



Implementing Critical Thinking in the Classroom: The Case of Media Literacy. A Bird`s Eye-view Perspective on Specialized Literature

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Abstract

The process of education in the 21st century takes place in a highly developed digital world. This triggers the need of students` becoming media literate, considering that media has an important influence on students` shaping perceptions of the world, beliefs, emotions, values, behaviour and attitudes, At the same time, it presupposes, on the one hand, a re-thinking of teaching objectives, teaching techniques, teacher and student roles in the classroom and, on the other hand, the necessity of developing in students a set of skills that help them learn how to get access to new information resources, find what they need to know and prove understanding of information and internalization of knowledge through their own products. The aim of this paper is to offer an empirical investigation on the topic under discussion, showing the relationship between media literacy and critical thinking. It also provides insights into the teachers` strategies, techniques and activities that might be used in the classroom, so that they could provide students with the skills they need - in order to cope with the challenges brought by the digital world - more exactly, with critical thinking skills. Findings from specialized literature are corroborated with own contributions.

Key words: Creative thinking; critical thinking; lifelong learning; media education; media literacy

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1. Introduction

[...] because today people use so many different types of expression and communication in daily life, the concept of literacy is beginning to be defined as the ability to share meaning through symbol systems in order to fully participate in society. (Hobbs, 2010, p. 16)

The world around us is changing amazingly fast. New means of communication between people have become new sources of information and have triggered the necessity of appropriate knowledge, effort of understanding messages, skills for their selection, analysis, and evaluation. Education needs to keep pace with these new realities and it should engage in the process of adaptation to the new types of literacy – digital literacy, information literacy, media literacy, multicultural literacy, technology literacy or visual literacy, for example. When it comes to education, we need to have in view not only how it deals with the information that is conveyed but also the different channels through which the information is provided to learners, as well as the set of competencies that both educators and learners need to acquire as a part of their lifelong learning process.

2. Media education; media literacy

2.1. Media education

In the 21st century, media's role (in their quality of social and cultural forces) has become a dominant trait of people's life and personal development, as media contribute to the shaping of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs. Many researchers in the field have been using the term "media education" interchangeably with that of "media literacy". Yet, there is a distinction between the two concepts. Media literacy refers to the skills and habits that individuals need to develop in order to access media, analyse, discuss about, evaluate and finally to produce it; media education refers "a conceptual framework" and is based on the analyses of the messages produced by media, as well as on the techniques through which they are produced (Fedorov, 2003:10). It also refers to pedagogical approaches and educational initiatives that help the learning process to foster media literacy. In short, media education is about teaching about media and with the help of media.

Masterman² formulated a number of eighteen principles that characterize media awareness education. For Masterman, media education (ME) represents a lifelong holistic process and a "serious and significant endeavour" within the general framework of people's education. A deep analysis of these principles made us take our own perspective, by grouping them under different headings and thus identifying aims (Table 1), characteristics of media education (Table 2) and classroom specificities that media education has in view³ (Table 3).

Table 1. Aims of media education

Aims	to empower individuals
	to increase motivation for learning
	to help investigation
	to "illuminate" the life-situations of learners

² <https://www.medialit.org/reading-room/media-awareness-education-eighteen-basic-principles>

³ Material processing of Masterman's *Media Awareness education: Eighteen Basic Principles*

	to foster critical intelligence and critical autonomy
	to develop transferable analytical tools

Table 2. Characteristics of media education

	Characteristic	Explanation
a) characteristics of ME	the unifying concept is representation	as media re-present the world and they are “symbolic sign systems that must be decoded” (Masterman)
	its effectiveness can be evaluated	Criteria of evaluation: a) the students` ability to apply critical thinking to new situations b) the amount of students` motivation
	consists of practical criticism and critical practice	
	is “committed to the principle of continuous change” (Masterman)	

Table 3. Classroom specificities in ME education

Classroom techniques	new ways of working in the classroom	it carries out its investigation on the basis of dialogue (rather than discussion)
	offers possibilities for reflection and dialogue	
	the classroom lesson is active and participatory	
Teacher-student relationship	new type of relationship between teachers and students	involves collaborative learning; new knowledge is actively created by the collaboration between teachers and students
Role of the student	students take more responsibility for their learning	students can be engaged in establishing long-term perspectives of their own learning
Evaluation	it is based on formative and summative student self-evaluation	

2.2. Media literacy

Many definitions have been offered in order to “capture” the characteristics and hidden implications of the concept. We think that the best solution is to offer the definition provided by CML – Center for Media Literacy⁴ (whose philosophy is that of “empowering through education”):

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyse, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet.

In short, it represents the education for life in a world dominated by media under diverse forms and presupposes both building knowledge and increasing skills (Potter, 2004). The concept was introduced by Marshall McLuhan (in the 1950’s – 1960’s), in what was called North American educational movement for media literacy. In the mid-20th century, when media literacy programs emerged, scholars and educators’ preoccupations centered round two ideas: student empowerment and protecting students from the harmful effects of media. The 21st century

⁴ Center for Media Literacy. <https://www.medialit.org/media-literacy-definition-and-more>

brought the preoccupation for preparing students to become active users of media (Buckingham, 2003), and at the same time, producers of media products.

According to the Center for Media Literacy, the word “informed” represents the central point of the concept (Thoman & Jolls 2003/2005: 10); it presupposes a four-step process through which learners get a set of skills that allow them to access information coming via different media sources, to explore them through “surface” and “deep” analysis, evaluate messages according to their own moral/democratic principles and, finally, to show ability in expressing themselves through their own messages constructed by means of various media tools. These processes allow for the empowerment of learners (as displayed in the *Empowerment Spiral* – according to Thoman & Jolls (2003/2005:15), based on awareness, analysis, reflection and action.

3. Media literacy. Literature review

The literature in the field of media literacy is quite vast, with numerous contributions coming from different countries, in which it represents a reality in school curriculum and schoolwork. Hefzallah (1987) suggests that television should be a variant form of literature in schools and supports the need of media literacy education, without being “overly technical”. Wurman (1989) is interested in the relationship between the information explosion and the way information is understood and insists on the ability of accessing information and selecting it on the basis of its meaningful effect on one’s life. Kinder (1991- cited in Robinson, 1996:10) mentions the influences that media have on children’s emotional and cognitive growth and relates children’s ability to read, understand and write narratives with their ability to read, understand and generate media narratives.

Buckingham & al. (2005, p. 3) consider that children develop media literacy even “in the absence of explicit attempts to encourage and promote it” as both children and young people are already acquainted with skills and competences (“functional literacy”) that allow them to get access to media content, as they are accustomed with using technology (Internet, mobile phones). Reviewing research in the topic, the authors also disclose a set of preoccupations, strictly linked to

a) access to media – with particular interest in 1) the role of parents and educators in guiding and controlling children’s access; 2) raising children’s awareness of personal risk in relation to new media;

b) understanding media – with interest on 1) the concerns regarding exposure to “inappropriate” content and “bad” language; 2) the relationship between individual’s motivation and his comprehension and processing of content; 3) understanding of verbal and visual elements; 4) the problem of representation: realism, fact and fiction; 5) the danger of stereotyping; 6) the commercial function of media

c) the creative dimension – referring to the way in which young people “create” media in everyday life.

According to Bordac (2010, p. 13), “media literacy skills involve the interconnectedness of different skills associated with multiple modes of communication and with multiple media types”. Hobbs (2011) enumerates the skills that both teachers and students need to develop: access skills; analysis skills, collaboration skills; reflection skills; taking action skills. Our analysis of the specialized literature discloses that many researchers in the field are preoccupied with the skills and competencies that students need to develop in order to become effective media literates (Table 4) - from using technological equipment, to thinking and production processes so that “students can grasp the social implications and functions of the media and interact with them in the most self-reflexive and responsible way” (Ranieri, 2012, p. 9).

Table 4. Effective media literacy skills (literature review)

Technical skills	• skills in using technology	Hobbs (2010)
	• effective search and find strategies	
Intellectual skills	• recognizing rhetorical devices • recognizing “covert and overt appeals” • using critical thinking faculties	Welsh & Wright (2010)
	• recognizing referents • recognizing patterns • matching of meanings to referents	Potter (2004)
	• evaluating media websites (in terms of safe and trustworthy resources) • comparing/contrasting sources, elements and content • identifying truth in messages	Lynch (2018)
Communication skills	• building social interactions with others	Jenkins (2006)
	• debating and transaction skills • communicative and socio-relational skills	Ranieri (2012, p. 23)
Cultural competences	• learning how to use “collective intelligence” – considered an alternative to media power – through daily interactions “within convergence culture” (involving the “flow of content” across multiple media platforms and national borders)	Jenkins (2006, p. 4)
	• finding common ground through media and popular culture	Hobbs & Tuzel (2015)

4. Critical thinking

[Media literacy is...] a framework for accessing, analyzing, evaluating and creating media. The development of critical thinking and production skills needed to live fully in the 21st century media culture. (Center for Media Literacy)⁵

Media literacy does NOT mean “don’t watch”, but it means “watch carefully, think critically” (Thoman & Jolls (2003/2005, p. 21)

Although most researchers in the field of media literacy seem to agree that critical thinking represents the most important type of skill that contributes to media literacy, there are voices that consider “critical thinking” just “an umbrella idea for an unspecified conglomeration of mental processes by which people challenge media messages” (Potter, 2010, p. 680).

According to Paul & Elder (2007, p. 4), critical thinking represents a complex type of thinking that has the following characteristics: it is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-corrective; “it entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities”. The authors consider that in order to be able to upgrade their thinking, students need to master two essential dimensions of thinking

- a) to be able to identify the “parts”/elements of their reasoning (assumptions; concepts; implications; information; inferences; points of view; purposes; questions)
- b) to be able to assess their use of these elements of reasoning (following universal intellectual standards: accuracy; breadth; clarity; depth; fairness; logic; precision; relevance; significance). If these standards are applied consistently to the elements of

⁵ <https://www.medialit.org/media-literacy-definition-and-more>

thinking, they will develop a set of intellectual traits (intellectual autonomy; intellectual courage; intellectual empathy; intellectual humility; intellectual integrity; intellectual perseverance; confidence in reason; fair-mindedness).

Critical thinking brings a cognitive educational perspective to the teaching and learning process. It has in view the competencies offered by Bloom's Taxonomy, in which thinking is classified according to cognitive levels of complexity: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

The cognitive taxonomy was revised in 2001 by Anderson and Krathwohl (Krathwohl, 2002); it presupposed changes at the level of the Cognitive Process Domain (in terms of the terminology used – where nouns became verbs, as in “Analysis” turned into “Analysing” – and in the position of level – where “Creating” has become the highest level of the domain). They also created a Taxonomy Table, expanding on the relationship existing between the Knowledge Dimensions and the Cognitive Process Dimension) in a constant effort of enhancing the concepts of teaching and learning and transforming the table into a useful instrument for the teaching process. Thus, their taxonomy includes:

- a) remembering (recalling knowledge from memory; recognizing)
- b) understanding (classifying; comparing; exemplifying; explaining; inferring; interpreting; summarizing)
- c) applying (attributing; creating charts, diagrams, graphic representations, surveys; differentiating; distinguishing - between component parts-)
- d) analyzing (executing; implementing; simulating)
- e) evaluating - as a precursor of creating – (making judgments - through checking and critiquing; elaborating recommendations)
- f) creating (planning; synthesizing; generating;)

Cress (2003:87) draws the difference between traditional critical thinking and the new approach to it. While the former was based on abstract logical arguments, offering an analytical, objective, impersonal and universal perspective, the new approach stresses on holistic notions that include “empathy and imagination in solving problems, formulating inferences and making decisions as part of applying critical thinking to community issues”.

5. Integrating critical thinking in the classroom through media literacy

Media literacy should be addressed in different ways at different levels.
(Ranieri, 2012, p. 9)

An important contribution to teaching media literacy was brought by Thoman & Jolls' *Oriention Guide to Media Literacy Education* (2003/2005). According to them (p. 20), the best approach to teaching media literacy is the “inquiry process”. This approach presupposes two types of skills: “analytical (deconstruction) and creative communications (construction/production)”. Lynch (2018) mentions a set of techniques of integrating media literacy in the classroom:

- teaching students how to evaluate media sources (on the basis of the idea that media change according to producer(s), the type of audience that is targeted or the source's biases);
- developing students' skills of identifying digital resources, as well as databases that are trustworthy and safe;
- offering students information about how media edit and alter information;
- teaching students to compare media sources;
- having students create media (presentations, websites, videos, posters, advertisements).

These techniques cover two important areas of the issue under discussion: teaching about media (types, characteristics, structure, operations), and helping students to analyze and evaluate

media. Media, thus, become an important “field” of study and analysis, helping “each student to become an independent life-long learner who can generate and apply his/her own cognitive strategies to a very wide variety of content” (Haywood, 2004, p. 249).

Hobbs (2011) demonstrates how media literacy can be incorporated into the secondary classroom and mentions the tools that teachers need in order to develop students’ critical thinking along with collaboration and communication skills, as well as the ways in which teachers can integrate media literacy in every subject. The goal is to help students become good thinkers and communicators. In Feuerstein’s opinion (1999, p. 51), as pupils increase their experience with media literacy, they will demonstrate greater capability in media analysis and critical thinking skills.

While media analysis involves critical thinking skills, the production process involves creative thinking skills. In what follows, we are going to enhance the elements that are linked to critical thinking and its integration in the classroom, while teaching media literacy. Learners are invited and encouraged to take a critical/reflective position (upon message selection, message content and message value), use critical viewing in order to analyse and understand messages conveyed by visual media – thus proving their visual literacy – and, last but not least, develop their autonomy by using abilities of media literacy in tasks outside the classroom.

Critical analysis implies the use of factual, conceptual and debatable questions as basic teaching techniques. It also means, according to Paul & Elder (2007), getting a good command of a set of universal intellectual standards that are able to offer information about the quality of reasoning about a problem and are based on the following elements: accuracy, breadth, clarity, completeness, depth, fairness, logicalness, precision, relevance, significance. These will help students to develop intellectual traits, such as intellectual autonomy, courage, empathy, humility, integrity, perseverance, reason and fairmindedness. The specialized literature offered us a set of solutions/actions to be taken in this respect (Table5). To them, we have added our own solutions (Table 6).

Table 5. Literature review solutions

Solutions/Actions to be taken	Source
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing thematic-modular instruction • ensuring resource-based teaching • questioning the mediated world in a critical way: to distinguish between truth and misconceptions, stereotypes or propaganda 	Robinson (1996, p. 5)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offering opportunities to express views and feelings appropriately • offering opportunities for solving problems • encouraging divergent thinking • helping students explore their thinking 	Rozakis (1998)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • training students to ask different types of questions: 1) “Right there” (literal questions); 2) “Think and search (comprehensive questions that require inference); 3) “Author and you” (related to the students’ prior knowledge and inference from the text); 4) “On your own” (based on students’ life experience) 	Kelty (1999, cited in Echeverri & McNaulty Ferri, 2010, p. 110)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fostering learners’ listening skills and reading comprehension • fostering learners’ collaboration in the process of producing messages • asking for feedback that can ensure revision of knowledge, so that it can become a springboard for new uses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using analysis skills • evaluating credibility • evaluating quality • evaluating risks and harms of messages • recognizing and resisting stereotypes • using rhetorical strategies in order to inform and persuade • using the power of information to help changes in the world 	Hobbs (2010)

• fostering learners` critical intelligence and critical autonomy	Masterman ⁶
• helping students to create media in a responsible manner	Silva (2019)
• ensuring emphasis on process skills for lifelong learning • facilitating student-centered learning (p.32)	Thoman & Jolls (2003/2005)
• helping students to come to well-reasoned conclusions/solutions and opportunities for testing them by resorting to relevant criteria and standards (p. 4) • helping students identify strengths and weaknesses of the points of view expressed (p.7) • helping students overcome their negative egocentric thinking (p.9-11)	Paul & Elder (2007)
• making students aware of the sense of belonging to a community based on sharing of interests and common aims (p.31) • understanding of the implications of the online identity, be it positive or negative (p.70) • fostering students` ability to understand other people`s self-representations (p.70)	Ranieri (2012)
• using project work as a tool for practicing critical thinking	Ruiz (2013)
• recognizing “overt and covert appeals”	Welsh & Wright (2010)
• developing problem solving and reflection skills	Cress, Kerrigan & Reitenauer (2003)

Table 6. Our own suggested solutions for teachers

helping students	to develop strong observation and interpretation skills
	to use knowledge flexibly and meaningfully
	to apply already acquired knowledge in new situations
guiding students	to identify and select useful media that can change their behaviour to the best
	to provide clear, insightful analysis, by establishing connections between concepts
	to provide clear, insightful analysis, by establishing connections between concepts
	to perceive and understand the visual material and the messages conveyed by it, through a process of “deconstruction”: sound, image, lighting, script, directions (Worsnop, 1989:54)
	to identify correct or false representations of reality
	to formulate questions clearly and precisely
offering students	opportunities to identify connections between what they learn and what happens in real life
	time to reflect on issues
	opportunities to use argumentative skills
applying	real-time learning from multiple media sources, thus helping students to become literate in all media forms
	appropriate strategies: making predictions questioning technique collaborative inquiry metacognitive strategies (evaluating, identifying, organizing, planning, reflecting, self-questioning, thinking aloud)
exploring	students` level of knowledge on a topic and decide on the role of media in the acquisition of knowledge
developing	students` cognitive skills (inferring, implying)
	students` collaboration skills with each other

⁶ <https://www.medialit.org/reading-room/media-awareness-education-eighteen-basic-principles>

encouraging students	to take active part in activities meant to develop communication skills
	to develop multimedia projects
	to be curious and creative
	to apply knowledge to new contexts

Summing up the findings and corroborating them with our own solutions, we reached the conclusion that the teachers' effort of developing critical thinking skills can materialize in particular types of classroom strategies, techniques and procedures that are meant to help students develop a set of skills and competences so that they could think for themselves and make their own judgement (to get "critical autonomy" – Masterman, 1985). The skills that we identified are presented below, with strict reference to the teacher's effort to integrate critical thinking in classrooms, through media literacy:

1. Assessing – a) the accuracy of reporting on an event; b) bias in media; c) credibility of sources of information; d) quality of media material; e) relevance of evidence presented linguistically or visually;
2. Analysing – a) the context in which information is created and conveyed; b) facts presented; d) goals of messages; e) meaning of messages;
3. Applying – a) data collected; b) theories of media analysis;
4. Clarifying – a) implications and consequences; b) points of view of speakers;
5. Classifying and categorizing – a) data presented; b) sources accessed;
6. Comparing and contrasting – a) assumptions in different media and contexts; b) data presented; c) facts; d) media discourses; e) opinions; f) solutions offered for diverse issues/ problems;
7. Constructing – a) frames of reference; b) hypotheses regarding context, facts, consequences or implications;
8. Creating own media material;
9. Deconstructing – a) conscious and unconscious bias; b) linguistic material; c) visual material; d) theories about media production and functioning;
10. Determining – a) embedded values in messages; b) motivations; c) relevance of data; d) significant elements;
11. Distinguishing – a) between assumptions, opinions and facts; b) among various cultural beliefs, traditions and values as relevant in media;
12. Examining – a) assumptions; b) data; c) facts; d) perspective- taking in various media;
13. Establishing – a) differences between facts and opinions; b) contexts for events; c) implicit messages; d) linkage between ideas; e) analogies; f) types of appeals (logical vs. affective);
14. Explaining – a) persuasive devices; b) visual symbols; c) viewpoints;
15. Exploring – a) biases; b) media content; c) media techniques; d) ways in which media messages can be interpreted by people belonging to different groups and backgrounds; e) others' points of view;
16. Defending – a) own ideas and solutions; b) points of view, from different cultural perspectives;
17. Drawing conclusions;
18. Evaluating – a) aesthetical qualities of messages; b) arguments used to persuade; c) alternative concepts; d) clarity of the message; e) data from multiple sources; f) evidence; g) impact of media vehicles upon message; h) information in context; i) reliability of information; j) statements; k) technologies used in creation of media;
19. Formulating – a) logical perspectives for scenarios; b) different types of questions;
20. Gathering – a) information/data from multiple sources; b) examples of good practices;
21. Highlighting – a) targeted audience; b) advantages and disadvantages of different media;

22. Identifying – a) false, misleading information; b) implications and consequences of facts/messages; c) intertextuality; d) assumptions with high impact on the audience; e) incongruences within messages conveyed; f) media techniques used to produce messages; g) points of view; h) possible solutions for various problems; i) realistic/unrealistic messages;
23. Inferring – a) meanings; b) conclusions; c) consequences; d) solutions;
24. Making choices through a trial and error process;
25. Organizing information in a logical order;
26. Predicting – a) events on the basis of past experience; b) consequences;
27. Providing – a) alternative solutions; b) examples;
28. Questioning issues – a) credibility of sources; b) credibility of messages; c) data; d) evidence that is offered in the message conveyed; e) new ideas;
29. Ranking media sources;
30. Recalling – a) information; b) past experience;
31. Recognizing – a) biases; b) sources of information
32. Reflecting upon – a) alternative representations; b) media culture; c) media effects; d) own beliefs; e) personal experience; f) own work;
33. Re-thinking – a) assumptions; b) own beliefs; c) solutions;
34. Seeking for – a) clarifications; b) new solutions;
35. Selecting – a) media; b) solutions; c) type of information;
36. Structuring of arguments;
37. Summarizing information;
38. Understanding – a) images; b) information; c) intentions; d) the tools of accessed media formats; e) the tools that help the production of own media material; f) vocabulary used in messages;
39. Using – a) abstract ideas to interpret information; b) data; c) facts; d) multiple sources; e) prior knowledge; f) questioning technique (factual questions, inferential questions and general questions).

Among the activities to be used in the classroom and which we consider fit for exploiting media at all levels of study and subjects taught in school, we mention and suggest (Table 7).

Table 7. Classroom activities for effective use of media

Problem-solving	Mingle, Pair, Share
Mind mapping	Think for yourself
Find the differences	Select from alternatives
Think-pair-share	Draw analogies
K-W-L	Socratic seminar
Debate time	Hypothesize

4. Conclusions

Our findings indicate that there has been an extended preoccupation for the study of media literacy, as well as for the role that critical thinking needs to have in the classroom, so that students become critical thinkers and effective communicators. Research revealed that critical thinking skills need to be developed in students, as they are not inborn skills. They need to be treated as the foundation of education as they ensure one's success in life, in their setting goals, taking decisions, solving problems, producing effective communication (constructing arguments, persuading people, solving conflicts, negotiating), quality work and good relationships within community.

Nowadays open access to media ensures, at the same time, access to information in various forms and with various means (language, image, sound, colour). Becoming media literate involves hard and consistent work not only from the part of the students but also from the

teachers. This comes naturally as a consequence of the fact that the youth, although very much accustomed to accessing media (as they possess basic or more or less advanced technical skills), need to be guided in selecting, analysing, evaluating them and even offering their own media products. This presupposes the need of their becoming aware of the media functions and of the necessity of interacting “with them in the most self-reflexive and responsible way” (Ranieri, 2012, p. 9). Under such circumstances, media need to become the object of students’ investigation from different perspectives, under the teachers’ guidance so that they could develop awareness of what media mean, how they function, how they can be understood and taken advantage of. This is where the issue of the development of critical thinking skills comes into being as part and parcel of the process of teaching media literacy. These skills become a necessary foundation for students’ lifelong development (from an intellectual, social, moral and cultural point of view).

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