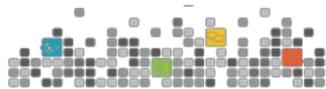


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Review, Reading the Media

Teachers College Record

Reading the Media in High School: Media Literacy in High School English

reviewed by David L. Bruce

Title: Reading the Media in High School: Media Literacy in High School English

Author(s): Renee Hobbs

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“We do not all become English teachers, and those of us who do cannot afford to forget this fact” (Scholes, 1998, p. 79).

In *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998), Robert Scholes fires a critique at the traditional English curriculum, stating that much of it has been based on a “set of assumptions about teaching that are so out of touch with our real situations as to be both ludicrous and dangerous” (p. 76). Those assumptions deal with a skewed view of the purpose of teaching literature and composition. Rather than

teaching students the broad concepts of reading, writing, and thinking to make sense of their lives and their world, English teachers often have taught a series of highly decontextualized skills. Scholes states that such an approach is no longer viable. The present population is comprised of “the most mediated human beings ever to exist on this earth...[and they] need to be able to read, interpret, and criticize texts in a wide range of modes, genres, and media” (p. 84).

If one were to be pragmatic about the textual forms of which Scholes speaks, a “wide range” would certainly include various forms of media such as TV, movies, the Internet, magazines, and advertising, just to name several of the numerous options. Historically, English teachers have had a long-standing aversion to media in the classroom, characterized by what O’Sullivan (1962) described as “either the defensive maneuvers of the ostrich or the offensive charge of the bull” (p. 82). Tyner (1998) asserts that many teachers have resorted to “banning popular culture as much as possible from the classroom” (p. 58).

Despite this widespread avoidance, there has also been a decades-long push from a vocal minority of educators who have advocated using media as texts that can be studied in a similar manner to print (Buckingham, 1992; Considine, 1997; Costanzo, 1984; Foster, 1979; Krueger & Christel, 2001; Masterman, 1985; Monaco, 1981).

Renee Hobbs’ *Reading the Media* presents an English department that stepped away from the binary either print/or media approach to classroom texts. Rather, the faculty demonstrated how both print and non-print can not only coexist, but compliment each other in classrooms. Hobbs presents—without prescribing a “how-to” template—a complex picture of students’ reading, composing, listening, viewing, and speaking both print and media texts in English Language Arts classrooms. As such, this book represents a welcome examination of integrating media literacy into a traditional English curriculum.

The research took place at Concord High School in Concord, New Hampshire over a seven-year period. The high school English department had overhauled their curriculum, deciding that the heterogeneous block schedules of 11th grade would be “Media/Communication.” According to one teacher, the class was conceptualized to “address nonfiction reading and writing, explore issues of media influence, examine advertising from a critical perspective, reflect and analyze visual approaches to the narrative, and encourage students to ‘read’ the media of the everyday life with a critical eye” (p. 27).

This book presents two research views of an English department and it is Hobbs’ mixed-methodology approach that makes the findings so powerful. The qualitative research details the integration of print and non-print texts. For example, one unit demonstrated reading with multiple versions of *Frankenstein*. Students read different iterations of that text, from Mary Shelley’s original work to a review of *Monster Theory* (Cohen, 1996). They also viewed several versions of the film including Boris Karloff’s *Frankenstein*, Mel Brook’s *Young Frankenstein*, and Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*. The class explored several themes: historical contexts, role of technology and science, parenting, and identity. Two teachers used the inquiry, “how are monsters a representation of both our culture and ourselves?” (p. 79) as the cohesive thread for the unit.

The quantitative findings are noteworthy and should make those interested in school reform take notice, particularly in the measurable academic gains students made as a result of studying media literacy. Hobbs found that students who received viewing and listening training with media literacy (Concord High School students) showed significant differences from the control group in their critical ability to identify main ideas and purposes of media texts, creative construction techniques, point of view, and omitted information. Concord students were also better able to compare and contrast news sources (p. 101). In addition, the experimental group showed significant differences in knowledge of advertising production, including various stages in pre/during/post production processes (p. 118).

Students from Concord High School also showed significant increases over the control group in print reading comprehension—including identifying main ideas and supporting details—and critical reading, which included identifying techniques used to attract and hold readers’ attention, values and point of view, and omitted information (p. 137). Concerning students’ composition skills, Hobbs states, “the infusion of media literacy into the English 11 course supported students’ growth as writers” (p. 140).

It is possible that such gains were made because the teachers in this book were willing to alter their pedagogy. One teacher stated, “It was time for us to really face up to the fact that we were not here to make kids potential English majors. Instead, we were aiming to help students become critical thinkers in responding to the world they live in” (p. 27). The many examples and vignettes Hobbs presents reinforce the necessity of allowing teachers to make curricular choices rather than be forced—as a growing number of teachers are—to narrow their options in order to conform to a standardized high-stakes test.

Through broadening their textual choices, the teachers also changed the power structure of the class. By inviting students to bring in examples of media texts into the classroom, the teachers moved out of their expert zone—especially having the better understanding of canonized readings—to encourage student leadership. Hobbs states,

Several English 11 teachers told me that they sometimes missed the comfort and routine of knowing that on a particular day, they would be on, for example, pages 128-150 in the literature reading. Teaching about media and communication didn’t work with that kind of predictability because students felt confident to bring their own experiences and knowledge into the classroom. (p. 67)

Such an approach highlights one of the book’s most important findings: students who were normally on the academic fringes of the classroom had modalities other than print to demonstrate understanding and expertise. Hobbs states, “media literacy activities may be especially beneficial in heterogeneous classrooms because they create rich learning opportunities for students whose reading comprehension skills may not be as strong as their overall intellectual ability” (p. 81).

Reading the Media is a valuable addition to the research of media literacy, adolescent literacy, and teacher education. In particular, the book illustrates what happens when teachers are empowered to make curricular decisions and to broaden traditional academic texts. By doing so, Hobbs has offered English teachers a welcome alternative to the ostrich and bull approaches to media in the classroom.

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Quote of the Day

We drive into the future using only our rearview mirror.
- Marshall McLuhan

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