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TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION CONTEXT

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Introduction

People in the 21st century live in an environment permeated with technology and mass media which give access to a myriad of information. Now, the Internet plays an essential role in the life of people. Never in history have people spent so much time watching TV, consuming media, listening to the radio, surfing the web, videos on YouTube, and being glued to their smartphones. Moreover, new forms of digital media communication are constantly developing. According to Carr (2011), the Internet has a stronger influence over people's thoughts and behaviors than the communication systems which were available before. However, there is limited evidence about media literacy in academic environments, except in the fields which are commonly associated with making, understanding, and producing media.

The field of media literacy is rather comprehensive. In recent years, the number of media literacy studies has progressively increased as their significance in the academic environment has been recognized. Nevertheless, there is a lack of information about effective instructional strategies which can be used to teach media literacy within curricula that are not strongly related to media and communications.

The quality and implementation of media literacy findings help to better prepare pre-service teachers for future careers, to foster their professional skills. The teachers at higher educational institutions should be familiar with different types of mass media, and media news.

Literature Review

Media literacy is a dynamic phenomenon. The architecture of media literacy is also quickly changing. Education in media literacy needs to be granted as an essential part of professional training. Knowledge and skills are highly important for society as they frame the professional training of students. Furthermore, these competencies enhance both the intellectual and moral development of students as well as stimulate their critical and creative thinking.

Thus, university teachers are facing an entirely new challenge of finding effective ways and strategies to create effective teaching and learning environment to enhance the critical thinking and media literacy skills of students as part of their professional qualification in a new and more sophisticated format.

The findings of studies prove that students cannot be media literate without being familiar with it, without having considered it, or without having talked about it. Crucial

questions arise about how to incorporate media literacy into the academic environment, and how to promote media literacy skills among graduate students at Ukrainian higher educational institutions. Undoubtedly, pre-service teachers of English language and literature should be familiar with mass media.

The relationship between media literacy and critical thinking

Media literacy is an umbrella term. There is a plethora of definitions of media literacy in research literature. This study uses the definition of media literacy suggested by Tyner (1998) who posits that media literacy is the ability to think critically about and effectively communicate in a variety of forms.

Taking into consideration the fact that mass media has a great impact on students' personalities, it is important to develop critical thinking skills, to form a critical attitude towards mass media content which they consume daily.

There is a strong relationship between critical thinking and media literacy. Critical thinking skills are pivotal skills in navigating the 21st-century social media landscape as they lay the foundation for media literacy. Critical thinking skills help students debunk fake news, disinformation, and misinformation.

Cooke (2017) identifies misinformation and disinformation as two sides of the same coin. Misinformation is defined as insufficient and unclear information, while disinformation is defined as intentionally distributed false information. Hence, the primary goal of media literacy education is to discover techniques to identify fake news, hate speech, and clickbait, especially online.

Hobbs (2010) recognizes essential competencies of digital and media literacy, such as Access, Analyze and Evaluate, Create, Reflecting, Act. In his opinion, "these five competencies work together in a spiral of empowerment, supporting people's active participation in lifelong learning through the processes of both consuming and creating messages" (Hobbs, 2010 p.18).

Research Methodology and Objectives

The aim of this study is to determine the media literacy skills of graduate students as an essential part of professional training. The study design included a literature overview, case study, sample selection and sampling procedure, distributing questionnaires, and analyzing the responses. The study also aimed to find out students' opinions towards different methods and activities for teaching media literacy.

This study used an action-research approach to explore the impact of the integration of media-literacy instruction into English language classes. Action research is a process of inquiry utilized by participant-observer educators involving the identification of problems, gathering, and analyzing data, and designing a plan of action for the purpose of improving the practice of education (Craig, 2014). The participants of this study were graduate students and would-be teachers of English language and literature. The study was carried out with 53 students.

Based on the nature of the study, two main research aims were stated for dealing with the issue: i) to develop students' media literacy in English classes; ii) to adjust strategies for promoting media literacy in the education process.

Discussion and Results

A principal understanding of the relationship between media literacy and critical thinking is articulated by Arke (2009) who postulates that media literacy is, in large part, a specialized form of critical thinking—a skill universally valued in education.

Higher educational institutions should regard digital media technologies as new tools of literacy, and effectively use digital tools to enhance the learning and communication skills of students. It is worth noting that Hobbs (2010) emphasizes that all students are able and should learn media literacy skills. Media literacy provides effective strategies that enable students to analyze and evaluate the information they get through the channels of mass communication.

The study found that media literacy education can be truly successful only if the relationship between the specificity of mass media and the way those specificities are understood by students.

The participants of the experimental teaching program on media literacy demonstrated more critical thinking about the media dealing with assignments related to media literacy. They were able to give a more thorough media analysis and they became aware that all media messages are created, organized to gain profit or power, understood individually by different people, and that media and media messages shape people's beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.

The study revealed that there is a need for knowledge and practice of media literacy among graduate students. Most of the students would like to raise their media literacy competence. Though the respondents articulated different attitudes towards media literacy programs, 69% of students are interested in such programs, 47% of students would attend media literacy programs, and 56% of students believe that they would benefit from the implementation of media literacy programs into university curricula.

Conclusion

Media literacy is a must-do in a modern digitally interconnected world. The study showed that English classes may contribute to the development of critical thinking skills through media literacy. Therefore, pre-service teachers should be taught to understand the technology they use, and the various forms of mass media they consume.

The experimental teaching program including different mass media materials proved to be successful. The impact evaluation showed that students were empowered to deal with social media as a source of information and as a means of decoding misinformation and disinformation, hate speech, manipulated content, clickbait, and hidden advertisement, to name a few. Moreover, the participants demonstrated a stronger sense of agency over the media sources they deal with, the sense of oneself as the agent of one's own actions and behavior. Hence, it would provide critical autonomy, and the ability to deconstruct media texts outside the classroom.

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