Media Literacy Conceptualisations in Irish Higher Education: A Phenomenographic Analysis of Media Lecturers' Accounts

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Author's Declaration

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for the award of any other qualification. The word count is 44,487 and does not exceed the maximum permitted allocation of 45,000 words.

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Abstract

This thesis centres on university-level media literacy (ML) and explores qualitative variation in the ML and ML teaching accounts of media educators in Irish higher educational institutions. It transcends terminological debate and conceptual complexities by advancing an alternative understanding of ML and its instruction, whereby lecturers' conceptions are constituted in terms of expanding and structurally related dimensions of awareness.

The outcomes are based on a phenomenographic analysis of interviews with 19 media educators and present four qualitatively distinct ways in which participants described ML. The hierarchically inclusive descriptive categories portray ML as: (1) media understanding, (2) practical task engagement, (3) critical analysis and (4) change and contribution. The categories are constituted along themes of expanding awareness, ranging from generalised media knowledge and conceptual/industry understanding to consideration of the civic and societal implications of media. Structurally, an inward-to-outward shift is apparent, thematised as expanding from a *'self'* to *'industry'* to *'society'* orientation. In terms of teaching ML, four further qualitatively different and hierarchically inclusive categories were generated. They reflect ML teaching as: (1) building media knowledge among learners, (2) cultivating students' critical skills, (3) facilitating considered debate and (4) enabling transformation. The findings also furnish insight into the relationship between media educators' perceptions of their own role and the intended outcomes of teaching ML.

The study is significant in moving beyond the long-standing tensions and definitional ambiguities surrounding ML and is timely given the emphasis on ML in navigating an increasingly complex media and information environment. The findings embrace and critically map variation in how educators at the forefront of university media education describe ML and its teaching, highlighting how diverse perspectives can holistically coexist. They also affirm ML's lifelong significance and transformative potential whilst acknowledging the complexities of teaching it. The findings extend ML research into Irish higher education, offering insights and understandings which are informative in the design and delivery of MLE, particularly across university settings.

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Níl bua gan dua
(Irish proverb: There is no victory without struggle)

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Mo grá mo chroí, our life resumes now.

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALA	American Library Association
ALLEA	All European Academies
BAI	Broadcasting Authority of Ireland
CML	Critical Media Literacy
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
CSO	Central Statistics Office (Ireland)
CT	Critical Thinking
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority (Ireland)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IUA	Irish Universities Association
IPIE	International Panel on the Information Environment
MIL	Media and Information Literacy
ML	Media Literacy
ME	Media Education
MLE	Media Literacy Education
MLI	Media Literacy Ireland
NALA	National Adult Literacy Association (Ireland)
NAMLE	National Association for Media Literacy Education (US)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofcom	Office of Communications (UK)
OSI	Open Society Institute
RTÉ	Raidió Teilifís Éireann (Ireland's public service broadcaster)
T&L	Teaching and Learning
TU	Technological University
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHO	World Health Organization

Chapter 1 Introducing the Research Undertaking

1.1 Introduction

The relationship between citizens and media is being rewritten. Not only do content creation and consumption converge but there is conflation between facts and fake news (European Parliament, 2025a; Hadlington et al., 2023; Lazer et al., 2018; Newman & Cherubini, 2025; OECD, 2024). Moreover, online commentary and communities intersect with real-world events (Blackburn & Zannettou, 2022; Fleming, 2020; Fujiwara et al., 2023; Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022; Oksanen et al., 2024; Prajapati et al., 2024; WHO, 2020). These dynamics, along with democratic concerns, the rise of artificial intelligence [AI] and pervasiveness of social media, have intensified the focus on media literacy [ML] and related educational interventions (Ehrlich, 2025; European Commission, 2024; Lessenski, 2023; McDougall, 2023; NAMLE, 2024a; Schmidt, 2021; Tiernan et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021b; von der Leyen, 2024).

The specificalities and capabilities of ML have long been debated (Buckingham, 1993; 2007a; 2007b; 2025; Bulger & Davison, 2018; Culloty, 2024; Ey, 2024; Hobbs, 1998; 2009; Livingstone, 2004a; 2004b; 2018; Masterman, 1989; 1997; 2013; Mihailidis, 2009b; Shnurenko et al., 2021). Recently, however, it has acquired renewed urgency, with Media Literacy Ireland [MLI] emphasising the importance of ensuring that every citizen has the skills to maximise “the best of digital technologies and to minimise any risks” (2024, p. 1). The European Commission has similarly underscored the “fundamental role” of media literacy education [MLE] in equipping citizens to exercise critical judgement in a world of proliferating platforms and messaging, but also “unprecedented risks” due to algorithmic influence, information bubbles and online echo chambers (2021, p. 13).

Despite this, ML remains a complex, often contested, evolving and “necessarily fuzzy concept” that overlaps with other literacies and transcends policy

boundaries (MLI, 2024, p. 1). It is also often “burgeoned” and “burdened” by expectations about its interpretation and implementation (Bulger & Davison, 2018, p. 19), from definitional challenges and charges of short-termism to differing pedagogical perspectives, practices and priorities (Altun, 2012; boyd, 2017; 2018; Bulger et al., 2023; Mihailidis, 2018). A further challenge is that limited opportunities exist for ML practitioners to share practices, insights or learnings (Edwards et al., 2023). Cognisant of the centrality of media to our everyday lives and educators’ role in helping learners to navigate an ever-increasing sea of information (Azoulay, 2024; MLI, 2024), this research is important in transcending the debate which has long surrounded ML. It contributes to ML understanding, particularly at university-level, by holistically embracing the different expressed accounts of educators, in this case media lecturers within an Irish higher education [HE] context.

1.2 Research background

Exactly four decades have elapsed since Masterman extolled the essentialness of media education [ME] and widespread ML “if all citizens are to wield power, make rational decisions, become effective change-agents, and have an active involvement with the media” (1985, p. 11). Over the years, “widely” varying ML conceptualisations have emerged (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013, p. 1614). The *National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy* produced one of the most enduring and frequently cited definitions, ascribing ML as the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide, 1992, p. 6). Other definitions reference critical thinking [CT], active media inquiry (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009) and/or reinforce ML as not only a pedagogy but a framework for life, work and citizenship in “a changing world” (Thoman & Jolls, 2004, p. 18). Recent global and political events have spotlighted ML’s “high stakes” (Bulger & Davison, 2018, p. 11). It is resultantly, and increasingly, advanced as a response to contemporary challenges (Culloty, 2024), from fake news and the rise of “dominant storytellers” and “story-sellers” (Kellner & Share,

2019, p. 2) to broader democratic threats (European Commission, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the affordances and challenges of media and technology, as the very tools that kept people informed were also described as "enabling and amplifying an infodemic" (WHO, 2020). Misinformation and disinformation have been since cited as the world's greatest short-term threat (WEF, 2024), with UNESCO's Director-General reaffirming the significance of MLE:

> With the spread of rumors and the distortion of facts, the boundary between true and false has become blurred. This is undermining the very foundations of our societies and democracies and putting lives at risk through the propagation of fake cures, the fueling of vaccine conspiracy theories, or the spread of racism and hate speech. In this deluge of information, we need more reference points and more rational thinking. And that is why media and information literacy is such a key skill for the education of 21st-century citizens.
>
> (Azoulay, 2024)

In an Irish context, Coimisiún na Meán (2024), the regulatory successor to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland [BAI], has outlined its commitment to ensuring people "can critically understand and interact with media and make informed choices" about online content. The (then) Irish HE Minister also emphasised the importance of understanding online information and news content (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2024) while the Media and Communications Minister has signalled the need for a "whole-of-society" response to disinformation by supporting ML "throughout our lives" (Department of Culture, 2025). Nonetheless, as Culloty (2024) observed, educational policies in Ireland and elsewhere often prioritise digital skills over media knowledge, CT and evaluation. Prioritising digital literacy and classroom technology integration rather than ML has, she contended, significance and implications beyond semantics. It additionally raises questions about educator conceptions and the expressed ML

teaching experiences of those involved in university-level media module/programme design and delivery.

1.2.1 ML and higher education

HE holds “one of the important roles” in shaping future society (Teague, 2015, p. 1). University students and educators, however, face manifold demands and challenges, including navigating the “radical uncertainty” and “supercomplexities” of an evolving offline and online world (Barnett, 2000, pp. 409-419). Whilst “transformative teaching” is crucial in preparing students for a shifting knowledge environment and a “complex and fast paced world full of pressing concerns and competing value positions” (McCune, 2021, p. 32), it is notable that ML is not consistently practised across all educational levels (Schmidt, 2012a). Moreover, ML research frequently concentrates on pre-or-post university cohorts/initiatives (De Leyn et al., 2022; Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020; Hobbs, 2004; McDougall et al., 2018; Moore & Hancock, 2022; Rogow, 2014; Schmitz et al., 2024). ML’s “tenuous post-secondary status” and challenges related to its university-level implementation were highlighted by Mihailidis (2008a). He cited not only “consistency” issues and definitional challenges, but also “contested notions of media literacy for the university” which could impede learning outcomes (p. 1). Others have described ML as caught in a “vicious circle”, whereby only the “development of a systematic and cumulative body of research” regarding its teaching and learning [T&L] can assist in clarifying goals and policies, as well as identifying “effective teaching practices and teacher education” (Lemish, 2015, p. 205).

With respect to media and information literacy [MIL] in Irish higher education institutions [HEIs], Mesquita & Castellini da Silva (2024) observed a varied landscape. Elsewhere, experts at the *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Conference* considered the simultaneous overestimation and underestimation of ML in an environment where “everything” is both at stake and expected (Bulger et al., 2023, p. 99). Bulger & Davison (2018)

also noted how ML is plagued by issues which impact education more generally, with its longitudinal nature making initiatives difficult to evaluate whilst diverse ML goals could lead to incoherent outcomes and expectations, spawning questions about what to include and measure. A US 'snapshot' report also highlighted the need for increased inquiry, including smaller-scale qualitative studies, to gain a clearer picture of ML educational practices and a better understanding of structures which enhance or hinder its implementation in classrooms and beyond (NAMLE, 2024c). It is against this backdrop, and in the hope of providing illumination into university ML, that this phenomenographic study was undertaken.

1.3 Researcher motivation

As expanded upon in Chapter 4, I worked in the media industry before entering HE teaching. In my former journalistic life, the term 'media literacy' did not arise. Perhaps this was because literacy was deemed to be the preserve of education/educators, government policy or advocacy organisations, or naively assumed by myself - and potentially others - as something which did not concern media per se. There was also a mistaken assumption that the legacy media of my earlier career would retain its position and privilege and that audiences would instinctively question and, constructively or legally, challenge media organisations and publishers. It was also assumed that journalistic and editorial oversight, fact-checking and media legislation/regulation would offer protection. ML has subsequently permeated my professional, pedagogical and personal consciousness through world events, the research of others (albeit often related to contexts outside of Ireland and settings beyond HE), its promotion by national and international organisations and campaigns such as '*Be Media Smart*' (MLI, 2023).

Simons et al. (2017) highlighted the connection between teachers' knowledge, classroom skills and ML's successfulness: "Effective media education requires that teachers have sufficient media literacy competencies as well as the

competencies to promote media literacy in students" (p. 99). Others reinforce the necessity for specific research into university ML, including studies reflecting faculty perceptions (Schmidt, 2012a; 2012b). As a researcher and communications' educator, I was interested in exploring media faculty perceptions of ML and its teaching.

1.4 Outline of the research undertaking

I set out in this research to phenomenographically investigate the lived ML and ML teaching experiences of university media educators.

1.4.1 Research questions

Two interconnected research questions underpin this study:

1. What are the qualitatively different ways in which media lecturers in Irish HEIs account for ML?
2. What are the qualitatively different ways in which these same lecturers account for teaching ML?

The research questions specifically refer to lecturers' *accounts* of ML and its teaching. As detailed in Chapter 4, I was conscious that I only had access to participants' descriptions and that my role was to ensure the outcomes accurately reflected the different ways they described ML and its teaching (Conner & Kay, 2011). Whilst both research questions are interconnected, I examined variation in lecturers' accounts of ML and ML teaching in separate sections. Doing so facilitated in-depth analysis of participants' ML descriptions and also enabled me to analyse in detail the different, yet interrelated ways they described their teaching experiences, including their perceptions of their roles as educators and the anticipated outcomes of ML instruction.

1.4.2 Research approach

Phenomenography has “revolutionised” the way that researchers and educators think about “the processes and outcomes” of HE T&L by providing enhanced insight and understanding into different perspectives (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013, p. 261). It furnishes a “comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex experiences” (Rolls, 2023, p. 130), such as ML, by enabling the researcher to enter participants’ lifeworld and richly and holistically capture the ways in which they conceptualise a particular phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2025).Through employing a second-order stance (Marton, 1986), phenomenography allowed me to explore how media educators described ML, from *their* perspective, and examine the structural and referential relationships between their different expressed ways of experiencing ML and its teaching.

1.5 Knowledge contribution

This research is significant not just because of the increased importance placed on ML in helping citizens “to navigate the modern news environment and take informed decisions” (European Parliament, 2025b, p. 1), but in advancing university ML research and affirming its self, industry and society benefits. It transcends the “terminological disputes” (Livingstone, 2003, p. 4), paradigmatic debate and ambiguities which have long surrounded ML (Bulger et al., 2023). Instead, it adopts an alternative approach and generates categories of description and related outcome spaces, which inclusively and hierarchically map the structurally significant, different and interrelated ways (Marton, 1986) in which those interviewed described ML and its instruction. The findings focus on collective experience (Åkerlind, 2024b) and enhance existing research by providing a holistic, higher-order account of ML and ML teaching, as accounted for by media lecturers directly involved in university ME delivery. The findings are valuable as existing ML literature frequently focuses on pre- or post-university contexts. They are additionally significant in an Irish context due to a dearth of localised research regarding ML, particularly in relation to HE. Beyond media and

communication studies, the findings are informative for university educators from varying disciplines, as well as researchers and institutional decision-makers and shapers interested in ML and its higher educational enhancement.

1.6 Thesis structure

The structure of the remainder of this thesis is outlined below:

Chapter 2 positions this study in relation to existing research. It discusses conceptual and paradigmatic aspects, ML's democratic/societal and CT associations, the role of educators and scarcity of HE-specific research capturing the lived ML understandings and teaching experiences of university media educators.

Chapter 3 outlines phenomenography's pertinency to the research aims. It addresses theoretical aspects and criticisms directed at phenomenographic research/researchers.

Chapter 4 details the research methods which I adopted in addressing the research questions, along with my experiences of phenomenographic interviewing and data analysis. Research quality and reliability are also addressed.

Chapter 5 presents my phenomenographic findings. Each research question is addressed separately, with a detailed analysis provided of the outcomes which I generated in examining qualitative differences in media educators' accounts of ML and its teaching.

Chapter 6 discusses this study's findings in relation to existent literature and their significance in enhancing ML/ML teaching knowledge.

Chapter 7 includes a summation of my research findings, consideration of the study's contribution to existing knowledge and addresses the educational

implications of this research for ML and its teaching in HE. I recognise the boundaries of this research and consider areas of possible, future investigation.

1.7 Conclusion

The context for this phenomenographic study was provided herein, including my personal, professional and ML research motivations. I set out the research questions underpinning this study and highlighted phenomenography's appropriateness in mapping the qualitatively different ways in which media lecturers accounted for ML and its teaching. I additionally underlined how this research contributes to ML knowledge and provided an overview of the thesis structure. In the following chapter, the focus shifts to the existing knowledge base and opportunities for this research.

Chapter 2 Definitional Debate, Pedagogical Priorities and ML in Higher Education

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I position this study in relation to prior research and identify gaps in the published body of knowledge regarding ML and its teaching in HE, focusing specifically on studies conducted in the context of MLE. Limited ML research exists in an Irish context, with no studies uncovered on HE media educators' conceptualisations or their related teaching experiences. Internationally, there is also a scarcity of research into lecturers' accounts of ML as existent studies predominantly centre on pre-university or adult education, ML interventions or student perceptions (Allen et al., 2022; Arsenijević & Andevski, 2022; Castellini da Silva, 2021; Diergarten et al., 2017; Gaultney et al., 2022; Hobbs et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2012; McDougall et al., 2018; Mihailidis, 2008b; Schmidt, 2013b; Stein & Prewett, 2009; Tisdell et al., 2007). The picture emanating from the research is complex, characterised by little definitional consensus, challenges related to ML teaching approaches and outcomes, and also difficulties in identifying a clear purpose for ML curriculum design (Arsenijević & Andevski, 2022; Francis, 2016; Higdon et al., 2021; Hobbs, 1998; Koltay, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2013; McNelly & Harvey, 2021; Mendoza, 2009; Sedelmaier et al., 2023; Vuojärvi et al., 2021). Furthermore, while some promote a "rich vision" for ML, others see it as one, albeit important, element within an increasingly complicated media and information environment (Bulger & Davison, 2018, pp. 2-3).

When it comes to university educators, Boon et al. (2007) highlighted the value of capturing their "real-world" accounts, given their role as "potentially vital agents" in implementing information literacy (p. 205). The same can be said of ML and media lecturers' perceptions, with Sedelmaier et al. (2023) stressing the importance of gaining HE insights in order to devise "learning settings devoted to media literacy" and guide the strategic development of ML programmes and related curricula (p. 397). Others query how educators can turn ML into impactful

ME strategies, especially in an AI era, if research is scant regarding the highest level of the educational system (Wilmot, 2023). Aware of the complexities but also research opportunities surrounding ML in HE, I set out to conduct a phenomenographic analysis of the ML conceptualisations and teaching accounts of lecturers at the forefront of ME delivery in Irish universities.

Structurally, this literature review is divided into four sections. The first section explores ML definitions, terminological challenges and criticisms pertaining to a lack of specificity (Beiler et al., 2020). The second section examines how ML is framed, particularly in relation to protectionism and empowerment approaches and critical and/or civic foci. The third section looks at research opportunities related to ML in HE, discussion over the role of educators and ML's applicability to other academic disciplines and HE more generally.

2.2 Definitional challenges

ML is cited as an increasingly necessary competency for 21st century success within public policy and elsewhere (European Commission, 2023; European Parliament, 2025b; MLI, 2024; Ofcom, 2024; UNESCO, 2021a; von der Leyen, 2024). Nevertheless, attempts at defining it have proven problematic. Twenty-plus years ago Livingstone pondered '*what is media literacy?*' and identified a need to rise above "terminological disputes" (2003, pp. 4-5). Even earlier, Rubin (1998) queried why, despite recurrent debate and analysis, so little remained understood about ML. Perhaps the present problem is that rather than understanding too little, what is known is disparate, intermingled with other literacies, clouded by terminological ambiguity or contention, or not representative of the current media and HE media teaching environment. Buckingham described ML as a "feel-good term" which "can be defined in many different ways" (2021, p. 3). In its *Media Literacy Policy*, the BAI likewise observed how ML can be "understood differently by different stakeholders" (2022, p. 1), contributing to clarity issues. It thus avoided defining ML, focusing instead on skills, success indicators and competency creation, with Wuyckens (2022) also

reiterating the need to rise above debate, bridge interpretative differences and achieve the “operationalization” of concepts (p. 168).

2.2.1 Bridging ML conceptualisations

Many ML paradigms exist. Moreover, concepts and terms aligned with ML have multiplied from MIL, multiliteracy, news literacy and digital literacy to information discernment, cyber and AI literacy among others (ALA, 1989; Ashley, 2020; Bawden, 2008; Deepmala & Upadhyay, 2021; Dobson & Willinsky, 2009; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2025; Glister, 1997; Hudders et al., 2016; Koltay, 2011; Leaning, 2017; Lee, 2014; Magomedov et al., 2020; Okkonen & Kotilainen, 2019; Pointon et al., 2022; Spires, 2019; UNESCO, 2011; Vraga et al., 2020; Walton et al., 2018; Weinrich, 2020). If ML, as the literature reveals, is a “complex and iridescent term”, often lacking in preciseness or agreement among researchers (Sedelmaier et al., 2023, p. 392), where does such complexity, iridescence or apparent imprecision leave media educators? Past definitional attempts prompted Tyner (1991) to conjure the tale of the blind men and the elephant whereby each described part of the beast. The nearest to an agreed ML definition (Livingstone, 2003) is perhaps that which resulted from the *National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy* (Aufderheide, 1992). However, as Martens (2010) observed, even this lacks sufficient “specificity” in providing “detail to people who want to design educational strategies” (p. 2). Over the years, interpretative and terminological discussion around ML has persisted (Anderson, 2008; De Abreu et al., 2017; Edwards et al., 2023; Erstad & Amdam, 2013; Hobbs, 1998; Martens, 2010; O'Neill & Barnes, 2008; Potter, 2010; 2022b). Debate has also surrounded ML’s ideals, application, priorities, appropriateness and/or over-egged capabilities (boyd, 2017; Buckingham, 1993; 2001; 2017; 2020b; De Abreu et al., 2017; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; 2019; Jolls & Wilson, 2014; Livingstone, 2004a; 2004b; 2018; Mihailidis, 2009a; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Potter, 2010; 2021; Sedelmaier et al., 2023; Thoman & Jolls, 2005). Questions additionally arise over whether singular ML definitions or simplistic notions of

literacy, learning and communication need to be revised to reflect participatory online spaces and increasingly prevalent critical and democratic emphases (Azoulay, 2023; BAI, 2022; Brown, 1998; Buckingham, 2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Hartley, 2002; Hirsh, 1987; Hobbs, 2015; Hoggart, 1957; 2004; Kellner & Share, 2007b; 2007c; 2019; Luke, 1994; Macedo, 2005; McDougall, 2020; Mihailidis, 2019b; NAMLE, 2024b; Ofcom, 2022; O'Neill & Barnes, 2008; Potter & McDougall, 2017; UNESCO, 2014; 2011; 2021a).

ML perceptions and definitions frequently depend on “one’s perspective or theoretical frame” (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 194), with Buckingham (2006) noting how the term ‘literacy’ implies the need for a broader, “more rounded” and “humanistic” conception of “education about media that is not restricted to mechanical skills or narrow forms of functional competence” (p. 265). UNESCO (2013), in its *Global MIL Assessment Framework,* also highlighted how literacy should be conceived as a layered and “evolving construct” (p. 30). The multifaceted and nuanced nature of ML is reflected in three distinct models from different decades - the Media Literacy Triangle (Dick, 1989), Cognitive Model of Media Literacy (Potter, 2004) and Production-Signification-Consumption Method and Analysis (Lacković, 2020b).

The extent of interpretative and terminological variation surrounding ML is apparent in Potter’s *State of Media Literacy* essay (2010), wherein he cited more than twenty sample definitions and pointed to potential scholarly ambiguity and/or confusion arising from this “patchwork” of conceptualisations (p. 676). Some highlight how ranging ML interpretations and a proliferation of umbrella concepts, terminologies and literacy frameworks have made standardised approaches difficult to realise (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Edwards et al., 2023; Wuyckens, 2022). Furthermore, even if areas of “fertile conceptual common ground” have been unearthed, the body of empirical evidence is often exploratory or fragmented (Martens, 2010, p. 15). Regarding HE enhancement, Sedelmaier et al. (2023) signalled that a “thorough understanding” of ML and its “underlying

competencies" is a "prerequisite for adequate learning settings targeting the improvement of media literacy" (pp. 392-393). This phenomenographic research embraces variation in university media educators' descriptions of ML and its teaching. It analyses the relationships between their lived accounts, offering insights which contribute towards the 'improvement' of ML's educational 'understanding'.

2.3 Varying approaches to ML

Definitional problems are one issue, however, divergence and debate also occur around how ML is framed. This again presents challenges, not just in terms of ML's conceptualisation but educational implementation. Four general approaches are mentioned within the literature - protectionism, critical media literacy [CML], the media literacy movement and media arts education (Freire & McCarthy, 2014; Kellner & Share, 2005; 2007c; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Postman, 1985; Tyner, 1991). In addition to the above, prioritisation is also given to the balancing of media pros and cons and further theoretical, creative, critical and/or civic aspects (Ashley et al., 2017; Barnes et al., 2007; Bazalgette, 2009; Buckingham, 2001; 2003; 2005; 2020b; Freire & McCarthy, 2014; Funk et al., 2016; Gainer, 2010; Hobbs, 1998; 2015; 2019; Kellner & Share, 2005; 2007a; 2007b; Livingstone, 2003; Maksl et al., 2015; Masterman, 1985; McDougall et al., 2014; Mihailidis, 2008b; 2018; Schmidt, 2021; Tyner, 1991; Vraga et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2015). Hobbs (1998), in *The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement*, cited an "explosion" in ML practices and materials. She also emphasised the need for educators to "develop community-based consensus" to counter the "broadness", "conflicts" and "tensions" which could hinder successful collaboration (pp. 16-27). Rather than an 'explosion' in university-oriented ML/ML teaching research, there is a scarcity of literature centring on understanding variation in how HE media educators account for ML and its teaching. This presents a gap which this research aimed to address.

2.3.1 Protectionism and/or empowerment

ML is frequently framed in protectionist or empowerment terms (Buckingham, 1998; Friesem, 2018; Hobbs, 2011a; Levitt & Denniston, 2014; Mendoza, 2009; Nelson et al., 2020; Potter, 2022b; RobbGrieco & Hobbs, 2013). Almost a century ago, Leavis & Thompson (1933) suggested that students be armed against "the commercial manipulation of the mass media" (Buckingham, 2003, p. 7). Meanwhile, the *Spens Report* (1938) likened the media to diseases warranting inoculation (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Masterman, 1985). Protectionism and empowerment approaches have subsequently morphed and magnified (Potter, 2022b), with ML's empowering capabilities frequently emphasised within scholarly and other output (Bergsma, 2004; Coimisiún na Meán, 2024; Cortés, 1991; Hobbs, 2011a; Pinto, 2014; Valdmane, 2016). Empowerment is evident in the BAI's *Media Literacy Policy* (2022) and the EU's *Audio Visual Media Services Directive*, however, it is worth noting that the same directive also refers to "protecting" people from "harmful or offensive material" (European Parliament, 2018, para. 25a). A review of empirical studies by Martens (2010) furthermore revealed that many scholars perceive MLE as countering negative media effects while Pekkala (2024), in an MLI conference address, referenced 'mean world syndrome' (Gerbner et al., 1980) and discussion around technological harm, safety and young people, calling for a more "holistic" educational approach to ML. Hobbs (1998) observed that, while diverse ML perspectives are a "source of strength and vitality" reflecting the "relevancy, power and appeal" of critically analysing media, the "dizzying array" of views and approaches could "paralyse" educators' efforts to effectively work together (p. 27). Higdon et al. (2021) similarly referenced the "quagmire" of "dichotomous" debate and problems facing newcomers and educators interested in implementing ML in their classrooms (p. 3):

> The competing categorizations have not elucidated the differing aspects of each approach, nor have they clarified if practitioners adopt one approach for all pedagogical situations.

O'Neill (2000) reflected how “the question is never simply one of ‘to promote or to protect?’” (p. 12). Others signal the necessity for teaching beyond “solutionism” and embracing, but also understanding, how “protectionism and resilience need to work together” (McDougall, 2023, p. 133). Whilst scholars increasingly recognise that treating protectionism and empowerment as mutually exclusive is “too simplistic” and that “terms used to label the sides in the purported debate” can be complementary rather than competing (Potter, 2022b, p. 121), UK research commissioned to address challenges in the ML sector highlighted the wide range of definitions in use internationally. It also drew attention to “tensions” around the framing and focus of ML (Edwards et al., 2023, pp. 27-28). Rather than furthering such ‘tensions’, this research has grasped a phenomenographic research opportunity by examining the different, related ways in which university media educators accounted for ML and its instruction.

2.3.2 Critical media literacy

Many commentators prioritise CML rather than ML. Among these are Ligocki (2017), who reiterated the need for CML by repeating Macedo’s concerns regarding the “stupidification” of “the bewildered herd” and the danger of citizens being controlled by the media (2009, p. xxv). Ferguson (1998), employing an iceberg analogy, likewise emphasised the importance of exploring beyond the “immediately visible” to uncover the “intellectual, historical and analytical base without which media analysis runs the risk of becoming superficial, mechanical or glib” (p. 2). Meanwhile, Kellner and Share argued that, in a digital age, CML is “imperative” not optional (2007b, p. 68). However, just as ML is difficult to define and frame, so too is CML (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). This can be explained somewhat by the fact that CML emanated from several disciplines including cultural studies, with origins extending to Plato, Kant, Adorno, DuBois and other critical scholars and philosophers (Morrell, 2008). *The Frankfurt School* notably applied critical social theory in examining the ‘culture industry’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972) and influence of media on consciousness and behaviour while

scholars at Birmingham University's *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies*, including Williams, Hoggart, and Hall, challenged audience passivity and extended ideology conceptualisations to include gender, class and race (Funk et al., 2016; Kellner & Share, 2019). CML approaches variously revolve around postmodernism, feminist perspectives, representation, equity, power, social justice, counterhegemonic media production and democratic principles (Kellner & Share, 2005; 2007a; Ligocki, 2017; Luke, 1994; Scorce, 2020). In order to guide educators and students in critical media inquiry, Kellner & Share (2019) devised a list of six key conceptual understandings and questions. However, even they acknowledged that CML is more difficult to understand and teach than most mainstream approaches to ME due to the "complexity and invisibility of how ideology functions" (p. 21). Complexity also arises over what 'critical' means in CML (Higdon et al., 2021) and whether it is an "ideological agenda" (Hobbs, 1998, p. 4) or pedagogical approach (Kellner & Share, 2007c). An emphasis on criticality has furthermore sparked concern that a critical perspective may diminish or eliminate emotional/enjoyable media engagement, impact objectivity or be accompanied by an underlying superiority (Buckingham, 1993; Grossberg, 1987; Hobbs, 1998; Walkerdine, 1986). This prompted hooks (2010) to reinforce the distinction between "critique that seeks to expand consciousness and harsh criticism that attacks or trashes" (p. 137). There is resultantly scope for research that serves as a "neutral foil" for participants' ideas (Orgill, 2012, pp. 260-261), which holistically and inclusively embraces variation in their ML conceptualisations and teaching approaches.

2.3.3 Critical thinking and ML

Scholars, policymakers and advocacy organisations frequently describe ML in terms of CT development. However, there is a dearth of research mapping the varying ways in which a collective of HE media educators conceptualise ML and its instruction, and analysing the "structure and meaning of the variation in these perspectives" (Ashwin, 2025, p. xxi). The fact that many commentators regard

CT as central to ME and ML is unsurprising in view of references to media analysis, interpretation and evaluation evident within existing ML and CML definitions (BAI, 2022; Buckingham, 2003; Burn & Durran, 2007; Fedorov, 2003; Feuerstein, 1999; NALA, 2020; Potter, 2021; Silverblatt, 2018; UNESCO, 2021b). Its prominence is also exemplified in the EU Commission's more recent description of ML as furnishing "the critical thinking skills required to exercise judgment, analyse complex realities and recognise the difference between fact and opinion" (2023, p. 3). Exponents characterise CT as thinking about thinking (Bruner, 1986) and learning how to critically consume, interpret and evaluate information (Ennis, 1996; Scheffler, 1991). Yet, in ML and related literature, CT definitions span a "conglomeration of meanings" (Potter, 2021, p. 16), with Anderson (2021) labelling it an educational "buzzword" (p. 5). Facione's (1990) much cited 'consensus' definition positioned CT as a "purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference" involving the "explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based" (p. 3).

The myriad ideas attached to CT are apparent in Potter's analysis of articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, prompting him to propose a "pyramidical structure" to avoid further "clutter" and accommodate the varying interpretations attached by media scholars to this "magical" and "ambitious" term (2022c, pp. 121-123). Others debate whether CT, like ML, is cross-disciplinary or subject/content specific (Ennis, 1989; Nygren et al., 2018), or if ML and critically-oriented pedagogies can entirely solve media and societal challenges (boyd, 2018; Mihailidis, 2018; 2019a). Selective exposure, disinformation, filter bubbles, manipulation and confirmation bias pose difficulties (Culloty & Suiter, 2021; 2024; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Kang & Sundar, 2016; Lee et al., 2014; Lessenski, 2023). There is also the argument put forward by boyd - albeit rejected by Hobbs (2018) and others - that ML has potentially backfired by promoting a form of CT that "asks people to doubt what they see" (2017; 2018). Media criticism can become

cynicism (Jackson & Jamieson, 2007; Mihailidis, 2009b). Moreover, links between ML and CT outcomes are not always clearcut. This is reflected in research by Arke (2005) which found no statistically significant correlation between undergraduates' self-reported ML levels, their media consumption and CT scores, although the value of MLE was nonetheless highlighted. As with ML, complexity thus surrounds CT, its characteristics and capabilities. Given the ambiguity in the literature, this thesis adopts a working definition of CT as a reflexive, analytical and evaluative process that involves not only the critical assessment of information/messaging, but attentiveness to underlying assumptions, biases, contexts and representations.

Regarding phenomenography, Åkerlind (2025) noted how it provides "epistemological insights" into human understandings and communication by acknowledging that the ways in which people experience phenomena will "inevitably vary" (p. xxiii). My research focus was not on CT but on delineating variation in lecturers' collective ML accounts in order to "develop a sophisticated understanding" of ML (Åkerlind, 2025, p. 11). While critical analysis and cultivating critical skills emerged among the generated categories of descriptions, they form part of the range of qualitatively distinct ways of understanding ML and ML teaching identified within participating lecturers' accounts.

2.3.4 Democracy, ML and countering fake news

Democracy is not a spectator sport (Blaustein, 2020; Davis, 2019), with the connection increasingly made by advocates, academics and policymakers between ML, combatting fake news and promoting democratic principles. As with other aspects of ML, however, complexities abound. Thus, while ML is often described in critical media analysis, content creation and democratic and civic engagement terms (Jolls & Johnsen, 2018; Kellner, 1995; 2005; 2007a; 2007b; Mason et al., 2018; Masterman, 1989; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Uršič & Jurak, 2023), it can be perceived too simplistically, implemented in isolation (Goodman, 2021) or treated as "a silver bullet solution" (Livingstone, 2018). As Share et al.

(2019, p. 2) outlined, the current media and information environment is “far more complicated than a reductionist idea of simply finding the truth”, while a 2023 *Media Index* report also signalled “no simple causality” between education and post-truth (Lessenski, 2023, p. 6). Fact-checking research in HEIs is “not coherent” (Tekoniemi et al., 2022, p. 1). Additionally, educators must be properly informed and supported in promoting analysis and discussion which advance democratic principles (Otero, 2003). But these are not the only challenges. Complex social and psychological considerations prevail (Lessenski, 2023), including students’ “blind trust” in social media (McDougall, 2019, p. 38), confirmation bias, cognitive retreat, the role of algorithms and AI, online echo chambers and intentional disinformation (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Gaillard et al., 2021; McNair, 2018; Nickerson, 1998). There is also the matter of whether countering fake news should be the main focus of MLE, treated as an “add-on” to existing curricula or necessitate a “fundamental reframing” of ME (Mason et al., 2018, p. 7). Rather than being a straight-forward ask or task, Edwards et al. (2023) and McDougall (2019; 2020) drew attention to the range of ML approaches and competencies required, with many commentators reiterating the importance of creating not just critical readers but reflexive and responsible media writers (Kellner & Share, 2019; Martens, 2010; Mihailidis, 2019a; Weninger et al., 2017). Chen et al. (2011, p. 84) called for “new media literacy” extending Toffler’s “prosumption” concept (1980, p. 288) while Runté (2015) also underlined the insufficiency of creating “sophisticated spectators”, necessitating CT skills but also people who understand how to “use the media” and “transmit information and knowledge” (pp. 4-7). Conscious of ML’s democratic associations, as well as the varying interpretations and foci apparent within the literature, there is a need for an “alternate qualitative” means (Rolls, 2023, p. 130) of embracing the complexities surrounding ML and its conceptualisation by capturing the lived accounts of university media educators and analysing relations between their different understandings of ML/ML teaching.

2.4 Higher education - the 'missing' ML piece

Scant ML research exists in relation to HE, creating scope for this study. In terms of university-level ML research, Mihailidis (2008a) observed how it has suffered from a "substantial lack of empirical data" (p. 11). Bordac (2009) also called for further research to be conducted into university T&L to uncover how ML relates to different literacies. In a localised context, researchers observed that while ML has gained prominence in national discourse, there is an MIL deficit in Ireland's educational system and a varied landscape in relation to modules delivered in Irish HEIs (Mesquita & Castellini da Silva, 2024). Sedelmaier et al. (2023) described MLE as a "missing piece" in HE and stressed how "school alone cannot equip students" with sufficient ML skills, necessitating university to fill the gap critically, scientifically and "arguably even beyond" (pp. 391-395). Significantly, they also underscored the need for a "thorough understanding" to be gained of what ML "actually denotes" and described the determining of its competencies and requirements as a "prerequisite" for HE settings targeting ML improvement:

> This is analogous to software development where no proper software system can be built without knowing the requirements that stakeholder[s] make as demands on the system. Ignoring or not knowing the requirements will inevitably result in a system that neither serves its purpose nor meets stakeholders' expectations. (pp. 392-393)

Another aspect is that many HEIs avoid comprehensive ML programmes or opt for an interdisciplinary approach in the assumption that academics across different disciplines will address media-oriented topics (Mihailidis, 2008a; Schmidt, 2012b; Silverblatt et al., 2002; Stuhlman & Silverblatt, 2007). Notwithstanding its importance, many educational institutions "ignore" or "undervalue" CML pedagogy (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. xi). Additionally, despite responsibility for its implementation falling predominantly to educators (Buckingham, 2020a; Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2016), research depicts ML as "an area largely neglected by university-level educators" and recommends that systematic

measures be implemented to address and coordinate ML within HE (Schmidt, 2012b, p. 17).

More broadly, teachers' ML competencies have been associated with their classroom practices, with effective ME requiring educators who possess "sufficient" skills to foster ML among students (Simons et al., 2017, p. 99). Other challenges concern teacher training, the "urgent" postgraduate pedagogical "problem" of developing ML skills and the role of educators' personal interest and motivation in the successful implementation of ML and digital literacy (Bessarab et al., 2022, p. 189). Regarding ML outcomes, Edwards et al. (2023) drew attention to sectoral incoordination, terminological, evaluative and quality issues including a lack of research into "what works'" and an "inability to share best practice or lessons learned" (p. 19). Meanwhile, Tekoniemi et al. (2022) advised that MLE research incorporate more "professional perspectives covering higher education" (p. 12). This study addresses a 'missing' research piece by analysing the professional ML perspectives, understandings and experiences of media educators who teach in Irish HEIs.

2.4.1 The role of educators

Many commentators describe shifts in educators' role, particularly in the MLE realm, from imparters of knowledge and "providers of a window on the world" to enabling student "mastery" (Jolls, 2015, p. 68), thereby enhancing students' capabilities and embracing literacy's and ML's larger societal, political and emancipatory purposes through citizenship-oriented pedagogies (Hartley, 2002; Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone, 2003). In the analogy proffered by McDougall (2019; 2020; 2022), albeit in a schools' context, ML teaching is characterised as "giving a fish" or "teaching to fish". In advocating for the latter, dynamic and "agentive" ML, McDougall recommended a curricular "reboot" and coming together of communities of practice to maintain a "watching brief", particularly in light of the escalation of social media, algorithms and big data (2019, pp. 41-43). But, what of a 'watching brief' in relation to the ML experiences and perceptions of

educators who teach on media programmes in HEIs? In today's "performative world", HE teaching is increasingly evaluated in terms of quantitative, extrinsic metrics rather than the "intrinsic satisfactions of engaging meaningfully with teaching" (McCune, 2021, p. 21). With respect to ML, its interpretation, teaching foci and outcomes are often "burdened" by expectations, prompting Bulger & Davison (2018) to observe that "as the media literacy umbrella grows, so too does the definition of 'effectiveness'" (p. 19). Rather than adding to this 'burden', useful T&L insight is gained by capturing the lived ML and ML teaching experiences of university media educators and mapping the relationships between their different conceptualisations including their descriptions of their role.

2.4.2 Educators' teaching perspectives and approaches

Prior research highlights HE's cruciality as one of the "final educational opportunities" to draw on students' curiosities and teach them how to critically reflect on the news media which will impact their futures (Gaultney et al., 2022, p. 60). The link between ML success and teachers' beliefs, knowledge and actions is also reinforced (Simons et al., 2017), with NAMLE (2024a), in its *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education*, emphasising that "how we teach matters as much as what we teach". Despite this, there is a shortage of studies analysing lecturers' expressed ML teaching perspectives and approaches. In a US context, Schmidt (2012b) found that although university educators considered ML as important, some were unwilling to teach it due to personal or systemic factors. Other HE-related challenges include a lack of a "clear or shared understanding" of the precise competencies required for ML (Sedelmaier et al., 2023, p. 397) and, it could be argued, ML teaching. Furthermore, university educators in today's "age of infinite information" must decide whether to adopt a lecturing stance, present students with statistics/research about media effects or empower them to embark on their own voyage of media discovery (Moeller et al., 2012, p. 50). Some prioritise departing from teacher-centredness, ensuring students are not forced into ML awareness, (re)designing media programmes to meet learners'

needs by trusting their judgement and an avoidance of dictatorial approaches (Moeller et al., 2012; Potter & McDougall, 2017; Sedelmaier et al., 2023). In a post-pandemic world, fostering student-teacher trust is portrayed as crucial due to increased disinformation and suspicion of institutions and authority, meaning that for educational processes to occur, there must be trust "in the one who intends to share and help us build something meaningful for our lives" (Corona-Rodríguez, 2022, p. 86). Others, as reflected in Masterman's *Eighteen Basic Principles* (1989), recommend democratic pedagogies, with Ryan and Tilbury (2013) calling for flexible and "revitalised" tertiary T&L which "actively involves" students in processes that "challenge learning relationships and the power frames that underpin them" (p. 5). Prominence is also given to "dialogic" teaching which appreciates students' media pleasures, knowledge and experiences, and rejects assumptions that educators necessarily know what is best for learners or other "sophisticated exercises" amounting to students "guessing what's in the teacher's mind" (Buckingham, 1998, p. 9). Studies indicate that ML interventions are most successful when an encouraging, inclusive, respectful and evaluative teaching approach is adopted, in which students are supported in discovering their interests, talents and needs (Byrne, 2009; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Zanin-Yost & Freie, 2020). Success is also linked to a T&L environment that reflects a "miniature community and embryonic society" (Dewey, 1907, p. 32).

Ideological, theoretical, generational and disciplinary factors unsurprisingly influence ML teaching. There is also increasing awareness, especially in a fake news era, that educators, like students and others, bring their life experiences, cultural identities and worldviews to ML practices requiring subjectivity to be acknowledged and discussed (Bulger, in Bulger et al., 2023). Another consideration is that not all educators are comfortable or knowledgeable about using media/media technologies or incorporating ML into their classrooms (Hobbs, 1998; McCall, 2007; Morgan, 1998). Edwards et al. (2023) also signalled a "lack of visibility" across the ML sector including limited opportunities for practitioners to "learn from each other", share insights or practices (p. 17). The

scarcity of university-specific ML teaching research and apparent lack of collaborative opportunities are notable considering HE's significance in "educating future citizens" (Gaultney et al., 2022, p. 60) and MLE's vital role in helping learners to navigate the complexities of today's mediatised world (Lipkin, 2019). This research analyses media practitioner accounts, capturing "how the world [of ML/ML teaching] appears to others", through which "we will learn what the world is like, and what the world could be like" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 13).

2.4.3 ML and its wider HE applicability

While ML and CML have been traditionally situated within media and communications studies, developments including AI, mis- and disinformation and "algorithmic decision-making" in HE (Prinsloo, 2017, p. 138) have extended their disciplinary and university significance (Čiderová & Belvončíková, 2024; Dzogovic et al., 2025; Huguet et al., 2019; Hutchison, 2023; Maxmudova et al., 2025; Mohialden et al., 2025; Sedelmaier et al., 2023). Others have also reinforced ML's significance due to the complex information environment facing students (Dolanbay, 2019; Greviana et al., 2024; Livingstone, 2018; Mihailidis, 2018; 2019a; Szabó, 2022; Volodymyrivna & Petrivna, 2025). The benefits of ML, including science-specific ML, in enabling individuals to navigate "varyingly credible information" during the COVID-19 pandemic were underscored in research undertaken by Austin et al. (2021, p. 239). In terms of HE engineering education, Pérez et al. (2025) signalled how pedagogical processes and practices must reflect the varied infoscape, including mis- and disinformation exposure, which students face during the design and problem-solving stages. With regards to ML and HE, Scully (2018) argued for ML modules with a specific disciplinary purpose and identify, citing feedback from both students and lecturers. Lacković (2020a) furthermore drew attention to the significance of critical media information pedagogy and training across all HE subjects, disciplines and programmes in order to foster more "socially just societies",

although also acknowledging the tensions within academic discourse regarding what such “training” and critical engagement should involve (p. 102).

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined existent literature related to ML, including how it is defined, framed and pedagogically approached. Among the complexities surrounding ML are an array of definitions and applications (Edwards et al., 2021), as well as the “ongoing dialectic” between those who see it as countering the risks associated with society’s mediatisation and those who consider it as facilitating personal, cultural, political and social empowerment (Hobbs, 2019, p. 9). While some qualitative studies have been conducted into faculty perceptions, particularly in a US context, there is a notable scarcity of ML research relating to HE and the lived understandings and teaching experiences of media educators. This is particularly apparent in an Irish HE context. In undertaking this research, I was conscious of the complex picture arising from existing ML research and the promises, responsibilities and expectations surrounding MLE, and media educators, in a tumultuous era where “everything” is expected and at stake (Bulger et al., 2023, p. 99). I also recognised the need to progress beyond complexness and confusion to holistically and logically embrace educators’ qualitatively different, expanding and connected ways of describing ML and its teaching.

Chapter 3 A Phenomenographic Approach to Understanding Variation in Lecturers' Conceptualisations

3.1 Introduction

In this research, I sought to advance an alternative, inclusive understanding of ML and its instruction. Rather than concentrating on individual interpretations or putting forward a correct or incorrect way of defining or approaching ML, I wanted to find a "shared understanding" and an "umbrella strong enough for us all to fit under" (Hobbs, 1999, pp. 6-7). A phenomenographic approach allowed me to extend beyond "squabbling", personalities and power dynamics (Hobbs, 1999, p. 2) and present an inclusive, higher-order analysis of the situated ML and ML teaching "activities and experiences" of media educators (Saunders et al., 2011, p. 90). Phenomenography considers that the same phenomenon may be "perceived differently by different people and under different circumstances" (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 116). The resulting categories of description offer a logically related, holistic and inclusive hierarchy which surpasses surface-level conceptualisations and embraces diversity within lived, collective experiences (Ashwin, 2025; Le & Chong, 2024; Marton & Booth, 1997). This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first section, I explain phenomenography's relevance to the research aims and its employment of a non-dualist, second-order and relational approach. Latterly, I outline phenomenography's conceptual underpinnings and consideration of *structure* and *meaning* (Marton & Booth, 1997) while also acknowledging criticisms of phenomenographic research.

3.2 Phenomenographic underpinnings

By exploring patterns of variation and mapping the qualitatively "different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects" (Marton, 1986, p. 31) of ML and its teaching, phenomenography matched my research aims. It does not "make statements about the world" but "people's conceptions of the world" (Marton, 1986, p. 32). This is pertinent as I

wanted to gain insight into lecturers' lived accounts of ML and its teaching, journeying beyond terminological and other debate towards more richly and inclusively understanding the "collective intellect" of those at the coalface of Irish HE media delivery (Marton, 1981, p. 187).

3.2.1 Phenomenography and its teaching and learning significance

Phenomenography is distinctive in having been developed within a HE context (Åkerlind, 2024a; Tight, 2016). It provides insight into enhancing T&L to maximise learner outcomes and quality (Cope, 2002; 2004; Marton & Booth, 1997) and has been "enthusiastically" embraced, as outlined by Entwistle (1997, p. 129):

> There are good reasons why phenomenography has been taken up enthusiastically. In higher education, we are generally intending to encourage the development of conceptual understanding in students, so a method which so vividly portrays differing conceptualisations must have direct relevance to teaching and learning. And so it has proved.

The "distinctive power" of phenomenography is its focus on variation in collective experience (Ashwin, 2025, p. xix). Central to this study, and other phenomenographic research, is gaining insight into participants' collective "focal awareness" (Boon et al., 2007, p. 209), namely the elements of experience *they* consider most important. A key outcome is that it can lead lecturers to address "important conceptual issues" (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p. 429). Phenomenography is also relevant to the ML realm as understanding media and our information society is more complex than a "reductionist idea of simply finding the truth" (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 2).

3.2.2 Non-dualistic stance

Phenomenography employs a non-dualist or relational epistemology whereby individuals' understandings of phenomena are viewed as a relationship between the individual and the experienced phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2024a; Bowden,

2005; Marton & Booth, 1997; Mimirinis, 2019; Orgill, 2012). Hence, no division exists between “internal (thinking) and the external (the world out there)” (Säljö, 1997, p. 173) or “the experiencer” and “the experienced” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 113). As outlined by Marton (2000):

> There are not two worlds: a real, objective world, on the one hand, and a subjective world of mental representations, on the other. There is only one world, a really existing world, which is experienced and understood in different ways by human beings. It is simultaneously objective and subjective. (p. 105)

This is relevant to this research as ML discussion frequently generates “more heat than light” (Livingstone, 2004a, p. 4). Rather than adding further ‘heat’, phenomenography’s non-dualistic approach enabled me to embrace lecturers’ different ML/ML teaching experiences as accessed through their descriptive accounts (Ashwin, 2006; Ashwin et al., 2014; Cutajar, 2014). Phenomenography furthermore assumes that ways of experiencing a phenomenon are linked to each another, forming a hierarchically inclusive outcome space (Åkerlind, 2005c; Marton & Booth, 1997). As detailed in Chapter 4, I generated logically linked categories of description. These are ordered inclusively within a hierarchy of expanding awareness, reflecting variation in lecturers’ collective ML and ML teaching understandings.

3.2.3 Second-order approach

Phenomenography employs a second-order rather than first-order perspective (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; Marton, 1981; Trigwell, 2006), describing “phenomena in the world as others see them” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 111). It does not centre on objective reality, but *participants’* “ideas and conceptions about that reality” (Parsons, 1991, p. 125). This second-order stance meant I could non-judgementally map variation in lecturers’ accounts (Marton, 1986), uncovering not just the meanings attached by those interviewed to ML and its teaching but

the “pedagogical potentiality”, knowledge and insights to be gained (Marton, 1981, p. 178).

3.2.4 Relationality

From a phenomenographic perspective, human experience is relational whereby the “object of study”, in this case ML and its teaching, is “not the phenomenon being discussed per se, but rather the relation between the subjects and that phenomenon” (Bowden, 2005, p. 12). **Figure 3.1** reflects phenomenography’s relational nature and the connectedness of the varying aspects, albeit I substituted ‘subjects’ in the original diagram for ‘participants’ to indicate lecturers’ voluntary and active research role (Corpuz, 2023; Cutajar, 2014).

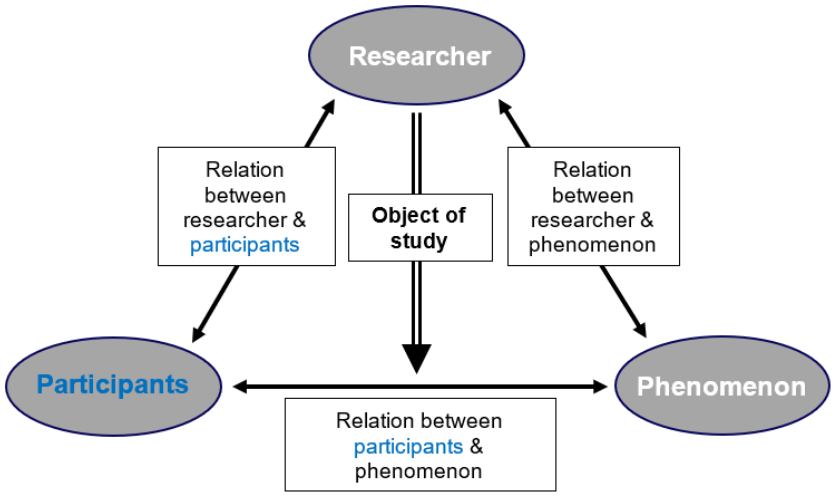


Figure 3.1: Relationality of phenomenographic research, adapted with permission from Bowden & Green (2005)

Besides the participant-phenomenon relationship, Åkerlind (2025) pinpointed the relationship between the “researcher and their experience of the research data” (p. 163). I was aware in my research that phenomenography is not about my views or considering ML through the eyes of broader society (Bowden, 2005; Stott & Voutsina, 2023), but “setting aside” outsider or researcher notions about

what is being studied (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p. 418). While my focus was on ML and ML teaching as described by those interviewed (Marton & Booth, 1997), I also acknowledge that "experiences and understandings are jointly constituted by the interviewer and interviewee" (Marton, 1994, p. 4427). I was furthermore aware that phenomenographers can only access the participant-phenomenon relationship as apparent from interviewees' descriptions and not directly (Säljö, 1997).

3.3 Framework of experience and relational thinking

Relational thinking, or the relationship between those interviewed and the "object of perception or content of thought", is crucial to phenomenography (Marton, 1986, p. 32). This research concentrates not on the phenomenon itself as the object of study but the "relationship between person and the world (or something in the world)" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 122), specifically the lived experience/relationship between media lecturers and ML and its teaching. I have sought to capture this in **Figure 3.2**.

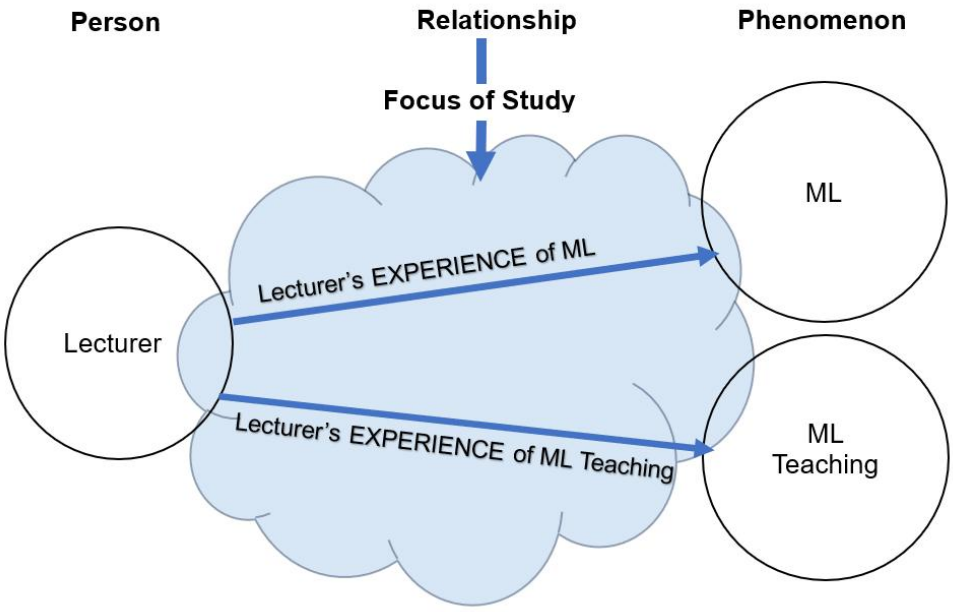


Figure 3.2: Experience of ML and ML teaching as a person-phenomenon relationship

3.3.1 Meaning and structure

Human experiences comprise structure and meaning. Both occur simultaneously and are interlinked so that to "see something as something… we have to discern it from its environment", distinguish its parts, identify their relationship to each other and "the way they relate to the whole" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 87). Phenomenographic analysis usually involves what/how and/or structural/referential frameworks (Harris, 2011). These "inform" and "frame" the research process and often incorporate "second level" analytical structures, namely the act, direct object and indirect object and/or internal and external horizons (Harris, 2011, pp. 110-112). Researchers are "justified" in employing any of these analytical frameworks, albeit what/how is more commonly applied to learning-oriented research while the referential/structural framework is usually used for other experiences (Åkerlind, 2025, p. 72). Marton & Booth (1997, p. 84) highlighted the interconnectedness of the how/what aspects as "a special case of intentionality". This links with Brentano's intentionality concept (1973) where there is "no hearing without something heard, no believing without something believed…" (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 37). An analysis of experiencing using structural and referential aspects is illustrated in **Figure 3.3.**

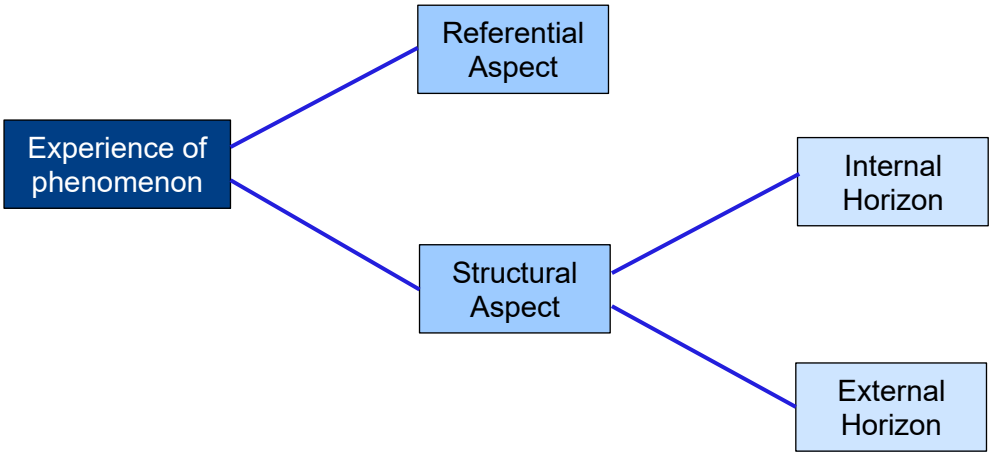


Figure 3.3: Anatomy of ways of experiencing a phenomenon based on Marton & Booth (1997)

The structural and referential elements draw on Gurwitsch's model of awareness (1964), with human consciousness divided into theme, thematic field and margin of domains (Harris, 2011). Different aspects in the thematic field are simultaneously present in people's awareness. The 'theme' is whatever aspect of the phenomenon is in focus and depends on the context in which the phenomenon is experienced by the individual. The margin refers to other, non-related aspects of the surrounding context. Notably, a different context may result in a different thematic field and/or different theme (Cope, 2004, pp. 10-11). Phenomenographic categories, Cope (2004) outlined, should include "dimensions of variation and/or a new 'value' in a dimension of variation and/or new or stronger relationships between dimensions of variation and a change in the nature of the boundary between the internal and external horizons" (p. 12). In terms of my research, I have generated inclusive and hierarchical categories of description and used referential and structural aspects to show qualitative differences and shifts in meaning and focus within lecturers' expressed ML and ML teaching accounts (see Chapter 5). The research outcomes are logically related (Marton, 1988). In my theoretical framing of the person-world relationship, I have been mindful that "human behaviour, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). Through the outcome spaces and referential and structural aspects, I have focused on qualitative differences in lecturers' accounts and the meanings which they attached to ML and its teaching. I was cognisant that a "'way of experiencing' is a way of discerning something from and relating it to a context" (p. 112), including those aspects which are discerned by those interviewed and other contextual elements which directly or indirectly shape their experiences/accounts. In the words of Marton & Booth (1997): "Our experiences of anything are always embedded in a context" (p. 96). Resultantly, I recognise that lecturers' accounts of ML and its teaching, like other human experiences, are situated contextually (Marton & Booth, 1997).

3.3.2 Holistic understanding of variation in experiencing

Phenomenographic analysis focuses on variation in how an aspect of the world is holistically experienced and understood by participants (Åkerlind, 2018; Marton & Booth, 1997). Phenomenographers do not attempt to represent "every nuance" in experiencing a phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2005d, p. 72). Categories of description thus correspond to critical *"dimensions of variation"* and form a "spatial arrangement", showing "*values* in those dimensions" (Marton & Booth, 1997, pp. 108-109, italics in original text). I have paid due attention to phenomenography's non-dualistic nature by focusing on participants' expressed ways of experiencing ML and its teaching (Bowden, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997). Recognising that there is "no complete, final description of anything" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 12), I concentrated on critical variation in how ML and the teaching of ML was accounted for by those interviewed. In line with my research objectives, I generated two separate outcome spaces showing a finite number of different, yet inclusive ways of conceptualising ML and its teaching, as described by participants. Each constituted outcome space forms a nested hierarchy.

3.4 Criticisms of phenomenography

Phenomenography has encountered criticisms, "misunderstandings" and "misinterpretations" (Åkerlind, 2024a, p. 1). Issues arise over the equating of participants' ways of experiencing phenomena with their accounts of those experiences (Orgill, 2012). Säljö (1997) described phenomenographic inquiry in "accounting practice" terms and criticised the wisdom of treating "talk", or participants' "utterances", as ways of experiencing phenomena (pp. 177-178). He also cautioned against uncritically interpreting interviewees' answers as complete ways of experiencing, noting that such accounts may instead represent experiences "borrowed from stories" inherited from, or shaped by, others (pp. 173-188). Further concerns arise over whether phenomenographers "consciously" select or discard data, thereby "constructing the relationship" rather than "looking into the transcripts to discover the particular ways" in which

participants described the phenomenon (Walsh, 2000, p. 20). Another consideration is whether interviewees tailor their answers to match what they believe the researcher wants to hear (Gibbs, 2011). I specifically focused on lecturers' accounts rather than the direct lecturer-phenomenon relationship (Ashwin et al., 2014; Cutajar, 2014). I sought to faithfully analyse "the multifaceted and nuanced nature of how participants understood" ML and its teaching, illuminating "the deeper, often implicit layers of conceptualization" (Le & Chong, 2024, p. 4, my italics). In capturing the "sum of collective experience", I also recognised that participants' responses should not be deemed complete descriptions as human awareness is "inevitably partial and contextually variable" (Åkerlind, 2025, pp. 73-77).

Criticisms of phenomenography also relate to bracketing issues and/or phenomenographer prejudice (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; 2000; Webb, 1997). Bracketing is considered fundamental to qualitative research (Balding et al., 2023; Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Whilst theoretically sound, it can be inadequately addressed, avoided or even fail (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; 2000; Balding et al., 2023; Dörfler & Stierand, 2021; Hajar, 2020). Åkerlind (2024a) reinforced how phenomenographic research interpretations are "regarded not as subjective or objective, but as *relational*" (p. 7, italics in original text). She also observed that phenomenography remains a "relatively esoteric research approach", with few experienced phenomenographers (p. 1307). As a novice phenomenographer and individual researcher, I drew upon the expertise and guidance of my supervisor and, also, the learnings and insights of other experienced phenomenographers (for example Åkerlind, 2005c; 2012; 2024a; 2024b; 2025; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Bowden, 2005; Cope, 2004). I endeavoured to remain focused on the object of study (Bowden, 2005), appreciating the importance of a reflexive and transparent "lens of awareness" approach (Stott & Voutsina, 2023, pp. 1-19). I also acknowledge, however, that absolute avoidance of the researcher's own knowledge and experience may not be possible (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Stewart, 2023).

Discussion additionally arises over the rigour and/or preferability of team versus individual analysis (Bowden, 2000b). As noted by Åkerlind (2005c, p. 328), numerous “high-quality” doctoral theses have been undertaken by individual phenomenographers. Moreover, any outcome space, whether generated individually or by a research team, is partial (Åkerlind et al., 2005). In my research, I remained mindful of “interpretative awareness” and the essentiality of maintaining a broader critical attitude, including employing necessary researcher “checks and balances” (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 125).

Phenomenography’s apparent “absence of ‘lifeworldly meaning’” or detachment of the person from their world has been highlighted (Greasley & Ashworth, 2007, p. 828), particularly its focus on “noesis” (mental orientations or the “act of consciousness”) and neglect of the “noema” or the intentional “object of that act” (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p. 564). However, this implies a dualist rather than non-dualist stance. As outlined, phenomenography is not about making statements about people or the world, but the “*world as experienced*” by them (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 118, italics in original text). This research correspondingly focuses on the “really existing world” (Marton, 2000, p. 105) of ML and ML teaching as described by those interviewed (Cope, 2004). Other misunderstandings or misapplications of phenomenography involve researchers identifying variation in descriptions, without explicating structural relationships between participants’ different understandings of phenomena (Åkerlind, 2024a).

The generation of a limited number of descriptive categories, along with the neatness, convenience and structure of constituted outcome spaces, has been critiqued (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Richardson, 1999; Webb, 1997). Although, the “satisfaction” of developing and refining categories is also acknowledged, with Cherry (2005) conceding that once conducted iteratively, carefully and transparently, phenomenography is a “powerful” research method (pp. 57-59). Phenomenography notably centres on capturing “qualitatively distinct differences” in participants’ understandings, not all

aspects (Åkerlind, 2024a). Outcomes should parsimoniously capture critical variation within the collective data in a relatively small number of categories (Åkerlind, 2005c; Entwistle et al., 2001; Marton & Booth, 1997), as reflected in my findings.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined phenomenography's adoption of a non-dualistic, relational and second-order approach in holistically analysing collective meaning, and in delineating not just qualitative differences in participants' ways of understanding a phenomenon, but also the structural relationships evident in their lived accounts. I presented the theoretical aspects underpinning phenomenography, as well as acknowledging and addressing criticisms directed at it. In the next chapter, I provide more specifics and justifications of the research methods I employed in examining lecturers' accounts of ML and its teaching, building upon the concepts and theoretical framings contained herein.

Chapter 4 Phenomenographic Research Design and Implementation

In this chapter, I explain the phenomenographic approach which I employed in analysing qualitative differences in how media educators across the Irish university and technological university [TU] sector accounted for ML and its teaching. Phenomenography, as previously outlined, has its origins in HE and focuses on revealing variation in “people’s conceptions” (Vuojärvi et al., 2021, p. 4). This chapter begins with a brief reflection on my personal research perspective and background, followed by a section detailing the data generation methods used. In the third section, I outline the iterative processes and phenomenographic journey involved in analysing the data in line with my research questions. I then focus on the reliability and quality including rigour, reliability and validity as pertaining to this phenomenographic undertaking, bearing in mind that these “need to be reframed within the context of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the [employed] research approach” (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 123). I conclude with ethical considerations and research method limitations and opportunities.

4.1 Reflection on personal research perspective

Thinking reflexively enables the “conversion” of “merely appetitive, blind, and impulsive action into intelligent action’’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 17). In conducting this research, I have reflected upon my own worldview, journey as a researcher and previous industry background. I initially trained as a second-level teacher before embarking on a career in print and broadcast journalism. I returned to teaching, albeit within the HE sector, working as a business, media and communications lecturer in the Middle East and later in Ireland. My media career, spanning more than 12 years as a senior news journalist and editor in the print and broadcasting realms, involved human interest stories, hard news and court reporting. Such reportage was, by necessity, underpinned by verifiable facts and accountability. In undertaking educational research, a combination of quantitative and qualitative

research involving positivist and interpretative approaches would have aligned with my previous media career.

Ontological questioning or the “nature of our beliefs about reality” (Richards, 2003, p. 33) has led researchers, myself included, to ponder the existence of a “singular, verifiable reality” or “socially constructed multiple realities” (Patton, 2002, p. 134). In this study, I investigate academics’ experiences and interpretations, thereby ruling out a positivist empirical approach which sees reality as “context free” and governed by the same objective, scientific methods as studying natural objects (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p. 53). An interpretivist approach matched this study’s purpose by exploring educators’ interpretations and expressed realities of ML and its instruction (Saunders, 1986). It facilitates textured responses and considers that people experience social phenomena in different ways. Context, representation, self-expression and how people “construct reality” are also central to ML (Canadian Association for Media Literacy, n.d.). As with ML, interpretivism is akin to a “quilt… a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 6).

4.2 Data generation

I specifically use the term ‘data generation’ rather than ‘collection’, recognising educators’ active participation in this research and the relational nature of phenomenography. My main research involved nineteen interviews with lecturers who deliver media/media-related modules in Irish HEIs. Three pilot interviews were additionally undertaken. The main interviews were held over a four-month period in 2022, with interviewees contacted by email and given the option of face-to-face or online interviews. A small number of emails went unanswered while three academics responded but opted not to partake in the research due to time/availability issues or an expressed lack of ML experience.

4.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are the typical means of phenomenographic data collection, although other methods are sometimes employed (Åkerlind, 2012; Bowden, 2005; Bruce, 1997; Green & Bowden, 2009; Han & Ellis, 2019; Marton & Booth, 1997; Reed, 2006). There is also ML research precedence for utilising interviews (Bordac, 2009; Gretter & Yadav, 2018; Schmidt, 2012b). Interviews offer the "best value" as long as participants are "willing and able to give information that others could not" (Denscombe, 2010, p. 174). I was also reminded of Brinkmann & Kvale (2013, p. 1): "If you want to know how people understand their world and lives, why not *talk* with them?" [my emphasis]. Education is additionally described as "best understood" through analysing the experiences of those whose lives and work are the "stuff upon which abstractions are built" (Seidman, 2013, p. 10). Conducting semi-structured interviews with lecturers aligned with my research purpose as it allowed me to obtain their accounts of their "lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013, p. 31). All interviews were undertaken as a "purposeful conversation" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 135), with participants afforded freedom to expand on their understandings and experiences of ML and its teaching (Han & Ellis, 2019). I established the topic at the interview outset and, as detailed by experienced others, combined set and follow-on questions (Åkerlind, 2005b; Åkerlind et al., 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997).

4.2.2 Pilot interviews

Three pilot interviews were undertaken - two with media lecturers and another with a HE T&L expert. In undertaking piloting, I wanted to enhance my phenomenographic interviewing technique, ensure the questions were appropriately framed and identify any potential misalignment with the research aim or required researcher or interview protocol changes (Åkerlind, 2005a). I was conscious, too, of the importance of maintaining a second-order, non-dualistic approach (Bowden, 2005). Revisions were made arising from piloting - some

questions were omitted while the wording of others was improved to allow for more nuanced answers and maximise respondents' reflection/expansion on ML and their ML teaching experiences.[1] I was alerted to my tendency to fill silences and interrupt participants on occasion. I also became more practically attuned to bracketing researcher knowledge and presuppositions, along with the importance of asking 'how' and 'why' rather than 'what' questions (Åkerlind, 2005d). In addition, I developed heightened sensitivity to empathetic engagement processes (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000) by focusing on participants' responses, seeking clarification and employing follow-on questions to elicit illustrative examples and experiences. As a first-time phenomenographer, another benefit of piloting was countering nervousness on my part and creating confidence in refocusing participants, and my questioning, on the research phenomenon.

4.2.3 Research context and interviewee selection

I undertook nineteen purposive primary interviews. In doing so, I considered the paramountcy of aligning purpose and method, maximising variation in lecturers' ML experiences, and the necessity to identify interviewees who were sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced about the research phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2005c; Bowden, 2000a; Trem, 2017). Consideration was also given to sample sizes in previous phenomenographic studies as well as participant numbers in ML research. Phenomenographic sample sizes vary, as evidenced by examples of ten to thirty-plus participants (Åkerlind, 2005b; Ashwin, 2006; Carlsson et al., 2025; Cutajar, 2014; Reed, 2006; Trem, 2017; Trigwell, 2006). Examined qualitative ML studies included ten to twenty interviewees (Bordac, 2009; Jormand et al., 2021; Schmidt, 2012b).

[1] Appendix B1 contains the final interview schedule

In terms of my research, I identified interviewees from a geographical cross-sample of Irish universities and TUs through detailed faculty and departmental profiling. I also deployed snowball sampling to maximise diversity in practice area and achieve "as great a heterogeneity of prior experience" with ML as possible (Åkerlind, 2025, p. 106). In identifying potential interviewees, I recognised that phenomenographic research should maximise opportunities for "manifesting the full extent of the various ways of experiencing the phenomenon" (Reed, 2006, p. 6) and explore the range of meanings within a particular community (Åkerlind, 2005c; 2025; Trem, 2017; Trigwell, 2006). My interviewee selection was based upon a clear logic and finding "the 'right persons' to study" (Baker & Edwards, 2011, p. 16). However, I was also mindful of achieving a balance between interviewing small enough numbers to allow deeper transcript analysis and including sufficient participants to facilitate "new and richly textured understanding" of ML and its teaching (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 183). Similarly to Bordac (2009), my sample selection was based on criteria including an area of specialisation aligned with ML. Whilst ML can be incorporated into any subject discipline (Scheibe & Rogow, 2011), it practicably and conceptually overlaps with programmes or schools in areas such as media studies, communication, journalism and education (Christ, 2004; Mihailidis, 2008b; Schmidt, 2012b). Hobbs (2010) also outlined how ML requires educators with the experience and expertise to know how to use it in "productive ways to support genuine learning" (p. 24). For the reasons outlined, the lived ML and ML teaching experiences of those directly involved in teaching modules in media, journalism, communications, or on programmes with a specific media-related focus, were purposefully sought.

4.2.4 Sample representativeness

Phenomenographers should aim for "representativeness in terms of variation, not frequency", with exposure to the research phenomenon, not demographic factors per se, the "best proxy for variation in ways of experiencing the phenomenon"

(Åkerlind, 2025, pp. 107-108). I interviewed lecturers from different media specialisms, genders, with varying years of experience, and from wholly academic backgrounds or media industry origins.[2] Some scholars have described women as "literally missing" or poorly represented within phenomenographic research samples and, resultantly, "lost in space" when it comes to constituted outcome spaces (Hazel et al., 1997, pp. 213-216). In terms of my sample, females account for 63% of those interviewed which is slightly higher than the 56% calculated average of female academics who teach on arts, humanities, social science, business or law programmes within the universities from which my sample was drawn, as per figures from the *Higher Education Institutional Staff Profiles by Gender* report (HEA, 2022). It should be noted that no specific media discipline breakdown is included in the HEA report, only broader programmatic classifications. A summary of those whom I interviewed is included in **Table 4.1**.

[2] Inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined in Appendix B2

Transcript#	Pseudonym**	Gender	Academic Experience (Years)	Industry Experience (Years)	PhD/ Doctorate	Primary Role
1	Maureen	Female	10-20	None	Yes	Lecturer *
2	Maebh	Female	10-20	11-20	Yes	Lecturer
3	Aoife	Female	10-20	5-10	No	Lecturer
4	Deirdre	Female	5-10	5-10	Yes	Lecturer *
5	Sheila	Female	10-20	5-10	Yes	Lecturer
6	Patricia	Female	10-20	10-20	No	Lecturer *
7	John	Male	0-5	10-20	No	Lecturer
8	Imelda	Female	5-10	None	Yes	Lecturer *
9	Peadar	Male	20-30	10-20	No	Lecturer*
10	Catriona	Female	10-20	None	No	Lecturer
11	Molly	Female	10-20	10-20	No	Lecturer
12	Bill	Male	10-20	10-20	No	Lecturer *
13	Treasa	Female	20-30	None	Yes	Lecturer *
14	Oonagh	Female	10-20	5-10	Yes	Lecturer *
15	Diarmaid	Male	10-20	None	Yes	Lecturer *
16	Daithi	Male	20-30	0-5	Yes	Lecturer *
17	Charlie	Male	5-10	None	Yes	Lecturer *
18	Rosaleen	Female	5-10	None	Yes	Lecturer*
19	Michael	Male	5-10	10-20	No	Lecturer *

* Also carries out research or additional programme/school duties

** Pseudonyms have been assigned to maintain participant confidentiality

Table 4.1: Profile of lecturers selected for interview

4.2.5 Interview modality/setting

Lecturers were offered the opportunity to partake in either face-to-face or online interviews. In offering both modalities, I strove to minimise concerns regarding qualitative interviews and power asymmetry by ensuring participants could opt for their preferred format and choose a time and date which was convenient for them (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013). While face-to-face interviewing is the traditional "gold standard", online interviews are "valid" and "trustworthy alternatives" which can facilitate research inclusivity, equality and resource efficiency (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021, p. 396). I was also conscious of the increased prevalence and popularity of online interviewing (Lobe et al., 2022) and the probability that media lecturers are conversant with online technologies. Further considerations were timetabling constraints faced by lecturers (the interviews were held between February and June 2022), the geographical spread of those contacted and recruiting participants from varying media backgrounds/specialisations.

Eleven interviews were held via MS Teams while the remainder of participants opted to be interviewed in-person at their HEIs. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent. In-person interviews were mostly held in a classroom or office space although one was recorded, by participant choice, off a canteen area which was not ideal due to background noise. Nevertheless, with persistency, patience and revisitation, I was able to decipher all audio content. With four of the online interviews, internet connectivity or time-lag issues meant they had to be restarted. However, I ensured to go back over the questions and fully capture participants' responses. Three MS Teams interviews were held after workhours or at the weekend by participant request. Transcripts were emailed to interviewees for verification and in two cases minor amendments were made. With the pilot interviews, two were conducted in-person and one via MS Teams to practice both modalities. All interviewees were asked the same primary questions in line with the interview guide. In recognition of the significance of the initial minutes of the interview, I spent time on introductions and rapport-building

(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013; McGrath et al., 2019). I was conscious of “authentic openness” (Webb, 1997, p. 198) and remaining alert and sensitive to participants’ responses (Walsh, 2000). I also employed follow-on questioning with the aim of uncovering their “underlying meanings and intentional attitudes” towards ML and its teaching (Åkerlind, 2005a, p. 65).

4.2.6 Duration, processes and focus of interviews

The interview recordings ranged from 35 minutes to over one hour in duration. Throughout the interviewing process, “whether in [a] real or online space” (Longhurst, 2016, p. 150), I made a conscious effort to remain focused on the interviewee and the knowledge sought. I also recognised the importance of affording each participant the necessary time and freedom to expand on their experiences (Kvale, 2007). In several instances, general conversation continued after the interviewee indicated they had nothing further to add. In some cases, at their request, I recommenced audio-recording as other ML thoughts, examples or observations came to mind which they wished to have included. Certain lecturers were more eager to elaborate on their experiences which goes towards explaining the longer recordings (one interview was 71 minutes in duration). Some other shorter interview durations can be attributed to nervousness and inexperience on my part as well as “natural variability” in interviewee communication styles (Åkerlind, 2025, p. 130).

In providing their accounts, Alsop & Tompsett (2006) noted how participants can give as little or as much detail as they choose. Nevertheless, especially in some of the earlier interviews, I could have attempted to elicit “hitherto unsuspected reflections” from more reticent interviewees (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 130). During the piloting and transcription processes, I also realised that I could have listened more actively at times. This would have helped in framing second questions, as advised by Brinkmann & Kvale (2013). I am further aware that some questions could have been more concise or probing. Following piloting feedback and reflection, I modified my original interview guide to include additional

questions, particularly those seeking concrete examples of lecturers' ML and ML teaching experiences. Whilst interviewing, I tried to focus more on 'why' rather than 'what' questions, as suggested by Åkerlind (2005a), although I was also aware that repeatedly employing 'why' questions could appear like an oral examination and lead to potentially "over-reflected intellectualized" interviews rather than eliciting examples and descriptions of lecturers' actual ML/ML teaching experiences (Kvale, 2007, p. 58). I learnt, particularly as the interviews progressed, to be more confident and comfortable in following up on ML aspects or experiences mentioned by interviewees that warranted further elaboration, explanation or exploration. This was done via follow-on questions such as *'can you tell me more about that?'*, *'can you give me an example of that?*', '*is there another example which you can provide?', 'why was that?'* or *'could you expand more on that from your own experience?'*.

My journalistic past meant I was familiar with professional interviewing and the importance of interviewer integrity, accuracy and objectivity, including setting aside personal views, judgements or presuppositions. I also had some experience of undertaking qualitative research interviews. Phenomenographic interviewing, however, was entirely new to me. While undertaking this research, I did my utmost to faithfully capture the meanings and intentions that participants attached to their experiences of ML and its teaching. I had the research questions printed at the top of the interview schedule to remind me of the study's phenomenographic purpose of investigating *participants'* relationship with the phenomenon, not my ML experiences (Marton & Booth, 1997). Several respondents remarked on how enjoyable and worthwhile they found partaking in the research interviews, describing it as a "really interesting" and "thought-provoking" experience that had enabled them to articulate their conceptions of ML and reflect on their particular ML teaching practices and experiences.

4.2.7 Transcription

I commenced transcribing the interviews during the data generation period as I was eager to learn as much as possible about my phenomenographic interviewing style and listen for any interviewer imprint. I was aware of the importance of focusing on participants' experiences, enacting researcher empathy and bracketing presuppositions to ensure detachment from my lifeworld. As a phenomenographic newcomer, I adhered to the practical advice of Ashworth & Lucas (2000) to review my interviewing skills, not just initially, but throughout the interviewing and transcription process. I effected change to traits such as a tendency on my part to move too quickly to the next question while I also added more clarifying and follow-on questions. Like Cutajar (2014), I became "sensitised" during transcription to the possibility that some participants described idealised, rather than actual or lived, ML experiences (p. 57). However, as outlined by Walker (1998) and Conner & Kay (2011), my purpose was not confirming the accuracy of lecturers' descriptions, but ensuring that my research faithfully captured their expressed accounts of ML and its teaching. Whilst transcribing, I listened back to each interview multiple times to ensure no inaccuracies arose because of audio quality or misinterpretations or mishearing on my part (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013). I was cognisant of debate around transcript constructiveness and reproduction (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013; Davidson, 2009; Hammersley, 2010). During and after the interviews, I thus followed Åkerlind's (2005b) example by noting key shifts in interviewee tone/emphasis and kept a journal whilst transcribing - as practiced by Lundh et al. (2019, p. 4) - to jot down "immediate thoughts" regarding "what the interviewee was 'talking' about", as well as to note repeated or reinforced points.[3] No other analysis occurred at this stage, in consideration of Bowden's "strong position" that it is "safer" not to conduct analysis until all interviews have concluded to avoid

[3] Appendix C2 contains examples of journal entries

altering or influencing later interviews (2005, pp. 19-20). Even though some participants might “experience a shock” from reading verbatim transcripts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013, p. 213), I felt it was important to email typed transcripts to interviewees as they contained *their* ML and ML teaching experiences. However, I was also cognisant that phenomenographic research is concerned with the collective mind, not individual descriptions (Marton, 1981).

4.2.8 Summary of interviewing processes

Whilst I was experienced in journalistic interviewing and had some prior experience in phenomenological research, I was nervous about conducting phenomenographic interviews. This was due to my newness to this type of research and keenness, but also anxiousness, to adhere to phenomenography’s second-order stance and capture as completely as possible “an articulation of the interviewee’s reflections on [their] experience” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 130). I knew to focus on eliciting underlying meanings. I was also aware that phenomenographers, as pinpointed by Cherry (2005), usually undertake only one interview per participant with such interviews taking place on the social discourse and meta levels (Marton & Booth, 1997). Piloting resultantly assumed even greater significance as it allowed me to finetune and revise my questions and questioning approach. It helped in ensuring that I bracketed any researcher presuppositions and employed an adaptive, follow-on questioning style which facilitated and encouraged interviewees to expand on their relationship with ML and its teaching. My journalistic background meant I was more accustomed to ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘when’ and how’ questions and had to learn to use more ‘why’ prompts. I additionally came to realise, in a similar way to Åkerlind (2005a, p. 65), that it is not the details within interviewee examples which are sought per se, but how such examples can be used as a “medium” to explore the different ways in which ML and its teaching were described by participants. An outline of the research planning, interviewing and transcription processes is provided in **Figure 4.1.**

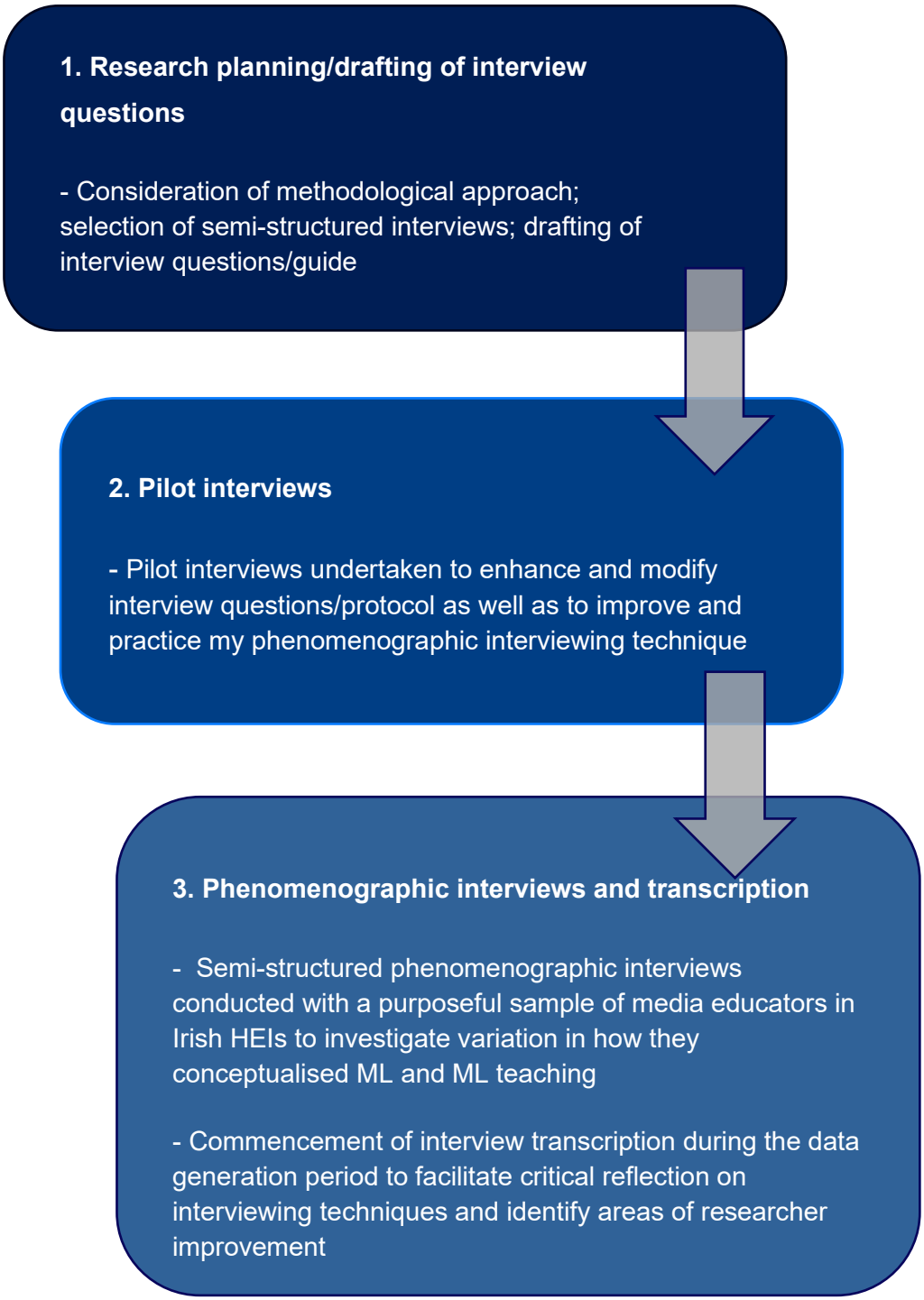


Figure 4.1: Summary of the steps involved in planning, designing and transcribing the research interviews

4.3 Phenomenographic data analysis

In analysing the interview transcripts, I adopted an iterative approach involving several phases with weaving and overlap between the stages. As part of this back-and-forth process, the transcripts were read, re-read and grouped multiple times over months. Notes were written on the transcripts, summaries created and pertinent passages highlighted which helped in extracting a pool of meanings and identifying critical dimensions of variation. This iterative and comparative cycle fed into the drafting, revisitation and refinement of the categories of description and outcome spaces. A visual representation of the data analysis process is shown in **Figure 4.2**. Whilst this might appear straightforward, the reality proved otherwise. Having read the experiences and reflections of other phenomenographers (Åkerlind, 2005a; 2005d; Åkerlind et al., 2005; Barnacle, 2005; Green, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997), I was acutely aware that categories of description must capture collective rather than individual experiences and that any interpretations must be diligently checked at each analytical stage against the transcript data. During my initial transcript readings, I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data while I also struggled in analysing the transcripts to address the two different, yet interrelated research questions. I therefore followed Bowden's (2005) advice, maintaining "constant vigilance", anchoring my analysis in the transcripts and "reading forward and backwards" around key participant statements (p. 28). With perseverance, time, revisitation and reflection, my initial confusion, frustration and anxiousness gave way to increased clarity, greater phenomenographic confidence and, even, enjoyment.

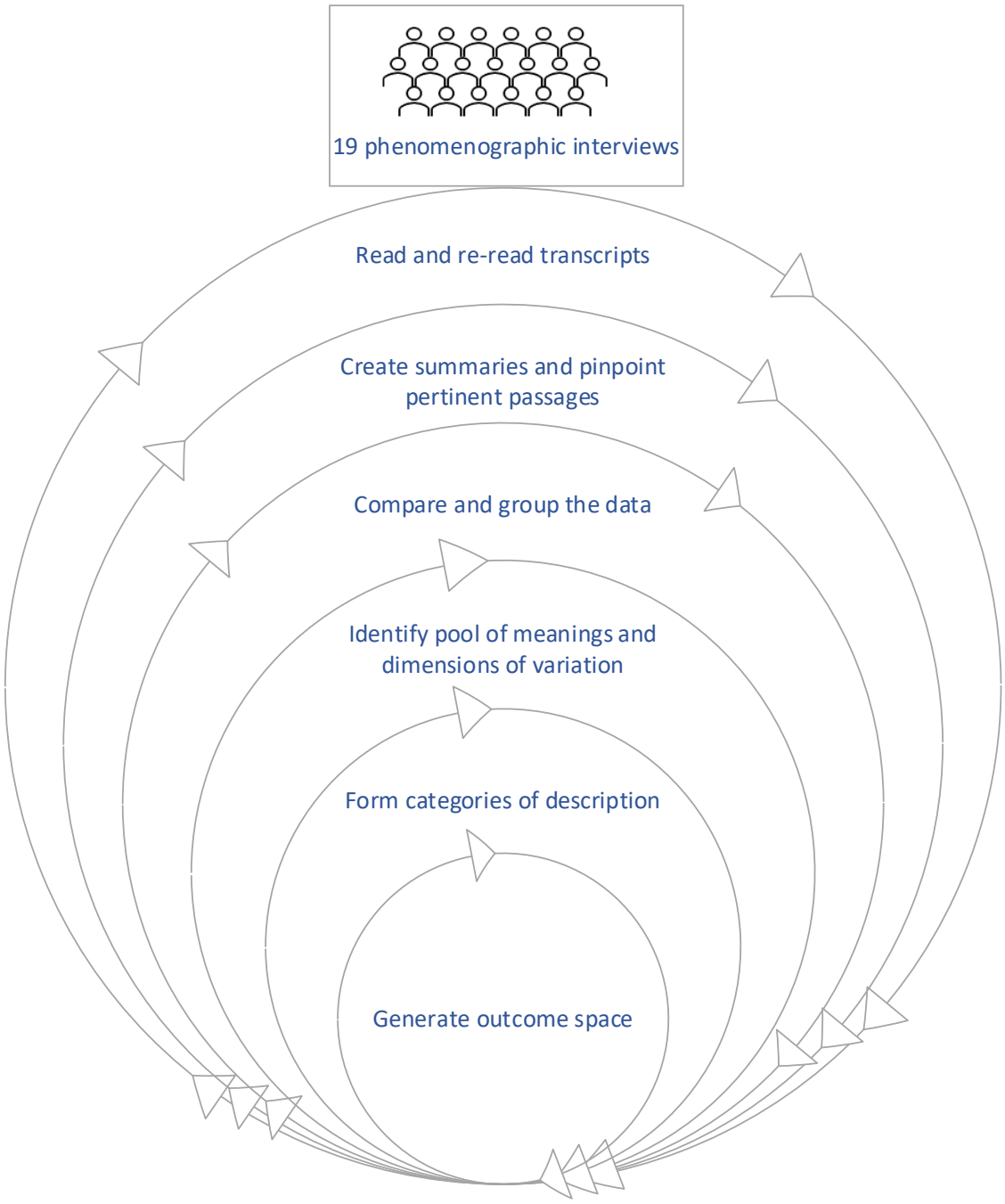


Figure 4.2: The iterative process involved in constituting categories of description and generating outcome spaces

4.3.1 Familiarisation and immersion

Varying phenomenographic analytical approaches exist.[4] Over an eleven-month period, I immersed myself in the data and took into account that phenomenographic analysis depends on "processes of reading and re-reading" (Green, 2005, p. 41). I concentrated initially on reading through all the transcripts in their entirety, making notes on each transcript and highlighting passages, patterns and meanings relevant to the two research questions. While this was useful in familiarising myself with the data, I also found it quite daunting as I had nineteen interview transcripts to navigate through, some of which exceeded twenty typed pages. My overwhelmedness was diminished to an extent by having manually transcribed each interview, while I had also listened back to the recordings many times for transcription accuracy prior to starting the analysis process. Nevertheless, it took me eight months (part-time) and ten iterations to come up with a set of five and finally four categories of description, as well as structural and referential aspects, which I was satisfied addressed the first research question capturing qualitative differences in how lecturers conceived ML. The second outcome space proved more challenging to generate. I meandered due to areas of overlap with the first research question and spent further months going over the individual and collective transcripts, as well as reading and re-reading selected passages and summaries to constitute categories which reflected participants' ML teaching experiences. In revisiting the data, I concentrated on variation across the participants as it is the "range of meanings within the sample group, as a group" that is sought (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 117). Frustration set in at times. Nonetheless, I did my utmost to maintain an open mind and keep any pre-determined views in check. I also avoided forming or foreclosing too quickly on the categories of description (Åkerlind, 2005c). This is reflected in the fact that the second set of categories continued to evolve over

[4] Appendix C3 provides an illustration of the data immersion and familiarisation processes

twelve iterations. Time gaps in my analysis helped in diminishing feelings of frustration, bringing about re-energisation and clarity. It ultimately took an additional three months for me to generate five, and finally four, inclusively hierarchical categories that reflected the qualitatively different ways in which participants described teaching ML.

In the earlier stages of my analysis, I grappled with the fact that a transcript could span more than one category and, similarly to Green (in Åkerlind et al., 2005, p. 86), my head "swam with complexities". My confidence and comfort grew as I went through the iterative analytical process. I tested, rechecked and adjusted the tentative categories against the data pool (Marton, 1986). When confused, frustrated or daunted by the enormity of the task, as recommended by Åkerlind (2012), I refocused on the transcripts and kept asking myself: *'What does this account tell me about the way lecturers understand ML or experience the teaching of ML?'*. I was also reassured by the insights proffered by Green (2005) that phenomenographic novices should not expect that their first attempts at building categories of description are "right", but rather they facilitate a "way into the data through which the categories can be revisited and revised as part of the processes of iteration" (p. 41). This was particularly the case with the second outcome space. I found that by focusing on each research question, revisiting my original summary notes, adding Post-it labels on the transcripts, extracting/re-examining relevant sections and checking back on overall transcript context and meaning, I was able to make the task more manageable and remain focused.[5]

4.3.2 Retaining context

Different suggestions exist regarding how to approach phenomenographic transcript analysis. Some recommend that the transcript be treated as a whole

[5] Appendix C5 provides some illustrations of the revisiting of the transcripts

(Åkerlind, 2005b; 2005d; Prosser et al., 1994). Others promote the so-called 'Marton Method' whereby small sections are extracted and interpreted (Marton, 1986; Svensson & Theman, 1983). In reality, I did both. By this I mean that the whole transcripts were read and re-read many times, including in batches. I also ensured, as described by Bowden (2005), that I had all the transcripts to hand, checking forwards and backwards within them to avoid separating quotes from their context. In undertaking my analysis, I knew it was important to ensure to read the transcripts with a particular purpose (Bowden, 2005). I tried to keep one aspect in focus (ML conceptions) and other aspects (ML teaching experiences) frozen, as recommended by Åkerlind (2005c). Although I found this hard to practically achieve, especially in the earlier parts of the analysis due to the interrelatedness of the research questions and initial researcher confusion and inexperience. As also mentioned by Bowden (2005), I was overwhelmed in the beginning with the detail and variation in the transcripts. However, by remaining guided and grounded by the research questions and concentrating on the transcript data, I found I was able to zone-in on participants' descriptions and discern critical aspects rather than just engaging in a "kind of cataloguing process" (Bowden, 2005, p. 26).

4.3.3 Iteratively returning to the transcripts

One of the biggest challenges I encountered was ensuring the vast amount of interview data remained manageable. Initially, I read through all the transcripts and wrote summaries on each one. I also listened back to all interview recordings a minimum of five times. Conscious of my phenomenographic newness and maintaining maximum data familiarity, I then revisited the transcripts in two batches, commencing with eight transcripts and then the remainder.[6] By examining the transcripts in batches, I was aware that some researchers use a

[6] Appendix C5 shows how the transcripts were also analysed in batches

smaller sample to begin their analysis before extending to the entire set (Åkerlind, 2005a; 2005b; Prosser et al., 1994; 2000; Trigwell, 2000). Once familiar with the data, I selected relevant passages and representative quotes to form a tentative pool of meanings. In a similar way to Åkerlind (2005b), I found it useful to spread-out the transcripts spatially to reflect areas of similarity and difference.[7] In doing so, I was also conscious of phenomenography's focus on the collective range of views and abandoning "boundaries separating individuals" (Marton, 1986, p. 42). By returning repeatedly to the transcripts and checking selected quotes and their context, I was able to form a pool of meanings related to lecturers' conceptions of ML and another for the teaching of ML. Throughout the varying stages, I was attuned to the importance of ensuring my analytical processes were loyal to the data (Green, 2005). Thus, I re-examined and verified the emerging categories and their structural relationships constantly against the transcript data.

4.3.4 Listening to the recordings

Work and life commitments meant there were breaks in analysing the transcripts. My almost three-hour daily work commute afforded me time and space to listen to the recordings and retain sought-after familiarity. In listening to the recordings, I was conscious that typed transcriptions are "constructions from an oral conversation to a written text" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013, p. 210), meaning that some interactive, contextual or expressive elements can be overlooked. While the Jeffersonian transcription method could have been used to detect speech and other non-verbal patterns, I found it more beneficial to re-read and listen back to each interview. I did this during the manual transcription process but, also, the lengthy analysis phase. Listening to the recordings helped me to avoid

[7] Appendix C5 provides an example of spatially arranging the transcripts during analysis

abstraction (Marton & Booth, 1997) and meant I remained attuned to contextuality and inherent meanings.

4.3.5 Examining participants' accounts

Phenomenography requires the researcher to set aside their own presuppositions and focus on how others talk about, experience and understand the phenomenon under investigation (Marton & Booth, 1997). This study is based on interview data. By interviewing a group of media educators within an Irish HE context, I sought to explore the qualitatively different ways that they experienced ML and its teaching. Phenomenographers notably have "access to nothing but what people communicate" (Säljö, 1997, p. 178). My findings, in line with Ashwin (2006) and Ashwin et al. (2016), reflect lecturers' *accounts* of ML and ML teaching as relayed by them during the research interviews.

4.3.6 Manual data management

Different approaches to phenomenographic data processing exist.[8] In opting for manual data management, I recognised that coding, such as that employed in content analysis, is not necessitated by phenomenography (Marton, 1986). My data analysis processes involved writing notes on each transcript, pinpointing passages pertaining to ML and ML teaching, returning to the transcripts, creating further summaries, checking for meaning and context and manually extracting the essence of the transcripts into a pool of meanings to form to form emergent and final categories of description (Marton et al., 1992).[9] Although time intensive and occasionally unwieldy, such data immersivity and revisitation enabled me to remain focused on the research aim and retain familiarity with the collective

[8] Appendix C1 provides an overview of different phenomenographic data processing and analytical approaches as summarised by Han & Ellis (2019)

[9] Appendix C4 illustrates the manual data management/coding processes undertaken

interview data. I was able to “stay with the transcripts”, iteratively and consciously return to the original data and summary versions, and critically discern the “fundamental meanings” and “underlying attitudes” of the participants towards the research phenomenon (Åkerlind et al., 2005, pp. 85-87).

4.3.7 Devil’s advocate

As a single researcher, I was aware that some express a preference for team rather than individual analysis (Bowden, 2000b; 2005; Walsh, 2000), whereby co-researchers assume a devil’s advocate role (Bowden, 2005). However, whether generated by a research team or single phenomenographer, outcome spaces are “inevitably partial” (Åkerlind et al., 2005, p. 93). Also, team analysis can encounter groupthink or become self-affirming (Åkerlind, 2005a; Barnacle, 2005). Moreover, it is possible to act as your own devil’s advocate with part-time research, as also experienced by Åkerlind (2005b), affording me the time and space to engage in critical, deep reflection during the analytical cycle. Time lapses meant I returned to the transcripts afresh, unfettered by prior analysis, and was able to revisit, review, revise and, most importantly, recheck my descriptive categories and structural and referential elements against the transcripts. Throughout the analysis process, I ensured to seek supervisor feedback in relation to the categories of description and structural and referential elements. Lengthy discussion of my preliminary findings also took place with an experienced critical friend and HE colleague.

4.3.8 Interpretative awareness and bracketing presuppositions

From the outset, I was alert to the need to bracket researcher presuppositions albeit, as (Bowden, 2005) acknowledged, the “object of the study, the focus on the research, is never completely separate from the researcher” (p. 28). The danger of abstraction also existed (Säljö, 1997). Self-criticality, awareness and a determination on my part to focus on the transcript data proved crucial. Åkerlind (2023) signalled the relevancy, but also distinction between suspending

researcher judgement (bracketing) and interpretative awareness whereby phenomenographers adopt a “critical attitude towards their own interpretations” (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 125). By undertaking the analysis over a protracted period, I was able to reflexively engage in an “iterative dialogue” with the transcripts and did not rush to predict outcomes or impose categories (Barnacle, 2005). Time gaps allowed me to re-examine the transcripts, collectively and in batches, and patiently and thoroughly check the emerging categories and validity of the outcomes. Bowden (2005) emphasised how new insights are gained through each transcript reading/revisitation. I also found this to be the case. I adopted an interrogative attitude towards my analysis and reassessed the data and my generated categories for ML prejudice or subjectivity on my part. I ensured that if it was not apparent in the transcripts, “then it is not evidence” (Bowden, 2005, p. 15). When I felt that I was lapsing into listing a multiplicity of differences to “the exclusion of establishing a smaller number of more holistic meanings” (Bowden, 2005, p. 26), I found it beneficial to return to the research question in focus and look for context and representative meanings across the collective transcripts. This became easier as my phenomenographic confidence grew and I became more familiar with the transcript data and the range of meanings within participants’ accounts including the possibility, and actuality, that any interview could span more than one constituted category (Åkerlind et al., 2005; Åkerlind, 2012; Ashwin et al., 2016).

4.3.9 Constituting structural relationships

In considering relationships between and across the categories of description, I was aware of differing opinions over whether structure is empirically driven or more related to the researcher’s professional judgement (Walsh, 2000). I was also cognisant of criticisms that focusing too soon on structural relationships could result in me imposing structure rather than allowing it to flow from the data (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Bowden, 1996; 2005; Cherry, 2005). Marton & Booth (1997) interestingly noted how “structure presupposes meaning” while meaning

also “presupposes structure” (p. 87). In order to remain holistically attuned and sensitised to interviewees’ experiences (Åkerlind, 2005b), I returned to the transcripts and searched for inherent meanings and variation therein. Like Marton (1986), I tested and re-adjusted my emergent categories against the data. Once I had formed firmer, more stable categories, I only then turned my attention to relationships between the categories. In my readings and revisitations of the transcripts, in alignment with Åkerlind (2005a), I tried to ensure that the process of constituting categories was not “unduly influenced” by a search for structural relationships (p. 119). As the iterative cycle continued, I found myself able to concentrate more on the structure of each outcome space.[10] In doing so, I was careful not to list “one conception after another”, but tried to logically reflect the different, layered ways in which the “perceived world” of ML and ML teaching was revealed by participants through their expressed accounts (Marton, 1981, p. 190). I checked and rechecked each outcome space against the transcripts, noting that “what is important is that the categories can be argued for convincingly on the basis of the data” (Ashwin et al., 2016, p. 966). This involved a protracted process of reading, reviewing and grouping the transcripts, sorting through selected passages, referring to my notes, and examining and reassessing the generated categories. In presenting my finalised outcome spaces, I realise that these are partial within the “hypothetically complete range of ways of experiencing a phenomenon” (Åkerlind, 2005a, p. 70). As previously outlined, I only had access to the accounts of those interviewed. The two generated outcome spaces present a holistic, hierarchically inclusive way of looking at the collective, expressed experiences of participating lecturers. However, I acknowledge that different people under different circumstances could perceive and experience ML and its teaching differently (Åkerlind, 2005c).

[10] Appendix C7 contains examples of different iterations undertaken in generating categories of description as well as the constitution of structural and referential aspects

4.4 Research quality and reliability

In phenomenography, as explained, participants are the not just the “bearers of different ways of experiencing a phenomenon”, but “the bearers of fragments of different ways of experiencing that phenomenon” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 114). The research interviews took place within a particular timeframe, HE and geographical context. The outcome spaces, which I constituted, are grounded in the “stripped” accounts of participating lecturers and capture the “essential meaning” and hierarchically inclusive relationships apparent within their analysed, collective descriptions (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 114). In undertaking this research, I knew that it was my responsibility, to the very best of my abilities, to ensure reliability and validity were “actively attained” throughout the research process rather than just being “proclaimed by external reviewers” upon the project’s completion (Morse et al., 2002, pp. 13-17). Bearing research and researcher improvement in mind, I undertook pilot interviews and adjusted my interviewing style and protocol. During the analytical cycle, delineation of qualitative variation, constitution of categories and generation of both outcome spaces, I did my utmost to remain faithful to the transcripts and “truthfully” and “really capture” how those interviewed accounted for ML and its teaching (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 127). As a phenomenographic newcomer and individual researcher, I was careful to employ strenuous “verification strategies” (Morse et al., 2002, pp. 17-18). This involved repeatedly and reflexively returning to the transcript data, revisiting and reviewing the categories, focusing on the context of selected quotes and discerning and checking for lecturers’ key meanings. I consulted with my supervisor, sought feedback on my emergent and final outcomes, and took into consideration the phenomenographic experiences and insights of other, more experienced researchers. I adopted the open mindset required of phenomenographers and assumed a scrutinous devil’s advocate role to my own work. Throughout the interviewing and analysis process, I remained attuned to bracketing ML knowledge/presuppositions on my part and avoided

abstraction by adhering to the advice of Bowden (2005) and grounding my analysis firmly in the transcripts.

4.4.1 Quality and trustworthiness

Criticisms of phenomenographic rigour have been compounded by qualitative researchers trying to parallel quantitative criteria (Morse, 2006). Other issues are a lack of consensus amongst phenomenographers regarding what constitutes rigour, along with concerns around the researcher's subjective input into the data analysis and outcome generation (Åkerlind, 2025). In terms of my research, I considered the view of Sin (2010) that quality is "a more inclusive concept for evaluating qualitative research" (p. 306). I engaged in interpretative awareness practices (Åkerlind, 2025; Sandberg, 1997; 2000) and applied active and comprehensive checking measures throughout the research process (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). I also took into account Guba and Lincoln's trustworthiness criteria (1994) including credibility, the applicability of the research outcomes to other contexts and ensuring the findings reflect participants' descriptions. With regard to credibility, I undertook pilot interviews, sent verbatim transcripts to participants, iteratively, critically and openly revisited the data throughout the transcription and analytical phases, and verified the categories of description against the transcripts. In deciding to undertake this study, I considered its applicability to Irish and other HE contexts where media modules/programmes are taught. I was mindful of confirmability in ensuring the findings preserve the "fundamental characteristic of the phenomenon originating from the experience of those interviewed" and that they maintain "the essential meaning as expressed" by participants (Barnard et al., 1999, p. 219). Morse et al. (2002) highlighted how researchers should identify and rectify any issues with research methods or interpretations. Cognisant of this and other criticisms of phenomenographic processes and outcomes, I have included details of the study's methods, data analysis and outcome generation procedures (Cope,

2004). Similarly to Burns (2000), an acknowledgement of my research position and background is also included at the beginning of this chapter.

4.4.2 Reliability

Reliability usually refers to replicability, what Booth (1992) depicts as the "probability" that another researcher, undertaking the same study, would arrive at the "same results" (p. 64). Phenomenography adopts a relational approach to the participant-phenomenon relationship. There is also the researcher's relational role in interpreting the data, with Åkerlind (2025) noting how no other researcher would constitute exactly the same categories even if examining the same dataset. Marton (1986) also addressed categories of description and replicability (p. 35):

> The original finding of the categories of description is a form of discovery, and discoveries do not have to be replicable. On the other hand, once the categories have been found, it must be possible to reach a high degree of intersubjective agreement concerning their presence or absence if other researchers are to be able to use them.

I recognise my relational role in interpreting lecturers' accounts. However, I attempted to overcome any researcher limitations on my part by approaching and revisiting the data openly, deeply and reflexively throughout the various iterations, retaining "active curiosity" (Åkerlind, 2025, p. 166). I implemented checks and balances during the research implementation and analysis stages to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the outcomes and have furnished details of the research decisions and practices undertaken. Coder and dialogic reliability are the main forms of reliability checking employed in qualitative interview-based research (Kvale, 1996), though they are not uniformly or universally applied. Discussion also surrounds their appropriateness or necessity (Bowden, 1996; 2000a; Marton, 1986; Prosser et al., 1994; Sandberg, 2000). Moreover, both approaches involve the use of several researchers to evaluate or counterbalance the potential impact of relying on one researcher's analysis of the data (Åkerlind,

2012). As a single researcher, I sought to embed reliability by undertaking a detailed and multilayered data analysis process. As outlined, I listened back to the recordings, returned to the transcripts repeatedly and reflexively over many months, and checked and rechecked my categories and outcome spaces against the data. Sandberg (1997) queried the 'meaningfulness' of interjudge reliability - "the extent to which other researchers can recognise the conceptions identified by the original researcher" - arguing that it can divert attention away from the researcher's procedures for ensuring transcript fidelity (p. 205). Others also ponder its suitability or necessity (Cope, 2004). Nevertheless, I took into account that some form of evaluating "the communicability of categories" can furnish the "researcher [with] information that someone else can see the same differences in the material as he or she has done" (Säljö, 1988, p. 45). Bearing this in mind, I sought supervisor guidance and feedback regarding my emerging and finalised categories. In addition, I discussed my preliminary findings at length with a trusted colleague familiar with ML. I have also furnished illustrative and representative quotations along with my categories of description to allow the reader to experience the data.

Sandberg (1997) advocated interpretative awareness, whereby the researcher acknowledges and deals with their "subjectivity throughout the research process instead of overlooking it" (p. 209). Whilst interviewing, transcribing and engaging in analysis, I was conscious of applying checks and balances to counter any potential biases or assumptions on my part (Åkerlind, 2012). I undertook manual transcription to ensure I was deeply familiar with participants' descriptions. I also listened back to the recordings for accuracy, context and meaning, wrote notes on all transcripts, analysed them in their entirety and in smaller batches, and returned consistently to the collective data. Through each iteration, I re-examined the responses of interviewees to ensure that the categories of description accurately reflect *their* views and experiences.

4.4.3 Validity

Validity is the “extent to which a study is seen as investigating what it aimed to investigate, or the degree to which the research findings actually reflect the phenomenon being studied” (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 123). Some, such as Säljö (1996; 1997), have raised concerns regarding the design and validity of phenomenographic studies. During the data generation and analysis stages, I remained focused on the research purpose. While undertaking both pilot and final interviews, I had the research questions printed beside me and at the top of my interview guide. This helped in countering nervousness on my part and served as a prominent reminder of the research phenomenon. Upon listening back to the interview recordings, I nonetheless realised that there were times when I could have directed/re-directed my questioning more towards the research questions while still maintaining conversational flow. Two forms of validity checking - communicative and pragmatic validity - are used in phenomenography. Communicative validity is the researcher’s ability to “argue persuasively” to others, especially the research community, “for the particular interpretation that they have proposed” (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 124). Pragmatic validity concerns the extent to which the research outcomes are deemed “meaningful”, “insightful” and “useful” by their intended audience (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 124). As already mentioned, my draft findings were shared and discussed with a colleague familiar with the phenomenon. Feedback was also sought from my supervisor while two other critical friends reviewed my draft research report. Regarding pragmatic validity and judgement of this study, I hope that my final report meets the “test” put forward by Entwistle (1997): “For researchers in higher education… the test is generally not its theoretical purity, but its value in producing useful insights into [ML] teaching and learning” (p. 129).

4.4.4 Ethical considerations

The importance of research ethics is underscored by the *Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland*, which is influenced by the UK’s *Concordat*

to Support Research Integrity (IUA, 2019). The *European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (ALLEA, 2023) also reinforces reliability and quality, honesty and transparency, respect for participants and researcher accountability. I applied ethical procedures throughout all stages of this research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013). Participant information sheets and informed consent forms were approved prior to commencement by Lancaster University's *Research in Ethics Committee*. All interviewees were fully informed of the nature and purpose of the research, voluntarily consented to take part and had the right to withdraw participation.[11] Full consideration was given to the questions posed, methods utilised and any interviewee impact (Cooper & Schindler, 2003), although participating in the study was considered to present little/no risk as the interviewees were adults, lecturing in HEIs on media modules/programmes and likely to be familiar with research principles and practices. I emailed transcripts to participants and was careful to eliminate identifying characteristics such as their names, the name of the module and educational institution. Each lecturer was assigned a pseudonym for anonymity purposes. The size of the country and Irish HEI sector make absolute anonymity challenging. Nevertheless, I have done my utmost to achieve this, while also recognising that some contextual detail is necessary to put the research into perspective and ensure the outcomes reflect the ML and ML teaching experiences and meanings expressed by interviewees.

4.4.5 Risks/opportunities

As outlined, I originate from a media industry background and teach within the Irish HE sector. The possibility and, in some instances, probability existed that some of those interviewed might know me either directly or indirectly. I remained mindful of my own position (Creswell, 2003) and the fact that in interviewing, the role of the interviewer and their integrity is "magnified because the interviewer

[11] Appendices A1 and A2 contain the participant information sheet and consent form

himself or herself is the main instrument for obtaining knowledge" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013, p. 97). I employed safeguarding measures to minimise any researcher bias (Gonyea, 2005, pp. 85-86) and sought to maintain focus on the research purpose, with participants interviewed regarding *their* understandings and experiences of ML and its instruction. In undertaking, and reflecting upon, this phenomenographic investigation, I am reminded of the experience of Kohnen (2012): "For my part, through these interviews I came to admire and respect each of my participants in a way that I hope enhances my understanding of their experience, rather than clouding my vision" (p. 18).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with a brief description of my research perspective, followed by details of the data generation and analysis methods employed, along with an outline of the study's ethical underpinnings and quality. As a first-time phenomenographer, the research was fulfilling, if not daunting and arduous at times. As observed by Åkerlind et al. (2005): "Learning 'to do' phenomenography is not a journey with a distinctive beginning and a clear end" (p. 99). In describing my research journey and outlining the practices and approaches which I adopted, I hope to have demonstrated how I 'did' the varying elements of this research to the very best of my abilities whilst also acknowledging that my phenomenographic learning curve was steep. In the succeeding chapter, I present the research findings, beginning with the first outcome space mapping the qualitatively different ways in which participating media lecturers conceptualised ML. This is followed by the second generated outcome space capturing variation in interviewees' expressed accounts of teaching ML.

Chapter 5 Mapping Variation in Lecturers' Accounts of ML and its Teaching

5.1 Introduction

I previously outlined the methodological approach which I adopted, the study's aims, phenomenographic underpinnings, data generation and analytical processes. My outcomes are presented herein, with the research questions restated for clarity purposes:

1. What are the qualitatively different ways in which media lecturers in Irish HEIs account for ML?
2. What are the qualitatively different ways in which these same lecturers account for teaching ML?

The research questions are addressed in separate sections. Each section opens with an outcome space presenting the empirically grounded categories of description which I generated to reflect qualitative differences in media lecturers' accounts of ML and its teaching. I focus thereafter on referential and structural relationships between the constituted categories before presenting a detailed outline of each category, complete with illustrative quotations from lecturers. The categories of description map lecturers' collective conceptualisations and form an inclusive or nested hierarchy. They are ordered based on breadths of complexity, showing different and expanding dimensions of ML and ML teaching awareness. Due to space restrictiveness, the selected quotations do not furnish a complete picture of each conception but rather provide insight into how the constituted categories are supported by the transcript data (Ashwin, 2006; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013).

5.2 Section 1: Qualitative differences in ML accounts

Nineteen media educators were interviewed regarding their ML conceptions. Detailed analysis of all transcripts (T1-T19) revealed four qualitatively different ways of conceiving ML:

1. ML as understanding key media theories and concepts as well as being generally aware of the media industry;
2. ML as engaging in practical activities and tasks including writing and creating content for different purposes and audiences;
3. ML as critically analysing media, applying relevant theories to media texts and engaging in CT;
4. ML as changing and contributing by reflecting on the wider implications of media societally, democratically and culturally.

The nested categories which I constituted to reflect the varying and expanding ways in which media educators described ML are presented in **Figure 5.1.** The generated categories do not purport to be the only possible configuration and I acknowledge that other outcomes could be potentially derived from the data. However, the generated categories have been confirmed, tested and rechecked against the transcripts.

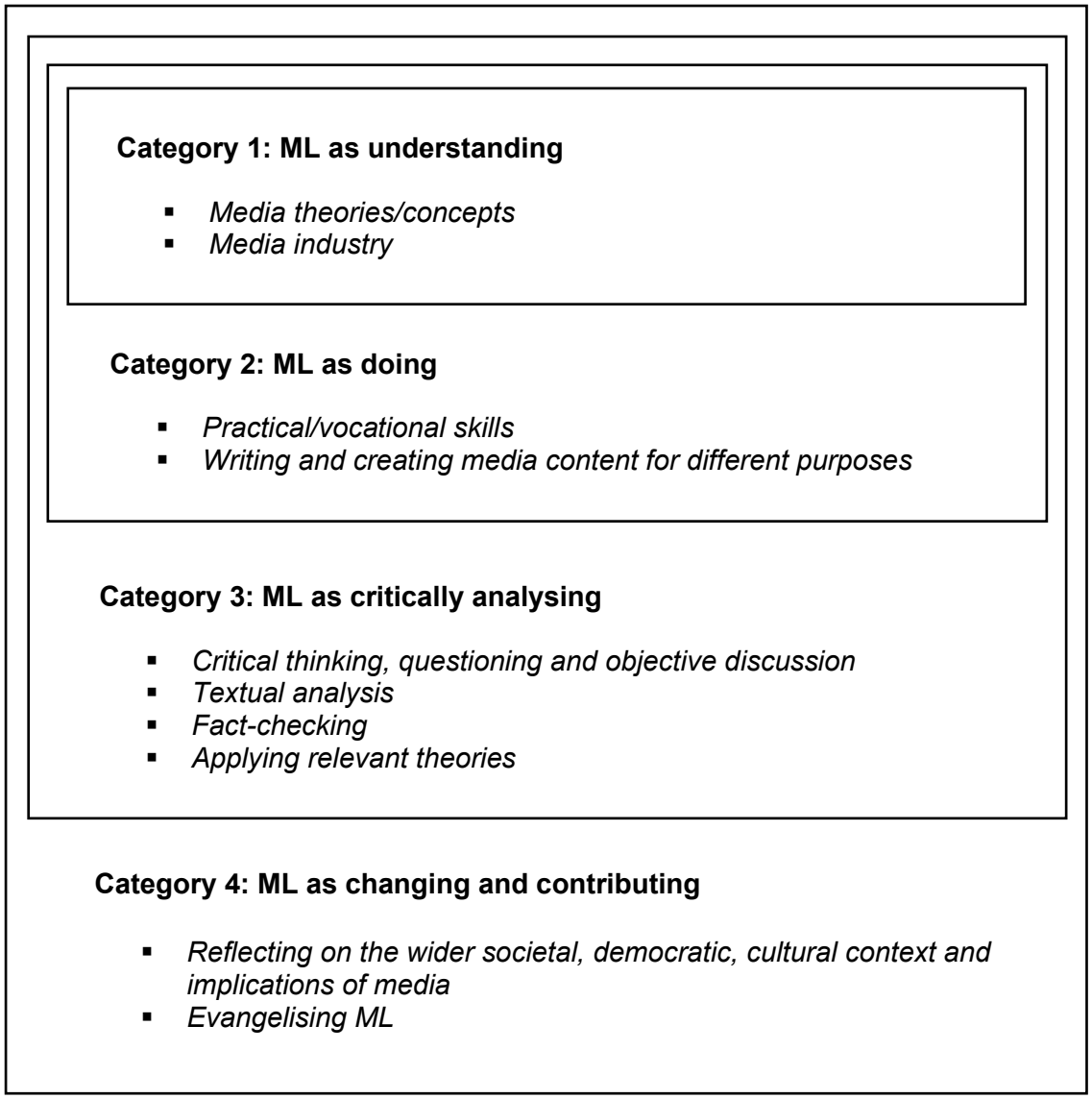


Figure 5.1: Hierarchical relationships between categories of description of ML

5.2.1 Outcome space: Referential and structural aspects of how lecturers conceptualise ML

	Referential Aspect		
Structural Aspect	Awareness/ understanding	Critical reflection/ discernment	Contribution/ change
Self	1		
Industry	2	3	
Society			4

Table 5.1: Outcome space: Referential and structural aspects of lecturers' experiences of ML

Table 5.1 presents the entire outcome space demonstrating relations between the four categories. The referential aspect focuses on shifts in ML conceptualisations among educators. This ranges from ML as awareness of key media concepts/theories and possessing an understanding or overview of media, to ML as critical reflection and the development of media discernment skills, to ML as contributing and changing.

Structurally, conceptualisations of ML expand from an inward-to-outward focus. These can be thematised as '*self', 'industry'* and '*society'*. Thus, in category 1 ML is conceived as focusing on the self by developing individual media awareness and understanding. Category 2 extends outwards and is more industry-oriented, incorporating practical and vocational media skills. Category 3 is about critically examining media/media texts and exhibiting discernment skills while category 4 sees ML as effecting personal change and enhanced societal contribution as well as yielding deeper reflection on the media's wider role in the world.

5.2.2 Categories of description: Media lecturers' accounts of ML

I now provide details of each of the generated categories, commencing with category 1 and progressing to category 4. The categories are designed to capture

qualitative variation in lecturers' ML accounts, arising from in-depth and iterative transcript data analysis.

5.2.2.1 Category 1

ML as understanding media theories and having awareness of the media industry

Lecturer accounts linked to this category described ML as understanding media theories, possessing awareness of concepts and principles underpinning media/media messages, as well as having consciousness of the media industry. This involves being able to distinguish between different platforms and content. In essence, ML is conceptualised as having a mental map of key theories and an overview of media and the media sector.

Category 1 characterises ML as being grounded in media theory. Knowledge of media principles, theories and terminology is considered a foundational aspect upon which media analysis skills and more conscious content consumption and creation can be built. A firm emphasis on understanding media theories is exemplified below:

> You can't be truly literate in media unless you have a good grounding in some of the key media and communication theories… You need to have some, even basic, understanding of the likes of semiotics and key theorists including people like Marshall McLuhan whose concept of the 'medium is the message' is even more pertinent in today's expansive new media world. Also, the likes of Stuart Hall and his concept of representation are important in building an understanding of media and the wider role and effects of media. These are the types of concepts that enable anyone who creates or absorbs media to be able to better understand media and become, hopefully, more aware of how media content is presented, reported upon and constructed. Other important concepts in my view are the likes of media industries and the idea of hegemony. (Michael, T19)

Lecturers described ML as “sowing the seeds” (Aoife, T3) and making people “aware of the communication process and different elements involved” (Catriona, T10). Central to this is media theory familiarity:

> There’s no getting away from theory, you can't get away from theory… university is all about theory. (Catriona, T10)

Besides providing a theoretical basis, ML was conceived as furnishing an overall picture of the media industry and how it operates including knowledge of journalism and news production principles. This was deemed significant for those intending to work in news, media or communications:

> Obviously, you have the various steps from where news is from and where the idea is generated from, right through to the final article being put together from a journalistic point of view, but also from a sociological perspective to be able to look at how the media works, how the media is shaped. (Patricia, T6)

Lecturers’ conceptualisations consistent with category 1 also characterised ML as being cognisant of the origins and distributors of content. This was perceived as fundamental, if challenging, due to an upsurge in media platforms and messaging:

> An engineer will go home at the end of the day and watch telly. I'm not going to go home at the end of the day and build a bridge… It's [media is] something that is in everyone's life. It's like learning to spell at this stage of the game… You should know what you're reading. You should understand where it's coming from and know whether or not it's trustworthy. And there's so much stuff out there and there are websites calling themselves ‘news’ websites… [so] that it's hard to decipher what's real and what's not and it's easy to turn off from it. (Molly, T11)

Part of knowing and “understanding” media is distinguishing between so-called legacy media and social media. For lecturers whose accounts are aligned to category 1, such knowingness extended to understanding how media messages, including news stories, are presented or framed. Foundational, yet fundamental

media knowledge was seen as crucial for those planning to work in the media or become content creators:

> [Media literacy] needs to be reframed to cover a larger area of media theory, looking at things like framing, agenda setting and those types of things… I think anybody working in public relations or the media needs to have an understanding of how news is constructed and how news is relayed before they can get involved in any way in trying to create campaigns which rely hugely on new and old media to get whatever the message is across. (Bill, T12)

In accounts linked to the first descriptive category, a media literate student possesses an overall understanding or "mental map" of the media landscape (Rosaleen, T18). An expectation existed that such a student could distinguish, even at a basic level, between different types of media content and platforms. In tandem, they would exhibit familiarity with media principles and theories. This does not mean, however, that they are "expert" in all aspects or areas of media, as illustrated by the quotation below:

> … A student should have a kind of mental map of the media environment and major issues and areas within and/or around media. And they don't necessarily need to be expert in all of those. So, maybe, it is that they are more interested in doing that type of content analysis stuff but they understand that there's these ownership and production issues and they would know where to go to find out about these, or, they would know when it is relevant to think about these things. So, I think that's what I consider a media literate person. You don't have to be a master of all of it. It's too sprawling. It was sprawling even in the mass media age and it's even more so now. (Rosaleen, T18)

In summary, lecturers' accounts aligned with category 1 conceptualised ML as understanding key media theories and concepts. Possessing a solid theoretical foundation was considered relevant for those studying, consuming, producing and/or circulating content by providing the contextual and conceptual building blocks required for fuller media understanding, engagement and analysis.

Besides theoretical aspects, interviewee accounts also depicted ML as having, what could be considered as, a helicopter view of the media industry. This incorporates awareness of agenda-setting, knowledge of who is involved in the media, and being cognisant of different media platforms and how content is presented/framed. Media understanding can extend to knowing what constitutes an opinion piece, grasping basic journalistic principles and being aware of public service media and platform ownership. Rather than granular knowledge and mastery of all media concepts, ML was perceived in bigger picture terms and accepting that expertness is not necessarily possible or probable in today's undulating media environment.

5.2.2.2 Category 2

ML as doing and engaging in practical tasks and activities

Linked to this category are lecturer accounts describing ML as focusing on practical industry skills including writing and creating media content for different audiences, platforms and purposes. In essence, ML centres on 'doing' and developing the key vocational skills required to be a media professional such as knowing how to present audience-appropriate content and determine what media format works best.

Lecturers whose accounts aligned with this category were smaller in number. Their accounts are noteworthy in that they described ML in terms of engaging in vocationally-oriented activities and tasks, essentially the realities and practicalities of undertaking and writing-up interviews and deciding which media format or presentation style is most suitable for particular stories/content. This contrasts with the first category where the central focus was on conceptual understandings and media awareness. In category 2 descriptions, ML involves knowing how to deliver and interpret a story and the best ways of sourcing, presenting and creating content:

> The writer or the journalist has now become the interpreter of the story so you need to know how to interpret or decide - based on your basic content - is it best as a news story, is it best as a feature article or a lengthy feature article? Is there good analysis and background? Is it a colour [piece]? Would it be more intimate as a podcast?... Should it be a video? Do you need visuals to tell the story?... Also interviewing techniques, how to interview, how to start interviews, how to write them, all that… It's the same with… design for print and copyright and images - what you can do and what do you have to do to source footage - existing footage - and all about cutaways, editing, the whole lot. So, all the skills are practical. (Peadar, T9)

Lecturer accounts linked with category 2 are qualitatively different not just from category 1, but also from conceptions aligned to higher categories by centring on knowing practically how media and content creation work. The central focus was on knowing-by-doing and experiencing first-hand how to pitch and produce content for varying purposes, platforms and audiences. Practical proficiency was perceived as extended to writing news stories, creating a contact list, crafting press releases and maintaining a media diary. Such skills were considered important in spite of, or even because of, shifts in the media environment including the snowballing of social media platform/content as illustrated in the accounts below:

> I may be contradicting myself in some ways but I think media literacy is for many, including people like myself with a media industry background, also very much about knowing how to actually create content, having practical skills like the inverted pyramid of writing, knowing the 5Ws [who, what, where, when, why/how] and knowing how to write, produce or edit media content in a way that is appropriate and suitable for different purposes and formats, be that social media, more traditional media, online, offline, video or whatever else. Understanding media concepts is one aspect but there is also the element of putting that knowledge into practice and being able to do as well as think. It's a very noisy world, especially online. If you are going to be a media producer, content creator, journalist, PR person or whatever, especially today, you need to know how to

> actually create content that is usable, and content that is suitable and, hopefully, worthwhile. (Michael, T19)
>
> … Even small things like to how to put together a media list… that's something that's meat and drink, you know, for anybody working in public relations or media and I think the students struggle with that because they're probably not willing to put in the hard yards to actually go and look up media directories or start reading newspapers and see, for instance, what a particular newspaper is interested in, what types of stories [are featured] or that type of thing. They tend to take, I think, an easier route with social media a lot of the time. (Bill, T12)

The practical version of ML, apparent in category 2 accounts, highlighted sectoral/employer demand to focus on vocationally-oriented media skills beyond theoretical knowledge:

> What they [employers] were recommending to us, based on the graduates they were hiring and the skillset they found to be missing, was a lot of them [media graduates] had very much a theory-based background but not practical skills. They recommended that you need to be multiskilled. You must be able to originate a TV story, for example, go out, shoot it, edit it and pitch it. (Oonagh, T14)
>
> …From our point of view, we're just preparing people for the workplace… The idea is that they [graduates] are able to go out and hit-the-ground running to a reasonable extent, as in they could go anywhere and be able to make a fist of something; that they can write news because news usually throws people at the beginning… They should be familiar with all areas of news in terms of video, video footage, shooting, editing and the same with podcast[ing] and the different type of scripting involved… (Peadar, T9)

ML, in the accounts of lecturers presented in this section, is thus oriented towards the functional and practical side of media. Lecturers described ML as undertaking media tasks and developing the vocational skills demanded by employers and necessary for media practitioners. This ML conceptualisation supplements

understanding media theories and adds a “multiskilled” aspect (Oonagh, T14). It is noteworthy that practical abilities, including those focused on written content, were deemed particularly significant in an online mediascape, with lecturers’ accounts pinpointing the pertinency of practical skills to tertiary level ME in terms of workplace preparedness.

5.2.2.3 Category 3

ML as critically analysing and evaluating media

Accounts consistent with this category conceptualised ML as critically analysing and evaluating media/media content and sources. This included developing better discernment skills, applying relevant theories and employing CT and proactive scepticism in analysing media. In essence, ML was characterised as being more interrogative of media, media sources and messages, extending beyond passivity to questioning.

The accounts of lecturers aligned with category 3 are qualitatively different from those presented previously. Rather than theoretical understanding or practical skill embedment, ML under category 3 was seen as centring on critical analysis and being able to objectively evaluate media content and sources. As illustrated in the quotations below, ML was depicted as exercising due diligence or “discernment”, not just in relation to media content but channels. Fact-checking and verifying information from multiple sources were also regarded as relevant, particularly in relation to social media content:

> Media literacy for me, when I think about it, is being discerning because of the nature of media now. There was always maybe an element that you couldn't always believe everything you heard or believe something just because it was in a [news]paper and [that] it wouldn't necessarily be true because the nature of journalism is to compact things and you don't always get the full picture - but I think social media has complicated things an awful lot and the internet has. There's so much stuff out there that you don't know the provenance of and how

> do you deal with that. I see that with people and not just students. They are getting information that they accept because it seems to be authoritative but it isn't. (Peadar, T9)
>
> I feel that we have to look on different media sources with a critical eye. (Sheila, T5)
>
> It [all media] is not made equally. You know, media might be put out into the world [and] you can certainly analyse it but it's the value that you put on it, I suppose… I wouldn't put any value on anything I saw on social media unless it is fact-checked and I understand that fact-checking comes from the international fact-checking organisation [International Fact-Checking Network] and then I would trust it. Whereas some people … take [all] media to be equal to each other and that, to me, is dangerous. (Molly, T11)

As well as querying the reliability of sources and content, ML was described as demonstrating consciousness of the inherent shakiness of the internet and scrutinising the infrastructures and power-structures at play. This was perceived as important, especially for younger generations who have grown up with the internet. ML accounts, as exemplified below, reinforced considered media consumption rather than passively accepting and unquestioningly absorbing, particularly online, content:

> I'm lucky and many of my colleagues are lucky to have grown up with the development of this stuff… When you were there for the early jankier version of the internet, where it was a bit slapped together, you're more likely to see that underneath the current glitz, it is the same and it's all a little bit shaky and it's all a little bit to be questioned. But I think that that's missing for younger people who have grown up natively within that space. (Diarmuid, T15)
>
> For me, media literacy is about critical awareness; being able to feel confident in asking questions about the media, not so you don't enjoy it or can't trust it, but you have a critical awareness or healthy scepticism about the media that you're encountering. You're wise enough to look for fact-checked media or consume a

> range of media to give you different perspectives. You're wise enough to know that media online is often manipulated by things like algorithms so that everything is tailored for you. And you understand ownership and you know what bias is. I think all of those things should be part of something like civics education, so people have training in them going forth into the world. It's always been important [and] it's never been more so. But I think media literacy, for me, is about having the confidence to have critical consciousness around what you consume. (Deirdre, T4)

In a media-saturated world, ML was furthermore described in terms of enhancing users' media consumption and enjoyment. Rather than a burden, probing and posing pertinent questions regarding media/media content was seen as adding to audience's appreciation:

> Media is something that we consume so much of so why not be critically aware and be engaged and using media literacy to add to your pleasure… You don't have solutions with media literacy, often it's just raising more questions and the right questions. (Daithi, T16)

Lecturers' accounts attached to this category also signalled the importance of being able to critically apply the media concepts and wider understandings mentioned in the first category. In other words, a shift was apparent from the theoretical and conceptual familiarity prioritised in category 1 to the application of theories in category 3. This shift involved moving from reading to interpreting. It also incorporated putting media concepts into practice by undertaking textual analysis as well as critically examining and evaluating how media/platforms engage in representation and present or construct different perspectives. As exemplified in the lecturer excerpts which follow, ML was furthermore seen as assessing the neutrality or otherwise of certain media texts:

> For me, it's really about understanding that the media creates, circulates and produces meaning in society. My favourite point is from David Morley - that there's no innocent text. So, whether it's *Peppa Pig*, or it's *Newsnight*, or an

> advertisement in a magazine, or it's a social media post, there's no innocent text. Everything carries meaning and we should always be analysing what that meaning is or where that meaning is coming from or how it's constructed. (Deirdre, T4)

> … It is the critical thinking capacity. It's recognising that any piece of media comes from a particular perspective. It was produced in a particular context. It has particular goals and that's something that young people find quite difficult because the media they consume is so disjointed… Whereas we might have very knowingly turned on Channel 4 and Channel 4 was different to the BBC, you could understand what that difference meant and that you were going to get slightly different content … But, for young people, everything is mixed together - you're on YouTube, you're watching a clip from here, a clip from there. (Rosaleen, T18)

While category 2 mentioned HE and practical preparedness for the workplace, accounts consistent with category 3 concentrated on a more contextual and comprehensive version of employability:

> … There are plenty of other ways and we often talk about this in fact - myself and my colleagues - that students could attain the same production knowledge. They could go and do a load of YouTube tutorials about [Adobe] Photoshop and they would have learned the same core production skill that they got maybe in [named] module. But, they would not be able to make the same stuff if they didn't also learn the history of visual media and be able to discern and pick apart and critique different sorts of typography or different visual approaches or whatever. So, it [ML] is very much the analytical parts and the ability to understand the cultural context of communication as well as actually make it. (Diarmuid, T15)

Some lecturer accounts linked to the third category queried whether the term 'media literacy' sufficiently captures the critical and evaluative aspects they conceived as important. This is interesting in light of scholarly and other debate regarding ML and CML, as well as discussions over the nature and purpose of ME:

> Maybe it's not for me to say, but I just feel the whole term ‘media literacy’ needs to be unpacked… I wonder does the whole term need to be really examined in relation to what does media literacy actually mean and everything that it's supposed to mean. Is media literacy empowering everyone … and, I suppose, students to be able to understand what is truth in the media? (Sheila, T5).

> … I would say media discernment might be a good alternative [to ML] because it is about discerning, knowing whether information is reliable, is it relevant, is it good and is it true. (Peadar, T9)

> Literacy is the glue… I would argue. It keeps evolving and changing and literacy means different things for different areas but it's all about the core area of trying to make more of what we would say is critical media literacy, not just media literacy. (Daithi, T16)

In terms of the attributes considered essential in a media literate student, lecturers’ accounts emphasised being willing to intelligently question media content/sources, exhibiting curiosity and having sufficient theoretical underpinnings to critically interrogate texts. This was also seen as extending to knowing how to research, think independently and take different perspectives into account:

> So, the student has developed the research abilities to understand the provenance of messages… Also, scepticism, exercising scepticism helps. (Maebh, T2)

> The student would be able to ask intelligent questions about the media or as somebody who's specialised [in media], they would have a strong understanding of key media theory. They would feel confident in applying it [theory] and discussing it and they would feel confident going against the grain and being critical… Those kinds of principles of objectivity [and] critical analysis have never mattered more… (Deirdre, T4)

> They need to have the compass skills of being able to see that the emperor is wearing no clothes and being able to unpack stuff, being able to see vacuous

> media, being able to uncover what's the subtext… Media literacy is all about subtext and being able to see beyond [this] and how to read a text within its context and reading the text in its own right as well. And that's what good writing is all about, it's about seeing and not being part of the herd; being able to critique stuff where other people might just feel pleasure. (Daithi, T16)

In summary, ML was characterised under category 3 accounts as focusing on CT and the ability to consciously critique texts by viewing media and associated messages with discernment. This involves exercising an amount of scepticism and objectively questioning content, including the subtexts, perspectives or representations which may operate within media texts. Practising curiosity and identifying inequities within content, as well as potential issues with online information, were considered important. Priority was also placed on fact-checking and determining the provenance of messages.

Variation existed in descriptions linked to this category. Some accounts described ML as not merely analysing media but applying the media-related theories, concepts and understandings emphasised in category 1. Additionally, there were descriptions alluding to the significance of CT and media evaluation in terms of enhancing employability and adding an additional analytical aspect to the practical media skills reinforced in category 2. Also apparent within accounts was reflection on the aptness of the appellation 'media literacy' and whether it required examination or re-purposing to embrace and emphasise the critical, empowering and evaluative aspects which lecturers described as crucial. There was mention of re-categorising ML as "media savviness" (Imelda, T8) or "media discernment" (Peadar, T9).

5.2.2.4 Category 4

ML as changing/contributing

ML, under this category, was conceived in terms of its role in effecting not just personal change but in enhancing reflectiveness on the wider implications of media, from creation to circulation. This incorporated more in-depth appreciation of the societal, democratic, political, historical and cultural context in which media operates. Essentially, ML was described as understanding the key role and impact of media/media outlets in an increasingly globalised, yet fractured information environment.

Category 4 lecturer accounts identified ML as facilitating reflection on the media's function and role in democratic society including its interconnectivity with and influence on politics, culture and identity. ML was seen as enhancing citizenship by bringing about changes in perceptions and increasing levels of (positive) media engagement. In contrast with previous categories, ML was viewed not only as a means of informing citizens but as aiding transformation by deepening their understanding of the media's pivotal role in shaping society, democracy and the wider world:

> What is citizenship in the 21st century… because, ultimately, what is it when we say we want people to be media literate? It's not just for the sake of it. It's that they have a good understanding of what it means to be a citizen in the 21st century. You might even go further and say what good citizens should be. But I think a huge amount of it does come back to ideas of democracy, of respect, of being able to listen to others and just basic principles that people need to be informed about issues. (Rosaleen, T18)

> Wherever you're moving in the world, whether you're working in any industry or you're just an ordinary citizen moving around, this [media] is one of the biggest day-to-day systems you're coming into contact with and I think that [a] good solid knowledge of that is beneficial on a personal, individual level. It's beneficial for

> society, it's beneficial even for employment and, you know, for employers. (Maureen, T1)

In accounts corresponding with category 4, ML shifted from an inward-to-outward focus. It was seen as moving beyond the conceptual understandings, practical skills' development and critical/textual analysis apparent in categories 1, 2 and 3 to creating more engaged, conscious and judicious citizens by heightening awareness about the role of individual media users and creators along with the wider influence of media organisations. In contrast with category 3, ML was portrayed in citizenship-enhancement terms with significance placed on "evangelising" or promoting ML amongst others:

> I think the benefits [of media literacy] are better citizens, making better judgements, so you get a better society from that. (John, T7)

> The other aspect, which I think is really important, is the job of evangelising [media literacy] so that when you leave here [named HEI] or even when you are here or amongst your family around the table, you are promoting media studies. That is a part of media literacy and that's really important as well… (Maebh, T2)

ML, in category 4 aligned accounts, was characterised as catalysing consideration and conversation about which media content and platforms are necessary, beneficial or harmful to democracy. ML was also depicted as increasing alertness about the impacts and implications of information distribution, and distortion, by fostering informedness and empowerment:

> There are always those who continue to believe that there was not necessarily a Holocaust and there was no Auschwitz. We need to have media literacy. It's very, very important because of the scary word we're living in and I don't know if we are allowed to name names but, you know, some of this got [US President] Trump elected… And, you know, what world are we are creating in the absence of having [the ability] to critically evaluate media? (Sheila, T5)

Moving beyond media as entertainment was a recurrent theme in lecturers' accounts. They described ML as not only "interrogating" the media's role politically, culturally and democratically (Imelda, T8), but as extending beyond passivity to conscious activity by cogitating on the far-reaching and "serious" opportunities, representations and affordances it presents and/or potentially perpetuates:

> Media is not just a form of entertainment that people have in their lives… Increasingly, it's a function of democracy, you know, and people in the media are now becoming presidents of countries and our field of interest is not the funster place that it was in the '70s and '80s. It's actually a very serious area of study… [Media literacy is] helping people to understand that these very powerful messages are not just little bits of entertainment but they're representing our world. And in some ways, they are crafting our world, shaping our world and there might be threats and there might be opportunities and people should know about this. (Maebh, T2)

> We're living in a cyber culture. I think what we're actually looking at is not even media literacy. I think it's actually just a questioning of the world in general because the world is media now. (Imelda, T8)

In terms of change and contribution, ML was described as raising consciousness of the role of algorithms in shaping the content we consume and the visibility, or otherwise, of certain messaging by enabling/restricting information or reinforcing narratives or viewpoints. Accounts corresponding with category 4 also referenced ML's role in countering the "bombardment" (Molly, T11) and manipulation of web and social media users:

> We're living in a post-truth era with all the associated problems. The reason we're living in a post-truth era is because of the capabilities of the digital platforms. So, if you think about just the psychology of that for a second - the news used to be 'new things that are happening that I should be aware of'. News was something to inform but now it's part of the overall entertainment industry. In order to engage audiences, we use the term 'engage' in the form of web marketing, so now news

> doesn't really inform you but it affirms you and affirms your prejudices and stands with you and creates a truth-model that's not doing anything to inform people. It's giving psychological affirmation so that's a problem and the reason it exists is because of the algorithms across all platforms. I don't just mean [on] social media … [It's] the way in which the news [that] comes to you is calibrated, calculated and served up, based upon your needs as opposed to the need of the citizen to be informed… I think if someone is media literate, they're aware of the forces that shape the media that they consume and how these can be skewed towards certain ideological positions. (Charlie, T17)

While category 2 focused primarily on developing practical media skills, including how to craft press releases or write media stories, it is noteworthy that category 4 aligned accounts centred on wider aspects of media creation and circulation particularly ethical considerations and reflecting on potential biases within media texts. Educators' accounts also extended beyond the more generalised media awareness apparent in category 1 and CT (category 3) to ML's interconnectivity with informed and ethically-conscious media "prosumption" (Toffler, 1980). Accounts that align with category 4 bring to mind the question posed by Strate (2014, p. 101): "Can there be media ethics without media literacy?". This is illustrated in the lecturer excerpts below:

> It's not just whether you can hold a camera [or] not just whether you can take a good photograph but what is that photograph being used for? How do you understand that photograph? And that brings you back into politics? It brings you right to the heart of democracy. It's, you know, gender and ethical responsibility in terms of sharing images… For me, that is media literacy. (Treasa, T13)

> If you are a media user or a media producer, you need to know what you should or shouldn't do, not just legally but ethically and the ramifications of circulating content. With empowerment and media accessibility comes rights as well as responsibilities for our actions or inactions, particularly in overseeing and determining what we share, what we consume and what we create. (Michael, T19)

ML, in category 4 accounts, was hence about deepening understanding and effecting change by focusing on the wider societal and cultural role as well as the far-reaching impacts of media, particularly in terms of democracy and shaping how we live, how we think/behave and who we are. Moving from an inner-to-outer orientation - from 'self' to a more globalised understanding of media - lecturers' accounts described ML as reflecting on citizenship in the 21st century including evaluating which media platforms, content and sources are helpful or harmful to democratic principles. Ethical responsibilities and considered media consumption and production were deemed important. Emphasis was also placed on who is seen or not seen within media texts and the role of media and media infrastructures, including online content, platforms and algorithms, in shaping or skewing personal and societal perceptions. In terms of contribution and change, ML was characterised as heightening consideration, and action, about the content and messages we, or others, propagate or produce. It was also about creating evangelists who promote media studies and wider societal understanding of the roles and responsibilities underpinning media. This envisaging of ML is in line with the Council of Europe (2025), which described it as not just enabling individuals to critically analyse and access media but as "empowering" people to make informed and ethical decisions about which media they use and create, thereby facilitating their participation and contribution to communities, nations and "global knowledge societies".

5.3 **ML conceptualisations and shifting relations**

Variation in ways of conceiving ML show a shift from category 1 accounts, whereby the focus was on generalised understandings of the media and related theories and concepts, to category 4 descriptions which centred on ML as furthering reflectiveness and activeness regarding media, particularly its interconnectivity and impacts on culture, democracy and society. The four constituted categories present expanding conceptualisations, with later categories including earlier ones. This is exemplified in educators' accounts. For

example, T19 (Michael) highlighted the importance of “having a good grounding” in key media theories in category 1. He also acknowledged in category 4, the wider societal significance of ML including the ethical considerations and responsibilities involved in consuming, distributing or producing content. Similarly, T4 (Deirdre) described the relevance of critical analysis in category 3 while reinforcing the wider significance of ML in category 4 by reflecting on algorithms, media gatekeeping and elitism, as well as the democratic and societal implications of the success or failure of particular media platforms.

As previously outlined and reinforced here, the research sample included nineteen media lecturers. While prudence is required in reporting relations between the categories, iterative transcript analysis revealed four different yet logically connected ways of conceiving ML. I have attempted to capture the expanding conceptualisations of ML as expressed by those interviewed in **Figure 5.2**. This graphical representation underlines the parallel shift in the purpose and benefit of ML from categories 1 to 4. It shows progression from awareness-to-inquiry-to-action and a broadening in ML benefits from a more individual *or* industry focus to benefitting the individual, industry *and* society.

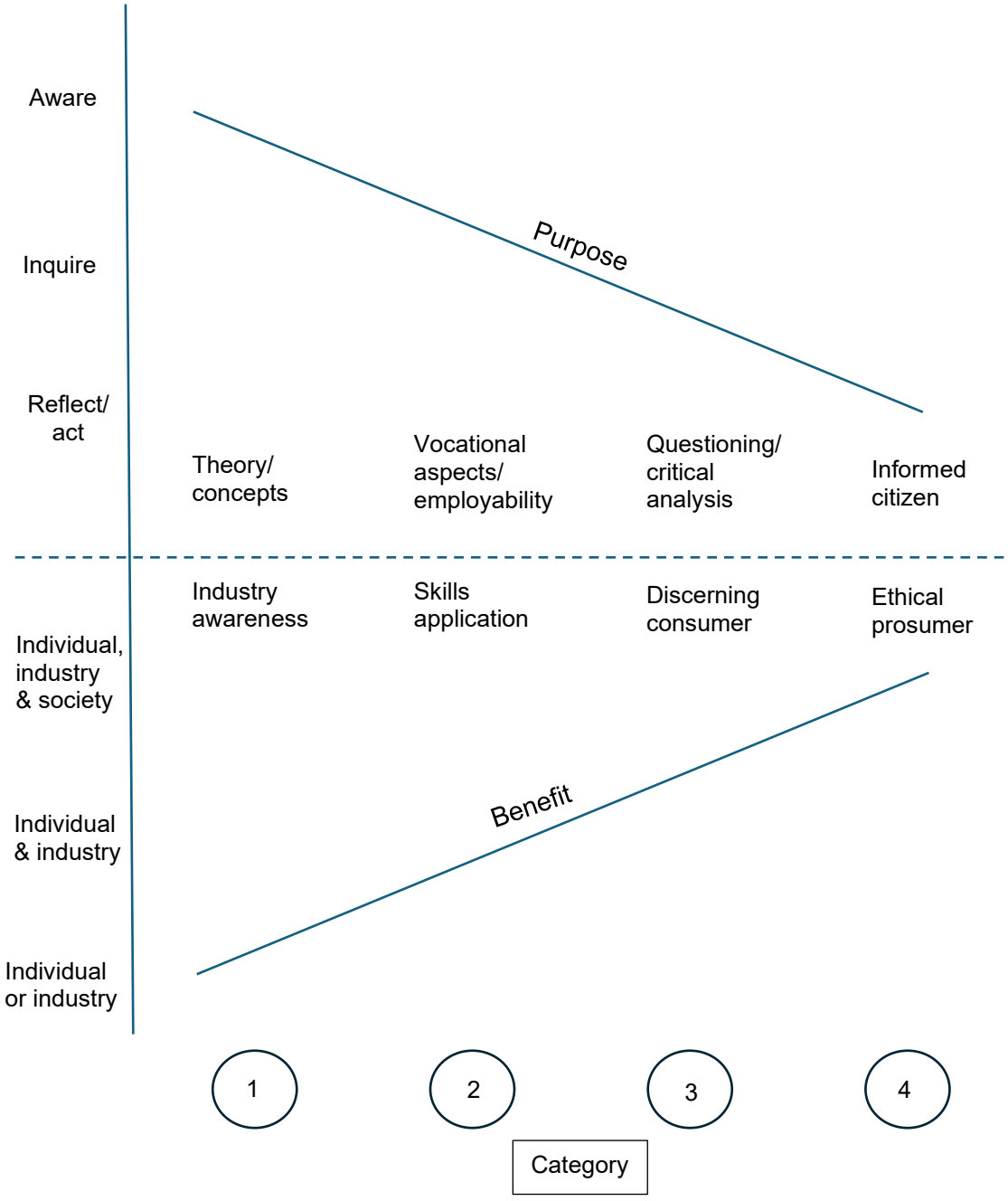


Figure 5.2: Expanding conceptualisations of ML across the categories

5.4 Section 2: Qualitative variation in accounts of teaching ML

Four qualitatively different ways of describing the teaching of ML were also generated during detailed phenomenographic analysis of the interview transcripts. The inclusively hierarchical categories of description, which I constituted, are presented in **Figure 5.3**. Within their accounts, lecturers referred to teaching activities, the expected outcomes of teaching ML, associated opportunities/challenges and their perceptions of their own role as media educators. The generated nested categories are followed by a graphical representation of the outcome space, presenting structural and referential relationships between lecturers' different descriptions of teaching ML. Thereafter, I further expand on the four categories of description and provide illustrative quotations from lecturers to elucidate each constituted category.

Category 1: Teaching ML as building media knowledge

- *Instilling theory and key media concepts*
- *Reviewing articles and news stories; reading texts and theories*
- *Teacher-led; students learn about how stories are presented in different media*
- *Students learn media theories/concepts*

Category 2: Teaching ML as cultivating critical skills

- *Cultivating confidence and comfort in questioning; able to critique without slating*
- *Teacher models textual analysis; students conduct their own textual analysis on given or self-selected texts*
- *Teacher leads discussion; students reflect and apply theory*

Category 3: Teaching ML as facilitating considered debate

- *Facilitating students to see other perspectives and broaden their views*
- *Objectively researching and being open to other perspectives*
- *Informed and constructive class debate and discussion*
- *Lecturer as guide/facilitator*

Category 4: Teaching ML as enabling transformation

- *Preparing students for citizenship, employment and the world*
- *Aware of media ethics, role and responsibilities; conscious of the unseen and able to derive own meaning;*
- *Can reflect on media's role in democracy/society; inequalities within texts; fake news etc.*
- *Able to analyse as well as create considered media texts/campaigns*
- *Lecturer co-learns with students and puts student at the top of the hierarchy*

Figure 5.3: Hierarchical relationships between categories of description of teaching ML

5.4.1 Outcome space: Referential and structural aspects of how lecturers conceptualise teaching ML

Table 5.2 illustrates the outcome space showing shifts in the referential and structural relationship between how the role of the lecturer was perceived and the envisaged outcome of teaching ML. From a referential perspective, the lecturer's role expands from transmitting knowledge, to assuming the role of motivator and/or facilitator, to shaping and bringing about transformation by preparing students for citizenship and the world. The structural aspect suggests a shift in the expected outcome of teaching ML as expressed by participants, with progression from the student receiving instruction/information and becoming more ML aware, to increased engagement with media texts and messaging, to assuming responsibility and ownership regarding the consumption, circulation or creation of media. The teaching of ML is presented as teacher-centric initially, moving latterly to student-led. As exemplified in the last category, the lecturer's role entails bringing about transformative thinking and action regarding not just media but its wider societal and democratic role. The outcome is that students are more reflective and responsible and, in essence, 'own' the media, media messaging and content they produce and/or absorb.

	Referential Aspect		
Structural Aspect	Transmitting knowledge	Motivating/ facilitating	Shaping/ transforming
Receiving	1		
Engaging	2	3	
Owning			4

Table 5.2: Outcome space: Referential and structural aspects of lecturers' experiences of teaching ML

5.4.2 Categories of description: Media lecturers' accounts of teaching ML

This subsection provides details regarding the constituted categories of description reflecting the varying ways in which lecturers accounted for the teaching of ML. They necessarily overlap in aspects with conceptions of ML.

5.4.2.1 Category 1

Teaching ML as building media knowledge

The first category describes ML teaching in awareness creation-terms. It is teacher-led, with students taught about key theories/texts and shown how stories are presented and/or represented in the media.

Educators' accounts consistent with this category characterised ML teaching as building students' media and communication knowledge by exposing them to previously unconsidered, or unknown, concepts and furnishing them with a solid theoretical foundation upon which greater media consciousness and critique can be developed:

> You have to sow the seeds… In teaching media literacy or in teaching [media], I like to expose students to topics and this is what I think works really well, is to expose [them] to stuff they have never encountered before. (Catriona, T10)

> I think when it comes to teaching media literacy, you have to get students to be aware of some of the key theories underpinning media whether that is semiotics, representation theory, cultural industries or whatever else. I think it's so, so important for students of media to have that wider context and background understanding. In other words, that they have the necessary building blocks to enable them to be better at consuming content or creating content. (Michael, T19)

Theory can be met with learner apathy or resistance, necessitating lecturer enthusiasm and providing class materials which are current and relatable, as exemplified in the following account:

> … It's about making it as alive as you can make it and media studies scholars are lucky because we have access to popular culture to make these theoretical ideas come alive but theory is theory… In an ideal world, the students would do what you would love them to do which is they will come to class with their readings done and their notes taken… And they've gotten the knowledge before they come to class or they're coming in with questions because they've engaged with the material… It's hard to encourage people to read theory. (Deirdre, T4)

Teaching ML, in accounts aligned with category 1, was described as involving the reinforcing of media concepts, the ongoing exposure of students to theory and the testing of such knowledge:

> As they're working through the year, I keep rephrasing and coming back to these points and drawing a kind of map of this conceptual landscape for them hoping that, for at least for some of them, the penny will drop. (Deirdre, T4)

In their accounts, lecturers pinpointed the importance of encouraging, even "forcing", students to study seminal texts. Reading was deemed particularly relevant in the early stages of degree programmes in scaffolding but also embedding longer-term media knowledge and learning:

> I force them to read really old readings like [George] Gerbner and cultivation theory and agenda setting with [Maxwell] McCombs and [Donald] Shaw. We look at a reading called *The Young Audience* by [Stuart] Hall and [Paddy] Whannel… And, so, I give them the old school readings... They don't necessarily enjoy the learning part of it because it's hard to read. It's a different type of reading. It's a different type of learning and they have to learn how to read that kind of writing… (Molly, T11)

> We… try to signal to the students that this module is one where you're going to have to set aside some extra time [and] there's readings you're going to have to do. All this stuff is quite a struggle to get them to do in first semester, first year, but the difference it has made is quite profound for us because once you get those key things in place in first year, it does greatly help with where they go in the years following and also what they're able to tackle in terms of some of the later theory areas or developmental practices. (Diarmaid, T15)

Challenges relate to clarifying and contextualising older theoretical frameworks in order to fit today's complex media environment, as reflected in the below account:

> It has become much more complicated and one of the difficulties we face is that a lot of the models and frameworks that have been tried and tested and that we've relied on for many years, even that I would have been taught when I was doing my undergraduate degree, were designed and conceived in a world that was pretty much talking about a mass media system where a handful of people made content. And they don't properly capture - it's not that they're obsolete and have no relevance at all - but they don't fully capture the media environment and that makes it more challenging because students didn't grow up in that mass media world… (Rosaleen, T18)

Whilst providing learners with a conceptual roadmap was one described aspect of teaching ML, lecturers' accounts also reinforced their role in introducing students to media's historical and sociological context. This was seen as critical due to a perceived lack of ML instruction and contextualisation within the Irish educational system prior to students arrival at third level, as exemplified below:

> Part of what [named] course is doing is introducing students to some fundamental ideas around why it is we study media in the first place, and where media studies fits in with sociology more generally, but also to give them some of the first level of what we hope are the fundamental building blocks of being a bit more critical about media forms themselves and the communication within them. So, trying to

> develop a level of media literacy, essentially from zero… It is highly apparent that there is nothing in secondary school that addresses this for them. (Diarmaid, T15)

Lecturers' accounts corresponding with category 1 furthermore emphasised developing consciousness of different types of content and platforms, something which was described as increasingly significant due to the ubiquity of social media and learners' unfamiliarity with traditional or local/regional media. Teaching ML was thus described as familiarising students with relevant theories and concepts and making them review print and broadcast press coverage:

> I force them to look at network news, say the six o'clock news on TV, Channel Four or whatever. And then I ask them to follow up that story the following day by looking at newspapers and to see how newspapers cover the story… Increasingly, I feel that I have to spend more time at the beginning of the year talking to the students about traditional media because younger people don't consume media in the same way they may have done a half a generation ago. They may not read newspapers, they may not listen to network news on radio, TV or whatever. So often, I would ask students to try and find stories and to see how a particular story that might be current in the news at that particular time, how it might be reported… Often, and I increasingly have done this over the last couple of years, I try and focus on local media. (Bill, T12).

Lecturers' accounts noted how teaching ML also involves alerting learners to the constructiveness of media messages and explaining how content is presented across platforms, thereby awakening their consciousness of the wider media landscape and context:

> I think even introducing students to how stories are created in the media, you know, it kind of blows their minds... For example, my media studies students, when I'm talking about representation and I'm like, 'you know, it's representation, it's not reality, it's trying to represent something that's happened', I can see their faces trying to comprehend [that] and then [going] 'oh, yeah, so something can happen but it can be represented in lots of different ways [and] the story can be

> told in lots of different ways, depending on the platform and the newspaper, and so on'. (Deirdre, T4)
>
> When it comes to teaching, I think you initially have to make students aware that there is more to media than what they think. It's not all about lights, camera, action. It's getting them to read different media, read different theories, seeing first-hand and explaining to them how stories are presented. It's introducing them to theories including Hall's representation theory. You have to get the ball rolling, you have to spark that awareness and build that knowledge especially for students who endlessly consume media but don't really understand or ever consider the bigger picture, the wider context or historical background of media. (Michael, T19)

In summary, teaching ML in category 1 accounts was conceived as teacher-led and providing students with a better media understanding by building their knowledge of key theories, introducing them to historical and cultural context and opening learners' minds to various media, including traditional platforms. It is noteworthy that, under this category, educators described themselves as guiding, even compelling, students to read seminal texts and traditional and local/regional press coverage in order to build better media knowledge (Molly, T11; Bill, T12). By becoming contextually and conceptually aware and viewing different texts/types, it was hoped to increase students' overall media knowledge and also create alertness about the constructiveness of certain media messaging, thereby setting in place foundational aspects on which more informed analysis, creation and consumption can be built.

5.4.2.2 Category 2

Teaching ML as cultivating critical skills

In category 2, the lecturer's role involves leading discussion and enabling students to confidently reflect upon, discuss and apply media theories. The lecturer was described as modelling textual analysis, with students interrogating provided or self-selected media texts.

In contrast to the previous category, teaching ML was seen as asking probing questions and cultivating students' autonomous analytical abilities by modelling textual analysis and supporting them to critically engage with media, make theoretical connections and consider aspects such as context or representation. Teaching ML was thus conceived as moving beyond theoretical familiarisation and reading (mostly) prescribed texts, as apparent in the first category, to igniting and enhancing learners' CT abilities.

The application and consideration of concepts including the public sphere, media industries, representation, surveillance, infrastructures, perception and privilege were emphasised in category 2-aligned accounts. Prominence was given to awakening students' critical consciousness, sparking discussion and getting them to look beyond surface-level messaging or meaning to consider sub-texts. The significance of questioning and providing a proper set-up, including introducing and revisiting theory and using topical media content or themes, was reinforced within educators' teaching accounts as reflected below:

> I give a lecture first on introducing the theory of the public sphere and then in the second half of the class, I have a list of conditions for successful public spheres - the things that need to be in place, freedom of expression as one [consideration], a free media as another. Then I ask them as a class to apply those conditions… If you were to take the internet or social media, are these conditions maintained in an online environment? (Maureen, T1)

> I might give them an image, an advertising image and say to them, using Stuart Hall's theory of representation, theory of encoding and decoding and reception theory, discuss the content and thematic elements of this image and possible interpretations by audiences, bringing together, obviously, the text, the image and the theory, and you're using that language of analysis and discussion. (Deirdre, T4)

> Over the last couple of years, I have done some things on representation and about people that are left out in terms of being a part of media. [There are] particular themes that I've been covering and number one is Travellers and number two is people with Down syndrome in terms of how they are viewed in society… I find they [the students] really sit up at this because they've never thought about the types of people that are on and in the media. They've never seen the lacks in terms of who gets represented and who doesn't. (Catriona, T10)

Enabling students to think more actively and constructively about media content and messaging was considered necessary in countering rote learning and the prima facie absorption of information. This was regarded as academically important, but also significant in developing students' analytical and research capabilities:

> …We don't want to be fellow travellers of just celebrating media, we want critical media literacy because that makes it more interesting. And it will make them [students] more challenged as well… It's not about Harvard referencing and cutting and pasting reviews from others. It's about your analysis… What does it mean to you? Drawing their interpretation and that builds their analysis skills and their ability to read a text and gain pleasure from that; that it's not just a chore, it becomes part of their learning… It's not telling them [that] this is the preferred reading, you know… What you want them to do is not just sit back and take notes. That's not the game. It's trying to get them to interrogate what the hell are you saying and to punch holes in it and not see me as the sage on the stage [but rather] being able to engage and try and find different ways that suit them and engaging with them in a different way. (Daithi, T16)

Whereas lecturers in category 1 characterised teaching ML as “sowing the seeds” of media awareness (Aoife, T3), accounts linked to category 2 used similar language but in relation to honing students’ critical abilities and opening their minds to questioning the authenticity and accuracy of media messages including online and social media information:

> What I'm really hoping for is that you plant a seed in terms of them being a little bit more critical about that field [media/social media] and understanding how that field operates. (Treasa, T13)

> I use Stephen Brookfield for critical thinking. He's really interesting and his key message is ‘interrogate all assumptions’. So, what I'm looking at, is that real? Is there a possibility of 150 things behind it? Of course, there is, and the students get their minds opened by that. (Maebh, T2)

Resistance to reading was mentioned in accounts aligned with the previous category. Difficulties can also emerge in teaching students to engage more analytically with texts, as apparent in category 2 accounts:

> They can learn the theory because that's what they are used to doing but then when it comes to applying [it], it's a different matter… Remember, they've come out of school where they've been rote learning, you know, for all their subjects. So, in a sense, their critical skills aren't well developed. (Catriona, T10)

> I think initially, when you're asking them to critique, they say, ‘okay, right – criticise’ and this is wrong… sometimes they're just maybe a little bit unsure. And I definitely think that the whole critical thinking, critical analysis aspect, all of that needs to be focused on in the class. You can't just expect that they're going to pick it up overnight. (Patricia, T6)

Educators’ accounts, under this category, noted the importance of modelling textual analysis and repeatedly asking questions in order to scaffold students’ learning and enhance their CT abilities:

> And I walk around the room, mimicking the camera and they realise... that's stalking... the camera is also a character. So, they were delighted. I could see they were impressed at what they had uncovered – 'wow, you know, there's so much more to looking at a film than just looking at the story'… And a question that arose from that – 'well, what's the point in that?', which is a good question. 'Why would a director do that?'. I try to explain that directors of film are like really good literary authors as well. They're not just presenting a story - all directors are different and they have a signature style. And it does take, in some cases, years of being engaged in film and viewing film to start to understand the kinds of techniques of different directors. It's not something that you're going to learn in just viewing a few films on a media course. (Aoife, T3)

> So, I was talking about post-feminism and post-feminist media culture… and I said… 'we're going to do a bit of analysis and we're going to look at a video from Beyonce'. The response was 'no, no, not Beyonce… I love Beyonce'... This is what you're trying to get them to understand. We're talking about Beyonce the text, the narrative, the representation, the context… and I want them to watch the song, which is probably 10 years old - *Run the World (Girls)*… And I want them to look at the video… the lyrics and the way the video has been styled overall… and take all those elements apart. And of course, that requires them to turn on critical skills that they wouldn't necessarily want to deploy on media they enjoy. But I think a lot of the time… we are often drawn to media, partly because we enjoy [it] but also because we sense that there's something more there. That's what you're trying to get students to say and to be… [able to understand that] this stuff is so powerful, not simply because we like it or all of that, but because of the layers of complexity. (Deirdre, T4)

In contrast with category 1, where educators assigned material, category 2 accounts described the importance of not just looking at prescribed texts but building students' confidence and comfort in analysing content of their choosing:

> I get them to bring in examples from real life and we talk about whether or not the article is still relevant and we talk about how things have changed. And then I ask them to suggest ideas on what's called a Padlet board [online collaborative tool],

> whereby I start a topic on a Padlet board and ask the students to post a relevant video there and we'll watch a video or listen to something each week. So, they're bringing in research. (Molly, T11)

> I use canonical texts that would have a lot written about them so that they learn the skill by looking at what other people have done but then I encourage them to obviously use their own text. (Daithi, T16)

In their descriptions, educators placed importance on creating a "Socratic" environment where students can openly and safely offer opinions. The lecturer's role also extended to finding topics which facilitate discussion and theoretical application:

> … You have to create enough of a sense of – 'oh, I do know that piece of theory that you talked about last week and that could apply to this other thing'. They have to feel comfortable enough to venture a guess and have a safe enough space to say stuff in front of one another and not feel stupid. That can be hard to create with larger class sizes... but I think that's what we have to do. I think you have to try and strive for a conversational version rather than a top-down, lectured version where you are just told to be critical because that's not going to work. You know, I'm a great believer in the Socratic method of just endlessly asking people questions until eventually you get them to start connecting things rather than just telling them stuff and hoping it's going in. (Daithi, T16)

Familiarising students with message constructiveness was reflected in category 1. This is extended in category 2 accounts, with educators emphasising encouraging learners to critically reflect on media representation, assumptions, affordances and ideologies, as illustrated below:

> I'm not training them how to generate media content… For me, the main thing is that they become literate in terms of the media they consume and a lot of that is ideological analysis. Looking at how certain ways of life are embedded in the text and how, maybe, they should be more interrogative of some of the unstated assumptions that underline something like the rom-com, for example, as well as

> the aspects of gender or class. Often inequalities that are extant in society are embedded in our media texts and it's just about making them more aware of that. (Charlie, T17)

Teaching ML, as exemplified in category 2 aligned accounts, was thus seen as fostering learners' CT capabilities by modelling textual analysis, asking incisive questions and establishing an atmosphere in which students can attempt to apply theory, analyse assumptions, pinpoint potential sub-texts and critique rather than criticise content.

5.4.2.3 Category 3

Teaching ML as facilitating considered debate

In category 3 accounts, ML teaching involves facilitating students to engage in considered debate by taking alternative views into consideration and learning to objectively research, discuss and debate topics. The lecturer is conceived as a guide or facilitator.

Lecturers' accounts described teaching ML as facilitating students to openly consider other opinions. Discussing media and media-related topics was deemed necessary in enhancing ML skills and countering binary thinking. The lecturer's role was conceived as positively and proactively facilitating students to objectively discuss media content while reinforcing the importance of research and evidence. Brainstorming, peer discussion, groupwork and inclusive class debate were identified as key aspects of teaching ML.

The qualitative difference between categories 2 and 3 concerned the teaching focus and outcome. While category 2 accounts centred on developing students' CT capabilities, with the lecturer modelling textual analysis and building learners' confidence in critiquing media/messages, this category frames the lecturer's role as guiding reflective, evidence-based discussion and debate. Critical discussion, in category 3 aligned accounts, required moving the students more centre-stage:

> I'm there to facilitate. I don't have to be amazing on TikTok. I don't have to have two million followers. I don't need to be hugely active [on social media] … but I have to facilitate students in learning… And you need to know a lot about how students are motivated and how to behave in order to engage them. And I think that's the best way to engage them, take the pressure off yourself as not the key actor in this and just being more open to the students taking control. And we do have a student, for example, who's very big on [social media] - you know, mine that resource in your class, don't be afraid of it and don't be intimidated by it… And I'm just guiding and being there to hold that [learning activity] together. And they [students] learn loads that way. (Maebh, T2)

> …I remember [identified person] saying 'you don't teach that much, do you, the students seem to do all the work?'. I said 'absolutely'. That's essentially it. They're the ones doing it. I'm guiding them... and I do think that that's going to be very powerful with the media literacy component within higher education. It really embodies everything that media literacy is all about - that they [the students] have to think about this [selected topic] and they have to look and see what is truth or what is fake news? (Sheila, T5)

> I think the challenge really is in that negotiation of a space for discussion for students that is inclusive enough for the majority or ideally all students to participate in the discussion and doesn't devolve into something where it's one-way broadcast from a lecturer and someone who's just taking some notes and hoping for the best. I really think you need more than that. To be critical and to be engaged, it needs to be two-way; it needs to be discursive and it needs to have some sharing of ideas and discussion of examples. (Diarmaid, T15)

Educators' accounts emphasised groupwork and peer discussion as vital in getting students to reflect on varying perspectives. The lecturer was perceived as encouraging opinions, student participation and informed conversation. Scaffolding students' learning was required, albeit of a different kind:

> Doing group work in class, I think that always helps… where they discuss it [particular topic/content] in their groups and see and hear various perspectives

> and realise that there's no one way of doing it. There are more perspectives and they need to be taken into consideration. (Patricia, T6)
>
> We do narratives in news and how certain publications will take a stand on things, even just in the language that they use. Also, how some stories are inherently racist and subconsciously biased and those kinds of topics. So, we talk about these things an awful lot and it's an ongoing conversation. (Molly, T11)
>
> I give different kind of moments in media history to students to fight about and the idea is they have to argue internally in the group to reach some consensus for where it might go. Then they have to present it back to the class and it sort of shows that there is no particular right answer to this. That the only way to get to it is by arguing and thinking about what works and doesn't work in terms of explanation. And that was the change that I made and a big change that has really made those essays at the end of the semester much better because it's a live group-based demonstration of the idea of dialectic knowledge; that you work towards some final, best version of an argument you make at the time based on what's available to you by going back and forth and comparing things and changing them and fighting with one another. And so those sorts of things, I think, are really valuable in the classroom… There's a whole kind of scaffolding… to build up that process. We try and do this both within the [particular] module but also over the degree as a whole… (Diarmaid, T15)

Rather than “pontificating” at students (Daithi, T16), lecturers signalled the importance of open dialogue and challenging learners to think independently, critically and objectively, along with pushing themselves to examine what/who they believe. Lecturers’ accounts linked to category 3 also acknowledged the “burden” of fact-checking (Rosaleen, T18) and the realities and limitations of ML:

> … We start the first two weeks on what culture actually is and mostly we settle that it's impossible to define and that then helps us in brainstorming… And we talk about material and non-material culture… We talk about how much we are influenced by any one of those things and then we bring that into the study of other concepts. At the moment, we're looking at hacking as a cultural

> phenomenon. We look at things like Anonymous [hacktivist movement/group] and Steubenville [the Steubenville High School rape case] and how Anonymous revealed that… And we looked at Anonymous in relation to the Arab Spring as well in Syria - and the fragmenting of that. We look at the internet and our interactions with it as citizens of various cultures and then certain denizens of the net. Then I get them to discuss all those ideas and mostly it's just discursive… (Imelda, T8)

> It's not about me telling students how important media is for them, for life and for society. It's about us, as a class, learning together, discussing, debating, analysing, discovering. (Michael, T19)

In the two previous categories, lecturers predominantly assigned texts and led learners in critically analysing media content and concepts. In category 3 accounts, lecturers described ML teaching as "unsettling" preconceived notions and "pushing" students to be more considered (Charlie, T17). Countering cynicism of all media, sources and messaging was also prioritised:

> What I want them to take away first of all is educated conversation. 'The media says' or 'the media thinks' isn't good enough for my class. Which media? Where did you read it? How reliable is it? Who wrote it? You know, if you're going to tell me 'the media says', give me an example of how the media says it. You know, I have no problem in having whatever conversation you want but let's base it in fact and find me evidence of your point. Give me the evidence. Send me the podcast, send me the documentary, you know, and we'll talk about it… I do push them to do things a bit differently and I push them in ways that they're not used to being pushed and sometimes they push back. But, you know, I want them to leave and if somebody says in a pub or whatever about 'the media', I want them to automatically think 'which media?'. (Molly, T11)

> In the context of news, it would often be 'here's a piece about climate change' or 'here's a piece about migration' and what stands out to you as credible or not credible here? One of the potential things about doing that is, which is a concern that has been expressed about media literacy, is that it might encourage people

> to be cynical about everything… We can have the conversation then about, you know, simply just doubting things isn't a good response in itself. (Rosaleen, T18)

Learner resistance to CT was evident in category 2 accounts. Educators, in accounts aligned with category 3, referenced other challenges including contentious topics, debating issues and the dismissal of all media content or platforms:

> I think that's what we're trying to strive for [criticality and the sharing of ideas]. But of course, that is limited by the level of comfort the students have with their own participation in that sort of class discussion and the level of patience and time that the lecturer or the facilitator can give to that occurring in the first place. (Diarmaid, T15)

> The capacity for misunderstanding the point, I think, is quite, quite high and that's when something like media literacy can have those negative results or contrary outcomes because we end up doubting everything or we just have a very simplistic [view] of 'oh, someone's trying to fool me', which is not what we're aiming at. (Rosaleen, T18)

Binary thinking and an unwillingness to listen to alternative viewpoints were identified as posing further challenges. Managing class discussion has become more complex, as illustrated in the below accounts:

> Getting the discussion going isn't the problem. It's getting them to come out of their bunker and see the other side, you know… I think that has come about an awful lot more since COVID in particular. And what I talk an awful lot about in media culture is binaries and opposites and we take it from semiotics all the way through to cancel culture and narratives. We talk about how the human brain works and how the media and, you know, the American political system likes to break things into opposites - good guys, bad guys, black and white, you know, men and women, and pit them against each other because it makes it an easier story to tell. And that's one thing that I just repeatedly keep coming back to in everything that we do – this idea that ‘if you're not with me, you're against me’,

and ‘what do I have to be to be on this side?’ and ‘how do I shape my personality?’. ‘How do I shape my social media?’. ‘How do I shape how I dress?’. You know, everything kind of centres around that and whether or not that's healthy… And it's been incredibly, just so much more difficult to actually teach it - so much more difficult to teach it and so much more difficult to get them to listen. (Molly, T11)

We're in a cultural moment where, I don't know how to phrase this, it feels like both students and teachers are walking on eggshells around certain topics… Even in the space of a few years, something can go from being a celebrated sitcom to something that's, you know, got a big X mark through it. (Charlie, T17)

A separate type of challenge would be because a lot of the content media can be maybe about things like sexism or racism. You have to be very careful about having those types of conversations in the class, particularly with undergraduates, especially, where our undergraduate population is much more diverse. A very obvious example would be something like Travellers where unbelievably, many students would have no problem saying, 'there's no such thing as racism towards Travellers' or 'you can't be racist towards Travellers' and then use horrifically racist language. So, there are those kinds of controversial issues, maybe like trans rights, that are very much a focus of the media and they're the ideal topics to focus on in terms of who might be putting out a perspective [or] why might the media be presenting this in a particular way but you just have to be very, very careful about how you manage conversations around those types of issues in a class, which is separate to media literacy. So, I think you're always being pulled away, almost, from the thing you want to focus on… If anything, I tend to avoid those discussions or keep discussions to a policy… you know, who should have responsibility to decide what's permissible online and should that be corporations? Should that be governments? Should societies be getting together? Keeping it at that level, but I would never now put up a piece of content and go, you know, how would we decide what this is because you cannot have students debating whether there's such a thing as racism. (Rosaleen, T18)

In the third descriptive category, educators' accounts emphasised autonomous research/reading and evidence-based discussion, thereby extending beyond the provision of assigned texts (category 1) and more basic CT skills (category 2). Category 3 accounts additionally reinforced the importance of encouragement and fostering trust in the lecturer's overseeing role:

> … Students often double-down on one particular viewpoint to the extreme without ever considering that there might be an alternative, equally valid or maybe more valid viewpoint… I often say, 'look, can you come back out of that rabbit hole and maybe look elsewhere and try and broaden your perspective on it to see other points of view?'. And I would often encourage them to see those other points of view by reading a bit wider on that topic. (Bill, T12)

> I can't change personalities but I can force them to listen to each other. And I can ask them to debate the other side of the argument and sit down and research it on their own, you know. And say, even like, with cancel culture or the mask wearing thing particularly with COVID, there were a couple of students who were very anti-vax [anti COVID-19 vaccination] in my class and they only came out and told me that towards the end of February [2022] when everything was relaxed and everyone could relax. And I think that people only talk and only listen when they're relaxed, you know, and when they can trust you and they can trust me as a lecturer not to let things go too far and not to turn around and say 'I agree with whoever' and that I am not afraid to turn around and say: 'You know what lads, we're going to leave that there today. Let's have a think about that and if anyone wants to say anything else, let's come back to it next week again. But for right now, I don't think it's or we're going in a very healthy direction here'. (Molly, T11)

Rather than leading textual analysis and media discussion as apparent in the preceding category, category 3 accounts portrayed the lecturer as facilitating the expression of opinion and encouraging learners to listen to other perspectives, read more widely, acquire evidence and ascertain the facts. Considered media debate, fact-checking and objective research were prioritised due to the increasing presence and prevalence of polarisation.

5.4.2.4 Category 4

Teaching ML as enabling transformation

The final category involves empowering students for active, reflective and ethical societal participation, with lecturers' accounts emphasising conscious and responsible media consumption and creation.

Category 4 teaching accounts underscored the importance of learners possessing greater depths of awareness regarding the media's wider role and function. Students were described as being changed and more engaged by their studies. In contrast to category 3, which emphasised contributing to informed debate and considering others' opinions, accounts aligned with the final category envisaged students taking a leading role. ML teaching was thus presented as enabling transformation by equipping students with the tools to independently navigate the media landscape, unpack their own meanings and actualise individual (and societal) change:

> It's like all of those problems from disinformation through to, you know, sexual objectification or whatever it is, they all need people to have the tools to be able to understand that they are absorbing messages or that they're coming into contact with meaning and messages. And that [awareness] gives them a buffer or barrier to simply accepting some of the information that they're coming into contact with. I don't think it should all be on the individual to manage that but that doesn't mean that you wouldn't, at the same time, give somebody the skills and tools to be able to negotiate the media environment for themselves. (Maureen, T1)

> I think teaching ML is all about the greater good - the greater good of the student, the greater good in terms of their employability as media graduates, but also the greater good in terms of understanding the role and implications of media and their own role and responsibilities as media consumers, users and producers contributing to and, hopefully, impacting positively on the wider world, workplaces and the societies they are part of. (Michael, T19)

Lecturers' descriptions highlighted how a fuller appreciation of the media's role often occurs in the latter stages of students' university studies. ML teaching was thus characterised as enabling students to apply the manifold understandings, skills and insights acquired during their media studies in reflecting upon media's impact/implications. Teaching ML was also about students becoming "evangelists" who are capable of, and hopefully willing to, reinforce the importance of media and the evaluation of media to others:

> It was very interesting, actually, a student came to me last week with an article that they found that was highly critical of how *BBC News* and British news in particular were covering the Ukraine [war] and what's happening in Ukraine compared to the amount of coverage that they had given to what is happening in Yemen. The article was incredibly critical... And, you know, I was kind of delighted that the student did that. I didn't necessarily agree a whole pile with the article but, nevertheless, it showed that the student was looking at media and saying: 'well actually, maybe, there's another way to look at this'. (Bill, T12)

> I think the students engage better with that idea at the end of their degree rather than the beginning of their degree and using all the key works by [James W.] Potter, [Renee] Hobbs, [Robert] Chesney and all these key thinkers… So, [it is about] them being media literate and it's them evangelising about media literacy towards the end of their course… You are soldiers, you've got to go out and do it now. And, never run your discipline down, sing it up and pass on your scholarly [knowledge]. (Maebh, T2)

Preparedness for employment and citizenship, as reflected in category 4 accounts, necessitates students understanding the complexities and effects of media, particularly the increasing power of digital platforms. Accounts reinforced contemplating issues like media ownership, algorithmic censorship, information distribution and data collection. In essence, teaching ML was described as learners valuing trustful and truthful media sources along with understanding the ethical issues underpinning, and potentially, undermining democracy:

> Some people might see a story that they're not entirely sure of or they might repost something without thinking, you know, so to understand the repercussions of what they're doing and what they're reading and the algorithms that are shaping their reality and their perception but, also, how that affects everything in their lives. (Molly, T11)

> Understanding the infrastructure, that's the first piece. Then the next piece is to understand how you interact with it as a person, so, how does my behaviour impact on that infrastructure? The choice of technologies that I use, then the choice of sharing [information] within those technologies… We don't self-reflect but the algorithms will reflect on us and our behaviours so that's important. (John, T7)

> It's a desired goal to create an informed citizenship within society because they [students] are bombarded with media texts at all times and there's various amounts of information and disinformation coming at them. So, in order to be able to navigate that, I think it's crucial. (Charlie, T17)

Rather than cultivating CT, as reinforced in category 2, and encouraging informed discussion (category 3), teaching ML in the final category is characterised as learners deriving their own meaning and reflecting on media, media messaging or sources which help or hinder society:

> It's so important that they're aware of what's being done and how media is functioning. Obviously, as media scholars, we would say that, wouldn't we? But I think it is very important. We all see media as the glue of society. It's the way of mobilising people together. So, we do want public service media. We want media that's consumable but an online media that respects rights and, you know, all the sort of stuff that the liberal agenda wants… but, we can be caught on the postmodernist agenda that we are just laissez-faire and we don't want that either. We have values and all that. So, what are the core ethical values of equality? All the sort of the agendas that are quite normative in a democratic society is what media literacy is trying to espouse. (Daithi, T16)

> Imagine a footballer who had all the brilliant skills - do you think Ronaldo knows about football, of course, he knows about football. He knows everything about it. He knows all about the culture as well as the technical stuff… It's absolutely bananas to me that someone can create stuff and not know about the culture they are creating it in. (Imelda, T8)

In pedagogical terms, category 4 accounts pinpointed the importance of co-learning, co-creating with students and, ultimately, putting the learner, rather than lecturer, centre-stage. This differs qualitatively from the previous category wherein the lecturer's role was conceived as being open to increased student control whilst encouraging, facilitating and, where required, managing and moderating debate. The following category 4 aligned quotations provide an illustration of this shift in pedagogical approach:

> …That's very good teaching and learning practice, not to put yourself at the top of the hierarchy but [to] put the student at the top of the hierarchy. (Maebh, T2)

> We don't have to have the answers and that's [the] part where, you know, we need to keep coming come back to co-creating. We don't necessarily have to be the solution or have the solutions. (Daithi, T16)

Teaching ML, as reflected in category 4 accounts, interlinks with what participants perceived as HE's purpose by preparing students for citizenship through creating informed and responsible media prosumers who understand the implications of content:

> I think if we look at the mission of higher education, higher education is about, obviously, training people for the workforce but it's also about producing citizens and citizens have, you know, a fundamental role [in] and a responsibility to the civic life and the political life of their nation. (Deirdre, T4)

> …It goes to the very heart of higher education in a really profound way, you know, because a basic way of describing education is to acquire knowledge to progress in life. The acquisition of knowledge in the digital media world is a problem and

> an opportunity as well… So, in the past, in say economics 30 years ago, you would teach the principles of economics and all that kind of stuff. We weren't all on our phone like we are now. Maybe we need to move from teaching content to teaching how to use content or how to access and use content. (John, T7)

> It's something we're very proud of in the course - that they [the students] go out and make things but I just feel very strongly that if you're going to go out into the world as a media producer, you should understand what you're producing and the power that that has. (Molly, T11)

Just as teaching challenges were evident in previous categories, the same is true of category 4. These ranged from ML being perceived, potentially simplistically, as inoculating against all societal and democratic ills to the professional isolation of lecturers and the necessity for ML communities of practice:

> Policymakers think if we just teach media literacy, it'll be great. There'd be less susceptibility to disinformation. It's very solutions [based] and kind of simplistic, which is great in a way because it brings more attention to media literacy and there's more funding available. But I wonder whether everyone's going to end up quite disappointed at the end because media literacy isn't going to do these things that they expect that it will… You could easily spend most of the lectures not actually talking about media at all, just so they [students] understand why the media aspect is important. And that's a massive challenge and that's to do, I think, with school. That is also why I'm a bit concerned about this idea of media literacy as just a solution to things because it isn't. It's generally a smaller aspect of the bigger things we're worried about, which are democracy and society and equality and so on. (Rosaleen, T18)

> I'm frustrated, to be honest, that a great deal of where we have gotten in [named HEI] in recent years has been largely down to serendipity. It's just we're trying things and some things are working. We happen to meet someone at a conference and they happen to give us something and there's very little formal building of that knowledge. There's very little institutional recording of that knowledge, you know, a lot of it is very hit and miss… And I think we are lagging

> behind some of our fellow EU countries in that… Communities of practice are not there for us to share what is and isn't working for us [and] to maybe support one another as educators in this kind of space, or to, you know, share ideas and share resources in this space. And so that's something that I'd love to see built up more and I think there's absolutely a space for that in Ireland. Some of that we can learn from the UK [and] Scandinavian countries who're doing quite a good job on this. (Charlie, T17)

Accounts aligned with the final category portrayed ML teaching as preparing students not just for the workforce but also for citizenship. Lecturers described placing the student, rather than the lecturer, at the forefront and engaging in co-learning and co-creation. ML teaching was conceived as heightening awareness of ethical issues and the power of online platforms, as well as the roles and responsibilities of media organisations and of those who consume, circulate or produce content. It was also characterised as enabling students to become "effective change-agents", as outlined by Masterman (1985, p. 11), by promoting the importance of media and ML amongst others. Rather than being presented as *the* solution, teaching ML was seen as an aspect in addressing concerns about democracy and society, with perhaps less simplistic expectations needed, along with more collaboration and communities of practice among media educators.

5.5 Teaching ML and shifting relations

Analysis of ML teaching accounts indicated a shift not only in participants' perceptions of their own role but the lecturer-student relationship and expected T&L outcomes. In **Figure 5.4**, I have sought to represent the "increasing breadths of awareness" (Åkerlind, 2008, p. 635) suggested in the ML descriptions within the sample of media educators included in this study. In the initial category, teaching ML is presented as lecturer-led and concerned with familiarising students with general media concepts and theories. The teacher–student relationship is depicted differently in subsequent categories, ranging from the lecturer modelling textual analysis and posing probing questions to cultivate

students' CT skills, to facilitating and guiding class debate, to enabling transformation in the final category by preparing students for work, citizenship and societal contribution. Whereas the T&L environment in category 1 is teacher-led, there is an expansion from leading, modelling and facilitating learning to empowering students to own their MLE experience. Rather than a more didactic model of teaching ML, the lecturer-student relationship is suggested as evolving to co-creation, with the student placed at the top of the hierarchy. Just as qualitative differences appear in how the role of the lecturer was described by those interviewed, and in the awareness, analytical and informed conversation skills of students, there is also hierarchical inclusivity in the learning outcomes of teaching ML as expressed by participants. The outcomes of teaching ML in the first constituted category are theoretical acquisition and greater media awareness while, in category 2 accounts, the desired effect is enhancing students' confidence and comfort in critiquing and analysing media/media sources or messaging. The ability to see other perspectives, conduct independent research and engage in considered debate is the next outcome, culminating in transmutation in category 4 with students presented as being changed by their studies. They, thus, understand the role and responsibilities attached to media creation, circulation and consumption, are capable and able to undertake considered prosumption and are willing to promote or "evangelise" ML (Maebh, T2) and reflect on the role of objective media in upholding democratic principles.

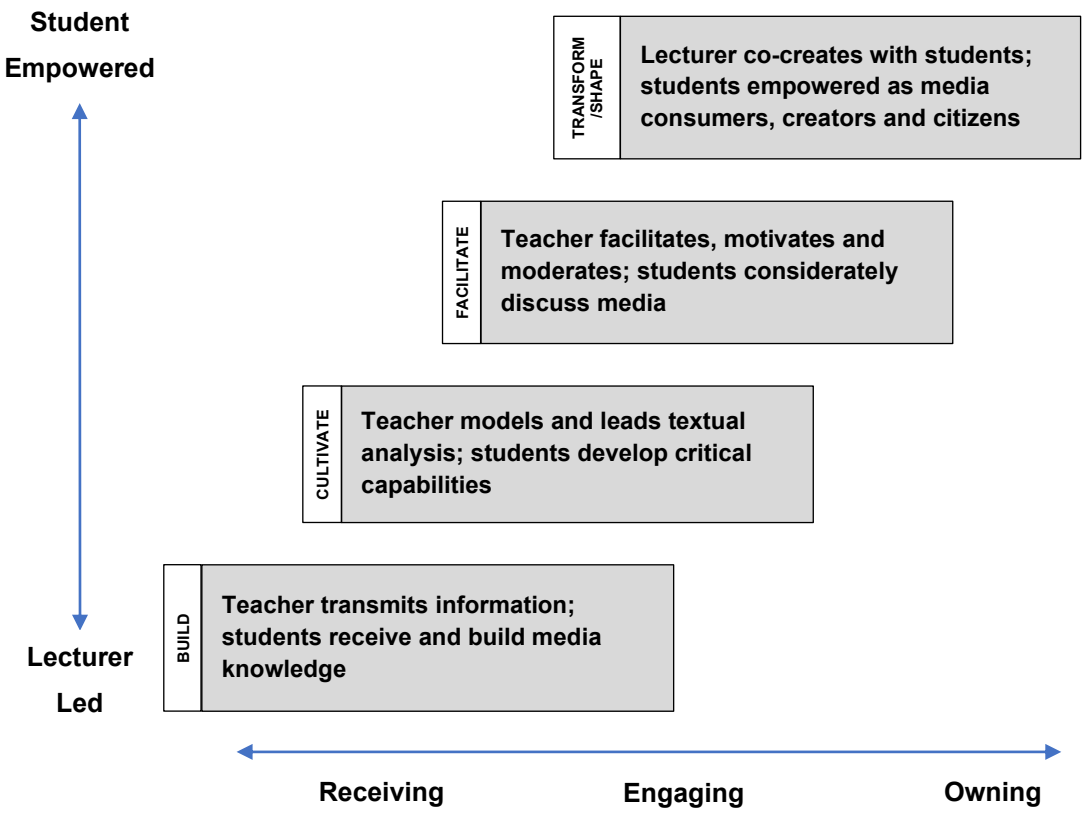


Figure 5.4: Model showing expanding and inclusively hierarchical conceptions of teaching ML as evident from lecturers' accounts

Just as shifts appeared to occur in the outcomes and role of the lecturer, there were changes in conceived teaching methods and activities. In category 1 accounts, the lecturer was characterised as presenting theories and media content for the students to read and review. Transmitting knowledge and the provision of foundational texts and media content for student familiarisation and consideration were prioritised. In category 2 accounts, the lecturer still provides texts for analysis but also helps and encourages students to apply theory, undertake textual analysis and employ CT in analysing texts, case studies or media of their choosing which they present to the teacher and/or other students. Under the third category, ML teaching is characterised as involving class debate and group work. Media-related topics are objectively discussed, with the students required to present independent research and engage in fact-checking in support of their viewpoints. In the final category, students are depicted as reflecting on

campaigns/content generated by themselves and others, as well as the professional, ethical and civic responsibilities required of media consumers, distributors and creators.

In **Figure 5.5**, I have attempted to create a more detailed graphical representation of the relations between the categories and the evolving relationship between the lecturer, student, other students, media content and the wider world as indicated from analysis of the collective transcript data. For example, in **Figure 5.5 (a),** the teacher is shown as presenting and transmitting content to the student, with the student learning about media theories and concepts and reading assigned texts or content. The most encompassing and transformative conception of teaching ML is represented in **Figure 5.5 (d).** There is two-way engagement, with the student envisaged as being empowered by their studies to co-create and consciously interact with the lecturer, their peers, media content and, crucially, society.

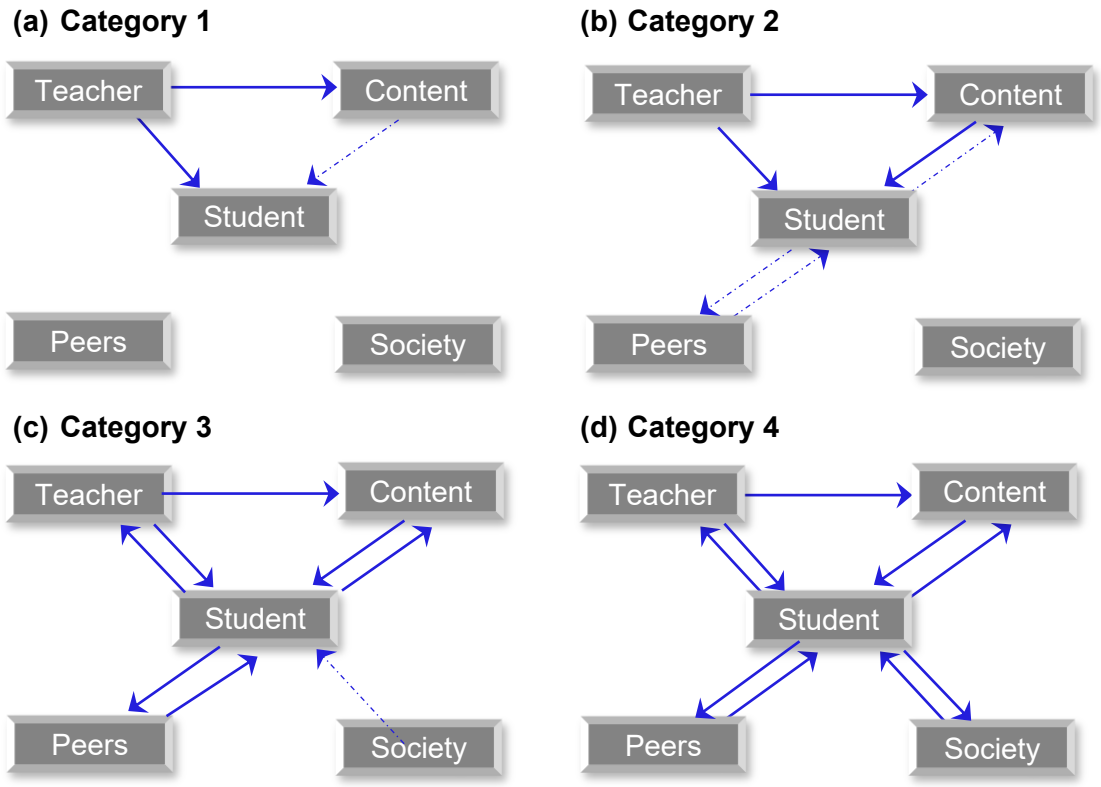


Figure 5.5: Variation in teaching ML conceptions and how relationships evolve from categories 1 to 4

As well as variation in conceptions of teaching ML across the four categories, it is also interesting to note the T&L challenges and complexities reflected in lecturers' accounts. A summarised version is presented in **Figure 5.6**, whereby the enabling and transformative aspects of teaching ML are accompanied by an apparent increase in T&L complexity, culminating in an expressed need for communities of practice among HE media educators and also pragmatism regarding ML's impact societally and democratically.

Teaching complexities/challenges
Need for communities of practice; realism regarding MLE outcomes
Controversial topics, cancel culture, objective debate challenges
Speed of media change and rise of new platforms and technologies
Student resistance to theory; outdatedness of certain theories/reworking of models to current media context
Students don't read/don't read traditional media

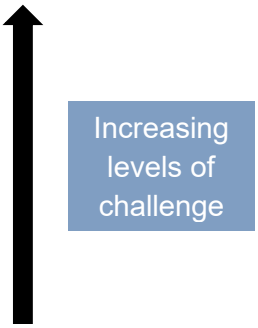


Figure 5.6: Levels of complexity in teaching ML

5.6 Relationship between ML and ML teaching accounts

Both research questions interconnect. There is also intersection between the outcome spaces constituted in response to the hierarchically inclusive research questions underpinning this study. While the initial outcome space presents the varying and expanding ways in which participants described ML, in essence 'what' it is and 'why' it is significant, the second focuses on their accounts of teaching ML thereby centring on 'who' (lecturer/student/students), 'how' (content, practices, society etc.) and 'why' (anticipated or actual outcomes). In the first outcome space, the categories form hierarchically inclusive and expanding conceptualisations of ML. They reflect how educators' expressed perceptions of ML shifted from an inward-to-outward focus, commencing with understanding media theories and concepts, expanding to vocationally-oriented media skills,

critical analysis and discernment, and reflectiveness on the media's role and function culturally, socially and democratically. The second outcome space also demonstrates hierarchical inclusivity and "expanding complexity of awareness" (Åkerlind, 2025, p. 14) albeit regarding lecturers' accounts of teaching ML.

As illustrated in **Table 5.3**, there appears to be areas of consistency between lecturers' conceptions of ML and their teaching accounts. This is particularly apparent in the first and final categories. The initial category of the first outcome space sets out theoretical/conceptual understanding as crucial. This is consistent with outcome space 2 where, in the first category, teaching ML is conceived as building media knowledge including familiarisation with media-related theories and concepts as well as reading and reviewing largely lecturer-prescribed texts and content. Understanding theory (category 1, outcome space 1) also overlaps with reflecting on media theories as evident in category 2 of the second outcome space. Overlap but also divergence occurs in categories 2 and 3 in the generated outcome spaces. It is noteworthy that practical media skills ('doing') are emphasised in the first outcome space. The practical/vocational element is less apparent in the second outcome space, with the focus orienting towards the analytical, reflective and discursive. The final category of both outcome spaces reinforces the societal role and impact of ML as described by lecturers. While the initial outcome space reflects ML's linkage to democracy, the second characterises teaching ML as preparing students for employment and citizenship by creating informed and societally-conscious media consumers and creators. This involves placing the student at the top of the T&L hierarchy and enabling learners to reflect more deeply on their own and others' media responsibilities, thereby, it is hoped, effecting the 'change' and 'contribution' reflected in outcome space 1. Whilst realism is required regarding what ML can achieve, the focus on its wider societal implications across the final descriptive categories of both outcome spaces connects with the purpose of HE, as reflected in lecturers' accounts.

Outcome space 1 (Research question 1)		Outcome space 2 (Research question 2)	
1	**ML as understanding** ○ Theories/concepts ○ Media industry	1	**Teaching ML as building media knowledge** ○ Theoretical/conceptual underpinnings ○ Reviewing content/articles ○ Reading texts ○ Teacher-led
2	**ML as doing** ○ Practical/vocational media skills ○ Writing and creating media for different purposes	2	**Teaching ML as cultivating critical skills** ○ Students reflect on media theories /Students apply media theories ○ Teacher models textual analysis ○ Students do their own textual analysis ○ Creating student confidence and comfort in questioning/critiquing
3	**ML as critically analysing** ○ CT ○ Questioning/objectivity ○ Fact-checking ○ Textual analysis/application of theories	3	**Teaching ML as facilitating considered debate** ○ Facilitating students to see other views ○ Objective debate/discussion ○ Lecturer as guide/facilitator/moderator
4	**ML as changing and contributing** ○ Reflecting on the wider implications of media on culture, society and democracy ○ Promoting ML	4	**Teaching ML as enabling transformation** ○ Preparing students for citizenship, work and the wider world ○ Deeper reflection on media's role; ethics; representation ○ Students can consciously/responsibly create and consume media ○ Creation of media/ML evangelists

Table 5.3: Relations between outcome spaces 1 and 2

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the outcomes generated from my analysis of qualitative differences in media educators' accounts of ML and its teaching. Lecturers' conceptions are configured as expanding and hierarchically inclusive categories of awareness. In Freire and Macedo's seminal book, *Reading the Word and the World*, Berthoff (1987) observed how "nothing in the field of literacy theory" is more crucial "than looking and looking again at the role of an awareness of awareness, of thinking about thinking, of interpreting our interpretations" (p. xii). This study sought to examine not only qualitative variation in lecturers' conceptions of ML and their accounts of ML teaching, but to explicate logical relations between the different categories of description. Both generated outcome spaces affirm the transformative and empowering aspects of ML and its teaching. They also point to the relevancy of media theory and critical analysis, with the theoretical, reflective and discursive possessing greater teaching significance than practical skill embedment and vocationally-oriented tasks. This is pertinent in light of persistent debate regarding ML, its purpose, outcomes and delivery. In the next chapter, I set out these findings in relation to existent knowledge.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The research findings were presented in the preceding chapter including the two hierarchically inclusive outcome spaces which I generated in response to the research questions underpinning this study. The first outcome space reflects the varying and expanding ways in which media lecturers described ML, ranging from general awareness to consideration of the wider societal role, contribution and implications of media. The second outcome space captures variation in the ways that lecturers accounted for the teaching of ML, shifting from knowledge transmission to empowering learners as media consumers, creators and, significantly, citizens. In this chapter, I position the outcomes of this study in relation to the existing literature. I highlight their significance in moving beyond contestation and conflict, affirming the transformative potential of ML and deepening understanding and insight into MLE, particularly within university settings. The interconnection between ML and educators' experiences of its teaching is explored while inherent and increasing challenges related to ML and its delivery are also discussed.

6.2 An inclusive way of describing ML

This research analyses qualitative differences in media educators' accounts and presents an alternative way of describing ML configured as an inclusive, logically connected hierarchy. This is significant as identifying what constitutes ML has long been a source of confusion, even "tension" (Hobbs, 1998, p. 16). Just as literacy can be "vague" and "contested", attempts at defining ML have resulted in "terminological disputes" within educational and policy settings (Livingstone, 2003, p. 4). Others have described ML as a "feel-good" or "umbrella" term (Buckingham, 2021, p. 3; Koltay, 2011, p. 213), incorporating multiple definitions and a diverse range of perspectives. Such breadth offers opportunities for

innovation while also risking incoherence around ML and its implementation (Buckingham, 2003; Bulger et al., 2023).

6.2.1 Embracing the multiple layers and variations of ML conceptualisation

Rather than focusing on individual lecturer descriptions, the findings embrace the multiple layers and variation in the ML accounts of a collective of media educators in Irish HEIs. In the initial outcome space, the categories of description are presented as themes of expanding awareness, reflecting a self-to-industry-to-society shift in lecturers' conceptualisations. The categories are "structurally related" (Åkerlind, 2008, pp. 635-636), whereby rather than being pitted against one another, they are positioned within a nested outcome space. This is notable in light of the complexities at the heart of often dichotomous media debates and divisions and distinctions between ML and CML, including whether such classifications are ideological or pedagogical (Hobbs, 1994; Kellner & Share, 2007c). Further complications have arisen over the delineation of ML into protectionist or empowerment approaches (Buckingham, 1998; Friesem, 2018; Hobbs, 2011a; Levitt & Denniston, 2014; Mendoza, 2009; Nelson et al., 2020; Potter, 2022b). Such complexities pose challenges for newcomers to ML, including educators trying to implement it in their classrooms, as they risk becoming "mired in these debates" thereby hindering the advancement of MLE and leaving teachers, students and institutions "even further behind in a rapidly changing media environment" (Higdon et al., 2021, p. 3). Lacković (2020a) observed how "we live in interesting times for academia" (p. 26). The same can be said of ML, its conceptualisation and educational implementation, with the continuous development of new media and communication technologies leading to "increasing demand for new approaches to media literacy" (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 24). Hobbs (1998) also drew attention to the "paradox" at the heart of ML whereby diverse perspectives serve as a "source of strength and vitality, reflecting the relevancy, power and appeal" of critical media analysis,

while the wide array of educator views and approaches could also “paralyse” efforts to effectively work together (p. 27).

By adopting a phenomenographic approach, this study extends beyond potential ‘paralysis’ by furnishing understanding into critical aspects of variation identified within lecturers’ ML accounts. The significance of understanding such variation was reinforced by Yates et al. (2012), not just in relation to professional practice improvement and research development, but in encouraging “diversity in peoples’ approaches” (p. 113). The first outcome space encompasses the range and variation in participants’ collective interpretations (Stott & Voutsina, 2023), from generalised media awareness and practical skill development to critical reflection and effecting personal change and enhanced societal contribution. This rich and inclusive portrayal of ML aligns with the *European Charter for Media Literacy* (2006). It reinforced how different characterisations are not “inherently contradictory”, but rather reflective of ML’s varying constituent elements (p. 2). The study’s “relationally constituted research outcomes” (Åkerlind, 2025, p. 12) also align with Potter (2022b, p. 5), who emphasised how media scholars now recognise the problems associated with the competitive labelling of “sides” within protectionist and empowerment debate. The emphasis instead, he contended, should be on complementary rather than competing aspects and the “value” inherent within different ML conceptualisations and approaches:

> There is little utility in continuing to treat this difference as a debate and in constructing arguments about which approach is better. Instead, scholarly effort will have much more utility when it is directed toward providing much more detail about how to maximize the value that each of these approaches could provide. (Potter, 2022b, pp. 19-20)

In enhancing holistic understanding of the ways in which lecturers accounted for ML and the relationship between their different descriptions, the findings extend beyond division and debate, offering valuable insight into university-level ML and

a potentially “progressive” (Åkerlind, 2025, p. xxiv) pathway forward in constructively embracing and integrating diverse perspectives.

6.2.2 Self-to-society benefits

The outcomes show an inward-to-outward shift in lecturers’ ML accounts. This self, industry and societal orientation aligns in many respects with the core ML competencies set out by the BAI (2022), specifically with regard to understanding and critically evaluating media, accessing and using media content, and creating and participating in the cultural, creative and democratic elements of society. Overlap also exists with the seven competencies outlined in the *European Charter for Media Literacy* (2006), which promoted the effective use of media technologies, understanding why and how media content is produced, as well as critically analysing the “techniques, languages and conventions used by the media and the messages they convey” (p. 2). Its final competency chimes with the outward focus evident in the final descriptive category of my initial outcome space. It is worth noting, however, that while the *European Charter* emphasised the ability to make “effective use” of media as central to exercising democratic rights and responsibilities (Bachmair & Bazalgette, 2007, p. 84), this research presents a broader interpretation of media usage. Herein, media usage is conceived in terms of the development of vocational skills that benefit the individual and industry and also as a potential catalyst for ethical, societal and democratic contribution.

In his eight stages of ML development, particularly the final *Social Responsibility* category, Potter (2021) also reinforced ML’s wider societal focus. Interestingly, he presented some earlier ML stages as pertaining more to childhood, such as language and narrative acquisition. He furthermore characterised ML development as “similar to a thermometer” comprising “degrees”, necessitating not just skills and knowledge structures, but a strong “personal locus” and “conscious effort” in moving up a stage (pp. 26-27). The findings of this study do not present a childhood-adolescence-adulthood conceptualisation of ML

development nor do they reflect Potter's version of a "continuum", whereby people are placed along it "based on the strength of their set of perspectives on the media" and the "number and quality of their knowledge structures" (p. 26). However, they do reinforce the importance of media knowledge, practical skills and critical analysis, as well as emphasising ML's benefits for individuals, industry and society. Buckingham (2007a) likewise alluded to ML as an "instrument" for personal development and active societal and civic participation, with Livingstone (2004a) framing it as a means but also a "right" which enables citizens to partake in society. Without a "democratic" and discerning approach to ML, she argued, the public could merely become "selective receivers, [and] consumers of online information and communication" (p. 20). In their accounts, lecturers underlined the importance of ethical and informed media consumption and creation. Significantly, they also portrayed ML in terms of "rights" and "responsibilities" regarding "what we share, what we consume and what we create" (Michael, T19). Additional reference was made to "evangelising" ML and consciously considering "what media we want" (Deirdre, T4). Becoming media literate was thus portrayed as advancing not only personal media knowledge and awareness, but as promoting such consciousness among others. This interlinks with Thoman & Joll's "empowerment spiral" (2005, p. 197), which encompasses awareness, analysis, reflection and action whereby ML builds critical consciousness and creates a "community of individuals who can be transformers of their world" (Bergsma, 2004, p. 159). Echoing the findings of this study, Livingstone (2004a, p. 20) also noted the "promise" inherent in ML and its part in repositioning media users from receivers to participants, moving them from passivity to activity, "from consumer to citizen".

6.2.3 ML and critical empowerment

Just as the benefits and outcomes of ML have spurred discussion, so too has its purpose. The research outcomes suggest different ML purposes, from understanding media concepts and developing practical skills, to critical analysis

and reflecting/acting upon the wider implications and responsibilities attached to media and its prosumption. The shift from awareness, to critical enquiry, to creating informed and empowered citizens closely aligns with prior research. As Potter (2010) observed, extant research mainly focuses on ML's potential to benefit individuals and society - either by enhancing media consumers' control over messaging (Buckingham, 1993; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Rafferty, 1999) or via its links to social activism (Anderson, 1983; Davis, 1992; Murakami, 2019). The change and action element evident in lecturers' accounts resonates with an address by MLI to the Irish Government's *Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media,* in which it outlined ML's key objective as "empowering" people to make informed decisions about the media content, services and sources they not only consume but create and circulate (O'Neill, 2022). Central to such empowerment, it emphasised, are CT and the ability to evaluate media. Critical analysis and media discernment were reinforced within lecturers' ML accounts. Overlap was also apparent with Kellner & Share (2005), who identified a need for media knowledge and the skills to interpret, discern and create texts. In their accounts, lecturers also signalled the importance of ML in building a deeper understanding of the "forces that shape" the media we consume (Charlie, T17), along with the rights and responsibilities attached to "our [media] actions or inactions" (Michael, T19). In a similar vein, Hoggart (2004, p. 189) pinpointed ML's connection to civic engagement, observing that "as many as possible of the citizens of a democracy must be not only literate but critically literate if they are to behave as full citizens".

This study's findings reinforce critical enquiry, including the questioning of media sources and messages, while also highlighting ML's role in recognising the potential constructiveness of news and the importance of fact-checking. The awareness-enquiry-change elements reflected in educators' accounts point to ML's dimensionality, its role and also possibilities. There are echoes of McDougall, who in an ethnographic study (2019), presented CML as the most effective tool in combatting fake news and building resilience against "information

disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5). An emphasis on critical engagement is also evident in European and global policies, where a "critical attitude" towards media and the promotion of engaged citizenship are increasingly prioritised due to the proliferation and influence of online communication platforms (Wright et al., 2015, p. 62). In an age of "info-obesity", Erdem (2018) noted how ML has become a "mandatory" life skill in building individual and societal resilience (p. 62). In their accounts, participants also reinforced individual, industry and societal aspects, noting how "true" ML requires a firm grounding in media and communication theories, alongside critical awareness around the production and dissemination of news (Bill, T12; Michael, T19). Rather than comprising a singular aspect or purpose, this study agrees with Potter's observation that ML embodies a "broad continuum" (2021, p. 75). Potter also indicated, however, that individuals must possess "strong motivation" in order to ignite higher-order ML skills (p.77). Rather than concentrating on personal motivation, putting forward an "apex" of ML (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, p. 429) or presenting it in developmental stages (Potter, 2021), the inclusive and hierarchical nature of the findings shows ML as spanning a range of different, yet interconnected purposes. A single, overarching or pinnacular aim of ML is not presented. The outcomes alternatively capture the "logically structured complex of the different ways of experiencing" ML (Marton, 2000, p. 105), an approach that it is argued is suitably adaptable and appropriate to a multidimensional and fluid media and information environment.

6.3 Variation in educators' perceptions of teaching ML

The second outcome space offers insight into media educators' conceptions of their own role, the T&L outcomes they associated with ML instruction and the shifting lecturer-student relationship. Their varied accounts reflect the challenges and complexities of teaching ML in an unpredictable and ever-evolving mediascape.

6.3.1 A transmission-to-transformation shift

The role of the lecturer, as reflected in this study's outcomes, shifts from being a transmitter of media-related knowledge, to assuming the role of motivator or facilitator, to enabling transformation by preparing students for active, reflective and ethical media consumption and creation as well as broader societal participation. The findings are noteworthy in view of McDougall's research into the part played by MLE, and correspondingly educators, in fostering "resilient" media engagement and analysis among younger citizens and his analogy of educational interventions as "giving a fish", denoting more "reactive" shorter-term initiatives, or "teaching to fish" involving sustained and critical ME (2019, p. 41). Fostering critical resilience, McDougall argued, must be prioritised along with political, societal and analytical considerations. Parallels thus exist with this study's findings. They portray the teacher's role as extending beyond simply transmitting, or 'giving', knowledge to empowering students to become conscious media prosumers and engaged citizens. The findings also resonate with Buckingham (1993) and Masterman (1985), who respectively emphasised the importance of "critical consciousness" (p. 143) and the cultivation of "critical autonomy" so that learners are capable of interrogating media and critically considering their own media practices "when the teacher is not there" (p.25).

The essentiality of independent CT skills and fostering students' civic awareness and responsibilities is underscored in this study's outcomes. The emphasis on CT is perhaps unsurprising, given that a review of ML practices and projects across 28 EU member states identified it as the most frequently addressed skill, followed by media usage (Santos et al., 2017). While creating critical consciousness is undoubtedly important, lecturers in their accounts also described their role in establishing foundational knowledge of media/media-related concepts and facilitating informed debate. In this respect, some commonality exists with the three cornerstones of ML identified by Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer (2016), namely an emphasis on "information" (Buckingham, 2007a,

p. 45), media “knowledge” (Potter, 2010, p. 680) and the development of CT or “analytical competencies” (Koltay, 2011, p. 217). However, the findings herein extend further. In their accounts, lecturers positioned themselves as guides who “scaffold” and “facilitate” students’ critical engagement by helping them to dissect media messages and assess both the accuracy and authenticity of information (Maebh, T2; Sheila, T5; Diarmaid, T15). This is notable as how teachers and others, including peers, mediate ML can have varying effects on young people, from inducing anxiousness by focusing excessively on the negative aspects of media and its consumption, to enabling “self-socialisation” by emphasising the opportunities and benefits of media engagement (Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer, 2016, p. 168). Checking for inequalities, affordances, ideologies or misrepresentations within texts and modelling/enabling textual analysis were highlighted in lecturers’ accounts. They also acknowledged the possibility that ML and associated teaching activities could inadvertently create, not anxiety necessarily, but cynicism of all media.

Participants relatedly reinforced the importance of developing students’ ability to “critique” rather than “criticise” media/mediated messaging, underscoring that fostering informed conversation and considered debate are crucial aspects of teaching ML. The focus on critique and informed debate is significant given that classroom environments are often framed by inoculative or protectionist approaches to ML instruction. In a Canadian study on teachers’ perceptions, Namita (2010) found that while some educators viewed ML instruction as a means of embedding CT skills, others stressed their role in helping students to deconstruct texts while also protecting them from the negative and manipulative effects of media. Whilst diverse ML perspectives and teaching approaches are not necessarily problematic, Namita determined that implementation challenges can occur if areas of common ground do not exist among educators. Instead of striving for commonality or uniformity, the findings of this study are reflective of what Share et al. (2019) characterised as the multi-faceted and complex nature of ML instruction. Just as in Dawes’ IL research (2019), faculty members’ ML

teaching descriptions span dimensions of variation. Media educators notably described teaching students to review articles, undertake textual analysis, develop critical confidence and engage in objective debate. They also highlighted their role in enabling learners to informedly dissect and discuss texts while raising students' awareness of their own (and others') media roles and responsibilities. The multi-faceted nature of ML teaching, evident in lecturers' accounts, is shaped by shifts in the media environment and an evolvement in the relationship between the lecturer, student/s, media and wider society.

In their *Digital Media Literacies Framework*, Reyna et al. (2018) proposed three essential ML competencies or 'domains' - functional, conceptual and audio-visual. They noted that as technology affordances advance and improve, students must become functionally competent but also skilled in employing "digital media principles at a 'prosumer' level" including the ability to critique content (p. 187). This involves internal but also external or socially-oriented analysis (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2014). Such observations are significant in view of the findings of this study, which present media educators' perceptions of ML teaching as providing a "situated framing" of contemporary media (Diarmuid, T15), reinforcing the basics (Bill, T12) and supporting externalised analysis by encouraging students to ask questions, engage in "Socratic discussion" and dissect and evaluate media of their own and others' creation or circulation (Daithi, T16). This is in line with Mihailidis (2019b), who argued in his *5As of Media Literacy for the Emerging Citizen* that engaging with media and media-related messages requires not only awareness and critical examination skills, but also an empowerment of students as individuals who "appreciate" the "wide-ranging" and crucial role of "vibrant, diverse, and free media in global contexts" (p. 137).

6.3.2 ML teaching outcomes and higher education

The outcomes of teaching ML, presented in these findings, do not focus in the main on handling information but heightening awareness of media, engaging with and discerning media content and moving towards autonomy. They extend

beyond Berlo (1975) who predicted the need for revised T&L outcomes, observing that while formalised education had historically centred on acquiring and storing information, humankind ought instead “to be taught how to process information that is stored through technology” (p. 8). Education resultantly, he argued, needed to be repurposed towards data handling rather than just accumulation. Grace (2005, p. 7) further observed how ME is frequently organised around a “deficit model” whereby media is perceived negatively and students are considered to be passive and vulnerable. ML and its instruction are hence often approached as providing a remedy to such issues. Rather than centring on deficits, the teaching outcomes apparent from participants’ accounts show a shift from increased media consciousness to students being empowered as responsible consumers, producers, creators and ‘owners’ of the media messaging they encounter and engage with. Similarly to Thoman & Jolls (2005), teaching ML was conceived as helping learners to become more competent and constructively critical of media, not only heightening their awareness but also strengthening their analytical and interpretative control over media. The engagement and ownership aspects are noteworthy in the context of Masterman (1985), who underscored the importance of “critical autonomy” or being able and willing to think for oneself (pp. 22-23).

The societal impacts of teaching ML evident in this study outcomes resonate with Buckingham (2019), who emphasised that education should enable students to understand and deal with existing knowledge while also empowering them to “explore alternatives and to demand change” (p. 118). The wider societal impacts of teaching ML, apparent herein, also echo Masterman (1985). He deemed ME as an important “instrument” in challenging inequalities in power and knowledge “between those who manufacture information in their own interests and those who consume it innocently as news or entertainment” (p. 10). Mihailidis & Thevenin (2013) similarly noted that “good citizenship” is contingent on individuals’ ability to “act as effective creators and communicators”, capable of “engaging” and “actualising” (p. 1613). While realism is required regarding what

teaching ML can achieve, lecturers' accounts indicated a correlation between ML and, what they perceived as, the overarching purpose of HE. As exemplified by John (T7), ML is "at the heart" of HE by preparing graduates not only for the workforce but civic engagement. Others also reinforced how MLE can have lasting and "profound" effects by creating informed and responsible media consumers/producers who understand the personal, as well as societal and democratic implications of content absorption, creation and distribution (Deirdre, T4; John, T7; Molly, T11).

6.3.3 Teacher-student relations and the role of co-learning and co-creation

The findings reveal a shift in the lecturer-student relationship. There is an expansion from teacher-led instruction, to two-way engagement, to learners being enabled and empowered in the final descriptive category to not only co-create and co-learn but also engage in a considered way with the lecturer, their peers and media content, ultimately fostering greater societal reflection and contribution. The focus on co-creation and co-learning is relevant considering an emphasis in HE research on students as partners and the pertinency of co-created T&L (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne, 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). NAMLE (2007) furthermore observed how MLE functions most effectively when a co-learning approach is adopted. The empowerment aspect, evident in lecturers' descriptions, corresponds with Ryan & Tilbury (2013) who recommended flexible and "revitalised" tertiary T&L pathways which enable learners and "actively involve" them in processes that "challenge learning relationships and the power frames that underpin them" (p. 5). The findings further suggest that as students become more knowledgeable, conscious and comfortable in analysing and discussing media, they assume greater autonomy and an openness to considering the implications and impacts of media consumption, circulation and creation. This is significant as ML, particularly CML, necessitates considering other views, dissecting texts and, in the words of Kellner

& Share (2007c, p. 9), extending beyond the surface-level to explore “the depths of the iceberg”. The importance of adopting a student-centred, bottom-up approach, including the use of collaborative inquiry, is highlighted by Luke (1994). She reinforced its appropriateness in empowering students to express and navigate their own media learnings, with other research also noting the relevancy of holistic, inclusive, integrated and adaptive approaches to ME, particularly in an environment where ‘new’ media has redefined the user-industry relationship (Cornelio & Cruz, 2014; Masterman, 1985). As illustrated in the accounts of Daithi (T16) and Maebh (T2), MLE involves varying pedagogical approaches including placing the student at the top of the T&L hierarchy and not presenting the lecturer as possessing all media/ML-related knowledge and solutions. This is reflective of Jolls (2015), who observed that educators’ roles have evolved from being “imparters of wisdom” and providers of a “window on the world” to becoming guides who create the conditions for students to collaborate, problem-solve and co-learn (p. 68). Just as lecturers’ accounts indicate, ML teaching involves what Masterman (1989) characterised as more open, democratic, participatory and active pedagogies, whereby knowledge is not just transmitted by educators but continual critical analysis, discernment, discussion and dialogue are encouraged, leading to new learnings for students and, also, teachers.

6.3.4 ML and ML teaching for and beyond critical thinking

In their accounts, lecturers outlined their conceptions of ML and their approaches to its teaching, with an emphasis on CT evident across both outcome spaces. When it comes to CT, Norris (1985, p. 40) defined it as “deciding rationally what to do or believe”. The findings of this study go further. Interviewees described facilitating students to question the accuracy and reliability of media messages, engage in fact-checking, undertake textual analysis and analyse and apply theories and concepts to prescribed texts or those of their choosing or creation. As already outlined, their accounts also prioritised the ability to “critique” rather than “criticise” media (Patricia, T6; Diarmuid, T15; Daithi, T16). The connection

between CT and ML in lecturers' accounts is not unexpected. As Hobbs (2010) observed, CT is the most reinforced skill within the body of ML research. Cultivating critical skills is also central to media arts education, CML and the media literacy movement (Kellner & Share, 2007c; Potter, 2022b; RobbGrieco & Hobbs, 2013). The importance of fostering critical awareness and strengthening analytical abilities among media users and creators is furthermore reinforced in the *Grünwald Declaration on Media Education* (UNESCO, 1982), *Paris Agenda* (UNESCO, 2007) and other UN-related research (Wilson et al., 2011). This is not to suggest, however, that unified approaches to ML and the development of CT exist. As Ashley et al. (2012, p. 230) noted, there is "no clear consensus" on how CT should be taught or assessed. Potter (2022c) also observed how CT may be presented as a solution to a myriad of ML-related issues while Madison (2019, p. 57) highlighted that it can be "touted as a pedagogical ideal" and "rendered meaningless" through over-use. Hobbs (1998, p. 28), in reflecting on how to "respect" differing methods, philosophies and instructional approaches, reinforced the need for "consensus" around the enactment of inquiry-based ML pedagogies which involve "critical questions about what you watch, see, and read". She also highlighted how an "inability" to reach such consensus could cause "defensiveness", "sniping", "polarization" and "fragmentation" among educators and others, stressing how the cultivation of a critical stance should be the "centre pole of the media literacy umbrella" (p. 27). This study did not seek consensus nor attempt to present an ML teaching ideal. Instead, it holistically captured qualitative variation in lecturers' accounts and constituted categories of description reflecting the lived realities of teaching ML as expressed by them. Rather than depicting CT as the sole emphasis of teaching ML or ascribing it with "magical" or overly "ambitious" qualities (Potter, 2022c, p. 122), the findings pinpoint its role in fostering students' capacity to constructively analyse media, instead of merely "criticising" it.

6.3.5 Guided discussion and the 'charged classroom'

Facilitating and encouraging objective classroom debate is also underlined within the second outcome space. This is tied to CT and is interesting in the context of media as providing a "powerful public pedagogy" and Kellner & Share's view that ML teaching should occupy a "site above the dichotomy of fandom and censor" (2007b, pp. 3-17). The connection between CT and dialogical teaching was emphasised by Freire (1973), with dialogue depicted as "a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it" (Shor & Freire, 1987, pp. 98-99). The expectation that learners exit HE as critical thinkers, capable of constructively dealing with "ill-defined" or controversial topics, is further underscored by Cotterill (2015, p. 407). Achieving this, however, is less clear-cut. As evident from educators' accounts, many challenges exist in ensuring students fully and objectively consider self-constructed realities or those shaped or perpetuated by others. Other challenges include polarisation or binary positions, a reluctance by students to undertake research, difficulties in selecting topics which are safe enough to discuss within media classrooms, and a tendency by some learners to reject alternative perspectives and/or double-down on existing positions when presented with alternative or contrary views. Lecturers, hence, highlighted their role in scaffolding and even "managing" critical discussion and "pushing" students to extend beyond obvious, sometimes deeply entrenched viewpoints. They further emphasised the importance of constructively countering cynicism (Molly, T11; Diarmuid, T15; Charlie, T17; Rosaleen, T18).

While many interviewees alluded to their facilitatory/guiding role, others, as exemplified by Charlie (T17), noted how media educators must increasingly "walk on eggshells around certain topics". This highlights the broader opportunities and challenges of classroom discussion. Although such discussion can motivate learners and foster critical thinking, socio-cultural awareness, curiosity and accountability (Bovill et al., 2011; Jerome & Algarra, 2005; Kuh, 2008; Rogers, 2004), it also risks being reduced to binary or argumentative exchanges that

obscure the “complex middle” (Tannen, 1998, p. 10). The findings, in line with Pace (2021, p. 229), suggest that media educators grasp both the “urgency” and the “fear” associated with teaching and discussing certain topics. The “challenges” and opportunities of “negotiating” a classroom space “that is inclusive enough for the majority or ideally all students to participate in the discussion” (Diarmuid, T15) are apparent. The findings also suggest that some media educators may feel “ill-prepared” to “take up the challenge” of teaching controversial topics or to practice, what Pace (2021) characterised as, “contained risk-taking” within the so-called “charged classroom” of today (pp. 228-230).

6.4 Further considerations and limitations

The findings offer insight into how ML and its teaching was accounted for by those interviewed. In line with phenomenography, they do not claim to be generalisable, but rather map critical dimensions of variation in the ways in which ML was experienced and articulated by participants (Åkerlind, 2024; 2025). The generated categories of description and outcome spaces represent a logically related configuration, derived from a particular cohort of media educators from a cross sample of Irish HEIs. They are not just contextually-situated, but grounded within lecturers’ analysed, “stripped” accounts (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 114). The sample was additionally chosen to maximise variation in lecturers’ exposure to the phenomenon rather than generalisability per se.

Phenomenographic researchers are often asked if similar conceptions would be constituted by others Marton (1986). However, categories of description are forms of discovery and resultantly do not necessitate replicability (Marton, 1986; 1997). Employing an experiment analogy, Marton (1986) reinforced the distinction between inventing an experiment and carrying it out. No expectation exists that different researchers would independently invent an identical experiment, however, once invented, it should generate similar results even if conducted by researchers in other contexts. Insight can thus be gained by comparing the generated research outcomes to those from related studies.

This study analysed the accounts of media educators in Irish HEIs, focusing on their experiences of ML and its teaching. Although no phenomenographic studies specifically examining ML perceptions in HE were identified, the outcomes from this research can still be considered alongside the findings of other related work. This research presents a shift in lecturers' perceptions of ML teaching, moving from teacher-centricity initially to student 'owned' in the final category. Areas of overlap exist with the findings of Vuojärvi et al. (2021) who, in a Finnish context, explored MLE for older adults and the conceptions of adult education teachers-in-training. They organised teaching approaches into four categories: instructor-led, collaborative, practice-based and learner-centred. While practical tasks/skills are emphasised in my first generated outcome space, it should be noted that practice-based teaching as constituted by Vuojärvi et al. does not appear among the categories in the second outcome space related to ML teaching perceptions.

In terms of ML and its conceptualisation, the findings of this study highlight the importance of possessing media awareness, undertaking practical tasks/vocational skill development, critical analysis, objective debate and understanding the wider implications of media creation and consumption. There are echoes of the outcomes generated by Webber et al. (2005) in a UK analysis of academics' conceptions of IL in the realms of English and marketing. Their research identified a shift in English academics' perceptions of IL from accessing and retrieving textual information, to practically retrieving information, to knowing how and when to conduct research, to becoming confident critical thinkers and autonomous learners. Conceptions of IL amongst marketing lecturers expanded from accessing information and applying practical skills in addressing real-world problems, to cultivating critical thinking and becoming independent and confident practitioners. The emphasis on confidence is reminiscent of media educators' accounts in this study, particularly in relation to teaching ML and the developing of critical skills which enable students to confidently reflect upon, apply and critique media theories/texts/messaging/sources. Just as the findings herein show a shift from self-to-industry-to-society (outcome space 1) and from

receiving-to-engagement-to-ownership (outcome space 2), the “locus for development” apparent in marketing educators’ IL conceptions demonstrated internal and external aspects (Webber & Johnston, 2005, p. 10). However, the civic/democratic implications highlighted in the outcomes of this study are not reinforced in their work.

Connections between lecturers’ conceptions of ML and their experiences of teaching ML are evident in the findings of this research, with areas of consistency across both outcome spaces. The significance of teaching intentions, along with understanding what students need to learn and fostering knowledge and appreciation of the object of learning is emphasised by Wright & Osman (2018). They also pointed to the importance of recognising how teaching can guide learners. In a US university context, Dawes’ (2019) phenomenographically examined faculty perceptions of teaching IL to first-year students and explored the influence of such perceptions on pedagogical approaches. Her categories of description intersect with those configured in this research in relation to teaching students to “judge the relevance, credibility, and authenticity of sources”, to analyse and synthesise multiple perspectives, to participate in discourse communities and to develop new understandings that influence behaviour and society (p. 551). The final category of description, in both this research and that of Dawes, also resonates with the wisdom conception put forward by Bruce (1997) whereby information - or in this case media - is used wisely and ethically to benefit not only oneself but, crucially, others.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the findings of this study in relation to existent research, identified areas of overlap and contrast, and suggested how they advance ML and ML teaching understanding. By embracing qualitative differences in the accounts of media educators in Irish HEIs, the findings move beyond often divisive debates surrounding definitional, ideological and pedagogical approaches to ML. Rather than viewing variation in ML teaching

accounts as potentially “paralysing” (Hobbs, 1998, p. 27), the findings depict lecturers’ conceptualisations as hierarchically inclusive, highlighting how diverse perspectives can holistically coexist. When it comes to “good citizenship”, Mihailidis & Thevenin (2013) noted how it is contingent on individuals’ “actualizing” and becoming effective and engaged communicators and creators (p. 1613). I argue that the outcomes of this research affirm the benefits of ML and its teaching, individually, vocationally and societally. They highlight ML’s significance in fostering CT and empowering learners. They also reinforce the transformative nature of ML and ML teaching by enhancing students’ consideration of the democratic and civic responsibilities attached to consuming, circulating and producing media. This is not to simplistically suggest that ML offers a solution to all societal challenges. Nor can it, on its own, overcome binary thinking or address learners’ reluctance to engage in informed debate, undertake fact-checking or objectively consider alternative perspectives. Nevertheless, by emphasising the importance of inclusive pedagogical approaches which guide and, hopefully, empower learners to journey along the pathway of ML discovery, the findings present ML’s possibilities while also highlighting the complex teaching realities experienced by media educators.

Chapter 7 Concluding Remarks and Reflections

7.1 Introduction

In this research, I set out to investigate the lived ML understandings and teaching experiences of media educators within Irish HEIs. I was spurred by the polysemous challenges, fluidity and debate long surrounding ML. I was also cognisant of the growing expectations and emphases attached to it due to the prominence and dominance of online platforms, algorithmic concerns, the growth of AI and the impacts of infodemiology and mis/disinformation (European Parliament, 2025b; European Parliament, 2025a; IPIE, 2024; Lessenski, 2021; 2023; MLI, 2024; Tiernan et al., 2023; WHO, 2020). Whilst responsibility for ML's implementation has largely fallen to educators (Buckingham, 2020a; Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2016), questions remain about how to devise HE learning environments which effectively foster it (Sedelmaier et al., 2023). An ML research opportunity furthermore existed in terms of Irish HE and the capturing of lecturers' conceptualisations.

This study makes a timely and valuable contribution to ML research by holistically and inclusively mapping the collective accounts of HE media educators. It moves beyond the vagueness and "terminological disputes" (Livingstone, 2003, p. 4) that have "mired" ML and its educational progression (Higdon et al., 2021, p. 3), providing instead a nuanced, hierarchically inclusive and higher-order understanding of lecturers' ML and ML teaching conceptualisations. It extends ML research into Irish HE and highlights ML's significance, emphasising the opportunities attached to its teaching along with areas of challenge. In this chapter, I summarise the research outcomes and outline their new knowledge contribution. I also address the study's validity, acknowledge the partiality of my findings and discuss their implications for ML and its teaching in HE. Finally, I highlight areas of potential future investigation before offering concluding remarks/reflections.

7.2 Summation of the research findings

Phenomenographically, I generated four logically connected categories of description reflecting the qualitatively different ways in which media educators accounted for ML. The constituted categories form an inclusive hierarchy and are ordered based on complexity showing expanding “breadths of [ML] awareness” (Åkerlind, 2008, p. 635), from knowledge and skill acquisition to the promotion and evangelisation of media studies and ML amongst others. The first category depicts ML as understanding foundational theories/concepts and gaining basic media industry awareness. In the following category, ML involves practical activities including creating content for different purposes while in category 3, ML centres on critically analysing and evaluating media, media messaging, texts and sources. In the final category, ML is depicted as effecting change by enabling civic, social, cultural and wider reflection on the function, role and implications of media from content generation through to circulation. Structurally, an inward-to-outward shift is evident from a more self-oriented version of ML in category 1 to enhancing civic consciousness in category 4. The final category corresponds with the agency and action competency set out by McDougall et al. (2018), albeit with regard to primary and second level ML teaching. It also aligns with MLI’s vision (n.d.) of empowering “responsible, ethical and effective” participation in the public sphere.

The second constituted outcome space comprises four hierarchically inclusive categories capturing lecturers’ accounts of ML teaching. It provides insight into media educators’ descriptions of their own roles as well as the outcomes they associated with its instruction. ML teaching is initially characterised as building students’ foundational media awareness, with the lecturer occupying a knowledge-source role. In category 2, the lecturer models textual analysis, leads discussion and cultivates critical capabilities, while in the third category they are portrayed as facilitating and guiding students in discussing and debating media-related content/topics and considering other perspectives. In the final category,

ML teaching is portrayed in transformative terms as preparing students to participate actively, reflectively and responsibly, not just in the professional sphere but in civic life. Referentially, there is a shift from teacher-centricity to student empowerment. Regarding the expected outcomes of teaching ML, there is an associated expansion from learner awareness to engagement and ownership.

7.3 Contribution to the literature

This study provides a valuable and timely contribution to ML research. It is significant in transcending the definitional and other complexities which have long surrounded ML and affirms its transformative potential. The findings underscore the self, industry and societal significance of university-level ML and ML teaching which is notable considering calls for increased academic inquiry into ML educational practices (NAMLE, 2024c), issues around ML expectations, emphases and outcomes (Bulger et al., 2023) and its "tenuous post-secondary status" (Mihailidis, 2008a, p. 1). Reflecting on ML and MLE interventions, Lipkin remarked how "there is a fire burning outside of our window" and "we don't have any time to waste" (in Bulger et al., 2023, p. 107). This research is timely given growing concerns over dis- and misinformation, including the "distortion of facts" (Azoulay, 2024), as well as the important role of ML in strengthening "societal resilience" (von der Leyen, 2024, p. 23) and supporting the navigation of an increasingly complex media and information environment (European Commission, 2024; European Parliament, 2025b; MLI, 2024; NAMLE, 2024a; WEF, 2024).

Just as phenomenography has much to offer to today's "troubled, divided, unequal and unsustainable world" (Ashwin, 2025, p. xx), this phenomenographic study has much to offer the complex, fluid, contested and often confusing world of ML (boyd, 2017; 2018; Culloty, 2024; Hobbs, 2011b; 2018; Potter, 2010). By employing a second-order perspective and focusing on collective meaning and structure, the findings enhance understanding of how university media educators

conceive ML and its teaching, moving beyond individual or atomised perspectives. Rather than attempting to resolve long-standing definitional tensions, the findings embrace variation in lecturers' collective descriptions and provide a deep, inclusive analysis of higher educational ML and ML teaching accounts. The insights offered are useful for informing "progressive" T&L practices (Åkerlind, 2025, p. xxiv) and university-level ML design and delivery, showing not just "what the world [of ML] is like" but "what the world [of ML] could be like" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 13).

The findings reinforce the whole-life, individual, employment and societal impacts of teaching ML, not just by building media awareness and analytical capabilities but also by encouraging considered debate and deepening consciousness of the roles and responsibilities involved in consuming, creating and distributing media content. This is important considering that, although characterised as "a key skill for the education of 21st-century citizens" (Azoulay, 2024), ML has been "burdened" by contested and competing expectations (Bulger & Davison, 2018, p. 19) and broader paradigmatic and pedagogical debate, including issues related to its HE conceptualisation and implementation (Čiderová & Belvončíková, 2024; Mesquita & Castellini da Silva, 2024; Mihailidis, 2008a; Schmidt, 2012b; 2013a; Sedelmaier et al., 2023). As far back as 1998, Hobbs drew attention to the collaborative impacts and limitations arising from media educator "conflicts and tensions" (p. 16), with Potter pinpointing the "odd position" occupied by ML arising from the accumulation of ambitious and often ambiguous definitions (2022a, p. 41). He also signalled the nonutility of perpetuating empowerment and protectionism debate, with scholastic energy better directed towards maximising the inherent value of different ML approaches (Potter, 2022b). Instead of "lumping" ML descriptions "together in a melting pot of homogenous understandings" (Beaulieu, 2017, p. 65) or raking over past tensions, the findings transcend definitional difficulties and conflicting/consensual paradigms by analysing variation in lecturers' conceptualisations. They furthermore explicate the structural relationships that link and "demarcate the

different meanings" attached by lecturers to ML and its teaching (Åkerlind, 2024b, p. 2). Insight is thus provided into "other people's ways of seeing" ML and ML teaching through which, I argue, understanding of university ML is "enriched and therefore becomes more powerful" (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 190).

The findings notably do not present a pinnacular purpose or optimal ML conceptualisation. Rather, they analyse variation in how a group of media lecturers in Irish HEIs accounted for ML and its teaching, focusing on the "collective experience as a related whole" (Åkerlind, 2024b) and the most critically distinctive and "structurally significant differences" in their descriptions (Marton, 1986, p. 34). Lecturers' conceptualisations are constituted within two nested outcome spaces, with the non-dualist, second-order nature of the findings showing ML on a continuum, extending from an inward-to-outward orientation, from passivity-to-activity. Regarding teaching ML, the findings show shifts in lecturers' perceived role and T&L outcomes. They advance understanding of the benefits of teaching ML, its CT and empowerment capabilities and also highlight ML's connectivity with what participants perceived as the purpose of HE. They additionally identify areas of teaching complexity and challenge, including difficulties around textured classroom debate due to controversial topics and entrenched learner positions.

In an Irish context, it is noteworthy that the government's *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* contains no specific mention of ML although it does highlight the importance of CT, communication, technology use and quantitative reasoning in meeting future "societal needs" (2011, p. 35). MIL has also been described as a developing area across the Irish educational system (Castellini da Silva, 2021; Mesquita & Castellini da Silva, 2024), with a dearth of research related to higher educational ML. In analysing the ways in which media educators in Irish HEIs accounted for ML and its teaching, the findings are informative in terms of university ML and provide educators, HEIs and policymakers with empirically-grounded insight into how ML is conceptualised and approached by

those directly involved in media module and programme design and delivery. This research is also important given Ireland's position as the "competent jurisdiction" for the largest video-sharing platforms in Europe (European Parliament, 2025b, p. 4). It is furthermore significant in light of the "cradle-to-grave" approach to ML promoted by MLI (2024) and also cited within *The [Irish] State's Response to Online Disinformation and Media/Digital Literacy, including Social Media and Fake News* (2024, p. 28).

7.4 Research validity

This research, I argue, has communicative and pragmatic validity for media educators and ML T&L, particularly in the HE realm. Åkerlind (2012) described communicative validity as being able to argue convincingly for the presented interpretation. Pragmatic validity concerns the meaningfulness and insightfulness of the research outcomes for the "intended audience" (p. 124), in this case the ML and university ME community. In presenting my outcomes and highlighting their validity, I draw attention to Entwistle's observation that the value of HE research lies in providing "useful insights" into T&L (1997, p. 129). Bowden (1995) emphasised how phenomenographic research aims at revealing "how people experience some aspect of their world" and should enable participants or others "to change the way their world operates, normally in a formal educational setting" (p. 146). Others have highlighted its potential to enhance pedagogical and educational outcomes and to inform community and public policy (Åkerlind, 2025; Beaulieu, 2017). The findings of this research illuminate how ML and its teaching are accounted for by a collective of university media educators. They are valuable for those interested or involved in ML and its teaching, ML research or the implementation of ML in HE or beyond.

7.5 Research partiality

The research findings are partial, reflect the ML and ML teaching descriptions of a particular group of media lecturers and have been generated by this researcher in response to the two related research questions. Any phenomenographic outcome space is partial (Åkerlind et al., 2005), with the conceptions constituted by the phenomenographer portraying a reality that is not always possible to express or understand in an absolute or complete sense (Barnard et al., 1999). Regarding this research, there are a number of factors which may have contributed to its partiality.

7.5.1 Context of the study

Firstly, this study, like other research, reflects a particular time and context (Åkerlind, 2024a) and captures the accounts of a relatively small number of lecturers who teach on media programmes across a cross-sample of Irish HEIs. I purposefully included those from varying media modules and specialisations and recognised that, as Barnard et al. (1999, p. 103) noted, “conceptions are abstractions from reality and are formulated in various ways depending upon the context of reality”. With the research sample, I had to strike an inevitable balance between maximising variation and managing the data generation and analytical processes. The sample size is in line with other phenomenographic undertakings. Whilst the geographical contextuality and numbers involved could impact the findings’ wider generalisability, I am reminded of Åkerlind’s (2005a) initial scepticism and subsequent endorsement of smaller sample size results.

Media lecturers could be perceived as positively inclined towards ML and its capabilities. Yet, the opposite could also be the case as definitional and implementation issues among media experts have led to “some intriguing conflicts and tensions” (Hobbs, 1998, p. 16). It should also be acknowledged that some interviewees queried their ML expertness, which is perhaps not surprising considering the uncertainty and debate long surrounding ML. Also, while this

study concentrates on media educators, ML can be linked to any module or discipline owing to its CT associations (Scheibe & Rogow, 2011). Focusing exclusively on media lecturers could be viewed as a bounding aspect, although I argue for the opposite due to the particular insights provided and the different media specialists interviewed. Another consideration is the fact that within an Irish context, the term 'lecturer' is used to describe those who teach in HE which could potentially or subliminally influence participants' ML teaching descriptions.

7.5.2 Researcher limitations

In assessing any research undertaking, consideration must be given to researcher limitations. In phenomenography, a challenge that I and others encountered (Åkerlind, 2005a; 2024a; Marton, 1994) concerned the sheer volume of data to be interpreted, along with difficulties, especially initially, in grasping the relational nature of the research findings and interpretations. I also struggled at the outset with phenomenographic interviewing as my industry background meant I was more accustomed to conducting media interviews. As a novice, solo researcher, I was conscious of my phenomenographic newness and the potential impinging of such inexperience on the research. Acute awareness of these limitations spurred me to reach out and refer to experienced others, as recommended by Åkerlind (2024a), and to learn from the insights of other researchers, most notably my supervisor. In spite of my best efforts and intentions, unwitting partiality may have stemmed from interpretative issues, unconscious bias or prior ML and/or ML teaching assumptions on my part (Åkerlind, 2012).

This phenomenographic study was influenced by the fact that I undertook it as a part-time doctoral researcher. Balancing interviewing, data transcription and analysis with a full-time teaching workload, a daily commute and life commitments often meant days and weeks away from the phenomenographic venture and, in truth, extended the journey beyond what I desired. Time lapses undoubtedly enhanced the iterative and analytical processes and ensured transcript

faithfulness via revisitation and reflection (Åkerlind, 2005b; Barnacle, 2005). These intervals, though productive, also interrupted the research venture's fluidity as, in reality, I frequently had to go backwards in order to move forwards. However, in this regard, I am reminded of Bowden's observations (in Åkerlind et al., 2005, p. 94) whereby each reading is "a new experience" affording fresh insight.

7.6 Educational implications

There is a scarcity of research into university-level ML and a lack of clarity as to "what should be included in media literacy education or how it should be delivered" (Culloty, 2024). Phenomenographic research, from its inception, has sought to provide insight into collective understanding and to inform improvements in T&L. My research findings offer not merely a structural but analytical "delineation of [the] different aspects and understandings" of ML, which are illuminative for the "design" (Åkerlind, 2024a, p. 12) of media modules and delivery of ML at university level. Semantic and conceptual fuzziness have long surrounded ML (MLI, 2024). The research findings move beyond conceptual abstractness (Säljö, 1997) by holistically mapping how those at the forefront of Irish university ME delivery described both ML and its instruction. They provide valuable HE insight and are significant in underscoring the whole-life importance of ML and the transformative potential of university-level ML teaching. Sedelmaier et al. (2023) observed how school alone cannot equip students with sufficient levels of ML "due to the prevalent purely mnemonic approach to (loosely related) data" and an apparently dominant focus on technical rather than critical aspects (p. 391), a limitation that reinforces the significance of this research and its findings.

ML's societal and democratic benefits are frequently, and crescively, reinforced within scholarly and policy output. As highlighted in the European Audiovisual Observatory report on *Media Literacy and the Empowerment of Users*, ML is now at the "fore of supranational debate" (Lacourt, 2024, p. 7) and has assumed

increased significance for legislators, users and media stakeholders, including educators, due to civic concerns, the expansion of online technologies and tools, the impact of algorithms and the emergence of AI. Amidst this context, the European agency underlined the importance of helping young people to develop the “necessary” critical skills in order to analyse “the mass of information they will encounter throughout their lives” (Lacourt, 2024, p. 32). The findings herein reinforce the role of university ML teaching in fostering students’ critical skills and in enabling them to informedly discuss and dissect media content and messaging.

While this research focused on the accounts of media lecturers, the findings have wider significance. In a MLI parliamentary briefing on *AI, Truth and Democracy*, attention was drawn to growing public and policy concern regarding algorithms, AI-generated content and “recommender systems”, as well as the ways in which attention and “power are captured and exercised within digital environments” (Veldon, 2026, p. 1). For educators across HE disciplines, the findings offer insight into how ML is understood and pedagogically approached, reinforcing its connections to critical thinking, fact-checking, textured classroom debate and civic engagement, while also highlighting conceptual and implementation challenges. At an institutional level, the findings are informative for university ML curriculum design and teaching training and strategy development. For policymakers and sectoral bodies, they underscore both the complexities and transformative capabilities of ML and its teaching. In this way, the thesis contributes not only to academic knowledge and pedagogical practice, but also to the advancement of ML and ML teaching within and beyond HE settings.

The nested categories provide an “operational definition” (Erstad, 2015, p. 92) of ML, as accounted for by media lecturers, and point to immediate but also sustained ML effects, suggesting its significance not merely for the university classroom, but life and society beyond. The empowering, inner-to-outer orientation of ML and its teaching is evident, with three key areas of benefit identified - self, industry and society. This is pertinent in light of the problem-

solving and creative capabilities deemed necessary for participation in technology-rich environments, an area where Ireland has reportedly underperformed compared to other developed nations (BAI, 2022; OECD, 2019). Also significant is the importance placed by media lecturers on foundational media knowledge and awareness, as well as practical and vocational media skills. Educators furthermore underscored, perhaps unsurprisingly, the connection between ML and CT including enhanced media discernment, the ability to apply theories and employ "healthy scepticism" in analysing media texts (Deirdre, T4) and in moving beyond criticism to critique. This is noteworthy in light of broader discussion concerning ML and the creation of wholescale cynicism of media content and sources (boyd, 2017; 2018; Hobbs, 2018; Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2024), as well as the potential "valorization of mainstream media" (Hobbs, 2018).

The second outcome space indicates the importance of furnishing students with theoretical and conceptual media understandings along with developing learners' confidence and capabilities in their application. ML teaching is furthermore portrayed as facilitating students to objectively debate and consider alternative perspectives, with the lecturer modelling, moderating and guiding inclusive, reflective and evidence-based discussion. This is not to underplay the challenges presented by binary thinking, entrenched learner positions and controversial and/or divisive topics, as emphasised by some interviewees. This could indicate a need for educator training on how best to engage students in constructive debate. It also points to the value of communities of practice around how to oversee and support productive and positive university classroom discussion which promotes the likes of "thick critical thinking" and pushes students beyond binaries "to position themselves more effectively, convincingly, and compassionately" (Wendland et al., 2015, p. 154).

As with lecturers' ML perceptions, the second set of research findings underlines the transformational and "profound" nature of ML teaching and its

interconnectivity with HE's purpose by preparing students for citizenship and the world (Deirdre, T4; John, T7; Molly, T11; Diarmaid, T15). Pedagogically, a shift is discerned from a lecturer-centred teaching approach to student ownership and from knowledge transmission to co-creation. The co-creation and co-learning focus, evident in the final constituted category of description, connects with the *Core Principles of Media Education* outlined by NAMLE (2024a) whereby "how we teach matters as much as what we teach". The co-creation element is also relevant in view of research into flexible HE teaching practices and the empowerment of students as partners (Bovill, 2020; Brown, 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2014), which requires revitalised teaching practices and "joined-up and systemic approaches to enhancement at the institutional level" (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013, p. 5).

Across both outcome spaces, there is alignment between lecturers' ML accounts and their expressed teaching experiences. However, it is notable that when it comes to ML teaching, interviewees placed less emphasis on practical media skill development and greater prioritisation on enhancing students' analytical and discursive capabilities. With respect to ML teaching's transformative aspects, preparation for work and, significantly, the wider world was reinforced by empowering students to become responsible and reflexive media prosumers and citizens. At the same time, the findings suggest a need for realism regarding what ML teaching can achieve and the necessity for collaboration, communities of practice and the sharing of T&L insights and MLE strategies. As Bulger et al. (2023, p. 99) notably observed, the ML community, including HE media educators, need to "encourage each other, continue to advocate for media literacy education, and become involved in our communities, institutions, and states". They additionally, and pertinently, highlighted how the "cherished part of participating in the field of media literacy education are the conversations", noting how some such exchanges are "transformed into published and shared work" while others, frequently, exist as only as "tendrils of memory" (p. 107). This study highlights the benefits, but also challenges, which surround ML and its instruction

as described by lecturers specialised in ME. It additionally and consequently may have implications regarding, what Scully (2018) described as, the “apparent institutional logic in which generic ‘one size fits all’ [ML] modules” are prioritised and privileged on the basis of their administrative, pedagogical, practical efficiency and “expediency” in an underfunded educational landscape (p. 5).

7.7 Further research directions and recommendations

This phenomenographic study has examined qualitative differences in how media educators in Irish HEIs accounted for ML and its instruction. As previously outlined, the research outcomes are based on a relatively small number of lecturers from media-related disciplines. In Ireland and elsewhere, there is an opportunity to build upon these findings by incorporating additional educators. This study could be extended within an Irish context by including further HE media lecturers. However, the focus could be broadened beyond media specialisms, in a manner similar to Schmidt (2012b), or expanded to include lecturers from other disciplinary areas. Such extensions are pertinent given that university students must navigate an increasingly complex information environment (Dolanbay, 2022; Livingstone, 2018; Prinsloo, 2017; Szabó, 2022; Volodymyrivna & Petrivna, 2025). The importance of critical media and information pedagogies across university programmes (Lacković, 2020a) further underscores the value of extending future research to incorporate additional disciplines. Opportunities also exist to undertake research in other geographical contexts to enable analysis and comparison of the accounts of HE educators between territories, with a view to further enhancing understandings of university-level ML and its teaching.

This study focused on lecturers. There is scope, especially in Ireland, for a comparison analysis of student and faculty perceptions of ML along with an exploration of the ML roles of teachers, peers and individual learners in the HE T&L environment. Such roles are analysed to an extent in this study but could be examined more specifically. Future research might also examine other levels of

the Irish education system to capture, phenomenographically or otherwise, the lived ML understandings and experiences of educators and/or students.

This study's findings indicate considerable overlap between lecturers' perceptions of ML and their accounts of its instruction, particularly in relation to the development of CT capabilities and the empowerment of learners. In light of the benefits and outcomes of teaching ML in criticality and civic terms, as reflected in these findings, further research may examine the extent to which higher educational ML teaching is perceived by students and educators as fostering critical capabilities and broader societal awareness.

In their accounts, lecturers highlighted challenges related to objective classroom discussion, entrenched learner viewpoints, an unwillingness to listen to other perspectives and "managing" debate (Rosaleen, T18). This points to a research opportunity to examine the lived teaching experiences of other educators within HE in Ireland or elsewhere in terms of how to engage students in informed and open debate. As Jerome (2017) observed, "there are no easy answers, just the constant struggle to reflect, understand and improve" (p. 533) Such research would facilitate educator reflection, aid understanding and contribute to possible T&L enhancement in fostering safe but also "brave spaces" (Arao, 2013, p. 135).

Several interviewees made the connection between teaching ML and what they regarded as the purpose of HE. This is significant, not merely in an expanding and evolving media environment, but an era shaped by algorithms and AI where HE must not only adapt but refocus on "holistic human development, creativity and innovation" as well as ethical understanding and meaningful societal participation (Pablo-Martí et al., 2024, p. 6). Scholarly and other output frequently focus on ML/CML definitions or specific MLE interventions. An opportunity exists to investigate the value that institutional, educational and/or political stakeholders place on ML in HE, given the curricular expectations, priorities, time, resourcing and professional development implications highlighted by interviewees and echoed by participants in a survey conducted by NAMLE (2024c), wherein one

respondent described ML as contingent on “proper” prioritisation because of its “bigness” and the multiple challenges which inhibit its addressal/inclusion (p. 19). Buckingham (2025) also drew attention to the distinction between “promoting” ML and actually “providing” it. Meanwhile, a UK House of Lords report on ML called for “the leadership vacuum on media literacy” to be addressed (2025, p. 4). There is additionally the matter, as raised by Curran (2013), of whether media studies is still viewed as a “Mickey Mouse” subject area, prompting Buckingham to lament a lack of headway “in establishing the public legitimacy of what we [media educators] do?” (2014, pp. 7-8).

A final research consideration is that I undertook this study as an individual phenomenographer. Future research in the areas mentioned might be undertaken by a team of researchers, as outlined in Bowden (2005), with a view to producing potentially more “complete” or sophisticated outcomes (Åkerlind et al., 2005, p. 93).

7.8 Final remarks and reflections on the PhD venture

I was motivated to undertake this PhD, not only because of my media background and passion for HE T&L, but also by a deep interest in ML in university settings, particularly how it is perceived by tertiary educators and their experiences of teaching it. My eyes were opened to different research approaches during the initial years of my doctoral journey. It was also during this period that I first encountered phenomenography. I recognised its suitability as an analytical approach due to how well it unpacks nuance, especially of complex topics such as ML, by exploring understanding of the phenomena from others’ perspectives (Taylor-Beswick & Hornung, 2024; Zoltowski et al., 2017) through the categorisation of descriptions and the constitution of structural relationships between the categories (Marton, 1986).

This study is significant in an Irish context by advancing ML research and furnishing insight into the different ways in which ML and its instruction were

accounted for by media faculty members within the university and TU sector. These findings also contribute to wider ML research by enhancing understanding of university-level ML and its teaching, moving beyond the complexities, iridescence (Sedelmaier et al., 2023), debate and divisions that have long surrounded ML and MLE by generating two hierarchically inclusive outcome spaces. Across lecturers' accounts of ML and its teaching, themes of awareness emerged indicating an inner-to-outer shift and an affirmation of ML's capabilities. These ranged from personal, industry and societal benefits to the transition from learners receiving instruction and information to reflexively and responsibly 'owning' the media they consume, produce or circulate. Across both outcome spaces, there is also an emphasis on CT and the transformational possibilities of ML and its teaching.

This research, as outlined, reflects a time, context and particular participants. I am furthermore aware of how my journey, as a researcher and burgeoning phenomenographer, is not nearly complete. This research endeavour has been given my all, stretched me beyond previously known capabilities and, also, fostered a hitherto unexpected love of academic research, which is now certain to be expanded upon, fulfilled and further explored.

Appendix A1: Ethics documentation - participant information sheet

Exploring Media Educators' Perceptions of Media Literacy and Media Literacy Teaching within Higher Education in Ireland

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a part-time PhD researcher with Lancaster University. I would like to invite you to take part in a study for my PhD thesis with the Department of Educational Research. The research centres on media literacy/media literacy teaching in Irish higher education.

Before deciding if you wish to partake in this study, you need to understand the purpose of the research and what it would involve for you. Please take time to carefully read the following information. Talk to others if you wish. Ask me if anything is not clear or if you would like further information. Ensure to consider whether or not you wish to take part in the study.

Purpose of the study

This research is for my PhD thesis. It may also be used in future reports, academic articles, publications and conference presentations by the researcher. The study aims to contribute to wider research about lecturer perceptions and experiences of teaching media and media literacy in higher education in an Irish context. It aims to contribute to knowledge surrounding media literacy embedment which can inform media literacy teaching practices and approaches.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to partake in this study because you are involved in delivering modules on a media-related programme/module within an Irish higher educational institution. I am interested in understanding how educators perceive media literacy and the approaches they adopt to its teaching.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to participate in an one-hour interview (approximately) to be conducted either online (via MS Teams) or in-person. A time and online/offline location for the interview will be mutually agreed. During the interview, you will be asked questions relating to your media background and media teaching practices and perceptions.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this study will allow you to share and reflect upon your media and media literacy teaching experiences. Your insights will contribute to wider understanding of media literacy teaching within higher education and contribute to research and knowledge surrounding the perceptions, practices and experiences of media educators in Irish HEIs.

Do I have to take part?

No. You can decide whether or not to partake in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and up to two weeks following your interview. If you withdraw up to two weeks after your interview, any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study will be deleted and not used in the study. However, it may not be possible to remove data after that time as it may already have pooled, anonymised and analysed. Please contact me if you wish to withdraw from the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

As a participant, you will be required to allocate 60 minutes of your time to partake in a research interview. It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages in taking part in this research. However, if you find discussing the research topic uncomfortable, you are free not to take part in this study.

Will my data be identifiable?

All personal information about you (e.g. your name and other identifying information) will be kept confidential and I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity as a participant involved in this project.

Will my identity be protected?

A pseudonym will be used within my PhD thesis and other publications or presentations to protect your identity. Identifying information about you will not be included.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways: I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications such as journal articles, reports, academic publications and presentations. I may also present the results of my study at academic or practitioner/media-related conferences. When writing the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in publications.

How my data will be stored?

'Data' refers to any notes which I may take during the interview, audio recordings of interviews and any email exchanges which we may had. Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher, will be able to access them) on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on the specified topic). In accordance with Lancaster University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years after the end of the project.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything concerning your participation in the study, please contact:

Researcher: Aisling Donnelly. Email: a.donnelly1@lancaster.ac.uk

Project Supervisor: Professor Paul Ashwin, Head of the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University and Deputy Director of the Centre for Global Higher Education. Email: xxxxxxxxxxx@lancaster.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

Professor Paul Trowler, Lancaster University's Department of Educational Research, Lancaster, UK, LA1 4YD. Telephone: +44 (0) 1524 XXXXXX. Email: xxxxxxxxxxx@lancaster.ac.uk

Thank you for considering participation in this project.

Appendix A2: Ethics documentation - participant consent form

Name of Researcher: Aisling Donnelly

Email: a.donnelly1@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.	
I am free to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and up to two weeks following my interview without giving any reason. If I withdraw within two weeks of taking part in the study, my data will be removed.	
I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of participants involved in this project.	
I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	
I understand that interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	
I understand that data will be kept according to Lancaster University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of participant Date Signature

_____ _____ _____

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of researcher/person taking the consent

_____ Date _____

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University.

Appendix A3: Permission to adapt figure (Bowden & Green, 2005)

[External] Re: Request for Permission

JB John Bowden [redacted]

To: Donnelly, Aisling (Postgraduate Researcher)

Reply Reply all Forward

Mon 16/06/2025 11:06

You replied on Mon 16/06/2025 12:04

This email originated outside the University. Check before clicking links or attachments.

Hi Aisling,

I wish you well with your thesis and the subsequent examination. Your project is a timely one, given the increasing importance of media and the need for everyone, especially graduates, to understand its complexity and place in society. It is difficult to imagine any field of study where the work of your 'participants' would not be relevant. Understanding how they see media and the teaching of media is important. Hence the value of your research project.

Of course, I would be quite happy for you to include our diagram in the modified form shown in your attachment. I think you would also need to get Pam Green's permission if you have not already done so. I am 100 per cent sure she would say yes. I am a 79 year old Emeritus Professor now and Pam has also retired. Thus, it is many years since I gave spoken with her. She is now a wedding celebrant and you could email her on [redacted]

I wish you well in your current work and in your career that follows.

All the best.

John

John A Bowden
Emeritus Professor
RMIT University

PG Pamela Green [redacted]

To: Donnelly, Aisling (Postgraduate Researcher)

Thu 19/06/2025 01:05

You replied on Thu 19/06/2025 10:14

This email originated outside the University. Check before clicking links or attachments.

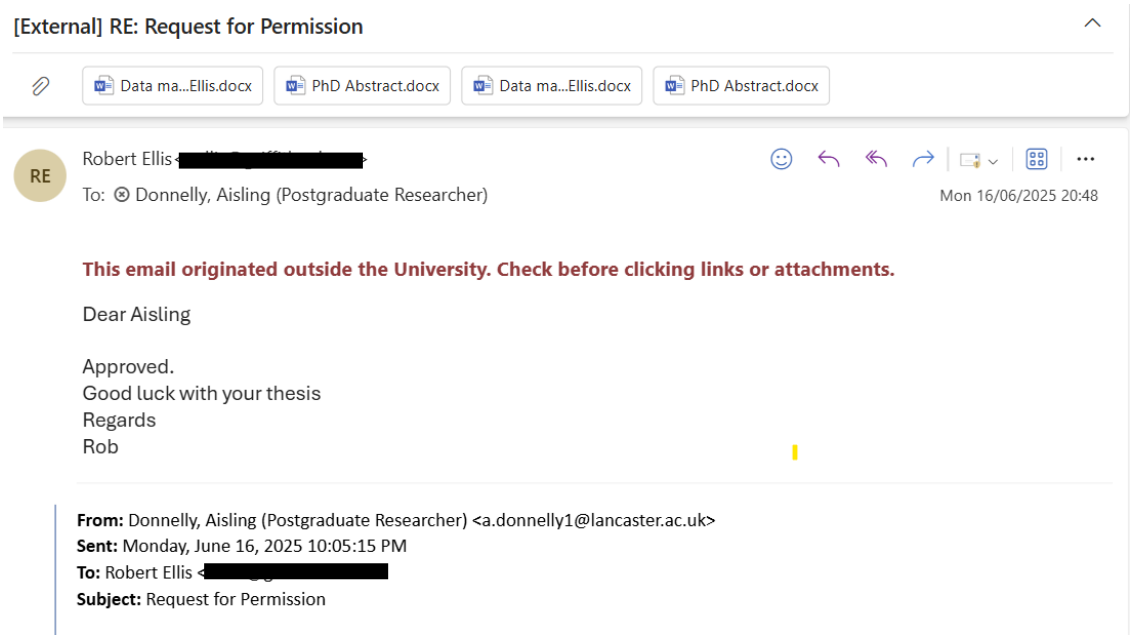
Dear Aisling,

I am happy for you to cite our work. I would appreciate it if the citing included both names: Bowden & Green, 2005, as the usual practice here in Australia.

All the best with your research,
Pam

Professor Pam Green
Chair: VIT

Appendix A4: Permission to adapt table (Han & Ellis, 2019)



[External] RE: Request for Permission

Data ma...Ellis.docx | PhD Abstract.docx | Data ma...Ellis.docx | PhD Abstract.docx

RE

Robert Ellis <[redacted]>

To: Donnelly, Aisling (Postgraduate Researcher)

Mon 16/06/2025 20:48

This email originated outside the University. Check before clicking links or attachments.

Dear Aisling

Approved.
Good luck with your thesis
Regards
Rob

From: Donnelly, Aisling (Postgraduate Researcher) <a.donnelly1@lancaster.ac.uk>
Sent: Monday, June 16, 2025 10:05:15 PM
To: Robert Ellis <[redacted]>
Subject: Request for Permission

FH

Feifei Han<[redacted]

To: Donnelly, Aisling (Postgraduate Researcher)

Tue 17/06/2025 00:01

This email originated outside the University. Check before clicking links or attachments.

Hi Aisling,

I don't think there is a problem from my end. But I am not sure about publisher. Although Frontiers in Psychology is an Open Access journal but I do not know if they own the copyright. Could you do a bit of research? If the publisher is ok, I do not mind that you use it in your thesis.

kind regards,
Feifei

From: Donnelly, Aisling (Postgraduate Researcher) <a.donnelly1@lancaster.ac.uk>
Sent: Monday, June 16, 2025 10:02 PM
To: [redacted]
Subject: Request for Permission

Re: [External] RE: Request for Permission

DA

Donnelly, Aisling (Postgraduate Researcher)

To: Feifei Han <[redacted]

Reply | Reply all | Forward

Tue 17/06/2025 11:14

Hi Feifei,

Just following on from my previous email, I have checked with the publishers. Please see below outlining that 'authors of articles published in Frontiers journals retain copyright on their articles...' https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/about#copyright-statement

I have also been in touch with Professor Ellis also and received his permission.

Many thanks again and kindest regards,
Aisling

Copyright statement

Under the Frontiers Conditions for Website Use and the Frontiers General Conditions for Authors, authors of articles published in Frontiers journals retain copyright on their articles, except for any third-party images and other materials added by Frontiers, which are subject to copyright of their respective owners. Authors are therefore free to disseminate and re-publish their articles, subject to any requirements of third-party copyright owners and subject to the original publication being fully cited. The ability to copy, download, forward or otherwise distribute any materials is always subject to any copyright notices displayed. Copyright notices must be displayed prominently and may not be obliterated, deleted or hidden, totally or partially.

Appendix B1: Data generation - interview schedule

The following was used to guide the research interviews.

Note to self: Remain aware of the research questions underpinning the study as outlined below:

Research questions:

1. What are the qualitatively different ways in which media lecturers in Irish HEIs account for ML?
2. What are the qualitatively different ways in which these lecturers account for teaching ML?

At commencement of interview:

Introduce myself, outline interview process including participant rights and answer any questions.

Before we start the interview, have you any questions related to the nature of the study, the information sheet as emailed to you, the signed consent form which you have kindly returned to me or your rights in this study, including the right to withdraw participation.

Await confirmation from participants before proceeding.

Explain that the interview will be audio-recorded, as outlined in the consent form, for transcription purposes.

Commence recording:

Just to recap, I am undertaking this research for my PhD thesis with the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. My study involves interviewing lecturers who teach on media-related modules or programmes within higher educational institutions in Ireland. You have very kindly agreed to be interviewed for this study and my thanks to you for that.

Outline of interview duration/main areas to be covered:

The interview will be approximately one hour in duration. It will include the following:

- *Your academic and teaching background and any industry experience*
- *Your understanding of what constitutes media and ML*
- *Your teaching practices/approaches*
- *Challenges/opportunities of teaching ML*
- *ML and higher education*
- *Further thoughts/comments*

Interview questions:

Note to self: Be aware throughout of why, how, what etc. follow-on questions…

Background

What is your area of specialisation? How many years have you been lecturing?

How many of those years have you been involved in teaching with media or about media?

What led you into teaching in media/PR/communications/journalism etc.?

Were you involved in the media industry prior to taking up a teaching role? If yes, can you tell me more about that…

Defining media

What, in your view, constitutes media or can be categorised as media?

Can all media be engaged with in the same way? If yes/no, explain why. Can you give an example?

ML and teaching practices

Can you tell me about a recent experience of teaching a course which addresses media literacy?

How was the course designed to address media literacy?

Follow on question: Who and/or what informed the module/course development? Can you explain further….

What did you ask students to do? Why did you approach the task/content in this way?

Did you find this approach effective in getting students to engage with media?

Follow on question: Would you adopt a similar or different teaching approach in future? Explain why/why not?

What was the nature of the assessments used? How did the assessments address media literacy learning?

Follow on question example: What informs your own practice when it comes to teaching media literacy? Why?

What elements or aspects do you consider most important in teaching media literacy? Why?

From your perspective, what constitutes 'media literacy' or how do you interpret ML?

What specific skills/knowledge/competencies should a media literate student develop? Explain/give examples from your teaching.

What elements or aspects do you consider least important in terms of teaching media literacy? Why?

Challenges and opportunities

Can you detail a recent challenge that you faced in teaching students to analyse media? Did you overcome this challenge? If yes, explain how? If no, why not?

Are there other difficulties, in your experience, that arise when teaching students to engage with media?

Are there any constraints to teaching ML? Would you teach media literacy differently if such constraints did not arise? Why/expand on your answer…

Do you have any future recommendations for the teaching of media literacy? Can you explain further…

Media literacy and higher education

Would you consider media literacy a desired goal of higher education?

What, do you believe, are the benefits or drawbacks in teaching students to become more reflective producers and/or consumers of media? Why?

Should media literacy/media discernment be considered fundamental to the development of all learners in higher education, regardless of subject area/discipline? If yes/no, why?

Other

Any other comments or reflections on your experiences of teaching media and media literacy?

What would help you in developing your media literacy teaching? How? Why?

What do you think would help educators, and students, in Irish HEIs in further developing media literacy?

Have you any further comments or insights that you would like to add?

Thank you for your participation etc.

Appendix B2: Data generation - inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	**Exclusion criteria**
Involved in teaching in the HEI sector in the Republic of Ireland (RoI)	Not involved in teaching in the HEI sector in RoI
Educators who teach on media-related courses or programmes at universities/technological universities or other HE institutions listed by the Irish Higher Educational Authority (HEA) as working under statute with the authority or in receipt of core public funding. See the HEA's website.	Educators not involved in the direct delivery of media-related courses/programmes in Irish HEIs as listed by the Irish HEA.
Specialised in areas conceptually linked to media literacy/critical media literacy e.g. media, communications, journalism, public relations, visual media, media production, new media, participatory media, media culture, media design, broadcasting etc.	Not specialised in areas conceptually linked to media literacy/critical media literacy e.g. media, communications, journalism, public relations, visual media, media production, new media, participatory media, media culture, media design, broadcasting etc.
Educators with direct experience of/familiarity with media instruction and student media engagement and analysis.	Educators not experienced in the teaching of media and student media engagement and analysis.
All genders	Not applicable
Engaged in media teaching for a period of time (i.e. have experience and insights to share regarding the research phenomenon). May or may not have media industry experience.	Less than 12 months media teaching experience.
Those willing to speak about their ML teaching perceptions, practices and experiences.	Not willing to speak about their ML teaching perceptions, practices and experiences.

Appendix C1: Data analysis - data analysis approaches

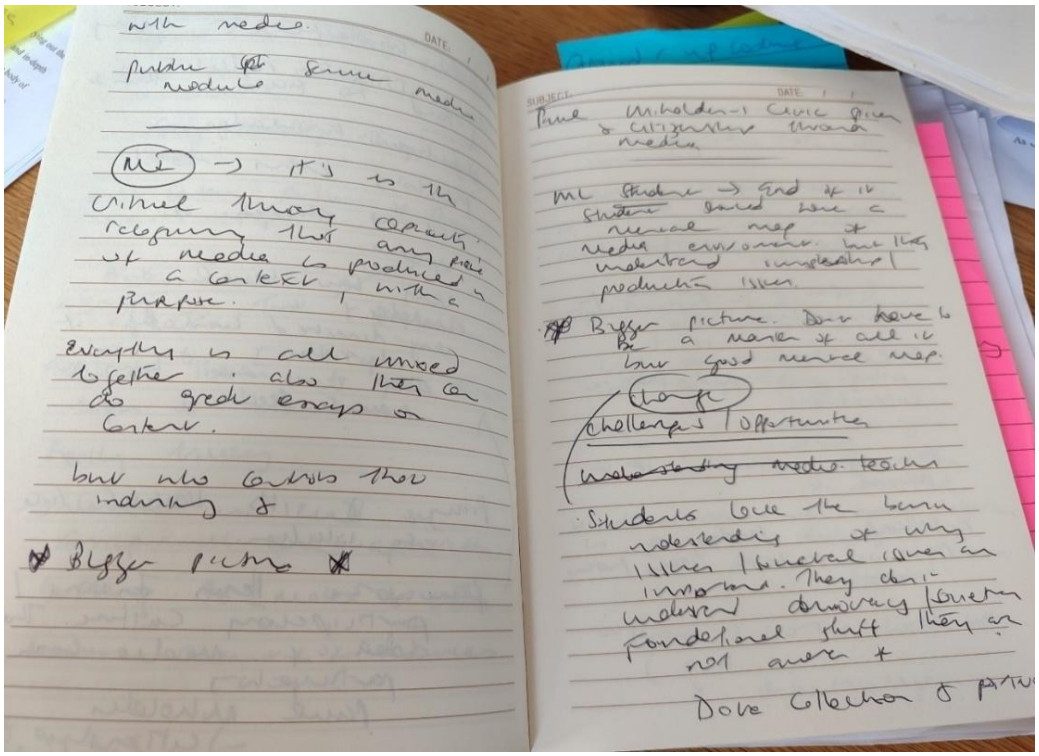
Overview of different phenomenographic data processing and analytical approaches (adapted from Han & Ellis, 2019).

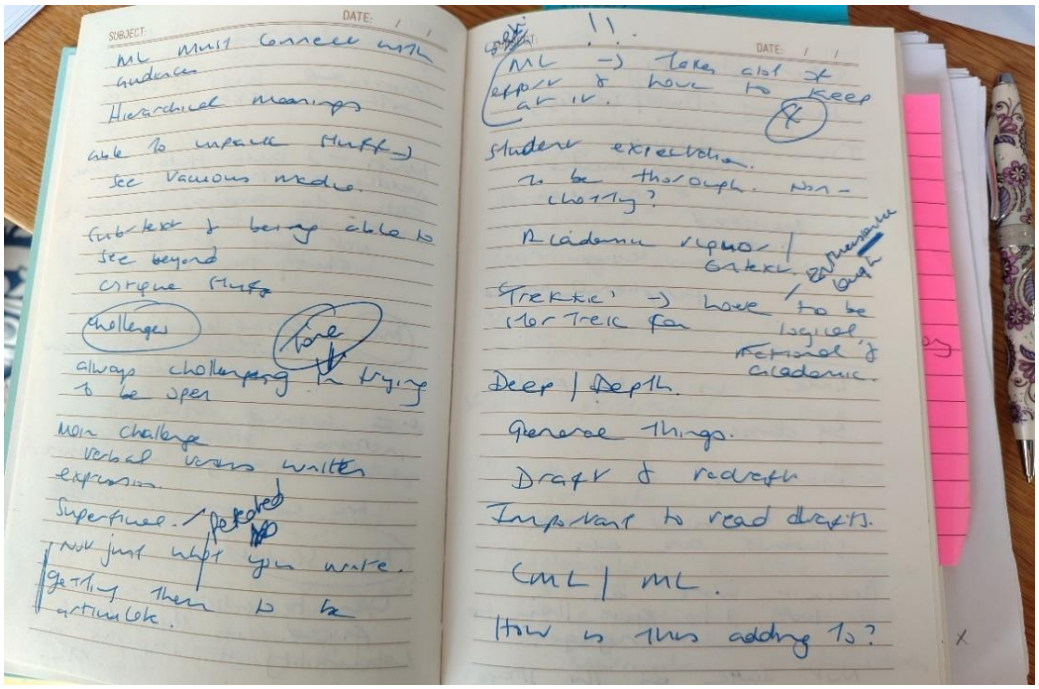
<table>
<tr><th>Marton et al. (1992)</th><th>Dahlgren & Fallsberg (1991)

McClosker et al. (2004)</th><th>Säljö (1997)</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>1. Familiarisation: The data is viewed for researchers to be familiar with the details.</td><td>1. Familiarisation: Similar to stage 1 in Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991), McClosker et al. (2004).</td></tr>
<tr><td>1. Identification: Data which is related to the phenomenon being described are identified.</td><td>2. Condensation: The most representative statements are selected to uncover patterns.</td><td>3. Identification: Similar to stage 1 in Marton et al. (1992).</td></tr>
<tr><td>2. Sorting: The identified data is sorted into 'pools of meaning' according to similarities.</td><td>3. Comparison: Unpacking similarities and differences to identify variation.</td><td>4. Sorting: Similar to stage 2 in Marton et al. (1992).</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">3. Contrasting and categorising: The 'pools of meaning' are contrasted and categories are generated with descriptions.</td><td>4. Grouping: The statements are sorted by similarities.</td><td rowspan="4">5. Contrasting and categorising: Similar to stage 3 in Marton et al. (1992).</td></tr>
<tr><td>5. Articulating: The essence of similarities is extracted, categorised and described.</td></tr>
<tr><td>6. Labelling: The categories are represented linguistically.</td></tr>
<tr><td>7. Contrasting: The categories are contrasted.</td></tr>
<tr><td>4. Reliability checking: The reliability is checked by having a portion of the data coded by independent researchers and the inter-coded reliability is calculated.</td><td></td><td>6. Reliability checking: Similar to stage 4 in Marton et al. (1992).</td></tr>
</table>

Appendix C2: Data analysis - samples of journal entries

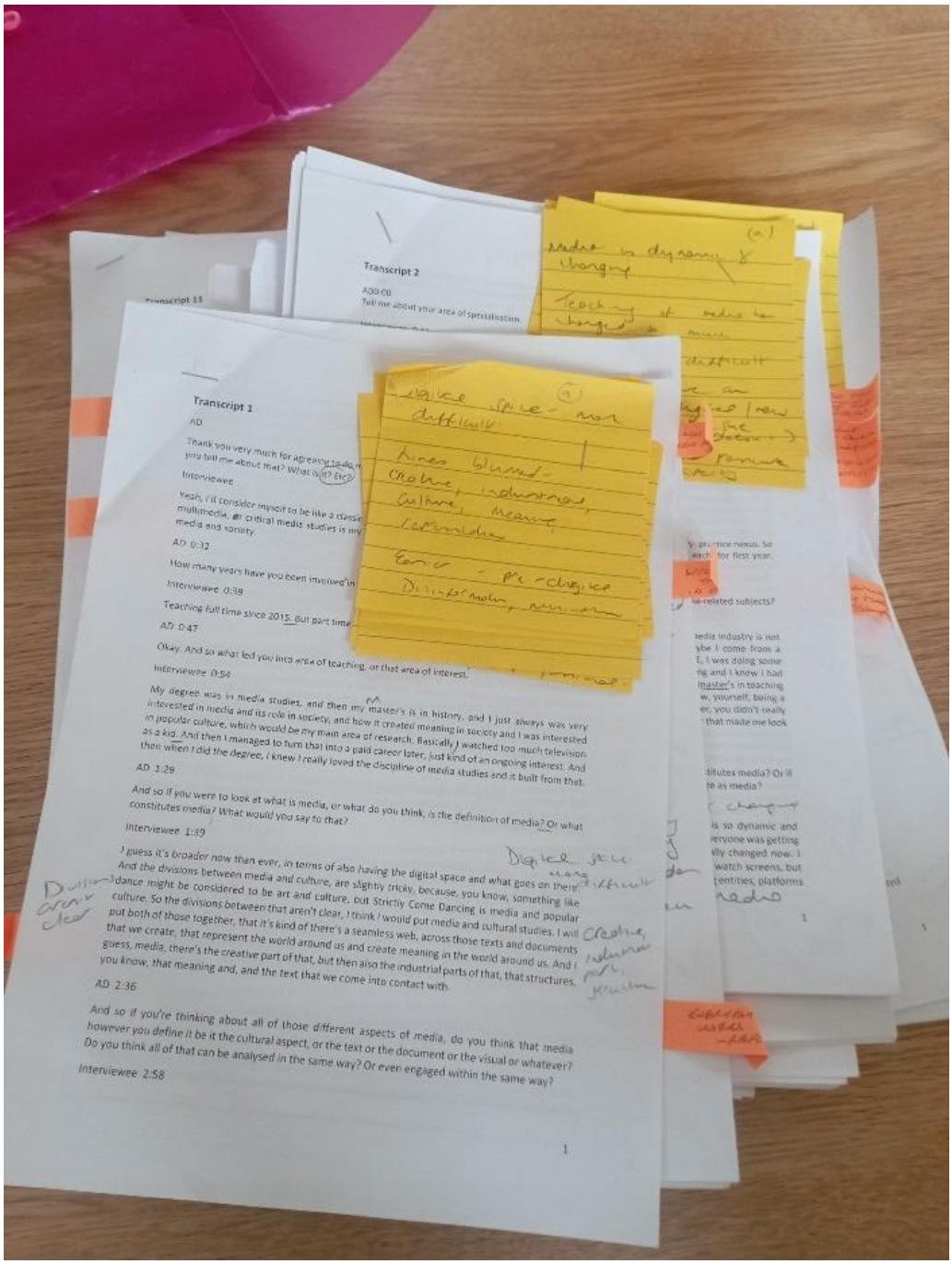
Samples of journal entries featuring contemporaneous notes on interviews and interviewee emphases.





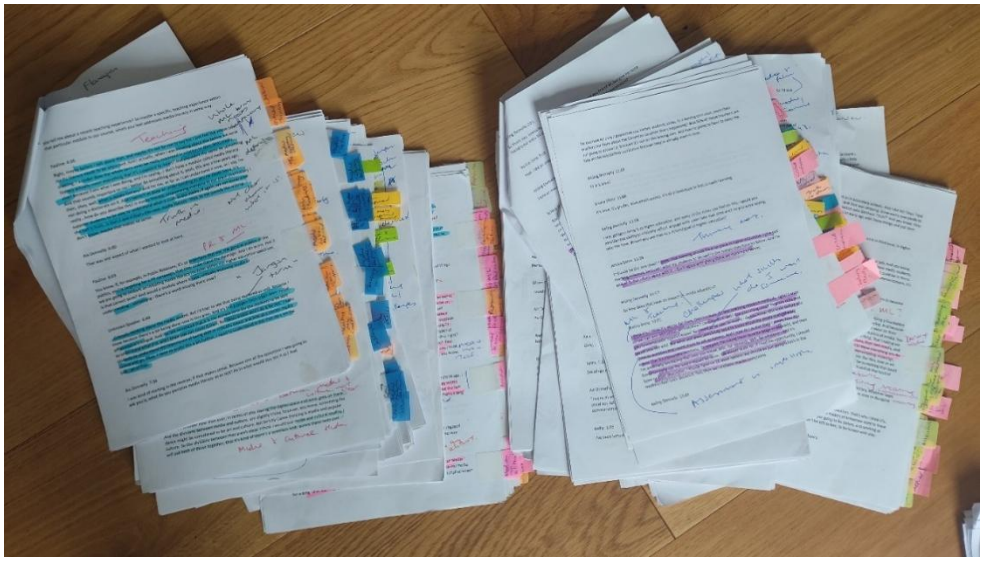
Appendix C3: Data analysis - transcript familiarisation and immersion

Examples of initial transcript familiarisation including summary notes highlighting relevant passages and pinpointing areas related to the two research questions.

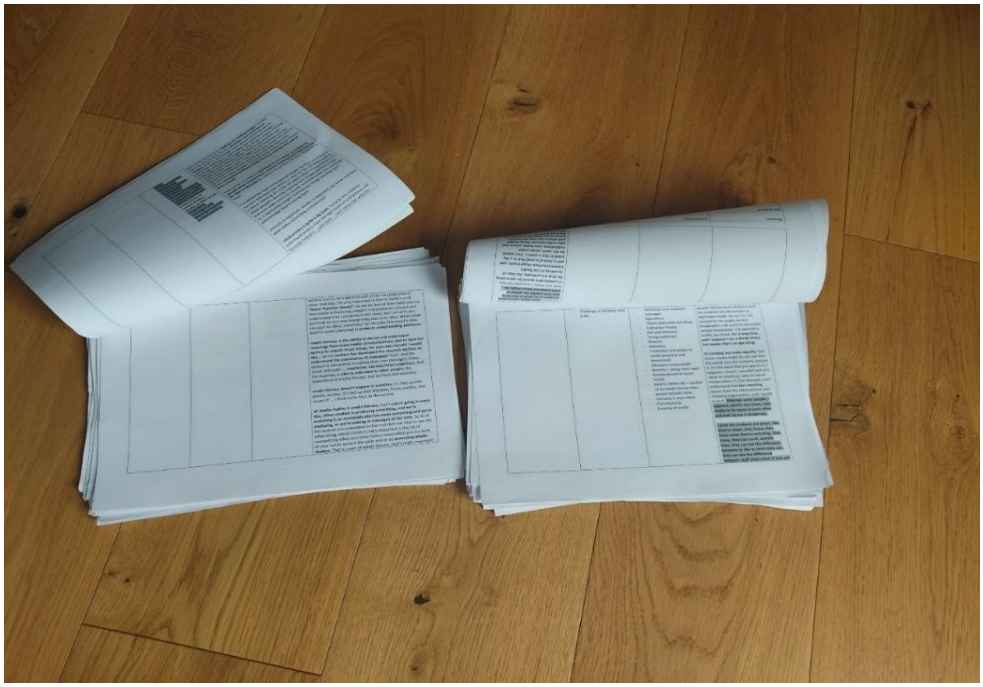


Appendix C4: Data analysis - manual data management/coding

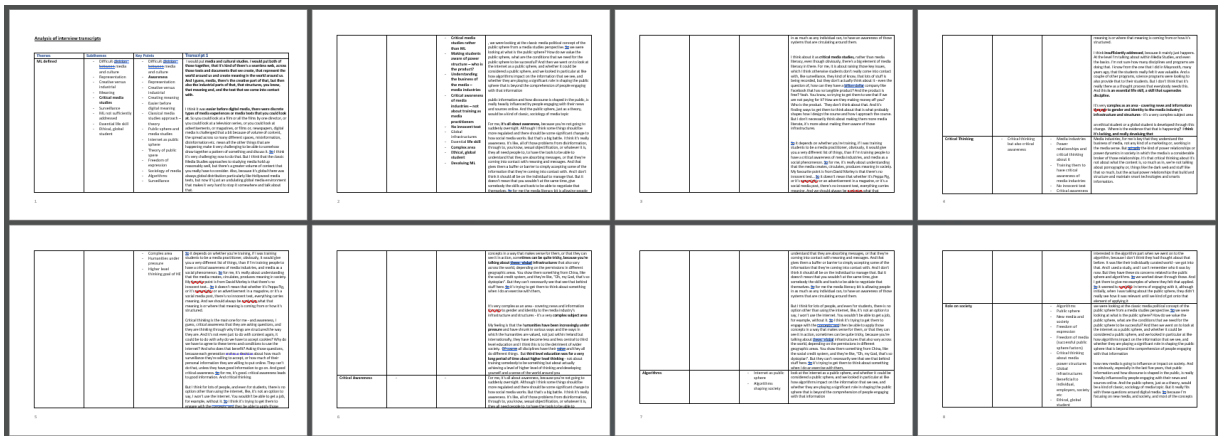
Each transcript was re-examined in detail. Labelling and handwritten notes were attached/included highlighting areas of relevancy to the research questions and key participant meanings.

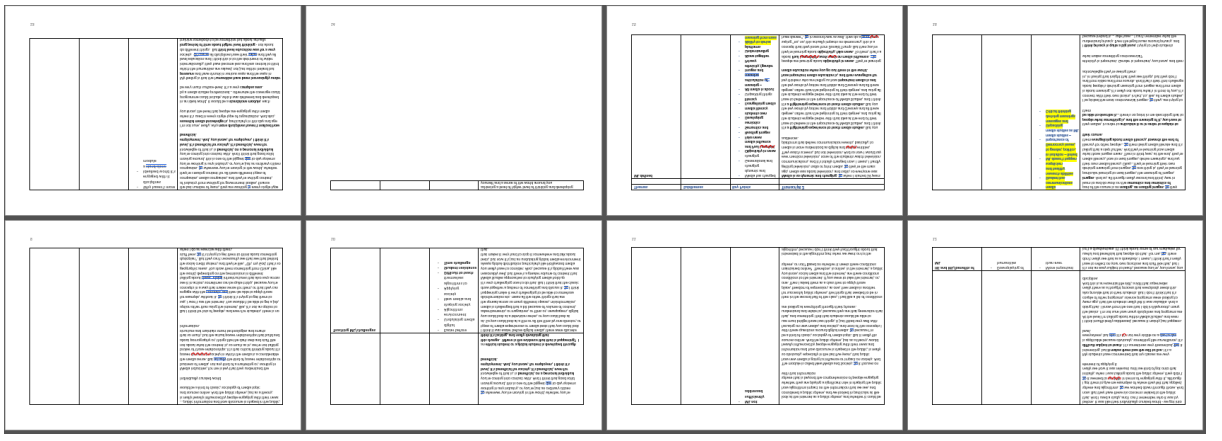


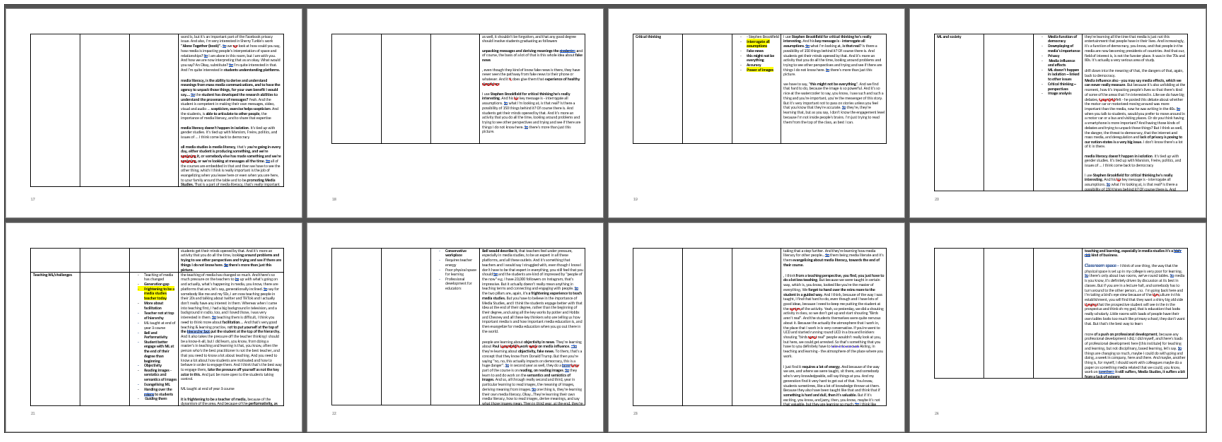
The transcript data was combined within a single document and examined again. Additional labelling and identification of key aspects were carried out.



All the transcripts were analysed and coded again, with over 76,000 words (321 pages of data) examined. Below is an example of the transcript coding which I undertook in table format, with relevant passages from participants, key meanings and summary notes arranged in columns.







The example below relates to the first research question i.e. lecturers' accounts of ML. It shows the initial mapping of variation across the transcripts and noting of areas of relevance to the research question.

Media Literacy and HE (Perceptions of)

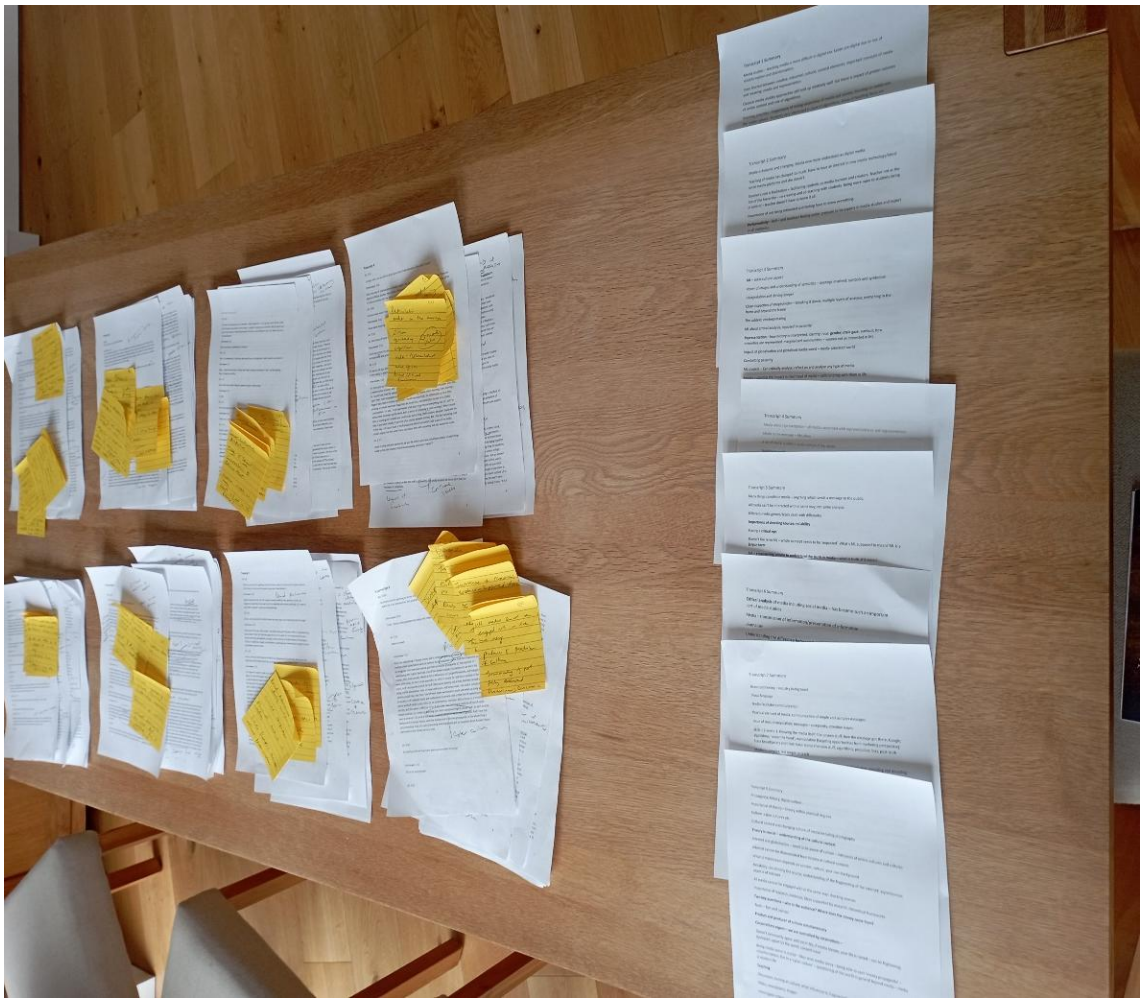
- **Views of ML/different interpretations of ML**
- **Different versions/accounts of ML**
- **Way ML is understood by interviewees**
- **Purpose of ML**
- **ML and outside world**
- **ML teaching/HE**

Key Themes from interviews	Associated Areas/Themes from interviews	Interviewee
ML more important than ever	Vital to society/more important than ever/crucial Need to 'evangelise' ML and importance of media understanding/awareness COVID crisis has emphasised importance of ML and media impact Students bring ML out into society/"ripple effect' 'Scary' world students are going out into/attention economy/fake news/misinformation/online 'bombardment' etc. World being 'shaped by media' Can't just be left to HE to embed ML Time of media transition/massive technological change and HE needs to adapt No 'threats' to becoming ML only opportunities/ML 'definitely works' (but not solution to all ills) ML not sufficiently addressed in HE/desirable goal of HE not sure 'desired' Big impact on society and democracy Needs to be in first year and onwards	[redacted]
Management buy-in/staff buy-in	PD/colleges need to 'invest in training' for staff 'Curated' apathy by colleges/culture of institutions/creating 'mini drones' Individual lecturers can only do so much Requires 'gear shift' in how people teach/assess Lecturers need to embrace technology and new media Difficult to teach Resourcing for guest speakers/outside experts HE slow to respond to change Needs top-down support Should be a standard course across subjects/"core to all modules' Complex to teach	[redacted]
	ML not a simple fix for all ills and a quick-fix solution offered by a module University now about specialisms/specialisation	
Applicability beyond media subjects	Can't understand why more disciplines don't embrace ML ML needs to be out of media/communications 'ghetto' Media-saturated world Should be standard course across subjects Corporate ethics Media ethics	[redacted]
Skills-based/technical aspect of HE	HE too jobs oriented/immediate job skill/industry oriented – questioning/critical thought needs embedment Curated' apathy by colleges/culture of institutions/creating 'mini drones' Importance of fact-checking and evidence-based research Analytical skills – understanding media environment and 'under the hood' of media e.g. data collection/algorithms/privacy etc. ML not sufficiently addressed in HE/desirable goal of HE not sure 'desired'	[redacted]

Appendix C5: Data analysis - continuing transcript analysis

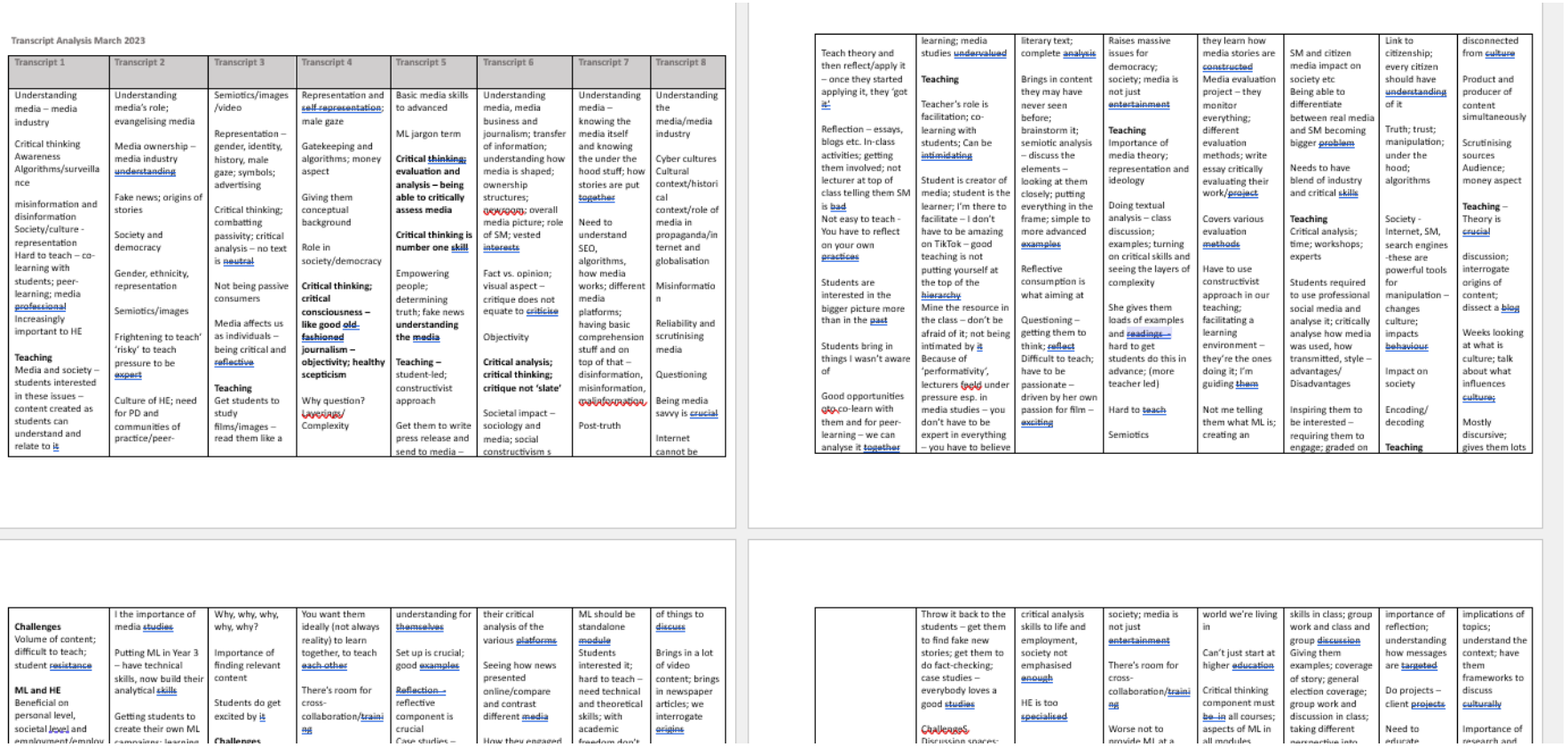
As well as looking at the entire collection of transcripts, I also re-examined the transcripts in batches. As part of this iterative process, the first eight transcripts were assessed for qualitative differences in lecturers' accounts of ML, followed by an analysis of the remainder of the transcripts. The transcripts were arranged spatially, Post-it labelling attached and handwritten summaries undertaken.

Additional typed summaries were also compiled (as shown to the right of the eight transcripts).



Appendix C6: Data analysis - iterative transcript coding

A table summarising the initial eight transcripts is shown below, with the same analysis and coding process repeated for all nineteen transcripts.



Transcript Analysis March 2023

Transcript 1	Transcript 2	Transcript 3	Transcript 4	Transcript 5	Transcript 6	Transcript 7	Transcript 8
Understanding media – media industry Critical thinking Awareness Algorithms/surveillance misinformation and disinformation Society/culture - representation Hard to teach – co-learning with students; peer-learning; media ~~professional~~ Increasingly important to HE **Teaching** Media and society – students interested in these issues – content created as students can understand and relate to it	Understanding media's role; evangelising media Media ownership – media industry ~~understanding~~ Fake news; origins of stories Society and democracy Gender, ethnicity, representation Semiotics/images Frightening to teach' 'risky' to teach pressure to be ~~expert~~ Culture of HE; need for PD and communities of practice/peer-	Semiotics/images /video Representation – gender, identity, history, male gaze; symbols; advertising Critical thinking; combatting passivity; critical analysis – no text is ~~neutral~~ Not being passive consumers Media affects us as individuals – being critical and ~~reflective~~ **Teaching** Get students to study films/images – read them like a	Representation and ~~self-representation~~; male gaze Gatekeeping and algorithms; money aspect Giving them conceptual background Role in society/democracy **Critical thinking; critical consciousness – like good ~~old-~~ fashioned journalism – objectivity; healthy scepticism** Why question? ~~Layerings~~/ Complexity	Basic media skills to advanced ML jargon term **Critical ~~thinking;~~ evaluation and analysis – being able to critically assess media** **Critical thinking is number one ~~skill~~** Empowering people; determining truth; fake news **understanding the ~~media~~** **Teaching –** student-led; constructivist approach Get them to write press release and send to media –	Understanding media, media business and journalism; transfer of information; understanding how media is shaped; ownership structures; ~~qqqqqqq~~; overall media picture; role of SM; vested ~~interests~~ Fact vs. opinion; visual aspect – critique does not equate to ~~criticise~~ Objectivity **Critical analysis; critical thinking; critique not 'slate'** Societal impact – sociology and media; social constructivism s	Understanding media – knowing the media itself and knowing the under the hood stuff; how stories are put ~~together~~ Need to understand SEO, algorithms, how media works; different media platforms; having basic comprehension stuff and on top of that – disinformation, misinformation, ~~qaiinformation~~ Post-truth	Understanding the media/media industry Cyber cultures Cultural context/historical context/role of media in propaganda/internet and globalisation Misinformation Reliability and scrutinising media Questioning Being media savvy is ~~crucial~~ Internet cannot be

Teach theory and then reflect/apply it – once they started applying it, they 'got it' Reflection – essays, blogs etc. In-class activities; getting them involved; not lecturer at top of class telling them SM is ~~bad~~ Not easy to teach - You have to reflect on your own ~~practices~~ Students are interested in the bigger picture more than in the ~~past~~ Students bring in things I wasn't aware of Good opportunities ~~qto~~ co-learn with them and for peer-learning – we can analyse it ~~together~~	learning; media studies ~~undervalued~~ **Teaching** Teacher's role is facilitation; co-learning with students; Can be ~~intimidating~~ Student is creator of media; student is the learner; I'm there to facilitate – I don't have to be amazing on TikTok – good teaching is not putting yourself at the top of the ~~hierarchy~~ Mine the resource in the class – don't be afraid of it; not being intimated by ~~it~~ Because of 'performativity', lecturers ~~(qqq~~ under pressure esp. in media studies – you don't have to be expert in everything – you have to believe	literary text; complete ~~analysis~~ Brings in content they may have never seen before; brainstorm it; semiotic analysis – discuss the elements – looking at them closely; putting everything in the frame; simple to more advanced ~~examples~~ Reflective consumption is what aiming at Questioning – getting them to think; ~~reflect~~ Difficult to teach; have to be passionate – driven by her own passion for film – ~~exciting~~	Raises massive issues for democracy; society; media is not just ~~entertainment~~ **Teaching** Importance of media theory; representation and ideology Doing textual analysis – class discussion; examples; turning on critical skills and seeing the layers of complexity She gives them loads of examples and ~~readings –~~ hard to get students do this in advance; (more teacher led) Hard to ~~teach~~ Semiotics	they learn how media stories are ~~constructed~~ Media evaluation project – they monitor everything; different evaluation methods; write essay critically evaluating their work/~~project~~ Covers various evaluation ~~methods~~ Have to use constructivist approach in our teaching; facilitating a learning environment – they're the ones doing it; I'm guiding ~~them~~ Not me telling them what ML is; creating an	SM and citizen media impact on society etc Being able to differentiate between real media and SM becoming bigger ~~problem~~ Needs to have blend of industry and critical ~~skills~~ **Teaching** Critical analysis; time; workshops; experts Students required to use professional social media and analyse it; critically analyse how media was used, how transmitted, style – advantages/ Disadvantages Inspiring them to be interested – requiring them to engage; graded on	Link to citizenship; every citizen should have ~~understanding~~ of it Truth; trust; manipulation; under the hood; algorithms Society - Internet, SM, search engines -these are powerful tools for manipulation – changes culture; impacts ~~behaviour~~ Impact on society Encoding/ decoding **Teaching**	disconnected from ~~culture~~ Product and producer of content simultaneously Scrutinising sources Audience; money aspect **Teaching** – Theory is ~~crucial~~ discussion; interrogate origins of content; dissect a ~~blog~~ Weeks looking at what is culture; talk about what influences ~~culture;~~ Mostly discursive; gives them lots

Challenges Volume of content; difficult to teach; student ~~resistance~~ **ML and HE** Beneficial on personal level, societal ~~level~~ and	I the importance of media ~~studies~~ Putting ML in Year 3 – have technical skills, now build their analytical ~~skills~~ Getting students to create their own ML	Why, why, why, why, why? Importance of finding relevant content Students do get excited by ~~it~~ **Challenges**	You want them ideally (not always reality) to learn together, to teach ~~each other~~ There's room for cross-collaboration/~~training~~	understanding for ~~themselves~~ Set up is crucial; good ~~examples~~ ~~Reflection –~~ reflective component is crucial Case studies –	their critical analysis of the various ~~platforms~~ Seeing how news presented online/compare and contrast different ~~media~~ How they engaged	ML should be standalone ~~module~~ Students interested it; hard to teach – need technical and theoretical skills; with academic freedom don't	of things to ~~discuss~~ Brings in a lot of video content; brings in newspaper articles; we interrogate ~~origins~~

	Throw it back to the students – get them to find fake new stories; get them to do fact-checking; case studies – everybody loves a good ~~studies~~ ~~Challenges~~ Discussion spaces;	critical analysis skills to life and employment, society not emphasised ~~enough~~ HE is too ~~specialised~~	society; media is not just ~~entertainment~~ There's room for cross-collaboration/~~training~~ Worse not to provide ML at a	world we're living in Can't just start at higher ~~education~~ Critical thinking component must ~~be in~~ all courses; aspects of ML in all modules	skills in class; group work and class and group ~~discussion~~ Giving them examples; coverage of story; general election coverage; group work and discussion in class; taking different	importance of reflection; understanding how messages are ~~targeted~~ Do projects – client ~~projects~~ Need to	implications of topics; understand the context; have them frameworks to discuss ~~culturally~~ Importance of

Examples are included below and overleaf of further iterative analysis and coding.

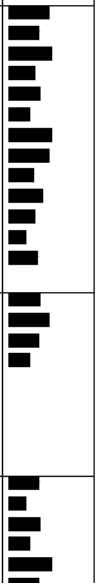
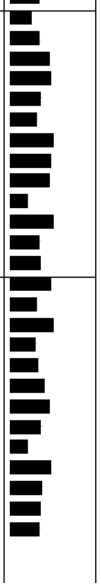
Key Concepts from interviews	Associated Areas	Interviewee
Representation/influence of media	Power of images/semiotics Power structures/gatekeeping/media 'elitism' 'No innocent text'/'no text is neutral' Stereotypes Constructed media messages Media ethics Creation of 'binaries' Cultivation theory Ethics Media privilege Affordances Tropes and codes What's visible and what's not	
Public sphere	Changing public sphere Traditional/legacy media versus online media Social media Role of public service broadcasting Rapidity of media change Role of influencers Participatory culture 'At heart of democracy'	
Critical media studies versus ML	Healthy scepticism Critical consciousness/critical reflectiveness/reflective consumption Media as 'entertainment' vs. media for analysis/interrogation	
	Critical thinking (not always the same as ML) Critical analysis skills/questioning 'why?' Critical awareness Creating 'educated conversation'/curiosity Textual analysis/multi-layer analysis 'Healthy scepticism' Critical doesn't mean 'slate' (Emer)	
Algorithms/cyber culture	Algorithmic censorship Manipulation vs marketing 'targeting opportunity' Data collection Digital rights/citizenship/intellectual property rights Ownership/authorship Online 'bombardment'	
Fact versus opinion	Truth versus fake news Post truth Trained/professional journalism versus blogging/opinion Fact-checking/source verification Misinformation/disinformation Informed opinion News framing/agenda Trust and truth 'Constructed' media messages Media ethics Cultivation theory Testing 'objective knowledge' 'Healthy scepticism'	
Understanding context	Cultural context/understanding socio-political context Democracy Citizenship	
	History of media/media theory 'Business' of media Mental map of media landscape Understanding global media culture Product and producer of culture Textual analysis	
Media production vs. media theory	Production and technical skills versus media analysis (balance of both) Over-emphasis on production Media discernment Editorial decision making Conscious consumption and ethical production/distribution Importance of media theory Product and producer of culture simultaneously	
Importance of ML/Benefits of ML	Beneficial to society, democracy, employment and individual – 'better citizens, making better judgments' Relevant to all subject areas/disciplines – 'media is everywhere'/ COVID effect/amplification/media as 'glue of society' Ideal as stand-alone module ML more important than ever/cultural effect Globalised world - 'ripple effect' of ML Evangelising ML Active rather than passive producers/consumers Well-rounded student/objective/critical skills/analytical skills/analysis of trust and	

Table 1 - ML Interpretations/accounts

Cultivating critical media awareness and informed media consumers, producers and citizens	• Understanding the constructed nature of media messages; the role, power and influence of media on 'representation' [Stuart Hall theory], culture, society and democracy; what and who is seen or not, and why?
Understanding the role and power of media, constructed messages and the media's influence on society and democracy	• Cultivating critical evaluation of media, media messages and sources; fostering healthy scepticism/media discernment; the importance of objectivity; interrogating assumptions • Understanding the media landscape, 'business' of media and role of professional journalism

Paragraph Summary of ML Definitions/Interpretations

ML criticality - cultivating critical media consciousness and informed media consumers, producers and citizens

Turning on the critical, disengaging passivity, fostering objectivity and embedding awareness of constructed media messages, and the influential role of media and the wider media industry on 'representation', culture and democracy, have been identified by media educators within Irish higher education as crucial media literacy skills.

Or alternatively…

Media discernment, reflective consumption and production, cultivating 'healthy scepticism' and an awareness of constructed media messages have been reinforced by Irish media educators as central to teaching media literacy in higher education. Key also is understanding the role, power and influence of media and the wider media industry on 'representation', culture and democracy/society.

Table 2 ML and Society

Importance of ML to democracy, society and individuals	• ML is more important than ever; media as 'DNA of modern citizenship'; ML benefits society and democracy but also students as human beings
Questioning sources/media messages/texts; healthy scepticism; fact-checking; critical thinking and analysis	• Concept of 'privilege' and who is represented in the media [or not] and why; social constructivism, media gate-keeping; SEO; algorithms; ethics etc. • Fact-checking; questioning; rise of fake news/post-truth; importance of critical thinking and reflective consumption and production; linked to employability skills; awareness of confirmation bias; manipulation; asking 'who' and 'why'?
Understanding media industry and environment; media ethics; media ownership; role of professional journalism	• Power structures/media ownership; professional journalism; understanding editorial decisions, agendas and news framing

Paragraph Summary of ML and Society

Media literacy is of increasing importance, not only in fostering critical evaluation of sources, media platforms and messages, but in benefitting society and democracy. Central to ML are critical thinking and questioning skills, embedding reflective consumption and production of media, fact-checking and an awareness of the important role of professional journalism.

Table 3 Teaching ML

Challenging, complex, overwhelming and even 'frightening to teach' due to speed of change, volume of content and number of platforms	• Speed of change; easier pre-digital; overwhelming media environment due to number of platforms, 'bombardment' with media messages/content etc.; need for educators to embrace technology; older media models may not fit; 'frightening' to teach media; generational gap issues
Takes time to teach ML as well as confidence, passion and flexibility	• ML is a 'fundamental skill' but takes time to develop and, increasingly, time to explain wider context and role of objective media to culture, society and democracy. ML, however, is not the overall 'solution' to issues of society, representation and democracy that it is sometimes considered to be
Issue of 'curated apathy', student resistance to theory and reluctance to question and objectively debate; potential for cynicism and division	• Student resistance to ML, media theory and questioning of media sources; students don't understand democracy, importance of objective media, wider context etc.; not enough embedment of ML at primary/second level; potential for cynicism of all media platforms/messages; divisive topics - treading carefully around topics and avoiding binaries • Lecturers must show willingness to embrace technology, confidence and a 'jazz-like', flexible approach; importance of communities of practice

Paragraph Summary of Teaching ML Challenges/Opportunities

Teaching media literacy within higher education is crucial. Embedding critical media skills, however, is imbued with complexity and becoming increasingly challenging, even 'frightening', due to the proliferation of media platforms, speed of technological change, lack of media literacy within earlier education, and student resistance to questioning media messages and sources. Countering 'curated apathy' takes time due to a lack of awareness among students of media and its relevance to democracy.

Table 4 Overlap between definitions of ML, perceptions of ML and society, and teaching ML

Key themes emerging…

- Importance of ML to democracy and society
- Critical evaluation of media messages and sources
- Understanding media industry and context
- ML is complex to teach, increasingly challenging but crucial

Key themes	Interpretations of ML	ML and Society	Teaching ML
Importance of ML to democracy and society ML is complex to teach, increasingly challenging but crucial	• Understanding the **constructed nature of media messages**; the role, power and influence of **media on 'representation', culture and society/democracy;** what and **who is seen or not, and why?**	• ML is **more important than ever; media as 'DNA of modern citizenship'**; ML **benefits society and democracy but also students as human beings** • Concept of '**privilege' and who is represented** in the media [or not] and why; social constructivism, **media gate-keeping; SEO; algorithms; ethics; etc.**	• **Student resistance to ML, media theory** and **questioning media sources; students don't understand democracy, importance of objective media, wider context etc.;** not enough embedment of ML at primary/second level; **potential for cynicism** of all media platforms/messages; **divisive topics** - treading carefully around topics and avoiding binaries • **ML, however, is not necessarily the overall**

Appendix C7: Data analysis - illustration of iterative journey

Below are some of the iterations undertaken in working towards describing the different ways in which media lecturers' accounted for ML. A similar iterative process was undertaken for the second research question regarding lecturers' accounts of ML teaching.

Conceptions of Media Literacy – Iterative Process

Various attempts are shown below in the iterative process towards describing the different ways lecturers' account for their perceptions of media literacy.

Research Question:

What are the qualitatively different ways that media lecturers in Irish HEIs conceptualise media literacy?

Or

What are the qualitative differences in media academics' accounts of media literacy in Irish HEIs?

First Attempt – February 18th 2023

ML as being aware of key media theories/concepts, having awareness of the fundamentals of the media and associated theories.

ML as possessing knowledge of the media industry, having a mental map of how the media sector operates, wider media environment and context, understanding the role of professional journalism, difference between social media and traditional media, ownership structures etc.

ML as developing vocational and employability skills and becoming better media producers, understanding and practically creating stories/media texts, understanding editorial decisions, storytelling, agendas and news framing; being able to distinguish between fact and opinion-based content.

ML as possessing critical awareness/critical thinking skills, applying relevant media theories, undertaking textual analysis and becoming active, analytical, and more 'discerning' consumers and producers of media by developing 'healthy scepticism' and questioning media sources/texts; appreciating the role of fact-checking, objectivity, ethics, informed debate, and the impact of algorithms etc.

ML as understanding the media's centrality to informed citizenship, democracy, culture and society, becoming media literacy 'evangelists' and reflective and responsible media 'prosumers' (producers/creators and consumers) who are fully aware of the role of media and constructiveness of media messages, the media's empowering capabilities and potential for misrepresentation, manipulation, misinformation, disinformation.

First Attempt – re-examined

ML as being aware of key media theories/concepts, having awareness of the fundamentals of the media and associated theories.

ML as possessing knowledge of the media industry, having a mental map of the media sector/context, understanding the role of professional journalism, difference between social media and traditional media, ownership structures etc.

ML as developing vocational and employability skills and becoming better media producers, understanding and practically creating stories/media texts, understanding editorial decisions, storytelling, agendas and news framing; being able to distinguish between fact and opinion-based content.

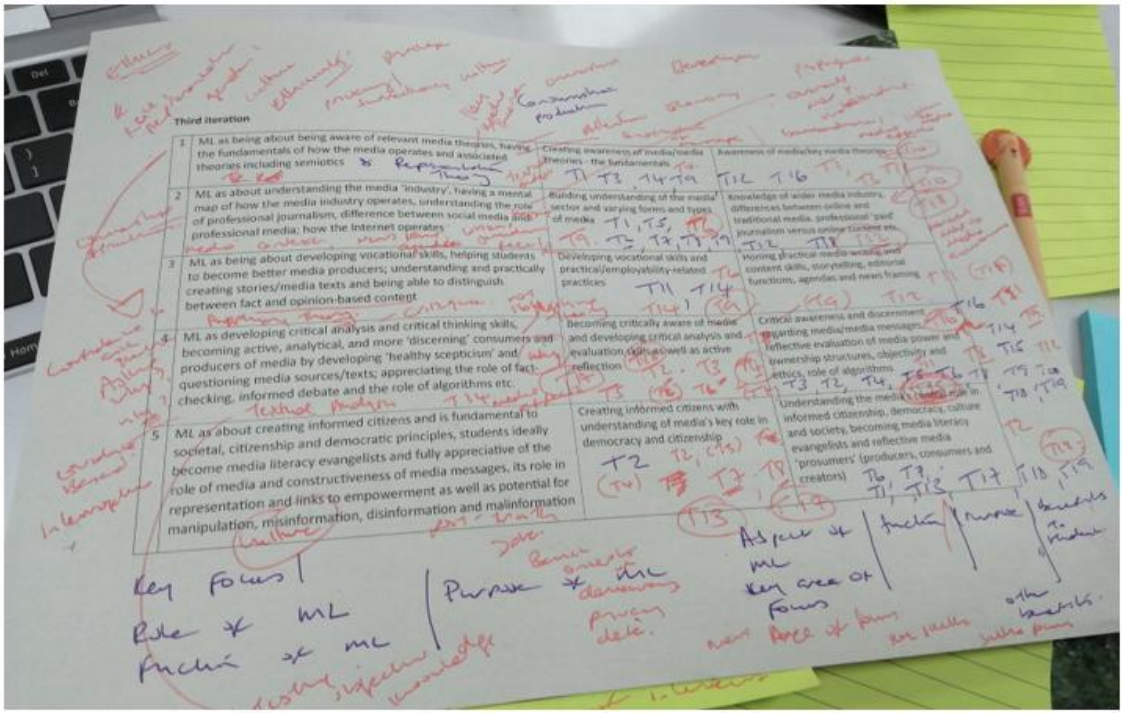
ML as possessing critical awareness/critical thinking skills, applying relevant media theories, undertaking textual analysis and becoming active, analytical, and more 'discerning' consumers and producers of media by developing 'healthy scepticism' and questioning media sources/texts; appreciating the role of fact-checking, objectivity, ethics, informed debate, and the impact of algorithms etc.

ML as understanding the media's centrality to informed citizenship, democracy, culture and society, becoming media literacy 'evangelists' and reflective and responsible media 'prosumers' (producers/creators and consumers) who are fully aware of the role of media and constructiveness of media messages, the media's empowering capabilities and potential for misrepresentation, manipulation, misinformation, disinformation.

Second Attempt March 1st 2023

Conception		Summary of Conception
1	ML as being aware of key media theories/concepts, having awareness of the fundamentals of the media and associated theories such as semiotics, Representation Theory, Reception Theory, Male Gaze, Culture Industry etc.	Having awareness of media/key media theories - the fundamentals
2	ML as possessing knowledge of the media industry, having a mental map of how the media sector operates, wider media environment and context, understanding the role of professional journalism, difference between social media and traditional media, ownership structures etc.	Understanding the media sector and varying forms and types of media
3	ML as developing vocational and employability skills and becoming better media producers, understanding and practically creating stories/media texts, understanding editorial decisions, storytelling, agendas and news framing; being able to distinguish between fact and opinion-based content.	Developing vocational skills and practical/employability-related practices and abilities
4	ML as possessing critical awareness/critical thinking skills, applying relevant theories, undertaking textual analysis and becoming active, analytical, and more 'discerning' consumers and producers of media by developing 'healthy scepticism' and questioning media sources/texts; appreciating the role of fact-checking, objectivity, ethics, informed debate and impact of algorithms etc.	Being critically aware and discerning of media/media texts/sources/messages; developing critical analysis and evaluation skills as well as active reflection; being able to apply theories
5	ML as understanding the media's centrality to informed citizenship, democracy, culture and society, becoming media literacy 'evangelists' and reflective and responsible media 'prosumers' (producers/creators and consumers) who are fully aware of the role of media and constructiveness of media messages, as well as the media's empowerment capabilities and potential for misrepresentation, manipulation, misinformation, disinformation.	Understanding media's key role in informed citizenship with links to democracy, citizenship, culture and society; countering misrepresentation, misinformation, disinformation, fake news etc.

Fourth Attempt – checking back over all interview transcripts and looking again at the emerging categories - March 20th 2023



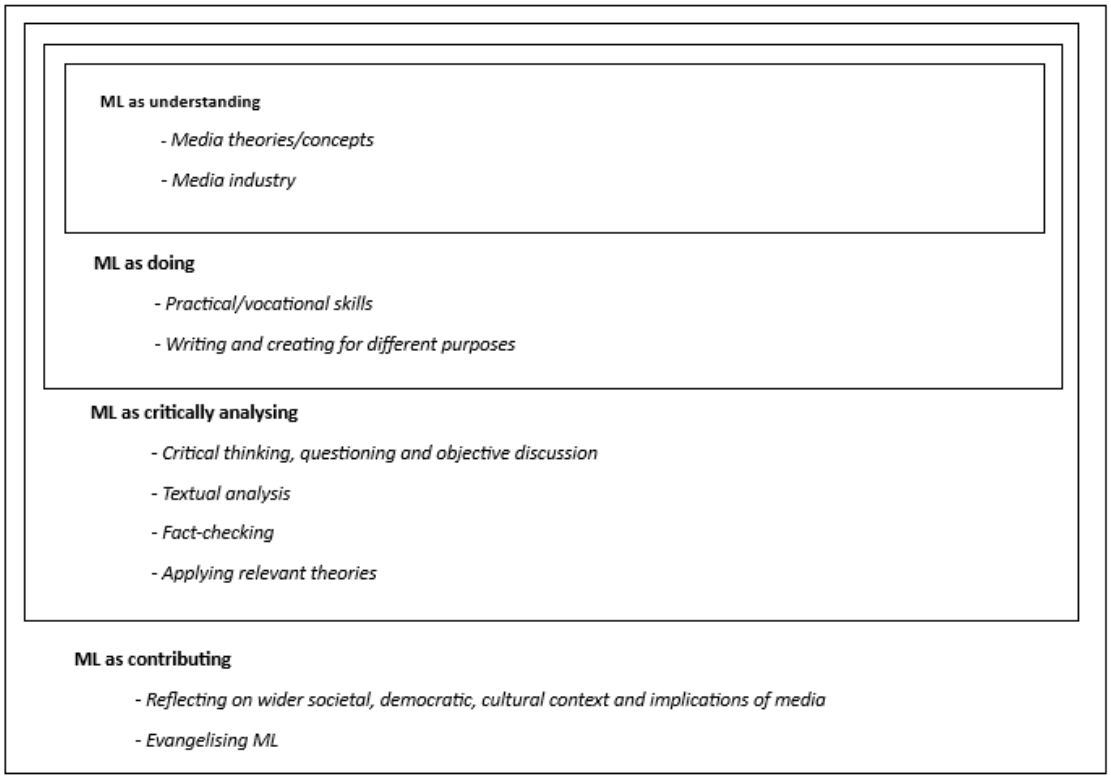
Eighth Attempt - April 10th 2023

Conception		Interview Transcript	Main areas of focus	Purpose/function of ML	ML benefits
1	ML as being aware of key media theories and concepts	T1, T3, T4, **T10,** T11	Key media theories and fundamental media concepts	Consciousness of principles and theories underpinning media and media messages	Awareness of media and its effects; knowledge of key principles underpinning media
2	ML as understanding the media sector/industry	**T6, T10, T12, T18,** T9	Different media types/forms/platforms etc.; overall media context/environment	Understanding the media sector and different channels, platforms, types etc.	Wider knowledge of the media industry - understanding the wider media sector/context beyond social media
3	ML as developing vocational and practical/employability skills	**T19, T18,** T6, T11, T12, T14	Media skills required for industry	Employability skills - being 'able to hit the ground running' professionally	More skilled media practitioners and informed/knowledgeable media creators/consumers; enhanced employability
4	ML as critically analysing and evaluating media	**T4, T8, T9, T17, T18, T15, T16, T19** T2, T3, T5, T6	Critical thinking and objectively discussing media; textual analysis; fact-checking; applying relevant theories	Developing critical thinking and media analysis skills	More analytical media 'prosumers'; critically considering the media's role and responsibilities
5	ML as understanding the media's key role in informed citizenship, its links to democracy, culture, identity and society	**T7, T8, T13, T17, T18, 19,** T2	Reflecting on the wider societal, democratic, and cultural context and implications of media	Developing new understandings/consideration of the media's civic role; reflecting about themselves and the world around them; engaging in more informed debate	New and deeper understanding of the media's role in society/democracy/culture; evangelising media literacy; new way of seeing media and its wider role and effects

Ninth Attempt - April 12th 2023

Conception		Interview Transcript	Main areas of focus	Purpose/function of ML	ML benefits
1	ML as being aware of the overall media industry and key media theories	T1, **T3**, T4, **T6, T10, T11, T12, T18, T19**	Key media theories/concepts, different types of media forms/platforms/types and the overall media environment	Consciousness of principles and theories underpinning media and media messages, and having a mental map of the media sector	Awareness of the media industry and what constitutes media; knowledge of key principles underpinning media/media effects; understanding the wider media sector/context beyond social media
2	ML as developing vocational and practical/employability skills	**T3, T9, T12, T14, T19,** T18, T6, T11	Media skills required for industry; differences between content, news writing and professional journalism versus social media/blogging/vlogging etc.; fact versus opinion	Employability skills - being 'able to hit the ground running' professionally	More skilled media practitioners and informed/knowledgeable media creators/consumers; enhanced employability
3	ML as critically analysing and evaluating media	**T1, T2, T3, T4, T5,** T6, **T8, T9, T10, T11, T15, T17, T18**	Critical thinking and objectively discussing media; textual analysis; fact-checking; applying relevant theories	Developing critical thinking and media analysis skills	More analytical media 'prosumers'; critically considering the media's role and responsibilities
4	ML as understanding the media's key role in citizenship and links to democracy, culture, identity and society	**T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T8, T9, T10, T11, T13, T14, T16, T17, T18,** T19	Reflecting on the wider societal, democratic, and cultural context and implications of media	Developing new understandings/consideration of the media's civic role; reflecting about themselves and the world around them; engaging in more informed debate	New and deeper understanding of the media's role in society/democracy/culture; evangelising media literacy; new way of seeing media and its wider role and effects

Tenth Attempt - April 11th 2023 – emerging categories of description



Structural and Referential Aspects

	Referential Aspects		
Structural Aspect	*Awareness /Understanding*	*Critical Reflection /Discernment*	*Contribute/ Change*
Self	1		
Industry	2	3	
Society			4

Or

	Referential Aspects		
Structural Aspect	*Awareness /Understanding*	*Critical Reflection /Discernment*	*Contribute/ Change*
Inward	1		
Outward	2	3	
			4

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