

Roles of the Teacher in Media Literacy Education

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Introduction

To develop critical thinking is one of the most important missions for educational facilities to complete. This is because of the recent proliferation of information technologies realized by computer networks and various kinds of multimedia tools. These technologies enable individuals to access information in large quantities regardless of its quality. Ability to make critical and rational judgements toward information is of great importance in such social conditions.

This paper proposes an idea of educational practice that aims to encourage students' critical attitude toward information. Roles of the teachers in this practice are also to be discussed.

Media Literacy Education in General

Media literacy education is an educational area originating with the social background of the huge power of the mass media against individuals. Media literacy aims to develop the ability to watch and understand critically the symbols that come from the mass media. Therefore, it should essentially be an example of critical thinking education.

In Japan, we can classify most media literacy education courses into two types. One is the "sociological" approach that emphasizes negative aspects of the mass media that is relevant to various social problems. The other is the "technical" approach that is mainly interested in teaching techniques to handle electronic equipment or to use the necessary software.

From our viewpoint, the two types mentioned above are not sufficient as critical thinking education. In both cases, there is a tendency to lack opportunities for the students to think critically by themselves. In the "sociological" approach, what is explained in the classroom about the social problems relevant to the mass media is often just the results of the critiques by some sociologists. Critical

methods, or how to find such problems, are generally not explained. On the other hand, the "technical" approach often lacks the critical attitude from the beginning. In this approach, technical achievement is regarded as the most important educational effect.

Media Literacy Education Based on Semiotics

The idea of media literacy education based on semiotics (Saito 2002) is supposed to be an alternative to the two approaches outlined above. Semiotics is known as the study of symbols and meanings, which comprise the basis of human communication. Semiotics has widely been applied to analysis and critique of various objects relevant to the problems of symbols and meanings, for example, language, media texts of various kinds, works of art, customs or behaviors which represent specific cultural phenomena, and so on.

This fact shows that semiotics provides essential knowledge and a framework for understanding the functions of symbols and meanings in human society. Therefore, surely semiotics should also provide a basis for media literacy education as the practice of critical thinking towards a variety of media representations or texts.

The main activity for the students in this approach is very simple; to analyze media texts according to basic knowledge of semiotics and to discuss with each other what they have found through the analysis. Basic concepts of semiotics should be explained by the teachers beforehand. However, the most important part in this approach is the students' activities; analysis and discussion about media texts. Through these activities using basic knowledge of semiotics, the students are believed to develop deep understanding about the functions of symbols in media texts and to acquire a critical attitude toward information they get from various kinds of media.

Roles of the Teacher in Media Literacy Education

In the type of media literacy education we discuss, the teachers are mainly expected to take the following roles:

- to show basic knowledge of semiotics as simply as possible;
- to encourage the students to think themselves;
- to guide the students to rational conclusions by suggesting the possible alternatives.

Generally, students are able to create advanced knowledge by themselves if they have a good minimum

essential basis and enough opportunities for practice. In our media literacy education, the basis that the teachers should give is the basic knowledge of semiotics (see Figure 1). This kind of essential knowledge will construct a cognitive framework in the students' minds and form a basis for development of advanced knowledge: the “bootstrapping” process known in computer technology.

Therefore, the teachers should keep in mind that too much explanation is likely to result in spoiling the students by taking away their opportunities to think and practice themselves.

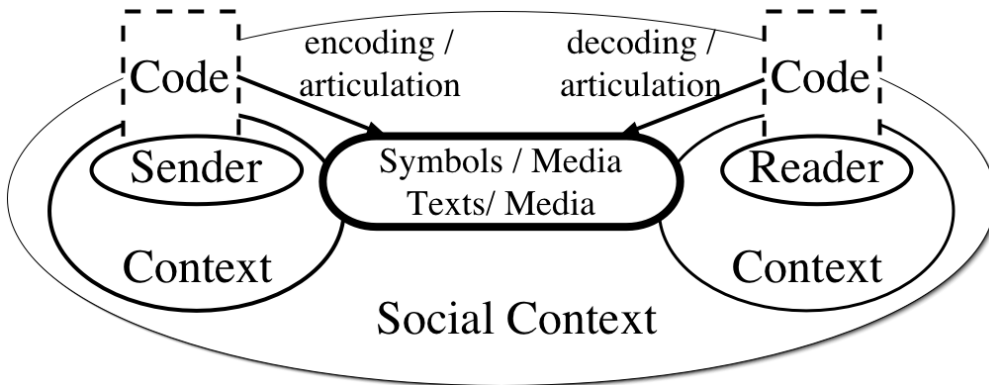


Figure 1: An Example of the Basic Knowledge of Semiotics (which is described in a communication model). Knowledge expressed in this figure is believed to work as a basis for bootstrapping in our media literacy education.

Conclusion

This paper discussed an idea of media literacy education based on semiotics that aims to encourage and develop the students' critical attitude toward information. Roles of the teachers in this practice are also discussed. This discussion shows our belief that a minimum essential basis and enough opportunities to practice are the most important conditions for the students to develop themselves.

References

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