Developing Media Literacy in Cyberspace: Pedagogy and Critical Learning for the Twenty-First Century Classroom

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Julie Frechette addresses the integration of new technology in the classroom by responding to concerns over Internet access and content through media literacy initiatives. She explores the means through which technological access is deployed, asking the questions: What does it mean to be technologically literate in the information age, how can information literacy be initiated, and how can the learning process be transformed? (xviii)

Many educators believe there is a need to integrate critical literacy skills, also known as information literacy, into the curriculum so that students are prepared for the global world we live in. These skills include the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce information/content in a variety of forms. Media literacy teaches students to explore and critically examine the media messages we are inundated with everyday. It is often defined as the ability to "read" media texts by analyzing, accessing, and evaluating communication in a variety of forms, and to "write" media texts by producing messages through personal experience, narrative, and point of view. By learning to critically "read" and "write" media, students can become effective and informed citizens who can make better choices and act in the best interest of ourselves and others (25). Not only is media literacy vital to the integrity of critical student learning, but the traditional role of the teacher as the "foundation of knowledge" has to be be reevaluated as massive amounts of information are readily accessible on the Internet. (xvii)

Frechette outlines the strengths and limits of computer technology within pre- and post-secondary education. She examines the changing nature of pedagogy with the introduction of decentralized technology, namely the Internet. "As James Schwoch, Miriam White, and Susan S. Reilly (1992) articulate, exploring the pedagogy of media culture is so vital to building a "critical citizenship" because contemporary media culture is a major site of everyday learning. Frechette further questions the notion of "critical citizenship" by attempting to answer the following questions: Who has access to the Internet? How has the Internet been utilized or conceptualized within the classroom curriculum? What do we mean by "critical citizenship" as articulated within the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy and media literacy? What epistemological assumptions, forms of authority, or modes of signification are produces and/or altered through this medium?

In the second chapter of the book, Frechette looks at the administrative, educational, and parental concerns that exist regarding the use of technology in the classroom. Another chapter focuses on focuses on critical pedagogy and its transformative possibilities within cyberspace. Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel (1996) wrote that critical learning can emerge within cyberspace through three interrelated areas - critical pedagogy, knowledge information, and understanding.

Peter McLaren (1988) maintains that critical pedagogy can empower students to intervene in their own self-formation and to transform the oppressive features of the wider society to make such an intervention necessary (33). Barry Kanpol (1997) argues critical pedagogy should be situated within a critical postmodernism that questions those world-views that uphold and perpetuate "absolutes" and "universal truths." As critical pedagogues we should be asking questions like: Whose knowledge or worldviews are we teaching? How is identity constructed? How many ways of learning are there? How many realities are there? (33)

Frechette believes that what is missing in educational technology are critical literacy skills that allow students to reflect on and question the underlying structures, content, and elements of computer and technological applications. (75) Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) reminds us that power and subjectivity influence all classroom dynamics. At the heart of cyberspace exploration in schools is the need to go beyond traditional democratic ideals of equal access to information and technology. Teachers and students need to become "problem-posers" by examining how new technologies create inequalities according to socioeconomic status, education, gender, age, and the like. Using Dewey's notion of "democracy" as a broad experiential condition where the needs of individuals and society are cultivated, schools need to devise pedagogical strategies to address those complicated structures of power that set people up as unequal members of society through new technologies. (113)

Students will need to learn how to deconstruct texts through their own voice, ideas, and perspective. Deconstruction is not about exposure of error but it is a way of thinking about the danger of what is powerful and useful. Patti Lather, citing John Caputo, explained that the goal of deconstructive critique is to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep the system in play, to set up procedures to continuously demystify the realities we create, to fight the tendency for our categories to congeal. (114) Students should develop a critical understanding of power structures within the media through their experimentations with media production. Students should learn to take apart an ideology like they would a puzzle with the freedom ability to re-create a new picture or puzzle through their own (re) assembling of the parts. This (re)assembling process is made easier by new technologies that allow students to easily cut and paste, digitally edit, and manipulate media so they become information providers as well as receivers. (115)

The Internet, along with advances in computer technology and software, has had a significant impact on many areas of our lives. The author has provided a strong argument for the need to encourage students to become content producers and to teach them the skills necessary to explore, interrogate, and analyze how the media shapes our culture and affects our world. The only way to transform or intervene in power networks of communication is to become part of the network. Students need to learn web design, how to correspond through email, and use multimedia to develop and present their critical cultural capacities.