

LESLEY FARMER

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INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

“Our teachers still aren’t educated in media literacy, to this day. They still have kids doing posters, which is fine. That makes sense -- whether it’s digital or physical -- but what the teachers grade on is how neat the poster is, and did I use my glue stick right? Look at the rainbow colors! There is little sense of artistic principles, little sense of how you construct a message effectively. They have no clue to this day. Arts are still undervalued, and I guess I’m not surprised, but I’m sad. Why can’t teacher education programs be more aware of media and information literacy? Why don’t they see the importance of it? That truly surprises and saddens me.”

BIOGRAPHY OF LESLEY FARMER

Dr. Lesley Farmer, Professor at California State University Long Beach, coordinates the Librarianship program. She also manages the CSU ICT Literacy Program. Dr. Farmer has worked as a library media teacher in K-12 school settings as well as in public, special and academic libraries. She served as International Association for School Librarianship VP Association Relations, chairs the IFLA School Libraries section, and coordinates the Education Section of Special Libraries Association professional development. Dr. Farmer received the 2011 ALA Beta Phi Mu Award for contribution to education, the 2015 SLA Anna Galler Award, and the ALS LIRT Library Recognition Award. Dr. Farmer is a frequent presenter and writer for the profession. Her latest books include *Information and Digital Literacies: A Curricular Guide for Middle and High School Librarians* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), *Introduction to Reference and Information Services in Today’s School Library* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) and *Library Services for Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (ALA, 2013).

Selected Questions:

- ***What started you, in terms of becoming involved with media education and information literacy? What was your inspiration?***
- ***What were some of the milestones in the media and information literacy field along the way?***
- ***Taking a step back, how far do you think the field has come in terms of being accepted and being able to meet the need out there?***

INTERVIEW TEXT

Tessa: *What started you, in terms of becoming involved with media education and information literacy? What was your inspiration?*

Lesley: I was an Art minor, and I have always been interested in film. In 1975 I joined as a volunteer with the local broadcast TV station near where I lived in Hayward CA called LVO, which had a public access community channel. I was trained on Television production, so I was a volunteer crew member. The work was behind the camera, doing the soundboard and directing.

Another part of my inspiration was Girl Scouts. I was a trainer of Girl Scout leaders. We were talking about ways to expand our training; "Could we do this in a broadcast mode?" That was my rationale for contacting LVO in the first place.

Then right after that, I served in the Peace Corps. After that, between 1978 and 1981, I worked for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia as a High School Librarian. One of the teachers there, Brother Harry, was very interested in video, and so I worked with him on creating a production area by re-purposing the mezzanine of the auditorium. We closed the area, we made it into a production spot, and then we trained our Center City Philadelphia high school boys to produce.

Through my work I joined the Catholic Library Association. We received an educational curriculum from the forerunner of the Center for Media Literacy, called "Catholic Connections to Media Literacy." The curriculum came in the mail, after I responded to a postcard with the headline: **Are you interested in Media Literacy?** (Sr. Elizabeth Thoman produced this curriculum through the Center for Media&Values in the 1980s.) I got this cassette tape and filmstrip piece along with a guidebook; that was the first media literacy curriculum that I worked with.

I thought it was really great and I tried to get other faculty interested. I had a professional relationship with one of the English teachers who was teaching the lowest group of seniors.

He understood the need for visuals; for example, he would use Junior Illustrated Classics Comics as a way for kids to get into a book. One of them was a Civil War book, *The Red Badge of Courage*. He had actually gotten comic books for all those kids. The students read the comic before they read the book, so they would have a visual mental picture. That's a problem with some people, when they read, they can't create a mental picture and so they're stuck.

This was really cool, and he'd shared this with me. He was also teaching American literature, so I said, "I've got a really neat idea for helping kids to bridge Thomas Paine and propaganda then and now, especially in terms of war." He said, "Okay," but he was a little bit hesitant. I was able to borrow the movie *Patton* from Temple University, and what I showed the kids was Patton's speech to the troops, to get them motivated. I included the speech in the unit with Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. The kids drew the connection between the two, and discussed what

motivated them. I pointed out the format of *Common Sense* and the format of the movie and the format of the speech and how each of those differed... it really went well and I have to say that the teacher afterwards said, "You can come into my classroom, and teach anytime!" As the school librarian, I was very pleased!

At that time, I was working on my doctorate from Temple University, around 1980, and I was able to borrow movies from the University. The high school auditorium was basically a study hall because there were no substitute teachers, if a teacher was out. One time I decided to show the students a movie to get them thinking. I chose Leni Riefenstahl's German propaganda movie "Triumph of the Will." It was really fascinating because students were gripped by it. I'll tell you, if there had been recruitment tables at the back, the kids would've signed up. They were actually starting to stomp their feet when the soldiers were marching, so I said, "You understand... this is propaganda. This is all set up," and explained to them about the use of the music, the camera angles and the production techniques. That was really impactful.

After I finished my doctorate, I went to Virginia Commonwealth University and taught School Librarianship. The very first class that I was teaching was on AV Production. The way that I started it out was to show students the four-minute film by Saul Bass, called "Why Man Creates" (which is now available on YouTube). Bass was talking about how to create, and how to use formats, etc. That was part of my instructions to students as they were producing, to question: What's the message? Who's the audience? What's the intent? -- and how, then, to match the media with the message. That was a conceptual way of teaching, rather than just saying to students, "Here is how to make a slideshow. Here's how to put together your film projector, et cetera." Instead, we focused on what I call the Grammar or the Language of Film.

That probably was my first formal teaching experience on production, and I particularly enjoyed the deconstruction aspects. Virginia Commonwealth University also had a film collection that you could borrow. Every Friday at noon, I would pick a film for faculty that was thirty minutes or less. We had great film shorts, and we would play them and analyze them filmatically, in terms of the language, the camera, and the context. We had some very good media literacy discussions.

By this point, I connected with the International Visual Literacy Association, so I presented at their conferences.

After earning my Doctorate, I married and moved to California, and was working at a K12 Catholic School, where I was a K12 Library Director. I worked in media and literacy there by introducing Apple III computers to the school.

Every spring, during one week, the high school offered the Upper School students (girls grades 9 to 12) experiential learning opportunities, during which time teachers could dream up a one-week course for students who signed up for it. I connected with the Marin County counterpart of LVO -- it was a TV station that had a Community Channel. I offered this course for the girls: we went to the community TV station, and they trained the girls in video production, while I taught media deconstruction and how to connect critical analysis with production.

The first year, the girls tackled topics such as, “What are people’s attitudes about the aging, senior citizens?” The girls interviewed second graders who were part of the primary school, high schoolers, then people that were in their 30s and senior citizens. The girls recorded and also learned how to edit the videos. Afterwards, the girls were able to have their productions broadcast through the local broadcasting station. We did that for a couple of years, and that was the highlight of our work in media literacy.

While I was still at that school, I noticed that girls weren’t using computers very much and there were no girl hackers. I wanted to make sure that girls felt comfortable about using computers, and I had one girl who became very interested.

She saw me doing a really simple repair on a computer. The chips had gotten loose because there were people pounding on the computer. I explained to her about the hardware. She told me that she had this stereo system and VHS, and she liked to put the cables together. I knew she wasn’t doing well in school so I wanted to get her excited about schooling, and I said, “Oh, let me show you about the computer.” Her handwriting wasn’t very good, and so I suggested she use a word processor. She took to it, and she became my assistant, and trained others. She was getting Ds before, but she was getting Bs after that.

We had another girl who was from India, and she was homesick. Her parents were in India and they had boarded her. She particularly enjoyed Grolier’s CD Encyclopedia on the computer, even though she wasn’t doing well academically. She skipped classes in order to get onto this CD encyclopedia, just to read at her own pace. That’s how she was learning. She also trained others so that she could earn the privilege of using the CD, and that worked well, too.

I realized then that we need to deal with media literacy and equity for girls – and in 1995, that was the topic of one of the very first books I wrote: on realizing gender equity through information literacy and empowering girls. I thought that by the 21st century, we wouldn’t have this problem with inequity with girls and some of the biases in technology. But we do! There were issues in 1995, and in 2005 there weren’t any more girls in computer science than there were before. In fact, numbers had gone down. “What’s this about?” I asked myself. I believe it was because of the stereotypes associated with girls being interested in technology.

By 2005 girls had more options for jobs, and girls were asking questions like, “Why would I choose a life where I have a career where I have no social life? That my meals have to be pizza and coke, with guys with very low social skills, and I’m going to have to work like a dog for 70 hours a week and it’s on spec, so I can be laid off anytime?” It’s easy to see why girls would reject such a path.

School counselors are also part of the problem because they say, “Oh, you don’t need math,” and then the girls go to college and guess what, they have to remediate to be in a technology field, and so that’s going to take them longer and cost more.

Also, the thinking about technology media is narrow, like, “Oh, it’s computer programming. It’s putting the cables together... hardware.” Not realizing that when you are using some kind of a measuring device, an MPE, or taking videos in order to improve your performance, or using electronic microscopes in biology or information systems in business... that we need to help

girls realize that the scope of this -- the whole thing, with digital photography, digital filming, video -- it's so much broader.

Even today, there is still a problem. In 2008, I wrote a book called, "Teen Girls and Technology: What's the problem? What's the solution?" It was published by Teacher's College Press, and the book included media literacy and some fun activities for girls to do.

By that time, I started to teach at California State University Long Beach. I have been there for the last 17 years. When I teach information and digital literacy, I have a specific unit on media literacy, along with information literacy, visual literacy, digital literacy, and we talk about transliteracy as well. That gives students the general lay of the land.

TJ: *What were some of the milestones in the media and information literacy field along the way?*

LF: It was in 1989 that the American Library Association had a summit, at which the ideas behind information literacy were articulated, as well as the needs of the libraries to provide information literacy. The term "information literacy" had been around since 1974, but hadn't been used much. At least in library land, 1989 was the turning point, and I attended an event to follow through on the summit and its implications. That helped me understand information literacy more, and in fact, my very first book on information literacy, which was published in 1991, is called "Cooperative Learning Activities in the Library Media Center."

At that point, we basically were talking about critical thinking, but eight years later, I wrote the second edition of the book in 1999, and I included more content using the term *information literacy*. The 1995 book for the girls explicitly included media literacy, and the content was affected by my experiences with young girls, knowing that they were going to be disadvantaged in the real world if they didn't have information literacy and media literacy.

Media literacy largely over-lapses information literacy, the difference being that with media literacy, you also have to deal with the straight technical stuff, whereas information literacy is focused more on locating, engaging with and using information. In library land, our core centers around recorded information -- although information literacy also involves spoken language, which has no technology at all, since it's not recorded.

With information literacy we don't usually talk about the issues, such as how to turn on a video camera, or how to attach the cables. In media literacy we are usually talking about an existing product, and then how we critically look at it and use it -- but media literacy goes beyond being a consumer, and addresses questions such as, How do you generate? How do you use the language in order to stand out and attract attention?

All this is to say is that about five years ago, there was a real push to go from the term of information literacy, to information and media literacy. The big player on that movement is UNESCO, and within UNESCO are folks from Russia who really pushed this idea. The way they used the term media is in its most global meaning: format. They basically were saying, "You've got ideas, but that's the information literacy, and then you've got the container, the format to communicate that information." That's how they use the term media.

UNESCO came to IFLA – the International Federation of Library Associations -- for approval, and so it's a joint effort. This year, for example, at IFLA's conference, which is going to be in Poland in August, the School Library Section is co-sponsoring a session with the information and literacy section, and the audio visual (AV) section. The theme is, "Using Video in the Digital Age."

The information and media standards were introduced around 2012, but another important development was that with cable TV, every local community was required to have a Community channel, and the local community channel is required to provide free training to community members, 16 and over. This means that locals can create and if you have a really good video, you could submit it for possible broadcasting.

This idea of community involvement provides voice to the community through the FCC regulations. To this day, there aren't many people who know about the availability of community media. Every time that I have the opportunity, I share that information, because it's power to the people and obviously, YouTube has empowered people, as well. But media literacy is still important, because people need to be knowledgeable producers. Producing can't be just, "I know how to turn on a camera and I know how to post it, and I can self-express."

That's not the same thing as understanding the language, the grammar, the syntax of what I call the critical features, of different formats. That's why the work of the Center for Media literacy is so important. That's why education has to be such a big part of what we do in libraries, too. Just because you can use media, doesn't mean that you know how to use it well, effectively, or that you should even use it at all. There are also issues of intellectual property, privacy, ownership -- all the legal and ethical aspects of using media.

What is the syntax? Looking at your audience, what is your message? And how does the format impact it? What is there about film that permits you to do things that, if you were doing that by radio, it wouldn't work? It's becoming much more complex to make these decisions as more tools are available.

TJ: *Taking a step back, how far do you think the field has come in terms of being accepted and being able to meet the need out there?*

LF: I can tell you that it's not as accepted and known as it should be. Often, people think that having media and information literacy is organic, just like, "Why should we teach kids keyboarding anymore, or teach them how to use a computer, because they all know it? They have a chip implanted in their brain nowadays." I also think a lot of teachers have not been trained themselves in media literacy, or even visual literacy. It's still the written word that's privileged.

"Fake news" has called attention to the gap in information and media literacy in our population. People are starting to realize, "Wow!" -- how impactful the media can be, and how we need to really analyze it, through not just a domain name, not just who wrote it but what tools did they use in order to influence me? How did they use the sound bite, the camera angle? The importance of media literacy started surfacing with the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates. That's

what got Kennedy elected. Kennedy understood the medium of television and Nixon didn't. Kennedy used it wisely -- and the same thing can be said about Obama, with social media, which he used to get the message out.

But educators haven't taken that next step to analyze the medium to this day, to say, "Okay, so let's look at the medium." Part of the problem with providing media literacy education is, where do you put media literacy in the curriculum? It should be in the visual arts, to address the format. Another curricular arena candidate is language arts, so it's not just reading the canon of Jane Eyre, but, how do we use language? A third arena to include media literacy is in social studies, in terms of the social impact of media.

Media literacy needs to be systematic. Algebra One is in 9th grade, Biology is in grade 10. We still haven't found a good niche for media literacy. Right now, probably the educators that teach media literacy more than anybody else are the school librarians. They collaborate with the teachers and make media literacy content-embedded, and I think that that makes sense, but it does undervalue the concept of "the medium is the message." I have a bias towards Marshall McLuhan!

Schools need to do curriculum mapping that incorporates media literacy. Let's make sure that students get the concepts and the skills. Each district in California has to have a technology plan for instruction, including digital citizenship. Still, they don't explicitly talk about media, and even Common Sense Media really isn't about media literacy, it's more like, How do you be safe on the internet? They've co-opted the words media literacy. Even nowadays, schools do not generally have curriculum mapped, with information, digital and media literacy included as a scope and sequence. This responsibility for media literacy is in the hands of K12. That's the one place that we can absolutely guarantee that every kid is going to have an opportunity to learn and practice information and media literacy.

Our teachers still aren't educated in media literacy, to this day. They still have kids doing posters, which is fine. That makes sense -- whether it's digital or physical -- but what the teachers grade on is how neat the poster is, and did I use my glue stick right? Look at the rainbow colors! There is little sense of artistic principles, little sense of how you construct a message effectively. They have no clue to this day. Arts are still undervalued, and I guess I'm not surprised, but I'm sad. Why can't teacher education programs be more aware of media and information literacy? Why don't they see the importance of it? That truly surprises and saddens me.