

Mira Feuerstein

Media Literacy in Support of Critical Thinking

Children Critical Thinking in Multimedia
Society

Thinking critically is one of the central issues on the education agenda today as results of the fast developments in media technologies which has expanded our access to information but not necessarily our in-depth understanding of the knowledge. More than ever pupils must be able to cope creatively with the virtual environments of the media. Critical thinking (CT) about the media – critical media literacy - enables students to navigate their lives in our so-called “digital society”. It also embodies the ideas of education for democratic values as it endows students with the ability to think critically and to make reasonable civic decisions in their lives. What is CT about the media? How do we prepare students to be critical media thinkers? These are some of the complex questions that motivated this innovative book. It is based on an original study, which included interviews and media tests with primary school pupils in Israel, as part of doctoral studies at the University of Liverpool. The book provides meaningful insight into the interrelationships between media literacy and CT and how to engage pupils teachers and parents in critical media inquiry.



Mira Feuerstein

Ph.D., in critical media literacy education. She is currently the head of the Media Studies department at Oranim College in Israel. She serves as a lecturer and responsible for teaching staff development, and has conducted a number of research studies. She has published books and articles on media and thinking teaching.



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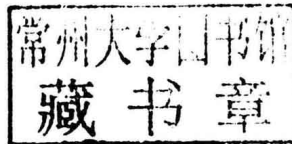
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Developing media

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To my dear parents, $\pi''\mathfrak{z}$, who were with me throughout, showering me with their love and support

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I felt it a great privilege to watch how teachers and pupils work from up close as they unpeeled the ‘secrets’ of the programme, reinforcing my personal feeling that has grown stronger over the years, of the importance of education for media literacy and the great educational potential inherent in it.

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List of Abbreviations

ANOVA =	Analysis of variance
BFI =	British Film Institute
CML =	Critical media literacy
CMLE =	Critical media literacy education
CT =	Critical thinking
CTE =	Critical thinking education
K =	Kritikal (value)
Landif =	Language difference
ME =	Media education
ML =	Media literacy
MLE =	Media literacy education
Nardif =	Narrative difference
Soceco =	Socio-economy
Totdif =	Total difference
ZPD =	Zone of proximal differences

Introduction

The inspiration for this study and its potential contribution

The original inspiration for this study came from my extensive experience in the media literacy education (MLE) field. My involvement in writing learning materials for kindergarten and school teachers and pupils (six instruction booklets in ML for elementary and kindergarten teachers in Israel), designing elementary school curricula, and supervising and training school and kindergarten teachers, served to inspire this study. For the past 15 years I have received spontaneous feedback and responses from teachers and children involved in ML programmes. Most of them cited the contribution of these programmes to their learning-teaching experiences, as well as the insights they developed about the media, changes that occurred in their media consumption habits, in how they thought and in the new approach they developed to various issues in their daily experiences with the media.

These responses instilled in me a desire to examine the MLE programme scientifically in order to investigate whether there was a basis for the enthusiasm shown by the teachers and pupils. If, indeed, there was, it was important to make the programme more visible in elementary school education. At the same time, I was also aware of the problems that the combination of children and media - particularly television - usually provoked, a public anxiety that Buckingham (1993) described so well:

TV is held to be the root of most, if not all, evil among the young.

It destroys the imagination, provokes delinquency and violence, undermines family life and is a primary source of sexism, racism, consumerism and any other obnoxious ideology one might care to name (p. xii).

With such an indictment, it's a wonder that TV is not blamed for halitosis as well!

Another area of danger that could be added to this list is the Internet. This, after all, is the source of the garish, gory soap opera incidents played up in the newspapers in Israel and the world: e-mail chats that lead to a romantic rendezvous that culminates in rape or murder. Or one could begin a diatribe about the unlimited, uncensored access and exposure to material containing violence and sex.

I have encountered these concerns in many areas of my work as coordinator of media teacher education in a teachers' college and as researcher, and it would be wrong to pretend that I am

somehow immune to them. Nevertheless, I never cease to be amazed by the tremendous power of this anxiety - power that prevents educators from acknowledging children's relationships with the media and makes them unwilling to deal with it as a tool with educational potential to be promoted in their teaching. Integrating MLE across the school curriculum will help students to understand the ways in which the media confine and define their discourse on diverse issues, and challenge them to take a critical stance in their reading, viewing or thinking about media representations (Masterman, 1997; Buckingham, 1993; Semali, 2000; Alverman et al., 1999).

More broadly, teaching MLE in elementary school is an important element in educating pupils to function better in a democratic society which, according to Dewey (1944), means preparing them for daily human interaction. MLE equips them with the relevant knowledge and skills needed for success in diverse areas of their environment in an information-intensive society functioning in the media age.

This is the background on which I decided to conduct a study that would highlight the ideological basis underlying MLE and its potential for nurturing critical thinking abilities among pupils from a young age so that they could develop insight into the content and messages of the media.

I hope that this study has the practical effects of shaping new directions for thought in the elementary school education system, motivating other teachers to join those who are already in the field, and helping to expand the number of pre-service teachers learning media.

As noted earlier, CMLE combines a number of disciplines and as such is an expression of its interdisciplinary characteristics, which will be summarised in this introduction. The intention is to provide readers with a better understanding of the theoretical rationale guiding this study and its aims, which are described below.

We live in a technological information age characterised by increasing quantities of information that are transmitted with ever-greater speed, thus altering what and how we know and how we become informed. Just as the car and airplane changed our concept of space and time, new information technologies as extensions of the mind are altering our concept of understanding and learning (McLuhan, 1964).

Information overload, as Kuhlthau (1997) argues, has created an era in which "anything goes", where individuals are exposed to constant changes in politics, economic and social norms in everyday life. Understanding what it means to be human is becoming more critical each day.

Shinar (1997) illustrates the danger looming over our existence as human beings in three domains:

Privacy - invasion of individuals' privacy by the unauthorized use of innovative communication technologies, such as "electronic tracking" of credit cards, and easy access by individuals, groups, corporations or governmental or private bodies to sources of information that provide extensive data (personal and otherwise) about private citizens.

Culture - globalisation of culture as reflected in the extensive worldwide distribution of texts such as MTV-like music, American television series ("Dallas" and "Dynasty"), and the McDonaldisation phenomenon.

These two examples reflect a reduction in the spatial existence of local cultures and the fostering of a consumer-rich lifestyle. In this process, a cultural homogeneity- hegemony has evolved in which information and culture have become services and products that are created, marketed and consumed just like any other commodities that follow the rules of commerce (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Economic interests - the new technologies created by new combinations of mass media and marketing powers have made public interests subordinate to private interests.

The high price of accessibility to meaningful information will increase, as will the gaps in accessibility. It will erode the universal vision of active civil duties within a democratic society (Hamelink, 1994) by fostering huge communication conglomerates that dominate the dissemination of information and culture, and it will increase the power of elite economists and politicians such as Rupert Murdoch and Bill Gates.

In essence, the problems related to the above three domains threaten the continued existence of democratic values. At the core of these values stands the idea of people's freedom of thought as an essential condition for the development of society. This means the freedom to develop different points of view, and to respond to the world around us without coercion from outside powers - in a word, to be autonomous (Yuval, 1985). To a great extent, the simulation and world images transmitted by the media technologies upset and impinge upon this autonomy.

The result is an ambivalent relationship between the public and the media, as described by Yuval (1985). On the one hand, we cannot live without the media as the channel of information of the immediate environment and everyday life. On the other hand, we live in a free world. "The country can control an individual's external behavior, but not his inner thoughts" (Spinoza, cited in Curley, 1994, p. 35).

This complex relationship between media and public has prompted a fundamental question facing schools today: How can we prepare our children for living full, productive lives in an information