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**What Research Says About … / Teaching Media Literacy**

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Media literacy is making a comeback, spurred by students' access to unlimited information on the Internet. Can schools provide the skills students need to become media literate in a digital world?

**What's the Idea?**

The Internet has kindled a resurgence of interest in media literacy. With vast amounts of information at students' fingertips, educators and parents worry about students' ability to make sense of what they encounter. Can students learn to recognize bias, track down sources, and cross-check information?

Media literacy in the past tended to focus on alerting students to stereotypes, advertising, and propaganda and on protecting them from undesirable influences. Today's digital media literacy encompasses many additional topics, from using search engines, to creating Web sites and online profiles, to participating in social networking. One of the most basic strands of media literacy emphasizes the skills and knowledge students need to locate and critically assess online content.

**What's the Reality?**

Although some countries (notably Canada, England, and Australia) have made progress in integrating media literacy into the school curriculum, schools in the United States generally have lagged behind (Hobbs & Frost, 2003). U.S. students may learn something about evaluating sources in research paper assignments and learn to recognize propaganda in social studies, but that's often the extent of their media literacy instruction. Even though students are spending more and more time on the Internet and teachers increasingly expect their students to do assignments online, digital media literacy skills are vastly underrepresented in the curriculum for all but the most advanced students (as, indeed, are offline critical-thinking and reading-comprehension skills).

Advocates of digital media education agree that reading online demands different skills than reading print-only texts does. They differ, however, on the extent to which training in the new literacies should go beyond procedural learning—how to use search engines, read URLs, identify Web site publishers, and so on—to include more cognitively demanding tasks that teach sound critical judgment and sense making.

**What's the Research?**

Research on teaching digital media literacy is in its infancy. Scholarly research moves at a snail's pace compared with the speed at which information and communication technologies proliferate. The current research does, however, provide ample evidence of the growing need for media literacy instruction that targets the added cognitive demands posed by the Internet.

Survey results confirm that students are increasingly online both in school and at home. Four years ago, 87 percent of U.S. students ages 12–17 reported using the Internet (Hitlin & Rainie, 2005); and almost half of students ages 8–18 reported going online in a typical day (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). In a 2005 survey of 7th graders in urban Connecticut middle schools and rural South Carolina schools, roughly one-third of the students reported that they were required to use the Internet for a school assignment at least once a week (Internet Reading Research Group & New Literacies Research Team, 2006). In the years since these surveys, use has undoubtedly continued to grow.

Researchers find that reading for understanding online requires the same skills as offline reading, including using prior knowledge and making predictions, *plus* a set of additional critical-thinking skills that reflect the open-ended, continually changing online context. For example, online readers play a more active role, selecting links rather than turning pages, and they often must interpret visual images to make sense of what they are reading (Coiro & Dobler, 2007). The RAND Reading Study Group (2002), citing several studies, suggests that students who are proficient online readers are not necessarily proficient offline readers and vice versa.

Unlike reading assigned textbooks, reading online challenges students to make judgments about the reputability and validity of the information they see. Researchers who directed several hundred college students to three bogus Web sites about fictitious nutritional supplements found that half of the students lacked the skills to identify the trustworthiness of the information, yet most thought they had strong research skills (Ivanitskaya, O'Boyle, & Casey, 2006).

Choosing appropriate search engines, following relevant links, and judging the validity of information are difficult challenges, not only for students of all ages, but also for most adults, including many teachers. More than half the adults surveyed in Great Britain were not able to use search engines or databases at a basic level (Buckingham, 2007). In the United States, almost two-thirds of a national sample of adults doing online searches were not aware of the difference between paid and unpaid search results and believed that search engines provide fair and unbiased results for any given search (Fallows, 2005).

Such research clearly establishes the need for online media literacy, yet very few studies have addressed how to teach the topic most effectively. Researchers and educators describe examples of media literacy instruction from kindergarten through college, but evaluations of these efforts are rare (Hobbs, 2004).

Hobbs and Frost (2003) investigated a media literacy course that was integrated into a yearlong high school English curriculum. Seven 11th grade English language arts teachers, three of whom attended a weeklong institute on teaching media awareness, selected texts to use in common and developed assignments that included analysis of television shows, news, and political speeches along with classic and contemporary literature. Although based on offline rather than online media literacy, the study found that explicit media literacy instruction increased both traditional literacy skills, such as reading comprehension and writing, and more specific media-related skills, including identification of techniques various media use to influence audiences.

**What's One to Do?**

Educators face enormous challenges in preparing their students to be critical online readers. For the most part, the teaching of critical-thinking skills is not part of the regular curriculum, and printed text is still considered the mainstay of school reading. Moreover, many recent studies identify persistent barriers to integrating new technologies into instruction, including lack of training and help for teachers and insufficient access to functioning technology (Cuban, 2002; Zhao & Frank, 2003).

Yet more and more students spend more and more time online. Rather than ignoring this fact of life, educators and education policymakers should embrace it. From video games to social networks, incorporating what students are doing online into the school curriculum holds great, and perhaps the only, promise for keeping students engaged in learning. By integrating elements of digital media literacy into their instruction, teachers can influence how well students critically assess content, both online and offline.

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