Incorporating Critical Media Literacy into the Pedagogy: Equip the Students with 21st Century Skills

Dr. B Nagalakshmi,
Content Developer & Freelancer,
email: nageethirumalai@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

Mark Zuckerberg navigated through technology in his dormitory. As a result he landed on ‘Facebook’. Today a cross section of youth and students are also navigating with his invention ‘Facebook’. The society is grappled with fear that they should not land on some unwanted, dangerous thing. The total amount of media messages that we are exposed to in a day of our life can be equated to our grand parents’ exposure to them in their entire lifetime. This paper throws light on various facades of media literacy, alleviating fear surrounding its use and abuse, significance of media literacy, media arts education and critical analysis of media contents. This paper also involves a survey research among the teachers and college faculties to assess their opinion about the need for the incorporation of media studies into the curriculum for developing the skills of the students.

Introduction

This multimedia age is dominated by information less from print sources and more from highly constructed visual images, complex sound arrangements, and multiple media formats. Mass media are spreading their wings, usurping into our cultural and other socializing spaces such as books, families, schools, sports, religious places, and so on. We are clamouring that media influences and intrudes into our culture in a time where ‘media is culture’. A study on internet behaviour says, more than 42 per cent of total number of users is in the 6-13 age group. The number has almost doubled from a 21 per cent of such users in the year 2013. Free internet plans are spearheading to capitalise so as to make an exponential growth in the number of users in the coming years. A Google spokesperson has seen the optimistic side of the scenario that over 40 per cent of our daily users are preteens who are mostly searching for concepts, meaning of words, wiki pages of popular personalities, new in the realm of science and technology and decoding religion. A 13-year old student raises a question, ‘just because it is risky driving on the highways, doesn’t mean you stop driving altogether?’ (‘The Times of India’, 1). This question paves way for the core discussions of this paper. Kellner says, ‘a media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behaviour, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities’ (1).

What is media literacy?

When a small group of people has the power to create and disseminate enormous amounts of information, the diversity of ideas shrinks as the potential for abuse increases. Media consolidation is always problematic as the majority of the audience perceives media messages as neutral and transparent. This positivist perspective supports an unproblematic relationship with media in which these messages are rarely questioned or challenged. Critical inquiry, therefore, becomes an essential requirement for literacy in the 21st century. Changes in technology, media and society require the development of critical media literacy to empower students and citizens to adequately read media messages and produce media themselves in order to be active participants in a democratic society (Share, 2). One should possess critical thinking skills and self expression in order to become and sustain as an engaged citizen of democracy. Media literacy is a powerful tool to instil these core skills,
enabling the citizens to sort through political packaging, understanding and contributing to public discourse so as to make informed decisions in the voting booth. CML’s MediaLit Kit gives the following more robust definition as mere definition is insufficient to situate media literacy.

‘Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access analyse, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms- from print to video to the internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self expression necessary for citizens of a democracy’. (Thoman and Tessa, 21).

**Busting the cloud of fear surrounding media usage**

Every action in the media has witnessed an equal and opposite reaction from the fields of research on medical, technological, scientific and cognitive studies. Though it has witnessed a manifold growth in terms of time and space, the tentacles of fear, threat, and abuse always have their grip on them. Despite this, its journey on highways continues without even an inch of deviation, return or looking back.

One approach to media education is called ‘protectionist approach’ which emerges from a fear of media and aims to protect or inculcate people against the dangers of media manipulation and addiction. This approach posits media audiences as passive victims and values traditional print culture over media culture. This approach poses TV as a powerful force of pedagogy which dominates the attention, time and cognitive habits of youth and children. In order to demystify such mythical clouds of fear surrounding media, facts must be explored upon. A widespread awareness about the positive side of media information can be created. Incorporating media literacy into the curriculum of schools and colleges serves this purpose of alleviating fear surrounding media usage. Though some colleges and schools have taken initiatives, a large majority are yet to take steps. Those who have taken efforts to introduce media literacy are about to streamline the process by giving a framework involving the modus operandi of its implementation.

**The need for media literacy**

This age demands media literacy from the students as they are immersed into the culture of media. Media literacy is not about memorising facts or statistics about the media but to raise the right questions about what one watches, reads or listens to. In the words of Lon Masterman, media literacy empowers one with critical autonomy, the ability to think for oneself (Thoman and Tessa, 23).

The New London Group, an international group of education proposes pedagogy of “multiliteracies” to address the different types of representation.

They write, “The role of pedagogy is to develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectives” (Share, 8).

**Learning and unlearning made simple with critical media pedagogy**

Media literacy education caters to the competencies involved in Bloom’s Taxonomy such as knowledge, analysis, comprehension, application, synthesis and evaluations. Douglas Kellner stresses the need for a new type of pedagogy. He introduces a new type of pedagogy which is summed up in the following:

‘A critical media pedagogy develops concepts and analyses that will enable readers to critically dissect the artefacts of contemporary media and consumer culture, help them to unfold the meanings and effects on their culture, and thus give individuals power over their cultural environment’ (10).
Learning is easy but unlearning is very difficult. Media literacy caters to both. The teaching approach that best suits the media literacy classroom is called the “inquiry process” which includes both analytical skills (deconstruction) and creative communications skills (construction). The combination of the two processes is like uniting the theory with application. This enables the students to discover and express their learning in an interconnected and natural process.

**Spicing up the curriculum with media arts education**

A mother of 5 –year old child Google the images of ‘Kimono’ as her child participate in a fashion dress competition. Another housewife browses through recipes to win the heart of her husband through his stomach. A new learner of carnatic music wants to get a better understanding of ‘gamakas’ and resorts to the music lessons on YouTube. These have underlying connections for a need for a media arts education.

This approach to teaching about media is seen in media arts education where students are taught to value the aesthetic qualities of media and the arts while using their creativity for self-expression through creating art and media. Though many art programmes teach students the technical skills to merely reproduce hegemonic presentations with little awareness of ideological implications or a type of social critique. But without critical analysis, it may become futile. Introduction of arts and media production into public school education paves way for making learning more experiential, hands-on, creative, expressive, and fun. According to Ray Mission and Wendy Morgan, by engaging aesthetics in education, teachers can create new opportunities for students to access different truths, provide a broad range of personal development, and make learning more fulfilling and entertaining. They write, “The aesthetic may only be one among many ways of knowing that human beings have, but it is a significant one because it acknowledges the breadth, diversity, and even contradictoriness of human experiences, as well as the drive to make sense of it” (226)

A major advantage of media arts education is it offers public education for an expansion of literacy and its inclusion of popular culture as worthy of serious study.

**Pyramid analogy of media approaches**

Kellner has made an analogy of cumulative approaches namely media literacy, protectionist approach, media arts education with a pyramid, building on each other rather than a linear progression of separate ideas. In this pyramid analogy, critical media literacy is at top since it incorporates ideas from the other three approaches. The approach with the least to offer the pyramid is the protectionist because it is based on a negative view of the media and a limited view of the audience’s potential to negotiate alternative readings. It can contribute to spreading awareness of media as influential and worthy of analysis and critique. The art education approach offers a useful base that can open education to be more experiential multimodal, creative, fun, and expressive.

**Research Method and Sample**

In order to assess the view of the teachers of schools and colleges about the incorporation of media literacy into the curriculum, a survey was conducted among 30 teachers from private schools, Arts and Science colleges and Universities. The sample includes 14 teachers from private schools and 8 teachers from Arts and science colleges and 8 from Universities. A survey questionnaire to get the response on the teachers’ awareness about the massive pervasiveness of the media into students’ life, ill-effects, constructive use, incorporation of media literacy into the curriculum, need for teaching analysing of media contents, using it for the purpose of learning was administered. The questionnaire had 10 questions.
Discussions of the results of the survey

- 86% of the teachers agree that the social media has pervaded into the lives of the students whereas 4% of them do not agree upon and the question leaves 10% believe as to some extent.
- 82% of the teachers have agreed upon the threat faced by the parents and society with the too much of exposure by the media among the students. 7% of the teachers have not felt any such threat. 11% of the teachers responded as to some extent.
- 90% of the school teachers felt that the students’ too much use of social media should be restricted. 93% of the college teachers felt it is not possible.
- 86% of the teachers were confident that social media can be used for developing creativity. 14% of the teachers were not sure about it owing to the implementation hurdles.
- 84% of the teachers strongly felt for the need for the incorporation of media literacy into the curriculum, 11% of the teachers did not agree, 5% of the teachers agreed to some extent.
- 71% of the teachers is not aware about the implementation of media literacy into curriculum in the western countries even before some decades whereas 29% of the teachers had awareness about this.
- The teachers’ opinion about the access pattern and the use of various social media gave the following statistics.
  A. 90% of the teachers felt the Face book, Internet and WhatsApp were most accessed by the students
  B. 60% of the teachers felt that You-tube videos and video games were the frequent accessed ones by the students.
- To a question about the subscription of students’ edition of newspaper in low resource contexts, 83% of the teachers favoured hoping to update the students with current affairs, 11% did not agree to this 6% of the teachers was undecided about this.

Critically analysing media contents – a panacea for problems involving media

If ‘books’ in the following words of Francis Bacon is replaced by ‘media’, the questions about which media have to be tasted, which media have to be swallowed, and ultimately which have to be chewed and digested are being raised.

‘Some books (media) should be tasted, some devoured, but only a few should be chewed and digested thoroughly.’

The following list of ‘Six Signpost’ questions developed by British Film Institute (Share, 17) stand as a locus point for students to focus on when analysing a media text:

1. WHO is communicating with whom? AGENCIES
2. WHAT type of text is it? CATEGORIES
3. HOW is it produced? TECHNOLOGIES
4. HOW do we know what it means? LANGUAGES
5. WHO receives it and what sense do they make of it? AUDIENCES
6. HOW does it present its subject? REPRESENTATIONS

Conclusion

This paper has created awareness and emphasises the necessity for incorporating media literacy into the curriculum of schools and colleges. But this paper is limited to the theoretical backup for incorporating media literacy and a survey research among the teachers about their opinion on incorporating media literacy. The paper gives scope for future researchers to evaluate the post-implementation effect from the colleges that have already implemented. Western countries felt that
they were at infancy stage when they introduced this four decades before. The countries which are about to introduce this in the forthcoming years would be at the initial stage and decades to go for them to develop. Educationists have to design the framework and work for its implementation realizing the urgency of the situation.

Annexure 1

Questionnaire

1. Do you feel the social media has grown rapidly and pervaded into the life of students?
   a. Agree.  b. Disagree  c. To some extent
2. Do you think it poses some threat among the parents and society?
   a. Agree.  b. Disagree  c. To some extent
3. Do you think teaching analysing media contents is the need of the hour to alleviate the fear surrounding it?
   Yes / No
4. Do you think the school/college students should be restricted from the too much access of media?
   Yes / No
5. Do you think media can be used for creativity and self-expression?
   Yes / No
6. Do you feel the need for the incorporation of media literacy?
   a. Agree.  b. Disagree  c. To some extent
   When media studies are incorporated in the curriculum of schools and colleges, the access of media among the students can be guided and made for constructive use.
7. Do you agree with the above statement?
   a. Agree.  b. Disagree  c. To some extent
8. Which of the following is accessed by the students?
   a. Facebook b. Whatsapp c. Internet d. Games e. You-tube videos f. Twitter g. All.
   If any other, Please specify.
9. Do you think the print media like subscription of student’s edition of newspaper will help the students keep abreast of the current affairs in low-resource context?
   a. Agree.  b. Disagree  c. To some extent
10. Are you aware that western countries have incorporated media literacy some four decades before?
    Yes / No

References