

Transcript

[00:00] [music]

Derek Bruff: [00:05] Welcome to “Leading Lines,” a podcast on educational technology from Vanderbilt University. I’m your host, Derek Bruff, Director of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching. In this episode, the newest member of the Leading Lines team, Melissa Mallon, brings us an interview about teaching critical media literacy.

[00:20] The interview features a faculty member, Natasha Casey, who teaches Communications at Blackburn College in Illinois, and a librarian, Spencer Brayton, a library manager now at Waubonsee Community College, also in Illinois.

[00:33] While Brayton was at Blackburn College, he and Casey collaborated to bring their respective fields, information literacy and media literacy, together, developing and team teaching a course on media and information literacy. The course took a critical look at the topics, meaning that there was a particular focus on the issues of power and control in digital media. Melissa has a new book out exploring the ways faculty and librarians can partner to teach digital literacies.

[00:57] This episode’s interview was right up for alley. She talks with Casey and Brayton about working across disciplinary silos, helping students think critically about digital media, team-teaching a new course, and practicing public scholarship through blogs and Twitter.

[01:10] [background music]

Melissa Mallon: [01:15] I am so pleased to have on the phone with me Spencer Brayton and Natasha Casey who are co-workers at Blackburn College in Carlinville, Illinois. I thought that maybe we could start by Spencer and Natasha talking a little bit about how the two of you know each other or how you came to work together.

Spencer Brayton: [01:40] We started our work when I was at Blackburn College as well, my first year there as library director. Natasha had me asked about coming and speak with her class about library resources. It was a media literacy course.

[01:57] I thought, "Well, this sounds a lot like information literacy." I was looking at her syllabus and what she had been doing in the class. I saw some paths crossing in terms of media literacy and information literacy. That's where our work started and conversations have started.

Melissa: [02:15] Natasha, I was just curious. From your perspective, Spencer had this sense that you were actually covering a lot related to information literacy. Did you realize that at the time? Had you even heard that term before?

Natasha Casey: [02:30] I'd love to say I did and sound fantastically up on lots of fields, but in reality, I hadn't. I heard the term but I had a very skills-based prescriptive idea of what information literacy was. I wasn't at all familiar with the critical information literacy component of the field, if you can call it a field.

[02:56] I didn't have any idea. It was only really when we started delving a little bit further and looking at the ways in which what were the commonalities and what are the ways in which these two areas overlap that we started to say, "Oh, this is something we should definitely collaborate on."

Melissa: [03:14] Was there anything particularly surprising or interesting to you when you were looking at that over these overlapping topics?

Natasha: [03:24] Yeah, definitely. Like I said, I think it kicked into another gear when we realized that there is this critical strand in both of the fields. I'd only been familiar with the media literacy component, but just basically questioning knowledge, power, how do you know what you know, these big meta-questions that you're always trying to get students to wrestle with, and knowing that those kinds of things are also a big part of the information literacy field became the building block for our collaboration.

Melissa: [04:03] Can you talk a little bit more about the critical aspect of this? Maybe a little bit from the two of you on the critical information literacy, critical media literacy overlap. I think it would be helpful for our listeners to hear your perspectives on what critical means in

this regard.

Spencer: [04:29] Sure. I know for me, after I had seen what Natasha was working with in terms of media literacy, I had started reading some more critical information, literacy pieces from the library field -- the "Critical Library Instruction" edited volume, I think, by Library Juice Press -- and talking with Natasha about it and applying that critical theory in critical pedagogy to information literacy.

[04:58] We were meeting and talking about that. A lot of it was able to transfer over to the more critical media literacy practices. Is that right, Natasha? Is that how...

Natasha: [05:11] Yeah. I think for both of us, we were somewhat upset with the ways that the skills-based approaches that are still popular in some aspects of both information literacy and media literacy seem to be what most of our colleagues thought of when media literacy or information literacy was brought up.

[05:33] I often get a typical response from other colleagues, which is like, "Oh, please teach those kids to stay off Twitter or isn't Instagram terrible today," this finger-wagging approach. We also wanted to balance that out but also we wanted to complicate like I said before these notions of power, authority and knowledge.

[05:55] We wanted to facilitate this kind of high order critical thinking and go beyond these kinds of checklists, like I said these sort of skills based approaches. For students to seriously consider the ways in which authorities of whatever sources they use should be challenged.

Melissa: [06:15] Yeah, that's really interesting and I think it's particularly poignant right now talking about ideas of power and sort of a higher level of communication, particularly on things like Twitter or other social media platforms. Can you talk a little bit about how you approach that with students and what their reaction was?

Spencer: [06:41] We use Twitter in the classroom. There are some students -- some people tend to think that students know how to you use all the social media and these different apps -- but they don't. Some don't.

[06:55] To think about having to create a Twitter account and tweet is completely new for them. We have to spend some time going over how that works. We do use Twitter, but we

also talk about how social media looks at your content, sort of monitors your data.

[07:15] We also have to -- in terms of the critical piece -- we have to let them know about those issues as well. We don't just have them do Twitter without talking about those aspects of privacy and things like that.

[07:30] We find though that especially as we get further with the class and different iterations and new projects -- we had students post takeaways after every week in the class -- we found that content really powerful in terms of what they were learning. That was something really valuable.

Melissa: [07:52] Were there any particular takeaways that seem to resonate through many of the reflections?

Spencer: [08:00] Natasha, do you remember any that stand out specifically?

Natasha: [08:03] I mean for us it's...I mean off the top of my head, I can't think of specific ones, but it's more about just having students be reflective about the process and getting them to understand how media works, who owns media, these sort of critical questions but at the same time understanding that there is a lot of pleasure to be derived from their media use.

[08:27] Again, it's not just about finger-wagging but it's getting them to understand what they're doing and for all of us. I don't think this is just an issue for students, I think it's for all of us.

[08:38] The central idea that underpins a lot of what we are doing is to move away from all of these banking models of education that I certainly grew up with, and I know Spencer did to a certain extent as well, where students are just expected to come in and we'll give you some great little nuggets of knowledge that you can take away, but we're more about problem posing and about having students reflect on it.

[09:04] Some are going to be deeper than others. Some are going to be more reflective than others. Hopefully they'll all be at least prompted to think a little bit more deeply about their media use and issues of representations and ideology and power and all sorts of those big topics.

Melissa: [09:25] These small things, right?

[09:28] [laughter]

Melissa: [09:33] I guess another question I always tend to have when thinking about encouraging this critical thinking higher level engagements with these sorts of media and digital literacy skills is that inevitably there's going to be some pushback. I'm curious from the students' perspective if you experience any of that pushback.

[10:02] I also want to ask you about your colleagues as well. From the student perspective, did you have anyone that was like, "Why are we doing this? Give me my checklist."?

Natasha: [10:17] Not explicitly, but I think the idea that students can think for themselves and have to wrestle with this material and they're not going to get some authoritative answer from a professor is a shift for some students who are used to sitting as I did when I was a college student.

[10:36] You sit in a lecture hall, you take the notes, and there's very little interaction. There's always going to be some resistance to that. Also, I think these ideas of what a professor is supposed to do is very much wrapped up with standing at the top of the classroom, preaching to your class if you like.

[10:57] There's definitely some resistance. Not everybody buys in, but I think that's the case for whatever approach you take in the classroom.

Spencer: [11:08] From my perspective, I think some of the students were wondering why the librarian was in the classroom all the time. They were used to coming to me or having me in class, just to show them essentially how to use the databases and where to locate those on the library website. My role in there, I think, was a bit confusing to some of them at first when we first started.

Melissa: [11:34] How did you get past that?

Spencer: [11:36] We had to provide that context. We didn't do a good job of it the first iteration of the class, but we learned from that. We had to place media literacy and information literacy, and my role in the context in the class at the outset.

Natasha: [11:55] I think once the students realized that we're both equally responsible for the class, we're both doing the grading, then they were fine with it. It was a little bit of a shift, because that wasn't something that happened a lot in our institution.

Melissa: [12:14] That lends to the other side that I was curious about. You've had to convince the students that this partnership between a librarian and their instructor is something that's important for this particular topic.

[12:32] Let's be honest, from the library perspective, we think we should be in all of those relationships.

[12:38] [laughter]

Melissa: [12:40] In this particular topic, did you get any pushback or maybe not pushback but just confounded looks from your colleagues?

Natasha: [12:54] Yeah, I think there was a little head-scratching. Like I suggested a second ago, it isn't a norm. It was the norm to have a librarian in the classroom but not necessarily in an equitable role with the professor. That's just at our institution. I know it's not the same everywhere.

[13:12] I think there was a little head-scratching in why would you attempt to bring these two fields together. For us, it seemed like a natural fit. This is, I think, one of the advantages of working at a small institution is that we were both able to make that maneuver.

[13:30] Once we renamed the class "media and information literacy," I think there was more acceptance that these two things do go together even though some people might not be sure exactly what we're doing. As time went on, I think there was less of that.

Spencer: [13:47] I think what had helped is when Natasha first taught the media literacy course, it is required for some different majors and minors. It did now become relatively recently a general education requirement course at Blackburn.

Melissa: [14:06] That's great.

Spencer: [14:07] We did gain some momentum there, I think. I don't it's so tough to fully

understand it, but we did make some headway with it.

Natasha: [14:18] I think we could also point to some other models. The UNESCO model has been around for a while where they bring media and information literacy together. Not always with maybe an obvious critical perspective, but certainly they're making the argument for why those two fields should be brought together as lots of other theorists have.

[14:37] We're able to borrow from that literature too, which I think helped us to make the case at a local level.

Melissa: [14:45] That's fantastic. That's one of the things that I've been really impressed with. The work that the two of you have done together in this area is that you're putting it beyond the context of just this single classroom experience.

[15:00] You're pulling in some of the other frameworks and examples of these types of collaborations that are happening beyond even just higher ed, which was something that I also have a lot of questions and curiosities about your work.

[15:20] I did want to ask you, too, just about that non-higher ed. I think I saw a line somewhere, Natasha, that you'd said that information and media literacy are traditionally siloed. That there is a lot of focus in K-12 on some of these topics, but there's not that blended focus in higher ed.

[15:50] I guess I would like to know, from your perspectives, what the role of the college classroom is for this type of instruction and investigation.

Natasha: [16:01] I think it's the perfect place to do it. To be completely honest, it was a little bit of a shift. I was used to being the only person in my classroom who was instructing. I had to be willing to give up some of the space in the classroom and really commit to learning more about the critical and information literacy areas.

[16:30] I think that's what actually ended up making our partnership valuable and equitable, is that we both delved into each other's areas. It wasn't just, "OK, if something information literacy comes up, Spencer, handle it, and vice versa with media literacy with myself."

[16:49] The classroom is a perfect place to work that out, because you can always tinker with

it. You can always try new things, what worked, what didn't. Like Spencer already said, we learned from the first time we taught it that we had to be much more explicit about why these two fields are separate, but why we think they should be together.

[17:07] Our students are working in a liberal arts education environment. You need to help them or at least facilitate that process for them. How do these things connect?

[17:16] What are the relationships between these areas and other areas that they might be studying? I think that's imperative like I said, especially in a traditional liberal arts setting, to help the students to understand that context.

Spencer: [17:31] I'm thinking again back to the first time we taught this and going back to what Natasha said about she'd take the pieces on media literacy. Then I would take the piece of the class on information literacy.

[17:42] The classroom environment was a little more rigid when we started. It just seemed to get more and more flexible. There was a better flow in terms of discussion and what topics and ideas that were brought to the classroom. It seemed more open, and more of a comfortable environment than a traditional classroom setting.

Melissa: [18:05] I think flexibility is important in the classroom, anyway, but particularly when you're trying to blend some of these topics that maybe people haven't really thought about than as one and the same. What about other faculty and librarians that may be interested in incorporating some of these topics related to critical media literacy, critical information literacy?

[18:39] Can you envision a scenario where maybe some of these types of activities that you have your students do -- if you've got some examples, that would be fantastic -- that could maybe fit into a disciplinary focus?

Natasha: [18:58] Yeah. The ones that come to mind are some of the more successful ones, obviously. We have a unit on remix. That's one of the areas that you really see media literacy and information literacy come together under that critical pedagogy heading.

Melissa: [19:23] Could you talk a little bit more about what that unit looks like?

Natasha: [19:26] Yeah, sure. Spencer, do you want to jump in, too?

Spencer: [19:31] Yes. We talk about remix culture. There's a DVD called "RiP!, A Remix Manifesto." It talks about copyright and fair use. I think it had been on Creative Commons as well. It follows a DJ who remixes older music into his own, almost, how he does that, ideas about, "Is he violating copyright? Whose work is that?"

[20:05] We talk about how even when you're writing a paper, are you creating something new? Are you simply remixing different knowledge for your argument and what your perspective is? Yes, we watched that movie. We had those large discussions on those big topics. That's one area.

Natasha: [20:28] I was just going to say, "That also leads then into questions of plagiarism, open access, what is copyright. That's connected, obviously, to ownership. All of these larger issues come as you're discussing the idea of remix, because a lot of students get really hung up on original papers, this "Having to write original papers."

[20:52] They're very much stressed out that they have to create something from scratch when nobody is doing that. I don't think that there's a lot of honesty around that discussion, particularly in academia, which is why something that seems fairly trivial maybe at first, like this video, opens up all these wider discussions about the nature of research, plagiarism, access, paywalls.

[21:22] Who gets to say when something goes into an "authoritative journal?" Who makes those decisions? How are they making those decisions? Who is getting left out? Who is being marginalized by those decisions? That's always a pretty interesting unit to go through with the students.

[21:44] I should say that we've also borrowed from other people working in both of our fields. For that reason, that we do all our work open -- our syllabus, our lesson plans -- we're happy to share with anybody who is interested in seeing a little bit more of the specifics of what we do in classes.

Melissa: [22:04] That's great. I love that, that you're living the philosophy of openness. You're teaching it, but you're living it. If you have links or anything that you would like to share, we can definitely add those along with the podcast information. If listeners want to check that

out, that's great.

[22:31] Shifting away from the course and some of the curricular areas that you've been focusing on here, I just wanted to ask about your blog. The two of you co-write a blog called "No Silos." Is that right?

Spencer: [22:47] Yeah. We both have our own separate websites. Natasha, her blog is No Silos. You're right. We do co-write them. Then we put them on our own websites.

Melissa: [22:58] Spencer, what's your website called?

Spencer: [23:00] Converging Spaces.

Melissa: [23:03] You've got Converging Spaces and No Silos, which we will also link to for you. What are some of your goals through sharing your work this way?

Spencer: [23:15] One is we've been able to connect with a lot of great people working in maybe similar areas or doing some similar things that we wouldn't have been able to know before, to connect with. That's one reason why.

[23:29] Like we said in terms of working openly, we also want to give credit to people that have shared their work with us and have helped us progress through our work, too, and also to share what we're doing with other librarians and other educators.

Natasha: [23:48] It's often through writing a blog — we don't do it as often as we should. [laughs] I certainly I'm not doing it as often as I should. It also helps you reflect about when you go to a conference or you have an idea or you have an experience related to this. It's also a good model for students to see that it's a much more conversational style.

[24:10] Yes, we write academic papers and go to "academic conferences," but there are other ways to share that information. I'm always interested in reaching a wider audience. I don't know if this is true or not, I probably should find out, but someone once told me that the average academic paper has five readers, which is kind of shocking. I know. It's shocking, right?

Melissa: [24:33] Yeah.

Natasha: [24:33] When you think about the work you put into that, it's really disheartening. I want, frankly, more than academics reading my work, too. There's that level of accessibility when you write a blog that isn't always there when you're doing something for a specific journal or a specific book.

Melissa: [24:55] I like that you pull in this idea of using a blog as a way of reflecting on not just your own work but your conversations, your professional network at conferences to that. It also is a really good modeling technique for students because it's diving deeper than just a summary.

[25:20] You're reflecting, thinking, and trying to find connections. That's fantastic. Natasha, where did you say you're calling us from today?

Natasha: [25:30] I'm actually in Portugal right now. I was over here for a le monde sabbatical, but I was also here for Media Literacy Research Symposium. Spencer presented virtually with me. That was pretty cool.

Melissa: [25:46] That's very cool, and very cool that you're calling us from Portugal. [laughs] Thank you for that. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to mention? Maybe some last tips for others that are wanting to embark on these types of collaborations to teach critical media and information literacy?

Natasha: [26:09] I was just going to say, one thing that Spencer has actually taught me through this process is to be, I don't know if 'fearful' is the right word, but certainly less hesitant to reach out to people because he's really good at that.

[26:23] He'll drop somebody a line. If people are interested, they want to network a little bit, or are genuinely interested in your work, they'll follow up. I've gotten much better at that as a result. It's really important, because the only way you're going to learn more about what it is that you're doing is to put your work out there a little bit.

[26:46] That would be a tip for people who sometimes feel like, "Oh, you know, I shouldn't talk to them," or whatever. We all have our fiery crushes — this is getting really academically nerdy now. Sometimes, you're a little intimidated to go talk to them. Like I said, because of Spencer, I've gotten much better at that.

Melissa: [27:06] That's great.

Spencer: [27:07] I think, too, sometimes when you're practicing the critical pieces, you can feel isolated at times. I think it's good to reach out and see what other people are doing. If I didn't think about reaching out to Melissa, there's no way we would ever be able to have a conversation.

[27:28] I do want to reiterate that people should definitely feel free to reach out and ask us for information about the course or things that we've written or other resources that we maybe have had curated. We're definitely willing to help out and have those conversations.

Melissa: [27:47] That's fantastic. Thank you so much. Before we officially wrap up, I've got one more question to ask each of you. This is something that we ask on every Leading Lines podcast interview. That is, "What is your favorite analog educational technology?"

Natasha: [28:10] It's something simple that I do in some of the classes. You can't go wrong with a big, giant sheet of paper and a bunch of markers. Do a little crowdsourcing, if you like, with the students in a room. Just because we use all this digital, it's no excuse to get away from the basics. We still have to communicate with each other in the room in person.

Spencer: [28:36] I'm looking out in the library right now. Both of our big mobile whiteboards are being used by groups of students. That's one thing. When I was at Blackburn, too, it was a popular learning tool. I would have to say that these mobile whiteboards, I would still go back and use a whiteboard.

Melissa: [28:57] That's great. All the people that I respect the most still have whiteboards in their office or somewhere. They're just full of scribbles.

Spencer: [29:06] Yes, exactly.

[29:08] [laughter]

Natasha: [29:08] That's where all the best ideas come from, the scribbles.

Melissa: [29:11] The scribbles, yes. [laughs] Thank you both so very much. It's really been a pleasure to talk with you. I know that you had to do some rearrangements with your

schedules, given your locations. It's been wonderful to hear about this collaboration and just how deep you've gone with it. Incorporating the critical piece is so important right now. I'm really excited.

[29:40] [background music]

Natasha: [29:40] It was great to talk to you. Thanks for your interest. I really appreciate it.

Spencer: [29:44] I really appreciate it, Melissa. Thank you for arranging this.

Derek: [29:49] That was Natasha Casey, Associate Professor of Communications at Blackburn College, and Spencer Brayton, Library Manager at Waubensee Community College. Thanks to Melissa Mallon from the Vanderbilt Library for that interview.

[30:01] Casey and Brayton mentioned teaching in their course the documentary called, "RiP!, A Remix Manifesto." That documentary features the DJ Gregg Gillis, better known as Girl Talk. Some of his tracks are entirely composed of samples of songs by other musicians, layered together with what I think is great intentionality.

[30:17] I've shared his work with the students in my first year writing seminar in a unit on plagiarism and academic integrity. It's helped generate really great conversations with them about copyright, plagiarism, creativity, and originality. I hadn't actually heard about that documentary. I look forward to watching it.

[30:32] You can find a link to that documentary, as well as links to Casey and Brayton's blogs and Twitter accounts in this episode's show notes, which are available on our website, leadinglinespod.com.

[30:42] How do you go about teaching students media and information literacy? Melissa and I would love to hear more examples of activities and assignments along these lines. You can find her on Twitter at @librarianliss with two Ss and you can find me at @derekbruff.

[30:55] You can find our show at @leadinglinespod. We'd love to hear from you. Leading Lines is produced by the Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communications, and the Associate Provost for Digital Learning.

[31:06] This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month.

[31:10] [background music]

Derek: [31:11] I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.