

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY PRACTICES FOR EQUITABLE FUTURES: A Field Guide for ELA Educators

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DIGITAL MEDIA has allowed English language arts (ELA) teachers to expand the way students imagine and interact with tales as old as time. For example, digital media can turn a marker and crayon map of Macomb into a three-dimensional exploration using Minecraft. It shifted how we understand characters. Experiences with digital media bring students into Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and beyond geographic borders. Digital media's integration in the ELA curriculum turns learning phonetic sounds into interactive games on iPads and Chromebooks.

But something wicked this way comes.

While not nearly as extreme on the surface as Bradbury implied or Shakespeare's three witches chanted, the increased focus and use of digital media within the ELA curriculum exposes new challenges. Current sites of struggle include disparities in access to digital technology (van Dijk), prevalence of algorithmic bias (Noble), digital monopolies (McIntosh), propagation of misinformation (Guess et al.), and concerns over privacy (McStay; boyd). What connects these challenges is the idea of equity; specifically, how these built-in inequitable realities of digital technologies can challenge the learning experiences of students, and how the built-in norms of technologies can mask their realities for young people today.

In the last few decades, conversations have emerged about advancing equity in secondary and postsecondary education settings, following from redistributive social justice and recognitive social

justice approaches to educational reform (Woods et al. 1). Kersch and Lesley (44) developed a framework for critical media literacy that introduces six principles, including "Equity and Access to Technologies," which proposes that equity and social justice can be enacted through redistribution of resources and recognition of marginalized groups that are often undervalued and left out. Beyond access, empowerment is another way to build equity, often through youth participatory action research: "in the broadest sense, empowerment refers to individuals, families, organizations, and communities gaining control... within...their lives, in order to improve equity and quality of life" (Jennings et al. 32). For example, Anyiwo, Richards-Schuster, and Jerald combined youth participatory action research with critical media literacy as a strategy to promote the sociopolitical development of Black Youth in the "Our Voices" afterschool program. We follow the path that these scholars have set by investigating the ways that educators and media literacy practitioners center equity in their classrooms and the barriers they face to making change.

Empowering diverse voices to impact and enact social change cannot be done without centering equity in teaching and learning. Doing this not only enhances media literacy curricula but also

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strengthens the ELA classroom to foster inclusive practices. Elevating equitable practices within critical media literacy can lead students to become change agents in their lives, communities, and democracy (Mihailidis et al., 2021a). Rather than approaching teaching and learning in the ELA classroom from only the traditional frameworks of literature and language, the integration of critical media literacy from within a framework of equity means education can become, as bell hooks (343) always believed it could be, “a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.” We argue that this form of critical media literacy, equitable media literacy, is the way toward a more inclusive future in classrooms and beyond (Mihailidis et al., 2021a; Mihailidis et al., 2021b).

In interviews with 27 media literacy educators and practitioners, themes of critical media literacy, equity, and inclusion were common. One interviewee shared that they “think being critically media literate is kind of at the core of the process of discovery right and at the core of the process of actually understanding the complexity, the nuances of the things that happened around us” (ML19). Practitioners who participated in our nationwide study about equitable media literacy echo this same sentiment. For them, equitable media literacy practice can empower individuals and communities. The practitioners we interviewed often partnered with teachers and classrooms through educational initiatives and curricular programming. And, the education they hope to provide students challenges the current gender, racial, and socioeconomic systems that nearly every practitioner described as oppressive. Remarkd one participant, “The importance of critical media literacy in terms of combating racism and building equity injustice and also making sure that persons who are most likely to encounter the effects, the punitive effects of racism, have the most to gain or lose through media literacy as well” (ML25).

Media literacy practitioners are not alone in their dedication to more equitable futures through media literacy. As noted by the dedication of NCTE, critical media literacy is an evolution of the ELA curriculum and an opportunity to disrupt inequities. However, in the same national study, we found that teachers surveyed said they face barriers to teaching media literacy that nonprofit practitioners, like those we interviewed, do not face.

In a survey of 741 media literacy practitioners and educators across the country, 91 K-12 educators

participated, and 84 said that they believe media literacy is important (92 percent). More specifically, 62 percent of K-12 educators see media literacy serving diverse communities, and 67 percent believe their media literacy educational practices address issues that affect marginalized communities. However, many don’t believe they have the resources to integrate media literacy into their curricula and face additional challenges like seeing bias in media literacy curriculum (46 percent) and believe that addressing issues of equity in media literacy educational practice is controversial (46 percent). K-12 educators also struggle to gain support from administrators for equity-driven media literacy work. For example, 29 percent of educators surveyed share that addressing issues of equity in their media literacy educational practice is not supported at their school, 47 percent believe media literacy isn’t widely understood in their school, and 53 percent find the teaching of media literacy challenging for them. This tension is long known in classrooms: teachers see a need, but the resources and supports are often lacking to respond to it. Despite being identified by NCTE as a natural and meaningful connection to the core aspects of the ELA curriculum, media literacy is still perceived to be outside of the core curriculum and lacks the legitimacy afforded to subjects like English, science, mathematics, and social studies.

In the same survey, not only did K-12 educators identify media literacy as being necessary for creating knowledgeable individuals (74 percent), empowering communities (64 percent), and supporting democracy (71 percent), but they also strongly believe that equity is a gateway toward imaging a better world by addressing issues that affect marginalized communities (67 percent) and structural inequities (58 percent). Again, this assumption comes to a head with concerns of administrative support for equity in curricula.

A Field Guide for Equitable Futures

To support these needs of educators working to build media literacy practices into their learning environments, our team created an empirically grounded resource that teachers can use to strengthen their curriculum with equitable media literacy practices. The field guide challenges educators and students to think about language and writing to promote critical thinking about media texts and their impacts on individuals, communities, and democracies. The

Field Guide to Equitable Media Literacy Practice is divided into five areas of exploration: *where I stand*, *who cares*, *imagining inclusive futures*, *working with communities*, and *where we stand*. (The interactive version of the field guide and the detailed project report are available at our site: www.mappingimpactfulml.org)

Where much of curriculum design is geared toward student outcomes, this field guide pushes both educators and students to consider their cultural and social locations and how media plays a role in the creation and development of them. We position media literacy as a framework to enhance curricular design. Each section of the field guide provides activities through a process of critical reflection about equity within their media literacy practice.

The first and last sections of the guide center on standpoint, asking about one's position and the position of their community. Where educators and students stand concerning media literacy, their community, their goals, and the resources available to them is the best place to start in evaluating equitable media literacy practice. In the first section, *Where Do I Stand*, we ask teachers to consider their beliefs about media literacy education. The prompts focus on identifying one's position within the communities they serve and how that relates to their understanding of critical media literacy.

Many of the practitioners we interviewed see their role as supporting equitable media literacy within classrooms without draining school resources. Reflected one interviewee, "We're listening to teachers, and we know what they need. So, we create the products that they need." (ML7). They later added that the tension between the need for resources and the lack of support within administrations and communities force them to walk a thin line, so to speak, between directly addressing racism and providing curricular support at a national level that educators in any state could use. The same tensions emerge in our survey.

The second section focuses on the differences among *caring for*, *caring about*, and *caring with*. Titled, *Who Cares*, activities in this part of the guide center care as a core component of equitable media literacy. The prompt introduces a caring ladder that allows educators to build on these distinct concepts of care to create a curriculum that pushes students to consider the many ways media can support issues or values we desire to see reflected through

equitable media literacy practices. One practitioner interviewed said their organization aims to connect students to inequity issues through a specific community lens. "This is really about getting kids really excited about engaging in the world in a different way and, hopefully, pushing them to get involved" through learning about different communities via documented experiences within the media they share (ML16).

The third section of the guide, *Imagining Inclusive Futures*, calls on teachers to consider how imagining alternatives to present scenarios can evoke new ideas about inclusion and equity. This section helps teachers critically assess their curricula to foster new possibilities with media literacy through re-imagining voice, representation, and connectivity within media literacy practice. Using imagination to break down the walls between what is possible and what currently exists allows teachers and students to engage with media literacy in a critical way.

In the fourth section, *With Communities*, we ask educators to consider how media literacy can position learners to use media to build empathy *with* communities instead of *for* communities. In this section we break down terminology and concepts that create tensions between teachers and the communities they wish to serve. Centering cooperation within equitable media literacy practice design enables teachers to break down barriers between communicating what students need and what we might think they need. For example, in one interview, a practitioner reflected on the challenges with exciting students about participating in media because the students "viewed the media as the enemy," and that the news appeared only when "there's a shooting, and then they come over and take a picture and get all the names wrong and leave" (ML18). Working *with* communities instead enables teachers to create curricula that start from a place of empathy for diverse communities.

In the final section, *Where Do We Stand*, we expand the question of positionality to include where communities stand together. We ask educators, administrators, parents, and students to evaluate who they see as media literate and how that reflects the community. In doing so, we guide users to consider how they engage in civic issues, topics, and life through critical media literacy.

Each stage of the field guide is meant to challenge the conventions of daily teaching practice to

incorporate critical media literacy into curriculum and instruction. The field guide is not offered as a traditional set of lesson plans or a quick addition to curriculum to meet state standards. Instead, the guide serves as a think piece and critical tool for improving curriculum through equity-focused media literacy educational practice. The guide is a chance to imagine more inclusive futures through media literacy practice.

The ELA classroom is full of stories; it is foundationally about stories—how one reads, speaks, or writes them. Centering equitable media literacy practice in the ELA classroom means giving new stories, all stories, life. One practitioner believes “building a more just and inclusive world” means changing the narrative. To this practitioner, change and transformation isn’t about being an activist, but it is about uplifting “the stories that create the conditions for change” (ML1). The field guide offers one approach to shift narratives. The field guide and our nationwide research project promote a new approach to designing equitable curriculum and instruction. While Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) backward design approach still can serve as a way to develop curriculum, the use of our field guide will elevate curricular design by asking questions of media literacy not as a lesson, but as a framework.

The ELA curriculum, fostered by equitable media literacy practices, asks for teachers and students to first explore where they stand—who they are and what they believe in. These questions become key components to entering a novel, writing assignment,

or speech. Thinking through how we first care *about*, then care *for*, and ultimately, care *with*, pushes teachers and students to build relationships that last. This includes our relationships with the characters we read, the dialogue we write, and the words we orate. Building toward a more imagined future means borrowing questions of media literacy and applying them to the curriculum we so often teach. Interrogating the curriculum for issues of voice and representation shifts from connections within the texts to connections among the texts. Challenging one’s curriculum with questions of equity in media literacy means changing one’s perspective on what media literacy can be to how it can be used. Being able to then see the impact of this media literacy-driven curriculum on one’s community is a chance to serve a community more equitably.

Concluding Thoughts

In this essay, we have shared how equity and critical media literacy are intrinsically interconnected. Based on empirical data from a nationwide research project, we have elaborated on the significance of equitable media literacies within the ELA curriculum and teaching broadly. Based on input from in-depth interviews and an online survey conducted with media literacy practitioners, we have shared a practical field guide as a resource for teachers of all disciplines, especially those within ELA who are committed to using media literacy to create a more inclusive and equitable curriculum. The field guide includes five areas of exploration: *where I stand*, *who cares*, *imagining inclusive futures*, *working with communities*, and *where we stand*. Our hope is that this approach shifts our traditional practices of curriculum development towards a mindset that centers vulnerability and fosters imaginative and critical thinking. This repositioning is a way forward toward more equitable futures, one led by focusing on equity and social justice, not just as a singular lesson within media literacy but as a central pillar of ELA curricular design.

As researchers and educators, we dream of a better future in service of one’s community. However, dreaming comes at a cost. It makes us reconsider. It makes us respond. It makes us vulnerable. As a result, we must rethink our curricula to be more culturally responsive and meet the moments we currently live within. While consistent curriculum revisions seem Sisphian, the process of doing so will help make these dreams come true. The desire

TEACHING TIPS

Based on interviews with educators throughout the US, Patrick Johnson and his colleagues present the Field Guide to Equitable Media Literacy Practice (www.mappingimpactfulml.org) they have created. Their field guide is divided into five areas of exploration: where I stand, who cares, imagining inclusive futures, working with communities, and where we stand. Identify one activity in each section to try with your students. Then consider working with a colleague or two to form your own field guide, setting up a Google Folder, perhaps, and collecting some of your favorite critical media literacy activities and assessments to share.

to create an enduring imagination through equitable media literacy practices will destabilize the systems we work in. Achieving the dreams of the marginalized means creating and sharing ELA curriculum that helps learners see themselves as empowered change agents, able to imagine and build a better, more just world.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) for funding this project. Additionally, we would also like to thank Sumi Day, Mikaela Joyce, Sydney Angrove, Johnny Richardson, and Aaron Stier-Cohen for their dedication and assistance with the research and design of this project. We are grateful to our research participants for their time, especially during a challenging time for teachers of the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic. The interactive version of the field guide and the detailed project report are available at our site, www.mappingimpactfulml.org. ■

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