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Issues in Applied Linguistics

Title

Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English

Permalink

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Journal

Issues in Applied Linguistics, 17(2)

ISSN

1050-4273

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Publication Date

2009

DOI

10.5070/L4172005118

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Peer reviewed

Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English by
Renee Hobbs. New York: Teacher's College Press; Newark, DE:
The International Reading Association, 2007, 190 pp.

Reviewed by Myrna Goldstein

Are You in Your English File?® Second Language Learning Research Center,
Milan, Italy

This book, written by national expert in media literacy education and communications professor at Temple University, Dr. Renee Hobbs, is a highly scientific, reflective and exhaustive account of the inception and outcome of one year of a pioneering project in Grade 11 high school media literacy in Concord, New Hampshire. The project, already in its ninth year, was created by teachers with the help of Hobbs. The project's goals focus on empowering students to effect meaningful social change by developing the skills to receive, decipher, analyze, and put to productive and creative use the daily media bombardment that all of us face. Hobbs' research goal is to use micro- and macro-analyses to lead to generalizations about the usefulness of media literacy within the context of English language arts education.

The book is written in a scientific but quite readable, down-to-earth style. Therefore, the information it contains is highly accessible for all types of professionals interested in the topic, including those who may be interested in conceiving a similar program in their own institutions, but perhaps may not be interested in pursuing scientific research.

This volume, a joint publication effort of the International Reading Association and Columbia University's Teachers College Press, traces the project's development and outcome, capturing the complex kinds of learning that students experienced. The in-depth research includes valuable quantitative and qualitative data including over 700 pages of teacher and participant interview transcripts, classroom observations, four handwritten field notebooks, and nearly 200 different samples including student writing, videos, lesson plans, and assignments. The qualitative data was used to help Hobbs understand the contextual details of local practice, and the quantitative data was examined in order to better comprehend the program's impact on student performances, attitudes, behaviors, and literacy practices. Hobbs gathered quantitative data from both Concord High School and a matched control group school to map changes in students' interpretation of media texts, in print, visual, electronic, and audio formats. The research included 200 variables culled from nearly 400 students at two points in time, resulting in almost 16,000 pieces of data. Sixteen questions about four focused categories served as the inquiry springboard: teacher, students, program, and community. For example,

the data contrasts how colleagues and school administrators versus parents and community leaders respond to media literacy education. Hobbs also examined how students responded to the program, including if and how their attitudes, literacy skills, motivation, confidence and identity development were affected. She also investigated the effects on the relationship between teachers and students and whether or not what was learned could be successfully transferred to non-academic environments. In addition, Hobbs looked at the effects on literacy instruction of teacher attitudes, skills, behavior and knowledge, examining how such instruction affects instruction in other subjects.

There are two generous appendices: One outlines in great detail the mixed-methods research design and qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The other provides a detailed list of English 11 curricular resources including books, videos, films, print media, radio and TV media, and websites. There are also nine pages that outline the references Hobbs used, in addition to an Index that charts cross references – for example, “All Things Considered (NPR Program)” cross referenced with “National Public Radio”. Table A.1 in the Research Design and Methodology Appendix gives an example of the data analysis. It compares the Concord and control group communities in terms of population, family structure, social class, father’s occupation and characterization of media exposure at home (e.g., the number of televisions and computers, and cable TV, newspaper and magazine subscriptions). Parental occupations were coded using U.S. Department of Commerce categories. Hobbs found that in both populations media consumption was similar.

Fortunately, this book can also serve as a manual. Hobbs provides valuable advice to researchers interested in pursuing similar inquiries – especially about enhancing the face validity of media-analysis instruments, the moderate usefulness and precision of measuring comprehension and media-analysis variables, and the experimental elements that offer a higher degree of precision in consistently producing results that may be replicated. In other words, not only is Hobbs presenting her skillful analysis, but she is also interested in encouraging further research in this area. With this book, she has given colleagues a solid foundation and model from which to work not only with her topical imprint, but also her thorough methodology.