

# Media Literacy as Timeless Learning

## ON THE PATH TO HOLISTIC MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

BY CARLY STASKO

AT AGE SIXTEEN I MADE MY FIRST ZINE. I DID IT BECAUSE IT SEEMED FUN, DIFFERENT AND A LITTLE MISCHIEVOUS. IT WASN'T AS IF I HAD SAT DOWN AND SAID, "HMMMM, SEEMS LIKE THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MEDIA IS DOING A REAL NUMBER ON MY SELF-CONFIDENCE. I KNOW! I'LL RECONTEXTUALIZE THOSE IMAGES AND AFFIRM MY PERSONAL WORLD VIEW IN A ZINE!" THAT LEVEL OF DECONSTRUCTION WOULD HAVE TO WAIT FOR LATER.

—Carly Stasko, author of *Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms*

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper I describe key personal and professional experiences which led me to develop a Holistic Approach to Critical and Creative Media Literacy education. It is a first attempt to outline just how universally applicable media literacy is, and just how instrumental it proved to be for my own survival. In fact, it helped save my life.



This short paper is an introduction rather than a conclusion because I am very much at the beginning of a new journey, still healing and finding a new identity in a changing media landscape. I hope it is an important original contribution to developing a new framework for key strategies that extend media literacy by revealing its truly universal aspirations and applications. But of course my hope is not only academic. I hope others will find the ways and means to transform media literacy in order to connect with their own most pressing challenges. I hope you will look for areas of your own empowerment and draw from them in your own teaching. While one of the primary goals of media literacy is to encourage student empowerment, sometimes it's also important—though uncomfortable—to look for our own areas of empowerment and healing as educators, so that we can find our own voices. I will for now begin what I envision here as a larger project that I will continue to pursue by sharing my story—a story about my mind, my media, my environment and my body.

## THE SHIFT

All my life I had one way of explaining my attraction to media literacy, and this story has defined (even confined) my identity. As a teenager I found that media literacy helped me empower myself. But something happened a few years ago that disrupted that story. It didn't invalidate it, but rather cast my own personal narrative in a new light. In fact, it dramatically changed my relationship with media itself. I want to share with you my story of learning as well as a call to action.

I was first drawn to media literacy through Toronto-based 'zine publishing and culture jamming, driven by my own need for self-expression and civic engagement. I was a young "turbo chick" feminist, a 'zinester, and a culture jammer (Stasko, 2001). Culture jamming is the creative and subversive act of 'detournement', when media activists remix the language of advertising to challenge the consumer ideals and stereotypes presented in mass media in order to present an alternative narrative. Culture jamming can involve climbing up on billboards and changing their text, to creating tailored stickers to alter the message of bus-shelter ads – in all circumstances the act is playful, critical and humorous and yet addresses serious issues. As a young culture jammer I wanted to present an alternative vision to the stereotypes and images in advertising, and to reclaim the public space in my environment which had become dominated by commercial rather than community messages.

Later, I founded the Youth Media Literacy Project (YMLP) through which I have visited numerous schools, campuses and community centers across North America and contributed to the development of innovative curriculum and course work material. I have led workshops on 'zine making, street art and social change, subvertising and media deconstruction, student activism and globalization.

Through my earlier experimentation with DIY media production and subversive media jamming,



ranging from billboard liberation to public interventionist theatre, I learned to engage with media through a form of empowering play. This profoundly impacted how I view media literacy and pedagogy. I see play and process at the core of media literacy learning because the media context is continually shifting and students are most empowered by skills that can help them engage with media in an adaptive manner. I often returned to the metaphor of jamming and the three meanings of jam: jamming the machinery, jamming as a form of improvisation, and jamming as a way of preserving sweet things. Similarly I saw media literacy in action as a means of challenging mechanizations of authority and oppression, improvising with symbolic cre-

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activity, and finally, as a means for students to make themselves heard through the creation of a new culture, new narratives and new interpretations resulting from critical and creative engagement.

Little did I know how such skills would continue to help me in challenges that lay ahead for me. These skills originally developed to empower myself and subsequently my students, later helped save my life. The method (jamming) didn't change, but the medium did. First I jammed billboards, and then I jammed my own body. I discovered the ME in MEdia.

## JAMMING CANCER

A few years ago I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a form of cancer that often affects young people, and which fortunately has a very high success rate from treatment. It was while in the hospital in the early weeks of my healing journey that my then colleague (and now fiancé) told me that I had to try to culture jam cancer. He said, "There's got to be a way you can jam this Carly. If anyone can figure out how to culture jam cancer Carly, it's you." Shortly after the diagnosis I was undergoing tests in the hospital, and happened upon a story in *Bust* magazine about Indy-artist

and filmmaker Miranda July. The article discussed her projects titled "Learning to Love You More" both a "web site and series of non-web presentations comprised of work made by the general public in response to assignments that are posted online" (July, 2006). Among the examples of assignments listed in this brief article, one particularly stuck out. It read, "Heal Yourself". That was the first time that I imagined that healing myself could be a form of art or creative expression—and yet it made perfect sense!

That night I raided the supply room and used hospital tape and scissors to make collages out of the magazines from the waiting room. This time I gave all the models bald heads, as if they had recently received Chemotherapy. Cutting and pasting magazines from hospital waiting rooms, I created a 'zine to leave in the hospital for other patients and their families to see. This 'zine was a place to experiment with new realities I was trying to contend with. It was also a place for me to express myself and connect with other young cancer patients facing the same challenges. As I played with the images I felt the familiar shifting of power. While in the hospital I also began making personalized healing music with my own lyrics and remixing recorded samples from the hospital, most significantly the sound of a big bell mounted on the wall of the Princess Margaret Hospital chemotherapy unit which is reserved for ringing upon the completion of one's final chemo treatment. I still dance to this triumphant song with the ringing bell loop playing over a vibrant hip-hop rhythm. Instead of simply reacting in fear to what was happening, I felt stronger. I felt like an artist, integrating and adapting to the challenges of the medium. This time the medium was me.

In the spirit of critical creativity, I analyzed and deconstructed the military metaphors my doctors used about cancer treatments, and then created new metaphors that suited me better. I began to visualize my immune system like a well-run and

loving community, where everything is recycled and sustainable. I knew from my media literacy background that there were a myriad of ways to tell the same story, and so I felt empowered to take on a more powerful role in telling my own story. I would not use the word “mine” to describe “the” cancer – it was just passing through. Eventually my family, friends and doctors began to adopt this new paradigm too! I felt remarkably encouraged as I deconstructed the language about health and disease, using all my creative abilities to jam the situation. I took this re-conceptualizing of medical metaphors and narrative to a new level when I embodied my image of the white blood cell/civic leader. I dressed up like a white blood cell and acted out new empowering narratives about healing based on the science of hematology and immunology, inspired by my own imagination and guided by my felt sense of the healing in my body. My friend dressed up as “Friendorphines” (healing endorphins inspired by friendship) and my then boyfriend (now fiancé) dressed up as “Love”, both of them supporting characters in this great drama taking place inside my body. Talk about Do-It-Yourself media!

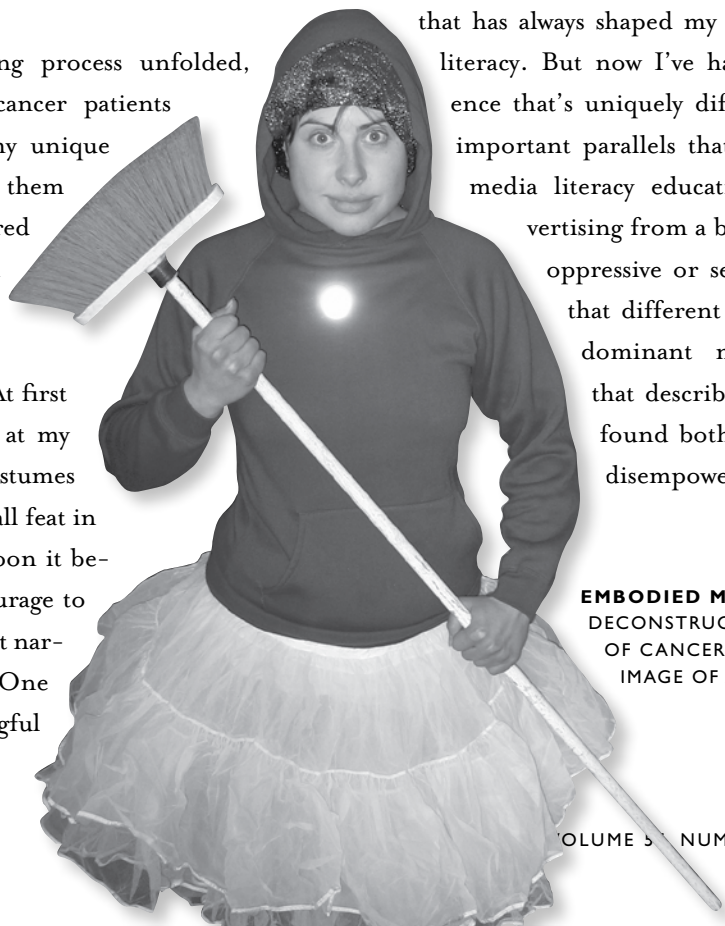
As my creative healing process unfolded, many of my fellow cancer patients took strength from my unique approach. Many of them had never considered an alternative option to submitting to the dominant narratives of western medicine. At first they would just laugh at my songs, collages and costumes (laughter being no small feat in a cancer ward!), but soon it became clear that my courage to challenge the dominant narratives could spread. One of my most meaningful

experiences happened when I brought my suitcase of costumes to a meeting of over 30 young adult cancer patients like myself. I led a workshop on finding your inner super-healer in which we all dressed up like our own super heroes, reclaiming our symptoms as strengths (ex: “Introducing Hot Flash! and The Bald Eagle!”), often embodying our own immune-systems together as we celebrated our strengths and courage together.

Too often we receive messages from consumer culture that discourage the imagination, instead promising us power through choosing and buying. We are surrounded by images of fetishized products and bodies which try to define our hopes for us. However, the creative power has always been ours; everyone can be the artist of their imagination. We don’t need to buy empowerment, we can grow our own!

I’ve begun to see my exploration of media activism as a healing journey, one in which I engaged fully with my environment by using my imagination and creative energy to shift relationships and power. My original story was one of trying to empower myself in what felt like an oppressive media context, and that has always shaped my approach to media literacy. But now I’ve had another experience that’s uniquely different but also has important parallels that made me rethink media literacy education. Jamming advertising from a billboard that has an oppressive or sexist message wasn’t that different from jamming the dominant military metaphors that describe cancer, because I found both to be limited and disempowering.

**EMBODIED MEDIA LITERACY.** STASKO DECONSTRUCTS THE MILITARY METAPHORS OF CANCER AND DRESSES UP AS HER IMAGE OF A WHITE BLOOD CELL.





In both cases I had to improvise with what was there, to have the courage to subvert a dominant narrative, and the creativity to generate a new narrative in which I had voice and could feel engaged in a meaningful and empowered way. This reinvigorated my passion for media literacy education because it showed me that processes learned in one context can be applied in unanticipated future ways. I have come to

see media literacy as a key adaptive skill in our rapidly changing culture and environment. That's why I've come to see the importance of bringing holistic pedagogical practices which focus more on transformation, process, timeless learning and meaning construction to media literacy education.

## WIDER LESSON/IMPLICATIONS

I didn't find media literacy in the classroom; I found it in the streets, with my media activist peers. It took visionary teachers like Barry Duncan (known as the father of media literacy in Canada) and other members of the AML (The Association for Media Literacy) to see how, for example, culture jamming could connect to media literacy education – it was they who first brought me into the classroom (a medium I was excited to jam as well). We need to carry on that tradition of recognizing the learning when it's happening.

It is important to think about how to distill the critical process into adaptive strategies for voice and empowerment, and to notice unexpected areas of application by broadening our notion of what media literacy is. This will also help us to see the value of media literacy in our ever-changing global society, because in addition to an ability to navigate advertising and logos, it is a skill necessary for navigating life itself.

Whereas I originally used media literacy to challenge consumer culture and transform my environment and identity, my project has taken on larger ambitions: my own broadening applications have led me to transform my understanding media literacy itself. It wasn't simply that I *applied* media literacy. My own understanding of it was permanently transformed and expanded in the process. I can't go back to my old ways of engaging in media literacy. I am in a new place, and need to recreate new ways. At times the old me and the old ways of engaging in media literacy seems limited and nar-

row, but I see them as a good starting point. The point is to continually grow and unfold.

We all have a survival instinct that has evolved over thousands of years. In a time when our culture and environment is changing more rapidly than ever and we encounter more information and stimulation than any generation prior to us, it is in culture and education that evolutionary leaps can happen to help us adapt and survive—even as what counts as ‘survival’ is changing.

Everyday we encounter power, expressed in the form of symbolic meaning making. If we expand the notion of media literacy to include a more holistic interpretation of both ‘media’ and ‘literacy’ then we can develop a new approach which can empower students, teachers, families and citizens in learning how to be actively enfranchised when encountering such power.

There is a heated debate about whether education is about preparation for work or for citizenship. Within the media literacy field the question is whether to develop connoisseurship about media or a more critical analysis of media messages. While I am fully immersed in those debates myself, by reflecting on my own personal experiences of survival and empowerment I see that media literacy education is about preparing us for unknown future challenges. To that end it has to be open-ended and inclusive. This holistic approach is very likely happening in many classrooms, but it might be happening outside of the curriculum or stated intent, perhaps emerging out of the very human needs for empowerment and voice. As educators it’s essential for us to recognize this importance. Much of what students have to learn is already in them and the teachers’ task is to draw it out. We have to help our students discover their own survival instinct and what that means within our modern media context. The aim is that they not only survive, but also *thrive*. Something media literacy educators may notice is

the distinctive times when students have used lessons and concepts in personally empowering ways. Rather than simply reproducing knowledge for class they are tapping into their own wisdom as to transform themselves and the world.

Students of media literacy continue to emerge throughout their lives. Yet media literacy itself is emergent. There are media everywhere, and in all of these contexts there is an implicit or explicit authority. The true purpose of media literacy is the ability to interpret, challenge and transform those meanings. I’ve had my own transformative experiences as a result of media literacy education, and in turn some of these experiences have led me to transform my vision of what media literacy can be. My old way of doing media literacy is like old shoes that no longer fit. I have a transformed vision of what media literacy is, rooted in my own experience.

## CONCLUSION

One of the tenets of media literacy is that all media are a construct, and hence we can construct and deconstruct them. It was an empowering moment when I realized that the metaphors doctors used



to describe me were just that—metaphors, rather than absolute truth. Since they were also constructs I could deconstruct them just the same way I learned to deconstruct advertising. I now see that the process isn't that different, though the context and medium were.

One of the best guides in developing a holistic approach to media literacy education is to consider the ways in which media literacy is applied holistically in divergent and interdisciplinary fields. Not only is it something that can be learned holistically, but is something that can be *applied* holistically. It was an awakening for me to realize this.

I creatively reinterpreted and extended the meaning and use of media literacy to help me deal with cancer, but this also permanently transformed my old way of thinking about media literacy itself.

It gave me a new vision of what media literacy could be. I've been taking time while I heal to reflect on that more, and now I feel poised to test it out in the classroom and see just what that new kind of media literacy looks like.

All good work must come from a personal place within, and media literacy is no exception. So I invite you to consider and notice where media literacy is happening outside the lines, beyond curricular expectations. The drive for self-expression and empowerment is strong and apparent all around us. I invite you to practice noticing it in yourself and in your students.\*

## ASSIGNMENT

Write a journal entry about three different times when you challenged authority to define an aspect of yourself, your life, your environment and/or worldview. Feel free to include drawings, images, newspaper or magazine clippings, song lyrics, or any other creative technique or source. Reflect on the experience and consider the following questions:

- What was my motivation?"
- What unique challenges did I face?"
- How is/isn't my story reflected in mass media and why?
- What knowledge base and experience did I draw from?
- How did this process transform my understandings of myself, of media, of literacy?
- How would I integrate lessons learned from these experiences into my approach to teaching?

## REFERENCES

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