DAVID CONSIDINE

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INTERVIEWER: DEE MORGENTHALER

(Quote)

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I would certainly like to see more teacher education programs integrate media literacy.

BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CONSIDINE
David Considine is a prolific author and professor at the Reich College of Education at Appalachian State University (ASU), where he established the first ever graduate program in media literacy. In addition to having served on the board of directors for the National Telemedia Council, the International Visual Literacy Association and the Alliance for a Media Literate America, Dr. Considine was consultant to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy during the Clinton and the Bush administrations. Since the beginning of his career as a school teacher in his native, Melbourne, Australia, Dr. Considine has been an advocate for media literacy's integration into schools.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

How did you become involved in media education?

What were your goals?

So, did you know Marieli Rowe?

In your early teaching years, were there any surprises in regards to what would connect with the students?

Anything else about your early experiences teaching that you think were pivotal?

It seems like in the U.S. we don't talk that much about music in media education.

Were there specific people or texts that have inspired your work?

Can you talk a little bit about your opinion about the state of media literacy today? How far do you think the field has come?

Do you think the field is moving in the direction you think best? Why, or why not?

And the thing you said before, I mean the real focus, could be in identifying those misconceptions and figuring out a way to educate the change makers.

So what is the direction?

What are some milestones you noted along the way?

So what would you like to see happen?

When I came into my doctoral program saying what I wanted to do, what I wanted to study, trying to explain media literacy to the education department was difficult.

Media literacy, as a discipline, feels incredibly fragmented and I agree with you wholeheartedly that everyone is really talking about the same thing.

(Interview Transcript Begins)

DM: *How did you become involved in media education?*

DC: I had just started teaching high school -- which in Australia is a six year experience -- in the early 1970s, so I might have been teaching 11 year-olds one minute and 18 year-olds the next period. So you had to be on your feet. And the kids were bored senseless. It was a fairly traditional school where they were required to do texts that they weren't interested in. And so I was just experimenting to see what worked for them -- music and film -- somewhere in that period of time when we also had the beginning of reel-to-reel video tape. I was able, as an Audio Visual Coordinator, to get several taping machines, and with televisions at home I started taping programs, which meant that I had very

relevant stuff in the classroom (for example, 8mm video production, which the kids loved -- especially the underachieving boys).

At the same time, LaTrobe University, which is where I had done my undergrad degree, offered the nation's first bachelor's degree in Media Education so when someone actually called me and said that I could get a degree for watching film, I thought, well I do that anyway, and developed an elective in media studies -- which went from year nine to year 10 -- which filled up and was a big hit.

The labor government came to power in 1972. They had been out for 23 years, and they started funding money to the western suburbs, the working class suburbs of Melbourne, where I was teaching. We got a grant which enabled funding for the first TV studio in the western suburbs so now production became a big part of media studies not just analysis. We did video and audio production also. And that's kind of where it went and it has been going on ever since.

DM: *What were your goals?*

DC: My goal, like most first and second year teachers, was simply to survive -- to make it from 9 o'clock to 3 o'clock. I'm serious. Even today, at my American university, when we surveyed most students when they graduated, the first thing they said they needed was classroom management. I tried very early to do classroom management by authority. I thought that it was about control and the reality is, with 40 kids in a classroom (which is what it was then), well, they more than outnumbered any teacher. So trying to control them was just not going to work; but channeling them, giving them something creative to do -- because they told me that they weren't interested in reading the *The Merchant of Venice,* and, quite frankly, neither was I. So I came very early to believe that interested kids did not have behavior problems.

I have been out of Australia for more than 30 years, and I had no contact with most of those children since. Then about four years ago, due to the magic of Google, some of them went looking for me, and found me. I have had two opportunities to go back there and meet them. Of course, those 13 and 14 year-olds are now pushing 50. It has been absolutely stunning to sit around with those men and women and hear how much they remember about what went on in the classroom. I mean they were 13, 14, 15 and I was 21, 22 but what we were doing was so different that it not only stayed with them but many of them say that it shaped their own career choices.

I have been teaching the core skills of media literacy both online and in the classroom for decades. But in the '80s, it was called "critical viewing skills," because I wasn't going to call the course about anything American until I knew what it even meant. So we did at least have a "critical viewing skills" movement or "articulation" or "awareness" in the '70s and '80s.

And today if you look at things like the "Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy" there is a huge body of research now that didn't exist at the time, that tells you what engages kids in the way of texts and what doesn't. And what most of it says is what I found out strictly by trial and error. If it is relevant to them, if it's got something to do with their life and connects the classroom to the real world then they get involved. So, in many ways I stumbled into media literacy because media was an important part of my life since the kids were so close to my own age.

I also created an American history course at that time. There was none when I got there and they told me that the students wouldn't be interested which I thought was insane because Australian kids were being drafted to fight in Vietnam. So, they needed to be paying attention to what was going on in America. So I included a lot of media in that way - critically and reflectively. They had to evaluate and analyze that in a history/social studies context as well. And lots of them went on to be teachers and school administrators and university lecturers.

In the American history class, we used the classics like *The Grapes of Wrath*, but this period was also when Robert Redford and Mia Farrow did *The Great Gatsby,* so certainly when we were doing the '20s we did *Gatsby*. In English we did, and I was amazed because these tests are often set by state examiners; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* -- a just incredibly powerful film -- still is; also *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I know because it was part of what I was doing as part of my bachelor's degree -- I surveyed students from suburban and rural Victoria, the state of Victoria. The two of the films that most resonated with them at the time were, *The Summer of '42*, obviously about an adolescent boy's rites of passage, and one of Stanley Kramer's lesser-known films, *Bless the Beast and Children*. They strongly empathized with the adolescent characters in those movies. And the more I saw them bond and empathize with them, that was really where my first book, *The Cinema of Adolescence*, came from. It is really why I left Australia. Because I was watching Australian kids watching American media and being influenced by it. I came to America in the later part of the '70s. And I came to study at the University of Wisconsin in Madison to study film.

DM: *So, did you know Marieli Rowe?*

DC: No, and that is the funny thing that Marieli and I have talked about in the intervening years...that I actually had to leave Madison, move to North Carolina, then run a conference (The International Visual Literacy Conference -- which I took into Madison in '85 or '86) before I came across a piece by Marieli in the "Journal of Popular Film and Television," I think, and subsequently invited her. And we were both astonished that we were in Madison at the time, both interested in the same things, but never knew each other, never had any kind of involvement. I subsequently joined the board of directors of the National Telemedia Council in about '92, I guess.

DM: *In your early teaching years, were there any surprises in regards to what would connect with the students?*

DC: I was a very junior teacher with a very traditional head of the English department that was looking with great suspicion at anything that I did. A lot of the kids that I got would have been regarded as, using an Australian phrase, "no hopers." My belief was not that they were "no hopers" but it was just that school did not engage them.

So, I knew that they were responsive and I was pleasantly surprised at how generous they were. In other words, they would put up with the boring stuff. They knew there had to be grammar, they knew there had to be long spelling lists, they knew there had to be constitutional stuff in the American history class. But they also knew that if they were lucky that once or twice a week something really good would come along. So, they put up with the boring stuff. I think kids are incredibly resilient and, on a level, are realistic. They understood that there are constraints and that not everything can be fun and entertaining but they would persevere so long as they thought something good was coming down the road.

DM: *Anything else about your early experiences teaching that you think were pivotal?*

DC: I did do a fair amount of music with those kids. And music is still marginalized, of course. The reason it is marginalized these days is so much of contemporary music is inappropriate language -- and this shows up in the movie *Dangerous Minds* -- but I really was doing Dylan and Joan Baez, for that matter, way back then and I used The Eagles, Don McLean's "American Pie"...you would have to have lived through the time to realize what a huge song "American Pie" was. I mean it was just revolutionary and to be able to take that into a classroom and to have kids work with it was just great. And then it became a surprise because kids would share things with me. I had never heard of Lou Reed. I had never heard of "Walk on the Wild Side"; and then they introduced me to Steely Dan and Genesis. A few of them went on to be very successful musicians. One of them is the most successful jazz guitarist in Australia. Both of them dropped out of school because, again, it wasn't working for them. Maybe my class was working for them but it wasn't enough.

DM: *It seems like in the U.S. we don't talk that much about music in media education.*

DC: Right, the Brits do and I love the approach of the Canadians also. But in America, again, the way that it is such a socially conservative nation -- certainly the curriculum and classroom is not particularly open to innovation or controversy. You have to remember, Edison told us that film would revolutionize the classroom and replace textbooks. He told us that 100 years ago and it still hasn't happened.

DM: *Were there specific people or texts that have inspired your work?*

DC: From my point of view, Neil Postman's work in the '80s, Len Masterman, Father John Pungente, Barry Duncan -- it's been a privilege to know all of those folks, and in many cases, to work with them, to team teach with them. Renee Hobbs wears me out. She has indefatigable energy. I had the privilege of working with her and team-teaching with her for several years for the Discovery Channel -- a kind of dog and pony show, "No TV," that we took around the country.

She pioneered significant steps: a bond with the White House; a bond with corporate America; scholarly research that gives meaningful evidence and data that skeptical people want [supporting the fact] that media literacy does make a difference. So her work with Babson and Billerica and at Temple is just exemplary.

On a quieter, more behind the scenes scale, Marieli Rowe. When the flame of media literacy was flickering and threatening to go out, her work as a quiet, committed presence making sure that the first Telemedium and then the "Journal of Media Literacy" continued to grow. There are just so many ways, including that first national conference back in '95.

I wouldn't have left Australia had it not been for the work of Dr. Patricia Edgar and Dr. Ina Bertrand and La Trobe. Because my first undergraduate degree was dismal and I promised (in fact you will see it on the home page of my website), I swore I would never go back to university after my first degree. I hated it and these two gave me an opportunity in film and media scholarship to experience success after mediocrity and encouraged me all the way.

And finally, Kathleen Tyner. Words can't describe -- she just has an incredible, not only national presence, but international presence, the book *Literacy in a Digital World*, and that's just one of them. She was one of the first people I ever invited to be part of the program. She will be back here in about two weeks. I think this will be her third gig with us. The students love her. I just think she is a remarkable person and academic.

Those are the people that have made the difference for me, both personally and professionally. You can't work with those folks and not have a personal relationship with them as well. And most of them at some point have ended up in Boone, NC, which I can assure you 20 years ago, none of them had ever heard of.

DM: *Can you talk a little bit about your opinion about the state of media literacy today? How far do you think the field has come?*

DC: The answer is simple: Not far enough. But that doesn't tell us anything unless you ask why. You are dealing with two things. Media literacy is an innovation and you are

trying to put an innovation into an institution, which is actually an institution of inertia.

The culture and climate of schools swallows innovation. Statistics tell us that by 2013 we will be spending 29 billion dollars a year on technology and almost all of the research, with the exception of a few pockets of progress, raises very substantial questions about whether technology transforms education or not. So even though the computer promises individual self-paced learning, we've turned it into "drill and kill." In other words, the system swallows the innovation and the innovation takes on the life of what's already been there.

So, we don't have 29 billion dollars to grow media literacy. It's hardly surprising then, that it happens in short bursts, flares up somewhere, dies down, and is subject to fad funding. The good news is that it is identified as one of the "21st Century Skills." The good news is that it is not difficult these days to find media literacy in one form or another showing up in various curriculum standards. So, in North Carolina, for example, English language arts (ELA), it says chapter and verse that students will respond to and analyze texts that are read, heard and viewed. It specifies media bias and media propaganda.

All of that is fine, but unless you do significant teacher training, and even then the latest federal research says, "Okay, so we've now exposed teachers to more technology classes, more media classes than previous generations of teachers had." The problem is when they get to the schools, the young digital native teachers encounter department heads and administrators who are often unfamiliar with and not receptive to what it is they are trying to do; a case in point being social networking. And you see this. The schools are almost schizophrenic in their perspective about media and technology. So bear with me here…this needs to be unpacked a little.

In 2006, the Secondary Principals Association released a report on technology and media in schools and social networking -- and generally they see the promise but then they also see the peril -- and their dominant concern is one of caution and safety. The following year -- and now these two groups ought to be on the same page -- the following year, 2007, in a report called "Creating and Connecting" the National School Boards Association essentially calls on school districts and administrators to relax their policies. It integrates social networking into the curriculum and classroom. Why? Because they know students are being alienated. Basically what they say is the actual reality is that the students who have access to those sorts of tools outside the school will increasingly find school irrelevant.

So you've got a big struggle and you can sum up that struggle with two different perspectives: the group that wants to control media and technology, and the group that sees media and technology in terms of challenge and creativity. And there is no clear winner. And I think in most cases, kids, the students, and their teachers are often the losers.

And the PEW group basically came to the same conclusion as BellSouth in reports in 2002, 2003 basically saying the same thing. One of them called it a "startling red flag." They saw a huge gap between the way the teachers perceived media and technology in their classes and the way kids perceived it. So again, with all of the effort that's gone on for 100 years based around tools in the schools – and we still have no common vision about that – why would we expect media literacy to be more widespread and sustained when the efforts have been so recent and the financial commitment so minimal?

You've still got to educate people that media literacy is not just teaching kids with media. And you've then got to teach the other group (the one that thinks they're doing media literacy but only does it from a protectionist paradigm, only does media literacy to the extent that they see the media as the enemy and therefore they're backing the old inoculation model, you know, which really should have gone out in the 1920s). But those folks are alive and well and not just in rural North Carolina. A fairly recent study concluded that many social studies teachers regard media and popular culture as "fluff" that they need to protect children from.

One of the problems we face is that 41 states - 41 states! - have not a single media or technology requirement for school administrators, and this is horrendous; just fiscally, leaving out the pedagogy. Given how much money the schools are receiving and spending on media and technology, why 41 states would not require administrators to have any background in it is nothing short of staggering.

So, the problem is that the teachers may well be trying to do something with media literacy but they have to convince administrators who have no background in this at all.

In 1985, I did a piece for the "School Library Media Quarterly" and I closed that piece by saying, "It's not the hardware or the software, it's the underwear." And the "underwear" is the underlying policies and procedures and perspectives that come into play. And there are like three different perspectives, and to this day, it's the first question I ask my grad classes in technology. We have media advocates, media accomplices and media adversaries. And the adversaries are still out there. They may be well-meaning, but on the other hand, they may be technophobes. They may at times think that media literacy is incompatible with print literacy. Ask any librarian about Harry Potter's influence on kids' reading.

You know, it's that if you're pro-screen, you must be anti-page. There are so many misconceptions out there, but you know, we have this saying that "perception is reality." So for media literacy to grow we have to recognize the misconceptions and then respond to them. My general belief is that the best area, the most viable avenue for doing that, is through the National Middle School Association. I think they have the most progressive view of education. Their former executive director has endorsed media literacy. It's compatible with their three bibles, and their three bibles are *Turning Point 2000*, *From*

Rhetoric to Reality and *This We Believe*. I defy anyone to read those three things and say that media literacy does not line up with those.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in '95 in their report "Great Transmissions" put it very simply, they said, "You can't understand the world of the adolescent if you don't understand their media environment." I really think that's incredibly fertile ground for working in, because they are really interested in the whole child, not just the cognitive-intellectual child. They break child and early adolescent development into five dimensions and it's very easy.

All five of those dimensions, if you conceptualize that as spokes in a wheel, you pick up those five dimensions of adolescence and say, "Media literacy can do that, it can do that, fits there, works there."

DM: *Do you think the field is moving in the direction you think best? Why, or why not?*

DC: Look, I think that John Naisbitt in 1982 in "Megatrends" said that we're drowning in information and starved for knowledge, and I don't see anything that tells me otherwise. If we're drowning in information and starved for knowledge, then I think media literacy is a lifeline. I think it's a lifeline for anyone who thinks they're going under.

It's not just a 21st century skill, it's a survival skill. The whole notion, the American ideal of "informed responsible citizenship," you can't possibly think that's the first word there, "informed." You cannot be an informed responsible citizen if you are not simultaneously media literate. It is a prerequisite for a healthy democratic society that society and its citizens are media literate.

DM: *And the thing you said before, I mean the real focus, could be in identifying those misconceptions and figuring out a way to educate the change makers.*

DC: Right. And we still get into fragmentation. Something came over the Internet the other day, and I said, "Oh God, are we still doing this?" It was a particular organization, and they were perfectly well-meaning. I mean, the program that we're running here in two weeks is very deliberately called "Linking the Literacies" but we keep getting into splintering the literacies.

So, the Library Science Group wanted to do information literacy, which begs the question, well, information to whom? And for kids, what they seek as information is not necessarily the formal types of information that librarians focus on. So anyway, this organization was promoting what they called "news literacy." If you're media literate you

are going to be news literate. And then I've heard "tele-literacy" and "screen literacy."

I mean, if you work with the principles of media literacy --If you work with the T.A.P. model (Text, Audience, Production), if you work with Lasswell's model – you're going to get all of those things under that umbrella.

Anyway, the newness comes along, and we get distracted by the newness of the tool, and we ignore the sameness of the school. And media literacy hits the same barrier. School culture and climate either supports or subverts an innovation. If you know that to begin with, you don't runaround saying, "Look, we got this dandy new idea called media literacy. Are you interested?" Because the first thing teachers are going to go into is, the, "I don't have time to" model. "How do you expect me to do this in addition to anything else?" That's a perfectly valid question for any teacher to ask when confronted with new expectations.

It's a risk-reward ratio and the minute anyone comes to the conclusion that that change – whether it's media literacy or a whole language versus phonetics, or anything else-- the minute you get into the risk-reward ratio and they conclude that it's too much trouble, then there goes the innovation. Not that it was a bad idea. We just hadn't made the idea compatible with the people we wanted to embrace it.

DM: *So what is the direction?*

DC: Well, I think we need a management model for targeting and growing media literacy with the constituencies that are out there: National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), National Middle School Association (NMSA), Parent Teacher Association (PTA). These groups have already been receptive but for the most part, we have a shocking one-size-fits all approach to staff development in education, not differentiated staff development. We make these basic training mistakes when each new technology comes along so it is not likely that media literacy will be approached with anything other than the same top down model when it comes to most single school sites or districts.

That's a model where teachers experience change as something that happens to them, not through them which ultimately breeds resentment and resistance undermining the very change we are trying to implement.

Well over a decade ago, the Aspen Institute recognized our approach to media literacy at Appalachian State (ASU) as something of an exemplary model. I am not talking about the master's in media literacy that we introduced in 1999. I am talking about the way in which media literacy has been integrated into undergraduate teacher preparation. Our undergrads in middle school training, with a focus on English language arts (ELA), have to take "Media & Young People," a class which focuses on the principles and purposes of media literacy as they relate to the nature and needs of early adolescents and the mission statement of the National Middle School Association.

But even though that's a good course, it is isolated to ELA in middle schools. The reality now, the big news at ASU is that all undergrads in our College of Education must take a course called "Teaching & Learning in a Digital Age." The course mandates that these young teachers engage in both media analysis and evaluation, and media design and production, using common rubrics with the projects and assessments all posted to a central site for comparison and evaluation.

So the data is available, accessible that administrators and teachers can look at to see how these projects, these portfolios connected to state standards, to media literacy "best practices" and to a pedagogy that meaningfully engages today's learners.

But once again that's not sufficient. What about the teachers who have been in the schools for 10 or 20 years? How do we get them on board? That's tough going in this economy. My dean, Dr. Charles Duke, and my chairperson, Dr. Michael Jacobson, have supported summer institutes -- free summer institutes for North Carolina teachers -- connecting media literacy to different areas of the curriculum and different grade levels. The attendance, the evaluations and the overall feedback have clearly indicated that when provided with opportunities like this, teachers value media literacy and are excited about taking it back to their classrooms.

DM: *What are some milestones you noted along the way?*

DC: We offer Media Literacy as a graduate course, which can be taken entirely online, again providing teachers with convenience of access. The Canadian's have just started this with an online course they call Plato's Cave, which similarly addresses a perceived need in their nation.

Finally it should also be noted that we are starting to see the first doctoral dissertations in this nation that have addressed media literacy in the U.S. Some of my own students have authored those studies while others have been the subjects of the studies. We are seeing media literacy increasingly show up in the literature in Library Science and in publications like "The Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy" from the International Reading Association.

One of the most consistent findings is that a key characteristic shared by teachers who get into media literacy is their personal passion, their vision and their dedication. It's fascinating for me to see a young woman like LeAnna Swing, who teaches social studies and English language arts in a middle school in Asheville, North Carolina. I had never heard of her, I didn't know her. I'd never met her. She came to the Institute two years ago. Free.

She sat there at the end and she met with me, and she said, "I think I'd like to do this master's degree but it's my husband's money as well and I have to go home and talk to

him." I said, "I understand that."

Two months later, she joins the program. And she has been remarkable whether taking classes on campus or online, constantly contributing her own ideas and experiences, including what works with her students and what needs more polish and practice. The giving, the sharing, and the community these young teachers build, including with those outside their field or region, this is all a testament to that old movie line, "if you build it they will come."

DM: *So what would you like to see happen?*

DC: I would certainly like to see more teacher education programs integrate media literacy. I don't necessarily think an undergraduate program and teacher preparation needs a course called "media literacy." If we focus on the competency, not the course, we can get away from some of the inevitable turf battles about what course gets dropped if we introduce a new one and so on. But the methods classes -- especially in English language arts, history/social studies, certainly the health education classes -- these are all areas with relevant state and national standards that address media literacy issues whether focused on citizenship, civil rights, human sexuality, substance abuse, global awareness, and so on. The problem with putting the responsibility in a single class is that it isolates rather than integrates media literacy as a concept and reduces the opportunities students and teachers have to reinforce and utilize the intellectual skills that are part of the process of becoming media literate.

Too often, however, department heads and administrators are not aware of these skills and are too willing to see anything with the word "media" in it as dumbing-down the curriculum or an invasion of pop culture.

DM: *When I came into my doctoral program saying what I wanted to do, what I wanted to study, trying to explain media literacy to the education department was difficult.*

DC: Right. And we even went through some similar things in Connecticut with a doctoral student who had areas of frustration there when she was trying to build support for her dissertation about media literacy. But it's the patient people like yourself that believe and are persistent that slowly get folks to open their eyes and be receptive. And to be perfectly frank, when I went to Madison in the '70s -- and I was self-funded so that was certainly helpful – they bounced me back and forth between Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education and Communication Arts where I was working with film. And they wanted to build this wall, about, "well, that's an educational film, but that's an entertainment film." And I said, "Yeah, but they are both being shown to the same kids. Can't you let me build a bridge between adolescents and media?"

And they just weren't in that place. They were in these distinctive, separate spheres and even at the point after I'd done a 600-page dissertation, and sat down with the chair and the committee. And it was Michael Apple -- who's brilliant -- Michael Apple actually asked during the dissertation defense, "What's this got to do with schooling?" Well, you know, and given how incredibly progressive and liberal his books on curricula are, that was a stunning question, but he was simply blinded by the fact that from an American education point of view, this was not educational. And, mercifully, the major professor came in and said, "Well, David's made it perfectly clear that in his country, where he comes from, this is part of the curriculum." You know, because in the media world we talk about consolidation and convergence, and yet educators still like to put things in their old boxes, like the Dewey Decimal System.

DM: *Media literacy, as a discipline, feels incredibly fragmented and I agree with you wholeheartedly that everyone is really talking about the same thing.*

DC: You've just got to put the pieces of the puzzle together. The guys that wrote *The Art of Japanese Management* back in the early '80s got it right. Somewhere in that book it says, "Management is not by just tools but by vision. We have the tools but we lack the vision." And I think that is absolutely correct.

And the problem there – if we go back to what I was saying before about schools, trying to grow media literacy in American schools that are triangulated by administrators on one side of the triangle, teachers on the other and largely media specialists on the other -- is that although all three are educated and licensed they are each in splendid isolation from the other.

You end up with what I call the "formula for failure." How can they possibly have a shared vision about media and technology, its role in the classroom and its relevance to young people, when they have no common education experience and therefore a fragmented vision?

So the way we prepare teachers and administrators perpetuates that lack of vision. And that's why I am not optimistic that we will see anything other than pockets of progress. Certainly nothing that would look like sweeping systemic change or transformation in education.