills to figure out what was going on. (A true story)

Many native-English-speaking students are regularly misled by offers and information on the Internet, despite the cultural and linguistic knowledge that is expected to help them avoid these pitfalls. Students with different first languages and different cultural values, like Kara, are even more susceptible to hidden Internet messages and their underlying ideologies, particularly when so much on the Internet is not explicit and is controlled by hegemonic forces rooted in Western values and behaviors.

Censorship is not enough to solve this issue and may not be appropriate (Frechette, 2005). Rather, pre-service teachers who use the Internet both for course preparation and student resources need to be aware of and also help their students understand the influences under which the Internet operates - what Frechette calls an “empowerment approach” (p. 555). One possible way for teacher educators to assist teachers in helping all students use the Internet critically is to focus on media literacy in teacher education courses. The qualitative study described in this paper employs a framework integrating literature on digital hegemony, media literacy, and teacher education to explore the process of teachers becoming media-aware and developing understandings to address the needs of all of their learners.

LITERATURE

Internet Hegemony

Hegemony can be defined as the influence of one group or idea over another, often enforced by implicit persuasion. Hegemony is not necessarily always bad, but it can be harmful when people do not see that they have choices either because they are not aware of its influences or they do not know how to change the situation. Much has been said about the Internet as greatly influenced by capitalist, Western, commercial hegemony; for example, Smith Nash (2002) claims that results and implications of Internet hegemony include that “the English language becomes the arbiter of reality,” non-English sites are “ghettoized,” and diversity is flattened rather than extended to a diverse global community. Although the Internet can be said to have “voluntary” or consensual membership (Hendricks, 2004), when its use is mandated by curricula or peer pressure or even just interest, users need help in identifying underlying issues and ideas that may impact their use. Some of these issues, cited as dangers by MediaLiteracy.com (<http://www.medialiteracy.com/>), include

- Fewer voices, as media ownership is consolidated in the hands of fewer than 10 wealthy individuals and global corporations
- News bias and public relations spin
- Violence packaged as entertainment
- Children and teens targeted by corporate advertisers
- Digital photo and film manipulation
- Media effects on community and personal relationships

Quinlisk (2003) adds that “the globalization of media means that a more limited variety of cultural stories are being told to an increasingly worldwide audience” (p. 35). Clearly, value-laden content is unavoidable, but making those values salient to students is crucial.

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