Democracy & Education

Media Literacy as Mindful Practice for Democratic Education

Theresa Redmond (Appalachian State University)

Abstract

This essay is a response to Brown's (2015) article describing her strategy of transaction circles as a student-centered, culturally responsive, and democratic literacy practice. In my response, I provide further evidence from the field of media literacy education (MLE) that serves to enhance Brown's argument for using transaction circles in order to promote democratic discourse, specifically augmenting her ideas by connecting the purposes and processes of transaction circles with key implications of media literacy pedagogy. I invite Brown to consider how her concept of transaction circles may be extended in three ways: (a) through acknowledging the indispensable role of the teacher, not the media or technology, in cultivating powerful learning opportunities for students; (b) through the inclusion of the broader contexts of message construction, language, ownership, and dissemination as part of critical media literacy; and (3) through the integration of media production as an essential aspect of media literacy. I conclude by proposing new questions related to critical media literacy education.

This article is in response to

I<small>N HER PAPER</small>, Brown (2015) argued that democratic educational opportunities may be at risk as a result of the proliferation of media messages that are not often included or examined in traditional schooling. She explained that without educational experiences that encompass careful and critical analysis of messages in all forms, our students are unable to fully participate in democratic discourse and reach their civic potential as active members in society. Brown cited literature that calls for critical media literacy as a way to provide our teachers and students with opportunities to examine the multimodal media messages that saturate our daily experiences. She contended that literacy serves not only a functional purpose but also a civic one, especially as pervasive new media increasingly impact our social practices and policies.

Connecting the landscape of the digital world with elementary students' in-school literacy learning, Brown (2015) made a clear case for including "transaction circles," an instructional strategy of her own design, as an approach for promoting student-centered,

T<small>HERESA</small> R<small>EDMOND</small> is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at Appalachian State University. She specializes in media literacy education, educational technology, and media arts and teaches media studies and teacher education. Her research focuses on pedagogy in teaching and learning with, through, and about media and technology and on how media and communication technologies impact the nature of literacy, expression, and citizenship in today's digital world.

culturally responsive, and democratic literacy practices. While Brown did not offer an explicit definition of transaction circles, implicitly she described them as a democratic variation of more traditional curricular structures, specifically literature circles and guided reading. Unlike literature circles and guided reading, transaction circles do not prioritize teacher-driven readings of alphabetic, print texts. Instead, the teacher supports students' own interpretations by fostering an open, discussion-based format that uses a range of multimodal texts, such as videos, in conjunction with print texts. Based on the concept of "transactional theory" (Rosenblatt, 1985), Brown contended that transaction circles open up opportunities for student readers to actively participate in meaning making because their personal experiences, both affective and cognitive, are valued during the reading, and they are free to engage in dialogue with their peers as they negotiate the texts. She further argued that it is only through open and active reading experiences that students will be able to "liberate ideas" and become empowered to participate as emerging citizens in the sociocultural and political discourses that shape our democracy (p. 2).

In her research investigating the enactment of transaction circles with a small group of third graders, Brown (2015) found that students were able to assume responsibility for their learning and were empowered to engage in dialogue with their teacher and peers about how they were interpreting the print-based, alphabetic text in conjunction with the digital, visual-based texts. She found that transactions circles helped students negotiate texts in authentic and democratic ways, noting that: (a) students engaged in the free exchange of ideas, "even if this meant disagreeing with one another"; (b) students became "active agents of their own learning"; and (c) "[students] felt empowered to challenge ideas found in the text" (p. 10). These findings revealed Brown's concept of transaction circles as an example of a highly effective 21st-century practice for reading instruction that is further supported by the Core Principles of Media Literacy Education (CPMLE).

Coauthored by leading scholars in the field of media literacy, the CPMLE provide "consensus" (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 8) for defining media literacy education (MLE) teaching praxis by outlining six core principles, each with subsequent implications for practice. The CPMLE provide a structure for identifying how teachers enact MLE in their practice, or the pedagogy of MLE. Brown's (2015) findings aligned strongly with the implications for practice outlined by the CPMLE, revealing her strategy as a powerful media literacy practice, or pedagogical reading structure, for classroom-based democratic discourse. In particular, Brown's findings emerged in alignment with the CPMLE Six and the implications for practice, as shown in Table 1.

Each of these implications for practice may be seen in the curricular structure of transaction circles that Brown developed. For example, Implications 6.3 and 6.4 align with Brown's finding that students engaged in the free exchange of ideas and were supported in sharing diverse perspectives based on their own experiences and interpretations, even if it meant disagreeing with each other. Collectively, the implications for practice included in the CPMLE and Brown's strategy of transaction circles contribute to democratic teaching practices that position students at the heart of their own learning experiences, preparing them to actively make meaning and construct understandings of texts within supportive, socioconstructivist contexts (Vygotsky, 1986).

While I agree with the premise of Brown's (2015) research and her results, I would like to extend her argument by problematizing three key aspects. First, it is important to note that the success of Brown's efforts in engaging students in learning had more to do the role of the teacher than it did the integration of multimodal texts. I encourage Brown to reconsider her conclusion that "the power of interacting with these informational texts came from blending the digital version of traditional books with the related YouTube videos" (p. 10). A predominant problem in media and technology education is a tendency to believe that the technology tools or media texts themselves carry instructional potential. However, this misunderstanding positions tools and texts in a vacuum and sells our teachers short by undermining the

Table 1. CPMLE #6 and Implications for Practice
Media Literacy Education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

Implications for Practice
6.1 MLE is not about teaching students what to think; it is about teaching them how they can arrive at informed choices that are most consistent with their own values.
6.2 MLE helps students become aware of and reflect on the meaning that they make of media messages, including how the meaning they make relates to their own values.
6.3 MLE is not about revealing to students the "true" or "correct" or "hidden" meaning of media messages, nor is it about identifying which media messages are "good" and which ones are "bad." In MLE, media analysis is an exploration of riches, rather than "right" readings.
6.4 MLE recognizes that students' interpretations of media texts may differ from the teacher's interpretation without being wrong.
6.5 MLE recognizes and welcomes the different media experiences of individuals of varying ages.
6.6 MLE uses group discussion and analysis of media messages to help students understand and appreciate different perspectives and points of view.
6.7 MLE facilitates growth, understanding, and appreciation through an examination of tastes, choices and preferences.

purposeful pedagogy and professional expertise they offer. In contrast to Brown's statement, I feel that it was her intentional arrangement of a socioconstructivist learning context, as aligned with the CPMLE and in conjunction with her careful selection of texts, that provided for powerful learning in this situation. In this way, one may begin to consider how the context of the classroom is a medium through which children learn. The physical print and multimodal texts are important pieces, but the role of the teacher and how she chooses to center students in relation to these texts and their own learning is vital.

Second, while Brown (2015) situated part of her argument for using transaction circles in research about the changing nature of literacy, it is essential to further acknowledge that technology and media impact what we think, in addition to how we think (López, 2014). In other words, part of the rationale for using transaction circles with multimodal texts is to make our curricula and pedagogy relevant for young people who may prefer digital media while also making it responsive to the ways people access and process information and ideas. Media and technology have fundamentally shifted our cognitive environments, abilities, and processes (López, 2014). As systems that rely on signs and the interpretation of signs in social contexts, contemporary media influence content and interpretations, impacting power relationships and structures within a given culture (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1998). The integration of social semiotics as a foundational dimension of media literacy helps us more completely examine multimodal texts in that it requires active attention to signs as cultural artifacts used to communicate both explicit and implicit content.

MLE uses semiotics to help teachers and students sort out the complex, interconnected nature of media messages. MLE encompasses the ideas that all media are constructed, each medium has a language of construction, and all media contain and convey values and points of view that may influence "beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, and the democratic process" (NAMLE, 2007). These ideas are represented in the CPMLE implications for practice

4.7 that states: "MLE trains students to examine how media structures (e.g., ownership, distribution, etc.) influence the ways that people make meaning of media messages" (p. 4). In addition to implications for practice, the CPMLE provides a document of key questions to ask when analyzing media messages (NAMLE, 2007). As shown in Table 2, the areas of "Messages & Meanings" and "Representations & Reality" may be useful as guides for students learning to deconstruct the language of media messages and scaffold their thinking as they begin to ask critical questions about media texts as cultural artifacts.

Thus, in order to completely integrate critical media literacy in teaching and learning, educators must not only prepare students by using a rich range of multimodal texts to access content but also teach them to recognize the constructed nature of media, including the codes and conventions that shape the language of media. In this way, critical media literacy is about more than the content of messages; it encompasses media as an ecology that exists through complex contexts of production, ownership, dissemination, consumption, interpretation, and values. As McLuhan (1964) famously explained, "The medium is the message," and complete literacy necessitates breaking down the media texts that we use to consume information, entertainment, and ideas not only by critically examining the content but also by critically identifying and analyzing the contexts of the messages and the mediums of the messages themselves. McLuhan's contention that the form of the message impacts the content of the message has far-reaching implications for media literacy in the 21st century as we engage with an increasingly complex range of blended media that comprise alphabetic text, still images, moving images, audio, and interactive, multimedia components. As McLuhan explained, visual media, such as video, are likely to bypass our cognitive domain, working on our affective and emotional centers and impacting our interpretations and message understandings in subliminal or subconscious ways. In this sense, the work of media literacy is not only to facilitate critical thinking in regards to the overt messages but also to interrogate implicit messages that may

Table 2. Selection from Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages

Messages & Meanings	Content	What does this want me to think (or think about)? What would someone learn from this? What does this tell me about [insert topic]? What ideas, values, information, or points of view are overt? Implied? What is left out that might be important to know?
	Techniques	What techniques are used and why? How do the techniques communicate the message?
	Interpretations	How might different people understand this message differently? What is my interpretation, and what do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation?
Representations & Reality	Context	Where was this made? Where or how was it shared with the public?
	Credibility	Is this fact, opinion, or something else? How credible is this (and how do you know)? What are the sources of the information, ideas, or assertions? Can I trust this source to tell me the truth about this topic?

be shaped by the visual qualities of message forms and contexts of consumption.

For example, in her research on transaction circles, Brown (2015) used two pieces of media with her third grade students: (a) an initial reading of the picture book *Nasreen's Secret School* (Winter, 2009) and (b) an ABC News segment published on YouTube March 20, 2013, about Malala Yousafzai. The picture book, based on a story from Afghanistan, was about a young girl, Nasreen, whose parents are taken away by soldiers, leaving her in such deep sadness and despair that her grandmother enrolls her in a secret school for girls even though it is forbidden. The ABC News segment reported on the harrowing experience of Malala Yousafzai, a 14-year-old Pakistani girl who was gunned down and left in critical condition by a Taliban soldier while aboard her school bus on October 9, 2012. Using multiple media is an effective strategy for engaging students in cross-textual analysis and media literacy. However, as discussed earlier, contemporary media and technology have altered our cognitive environments, abilities, and processes (López, 2014), creating a need for literacy to encompass not only reading message content but also reading the language of the message mediums, including the constructed languages of signs, symbols, codes, and conventions, and the contexts of production, dissemination, and consumption. While Brown (2015) referred to the picture book as portraying a "true story" and described the video segment as showing "the real-world experiences" through "flashback," the curricular event could have been extended in two primary ways: (a) by working with students to deconstruct the multimodal languages of the texts they were using to access the story's content, and (b) by encouraging students to investigate the original contexts of message production, dissemination, and consumption.

To begin, students could describe, discuss, and deconstruct the pictures in *Nasreen's Secret School*, including how the position of the characters on each page might be a visual strategy to convey power relationships or how the colors employed in the illustrations might communicate emotion. Students could examine the larger production and viewing contexts of the ABC News segment, including the purpose of news, the editing styles used, and the audiences of network news. In her article, Brown (2015) used the words "true story" and "real-world experience" to suggest the nonfiction or documentary nature of the two texts, but media literacy education calls upon students to develop a vocabulary for talking about media and more deeply examine what is "true" or "real," as all media are constructed to represent a particular point of view, bias, value, or purpose. Through media literacy education as pedagogy, teachers and students actively deconstruct not only the words but also the pictures, audio, and video constructions that *frame* the content and serve as a lens that impacts our comprehension and interpretation. Students may benefit from further deconstruction that cultivates the development of a media literacy vocabulary, such as the convention of reenactment, a technique widely used in news and documentary that Brown referred to as "flashback." Students might also critique the questions that the BBC News correspondent asked Malala or, more important, did not ask in the interviews. They might research media ownership of

ABC News and the BBC and consider why ABC News might employ clips taken largely from a BBC News piece. Finally, students could discuss the inclusion and purpose of the "World News" segment within the larger news hour, examining the text holistically. This type of comprehensive media deconstruction would include an analysis of the commercials and how advertising might reveal target audience(s) of the news show. Not only is this pedagogy possible for third-grade students who are capable of complex higher-order thinking and media analysis (Share, 2009), but emerging research suggests that beginning media literacy education in elementary grades is essential for engagement and empowerment in the digital age (Hobbs & Moore, 2013).

Third, in considering ways to extend Brown's (2015) thoughtful work, it is important to recognize that critically reading and engaging with media texts in the classroom may not be enough to cultivate students' civic engagement. While transaction circles may be an effective strategy to foster democratic discourse, civic engagement depends on action and advocacy in addition to critical inquiry. Buckingham (2007) described literacy as a "cultural practice" encouraging teachers and students to engage in the production of media texts as a key element of complete literacy. Students could engage in media creation by responding to the selected texts by authoring a blog post, making a photograph, or producing a response through some other multimodal form. Through media making, students may more fully grasp the constructed nature of media and be better positioned to critically consider information and ideas that they encounter through life.

As Brown (2015) pointed out, students coming of age amid a digital culture need opportunities to cultivate critical media literacy through the examination of a range of multimodal stories, and their investigation is most productive when framed by socioconstructivist pedagogies where students are positioned as active makers of meaning. By including the critique and creation of multimodal texts in teaching and learning, students may access literature in rich ways that reflect their outside-of-school literacy experiences and engage in democratic literacy practices that may shape their future civic engagement. I agree with Brown's assessment that transaction circles are a useful reading strategy that may be incorporated into any literacy curriculum. Furthermore, I contend that variations of Brown's concept may be integrated across other content areas, including math, science, social studies, and the arts. Many organizations have position papers or statements calling for media literacy education, including the Association of Mathematics Teacher Educators (AMTE), the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and the National Art Education Association (NAEA) (see Redmond, 2016). In this way, media literacy education emerges as a multidisciplinary pedagogy for teaching and learning across subjects and topics in the digital world.

Finally, like Brown (2015), I also wonder how we, as educators, can truly teach in antioppressive ways if teachers, not students, select the texts for reading. Is cultivating a student-driven learning environment enough to achieve authentically democratic learning if students' voices are excluded? Research first into the role of the teacher is certainly needed to illuminate

this point—specifically research that investigates teaching the media—as well as research on the role(s) of students in contributing to critical media literacy conversations in their classrooms. A second area for future research is in regards to fostering civic engagement through media literacy. López (2014) explained that "a primary assumption regarding media literacy advocates is that when learners become fluent in the technique and tactics of media persuasion and production, it should lead to some kind of active and attentive engagement with media" (p. 87). Yet how will we know, or can we ensure, that such educational opportunities will lead to civic engagement?

As more questions emerge, I applaud Brown's (2015) work in bringing multimodal texts and media literacy education into classrooms through transaction circles. By exploring and employing media literacy education as both praxis and pedagogy, teachers and students have an opportunity to enact and model democratic, critical inquiry and communication as crucial dimensions of mindful practice for both teaching and learning in the multifaceted and multimodal world of the 21st century.

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