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REVIEW AND CRITICISM

The State of Media Literacy: A Rejoinder

Renee Hobbs

Thanks to *JoBEM* editor, Susan Brinson, who offered me the opportunity to write a rejoinder to W. James Potter's essay on the State of Media Literacy. Potter begins his response to my essay by alleging that my identity and track record limit the value of my perspective on the field. After justifying his own editorial choices in terms of breadth, balance over time, balance across scholars, and description over prescription, Potter then suggests that my critical perspective regarding his work is an indication of my own lack of media literacy.

I begin my rejoinder by wishing that Potter addressed my principal argument, where I claim that his review examines media literacy from a too-traditional mass communication perspective, rooted in the media effects tradition, and as a result, it neglects much important recent work from this increasingly global and interdisciplinary community of scholars and practitioners. When media literacy is conceptualized primarily as a response to presumed negative media effects, pedagogy shifts from its roots in constructivism to become essentially persuasive. Some educators aim to deliver a message about privacy or reputational issues on the Internet, desensitization and media violence, the limiting world view offered by gender stereotypes, the dangers of media ownership, or the emotional manipulation embedded in fast food advertising. They can do so in ways that promote analysis and metacognition as well as divergent, critical thinking, or they can deliver a voluminous collection of facts, carefully assembling a compelling persuasive message using rhetorical strategies that position students as spectators who, more or less inevitably, will be expected to adopt the "right" perspectives on key issues (or at least be able to reproduce them on an exam). The robust and meaningful tension at the heart of the empowerment-protection debate derives its potency from these concerns. It may be that the distinction about how pedagogical methods reflect

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and shape instructional goals is irrelevant to Potter. But in a recent interview with Tessa Jolls of the Center for Media Literacy, he showed authentic concern for how research and service pressures may interfere with college faculty placing a proper focus on developing students' writing and critical thinking skills (Potter, 2011). On most college campuses across the United States, this is a widely shared concern.

And it is one of the reasons interest in media literacy grows among communication scholars: a sense of genuine discovery results from the recognition that emphasizing disciplinary frameworks may promote coursework that consists of the assembling and arrangement of "info-bits," as Potter calls them, facts which quickly become outdated, lose their relevance, and serve no long-term value to students. Media literacy education practices, which embody deep theoretical roots in the constructivist learning principles outlined by Dewey, offer a valuable alternative to teachers, enabling them to set aside their exclusive focus on knowledge transmission and work instead on engaging students with practices that promote intellectual curiosity, including asking questions about what you watch, see, read, and listen to—across all types of media genres and forms. This approach to education is well-suited to the contemporary world, where the latest facts are at everybody's fingertips. Today, the difference between an unskilled and strategic user of digital media, mass media, and popular culture is ever more obvious and important.

There's plenty of gee-whiz rhetoric valorizing the benefits of engaging kids as producers and authors of digital and social media. But make no mistake about it: creating a learning environment to develop the constellation of competencies required to be effective is not a piece of cake. Students arrive on campus with vast differences in their levels of knowledge and skill. Teachers and students alike are motivated differentially to develop these competencies in the classroom, and the ever-changing nature of the digital media and technology landscape is unlikely to slow down. As scholarly and professional literature reveal, implementing the instructional practices of digital and media literacy is a challenging process that places new demands on faculty and students, shifting expectations about the core practices of teaching and learning (Hobbs, 2011). Some students, raised in the No-Child-Left-Behind "jump through the hoops" testing-centric culture, will resist being asked to shift from passive sponge to engaged participant. Other challenges arise when students actually take seriously the practice of critical thinking about the mass media, popular culture, and digital media. For example, when students truly are empowered to ask critical questions, they do not stop when the lesson concludes. Their hard questions may make us uncomfortable. Easy access to diverse sources of information combined with the ability to ask strategic questions, the ability to multitask and crowdsource, and the skills of self-publishing may open up complex and unanticipated issues where the teacher has little expertise.

Digital and media literacy education is a community education movement (Hobbs, 2010) because educators across a wide spectrum of fields now recognize the disconnect between the traditional modes of teaching and the world in which we now live. As media literacy advocate and cultural anthropologist Michael Wersch puts it, "The urgency of our movement is not grounded in a single political issue.

It is grounded in broad cultural and technological shifts pervasive enough to be recognized by virtually everybody in our society" (2011, p. 2).

It is energizing that new stakeholders are discovering the value of exploring the pedagogical ramification of developing various "tool" literacies (ICT, computer, digital, visual) in relationship to the "representational" literacies (media, information, news). Communication researchers and teachers certainly are key agents of this work. But public discourse about media literacy now is populated by a wide range of stakeholders, many of whom see teaching about digital media and technology from perspectives inflected by the humanities and social sciences, cultural studies, youth development, community development and social justice, to name a few.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Potter sees the world in terms of the six research areas defined by the discipline of broadcasting and electronic media: industry; technology; policy/regulation; media content; audiences; and effects. By positioning media literacy squarely within the effects tradition, Potter views current momentum in research and scholarship in media literacy as validation for the longstanding value of the effects tradition. It is a legitimate perspective on the field, certainly, but it seems to be, in my view, inappropriately marginal. Adopting this perspective removes more than 90% of all the most interesting new ideas now emerging from new scholarship on this topic. For this reason, I was motivated to respond to Potter's essay on behalf of *JobEM* readers, who when encountering an essay titled, "The State of Media Literacy," might reasonably expect to find a comprehensive review of current work in the field. The citations I share in my response essay represent the work of scholars, advocates, policymakers, and practitioners from a number of different disciplines and fields, who have been coalescing towards a set of ideas and values about the practices of media literacy education, publishing this work in journals including the *International Journal of Learning and Media*, the *Journal of Communication*, *Learning, Media and Technology*, *Educational Media International*, the *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*, *Pedagogy*, the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, and many others.

JobEM readers can decide for themselves whether my response to Potter's review essay reflects a narrow personal vision or a broader, more inclusive and well-informed one. Similarly readers can judge whether the rationale Potter offers to defend his editorial choices in the review essay aligns with the actual quality of the work itself. But I vigorously reject his argument that the critical spirit of academic argument is antithetical to the values of media literacy education, and that, to be more media literate, I should have withheld quality assessments and instead drawn productive connections between our two essays. In my view, this last point is a particularly weak argument that betrays fundamental epistemological principles at the heart of academic inquiry: scholars contribute to build new knowledge by rigorously subjecting ideas to reasoning, evidence and critique. I offer my scholarship, teaching, creative multimedia work, and advocacy to the public in the "critical friends" spirit (Bambino, 2002). In doing so, I inevitably receive a share of valuable and well-meaning criticism which supports my intellectual growth and vitality. My critique of Potter's review essay was generated by the same spirit, as I aim to

improve the quality of media literacy education practice through cultivating the highest expectations for both current and future scholars and practitioners in the field.

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