

“If You Build It, They Will Come”

Developing a Graduate Program in Media Literacy in a College of Education

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Who studies media literacy and why? What has the nation’s first graduate program in media literacy learned about what motivates students to come from across the country and around the world to pursue the study of media literacy? How do students in this learning community support each other? How did the graduate program emerge from a college of education’s commitment to a social constructivist model of learning, and how is media literacy reinforced and integrated in other degree tracks throughout the college? The coordinator of the program offers some insights, including anecdotal comments from the students themselves.

Keywords: *media literacy graduate program; college of education; case studies; social constructivist model; learning community*

We live together, eat together, and play together. These people are more than my classmates; they have become a support system and lifelong friends.

—Nicki, final year of media literacy master’s degree

The graduate program in media literacy at North Carolina’s Appalachian State University is now 5 years old. During this brief period of time, with little promotion other than the program’s Web site, the offerings have attracted more than 50 students from throughout the United States and around the world, whether coming to study on campus, taking online classes, working toward the full 36-hour master’s degree, or opting for the 18-hour certificate of completion.

Like students in almost any program anywhere, ours reflect at least some of the complexity of the American human landscape. They are liberal and conservative, gay and straight, married, single, divorced, born again, agnostic, and even clergy. The youngest ones are in their mid-20s, whereas several of the older students are in their 40s and 50s.

Author’s Note: *All students quoted in this article completed written surveys and gave permission for their comments and first names to be used for this article. “Amber” and her son “Caleb” are changed names; the mother has given permission for the lengthy segment of her writing to be included in this article.*

Their interests include media and democracy, media and child development, media and emotional intelligence, media and the arts, and media and mythology. The students include a high school biology teacher, several middle-grades teachers, community college instructors, an art educator, a software designer, an English-as-a-second-language teacher (who is currently researching the immigrant experience in American cinema and society), a former journalist, and a former commercial video producer.

In addition to the American students, the program has attracted individuals from Cyprus, Thailand, Malaysia, and Japan. Mariko completed her undergraduate degree in Yokohama and is currently developing her thesis, which addresses a cooperative interagency media-literacy planning process in Japan.

The first thesis completed within the master of arts—media literacy concentration—*Communication and Media Education: A Curriculum Plan for the Pauline’s Communication Center in Metro Manila*—was written by one of the international students: Sister Clothilde De Las Llagas (2002) from the Philippines. In other words, a Catholic nun from a big city in Asia came to Baptist, rural North Carolina to see if she could develop a media literacy strategy that would connect with the mission statement of her order.

Clothilde’s story is not uncommon. Like many of the students in the program at Appalachian State, she had an already-established career. She would attempt to locate media literacy within the duties and job description of that career. Central to her endeavor was the attempt to locate well-defined theories and principles of media literacy “that respond to the expectations, needs, and interests of today’s media audiences.” Her interest in media literacy, she noted, came to her “through media exposure, experiences, and dialogue with youth” in her own country. One significant model for Sister De Las Llagas was provided by the Daughters of St. Paul in both Brazil and Boston, each of which had established a communication center that offered media education classes. Clothilde also wrote that her experience with media educators.

outside her own nation deepened her realization that media literacy offered “empowerment and a culture of life.”

Saving lives was also a major motivation for Margaret. She is the western region field coordinator for the Tobacco Prevention and Control branch of her state’s Division of Public Health. Her exposure to media literacy began by attending conferences and workshops. Although her point of entry was clearly focused on protection and prevention, she also found that the first class at Appalachian broadened her horizons: “I was hooked due to the students’ coming from a variety of professions and backgrounds, sharing varied media and professional experiences and perspectives.”

In the time that she has been in the program, Margaret has connected media literacy to her work in 26 counties, developing community coalitions and working on grants. With a heavy focus on youth, she develops ways to get the public to understand how mass media affect social norms. One outcome of her work is that training in media literacy and tobacco—Smoke Detectors—has been incorporated into the statewide training at the 2004 Youth Leadership Institute. Much of her work also goes beyond simple analysis of tobacco advertising and instead, engages young people in youth media production, including the creation of counter-marketing messages and the promotion of smoke-free schools and smoke-free work sites.

Margaret and her colleagues in the county also teamed with Appalachian’s College of Education to bring Jean Kilbourne to the campus in July of 2004. Kilbourne is well known for her video series *Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising’s Image of Women* (Kilbourne & Jhally, 2000) and her book *Deadly Persuasion* (1999). Her appearance at Appalachian continues the program’s tradition of exposing students to national and international experts in media literacy education, including Barry Duncan, Kathleen Tyner, and David Buckingham.

Sharing Margaret’s interest in the protection/prevention paradigm is Nicki from Kansas. Nicki’s height and demeanor present a commanding presence. Add to that a sense of self-confidence and strong presentation skills, and you have an outstanding advocate for media literacy—as Nicki demonstrated during her presentations to national media education conferences in Austin and Baltimore, where she impressed international leaders, including Len Masterman. In November of 2003, Nicki also presented a compelling and engaging session on media and the presidency to the National Council for the Social Studies in Chicago. What was most significant about this session was the fact that social studies is not her natural background. Her background was in prevention, working with teens and high-risk behavior, including teen pregnancy, suicide, alcohol, and substance abuse.

But the program at Appalachian broadened her horizons: “In truth, I did not come close to grasping the meaning of media literacy or the magnitude of the field until I was enrolled at ASU,” she explained. Although she continued to address the way media influence adolescent attitudes and behavior, Nicki began to look at a bigger picture. “Why is it,” she asked, “that in the most democratic nation in the world, Americans aged 18 to 35 years of age are least likely to exercise their rights and responsibility to vote?”

In workshops that often were standing room only, she began to explore the role of media in a democratic society. Using media, she discovered, provided a common cultural connection while talking to adults and teenagers. In the case of the Tom Hanks movie *Castaway*, for example, Nicki found that the film “teaches powerful lessons about self-reliance, self-assessment, self-discipline, love, and survival.” She also found that some of the key principles of media literacy became particularly powerful during such interactions. Asked which concept she most valued, Nicki chose the principle *audiences negotiate meaning*: “When we acknowledge that no two people see or hear the same thing in the same way, it invites participation and critical thinking,” she responded.

The people in the program at ASU may never have come to know Nicki had it not been for the intervention of lady luck. One night in a gambling casino in Minnesota, she pulled the handle and hit an \$8,000 jackpot. “I danced all the way to the bank with that check and invested it in a trek to the mountains of North Carolina and my classes at ASU.” As Nicki said, “I won the jackpot in Minnesota but I got rich at Appalachian State.”

Part of that richness is the sense of community that has developed among the students and the faculty. Nicki believes that the program organization, with its emphasis on intensive short summer sessions, “has helped to create strong bonds in our learning community. We live together, eat together, and play together. These people are more than my classmates; they have become a support system and lifelong friends.”

This view is also shared by Kate, known to many in the program as “CommuniKate.” She believes the program has strengthened her conceptual understanding of media literacy and also “provided a strong support group and network for enhancing my further growth and development as a media literacy professional.” Kate added,

The relationships I have developed with students have provided me with a strength and camaraderie that has helped me to move forward in this field, knowing that as questions and concerns arise, there is always someone who is both willing and able to address those questions.

One example of this is the informal and impromptu listserv that Belinha set up after taking just one course in the program. As a middle school teacher, Belinha's passion for media literacy has been documented by coverage in *US News & World Report* (Tugend, 2001) and *American Journalism Review* (Tugend, 2003). What those articles do not tell readers, however, is Belinha's capacity to serve as a conduit for the group, whether bringing us news of each other's trials and tribulations and family developments or supplying the class with free tickets for the Museum of the Moving Image when they studied in New York City. One of the things Belinha most values about her experience at ASU "is how much people want to be there, want to learn, and want to share their individual work. There is, without question, a bond that is created when you start the program.

IN THE BEGINNING: THE COLLEGE CONTEXT

Any attempt to understand the bond that binds the people to the program and the place requires looking at the college that houses the degree. Doing so answers, at least in part, questions of how and why the first graduate program in media literacy in the United States ended up in rural North Carolina. Understanding that requires taking into account the pedagogical philosophy and context of the Reich College of Education, which is home to the program.

In 1995, the college teamed with Wisconsin's National Telemedia Council to cohost this country's first National Media Literacy Conference. It attracted participants from 5 countries and more than 30 states. The success of the conference demonstrated that people were interested in media literacy and that they would come to a relatively isolated location to learn about it. That was sufficient for the dean, Dr. Charles Duke, to green light the development of the master's program.

But it was at the undergraduate level where the seeds were really being sown. For many years, the college had offered both media production and media analysis classes that were taken by students, many of whom decided to minor in media studies. For more than 10 years prior to the 1995 conference, these courses provided a rich opportunity for faculty to understand what students were and were not responsive to. Throughout the 1990s, the college also developed a conceptual model for teacher preparation with an emphasis on a social constructivist model of learning. This model was compatible with much of the media education literature from Australia and the United Kingdom, which articulated the process of meaning making during the interactions between young people and the media.

At the same time, the college reorganized core classes in undergraduate teacher preparation. One of the new classes—Literacy, Technology, and Instruction—represented an interdisciplinary, interdepartmental, team-teaching approach that provided an enormous opportunity for faculty and students to explore the impact of media and technology on traditional and emerging concepts of literacy, including media literacy. In addressing media literacy at this time, students were challenged to understand why it had gained increasing support from organizations like the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and the Office of National Drug Control Policy at the White House. They were also challenged to track the emergence of media literacy skills in numerous subject areas in various state standards. In the years ahead, this strategy would be strengthened when students were presented with documents of support from The National Middle School Association, The National Council for the Social Studies, and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Several of the master's students are currently developing media literacy curriculum to match state standards, including those in South Carolina and Michigan.

During the 1990s, the college also began recruiting students to several off-campus graduate programs in elementary education and middle school education. The students in these programs had typically been teaching anywhere from 3 to 25 years. Some of them were extremely comfortable with the technological revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, whereas others had almost no experience with e-mail, digital cameras, Web quests, or PowerPoint. PowerPoint, in fact, became a significant "teachable moment" with these teachers. Almost 100% of those who already were familiar with the technology had seen a bad PowerPoint presentation. When challenged to explain what was unsuccessful about these programs, they invariably listed pacing, text size, overuse of special effects, and other problems. By doing this, they came to understand that the new technology represented merely a delivery system that was only as effective as the individual designing and presenting the information. They came to understand in practice, as distinct from abstract theory, the idea of media characteristics, attributes, and symbol systems that they had covered in readings such as Gavriel Salomon's (1979) *The Interaction of Media Cognition and Learning*.

Their Instructional Technology course also required them to critically analyze and evaluate traditional classroom materials, including their textbooks. If the PowerPoint assignment stimulated their interest in new technologies, the analysis of textbooks challenged many of their existing attitudes and assumptions. Drawing on the work of Michael Apple (1991, 1996) and of Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (1991), the Instructional Technology course required teachers to evaluate their textbooks in terms of balance and bias. To use the language of media literacy, it challenged teachers to examine these books in terms of their ideology and values, particularly in terms of the way they depict and represent race,

class, gender, and disability.

Although the teachers were not always comfortable with the assignment, their written comments consistently reflected how deeply the experience had affected them. Over and over, in looking through the students' papers, one finds a recurring theme, as illustrated in the following quotes by three different students:

This study prompted me to look at the Social Studies texts I teach from. I never thought twice about who was shown in the pictures or which race's names were used in the storylines.

I feel a little ashamed of myself after doing this reading assignment. As a White man, I have gone quietly on with my own life . . . thinking I was educated and multicultural. I guess I always assumed the texts these days had done away with the narrow view of history.

As a teacher, and apparently a naïve teacher, I never really thought about race, class, and gender in textbooks. I guess I just take things at face value and don't analyze it.

To say that work like this was an eye-opening experience for these teachers, many of them seasoned professionals, would be an understatement. Given the opportunity, teachers can see the purpose and the value of critical inquiry, whether applied to the materials they use in their classrooms or to the media their students are exposed to at home in their living rooms and bedrooms.

And it is not just the teachers. Appalachian State University also offers a doctoral program in educational leadership. During the past year, an elementary school principal in that program has begun to work with both teachers and parents to broaden their understanding of the impact of media and technology. Within the school, that has not only meant on-site teacher training with technology such as Intel Corporation's (2002) *Teach to the Future* but also changed much of the way in which the administration and staff interact. Faculty meetings are now typically held in a computer lab. In the past, much time in such meetings was spent with the principal's reading through an agenda. Now and in the future, the sessions are more likely to be interactive and to incorporate technology. For example, in one faculty meeting, teachers went online to research the type of medication students in the school were using.

The principal is also bringing these changes to parents. In part, this is taking place through the increased use of e-mail to reach parents and through the development of Web sites for each of the classes, so parents can see what their children are studying. The school also surveyed children and their parents to ascertain what media and technology were available in the home, the frequency of use, and the context (with or without parental supervision) in which the interactions occurred. Another way in which media and technology are becoming a central concern for the school is by placing them on the agenda for parent meetings. This is a conservative rural county. It is common for several hundred parents to attend a meeting at the school. After reading James Steyer's (2002) *The Other Parent*, the principal used a PowerPoint presentation to facilitate dialogue with the parents about the role of media in their homes.

A PARENT'S RESPONSE

Although higher education typically stresses the logical, rational, and cognitive aspects of teaching, in the real world where real children and their families live and learn in a natural environment, some of the most important lessons cannot be measured. They occur on a deeply emotional level. At times, those teachers who are also parents share, with raw emotion and candor, some of their own reactions to what we study in the classroom and what they experience in the lab that is their family.

One such moment took place in the spring of 2004 in a course titled Media for Young People. Largely focused on middle-grades teachers, the class connects media literacy to national middle school philosophy and pedagogy, including *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2003), and *A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality* (Beane, 1990). In the first few weeks of the semester, students were assigned readings from *The Second Family: How Adolescent Power is Challenging the American Family*, in which Taffel (2001) argued, in part, that American adolescents are afflicted by "the tyranny of cool," whereby their loyalty "is less to their own families than to the kid culture and the closed society of their peers" (p. 17). Taffel asserted that the media have become a principal shaper of adolescent values.

The reading provoked the following e-mail from Amber, the mother of a teenage boy:

I was bowled over by what I read. My 16-year-old son is going through everything the author discusses. Caleb matches the description of today's detached adolescent perfectly—even down to the desire to be a star. Lately, he and one of his best friends have become obsessed with starting a band. Caleb wants to be able to get up in front of his whole school and blow them away with his music.

Like many parents of adolescents, Amber feels that she is losing the child she knew—that he is being replaced by some young stranger who wants to have nothing to do with his parents:

His only joy seems to come from spending endless hours on Instant Messenger with his second family. He's started calling his female friends his sisters. He doesn't even go by his own name anymore. At school he is known as "Badger."

What had started for Amber as a professional reading in teacher preparation quickly became personal as she located herself and her family within the text. It is what we in the program refer to as "putting the ME in MEdia and MEaning." It is also a splendid example of social constructivist learning and the media literacy principle that "audiences negotiate meaning."

Amber's response to the reading highlighted some key concepts in the program that address not only what the media do to children and teens but also, in turn, what they do with media and technology. If media and technology represent a siren song that calls young people away from their family, it is also possible that they can be the very bridge that connects kid culture to parent culture. Amber was not prepared to surrender her son to the second family without a fight. Although her husband constantly criticized Caleb's tastes, Amber believed confrontation was not the answer. One night as her son was about to retreat to his computer, withdrawing once more from the family, Amber suggested that the two of them go off together and play some music.

Amber plays acoustic guitar. Her son was just starting to teach himself the electric bass. Although they had different musical tastes, Amber believed their common interest in music was enough to overcome the taste differences. She helped her son figure out the bass notes for "Landslide" by Stevie Nicks. "Because I finger pick rather softly, he was forced to keep his volume down on his amplifier. Within an hour," she noted jubilantly, "we sounded great together." The common cultural connection mother and son had forged through music now began to spread to movies. Caleb wanted his mother to see *Pleasantville*. Amber asked for additional recommendations, and I suggested that they might find common ground in watching and discussing *Pump Up the Volume*, *Donny Darko*, and *Life as a House*. I would not recommend these movies for shared viewing in every family, but in this case they seemed appropriate.

I am waiting to hear which films the family settled on and what conversations followed the screenings. What I had learned about Caleb in a few short weeks convinced me that he had long ago begun to interpret the world through his own filters. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than on the occasion the class was discussing media values and ideologies. Amber raised her hand to explain that her son had long ago both recognized and resisted media messages. The example she provided was the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Caleb hated it from the first time he saw it because to him, the message that "there's no place like home" sounded more like "kids are supposed to stick around."

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Media literacy is not for everyone. Although some come to view it as an eye-opening experience, others quite clearly do not get it.

Joanna is a high school teacher in Illinois. Her gateway to media literacy was Neil Postman's (1969) *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* and a student who believed the moon landing was a hoax. That was the moment when Joanna saw the need to help her students distinguish between scientific fact and science fiction. But she knows she has taken the road less traveled. Asked how her peers and colleagues regard her shift to media literacy, she freely admits, "Most people think that I'm crazy. Very few people see where I'm coming from and fail to see its importance."

Up the road a piece in Michigan, Maggie has also encountered a conservative school culture that does not understand the need for media literacy. Ironically, the students Maggie encounters at community college are reason enough. "By the time they get to me," she writes, "they already view themselves as consumers, not citizens."

Nicki also has witnessed the uncertainty many teachers bring to the subject of media literacy:

Many will sit and listen and observe but resist being pulled in. So many of the teachers I have worked with have expressed fear about working with these materials, but they cannot tell me what scares them. Is it fear of new things? A lack of creativity . . . or a fear of losing control?

For media literacy to continue to make the significant inroads that it demonstrated throughout the 1990s, these fears not only will have to be identified but also alleviated.

Although that work is daunting, at Appalachian we continue to locate the models and methods that are bringing change. In Stephen's case, his principal made the difference. She took a young, lateral-entry middle-grades teacher and gave him the chance to do media literacy: "I cannot say enough about my principal. She has shown total support. . . . She has a

strong commitment to the development of critical cultural skills of adolescent students.”

For Theresa, media literacy has become not only something she explores in the classroom but also a subject she discusses with her teenage brother and her parents. This past Christmas, when the family found themselves rained out and in a crowded condominium, they spent part of the time reading excerpts from Kilbourne’s (2000) *Can’t Buy My Love* to each other.

Finally, and perhaps ironically, there is the evidence of engagement that takes place in the realm of distance education, which is so often disparaged for its sense of alienation and its lack of human contact. Each spring, students from across the state and throughout the country sign up for Appalachian State University’s online Media Literacy course. By the end of February 2004, just 6 weeks into the course, more than 900 posts, prompts, and responses had been logged in. Like each previous class, this group reported that their interactions with the instructor and other class members were not only more frequent but also deeper and richer than they would have been in a traditional classroom.

But it is not the frequency of responses that is of most value. Rather, it is the richness of those interactions—a richness that is permeated with respectful dialogue, discussion, and disagreement about the role of media in our lives. For some of these students, distance education transports them from the comfort of their geographic and intellectual terrain and challenges them to look at their world through other perspectives. As a student from a liberal New England state recently expressed, “I’m loving this. . . This is the first time in years I’ve talked with people who didn’t think and feel exactly the same way that I do.”

For those who believe media literacy is an essential prerequisite for responsible citizenship, such dialogue and engagement must surely support the foundation of a healthy democracy.

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