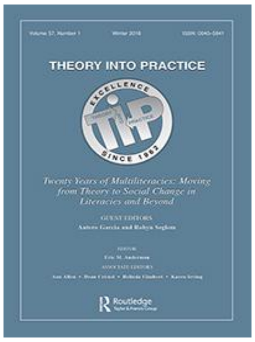

Theory Into Practice

ISSN: 0040-5841 (Print) 1543-0421 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/htip20

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To cite this article: Nicole Mirra, Ernest Morrell & Danielle Filipiak (2018) From Digital Consumption to Digital Invention: Toward a New Critical Theory and Practice of Multiliteracies, Theory Into Practice, 57:1, 12-19, DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2017.1390336

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1390336

Accepted author version posted online: 08 Dec 2017.
Published online: 08 Dec 2017.

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Theory Into Practice, 57:12–19, 2018
Copyright © The College of Education and Human Ecology, The Ohio State University
ISSN: 0040-5841 print/1543-0421 online
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1390336

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From Digital Consumption to Digital Invention: Toward a New Critical Theory and Practice of Multiliteracies

The teaching of media and digital literacies has gained increased attention in the 20 years following the New London Group's landmark publication. From approaches urging the study of popular culture to calls for youth led social media revolution, there is no shortage of approaches. Yet scant attention is offered toward articulating a new and comprehensive theory of pedagogy and production that acknowledges the changing tools and technologies at young people's disposal, conceptualizes young people as media producers, and applies these developments to today's complex classroom context. We aim to articulate a new critical theory of multiliteracies that encompasses 4 types of digital engagement: (a) critical digital consumption, (b) critical digital production, (c) critical distribution, and (d) critical digital invention. We make the argument that a new critical theory of multiliteracies needs to account for each of these types of digital engagement but that, ultimately, we must move beyond theorizing our youth as passive consumers or even critical users of digital technologies toward the project of facilitating youth communities of digital innovation.

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You have likely seen or used an online map recently—a visual representation of a neighborhood dotted with landmarks ranging from public buildings and transportation hubs to restaurants and bars. As ubiquitous as these maps are, we rarely stop to ask: Who gets to decide what counts as a landmark? How are these maps developed? What purposes can they serve beyond simple navigation?

A group of young people in West Oakland pondered these questions as they considered the increasing level of gentrification in their neighborhood.

They took their concerns to Youth Radio, a local community media production organization, and worked together to develop an interactive online map dotted not with businesses, but with the stories they compiled of both long-time community members and recent newcomers to the area. Users can click on the house of a long-time resident and hear her story of resisting displacement or on the location of an open-house where a young couple is considering moving in. They can also add their own stories to the map.

These youth were not content to merely consume media, or even to analyze it; instead, they engaged in critical interrogation of media culture in relationship to their physical and social location and innovated an existing multimodal tool to their own expressive and civic purposes. When asked about the motivation for creating the community map, one of the young designers responded, "We are the future, and we're going to have to deal with gentrification—for better or for worse" (Bliss, 2015).

The literacy theorists of the New London Group (NLG; 1996) could scarcely have imagined this future when they wrote their landmark manifesto 20 years ago. The range of tools that youth can access, and the communicative possibilities of those tools, has expanded exponentially, and the range of forces acting upon their possible *social futures* have become ever more pronounced—consider the polarized political landscape, the corporate-controlled media culture, and the continued prevalence of systemic racial, social, and economic inequities.

Yet what the NLG did recognize (earlier than most) is that integrating their theory of multiliteracies into widespread practice with youth necessarily involves a radical revamping of literacy curriculum and instruction in public education systems around the world. Making the critical experience of creation that the Oakland youth at Youth Radio had commonplace for all young people requires educators to rethink the foundational definition, nature, and purpose of literacy, media, and education itself.

In this article, we detail the enduring barriers and halting progress that has been made toward reimagining media literacy in the US educational context in the 20 years since the NLG's contribution, highlighting the fact that digital media is still too often treated with fear or dismissal in literacy studies, or else treated as a neutral communicative form to be studied and modeled. We propose an updated and extended critical theory of multiliteracies that advocates moving beyond simply teaching students how to consume various media and extends into teaching students how to produce, distribute, and even invent new media forms themselves. We argue that this theoretical advance is needed to honor young people as creators and citizens who can harness tools of expression to amplify their voices and address the pressing social issues affecting their lives in the 21st century.

Trajectory of Media Education: From Digital Consumption To Production

In a recent survey by the American Association of School Librarians (2012), 98% of respondents indicated that their schools filter online content—social networking, chatting, and gaming sites were among the content most commonly blocked. This statistic speaks to the wary and distrustful relationship that many school districts continue to have with digital media; although calls for 21st-century learning have led to large investments in educational technology and commitments to technology-integrated instruction (US Department of Education, 2016), much media education continues to be driven by fear of the world it opens up to students and/or skepticism that it can be used for anything more meaningful than recreation or distraction (Fry, 2015).

Kellner and Share (2007) characterized this response to media education as a "protectionist approach" (p. 2) and highlighted its characterization of young people as passive consumers of potentially dangerous content. This approach also characterizes much *digital citizenship* education, which highlights the dangers of the Internet as a space for bullying or embarrassing digital footprints and focuses on coaching young people about how to model good behaviors online (Ribble, 2015). This instructional model is a digital application of what Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) dubbed "personally responsible" citizenship—a depoliticized interpretation of civic life focused on honesty and “niceness” that has little relationship to the maintenance of (or participation in) democratic governance (p. 241).

The protectionist approach is often used alongside the media literacy approach, which characterizes digital content as a genre of informational text roughly equivalent to print-based forms like essays or books and focuses on teaching students to understand its structure and purpose to avoid being manipulated. For instance, just as students might learn about the functions of stanzas or line breaks in poetry, they could similarly learn about the functions of hyperlinks and infographics in digital news stories or blog posts. The Common Core State Standards (2010) have ushered in an instructional focus on informational text and specifically highlight media literacy as a key 21st century skill, arguing that “students who are college and career ready … use technology and digital media strategically and capably” (p. 7). Although this approach moves toward expanding the literacy tent to include multimodal forms, it does so with little analysis of the fundamental ways that digital media differs from print in nature, use, and purpose—let alone the power dynamics between creator and consumer in a corporate media culture (Hobbs, 2011). The implied relationship between reader and text is much different for a poet than for a digital ad copywriter and media literacy approaches often mask this imbalance.

The media literacy approach inches toward production by encouraging students to write about media, sometimes utilizing the tools of media to do so, but many of the opportunities that do exist for students to produce using media tools emerge from two sources: arts organizations that stress creative expression or education technology organizations that stress job readiness. Media centers are popping up in many libraries and afterschool programs to capitalize on student interests in photography, film, and various forms of making. Meanwhile, pushes for students to learn coding and computer science are couched in rhetoric stressing the need for students to gain media production skills to be competitive in the global marketplace.

Many of these programs situate production as a politically neutral activity; in other words, young people are viewed as individuals and the tools they use to create media are viewed as implements free of any bias or intent until manipulated by those individuals. This view obscures the fact that individuals exist within overlapping social groups with varying amounts of social power and privilege, as well as the fact that digital tools reflect and amplify the power of social constructs.

Some youth production sites do exist that take these constructs into account, and they are usually grouped under the banner of *critical media literacy* (Kellner & Share, 2007). We turn now to the crucial contributions of this movement.

Re-Emphasizing Criticality In Media Literacy

In addition to advocating for an expansive definition of literacy that includes multimodal and hybrid textual forms, critical media literacy insists upon applying theoretical lenses related to power and cultural studies to the consumption and analysis of these forms. As Kellner and Share (2007) argued:

> Critical media literacy thus constitutes a critique of mainstream approaches to literacy and a political project for democratic social change. This involves a multi-perspectival critical inquiry, of popular culture and the culture industries, that addresses issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power and also promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media.

This approach demands a Gramscian analysis of the hegemonic nature of digital media and the symbiotic forces of coercion and consensus that work to maintain the power of the capitalist state (Gramsci, 1980). Teachers and students must analyze not only the text itself, but also the roles of the creator, the audience, and the stakeholders with interest in this power relationship.

This analysis opens the space to criticize the normative ideologies at work in many multimodal texts. It allows students to see the sexualized depictions of women often at work in advertising, or the ways that narrative storytelling often defaults to a White, male, middle-class perspective as *normal* or *average*. It also fundamentally questions the logic of neoliberal democracy that equates freedom with financial choice within markets rather than political action in the public sphere.

To honor the progress of the critical media literacy movement and extend this work further into the ever more complex 21st-century educational context, we turn now to a retheorizing of critical media literacy.

Retheorizing Critical Media Education: Toward A Pedagogy Of Digital Invention

In what follows, we offer our vision of a retheorized critical media education. There are three impetuses for this work. One, as we have endeavored to show, the *critical* in critical media education needs to account for advances in critical theorizing that have opened the door to poststructural, anticolonial, and feminist discourses that have different ways of conceptualizing the subject, social analysis, and praxis. Second, as media technologies transform educators must be constantly vigilant in revisiting their notions of media literacy, media engagement, and media education. Finally, as students change, teachers must remain attentive to students' sociocultural and sociopolitical realities as professionals envision the purposes and uses of an education in the world today. Toward these ends, we offer a four-part theory of media education that includes critical digital consumption, digital production, digital distribution, and, ultimately, a pedagogy of digital invention.

The cultivation of a broader set of digital skills and dispositions that expands beyond core content knowledge is crucial if students are to become innovators and leaders who can excel within the social, academic, and work environments of the future; however, a vague focus on literacy alone does not provide substantial direction for critical teaching practice. As discussed previously, the meanings of digital literacy can just as easily be oriented toward deficit-oriented and protectionist views as critical models of analysis and production. Without more direction, practice will continue to lack coherence as teachers struggle in isolation to imagine and implement the processes and structures that might support students as digital civic agents.

This is why we specifically call for a pedagogy of digital invention; as a term, *invention* opens new spaces of possibility for educators to enact curricular and pedagogical approaches that prepare students to practice solving problems for which answers do not currently exist. Importantly, a pedagogy of digital invention does not discount the analytic and production-centered skills of critical media literacy; instead, it views them as necessary components of a developmental trajectory leading toward innovation and original creation on the part of young people. The components of this iterative arc of critical digital pedagogy include: critical digital consumption, critical digital production, critical digital distribution, and critical digital invention.

Critical Digital Consumption

Invention cannot take place without a sophisticated understanding of the affordances and gaps in the existing technological and media landscape; as such, critical understanding and analysis of digital media are crucial skills for young people to master. In the wake of the bitter presidential election season, amidst talk of a *postfactual* democracy, explicit instruction about how knowledge is produced, manipulated, and marketed to audiences in a polarized political culture is essential to reimagine informed citizenship. Just as adults have been found to experience difficulty differentiating between trustworthy and fake news reports, recent research confirms that young people experience similar confusion (Kahne, 2016). The traditional practice of helping students determine reliable sources to serve as evidence for their claims in research and persuasive writing now requires a new level of discernment and analysis as teachers and young people collaboratively examine the motives, techniques, and effects of multimodal texts with unparalleled power to influence how citizens think and act in public life.

As discussed in the previous section, this discernment must actively engage with the *critical*—not the politically neutral version connoted by the concept of critical thinking, but the politically engaged version that considers the ways that race, class, gender, and other social constructs are leveraged to construct particular narratives about marginalized groups of citizens. For example, although traditional media literacy approaches are useful to help students understand the persuasive techniques that advertisers use to encourage consumers to purchase products or that campaign staff use to sway citizens to support political candidates, a critical digital media consumption approach is needed to help students deconstruct the tropes that are used to encourage individuals to identify with particular communities (gendered, raced, etc.) and connect particular products to these identities. Consider the term *dog-whistle* that emerged during the presidential election campaign, referring to terms or phrases inserted into speeches that connote support for particular ideas to a targeted audience without saying so explicitly. Analyzing this type of speech requires theoretical tools that go beyond surface analysis of content to the narratives being fostered beneath the surface.

To do this, teachers and students need access to previously othered critical traditions such as postcolonialism, poststructuralism, feminism, critical race theories, and intersectional theories. The media classroom needs to see itself as a space that explicitly embraces critical theories and that envisions to create spaces for metatheoretical awareness, cultural analyses, and cultural critique. Additionally, media classrooms need to engage rapidly evolving media genres and help students to understand how reading a mobile application, a web site, or a social media platform may require different tools than reading a newspaper, a print magazine, or even a film. This requires explicit conversations about visual literacies and digital rhetorics.

Critical Digital Production

Just as strong literacy practice conceptualizes the activities of reading and writing as inextricably linked, so must it envision media consumption and production as symbiotic partners. This partnership between consumption and production has not yet been equitably achieved; although students across demographic groups are likely to analyze digital texts, low-income students and students of color are less likely than their more affluent, White counterparts to create texts using technology. Without guided experiences of production, students are not only less likely to fully understand the inner workings of the media they consume, but are also denied full access to the primary means of knowledge creation and amplification of the 21st century. The development of writerly voice is now connected to the ability to leverage digital communication tools; as a result, teachers must offer students meaningful learning experiences using these skills.

A critical practice of production extends beyond using tools to create digital versions of essays and other traditional products that would previously have been crafted with pen and paper; it involves sophisticated understanding of the specific affordances (and shortcomings) of mass media platforms and the design of learning experiences tailored to those affordances and crafted to highlight marginalized voices.

Students need access to the technological tools and expertise that allow them to be powerful producers in the digital age. A critical digital production involves conceptualizing radical counter-narratives and having the tools and the ability to create these counter-narratives by leveraging the most advanced digital technologies. Critical media classrooms can help students to understand the various ways that writing happens in digital spaces and how that writing is different than what passes for quality on traditional compositions. Students also need to develop their oratorical skills as much of digital communication is voice captured in audio and video texts. Digital production also requires an aesthetic sensibility and the ability to capture still and moving images and to juxtapose those images with written and spoken commentary, as well as music and visual art.

Critical Digital Distribution

One of the most influential affordances of digital media tools is the ability to distribute literacy products at an unprecedented scale across time and space to vast audiences. Indeed, what makes digital media production a potentially transformative practice is the prospect of authentic engagement with individuals outside of the traditional classroom space. Although the aforementioned protectionist tendencies in media literacy have left this potential largely underutilized, a model of critical digital distribution embraces an expansive view of sharing literacy practices across overlapping ecologies of home, school, peer, and digital environments. Ranging from blog-publishing platforms to Twitter hashtag creation and beyond, distribution involves teachers creating opportunities for students to share what they create with interest-driven and civic audiences in addition to traditional academic ones.

Again, a critical attention to distribution involves analyses of the audiences that various tools invite (and exclude) and consideration of the intent behind distribution, which could range from persuading individuals to purchase corporate-sponsored products to informing citizens about social issues or exhorting them to civic action.

Critical Digital Invention

The most important contribution that we aim to make in extending the legacy of the NLG is the re-envisioning of young people as not simply masterful and critical consumers, producers, and distributors of digital literacies, but as inventors with the competencies and dispositions needed to dream up digital forms of expression that adults cannot yet imagine. Whether hacking an existing digital tool or creating entirely new software or mobile applications, the ultimate goal of critical digital pedagogies should entail providing young people with the skills needed to think and create beyond the circumscribed boundaries of mass media producers. Such practice is crucial to ensure that creative solutions emerge to tackle the most pressing challenges of the 21st century in compassionate and inclusive ways.

This practice, by necessity, must focus on equity. Users of digital technologies are increasingly diverse according to all identity markers; however, what about the producers? Who created the company that invented my laptop, tablet, and cell phone? Who invented and made public the most popular social media platforms? Or who has invented the software programs that house my documents, spreadsheets, and photographs? A consideration of these questions and others reinforces that a real divide exists in who envisions themselves as users of the latest technologies and who considers themselves as inventors of the technologies that may transform the world of 2030 or 2050. What would the current generation need to do differently to provide all of its children with the opportunities to design and build the digital technologies of the future? How might they employ their knowledge of critical theories and their beliefs in equity and justice to develop technologies that inspire change while also gaining a set of skills that will allow them the ability to change their own lives socially and economically? We envision a critical media literacy that imagines itself as challenging material conditions of inequity and diversifying the digital entrepreneurs of tomorrow to honor the voices and experiences of youth who have previously been marginalized.

Promising Practices

Although positioning young people as inventors is revolutionary in itself considering the deficit orientations toward youth that permeate society, the theory and practice of critical digital invention goes further by interrogating which young people get the opportunity to invent in the first place and advocating for a more equitable vision of digital innovation. Some powerful movements in this regard are #YesWeCode and the Mozilla Hive Learning Network, but they are just the tip of the iceberg. These out-of-school spaces are impactful, but they only reach a small handful of young people. Every elementary, middle, and high school needs to rethink its space, its tools, its human capital, and its pedagogical practice to open spaces for digital invention and the apprenticing of digital inventors.

We see great promise, for instance, in the adoption of programs like youth participatory action research inside and outside of schools, where students are apprenticed as critical social researchers of issues impacting their communities and then direct action and advocacy projects emerging from their findings (Fine et al, 2004; McIntyre, 2000). These projects can be amplified with the use of digital media tools leveraged in ways that democratize decision-making while, at the same time, providing previously unavailable methods for youth to invent new ways of interrogating and transforming the social and material conditions of their communities. Integrating mobile media (Garcia, 2017), digital stories (Filipiak & Miller, 2014), and photovoice (de los Rios, 2017) into youth-driven, action research projects permit opportunities for youth to reflect on questions of who they are and what they deem as important. Just as importantly, it steers them toward thinking critically about the meanings and powerful semiotic potential that different forms of media may offer in communicating a message. Supporting this critical orientation is an ethical imperative in 21st-century teaching and learning; as inventors, youth need ample opportunities to try on new critical ways of being and imagining in the world.

We are also encouraged by *connected learning*, an approach to education that sees technology as a tool that can broaden access to interest-driven, peer-supported, and academically-oriented learning experiences when used to design activities that encourage production, open networking, and shared purpose among learners (Ito et al., 2013). Connected learning sees technology tools as valuable not in and of themselves, but to the extent that they open up opportunities to increase access to and participation in academic, professional, and civic life for all individuals, particularly those who experience educational and social marginalization (Jenkins, Clinton, Puruchotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2009). The model seeks to promote individual and collective outcomes as young people gain 21st-century skills and then apply them to not only their own personal success, but to the advancement of shared social goals of equity and justice (Garcia, 2014).

Conclusion

We are indebted to the scholars of the NLG and to all who have worked over the past 20 years to instantiate media studies and media education as credible discourses in K-12 and higher education. Throughout this entire movement, critical theories have been at the core of the project and literacies of access and dissent have fueled the work. We hope to have augmented this important work by integrating the critical theories that have been used to date in the field, by leading with a pedagogy of production and invention, and by taking stock of the technological innovations that have made so much more possible now than when we began.

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Additional Resources

1. **Teach Youth Radio: Storytelling resources for educators. Retrieved from https://youthradio.org/for-teachers/**
   This web site (from Youth Radio, the organization mentioned at the start of this article) offers a wealth of lesson plans and resources for educators that they can use to help students create transformative digital literacy products. Youth Radio provides mentor texts created by youth and then provides clear, step-by-step directions that young people can use to develop a passion, create media about it, and share it with the world.
2. **YPAR Hub. Retrieved from http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/**
   This web site serves as a repository for information about youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects currently in progress around the world. Teachers can navigate through the well-organized site to learn about active projects in their area and find resources to help them start YPAR projects of their own.
3. **Connected Learning Alliance. Retrieved from http://clalliance.org/**
   This web site is a hub for the Connected Learning Alliance, a group of educational and media organizations united in their desire to promote learning that is interest-driven, peer-supported, and relevant to the multiple spheres of students' lives. Teachers can find case studies of connected learning in action, learn from blogs written by fellow educators about implementing connected learning in the classroom, and access useful publications.