



Critical Media Literacy in the 2.0

Jesse Gainer

This column is dedicated to the memory of Howard Zinn, who passed away this year at the age of 87. Zinn's life and work—an unwavering pursuit of justice through focused attention on the marginalized and the oppressed—inspired countless people across the world. Zinn's work highlighted what traditionally is not present in mainstream history texts, such as the voices and experiences of women, people of color, workers, and social activists. Readers of his work gain knowledge about historical figures and events that were not typically part of most people's classroom experiences. However, the significance of his work is greater than the factual pieces of the puzzle he helped add to our historical narrative. His work points to a critique of larger systematic and structural inequities that lead to the privileging of a few and the oppression of many. His insistence on shining a light on unofficial history, or as he put it, the "people's history," is at the heart of what we call critical literacy.

There is no doubt that technological developments are rapidly changing the way we communicate and, therefore, the demands of what it means to be a literate person in the 21st century. The term Web 2.0, the theme of this issue of *Language Arts*, refers to changes that have come about because of technology that allow quicker and broader sharing of information. Instead of focusing on technical aspects of the new technologies, Lankshear and Knobel (2006) describe a new ethos that emerges from literacy practices that are more participatory, collaborative, and distributed. In other words, rather than readers passively receiving information from "expert" texts, Web 2.0 blurs lines between consumers and producers of text and therefore increases the participation of ordinary people in knowledge production. Many see this new power to "publish" text to wide audiences as a needed democratization of knowledge that can potentially develop a more engaged citizenry.

What does critical literacy look like in this new media landscape? For many educators, this new participatory nature of publishing, especially on the Internet, is a cause for worry. There is concern about large quantities of unfiltered information—easy to access but difficult for students and teachers to evaluate for credibility. To address this, needed attention has been directed at curriculum and pedagogy that helps students navigate information sources, such as Web pages, and evaluate them for trustworthiness. However, as Fabos (2008) points out, there is also great need to focus on the bigger picture and engage students in Web evaluation, rather than only Web *page* evaluation. For example, Fabos highlights the commercialization of search engines as a real threat to the democratization of knowledge often hoped for with Web 2.0 culture. Although many people assume search engines are neutral, the fact that they are run as commercial enterprises affects the types of information they generate as links. Therefore, it is important for students to consider the type of information they are likely to encounter when using search engines and also what may be missing.

Critical literacy education cannot stop once students learn to evaluate and critique multiple forms of text, information providers, and the society in which texts are produced. In classrooms that promote critical literacy, students also learn to produce texts that work as counternarratives, disrupting mainstream discourses and standing in opposition to unjust status quo (Morrell, 2008). Although this is not a new concept, with the rise of Web 2.0 and the shift toward expanded possibilities for publishing, the ability to create multiple forms of text takes on heightened importance.

Critical media literacy pedagogy offers a framework for educators interested in exploring such issues with students. According to Jeff Share (reviewed in this column), "this new pedagogical approach to literacy offers the dual possibility of

resisting media domination through critical analysis and empowering individuals to create alternative media for counterhegemonic expression” (p. 3). The websites and books reviewed in this column offer educators background, ideas, and examples on how to incorporate critical media literacy into the curriculum regardless of the age of the students.



Zinn Education Project
(<http://www.zinnedproject.org>)

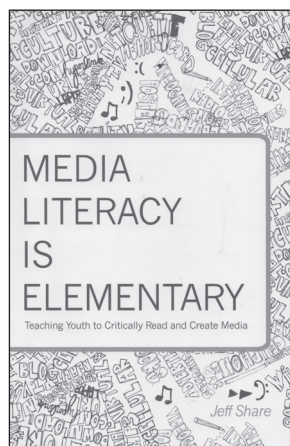
Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change

If you have read Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, the chances are you can remember exactly when you read it and how much it transformed your worldview. I know this is true for me, and it’s also true for the people who put together this outstanding website dedicated to helping teachers implement the spirit of Zinn’s work in middle school and high school classrooms. The Zinn Education Project is coordinated by two nonprofit organizations, *Rethinking Schools* and *Teaching for Change*, and includes over 75 free downloadable activities, as well as many other resources for teachers designed to help students gain complex understandings of US history and to develop a sense of agency around social issues.

The website is organized with pages that provide background, goals, and philosophy statements; links to many resources, including books, videos, and other teaching resources; links to regional and national organizations that network social justice educators; and interactive spaces where teachers can provide input and share ideas. The resources available on this site are multimodal, including print, video, and audio sources. You can even see a video of Howard Zinn speaking to the National Conference for the Social Studies in 2008. Another example of what you will find is a podcast of a conversation with Zinn shortly before his death in which Bill Bigelow, Curriculum Editor for *Rethinking Schools* magazine, asks questions sent in to the Zinn Education website by teachers.

The Teaching Materials section of the website (the largest section) is filled with lessons that can be explored by time period or theme. This

section also provides an annotated list of teaching resources, including books, films, posters, and websites, aligned with the social-justice-oriented philosophy of the project. The materials section offers an array of free files containing lessons that range from the colonial period of the United States through present day and include diverse themes, such as colonization, slavery, civil rights movements, environment and food, LGBT, social class, anti-war movements, and many others. Within each theme and time period, well-developed lessons offer ideas and materials for teaching topics such as the Haymarket Affair, the Chicano School Blow-outs, globalization, and other issues that rarely find their way into “official” school curriculum.



Media Literacy Is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically Read and Create Media

Written by Jeff Share

Peter Lang, 2009,
165 pp., ISBN
978-1-4331-0392-6

In this book, Share provides the theoretical underpinnings of critical media literacy education as

well as ideas and examples on how to implement such pedagogy in the classroom. As the title of the book suggests, Share focuses his attention on critical media literacy at the elementary school level. Some may be surprised that he shares examples that start as early as pre-kindergarten. I find it exciting to see attention given to early childhood and elementary, since the majority of books and other materials dealing with critical media literacy attend to older students. As Share demonstrates in the book, young children are quite capable of dealing with complicated themes, and it is important to start planting the seeds of critical literacy at an early age.

This book begins with background and a rationale for curriculum focusing on critical media literacy. In the first three chapters, Share discusses the changing world in terms of technology, how information is constructed and shared, and the resulting heightened need for critical media literacy. Along with the theoretical framework, he defines the five core concepts of critical media literacy (which are

also laid out in two excellent charts in the appendix) and distinguishes this approach from other forms of media education. In addition to clearly laying out foundational understandings of key constructs of critical media literacy, these first chapters have illustrative examples showing how critical media literacy education is being implemented in diverse contexts around the world.

In Chapter 4, “Voices from the Trenches,” Share describes a case study done with teachers from an urban public elementary school in Los Angeles, California, that once focused efforts on media literacy with the help of a grant. Share used to teach at the school and has gone back to interview teachers about why it is important to implement critical media literacy in curriculum and how best to do this. The chapter includes extensive data from interviews with the teachers who worked with the grant to develop media literacy integration across the curriculum, and it uses the words of multiple teachers to show how media literacy can be incorporated into elementary classrooms. However, it also shows how the neoliberal agenda on education—specifically NCLB and emphasis on “accountability”—function to narrow curriculum at the expense of teachers’ professional decision making. The extreme pressures to focus only on measurable skills aligned to testing, and the adoption of scripted reading curriculum, led to dissolution of the media literacy curriculum and even the closing of the school’s computer lab. Share’s inclusion of teachers’ perspectives in their own words is a respectful affirmation of their professionalism. This strongly counters the manner in which most so-called educational reforms are designed and implemented with no regard for teachers’ input.

For me what is most impressive about this outstanding book is Share’s ability to weave theoretical foundations of critical media literacy with practical information for teachers interested in making space for critical media literacy in the classroom. Practical information comes in the form of many examples showing how teachers in elementary classrooms have implemented critical media literacy curriculum. Chapter 5 goes into depth on the practices of two teachers who implement critical media literacy in early childhood settings. Share himself has years of experience as a bilingual classroom teacher and has worked extensively with many teachers developing critical media literacy classroom practices. In addition to the excellent examples provided in the text,

Share provides the link to a website providing plans and details from a variety of critical media literacy lessons he and colleagues have developed and implemented.



Captura: Digital Storytelling Toolkit (<http://captura.llanogrande.org/>)

The Llano Grande Center

The Llano Grande Center is a nonprofit organization located in rural South Texas dedicated to developing youth leadership through community engagement. The center helps young people become engaged community leaders through exploration of their own personal narratives and by highlighting the connections between those narratives and other stories of relevance in the larger community. In this way, youth at the Llano Grande Center learn about issues of identity connecting their personal stories to stories of their families, communities, and the world. The philosophy behind the work of the Llano Grande is very much aligned with cultural studies and Freire’s (1970) definition of praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 36). The work of the Llano Grande Center is extensive and worthy of a much more thorough treatment than I can provide here. For this review, I am highlighting one aspect of their work—their digital storytelling toolkit.

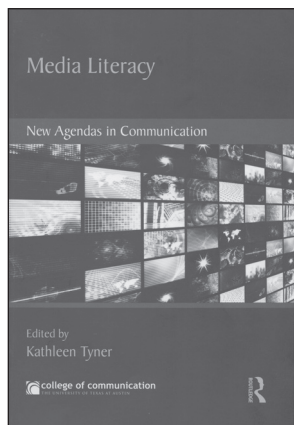
The Llano Grande Center, in collaboration with their colleagues from the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) series, have created a toolkit—Captura—to help others learn about the process of digital storytelling as collective action for community change. Using multimodal text that weaves together typographic print with digital video, the toolkit guides users to tell their own stories of personal and community relevance.

The Captura website is organized in sections that provide information and examples, essentially walking users through the steps of planning, camera work, directing, and editing digital stories. The site provides a clearly laid out philosophical framework that draws on constructivism and critical theory to discuss the power of narrative



storytelling and community engagement in creating a more just society. Users of the site are given guidance through each component in the process of digital storytelling; separate sections include quotes from high school students; videos of students explaining important information; and text relating to technical information, such as materials required, “how to steps,” and other tips. The site includes an Appendix section with downloadable PDF files full of useful materials, such as tape logs, sample consent forms, story organizing maps, and more.

In addition to a wealth of resources and technical information about creating digital stories, a section called “Now Showing” provides many examples of exemplary digital stories created by members of the Llano Grande Center community and some of their colleagues across the United States. Some of the stories include oral histories, stories of community organizations, stories made for purposes of advocacy around social issues, and personal narratives. A common theme in each of the stories, and what I find most significant about this work, is the cultural-historical and critical frameworks that went into creation of the stories. Llano Grande Center is dedicated to helping students develop critical perspectives and to apply this lens to their own lives and communities. The captivating and artfully created stories provided in this section offer teachers wonderful examples to share as models of exemplary work that can inspire and inform students when creating their own stories. This digital storytelling toolkit from the Llano Grande Center serves as both mentor text and “how to” guide for the creation of alternative media representations called for by scholars, educators, and others in the fields of critical media literacy and cultural studies.



**Media Literacy:
New Agendas in
Communication**

Edited by Kathleen Tyner

Routledge, 2010,
243 pp., ISBN
978-0-415-87221-8

Kathleen Tyner, editor of *Media Literacy: New Agendas in Communication*, explains that this book grew out of

conversations between scholars at the New Agendas for Media Literacy conference that took place in 2008. One of the central themes discussed at this conference was the disconnect between the ever-growing media skills that are required in today’s society and their relative absence in formal learning environments. Participants in the conference discussed this educational gap and how it impacts critical media analysis and production in our society.

In this book, a diverse group of scholars present innovative examples that relate to literacy and learning in informal and formal educational settings. After a brief introduction by Tyner, the book is divided into four main sections, including media literacy in community-based settings, formal classroom-based settings, higher education, and virtual environments. Each chapter presents research relating to how educators can build on new literacies in the different educational environments. In addition, the chapters examine how critical literacy practices can play out in today’s new media landscape.

The first section of the book includes two chapters about out-of-school programs designed to provide new literacy tools and access to marginalized youth in India (Asthana) and the United States (Bass and Brandy). Part two of the book includes two chapters that focus on media literacy in the formal educational setting of school. One examines elementary teachers’ perspectives of media literacy (Share) and the other explores education in a media-themed public high school (Butler). The third section has three chapters focusing on higher education. One explores how teacher education students engaged with digital video during a course assignment (Bruce). The next explores critical analysis of news media in a university-level journalism course (Fleming). The final chapter of this section investigates how controversial topics are mediated through technology such as online courses (McBrien). The fourth and final section of the book relates to learning in virtual environments. The first chapter of this section develops a conceptual framework for critical analysis and production of video-game content (Delwiche). Another chapter discusses a case study of Quest to Learn, a public school designed around the theme of “gaming literacies” (Robison). The final chapter of the book explores mobile media and game-based learning in terms of their potential contributions for innovative teaching and learning (Mathews and Squire).

Although the book is not designed to be a practical guidebook on how to teach media literacy in the classroom, the chapters provide many descriptions of engaging media-related activities that worked with students at a wide range of levels. The chapters offer accounts from research conducted around the world in diverse contexts and provide key insights and theoretical background for educators interested in gaining an understanding of media literacy. Such understanding is imperative for anyone interested in developing critical media literacy as part of the curriculum.

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Jesse Gainer is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at Texas State University–San Marcos. He and his colleagues, Mary Esther Huerta and Jennifer Battle, together will serve as the editors of the Professional Book Reviews department for Volume 88 of *Language Arts*.

DAVID WIESNER ANNOUNCED AS THE 2010 CLA BREAKFAST SPEAKER

A master in the art of visual storytelling, David Wiesner has delighted readers young and old with his ingenious forays into the world of imagination. His characters often dance in the twilight of consciousness, led by the shadows of reality to a land of make believe. This magical, dreamlike quality of his work bridges the familiar and the fantastic, giving form to the elusive quality that we call creativity.

Each of Wiesner's books invites the reader to a hand-held masterclass in imaginative thinking, challenging us to see the wonder that fills the world around us. In the semi-autobiographical *Hurricane* (1990), the imaginative play of two young boys is fueled by the awe of nature as they chart new adventures from within a toppled elm tree. Nature emerges again as a starting point for *Tuesday* (1991), his first book to win a Caldecott Medal. A second Caldecott Medal would follow for *The Three Pigs* (2001), where familiar characters transform and recreate their own tale. A third Caldecott medal for *Flotsom* (2006) acknowledges that his work has without question caused us to rethink the boundaries of the wordless picture book.

Now with more than twenty titles to his credit, Wiesner's latest work—*Art and Max*, due out fall 2010—takes his style in yet another direction as he explores the use of multiple media within a single text. Join other advocates of children's literature for a morning to celebrate the art and creativity of visual storytelling as this remarkable artist gives us a backstage tour through the creative process. For more information about the event, please contact Jim Stiles at jwstiles@live.com or Deb Wooten, dwooten1@utk.edu.