

Chapter 1

Introduction: Media Literacies

Media literacy is complex – hence our plural, media literacies. It is not something we can separate from oral or print literacy, so our starting point in this resource is that a critical relationship with media is required across the curriculum, not just in Media Studies.

In *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), Richard Hoggart was one of the first writers to explore the complex relationship between social status, education reading, culture and media. It is now largely accepted, by teachers, that literacy includes a wide range of reading practices, including popular culture and media texts. The UKLA state:

Now that digital technologies permeate all aspects of life, to be literate means to be familiar with a range of texts communicated through diverse media and to be able to communicate through a variety of media. (UKLA Agenda for Action, 2015).

The ‘New Literacy Studies’ (Street, 2003) observed literacy not as a static set of competences but rather an ideological and contested process of meaning making. Texts are all around us in the many practices in which people engage to make meaning in many modes. We could, then, link print and oral literacy to media literacy and extend this to an all-embracing concept of ‘dynamic literacies’ (Potter and McDougall, 2017).

However, our education system remains static, rather than dynamic, and still tends to separate types of culture into its different subjects so that the analysis of media is not often a part of subject learning across the curriculum. An outcome of this is that media texts are used across the curriculum as resources, but critical engagement *with them* is not part of classroom activities. Unless students take Media Studies, this kind of *critical* media literacy is not routinely taken into their broader studies in the secondary school.

By *critical* media literacy, we mean:

Reading media critically – using textual analysis techniques for close reading of media texts. This includes analysis of still and moving images, looking at the ways in which meaning is conveyed through choices made with

regard to, for example, camera, editing, sound and effects and the key concepts of genre (types of texts), representation (messages conveyed and meanings made) and narrative (storytelling and structural approaches).

Understanding the powerful nature of media – how it influences, includes and excludes and reinforces dominant meanings in society. This can include an awareness of who owns and produces media and, in the current climate, can extend to a consideration of ‘fake news’.

Engaging with media – to represent yourself, respond proactively to media, participate in the new digital age, to be creative with media, to be active rather than passive as a media citizen, to be dynamic in your engagement with media texts.

The material in this Minibook is designed as a practical set of strategies for integrating media literacies into learning and teaching in a range of subject contexts in the secondary curriculum.

The recent UNESCO declaration on Media and Information Literacy (Paris, 2014; Riga, 2016) notes that:

MIL is indispensable to a critical process that empowers and engages people as global citizens, and that it must be at the heart of strategies for the creation of a culture of communications that is open, inclusive, and based upon respect for human rights and democracy, and which contributes to human development at all levels. (UNESCO, 2016: 2)

In the UK, the media regulator OFCOM (2004) offered a ‘pragmatic’ definition of media literacy as consisting of three elements: use, understand and create media:

At its simplest level media literacy is the ability to use a range of media and be able to understand the information received. At a more advanced level it moves from recognising and comprehending information to the higher order critical thinking skills such as questioning, analysing and evaluating that information. This aspect of media literacy is sometimes referred to as ‘critical viewing’ or ‘critical analysis’.

(http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/of_med_lit/whatis/ - accessed 21.9.07; no longer accessible)

Media Literacy: The 5A Model

For the activities in this resource we draw on more recent work by Mihailidis (2014), who proposes a model of ‘5 A’s’ for media literacy:

Access – to the full range of media available and to digital/online participation

Awareness – of representations, values and ideologies at work in media

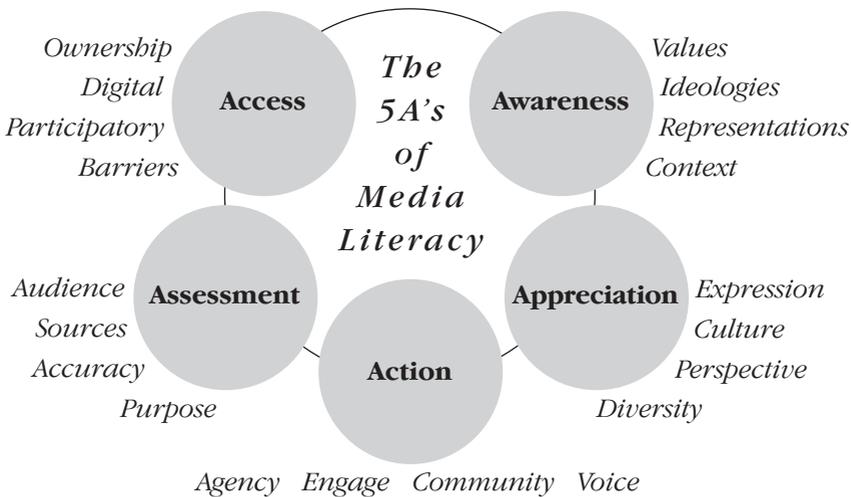
Appreciation – of culture, diversity of expression and perspectives

Assessment – of audiences, sources, accuracy and purpose

Action – agency, engagement, voice.

For our strategies in this book, the three media literacy elements we cover are **Awareness** (of how media represent people, places, social issues, time periods, cultures), **Assessment** (critical reading of media) and **Action** (active use of or creation of media). As the next section explains, these strategies have been co-created with secondary teachers and their students, so this is not a book written from a removed vantage point or an ‘ivory tower’. Crucially, the people we worked with in four schools talked to each other and to us about media literacy and where they see rich opportunities for combining their learning and teaching of the subject with critical and creative learning about media.

Figure 1.1: The 5A Model (Milbailidis, 2014: 146)



In the chapters that follow, we work with some other terms from media education which may be new to the subject areas we are embedding them within. These key concepts include:

Discourse – ways of presenting the world through language as a coherent ‘world view’.

Encoding / Decoding – messages in media texts are encoded by producers and decoded by audiences, but sometimes, and especially in the online age, meanings are passed on and amended by audience members to one another (secondary encoding).

Ideology – a dominant set of ideas presenting itself as ‘common sense’ or truth. Power relations are reinforced through ideology. A media text may reinforce, challenge or negotiate aspects of a dominant ideology in a society.

Micro / Macro – micro elements of media texts such as camera angles and framing, sound, design and layout, coding, editorial decisions, dialogue and performance add up to the ‘macro’ level of representation and ideology, so critical media literacy is about deconstructing from the macro to the micro and back again to analyse meaning-making.

The ‘Other’ – through marginalisation, exclusion or representation, a group of people are marked out as exotic, alien or different to ‘the norm’. In media texts, we look for who gets to speak, to represent themselves, who is spoken about or represented by others and who is absent.

Realism - a variety of ideas about the degree to which, and the variety of ways in which, media texts represent an idea of reality. There are a range of ‘realisms’ – social realism, classical narrative realism, neo-realism, magical realism.

Text – texts carry meaning that is constructed and Media Literacy is about looking at texts in order to deconstruct them. All media products are texts. But we can extend this term to include people, ourselves and others – anything that is made up of a range of signs that are decoded and interpreted by people.

This book presents ideas for integrating media literacy into other subjects at an introductory level, but each chapter combines critical analysis of media with the active use of media. Therefore, whilst the tone is one of ‘starting out’, these strategies are consistent with more far-reaching aspirations for media literacy, as articulated here by Renee Hobbs as:

... an examination of language and literacies in helping people re-engage the head, heart, hands and spirit as we seek to address the challenges we face and live with integrity in a rapidly changing global world. (Hobbs, 2016: 235).

UKLA