CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AS CURRICULAR PRAXIS

REMAPPING THE PEDAGOGICAL BORDERLANDS OF MEDIA LITERACY IN U.S. MASS COMMUNICATION PROGRAMMES

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Abstract

The current stalemate of mass communication as neither a professional nor a worthwhile academic discipline in U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in the gradual evaporation of the critical in its curriculum. In light of this, this article strives to reclaim "the critical" in media literacy, aiming at three main goals. First, it attempts to problematise the escalating vocationalisation of mass communication education. Second, it seeks to build a philosophical, theoretical base for critical media literacy, informed by critical educational theories developed by Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and others. Third, it aims to identify some core areas of critical media literacy by which to reconfigure mass communication as an interdisciplinary academic field within the larger context of democracy. Ultimately, the article makes the case for repositioning critical media literacy as pedagogy of possibility that opens up a new pedagogical space for alternative, counter-hegemonic mass communication education and practices.

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Introduction

Mass communication in the United States is marked by both growth and crisis. Mass communication and media studies as a college-level discipline[1] has grown exponentially over the past several decades in the U.S. For instance, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred in communication, journalism, and other related mass communication programmes increased from 10,324 to 73,955 between 1971 and 2006 (National Center for Education Statistics 2008). This trend is easily confirmed by other educational statistics and enrolment survey data, such as the University of Georgia's annual surveys of journalism and mass communication (Annual Surveys n.d.). Mass communication and media studies are usually housed in the same academic unit, so the two terms are frequently used interchangeably. This blurring of fields comes as no surprise, because mass communication institutions, technologies, and practices are inexorably linked to the mass media.

While the discipline has grown rapidly, this growth is characterised by an insidious symptom: the gradual evisceration of "the critical" in its curriculum. As McChesney (2004) rightfully observed, the enormous growth of mass communication largely stems from the swelling demand of students seeking jobs in the growing mass communication and information industries rather than from the acceptance of mass communication as a worthwhile academic discipline with its own idiosyncratic disciplinary core and theoretical and methodological sophistication. Thus, he goes on to argue, "The trivialisation and irrelevance of U.S. media studies is directly related to the marginalisation of critical perspectives" (McChesney 2004, 42). Even when critical issues are raised in the mass communication classroom, they mostly end travelling at the university gate, creating and reproducing a disconnect between critical academic discourse and public spheres outside the university. Similarly, Jensen (2009) also sees a crisis in journalism, which has historically been the most important pillar of mass communication education, due to its inability and unwillingness to tackle some of the most urgent problems of our times, such as increasing media ownership concentration, the breakdown of traditional news media, a decline in serious journalism, and environmental deterioration, to name a few. Furthermore, it is hardly convincing to advocate mass communication as a professional discipline such as nursing, clinical psychology, legal education, or medical training when only about a half of mass communication graduates find full-time or part-time jobs in the broadly defined communication field (Becker et al. 2009).

I argue that one solution for this growth in crisis is to place critical media literacy (CML) in a central position in mass communication education. I use the term "critical" media literacy purposefully to distinguish it from other conceptions of and approaches to media literacy, especially psychological and cognitive approaches.[2] Media have become an inevitable condition of our daily life and a torrent of graphic, sensational, and fast-paced news and entertainment content streams across different platforms (Gitlin 2003). It is no exaggeration to say that today's media function as an omnipresent pedagogical institution, shaping our values, ideologies, identities, and communities. Consequently, the need to help young people achieve media literacy has become an important public policy priority across different educational levels in many countries. Thus, a U.S. Federal Com-

munications Commission (FCC) commissioner, Michael Copps (2006, 2), claims, "in a culture where media is pervasive and invasive, kids need to think critically about what they see, hear and read. No child's education can be complete without this." In terms of media literacy education, however, the U.S. lags behind other advanced democracies such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Sweden (Kubey 2003; Kellner and Share 2005; Mihailidis 2006).

It is within this context that I take up the issue of media literacy education in U.S. higher education. This article attempts to unearth the hidden curriculum of U.S. mass communication programmes and reconsiders CML as a guiding principle for a wider, continual curricular praxis, as opposed to curriculum as a product (Grundy 1987). Some central questions to be explored then include the following: What does it mean to incorporate critical literacy into mass communication education? What are the problems of mainstream or scientific approaches to media literacy? How can critical educational theories help reconfigure the disciplinary identity of mass communication in general and the pedagogical goal of media literacy in particular? What are the core areas of CML, as differentiated from other notions of media literacy? In exploring these questions, I shall start by pointing out some serious problems and challenges facing U.S. mass communication programmes today.

The Stalemate of Mass Communication in U.S. Higher Education

Mass communication, with its fragile and often contested disciplinary identity, draws from an eclectic mix of theories, methods, and applications from social sciences, humanities, and even engineering. Nonetheless, mainstream American mass communication scholarship, or "the dominant paradigm," has long been characterised by its propensity for behavioural and functionalistic theories and methods (Gitlin 1978; McChesney 2000, 2004). Later the emergence of the critical and cultural studies paradigm has served as its antithesis. In other words, "the field is divided between those attempting to make the processes of communication more efficient and effective and those committed to criticising the forms and practices of the media in contemporary society" (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 1998, xiii). Consequently, while it seems bizarre, there are strange bedfellows (e.g., journalism and advertising) in most well-established mass communication units. This often creates a palpable tension between journalism and mass communication in the service of democracy, on the one hand, and mass communication on behalf of corporate interests, on the other. An unfortunate yet escalating trend is that mass communication curricula are increasingly integrated with advertising and public relations (PR) courses. Surveys of any of the mass communication programmes (113 as of 2009) accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) show a significant presence of advertising, PR, and/or strategic communication courses in their curricula.

This increasing presence of corporate communication courses may reflect a larger trend, an increasing commercialisation of U.S. higher education institutions or the "hijacking of higher education," as Giroux (2007) bluntly termed it. The unequal distribution of cultural capital and the maintenance and reproduction of these conditions via the commercialisation of higher education have been greatly criticised by current scholarship (e.g., Blackmore 2001; Bettig and Hall 2003; Chomsky 2003;

Giroux 2007; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). In this market-driven conception of education, pedagogy is reduced to "the measurable, accountable methodology used to transmit course content," normalising the technical and instrumental rationality at the expense of critical education (Giroux and Simon 1989, 221). As a matter of fact, there is much truth in Chomsky's (2003) observation: "[T]he university serves as an instrument for ensuring the perpetuation of social privilege…. [I]t generally means that the universities provide a service to those existing social institutions that are in a position to articulate their needs and to subsidise the effort to meet these needs (180-181)."

Regrettably, the penetration of corporate logics and instrumental rationality is undeniably evident in mass communication education. The curriculum is teeming with such catchy or marketable course titles as Strategic Brand Management, Integrated Marketing Communication, Interactive Advertising, and Corporate Public Relations, to list just a few. The problem does not lie in the inclusion of advertising in the formal curriculum, but rather in the way it is taught. Rather than considering advertising as a cultural force that helps fashion contemporary consumer culture, advertising courses are designed to train professionals who are well-versed in industry standards in market research, copywriting, graphic design, media planning, and the like. This trend clearly marks a radical shift from mass communication in the interests of public culture and democracy to the strategic mobilisation of consumers on behalf of mercenary clients.

Much to the dismay of critical educators in mass communication, the rise of PR and advertising has accompanied the fall of serious journalism and the shrinking of the public sphere. There are certainly still a considerable number of courses dedicated to examining the democratic obligations of the media and mass communication, but the curriculum is increasingly influenced by the logics of the market. In turn, this trend creates an educational environment in which the curriculum is continually reconfigured with the aim of professional training, and in turn students' learning is assessed from an overly narrow perspective of their mastery of employable skills. Curriculum standards can serve restrictive roles and help produce "official knowledge" (Apple 1999). Therefore, this increasing vocationalisation expedites the process of conservative social engineering in which the notion of education for democratic citizenship is effectively replaced by specialised knowledge that serves the status quo while simultaneously helping to internalise the hegemonic power maintenance on the part of the educated. Furthermore, vocationalisation fails to elevate mass communication's status as a valuable academic discipline. Indeed, "communication is a failure in the prestige game on U.S. campuses for the simple reason that aside from Penn and Stanford, it barely exists on Ivy League and other elite private university campuses."[3] At most large state universities that house large-enrolment mass communication programmes, it has become "a hepped up form of vocational education" (McChesney 2004, 54).

Those who believe that critical media education is on the verge of extinction face a real challenge when they attempt to initiate curricular reform. The current curriculum is aligned with mainstream industry in the name of professionalism, and alternative approaches are often discouraged or disparaged. Breaking this cycle is arduous and often produces animosity. The recent experience of Manjunath Pendakur, one of the most well-regarded critical media scholars in North

America, illustrates this difficulty. Pendakur was the Dean of The College of Mass Communication and Media Arts (CMCMA) at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC). He left the university in 2007 due to the outrage of some CMCMA graduates, even after his second five-year term was approved by the university. In a petition letter sent to the SIUC Board of Trustees, participating alumni asked for the resignation of Dean Pendakur for his misguided curriculum reform:

> *Nowhere does [the mission statement] mention that the College seeks to train students for successful careers in their chosen profession or to assist them in finding jobs upon graduation. What purpose could a college possibly have other than the benefit of its students? What practical good is an undergraduate degree if it does not include employable skills?* (Letter of Concern 2006)

Nowhere in the more than 2,000-word letter did the alumni specifically mention his misbehaviour or incompetence as a dean; rather, the letter presented an accusation grounded in a false dichotomy between theory and practice. The CMCMA made it clear that it aimed "[t]o educate and serve society as a public institution by engaging in critical, theoretical and *practical* [italics added] scholarly/creative activity" (MCMA Vision n.d.). In the lengthy letter, the alumni rarely addressed such vital components of college education as civic participation, critical thinking, community service, or democracy at large. The allegation typifies an instrumental rationality that purports that education should be evaluated in terms of its use value, "where use is increasingly narrowly defined as economic productivity" (Ruitenberg 2004, 347). This example is not an isolated event. As early as the late 1960s, there was a notable effort at reforming mass communication education (e.g., journalism education reform at the University of Iowa initiated by Malcolm MacLean, Jr.; see Norton Jr. 2001). The increasing infusion of corporate communication paradigms into mass communication curricula blurs the roles of public scholarship and corporate practice. As a result, in mass communication classrooms euphemisms such as strategy, effectiveness, efficiency, and measurement prevail over such important issues as citizenship, social justice, and democracy.

There is yet another layer to the problem with media literacy education and scholarship. Although there may be a common definition of media literacy, there is only a murky consensus as to its fundamental goal and how it should be achieved. Despite a wide variety of theoretical positions (from critical theory to the cognitive-psychological approach), media literacy is generally defined as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of texts" (Christ and Potter 1998, 7). When one of the most prominent communication journals, *Journal of Communication,* dedicated an entire issue to discussing the status of media literacy, the special issue editor wondered why "we really understand so little about the subject" (Rubin 1998, 3). One answer may be that, because media literacy has been greatly influenced by the behavioural and functionalistic traditions of mass communication scholarship, it has often been narrowly understood as the cognitive or psychological aspects of media use and measured in terms of individual competency levels. Although the goal of this article is not to critique the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological problems of this approach (often called media effects research), some points must be made clear here.[4]

First, media effects research seldom challenges the status quo. Although its research findings may point to the effects of some detrimental media content, the

basic system of unequal power relations and the media that support them remains largely unquestioned. This politically sanitised version of media literacy leads to a dubious conclusion: "[T]he individual should be regarded as the locus of media literacy – not schools, parents, or the media industries" (Potter 2004, 266). Driven by the desire to find some lucid cause-and-effect relationships, media effects researchers often present a body of self-evidentiary, uninspiring findings such as "media literacy education (i.e., cause) helps the student to become media literate (i.e., effect)" or "individual differences in cognitive capacities lead to the different levels of media literacy." In fact, it is not uncommon to find articles in some of the most respected journals that operationalise media literacy in terms of how well subjects cope with experimental stimuli, such as gory violence, sexual movie scenes, or stealthy promotional messages. This is not to say that the cognitive approach has no place in media literacy education, but rather to clarify its limitations in considering the larger social, political, and cultural forces that constitute much of the non-quantifiable mechanisms and forces of the media. While it might be possible to dissect media literacy into a set of measurable or manipulatable variables, media power often overrides individual cognitive differences. The microscopic obsession with statistical rigor, methodological refinement, and technical craftsmanship tend to discourage the formation of collective, critical pedagogy of media literacy within the larger context of a more democratic media system.

The narrowly conceived, scientific notion of media literacy adds fuel to the attenuation of critical media education. The problem does not necessarily lie in the adherence to scientific neutrality, but rather in a misconception of science that emphasises rigorous, objective methodology over the need to take a position and to ask socially meaningful research questions at the outset of inquiry. Chomsky (2000, 35) asserts, "Science survives by constant challenge to established thinking. Successful education in the sciences seeks to encourage students to initiate such challenges and to pursue them." However, such a task is not easily carried out in the vocationalised educational environment where students have to "work within hierarchical institutions and confront reward structures that privilege individual distinction over collective social change" (Lipsitz 2000, 80).

Moreover, the cognitive, psycho-reductionist approach tends to restrain media users as helpless receptacles of media messages rather than helping them become active agents of cultural politics. Thus, responsibility is now placed on individuals, while media mega-corporations are relieved of public accountability and social responsibility and allowed to continue running their businesses as usual. Essentially, the dominant education in mass communication is politically pessimistic; it restricts students to the norms of the status quo and is consequently cynical toward the possibility of change.

The indifference to media literacy may also be attributed to the naive active audience theory, which posits that mass media industries are sensitive and responsive to audiences' needs, offering what audiences want to read and watch (Meehan 2005). This position offers no critical insight into the complex, interconnected relations between media, society, and culture. Nor is it possible to find a meaningful link between media literacy education and the larger goal of realising a more democratic society. Media literacy ought to help mass communication attain legitimate intellectual recognition. Media literacy should help restore the notion

of democratic citizenship education in mass communication. Media literacy must serve as a *raison d'être* for wide curricular reform that can unify both theoretical courses (e.g., Media and Public Opinion, Political Economy of the Media, or International Communications, to name a few) and skills-oriented practical courses (e.g., journalistic writing courses and multimedia production courses) to serve the interests of democracy and civic participation.

The cognitive, media effects-based version of media literacy that is largely convergent with the scientific, behaviourist tradition of mass communication scholarship has apparent limitations in achieving these goals. Without "critical" literacy at its heart, media literacy education runs the risk of being reduced to a set of technical skills that can be implanted by the teacher into the student's mind in the traditional classroom. While a media effects-based conception of media literacy could offer some "self-defence skills" (Karlberg 2007), the inclusion of media literacy as a credit-earning, standalone course may simply serve as a token. Essentially, knee-jerk, *ad hoc* responses to the call for critical media education on behalf of democratic citizenship are insufficient and unwarranted. Although including a media literacy course in the formal curriculum would be a step forward, students need daily exercise (comprehensive critical media literacy), rather than a single dose of a painkiller.

Critical Educational Theories and Media Literacy Education

Having examined both the vocationalisation and scientification of mass communication, the following questions are now at stake. Can we open a space for critical pedagogy when the mass communication curriculum increasingly falls victim to market forces? Is it still possible for mass communication education to be critical? If so, how can we envision CML as an alternative, counter-hegemonic curricular praxis? In helping us contemplate the pedagogical borderlands of CML, critical educational theory has much to offer regarding these urgent yet insufficiently recognised issues.

Some may argue that critical pedagogy is inadequate for media literacy because of its overly theoretical or ideological nature. This accusation is rooted in a misconception of theory and a misguided belief in neutrality. As McLaren (1994) sharply points out, "any worthwhile theory of schooling must be *partisan*. That is, it must be fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice" (McLare 1994, 176-177). Seen from this perspective, media literacy education is never apolitical, meaning media literacy should actively pose the questions of ideology, politics, and power struggles that are inherently embedded in the production, distribution, and consumption of media and popular culture. In his foreword to the 30th anniversary edition of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Oppressed,* Richard Shall acutely captures the political nature of education:

> *There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which*

> *men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world* (as in Freire 2000, 34).

If education is never a neutral venture but one that either brings the conformity of the status quo and its logic, or one that provides the linguistic, theoretical, and communicative resources necessary for students to transform their world, then it is imperative for mass communication educators to consider their role in providing either an education that helps ensure the continuous, seamless operation of the dominant media institutions or a pedagogy of freedom that enables both theory and praxis for alternative and democratic media education and practices.

It would be almost impossible to present any meaningful notion of critical pedagogy without discussing Paulo Freire's contribution to critical literacy as liberatory practice. Although he initially developed his critical pedagogical theory within the particular situation of educating adults in Brazil's underdeveloped regions, his lucid articulation of liberatory, transformative pedagogy transcends both geographical and temporal borders. Above all, Freire's main concern was the elimination of oppression and the recovery of hope and possibility through education. Rebutting the traditional notion of education, which he dubbed the "banking system of education" (Freire 1998b), he was able to establish a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent critical educational theories. As Freire argues, in the banking conception of education, knowledge is seldom presented in a way that encourages students to think against the grain. All that is required of the teacher is to implant knowledge into the unsuspecting student's mind. Not only is this a threat to students' freedom to construct their own knowledge, but it is also a serious threat to the possibility of materialising a democratic, transformative pedagogical space in the classroom.

One of the most salient premises of Freire's theory lies in its understanding of human beings as critical agents of history, insofar as they are conditioned – but not determined – by historical specificities while simultaneously being free to dream of the future as a possibility (Freire 1998a). In fact, a large part of his work is dedicated to promoting education as a means of expanding the possibility of social change: "[H]istory is possibility and not determinism … It is impossible to understand as possibility if we do not recognise human beings as beings who make free decisions" (Freire 1998b, 37). Using Freire's liberatory pedagogy, we can postulate media literacy as a transformative pedagogical practice. This conceptualisation helps mass communication educators envision alternative mass communication education and media praxis to help students become critical media users as well as capable media producers.

Freire's emphasis on critical thinking also informs the theorisation of CML. In his view, critical thinking is not simply limited to a set of analytic skills, nor is it "encyclopedic knowledge, and men as mere receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts, which have to be filed in the brain" (Gramsci 1981, 193). Freire was specifically concerned with teaching critical thinking that questions the status quo, fosters critical capacity in citizens, and enables them to resist various social dominations. Thus, his critical pedagogy requires taking a position on behalf of those who are disenfranchised from social, economic, and political possibilities. In a similar vein, Winch (2004) also advocates the development of critical rationality and agency, or the process of conscientisation, as the

core of any meaningful notion of critical education. Thus, it is not the teacher who implants media literacy "skills" into the student's mind, but rather the student who initiates their own exploration of media territories by crossing various intellectual and disciplinary borders.

While ideological apparatuses (including the media) in a capitalist society induce individuals to conform to the established structure of dominance, it is also true that critical pedagogy can provide resources with which to organise and empower individuals against the existing hegemony. Exploring this pedagogical terrain would be one of the most fulfilling tasks for critical educators. Therefore, if we are to embrace Freirean critical pedagogy, it is imperative to dream of a more democratic educational system and to envision the possibility of liberatory media education that stands out of the corporate-endorsed vocational curriculum. Although Freire did not directly mention the notion of media literacy in his work, he gives a hint of what it means to practice critical media pedagogy in his later work (2004), where he talked about television literacy as a way to unearth the ideological functioning of the media:

> *In reality, all communication is the communication of something, carried out in a certain manner, in favor or defense, subtly or explicitly so, of something or someone and against something or someone that is not always referred to. Thus, there is also the expert role that ideology plays in communication, hiding truths, but also ensuring the ideological nature of the very communicative process* (*Freire 2004,* 94).

Hence, being critical involves challenging taken-for-granted notions of mass communication such as objectivity, fairness, balance, diversity, and the like. In other words, CML would mean actively questioning how these concepts are used, misused, and abused in what particular contexts and for whose interests. For example, instead of uncritically accepting objectivity as an unbreachable journalistic tenet, CML would invite students to scrutinise how it functions as a restrictive force that helps shield lethargic, sycophantic journalism. This kind of CML certainly requires comprehensive knowledge of the media at both institutional and symbolic levels and critical interrogation into the interplay between the two. In this regard, Henry Giroux's theorisation of the cultural politics of media and popular culture has much to say.

Freire and Giroux share the central tenet that the role of education is to help students to be free and to be the agents of history. With that philosophical foundation, Giroux has been concerned with expanding the possibility of agency. That is, he seeks to find a theoretical language by which to talk about non-deterministic, critical yet context-specific educational policy, theory, and praxis that can help overcome fatalistic cynicism to realise substantial social change.

Critical media studies scholars, especially those who inherited the Frankfurt School of thought and economic-reductionist structuralism, tend to dismiss media and popular culture for their role in exclusively serving the ruling class's interests. For instance, Louis Althusser (1971) saw the media as one of the most effective Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) for reproducing capitalist dominance. This kind of structuralism may offer a legitimate analytical lens by which to uncover the functions of superstructural apparatuses such as church, education, and the media in reproducing false ideologies and maintaining unequal social relations.

However, such reductionist logic is limited, as it fails to consider the possibility of oppositional ideology formation and practices. If the dominant ideology is always the ideology of the ruling class and that ideology is overpowering and all-encompassing, is it at all possible to reject that dominant ideology? If not, where is the possibility of social change? Regarding this theoretical impasse, Giroux offers a convincing response: Schools are "to be viewed as social sites marked by the interplay of domination, accommodation, and struggle" rather than "sites that function smoothly to reproduce a docile labor force" (2001a, 82).

Thus, instead of simply dismissing media and popular culture as trivial or insubstantial, critical educators need to take these up as pedagogical resources to help students unearth the hidden politics of the media in relation to social problems. In developing his notion of critical public pedagogy or critical cultural studies at large, Giroux (2000) discusses Stuart Hall's notion of "articulation," which allows for the possibility of "oppositional reading" as opposed to "hegemonic or preferred reading." Central to his understanding of Hall's theory of articulation is the idea that critical pedagogy requires deep awareness about both the material conditions of cultural texts and the possibility of oppositional discourses within the dominant ideology. The media and culture are thus sites of struggle, identity formation, and power relations. Giroux's theoretical appropriation of articulation is significant because it opens the possibility of challenging various forms of dominance at both institutional (i.e., political economy of the media) and symbolic (e.g., cultural studies, textual analysis, audience reception analysis) levels. Considering that today's ideological topography is not monolithic, it is imperative to understand critical pedagogy with a sense of agency:

> *Many current trends in critical pedagogy are embedded in the endemic weaknesses of a theoretical project overly concerned with developing a language of critique…. Unfortunately, this one-sided emphasis on critique is matched by the lack of theoretical and pragmatic discourse upon which to ground its own vision of society and schooling and to shape the direction of a critical praxis* (Giroux and McLaren 1991, 156).

Not only does Giroux's theory understand pedagogy as a mode of cultural criticism, but it also provides a critical-pragmatic tool by which to make the pedagogical political. In this endeavour, Giroux makes it clear that critical pedagogy ought to transcend the policed boundaries of traditional disciplines. Giroux (2004) rightly reshifts the microscopic, purely textual focus of cultural studies to the notion of critical public pedagogy for democratic citizenship by asserting that cultural studies should support a pedagogy of possibility, one that actively seeks to transform the victims of domination into the agents of democratic resistance and struggle. His lucid articulation of critical cultural studies reveals the media as constructed and contested cultural space that can be used for the theorisation of CML. According to Giroux and Simon (1989), critical pedagogy needs to be "a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations" (222). Giroux's particular emphasis on the media as pedagogical resource is worth quoting here:

> *If critical educators are to make a case for the context-specific nature of teaching – a teaching that not only negotiates difference but takes seriously the*

> *imperative to make knowledge meaningful so that it might become critical and transformative – they must expand curricula to include those elements of popular culture [and media] that play a powerful role in shaping the desires, needs, and identities of students* (Giroux 2001a, 133).

Giroux's contribution is significant because his theory helps us to not only break the vicious cycle of cynicism propagated by neoliberal education, but also come to grips with the notion of agency. Critical pedagogy has long been criticised for its inability to furnish concrete pedagogical tools and methods that can actually be implemented in the classroom. For Giroux, such an accusation is a *non sequitur* because his critical pedagogy vividly demonstrates what it means to connect critical theory to pedagogical praxis. Indeed, empirical analyses (in the broad, critical sense) of various popular cultural and media texts inform much of his intellectual work. For example, Giroux (2001b) used a popular film, *Fight Club,* as a pedagogical text by which to tackle some of the most pressing issues of contemporary capitalist society, including consumerism, corporate social control, masculinity, violence, and resistance. This sort of pedagogical practice not only opens a space for students' own critical inquiry into the mediated cultural text, but it also invites them to think about what it means to be oppositional and anti-hegemonic via CML. Giroux's works always help to make the pedagogical political, the political practical, and the practical pedagogical, dealing with such diverse issues as the politics of youth and innocence (1999, 2000), terrorism and the media (2006a), natural disaster and the politics of disposability (2006b), and the neoliberal transformation of the university (2007).

As Giroux argues, when the texts of everyday media culture are incorporated into the project of critical pedagogy, they create the possibility of combining textual, historical, political, and ideological analyses in ways that help teachers and students move beyond the limits of protectionism and traditional disciplinary boundaries. Therefore, Giroux's theory of culture, when reinvented for a theory of CML, enables us to see not only the hegemonic struggle embedded in mass communication education but also a discursive space wherein the possibility of change transpires.

Remapping the Pedagogical Borderlands of Critical Media Literacy

Based on the understanding of critical pedagogical theory's contribution to CML, my aim in this section is to identify some core issues and areas of CML. It may be useful here to recapitulate what is meant by CML. It can be understood as the ability to read, analyse, evaluate, critique, and create various media texts within multiple social, historical, economic, ideological, and cultural contexts. A point of departure from other conventional, cognitive approaches to media literacy is how well students understand the media's various positions, operations, and functions within multifaceted contexts, and whether they are willing and able to produce media that advance democratic principles and social justice. This definition of CML resembles Kellner and Share's (2005, 372) definition: "Critical media literacy not only teaches students to learn from media, to resist media manipulation, and to use media materials in constructive ways, but is also concerned with developing skills

that will help create good citizens and that will make individuals more motivated and competent participants in social life."

First, CML needs to be comprehensive and contextual. A comprehensive CML will require actively crossing the narrowly conceived disciplinary boundary of mass communication. For example, rather than simply considering media to be almighty, independent variables that operate independent of other socio-political forces, CML needs to consider the media within larger socio-political contexts. Most mainstream media theories treat the media as an influence on other vulnerable variables – for example, media determining the formation of public opinion by setting a certain agenda (agenda-setting theory), media presenting a certain frame by which to interpret a news event in a certain way (framing theory), or reality police shows shaping the viewer's worldview in line with the violent TV world (cultivation theory). In contrast, CML must question outright the myth of the so-called free, autonomous media – media operating freely and existing outside the domains of social conflicts, inequality, and ideology. This would involve, for instance, unearthing how public opinion is manufactured not only by the media but also by more potent yet invisible gatekeepers, rather than naively assuming it is something that emerges free of such external forces. Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney (1998) capture the need for comprehensive and contextual media literacy by noting: "[T]he media can only be understood in relation to their context, a context that is simultaneously institutional, economic, social, cultural, and historical" (xvi). Only then are students able to examine "how media and communication systems and content reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class and social relations" (McChesney 2004, 43). Lewis and Jhally (1998) also espouse a contextual approach, asserting that "a textual analysis that takes place without examining the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions in which texts are produced and understood is necessarily limited" (110).

Second, CML needs to move beyond simple protectionism to make media literacy education more political. Ironically, many media literacy projects tend to victimise youth and their cultural experiences. Especially for conservative protectionist groups, the primary goal of media literacy education is to keep students from being exposed to immoral and dangerous media content. This politically sanitised, rather than politically sensitized, version of media literacy is insufficient or even counter-progressive; it dodges the issue of how the unequal appropriation of material and symbolic resources is ensured and normalised. Protectionist solutions may include preventing children from listening to the songs of Eminem, 50 Cent, and the like because of their misogynic, violent lyrics, or calling for direct regulatory interventions into media content while failing to critically analyse the hidden mechanisms by which such cultural artefacts are produced, distributed, and promoted. Thus, the real players of the music industry – MTV, radio conglomerates, mega record labels, and even retailers like Walmart – remain unquestioned and unchallenged. Therefore, the protectionist version of media literacy runs the risk of reducing media literacy to the chore of weeding out bad apples, ultimately serving to neutralise the political project of media literacy. In contrast, CML views media literacy as a form of cultural politics that helps students to deconstruct and reconstruct the political and cultural meanings of media as well as to participate in collective social action, democracy, symbolic imagination, and struggle. With the

increasing vocationalisation of the mass communication classroom, it is imperative to politicise media literacy to help students criticise the values propagated by corporate power. Although educators are desperate for media literacy resources, it is vitally important to take a critical stance in recruiting industry sponsorship because corporate sponsors may want to soften media literacy "to make sure that public criticism of the media never gets too loud, abrasive, or strident" (Hobbs 1998, 26).

Third, CML opposes a false dichotomy between theory and praxis. As discussed previously, the misconception of media literacy as faulty scientism has expedited the evaporation of the critical in media literacy education. In turn, this legitimises artificial divides between the theoretical and the practical, between the scientific and the interpretive, and between the critical and the professional. Critical education for democratic citizenship does not necessarily negate education that may be useful for one's profession. As Lewis (1998) explains, a distinction can be made between "education for jobs" and "education about work." CML can be integrated into mass communication curricula in light of the latter. Among the U.S. mass communication curricular, multiple levels of disconnects exist between theory courses, practical courses, PR courses, journalism courses, and the like. In bridging the multilayered gaps, CML can serve as a guiding philosophical principle to remedy the seriously compartmentalised mass communication curricular. This wider curricular reform praxis in light of CML must be accompanied by the abandonment of the notion (or myth) of disciplinary purity, because it runs the risk of creating borders that keep students from actively and broadly exploring their own position in the media and cultural environment. As a reformer's guiding principle, CML not only remains at the normative level, but it can also be meaningfully infused with other specific, skills-oriented courses such as journalistic writing and media production courses. Skills courses can be reconfigured to advance social justice and democracy and to bring about positive social change on the university campus and beyond. Further, mass communication curriculum reform via CML does not call for jettisoning the so-called strategic communication (i.e., advertising and PR) courses. Rather, those courses can be restructured to advance a public agenda and socially responsible messages. This process requires re-theorising those sub-fields in light of CML. For example, a meaningful effort was recently undertaken to reclaim "the public" in the world of public relations (Nayden 2009).

Fourth, critical educators need to actively incorporate media production into CML education. However, this does not necessarily mean training students to be well-versed in production skills according to the mainstream industry's standards and expectations. Rather, it encourages students to initiate and organise their own alternative and oppositional media culture and practices – what Hobbs (1998) termed "expressive" media production, as opposed to "vocational" production (20). Likewise, Lewis and Jhally (1998) caution against the same misguided approach to media production: "[T]eaching production as purely a set of technical skills leads to an analytical immersion rather than a critical stance." To make media production critical and political, they argue, "production [should] be integrated into an overall theoretical approach that highlights the question of power" (117-118). In fact, Sut Jhally's Media Education Foundation (MEF) itself epitomises what alternative media production can do for mass communication and media education on behalf

of democratic citizenship education.[5] Media production grounded in CML should include the self-reflective process of relating critical theories to the production of media content that is free from both bureaucratic and commercial interests. It should also include the process of questioning the logic and aesthetics of mainstream media production within the larger context of public culture. For example, students may critically examine the limitations placed on them as independent media producers of controlled access to corporate-owned, copyright-protected media materials that may be essential for their video documentaries.

Fifth, CML needs to take visual images seriously. The importance of visual literacy does not solely reside in humanistic or aesthetic dimensions, but also in a political dimension. Instead of dismissing visual images as trivial, critical educators must recognise visual images as an integral part of students' daily media culture. CML demands that students learn "how to read critically the new technological and visual cultures that exercise a powerful influence over their lives as well as their conception of what it means to be a social subject engaged in acts of responsible citizenship" (Giroux 2001a, 133). Nevertheless, a common misconception about the use of visual media (including TV shows, movies, commercials, music videos, and videogames) is that the younger generation is highly competent compared to their older counterparts. While this observation may be true, visual images are often so taken for granted that there is little serious discussion about their relevance to critical pedagogy. Instead, CML strives to help students develop critical abilities to decode the social, cultural, and political meanings attached to and embedded in visual images and to ultimately produce with their own creative and oppositional readings. Ultimately, CML of visual images "involves learning how to appreciate, decode, and interpret images concerning both how they are constructed and operate in our lives and what they communicate in concrete situations" (Best and Kellner 1998, 85-86).

Finally, CML needs to be updated and expanded in light of new media and globalisation. Recent intellectual developments (Kellner 2000; Livingstone 2004; Nam 2009) point to the need for media literacy to be responsive to the changing conditions of literacy. Kellner's (2000) theorisation of multicultural and multiple literacies is particularly helpful in this regard. Departing from a romanticised or depoliticised eulogy of the so-called information revolution, his notion of multiple literacies helps CML take up new media and the Internet in the context of realising radical pluralist democracy in the age of neoliberal globalisation. Without losing sight of the socio-historical specifics of the production, distribution, and consumption of information as a commodity, CML requires students to create as well as consume information in the networked cultural-political environment, if the Internet is to become a democratising force. Thus, Kellner (2000) argues, "transformation in pedagogy must be as radical as the technological transformations that are taking place. Critical pedagogy must thus rethink the concepts of literacy and the very nature of education in a high-tech and rapidly evolving society" (196). For example, the recent growth of various social justice, democratic, and anti-globalisation movements via social media on the Internet (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) affords a striking illustration of the Internet's possibility for creating a new site for public pedagogy. Further, CML can help link the emergence of free, collective labour online (e.g., Wikipedia) to important topics in mass communication and media studies, such as

free speech, net neutrality, Internet regulation, and copyrighting of public culture. A word of caution must be noted here. The so-called information revolution and media convergence have come with an increased audience control over media content and the extreme personalisation of daily media consumption (Sunstein 2001). This personalisation is often uncritically seen as signalling the complete reversal of the power relation between the media and the consumer. While it is true that new social media and the Internet can help increase audience autonomy, it is equally important to think critically about the limits and limitations of such new media in terms of how they impede, rather than promote, democracy and how they are appropriated by corporations. Moreover, CML should be enriched in light of globalisation. For instance, Nam (2009) proposed that critical global media literacy be comprised four distinct yet interrelated levels of analysis: political economy of the global media; international flow of news and culture; media coverage of global events; and the institutionalisation of global media policy and regulation. This conceptual framework may prove useful for mass communication courses in international communication, comparative media systems, global media diplomacy, etc.

Concluding Remarks

This article was an exploratory attempt to reconfigure CML to serve as larger curricular praxis for U.S. mass communication programmes in higher education. As argued, the critical analysis of media literacy has been gradually attenuated and the mass communication curriculum compartmentalised. Although many academic mass communication departments have incorporated media literacy as part of their formal curriculum, it has been often treated as a set of narrowly defined measurable cognitive skills. Regarding this evisceration of the critical, this article made the case that CML needs to be reconsidered as a rationale for curricular reform, one that aims to redraw the pedagogical borderlands of media literacy and of mass communication education at large. It argues that CML ought to strive to help students initiate their own open, critical inquiry into the conditions of media production, representation, and reproduction. To reiterate, CML should be grounded in the critical interrogation of the unequal distribution of both economic and cultural capitals, the unjust media representation of race and gender, and, most importantly, the vision of more just, substantive democracy. This process will require refocusing the pedagogical aim of mass communication from training students to be competent yet docile cultural workers to helping them to become transformative social agents who cross disciplinary boundaries and engage in the project of realising democracy in their various capacities – as journalists, media producers, and creative cultural workers. Only then will we be able to get out of the stalemate of mass communication and media studies education.

To reclaim the critical in media literacy is to reform the mass communication curriculum. CML should serve to expand transdisciplinary pedagogical space, for example, by initiating a meaningful intellectual dialogue between cultural studies, political economy, education, arts, race and feminist studies, and the like. Furthermore, CML as curricular praxis must offer broader general education media courses at the institutional level. CML should accompany a larger, wide-reaching intellectual movement that challenges the philosophies, policies, and curricula

that make up the neoliberal university. Although it is true that the article was largely based on the critique of the U.S.-based mass communication programmes, its philosophical and theoretical frameworks well apply to ever-commercialising universities across the globe.

To conclude, the disconnect between critical pedagogy and media literacy can be remedied by reconfiguring CML as curricular praxis that goes beyond the often restrictive, market-driven disciplinary boundaries. The charge that CML remains purely theoretical can be overcome by taking daily media and popular culture seriously as legitimate pedagogical resources. Ultimately, CML promotes a collective effort to reform mass communication and media studies curriculum in the service of democracy. Thus, it is positioned as the pedagogical project of reformers rather than of conformists.

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Notes:

1. Probably no other discipline or academic field has been as diversely labeled as communication. Some common names and/or sub-fields of it include communication(s), communication arts and science, speech communication, communication studies, mass communication(s), mass media, media studies, information studies, etc. A general trend is that mass communication is used as an umbrella term to cover its many sub-fields such as journalism, advertising, public relations, and telecommunications/electronic media. Three of the discipline's most prestigious scholarly/professional organizations – the International Communication Association (ICA), National Communication Association (NCA), and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), have different approaches to the communication discipline, and this intellectual chasm is well illustrated in their different division compositions and names. In this article, I use the terms mass communication and media studies in order to denote the academic study of mass communication institutions, processes, regulation, and policy as well as their influences and effects on society. In general, this article uses the two terms interchangeably in the context of U.S. higher education. Communication rooted in humanistic and rhetorical traditions is not included in this discussion and critique. For a detailed historical account of journalism and mass communication education in the United States, see Dickson (2000).

2. For a wide variety of theoretical approaches and issues related to media literacy, see American Behavioral Scientist, volume 48, special issues 1 & 2 (2004) and Hobbs's (1998) "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement" in Journal of Communication.

3. This hierarchy is also unmistakably seen at the graduate level. Most, if not all, highly regarded U.S. mass communication programmes are housed in large state universities, although there are a few notable exceptions. According to the 2004 reputational study of U.S. mass communication doctoral programmes by NCA, the top ten include Pennsylvania, Stanford, Michigan State, Southern California, Wisconsin, Texas, Alabama, Penn State, Illinois, and Ohio State.

4. This point is well articulated in David Gautlett's "Ten Things Wrong with the 'Effects' Model," although I do not agree entirely with all of his arguments. Refer to Gautlett (1998).

5. Established in 1992, The MEF (www.mediaed.org) has produced and distributed numerous "documentary films and other educational resources to inspire critical reflection on the social, political, and cultural impact of American mass media." Its highly acclaimed, award-winning educational films have been widely used across different disciplines in high school and college classrooms.

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