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Critical Media Literacy and Popular Culture in ELA Classrooms

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- Unpacking the Sites of Our Media (and Pedagogy)**
- Moving beyond Media Consumption toward Production,
Dissemination, and Invention**
- Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

This publication of the James R. Squire Office on Policy Research offers perspectives with implications for policy decisions that affect literacy education, teaching, and learning. Ernest Morrell, professor and director of the Notre Dame University Center on Literacy Education, directs the Squire Office on behalf of NCTE and creates research and reports with the involvement of literacy education leaders in the field. All policy briefs from the Squire Office are available at [NCTE.org](https://ncte.org).

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The daily realities of students throughout the United States are increasingly mediated by the pervasiveness of popular culture. A new report found that Instagram has had a 42.86% increase in users since 2017 (Zote, 2020). Of this, the US makes up 120.7 million active users, about a third of the nation. These numbers represent a new social politics around how culture is created, disseminated, and engaged. Mainstream outlets no longer have a foothold on what narratives are relevant to the public.

Students are often portrayed as mindless consumers of popular culture, but a spike in social media engagement by Millennials and Generation Z reveals that K–12 youth are often at the helm of creating media content and impacting the trends which constitute popular culture. Coupled with the realities of this shifting landscape, an increasingly diverse student population throughout the United States is faced with a static literary canon within ELA classrooms that continues to prioritize white, Eurocentric texts. Much research has delineated the kinds of harm this lack of representation perpetuates for all students, but particularly for racially and linguistically minoritized students who continue to be marginalized by curriculum. While efforts to address our new digitally saturated social reality have taken the form of integrating digital/media literacy into ELA classrooms, the ethos of the canon, or what counts as essential knowledge for schooling, continues to limit how

critically and substantively teachers engage media and popular culture. Thus, new perspectives are urgently needed in ELA to help teachers critically engage media and popular culture to avoid continued harm and to center students as critically engaged members of a new digital social reality.

One crucial orientation for doing this is understanding that our

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digitally mediated reality is neither ideologically nor politically neutral. For this reason, critical media literacy must attend to the politics of digital tools and platforms. For example, in May 2020 Twitter decided to add a fact-checking link to several misleading tweets from Donald Trump, while Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg faced backlash for decidedly *not* deleting or providing fact-checking information around the same information from Trump posted on Facebook. In the midst of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, Twitter, Google, and many other major platforms chose to center support for the movement on their main pages, an act that may be politically and economically driven. These are a few salient examples that make it necessary for ELA classrooms to engage in the future of critical media literacy with careful attention to the *tools* of media as a crucial aspect of understanding media consumption and production.



Unpacking the Sites of Our Media (and Pedagogy)

The digital is not a place. Studying media literacy and critical media literacy does not mean gazing at an alternate space to the world students inhabit in schools. Rather, digital media requires educators and students alike to look critically at our present, digitally mediated lives. Such foci for critical media literacy expand the necessary

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and how such platforms shape, abet, and suppress particular viewpoints and ideologies. How are participants filtered, moderated, and shaped as they write on a social media platform like Twitter? How are forms of content moderation and video monetization shaping the consumptive habits across the vast and growing body of media on YouTube? Reading the values of these tools requires a vigilant critical media literacy that expands classroom responsibilities. Alongside these new directions, current conventional thought around media viewing and listening habits points to our data held in “the cloud.” This popular

concept—foisted upon our public consciousness—conveys a billowing mass that hovers nearby, containing our information always available and ever present. And yet, the cloud is not. Accessing media from the seeming digital ether is actually the wizardry of plucking content that users and companies store on servers housed somewhere else; the cloud, as it were, is just someone else’s computer and perhaps, if we read these metaphors critically, youth perspectives around privacy, surveillance, and convenience would be challenged.

Critically “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987) means much more than critically exploring the content that is encountered via social media. Rather, these platforms and their affordances—Facebook’s filter bubbles (e.g., Pariser, 2011) and Google’s opaque process that reinforces colonial, racialized power (Noble, 2018)—illustrate new ways that critical media literacy must interpret the tools of power today. As Srincek (2017), Zuboff (2019), and others have explored, the cordoning off of online social interactions to a limited number of platforms has meant that modern conceptualizations of capitalism are tied to digital surveillance and to the processes of using varied platforms. As the turn of the 21st century approached and digital technologies were just beginning to revolutionize education, a collective of literacy scholars sought to articulate a vision for how these tools could best be critically engaged to support transformative learning.



The New London Group (1996) urged educators and researchers to explore the then newly emerging contexts on which to critically “design social futures” in the burgeoning globalized, participatory era.

Moving beyond Media Consumption toward Production, Dissemination, and Invention

As the participatory turn in communications studies indicates, student engagement with popular culture and media in the ELA classroom is richest when it encompasses both analysis of existing texts and composition of new ones. When young people become literacy creators in addition to consumers, they gain a deeper grasp of various modes of expression and the necessary skills to contribute to ongoing creative conversations (Kellner & Share, 2019). Such creation is crucial not only for students’ growth as scholars, but also for their development as civic leaders; as critical literacy theorists remind us, the abilities to make and communicate meaning are the catalysts for acting in community with others to sustain and improve democratic life (Morrell et al., 2013).

In today’s multimodal literacy landscape, it is easier than ever before to provide students with opportunities to express themselves creatively and civically. Before the advent of web 2.0 technologies, the publication and dissemination of texts was much more

dependent upon gatekeepers (e.g., media conglomerates, publishing companies), which meant that even when students had the tools to create their own media, they encountered barriers to sharing that media beyond a classroom or local community audience.

Today’s digital communication context is

no longer as hierarchical and unidirectional; social media platforms are conducive to multidirectional dialogue that allows for the amplification of a wider variety of voices (Cohen & Kahne, 2012).

The New London Group (1996) argued that if digital communication outlets simply sought to transmit the same types of texts from the same voices on a wider scale, they would replicate stratified social power dynamics; instead, they advocated that this opportunity be used to foreground and celebrate a wider array of literacies for the purposes of building a more equitable public life. As they noted, “cultural and linguistic diversity is a classroom resource just as powerfully as it is a social resource in the formation of new civic spaces and new notions of citizenship” (p. 69).

Twenty years later, the range of tools that youth can use to share their unique perspectives has grown exponentially—

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from Twitter to TikTok and beyond—and literacy educators can be leaders in supporting youth as they craft and curate their voices if they are ready to think beyond the classroom walls and engage with the wider public (Jocson, 2013). Leveraging media and popular culture in the ELA classroom should no longer focus only on helping young people consume and analyze the texts that surround them; it must support them to compose new texts, disseminate them to the world, and invent new expressive forms for the purpose of building expansive and just social futures (Mirra et al., 2018).

This mission in some ways complements existing educational innovations that advocate for

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- collaborative and
- action-oriented
- pedagogies,
- including project-
- based learning
- frameworks
- (Caraballo &
- Lyiscott, 2018).
- Educational
- platforms that
- encourage

young people to share their multimodal compositions (e.g., blogs, videos, performances, community presentations) with audiences beyond their classrooms are offering a conduit for youth voices. The National Writing Project (NWP), a valued partner of NCTE, has been a leader in supporting civically engaged youth writing

through their Writing Our Future projects; the American Creed initiative encouraged classroom communities to share stories about what the concept of *American* means to them, while the Letters to the Next President initiative facilitated the creation of a public database of over 11,000 youth letters about the civic issues that matter to them (Garcia et al., 2020).

Despite the growth of such platforms, wariness about the privacy of student data and the risks involved in connecting with a broader public beyond the school perimeter remain, which can stifle broader efforts to cultivate and share youth media. Many of the most intensive and engaged opportunities for youth composition and dissemination are facilitated through community organizations (Baldrige, 2019). YR Media, a national network of youth journalists based in Oakland, California, produces online content and develops apps by and for young people, as does the Black Youth Project in Chicago, Illinois. New York City’s Global Action Project supports youth with making media to amplify and engage in movements for social justice. Such organizations offer models that literacy educators can take up in their classroom contexts to foster youth creation in ways that support them to not only master the media tools of today, but also to invent the new tools and forms of expression of tomorrow.



Recommendations for Policy and Practice

For District & School Leaders

1. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic illuminated alarming disparities in access to technology across lines of race and class. Thus, it is crucial to ensure that all students have equitable and expansive access to sources of media and popular culture for learning. This includes

a. *Digital devices:* Considering the fact that media and popular culture are now largely produced and distributed through digital platforms, it is imperative that students enjoy access to devices through which they can both access this content for learning and create their own multimodal texts.

b. *Internet access:* Since devices cannot be conduits for digital learning without internet capabilities, students must also be provided with high-speed internet access in both school and home learning contexts. In addition, this access should be as expansive as possible since firewalls and other restrictions choke off opportunities for critical thinking and analysis of digital content.

c. *Multimodal/multisited instructional resources:* When allocating funding for instructional resources, leaders should think beyond traditional print texts and ensure that teachers and students can benefit from a wide variety of visual,

audio, and multimedia material, as well as community-based learning experiences.

2. Support teachers to engage students in critical media literacy and analysis of popular culture. This includes

a. *District/school policies:* Teachers and families need access to clear and committed policy documents that demonstrate strong support from leadership for the critical thinking and dialogue necessary to analyze media and popular culture. NCTE offers several resolutions to assist leaders in crafting this policy language, including *Resolution on English Education for Critical Literacy in Politics and Media*; *A Call to Action: What We Know about Adolescent Literacy Instruction*; and *Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education*.

b. *Sustained opportunities for professional learning:* Considering that the development of media and popular culture is outpacing many teacher preparation programs, teachers need intensive, sustained, and meaningful opportunities to learn about the affordances and new content and integrate it into their instruction. Considering the controversial issues often addressed in the media, special attention needs to be paid to facilitating these discussions in ways that prioritize student safety and values of inclusion and antiracism.

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c. *Organized opportunities for student media production/dissemination:* As teachers and students develop innovative projects to support student media production and dissemination, leaders can amplify these efforts by dedicating resources to school, district, and community events to support and disseminate student voice.

For Educators

1. Integrate a wide range of media and popular culture into standards-based literacy instruction. This includes

a. *Assessment of background knowledge students hold around media and popular*

culture: Since students are immersed in a digitally saturated reality, any effort to integrate media and popular culture into instruction must consider how they already make meaning of these, and their relationship to the

[T]eachers need to invest significant effort into examining their own knowledge and biases and ensuring that they develop norms, protocols, and strategies that prepare students to have inclusive, antiracist dialogues.

literacies of media and popular culture as crucial entry points for instruction.

b. *Development of multimodal text sets and unit plans:* Media and popular culture abound with texts that engage with complex themes and language on par with (and often beyond) any novel in the traditional ELA canon.

Twenty years into the 21st century, it is essential that teachers explore this range of texts and integrate them in a robust manner into their instruction. They are supported in these efforts by skills-based standards, including the Common Core. NCTE journals highlight the innovative work of ELA teachers in this area, as do lesson plans featured by NCTE's ReadWriteThink website.

c. *Commitment to critical analysis and racial literacy:* Robust and meaningful engagement with media and popular culture will inevitably surface a wide range of controversial social issues. Instead of avoiding discussions about these issues, teachers should lean into them with students to hone their critical media literacy skills. Before doing so, however, teachers need to invest significant effort into examining their own knowledge and biases and ensuring that they develop norms, protocols, and strategies that prepare students to have inclusive, antiracist dialogues.

2. Build capacity to engage in pedagogies that support youth voice and creativity. This includes

a. *Formative and summative assessments that go beyond the five-paragraph essay:* A commitment to engaging students in consumption of media and popular culture in the classroom must also include a commitment to supporting students to express their learning through a variety of multimodal forms.

Essays are just one way for students to express what they know and think; teachers should encourage and make possible a variety of modes through which students can demonstrate learning creatively.

b. *Authentic venues for youth media production and dissemination:* Digital media platforms have dismantled

traditional gatekeepers when it comes to sharing student voice, and as a result, there is no longer any reason for student learning to remain within the classroom walls. Teachers should seek authentic and meaningful outlets for students to raise their voices and share their media production in community and digital spaces.

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