What We Know: Planning, Implementing, and Assessing a Media Literacy-Themed Summer Camp

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Abstract

Information and media literacy are essential for today’s children and teens as they navigate an increasingly saturated information environment. Educators at all levels must seek to communicate and teach the skills that students need to evaluate, understand, and use information in engaging and innovative ways. This paper highlights such an effort by librarians and staff at Florida Institute of Technology in the planning and implementation of a camp called “What We Know: Understanding Media and Its Influence.” The camp was administered by five library staff and attended by ten teens between the ages of 12 and 16. Throughout the camp, staff used campers’ feedback and surveys to gauge the impact of the program. Camper age differences proved to be the biggest challenge to camp success. Overall, 78% of attendees reported that camp was more enjoyable than predicted. Qualitative data gathered through discussion and peer-to-peer interactions indicated that, in general, camp attendees gained increased awareness of problematic issues in media. Future camps will include a more focused age range and more hands-on activities.

Introduction

Perceptions of digital, informational, and media literacies often paint a picture that does not accurately represent reality.1 Teens and young adults may often find themselves in academic settings unprepared for college-level research and lacking the necessary skills to critically...
evaluate what they see, hear, or read. Students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to lack digital literacy competencies, including the ability to use information and communication technology (ICT). How can universities and colleges address this gap in student knowledge? Through coupling a need for stronger information literacy with an institution’s need for community outreach, educators can help bridge the gap in student education and prepare today’s junior high and high school students for higher-level thinking and further education.

Defined as a group of abilities and competencies covering information discovery, understanding, and use, information literacy may be introduced to students by way of media literacy. As part of information literacy, media literacy focuses on the use, creation, and understanding of media in various forms. Another subset of information literacy, news literacy, focuses on differentiating journalism from other media. Using familiar media such as television, social media, and Internet resources, media literacy may be used to teach critical thinking. In line with these ideas, library staff and faculty at Florida Institute of Technology set out to plan a media literacy camp geared toward secondary school students. This paper treats the inaugural camp as a case study and discusses the planning, execution, evaluation, and assessment of the camp and the need for improvements in future endeavors.

Literature Review

Participatory digital media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, message boards, and chat rooms) require social media literacies that can be defined by the following five categories: attention, participation, collaboration, network awareness, and critical consumption. While students liberally connect and communicate with others (attention, participation, collaboration), most do not understand the ramifications of their digital interactions on a larger public scale (network awareness and critical consumption).

The growth of civic engagement via digital participation has been long debated with two broad schools of thought: one school contends that information seeking, social networking, and Internet use empower users to have a voice and provide an outlet and forum for creative expression, while the other school of thought states that online information seeking and socializing create a distraction from other forms of community and civic participation. While any form of participation propels users from a passive role to a more active one, participation does not necessitate an engaged and media-literate consumer. Media and digital literacies are now necessary to exist in our information-dense society, as the ability to effectively navigate and filter both media input and communication output is an essential life skill. This skill requires assessment and analysis of news sources, point of view, and motivation, as well as an understanding of how to contribute to the discourse in a civil, socially responsible, and ethical way.

Information literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, and news literacy are increasingly overlapping in today’s world, particularly for teens and young adults as they become politicized. And despite the demonstrated need for media-literate consumers, online interactions between students and teachers rarely occur until college, potentially leaving teens unprepared and lacking certain key literacies and digital etiquette. Furthermore, teens of parents with lower socioeconomic status are already less likely to be information and digitally literate. According to Walther, Hanewinkel, and Morgenstern, the prevailing approach to media literacy emphasizes
shielding students from harmful media effects. More recently this has been replaced by the “immunization approach,” where individuals with more information are better able to “withstand” any potentially harmful effects of media.\textsuperscript{xiv} Vraga and Tully also discuss the role of media literacy education in how viewers evaluate or identify bias in news. They acknowledge that whether “news media literacy is effective in helping audiences identify biased news content” is still an area for research.\textsuperscript{xi} Mihailidis and Thevenin argue that apolitical media literacy education is problematic because the responsibility of education is to address injustice. Media literacy education can equip students to address injustices, but not if it is presented apolitically.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Though formal education about media consumption is largely non-existent (and may in fact be pushed aside in favor of digital “literacy”), many teens are still active users of all types of social media and use it in their daily lives.\textsuperscript{xvii} Unfortunately, many secondary school policies often restrict digital communications between teachers and students, creating an educational vacuum where media literacy could be effectively taught.\textsuperscript{xviii} School districts and parents prefer to sustain an apolitical approach to education regarding media consumption, an ineffective approach that inhibits students’ critical analysis skills.\textsuperscript{xix} At the university level, where the restrictions and barriers faced by secondary school teachers are less formalized, librarians and instructors can more easily interact with students in an online setting.\textsuperscript{xx} Librarians at the university level have a unique opportunity to instruct students in becoming critical consumers of media.\textsuperscript{xxi}

Students should possess the skills to evaluate mass media sources effectively and critically in order to fully participate in our information-rich society.\textsuperscript{xxii} As Dilevko explains, it is important for “students to move away from passive reading of news media sources and move towards being able to decode the social context of mainstream news and develop informed and negotiated reading practices.”\textsuperscript{xxiii} Stand-alone programs that target specific media literacy outcomes may be the preferred educational approach.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

A number of libraries have implemented outreach programs or camps for children, particularly during the summer months when most schools are not in session. These creative programs have proven beneficial to children, parents, and libraries, providing entertainment and active learning, and increasing library attendance and community outreach.\textsuperscript{xxv} Godbey et al. note, “While many outreach programs are librarian-driven and focus on helping students develop information literacy or lifelong learning skills, the programs can also serve as part of a broader recruitment effort on the part of the university.”\textsuperscript{xxvi}

Summer camps are not unfamiliar in the library world. Darien Library in Connecticut developed a three-day technology camp targeted toward teens within the community.\textsuperscript{xxvii} Ludwig offers tips for hosting a teen camp, which includes promoting camp as much as possible, basing the lessons around projects instead of all lectures, allowing for creativity, and getting feedback from students, ideally with an evaluation form at the end of each day and at the end of the camp session. She also notes the importance of breaks, even if they are not very long.\textsuperscript{xxviii}

Several academic libraries have implemented successful summer camps focusing on information literacy or similar topics. University of North Carolina at Pembroke offered two summer camps, one for children and one for teens.\textsuperscript{xxix} UNC Pembroke’s camps ran for two weeks and were scheduled for three hours per day. Although no formal assessment was performed, camp leaders noted that campers “developed . . . as intellectuals,” had more confidence in using an academic library and its resources, and now had experienced the “hustle” of college life.\textsuperscript{xxx} Other examples
include Parma-South Library branch of the Cuyahoga County Public Library (Ohio), which has held summer science camps for three consecutive years. Their camps were held for two hours per day for five days and included a weeklong project, an art project, a literature component, a music component, hands-on activities, short videos, and guest speakers. Camps were deemed successful despite a lack of formal assessment. Staskus stresses the importance of having adequate time to plan for the camps and eliminating activities that were too dull, complicated, or expensive. Staskus also notes that groups of two to four students were more successful at completing camp activities than students working alone.

Methods

Florida Institute of Technology (Florida Tech) is a private research university located in Melbourne, Florida. First established as Brevard Engineering College in 1958, Florida Tech maintains programs in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, aviation, and liberal arts. Evans Library, built in 1984, is currently the university’s sole library facility. Every summer, Florida Tech hosts numerous academic, athletic, and artistic summer camps as part of a community outreach initiative. In keeping with its own community outreach initiative, Evans Library held its inaugural summer camp in the summer of 2015. The methods outlined in this paper describe the topics and activities addressed in the camp, as well as the organization and planning process.

The camp, “What We Know: Understanding Media and Its Influence,” began as an information literacy camp targeted toward teens age 12 through 17. As camp planning progressed, the overall tone and content of the camp shifted from information literacy to media literacy, focusing on the messages and media that teens encounter on a daily basis. The camp was administered by five librarians and attended by ten teens between the ages of 12 and 16.

“What We Know: Understanding Media and Its Influence” took place over a period of five consecutive afternoons in June 2015. During the initial planning process, each day of camp was assigned a theme or topic. These themes built upon one another and provided the baseline for planning lessons and activities during the duration of camp. Incorporating standards from the knowledge practices and dispositions of the Association of College & Research Libraries, camp organizers decided upon the following activities, topics, and themes:

Day 1: Introductions, and Why We’re Here

Day 1 covered introductions between campers and camp staff, as well as an introduction to the overall theme of the camp. Activities included name games, discussions about copyright, and a tour of the library facilities.

*Fishbowl Activity: Why Do We Have Media?*

**Objectives:**

- To assess campers’ levels of media literacy.
- To assess campers’ opinions on media, censorship, and objectivity.
- To encourage campers to begin engaging with subjects covered in camp.
Library staff utilized a “fishbowl” discussion on media and censorship to gauge camper knowledge levels. Fishbowl discussions foster non-confrontational discussions by only allowing participants within the “bowl” (discussion table or area) to discuss the assigned topic.

Participants were seated in a circle, where the total number of chairs equaled half the total number of campers. The number of active participants at any time equaled the number of chairs minus one. Non-active participants and observers were asked to sit or stand silently outside the bowl. A designated moderator began the discussion by introducing pre-selected topics: Why do we have media? Why is media important? As the discussion progressed, campers leaving the bowl were replaced by observers. Camp staff members who participated in the activity were instructed to not steer or direct the discussion in any way.

**Day 2: Creating Information: People, Purpose, and Perspective**

Day 2 of camp focused on information creators and the ethics surrounding the creation and dissemination of information. Discussions included ethics scenarios, social media ethics, whistleblowers, information bias, interviewing scenarios, and how information is spread.

*Understanding Primary and Secondary Sources*

Goals:
- Campers will be able to identify sources as either primary or secondary.
- Campers will be able to identify the main characteristics of primary and secondary sources.

Campers were divided into two groups and presented with a pile of resources that included books and journals. Campers were asked to identify primary and secondary resources among the items presented to them. Points were awarded to each team for each correctly identified resource.

*Information Domains*

Goals:
- Campers will be able to recognize the type of Internet source based on domain name.
- Campers will be able to evaluate different types of domains for potential bias.

Using the same two teams from the primary and secondary source activity, campers were given a particular domain type (.gov, .edu, .com, and .org) and asked to list websites using that domain type. Campers were given ninety seconds for each domain type and awarded points for each correct answer.

*Who Creates Information?*

Goals:
- Campers will be able to demonstrate that facts and opinions are not the same.

This activity included a presentation on social media’s role in the information landscape, ethics in news, and whistleblowers. After the lecture, campers engaged in an interviewing activity that illustrated the unreliability and subjectivity of eyewitness accounts. For the activity, campers were split into two groups consisting of “witnesses” and “interviewers.” Witnesses represented five different and conflicting eyewitness accounts of the same event. Campers in the interviewers group were tasked with determining the true course of events based upon the conflicting reports.

**Day 3: Data, Information, and Manipulation**

Day 3 focused on how data and news are manipulated and packaged for consumption. Campers learned of various data-manipulation techniques, including truncated axes and misuse of
cumulative growth. Other topics included “reality” television, hoaxes, and sensationalism in the media.

*Sensationalism in the News*

Goals:
- Campers will be able to analyze the manner in which news is broadcast in today’s world.

Campers were shown a playlist of news broadcasts from the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s, ’80s, ’90s, and present day and asked to compare and contrast differences between each decade.

*Propaganda and Spin*

Goals:
- Campers will be able to identify how news items are manipulated.
- Campers will learn about media manipulation tactics through direct experimentation.

After learning how news broadcasters can spin stories to have new and different meanings, campers were asked to do the same. Campers were presented with a selection of age-appropriate “odd” news stories from the *Huffington Post* and asked to change the overall tone and meaning of their selected story without altering any essential facts. After rewriting the story, campers were presented with the opportunity to record their own broadcast version.

**Day 4: Why Am I Hungry? Advertising and Its Impact**

Day 4 examined how advertising impacts and shapes our views of the world. Discussions on branding, product placement, and targeted advertising were followed by a marketing exercise.

*Product Placement*

Goals:
- Campers will be able to recognize product placement in movies, television shows, and other media.
- Campers will learn about the ways in which music and color can be used to manipulate emotions and persuade consumers to purchase products.

Along with discussing the ways in which media producers include strategic product placements, this lesson included an activity on brand recognition. Campers were asked to identity brands based on slogans and jingles, demonstrating the pervasiveness of advertising in daily life.

*Targeted Advertising*

Goals and objectives:
- To encourage campers to ask questions regarding ads.
- To have campers address the following questions regarding targeted advertisements:
  - Is this accurate or realistic? Why or why not?
  - What is this ad trying to tell me? Do I believe it?
  - Is this ad trying to sell a product or lifestyle? Do I want what the ad is selling? Why or why not?
  - How might this ad affect me, personally, or others that come to mind?

This activity utilized a prepared playlist of commercials and advertisements. Videos spanned a variety of products and years, but remained age appropriate for campers. Foreign language
commercials were also included to help campers analyze non-verbal advertising. The following questions were asked as each video played, allowing for discussion time after:

- What do you think?
- Who is this ad targeting?
- How can you tell?

When campers were hesitant to voice their thoughts, the following prompts were used:

- Who do you see?
- What is happening?
- Who do you not see?

After the discussion, campers were given the opportunity to market their own products using what they had learned. Campers were given a choice of various “marketable” items such as empty boxes and bottles, and asked to develop and record a commercial that marketed these items to an atypical audience.

**Day 5: Do You Know What I Mean? Research and Reporting**

“What We Know: Understanding Media and Its Influence” camp concluded with a visit to the university’s radio station, where campers were given the opportunity to record their own media messages. Campers were also asked to participate in a short camp assessment on day 5.

**Assessment Methods**

Evaluations leaned heavily on the side of qualitative assessment due to the small sample size and experimental nature of the camp. Quantitative assessment was limited to analysis and grading of camper-produced projects from days 3 and 4. Parent evaluations focused on their impressions of the camp’s value, both financially and educationally. This camp functioned as a pilot project for future camps, and post-camp evaluations examined the experience as a case study.

Through an initial student-led discussion, staff gathered baseline data to determine participants’ level of understanding regarding journalistic ethics, media literacy, politicized topics, and civic engagement. This process began on the first day of camp with a fishbowl discussion designed to allow staff to evaluate where campers placed on the spectra of media, information, and digital literacy. Staff members were able to utilize this information to track campers’ progress during camp through both formative assessments and activities.

Throughout the week, staff conducted formative assessments to measure comprehension of content and gathered qualitative data via activities and student projects. Two video projects were assigned: one asking campers to exaggerate or falsify a news story, and another asking campers to advertise a product to an atypical audience. Three camp staff analyzed and graded the video projects based on the campers’ ability to follow directions (five points), the final product’s alignment with activity goals and objectives (five points), and completeness of assignment (five points) for a total of fifteen possible points. Camp surveys administered at the end of camp evaluated campers’ perceptions of camp and self-reported media literacy gains.
Results

Media Literacy Gains through Discussions

Behaviors and activities that indicated an increase in campers’ media literacy skills were noted by staff via observations and activities throughout the week. Campers facilitated several politicized discussions, allowing staff to evaluate their responses without instructor prompts. As the week progressed, campers led more discussions and raised more difficult and complicated questions than those initially asked, including questions regarding portrayal of heteronormativity and traditional gender roles in advertising. Campers moderated each other successfully and encouraged one another to participate during these discussions.

Media Literacy Gains through Activities

Camper videos relating to falsified news stories received an average score of 11.1 out of 15 available points (table 1), while videos relating to advertising received an average grade of 13.8 out of 15 (table 2). Scores for both activities ranged from 7.5 to 15 (tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Scores for camper-created “Propaganda and Spin” videos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well did the group follow instructions?</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well did the product align with the activity goals and learning objectives?</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the activity completed?</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Scores for camper-created advertising videos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well did the group follow instructions?</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well did the product align with the activity goals and learning objectives?</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the activity completed?</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Assessments of Camp

In the survey, 100% of campers claimed to understand the content presented during the week. When campers were asked what they learned at camp that they did not know before, responses covered news, media, information literacy, advertising, and digital literacy:

- “News is biased.”
- “I didn’t know how 3-D printers work.”
- “Not so much learned as realized about advertising—the colors.”
- “1. Copyright laws, 2. About the other kids.”
- “I learned that they try to advertise products in movies or TV shows.”
- “Learning more about advertisements or on how you approach your audience.”
- “How to approach your audience in new ways.”
- “Find ways on how movies/shows secretly advertise.”
- “Advertising.”

**Figure 1**: Camper responses to the survey question “How did you sign up for camp?”
Figure 2: Camper responses to the survey question “What were your expectations regarding camp?”

Table 3: Camper responses to survey questions regarding their understanding of the content covered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you better able to understand news you see after this camp?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you better able to evaluate the ads you see after this camp?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you more aware of the influences of media after this camp?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you more likely to think before you create and post content after this camp?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Staff Assessments of Camp

Library staffers provided the following comments regarding camp:

- Limit age range to better adapt content and activities.
- Find dedicated space for the duration of camp.
- Dedicate fewer staff members and recruit teens/student employees to assist.
- Work more closely with Arts and Communication, the Crimson, FIT-TV (campus television station); continue working with WFIT (campus radio station).
- Have clearer goals for both staff and campers: media literacy vs. information literacy vs. social media vs. digital literacy.
- Incorporate more activities.
- Encourage partnered projects and activities that nurture the friendships campers develop.
Discussion

Qualitative data gathered through discussion and peer-to-peer interactions indicated an increased awareness of problematic issues in media, though more data must be gathered in order to determine if this awareness translates into more critical consumption of media over time. Self-reported survey responses indicated an increase in camper awareness of media literacy and issues, though the magnitude of this increase is unknown.

The age variation among campers proved to be one of the largest obstacles both in operating the camp and in evaluating its success. Though the average camper age was 13.3, campers ranged from 12 to 16 years old. This reflected a significant developmental difference between campers, which was particularly evident in their prior exposure to media and how campers responded to camp content and activities. This is consistent with previous findings, where both gender and age were found to be factors in the adoption of information and communication technology. The oldest campers (at 15 and 16) did not fully participate or engage in video activities, though both fully participated in discussion-based activities. Despite a lack of engagement on the part of the oldest campers, scores from day 4’s advertising activity indicate that campers were able to both understand and apply camp content.

While this pilot study leaned heavily on qualitative assessment, quantitative data could be obtained from future camps. The results of gamified activities, such as those on day 2, could be recorded for analysis later. Pre- and post-assessments of camper media literacy levels are also suggested as another means of measuring camp success. In addition, camp staff noted that clearer goals regarding activities and learning outcomes would be desirable in future camps.

Conclusions

Qualitative data gathered through discussion and peer-to-peer interactions did indicate an increased awareness of problematic issues in media. While indicators of awareness were present, additional data will be needed to determine if this awareness actually translates into more critical consumption of media over time. As noted by Vraga and Tully, the role of news literacy in teaching audiences how to identify biased content is still open for research. “What We Know: Understanding Media and Its Influence” camp addressed this research question, and the observations in the pilot project support this as a valuable research area.
Notes


8 Ibid., 17.

Rheingold, “Attention, and Other 21st-Century Social Media Literacies,” 18.

Renee Hobbs, “Digital Media Literacy” (white paper, University of Rhode Island, 2010), viii.


Bridges, “Librarian as Professor of Social Media Literacy,” 49.

Ibid.

xxiii Ibid.

xxiv Martens and Hobbs, “How Media Literacy Supports Civic Engagement in a Digital Age,” 120.


xxviii Ibid., 31.


xxx Ibid., 13.


xxii Ibid., 34.


xxiv Nasah and DaCosta, “The Digital Literacy Debate,” 520.

xxv Vraga and Tully, “Media Literacy Messages and Hostile Media Perceptions.”