

Are We Speaking the Same Language? Assessing the State of Media Literacy in U.S. Higher Education

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Abstract

Are We Speaking the Same Language? Assessing the State of Media Literacy in U.S. Higher Education surveys the reported existence of media literacy education in U.S. universities. Looking at two national surveys that investigated the existence of media literacy programs and/or courses in the academy, this paper shows how the term has been conceived in many different ways and across all academic departments. This has resulted in wide and varied adoptions of media literacy in U.S. higher education which, the paper argues, has caused vague and somewhat disparate understandings of what media literacy education is and how it functions in a university classroom. The paper concludes by asking three questions about post-secondary media literacy education: *Should media literacy develop definitional parameters for the university? What differentiates media literacy from other media-related disciplines? What should media literacy look like in the university?* and offers suggestions for future inquiry into post-secondary media literacy education that can enable dialog around media literacy frameworks for higher education.

Introduction: Problems Locating Media Literacy in the Academy

In 2003, Penn State Professor Patricia Hinchey recollected common responses to teaching media literacy in the university: “During the course of the year I learned that invariably when a colleague asked “What are you teaching this year?” and I answered “teaching media literacy,” I could anticipate the follow up question, “What is Media Literacy?” (p. 268). Hinchey’s story is indicative of media literacy’s current existence in U.S. higher education. Difficulties in both defining and locating media literacy initiatives in the university have often led to vague and disparate conceptions of the term. As a result, media literacy education’s potential value to higher education has been constrained (Christ & Potter, 1998).

Central to media literacy’s tenuous post-secondary status is the issue of consistency. Specifically, inconsistencies in definition, use and adoption have led to marginal and often contested notions of media literacy for the university. This has ultimately hindered media literacy’s ability to produce tangible and coherent learning outcomes for higher education. Three general trends have contributed to such inconsistencies.

First, since its formal introduction in the United States in the early 1990s, media literacy implementation across all levels of education has lagged behind other major English-speaking countries in the world (Mihailidis, 2006; Kubey & Baker, 1999).¹ As a result, the United States has labored to build and successfully implement media literacy initiatives on all levels of education. Media literacy advocates will point out that all fifty states have adopted standards and parameters for the existence of media education in K-12 education. These parameters, however, have little in common with one another or the learning parameters commonly associated with media literacy.² While new state-led initiatives have increased the overall exposure of media literacy, its progress in the United States continues to struggle (Galician, 2004).

Second, the majority of media literacy teaching initiatives and scholarship has been geared towards K-12 education (Hobbs, 1998). This has done little to cultivate media literacy in higher education. Post-secondary teachers largely construct and implement their own curricula. Pending administrative approval, college-level educators are generally free to teach with the content they find most effective and with classroom techniques that personally suit their teaching style. As will be illustrated below,

this has led to different interpretations about what constitutes media literacy education in the university, including where it should be taught, how it should be taught, and who should teach it.

Third, the existing definition of media literacy is premised on rather broad and figurative terminology. In the United States, media literacy is commonly referred to as the ability to “access, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media” (Aufderheide, 1993). While this definition has solidified the existence of media literacy in K-12 education, it provides little guidance as to how these terms should be conceived in the university—specifically in terms of teaching and learning outcomes. While such definitional vagueness is not necessarily negative for post-secondary media literacy, it has compromised, to an extent, the learning outcomes media literacy education aims to achieve.

This paper looks at the results of two exploratory studies that surveyed the existence of media literacy in higher education. The results of these studies lend themselves to addressing some of the key questions and inhibitors for post-secondary media literacy education as it currently stands in U.S. universities: Should media literacy develop definitional parameters for the university? What differentiates media literacy from other media-related disciplines? What should media literacy look like in the university? Frameworks for post-secondary media literacy are first discussed to provide some background for the exploration and subsequent discussion.

Situating Media Literacy in Higher Education

Over 20 years ago, British media scholar Len Masterman wrote about the possible influences of media education on citizenship. Masterman (1985) underscored the role media education can play for citizens in democratic institutions:

Media education is an essential step in the long march towards a truly participatory democracy, and the democratization of our institutions. Widespread media literacy is essential if all citizens are to wield power, make rational decisions, become effective change-agents, and have an effective involvement with the media. (p. 13).³

Masterman posited that students, if educated about media, would not only increase their ability to intelligently use media for personal gains, but also further strengthen their values and beliefs about democracy. In this way, the necessary conversations and discussions about political, social, economic, and cultural issues would be knowledgeable, diverse, and progressive. Wrote Masterman (1998) over a decade later: “It is our crucial role as media teachers to ensure the continued evolution of that critical public” (p. xi). The evolution of a critical public, according to Masterman, is the evolution of a media literate public.

The theoretical starting place for post-secondary media literacy education is the engaged citizen. Scholars (see Jerit et al., 2007; Dahlgren, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Schudson, 2003) have written extensively of the vast civic influences of media on individuals, and the need for new responses to the growth of media’s role in the civic process. Media literacy in the university can approach citizenship by providing a platform to teach not only media analysis skills, but also the ability to effectively use media to exercise democratic rights (Brownell & Brownell, 2003). Art Silverblatt (2004), Professor of Communications and Journalism at Webster University in St. Louis and media literacy scholar, wrote of the need for media literacy to counteract the public’s increasing reliance on media:

...audiences have come to expect the media to serve the functions of traditional social institutions—functions that they were never designed to fulfill, looking for answers when the media presentation is simply focused on attracting a large audience by any means possible. The public’s reliance on Western media for guidance and support can therefore be problematic unless media messages are examined critically and put into meaningful perspectives (p. 38).

Silverblatt reflects media's almost contradictory purpose for society, and the increasing need for educational responses that address this current state. What do Silverblatt's "meaningful perspectives" look like? In light of Silverblatt's argument, meaningful perspectives are perspectives on citizenship.

Post-secondary media literacy can offer teaching and learning platforms that are focused on informed and engaged citizenship. It can do so by not only teaching critical analysis of media messages, but also by emphasizing the connections between media and civil society. What is the relationship between news production and audience reception? How do we understand our community as a reflection of media? What does it mean to be "informed"? Where and how can we find diverse, credible and independent information? What are the avenues for participation in the civic process? How can we appreciate media's necessary role for civil society? Through such inquiries, media literacy stands to bring added value to existing media disciplines in higher education.

Further, the university, as the last formal stage of education for most, is where such relationships can be cultivated. Wrote the authors' of the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement in Teaching's *Educating Citizens*:

College is the last stage of formal education for most Americans and the last formal education outside of their field of specialization for those who pursue further study. Although informal education can continue throughout life—at work and through engagement with the media, the arts, and books—to a great extent experiences in college determine how inclined individuals will be to pursue this kind of ongoing learning and what intellectual and personal capacities they will bring to those engagements (Colby et al., 2003, p. 6).

The continued pursuit of knowledge is central to the advancement of media literacy in higher education. As students prepare to become independent and active participants in civil society, they must learn to actively seek, use, and assess information pertinent to their lives, communities, and country. Media literacy can help individuals find to access the relevant information to pursue "ongoing learning" in a knowledgeable way by highlighting engaged citizenship as part of its agenda.

For post secondary media literacy education to fulfill its potential to prepare media literate citizens, it must be understood by educators in terms of place, scope, and use in the university. As the analysis below will reveal, without a grounded understanding of how media literacy stands to benefit higher education, its growth in academia may deter the potential to offer added value to the classroom.

Past Attempts to Measure Media Literacy in U.S. Higher Education

Despite the general lack of attention paid to post-secondary media literacy education, two past explorations have attempted to locate its existence in higher education. Both studies highlight some of the core inconsistencies apparent in surveying a term with no common platform for the university.

2002 – Webster's Attempt⁴

The most significant attempt to locate media literacy in the university occurred in 2002. Led by Professor Art Silverblatt, a team of media educators and scholars drafted and electronically disseminated a survey that attempted to "identify the breadth and depth of media literacy courses in institutions of higher education across the United States" (Silverblatt et al., 2002). The team sent 3,200 email messages to journalism, media, communication, education, and other departments in universities, colleges, and community colleges across the United States. They also posted the survey to their website and conducted some primary research into schools and colleges. The study was published on Webster University's Media Literacy program Web page.⁵

Of the 3,200 emails the team sent, they received 74 responses. Based on these responses, Silverblatt et al. reported that 61 universities across the United States offer media literacy in their institutions: 34 offer it as a separate course, and 27 claim it is integrated across their curriculum (Silverblatt et al., 2002).

Master's degrees with concentrations in media literacy are offered at five institutions, and three doctoral programs offer a designated media literacy option. The courses or contents lie predominantly in schools of communication, but can also be found in teacher training programs, and English and education departments.

In spite of the increasing frequency of new media literacy initiatives in the university, some haziness still exists about whether or not higher education institutions are committed to acknowledging media literacy and offering it in their curriculum (Silverblatt et al., 2002). Silverblatt et al. (2002) found that "there appears to be considerable confusion within the higher education community about what media literacy is and what makes up a media literacy curriculum."

Two specific themes highlight the general indistinctness to media literacy evidenced in the Silverblatt study. First, there seemed to be an active resistance to the basic idea of media literacy. Noted Silverblatt et al. (2002): "A respondent from the University of Hartford commented, 'A small number of faculty still cling to the notion that studying media and pop culture is not a serious or worthy academic pursuit.'" Second, there seemed to be a general confusion about the definition of media literacy.

Silverblatt's team encountered the core difficulties inherent in locating a new and rather complex term: without a clear understanding of what media literacy is and how it works in higher education, departments and educators reported media literacy's existence based on however they personally conceived the term's meaning. The natural outcome of this scenario is the lack of common understanding.

In conclusion to their survey, Silverblatt et al. (2002) mentioned that a network for media literacy educators in the university and a list for students interested in media literacy could be born from such a survey. Silverblatt et al. are correct in stating that Webster's survey represents a start for dialogue about media literacy in post-secondary education. However, this dialogue may be as wide-ranging as the responses to the team's survey questionnaire. If there is no common understanding of media literacy's role in higher education, discussions may only further widen its already vast and marginalized post-secondary existence.

2004 – Maryland's Attempt

A second attempt to locate media literacy in higher education occurred in the spring of 2004. The author of this paper led a team of researchers surveying the existence of media literacy education in 48 journalism and mass communication programs across the United States.⁶ While this study did not attempt to inquire about media literacy across all higher education, its results were indicative of the struggles media literacy encounters in the university.

The open-ended survey asked the participants how they viewed media literacy, if it existed in their curriculum, and how they envisioned it as a curricular and educational tool. After approximately sixty-percent of the survey questionnaires were returned, follow-up phone conversations were conducted with randomly selected participants. While the results were useful in providing a general overview of how journalism and mass communication programs view media literacy in general and as part of their curricula, they were far from encouraging.

The researchers were met with pessimism towards media literacy. The respondents' negativity was exemplified by three general criticisms. First, the respondents were critical of a survey asking about media literacy in journalism and mass communication education. One respondent went so far as to call the survey, and media literacy, "irrelevant." Second, many respondents balked at the survey, saying their programs already taught media literacy. Third, most respondents were negatively disposed to adopt what one director of studies deemed "a fifty-cent term with no place in professional education." The overall tone was negative and occasionally reactionary towards what some deemed a "useless" endeavor.

This study was further plagued by what the Silverblatt team encountered two years earlier. Many university educators were resistant to a term they were unfamiliar with. In the Silverblatt et al. study, this

led to reporting of media literacy that ran the gamut of possible media and communication courses. In the Maryland study, this resulted in a general hostility to both the term and its educational framework. One professor from a southwest state university wrote in the comments section of the survey: “not sure what you mean by media literacy. A definition would have helped.” Another director of studies had a personal assistant call the researchers and request a definition for media literacy and some examples of how it is used in other departments. The participants in the Maryland study seemed irked by the thought of another “academic” term entering a discipline focused on training professionals and future media practitioners.

Webster University Re-issues Survey in 2007

In 2007, the Webster University media literacy survey was re-issued by a graduate student in the School of Communication. The survey results were published online on Webster’s media literacy program page in the form of a PowerPoint presentation.⁷ While the PowerPoint did not show any rigorous results from the re-issued survey, it did show the general increase in reports of media literacy’s existence in higher education. The authors noted that 158 U.S. universities reported offering a course in media literacy, while 135 of the 242 respondents reported offering media literacy as a component of other courses. Such results further reinforce the trends seen in this study. New media literacy initiatives in the university continue to emerge. As they continue to grow with little common foundation, they stand to further dilute the learning outcomes advocated by media literacy education.

A Snapshot of Media Literacy in Higher Education

The summation that follows highlights the interesting similarities and differences in existing media literacy degrees, programs, and courses in U.S. higher education. This snapshot consists of information taken from Webster’s 2002 study, Maryland’s 2004 attempt to assess current media literacy in journalism and mass communication programs, and general inquiry into new media literacy courses and/or initiatives in higher education conducted from 2006–2008.

Programs

Webster’s 2002 study reported that six institutions offered specific concentrations in media literacy, while three others offered a certificate in media literacy.⁸ Browsing through the degree and program requirements reported by these institutions, there were no significant attributes of their curricula that could separate these programs as teaching “media literacy” from programs that do not. However, most programs reported in the study included some aspects of media literacy skills—access, analysis, evaluation, comprehension, production (Aufderheide, 1993; Masterman, 1985)—the core concepts of media literacy as stated in the common U.S. media literacy definition of 1993 (see Table 1).

One Undergraduate Program

Webster University in St. Louis offers a Bachelor of Arts in “Media Communications with an Emphasis in Media Literacy.” This is the only program in the United States reported to include the term media literacy in its undergraduate degree title. The mission statement for the media literacy emphasis reads:

The emphasis in media literacy consists of the following areas of study: an awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society; an understanding of the process of mass communication; the development of critical approaches with which to analyze and discuss media messages; an awareness of media content as a “text” that provides insight into our contemporary culture and ourselves; an awareness of the depiction of diverse groups within a culture by the media; and the cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of media content (Webster University, 2005a).

Webster's media literacy concentration offers courses in ethics, cultural diversity, law, media economics, politics, and international criticism. Practical coursework includes media writing, video production, media technology, and media fieldwork. If one were to attempt to distinguish what makes Webster's curricular offerings specific to media literacy, he or she would be hard-pressed to differentiate them from many other general media studies programs.

Webster's mission statement, however, is indicative of the complexities involved in attempting to isolate media literacy in higher education. Scholar(s) who are familiar with the intended outcomes of media literacy education are associated with this program. Thus, common media literacy outcomes are noticeable, including:

...understanding the process... , the development of critical approaches... , an awareness of diverse groups within a culture... , and the cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation. . .

These terms and phrases signify engagement with media. They go beyond analysis and exploration, towards a critical cultivation of understanding. They underscore awareness and reflection through connecting critical skills to an understanding of media's social and democratic functions.

Webster's program could be argued as representative of a general media/mass communication degree track. Yet the mission statement places the purported outcomes of a media literacy educational experience in the context of the program. Webster's curriculum is specifically oriented around the advocated results of a media literacy educational experience: awareness, engagement, understanding, production and enjoyment. How such learning outcomes are taught in the classroom, however, is both difficult to tangibly measure and rarely a topic of conversation.

Graduate Programs

Silverblatt et al. (2002) reported five schools offering master's degrees with concentrations in media literacy, and three doctoral programs offering a designated media literacy option. The five master's degree programs are significantly different in curricular offerings and program goals. Of the five programs, three—Appalachian State, Rutgers and Webster—house leading academics and scholars in the media literacy field. These three programs, consequently, reflect similar mission statements, course organization, and intended outcomes.

Both Appalachian State and Webster use the term "media literacy" in their program titles. While Appalachian State's program is based more on educational and curricular theories of teaching media, and Webster's tends to approach media literacy through a critical media inquiry lens, both programs' course listings cover culture, economics, media production, media criticism, and media literacy. Further, each program claims to apply a media literacy framework to their degree, as seen through their mission statements. Webster's (2005) states:

This emphasis examines the cultural, political, and economic context of media, which affects media programming. The media literacy emphasis focuses on research strategies for the systematic analysis of content and provides opportunities for fieldwork experiences in different sectors, including education, community, professional, and media arts.

Appalachian State (2007) similarly writes of its Master's program:

The media literacy concentration develops the technical and intellectual skills to successfully utilize and critique traditional and emerging mass media formats and information technologies. Particular emphasis will be placed upon the impact and influence of media content and format on school and society, students and citizens. Attention will also be given to the subject of media audiences and media ownership. Graduates of the program will be prepared to foster media literacy initiatives, projects and curriculum development in a variety of educational settings.

These statements are the means for distinguishing the “media literacy” concentrations in the programs. Browsing courses and course syllabi offers little evidential differentiation between these programs and general Master’s degrees in media, communication, or journalism studies.

Rutgers University also houses a Master’s degree that was reported to teach with a concentration on the skills and dispositions advocated by media literacy. Rutgers mission statement includes no direct mention of media literacy. Rather, its degree requirements include a vast array of different media and communication courses. Nevertheless, within the Rutgers course layout one media literacy course exists. Beyond that however, there is little prose specific to media literacy within the course layout, description, or mission statement of the degree.

The New School and Southern Illinois University, on the other hand, do little to advertise the media literacy concentrations they reported to offer in their programs. The New School’s Master’s of Art in Media Studies is predominately production focused. In addition to production across all media formats, it offers theory courses in media history, cultural studies, media criticism and analysis. Its course syllabi cover different media and issues in the media through political, economic, social, and cultural lenses. The New School’s curriculum is in fact quite similar to Webster, Appalachian State, or most media programs for that matter. The only noticeable difference, on the surface, is that the essential features of a media literacy curricular experience—engagement, awareness, and critical understanding of media—are not mentioned in the New School’s main overview.

Southern Illinois offers even less evidence of media literacy in its curriculum. It offers a Master’s in Speech Communication with no mention of media literacy attributes. The curricula and overview offer no key insights or descriptors alluding to the tenets of media literacy education.

While there can be no logical dispute against the New School and Southern Illinois’s inclusion as programs offering media literacy curriculum, they have no specific mention of the learning experiences, skills sets, and educational philosophies commonly associated with media literacy education. This is one difficulty inherent in attempting to locate media literacy attributes in the university: using course descriptions to find certain signifiers of media literacy learning outcomes is inadequate at best.

The doctoral offerings at Rutgers University, New York University, and the University of Alabama, like in most institutions of higher education, are highly specialized towards the aims of their individual universities. They consist primarily of one or two courses that doctoral students may opt to take if they wish to concentrate in a media-related field. New York University, for example, offers media literacy and art courses in its Department of Art. Rutgers offers a doctoral program in Communication, Information and Library Sciences, in which students can pursue a concentration track in media studies. This concentration offers courses in media literacy, media and history, media and politics, and media and culture. The University of Alabama offers a doctoral degree in communication studies. Courses include everything from journalism to library science and information systems. While Alabama mentions nothing specific about media literacy, its curriculum offers such an array of media courses that, if taught in a “media literacy” manner, could easily fall under the media literacy umbrella.

Courses

Self-reporting media literacy courses in the university has exposed the same ambiguities apparent in the program parameters. In the 2002 investigation, 61 universities reported having a media literacy course(s) at their institution.⁹ However, the vast differences in the course-titles alone signify the vague and sometimes confusing boundaries for what constitutes “media literacy” learning outcomes in higher education.

So-called media literacy courses were reported with titles such as educational technology, introduction to mass communication, mass media, television production, digital video, basic filmmaking, mass communication theory and research, media and community, queer TV: television and lesbian/gay identity,

Table 1. Media Literacy Degrees Offered in the United States*

Undergraduate	Doctoral
Webster University in St. Louis	New York University Rutgers University University of Alabama
Masters	Certificate
Appalachian State University New School Rutgers University Southern Illinois University Webster University	Southern Illinois University University of Dayton University of Massachusetts, Boston

*As reported by faculty from these institutions in 2002

Source: http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Report.htm

announcing and performance, introduction to computer, the mass mind, gender and the mass media, and so on. All of the reported courses could be media literacy-oriented. However, based on the content and available syllabi, it is difficult to distinguish whether or not they are familiar with the foundations of media literacy education.

More recently, courses have appeared that include the term “media literacy” in their titles (see Table 2). This does not necessarily mean that these courses are utilizing media literacy educational philosophies to teach, but that they are utilizing the term to implement new curricular approaches to media education. This further points to the general growth of post-secondary media literacy education.

Looking specifically at the curricula of the media literacy courses located between 2006–2008, their content is surprisingly similar to those reported in 2002. The courses at Portland State, Illinois, Maryland and Utah State include the general media literacy descriptors, including media evaluation, assessment, analysis, and production. Further, the courses specifically address different media and certain aspects of media analysis—race, gender, sex, violence, politics, and globalization. This also, however, reinforces the notion that the field has not expanded in terms of frameworks, platforms, and general understanding of what media literacy is, but mainly in overall popularity.

At Utah State and Maryland, the required course readings are available online and often deal with current media topics. At Illinois students not only produce media but are also required to use media logs to report on their exposure to media and advertising. The University of Alaska also offers a generalist course in media literacy, but at a distance.¹⁰

Generalist courses in media literacy are also available for upper-class students. The University of Maryland, Temple, and Portland State offer media literacy courses on the 300, 400, and 700 levels of education. Still other recently born courses apply the term media literacy to specific topics. For example, the University of Vermont offers a course titled media literacy and the environment, and the University of San Francisco uses the term digital media literacy to teach about educational technologies and digital media in the classroom. Thus, the term “media literacy” has been expanded and adapted to fit numerous disciplines and topics of study. This has occurred since the onset of media literacy in the United States.

Table 2. Media Literacy Courses Offered in U.S. Higher Education – 2006–08*

Brigham Young University	University of Alaska, Fairbanks
Columbia University	University of Connecticut
Hofstra University	University of Illinois at Urbana
Louisiana State University (ML Chair)	University of Maryland
Oklahoma State University	University of Massachusetts at Amherst
Portland State University	University of San Francisco
Temple University	The University of Texas at Austin
Tufts University (senior ML project)	The University of Vermont
Utah State University	University of Alaska, Fairbanks

*Institutions listed that offer seminars/courses with the words “media literacy” in their title. This table is not inclusive of all new courses that include the term media literacy, but representative of some of the general new trends in course offerings.

Going Forward

The analysis of programs and courses in post-secondary media literacy education reveals a term burdened by pedagogical and definitional complexities. The reported existence of media literacy does little to provide a clear picture of how it functions in the university, where it exists, and whether media literacy is achieving its intended outcomes. In light of this, numerous questions arise: Should media literacy develop definitional parameters for the university? What differentiates media literacy from other media-related disciplines? What should media literacy look like in the university? As each of these questions is addressed, it may be useful to ponder if setting parameters for media literacy in the university is necessary at all.

Should media literacy be defined more explicitly for the university?

Based on the results of this exploration, it is safe to assume that the definition of media literacy is, by its nature, subject to vast and varied interpretations. The disparate definitions of media literacy, however, are not found in competing texts or by scholars arguing over the core purpose of the media literacy education movement. Rather, they stem from the theoretical looseness of the term itself. “Media literacy” is easily adaptable to many different academic disciplines and for many different academic pursuits. While this is in no way negative, it may compromise the learning outcomes defined by the media literacy movement over the last few decades.

Creating strict definitional parameters for what is and what is not media literacy does not seem to be the answer. This may only lead to further confusion about the term and its purpose—not to mention create even greater problems in attempting to draw guidelines for distinguishing who does and who does not teach media literacy.

The results of this inquiry suggest using the existing common definition and educational frameworks for media literacy to build more awareness of media literacy outcomes for higher education. Media literacy education should cultivate students who can effectively read the media. This entails greater critical analysis skills (comprehension, evaluation, assessment), critical thinking skills (awareness, reflection, engagement) and an appreciation of the necessity of media for civil society. In this way, media literacy education can go beyond basic media and communication courses in that although it is grounded in inquiry-based pedagogy, it provides “a new way to teach and more importantly, *a new way to learn*” (Thoman & Jolls, 2004).

Those claiming to be media literacy educators should not feel the need to dictate a strict definition of media literacy at will, but rather to be able to discuss how their classrooms work to teach students about media in a way that enables healthy skepticism, appreciation, and an understanding of media’s necessary existence for democratic society.

Should media literacy distinguish itself from other media-related disciplines?

As media and communication scholars have noted in the past (see Rogers, 1994; Gerbner & Siefert, 1983) attempting to define new fields or sub-disciplines is not always beneficial for educational initiatives and outcomes. Media literacy, as it is presently conceived, should not attempt to distance itself from existing media and media-related disciplines.

Where media literacy education distinguishes itself from general media studies/mass communication education is that it is based *not on specific content*. Rather a media literacy education experience should be the application of content to specific learning outcomes (Mihailidis, 2008). Media literacy education, by nature, has no prescribed content—or an infinite amount of content—to teach. It utilizes critical inquiry and critical understanding as foundations for learning to effectively read the media. Thus, media literacy includes all types of media studies. Where media literacy education becomes unique is in its approach towards learning outcomes. By placing the student in the middle of the learning experience, media literacy education aims to teach students critical skills—comprehension, evaluation, analysis, production—of media messages across all media formats, in a way that enables the critical

understanding and awareness of media's responsibilities in democracy and roles in civil society. The *transfer* between skill attainment and critical reflection is the crux of media literacy.

If media literacy can be reconceived to focus on a shift from content to learning outcomes, frameworks and platforms can be built in ways that can enact effective and unified post-secondary media literacy education. Currently, disparate academic interpretations of media literacy have made it difficult to shift the conversation towards constructive outcomes. Academics are trained to debate, discuss, define, and create terminology for new educational initiatives. It is no great surprise, then, that a term as loose as "media literacy" is subject to wide adoption and opposition. However, this does not mean the term is inadequate, but rather that its tangible and concrete existence for the university is still largely marginal. As a result, all the courses mentioned above pass for media education courses, but not all may pass for producing media literacy outcomes.

Media studies, journalism studies, cinema studies, and other mass communication related disciplines have endured the trials and tribulations of establishing themselves in the halls of academia. Media literacy can add value to the existing media-related disciplines by offering new teaching and learning goals that emphasize the role of media in civil society. In this way media literacy can stress the importance of being a responsible, aware, and active participant in local, national, and global communities. Such an educational experience can help better prepare university students for active and inclusive roles in information societies.

What should media literacy look like in the university?

The most obvious location for media literacy in higher education to date has been in schools of mass communication, journalism, media studies, and education. Media literacy courses also exist less frequently in English and American studies. Commonly, media literacy is either taught through a media lens or an education lens. The media lens is concerned with critical media analysis. It specifically aims to teach the skills and dispositions to view media in informed, understanding, and knowledgeable ways. The education lens deals with preparing future teachers to integrate media into the classroom. Both strands of media education are effective and can co-exist.

Relatively few programs offer courses solely dealing with media literacy teaching and learning outcomes. In 2002, it was reported that discussions concerning media literacy, if taken place at all, were reserved for classes taught in the general education programs (Christ, 2004). David Considine (2004), founder and director of Appalachian State's graduate program in media literacy, points out that while on the primary and secondary school levels there "is some evidence of media literacy being offered as an elective or stand-alone subject. . .the dominant pattern has been one of integration rather than isolation" (p. 100). For K-12 education, it is perhaps logical to place media education in social studies programs. At the university level, if the skills and dispositions media literacy education purports to teach are acknowledged and taught by journalism, media, and mass communication faculty, then the integrationist model for media education can substantially benefit students.

In the 21st century media landscape, it is important for all university students to graduate with a basic understanding of the ways in which mediated information influences individuals, societies, and democracy. Future journalists need to know about the possible influences of their work, future teachers need to know how to effectively teach with and about media across all disciplines, and the future public should be aware of media's role in civil society. Media literacy education stands to offer the unique opportunity to engage in teaching and learning techniques that place the emphasis on the cultivation of civic engagement through understanding media's role in civil society.

This study found that those claiming to "do" media literacy placed little emphasis on such outcomes in the purview of their courses. Of course it is difficult if not inadequate to attempt to tease out learning outcomes from syllabi and course overviews, but the point remains salient: as the use of the term media literacy increases in universities across the United States, it is perhaps useful to better promote those learning outcomes so they are not compromised by wide and varied use of the term.

Directions for Future Inquiry in Post-Secondary Media Education

This paper represents a starting point for dialog about media literacy's existence in the university. The following recommendations for future inquiry can help develop meaningful dialog about media literacy outcomes in the university.

First, more assessment of media literacy's existence in the university is needed. In 2006, William Christ edited *Assessing Media Education: A Resource Handbook for Educators and Administrators*. In the preface, Christ alludes to a key implication for media literacy in higher education: re-thinking how teachers teach and what knowledge students take away from the classroom. Wrote Christ (2006):

We are living in the age of accountability. Though calls for accountability and assessment have come and gone, the current demands for proving that students are learning seem more insistent as they become codified in educational policies. The move from asking teachers what they teach to requiring programs to show that students are learning is a paradigm shift that costs blood, sweat, and tears. It requires educators to look differently at their curricula, courses, syllabi, and measurement mechanisms (p. xi).

In an age where outcomes are at a premium, media literacy may be one way to show that students can become critical thinkers, engaged citizens, and media savvy individuals. Expanding efforts into assessing where, how, why, and to what effect media literacy education initiatives exist in higher education can not only help improve the overall quality of a program, but may also serve as the response to calls for more teaching and learning assessment.

Second, more empirical evaluation of media literacy outcomes in the university is needed. Post-secondary media literacy has suffered from a substantial lack of empirical data concerning its educational effectiveness. This has resulted in a dearth of any credible data for the outcomes of post-secondary media literacy education. Rigorous inquiries into skill attainment and learning outcomes can provide evidence of media literacy's effectiveness based on statistical data. New frameworks and guidelines based on quantitative findings can further serve as discussion points for substantive conversations about the scope and utility of media literacy in higher education.

These recommendations can help move the discussion of media literacy in the university forward. For as the use of the term grows, so should assessment of its use and utility for the university. This should help to broaden the understanding of what media literacy can add—both intellectually and methodologically—to media and mass communication disciplines. This should not serve as evidence to begin a new discipline in the university, but rather to spark discussions on what media literacy specifically means for the university classroom.

Conclusion

The overwhelming evidence from this paper reflects the need for a more structured understanding of media literacy outcomes for the university. Such an approach should not build walls of inclusion for media literacy, but instead reflect the learning process defined by media literacy education. In this way, media literacy education can focus on critical inquiry and the connections between information and civil society. Only at this point will the term begin to find solid ground in higher education.

A recent ERIC database review of trends in journalism and mass communication education summarized three “enduring issues” in media education:

1. The need to focus on service to the public.
2. The need to address challenges posed by new economic, technological, and social realities.
3. The need to make journalism and mass communication education and practice diverse, inclusive, and global (Bryndilsson, 2007).

Media literacy education can help serve the public by teaching media for aware and informed citizenship. The promise of media literacy is to provide a critical approach to media that allows students the opportunity to become active media users, participants in society, and informed citizens (Livingstone, 2004). Only then will media literacy gain credibility as a teaching tool and educational discipline. Until its outcomes are made clear and its status in higher education is legitimated, media literacy will remain on the margins of higher education.

Notes

1. For more information on the origins of media literacy education policy in Australia, Canada & the United Kingdom, please see a report by Heins & Cho (2003) titled: *Media literacy: An alternative to censorship*.
2. More information on specific state initiatives to adopted media education in their system can be found at http://www.frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm
3. Taken from the 2006 publication, *Global Trends in Media Education*, by Tony Lavendar, Birgitte Tufte, and Dafna Lemish, (Eds). See references for full citation.
4. The researcher of this study was told that a graduate student at Webster University reissued the 2002 survey in 2007. This data was recently published in the form of a brief PowerPoint presentation on Webster's Media Literacy program web site (<http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/>).
5. http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Report.htm
6. The 2003 *AEJMC School Directory* was used to locate all the programs offering both undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in journalism or journalism and mass communication/media.
7. For PowerPoint present, please visit: <http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/>
8. The 2007 Webster survey noted 27 bachelor degrees, 10 master's degrees, 2, doctoral degrees, and 3 certificates in media literacy reported. However, these new institutions were not listed in the powerpoint presentation posted online.
9. For complete list of reported courses, see: http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Data-Totals.htm
10. Alaska's weekly course agenda is similar to the other generalist courses, the only difference being that the students never meet face-to-face, instead participating and completing all assignments online.

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