

Conceptualising Media Literacy: Discourses of Media Education

Dr. Tzu-Bin Lin, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Abstract

There is an increasing recognition about the importance of media education worldwide. It is necessary to identify what media education represents in different contexts. Western countries have a longer history in practicing media education and developing various discourses. Countries in East Asia, as latecomers, have adopted these discourses from the West in their early stage of promoting media education. However, some modifications have been made and they will be discussed in this paper. Each identified discourse will include its rationales and key themes. This paper is an analysis of various discourses of media education in the global context.

Introduction

Media education, the practice of teaching media literacy, has a long history in English-speaking countries such as the UK, Australia, Canada and the US. In recent years, there has been a fast-growing interest in media education in East Asian countries like Taiwan, China (including Hong Kong), Korea and Singapore. However, the socio-cultural context and the aims of promoting media education differ between countries. As a result, there are various discourses concerning media education.

Through reviewing books, research papers and policy documents, this paper distinguish discourses by using key words. Discourse represents a set of limited possibilities while it excludes others. The importance of analysing discourses is described by Fairclough in this way:

Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or 'constitute' them; different discourses constitute key entities (be they 'mental illness', 'citizenship' or 'literacy') in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects (e.g. as doctors or patients), and it is these social effects of discourse that are focused upon in discourse analysis. (1992: 3–4)

These discourses of media education not only construct what media education should be but also compete to persuade the public to gain the legitimacy needed for these to be practised. Through identifying different media education discourses, this paper aims at providing a landscape of media education and offering a starting point to its understanding.

Discourses of Media Literacy

Various protectionist discourses

Protectionist discourse is prominent in the long history of the development of media education. However, it is not a cohesive and systematic discourse. In this section, three various types of protectionist discourses will be presented.

Cultural protectionism

The view that media education is a means of cultural protection is the earliest media education discourse. In the 1930s, the growth of popular cultural forms made certain groups of people uneasy, such as F. R. Leavis. They were interested in promoting high culture to fight popular culture. They proposed that English teachers had to train pupils in 'taste and sensibility' and that this kind of training can have the effect of countering 'the multitudinous counter-influences – films, newspapers, advertising – indeed, the whole world outside the classroom' (Leavis & Thompson, 1933: 1). They wanted to train students to 'discriminate' when they consumed mass media and popular culture.

Within this discourse, the strategy of discriminating makes a binary opposition between high culture and popular culture. Furthermore, 'resist', 'low/cheap pleasure', and 'cultural taste' are common phrases in this discourse. Thus learners, mainly children and adolescents, are viewed as vulnerable so adults must inoculate them with the vaccine of media education. Learners are not active but passive, waiting to be injected. The central concern is how to maintain their desired cultural value.

According to Lin (2008) and Cheung (2009), this cultural protectionism discourse rarely exists in the field of media education in East Asia. A possible explanation could be that the socio-cultural context is different. There is no prominent high-culture debate taking place currently.

Media and moral panic

Moral panic caused by media is the origin of the discourse that media education is an antidote to what is seen as the moral debilitation of young people by media. According to Critcher (2003), moral panics are those relevant to moral issues, such as children

and violence, female violence, sex on the screen, child abuse and paedophilia. Here, a significant characteristic of moral panic is that it is usually about children and adolescents because they are viewed as the most vulnerable groups. It integrates moral issues such as sex, violence and health issues – for example smoking, drug use, AIDS, and alcoholism – with media. All these issues to varying degrees cause different levels of moral panic in society and may lead to nationwide campaigns. The contemporary concern about various internet-related risks such as paedophilia is another example (Burn & Willett, 2005).

The main argument of this discourse is that the above issues represented in the media will have ill-effects on young viewers. These moral concerns are also closely linked to ‘public health’ and ‘environmental’ issues. This widely adopted metaphor of health/public health is another feature of this discourse. In the United States, Hobbs describes the prevailing media literacy in health education and some possible pitfalls:

Health educators, perhaps more than any other subject area teachers, are more likely than educators in other disciplines to have embraced media literacy as a promising practice. Some kinds of media literacy activities are ubiquitous in health education state frameworks. (2005: 76)

Hobbs also lists a series of frequently mentioned topics in health education relevant to media, such as tobacco, alcohol, violence and abuse. In this discourse, adolescents and children are described as viewers who are easily influenced by ‘the unhealthy media messages concerning sexuality, violence, nutrition and body image, and alcohol, tobacco, and drug use’ (Heins & Cho, 2002). Heins and Cho also state that the US government is interested in the moral protection discourse and uses it as an essentialist approach to media education.

In East Asian contexts, the moral panic discourse functions as the rationale for promoting media education. Advocates often emphasise the negative influence of media on children and young people. For example, the borrowed metaphor of ‘public health’ is prominent in Taiwan (Chen, 2006) and the potential damage to health that media consumption may cause becomes an issue to parents, educators and policy-makers in Singapore (Lim & Nekmat, 2009).

Anti-consumerism

The increasingly commercialised media have brought a new issue to media education, as Tufte (2003: 37) points out in her example of the media industry’s motives:

Due to the growing commercialisation of television during recent years, it is becoming increasingly evident that television is no longer produced for the enlightened citizen, but that a great deal of the overriding aim of television is to reach the consumer. In other words, in the self-perception of the media, a shift has occurred from the idea of the media receiver as a member of the community, who is to be educated for democracy, to a view of the media receiver as a consumer.

Besides this redirection, it is clear that the target audience is young people, the new generation of consumer, rather than adult citizens. Buckingham argues thus:

Yet, on the other hand, media produced specifically for young people may be becoming increasingly difficult for adults to access or understand. The notion of the vulnerable child in need of protection from the dangers of the media, an assumption on which media education is frequently based, is steadily giving way to the notion of the child as a sovereign consumer. (2003a: 310)

This change draws the attention of media educators as well as the advertising industry. Because children and adolescents have become new groups of consumers, advertisers are keen to put more money into promoting consumption among young people (Buckingham, 2000a).

Fear of consumerism has also become one of the rationales of media literacy in the US. Schwarz (2005: 9) mentions that some researchers hold negative attitudes towards the media, claiming that 'the media viewed adolescents strictly as consumers and ready targets for advertisers'. Anxieties over the influence of advertising has resulted from 'the parental movement in the national scale' (Gunter & McAleer, 1997). The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) is an example in the United States. In its founding statement, it explains why the CCFC exists:

The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (formerly Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children) is a national coalition of health care professionals, educators, advocacy groups and concerned parents who counter the harmful effects of marketing to children through action, advocacy, education, research, and collaboration among organisations and individuals who care about children.

The CCFC argues that commercials are 'exploiting' children and have 'harmful effects'. Consequently, another assumption is that adults are immune to media and

consumerism while young people are waiting to be rescued. This viewpoint is based on the developmental psychological model that views children and adolescents as immature – or in the preparation stage for adulthood.

Revealing the hidden ideologies in media texts

Marxist media critics and left-wing critical pedagogy advocates are the main supporters of the discourse that media literacy can expose the ideologies in media texts. This discourse blossomed in the late 1970s and has lasted until now, with key figures such as Len Masterman in the UK and Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren in the US. The left-wing academics in the US are usually known as the school of critical pedagogy.

The core value of this discourse is, as Masterman (1985: 11) points out, that ‘media have now penetrated to the heart of our democratic processes’. Also, there is a recognition of the media experience that learners have. Masterman (1980) argued the need for teaching about television since it was closer to the daily experience of learners compared to films. The learner’s experience is the rationale for studying television. However, ‘demythologising’, to reveal the hidden ideologies, is the main target rather than focusing on the pleasurable experience gained by learners. Therefore, the experience of a learner is important as a rationale for promoting media education but plays an invisible role in the pedagogic process.

The main rhetorical strategy in this discourse is based on revealing ideologies in media texts. Giroux (1994), for instance, tries to explore racism and patriarchy in popular media; Masterman (1980) also views ‘television as a conveyor of ideology’. In order to reveal the hidden ideology, textual analysis is adopted. Therefore, critical viewing skills through textual analysis form the core of this discourse. Kellner indicates:

The gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens in learning how to cope with a media environment and how to resist media manipulation and to empower oneself in relation to our media and culture. (1995: xiii)

Here, Kellner’s rhetorical strategy gives us a deeper understanding of the assumption that people are manipulated by media. To avoid this manipulation, individuals must learn how to resist through ‘critical media literacy’ (McLaren *et al.*, 1995). This discourse does not put much emphasis on students’ media production that is a very important element in other discourses. In the UK, for instance, Masterman holds the position that students’ media production is nothing but a second-class imitation.

However, it is necessary to point out that the work done in the UK is different from the work in the US, though they share similar assumptions. One important distinction

that needs to be pointed out is that Masterman has rich experiences in the teaching and practising of media education in the UK, which means that this discourse has influences on school curriculum and pedagogic practice. In the US, this discourse lacks systematic practice and critical pedagogy itself is a discourse full of diversities. As Buckingham points out:

The theoretical discourse of critical pedagogy has always been a strongly synthetic one. The central aim has been to unite different forms of political struggle, and (increasingly) different theoretical perspectives, into an overarching synthesis – or what its feminist critics have termed a ‘master discourse’. ... critical pedagogy is ‘a political project that embraces human interests that move beyond the particular politics of class, ethnicity, race and gender. (1996: 629)

These advocates of critical pedagogy try to ‘engage in the crucial task of rethinking media literacy’ and to produce ‘a pedagogy of representation’ (Kellner, 1995). Therefore, ideological enlightenment can be achieved and people can then understand how the ‘dominant power controls the representations’.

Unlike Giroux and McLaren, Masterman not only defines the field of study, rationales, and core concepts (see Masterman, 1980: 8–20) but also provides examples of how to teach. He argues that films no longer occupy a central role in young people’s lives while television does. The model of breaking through the ideological mist suggests that there is going to be something, the concluding pattern, out there waiting to be found. The role of teachers is to navigate learners through the mist and then to find the valuable treasure, the ideological enlightenment. Teachers are like the authoritative captain while learners are crews with limited agency.

Media education is a vocational training

As early as the late 1970s, media education was identified as having the potential to provide learners with skills for their future careers. Skills of producing media texts are the main theme of this discourse. This discourse is flourishing in the UK, as Buckingham describes:

The last decade has seen a major expansion in so-called vocational media education in the UK. This move dates back to government attempts, beginning in the early 1980s, to bring the curriculum more into line with the requirements of employers – a move which was justified through arguments about ‘relevance’. (2003b: 98)

As a result, this vocational approach has been integrated into the formal media education curriculum. Recently, Brereton has proposed the relation between vocational education and media education, as 'media education in particular promotes the strategy of developing key skills for future employment which include group, communication and literary skills' (2001: 178). Within the framework of the National Curriculum in the UK, vocational media education focuses more on the production dimension 'with theoretical issues arising from contextualising and interrogating production work' (QCA, 2005: 47).

Key terms such as 'skills', 'technologies', 'industrial practices' and 'future career' can be identified from the above discussion. Jeong has described this discourse in this way:

The pedagogy of this [media production training] approach can be identified as a matter of teaching the rules to operate the media equipment and techniques, and the production procedures to follow, while the content of the production or young people's personal and group development do not seem to be a major concern. (2001: 88)

Therefore, learning the techniques is the most important aim, rather than media analysis and other relevant dimensions. The learner's role is more like that of an apprentice who will gain employment in the media industry. Teachers act as trainers/masters. Therefore, learners do not need to worry whether media are positive or negative in the cultural, moral or ideological dimensions explored above.

Media literacy is for 21st century citizenship

It is argued that media education/media literacy should be a new component of citizenship. Taking the UK as an example, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) states that:

The Government believes that media literacy, if properly integrated into children's basic education, can make an important contribution towards the development of adult citizens who better comprehend a democratic society, including the role of the media, and are therefore more active participants in that society. (2001: 4)

Media education is part of the wider citizenship education that can assist citizens to understand their democratic society and therefore perform better within it. Moreover, the statement concerning media literacy made by the Office of Communications (Ofcom) says:

In an increasingly converged communications world, people face greater media choice. ... Through confident use of communications technologies people will gain a better understanding of the world around them and be better able to engage with it. (2004: 2)

Though the main receivers of this message are adults, this statement shows that engaging the public sphere in society in different forms is very important to all citizens. The ability to engage is an element of being a responsible citizen in a democratic society. However, as Buckingham (2000b) has argued in his research on news and youth, the changing media environment – more commercialised messages and entertainment content – has brought challenges to ‘news media’. The function media plays in creating a public sphere has changed. Moreover, accompanying the appearance of the internet, the relation between media and democracy has become more complicated. Hobbs (1998: 57–8) describes the situation in the States: ‘How can citizens be best prepared to participate in a democracy?’

In more and more classrooms in the United States, educators are beginning to help students acquire the skills they need to manage in a media-saturated environment, recognizing that in its broadest sense, literacy must include the ability to skilfully ‘read’ and ‘write’ in a wide range of message forms, especially considering the dominance of image-based electronic media.

Again, media literacy is viewed as a new literacy that can help citizens engage in democracy and reduce the information gap. Although every individual citizen should be equipped with media literacy, the rhetorical strategies tell another story: only those learners in schools are trained towards performing as well-functioning citizens in the future. None of the rhetorical strategies mention how adults can learn about media literacy.

Meanwhile, there is the ‘civic engagement’ approach (see Goodman, 2003) focusing more on the wider social context – that is, media education and citizenship education do not necessarily happen in the school environment. Young people can engage in the discussion of social issues through their media productions, which express their concerns and viewpoints. There is no need for teachers in the traditional sense but for a teacher as facilitator who helps young people to develop their own voice through media production.

The citizenship discourse has a profound influence on East Asian countries. Both in Hong Kong and Taiwan, media education is viewed as a social movement in which citizens autonomously participate (Lee, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2002; Wu, 2004). In the first official policy document in media education in East Asia, in Taiwan, the ‘civil right’,

'the public', 'modern citizen' and 'democratic society' show a direct link to the discourse of citizenship (Ministry of Education, 2002: 8). Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, the purpose of promoting media education is to cultivate critical citizenship through the 'social participatory model' (Lee, 2007: 137).

As a result, a media-literate citizen can critically and independently evaluate media content and, furthermore, maintain a healthy democratic society. In East Asia, 'empowerment' and 'liberation' are two key components of media education (Cheung, 2009; Lin, 2009). The assumption of media education implies that media has a negative effect on society.

'New' Media Education approach

This approach is a popular media education discourse and some have named this discourse 'new media education' (Lavender & Tufté, 2003: 2) to distinguish it from the other discourses of media education. The important socio-cultural context of this discourse is the appearance of new media in the late 1980s. New media technology provides more opportunities for accessing the media and that changes the lifestyle of human beings drastically. Goodman provides an account of this issue while describing his experience observing his son's orientation day at kindergarten:

Today's explosion in media technologies has brought new literacies into being, transforming the way these kindergarteners read the word and read the world, even if our schools have been one of the last places to recognize this. (2003: 1)

The 'new literacies' is one of the key arguments in this discourse. Literacy is adopted as a metaphor to characterise media education. As Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994: 213–14) argue, there is a need for a 'wider and contemporary definition of literacy' based on their empirical study on media production in schools, which represents a re-direction of media education.

The relation between media education and media literacy is clearly defined by David Buckingham (2003b: 4): 'Media education, then, is the process of teaching and learning about media; media literacy is the outcome – the knowledge and skills learners acquire'. Some characteristics of this discourse are:

1. The assumption that the mass media are not negative: as Buckingham (2003b: 1–2) points out, media only 'provides us with selective versions of the world, rather than direct access to it'. Media are no longer predominantly judged as either good or bad.

2. Moving beyond the protectionist: Burn and Durran (2007) point out the importance of 'literacy' in media education: literacy implies cultural competence but it is different from Leavis' arbitrary discrimination between high culture and popular culture – that is, cultural protectionism. On the contrary, they apply Raymond Williams' positive perspective on popular culture to define the cultural function of media literacy, which is a way of moving beyond cultural protectionism. Cultural taste is not decided by elites but by specific social and historical conditions of the individual.

Therefore, media education is a 'preparation' for the learners' future lives rather than protecting them from adverse influences. This position has led to a shift in pedagogic practice, that is, the teachers are not instructing but having a dialogue with learners and assisting them to learn. As Buckingham (2003b) explains, 'critical analysis is seen as a process of dialogue rather than a matter of arriving at an agreed or predetermined position'. Moreover, the issue of 'pleasure' is brought to the agenda of media education (QCA, 2005). In this discourse, the pleasure of learners plays a positive and important role in teaching and is not merely a rationale to justify the necessity of media education.

3. Emphasising both 'reading/understanding and writing/producing': producing media texts is a way of teaching creativity as well as a way of allowing learners' own voices to be heard through producing their own media products. This rhetorical strategy has a strong influence on UK media education, especially post-14 education where Media Studies is an optional subject. Moreover, valuing the role of media production in the pedagogy of media education is another characteristic of this discourse. Moreover, the emergence of new media 'offers many different ways in which young people can actively engage in media making and exchange' (de Block & Rydin, 2006: 295). It is easier to teach media production now than a decade ago.

The discussion of this new approach can be concluded by Carmen Luke's vision of media education:

In the broadest sense, then, Media Education at the beginning of the 21st century can be characterised in the following ways. It aims to make students critical and selective viewers and consumers of popular culture, who are able to reflect critically on media messages, their own selection of and pleasure derived from media genres and texts, and to use those critical skills in the production of their own multimedia and/or audio-visual texts. Although the principal focus remains on mainstream broadcast media (e.g., radio, newspapers, magazines, television, and films), many teachers now include a range of popular culture text and practices (from toys to

rave dance parties, surfie or mall cultures), as well as emergent new media such as CDs, console gaming or Internet. (2003: 108)

The 'media production turn' is a remarkable shift in media education. One of the crucial elements is the increasingly popular new media, which make the media production easier and enrich the channels of dissemination of an individual's media text (Goodman, 2003) – that is, these new media make the creative production in media education possible while focusing on the wider social and economic context of these new technology, which are not value-free. Buckingham provides a penetrative account of the relation between media education and new technology:

It argues media education can provide an important critical dimension to the use of technology in education, that moves beyond a merely instrumental approach; and that it can help to bridge the 'new digital divide' between students' experiences of technology outside school and their experience in the classroom. (2007: 111)

Moreover, he points out the lack of a skill-oriented 'information and communication technology' curriculum in the National Curriculum and the issues of the 'new digital divide'. Here, he not only takes the issue of 'access' to new technology in the sense that many policy-makers have taken – the neutral teaching tool and the panacea of educational problems – but also defines 'access' as 'cultural forms of expression and communication' (Buckingham, 2007: 115). He argues for a new approach to media education that can go beyond the 'instrumental' approach and bridge the 'new digital divide' based on the achievements and experience of media education.

Conclusion

Viewing media literacy as beneficial and even necessary is a global trend but as Penman & Turnbull (2007: 3) indicate: 'there is no universal agreement on what it is'.

It is important to point out that the discourses that have been discussed above are not mutually exclusive: on the contrary, the boundaries among them are blurred. To some extent, the new media education discourse overlaps with the discourse of citizenship but with more emphasis on the importance of both reading and writing. New media technology is a cross-discourse element among these media education discourses but functions differently in each discourse.

The cases from East Asia are rarely mentioned in the relevant research papers on media education because most countries are in the early stage of promoting media education.

Therefore, the discourses are mainly borrowed from the western and, sometimes, various discourses are adopted strategically. The citizenship discourse with a negative assumption from the protectionist discourses of media is an example of a hybrid discourse. As late-comers to media education, advocates in Asia are aware of the dangers of solely applying the protectionist discourse. They strategically adopt the negative effect as rationale for promoting media education while adding the flavour of the active 'civic engagement' rhetoric. This hybrid discourse carries contradictions in itself.

Media education is a globally growing field. There may be some new discourses emerging to suit the local Asian context but these will take time to develop. Meanwhile, there are more empirical studies needed, especially in the East Asian context.

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