

Incorporating Media and Technological Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom

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Abstract: So much has changed about the way we partake and receive our information over the last few decades. Seemingly everyone gets their information from the internet or television. Unfortunately, the internet allows for unchecked information to be taken as fact which leads to an incorrect interpretation of fact and fiction. There is arguably no greater target audience for the sort of misinformation found on the internet and social media than our youth due to how impressionable their minds are. Because of this, I am interested in discussing what can be done as social studies educators to prevent our students from falling prey to the plethora of misinformation that exists in our current technological and media world.

Introduction

Imagine that you are teaching your class of eighth grade social studies students about the Civil War. You educate your students on the various battles and reasons for the war and describe to them how it was one of the darkest times in American history. As you discuss with them how Abraham Lincoln intended on freeing the slaves, one student raises his hand and asks, "Are you sure? I thought that it was the South that did not want to enforce slavery. That is what I heard." You know that this is preposterous, so you ask them where they heard such a thing.

"Well, I read it on a website!" the student exclaims assuredly. When the student replies, you see that multiple other students are nodding their heads in agreement as they believe this to be true as well. You now realize that this is a much bigger issue than you could have imagined. The internet and various other outlets are readily available for students to gather information from, whether it be fact or fiction. You realize something has to be done to aid students in keeping them from falling victim to this sort of misinformation.

In a social studies classroom, teachers are not only teaching subject-matter, but they are also mentors to their students, or often play the role of counselor. There is an abundance of challenges that teachers must balance as well. Some of these challenges include understanding and relating to your students, differentiating instruction, eliminating barriers for their students when it comes to their ability to succeed in the classroom, and many more. This can be said for any teacher of any subject. However, with the emergence of technology, the internet, social media, and popular news sources, the role of the social studies educator has become far more challenging than it once was. While all subjects must deal with providing their students the pathway for deciphering fact from fiction, there is arguably no subject that deals with this more than the social studies classroom, given that social studies deals with current events, politics, and history on a daily basis. In this sense, incorporating media and technological literacy, meaning educating students on how to analyze information through various sources and to decipher fact from fiction from these

outlets, in the social studies curriculum is critical to student growth in their education, as well as in becoming informed citizens in their communities.

Support for Media and Technological Literacy in Social Studies

There is vast support for the implementation of media and technological literacy in the social studies curriculum. While the methods and means of which the implementation of this can occur varies, the overwhelming research supports the integration of these practices into the curriculum. According to Dr. David Consadine, “media literacy is a logical, even necessary match for social studies standards that address global connections, individual development, and mass identity...mass media must surely be considered major agents of socialization and therefore worthy of study” (Consadine, 2002, p. 32). These thoughts resemble the majority of research found that are in agreement that media literacy is a critical skill for students to develop, especially in a social studies classroom. In some instances, these practices are being implemented; however, as Consadine (2002) notes, “while it is true that media literacy is beginning to show up in state standards, that innovation should not be equated with classroom implementation or practice” (p. 33). This is an important distinction because as noted, while the standards may demonstrate that media literacy should be presented, it does not always work that way in the classroom.

Many teachers agree and believe that media literacy should be implemented in their social studies classrooms, but the unfortunate issue is they do not know how. Educators must be provided with the appropriate tools and resources to aid themselves in their media and technological literacy growth. Further, in order for media literacy training to be effective, it needs to reflect the expectation that is to be treated with the utmost importance. As Rogow (2009) claims, “the vast majority of educators genuinely want their students to thrive, and that is a good thing because media literacy is completely reliant on the abilities of highly skilled teachers” (p. 73).

Role of the Educator

Social studies educators play a large role in their students lives outside of simply teaching them on a certain subject-matter. A goal for social studies educators is to better prepare their students for the real world. Further, social studies educators aim to make their students functioning members of society and to perform their civic duty of being informed citizens. While it is important to decipher fact from fiction inside the classroom, it is equally important to do so outside of the classroom. It is important that social studies educators play a key role in the integration of media and technological literacy in their classroom in an effort to make their students more well-rounded students. As Johnson (2018) says, “Teaching media literacy is how we can fight off ‘fake news’” (p. 36). At a time in our nation where misinformation runs rampant both online and in our news media, there has arguably never been a more critical time that educators provide their students the foundation to make informed decisions when determining what is fact and what is fiction.

As noted above, there are a vast number of social studies educators that have been surveyed that believe that integrating media and technological literacy is important and critical to student growth in their education and in their citizenship. As

Stein & Prewett (2009) note, “Although media literacy education may have come late to the social studies, many social studies teachers perceive a need for media literacy in their classroom” (p. 132). With this perceived need comes responsibility for educators to implement these practices. Further, when integrating media and technological literacy into the social studies curriculum, it is important that social studies educators understand that it can be a long, difficult process in doing so. One thing that must be taught to students in the social studies classroom is that misinformation is not entirely the fault of the consumer, but it is equally the fault of the provider of the misinformation. Educating students on the harm of misinformation and providing them the framework for understanding fact from fiction is important, but it is equally important that students know that it is not entirely their fault if they fall victim to misinformation. As Faix (2018) states that “...acknowledging that (misinformation) is unlikely to change can help underline for students the importance of source evaluation as a lifelong information literacy skill...” (p. 49). As educators, it is crucial to explain to students that as long as the internet and other forms of media exist, there will be misinformation. The role of the educator in this sense is to explain to their students that it is not their fault that misinformation exists and to provide them the necessary resources to avoid falling victim to said misinformation.

Strategies to Implement Media and Technological Literacy in Social Studies

Social studies educators who intend to implement these specific literacies into their classrooms must have strategies in order to do so. Manfra & Holmes (2020) demonstrate a five- step strategy plan for implementing media literacy into the social studies classroom. The five steps are as follows:

1. Connecting media literacy with the purposes of social studies education
2. Explore the history of misinformation in United States history
3. Trace the history of the field of journalism and journalistic ethics
4. Analyze contemporary examples of misinformation
5. Develop efficacy working with tools and heuristics for detecting misinformation

Each of these steps is a great examples of how media literacy can be incorporated into the social studies classroom. First, it is important to connect media literacy to social studies and explain to students why they are important together and how they are connected. Second, it is equally important to explain to students how misinformation in United States history has existed for a very long time, and how they can determine what is not factual about history. Educators should also teach their students the role of journalism in history and providing information. Further, an extension of this can be educating students on the facts that history is typically written by the “winners,” meaning those in power. History typically has also been written from a white male perspective, often leaving other perspectives behind. Educating students on these facts can help them have a greater understanding of

the type of information they may encounter on their own, and what to make of it. Educators then can begin to analyze information from news media and social media platforms and students can begin to develop an understanding of how to make the determination of what information is deemed to be accurate and inaccurate. Finally, students should be able to use the tools and resources given to them to detect misinformation more regularly.

Understanding Potential Challenges

Implementing these literacies into social studies classrooms does not come without challenges. However, understanding how to confront these challenges can best aid social studies educators in working through them to help educate their students on the best practices at hand to identify misinformation in the various forms of media. In a survey conducted by Gretter & Yadav (2018) out of Michigan State University, educators were asked about potential disadvantages or challenges that they would face in implementing media literacy into their teaching. The vast majority of surveyed educators, 67% in fact, say that parents might disagree with teaching their children these practices (Gretter and Yadav, 2018, p. 113). There could be a variety of reasons for parents disapproving of these teachings which could include parents being against the use of social media by the children, or perhaps they do not agree with educating their children on how to properly evaluate sources because they may feel that it targets their thoughts and beliefs. This is a very real challenge that all educators face on a daily basis and especially social studies educators. If parents object to the teaching of media literacy in the classroom, the educator must work with the parents so that they may understand the importance of including this in the curriculum. Keeping an open line of communication with parents is a critical aspect of teaching, but it is especially true when it comes to specific curriculum and teaching for their children. Being open and honest about the education of their child is of the utmost importance. It is the job of the educator to teach their students, and that takes precedence.

Conclusion

First and foremost, teaching students about media literacy can help provide students the necessary skills and resources to be more informed citizens outside of school, as well as being better decision makers due to the fact that they have the tools to make more informed decisions. Second, much research shows that media literacy in a social studies classroom is critical and necessary due to the content nature in the social studies classroom. With as much media as students take in on a daily basis, it is important they understand what to make of all of it, and how to determine fake from real. Students in today's society are also more well-versed in technology than any other generation. This is more of a reason to work to improve the literacy in these aspects. Research also shows that the vast majority of social studies educators have a strong desire to incorporate media literacy into their curriculum. This is a positive because in order to best educate students in these literacies, educators must be willing to educate their students on these practices, and they must develop an understanding of the best ways to do so.

While there are challenges and perceived negatives for implementing media and technological literacy into the social studies curriculum, the positives far outweigh the negatives. Providing students with the resources and skillset to appropriately identify misinformation and decipher fact from fiction is of great importance for the growth of students in their education, but perhaps more importantly, as members of their community. Incorporating these practices into the curriculum aligns with the standards of teaching social studies in that social studies focuses on history and civic participation in much of the curriculum. Educating students on how to best identify misinformation makes them better educated on history, as well as better participants in their civic duty.

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Nicolas Ciotola is graduate of The Ohio State University with a bachelor's degree in sports industry. He is currently working to complete his Master of Education from the University of Toledo. He is specializing in middle childhood education, grades 4 through 9 in social studies and English language arts education.