

From "General Education in a Free Society" to Holistic Education: Exploring the Advanced Rationale for College Students' Media Literacy Education

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing media environment, college students, as the main force in media usage, have a media literacy level that concerns personal growth and social development. "General Education in a Free Society" contains many advanced and far-reaching educational philosophies. This paper deeply analyzes the core concepts of cultivating a "whole person," balancing the breadth and depth of knowledge, and emphasizing critical thinking and effective communication skills as presented in the report. It reviews the achievements and problems in current college students' media literacy education and proposes corresponding educational strategies based on these insights. The aim is to leverage classic educational philosophies to improve the media literacy education system for college students, helping them to develop comprehensively in the complex media environment, better adapt to society, and play a positive role.

Keywords

General Education in a Free Society; College Students; Media Literacy Education.

1. Introduction

The purpose of education is to cultivate the whole man. It has been aptly said that the aim of education is to develop "good" people, "good" citizens, and useful individuals. A "good" person means someone who is internally complete, composed, and resolute, ultimately rooted in a fulfilling philosophy of life [1, 2].

In 1943, Conant established a committee at Harvard composed of 12 distinguished professors and external individuals from history, education, biology, philosophy, language, politics, chemistry, physics, and other fields to study the objectives of general education in a free society. The committee published the epoch-making "General Education in a Free Society" in 1945 [3]. The report opens with quotes from Pericles and Plato, posing an important question throughout the book: How can a democratic society find a balance between diversity and common standards? The book states, "Generally, education must accomplish two things. First, to help young people become individual human beings with a unique, personal life; and second, to enable them to adapt to public life, that is, as citizens and inheritors of a common culture, they should share the cultural heritage with others. [3]" These two goals of education cannot be strictly separated in theory or practice.

Since its publication, "General Education in a Free Society" has had a profound impact on higher education worldwide [4, 5, 6]. This paper first introduces the historical background and core concepts of the report, then elaborates on the definition of holistic education and its importance in contemporary education. It discusses the role and challenges of media literacy in 21st-century education and poses the research question: How can holistic education be combined with media literacy education to cultivate college students adapted to future society?

2. Core Educational Concepts in "General Education in a Free Society"

2.1. The Concept of Cultivating a "Whole Person"

In the "General Education in a Free Society", the "whole person" is a core concept with rich and diverse connotations. A "whole person" implies that an individual should not only possess solid professional knowledge but also have a broad foundation in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and other fields, forming a comprehensive knowledge system. At the same time, they should have rational ways of thinking, able to use logical reasoning, analysis, and judgment to understand the world and solve problems. Most importantly, they should have good moral literacy, hold correct values, respect others, care for society, and have the courage to take social responsibility and actively participate in public affairs.

Media literacy has become one of the essential literacies for a "whole person" in modern society [7]. In today's ubiquitous media environment, college students need media literacy education to maintain a clear mind, correctly view the various information and values conveyed by media, avoid being misled by bad information, and use media to spread positive energy and contribute to social development.

2.2. Balancing Breadth and Depth in General Education

The report emphasizes finding a balance between the breadth and depth of general education. On one hand, it guides students to widely explore knowledge in different disciplines, break down disciplinary barriers, broaden their horizons, and understand the diversity and complexity of the world. On the other hand, it also encourages students to delve deeply into certain key disciplines, master their core theories and methods, and cultivate professional thinking abilities and research spirit.

This balance is equally crucial in media literacy education. In terms of knowledge breadth, college students need to understand the development history of media, communication characteristics, communication models, and their different roles in social life. At the same time, they should also be aware of the relevant laws, regulations, and ethical norms in the media field, forming a comprehensive understanding of the media ecosystem. In terms of knowledge depth, college students should deeply understand the basic theories of media communication, such as agenda-setting theory and the spiral of silence in communication studies, understanding how media influences public cognition and the formation of public opinion [8]. They should also explore the interrelationships between media and society, culture, politics, economics, and other aspects, master the operational mechanisms of the media industry, and understand the principles of new technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence in media applications, so as to gain a profound insight into the essence behind media phenomena and better establish themselves in the media environment.

2.3. Emphasis on Critical Thinking and Effective Communication Skills

"General Education in a Free Society" places great importance on cultivating students' critical thinking and effective communication skills. Critical thinking requires students to have the ability to think independently, dare to question, and be good at analyzing and arguing. When faced with complex information and viewpoints, they should use rational methods to discern truth from falsehood and assess strengths and weaknesses, not blindly accept existing conclusions, but form their own opinions through in-depth exploration. Effective communication skills emphasize that students can express their ideas clearly, accurately, and logically, whether in writing or speech, making their views understood by others, and actively listen to others' opinions, engaging in good interactive communication.

In the context of media literacy education, the importance of critical thinking is becoming more prominent. College students are exposed to a vast amount of media information every day,

which is of varying quality. Only with critical thinking can they critically examine the content presented by media, such as whether news reports are objective and fair, whether advertising promotions are exaggerated and misleading, and whether the speeches on social media are reasonable, thereby avoiding being influenced by false information and one-sided views. Effective communication skills are related to the effectiveness of college students' participation on media platforms [9]. They need to master different media context expression skills, such as how to convey their views concisely and powerfully on Weibo, how to clearly express themes through images and sounds when making videos, and also learn to respect others and respond rationally to different opinions in online communication, participating in social dialogue through effective communication, and contributing to a healthy media public opinion environment.

3. Current Status and Problems in College Students' Media Literacy Education

3.1. Achievements

In recent years, Chinese universities have made certain achievements in the education of college students' media literacy. Some universities have realized the importance of media literacy education and have begun to actively explore corresponding educational models. Some universities have set up specialized media literacy courses, such as "Introduction to Media Literacy," systematically introducing to students the basic concepts of media literacy, the development and evolution of media, and how to correctly analyze and use media. At the same time, they have also carried out a variety of media practice activities, encouraging students to use the media knowledge and skills they have learned to create short videos, graphic works, etc., and improve their media operation ability and innovation awareness in practice.

3.2. Problems

At present, many universities still have many imperfections in the construction of media literacy course systems. First, the courses lack systematicity and show a scattered and fragmented characteristic. They often involve some media literacy content in the curriculum settings of different majors, without forming a complete and coherent curriculum system, making it difficult for students to build a comprehensive and clear media literacy knowledge structure. Second, there is a serious phenomenon of theory and practice being divorced in the course content. Most courses focus on the teaching of theoretical knowledge, explaining abstract content such as media concepts and theories too much, but neglecting practical operation and case analysis.

There are also some problems in students' cognition of media literacy. Some college students have a one-sided understanding of media literacy, equating it with the ability to use media tools, focusing more on the entertainment functions of media, such as being addicted to short videos and online games, while neglecting the more important role of media in information acquisition, analysis, and judgment, as well as social participation.

4. College Students' Media Literacy Education Strategies Based on the Concepts of "General Education in a Free Society"

4.1. Improvement of the educational objectives with a view to the development of the "whole person"

Colleges and universities should deeply integrate the goal of media literacy education into the overall goal of talent cultivation, and make clear the specific requirements of media literacy education oriented to cultivating "complete human beings". This means that college students

should not only have the skills to utilize media tools in the media environment, but also have rational media knowledge, correct media values and a strong sense of social responsibility [10]. Measurable and phased sub-targets for media literacy education should be formulated. In the face of the complex media environment and social problems, to make rational judgments and actively spread positive energy, and to contribute their wisdom and strength to the development of society. Through such a gradual and goal-oriented educational process, the media literacy of college students will be gradually enhanced so that they can become "complete human beings" adapted to a mediatized society.

4.2. Building a curriculum that combines breadth and depth of knowledge

In order to broaden the breadth of knowledge, the content of media literacy courses should cover the historical lineage of media development, from the ancient primitive forms of media to the modern digitalized and intelligent emerging media, so as to enable students to have a clear understanding of the process of media evolution and the social driving factors behind it [11]. At the same time, the characteristics and modes of communication of different media forms should be introduced in detail. Students will be guided to explore the interrelationship between the media and various aspects of society, such as culture, politics and economy [12], and to analyze the role of the media in the fields of cultural inheritance and innovation, political public opinion guidance, and economic and industrial development. At the same time, it is also necessary to pay attention to the application of new technologies in the media, such as how big data realizes accurate push, how artificial intelligence changes the news production process, etc., so that students can deeply understand the cutting-edge dynamics of the media industry and the internal operation mechanism, and enhance their insight into the nature of media phenomena.

4.3. Strengthening the development of critical thinking and effective communication skills

Teachers should consciously incorporate elements of critical thinking training in the teaching process. This can be done by setting up a topic on media information analysis, selecting different types of media content, such as news reports, advertising campaigns, Internet comments, etc., and guiding students to use logical reasoning, evidence evaluation and other critical thinking methods to analyze such content in depth. Students will be divided into groups with different viewpoints, so that they can collect information, organize their viewpoints, and organize debates and group discussions before class. In this process, students not only have to defend their own views, but also have to listen to and refute each other's views. Through this exchange of ideas, they are prompted to think deeply, improve their judgment of media opinion, and gradually develop the ability to think critically.

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, the ultimate goal of media literacy education is to cultivate ideal citizens of society. In today's university education, which has shifted from traditional elite education to mass education, higher education not only undertakes the mission of cultivating social elites but also bears the responsibility of cultivating qualified citizens. This paper, based on the concepts of "General Education in a Free Society," has conducted a comprehensive and in-depth discussion on college students' media literacy education. It first analyzes the core educational concepts of cultivating "whole people," balancing the breadth and depth of knowledge, and emphasizing critical thinking and effective communication skills in the report, which provide a commanding perspective and a solid theoretical foundation for us to think about college students' media literacy education.

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