

## A NEW DIRECTION FOR MULTIPLE LITERACY EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT.** A broader view of literacy has emerged as part of the larger debate about educational reform across the globe. Many now argue that availing children with additional skills in technological and media literacy will foster creativity, motivate youth, and improve their economic opportunities while increasing the core of high skilled labourers available to meet the needs of the “knowledge” economy. From Canada and England to Australia and New Zealand, media literacy has become part of the core curriculum. Within the U.S., implementation of reform in this vein has been slow and a number of informal education institutions have stepped in to meet the perceived need, augmenting the core curriculum with media literacy and production opportunities. Yet there are serious questions about what skills the children are actually learning and whether the literacy discourse is yet another attempt at ignoring persistent educational inequalities along the lines of gender, race, and class. In this paper, we consider the viability of combining critical media literacy with standpoint theory to strengthen the multiliteracies movement, offering a more critical and empowering pedagogy. To this end, we analyze an exemplary site of this approach in Los Angeles.

### UNE NOUVELLE ORIENTATION POUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA LITTÉRATIE MULTIPLE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Une vision plus large de la littératie s'est élevée dans le cadre du débat plus vaste de la réforme de l'enseignement dans le monde entier. Bon nombre avancent maintenant que le fait de faire profiter les enfants d'aptitudes additionnelles en technologie et en média nourrira leur esprit créatif, les motivera et améliorera leur situation économique, tout en augmentant la base des travailleurs hautement qualifiés qui pourront répondre aux besoins de l'économie « du savoir ». Du Canada à l'Angleterre en passant par l'Australie et la Nouvelle-Zélande, la médiatique fait partie du programme de base. Aux États-Unis, la mise en œuvre de réformes allant dans ce sens est lente et un nombre d'institutions d'enseignement non institutionnel a emboîté le pas afin de répondre au besoin perçu, en ajoutant au programme de base des possibilités en étude des médias et de production. Pourtant, il y a de sérieuses questions à propos du type d'aptitudes que les enfants apprennent réellement et on se demande si le discours de la littératie représente une autre tentative de ne pas tenir compte des inégalités qui persistent dans l'éducation relativement au sexe, à la race et à la classe sociale. Dans cet essai, nous prendrons

en considération la viabilité de combiner de la médiatique critique avec un point de vue théorique afin de renforcer le mouvement des enseignements multilittéraires, en offrant une pédagogie plus critique et plus stimulante. À cette fin, nous analysons un site exemplaire de cette approche, situé à Los Angeles.

### Overview

Since discourses on the “information society” gained ascendancy with the writings of Castells (1996, 1997, 1998), Reich (1992), Drucker (1993) and Gates (1995) in the early 90s, debates have been waged on what direction educational reform should take. In England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, media literacy had been part of this debate for a number of years, and institutions in these countries have taken steps to incorporate some forms of media education into their core curriculum. In Canada, most provinces include at least some media components throughout schooling, in part as a response to the pervasiveness of U.S. popular culture (Pungente & O’Malley, 1999). For over 20 years, Australia has institutionalized media literacy into education, incorporating issues of social justice and multiculturalism (Luke, 1999). And media education is thriving in New Zealand as well, including professional development and adaptation in English and other subjects (Lealand, 2003). The United States has also instituted policies to include media education, particularly since the Clinton years, but continues to lag behind their partners to the North, South, and East (Kubey, 2003). Almost all 50 states have added language on media literacy to their state standards, but little has been done to actually incorporate media and other forms of literacy into the curricula (Kubey & Baker, 1999). The main form this movement has thus taken in the U.S. context is informal educational institutions that generally include youth media production as a core element of their programs.

Since the publication of the New London Group’s “manifesto” on *multiple literacy* in 1996, a new element was brought to the debate – combining talk of economic imperatives and technological training with diversity and democratization. The authors introduced a pedagogy that embraces linguistic and cultural difference, offering literacy training more suitable to the social, political and economic needs of contemporary society. In the U.S., organizations like the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills – which was founded in 2002 as a public-private partnership between the Department of Education and corporations including Microsoft, Apple, Cisco, and AOL – have taken the lead in pushing education to meet the needs of the new century, advocating the integration of ICT literacy into math, English, science, and geography curricula. Along with others, they argue that providing children with skills in technological and media literacy will foster creativity,

motivate youth and improve their economic opportunities while increasing the core of high skilled laborers available to meet the needs of the Post-Fordist, knowledge economy.

While this burgeoning movement holds great promise of improving educational opportunity and success, there are serious concerns as well. The first is the potential for co-optation by corporate interests, like the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, that will then fit multiple literacies into the continued movement toward instrumental rationalization of schooling, as merely serving the imperatives of the market.<sup>1</sup> A second concern is that the movement will become another mechanism for maintaining asymmetries of access along the lines of race, class, and gender, by inequitably allocating resources and forgoing discussion of larger structural inequalities. Finally, there is deep concern that issues of critique and power will be deaccentuated or discarded as multiple literacies curriculum are developed and disseminated.

In the remainder of the paper, we examine the multiple literacy agenda through the dual themes of diversity and critique. Combining insights from critical media literacy and standpoint theory, we argue that the movement can benefit marginalized groups only if it moves beyond serving economic imperatives alone to cultivate creativity and critical reflection in youth. And we believe it must be openly political in nature, addressing issues of power and empowerment, while attempting to start analysis and production with the voices, experiences, and discourses of marginalized and underserved populations. In keeping with the theme of the issue, we ground our theoretical approach in the analysis of an informal educational institution in Los Angeles that works predominantly with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) youth on media production projects.

### *The multiple literacy agenda*

Since at least as far back as Rousseau, philosophers have been arguing for the cultivation of the whole human and all five senses in education. Dewey (1916) became one of the leading proponents of this line of reasoning, advocating a break with the Cartesian separation of mind and body and instead calling for learning through doing. Later, Marcuse (1972, 1978) proposed an aesthetic education that allowed one to see beyond the prevailing instrumental and technological rationality, including a sensual component that embraced the body, a return to nature, and the incorporation of sight, sound, hearing, touch, and taste into the learning process. McLuhan (1965) went further, promoting an education that embraced the inchoate electronic age and new technology, or extensions of the human from his perspective, or risk losing touch with children. With the explosion of media culture and rapidly evolving technological advancement, educators have worked to translate the new realities of the relationship between humans and technology into the classroom, though with mixed success.

Multiple literacy education (ML) attempts to address this issue by focusing on the evolving needs of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The project includes an acknowledgement of the profound influence of difference and hybridity in a more global world and the need to foster skills in established and emergent technologies. The New London Group laid the foundation for this approach with their 1996 manifesto “A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures.” In the article, the authors – Courtney Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, Jim Gee, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther Kress, Allen Luke, Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels, and Martin Nakata – provide a theoretical overview of a new literacy pedagogy that enables students to achieve two related goals: “creating access to the evolving language of work, power, and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for them to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment” (p. 60).

ML involves negotiating a multiplicity of discourses in a world of increased cultural and linguistic diversity and ever evolving forms of technology and communication. The authors thus argue for a different kind of pedagogy where language and other modes of meaning (like images and sound) are considered as “dynamic representational resources” that are constantly remade by users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes. They break the pedagogy into four elements, all related to *design* where “we are both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning and at the same time active designers of meaning” (p. 65). These include *situated practice*, which draws on the experiences of meaning-making in life worlds, the public realm, and work; *overt instruction*, where students develop a metalanguage of design; *critical framing*, which allows interpretation of the social context and purpose of designs of meaning; and *transformed practice*, where students become meaning-makers who can navigate the social, political, and economic world as active, autonomous agents.

The pedagogy is framed as part of a broader program that not only embraces difference, but works to create a more equitable and “authentic” democracy. Key to this movement are issues of access and critical engagement, empowering youth to become agents who can work to change the surrounding reality. This is partially accomplished by harnessing, rather than overcoming, difference and finding ways to make cultural and linguistic diversity assets for students and all of society through the formation of a “civic pluralism.” Luke (1999) argues that some of these ideas have already been implemented in Australia: “From a social justice position, then, media analyses can show how inclusions and exclusions are structured in public discourse: the marginalization, trivialization, or romanticisation of indigenous Australians and other cultural minorities, gay persons and issues, rural groups, disabled persons, girls, and women” (p. 624). Unfortunately, given growing racial tensions and the standardization focus of No Child Left Behind and other

neoliberal reforms, we wonder how curricula of this sort can be implemented in the U.S. and beyond today.

A second key goal more in line with neoliberal thinking is to create “knowledge workers” who are flexible, adaptable and creative and to establish the seeds for future “learning organizations” where collaboration, communities of practice, networks, and alternative assessments are stressed. The New London Group sees this goal as largely compatible with the broader aim of social justice, arguing that “economic efficiency may be an ally of social justice, though not always a staunch or reliable one” (p. 68). And yet a serious concern is the power of the economic rationale to overshadow the social justice element of the pedagogy, and further solidify the evolution of schooling to serve the dictates of the market economy above all other concerns. Multiple literacy pedagogy together with an influx of funding from public-private partnerships could influence and even dictate parameters for what is taught and how it is taught. One could argue this appears to be the case with the aforementioned Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, which advocates educational reform primarily to serve the economic interests of its members while framing the agenda in the language of a multiple literacy agenda. The partnership does mention ensuring children’s success as both citizens and workers, but the main thrust of their “Chairman’s” [sic] statement orients the debate toward the latter: “Twenty-first century jobs require 21st century skills. Successful businesses are looking for employees who can adapt to changing needs, juggle multiple responsibilities and routinely make decisions on their own. We must infuse 21st century skills into K-12 education in order to better prepare today’s students for tomorrow’s workplace.<sup>2</sup> They call for adapting to society rather than transforming it, completely eschewing issues of diversity, civic education, and critical engagement with media and technology.

The contradictory nature of multiple literacy fits within the broader critique of instrumental progressivism that Robins and Webster (1999) offer in their book, *Times of the technoculture*. The authors posit a paradox where reforms of this nature are generally framed within a more progressive view of education – based on flexibility and adaptability, teaching skills over reified content, cooperation, creativity, and relative student autonomy – while serving the economic and political interests of corporations and the power elites. Rather than empowering students, the reforms essentially empower corporations to dictate the content and nature of education toward their needs and ends, eliding the more holistic approach progressive educators once stressed.

To reengage the centrality of difference, power, and critique, we believe a synthesis of insights from critical media literacy and standpoint theory can enrich the multiple literacy education of the New London Group. In the following sections, we offer brief synopses of these theoretical paradigms followed by a synthesis into a new *critical multiple literacy* (CML) education.

### *Critical media literacy*

Advocates for media literacy generally base their position on one of two arguments. The first is that students must be offered the skills necessary to succeed in the new economy. The second is a recognition that media culture plays an increasingly important role in educating children. We have already discussed the first in some detail and will now examine the second. Many inside and outside academia today argue that media has gained the power to profoundly influence the way children and adults think about themselves and the world around them. Not only are children viewing approximately 100,000 ads per year, but according to a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation are now exposed to an average of eight hours of media and technology each day. By providing representations of identity and preferable normative behaviour, it can be argued that television, movies, videogames, music and, magazines increasingly define not only the bounds of the discussion but its content as well. Increasingly, youth appear to identify themselves within market constructed stereotypes and modes of behavior that influence their fashion, hairstyle, artistic tastes, and social interaction. Kellner (2001) among many now argues that media culture carries a pedagogy of its own that may predominate over the power of families and the educational system to influence children.

Media representations define gender, race, class and sexuality in the context of an entertainment medium with little overt concern for the ramifications of the icons used or the pedagogical effects. The “white moral panic” of Giroux (1996) or manufactured fear Michael Moore details in his film *Bowling for Columbine*, for example, show how culture can reduce empathy for the downtrodden and build residual distrust that promotes neoliberal ideologies of reducing entitlements and tougher crime laws. Giroux and Kellner argue that commercial interests have simultaneously targeted youth as consumers, indoctrinating them into the market ethos before they have time to question its faults and excesses. And Habermas (1962) and Giroux (1997) believe these same interests have been driving youth from the public sphere, active democratic citizenship, and free thought: through the selling of identities that replicate commodified models and ideals; through daily lives that are increasingly planned and prescribed with little time to critically engage the world or creatively examine their own lived experience; and through the shrinking of public spaces where children can develop social and cooperative skills.

Given these assumptions, it appears essential that media literacy education include a space where children can critically reflect on the underlying messages and representations of popular media. Yet most programs instead use media primarily as a “neutral” pedagogical tool or offer undialectical views of its effects. In attempting to transcend these approaches, Kellner and Share (2005) offer a useful classification system for distinguishing the various types

of programs currently operating in the U.S. and ways to bring them together toward a more *critical* media literacy.

The first approach they highlight is *protectionist* in nature, emerging from a fear of media's negative effects on children. It seeks to inoculate students from the dangers of media manipulation and anesthetization. The protectionist approach might best be exemplified by Neil Postman's 1985 book, *Amusing ourselves to death*, where he insisted that even the best children's programming, like *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*, had harmful effects through its focus on entertainment over content. He argued that given television's one-way communication and absence of social interaction, it broke down the mechanisms of dialogue and questioning so essential to learning and instead became a simple conduit for non-stop entertainment. The pedagogy promoted by television contained three basic principles for Postman: a lack of prerequisites (which encourages fragmentation and discontinuity of knowledge), a lack of complexity (that encourages laziness and hedonism), and a lack of criticality and reason (leading to anti-intellectualism and irrationality). The protectionist approach sees media and technology as impediments to overcome.

*Media literacy education* is a second form of media pedagogy found in the U.S. While the movement is relatively small, it has made some inroads into mainstream educational institutions, including the adoption of aspects of media literacy into the educational standards of most of the 50 states. The Alliance for a Media Literate America offers a synopsis of the general focus of these programs, "Media literacy is seen to consist of a series of communication competencies, including the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE and COMMUNICATE." These organizations seek to expand the notion of literacy to include multiple forms of media (music, video, Internet, advertising) while still working within a largely uncritical print literacy tradition.

A third approach is *media arts education*, which focuses on valuing and appreciating the aesthetic qualities of media and the arts. This method promotes creativity and self-expression through media production. It offers the benefits of establishing a more experiential, hands-on, creative, expressive, and fun educational practice. Media arts education, though, often tends to emphasize production and performance at the expense of critical analysis, offering an uncritically positive view of technology.

The last approach, *critical media literacy*, takes the best of the other three approaches, "teaching students to be critical of media representations and discourses, but also stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self-expression and social activism" (Kellner, 2001, p. 336). It advocates moving beyond the acquisition of skills alone to dialectically engage the negative effects and positive emancipatory possibilities of media

literacy. It includes a strong critique of mainstream approaches together with an alternative pedagogy and a political project for democratic social change. Critical media literacy incorporates theories from post-structuralism, feminism, critical pedagogy, and post-colonialism to engage media from multiple vantage points. And it promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media, embracing its creative potential and power to allow students to challenge dominant discourse and create their own representations.

Critical media literacy can serve as an effective tool for identifying the elements and objectives necessary for good media pedagogy, synthesizing insights from the other three approaches into a more cohesive and critical whole. However, circumstances can dictate the extent to which this synthesis can occur. When educators teach elementary school students media literacy concepts, for example, they often begin with media arts activities that later lead to critical analysis. And in the current milieu of tightly scripted curricula and strong focus on standardized test performance, time for alternative curricular approaches can become severely circumscribed. While the goal may be to move toward critical media literacy, depending on the developmental level of the students and outside constraints, teachers are often in a position to simply plant the seeds for this process or lay the foundations for transformative learning.

In line with the methodology, it is also important to distinguish between teaching *through* the media and teaching *about* the media. One danger for critical media literacy is falling into the technician pitfall of emphasizing skills over the analytical concepts of critical inquiry. Tyner (1998) points out three ways to recognize this distinction: 1) media analysis is taught in an unstructured manner; 2) students simply copy common media commercial formats; and/or 3) information coming from technology and media is portrayed as reflections of society rather than a construction of reality. Programs that teach *through* the media are often little more than traditional pedagogy enhanced with fancy and often expensive technology. We believe it is essential to teach both *through* and *about* education if we are to help children navigate the increasingly complex global, technocapitalist world. Some of the language in ML seems to too readily embrace the boundless potential of media and technology and the autonomy of children, without seriously engaging contemporary institutional and structural constraints.

Finally, we believe Robert Ferguson's (2001) work on *critical solidarity* can help move the field forward, by focusing on the interconnections and interdependence people have with media and information as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which is largely the spirit of the New London Group. He believes media education should be contemplated within the broader progressive goals of understanding, tolerance, and friendship among nations, races, and religious groups. And yet he also argues, following

Len Masterman's (1990) work, for the centrality of *critical autonomy*, where students are given the freedom to judge for themselves the relative merits of alternative possibilities rather than being indoctrinated into a particular worldview – either from the right or left. This fits within the ML notion of allowing students to “navigate the social, political and economic world as active, autonomous agents,” but recognizes that teachers must critically engage with larger questions of education and political economy and allow children to challenge whether economic imperatives and social justice are really as compatible as ML believes. In the next section, we develop these ideas further, within the purview of standpoint theory.

### *Standpoint theory*

We believe feminist standpoint theory (FST) offers useful insights that can enrich CML, by focusing increased attention on power, perspective, and praxis. It offers new tools to deconstruct hegemonic texts and discourses and a stronger focus on empowering marginalized groups, starting from the position that all knowledge is “socially situated” (Haraway, 2003). It allows a different orientation for media production projects, capitalizing on the voices, experiences and discourses of marginalized groups. And it provides inspiration to struggle to ensure that CML works toward actively engaging students in the struggle to transform the world for the better.

Sandra Harding (2003), one of FST's leading proponents, offers a useful outline of its core assumptions: 1) knowledge and power are inextricably linked; 2) knowledge is never neutral; 3) subordinate groups often have access to perspectives that can unearth truths more difficult for dominant groups to see; and 4) science should be prescriptive as well as descriptive; 5) science and research can thus offer tools to empower oppressed groups if combined with collective action. Harding further articulated the most important and controversial aspect of the position: “Standpoint theories argue for ‘starting off thought’ from the lives of marginalized peoples; beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives” (p. 128).

Advocates believe marginalized voices offer access to experiences and insights that are often missing from dominant media and discourse, thereby expanding the scope and content of knowledge. Uma Narayan (2004), for example, believes that given that people in oppressed situations actually *live* the effects of oppression, they have the potential to understand it more clearly than those who benefit from a particular political organization. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) goes further to suggest that marginalized people hold a unique position in society as *outsiders within*, and this location offers them greater ability to see anomalies of omission and distortion in the “taken-for-granted assumptions” of the normalized hegemony. She explains, “where white males

may take it as perfectly normal to generalize findings from studies of white males to other groups, Black women are more likely to see such a practice as problematic, as an anomaly” (p. 119). Subordinate positions can also offer greater insights into the anomalies of misrepresentation so common in media texts and alternative perspectives that can enrich learning, increase tolerance, and bring to voice the concerns and perspectives of marginalized students.

While people who experience oppression may have greater potential for understanding the structures of oppression, it is important to recognize that critical consciousness is not automatic. Antonia Darder (1997) explains, “The consequence is that very often people of color whose bicultural voices and experiences have been systematically silenced and negated are not necessarily conscious of the manner in which racism and classism have influenced their individual development, nor how they have functioned to distort perceptions of their cultural group within an Anglocentric world” (p. 345). Critical insight requires collective intellectual and political work to unveil the structures of oppression. And this process involves providing students with the tools necessary to study up and see beyond the hegemonic sheen, through their own experiences and those of other groups.

Critical multiple literacy can become a more effective tool of empowerment and social justice if marginalized individuals and groups are given the opportunity to tell their stories and express their concerns. Kellner (2001) argues, “Technologies can be used as instruments of domination or liberation, of manipulation or social enlightenment, and it is up to the cultural producers and activist intellectuals of the present and future to determine which way the new technologies will be used and developed and whose interests they serve” (p. 337). We believe standpoint theory can empower marginalized groups to have a say in this process, enriching CML with further insights on the nature of oppression and mechanisms to overcome it. It can also offer practitioners useful tools to deconstruct their own positionality and that of their students and offer a launching point for media production projects tied more closely to social critique and transformation.

In research, Harding argues for the power of FST to strengthen science by broadening its reach and studying the intimate relationship between power and knowledge. This can also be the case with media literacy and production, analyzing media from multiple perspectives, paying special attention to power, and starting projects with the voices and/or experiences of the oppressed. Boys can attempt to look at the world through the eyes of girls or whites through the eyes of blacks. Production projects can start with the voices of oppressed groups (through interviews or information on their objective social position) and help students to come to terms with their own identities in relation to others.

At the same time, consideration must be given to how standpoint theory relates to the dominant group. While marginalized peoples can greatly benefit from starting from their subordinate position, it is much more challenging to get those in the dominant position to reexamine the world from a marginalized optic. In addressing this issue, the critical autonomy of children should be respected and efforts made to ensure that children are not indoctrinated into a particular worldview. But educators can offer them tools and methods to problematize the hegemonic discourse and to critically examine and reflect on alternative narratives and ideas.

*Critical multiple literacy education*

We believe that synthesizing critical media literacy with standpoint theory allows for a richer version of multiple literacy education we call *critical multiple literacy education*. Critical media literacy offers the foundational tools for an education that allows children to reflect critically on media representations and political economy, the creative and critical skills to look beyond hegemonic discourse, and the empowerment to become agents of change for a more just, tolerant, and democratic world. Standpoint theory adds the centrality of positionality, voice, and power to the pedagogy, advocating for beginning from the voices and experiences of the most oppressed groups, who may be in a better position to critique society than those who benefit from the current order of things.

But what does a critical multiple literacy education look like? Building on the foundations laid down by the New London Group, it starts from embracing difference and a movement toward the cultivation of civic pluralism. It does avail students with the skills necessary to succeed in the new global economy, but as part of a larger agenda to challenge the “new world order.” It alters the nature of discourse away from deficiency theories, and sees cultural and linguistic diversity as assets that can be harnessed toward improving social, political, and economic life.<sup>3</sup> This includes reversing the current trend of discouraging bilingualism in school and challenging standardized curricula that have no relevance to many students’ lives. At the same time, it takes a more critical dialectic view of media and technology that recognizes the power of instrumental and technological rationality to blanket the social justice agenda within the imperatives of the market. It advocates media production to cultivate creativity and critical-reflexivity, but always within a broader critique of technology and the larger society. And it embraces the critical autonomy of children, never falling prey to a pedagogy of indoctrination – while always advocating intolerance of intolerance.

We believe that a critical multiple literacy education must also deal explicitly with questions of power, in two ways. First, following standpoint theory, it should stress the intimate relationship between power and knowledge and the fact that all knowledge is socially situated. This would challenge

the positivism that predominates in American scholarship today and offer mechanisms to reestablish the relationship between science and the solving of social problems that Harding and other standpoint theorists advocate. It will also work to ensure that curriculum is relevant to students' lives and that their knowledge systems are respected. Second, the pedagogy should serve as a mechanism to openly politicize education itself and offer the hope and critical tools necessary to empower children toward becoming active citizens.

Following the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970, 1998) and his contemporaries, it would not be a set curriculum with prescribed teaching practices or universal curricular content. Instead, it would offer a basic theoretical foundation and critical pedagogical strategies, including the deconstruction of media texts, the creative production of media by children, and the teaching of skills in the use of various technologies necessary for success in contemporary society. Content would be culturally specific to the children, ensuring their interest and engagement with the material – but also transcend the particularity of their experience to see the world from disparate perspectives. And open dialogue and mechanisms to allow children to participate democratically in the learning process would be integrated as key aspects of the pedagogy.

#### REACH LA

Examples of critical media literacy education can be found sprinkled across the United States in the rare public school classroom or more often in innovative programs run by non-profit organizations.<sup>4</sup> One that attempts to actualize some of the theoretical insights expounded above is REACH LA, an organization in Los Angeles “dedicated to making positive differences in the lives of urban youth through innovative programming, networking and advocacy.” While time and logistical constraints limited our ability to observe their activities at length, we were able to interview the director of the program and a student participant and view a number of videos created by current and former students.

REACH LA combines media arts and technology with health education, teaching students media production techniques they can then use to create public service campaigns addressing HIV/AIDS, homophobia, racism, and other pervasive problems facing urban teenagers. It was founded in 1992 by four women dedicated to combining the arts with a social justice agenda. Their mission was to build a working partnership between urban teenagers and artists where youth could creatively design the ways in which pertinent social issues in their community were addressed. To this end, they use Augusto Boal's (1985) theatre techniques and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, coming to embody many of the aspects of a critical multiple literacy education

– including combining media production and deconstruction with social justice issues and praxis toward social transformation.

We had the opportunity to view a series of videos created by the students between 2001 and 2004. The videos consistently orient themselves toward the voices and experiences of the groups under study – generally incorporating extensive interviews together with popular media images and cinematic techniques. They show an openness to discussions of their identity as LGBT youth and the challenges they face in navigating life's travails. The videos often transcend the particularity of those lives though, providing deeper critiques of homophobia, mainstream media, and general social prejudice. And they tend to offer positive messages that empower others to learn from their experiences and struggle to redefine their realities.

One video, *We Love our Lesbian Daughters* (2004), captures the nature of the program. Parents and lesbian girls are interviewed, talking about the experience of coming out, of community and school prejudice, and of the importance of family support to their lives. The film stresses pride and acceptance and the importance of family as a potential support network. Another, *Surfacing*, powerfully engages questions of sexual abuse, through the voices of a series of victims. The video talks about coming to voice, about gay coding in popular media, and about tools to overcome the abuse (through messages like "it's never the victim's fault," "all it takes is courage," and "speak out!!!"). Others explore "gender benders" (*Are You a Boy or a Girl*), heteronormative television imagery (*Profit of Hate*), and gay dating (*Gay Girl on the Party Line*).

According to Executive Director Martha Chono-Hesley, the organization works toward the creation of a safe space of respect and trust for students, where they can feel comfortable sharing their personal concerns and problems. The students and facilitators begin the program with creative writing exercises to connect with and critically reflect on their personal experiences and problems. Through a collective process, they share their stories and in "wrap sessions" discuss, critique, and support each other. The students then move into other areas of media production having established a higher level of trust and interconnectivity. The process also involves focus groups to collect community input and establish collaborations. The high level of trust is exemplified in the videos, which generally include the students' own voices exploring their lives as gay youth and those of their family, friends, and fellow students. One participant explained his positive experience with the organization, "She [Chono-Hesley] sees us as artists...we take part of ourselves into our videos. If you could teach that in high school, that would be really cool...everybody's life has value in it."

Creating messages that challenge the discrimination and hypocrisy of the dominant discourse and making intimate connections to students' lives give

this work critical and emancipatory elements missing from many programs. As students develop media literacy and production tools, they are simultaneously becoming more critical viewers who can create counter-hegemonic media that address personal issues of poverty, homophobia, and racism while connecting it to broader structural issues in their community and the larger world. Many of the videos took this approach, deconstructing mainstream media images of homosexuality and sexuality in general and engaging homophobia, parent-child relationships, and support for sexually abused children. One video, *Home*, showed two lesbian girls in love transforming a traditional wedding into a gay marriage framed within a music video that made it more engaging and interesting to viewers. Another, *Surfacing*, powerfully captured the effects of child abuse through the voices of victims and poetic explorations – imploring victims to speak out and get help. As one participant told us, “When I finished the film [*He Did It*] I was relieved...letting others know that someone else has gone through such hard times.” And he was proud that he was “sending out a positive message, because I did get through it.” REACH LA’s approach to analyzing and producing media from subordinate positions and then “studying up” to reveal the larger oppressive social structures serves as a useful archetype to our general program for critical multiple literacy education.

### *Conclusion*

Multiple literacy education offers a foundation from which a more progressive approach to education can be based. It engages key discourses on new economic imperatives while also stressing the need to empower children, teach civic education, and work toward democratic reform and social justice. And yet the pedagogy must be critical in focus or else risk falling prey to perpetuating current instrumental and economistic views of education. In this paper, we have attempted to synthesize the ideas of critical media literacy and standpoint theory into a richer theoretical paradigm for multiple literacy education.

Critical multiple literacy education provides powerful tools for students to navigate the complexity of a more global, technologically complex and saturated world. They gain skills and knowledge in media and technology together with a more critical view of its profound influence. And it empowers them to engage in local and global politics and gain a voice in ongoing debates. We believe talking with people rather than about them holds great promise to enrich the educational experience of media production and its ability to lead toward understanding and praxis.

At the same time, we want to ensure that critical multiple literacy education not be seen as a panacea to all of the social problems faced by marginalized groups today. While we believe youth media production and critical multiple literacy education can assist children in gaining a voice, self-confidence, and

a more critical view of the surrounding world, we do not believe that this alone will allow them to overcome the structural barriers to true equality of access and opportunity. Issues of inequitable funding and overcrowded schools (Kozol, 1996, Valencia, 2002), curricular focus (Freire, 1998, Apple, 2004), access to caring and qualified teachers (Muller, 2001, Valenzuela, 1999), and underlying racism require more profound educational reform.

Critical multiple literacy education does offer great promise as a mechanism to move beyond the archaic and atavistic education of today. By incorporating issues of technology, media, and difference into the core curriculum, students will be better prepared to participate in social, economic, and political life. By focusing on diversity, democracy, and civic participation, it can empower and inspire youth to act to change the world. The agenda must be underwritten by a commitment to social justice and critical examination of the surrounding reality. And it must be part of broader social, economic, and political transformation that addresses asymmetries of power, access, and opportunity along the lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality. By focusing on empowerment and democratization, it can plant the seeds that could later germinate into projects for profound social transformation.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Robins & Webster (2001), Apple (2004) or Giroux (1997) for further articulation of the instrumental, economistic nature of education today. For a more general analysis of technological and instrumental rationality see Marcuse (1964), *One-Dimensional Man*, although we propose a more dialectical view of technology, that sees its potential as an emancipatory vehicle for oppressed and marginalized groups and a mechanism for increased democratization.
2. Taken from the "Chairman's Corner" section of the website: [www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org).
3. See Valencia (1997) for further insights on deficiency theories, which place blame for minority underperformance on biological, cultural, and environmental factors rather than structural inequalities and barriers.
4. See Kubey (2001), *Media literacy around the world*, for a good recent synopsis of many of these programs.

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