Editorial

Critical Media Literacy in Teacher Education

While for some of those engaged in teacher education the term 'critical media literacy' might be daunting, others might immediately sense fascination and curiosity. As for us, we believe that one should not be dismayed by such phrases too quickly just because they may not be as prominent in popular discourses or require a pause to grasp their full essence. Each and every single word in it bears a load of meaning, while all of them taken together hold timely, educationally valuable and purposeful content and practice. In fact, critical media literacy (CML) may be regarded as one of various crucial future literacies to be facilitated in teacher education and schools. In this heiEDUCATION special issue we aim to reveal the main points behind the framework of CML and simultaneously to emphasize its need in (teacher) education.

In the current media-saturated times, CML aims to expand the notion of literacy and to deepen critical engagement with the media (Kellner, Share 2007, 2019). By broadening the notion of literacy, CML starts with the presupposition that we communicate, read and write not only with letters and numbers, but with multiple forms of media: music, film, video, advertisement, popular culture, print media, television, photographs, computer games, etc. Simultaneously, CML emphasizes the need to deepen critical analysis of the various forms of media, information and communication technologies as well as those specific relationships between media and audiences, information and power (ibid.; Flores-Koulish 2005). At the heart of CML is the acknowledgement that media are not politically and normatively neutral, but an often misperceived source of cultural pedagogies "that teach us about ourselves and the world around us" (ibid.; Freire, Macedo 1987). The ultimate goal of CML is thus not only to learn with and about media, but with the same stroke of critical reading of media messages – to empower people to produce media themselves in order to be active, responsible citizens in democratic societies (ibid., p. xiii; see

also Dewey 1963, 1997; Freire 1970; Giroux 1994; Mihailidis 2014; Vincent-Lancrin et al. 2019; Trust et al. 2022; Buckingham 2000; Jenkins 2009). Accordingly, CML is a theoretical framework and practical pedagogy (Kellner, Share 2019).

In the past decades, democracies around the world have been alarmed if not shattered by the influences of (social) media. Especially in the U.S. and Europe, we are witnessing the rise of right-wing populism, historical revisionism and an increasing polarization around the topics of immigration, race, gender, sexuality, climate crisis and the like. Against this background, the voices that advocate for (critical) media literacy education[1] are rising exponentially on transnational and national levels (see e. g. UNESCO 2011; European Commission 2022; NAMLE 2007; Kultusministerkonferenz 2022). It seems that by now no one questions the need for media education all the way across pre-school to university curricula. There is just a fair amount of uncertainty of *how* to best develop those specific knowledge and skills applicable to the analysis of all kinds of media and its discourses.

'Critical' in CML does not mean that its practitioners are continually critiquing media or taking a negative stance towards its consumers or producers. Rather, CML emphasizes critical thinking skills and a critical approach of inquiry into the relations of power as well as their (re)production. In fact, CML is rooted in a number of historically rich and influential theories, schools of thought and disciplinary approaches: cultural studies, critical theory, critical pedagogy, feminist theory, intersectionality, positionality, social pragmatism, democracy pedagogy, social constructivism, semiotics, politics of representation, social and environmental justice, post-colonial studies, critical discourse analysis, critical race theory, etc. All of these frameworks question power disparities, socially constructed differences and categories such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, age, (dis)ability, etc. Global axes of social and environmental injustices were and remain significant for CML as well. Influenced by such an opulent source, CML pedagogy is clearly not to be bound to one academic discipline, but comprises a spectrum of them.

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1 There is by now a rich history of how media education has been named, especially in the English speaking countries. 'Media literacy', 'media education', 'media literacy education', 'critical digital literacy', etc., have been sometimes used interchangeably. While CML stands on the shoulders of many trailblazing scholars and relies on a significant number of inter-disciplinary theories and practices that deal with critical analysis of various media texts, it aims to emphasize the word 'critical' in particular. While the topic of (critical) media literacy history is important, it is, however, not the focus of our introduction to this special issue. For more information and comparison see Vasquez et al. 2019; Morell et al. 2013; Flores-Koulish 2005; Kellner, Share 2007, 2019; Frau-Meigs 2012; Frau-Meigs et al. 2020.

Certainly, this makes CML everything but an apolitical framework. On the contrary, it highlights intersecting relationships of power, dominance and socially unjust representations. It also sees media communication as a transformative force of articulating alternative views towards society, experiences ignored by society's majority or the dominant discourse and the desire to play a role in a common democratic practice. For this reason, it is also worth noting that between critical media consumption and critical media production, there is a broad range of critical practices that are related to media, e. g. meeting and discussing with others, organizing critical events, etc. Consequently, biases, privileges, discriminatory experiences, lack of social justice and similar topics are at the centre of CML content and practices. This in turn means that teachers and educators are expected to possess conceptual and historical understanding, reflective and communicative competencies to skilfully stir such loaded conversations, along with showing enthusiasm and creativity while exploring the potentials of media in such conversations. Moreover, CML requires cross-disciplinary comprehension and the ability to keep up-to-date with changes in the media landscape. All of this can feel like an avoidable burden for many teachers and educators, who are already struggling with their fair share of daily workload.

The significant lack of tools, training and curricula materials to put CML theoretical framework into practice might also be the reason why CML is often stripped of the word 'critical' (as that which may cause trouble, but might be avoided), and enters the curricula only as the unquestioned 'media- and digital-literacy'. Limited guidance on how to facilitate *critical* media literacy skills is provided to educators and teachers alike. The rare examples of sound media literacy education only appear in the classrooms of media-savvy teachers, (online) offers of (non-)governmental organizations as well as one-off information and training events. However, guidance and support for a widespread implementation of CML education is missing. This challenge of CML pedagogies becomes even more complex, when one considers the multifaceted contexts in which educators try to navigate recommendations from international, national or local stakeholders.

While trailblazing their successful teacher education program at the University of California, Los Angeles, Kellner and Share also acknowledge the crux: CML is "not a pedagogy in the traditional sense, with firmly-established principles, a canon of texts, and tried-and-true teaching procedures" (2019, p. 7). There are indeed not that many teacher education programmes to tap into for comparisons or inspirations of how to teach (critical) media literacy (Nagle 2018; Tiede et al. 2015; Robertson, Hughes 2011; Mihailidis 2008; Maloy et al.

2021; Trope et al. 2021; Butler 2020). What might add more perplexity to the framework of CML is the understanding that to become critically media literate does not come with one course or training taken. One does not possess "a finite set of skills", but rather has a "working knowledge of, and knowledge to apply, key concepts" (Buckingham 2003). Kellner and Share go further and suggest a set of questions that rely on Buckingham's emphasized conceptual understandings, such as social constructivism, semiotics, positionality, politics of representation, etc. (2019, p. 8). Who has created the text? How could it be understood differently? Whom does is advantage or disadvantage? These are just several of the suggested questions that could lead students and teachers onto the CML path (ibid.; see also Flores-Koulish 2005). Since critical thinking is not a formula, as Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011, p. 210) argue, but a journey, asking questions is a sensible starting point for the process of deconstruction and critical inquiry.

CML classrooms are furthermore the spaces of changing power dynamics among students and teachers: "media literacy education as both content and process *per force* makes students and teachers co-learners" (Pacatte 2005, p. xi, emphasis in the original; see also Pranaitytė, Wienand 2023). Essentially, all texts (understood in the broadest sense) are socially constructed and the ways we read them are also never neutral (Vasquez et al. 2019, p. 306–307). It was Freire and Macedo (1987) who argued for a simultaneous learning to read the word and the world, emphasizing that "our reading of any text is mediated through our day-to-day experience and the places and spaces that we encounter and occupy, together with the languages we use" (Vasquez et al. 2019, p. 301). This does not mean to propagate moral relativism, but rather to stress the need to share different readings and engage in democratic talk. Inviting and recognizing diverse students' knowledge, questions and multimodal practices into the classrooms enables discussions that are meaningful to them and to different communities, furthermore assuring the creation of a more inclusive critical curriculum (ibid., p. 306; see also Pranaitytė 2022).

There is no "one size fits all" solution in the field of CML and we emphasize the subtle combination of factors that need to be taken into consideration when creating teaching and learning programs that facilitate CML. Vasquez, Janks and Comber (2019, p. 306) argue that

> Critical literacy should be viewed as a lens, frame, or perspective for teaching throughout the day, across the curriculum, and perhaps beyond, rather than as a topic to be covered or unit to be studied. What this means is that critical literacy involves having an ingrained critical

perspective or way of being that provides us with an ongoing critical ori-
entation to texts and practices.

Learning and teaching CML is context specific (Hobbs, Jensen 2009; Vasquez
et al. 2019), but we need sound research to detect to what extent, and which
components and dimensions are sensitive to different learning environments.
Notably, there is a significant lack of comparative studies and joint research
initiatives that focus on pre-service teachers' understandings and practices of
CML.

The complexity of and the need for CML in pre-service teacher education were
the primary driving forces behind the transdisciplinary research and transfer
cluster 'Critical Media Literacy' at the Heidelberg School of Education. Together
with our colleagues from the Teachers College at Columbia University, we aim
to enhance critical engagement with the media in various educational con-
texts by recognising the need for teacher education to include CML as a basic
and crucial future literacies competence to bring into schools.

In an effort to unpack the ideas of how CML figures in pre-service teacher edu-
cation across the Atlantic, we jointly conceptualized and carried out a virtual
lecture series entitled *Critical Media Literacy: A Challenge for Teacher Education
and Beyond*. From June to November 2021 we took turns between Heidelberg
and New York and delved into the CML inquiries from different disciplinary and
pedagogical angles. The present heiEDUCATION issue encompasses a signifi-
cant part of the presentations that were live-streamed to the interested public.
All authors are teacher educators and bring their specific expertise and experi-
ence in approaching and teaching through the CML framework.

In their contribution **Kelsey Darity** and **Suzanne Pratt** discuss ways STEM+C
(science, technology, engineering, mathematics and computer science) teach-
ers could create collaborative and experimental learning spaces that allow
the enactment of CML in their pedagogies. The authors present a case study
of such a space created for teacher learning within an institution of higher
education, which supported newly graduated teachers working in high-need
schools in New York City. As a collaborative learning space, Global Citizens
united teachers and teacher educators in a 'sandbox' for interdisciplinary
experimenting with teaching practices. Kelsey Darity and Suzanne Pratt simul-
taneously conducted research within this newly created space and were quick
to indicate that CML practices of critical analysis of (multimedia) text, (re)con-
struction and social action did not occur as a linear process. The firsthand
collection of data was important in the later process of deconstruction and
reconstruction, because it provided people with the knowledge of what ques-

tions to ask while analyzing data or communicating the knowledge gained from their research to peers and community members. This clearly facilitates the development of skills and goes beyond a general knowledge of scientific concepts towards a more nuanced understanding of the data and its impact. The authors addressed something particularly important in the CML context, which accentuates social action and change: STEM+C classes and their curriculum centered on data collection can help cast a light on the fact that science is slow and research takes time. Moreover, the findings suggest that a CML emphasis should not only rest on the analysis of media but also on its production (reconstruction) and distribution (social action), thus positioning students as knowers and agents of change rather than just critical consumers.

The contribution of **Nina Jude** discusses the presence and absence of CML concepts and frameworks in International Large Scale Assessment (ILSA), which assess students' competencies, attitudes and contexts of learning around the globe and in turn inform educational policies, funding decisions, curriculum and development programs. While the data from such assessments are used for long-term monitoring and play an important role in shaping the school system of the future, they focus only on a selected range of competencies in specific areas of literacy. The author thus examines existing ILSA to identify indicators and concepts relating to CML. Since CML is not 'one' competence but related to numerous qualities, for the purpose of the study Nina Jude identifies two aspects that CML includes and which serve as a starting point to approach ILSA, namely reading and digital literacies. The common aspects mentioned with regard to literacy include traces of CML, in particular while evaluating trustworthy sources, distinguishing between facts and opinions and critically assessing information found online. In the subsequent analyses of these assessments such literacy aspects are often associated with students' socio-economic background. The author concludes that CML should be more prominently targeted in ILSA, in curricula and classrooms, because young people increasingly spend time online in and outside of school and do not develop sophisticated digital skills just by growing up using digital devices.

The joint contribution of **Yoo Kyung Chang**, **Shannon Suiru Lei** and **Xiaoyi Gabby Zhou** discusses the notion of metaliteracy as an essential skill in educational contexts. The authors analyse data that illustrate online media consumption during the spread of the global pandemic and specifically examine news literacy. With social media being the primary channel where people access news, the effective understanding of such practices should be approached together with considerations of targeted news feeds, echo chambers, polarization, propaganda, conspiracy theories, fake news and misinfor-

mation. Yoo Kyung Chang, Shannon Suiru Lei and Xiaoyi Gabby Zhou argue that more studies need to be conducted while trying to cast more light on media design features, social practices and patterns of online news consumption as well as collective news production. Their research results confirm the subjective nature of online media consumption, which might be explained by media consumption habits. The authors emphasize that CML requires cognitive and metacognitive skills as a prerequisite to understand and apply appropriate strategies to navigate online media. They acknowledge that while CML is important in developing informed citizens, teaching and learning CML is a difficult endeavor primarily due to its interdisciplinarity and diverse definitions and interpretations. Yet metaliteracy, which refers to multiple literacies, promotes critical thinking as well as metacognitive awareness and skills to recognize one's practices of such literacies, is particularly important in fostering CML education. Furthermore, CML education should include the recognition that metacognition is also a sociocultural practice.

Sarah Creider offers an insightful contribution into the ways teachers can explore texts, build connections between them in local and national conversations and detect explicit as well as hidden ideologies, stereotypes and representations. The author provides concrete tools for teachers to use in their classrooms and shows how this could be done in practice with a powerful example from the U.S. context in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd. Membership categorization analysis (MCA) is used in order to cast light on the ways we tend to use (collections of) categories to refer to people and their actions. MCA is a method for understanding how speakers and authors use categorical terms (e. g. resident, activist, property-owner, mother, child, Black, White, etc.) and how close analysis of their use in texts can help in recognizing societal denials, silences and stereotypes as well as explicit racist ideologies. This makes MCA a particularly powerful tool in CML practice as it offers concrete steps for real-life conversation examples. By asking how and when people are assigned membership to certain categories, MCA also questions the ways they are built and used. One way to do this is by asking which terms were not chosen in a particular text to describe a particular context. And since texts are closely connected to the societies from which and for which they have been created, the relationships that are set up by the categories used in them should also come under scrutiny.

The contribution of **Michael Haus** discusses a 'political reading' of film. Being an essential part of popular culture, films create a tie between enjoyable entertainment and social self-thematization. Yet they are also shaped by political and economic conditions that need to be taken into consideration. The author

argues that dealing with media in the context of CML goes beyond the questioning of 'truth' within film content and beyond 'harm prevention' within the consumption of media. Michael Haus considers films not only as a tool for conveying educational content, but as a type of pedagogical text which should be based on an inherent democratic practice. While questioning the predominant power relations in society as being reinforced or challenged, films also provide expression forms for marginalized political or artistic groups. The author furthermore considers how a critical film analysis can serve the purpose of democratic education and empowerment, because, according to the author, "Learning and critical thinking, interpretation and political empowerment go hand in hand". The importance of watching the film together with others in a group and then discussing it is highlighted for the educational and transformative effects primarily.

As the contributions to this special issue show, practical applications of CML in teaching and learning contexts are, thus, a work-in-progress on an international scale. We are delighted to facilitate this process and with this special issue – to contribute to the understanding and application of the concept in teacher education.

February 2023   Lina Pranaitytė and Michael Haus

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