

From Information Reserve to Media Literacy Learning Commons: Revisiting the 21st Century Library as the Home for Media Literacy Education

PAUL MIHAILIDIS and VALERIE DIGGS

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From Information Reserve to Media Literacy Learning Commons: Revisiting the 21st Century Library as the Home for Media Literacy Education

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Media literacy, while growing considerably during the past three decades, remains on the margins of educational establishments in the United States. Its interdisciplinary nature and broad definition have caused some confusion as to how best it can be utilized in school systems. At the same time, the school library has had to reinvent itself rapidly for a digital media age. Reconceived as a “learning commons,” the school library of the twenty-first century is no longer seen as simply a repository for information, but as a center for knowledge. This article will outline a framework for the media literacy learning commons designed to help students navigate information in a digital age. The school library, repositioned in this way, can excel as a place where students are free to express, explore, and empower themselves to become more active and engaged participants in their daily lives.

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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

Media literacy is fast becoming a coursework staple on college campuses and in elementary and secondary schools. Despite the huge attention to

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Q1

this movement nationally and internationally, U.S. public libraries generally could and should do a lot more to play a role in this new interdisciplinary field. If for no other reason, one rationale for offering instruction in media literacy in public libraries is how much kids are learning about the subject in elementary and secondary schools. It is this rationale that has led *PLQ* to solicit and publish the following article on media literacy. In almost every case, readers can substitute the words “public library” for “school library” or “school media center” and the logical argument or the actionable policy recommendation would be exactly the same. If readers know of solid media literacy programs going on in public libraries, let us know. It always is exciting to see which libraries are leading a subject or service trend.

INTRODUCTION: LIBRARIES IN A DIGITAL MEDIA AGE

In a recent forum hosted by the *New York Times* (“Do School Libraries Need Books?” 2010), scholars, librarians, educators, and administrators debated the future of books in libraries. The participants’ lively opinions offered a wide range of insights into the library of tomorrow. All envisioned a more dynamic space, varying in the amount of shelved books available (from zero to a lot), and were unanimous in the existence of new multimedia technologies and platforms for the twenty-first-century learner.

School libraries have been under increasing pressure to reinvent themselves in the face of decreasing budgets, decreasing space, and an increasingly wired population. Students in today’s libraries are digital natives—for better or for worse—who are no longer primarily perusing shelves, but are logging into a world of information available at their fingertips. It is this environment that has spurred direct questions about what libraries do, how they do it, and to what end.

In recent years the library has been reinvented in the context of a learning commons model that provides for more dynamic and participatory approaches to information and engagement. This reflects a keen attention to how students use information in the twenty-first century. The educational strand that aligns with the learning commons approach to the school library is commonly referred to as *media literacy*. Media literacy education, a movement that has grown considerably during the past three decades, is premised on teaching and learning about media’s role in daily life and cultivating critical thinking skills to become more aware of media’s ubiquitous power. Recently, the media literacy movement has come to encapsulate ideas of interactivity, participation, expression, and navigation in digital contexts. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, which provides direction for schools preparing students for the twenty-first century, lists media literacy as one of the three “literacies” students need and defines them as follows:

People in the 21st century live in a technology and media-suffused environment, marked by various characteristics, including: 1) access to an abundance of information, 2) rapid changes in technology tools, and 3) the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions on an unprecedented scale. To be effective in the 21st century, citizens and workers must be able to exhibit a range of functional and critical thinking skills related to information, media and technology. (“P21 framework definitions”) 70 75

Beginning with an outline of the learning commons library model, and following with an overview of media literacy education in a digital age, this article will present a new framework and model for a *media literacy learning commons*. The model offers a series of guidelines that detail how libraries can integrate the tenets of media literacy education into the dynamic spaces and approaches offered by the learning commons model. The goal is to provide new foundations for thinking about the school library of tomorrow as a place where students can feel enabled and empowered to be active creators, producers, and participants in an information age. 80 85

THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LIBRARY: A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Gathering information, storing it, developing systems to retrieve it, and helping others become better users of it has been the responsibility of librarians throughout history. Librarians have used the technologies available to them—from clay tablets to papyrus to books to CD-ROMs and the Internet—to offer their communities information to support education, cultural and economic advancement, and recreation. At the turn of the century, school systems moved away from textbook-based curriculum to more resource-based instruction. After World War II media became important. Audiovisual materials were emphasized and funds were appropriated for the purchase of books, and with the passage of Title II school libraries began to be seen as centers where books and other materials could be housed and distributed. 90 95

Fast forward to the twenty-first century. Are school libraries still perceived as information repositories or data warehouses? Is the primary function of a school library to disseminate information in print or online? With the advent of the movement to transform school libraries to true learning commons spaces, the answer is a definitive no. 100

How does the school library profession define *learning commons*? The movement toward the transformation of traditional library spaces into learning commons or information commons began in higher education during the previous two decades. Scott Bennett (2009) indicates that this transformation was in response to the recognition that students and faculty needed 105

“well-equipped facilities and instructional help in mastering information technology.” Fostering a culture of “intentional learning” is the primary educational goal of such spaces. In K–12 public education, the concept of the learning commons has evolved to become one built around a “collaborative learning community” with the primary goal of “improving learning and achievement for each and every student” (Loertscher 2008). 110 Q2

A learning commons in a school is far more than a place to check out a book, find that certain piece of information online, or meet with friends to work on a project. A learning commons is the center for student learning in a school that fosters creativity through the use of collaborative spaces and a relaxed atmosphere, encourages student and staff ownership of space, offers new technologies, and uses space creatively to encourage the arts, writing, and most importantly, inquiry-based thinking. Learning how to ask meaningful questions, and creating personal knowledge from the answers to these questions, is the primary function of a learning commons in public education today. In Massachusetts, Chelmsford High School’s Learning Commons motto is “Ask, Think, Create” and signage over a large performance area reads “We set sail on the sea because there is knowledge to be gained (John F. Kennedy).” 115 Q3 120 125

Students gather in group work rooms, coffee is served in the mornings, and students display artwork around the learning commons in a variety of ways. “Listening Lunches,” held once each month in the learning commons, give students at Chelmsford High School the opportunity to perform for their peers—be it through open microphone sessions, poetry readings and slams, or the guitar class’ latest work—while their classmates eat lunch. Wireless access for laptops exists, and students can be found answering questions and communicating personally meaningful answers in a variety of ways. The uses of tools such as Glogster enhance creativity and give students different options for communicating information. There are no posted rules, and students and staff exhibit mutual respect for the space and each other. 130 135

The American Association of School Librarians published standards in 2007 titled *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (American Association of School Librarians 2007). These standards are clear in defining the path of school libraries, or learning commons, as more learning-centered. The four standards—(1) inquiry, think critically, and gain knowledge; (2) draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge; (3) share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society; and (4) pursue personal and aesthetic growth—give shape to the concept of the learning commons model and help define what school librarians are doing when redesigning their spaces both programmatically and physically. 140 145 150

School libraries will have a limited and very narrowly defined future on the education horizon if they continue to be just information repositories. Why would students visit when Google can give them the answers

they need or if the library databases are available on every home computer? School libraries are destined to fail if they do not expand the definition of “service” to begin not only to engage students in higher-level thinking skills and creative thinking, but also to encourage problem solving, all while in the pursuit of the development of personally meaningful questions. 155

Employers today are actively seeking creative minds that can solve problems and ask questions no one has asked before. If we are to prepare our students for life and the workforce, the way we have been doing business has to change. With shrinking budgets and the demand for more and better technology, school libraries that are perceived as information repositories are doomed to fail. The learning commons model encourages open collaboration, community spirit, questioning minds, and the creative spirit. At Chelmsford High School, “We have become central to teaching and learning because our mission is tied to the ideals and mission of our school and district, and we are committed to offering our services and space to all our constituents” (Diggs 2009). 160 165 170 Q4

MEDIA LITERACY FOR A DIGITAL AGE

The media literacy movement in the United States has grown considerably during the past three decades. Its common definition is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide and Firestone 1993, 7). The broad parameters of this definition have led to 175



FIGURE 1 Students Work Collaboratively in the Open Space of the Learning Commons.



FIGURE 2 Wireless Internet Access Provides for More Informal, Collaborative Learning.

some confusion as to where exactly media literacy should live and how it should be adopted in educational settings (Kubey 1998; Kubey and Baker 1999; Mihailidis 2008). While this is in no way problematic, it has perpetuated the lack of a solid framework for common approaches to media literacy education.

The movement, however, has found solid ground in its fundamental approach to teaching and learning about media through the application of critical thinking skills and critical analysis of information in its various forms (Alvermann and Hagood 2000; Buckingham 2003; Hobbs 1998; Potter 1998; Silverblatt 1996). Recently, media literacy scholarship has evolved to incorporate new media realities—convergence, participation, play, interactivity, and collaboration—into its pedagogical approach (Jenkins 2006, 2007; Kellner and Share 2005, 2007).

In the information age, media literacy education's focus on digital landscapes seems not only logical but also necessary. Today, the average youth is spending upwards of eight hours a day with media outside of school or work (Kaiser Family Foundation 2010) and more than eight hours per day engaged with screens (Stelter 2009), and social media sites like Twitter and Facebook are growing exponentially. Such simple statistics reinforce the need to find new and imaginative ways to help educate youth and the general public about how to critically view, analyze, and use information for better engagement with communities large and small. This means not only new approaches to media literacy education in the classroom, but also new spaces for such learning to take place.

Following are three approaches to media literacy education that explore its value as a teaching and learning movement for information societies, and visualize the dynamic learning commons space as an outlet for media education in twenty-first century libraries.

Participation, Interactivity, and Play

In his seminal 2006 white paper “Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century,” Henry Jenkins outlined what he deems “core media literacy skills” for the twenty-first century: play, simulation, performance, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation (Jenkins 2006). With no further explanation, it is quite clear that these core skills represent a departure from approaches to media literacy prior to the exponential expansion of digital media technologies into the home and school.

Youth today have endless amounts of information readily available. They are active seekers of information rather than passive consumers. With the barriers to access increasingly diminished, individuals are sharing information through media avenues as never before. New means of expression, dialog, and community are enabling group dynamics that are changing how we navigate information and understand media messages. Jenkins’s (2006) approach to media literacy education places the individual as interactive, engaged, and participatory in information environments. The development of core competencies around the new realities of digital technologies are at the heart of media literacy education in the twenty-first century.

Sharing, Cooperation, and Dialog

In *Here Comes Everybody*, Internet scholar Clay Shirky writes: “When we change the way we communicate, we change society. The tools that a society uses to create and maintain itself are as central to human life as a hive is to bee life” (Shirky 2009, 17). From civic activism on Facebook to Obama’s grassroots political campaigns and the use of Twitter to break news globally, social media have enabled communities to engage in new discourse, information exchange, and dialog (Benkler 2008; Weinberger 2008). Sharing information has lowered transaction costs for group cooperation (Shirky 2009).

These new realities for how youth express and share online lead to a number of questions: What are the parameters for sharing information online? How have new media technologies enabled new forms of collaboration? What are the consequences—both positive and negative—of increased dialog through mediated spaces? Youth must be made aware of how social media technologies are changing dialog, collaboration, and expression online. The ease of participating online has large implications for the future of civic dialog and discourse on a global scale.

Aware, Active, and Engaged

Scholars are increasingly exploring the connections between media education and information use as a predictor for civic engagement (Kahne

2010; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Shah, McLeod, and Lee 2009). Whether students are playing games online, chatting in anonymous spaces, or posting information to social media networks, the results of their efforts will contribute to the new types of civic engagement that exist online. 245

It is not enough to simply assume that more skilled consumers and users of media will become more engaged and active citizens. Media literacy education strives to make apparent the connections between critical analysis of media and media's larger necessary role in a functioning civic democracy (Kahne 2010; Mihailidis 2009). This connection, in an online age, increasingly means teaching about the attainment and distribution of information as *public* acts. Posting pictures, videos, notes, and so on, online are all acts with public repercussions. Collectively, they build portraits of individuals—snapshots of our *self*, as reflected in our preferences, values, beliefs, likes, dislikes, and so on. These together create a civic portrait of our communities. And in a digital age, this has vast influence on how we communicate about politics, economics, and culture. 250 255 260

ENVISIONING THE NEW SCHOOL LIBRARY AS A MEDIA LITERACY LEARNING COMMONS

The library of today has become much more than a repository for information. It is now conceived as an active learning environment where its patrons engage in the type of information use and expression common in their daily routines (Diggs 2009). What can reenergize the role of the library in this environment is its focus on providing not only access to information—which no longer needs concentrated physical space—but also direction for learning how to become an active, engaged, expressive, and empowered media user in everyday life. 265 270

The framework in Figure 1 offers five guidelines for integrating media literacy education in the learning commons model for twenty-first-century school libraries. The model stresses both the active information seeker and the creative participant and producer, as situated in the learning commons model. 275

Access Is Now a Real Window to the World

Libraries are the traditional access points for information in schools. Most classrooms have limited individual technology capabilities, thus school libraries serve as de facto media hubs. Further, students now utilize library spaces for more than traditional information seeking. 280

In this context, the media literacy learning commons can help students harness the endless stream of content available online. Beyond providing the ability to search for information, learning commons can help youth



Q9

FIGURE 3 The Twenty-first-Century Media Literacy Learning Commons

understand the fundamental responsibilities they have as online navigators, which includes fostering inquiry-based learning, cultivating a sense of shared ownership of online space, and acknowledging the diversity that accompanies the unfettered access to a global stream of diverse information. 285

Investigation Is Now Easier . . . and Harder

Before the Internet and social media platforms enabled a new level of interactivity with media, the credibility of information was rarely an issue within a library. Today, that has changed drastically. In many ways searching for information has become easier through new media technologies. However, this ease has also created a new level of necessary oversight around the credibility of online information. 290

The media literacy learning commons model must teach not only how to navigate information in the library itself, but also how to develop sound exploration skills with the Internet and new media technologies. Searching 295

online databases, filtering through academic and nonacademic sources, tracing hyperlinks, differentiating blogs from news sources, and general savvy for Web-based investigation, are all effective strategies that a media literacy learning commons must employ. School librarians cannot assume that because youth have grown up as “digital natives” they have the skills and knowhow to effectively investigate information online. They may understand the terrain of the Internet and its socializing abilities, but this is markedly different from rigorous exploration online.

The Nuts and Bolts of *Critical Analysis*

In today’s age, where Wikipedia is increasingly seen as reliable as traditional reference encyclopedias (Giles 2005), and where blogs and social media avenues have become primary sources of information for youth, the physical walls of libraries no longer protect librarians from the responsibility of teaching about critical analysis of information. Media literacy has long employed key questions for assessing information, made popular by Temple University scholar Renee Hobbs. Conceived as a framework for media literacy content assessment, the questions are:

1. Who is the author and what is the purpose?
2. What techniques are used to attract attention?
3. What lifestyles, values, and points of views are represented?
4. How might different people interpret messages differently?
5. What is omitted from the message? (Hobbs 2007)

The media literacy learning commons can utilize these questions and do more. It must help students assess the nuts and bolts of messages (content, authorship, form, structure), and judge credibility, bias, diversity, and independence. In an age of YouTube, blogs, and social media, the ability not only to practice sound investigation, but also to deconstruct the messages themselves is vital for information-savvy youth.

Understanding *Expression*

Notions of public and private have drastically changed in the digital age. Students of today have greater responsibilities in terms of their public identity than at any point in the past. How they express themselves online will have repercussions in both the short and long term.

The media literacy learning commons can be a space where, through understanding how information is published, repurposed, and distributed, students learn about the potential—and potential pitfalls—of expression online. Utilizing the learning commons space for students to perform

and publish can create situations for reflecting on how their conduct in face-to-face and online scenarios is similar and different and the implications of each style of expression. In a participatory age, students must construct new understandings of audience, identity, and privacy. The learning commons model can help provide structure around enabling responsible and healthy expression online.

Appreciation of the Power of Creativity and Fun

Finally, the twenty-first-century learning commons should be a space for creativity and enjoyment. Silence is no longer the absolute mandate of the school library, and in an age where students are wired to technology, the learning commons model should reflect a place where their relationship to information can be modeled as an enriching experience.

From public readings to music, art, poetry, and design, the library can evoke creative dispositions around information that cultivate an appreciation for its powerful and necessary role in civic democracy and community. This can also help students see the benefit of being expressive and inquisitive. Media literacy is premised on creation as a core skill in media competency. The learning commons model can allow creation and creativity to permeate its space and encourage its users to become active performers through multimedia in their everyday lives.

CONCLUSION: EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGH THE MEDIA LITERACY LEARNING COMMONS MODEL

In connecting the new learning commons model for school libraries with twenty-first-century approaches to media literacy, this article positions the media literacy learning commons as a new approach for media literacy's integration into K–12 education. Cultivating habits of media literacy—access, investigation, credibility, participation, and appreciation—can make the library of tomorrow more relevant, dynamic, and suited to cultivate good habits of information use and expression.

This does not mean that books will go by the wayside. The recommendations in this article are meant to explore an expanded role for the learning commons: one that is more cognizant of the current information environment of the students that school libraries serve. This means that the learning commons will maintain its crucial role in providing students with the access, space, sense of ownership, and resources needed to inquire, research, and expand their knowledge base. This also means that the learning commons will work with teachers to provide new means for student inquiry, based on understanding information processes in a digital, mobile, and hyper media age.

The existence of media literacy in our education systems is no longer optional. The central thrust of media in all facets of today's society demands educational responses premised on teaching and learning about the various roles of media in daily life. The learning commons model for school libraries embraces the idea that students of today are more empowered by information than ever before. Teaching and learning about the myriad of ways to harness the new dynamics of information can relocate the twenty-first-century learning commons as the home for civic engagement, democratic participation, and, most importantly, student empowerment.

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