Critical Media Literacy in Teacher Education: Discerning Truth Amidst a Crisis of Misinformation and Disinformation

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Teacher educators, teachers, and K-12 learners today are immersed in multiple media environments, some of which are beset with dangerous information and deliberate falsehoods. In the age of misinformation and disinformation, critical media literacy must become an essential dimension of teacher education. Current and future teachers need to develop critical media literacy skills to think deeply and critically about the media they use for teaching (e.g., YouTube videos, websites, podcasts, books) and the media they and their students are exposed to on a regular basis (e.g., social media, news, TV, movies), and then begin envisioning how they will support students in becoming critical readers, viewers, and listeners of the media they interact with daily. In this article, we will discuss the role that teacher education plays in generat-
ing a more media literate society that is able to respond to and prevent crises of disinformation that threaten democracy and social justice.

**INTRODUCTION**

In his 2021 presidential inaugural address, Joe Biden highlighted the challenges raised by the “cascading crises of our era”: the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate change, widespread economic inequality, long-denied demands for racial justice, America’s shifting position in the world, and authoritarianism and its attacks on democracy (The White House, 2021). Reflecting on the President’s remarks, it is apparent that responding to these crises requires everyone to continually access and critically examine information from digital and print media in order to make informed decisions about their actions as members of a democratic society. “Thriving democracies” wrote Breakstone and colleagues (2019) “need citizens who are able to access, evaluate, and use reliable information to participate in public discourse” (p. 4).

However, while the Internet and various media outlets provide information freely and almost instantly, much of that information is not reliable, verifiable, or true. Just last year, authors of the Aspen Institute’s Commission on Information Disorder report noted that the misinformation and disinformation propagated by social media created “a chain reaction of harm,” and acted as a “force multiplier for exacerbating our worst problems as a society” (p. 1). Oftentimes these harms are amplified in communities of historically marginalized groups of individuals, which are more likely to be targeted with disinformation campaigns (Austin et al., 2021). The Latino community, for instance, was targeted with disinformation posts in Spanish on social media and in messaging apps during the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased vaccine hesitancy in a community already at high risk for complications from the virus (Sesin, 2021). This is just one example, of many, that demonstrates the very real consequences that media and information have on individuals and society.

At a time when information is easy to come by, but the truth is hard to find, teachers can play a crucial role in shaping the future of society. This is especially important given that students of all ages are ill-prepared to critically read, listen to, and view media. A study from the Stanford History Education Group found that the majority of middle-school through college
students did not have the skills to analyze or deconstruct a variety of mass media, including advertisements, news, and social media sites (Wineburg et al., 2016). A more recent study of nearly 3,500 high school students had similar “troubling” findings (Breakstone et al., 2019, p. 3). In this context of spiraling social problems and relentless misinformation and disinformation, critical media literacy is an essential element of civic life, and therefore, we believe it should be an essential dimension of teacher education.

Media literacy is defined in a variety of ways; most commonly, as an umbrella term encompassing the analysis of mass-media, pop-culture, and digital platforms. Using the concepts of media literacy laid out by Buckingham (2003, 2007, 2019), a media literate individual is able to ask questions about the production, representation, language, and audience of any media text. Critical media literacy, more specifically, explores ownership, production, and the distribution of media, encourages inquiries about dominant ideology, and is rooted in social justice and making space for change-making (Kellner & Share, 2005). Critical media literacy looks beyond the content of the media to better understand dynamics of power related to how and why that content came to be.

To date, there is no required critical media literacy component of teacher education. So far, professional learning opportunities about critical media literacy have been limited to formal workshops during school professional development (PD) days, conference sessions, and personal connections between teachers and media literacy practitioners (Butler, 2020). While these PD opportunities are valuable, considering how important a media-literate society is to public health, democracy, and social justice, more is needed (Butler, 2020).

While media literacy, and work done in its name, has been ongoing for decades, the rapid pace with which disinformation and misinformation is spreading and harming individuals and society requires an innovative approach to addressing this technological challenge - one that democratizes the work by providing teachers with multiple levels of support before, during, and after their teacher licensure programs. Therefore, our vision for 2025 is that critical media literacy must be an integral dimension of how colleges and universities prepare future teachers and how schools and districts support the professional growth of current teachers. By holistically integrating critical media literacy into teacher education, teachers and students will be better prepared to be critical consumers of media and, thus, more informed and active citizens.
VISION

We propose working toward a future in which every teacher educator and every current and future teacher: 1) critically examines the media platforms, outlets, messages, and tools they and their students interact with on a daily basis; 2) reflects upon how their decisions regarding the use, selection, and production of media influences their teaching, student learning, and society; and 3) integrates critical media literacy and critical media production activities into their classes to develop their students’ critical media literacy skills.

To achieve these goals, educators need to know how to “read” a variety of media materials, including, but not limited to, print, digital, visual, aural, and social media. Specifically, they must be able to critically examine the content of the media and the power behind that content. This includes deconstructing how individuals, organizations, and even governments use design, images, text, sounds, and other elements of print and digital media to communicate ideas and information with the goal of influencing the opinions and behaviors of others. This also includes a deep inquiry into the behind-the-scenes production of media. While a lot of attention is paid to who is on screen (e.g., movie actors, social media influencers, public figures), much of the power of media comes from those who design, produce, manage, and distribute the media that surrounds us every day.

Goals to Achieve by 2025

Based on our vision, we propose the following measurable goals for the field of teacher education to achieve by 2025: 1) Integrate critical media literacy into national and state standards; 2) Integrate critical media literacy into education technology standards and guidelines; 3) Provide access to critical media literacy courses for students in schools and colleges of education; 4) Embed critical media literacy activities into teacher licensure courses; 5) Provide ongoing, long-term support for in-service teachers to develop and expand their critical media literacy skills.

Threats to Vision

Achieving our vision of developing critically media literate teachers and students will be difficult without collective answers to the following questions, which highlight the potential threats to our vision.
First, will social media platforms, media companies, and politicians make it harder to become media literate in the expansive information age? Critical media literacy requires uncovering the systems, practices, and decisions that shape the production, distribution, ownership, representation, language, and audience of any given media text. Yet, the lack of transparency in algorithms, design decisions, and even data collection practices from social media platforms and media companies can hinder critical media literacy. An organization calling for algorithm transparency noted that “you can’t regulate what you don’t understand” (AlgorithmWatch, 2020, para. 6), and similarly educators and students will struggle to critically examine the systems, practices, and decisions of social media platforms, media outlets, and politicians without more transparency.

Second, will teacher educators and new teacher candidates see critical media literacy as another add-on or as an essential feature of the art and craft of teaching? Considering how saturated daily life is by media of all types, it may be difficult for educators to see the threats posed by passive consumption. Additionally, when educators define themselves and their roles mainly in terms of teaching specific academic subjects, critical media literacy may look like just another requirement imposed by regulating agencies. However, every academic discipline is threatened by misinformation and disinformation, and critical media literacy is key to maintaining academic integrity.

Third, how will teacher educators develop their critical media literacy skills so that they are well-equipped to support and design professional learning activities for current and future teachers? Teacher educators must be willing to engage in critical media literacy practices so they can model these practices for teacher candidates.

Fourth, will colleges and universities, which are struggling with budget and resource restriction, support innovative and creative media literacy courses, programs, and initiatives? Integrating critical media literacy need not be seen as too expensive, and, when there are inevitable expenses, the long-term benefit to society will make the initial investment worthwhile.

IMPLEMENTATION

In order to achieve our vision, we propose five new initiatives that are aligned with our previously mentioned goals.
1. Integrate Critical Media Literacy into National and State Standards

Critical media literacy should be embedded into the curriculum standards for every subject. Recently, the National Council of Teachers of English posted a call to action to incorporate media education in English Language Arts “because English teachers have a professional responsibility to prepare students for work, life, and citizenship, [therefore] media education must be an essential component of the professional identity of teachers” (2022, para. 6). However, English teachers alone should not have to shoulder the burden of preparing all students to be critically informed citizens. Education has the power to perpetuate or disrupt dangerous systems of misinformation and disinformation that spread through our society; therefore, *all* teachers must be empowered with the skills and confidence needed for disruption. Many national and state curriculum standards have not been revised in several years - including the Common Core State Standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) - and do not reflect the essential skills and knowledge that students need in today’s digital information age. Therefore, state departments of education, professional organizations, and other curriculum designers should revise and update their standards to incorporate critical media literacy.

Additionally, to help teacher educators and current and future teachers see critical media literacy as more than another add-on to their teaching, critical media literacy should be embedded into how teacher educators define the standards of effective teaching and learning. For example, the 2020 NSTA/ASTE Standards for Science Teacher Preparation state that “effective teachers create anti-bias, multicultural, and social justice learning” (Morrell, et al., 2020, para. 9). That statement becomes even more impactful when critical media literacy is added to that list of goals for teacher preparation.

2. Integrate Critical Media Literacy into Education Technology Standards and Guidelines

Critical media literacy should be integrated into the ISTE Standards for Students (2016) and Educators (2017) and the National Education Technology Plan (U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2017). The ISTE Standards for Students and Educators each currently have a digital citizenship component that focuses specifically on the rights and responsibilities of participating in a digital world – including how to act in a legal, ethical, and positive manner in online settings, how to use and share
intellectual property, and how to manage identity and personal data in the
digital world. Yet, in today’s society, where the digital and physical worlds
are deeply interconnected, being a citizen requires more than understanding
rights and responsibilities - it requires the ability to critically investigate the
media from a lens of social justice, act against the harms and systems of in-
justice in the media and determine when and how to use the media to make
informed decisions. Therefore, these standards could benefit from empha-
sizing the critical aspect of critical media literacy in either the digital citi-
zenship or knowledge constructor domains. Meanwhile, the 2017 National
Education Technology Plan does not even mention the term “media liter-
acy.” Since education stakeholders look to ISTE and the U.S. Department
of Education for guidance regarding technology in education, it is essential
they revise and update their standards and guidelines to include critical me-
dia literacy.

3. Provide Access to Critical Media Literacy Courses for Students in Schools
and Colleges of Education

Students in schools and colleges of education should have access to
critical media literacy courses that can support their development of founda-
tional knowledge and skills to inform their practice as future teachers. Criti-
cal media literacy courses could be offered in a school or college of educa-
tion, a department of communication, or another department. Colleges and
universities that are struggling with budget and resource restriction might
develop an interdisciplinary certificate, major, or learning pathway in criti-
cal media literacy in which the costs can be shared across multiple depart-
ments at an institution.

4. Embed Critical Media Literacy Activities in Teacher Licensure Courses

Teacher licensure programs should feature critical media literacy activi-
ties in every required course. With creative thinking and forethought, criti-
cal media literacy can be embedded into any teacher education course or
activity. For example, teachers can use the “Critical Media Literacy Guides”
(Butler et al., 2021) to critically analyze the production, language, audience,
ownership, distribution, and representation of a YouTube video, website,
movie, image, cartoon, meme, or other type of media before incorporating it
into their lesson plan. In a social studies methods course, teacher candidates
can use or remix one of the 100+ activities in the open access eBook *Critical Media Literacy and Civic Learning* (Maloy et al., 2021). In an English Language Arts methods course, candidates can examine how and why different persuasive writing techniques are used to propagate disinformation on social media and in the news. In a math or science methods course, candidates can critically examine the representation of traditionally marginalized individuals in their textbooks and curriculum materials.

In any course, teacher candidates can be asked to critically analyze their own, and their students’, use of and interaction with media, including examining the media they produce (e.g., mini-lecture videos), the media they select and use (e.g., the images they include in presentation slides), the media that is embedded within their textbooks and other curriculum materials, and the media their students engage with outside of school (e.g., TikTok). Giving teacher candidates time to reflect upon and question the ways in which media shapes their teaching, learning, and student learning will help them adopt critical media literacy as part of, not an addition to, their lesson plans and curricular goals (Butler, 2020). Critical media literacy prompts can also become part of the lesson planning templates teacher candidates use, and, regardless of subject area, can be incorporated into the content of those lessons.

To achieve this goal, teacher educators need to be able to design critical media literacy activities and role model critical media literacy practices. However, they do not need to have extensive expertise to do this. They can begin by co-designing critical media literacy learning activities with teacher candidates. This will allow teacher educators and future teachers to build their critical media literacy skills together rather than requiring that teacher educators first become experts in this topic.

### 5. Provide Ongoing, Long-Term Support for In-Service Teachers to Develop and Expand Their Critical Media Literacy Skills

After teacher licensure programs, teachers should continue to be encouraged and supported to develop their critical media literacy skills. This might happen by inviting teachers to incorporate critical media literacy into their yearly professional goals and professional learning community (PLC) conversations. Schools and districts could also collaborate with experts at local universities to provide high-quality ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers. Or they could provide small grants to teachers to participate in formal PD (e.g., graduate courses, conferences) or informal learning opportunities (e.g., Twitter chats, unconferences, book studies,
watch parties) and then lead critical media literacy PD activities for their colleagues.

Critical media literacy is essential for disrupting systems of power and oppression and can begin with simple questions - who designed this media? Why? How? For Whom? What is the visible message? What is the hidden message? Whose story is told? Whose story is left out? When teachers are empowered to ask critical questions, they will pay closer attention to the expansive influence of media in their lives and their students’ lives.

**CONCLUSION**

The cascading crises identified by President Joe Biden at the beginning of his presidency have not gone away, and newer ones continue to emerge. Crises do not have to be permanent or paralyze our collective capacity to respond. But solutions depend on understanding, and such understanding comes from having the critical media literacy skills to locate reliable and truthful information on which to base personal and public policy choices. By holistically integrating critical media literacy in teacher education, current and future teachers, and their students, will be equipped not just to respond to the cascading crises of our era, but to vitally shape the future by preventing further crises that threaten democracy and social justice.

**References**

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