Creating the Critical Classroom:

Examining the Effective Use of New Media Technologies in Elementary Schools

By

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EFFECTIVE USE OF NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

Abstract

This paper is situated within a framework of critical pedagogy where it examines a series of practices and strategies that teachers have used for the effective implementation of media literacy programs in kindergarten to grade eight classrooms. Supported by an in-depth literature review and five (n=5) interviews of practicing teachers, the research of this paper is positioned upon the importance of studies in critical literacy, digital literacy and multiliteracies, together referred to as new media literacy throughout this paper. Identifying the importance of the media literacy strand within The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language document, this research encourages teaching the subject with a technology integration approach that moves beyond teaching a basic set of skills with computers and other new media technologies. More specifically, this paper supports the argument that the dominant value of media literacy should focus on how these tools can enhance all learning. Once students have a more critical understanding of the potential power that exists in the access to, or creation of new media, they are more aptly prepared to be both efficient consumers and effective creators of that media.

Keywords: new media literacies, critical pedagogy, critical thinking, critical literacy, media literacy, multiliteracies, technology, global society
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study

An ongoing goal of education has been to provide students with the necessary strategies and levels of understanding to participate wholly in the social, political, and economic practices of their communities. To engage in these very important components of life, teachers have traditionally encouraged the development of literacy skills centred on reading and writing in standard forms of page-bound, print-based text. While this served the needs of society for hundreds of years, the development of learning conditions meant to establish equitable participation today has required a change in the traditional literacy. Adopting a broader understanding of how new technologies are now making information more accessible to a wider audience helps redefine literacy pedagogies, and acknowledging the tools of communication better positions teachers and students to understand the context of increasingly globalized societies.

Educators must encourage students to think about traditional reading and writing more critically and to be active participants in the reading of texts to understand how all things are reflected in society. These are the roots of critical literacy (e.g., Freire, 2001; Giroux, 1989; Apple, 1998). Educators must also encourage students to utilize digital technology in the classroom more effectively by building deeply interactive relationships with many technologies for the purposes of comprehending and creating various media. These are the roots of new media literacy (e.g., Jenkins, 2001). When these efforts meld, the potential for digital technology to assist learning processes for the reader and the writer opens up greatly. Without this symbiosis of critical thought and new media literacy, there is a danger of losing the strengths of traditional literacy in the instantaneous and often fragmented chaos of the digital world.
Children are exposed to media from the time they first open their eyes, but we must be aware that this observation does not automatically come with an understanding of the messages or meanings attached to the media they see. This study examines the practices of teachers who are taking their classroom lessons in media literacy to a much deeper level of conscientious interaction. A teacher engaged in this type of study has a goal of helping students feel comfortable being critical thinkers. To explore this fully, the conscientious classroom is one that recognizes that information and media have many forms of delivery: from cereal boxes, to children’s books, or what’s on television to students’ favourite video games, all of these media carry a message capable of changing opinions or actions. New media literacy embraces this type of critical understanding and seeks to further unpack questions of how media technologies (including hardware: computers, tablets and smart phones; and respective software, websites and apps) play an even greater role in affecting how communities interact and share their voices across an ever-expanding and globalized society.

But is all of this critical knowledge just a distraction to students, and will they still be able to find their own voice if they spend all this time consuming the voices around them?

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to expand upon the value of critical thinking for students as literate consumers of new media, and more importantly to build a solid foundation for becoming proactive creators of new media. The study aims to zoom in and focus on what a critical classroom looks like, building from a framework of critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 2000), and seeks to find a clearer path for negotiating creative literacy practices that step off the page and leave the pencil behind. However this does not suggest disregard of traditional literacy, but rather that the best practices of critical inquiry need now be applied to the media of the 21st century by
making accommodation for the different needs of individual students trying to express their ideas. Embracing changes in literacy pedagogy in the past has meant taking some drastic departures from comfortable, controllable practices in the classroom, and this is certainly the case in classrooms where new media literacy programs are already being exercised.

The purpose of this study is to discover and subsequently deliver effective strategies for all teachers to implement new media literacy programs into the classroom. A more critical approach to learning is meant to embrace all elements of community reflected within the media, which means there are endless cross-curricular opportunities within a fully integrated new media literacy program. This study seeks to find support for the creative potential and opportunity for positive community engagement that can be realized by students of new media literacy. Those who are encouraged to engage with as many different types of media as are explored in this type of program will have a new capacity to share their ideas in ways that no generation before them has been as fully capable of realizing. This study seeks to find ways to give the digital natives (Presnsky, 2001) a way to express their voice, rather than always insisting it be scribed in a notebook.

1.3 Research Questions

The greatest obstacle in this inquiry has been finding classrooms where new media literacy practices are in place. At the core, building this understanding means helping students have a greater sense of empowerment. Literacy is all about being able to communicate ideas effectively, and without access to the tools to do so, there is a strong chance that students are not going to be motivated to share much of anything. With that in mind, the questions of this study seek to better understand the perspectives of educators who can best judge the effects a new media literacy program (or lack thereof) can have on students’ abilities to communicate.
The main thesis question then becomes: How are teachers using new media technologies to promote students' understandings and interactions with the world around them? But unpacking this question means understanding other questions about new media literacy and what it looks like in the classroom. To get there, the following sub-questions help guide the inquiry:

- How do new media technologies inform critical literacy pedagogy?
- How are teachers negotiating a curricular integration into the changing technologies of teaching and learning?
- What are the limitations against the use of new media technologies in classroom activities?
- How are new media technologies helping students extend meaningful and purposeful ideas beyond the classroom?
- How have new media technologies changed the end products that students used to create?
- In what ways are the end products different than what students create with more traditional tools and methods?

This project attempts to open doors for teachers feel more comfortable exploring new media literacy so that children may become more conscientious citizens.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

Currently both a full-time employee of a large broadcasting company and Master of Teaching student at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, to say that I got here on a very circuitous path would be putting it lightly. I have spent somewhere just north of a decade working in the film, television, and theatre industries in Toronto, and it might be easiest to stop there and label that passion as the cause of my current
interest in new media literacy. But, the fact is, my concern for examining better practices for
critical consumption of media started long before that…

I came to OISE as the product of two elementary school teachers for whom critical
thinking was a vital component of learning, which means I rarely get away without thinking
(usually too much) quite analytically about most topics that cross my mind. Six years ago, when
I decided to return to university to finish my degree, I went with hopes of tying in my interest in
media to a shifted career in professional writing and new media development. Three months into
the program a very insightful professor advised me to consider developing an independent study
where I might more finitely explore my thoughts on how media could better be utilized in a
classroom setting. This, after my repeated questions about why classes were still being taught
without considering how students would be consuming the material of each subject, prompted
my undergraduate thesis on the need for digital literacy practices at all levels of education.

When I finally graduated from university, umpteen years after I first started, I realized
part of the concern I had addressed in my undergraduate thesis was also part of the reason I had
not stayed engaged with my studies years earlier. This brought me to a new consideration:
perhaps what I needed to do was find a way to help younger students discover that there are
many different ways to share their thoughts, and they need not feel forced into a definite pattern
of study. It has taken me far too many years to find my voice, and I have hope that my interests
as a teacher, and my focused efforts to open doors toward a creative and conscientious
expression of thoughts, may subsequently assist students and educators to more comfortably find
the voices they seek.
1.5 Structural Overview

This Master of Teaching Research Project (MTRP) is divided into five chapters: Chapter One includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as my personal background and how I came to be involved in new media literacies and this particular study. Chapter Two contains a review of the literature, summarized as a sequenced collection of what I consider to be the building blocks of new media literacy and as derived from an understanding of critical literacy. Chapter Three identifies the methodology and research procedure that was be used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter Four covers a deep analysis and reflection on the data and findings from the interviewed participants, and Chapter Five stitches together my discoveries in the interviews with the literature reviewed on the subject. Combined, these chapters support the goal of determining best practices for effective and meaningful implementation of new media technologies into the classroom.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Early Studies in Critical Thinking

This research study is founded on the belief that critical thinking has been proven time and again to be a necessary practice in all classrooms. As early as seventy years ago, Edward Glaser (1941), in a seminal study at Columbia University, defined critical thinking as “an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way problems and subjects that come within the range of one’s experiences; knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reason; and skills in applying these methods to new circumstances related to personal need” (p. 5). With this conviction in mind, this study moves forward from the belief that critical thinking must be the focus of an effective education system that prepares students to deal with the challenges in their future. From here it seeks to document promising approaches for using critical thinking and critical pedagogy as frameworks for teaching students to use, consume or create with new media technologies (which include but are not limited to: computers, tablets, smartphones, video, audio, and gaming interfaces).

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom broke down the cognitive processes of critical thinking into six steps. Bloom’s taxonomy considered these to be additive learning behaviours that were defined to acknowledge the basic levels of learning. It also provides an instructional framework for the behavioural outcomes that are intrinsic to the development of higher level thinking skills. While individual differences are determining factors in overall ability, it is essential that opportunities be presented to all students to engage in activities that encourage them to think more critically and to utilize the wide variety of learning materials currently at their disposal. The sequential development of critical thinking skills begins with the knowledge that this is a worthwhile endeavour, comprehending what is required to make this happen, applying a procedural plan to
set the wheels in motion based on the information gathered, analyzing the organizational principles and predicted outcomes, and synthesizing information to create new frameworks for learning and evaluation of process and product on an ongoing basis (Bloom, 1956, pp. 31-42). An encouraging aspect of learning for Bloom is that while the teacher continues to focus on and utilize the hierarchy of learning as a teaching tool, a basic level of understanding of the sequential development of critical thinking skills in students and self is being continually reinforced and nurtured.

Bloom’s taxonomy has been criticized, however, as many find that his focus on the overly hierarchical cognitive sequences of thought development and analysis do not thoroughly acknowledge the more significant social and political ideologies within a particular discourse. James Paul Gee (2009) stresses that “for learning to be critical, as well as active, in a particular semiotic domain, the learner needs to learn, not only how to understand and produce meanings in that domain that are recognizable to those affiliated with the domain, but, in addition, how to think about the domain at a ‘meta’ level as a complex system of inter-related parts” (p. 11). This position builds on the understanding of critical thinking as more than just a situated set of processes that give us a better understand of a subject, rather, Gee’s theory of learning is social, and frames the learner as an interactive component of his or her environment. There, learning is cultural; influenced by the connections between concepts, people, and the individual packages of knowledge everyone carries around with them.

While Gee’s work is founded in a socio-linguistic approach to literacy, his theories on the interactive connectivity of learning have a close resemblance to theories in critical pedagogy. Founded on the work of Paulo Freire and his 1970 text Pedagogy of the Oppressed, critical pedagogy takes the stance that learning must be a dialogical process negotiated between teacher
and student. Dialogue in this sense is seen as an epistemological necessity where interactions between people are “an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing” (Freire, 2000, p. 17). In Freire’s view, through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world. (2000, p. 80)

This paper supports these dynamic horizontally-framed relationships between teachers and students as necessary components to studies in new media literacy. Critical thinking itself must be considerate of the cultural influences and social impacts on all discourse communities; further, a dialogic communication between students and teachers must be present for learning to effectively navigate the complex relationships our society has with the many technologies and products of new media.

2.2 Understanding Multiple Literacies

Where the term literacy has a history of meaning relative to being literate, the ability to read and write has for some time been subsumed within the definition. More broadly, though, literacy is defined as the ability to gather and communicate meaning from a variety of socially contextual symbols. It is a process that requires reading, speaking, and/or writing through which the individual derives and conveys meaning and uses knowledge to achieve the goal of
communication. As another voice coming from socio-cultural perspective, Luis Moll (1994) notes, increasing literacy does not happen by gathering “isolated bits of knowledge but in students’ growing ability to use language and [basic] literacy in more and broader activities” (p. 195). It is dynamic and evolving, continually reflecting changes in society and most recently expanding to include literacy in new media technologies. This line of thinking parallels Gee’s belief that,

an academic discipline, or any other semiotic domain, for that matter, is not primarily content, in the sense of facts and principles. It is rather primarily a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices. It is in these practices that 'content' is generated, debated, and transformed via certain distinctive ways of thinking, talking, valuing, acting, and, often, writing and reading. (2003, p. 21)

By this mode of reasoning, we must consider the foundations of literacy as tied to a set of interactions between learning and knowing, or absorbing and performing our understanding of socially constructed norms.

In order to access what Kelly Molden (2007) believes to be “the deepest level” of literacy, we must recognize that critical thinking involves much more than simply analyzing and interacting with texts and the socio-cultural influences around us. We do so not simply to acquire new facts but also to review and challenge information and to think about and dispute information when necessary (p. 52). While new information may be valuable and enlightening, it can also be misleading and at times harmful to “passive” readers who lose sight of the purpose for their reading and fall victim to manipulative texts. This is a very important consideration as more of a student’s environment (in school and out) becomes “mediatized.”

In the age of digital technology (television, computers, Internet, cell phones, and other
devices), the need for critical literacy is essential. With the variety of informational sources available to anyone with the appropriate access, it is important that users become informed consumers. Literacy is no longer just reactive, but interactive, and in some instances pro-active in that it involves more than just a basic skill. It has become a definable process that does not happen just through using technology; rather, critical literacy must be taught and practised as an integral part of learning (Burbules, 1997, 118).

Teachers and students must have a meta-language that connects the information of their language, images, texts, and influential interactions with others. Digital technologies provide the tools of access to the semiotic indicators of this information, but it takes a new collaborative definition of terms to create an educationally manageable literacy to give meaning to this information. In support of this, the New London Group initiated the International Multiliteracies Project in 1995 with aims to create a meta-language that could be used in developing curriculum around multiliteracies. Their intentions paid conscious heed to the antipathies of teachers who might be hesitant to incorporate such change into their programs. The New London Group (1996) further acknowledged the importance of setting a stage that does not favour any class of citizen over another, such that no one student should be any more empowered because of certain privileges he or she may have outside the classroom (p. 77).

As curriculums shift and new technologies become the tools of learning multiliteracies, it becomes even more crucial to frame critically the context of that which is being learned. It is important to understand the discourse of any set of knowledge and even more so if educators seek to redefine practices within the network society (New London Group, 1996, pp. 86-87). For example, if a teacher suggests that Photoshopped advertisements present a fictitious ideal image of the female form, and thereafter insists that the use of Photoshop is a perversion of media
technology, students may fail to recognize the many valuable tasks that Photoshop might help to achieve. Critical framing gives the learner the distance needed from any observed subject, or any tool used, to then understand that there may be other extensions or applications within the capabilities of that subject.

These frames extend to the critical evaluation of the social and political contexts of the students’ work. It is the responsibility of the teacher to remind students of how the work they are doing connects to their own experiences and discourses, and conversely it is the students’ responsibility to understand how to tie personal interests back into the larger framework of the network society (New London Group, 1996, pp. 88-89). This does not suggest that all studies must be weighted heavily or rigidly structured just because students may be learning from a larger global arena, rather that each piece of information they take from the arena can be examined as a part of the larger whole. Critical framing in this context both stabilizes the pedagogies of learning multiliteracies and encourages students to understand (if not seek) the further reaches of any particular subject.

As teachers encourage critical framing with a focus on media literacy, they help students realize that using computers and new media technology is about more than accessing information, as the more crucial skill is having the ability to evaluate and interpret both content and its source. As Paul Gilster points out in his interview with Carolyn Pool, “Teachers, librarians, [parents, and students] must learn that [one cannot] understand information [one] finds on the Internet without evaluating its sources and placing it in context” (Pool, 1997, p. 6). Because accessing information on the Internet is far different from the physical process of retrieving a book or periodical source, it can be considered “easier” to amass information and construct a data collection about a subject (Pool, 1997, p. 7). However, just because students can
build a collage of works by cutting and pasting material from a number of sources does not mean they understand the subject. While students may have the technical competence to access the information, they require guidance to evaluate the quality of both the sources and the material gathered from them.

Presenting one possible solution to this concern, Paul Gilster argues that this digital learning is a supplement to the teaching that a teacher must do, and that the most important role a teacher can play in directing the online learning experience is teaching students how to use the tools critically (Pool, 1997, p. 8). This means checking sources and verifying information is accurate as well as understanding the context from which the information is coming. Gilster believes that facilitator is the wrong term for what a teacher must become and cites situations where classes completely lose focus and quickly go off on a tangent once they sit in front of a computer. He believes a more important role would be for the teacher to act as a mentor and the students as apprentices in knowledge assembly (Pool, 1997, p. 9). This process includes gathering information from multiple sources, not just new media and the Internet but also book sources, journals, and periodicals as well.

While it conceivably affords some structure to the sometimes fragmented media literacy landscape, the issue with this approach is that it suggests a continuation of top-down instruction as the best way for students to learn. The mentor-apprentice relationship further ignores the beliefs that critical literacy is a dialogic process and texts are best explored and examined together as the subjects (students) of new media (the teacher). Holding critical literacy at the root of learning about new media does not mean that teachers must refrain from guiding the growth of understanding (Freire, 2000). Since teachers must bring knowledge to this dialogue, we can side
with Gilster and recognize the importance of helping students understand how to evaluate the
goodness of references from any source (or any media).

Positioning a teacher as a co-constructor of knowledge, classes divided into groups can
operate to build new media literacy without necessarily having every student always sitting in
front of a computer. As lesser-experienced teachers build their own technical competences and
seek to further their own media literacy, they can use their own learning as a model for critical
thinking and share their procedure for assessing information pulled from the Internet and various
other sources, then work with the students to assemble a final project. As work is collected,
students can share their own computer skills to guide the digital development of the work, thus
taking on a leadership role and potentially furthering the skill-set of the teacher. This builds an
assembly of common knowledge about acceptable and safe practices for utilizing information
found on the Internet. At the same time, this serves schools by addressing issues of economics
and equity.

This type of environment is what Henry Jenkins et al (2009) refer to as participatory
culture. Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to one
of community involvement. Most new literacies are enhanced by social skills developed through
collaboration and networking. These include play, performance, simulation, appropriation,
multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgement, transmedia navigation,
 networking, and negotiation (Jenkins et al, p. 4). These skills build on the foundation of
 traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the
classroom, and help to further enhance social identities within a classroom.

It is not by chance that the umbrella term of multiliteracy studies tends to look like a
tightly knit combination of these skills and critical pedagogy (New London Group, 1996). While
this paper zooms in specifically on new media literacy as a focus, it does so while holding a critical lens and framing the entire discourse under the broad perspective of dynamic relationships and interconnected streams of knowledge. As Rob Simon (2011) notes:

The best multiliteracies research interweaves concerns with new literacies with important questions of diversity, identity, and politics. Foregrounding political contexts tempers temptations to regard technology as powerful – or power – in and of itself, rather than a means to power, one that might support more equitable or democratic possibilities for learning, or more oppressive ones (Street, 2011). Foregrounding social contexts counteracts idealizations of new literacies as technical, even deterministic, fixes to human problems, highlighting teachers’ and students’ intellectual work, diverse identities, and the epistemic dimensions of classroom relationships. (p. 363)

We cannot consider new media technologies as the forefront of our study here, rather the new tools that give us access to the information and conversations that shape our society. To become engaged and purposeful members of that community, we must hold a “horizontal pedagogical framework to capture the ways that students are engaged with technology and assuming critical dispositions as creators and consumers of digital texts” (R. Simon, personal communication, April 6, 2014). Students are already digitally literate and know how to use many new media technologies, as teachers we need to negotiate a way to help bridge that tech-savvy to a critical understanding of the “means to power” that it affords.

2.3 The Digital Divide

Torin Monahan (2005) states that a number of teachers whom he has interviewed about computers in the classroom have suggested a digital divide exists, reflecting a socio-economic barrier that has a similarly significant impact as concerns about race or ethnic identity (p. 61).
But this concern of a digital divide is not restricted to the economic restraints of those who can afford a computer and those who cannot, nor is it isolated globally to those schools that can give students access to computers. Rather, as David Buckingham (2003) notes, “this new ‘digital divide’ could be seen as symptomatic of a much broader phenomenon – a widening gulf between children’s worlds outside school and the emphases of many education systems” (p. 3).

As curricula are adapted to conform to the needs and ideals of a digitally literate society, students are being taught (indirectly) that there are fewer requirements for attention to traditional literacies. These concerns stem from social support for a system upheld mostly by mass media and the surrounding discourse community that covets audio and visual stimulation over the printed word. Barrie Barrell (1997) fears that the English language (under these pressures) has become nothing more than a support system for understanding the more technologically focused stimuli a student faces (pp. 123-124).

Barrell (1997) notes that English teachers were being asked by the administration to encourage students to communicate via computers and the Internet and explore websites to discuss or analyze assigned novels, poems, and plays, and this need is stressed even more heavily today now that media literacy is part of the language arts curriculum. While they concede that this may open some interesting perspectives for the students, many teachers have concerns that this will further limit in-class discussions and negatively impact teachers’ abilities to engage students directly or shape a cohesive reading of a text. Teachers feel that their resources are being stretched too broadly and too thinly and that the electronic exploration will come at the cost of comprehension or critical thinking about subjects that might otherwise require a deeper analysis (p. 126).
On the other hand, there have been a number of communities of thought that have bloomed in the new network streams that go beyond criticism and/or minimal rewards of personal growth. Collaborative assemblies of people are building a new world of collective information, all made available through the global network, and it is networks like these that are breaking down more barriers than was ever imagined possible. Information and education development are supported by systems such as Web Quest (for research and information gathering) and Think Quest (for advancing skills with ICTs). Meanwhile, elementary schools, secondary schools, and universities continue to find new ways of linking over an international web of resource material and historical data.

These technologies are helping students understand their culture in new ways. Rather than being forced to abandon their heritage by the more traditional confines of nationalism, immigrants in a globalized (and ICT supported) community are given access to their native lands. This connection allows them to structure a support and build understanding of belief systems that might not exist in Canada. A balanced global society realizes the value of multiculturalism, and education within that society should have a means to share that value.

2.4 Writing in the 21st Century Classroom

The freedom of writing in new media environments opens up the opportunity for students to share their perspectives with people of different cultures around the world. This exposes concepts of democratic consciousness and societal awareness as students become aware of both audience and self-reflexivity. A prominent example of this is a case in which students at a school in Maine exchanged cellphone texts with children in Greece, France and Guatemala: “Beyond focusing on correctness, writing for a real audience allowed students to focus on the readers and their perspective and level, rather than just on getting their words on paper”
While exercises in contacting students of different cultures are not new, having a pen-pal in the traditional sense meant waiting weeks or months to get feedback. The immediacy of feedback is important for children to understand the progression to dialectical thinking and thought processing. The establishment of critical literacy requires more than the ability to dissect meaning after long examination: it carries with it a responsibility to think critically in all aspects of communication. An open text interactive environment such as that established by computer communities is a strong step in this direction.

From his case studies, Warschauer also notes the importance of computers as a rewriting tool: “once students decided to make changes on an essay, they could do it so much more easily by computer than by hand-writing” (p. 69). While this seems like a self-evident point, it becomes an important factor when a computer is integrated into the classroom and students are learning to understand the editing process more fully in a group setting. Far too often, in a traditional classroom, it is common that if students use a computer at all, they do so at home, where the editing process ends with the suggestions of the spell and grammar checks in the word-processing software. In contrast, classrooms that have computers and other ICTs have the potential to allow students to make more substantive changes to their work on the spot, as they talk through their writing and the ideas they have with classmates or their teacher.

The transportability of thoughts is an important step in writing. Writing is a recursive process by which thoughts do not always come in a linear fashion. The hand-written paper forces students to rewrite and reorganize thoughts in a much more concrete way, versus the cut-and-paste function on a word-processor where thoughts can be moved around freely. This process allows students to see their own ideas from a different perspective and how thoughts
might be more effective if organized differently. Sharing this perspective with classmates is of course easier because of the option of printing multiple copies, or remotely sending digital copies to each other via email or file exchange. Word-processor specific applications further add to the overall interactive editing experience that can occur within a digitally connected classroom, and taking that a step further are the classrooms that have open writing forums like blogs and wikis.

But, while interactive learning and media literacy exercises become a more common example of ICT integration into the classroom, there is a question as to whether this is being done to positively support and reinforce critical learning or to merely satisfy some perception of need. Marjorie Kibby (2006) argues we should be cautious “in regard to giving the quality of learning over to new and powerful technologies without considering the implications for the quality of experience of all students” (p. 139). To address this type of concern, Henry Giroux (1989) views the role of an educator as presenting the opportunity for students to challenge the concepts that are being presented. “Students can be given the opportunity to address the question of how knowledge and power come together in often contradictory ways to sustain and legitimate particular discourses that define a notion of public good. This suggests everything from criticizing curricula content and classroom social leadership to state control” (p. 33). As that concept relates to the integration of new media into the classroom, Giroux would suggest that students must be made aware that the social impact of what they are learning (in the privacy of classrooms or their homes) can have a vastly different effect when they share that knowledge in the (more public) network of an Internet community.

Critical thinking must reference all of the semiotic indicators of the language in which a text is presented while noting what suggestive imagery within a text *can* mean more than the
commonly accepted dominant reading of the suggestion. This means that students must learn to fill in the gaps, especially when information comes in the truncated and often distracting forms of complex hybridized texts such as those presented on the Internet. Elizabeth Charters (2004) points out that “while computer literacy is certainly a necessity in today’s world of work, educators and employers may be aware of the tendency of computer applications such as web browsers to alter people’s perceptions in subtle ways that undermine their ability for higher level thinking” (p. 37). The use of ICTs and consumption of new media in classrooms must then go beyond attempts to establish a functional literacy (or competency) with the machines, to consider the multiple ways in which the learning, creating and adapting of studies could be interpreted differently through media development. To overcome this stigma and build a more effective command of their new media literacies, students must be taught to view their work and interaction with media technologies with a critical eye.

2.5 New Technologies as Learning Tools AND Media

Allan Ellis (1973) gives warning that computers and new technologies cannot be a substitute for teachers or a fix for long-standing concerns in education. There is a grave tendency within the development of computer technologies to standardize the processes of education since this makes for much easier and less expensive programming of software. By doing this, we automate the learning process and in turn run the risk of “replicating the best of the worst of regular classroom teaching, thus legitimizing current practice while missing our chance to construct new practice” (p. 47). It essentially removes the creative stimulus from learning (and teaching) and leaves the software developers (and the companies for whom they work) to guide students’ understanding of subjects.
Perhaps the hardest task that teachers and students will face in the evolution of digital learning will be realizing the true requirements of an educational problem, as it does not necessarily follow that the solutions to all problems should entail the use of a computer, even if it may be more efficient to use one. The computer can be seen in this light as a tool of the learning process, one that can be substituted with other methods and knowledge. Without this perspective it might be difficult for students to evaluate the computer critically as a part of the system that is influencing and guiding their learning. To be critical of the social context of any work, a student should be able to step back and appreciate all of the pieces that connect his or her quest for information to his or her understanding of a subject (Ellis, 1973, pp. 53-55).

Students who grow up using computers tend to think of them as an extension of their own thought processes. It may just be, as Marc Prensky (2001b) posits, “the most useful term I have found for this generation is Digital Natives. Our students today are all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet,” (p. 1). He supports his claim with the note that today’s students have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using “the tools of the digital age,” (p. 1). The ability to access data has become an extension of the fingertips as computers and the Internet fast-forward thought processes beyond the speed of natural human inquiry. A single query can solicit millions of pieces of information in under a second, but many of them fall well outside the inquirers’ necessary scope of interest. But the technological system is not a substitute for evaluation or critical thought, and a student must still weed through that data to make meaning of the material. The ability to decode those messages will be made even stronger if a student understands certain political associations and influences that are specifically inherent to Internet queries. This is a further step of critically dissecting the pieces that add up to the larger social system of the learning process (Ellis, 1973, p. 56).
One of the most valuable aspects of understanding the computer in these ways is that the computer itself, with the system processes it contains, becomes both a mechanism and a metaphor for talking about procedural learning. In many aspects, the computer is an incomplete machine. It does not act autonomously, but rather requires an operator to define the parameters of what it is intended to do, or learn. The user becomes a guide for the steps a computer must take to achieve a certain goal. In this respect, the computer is doing the work, and the user is simply pointing it in the right direction (Ellis, 1973, p. 134).

Another perspective suggests that certain software programs (though initially designed by human input) empower the computer as the guide to particular learning or knowledge. The processes of the program direct a user to follow certain steps and build a set of skills as a routine order of operations. By doing so, a user is able to advance to higher levels of knowledge and continuously build an advancing skills set. When children play video games or connect with others through social media, they are not just amusing themselves to distraction; rather, they are building a skills set that opens vast possibilities for their future.

2.5.1 Computers as a Tool and a Medium

Perhaps one of the best ways to conceive of utilizing computer technologies in the classroom comes with realizing that a computer can serve as both a tool - processing specific problem-oriented tasks and a medium - as the basic fabric of creative potential. Torin Monahan (2005) suggests we can think of a computer used for mechanical exercises and practices as a tool - the way we would think of a pencil, a pen or a brush (p. 74). In this capacity the computer functions to help its users build solutions by following sequences that correspond with the design of a computer’s hardware or software programs. Each piece of hardware and software may have
a specific function by design, but this does not exclude the possibility of users creating new functions for these systems.

It is because computers have this manipulability that Monahan suggests they can be thought of as a blank page or canvas that has been primed to become whatever the user intends. He also points out that the tool-like qualities of a computer do not negate its capacities to act as a social fabric or medium capable of human interaction and creative design (p. 75). Computers create the space for making larger connections and allow users to take responsibility for positions within the larger network as they embrace the social learning and individual growth that the technologies afford (p. 72). Building new media literacy means understanding the many uses of computers, and critical use of these technologies means unpacking many of the creative freedoms they afford.

2.5.2 Understanding the Creative Aesthetics of Media

Creative aestheticism has a unique function within new media rhetoric: where digital literacy is learning to speak the language of the computer, by understanding artistic persuasion and the critical components of digital media, users of the technology can eventually learn to create their own media. Andrew Burn (2009) defines critical, in terms of media education, as “a desire for students to learn both about the cultural and semiotic properties of the media” (p. 9) and he frames this understanding within the conceptual aesthetics of Aristotle’s rhetorical proofs: ethos, logos, and pathos. By dissecting media analysis and digital literacy in this way, Burn positions all media in line with the arguments of politics and supports the belief that all texts are “persuasive, never neutral, and always have an angle” (p. 9).

When students understand new media and digital literacy from a perspective of rhetorical analysis, they are well positioned to analyze the arguments and persuasive elements in other
works critically. The foundation of this knowledge is a sturdy base for creative development of purposeful and conscious material. Here, arguably, the student is much more aware of the importance of the ethical implications of his or her work as it relates to the credibility of the speaker (ethos), the logical consistency of the argument (logos), and the emotional appeal to the intended audience (pathos) (Burn, 2009, pp. 10-12). New media literacy, in this case, means having the ability to understand how a position is framed relative to the individual, the subject, and the audience, as represented by the processes outlined by the design of the media.

Aesthetics reflect a collision with the subjective opinions of society, the embodied experience, aspiration, and desire. It is a combination of external structures of text, history, and education with the internal structures of perception of embodied creative work and subjective experience (Burn, 2009, p. 13). When these concepts are applied to an analysis of computers and digital media, it gives teachers a powerful way to guide critical analysis of new media texts.

2.5.3 A New Medium for Critical and Creative Learning

Marc Prensky (2001) believes “one reason we are not more successful at educating our children and workforce, despite no lack of effort on our part, is because we are working hard to educate a new generation in old ways, using tools that have ceased to be effective” (p. 8). The traditional methods of teaching with the old methodologies and tools leave many children feeling under-stimulated - it is not that the work is too hard, but that it is boring. Prensky posits “that if we want to improve education, whether in schools, institutions or in corporate classrooms, it is incumbent upon us (and eventually upon the people from those generations) to invent radically new ways of learning that mesh with their new world, style and capabilities” (p. 8). The more teachers understand how computers “speak” to their students’ interests and that new media can
inspire new ways of thinking, the more teachers will be willing to explore new avenues in teaching and learning.

Seeking to make the connection, and cease the “boredom,” a number of educators, like Prensky, have realized that study of the “new world, style and capabilities” of the younger generations should be approached with the same critical analysis they aim to teach. Concepts relative to classical rhetoric and creative aesthetic become extremely important when teachers begin to dissect students’ relationships with media. Assessing the value and learning potential of video games that have a strong narrative calls for this type of critical analysis. Even in games where narrative is not the central focus, if we follow Burn’s (2009) belief that all texts are persuasive, a game that may seem to be entirely focused on solving a series of simplistic problems can be reconceived to have strong political meaning.

In his text Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames, Ian Bogost (2007) encourages the consideration of simple problem-oriented game, conceptually redesigned to twist the moral queue of its players. He posits that this type of mediatization of a morally ambiguous act removes or distorts the critical lens that we might otherwise hold to the subject. As we see commonly in videogames (e.g., Grand Theft Auto, Call of Duty), violence and morality are often obfuscated by the goal of succeeding or surviving. Encouraging students to think of video games in this way opens them up to an even deeper analysis of games in which narrative dominates the procedures of play. Pivoting on this type of thinking, Prensky (2001) insists that digital game-based learning is a necessary step in education. He feels that the move will focus on a user-driven learning phenomenon in which learners of all levels will interact with the tools of learning because they are interested and excited to do so (p. 9). The motivation for learners becomes as
much about enjoying the process as it is about getting to the end point of acquiring a set of knowledge or skills.

James Paul Gee (2003) also heavily supports gaming as a learning tool and aims to establish a modified understanding of what video games can teach us about how we learn. He believes that children should be able to play video games from as early as three years of age, but supports this with the proviso that “parents must ensure that kids play games proactively, that is, that they think about the design of the game, the types of thinking and strategies it recruits, its relationship to other games, books, movies, and the world around them” (p. 83). This would be further enhanced in an environment that encourages children to be fully engaged in other tasks like drawing, writing, and social activities where this multi-tasking rounds out their understanding of how the interactions with a computer game are not wholly suggestive of the world around them. All of these tasks are tied to building a skill set for valuing aesthetic appeal, which further enhances anyone’s ability to use, analyze, or even just play video games critically.

Gee believes that a certain type of learning happens in playing video games that drastically contrasts with what happens in other learning environments like the classroom. He believes that too often instruction when given in verbal cues (too far in advance) leaves the student overwhelmed and under-stimulated. Games, in contrast, give the user information “just in time” when and where the player needs it. Second, he notes that games are often just difficult enough to challenge the “outer edge” of a player’s growing competence. This creates a sense of pleasurable frustration or a desire to be challenged continuously and re-stimulated in this way. And third, he believes that video games create a “cycle of expertise” by giving a common set of problems that encourage players to develop a set of strategies that must be continuously applied or routinized (Gee, 2003, pp. 35-48). The game then challenges the players in new and more
complex ways that contest the routinization and encourage players to deconstruct their previous
learning models and rebuild new routines at an even more advanced level.

For games that are analyzed in the classroom there is an opportunity for teachers to
explain the rhetoric in their design and easily draw class discussion around this topic. Narrative
games function as a system of persuasive actions and can be read much like the narrative of a
text-based story, but they have much more depth than this as a learning tool. Because players are
afforded the opportunity to make decisions for their characters, it is possible to understand (and
analyze) the persuasive aesthetics of conversation. Players make meaning of the conversations
they have with other characters in the game, knowing that picking one action over another can
make allies or may increase their position as rivals. Aside from conceptualizing about how these
decisions persuade the positions of other characters in a game, this type of decision-making gives
players a phenomenological sense of morality that is not always accessible in a more
disconnected medium.

There are many deep levels of learning that happen during game play. When encouraged
to analyze more deeply what procedural rhetoric is designed in each game, students will consider
the games and attitudes as a player differently. They can extract elements of personal character
and compare actions on screen to certain choices that they may have to make in their real lives.
Because this type of connection is possible in video games, teachers are able to draw a critically
analytical framework around a game and make a similar comparison to events, perspectives, or
social contexts around the world. As such, video games as new media offer even more valuable
lessons than the learning skills students gain from playing the games.

If we conceive of this type of learning as being a potential model for all learning, then it
becomes easier to understand how encouraging active critical thinking skills, as required by
video games, can produce some fairly self-aware students. This learning is even further enhanced if a teacher initiates analysis of the contents and processes of a game and connects them to various socio-cultural reflections in society. At the point when students begin to comprehend the rhetoric of game design, they can further conceive how variations in that design might affect the persuasive aesthetic (or actions and turns of narrative) in how the overall game somehow connects to the current discourse in other streams of media.

We must recognize that students will most often learn best in the medium that they are exposed to most, for they have adjusted their thinking strategies to fit that way of learning. If we as teachers are planning to demand students’ attention, we cannot expect that traditional literacies supported by books or even interactive lessons using other new media technologies will always command that focus. Prensky (2012) draws a parallel between certain institutions we can all fathom as he playfully states:

Several hours a day, five days a week, sharply focused attention – does that remind you of anything? Oh, yes – video games! That is exactly what children have been doing ever since *Pong* arrive in 1974. They have been adjusting or programming their brains to the speed, interactivity, and other factors in the games, much as boomers’ brains were programmed to accommodate television, and literate man’s brains were reprogrammed to deal with the invention of written language and reading (where the brain had to be retrained to deal with things in a highly linear way). (p. 78)

If our students have in fact been “programmed” to learn differently, we must build a new media literacy program that includes all possible methods of sharing information, even videogames.
2.6 Summary of Literature

Extending awareness to the critical intersection of new technologies and cultural identities breeds new media literates. Students, who want to engage with various media, because they know it will afford them a greater understanding of future encounters, will eventually “insist” on having these technologies in the classroom. (As Prensky (2001a), for example, argues.) A digital learning environment that establishes a purposeful reason for the efficient use of computers is an essential educational component in the 21st century. From an early age, students encouraged to read and write with greater attention to contextual relevance and the social impact of their work are more engaged and learning is far more meaningful.

Critical thinking is the driving force that encourages the practical and effective use of digital technology, but persistent efforts must encourage student’s enthusiasm and motivation toward exercises in the critical understanding and experiential learning with these technologies. When critical thinking is taught in isolation, it tends to deny the naturally critical and curious perspectives of children, just as it tempers the contrasting lenses of their extended community. Teachers must help students identify the significance of their local cultural influence as they build a greater understanding of how that dynamic is reflected within the globalized network of an ever-expanding digital community.

New media technologies are merely the new(est) tools of learning, and they should not be perceived as an integral modern educator, nor should teachers expect that new media literacy can just happen with exposure to digital technology. Understanding must move past the basic knowledge, comprehension, and application of an instrument; providing opportunities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate material that is referenced and manufactured in ways that will enrich the learning experience and increase knowledge. New media literacy does not just address how to
access information but also generates the ability to comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate the technologies and how we are socially, culturally and politically affected by them. A majority of 21st century students in Canada have always known and will continue to have access to some form of new media technology, so critical thinking and literacy skills must develop in conjunction with an understanding of the mechanics of these technologies. New media literacy can and must be taught to prepare students for the demands of the future. While they may become digitally literate on their own, for most students, “thoughtful” use of media technology is always going to take different forms or require a different approach, since every situation will be infused with its own contextual significance.

Combined with the extensive possibilities of a digital environment, students who learn to develop new media literacy with a critical sensibility will be able to circumvent the trends of how this technology has been presented. While in the past, “instead of starting with learning goals, teachers have cut up and corroded our experience and knowledge to slot into the capabilities and strengths of software, rather than the creative potentials of wetware” (Brabazon, 2007, p. 153) , the future must include a conscious effort by educators and students to avoid this tendency. If critical literacy begets a greater sensibility for the social relevance of a text, it follows that new media literacy lends itself to a greater sensibility for the overall impact technology can have in today’s digital world. A relationship between educators and students that focuses on this purposeful and meaningful use of technology results in the ultimate realization of potential, where the vast capabilities of new media literacy can help all students add form to the critical and creative capacities of the mind.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Procedure and Research Approach

This phenomenological study explores qualitative research about the foundations of new media literacy programs in multiple schools. To do so, this work examines the observations of practicing elementary school teachers who are seeking to define media literacy within their classrooms. As outlined in John Creswell’s (2007) *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five Approaches*, this study follows a “qualitative approach” that studies “participatory knowledge claims” under a “narrative design” by a semi-structured interview method that ask five participants twenty-five “open-ended questions” (p. 21).

This study is framed around an understanding of qualitative research that, “begins with assumptions,” and “the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a … problem,” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). To study this problem, this research:

use[s] an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and the complex description and interpretation of the problem and it extends the literature or signals a call for action. (ibid)

The purpose of which falls in line with Michael Quinn Patton’s (2001) perspective on the value in designing a qualitative research study, where he posits:

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the
nature of that setting - what it means for participants to be in the setting. The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (p. 49)

With the goal in mind to examine the phenomena of observations the participant teachers have witnessed, this paper aims to understand these occurrences as potentially predictable outcomes for consistent practices within the classroom. More specifically, however, pointing inquiry at teachers’ reflections, the interview questions seek depth in understanding the patterns of behaviour that are frequently exhibited when students are in the position to access new media technologies. Further, this paper considers the position described by Moustakas (1994), whereby, “Phenomenology seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts judgments, and understandings” (p. 58). As such, the focus of this phenomenological research study will be to understand the extent to which teachers have perceived to be moments of student engagement in the purposeful and meaningful use of new media technologies in the classroom.

The data collected herein represents the views of only a limited number of teachers, but reflects what I believe to be some best practices in having students engage in critical pedagogy. Information throughout the study has been examined to analyze the value of new media technologies as the 21st century tools of inquiry, and critical thinking along with creative problem solving as the foundations of approach to new media literacy. The data of this research study has been arranged to support various themes that have emerged from both an in-depth literature review and all five interviews.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The data collection for this study is composed primarily of the transcribed responses to five informal interviews. Upon consent from the participants, interviews were recorded so that a
thorough transcription of responses could occur after the interview, and to ensure that all information was noted accurately. The questions in the interviews focused on what the (new) media literacy programs look like in each teacher’s classroom, and explored their perceptions of how the program affects student’s abilities to communicate ideas. See Appendix A for a complete list of questions.

3.3 Participants

Because this study is meant to examine what teachers have found to be promising exercises for engaging students in new media literacy, the ideal participant was meant to be a practicing elementary school teacher who had an established pattern of using technology in their classroom. While Creswell (2007) suggests the necessity of seeking participants who have experienced the phenomenon of study, finding teachers who used some form of technology and who encouraged critical thinking exercises in their classrooms was not an easy task. On first attempt, a number of potential participants were contacted only to discover that their experiences limited their ability to contribute to my work. After further investigation, five participants were established through a network of peers and colleagues. One participant who was an acquaintance from an undergraduate program offered another contact who was a personal coworker. Three other participants were selected after other recommendations were made about people who were using, or seeking to use new media technology in some different ways. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym for the purposes of this study.

Participants were all initially contacted by email at which point they were given an outline of my research and the basic protocol for my interview process, should they choose to become a participant. Once a participant agreed to be a part of the research, I contacted them to arrange a time to meet in person. Three of the participants chose to have me meet them at their
schools, and the other two had me meet them at their homes. Upon meeting the participants, I requested permission to audio record the interview as a mode of keeping record with absolute accuracy, noting that the recording would be transcribed after the interview for the data analysis to occur more effectively. Participants were given a letter of consent and a copy was held by both the participant and myself as researcher. Before the interview began, as part of the ethical protocol, participants were advised that at any point they were free to refrain from answering a question or to withdraw a response up to the time of final publication of the research paper.

Each interview was presented with a full collection of the twenty-five research questions (included as Appendix A), with interviews lasting between thirty-five and sixty-five minutes. The line of inquiry and subsequent discussion focused on teacher’s experiences and opinions as perceptions of practice within their own teaching. Teachers were invited to reflect on their own actions as well as speculate on certain causes of action that occur elsewhere in their schools, if only to frame their work in relation to others (where questions of accessibility and community share a more common ground).

3.4 Data Analysis

Having audio recorded the interviews; I followed each with a direct transcription into a word document so that I might more clearly analyze the data. Using Dictanote Pro, the bulk of each interview was transcribed. Following that, I conducted a series of playback reviews, during which I filled in the gaps or edited the interviews for content. After transcription was complete, interview responses were analyzed for themes that corresponded well with the literature review. To organize this information, I used open coding of responses to match with my pre-defined central themes, and made notes as I went through each interview. Any sub-themes were then further categorized or organized to support the research within the findings section. Collectively,
this review of data forms a multi-faceted narrative of the effective implementation of new media technology in the classroom.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

This research study has followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Interview participants were given a letter of informed consent (see Appendix B) prior to the interview. The content of the letter was reviewed with each participant and he or she was informed about the purpose of the study, the content of the interview questions (see Appendix A) and the confidentiality rules to be followed throughout the study. Participants were informed of their right to refrain from answering any questions throughout the interview and the option to withdraw from the study at any time prior to its publishing. The procedure was followed exactly as outlined in the letter with no changes made after the interviews were complete. Every effort has been made to ensure participants’ comfort and willingness to participate in the interview and to ensure the data included in the research process remains secure. Interview participants signed two copies of the letter giving consent to participate in the study. One original copy has been retained by the participant and the other by me as the researcher. After the interviews, audio recordings of interviews were kept on a password-protected hard drive on a personal computer. After final completion of the research process, interviews will be permanently deleted within five years. In order to protect the anonymity of the research participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout the research process.

3.6 Limitations

The greatest challenge to the research in this study was finding teachers who were both encouraging of critical thinking and engaged in new media literacy studies within their
classroom. The limitation that this challenge created was that the views and opinions within this study reflect only the voices of teachers who either use, or have a desire to use new media technologies regularly in their classrooms. Since new media literacy can be a rather controversial subset of the language curriculum (in that students are asked to analyze advertising, spin, bias, social media and interactive Webspaces – subjects unfamiliar to many teachers) the interview participants of this study reflect the perspectives of teachers who not only are comfortable teaching the subject, but who feel it is a necessary component of education. In all cases, the interview participants grew up as students having some computer technology classes or training, meaning that none are intimidated by the basic use of any technology (as some teachers may be). As such, the participants’ responses do not necessarily reflect the general opinions or beliefs of all teachers.

A further limitation of this study could be perceived from the view that teachers of this subject sample all came from the same school board, and from schools within the Greater Toronto Area; as such, teachers and opinions about students of rural areas and smaller communities are not wholly represented within the perspectives offered within this research. Further limitation in this study has been that of holding the number of total participants to a small sample size of only five \( n = 5 \) people, where most significant phenomenological data samples are suggested to be of ten or more participants (Creswell, 2007). Further limitations in this study were noted as participants shared perspective and thoughts about students whom they have not observed for an extended period of study. Lastly, because the nature of this inquiry asks if one situation is better than another, the bias, memory or changed practices may have participants answering questions based on current beliefs and not observations from the past.
Other limitations to consider include the scope of my literature review, the choice of my questions as a researcher, possible qualitative measurement bias or research interpretation as I document my findings. Since the intentions of my study were to find participants who could speak on these subjects, I have reflected a wide range of experiences that reflects the teaching population as a whole. Speculation of the practices of other teachers is based on participant opinion and not a larger sample of teachers whose experiences do not comfortably fit within the scope of this paper.

Further speculation on the part of the participants assumes they can accurately represent the experiences of their students who are not a part of this study. Each participant views the experiences of his or her students in different ways. While this can be perceived as a necessary part of an interview process, it does not include student voice in the study. Conclusions were based on student engagement and motivation through observation of behaviour only and not on the actual responses from students. While student voice is likely the most necessary element in determining what should be happening in the classroom to integrate new media technologies, the ethical review clearances set for the Master of Teaching Research Project do not allow student participation in this research study.

The most notable limitation to any qualitative research study is that the work is based on one researcher’s perspective and interpretation of data. While all efforts have been made to make clearly informed and unbiased conclusions, due to the nature of this work, the influence of my own ideologies is bound to be present in my analysis of all literature and interview data. As such, this research is designed to represent a balance of limitations, though must be read with an understanding that there are many components that have come together to form a multi-faceted structure supporting singular objective in inquiry.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This section examines the findings of five semi-structured interviews conducted with elementary school teachers in the Toronto District School Board. These interviews were audio-recorded with a hand-held device and transcribed to better allow for conceptualization and coding into various themes and sub-themes in dialogue with the literature review of Chapter Two. To serve as a frame of reference for the synthesis of the data in these findings, the themes have been organized into five categories: Critical Thinking in the Classroom; Multiliteracies and Media Literacy; New Prompts for Investigation (Using ICTs); Creating New Media; and Limitations of Hope for Change, some of which were further divided as various sub-themes seemed prevalent in the data presented by the participants. This information, while a collection of individual perspectives, has purposefully been organized to serve the goal of the central question of this research paper: How are teachers using new media technologies to promote students' understandings and interactions with the world around them? As such, while the opinions expressed from each participant reflect a variety of perspectives and possible best practices, this should by no means be considered an exhaustive account of the options for most effective integrations of technology. These finding should thereby be considered one collection of ideas that point toward a larger line of inquiry supporting a larger collection of effective strategies for utilizing new media technologies in any classroom.

4.2 Participants

Sam

Sam has been teaching for twelve years and in that time taught kindergarten through grade twelve. He began his teaching career in Europe, and currently teaches grades one through
six for health and physical education as well as computer studies for grades seven and eight at a downtown Toronto school. Sam has had an active role in implementing new pathways for learning through outdoor education and seeks to do the same with his work in computer studies.

Jeff

Jeff has been teaching for nine years and had teaching experiences in Quebec, England, as well as in and around the Greater Toronto Area. He has taught grades six through twelve and some courses at the college level. He is currently teaching grade seven and eight core English as well as a regular rotation with students who have mild intellectual disabilities (MID) at a middle school in Central Toronto. While Jeff admits his current use of new media technologies is somewhat limited, he was anxious to participate in the research since he believes so strongly that there are changes and opportunities that should be made available to all students, where so many are only afforded to students with special needs.

Andy

Andy has been teaching for ten years in and around Toronto and in that time taught kindergarten through grade six, provides prep periods for grades seven and eight, and worked as a learning specialist for English language learners. Andy is currently teaching kindergarten through grade eight information and communications technology (ICT) classes at an elementary school in West Scarborough. Andy regularly connects his ICT lessons to a number of social justice initiatives on a global scale.

Shabaz

Shabaz has been teaching for twelve years and has had a large range of experiences in that time. His first two years were in Toronto teaching grade seven language arts and drama followed by one year teaching drama and production design in England. Upon his return to
Toronto, Shabaz taught for four years in kindergarten to grade three health and physical education along with grades seven and eight core math and language arts. He is currently teaching at a West Scarborough school that has a great cultural and socio-economic diversity within its population. Shabaz has predominantly taught as a grade eight core teacher but has also taught visual arts, drama, music, computers, learning resource and physical education in many grades. Shabaz was a classmate in my undergraduate studies and also served as an associate teacher for my early volunteer work in the classroom. Due to the nature of our personal relationship, his understanding of this research was fairly vast before his interview, though he insisted his voice be heard, since he has been making regular efforts to improve his students’ interactions and expressions with new media technologies in his classes.

*Priya*

Priya has been teaching for eight years in and around the Greater Toronto Area. She has taught from kindergarten to grade eight and acted as a specialist for drama, music, health and physical education. She is currently teaching grade six literacy and social studies at a downtown Toronto school. Priya has been doing extensive work with integrating technologies into her classroom and was a connection through an associate teacher in one of my practicum placements who knew Priya’s work would tie nicely within my field of research.

4.3 Critical Thinking in the Classroom

Critical thinking and various forms of inquiry are the foundations for deeper analysis of complex connections and the relationships between ideas. The definitions of critical thinking can be broad, depending on what you read, and who you speak to, and just as broad can be the way critical thinking looks when it comes into form in the classroom. This following section reviews
the opinions, actions and observations of the five participants and what they have experienced both over the terms of their careers and in their current classrooms.

4.3.1 Group Discussions

While critical thinking is itself predominantly conceived as an independent process that happens in the isolation of an individual’s mind, each teacher expressed a solid connection between a child’s ability to perceive deeper meaning and the frequency with which the class engaged in group discussions about a number of subjects. As Andy noted, “the power of the collective is much more inspiring than when you ask a child to think deeply about something on their own.” Giving children opportunities to think about a subject and discuss it as a whole gives great depth to the subject as each student has an opportunity to share a perspective. This is very important, especially as we seek to have a diverse cross-section of identities and ideologies represented in our classroom.

The fact that many classrooms in the TDSB have a cross-section of cultural diversity means that students are more likely to include these various perspectives when thinking about a particular topic. But in order for these perspectives to be realized, it is important that students understand how to communicate effectively with their peers. Students must realize the value of their voices in the classroom, but just as important is being able to support other students who might not so willingly share. Jeff suggests “active listening exercises to remind the students that good listeners are far more powerful than good talkers,” and he reinforces this regularly in group discussion. He finds that by putting a higher value on listening even those who may be timid initially are more likely to speak up to revoice what they have heard, thus reinforcing the importance of the activity.
Building this type of dynamic in the classroom may mean setting up a different set of strategies for how group discussions and critical thinking activities may operate. Shabaz has effectively used an incredible set of strategies for helping his class group understand the value of every member within it:

The core idea of understanding roles is the foundation of my classroom. We focus on understanding our place within the classroom, the school, the neighbourhood, city, country, and world. The students gauge their place by what they can offer to each level to make it better. We gather knowledge on each level, and then reflect back to where we fit in. We spend a few days a month fundraising by running events for the school community, with the bulk of the proceeds going outside of the school (we have a mandate for school:community:world equals ten:fourty:fifty). We spend a lot of time reading personal stories of people in different situations, and encourage open dialogue amongst the class to express any and all viewpoints.

When further asked if he felt that this sometimes created an unnecessary conflict between certain members of the class, he insisted that “it absolutely does not. Children work out their own pecking order and there will always be one kid who comes out on top. Setting things up in this way ensures that everyone has a role to play and no one is left behind.” This is an important consideration for every teacher, and it seems that having students hold each other accountable for their roles and responsibilities within the classroom may just be an excellent way to ensure everyone is taking part.
4.3.2 Guided Questions

Now that they are all paying attention, and working well together, how do we best work towards ensuring that the students are discussing what we want them to discuss? It is one thing to have the group work and speak well together, but if the topics of their discussions are not taking shape we would like, or the inquiry is not digging deep enough, we may have to set up a better prompt for the group’s discussion. Another common sub-theme of the interviews seemed to come through in the guided questions that my research participants use to prompt critical thinking and engagement with a number of topics.

Most interesting is the level of involvement in the guiding from one teacher to the next, Jeff feels that questions best come as direct response to the text being discussed and that “the more questions, the better,” meanwhile Sam has a core set of questions that he uses as prompts: “Who is saying this? Why are they saying this? What do they want from you? To whom are they talking? How do you know these things?” More extensively, Sam guides his class with a common set of values that he feels are a necessary component of authentic creativity. He suggests to his students “Be aware of how others perceive you; Be aware that all opportunities have a cost; Be aware that your actions have consequences; Be aware your values are manifest in your decisions; Be aware that reflective practices inform future decisions. Another tactic was to have kids question everything, as Priya encourages her students to do:

You have to help kids get there, but once you help point them in the right direction, I think kids feel really good about getting to second guess things – I mean, when you tell them that what they’re reading may not be all true or that there may be something else that is not being said, that they can go and look for other facts or stories to cover a period of time. In English, I think it’s different because then we’re looking more at analyzing
meaning or critiquing a particular work – it’s not the same type of comparative or contrasting type of inquiry that we get when we’re looking at History, at what was shared in one place and what it says in another. Show them that there aren’t always the same things said about the same subjects – or that one person’s opinion can be very different than someone else’s and both are saying that they’re right, and both are saying that their version of the story is the only one.

Priya admits that guiding her students in this way sometimes means not guiding at all, and she finds that many times she has to just “go along for the ride” once her students break off into a stream of investigation or inquiry.

Shabaz tends to conduct his guiding in a slightly different way in that once a problem is posed to the group, he prefers to have them work it through as much as they can on their own as he still holds on to the reigns as much as possible:

My students are always encouraged to approach any question with logic and reason. I never provide an unsolvable question, and try my best to guide them to an answer without ever providing them with the actual answer. To accomplish this, my classroom relies on Socratic Discourse. By talking something through, students can guide each other through any complications, and use each other as inspiration for ideas. Our inquiry model for this type of learning is through replacement: what if that was me in that situation? This works for both positive and negative situations, on micro and macro levels. It can be as simple as “Would I want someone treating my sister like that?” to as advanced as “If I didn’t agree with my country’s political ideology and felt it was against the people’s wishes, would I stand up against them?”
Shabaz’s philosophy rests heavily on the belief that his student’s will always want to dig deeper on their own, and again returns to the dynamic of the group relationship he has established in his classroom to make sure that these discussions flow smoothly and consistently.

Taking his focus specifically to task, Andy believes it is important “to show life is bigger than individuals and their problems,” for him, it is more about “trying to add perspective.”

Guiding questions in Andy’s classroom means pointing kids to think about others first:

It’s important to keep giving kids lots of questions asking about equity and fairness and why it is that we have so much when others aren’t even getting by. I build and encourage my students to join clubs focused on improving our school (called the Do Good Club) and set aside time for kids to explore areas I’ve set up in my classroom that display information about people or places in need. And from that, I like letting kids to supply their own ideas and tasks to make sure that people stay positive but are always thinking about others first – like putting up happy faces on walls, complimenting others, doing something kind for someone we don’t know well.

Andy’s work with his students goes beyond guided questioning and into guided behaviour and thinking in general. His thoughts and concerns are not just about how do his students think about a particular problem in a microcosm, but how does that problem affect the “big picture.” Not to say that there is anything wrong with any of the previously noted ways for guiding questions among the students, but for the sake of this research, Andy’s suggestions most congruently line up with the goals of effective and applied critical thinking strategies. He goes beyond critical thought and pushes his children to the position of critical pedagogy in his classroom, where his students are regularly reminded that “people are part of a bigger puzzle and what they do affects the rest of their ‘hood and the world environment.” This type of learning is meant to combat the
misrepresentations of various cultural and ethnic identities in the media, but as Shabaz points out, sometimes this type of learning needs to be even more explicit:

We have spent some time looking at the history of stereotyping and why it exists. We need to understand the origins of different stereotypes in order to understand how we take in others versus how they actually are. One interesting tool has been Google Earth, putting students in quite literally foreign territories to see what it is like there.

Once students start to understand that the reasons for critical thinking are more substantial than just analyzing the value in a particular statement or set of ideas, they can start to frame the information they gather in the larger perspective of a connected set of communities. This helps position their views more clearly within the vein of global awareness that absolutely necessary once they start creating their own work (and / or media) and sharing their ideas with a more global audience. Understanding this perspective takes vision and experience, as well as the capacities to accept if not empathize with the diverse cultures and practices around the world. Fortunately, as Jeff pointed out,

Toronto is a fantastic place to teach because it’s a microcosm of the entire world in some regards. We certainly do focus on ethnic backgrounds and international events at times, but when there’s so much to look at locally, we mostly focus on that with lots of local field trips and even just walks in our neighbourhood.

This means that students in Toronto are perhaps uniquely positioned to build that critical lens with the acuity necessary to understand the impacts that can be made through their actions.

Having thoughts and discussions on a level where various perspectives are represented is only a start, once children are able to think and communicate effectively in this way, they will need to understand how to take the next step in sharing their understanding. It is one thing to
discuss ideas and challenges presented to them by a teacher, and another to be able to dissect the information as it comes from another source.

4.4 Multiliteracies and Media Literacy

We are more inundated with media today than any generation has witnessed in history. Every moment is filled with some type of message that is trying to sell this or persuade that, but how often do we really stop to analyze this stream of information, and how clearly are we able to understand the messages when we do? When the Ontario Language curriculum was redesigned to address this “combination of several media “languages” – images, sounds, graphics, and words” as the Media Literacy strand (Ontario, 2006, p.13), it came in almost as an afterthought, or addendum to studying all the other important aspects of traditional literacy. Unfortunately, many teachers seem to still feel that is how it is dealt with in the classroom as well. In the search for participants I aimed to interview those who have regularly brought media-literacy into their classroom, and more specifically who have bridged media literacy with traditional literacy, seeing it as a combined function of multiliteracies. That said, even in the multiliteracies classrooms (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Simon, 2011), the type of texts and how the texts were accessed varied quite a bit.

Looking across a broad spectrum of ideas Andy and his class examine media (specifically) with a goal to,

provide reference points by examining works together through variety of streams like news (al Jazeera), social media (Twitter, Facebook) and discuss those reference points in depth. Doing so provides the background necessary for students to analyze and synthesize all the data they are bombarded with on a daily basis and use the more relevant pieces to eventually produce something meaningful of their own.
This is not an easy task however, and admittedly, Andy’s time with the students is allowably focused on Information and Communications Technology (ICT). His time with the students is precious, since he only sees each group once a week for this purpose, so every lesson and chance he gets with them is filled with the hope of using media and bridging other literacies to a more complex and full understanding of the world. He admits, that all the teachers in his school have the “same access to [the] same tech[no]logy” but “few take advantage of it”.

While homeroom teachers are supposed to be teaching media literacy as a part of their language curriculum, because students get one period a week with Andy, sitting in front of a computer, they rarely teach anything of the sort in the regular classroom. As a result, Andy feels like it is his duty to inform the students of what they are actually facing, claiming “When I teach ICT (tech), K to eight, we spend some time when possible examining issues like Internet freedom, surveillance, Facebook’s use of metadata, etcetera. So we will watch documentaries online, have debates, weigh the pro and cons of various actions or ideas,” all of which may be crucial and a phenomenal use of the time Andy has with his students, but when the regular classroom teachers are not bridging this concept into other types of literacy, it becomes a question of whether or not the critical lens remains.

In a classroom where there are still more books than computers, it is interesting to compare how the investigations through literacy shape up. Jeff points out that his students do use various media technologies throughout the day, but also acknowledges that his lessons are only centred on the use of these technologies “once every couple of weeks on average,” which he figures is fairly often considering many teachers rarely use them at all. Noting this, Jeff realized that maybe he was not teaching the kids as much as he could be about the critical use of these technologies and the media they face when they are using them. The majority of the time his
students have a device in their hands they are working on something independently or using the tools to look something up for a task otherwise unrelated to literacy in general.

Perhaps there is not a problem with this so much as we need to recognize that simply putting some media technologies in front of our students is not teaching them about media literacy. If we take the time to understand the components of “traditional literacy” (oral communication, reading and writing) to be as crucial as the subsidiary components of media literacy (images, sounds, graphics, and words), then it seems strange that so much of the strand is taught without the care and attention to the finer details that it takes to build media literacy. One could in fact argue that building a solid foundation of media literacy begets a more comprehensive understanding of the components of traditional literacy, though the opposite (it seems), is far from true.

In Shabaz’s classroom, he has laid a foundation of practice whereby, books are rapidly becoming the rarest form of media for accessing information in our classroom. Every day the kids engage with sources other than their textbooks. I would say that the most “book learning” they do is in math, and simply due to the need for repetition and consistency.

He says this after previously noting, “We also use different math sites to augment my lessons in class (in essence, the Kahn academy),” the fact is, in Shabaz’s classroom, students are using media technologies because they find it restrictive to do otherwise. Shabaz argues that when “there is so much that students can do or access when they have their hands on these technologies, it’s hard to imagine handcuffing them to a book.” He admits his take on media literacy has helped build the students confidence in exploring new media, but also looks to continue expanding the class’ scope of perspective. Since so far in the class,
the core focus of media literacy is on the deconstruction of advertising. This is accomplished using print, TV, and internet ads. We also look at the concept of spin and bias and how one’s source directly impacts one’s understanding of information. The students then look at how to create their own version of spin, and in one instance build ideas based on lies to see if the can sell their fictitious work to students in other grades. There is a crossover here between math and learning resource and with media literacy. This crossover is not only important, but crucial for building a concept in the minds of children that these relationships between understanding media and understanding other subjects go far beyond the technology of transmission. Media literacy is not the subject that occurs simply because we have put computers in front of the students and asked them to apply a critical lens to their understanding of the subjects displayed. Rather, it is a strand built upon critical thinking, meant to hone students’ abilities to analyze and evaluate the media they face that surrounds them. While often times, tasks may seem best addressed, or the media most current on technologies that are not printed or limited to such linear formatting, it is always important to pick the right tool for the job. As Shabaz explained his own rationale for using technology:

I don’t think I ever use new media tech for the sake of using new media tech. I choose the best source for instructional purposes, not with the intent to specifically use technology. One of the main concerns I have with modern instruction is the use of technology for technology’s sake. Meaningful inclusion is often misplaced with the desire to be cutting edge. As an example: I had my teacher candidate from UOIT that insisted on using tablets to measure items, leading to a full on revolt by students who wanted to use a meter stick for a tangible measurement.
Technologies must have a function and purpose, and not simply act as a substitution for something that could have just as easily been achieved using a method or tool that already exists.

In Priya’s classroom, she considers media literacy to be an active process of learning and examining many different types of material:

There [are] always text books to read and other print material that we have to work through. I like the students to be up and active and sometimes even acting things out and moving around a bunch too, so it’s not all reading or being on the computers. But I would say that they’re looking at something online all the time, or that rather they always have access when they have a good reason to look something up or to validate something. It’s often easier for them to compare and contrast something they read in a printed text, then if they can search for something comparable online it’s going to give them a better view of the subject overall, since finding another similar printed ad might not be quite so easy. I would always rather they see the print ad first though, instead of just digging around on the internet for everything.

As Priya points out, at times for media literacy there is no greater value in examining static advertising online, especially if students could be holding a collection of print ads in their hands. The significance of this highlights that sitting in front of a computer does not automatically equal media literacy; for that matter, nor does the viewing or listening, or even the basic creation of video or audio recordings equate to media literacy. Studies in media literacy centre on the use of various media (meaning technologies and texts) to access a variety of ideas and concepts, but ultimately effective media literacy programs must be critical of media (meaning the messages). Perhaps the fact that the term media is polysemic in this case is why teachers have such difficulty opening up the subject. Teachers must always keep in mind (and practice) that media literacy is
about positioning the ideologies – political and social – of any text, both within the context of its creation and its audience. Perhaps by labelling the entire focus under *multiliteracies* (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Simon, 2011), where all texts are the tools for examining any message; we might avoid this confusion, and see more importantly the value of critical thinking at the core of this strand in the language curriculum.

**4.5 New Prompts for Investigation (Critical Multiliteracies)**

What are we (as educators) doing with the students? What are we discussing? Are we making it clear that there are messages here that we must address? If most commonly my participant teachers are looking at “bias and truth in terms of analyzing media messages” (Shabaz), what sort of shape do their guided discussions and inquiries take once they start applying the critical lens to new media? The good news is critical thinking strategies rarely change that much from one subject to the other, the more difficult news to swallow is, the news: media representations are filled with subtexts and spin that are meant to distort a typically concrete idea. For young students especially, teaching them to dissect these messages means understanding the compound relationships between how media represents them and the rest of everything else around them. To do so means helping students understand how to use the tools at their disposal to access this information. Once there, we need to help them understand how to pull these messages apart, and analyze the information with the critical lens they have built in other aspects of their studies.

**4.5.1 Modelling Access – Finding the Core of Media Messages**

Every teacher in my participant group discussed the necessity of modelling the steps to access the core ideologies or subtleties of a message. Admittedly, understandings of subtext and persuasions in media messages are about more than (as Sam put it) “asking students who they
think the message is for, and what tells them that’s the intent” since these concepts of audience and intent only skim the surface. Instead, these teachers mostly believe that finding the core of media messages means understanding much more about the identities and the politics that are both present and not present within the design of a particular media piece. Jeff believes it is important to start at that base level of understanding the intended audience of a media piece, but then to ask students “why the advertisers have made the choices they have in their ad, and how can we see that they’ve made certain choices.”

Supporting this type of inquiry himself, Andy further “encourages [students] to question everything they see in a media message and don’t take any image, sound bite or talking head for granted.” By this, he means don’t take everything you see, hear, or find yourself immersed in at face-value. This is not a new concept, and tying it to a strand of learning in the curriculum ought to have happened decades before we were surrounded by the streaming media that seemed to otherwise catch the defenses of the education system off guard. Critical consumption of anything around us has been a goal in schools for some time, but for some reason, we have for years taught children to use someone else’s critique as the lens, rather than encouraging them to become the primary analysts. With the volume of information that floods in their path every day, it is crucial for them to learn these tasks.

Andy believes teaching kids how to access the information is only one part of the equation, and that more importantly they need to understand that no matter how critical they may become of what they see, they are always being watched themselves:

Watching documentaries like *Generation Like* on PBS in which the kids saw what media and marketers really think of them (dollar signs, dollar signs). We’ve read and talked at great length about a book called *Black Code* and what is going on in cyberspace. We’ve
also conducted focus groups on the topic of media saturation and commercials and shared the results of those focus groups with other classes through Google Docs and our own new forms of media.

Andy positions this understanding at the root of his lessons in dissecting the messages themselves, for he finds that to simply analyze something without understanding the purpose for its creation is to ignore the real power behind a message. Under the same umbrella of concern, he feels teaching his students to work with their guard up is a necessary step in modelling effective inquiries in media studies.

Addressing the potential dangers in her own way, Priya has had similar concerns as she has tried to model the best steps for “digging into media” on the Internet, especially since it is not a medium she can control as easily as other forms (like her use of print-based materials). She maintains,

That’s a worry for anyone really, especially parents and teachers who are worried their students are going to be surfing porn or something in their class. But really I think accessing information and media on the internet is just like reviewing and critically reading any text – you have to tell kids that what they’re seeing is just one view and one set of people showing you that view – it doesn’t mean that it applies to all of us, or that it’s necessarily true, just because (or especially because) it’s made by some media company.

Ensuring safety and creating an environment that positively moves students in the direction of the curriculum goals is just another step in the critical media literacy work that Priya continues to build with her students. She claims she is always seeking new ways of modelling the next steps to “digging into what was said, what wasn’t said, what he said or she said, or (I guess) what she
wasn’t allowed to say for some time, right?” She speaks of feminine oppression as something comfortably usurped by today’s society and feels that technology has given everyone a means of expressing their opinions and perspectives, even though she admits the voices of today are often clouded by media, and in some cases take even more filtering to be heard.

In Shabaz’s class, he takes an even different approach to understanding multiliteracies. Recognizing that the Media is made up of many different types of organizations and presented in many different ways, he encourages his students to position themselves in the class standard Socratic circle as he opens up a critical thinking exercise devoted to dissecting media:

I try to model critical thinking through reflection. I introduce topics via a speaker’s corner type set up with a podium. Sometimes I take a stance on an issue that I know will directly conflict with the bulk of the class, and sometimes I offer an impartial introduction to a topic. We discuss initial reactions and viewpoints, and allow students to freely take a stand with only the modicum of background info that they may/may not have. Then students are required to inform themselves through research. That research can be online, through a library, by talking with parents, are even other teachers. We then go back to group discussion: this time students are responsible for the input they offer, and can be taken to task if their source is seen as questionable. The no-holds-barred aspect forces students to find reliable information and statistics, knowing that someone else may debunk their ideas based on poor choices.

Shabaz finds this keeps his students conscious of their own work, as much as it encourages them to be conscious of the work of others. Once they start to understand the pattern of inquiry required to validate or “debunk” ideas, they are more effectively armed to attack the many layers of subtext that cover many media messages. He notes,
I focus on source recognition and evaluation for non-fictional writing and reading. Students have been taught to focus their attention not only on what it is they are reading, but who has written it, and if there would be any bias and/or error in the work. They are taught to compare and contrast the ideas of one source with another in order to help them better understand the “truth”.

Unfortunately getting to the truth is not always easy, and decoding messages can require a very deep frame of schematic reference sometimes beyond a student’s level of comprehension; conceivably though, this level of understanding will come with time and experience. The important first step is making sure students recognize that they too are a commodity for advertisers and commercial enterprises since their interest creates a purchasing power that makes them just as valuable as any consumer.

4.5.2 Media Representations – Understanding Spin, Bias, and the Quest for Truth

Once students begin to see themselves as potential targets for advertising, they start to question things a little bit differently. It may be one thing to suggest to a student that an ad has been created with their demographic in mind, but it is another for the child to see that ad and know that much themselves, and an even deeper connection that occurs when a child can go through that process and then find fault in the representative design of a particular message. There are many steps that need to be taught in order for a child to come to this level of consciousness, and arguably, many teachers are rarely so critical of the media that they consume daily. This does not mean that it should not be happening, and once again (if nothing else), leaning back on the language curriculum, teachers should be in regular motion to help their students negotiate the high seas of mixed-media advertisers and their mixed-media messages.

In his ICT classes, Andy encourages his students to,
question the deeper meanings on a page. What the author sets out to express and what meaning(s) the reader gets can be very different things. Motives and reasons for publication or posting text online can be very different from one person to the next, no matter how similar the content may seem. I want them to question the validity and accuracy of data in online texts, blogs, or really anything that they see.

Andy believes it is most important that his students are always aware of the motivation of the creator(s). He always takes time to discuss purpose and how to identify target audience. Most valuably, he teaches his students to find the deepest truth they can in understanding what an ad’s creator(s) stand to gain or benefit from the audience viewing their message. He regularly examines the contrast between the product they are selling and the ad they are selling, which says more about the company and their intentions (many times) than the products they create.

Similarly, Sam tends to encourage his students to “look at media messages with a critique on the misinformation and capitalistic motives for their claims,” stating more specifically as a guideline to all his students (even those whom he coaches on various sports teams), “it’s important to look at what’s not there.” What is missing from this text? What is present and what is not is a big concern in the examination of media, but it is a very difficult thing to imagine teaching, especially to young children. More often than not, this only becomes clear if we have a deep enough understanding of what diversity should look like. Evaluating and referencing features of our own community will impact on our level of understanding of this concept.

To help his students understand how they are represented in the media around them, Shabaz “spends entire classes just sifting through points of discussion. We look at how the students are directly affected. We talk about their buying power, students as a focus of targeted marketing, and what campaigns they buy into.” They talk about this at great length as a class and
then try to extend that thinking into how what the media says about them might look different when compared to what the media says about their community:

With Rob Ford in the news, the students in my class were very interested to figure out what being a Torontonian meant. They created a list of what they felt made them feel that they were part of a greater community (favourite places, things they were proud of, teams, etcetera). They then gathered media depictions of Toronto from a certain date forward. They were dismayed to find that a global take on what it meant to be a Torontonian involved the Mayor’s antics, and that a reputation to be proud of was hard to find. After allowing them to go back further, many students discovered lawsuits from the G20 riots, which led them to reading up on the summit and why people reacted the way they did. By the end of the activity, students from Scarborough that were more Scarberian [sic] than Torontonian suddenly found themselves viewing themselves more positively from a global level.

It is fascinating to think that children will change perspectives so wholly based on what they see represented in the media. In the case of Shabaz’s class, the “Scarberians” had thought of themselves in a somewhat negative light – no doubt a reflection of local media and a local population’s ideologies of what it meant to live in the city versus the suburbs. While on almost any other level, that would be the opinion that mattered most to his students, when reflecting on the global impression of Toronto, it suddenly seemed more favourable to live in the lesser identified Scarborough.

Further confirming this stream of consciousness, Priya believes that media spin becomes most obvious to students if it is discontinuous with the community or identities around them:
I would say that’s where kids start realizing what’s missing or if they don’t where I can start pointing at what might be different in the media text compared to what they see in their daily lives. In a classroom where most of the kids South Asian, it can be hard for them to see themselves in the story. It’s like they lose interest because they know, or they understand that the ad was written by some white guy and doesn’t necessarily have any South Asian connections. [Because of that] I try to get as much as I can to represent their culture, but it’s not always easy to find in a book or a magazine – it’s sometimes, or more often things (again) like videos or media that I can find online that better represents the kids in my class.

Priya works hard to justify the lack of material in her class but she knows it is a battle her students face every day and in every element of the media that they consume:

I mean, how many South Asian kids do we see on TV? Like Fez on That 70s Show, or, what’s his name, Rajesh on Big Bang [Theory], but these guys are not really representative of grade six kids in any real way. They’re older for starters and they’re token characters who are made fun of for their culture as much as they’re forced to deny it in the shows. I think kids get that.

She finds it frustrating too – though because of this, she find it is all the more important to help students realize that there are intended audiences designed by the people who are creating the media, these are the powers that influence our identities only if we let them do so, otherwise, it is simply up to the students to negotiate this disparity. She describes their position:

I think they see the void more clearly than maybe some other students might. But not just because they have a different background – there are white kids in my class too, and they get it, so I don’t think it’s about where you’re from, more like who is represented in your
class, and who’s not represented on TV or in other media? Maybe it’s an easier question for them to ask because they can see the contrast, and see it every day. I think they get it though – that there’s someone missing, if it’s not them, it’s someone else. I think they just do. But we do talk about it a lot. That there are meanings and targets and goals and audiences intended for all that we see. It’s the same in Social Studies or English or any class really, because it’s always about who are we as readers or viewers, and who was this originally written or produced for. We, or rather students are not the direct target of history, but they may be of history books, when it comes to more main-stream media some of it’s for them and some of it isn’t.

While Priya identifies with these students and feels that she too was someone who “didn’t have anyone who cared to make sure [she] was represented when [she] was growing up” she seeks to make sure her students do have that connection. Even with that in mind, she claims “it’s something that makes them who they are – negotiating that meaning from something created for someone else. I think they know that it’s rare that the creator of something had them (specifically) in mind when they did their work.” This message becomes all the more powerful when she sets her students to task, and encourages them to create new media works of their own.

4.6 Creating New Media

4.6.1 Enjoying New Forms of Expression

As Jeff pointed out in his interview, “Middle school students are often more capable expressing what they don’t like rather than what they do like.” This matter of stating opinion becomes resoundingly clear as students are asked to do something they don’t want to do – often they claim this is due to some combination of boredom, tedium, or monotony, and while I too can confess to resisting a lesson a time or two in my childhood, I only wished I had the
opportunities afforded to the students of my participants. With the seemingly unlimited range of possibilities that using ICTs can give, it could be argued that students will never be at a loss for creative potential and that the subject of how we express ideas, facts and opinions should never again be boring. Perhaps, as Sam alludes, if teachers too tightly restrict the goals of creating new media in the classroom, or too narrowly confine the parameters of a lesson, students will find no more joy in working on computers or new media technologies and it will be no more rewarding than being stuck with a pencil and paper in their hands.

Sam explains lessons he’s seen other teachers share as being overly controlling of the student’s creative potential, “They are given more explicit instructions as to the purpose of their work: writing to a very particular audience, and their work must check a certain number of boxes as far as how the ideas are presented. Upon reviewing the answer, any deviation from audience or design equals negative evaluations on the effectiveness of the work.” His concern points to the fact that forcing strictly (teacher) defined audience and design parameters robs students of the creative license and critical foresight needed to build the media themselves. Since these are crucial components of Media Literacy (and elements that should be present in any literacy study), constricting the pathways to successful media design to a singular vision completely goes against the values of multimedia presentations, or learning multiliteracies.

The fact is, to deny the students’ creative freedom is more than just denying them the building blocks of multiliteracies; it is in fact taking away what has been a primary mode of communication for these digital natives. As Priya admitted:

Most of the kids are doing way more with the computer than I can do, from Photoshopping stuff and making their own movies and, even looking up how to do things – I had this kid in my class two years ago, every other day he’d come in with his guitar
and he’d learned some new song – never took a lesson, but just kept watching YouTube videos and teaching himself to play from watching videos. I mean, how can you argue that these kids aren’t learning from this stuff?

Of course there is learning and there are new forms of media expression that are being influenced by the media children are consuming; and “for sure when [Priya] lets them present in other ways [her students] have more fun,” but is this fun coming at a cost? On the flip side of her own argument Priya is quick to acknowledge her own concerns and admits that “it can be hard to keep them on task, and once they start working on media assignments it can be even harder to force them back into writing mode when I really need to seem them do that type of work.” Admitting some of his own concerns, Andy alludes to the necessity of “alerting kids to the risks involved in using technologies (bullying, surveillance, marketing) that they aren’t getting at home from parents.” He also sees that this is all the more reason to discuss these concerns in the classroom since it is an inevitable part of their future, and understanding how to build their voice for the future. Andy counters his fears:

Using tech in the classroom makes kids comfortable with tech outside the classroom, and forces them to stay current with everything around them. This is fundamental to their success in high school and post-secondary. The need to be computer-literate and media-savvy is absolute in order to stand a chance of landing a position in the workforce of the future.

If the value of creating new media is best wrapped in its potential for the future, it is important to recognize the current uses and valuable justifications for technology that are already commonplace within the professional arena. Shabaz believes that there are many parallels in what we see happening in many office spaces (where his wife works), and what the kids are
doing with technologies today. He feels that most students would be capable of stepping in and performing the tasks of many office-space professionals. More specifically, he feels children have a better sense of how to use the technologies seamlessly since they have never been without it. Children also tend to more clearly and quickly understand what utilities are available to them. Shabaz believes:

The greatest opportunities stem from the immediacy that technologies provide, be that in regards to information access as it happens, or even the ability to work in groups from anywhere. No longer do students have to get together to hash something out…they can now go on Google Docs and edit a project simultaneously, and communicate homework with each other through social media. More than once I have had students say that they were struggling with a math problem, only to turn up in my class not only with it solved but with an ability to explain their work after seeking help from peers online, or having those same peers direct them to helpful information or how-to videos online.

Students seem somehow drawn to this type of learning and discovery, as if motivated now to learn when learning goals or concepts were not made clear enough when they were first explained. Some have argued that this means students will pay attention less in their daily tasks, since they tend to assume that the information they need will always be available at a later time (in an often times more controllable format). These teachers tend to see it a different way, however, believing more completely that the efforts students are now making to extend their learning beyond the classroom is more indicative of the resilience of these students – an ability to bounce back from restrictive learning methods and learn at all costs. It is also possibly suggestive of a new function of these technologies that is rarely tied to our assumption of value in daily learning, namely: the motivation and engagement afforded simply by giving students the
medium of delivery that is more attuned to what they have grown up knowing or using outside the classroom.

4.6.2 On Task: Engagement and Motivation

Even in a classroom with students who have learning difficulties, Sam points out that when you give students “real-life reasons for their writing they come up with real-life solutions for their work.” He believes it is imperative to “start with real-life issues for lesson planning,” so that students feel that there is reason for using the technology in different ways. More often than not, he finds students’ resistance to work is not just because they have a problem with the tools teachers give them to do the job, rather the lack of connections teachers offer between what the students have been tasked with doing and their decision making in life. This means tying “real-life” values and perspectives from various outside sources to classroom lessons, and since, as Sam notes, when students use new media technologies “more information is readily available; divergent points of view are more accessible; and since finding information is easier, it makes learning more fun, thus more engaging.”

Andy, reiterated these sentiments and suggested that his students are always happier to share their ideas using multimedia since, as he notes, “writing ideas down isn’t nearly as engaging as making something, so kids get fired up and show energy and enthusiasm while building sites and media. They’re always eager to share what they did with classmates and other teachers.” It is really about ownership and pride. Students who have a personal investment in the product they create or a project they are a part of feel more connected to how is put on display and perceived by their entire audience; be they peers, teachers, or community members.

Recognizing this pattern, Priya admitted some teaching goals she’s yet to realize:
I really want to get the students into making their own movies and editing and everything. I’ve thought for years that teaching a whole class about the roles of making our own movie and how many different roles there are for students to engage in that type of project. It would take lots of little steps along the way. And the key would be taking everyone through the steps so that you can get them comfortable with the software and the processes of making work on the computers or using video cameras or whatever. There will be natural talents and eyes for the art that come from that, and the voices of students should probably be allowed to evolve to their own best strengths rather than me suggesting that this kid should have this one role – why not let them all film a little bit, and all take turns editing a bit of the larger picture. A whole class or group of classes or entire school maybe all working toward building something - with one common audience – who could be as big as the “global society” as we were talking about. I mean, why not, right?

Her ambitions seem to be driven by a passion, enthusiasm, motivation, and engagement with the potentials of this technology as much as her students. But the real value here is that Priya does so knowing that this type of activity is exactly what her students would love to sink their teeth into, and it would be a phenomenal way to connect a series of ideas to the larger picture, and address a larger audience. Also interesting to note is that many other teachers are also making strides to build upon similar ideas. Maybe not all are as grand as making a movie with the entire school, but each of them seems destined to consider audience and the potential reach of students’ voices in a whole new way. No longer are ideas of conscious learning stopping at the teacher’s desk, new media technologies are now spring-boarding dreams and ideas to audiences around the world.
4.6.3 Audience Addressed: Creating for Community and Global Awareness

It is one thing to package a set of ideas or hand in an assignment for an audience of one, but it requires a completely different set of strategies and a whole other level of consciousness to help students understand how to share their thoughts with a potentially global audience in mind. Sam believes “students must define their audience before they create their work, and therefore define what that audience is looking for (understanding the differences between peer and teacher audience, or in-school versus public consumption of media).” To build these definitions, we have to start small, and ultimately grow from the cognitive analysis of critical thoughts on a subject, to evaluating the more social and political implications of students’ work. Once students understand the significance of these ideologies they are much more capable of creating a product that displays full awareness of intentionality and audience. Recognizing this is not an easy task, each of the participants in the study had their own procedure for guiding their students understanding of best practices at this most critical juncture in creating new media.

Perhaps Jeff stated the group’s concerns best, noting “It can be a large endeavor to have students connect just within the school atmosphere. Conceding that, I try and always provide students with the opportunity to extend beyond the expectation. I’ve long been a fan of setting up exchanges/buddies with younger students in neighboring elementary schools.” He feels making that connection is an important step in opening up perspectives and extending the network of knowledge that his students hold within their frame of reference. “I guess it’s a matter of making sure they can see themselves and the other people around them in what they’re doing, or making,” Priya said of her own students.
Shabaz has a rather firm belief that the students must do a great deal of work to connect with their community and the communities around them before they could possibly hope to speak to or about that audience:

In order to help connect the students to community, they have to be involved and absorbed in the community around them. Many students identify their community strictly as the ethnic or religious community they are a part of. There are students living in the boroughs of Toronto that never venture beyond the blocks that surround them. On more than one occasion I have taken students downtown and watched shocked as they marvel at seeing the CN Tower for the first time. These students need to feel connected to something bigger than their own experiences. My program focuses on making students feel a part of the community by making them feel beholden and responsible to the community. This is done through non-academic community involvement (like babysitting nights, community clean up, local volunteering), as well as tours through the city to make it feel like their own (we’ve done Queen Street Graffiti walks, visited U of T, spent time at the Harbourfront, Kensington Market, Financial District, and that sort of thing).

While this concept of students’ understanding their place in the community around them is important for developing a greater sense of the foundations in critical pedagogy, creating new media for a global audience must eventually follow a set of strategies specifically tailored to the task. Andy encourages his students to compare and contrast similar assignments most of the time. “As we are building web sites we are looking at other sites to gauge what their peers might like to see. Also, we create focus groups where questions posed to kids in their class help them identify ways to target particular segment of population.” Shabaz has some similar strategies for building a greater understanding of how audience is decided upon, and how they are "pitched:
We analyze the concept of target markets: what are different age groups interested in? What do they want to buy? What do they consume, media wise? How can marketers of the product they buy reach them most effectively?” And when it came time to making sense of these questions, “We did a breakdown of Superbowl commercials in relation to who they were directed towards, and how much of the actual audience were from that targeted group.” Shabaz reiterates his encouragement toward students using logic and reason to analyze their own media. “They evaluate their own created work on the basis of a) is it true, b) is it believable, c) is my idea clear and d) is it entertaining. Quite often a and b would not be asked of the same media,” since one refers to non-fiction and the other to a fictional piece.

The more authentic the piece is, the more the students seem to attach themselves to the positive reflection of their work in the larger media sphere. Andy recounts,

Like I mentioned, we have done charity events with global focus and also did clothing drive for community agency called New Circles. The school wiki that covers all this work is seen by people all over the world. And I’ve had our kids present their tech projects and initiatives to other schools in our family of schools. I’m always looking for cool ideas to help our students feel connected as much as they connect others to them.

I reflect on this type of work with thought toward Priya’s dream of making a video with her class that she might share with the world. In her interview she compared the work her students have done and the extensive knowledge they have, with what it might take to reach the next level of speaking to a larger audience, with meaning and purpose toward social justice on a global scale. She admits,

Students know what YouTube is, a number of them have accounts and already share things on a global scale (even when maybe they shouldn’t), but they know the reach and
how to extend into it. We’re all aware that the big issue teachers and parents worry about is that safety, but working together as a class it would be much easier to control. Especially if [the project] is a bunch of little ideas coming together cohesively form a unified vision. We’d share that together, on the larger scale – but as one body, one class. To get them there I know it would take some focused writing of something that really speaks to an audience. I think that’s why I’ve been afraid of letting them go on the film project – I mean, that I’d be so critical of their work, or maybe they’d be so critical of their work, that they would never really create a product that they thought they could happily share with their larger audience.

So, if we teachers are that afraid of letting the guided work of our students go public, how are we ever going to build confidence in the students? It seems more likely that strength may just have to come from the students themselves, but we cannot blame them if it takes a little extra work to get them there. The patterns that suggest learning and thinking should look a certain way, and demonstrations of knowledge should look another, have been in place for far too long. It is no surprise that even when given a choice, one that seems at face value to be way “more fun,” “more engaging,” or “more inspiring,” the technologies and media creativity are tossed aside for the security of more simply writing it out.

4.6.4 Writing as a Safety Net

It could be that after all this time and effort to expand the realms of possible expression, students prefer writing, or it could be that this need to address an audience has them caught in the perception that an audience need always be addressed in a common way. Certainly educational practices have long suggested that a written essay is a preferred method of expressing an opinion on a subject. The majority of academic voice is only considered credible if we can look it up in a
library somewhere, and yet, this is changing. With online courses, and university professors posting entire lecture series online, we have seen a shift in what are acceptable standards for academic voice. Still, it seems that even today, more often than not, a written paper will be the common form for handing in assignments.

Discussing his students’ actions and how the product of their hard work is not always consistent with the goals they initially set for themselves, Shabaz concluded, “After many, many differentiated instruction workshops, I have learned two things:

1) Students love to be offered a choice in the way in which they present information. I have students making videos, websites, collages, paintings, dioramas, etc. By offering up the ability to present information in any format, you will often receive new and interesting approaches to old ideas

2) For some reason, though they have the best intentions, students invariably show up the day the assignment is due with an essay. They may have started with a totally unique and innovative approach, but in the end they just want to get it done and in. I bet your thesis is in the form of a written document…

And of course, he is right. Could this work have happened in another format? Perhaps, but there is something I can take away from this experience having written my way through it, and not simply submitting a website that summarized my findings and research. Perhaps I have a passion more in tune with Priya and her students, where “there are some kids who still seem to really like writing.” I think too, I can also fall in line with those “uncommon characters” in her class that “when given a chance, seem to enjoy getting dirty in ways that allow them to explore new things or new ways of sharing their creativity.”
While it would be hard to say for certain, without direct questioning of students or enough time to study the phenomena of their decisions, it seems Shabaz’s observations seemed the best fit to explain why some students (even when given the choice) still type up a paper instead of creating new media:

I think they are more engaged when they use new media technologies. Many of them have intense backgrounds with different software, and have the ability to shine, be it through graphic design, music production, video production, or web design.

On the other hand, I think students are more confident when they write their ideas. They have been trained since kindergarten to write down how they feel, and are constantly scared of the writing they will have to do in secondary and post-secondary school. They constantly seek affirmation of their writing prowess, and years of it being the only way, writing has become their safe way out.

If children are still somehow prone to hold onto more linear writing as some form of safety net, perhaps then we need to evaluate this process with one big step back from all the positives it seems there are in favour of the shift. Clearly, these interview participants are teachers who have tried to motivate their students with regular access and school tasks centred on the core of the children’s digital nativity, and yet even still (it seems) students have been programmed so fully to believe that writing is an “easier” or perhaps more succinctly comprehensive way to answer a problem in school. Even so, it seems necessary that we look at the resistance and limitation to implementing the use of these technologies in classrooms further, for it seems something may be amiss.
4.7 Limitations of Hope for Change

There has seemingly been an endless list of reasons that schools or teachers do not use new media technologies in their classroom, and while the earlier part of my research and the literature review covers these perspectives to a certain degree, it seems more valid to include the perspectives of the interview participants to cover this topic. Since these are the ambassadors for change, and the teachers who deeply understand the value and potential of these technologies, their voices are conceivably the best hope for suggesting changes that should be happening and at what level the problems are occurring.

From a single vision tied to an already perceived better, Jeff noted that he wished “cellphones were permitted at my school. I’m hoping that TDSB catches up with Peel and begins to promote the use of Smartphones in class,” to the more detailed list of what his school is lacking in terms of new media technologies, as Andy notes,

the WIFI connection at the school is [poor]. There are too many passwords for devices. The PCs we have are old and slow. The TDSB will not give us permission to update Java, Chrome, Internet Explorer or any primary software, so we always have to put work ticket in with the help desk. I had to wait two months for network support to be remotely installed. Of course the financial cost of constantly updating and upgrading the tech at school limits what we have and can do, so as a result we are always years behind industry standards and playing catching up. My best solution was begging manager at BestBuy for cheap digital cameras, routers and other technologies that could help get us by.

Keeping in mind, this list is detailed because Andy knows all the technology in his school. Many teachers are not even aware, and many schools have nowhere close to the volume of tools that are present at Andy’s school. It is a tough spot to start – conceiving of these difficulties in a
school where they have someone as technically proficient as Andy, it is hard to imagine the
difficulties that must be occurring in a place that does not have that expertise on hand.

But then, concerns related to accessibility do not end there. At a school where there are a
significant number of technologies available, teachers must be conscious of the lack of such that
students face when they go home. As Shabaz pointed out, “Not everyone in my class has equal
access, since I have several students with no access to a computer at home. We do not have
computers that we can sign out to those students, and internet would be an issue for them
regardless.” However, there are solutions that some schools are beginning to offer, Shabaz’s role
in the school has been pivotal in opening these doors, “We are lucky in our school to have an 8th
period open lab. The last period of the day the lab is open with a teacher slotted to support any
student requiring help. Students without home access can utilize this time to do research, type, or
access programs that other students might be working on from home. This does not even the
playing field, but is a good first step.”

On the other side of the city, where there is less concern about children having access to
the tools at home, it comes back to how frequently the teachers are accessing the tools, or
encouraging their students to do so. As Priya discussed the circumstances at her school, she
explains,

anyone can use them, it’s just a matter of signing them out for a specific period or block
of time, but I would say the two sets live in my classroom or the room [of the one other
teacher who uses them frequently] – and he’s really been trying to get other teachers to
use them, but there just haven’t been many other takers. I think a lot of the teachers at my
school are just used to doing things the way they always have. They all have a computer
or two in the classroom and their kids take turns on those computers, but they rarely
make use of the whole sets, probably because they’re not really doing anything that requires everyone on the computer at the same time.

Then once again, we must ask why? Why are teachers not taking advantage of what they have in the schools where they have it? Is there something they have seen that has dissuaded their passion or perhaps put them off the idea of using media technologies in the first place? Shabaz has a theory that too often when one or two people on staff start using technology regularly in their classes, it gets used to excess. Other teachers in the school start to see it as a “false dependency” on these technologies. He backs up his belief referring again to some new teachers or the entrenched technophiles already among the teaching profession who believe that using new media technologies in the classroom is the only way to teach. Shabaz believes,

This often leads to less meaningful uses of these tools. Just as we can’t use a single paintbrush when teaching a diverse class, we can’t use new media technologies alone. There are elements of non-tech related work that often get put aside that are important; whether it’s learning to take notes by hand, group work outside of cyberspace, or kinesthetic and spatial awareness that can only come from movement, we need to address the multiple intelligences of children and not get hung up on technology just because it is avant-garde.

He admits, however, that the other side of the fence is still more populated. There are far more teachers in any school who do not know how to use new media technologies with any great degree of proficiency and for the most part “the teacher providing the material must be well versed in the technology.” It is one thing to have a few technological specialists in the school, but they will not be able to serve the needs of every classroom. Shabaz continues,
as the tourist versus native argument goes, it is difficult for someone not abreast of the technology to try to teach someone who has an innate ability to work with the technology. Too often the school board pushes in new tech with little to no pedagogical and practical support.

This seems to be breeding fear in teachers and frustration in students, since neither has been able to meet regularly on a common ground, as Priya takes pause to wonder what’s happening in her school and why more teachers are not using what’s available to them, she claims,

I think a lot of people are scared by what they don’t know about or they just don’t see what they can do as being any better than what they’ve ever done. I don’t think that there are any limitations in the computers that stop them, more like limitations in their vision or limitations in them seeing past the work sheets they’ve been using for the past twenty-five years.

If these are limitations that are to be overcome, teachers like my participants are going to have to keep going strong with the work they have done. I believe other teachers need successful teaching with technologies modelled just as children need their learning with these technologies modelled throughout various lessons. The most effective use of new media technologies in the classroom is dependent on everyone being on board. It is not going to happen all at once, and there will surely be standout teachers and standout classrooms in a school, but only once the entire school works to build an operative program of technological utilization will the maximum potentials be realized.

Perhaps my participants need to frame the steps to their own successful use of technologies in a way that would speak to their colleagues. On the other hand, some teachers may be intimidated by the prospect of opening up critical thinking and especially critical
pedagogy in their classrooms if they perceive that to mean too much loss of control. No matter how effective they may believe a new media literacy program may be, if they do not buy into the cognitive processing behind critical thinking (often considered an abstract concept), or they believe the social, political and cultural frameworks behind critical pedagogy to be too extreme, having teachers buy in to these practices to enhance students’ effective use of media technology is likely to be a tough sell. But trying to be a little more optimistic, I believe there will be teachers who make the commitment and embrace the changes in their teaching practices so that their students become more consciously engaged members of society. Yes, this means a more horizontal relationships between teachers and students, alongside modes of exploration and communication that can be more difficult to control than a typical classroom, but can teachers really afford to not go there?
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction: Looking back and looking forward

This paper has taken many forms throughout its development. Ultimately its shape has been influenced by the ever-changing perspectives I have had in determining what stream of literacy best fit the focus of my concerns. My choice to focus on new media literacy was meant to address the engagement of students in literacy programs, and more specifically to understand what was happening in cases where teachers were making the extra effort to teach to children the way they want to be taught (e.g., Prensky, 2001). Holding the belief that students will thrive when given regular access to tools that can provide them the means to having a louder voice than they are commonly allowed to have (either within the classroom or more specifically when directed toward a single audience member of one teacher), I have sought to document what teachers believe are the best practices for helping students realize their potential to share their motivated and concerned voices far beyond the school walls.

This chapter discusses the findings from the interviews in context with the earlier research in the literature review, and aims to stitch together concepts that support the next steps for building effective new media literacy programs. To unpack these thoughts, this chapter has been divided into the following categories, Bridging the Digital Divide; Connecting with the Global Society; Teaching and Learning New Media Literacy; Implications and Recommendations; and finally, the chapter ends with the Conclusion. These ideas are both a reflection on this research and a summary of the strategies explored in this paper, together meant to give teachers and their students the best opportunity to enjoy, engage, and effectively use new media technologies in any elementary classroom.
5.2 Bridging the Digital Divide: Filling the gap with interactive discussions

As this paper recognizes, there are still many issues of accessibility when concerns related to technology integration come to the table. Even in classrooms where there is a computer in front of every child, there are discrepancies between the quality of one computer or its software compared to another. However, this research takes a greater stand, drawing on the position of David Buckingham who argues that the largest cause of the digital divide is not accessibility, but a divide of cultural or communicative competence. As he believes, “it’s not about do you or don’t you have a particular piece of technology, it’s about do you have the kind of cultural capital that’s required to use that technology?” (Buckingham, 2013, [Video file])

Getting to the real issue takes acceptance and understanding of the inevitable changes in the landscape of education. Teachers must recognize, as Shabaz has, that students “are more engaged when they use new media technologies,” and that all teachers must inevitably make the shift, at some point in time, to embracing the learning potential afforded by new media technologies. Technology of course, is not a panacea, in that it may just require extra work to bring the greatest benefits and the true realization of that “cultural capital” into the hands of children. But arguably, this understanding should have been addressed long before our society shifted toward the need for new media technologies in the classroom.

Some teachers may have a difficulty with this paper’s position of supporting critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 2000), believing that to suggest a shift in education is an over-politicized approach to teaching; but we must keep in mind that all teaching is political. Other teachers may take opposition to the idea of trying to bridge the gap between their traditionally indoctrinated views of teaching and an approach that is more open-ended and dialogical. But all can get there. None of the participant teachers for this research would consider the work they do to fall under
critical pedagogy, nor would they believe they have set up a critical classroom (e.g., Giroux, 1989; Apple, 1998). At the same time however, each of the teachers had in fact opened up conversations for critical reflection on many subjects, and subsequently developed practices and dialogical models of learning that were much more supportive of student identities and the connections that surround them.

Just as Shabaz has his students build an understanding of their “place within the classroom, the school, the neighbourhood, city, country, and world,” so too does critical pedagogy ask that students reflect upon how their personal experiences are represented (or not) in the world around them. As Henry Giroux (2011) points out, pedagogical shifts tend to emerge out of a struggle, and as teachers we must recognize that students are currently caught quite deeply within a particular type of struggle. While all around them, millions of media streams are screaming out about news, information, entertainment, politics (you name it), children are sitting in classrooms and they are still struggling to find a voice. It is within our power as teachers to provide new means for students to uncover and take hold of new approaches for authoring and publishing their concerns, connecting to broader audiences and purposes.

In some cases, the apprehension s remain fixed on the belief that opening up discussions in this way leads to a loss of control, but as Priya acknowledges, as teachers, sometimes we “just go along for the ride” as students explore their universe in their own creative ways. So then, this doesn’t need to be an intimidating proposition. Once we start framing critical pedagogy within the perspective of the connections and understandings that students are taking away from their inquiries on a particular subject, most teachers are likely to want that type of thinking and work done in their classrooms.
To bridge that divide, we must reflect on the value of *traditional literacy*, recognizing the basics of reading fluency and writing ability as necessary components of all higher learning. From there we can build an appreciation for studying digital literacy to establish a functional relationship with various technologies, just as we can find respect for the more modest intentions of media literacy as a strand in *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8, Language* document. It is here, however, when given the task of swimming through the information contained in the flooded pools of advertising and fast flowing rivers media that both teachers and students sometimes start to feel that they are drowning. It is also here, more than in most other subjects, that critical connections become the lifelines for navigating the knowledge flows of our global, and often over-mediatized, society. (Molden, 2007)

Education cannot exist in a silo, and we cannot expect children to focus *all* their learning on isolated packages of information. Learning in today’s fast-paced world of hybridized texts and mixed-media messages must involve a progressive motion with critical thinking strategies alongside an understanding of the depth and contextual significance of not only the information presented, but also the media technologies themselves. As Simon (2011) suggests, “rather than ‘autonomous’ tools, technology, like teaching, should be regarded as situated social practices (Street, 1995). These practices are inextricably shaped by social, political, cultural, and institutional contexts,” (p. 364).

Bridging the digital divide means more than making sure that there is technology used regularly in the classroom. And it is not enough to understand the far reaches or deeper implications of technology in a socio-cultural level; the value in knowing this, is more about building a foundation of discourse and discovery that empowers students so that they can recognize no medium (alone) should limit their abilities to connect or communicate effectively.
On the other hand, just because technologies are available, doesn’t mean that they need to be used at every moment of teaching. Shabaz highlighted an important point, reminding me that students and teachers must learn that new media technologies should only be used when they are the “best source for instructional purposes, not with the intent to specifically use technology,”

As Simon (2011) argues,

The greatest challenge of multiliteracies pedagogy may well be in addressing the ways that new technologies interpolate teachers and children, inviting new forms of the human problems that teaching always entails. Investigating human dimensions of multiliteracies pedagogy involves interrogating fundamental assumptions about children and their capacities, viewing their cultural legacies and languages as powerful resources for teaching and learning, embedded in social contexts and social relationships. This requires working against the idea that as teachers our task is to imbue children with literacy skills – those of the past, present or future – to instead learn with them, including about new opportunities and new struggles that technologies afford. (p. 365)

While the position of this paper rests on multiliteracies theories such as these, ultimately it has gone on to frame new media literacy as the critical point of deeper understanding within the media literacy strand (as most commonly presented in the Ontario Curriculum, 1-8: Language document). This is not to discount the value of other literacies, but instead to highlight this position as the one where teachers and students seem to either “get it,” or not. As Jeff admits,

We’re not doing nearly as much with media and computers as I would like. Maybe once every couple of weeks we get to look at them. But then sometimes it’s longer and the kids can’t even remember what we were talking about the last class. I think some kids just get
it though, no matter how much time you spend looking at an ad, or something on the internet. Others just think it’s cooler than sitting around staring at books.

So some of Jeff’s students get it, but does Jeff get it?

It must be an odd thing to admit, because Jeff would consider himself to be “a bit of a technophile,” but he believes he still hasn’t found his groove (yet) for teaching media literacy to its greatest potential capacity. He stepped away from one response briefly in his interview to comment that he “really wants to see what comes of this research, so that [he] can learn what to do with [his] class.” Then, maybe Jeff does not get the best practices for teaching media literacy, but he does see the importance of it, and he understands that he may need to reframe his thinking and his practices in order to help his students get the most out of the (limited) time they have with media technology.

Jeff realizes that almost all his students are comfortable using the technology, but both he and they need to find more purposeful and meaningful ways to connect that proficiency with the type of critical discussion they are having elsewhere in the class. To this end, the interview participants all supported the phenomena of critical thinking practices as a necessity for increasing student engagement and motivation in any subject area; but most specifically, all saw this as a necessary bridge connecting student identities and their pre-existing knowledge to that of the teacher, the surrounding community, and even the technologies within the new media literacy programs.

The digital divide survives only so long as teachers continue to teach from the other side of an entrenched pedagogy of education. This is not some war to be waged staking traditional learning goals against those supported by technology (e.g., Barrell, 1997). Our goal as teachers is to connect with our students and to do so we must remove the overly restrictive steps, rules and
codes (all serving a singular solution), and instead open up the dynamic potential of learning. While some teachers might argue that they are not well-suited to address the “programmed” learning needs that the “digital native” students in our classrooms demand (Prensky, 2001); a more critical framing of the more linear traditions within their class programming is a step in the right direction, and will serve to extend the roots of their students’ aptitudes for learning (e.g., New London Group, 1996).

Once a critical foundation is in place, students can begin to carve their own paths of knowledge acquisition, and negotiate through the streams of traditional learning methods, digital technologies and media that are otherwise perceived to be filling the gap. Students will find their own way to connect; teachers just need to give them the means to do so. But we must keep in mind, whether it is for literacy studies or any other subject, the use of computers and digital technology must never dominate the true purpose for their existence in the classroom: to support and inform students’ learning in dynamic ways, and to extend the reach of students’ voices beyond the school walls.

5.3 Connecting with the Global Society: Reaching out and going beyond

While students in Toronto may live in what Jeff referred to as the “microcosm of the entire world,” the fact is, there is so much more of the world to see. And even within Toronto there are many students and cultures that are poorly represented or even oppressed. It takes a bold step as an educator to be willing to explore as Andy has done with his students “through a variety of streams like news (al Jazeera), social media (Twitter, Facebook).” To ignore these components of our students’ everyday lives is to deny them the identities they carry around with them when they aren’t otherwise forced into being something else. As Prensky (2001b) points out, today’s students,
are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to “serious” work. (p. 2)

If we as teachers are going to help students understand the value of that “serious” work, we need to find ways of extending what they “like” making it something meaningful and purposeful that extends to a network beyond our classrooms.

It is not a difficult thing to get excited by the prospect of making something in school that is significant enough to share with the outside world. Whether you consider it as being for students or teachers, the idea of connecting class-built knowledge and experience to a larger audience is phenomenal motivation for extended learning. As was reflected in Priya’s hope to create a large film project with her students, the potential for “a whole class or group of classes or entire school” to work “toward building something – with one common audience – who could be as big as the global society,” is an exciting proposition, but also an intimidating one.

As Sam acknowledged, “students must define their audience before they create their work,” but how are they to do so for a global audience that they have never met, or know so little about? This returns us to a position of media consumers, instead of media creators. Only when students and teachers are able to comfortably negotiate the field of what media has to offer them, will they be able to capably give back themselves. But this is itself a frightening proposition for some teachers, since Internet safety and the well-being of students go hand in hand. It is here where media literacy becomes the pivot-point upon which teachers must carefully position themselves against years of programming and “likes.” This is the spot where some students may just head home at the end of the day with the mind to no longer be a kid.
Some critical pedagogy theorists believe this is a necessary step in a child’s development, but few would suggest that the reason for this need is a positive one. As Giroux (2010) discusses some of his greatest frustrations with media conglomerates, he notes,

Disney along with its researchers, marketing departments, and purveyors of commerce largely controls and services this massive virtual entertainment complex, spending vast amounts of time trying to understand the needs, desires, tastes, preferences, social relations, and networks that define youth as a potential market. Disney’s recent attempt to corner the young male market through the use of sophisticated research models, ethnographic tools, and the expertise of academics to win over the hearts and minds of young people so as to develop strategies to deliver them to the market as both loyal consumers and commodities indicates the degree to which the language of the market has disengaged itself from either moral considerations or the social good. (p. 414)

As Shabaz admitted, students “know the reach” afforded by media, and from about grade four on, most students recognize that there is some sort of bias to the advertisements they see plastered all around them. It is a deeper connection to bridge, however, when students realize that this media just might be there to deceive them. As Sam guides his students to consider “it’s important to look at what’s not there,” since just as often as not, there is probably something hidden behind the Disney castle that we as an audience do not get to see.

But the key here is exposing students to it – and inviting them to ask critical questions while they more deeply investigate these concerns for themselves. The best solutions come from seeing the problem from all angles, and if we do not take students all the way around the issues surrounding media influence, they will be hard-pressed to understand the depth of social, cultural, political and economic persuasions behind any message. As all the teachers that I
interviewed agreed, children will gladly engage in the conversations about unpacking media messages, but it rarely happens on its own. We must begin the dialogue that helps students articulate their position within many different contexts and communities, at a local and global level.

Once we give students perspective on these social, cultural and political frameworks, they are more capable of negotiating understanding on their own, and thereby able to position their own identities within the scope of the potential impact that any media or technology might have upon their lives. As happened in Shabaz’s class once his students started looking at the spin-off media related to Rob Ford’s actions, they students “suddenly found themselves viewing themselves more positively from a global level.” These connections are innate, but students do not always connect them innately.

In teaching our students to think critically about media, we have to follow Priya’s advice and make sure that the students can see themselves reflected in what we study. We have to connect their learning and their thinking to the real world, so that when they start producing their own content with the goals of extending the reach of their voices, they know who their audience really is. While Warschauer’s work was initially about connecting with other students in different parts of the world, he framed the importance within the ability for students to really know their audience, and to understand the types of inquiry, empathy and responsiveness it takes to communicate on those terms.

Warschauer (2006) noted that “writing for a real audience allowed students to focus on the readers and their perspective and level” (p. 72). Not surprisingly, Sam teaches with the same goals of connecting his students with a set of “real-life reasons for their writing,” so they can understand what purpose and meaning feels and looks like as they write for a particular audience.
Utilizing these strategies, we take students through the levels of comprehension and interactive experiential learning necessary for them to situate themselves well in a networked society. Having students who are able to filter messages that come at them from all directions and can just as capably synthesize positional arguments founded on the same principles are the valuable products of an effective new media literacy program. Teachers must be as excited as their students by the potential reaches of this type of persuasive knowledge, but we will only get there if we take the risk to tip the scales beyond the pivot point and be there to support our students as they begin to question exactly what identity they have purchased from Mr. Disney.

5.4 Implications for Teaching and Learning New Media Literacy

As I consider how this is all meant to take shape, and what implications beat at the heart of this research, I feel it is necessary to reiterate a quote from Henry Giroux (1989):

Students can be given the opportunity to address the question of how knowledge and power come together in often contradictory ways to sustain and legitimate particular discourses that define a notion of public good. This suggests everything from criticizing curricula content and classroom social leadership to state control. (p. 33)

We know that this is possible and that it is happening in classrooms. Shabaz may be ahead of the curve, but reflecting again on his classroom practices, I am happy to know that he holds his students learning and potential actions in such high regard:

Our inquiry model for this type of learning is through replacement: what if that was me in that situation? This works for both positive and negative situations, on micro and macro levels. It can be as simple as “Would I want someone treating my sister like that?” to as advanced as “If I didn’t agree with my country’s political ideology and felt it was against the people’s wishes, would I stand up against them?”
This teaching model is not an easy “flip to page twenty-four of your text”-approach. As research would suggest, children aren’t going to sit for that type of teaching much longer (if they are still sitting now). But then how do we get there?

I have seen a wide range of teaching models in the many classrooms of my volunteering and teacher candidacy, but a very few have ever leaned over the tipping point of critical pedagogy. In multiple teaching placements, I have gone into a classroom and been handed a text while being asked to “continue teaching from here.” In most cases however, it took very little prompting from me to get an associate teacher’s support in allowing me to set the text down for my time in the classroom. Surely my efforts were dismissed as the youthful enthusiasm of a beginning teacher, but my passion for teaching by way of interactive exploration and hands-on inquiry are the very reasons I have come to teaching after years of trying to build my own voice elsewhere.

I believe that just like learning, teaching should be fun and engaging. I want to feel motivated to explore subjects with my students, just as I want them to feel enthused about sharing their knowledge with me. If I am not engaged in regular dialogue and discussions with my students, then I have lost them – to their own devices, or the distractions of some other media- my role as a teacher must be to help them focus that energy and potential on something meaningful, even if it means stirring everything up, or stopping everything to listen to their voices and what has meaning to them.

To the extent of my experiences, I have yet to see a student who has no interest in media. Whether it is video games, social-media, television or even back to books (that are still media, and that certainly have messages), there is always a point of access to connect with a student through some type of media. Accepting that, the question returns as to how we are to best engage
in the dialogue and have students shift their perspective from one of passive consumers to one of critical creators of new media?

The following figure from Chen, Wu and Wang (2011) helps frame the transition well:

![Figure 1. Transitioning from passive consumer to critical creator of media content (p. 85).](image)

It can seem all too easy for students to sit back and rest on their ability to access and understand media content at a textual level, or for us as teachers to believe that teaching to that level is all we owe to media literacy. But teaching to that end is like suggesting students do not need to learn to write, as long as they can read. As the chart above moves toward “Prosuming media literacy,” we can think of this as the point where students might know how to use the technology on a basic level (to take a picture or send a message), or to compare this again to writing progression, this is the point when students might know how to write, but their work lacks depth, continuity, persuasion or purpose. As teachers, we need to get them to that level by helping students understand what is necessary for them to share their opinions and ideas, and to
participate in all discourse communities, be they text-based or media-rich environments. (Chen, Wu, Wang, 2011)

When we have students not writing as well as we would like them to, we make it a goal to teach those students how to improve their writing and to help them to that point of proficiency where they are able to effectively write what they want to write. Somehow, teachers tend to think that the use of or watching of media is enough, and that to spend multiple lessons learning how to create media-rich content is either a waste of time or somehow just not possible in an elementary classroom. But media literacy must serve the same intents and purposes of traditional literacy, and ultimately, as was corroborated by my participants, when we start showing students what they are really capable of creating, students will want to learn how to build that type of proficiency in media literacy. And when we further examine the work that has influenced so much of their lives and identities, students will want to expand on their potential by moving on to that more critical understanding of how to create socially conscious media content that has value on a global scale.

There are still many concerns that focusing too much on media literacy or education that is filtered through the lens of networked information obfuscates the more crucial learning that should be taking place in classrooms. However, we cannot hold on to these technologically deterministic views so firmly as to suppose that “computer applications such as web browsers alter people’s perceptions in subtle ways that undermine their ability for higher level thinking,” (Charters, 2004, p. 37). Even if we yield to William Kist’s views of teaching “new literacies” in a school environment as possibly forcing them to become “dominant literacies,” (2004, p. 7), like Kist, we must recognize that the dominant literacy need not suggest a negation or devaluing of any other literacy. Studying media literacy does not mean we stop studying other subjects or
other strands of the language curriculum, but it does mean we may start discussing them in different ways.

5.5 Conclusion: With a little help from my friends

Teaching new media literacy carries with it a set of requirements very close to teaching any language art, in that students must first learn to consume, analyze and organize information on a very textual level before they can start to evaluate and synthesize their own texts. These cognitive processes of knowledge and skill development carry over to almost any subject, and therefore, we cannot view the need for this type of thinking in new media literacy as an obstacle. This is the core of critical thinking and teachers should have this in mind as they encourage students to approach their learning of any subject with a set of meaningful goals in mind.

Once students are able to experience that negotiation of understanding, and realize that anything they face can be examined with the same degree of scrutiny, they are well-positioned to face a world of information. Students may realize within this phase of development that their own experiences and knowledge suddenly have a different value, and that they too deserve to be heard among the many other streams of information. They may even go so far as to start reaching out and creating texts and media of their own, to share what they deem to be an important reflection of their identity. But what happens if they do so blindly? How does that look when these children start yelling their own opinions before they have really learned how to listen to the opinions of others around them?

The role of media literacy in the language curriculum is to help students shape their voices, as much as it is to help them develop the means for sharing it. Only by a critical analysis of the social, cultural, political, and economic impacts of messages can we frame the voice of one within the voices of many. Critical pedagogy seeks to provide the means for students to
empower themselves – it is a way to embolden the oppressed voices of children who have for far too long been asked to stay silent, or speak only when spoken to. And it does so, quite often, by simply listening. Under a critical pedagogical model for new media literacy, children are no longer producing text in a linear format dedicated to one teacher. Instead, they are invited to position their views and experiences within the global society, and to share their ideas and voices with any audience of their own choosing.

In its own unique way, the writing of this research paper has become my own model for critical pedagogy. Having experienced the developmental growth of a basic idea, the more I tried to connect my own knowledge to that of the educational theorists around me at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the more I found the dialogues opened up and an even deeper connection to my inquiry was possible. For me, working toward a meaningful Master of Teaching Research Project meant that it would not be enough if I only uncovered a set of data to answer a personal dilemma, rather I had to extend my research far enough that my findings had purpose beyond my own learning. Having taken this critically pedagogical journey this far, I see now just how much further this learning I have done can potentially reach. And yet, despite that view, I have also realized just how much more there is out there for me to uncover. I now seek to continue research in critical media studies with hopes of creating an even more extensive set of knowledge with which students and teachers might feel more empowered to find a connection and bridge the digital divide in creative, meaningful, purposeful, and most importantly, fun ways.

With a little help from my friends and a lot of critical thinking to guide my steps, I move forward as a beginning classroom teacher, and I recognize that these practices may not always be easy to control. But it will be fun. It will be daring. It will be that which motivates me to get up every day and head into the classroom where my students are bound to be waiting with a
thousand new questions and challenges that we might explore together as students and teacher. This dialogic exchange will therein feed my goal of lifelong learning and inspire my deeper curiosities in many things, new media included.

From here, there is much to learn, and many people from whom to learn it. In the duration of this paper’s evolution, hundreds of new theories for best practices have emerged, and the only way to truly experience those is to live them; to try them; to be daring enough to take my students past that critical tipping point of engagement and dig in as deeply as possible to the boundless potential of new media literacy. This is not where my journey ends; rather, this is where the next step begins.
REFERENCES


Toronto: Ministry of Education.


Appendix A: Interview Questions

Hello ________________, and to put it in on record my name is Ryan Heimpel, and I am a Masters of Teaching student at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto. I first just want to thank you for your participation in this interview. All data collected from our discussion here today will assist my research for my Masters of Teaching Research Project (referred to as the MTRP in our program), and information that you share here today will be kept in my confidential and secure care. Any personal identifiers that you may use within the interview will be taken off the record and any references I make to your contributions will be mentioned under a pseudonym to protect your identity and personal interests.

The topic we will be discussing here today will centre on media literacy and what technologies your students are exposed to regularly in your class schedule. I am going to be asking you fifteen (15) questions and the interview should take approximately 35-45 minutes to complete. I would like to record our conversation so that I might refer back to this interview with accuracy as I continue my research. Do I have your consent to do so?

I would also like to remind you that you have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time; up to the time my work is published. If you have any questions or concerns, or feel a need to contact me after the interview, you may do so at the phone number or e-mail address provided on the consent form. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background of Participant:
- How long have you been teaching?
- What range of grades or specialties have you taught?
- How frequently are you using new media technologies (computers, tablets, cellular phones, perhaps gaming systems or other creative devices) in the classroom?

General Classroom Practices on Critical Thinking:
- How do you help students understand their role in a community (classroom, school, neighbourhood, city, or global society)?
- What types of critical inquiry might you encourage in this type of activity?
- How might you model critical thinking practices in your teaching?
- What do exercises or activities in critical inquiry typically look like in your classroom?
- What different practices do you encourage for critical literacy (when students read books or other types of texts)?
- How do you encourage students to bring that critical thinking into the work they create?
On Media Literacy:

- What does the media literacy strand look like in your classroom?
- How often would you say your students are engaged with other media?
- How often do you teach lessons using new media technologies?
- How do you (or how does the school) deal with accessibility and equity factors – does everyone have access to the same technology?
- What are the limitations of using new media technologies in the classroom?
- What opportunities are created by using new media technologies in the classroom?

Critical Media Literacy:

- How are students in your class encouraged to examine the meaning of media messages?
- What do you do to help students reflect upon how media represents them?
- How might you carry this over to media representations of the community around them?
- How do your students explore media depictions of particular groups?
- How might you help students understand that media is directed at a particular audience?

Creating New Media Literacies:

- How are students taught about addressing audience with their own work?
- How often are students encouraged to share their work in a way other than writing?
- Would you say students are more confident and engaged when they write their ideas or when they share them using new media technologies?
- How might you help students connect their work to the community around them?
- How far are you willing to push your students in connecting their ideas to a larger community than the school atmosphere?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Date: ___________________
Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying The Effective Use of New Media Technologies in Elementary School Classrooms for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Susan Schwartz. My research supervisor is Dr. Rob Simon. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a forty-five (45) minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

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Instructor’s Name: Dr. Susan Schwartz
Email: susan.schwartz@utoronto.ca
Research Supervisor’s Name: Dr. Rob Simon
Email: rob.simon@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can refrain from answering any question within the interview and that I may withdraw any responses at any time before publication of the study without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Ryan Heimpel and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________

Date: __________________________