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Media Literacy for Political Engagement: A Curricular Unit Design

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in Teaching

Hamline University

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

If, one year ago, I were asked what I thought about youth and social media, I would have had a lot to say. None of it would be particularly positive. I thought that the widespread use of social media platforms was replacing other forms of communication, leaving students less able to express themselves verbally or in writing. I thought that the attention-grabbing nature of so much of the content on social media led to real deficits in the attention spans of those who use it. I thought that it could be blamed for warping people's ability to tell fact from fiction, and was adamant that "fake news" posed a real threat to the health of our democracy. And I thought that social media also obscured the extent to which people were doing exactly what the social media platforms wanted them to do: acting not from their own values, a sense of responsibility to others, or a common purpose, but from their own individual desire to attain momentary pleasure – to the delight of advertisers. Today, I still believe a lot of this, and in this project I hope to outline some criticisms of new media that I see as legitimate. I am not an active social media user for many of the reasons listed above. But I have come to appreciate that the best way to reach students is to meet them in the world they inhabit, even if it is not the one I am accustomed to. What I have discovered is that this world in which young people live is full of technologies that are at turns joyful, puzzling, original, frustrating, and visionary. If my students are going to shape the future, they must first be able to understand and shape their present, and it is my job to help them attain those understandings. In this chapter, I will explain my own background and define the problem. I will then explain the objective of this project, which seeks to answer the

question: How can critical media literacy skill development increase students' ability and willingness to politically engage?

Professional Experience

At the time of writing this, I am in just my second year of teaching high school social studies. Just a few short months before the pandemic changed everything, I was hired at an alternative high school in a suburb north of the Twin Cities. This project is very much a product of its context: it is written by someone who learned how to teach during a global pandemic. I am incredibly lucky to have been hired when I was, just before millions of Americans lost their jobs. I also feel a sense of heightened responsibility teaching when I am: in an unprecedented stretch of distance learning and in the aftermath of a summer uprising that had a profound and transformative impact on my own South Minneapolis neighborhood and on the communities in which my students live, work, and learn. This project feels even more necessary in a time in which we are examining more closely the communication technologies that bind us together.

When I started in my current position, I had nearly finished my initial licensure program at Hamline University. In that program, I was able to upend many of the assumptions that I had about social studies teaching when I started. In the two-plus years in which I worked towards my licensure, I was able to examine deeply the purpose of education and construct knowledge about the kinds of practices that best lead to student empowerment. I strengthened my commitment to teaching critical thinking skills; and deepened my own critical thinking in the process. I learned to plan units and lessons not by focusing on activities, but instead focusing on essential outcomes. Ultimately, I came away with an idea of how the teaching profession could provide me with a sense of purpose that had eluded me in the years prior.

After graduating from the University of Minnesota with a degree in political science, I did not have a clear idea of what career I wanted to pursue. In college, I was fortunate to be able to dabble in a number of different fields. For a short spell, I wanted to study economics, but became quickly disillusioned. On a whim, I started taking Russian language classes and studied in St. Petersburg for a semester, learning about the political economy of the post-Soviet states. When I returned, I thought about preparing for law school. Labor law, in particular, fascinated me. But I never really found something that truly hooked me until I started teaching. I began volunteering with the Minnesota Literacy Council, teaching classes to immigrants who had only recently arrived in Minnesota. And although I look back on my teaching then and shudder at some of my lesson planning, I remember it as a time in which I was finally able to align my actions with a sense of political purpose. I saw the skills that I was tasked with teaching as enabling my students to liberate themselves from situations that were skewed against them. Today, I see my career as serving a similar purpose: my job is to give students the skills that they need to be able to interrogate, rethink, and ultimately remake their world.

The Problem

“Students these days aren’t really *into* politics.” “This generation is too self-interested.” “Social media has students believing conspiracies instead of facts.” These are variations on themes that I have heard uttered time and again from my colleagues, friends, and mentors. And I would be lying if I said I had not experienced some measures of astonishment, disappointment, or uneasiness at my students’ occasional lack of knowledge or interest in topics that I consider to be crucial. Many of my students, in 11th and 12th grade, are not able to identify the three branches of government or tell me who their U.S. representative is. I heard countless times from my students in the run-up to the 2020 election that “voting doesn’t matter.” And almost daily, I hear

a student say, “I just don’t like politics.” But what I notice in my classes does not suggest a population of students that “just don’t like politics.” My students rarely shy away from a complicated or difficult discussion. They demonstrate an almost insatiable interest in certain topics: the 2020 racial justice protests, Big Tech and social media, and educational justice, to name a few. I noticed that, while very few students stated an interest in politics, they were engaging in political issues all day long. I began to suspect that, when teachers and students alike proclaim that students “just don’t care,” they are missing something.

Contrast these statements with what these friends and colleagues (and students themselves!) say about what teenagers *do* care about: “They are always on their phones.” “They’re addicted.” “It’s like they cannot communicate face to face anymore, and only care about likes and shares.” “They are living in a world of instant gratification, and it’s terrible!” Countless think-pieces have insisted on these points (Steyerl, 2018; Twenge, 2017), and certainly addiction to technology is a genuine problem. Likewise, there is something to be said for the fact that young people compete for likes and shares on social media platforms, and that this can affect their mental health. But one thing that positively *cannot* be stated, by anyone paying attention, is that young people are not engaged. The teenagers in my classes are in a near-constant state of engagement; rather than mindlessly scrolling on social media platforms, they are *creators*. They take photographs and edit and publish videos. They add captions and visual effects to their work, and leave feedback for others. To some extent, they demonstrate an awareness of how to maximize the impacts and effectiveness of what they post (something I will return to in Chapter Two). And while much of what teenagers post might seem superficial, a whole lot of it is not. During the 2020 election, my students showed me the ways that they were engaging: they made and used hashtags and made up dances that supported one candidate or political position. And

they organized! Countless young people urged others to vote in 2020, and that year saw a large spike in youth voter turnout.

As I began thinking about why people insisted that students did not engage in politics, I started to see that the problem was two-fold. First is that people were using the word “politics” to describe the electoral process and the traditional institutions and processes (voting, town hall meetings, etc.) that accompany it. But the electoral process, especially at the federal level, often excludes some of the issues (like climate or racial justice) that young people like to talk about. Second, people were understanding “engagement” in a traditional sense, too: older generations looked for signs that young people were engaging in the same ways that they did, and they did not find them. Young people were not writing in to newspapers or attending city council meetings, and so they declared it a crisis of political engagement. But what I have come to realize is that students are both incredibly engaged and keenly interested in politics.

Still, although there is great potential in the ways that students engage, the strategies they employ are not always politically powerful. I am left, then with the following questions: What specific skills do students need in order to engage in meaningful political action? How do the skills and competencies described in media literacy education relate to these? How can a unit designed for a social studies elective class simultaneously meet state standards (many of which stress democratic participation and civic engagement) and prepare students to be empowered actors that are willing and able to begin engaging with the issues that matter to them?

The Objective

In order to answer these questions, I will research media literacy, social media, and political engagement, and I will design a unit that focuses on teaching students the critical skills necessary to navigate the new media landscape in meaningful ways. Just as traditional literacy

consists of a set of competencies necessary to read and compose traditional texts, media literacy consists of a set of competencies that students need to be able to read and compose social media posts, videos, memes, bite-size news stories, and live-streamed collaborations and debates. Students will learn to analyze, evaluate, create, reflect, and act on various types of new media, gaining the critical capacity to use those media for political ends. While critical media literacy curricula have been designed for the language arts classroom, curricula that have a specifically political focus – which center political issues and explore not just the types of media themselves but the power that underlies the systems in which they are produced and consumed – have not been developed or explored to the same extent. This unit will offer social studies teachers an opportunity to teach political engagement while allowing students to develop critical understandings of the media that are most meaningful to them.

Summary

In this chapter, I offered a rationale for a curricular unit design centered around critical media literacy practices in the social studies classroom. I acknowledged that many people ignore the potential political power inherent in the tools that most students use daily. I discussed my own background and motivations, as well as the context in which this project was designed. The next chapter will seek to answer in more detail the research question: How can critical media literacy increase students' ability and willingness to politically engage? In doing so, I will review research into political engagement, new media technologies, and critical media literacy in order to build the case that this curriculum design is a relevant and necessary undertaking. In Chapter Two, I will describe the project that resulted from the research presented in Chapter Two. I will also explain how the project will be implemented, and explain how I used specific teaching and

learning frameworks to plan for instruction. In Chapter Four, I will reflect on the entire process and outline some of the strengths and limitations of the project.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter contains a review of relevant research that speaks to how critical media literacy skills can encourage young people to become more politically active and engaged. This chapter will take up the following questions, in order:

- 1) What do we mean when we talk about *political engagement*?
- 2) What characterizes the media landscape that students currently inhabit?; and
- 3) What specific skills do students need to be able to be politically engaged in that media landscape?

In order to better answer these questions, this chapter begins with a summary of recent scholarship into the changing nature of civic and political engagement. It next describes recent developments in technology and culture in order to make the case that engaging with various forms of “new media” is an essential part of political engagement in today’s world. Then, this chapter cites pedagogical research in order to argue that teaching and learning that is specifically designed to increase critical media literacy skills in young people is necessary, and should focus on a set of critical competencies.

Political Engagement

In a year (2020) that saw a large increase in youth voter turnout in the general election, it would appear as though young people are becoming more engaged in making decisions that could change the world around them. Many in recent years have cited low voter turnout and rates of participation in certain civic institutions as a sign that young people are simply not as civic-minded as they used to be (Barrett, 2018). But political change does not just happen at the ballot

box. It does not just happen in public hearings, or emanate forth from the halls of major institutions. New forms of civic engagement, especially among young people – e.g., signing online petitions, crowdfunding, hashtags and social media campaigns, and school walkouts – suggest the need for a new conceptualization of engagement. This section outlines some of the main arguments for and against the proposition that young people are becoming less engaged. It continues with an explanation of *participatory politics*, a concept which is central to understand how recent changes have encouraged entirely new ways of “doing” politics. Additionally, acknowledging that the terminology commonly used to speak about this issue – i.e. *engagement*, *civic*, *political*, and *participation* – are not used consistently, this section focuses the argument by defining *political engagement*.

A Crisis of Engagement?

Some common grievances about civic life in the United States in the early 21st century seem to reverberate across the nation’s political divide, and serve as talking points for our nation’s political-pundit class: institutional stability is eroding, as is the public’s trust in those once-trusted institutions, and people gravitate towards echo chambers of thought rather than engage across lines of difference (Aguilera, 2021; Rajan, 2020). Are we becoming increasingly isolated from one another? In an influential and widely-cited book, Putnam (2000) argues that far fewer people are joining and participating in civic organizations like labor unions, religious groups, and volunteer organizations, and that this decline can be linked to a corresponding decrease in the kinds of meaningful civic discourse that might otherwise take place in those settings, threatening the very fabric of civil society. Stolle and Hooghe (2004) respond to Putnam by pointing out that the tendency of older generations to claim that civic-mindedness is declining has existed at least since 1790; but they also cite empirical studies that support the first part of

Putnam's thesis: that levels of participation in the kinds of organizations that he describes are decreasing. The question then centers around the second part of his thesis: does it matter? Does this represent a threat to civil society?

For many, the answer is a resounding "no." And these scholars poke holes in Putnam's thesis that people are not as meaningfully engaged as they were before. People are still finding ways to participate in meaningful civic discourse; it's just that the game has changed. Banaji and Buckingham (2010) found that young people (age 15-25) are indeed more alienated from traditional forms of political engagement than their counterparts in older generations. But given a chance to explain their views, these young people would speak at length about what they felt needed to change: inequality, corruption, discrimination, police violence, and so on. Young people are willing to engage, and in fact do care about political issues and want to create change.

Hidden Engagement

One reason that this tends to go unnoticed is that the issues that dominate the traditional talking points of elected officials and television news anchors are simply not the same ones that young people tend to care about (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Gerodimos, 2008). Young people are not seeing themselves reflected in mainstream political conversations. We know this because when platforms allow young people to engage with issues that link more directly to their own personal experience, engagement increases (Gerodimos, 2008). And because young people are concerned with different issues than other generations, the extent to which they do engage can be overlooked. Researchers that look for evidence that youth are discussing tax reform might be discouraged; but they might miss a world of civic debate and dialogue around, for example, Internet piracy (Miegel & Olsson, 2010). Engagement is, in fact, hiding in plain sight.

Besides the issues with which young people prefer to engage, there is another reason that engagement might be hidden: the very nature of citizenship has changed. While some decry how culture has changed from one of public commitments to one of self-fulfillment, Lichterman (1996) finds that people are still committed to their communities; the *way* that they commit, however, is more personalized and self-expressive. Dalton (2016) describes a shift from “duty-based citizenship” – in which the “good citizen” is one that abides by laws, votes, and pays taxes – to “engaged citizenship.” Dalton argues that engaged citizenship entails more independence, more assertiveness, and more direct action, and less emphasis on voting and traditional authorities. Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) argue that the evolution of different kinds of networking in digital society has led to scholars looking for new collaborative models to explain how people engage with ideas and with each other. The idea of a dutiful citizen, one who votes, attends union meetings, and talks politics at a local civic club, is outdated. But this certainly does not mean that engagement itself has disappeared.

In fact, some scholars and researchers have begun speaking in terms of “participatory culture” as opposed to “consumer culture.” (Burgess & Green, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2009). Similar to Dalton’s (2016) argument, this would seem to suggest that the very basis upon which people interact with their world and each other is changing. Jenkins et al. (2009) recognize that recent technological developments have created the conditions by which people are no longer simply *consuming* media: frequently, they are creating, producing, and disseminating it. Additionally, the concept of new cultural forms that are participatory is dismissive of the idea that these new forms of engagement are hyper-individualized. Rather, they make it possible for the average person to not only create, but also to reply, recirculate, remix, and rethink shared

media content (Jenkins et al. 2017). In a report for the MacArthur foundation, Jenkins et al. (2009) define participatory culture as one that adheres to five key principles:

- 1) Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
- 2) Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
- 3) Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,
- 4) Members who believe that their contributions matter, and
- 5) Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created). (pp. 5-6).

These are principles which reflect the fact that people are contributing to *communities* of media production and consumption. This is not as simple as individual expression – despite the way that social media issues are often framed. Participatory culture therefore refers to a framework with the potential for fostering meaningful civic engagement.

But what exactly is meant by the term “civic engagement”? In fact, since Putnam popularized the term “civic engagement” in the 1990s, its use has spread widely along with the argument that it is on the decline (Berger, 2011). But Berger also advocates for doing away with the term “civic engagement” altogether. Civic engagement has come to be used as an umbrella term that encompasses just about everything a citizen might do: participate in electoral politics, volunteer, connect with peers, join some kind of association, and promote certain moral norms. The term is indeed so broad that when speaking about “civic engagement,” it is not immediately clear whether one is referring to *social* engagement (the state of being invested in social groups, dynamics, and norms), *moral* engagement (the state of being invested in activities that promote moral reasoning and moral agency) or *political* engagement (the state of being invested in

explicitly political issues and their attendant processes) (Berger, 2011, pp. 3-4). A citizenry that is engaged in all three is key to the health of a democracy, according to traditional wisdom, but they do not necessarily go together. One might be socially engaged to a great degree, as measured in group membership and participation in social activities; yet that does not necessarily predict that same person's political engagement.

Berger's view is that political engagement is a combination of attention *and* activity; not simply paying attention, but also investing one's energy in political causes. As the next section demonstrates, young people typically have no trouble investing their attention and activity socially (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019; Lorenz, 2020). But there is evidence that, while young people might be paying attention, they are not investing as much energy into political causes (Mihailidis, 2018). Additionally, political engagement, defined as investment in explicitly political issues and processes, is a term that aligns more closely with relevant social studies standards than social or moral engagement (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2020). In order to avoid confusion and narrow the focus of this project to the area in which students are demonstrating the highest need for skill development, the rest of this paper will prefer the term *political engagement* to other, similar terms.

This section has demonstrated that there is not, in fact, a crisis of engagement among young people in the United States. Rather, the extent to which young people are engaged has become obscured. First, the types of issues that young people tend to care about go ignored in mainstream discourse. Second, the very idea of engagement and of being a "good citizen," has changed along with changes in technology. Finally, the lack of traditional engagement is not a crisis because the participatory nature of these new forms of cultural production means that people are able to converse, respond, and share with each other in new ways. The old forms of

engagement may be dying out, but they have been replaced with new forms that are in no way lacking in vibrancy and potential. The section ended with a note about terminology. From this point on, the term *political engagement*, more relevant to the goals of this project, will be preferred. The next section will take a closer look at the new forms of media. It seeks to answer the question: what characterizes the current media landscape? What sorts of communication technology do young people have access to? Having a clear idea of the current media landscape will be crucial for developing a sense for the specific skills that people need in order to navigate that landscape successfully.

A New Media Landscape

Twenty years into the new century, we find ourselves at a moment in many ways dominated by new, more participatory technologies. More than two-thirds of Americans use social media, and of those that use Facebook, the vast majority are active daily (Perry & Anderson, 2019). Celebrities and politicians alike must maintain robust social media presences in order to reach their intended audience and stay relevant. And social media platforms have updated their designs and governing algorithms to encourage users to spend more time on their websites (and therefore spend more time viewing advertisements). Most recently, TikTok has cultivated an incredibly active, engaged user base. This section will explore the shifting nature of engagement on TikTok and other platforms as a basis for the argument that young people must learn a specific set of skills in order to use these new technologies in politically meaningful ways.

Attitudes Toward Social Media

A Pew Research Center poll (Anderson et al., 2018) surveyed Americans about their levels of political activity on social media, asking about whether they were members of groups

formed around political issues, encouraged others to take action, looked up information on protests or rallies, or used political-minded hashtags to spread awareness about issues. The researchers found that over half of Americans have engaged in these sorts of activities.

Additionally, a strong majority in the United States agreed with the statement that social media platforms are either “very” or “somewhat” important for getting elected officials to pay attention to issues and creating sustained movements for social change. But the polling also demonstrated a widely held perception among Americans that social media can distract people from issues that are truly important and “make people think they’re making a difference when they really aren’t” (Anderson et al., 2018, Table 5). My students and colleagues tend to echo these perceptions, often stating that these platforms *can* be powerful, while expressing doubt at their true effectiveness.

TikTok, YouTube, and the User Experience

One of the most widely used social media platforms among young people today is TikTok, which has been downloaded over two billion times and experienced a large uptick in users and engagement during the pandemic (Carman, 2020). The platform allows users to create short-form videos (with a maximum length of 60 seconds) with a variety of filters, background music, and visual effects. TikTok then uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms and machine learning to measure the amount of time that users spend watching certain videos and how they interact with them (e.g. which videos they leave comments on, and which cause them to click through to the creator’s profile). The algorithms compile this data in order to create a psychometric profile for each user, which is then used to curate a personalized “For You” video feed for each user, filled with suggested videos that automatically play when scrolled past. The experience, which does not require users to input any information about their preferences and

instead “learns” them, delivering an endless stream of custom content, has reminded at least one reviewer of Alice falling through the rabbit hole (Khan, 2020).

Similarly, when one opens YouTube either on a web browser or on a mobile app, the videos that appear are customized just for the user. YouTube employs an algorithm that uses each individual user’s search history, geographic location, gender, age, and viewing history in order to serve up to the user a list of videos that the algorithm thinks it the user will watch. This is all designed to maximize the amount of time spent using YouTube (LaFrance, 2017). A 2018 survey found that 85% of teens use YouTube. That same survey also found that smartphone use has become virtually ubiquitous, with 95% of teens reporting that they have access to a smartphone (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

But despite fears over psychometric profiling and an interface that encourages endless scrolling (on TikTok, the “for you” feed never reaches an end, and videos play automatically), there are reasons to believe that technologies like TikTok and YouTube can be used for more than just viral dances. TikTok users’ activity is varied and creative: to raise awareness about a political issue, a user might make a short comedy sketch, a dance set to popular music with relevant, often political, lyrics, or an explanation of a news story set against a backdrop of highlighted text (Jennings, 2020; Lorenz, 2020). In these ways, members of Generation Z are informing each other—and having fun doing it. In fact, the sorts of media production that can be found on TikTok are reminiscent of many of the principles of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009): there are low barriers to artistic expression, an emphasis on creating (or remixing) new content and sharing it widely, and social connections that are built through comment sections and response videos.

In some cases, the participatory tools available to users of media platforms like TikTok can lead to political action. Teenagers used TikTok in 2020 to post news updates about the presidential election and voice support for their favored candidates' policies. They joined “hype houses”—group accounts formed to support one political party or set of viewpoints—in order to more efficiently and effectively campaign for the issues they care about. Young people also used the platform’s “duet” feature (which allows a creator to post two videos side-by-side) to respond to the posts of others with different views (Lorenz, 2020). This all happened despite TikTok’s explicitly stated desire to be apolitical: it bans political advertising on the platform and the non-chronological nature of the “for you” feed makes it difficult to follow developing news stories or gain a full understanding of a sequence of events (Jennings, 2020). As much as TikTok tries to steer clear of news and politics, young people are evidently displaying a remarkable desire and ability to use the new tools of the platform to make sense of their world.

Access vs. Skillful Use

It is clear that young people have access to a world of remarkable participatory technologies at their fingertips. But we should not conflate *access* to these technologies with the skillful use of them. While the vast majority of my students use TikTok, it would be a mistake to assume that all of them are experts at finding information online, let alone at analyzing and evaluating that information. Young people often assume that they can find information by using Google’s search function, without considering questions of authorship, bias, and quality (Hobbs, 2010). Across grade levels, students have difficulty evaluating online content, struggling to identify authorship or explain why certain evidence is stronger than others (McGrew et al., 2018). And there is the very real concern that people who use social media uncritically are susceptible to falling into a pipeline that leads them to reactionary politics (Citarella, 2020).

Young people are consuming an astounding amount of information, but if they remain unaware of who is behind that information, or unable to judge the reliability of that information, they will find it difficult to develop informed opinions and they will be ill-equipped to participate in society in meaningful ways. Society is, after all, more “online” than it ever has been before.

The use of social media platforms is widespread, and therefore there is a clear need for students to learn skills that teach them how to parse the information that they consume. It is due to that need that many are now calling for critical media literacy education. In order to empower young people to engage in the kinds of creative, thoughtful, and meaningful political action described above, they must first learn a specific set of skills; critical media literacy is the field that defines those skills. In the next section, I hope to demonstrate that critical media literacy education is needed not simply because students have trouble evaluating information, but for what it ultimately promises: a citizenry that is well-informed and well-equipped to engage politically with the most pressing challenges of the day.

A Call for Media Literacy

The events of the past few years have brought renewed attention on the possibility of media literacy education to respond to new media realities. This section outlines the history of media literacy as a field of scholarship, explaining that “media literacy” has traditionally been used to refer to a set of skills or competencies that allow people to understand the media they are consuming. But people nowadays, especially many young people, are more than mere consumers. As explained above, scholars are now speaking of an increasingly participatory culture in which people produce all kinds of media and interact with friends, strangers, and even once-unreachable public figures. The nature of the current media landscape means that many people have the tools to be able to exert real political pressure and take meaningful action; how

can they learn to use those tools? This section develops the argument that media literacy education that is explicitly *critical* is what is needed for this moment, because it empowers young people not just to be discerning consumers of media, but critically conscious powerful producers of media that they can use to remake their political reality.

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, media literacy has come to be seen as crucial in combating some of the most worrisome online trends. New norms in digital culture and across social media platforms have led to more spectacle and less nuanced arguments, and in some cases flawed and dangerous (e.g. racist, sexist, or destabilizing) ideologies have been allowed to flourish (Cinelli et al., 2020; Mounk, 2018). The idea that social media platforms are rife with misinformation is taken for granted in everyday discourse. Institutions have responded with calls for more media literacy interventions. Lawmakers in the state of California passed a bill that called for the development of a model curriculum in media literacy, citing the spread of fake news. Facebook developed a “Journalism Project” in order to improve their users’ media literacy. And at least one major foundation has increased funding for media literacy programs in the form of grants (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

But these calls for a citizenry that is more informed about the information it consumes are not entirely new. Masterman (1985) cites a saturation of contemporary society by increasing amounts of manufactured information as a reason to prioritize media education. In 1992, participants at the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy set out to design a national framework for media literacy. They had found that media literacy groups, while gaining recognition on a national level, lacked common vocabulary, goals, and strategy. The groups’ representatives at the conference decided on a rather simple definition for media literacy: “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes”

(Aufderheide, 1993). After twenty-five years, that original framework is still predominant. The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) still provides a very similar definition: “The ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” (NAMLE, n.d.). Both of these definitions posit that media literacy, like traditional literacy, is based on skills or competencies: namely, analysis, decoding, evaluation, and synthesis.

Media literacy is distinct from traditional literacy, though: it is an interdisciplinary field that recognizes and responds to changes in patterns of production and consumption of media. While being literate in a traditional sense might mean that one is able to decode, analyze, and produce written texts, media literacy extends those skills to the diverse combination of sights, sounds, symbols, and other forms of representation that are found across different forms of media. And being literate in regard to social media platforms means navigating an environment that is structured directly by corporations looking to make one’s participation a commodity (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). In short, it requires a unique and interdisciplinary set of critical capacities. Being media literate means being able not only to access, analyze, and evaluate traditional texts; it means being able to do so across a wide variety of types of text, as well as wrestle with the implications of platforms that are designed to hold users’ attention—indeed in some cases, designed to dissuade certain kinds of engagement.

The Effectiveness of Media Literacy Education

Does teaching media literacy work? At least one study (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017) measured the effects of media literacy on judgments of accuracy, and found that while political knowledge did not improve the students’ ability to evaluate accuracy, media literacy education did. Another (Ashley et al., 2017) found a positive relationship between news media literacy and

internal political efficacy, defined as the feeling that an individual can influence the political system. Hadley et al. (2019) studied a critical literacy program and found that it encouraged restorative spaces that allowed young people to fight for change in their community. These examples point to the sense that media literacy curricula can help students to develop the skills necessary for meaningful political engagement. But what, specifically, does an effective media literacy curriculum look like? To what learning outcomes should it be oriented?

Media literacy education as it is typically considered is not without its critics. Buckingham (2020) writes that media literacy education is popular among policymakers because it allows governments to avoid responsibility for the ill effects of social media platforms. If it is understood to be an individual's responsibility to be a conscious and critical consumer, then the state can recuse itself from any efforts to hold the companies that operate the platforms accountable. This question of responsibility has taken center stage in recent years, with President Trump in 2020 repeatedly threatening to repeal a law that provides immunity to online companies for most of the content published on their platforms (Lee, 2020). But in the meantime, we find ourselves in a situation where media literacy education is often posited as a set of rather simple, rather individualized tools that, if universally adopted, would presumably solve our problems.

In joining this critique of media literacy, boyd (2017) argues against "band-aid" fixes such as the now-widespread labeling of misinformation by social media networks. These fixes, the argument goes, will not work for a number of reasons. First, people no longer agree on what makes a source a trusted one. Whereas the assumption might have once been that major media outlets, scientific and medical journals, and websites like Wikipedia present the same truths, these and other sources are now seen as untrustworthy by many Americans. If the New York

Times represents the elite “liberal media” to so many, then advising people to “find a trusted source” may not actually lead them to reliable information. Second, in the United States, people are taught to privilege their sense of personal responsibility above nearly all else. This effectively makes everyone responsible for their own understandings, and teaches people to investigate stories for themselves rather than trusting certain media. Third, people have come to value experience over expertise; for example, trust in doctors and other medical experts has fallen as people trust their own experience (such as anecdotal evidence or looking up information on WebMD) over information that comes from experts. This suggests that instead of traditional critical media literacy education—which teaches people to ask questions about the information they are receiving, something they inarguably are already doing—systems must be developed which would allow people to engage with each other across the lines drawn by these new, tribalistic camps (boyd, 2017).

Media Literacy for Engagement

In light of this widespread tribalism, the spread of misinformation, and the distrust of experts, Mihailidis (2018) also argues that contemporary approaches to critical media literacy pedagogy do not do enough to spark meaningful engagement. These approaches assume that media consumers can maintain a critical distance from media, while research shows that complicating factors such as confirmation bias and selective exposure make this unrealistic. They are also deficit-focused: they aim to teach students to deconstruct sources for evidence of bias and editorial slant. These skills are certainly helpful, but some scholars (Goldstein, 2017; Jenkins & Billard, 2017; Mihailidis, 2018) argue that this can lead students to feel more comfortable playing a blame game than conducting critical inquiry. Mihailidis (2018) and Goldstein (2017) argue that traditional media literacy education can leave students feeling *more*

disconnected, even hopeless. It can teach students to critique different sources of information effectively, but leaves little room for learning about how the media can produce positive changes.

There have been attempts in the field of media literacy to assess students' enduring understandings, but difficulty arises in assessment because the skills being assessed are so distinct. While many studies assess the effectiveness of media literacy programs by posing researcher-created questions to students, Schilder and Redmond (2019) analyzed the questions that students posed in response to viewing a piece of media advertising before and after a media literacy course. They argue that relying on student-generated questions constitutes an approach that better measures students' acquisition of skills. They found that after participating in the course, students ask more complex questions about authorship, audience, representation, production techniques, and message content. The ability to ask questions related to these specific domains suggests that students were able to transfer the critical inquiry skills they learned to new situations. Even more importantly, they found that after the media literacy course, students asked questions about how certain pieces of media impact people differently and linked media to policy. This has implications for teachers designing media literacy curricula: teachers should focus as much on teaching students how to ask questions as they do on teaching them how to provide answers.

Freire (2008) argues that true democracy can only be achieved when people are given the tools to be able to critically confront their own problems; in other words, to be agents in their own liberation. That requires teaching people to think critically about their social, cultural, and political positions in relation to others, and examine the responsibilities that accompany those positions. It requires readers of texts to be able to question their own assumptions and

internalized narratives to recognize how they relate to power and domination. Only then will people begin to have the critical consciousness that is a prerequisite for agentic change (12-13). Vasquez et al. (2013) describe this as “disrupting the commonplace,” explaining that in order to create new political realities, things that are taken for granted need to be re-thought. While *literacy* describes the use of language that leads to a sense of agency within a culture, *critical literacy* is the use of language that allows a sense of agency that considers one’s historical and political situation and gives one the power to change one’s culture (Shor, 1999). What students need today is a set of tools that help them develop and strengthen critical consciousness. Freire (1985) states that “reading words, and writing them, must come from the dynamic movement of reading the world” (p. 19). At the present moment, the “world” that young people are reading, and the experiences that they can speak about, are rooted in a complex landscape of participatory media. In order to be empowered to change the world, they must first understand the relationship between the language of their world and the context in which it originates.

A unit design that empowers students by teaching them to read social media critically should still be centered on a clear set of skills; but rather than serve as ends themselves, those skills should serve as means to student empowerment. Hobbs (2010) formulates a “spiral of empowerment” made up of five competencies that encourage active participation in the construction of knowledge. She borrows from previous media literacy scholarship and cites constructivist education in defining the competencies as follows:

- 1) Access: Finding and using media and technology tools skillfully and sharing appropriate and relevant information with others

- 2) Analyze & Evaluate: Comprehending messages and using critical thinking to analyze message quality, veracity, credibility, and point of view, while considering potential effects or consequences of messages
- 3) Create: Composing or generating content using creativity and confidence in self-expression, with awareness of purpose, audience, and composition techniques
- 4) Reflect: Applying social responsibility and ethical principles to one's own identity and lived experience, communication behavior and conduct
- 5) Act: Working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, national and international levels (p. 19)

The inclusion of reflection and action demonstrates a commitment to fostering student participation and engagement beyond the classroom. While most media literacy teaching and learning is focused on the “analyze and evaluate” step, studies have found that when the focus is *creating* media messages, they will better understand their effectiveness and will, in turn, become empowered to action (Goldstein, 2017; Mihailidis, 2018). This set of five competencies will serve as an important framework for building a curriculum that encourages political action.

Conclusion

This chapter cited research that answers the research question that guides this project: How can critical media literacy increase students' ability and willingness to politically engage? It began by examining the shifting nature of citizenship and engagement in contemporary American life, arguing that much of mainstream discourse ignores the ways that young people today are interested and engaged in political issues. It then described aspects of the media landscape that most people have access to, citing sources that explain the nature of the innovative

tools at young people's disposal. The chapter continued by explaining the history of the field of media literacy, and argued that if political engagement is the desired outcome, then a media literacy curriculum that is explicitly critical is necessary, and should center student production – creation, reflection, and action – rather than simply focus on receptive skills such as analysis and evaluation. A critical media literacy unit is a welcome addition to a social studies classroom because it builds the prerequisite skills for students to be able to meaningfully engage in political life by learning to better understand their world. The next chapter will describe the project, explain the setting and participants for whom the project is designed, and list the relevant state standards. It will further explain which aspects of the curricular frameworks that will be used to develop the assessments and learning activities, and will suggest potential instructional strategies.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Overall, I remain concerned about the effects of social media use on youth. Young people in my classroom that struggle to put away their phones seem distracted, anxious, and emotionally unsteady. And research shows that the majority of Americans believe social media distracts people from the real issues that they face (Anderson et al., 2018). Yet social media, made up of online platforms created by massive corporate entities that seek primarily to gain people's attention for the promise of increased advertising revenues, is one of the building blocks of our current reality. It is certainly one of the building blocks of young people's reality. And young people have responded to the widespread availability of participatory technologies (e.g. video capturing and editing, varieties of communication tools) with brilliance. The ability of individuals and groups to edit multimedia projects and reach potentially millions of viewers in a short period of time is not to be understated. Organizers and activists have used social media to put pressure on those in power to change; young people use these tools to engage with ideas and issues that they care about. What I have come to realize in my own experience is that telling students what is good for them does not actually help them much: it is not effective or engaging, nor does it allow them to deepen their understandings. Students must be able to explore, analyze, evaluate, and create social media themselves in order to understand its power (or lack thereof).

A good social studies curriculum empowers students; that is, it allows students to develop the skills necessary to ask questions in order to deeply understand their world, and the skills necessary to change it. If students are to gain these skills, then a curricular unit that explores the power of individuals within the current (social) media landscape seems crucial. Such a

curriculum would allow students to explore what the research says about social media use, both positive and negative, in order to ultimately take a reasoned position on its place in society. It would allow students to sharpen their abilities to evaluate online sources, in order to better understand the biases, purposes, and power structures that exist in the media they consume. It would also allow them to create pieces of content that address real-world issues in order to examine its strengths and limitations. And ultimately, it would allow students to better understand the nature of both power and social change. In this project, I researched the question: How can critical media literacy skills increase students' willingness and ability to politically engage? I found that a curricular unit that adheres to the principles listed above has a chance to increase both students' ability and willingness to engage politically.

In this chapter, I will describe the curricular unit plan and individual lesson plans that I created. I will outline the setting and participants for whom the unit was designed, and explain why I believe it is relevant even for students and settings that do not fit that profile. I will explain the standards and instructional frameworks that I used to design the project. Finally, I will describe the timeline in which this project was created and when it will be implemented.

Project Overview

A curricular unit specifically targeted to deepen and enhance critical media literacy skills can lead to a greater sense of agency and build the understandings that students need to engage politically (Ashley et al., 2017; Bulger & Davison, 2018; Hadley et al., 2019). This project is an original design for a curricular unit that aims to teach core competencies of media literacy while simultaneously allowing students to explore how people and organizations fight for change. The unit plan contains assessments designed to measure students' learning based on their demonstrating media literacy competencies (e.g. source evaluation), reflecting on their own

media consumption and production habits, taking a stand in a class debate about the effectiveness of social media, and creating their own media artifacts designed to address a specific social issue. I created a unit plan that contains a project introduction, overview (containing standards, learning outcomes, and assessments), lesson plans, and supporting materials.

Standards

This project is designed to meet several current Minnesota state social studies standards (MDE, 2011), which are represented in Figure 1. It should be noted that in December 2020, the Minnesota Department of Education released the first draft of a new set of social studies standards, but at the time of writing, it exists only in that draft form. In writing the unit's essential outcomes, I did not use the exact language of these standards and benchmarks, but did borrow from them.

Figure 1

Applicable Minnesota State Standards in Social Studies

| Standards | Benchmarks |
|--|---|
| <p>9.1.1.1 Democratic government depends on informed and engaged citizens who exhibit civic skills and values, practice civic discourse, vote and participate in elections, apply inquiry and analysis skills and take action to solve problems and shape public policy.</p> | <p>9.1.1.1.1 Demonstrate skills that enable people to monitor and influence state, local, and national affairs. For example: Working with others; conducting civil conversations; articulating ideas and interests; negotiating differences and managing conflict with people or groups who have different perspectives; using parliamentary procedures; building consensus.</p> <p>9.1.1.1.3 Evaluate sources of information and various forms of political persuasion for validity, accuracy, ideology, emotional appeals, bias, and prejudice.</p> <p>9.1.1.1.4 Examine a public policy issue by defining the problem, developing alternative courses of action, evaluating the</p> |

9.4.4.22 Post-World War II United States was shaped by an economic boom, Cold War military engagements, politics and protests, and rights movements to improve the status of racial minorities, women and America's indigenous peoples.

9.4.4.23 The end of the Cold War, shifting geopolitical dynamics, the intensification of the global economy, and rapidly changing technologies have given renewed urgency to debates about the United States' identity, values, and role in the world.

consequences of each alternative, selecting a course of action, and designing a plan to implement the action and resolve the problem.

9.4.4.22.6 Identify obstacles to the success of the various civil rights movements; explain tactics used to overcome the obstacles and the role of key leaders and groups.

9.4.4.23.4 Analyze the impact of twenty-first century technological innovations on society.

Curriculum Design

Teachers should always teach for enduring student understandings. This statement might seem obvious, but it is important to state because many still imagine teaching as a performance in front of an audience, and imagine that a good lesson is one that “covers” a lot of material. Wiggins and McTighe (2011) summarize research in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience to assert that students understand only when they can extend, transfer, and apply what they learned to new situations in different contexts. Students do not gain this sort of understanding by drill or by memorization, because drill and memorization do not offer students opportunities to apply their knowledge. Similarly, curriculum that is focused on breadth of knowledge rather than depth of knowledge leads to knowledge that is disconnected; by learning content instead of concepts, students do not learn how to connect that knowledge to new situations. Effective learning requires instead an emphasis on the concepts and ideas that underlie each piece of content. When students gain an understanding of larger concepts, they are able to apply that conceptual knowledge to new situations. Accordingly, effective assessment should be performance-based: it should be an opportunity for students to demonstrate that they know how

to apply what they have learned, not just that they know certain facts or formulas. Students remember information that they use authentically (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, pp. 5-6).

If the goal is to provide students to authentically use, or “perform,” the information they are learning, then methodical planning is needed. Reeves (2011) writes that teaching is in need of “deep design”: lesson planning that is centered on students and the kinds of thinking they do, the skills they develop, and what understandings they will take from the lesson and be able to apply to other situations. Deep design is distinct from the kinds of teacher-centered and activity-centered lesson planning that many new teachers employ: rather than ask, “What will students learn?” new teachers might instead ask, “What will students do?” Whether planning learning activities or assessments, teachers can use deep design to ensure that they are teaching toward specific learning outcomes.

Understanding by Design

It is just this kind of deep design that is the focus of Wiggins and McTighe’s *Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* (2011). Their contention is that the most effective curriculum is planned backwards: beginning with the long-term desired outcome and ending with the lesson plan. The authors acknowledge that this is not a new idea. Bloom’s taxonomy, for example, is designed to align educational goals with assessments. But Wiggins and McTighe outline a unique series of steps and guiding questions that allow teachers to start not with content, but with enduring understandings. When teachers ask themselves, “What is it that students should be able to *do*?” or “How is it that students should be able to *think*?” planning begins to look more complex than the more traditional questions of “What is this unit about?” or “What is it that students should know?” The Understanding by Design process is split into three stages: 1) identifying desired results; 2) determining acceptable

evidence; and 3) planning learning experiences and instruction accordingly. Figure 2 below shows how I used Wiggins and McTighe's (2011) process to design a unit backwards.

Figure 2

Overview of Stages for Critical Media Literacy Unit

| Stage 1 – Desired Results |
|---|
| This unit will allow students to develop media literacy skills and conceptual understandings about the effectiveness of social media messages. Students will be able to use their learning to analyze sources for message quality, point of view, and audience; create a multimedia project (in the style of a social media post) that addresses a public policy issue of their choice; and apply their understandings of the relationship between the concepts of power and social change in order to consider the effectiveness of the strategies used by present-day social movements. |
| Stage 2 – Evidence |
| Students will be assessed through daily exit tickets, a multi-day multimedia project, and a final structured academic debate. |
| Stage 3 – Learning Plan |
| <p><i>Major learning activities include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining and exploring the concept of power • Identifying and analyzing types of online data collection • Analyzing modern-day social movements • Evaluating online sources for credibility • Comparing and contrasting historical social movements with present-day ones • Researching a social issue • Creating a multimedia project to address that social issue • Taking and justifying a position on whether social media can empower its users to make change |

Note. This figure borrows its format from Wiggins and McTighe (2011, p. 44).

Teaching Conceptual Understanding

The second framework that I used to design the unit is from Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern's *Tools for Teaching Conceptual Understanding, Secondary: Designing Lessons and Assessments for Deep Learning* (2017). Like Wiggins and McTighe (2011), this framework encourages backward design. But Stern et al. (2017) argue that teaching and learning should be

organized around teaching fundamental, powerful concepts. Allowing students to develop strong conceptual frameworks is both more engaging and better prepares students to apply their understandings in unique ways. An illustrative example is that of a sixth-grade social studies class that, in a unit on U.S. westward migration, deepens their conceptual understandings of migration, hardship and resources. Students' conceptual understandings are then evaluated by applying their knowledge to a new situation: the shrinking of the Aral Sea (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, Introduction section, paras. 13 & 14). This framework encourages planning around just a few central concepts; as students deepen their understandings of those concepts and how they relate to one another, they will be both better able to understand the content being taught and apply their understandings to new problems. I designed this unit around two fundamental concepts: *power* and *social change*. Students ask questions such as: What is the nature of power? Where does it come from? How does power relate to social change? How does social change happen? In asking and answering these questions, students will be better prepared to take a stand in the unit's final structured debate ("Is social media empowering?"). They will also find themselves prepared to transfer their understandings of power and social change to other subjects and content areas.

Audience and Context

The curricular unit was written for use in a high school social studies course. It meets standards that are most typically used in teaching high school civics or U.S. history, but is designed to be flexible and adaptable. An educator who wants their students to develop media literacy skills and deepen their understanding of how individuals and groups can change the world might find these lesson plans useful, and with slight changes could adapt them to a course in world history or human geography. In the "Design Frameworks" subsection below, I explain

how the unit was designed to develop students' conceptual understandings of power and social change. These concepts are present in every social studies content area, and therefore this unit might be useful in any other course.

In designing the plan for learning, I considered my own students. I teach at a public alternative high school in an inner-ring suburb of the Twin Cities. As part of an intermediate school district, the school mostly uses rolling open enrollment from public high schools in member districts. The school employs both group learning and credit-recovery models. This means that students attend both "group" classes, in which the learning resembles that in a traditional public high school (though with smaller class sizes), and individual "lab" classes, for which students work at their own pace on a curriculum designed by the district and accessed online. This curriculum is designed for group instruction.

The students at the school represent a wide variety of different races, cultures, family backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. Roughly 10 percent of enrolled students receive EL services, and another roughly 10 percent receive special education services. Around 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Students come to the alternative school for a variety of reasons. Some students simply prefer to work at their own pace. But most have, for one reason or another, underachieved academically in their home districts. Some have fallen behind due to mental health-related or behavioral issues that have kept them out of classrooms for extended periods of time. The school offers students the opportunity to build more meaningful relationships with their teachers than they might have at a traditional high school. Students can often feel powerless, anxious, or disinterested. As a result, the alternative school setting requires planning for instruction that is engaging, flexible, and empowering. This curricular unit can be considered successful if it attains all three; and since students across the country, in all settings,

benefit from engaging, flexible, and empowering curriculum, this unit can serve a wide variety of students.

Timeline

The first three chapters of this capstone were drafted in November and December 2020. The final capstone course, in which Chapter Four and the curricular unit were drafted, took place in the spring semester of 2021. Using my research into political engagement, social media use, and media literacy, and the two design frameworks, I began writing essential learning outcomes for the curricular unit in February 2021. Next, I designed the unit's assessments: the final structured academic debate, the multimedia project, the personal reflection, and daily exit tickets. In March, I developed a rough draft of the unit's lesson plans. In April, I had finished drafting every piece of the project and completed and submitted an online presentation to my peers.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the scope of the project as well as the frameworks that were used for its design. It listed the relevant state standards, and used the Understanding by Design template to list the desired outcomes, assessment evidence, and learning plan that were used to create the project. It also described the participants and the setting in which it will be implemented. This unit will aid educators that wish to teach for empowerment; media literacy, as well as a conceptual examination of how social change occurs, will allow students to better understand their world in order to change it. In Chapter Four, I conclude by reflecting on the process of creating the unit plan, revisit the parts of the literature review that were most instrumental in creating the project, and describe possible implications and limitations of the project. I also explain how I will use the project and how I might share it with other educators.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

Introduction

In this project, I aimed to provide an answer to the question, “how can critical media literacy skills increase students’ ability and willingness to politically engage?” I chose to focus specifically on social media, as the forms of communication and types of content found on social media are the ones with which today’s high school students are most familiar. I researched youth political engagement, media literacy, and the impact of social media on each of those fields. Once I had an idea, based on the research, of what skills students needed to learn in a social studies classroom, I began constructing a curricular unit that teaches those skills. The final project allows students to increase their media literacy skills while also developing an understanding of the extent to which social media can help to build the power necessary to effect social change.

In this chapter, I begin by reflecting on my process. I hope that in explaining how I became interested in the topic, and outlining the steps I took in creating the project, I will make the purpose of the project even more clear. I continue by highlighting some of the most important research I came across in completing the literature review. In that section, I will explain which sources I found most useful for the purposes of the project, and which I will return to when I need more inspiration. Next, I describe some of the limitations of the project. I conclude with a description of how the project will be used and how I hope other teachers might use it.

The Process

I began this process in September 2020 with little idea of what the end result might be. I started, however, with a passion for teaching media literacy skills and an idea of their importance. In addition, in my own practice, I use every opportunity I have to talk to my students about their social media use. I find it fascinating the extent to which the world in which my students exist—the people they talk to, the ideas they engage with, and the bits of entertainment they consume—occurs on social media platforms. When I was young (and I'm only about 10 years older than my students), I watched the same television shows as my parents, and besides physical media, there was very little content that was truly “on-demand.” Now, students live in an on-demand world, and watch and interact with content tailored to their tastes, largely independent of older generations. Many in my own and older generations look upon this transformation with disdain, and certainly there is cause for concern. But I knew that I wanted students to be able to examine those concerns for themselves. I thought, “What skills do students need to be able to critically examine their own social media use? Will those skills lead them to use social media technologies for good use? What skills will encourage students to engage with the political?”

I decided to frame my research along these questions. And I found that students are already, to some extent, politically engaged. But I also found that students as a whole lacked understanding about the powers, and the dangers, of the social media platforms that they use every day. In order to better understand how to most effectively exchange ideas and effect change within the current media landscape, students need a specific set of skills. These skills are best described by critical media literacy scholars, who understand the central importance of media literacy for empowering students.

After I had done some research and drafted the first three chapters, I became stuck when considering *how* to teach those skills, and found new inspiration in Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern's *Tools for Teaching Conceptual Understanding* (2017). I had been assigned this book by my content advisor, Dr. Kim Koeppen, when she was my professor, and I have used it periodically to plan lessons and units in my own practice. I rediscovered the book when I was writing learning outcomes for the unit, and from it I gained tremendous insight. I identified *power* and *social change* as the concepts around which I would organize the unit. Once I realized that, in order to better understand the power (and limitations) of social media, students had to explore and understand those two concepts and the relationship between them, everything else fell into place. What resulted was a curricular unit design in which students inquire into the nature of each of those concepts and explore how they relate to social media and contemporary and historical social movements. With deeper understandings, students will be better equipped to understand how power operates and what can be done to change it when necessary.

The Research

In my research, several sources stood out as particularly useful. For a general understanding of the skills and competencies found in media literacy curricula, I kept returning to the National Association for Media Literacy Education's website (NAMLE, n.d.). As I learned more about the differences between traditional and critical media literacy, one source stood out among the rest. Mihailidis (2018) describes traditional media literacy educational practices as incomplete. In outlining a value system he terms *civic intentionality*, Mihailidis (2018) argues that media literacy practices do not take into account the full complexity and limitations of the current media ecosystem; social media might encourage engagement in the form of consumption, but it can actually restrict creative expression. Additionally, social media platforms essentially

lock their users in with other users who agree with them, making it difficult to measure the real political impact of actions taken online. He argues instead for media literacy interventions that bring people together and that encourage meaningful engagement. In a nutshell, “if media systems and structures must be reformed, people cannot simply understand how they work but must translate their capacity to understand media with taking deliberate civic actions to improve, reform, or re-imagine media’s role in our civic systems” (Mihailidis, 2018, p. 159).

In developing an understanding of social media platforms and how young people engage with them, I leaned on previous research into participatory media use by young people. Jenkins et al. (2016), in particular, helped me to understand the changing media landscape and the ways in which young people create, publish, and share in ways that they never had before. The research into participatory media tends to frame social media use a little more positively than other sources, which I kept in mind as I designed my lesson plans (I continue to believe, as I stated above, that students cannot simply be told that “social media is bad”). In attempting to understand what creative technologies current social media platforms offer their users, Lorenz (2020) offered me a lot of insight. Overall, I believe that I was aided by the fact that my research was interdisciplinary. In reading research from a number of fields, I was able to develop an answer to my question that draws from all of them.

Limitations

The main limitation of this project is that it just scratches the surface. While I believe that a 14-day unit designed to get students to ask questions like, “Does social media empower me?” or “How can I build power to be able to act?” will allow them to develop deeper understandings of those concepts, I was left feeling that the final result did not do enough to allow students to actually *experience* those concepts. One of the ultimate goals of the project is for students to

recognize the limitations of social media use in engaging in meaningful action. The unit's final project allows students to find out for themselves how powerful they think social media is; but in that same way, they should be allowed to find out for themselves how powerful it feels to take part in different kinds of actions. Combining this unit with service learning or even youth participatory action research would enhance even further students' conceptual understandings.

One further limitation is that teachers may find that they have to adapt these lessons for different groups of students. While the lesson plans contain opportunities for differentiation by including different levels of text and allowing for creative groupings of students, the unit plan may prove to be not as flexible as I had hoped if it is being taught in an EL or special education setting, for example. In those settings, a teacher may want to replace some of the texts included in the lesson plans.

Finally, the major potential technical limitation of this project is that it requires individual students to have access to a smartphone and access to social media platforms. Some students do not have smartphones, and some schools block access to social media on their wireless networks. While all students at my school have access to these things, I recognize that this may not be the case for other teachers, and they may have to adjust their lesson plans.

Implications/Using the Project

In creating this project, I intended to provide an opportunity for social studies teachers to allow their students to explore the concepts of power and social change through an exploration of social media. I have already used parts of some of the lessons with my own students, but I plan to implement this unit in full toward the beginning of next school year. I find that it could serve teachers well to be used as the first unit of the year, for a number of reasons. First, it might tie well into building norms and expectations for the classroom, especially in a school (like mine)

that does not have a particularly clear cell phone policy. Second, the content is, I believe, inherently engaging due to its subject matter. Students simply want to talk about social media, and in my own limited experience they seem surprised when they see a lesson plan that addresses. Third, many of its learning activities involve group learning or active learning. In a classroom of students that are just beginning to get to know each other, this could be a great unit in which they continue to build meaningful relationships.

My hope is that by sharing this project or the ideas it contains with teachers I know, teachers will be less apprehensive about teaching about social media. I hope, too, that teachers can adapt this project to their own use in lessons that address social movements that are yet to come. In doing so, they will allow students to analyze those social movements for strategies and elements of power-building, and students will exit the unit with a better understanding of what it may mean when they use their phones in certain ways.

Summary

In this chapter, I first reflected on my process: I described why I became interested in the topic, what I began to research, and how I wrote the unit plan and lessons. I then summarized some of the sources that had the largest influence on my final project. Next, I described some of the limitations of the project, so that teachers know what may need to be adapted for use in their classrooms. Finally, I described how I will use the project in my own classroom and my hopes for how it is used in others. I hope, in reading this project, teachers are inspired to find even more ways that they can help students build the skills they need to become politically engaged.

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