

Hobbs R. (Ed.), *Exploring the Roots of Digital and Media Literacy through Personal Narrative*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2016

Recensione di Alessandro Soriani

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“It’s humbling to write about the past. Whatever you think you do know, you are always aware that there is much more that you don’t know.”

These are words used by Renee Hobbs, Professor of Communication Studies at the Harrington School of Communication and Media of the University of Rhode Island, to describe, in the very first lines of the final chapter of the book we’re reviewing here, her latest work as editor: a collection of sixteen essays written by some of the most influential scholars and practitioners in the field of Digital and Media Literacy.

The book mainly aims to provide readers with a picture of the main concepts and of the most influential theories and practices that structured Digital and Media Literacy as disciplines; and it does that by creating a sort of dialogue between the past and present.

The structure of the book is simple and yet, effective. Each of the sixteen voices that the reader will hear are presenting their own, and we quote, “intellectual grandfathers” and how their thinking is still influencing and enlightening them.

The metaphor of the grandfathers aims to highlight the role of the intellectual roots that we all come from: we all have theoretical and intellectual figures that helped us in developing our “forma mentis” and those figures, with their lessons and their witness, are still talking to us.

That’s the reason why, figures from the past, like Dewey, Vygotsky, Freire, McLuhan or Bruner, masters that are not necessarily bound to the field of Digital and Media Literacy, are presented here like old “grandfathers” that, for the authors, still represent strong foundations upon which it is possible to stand and build new ideas on.

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Hobbs, in presenting all the other contributions, explains the choice of a book made out of personal narratives. Media literacy is a field of studies that encompasses a wide range of competencies and has roots in many different disciplines: the contributors are narrating their own experience and point of view not by simply presenting their work. They describe the roadmap of the development of their ideas and their lives, a roadmap traced by the path of glorious and important thinkers of the past.

The intention is not to give birth to the ultimate definition of digital and media literacy, but rather to trace and explore the different perspectives of such a wide field, and showing how much enriching and important it is to keep an open dialogue with the pillars from the past and from other disciplines.

David Weinberg, senior researcher at the Berkman Center and former co-director of the Harvard Library Innovation Lab, describes his life, first as freshman in 1968 and later as a faculty member, and how he met the thinking of Martin Heidegger. In his pages, he addresses the importance of communication in the age of the net: a time where everyone has access to a tremendous amount of knowledge but at the same time where it is equally easy to remain “total idiots”. Heidegger showed us that, as individuals, we are an active and situated part of the world we live in; we constantly give meaning to what is around us, to our actions, to our experiences. In particular, Weinberg, is interested in the concept of language, that for Heidegger isn’t simply a way to express meaning, but an action with the power of shaping the meaning actively. This connection helped him to better define the role, the “meaning”, of communication: an action that discloses new possibilities, new and different ways of interpretations.

Lance Strate, professor of communication and media studies at Fordham University, writes about his “intellectual grandfather” Marshall McLuhan. In Strate’s opinion McLuhan’s work is important because he showed how important it is to recognize the role of cinema and television in shaping and changing society and everyday culture. Reading McLuhan’s famous work, *Understanding Media*, was, for the professor, a hard experience, but after reading *The Medium Is The Message*, he writes, he finally got the point. Lance Strate realized that the goal of media literacy should be to maintain a state of “strangeness” regarding the media environments we live in: an attitude that means an act of taking distance from the media, and “learn to look at them rather than through them”.

Dana Polan, professor of cinema studies at New York University, traces an overview of Roland Barthes’ works underlining his analysis of mass culture. What makes Polan so close to his influencer is the idea that every social practice can be read as ideological and that mass culture can be seen as a set of intentions and strengths that operate on social subjects in ways very difficult to escape from. Polan states that Barthes brings to media literacy the idea to consider the social and

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contextual meaning in every form of human interactions, especially the ones carried by media.

In her essay, Cynthia Lewis, chair of curriculum and instruction at the University of Minnesota, describes the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher of the 1920s and in particular why she owes him as an academic. Bakhtin's view of the construction of meanings rooted in the complexities of the interceptions and incongruences between messages and interpretations. Lewis is particularly interested in how ideologies are shaped by interpretations: by an act of giving meaning to messages; an act that cannot be controlled and this can be seen as a great opportunity to foster media literacy as a tool for social change.

Media Literacy involves specific competences that are not only about access and critically choosing information, analysing the content and the context of media environments and being able to produce and write creatively for media with the help of digital tools. Being media liberated also means having competences that relate to one's own conduct and behavior in a responsible and ethical way and to take action to solve social problems in collaboration with a community (Hobbs, 2010).

Srividya Ramasubramanian, associate professor of communication at the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University, in presenting Gordon Allport's work, addresses his attention to the importance of social change. Allport's studies about media mainly address the uniqueness of the human being, challenging the concept of prejudice, with social change as an overarching objective.

Michael RobbGrieco, media literacy historian and director of curriculum and technology integration for K-12 schools in Windham Southwest Supervisory Union, introduces the readers to Michel Foucault, the French historian famous for his studies about the structure of knowledge and power relationships. Foucault's attention on the importance of understanding the past's dynamics to better understand the present and the way we act and think today is a key element in RobbGrieco's media literacy's approach. Three are the main objectives that schools should identify as priorities for media literacy: to foster students' curiosity to understand the world they live in, offering students opportunities of participation in greater power and provide students' with opportunities for transforming discourse and challenging power relations.

In her contribution about Theodor Adorno, Gianna Cappello, associate professor in digital-media sociology and education sociology at University of Palermo, co-founder and president of MED, the Italian Association for Media Literacy Education, explains why media literacy practitioners should focus on educating their audiences on self-reflection. Adorno insisted on the idea that mass media were replacing the arts, pushing people to simplify their thinking by providing them with stereotyped representations of the reality. Even if Gianna Cappello is clear in say-

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ing that the vision of Adorno may seem extreme, she's equally clear in stating that her "grandfather" showed to her and us all a big priority for media literacy educators: educate subjects who are able to practice self-reflection on the media around them and able to resist the technologist and consumerist drift that this field is taking.

Douglas Kellner, chair of philosophy of education at UCLA, shares his vision of media literacy that he derives from the influence of Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School. Kellner's priority is understanding media and their political, cultural and social effects. Marcuse discusses the decline of the family as principal agent of socialization in favor of mass media. He argues that the industry of media creates a series of false needs for individuals and pushes them towards a one-dimensional universe of thought and behavior. This is the starting point that the author is using to show his approach to media literacy: develop a critical theory of technology and media that sees these tools as instruments of power, domination and social control and yet as instruments of resistance, empowerment and social change.

This book also includes the contribution of Henry Jenkins, provost professor for Communication, Journalism, Cinematic, Art and Education at the University of Southern California, who talks about John Fiske's influence on cultural studies and, consequentially, on media literacy. Jenkins describes Fiske as the "John Appleseed of cultural studies", a powerful metaphor indeed, that gives the readers the idea of the importance of Fiske's vision of popular culture and mass media audiences.

Fiske, in contrast with Adorno, refuses to see the media audience as an uncritical mass of individuals who are consuming media content passively and blindly. He stands for the valorization and the respect of different forms of popular cultures. In his essay, Jenkins reminds us of the importance of valorizing the pop-culture, especially in media literacy programmes, and the importance of putting students in a position to express themselves through technologies and media: creating to understand, constructing their own stories, their own songs, videos, videogames, to better understand the political, economic and cultural context they are plunged in.

Amy Petersen Jensen, professor and associate dean for research and creative work in the College of Fine Arts and Communication at Brigham Young University, writes about her role model: Bertolt Brecht. She discloses the importance of the arts and her mentor's approach to media literacy of her own development. Coming from the world of theatre in the early '900s, Brecht was one of the first who reimagined the role of spectators and tried to create politically motivated theatre experiences that tried to actively engage the audiences.

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Brecht stated that the transformations of the theatre couldn't be the result of some artistic impulse but needed to correspond to a whole transformation of the mentality of our time (Brecht,1968) , and for Amy Petersen Jensen, this is the same kind of transformational critical thinking we need in the field of media literacy.

Donna E. Alvermann, research professor of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia, connects her work and thinking to the French feminist and existentialist Simone de Beauvoir. Avermann has researched extensively about teenagers and their informal learning opportunities that come from popular cultures and media: what she finds inspiring in de Beauvoir's contribution is her dialectic vision between one's personal freedom and the sense of responsibility towards society, and secondly her valorization and her sense tolerance for ambiguities. Educators and practitioners should always mind the gap between what they think is right for the people they work with and what is right for them, a gap that may assume the dimensions of selfishness against social responsibility.

Jeremiah Dyehouse, associate professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island's Harrington School of Communication, is proud in presenting John Dewey as his intellectual grandfather. Dewey's works focusing on the importance of the schools as forges for democratic processes and the importance he gave to the role of language and communication as instruments for social participation and social improvement are seen by Dyehouse as lessons that one should still keep in mind when dealing with media literacy practices.

Dyehouse argues that the shared understanding of such symbol-rich environments as we live in (society, media, schools), is the result of successful co-operations in actions rather than the cause; and that this is something that media educators should take in account in their practices.

Renee Hobbs, editor of the publication, also describes how her own work is influenced by Jerome Bruner's thinking. Actually, she reveals how it was Bruner himself who gave her the idea of this book, writing about sharing life narratives, during a dinner after a conference in 2009.

Jerome Bruner worked a lot on the value of autobiographical narratives showing the importance of this act in people's development (Bruner, 2004) and Renée Hobbs sees the application of this process in media literacy as the act of giving meaning to symbols. If personal narrative is a learning practice, a way to better interpret the symbolic system around us, media literacy should enable people to raise their awareness of the media environments, strongly connoted by symbols, they live in.

In her essay, Vanessa Domine, professor, researcher in communication, education, technology and media literacy and coordinator for bachelor, master degree and doctorate in media ecology of New York University, explains how Neil Post-

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man, one of the most relevant figures of media education, influenced her approach towards media literacy. Three are the key ideas she “inherits” from her intellectual grandfather: privileging humanism in a technology world; giving more value to education than schooling; and the importance of inquiry and dialogue.

Peter Gutierrez, comic writer and former teacher with a huge experience of pop-culture, education and media literacy, underlines, in his contribution, the importance of considering and appreciating all forms of media and of popular cultures in media literacy discourses.

By presenting the virtuous example of his influencer, Scott McCloud, and his graphic-novel-essay *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993), Gutierrez reminds us that different forms of cultures, especially the ones popular among youngsters, that may have been marginalized or simply not considered by formal education systems, are in fact a powerful source of reflection and sense making.

Susan Moeller, the last contributor to this book, is the director of the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda (ICMPA) and professor of media and international affairs at the University of Maryland. Moeller uses the pages at her disposal to talk about how Roland Barthes and his vision about images and photography influenced her approach to media literacy. In particular she discusses the power of the image over our emotions and the fact that media literacy is not a collection of technical skills needed to decode a text, an image or a movie, but something more: an intentional act that needs to involve critical thinking and needs to have a real impact in the lives of people.

To conclude, this book, this collection of voices, of personal narrations, of experiences, could be seen as a journey between the past and the present, between old noble examples and today’s practices.

Slowly, one narrative at a time, the authors sketch a drawing of digital and media literacy. They try to remind us that digital and media literacy are not only a set of cold skills needed for the world we live in, but, using Dr. Spock’s words, a possible way to “live long and prosper” in this digital age.

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