



Exploring the Roots of Digital and Media Literacy through Personal Narrative

Hobbs, Renee
Temple University Press, 2016

Book Review

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Renee Hobbs's collection of personal narratives from leading thinkers in digital and media literacy is not only a fascinating foray into the field; it also presents various authors' stories of encounters with dominant theorists across multiple disciplines. Sixteen authors from a myriad of academic disciplines (philosophy, education, communication studies, language and literacy, media studies, and fine arts, among others) spanning a number of occupations (professor, writer, teacher, director, and more) write out their intimate interactions with the theories and theorists (McLuhan, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Barthes, Foucault, Postman, Dewey, and others) that shaped their scholastic and personal lives. Each contribution in this collaborative work is a self-reflection, a collage made up of sundry parts of theory, experience, and practice. This collection started with Hobbs's desire to unearth the historical origins of media literacy and trace the complex genealogy of media literacy. Hobbs diverges from the traditional historical treatise, in form as well as in content, by soliciting personal narratives from contributors, asking them to search out their intellectual grandparents, to map the DNA of the theories that shaped their lives and their work. While the subject is fairly standard, the vehicle (personal memoir) adds a compelling nuance to the investigation. If we take Marshall McLuhan at his word and the medium is, in fact, the message, then Hobbs's collection is not only an exploration of media literacy but is also an embodiment of it.

Although reticent to endorse one orthodox definition of media literacy, Hobbs describes media literacy as "the knowledge, competencies, and social practices involved in using, analyzing, evaluating, and creating mass media, popular culture, and digital media" (9). Media represent any form of communication and literacy, the ability to decipher said communication, and reaches far beyond the bounds of print. And media literacy, according to Hobbs, invites a

deeper exploration of important issues concerning “heightened critical consciousness,” “the social nature of representation and interpretation,” “the dialectic of protection and empowerment,” as well as “the role of art in the practice of civic activism,” to name only a few (9). It is clear that development of media literacy is crucial not only for sustaining a world economy, connecting global communities, and engendering personal enrichment, but also vital for the creation of informed and engaged citizens.

The whole collection is engaging and picking favorite contributions is a difficult task. However, I found David Weinberger’s description of his college-age identity crisis, subsequent nihilism, and profound encounter with Martin Heidegger’s concept of “Dasein,” intriguing and not a little humorous. Weinberger’s view of life and language (and therefore media), as inherited from Heidegger’s philosophy, emphasizes the inherent shared nature of media. Cynthia Lewis’s chapter explores media literacy via the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin and provides another example of the shared nature of media and how, as Bakhtin emphasized, “the word in language is half someone else’s” (78). Lewis succinctly summarizes Bakhtin’s view of language as “foundationally dialogic, intertextual, and heteroglossic” (78). Lewis also relates how her familial connection to Rabbinic Judaism’s love of dialogue, her suspicion of authority and institutions, her research interest in discourse analysis, and her role as a teacher of workshops on critical literacy brought her to love Bakhtin’s view of language as infinitely nuanced and beautifully complicated.

Although previously familiar with Heidegger and Bakhtin, the work of Jerome Bruner, a cognitive psychologist, and scholar, was completely unknown to me when I picked up this book. In Hobbs’s chapter, she relives the three times she encountered Bruner’s work: as a child, in graduate school, and when she actually met Bruner - and how this fortuitous encounter led her to create this book. I am personally enamored with the role that narrative plays in personal and communal lives so Hobbs’s synthesis of Bruner’s view of people’s personal life stories as constructed, culturally shaped “variations on the culture’s canonical forms and stories” speaks to me (192). As I experienced, Hobbs’s collection about media literacy performs the function of media literacy as it explains the higher functions of media literacy.

I highly recommend this collection for anyone interested in the reflexive relationship between scholarship and the personal (faculty, administrators, graduate students, academic advisors, and lay people alike). Although not a primer text on theory, this collection, by utilizing the lens of personal experience, makes an engaging text for those with even a moderate interest in theory and literacy.

https://wabash.center/resources/book_reviews/exploring-the-roots-of-digital-and-media-literacy-through-personal-narrative/