

# Introducing Media Literacy to Undergraduate Students

Amy Saxton  
University of Hawai'i at Hilo  
200 W. Kawili St., Hilo, HI 96720  
U.S.A.  
saxton@hawaii.edu

**Abstract:** Despite the pervasiveness of media into all aspects of most peoples' lives, many people still perceive "media" as only television ads and newspaper articles. The truth is that media is all around us all the time, impacting us in ways we don't, but should, recognize. This instructional module was designed to introduce undergraduate students to the concept of "media literacy," or of being aware how ubiquitous a presence media has in our lives. The web-based module used pre-, embedded, and post-assessments, videos, images, and narrative to introduce media literacy. Pre-assessments showed that students had minimal pre-existing knowledge of media literacy and post-test results showed an improvement in understanding of the material presented. Most of the responses to the three open-ended post-test questions were informative and positive. This study shows a need for media literacy education and this researcher hopes to market this tutorial to instructors and students in all subject areas.

## Introduction

With everything that undergraduate students must focus on, why should we consider introducing something new? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, education is no longer confined to the classroom and the subjects taught are no longer self-contained. Education is becoming more cross-disciplinary, with information and knowledge from one area weaving into others. It is the responsibility of educators to "promote people's capacity to simultaneously empower and protect themselves and their families as everyday lives become more saturated and enmeshed with information" (Aspen, 2010, p. ix). According to Aspen (2010), educators need to equip students with the ability to transfer their formalized education to real life:

"...it is vital that formal education begin to offer a bridge from the often insular and entertainment-focused digital culture of the home to a wider, broader range of cultural and civic experiences that support their intellectual, cultural, social and emotional development" (p. 25).

In 2009 the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy published a report *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age* which recognized that "people need news and information to take advantage

of life's opportunities” (Hobbs, 2011, p. 14) and suggests that “media and digital literacy education is now fundamentally implicated in the practice of citizenship” (Hobbs, 2011, p. 14-15).

The Knight Commission report (2009) lists 15 recommendations in three broad categories for healthy, democratic, informed communities. The second category is "Enhancing the Information Capacity of Individuals" which advises that "people need tools, skills, and understanding to use information effectively" (p. xvii). Recommendation six of the Knight Commission report (2009) addresses media literacy directly by recommending the integration of "digital and media literacy as critical elements for education at all levels through collaboration among federal, state, and local education officials” (p. xvii).

The Knight Commission report also warns "schooling that fails to provide digital and media skills threatens to leave {students} at a profound social, economic, and cultural disadvantage" (p. 46). Other authors have also warned that "young people continue to experience disparities in access to digital media tools, resources, and skills" (Tripp, 2011, p. 330). Tripp (2011) provides ways in which libraries can help bridge the gap and assist students with developing the skills necessary to interact with media.

Although Mookini Library has a well-used library skills tutorial which all University of Hawai‘i at Hilo and Hawai‘i Community College students in English 100 and equivalent classes must complete, the tutorial does not include a media literacy component. The content of the library skills tutorial has been tweaked as book and journal article databases, access methods, and searching strategies have changed, but the essential concepts are nearly the same as in the original tutorial begun in the learning management system (LMS) WebCT many years ago and which was simply migrated to Laulima, the LMS currently used by the UH system.

A web-based instructional module was developed to introduce the concept of media literacy to undergraduate students. This module was designed to be an introduction only, not an in-depth exploration of the subject. The effectiveness of the module was anonymously tested by undergraduate students in an Introduction to Popular Culture course.

## **Background**

Unfortunately, “media literacy” is one of those phrases that has different meanings to different people. Potter (2010) lists more than 20 definitions from scholars and citizen action groups in a variety of subject fields and raises three main issues that highlight the problem with establishing a definition: what is meant by media, what is meant by literacy, and what is the purpose of media literacy.

This researcher compiled a definition of media literacy for this tutorial based on the most frequently encountered concepts and phrases. As described on the Introduction page of the tutorial, “media literacy is a set of competences that enable people to access, analyze,

evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of media including print and electronic, words and images, video and audio.” In the assessments, this is abbreviated to “media literacy is a way to understand and interact with the world.”

Numerous frameworks are available for teaching about media, including the TAP (text, audience, production) method described by Considine (2009) and the MAPS (mode, audience, purpose, situation) protocol described by Rodesiler (2010). Several sources recommend variations of the method that addresses the who, what, why, and how of media literacy, including the Center for Media Literacy and the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (Aspen, 2010). Because of the prevalence of this question cluster as well as their ease for remembering, this researcher chose to structure the module around these common journalistic questions.

While the focus on media literacy is increasing (Aspen, 2010), a quick web search showed few media literacy tutorials at educational institution websites, although this could be due to the tutorials being behind login screens in course management sites like Lulima. The few publicly-accessible tutorials looked many years old and were not inspiring. This module was designed to grab the short attention spans of undergraduates by using images, videos, and short chunks of text.

## **Methods**

A web-based instructional module (<http://medialiteracytutorial.weebly.com>) was created using the Weebly website-authoring tool. The module contained brief text explanations and an image or video example for each of the seven sections (Introduction, Where?, Who?, What?, Why?, How?, When?). The content was deliberately kept short in deference to the short attention spans of many undergraduate students.

Tests were created using Google Forms and embedded into the module. The results were automatically gathered into spreadsheets for data collection.

The module was divided into eleven pages: an explanatory welcome page; the pre-test to gauge pre-existing knowledge; a page introducing the concept of and a definition for media literacy; one page for each of the who, what, how, etc. questions; the post-test (called Final Review to lessen anxieties); and a thank you page which solicited additional comments.

Figure 1 below shows part of the tutorial home page, including the layout structure of the tutorial in the green navigation bar at the top of the page.

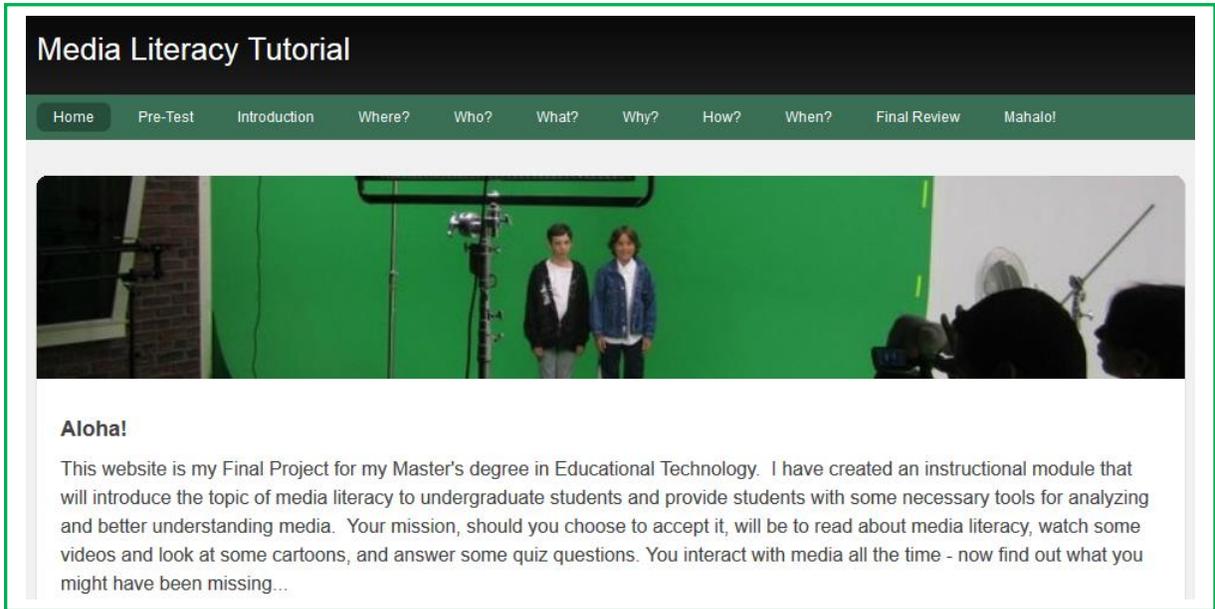


Figure 1. Media literacy tutorial home page.

Figures 2 and 3 below show sample pages from the tutorial. Figure 2 shows the Where? page with an image example in the content. Figure 3 shows the What? page with an embedded video as example.



Figure 2. Media literacy tutorial Where? page.

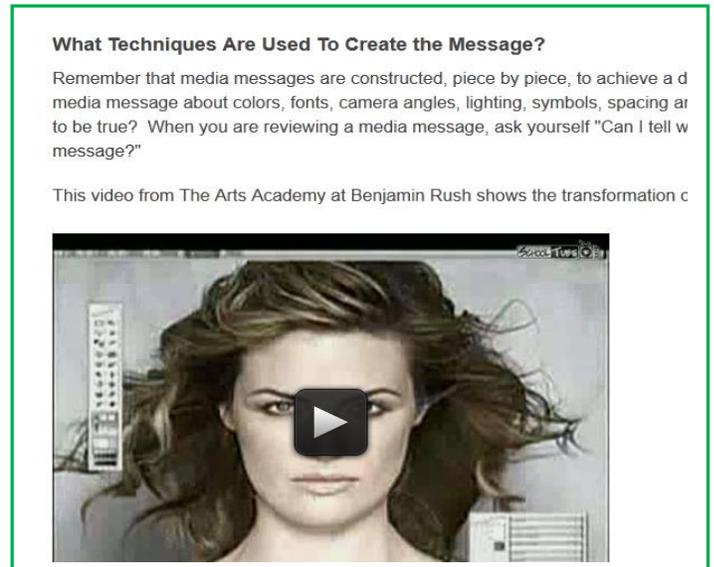


Figure 3. Media literacy tutorial What? page.

Thirty-nine students in two sections of a UH Hilo English course, Introduction to Popular Culture, were asked to evaluate the module. Participants completed a pre-test consisting of two demographic, one multiple choice, and six true/false questions. The test questions embedded into each component of the module were identical to the pre-test questions. The post-test true/false questions followed the same structure as the pre-test, with different, but parallel questions; the post-test multiple choice question used the same choices, but in a different order. The post-test also included three open-ended questions: What three things have you learned about media literacy? What two things do you still not understand about media literacy? What one thing would you change about this media literacy tutorial?

Before participants began the pre-test, they were instructed to use a random number generator and input that number in both the pre-test and the post-test to track the participant's responses while maintaining anonymity.

## Results

Evaluating the module was a combination of comparing pre-test and post-test results and reviewing comments from the open-ended questions.

Fifteen participants completed the pre-test, but only 11 completed the post-test. Results showed that 60% of initial participants did not have pre-existing knowledge of media literacy (figure 4) and that only 20% of initial participants had previously participated in a class that included media literacy (figure 5).

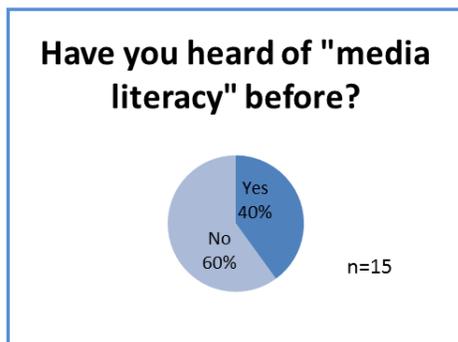


Figure 4. Demographic question one.

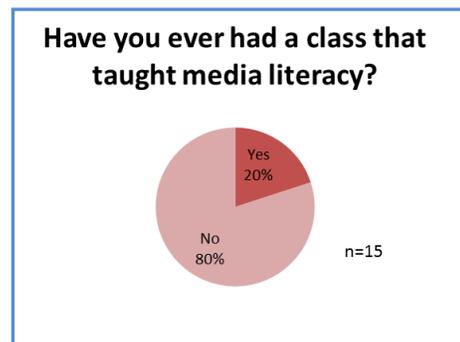


Figure 5. Demographic question two.

Post-test results showed some improvement in understanding of the material presented, with more questions answered correctly on the post-test than the pre-test (figure 6).

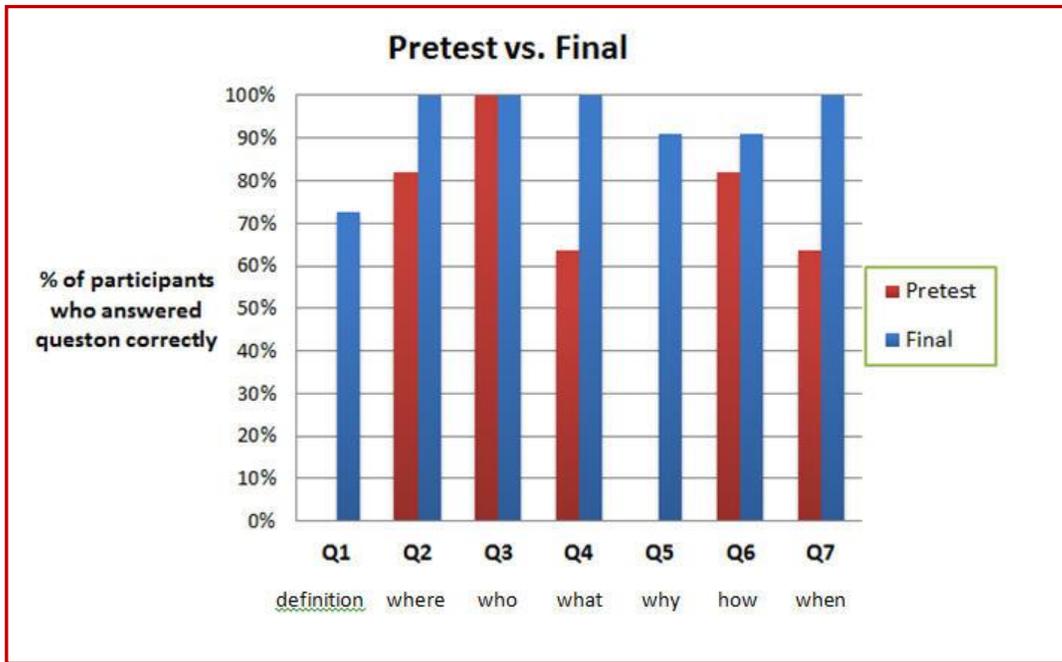


Figure 6. Answers by question.

All participants had an increase in the percentage of questions answered correctly on the post-test (figure 7). There does not appear to be any correlation between level of increase and whether a participant had heard about or had a class about media literacy before.

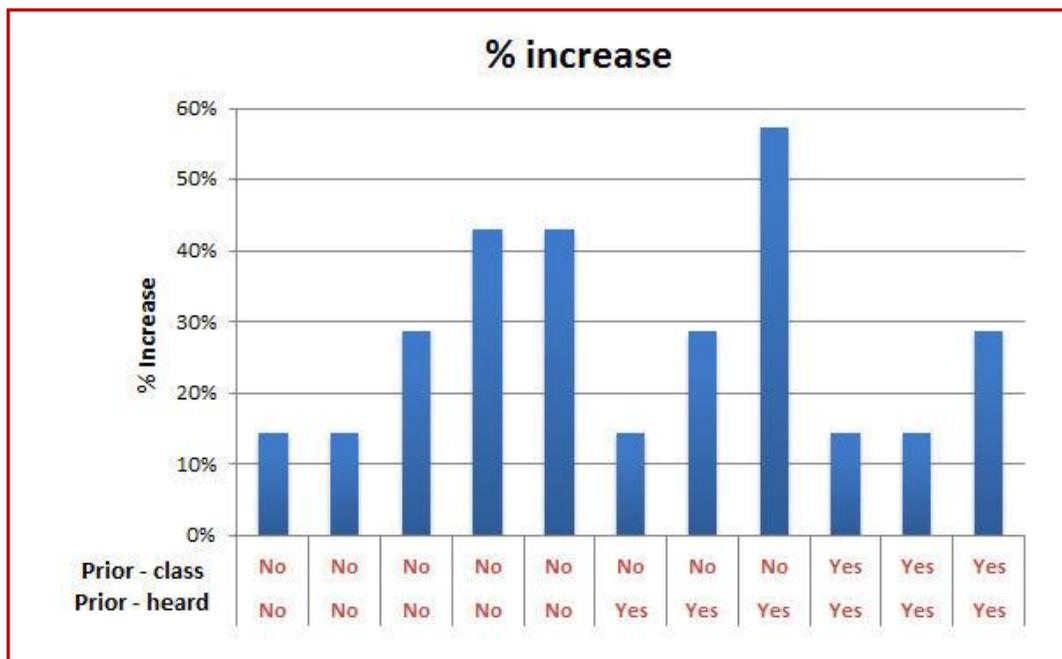


Figure 7. Answers by participant.

This researcher was particularly pleased with the number and thoughtfulness of the answers provided to the three open-ended questions at the end of the post-test, some of which are provided here.

What three things have you learned about media literacy? (9 responses)

- Three things I learned were media literacy is always around, every one perceives messages differently, and media messages are everywhere even when you don't notice they are.
- Literacy involves creation as well as consumption of media. Every message has a purpose to influence or instigate a response from the viewer. News agencies are not exempt from promoting biased opinions.
- It is very attention grabbing technique, it's excessive, though most advertisements in media are short they are increasingly impacting both consciously and unconsciously.
- I learned how much there really goes into altering images and that there is usually a certain kind of people behind each media message that is out there.

What two things do you still not understand about media literacy? (5 responses)

- I still don't understand how this isn't studied more even at a younger age since children experience {sic} media just as much or even more than adults. I also don't {sic} understand how we can prevent ourselves from being effected so much by it.
- Majority of the media techniques to grab others attention and why it is that viewers feel the need or are severely impacted to go and but into the advertised products.
- What it really does and how it affects people daily.

What one thing would you change about this media literacy tutorial? (8 responses)

- It seems ironc {sic} but maybe use some of these media appeals to teach this. Meaning bright letters and fonts and even more representations of it and using the lesson as an example itself?
- I would change nothing. This media literacy tutorial was very informative and I learned a lot :)
- Nothing, it's a great and simple tutorial (easy to get through), it's not too long, and was quite interesting
- Make it a little more challenging.

## **Discussion**

The multiple-choice question which asked participants to choose a definition of media literacy proved the most difficult, with no participant answering correctly on the pre-test and three still answering incorrectly on the post-test. All participants had an increase in the number of correct responses on the post-test compared to the pre-test. No participants answered a question incorrectly on the post-test that had previously been answered correctly on the pre-test (a common occurrence in the library's current information

literacy tutorial, although this could be due to the relatively simplistic nature of this media literacy tutorial compared with the more comprehensive nature of the information literacy tutorial).

## **Conclusion**

This paper reviewed the process of creating and evaluating a web-based module to introduce media literacy to undergraduate students. Based on the lack of both pre-existing knowledge and classroom experience with media literacy that participants indicated, a tutorial such as the one described here is necessary to familiarize students with being media literate. The improvement shown from pre- to post-test by every participant indicates that the module was successful.

This researcher hopes to revise this tutorial and make it available for any University of Hawai'i student, replacing the random number generator with the school's authentication login. In this way, the tutorial can be promoted as an additional educational tool, with the ability to send student responses to the course instructor. Although the target population for this project was students in a particular English course, the tutorial can be utilized by students in other subjects, and may even be useful for high school students, considering that many undergraduates only recently left high school themselves.

The influence of television was wonderfully illustrated by the noticeable increased demand for L. Frank Baum books that libraries experienced after the 1956 television broadcast of *The Wizard of Oz* (Jacobs, 2010). In today's infinitely more media-rich society, students need to know that tech savvy doesn't necessarily lead to the "ability to think critically about the words, images, and ideology youths encounter in modern media messages" (Considine, 2009, p. 72). Students don't realize that tech savvy doesn't automatically mean tech smart, and it is the responsibility of educators to begin working with students to remedy this deficiency, or students may never realize this lack in their tech arsenal.

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