

A Deeper Sense of Literacy

Curriculum-Driven Approaches to Media Literacy in the K-12 Classroom

CYNTHIA L. SCHEIBE

Ithaca College

Media literacy can be used effectively as a pedagogical approach for teaching core content across the K-12 curriculum, thus meeting the needs of both teachers and students by promoting critical thinking, communication, and technology skills. This article focuses on the work of Project Look Sharp at Ithaca College, a media literacy initiative working primarily with school districts in upstate New York. Basic principles and best practices for using a curriculum-driven approach are described, with specific examples from social studies, English/language arts, math, science, health, and art, along with methods of assessment used to address effectiveness in the classroom.

Keywords: media literacy; critical thinking; curriculum; pedagogy

One hundred elementary school students are chattering loudly as they walk back up the snowy hill to their school, coming from the local movie theater where they have just been treated to a special holiday showing of the movie *Antz*. The children are not just excited about seeing the movie; they have spent the past 2 weeks in their science class learning about ants and other insects, and now they are calling out examples of ways in which the movie misrepresented true ants. "Ants don't have teeth!" calls one boy. "Who were all those boy ants?" a girl asks. "I thought almost all ants were girls!" Her teacher nods and confirms that nearly all soldier and worker ants are sterile females.

Back in their classrooms, the students and teachers list the ways in which the ants were portrayed correctly (with six legs, three body segments, living in tunneled communities, carrying large loads) and incorrectly (talking, wearing clothes, with white eyes, etc.). The teachers take time to correct any misperceptions and to reinforce accurate information and then lead a discussion about why the moviemakers showed ants in ways that were not true. "Because they didn't know any better?" proposes one girl. "Because they wanted them to look like people!" suggests another. "It would be boring if they couldn't talk and just ran around like ants!"

AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 48 No. 1, September 2004 60-68

DOI: 10.1177/0002764204267251

© 2004 Sage Publications

This type of curriculum-driven approach to media literacy is at the heart of our work with K-12 teachers at Project Look Sharp, a collaborative initiative of the teacher education, psychology, and communications programs at Ithaca College. As many theorists have noted (e.g., Hobbs, 1997), media literacy is a logical extension of traditional literacy: learning to “read” visual and audiovisual messages as well as text-based ones, recognizing the basic “language” used in each media form, being able to judge the credibility and accuracy of information presented in different formats, evaluating the “author’s” intent and meaning, appreciating the techniques used to persuade and convey emotion, and being able to communicate effectively through different media forms. Media literacy, then, incorporates many elements from multiple literacies that are already central to today’s education, including information literacy, computer literacy, scientific literacy, and cultural literacy. In addition, media literacy builds critical-thinking, communication, and technology skills and is an effective way to address different learning styles and an appreciation for multiple perspectives.

Before building media literacy into a curriculum unit, it is essential for teachers to have some basic training in media literacy theory and analysis (through staff development workshops and trainings). Project Look Sharp encourages teachers to weave the core elements of media literacy into their teaching practice early in the school year (see Best Practices below). We then work directly with individual teachers (or teams of teachers) to develop unique media literacy lessons that will help teach core content required by their districts and the state. We always start with core content (rather than the media literacy aspects), keeping in mind the teacher’s own goals and needs, with a focus on basic learning standards for their grade and curriculum area.

Sometimes we are asked by school administrators to develop a series of lessons or resources to address a particular issue or need. For example, the second-grade social studies curriculum in New York State includes teaching about rural, urban, and suburban communities, and teachers were having a hard time conveying those concepts to 7- and 8-year-old children. Working with the teachers, we developed a series of lessons based on collective reading of historical pictures and short clips from television shows reflecting the three types of communities. Students from rural, urban, and suburban elementary schools then produced digital videos about their own communities and shared them with classes from the other schools. Students were surprised to find that there were many similarities in their videos (they all included fire stations, for example), and that some of the stereotypes they held about different types of communities were not true. Although this was a great deal of work, the unit went far beyond simply teaching the desired social studies and media literacy lessons by building (or reinforcing) a host of other social and organizational skills.

This approach has been surprisingly effective, not just in increasing the students’ interest in a particular topic but also in deepening their understanding of the information itself. Teachers who gave a test about insects following the *Antz*

movie found that students performed best on questions that related to the discussion of accuracy in the movie (e.g., the physical characteristics of insects), and that even 6 months later—at the end of the school year—most students remembered that information accurately.

By emphasizing media literacy as a pedagogical approach rather than a separate content or skill area, we have been able to help teachers multitask. We have also found that once teachers have developed an awareness themselves of the basic concepts and practices of media literacy, they begin to see opportunities for incorporating media literacy into their classrooms on an ongoing basis. For example, teachers whose classes were going to see *Antz* took a few minutes to explain the concept of “product placements” and told the students that they would be seeing some product placements in the film. When the first bottle of Pepsi appeared in the scene of Insectopia, there was a shout from the children in the audience—“Product placement!”—and students continued to identify product placements in videos and other media for the remainder of the school year.

In using a curriculum-driven approach, teachers sometimes take a narrow focus for a particular topic or lesson (e.g., linking current advertising appeals to a sixth-grade unit on Greek myths) or weave media literacy into ongoing activities in their classrooms (e.g., in a weekly discussion of current events). Sometimes media literacy is used to link several different parts of the curriculum together (e.g., investigating local history and literature through examining original documents at a local museum). And sometimes the production aspect of media literacy is used creatively to convey information to parents and administrators (e.g., fourth-grade students’ producing a video to illustrate a typical school day for their parents to watch at open house).

This, of course, is not the only way to approach media literacy education. Students benefit greatly from specific lessons or courses focusing solely on media literacy, media production, and other media-related issues. But our experience has shown that this is rarely possible in the public school system, especially with the increasing focus on tests and a “back to basics” approach. For many teachers, finding even a few days to devote to media literacy is problematic; they are already swamped with core-content requirements they must teach. Even with a growing emphasis on technology skills and critical thinking, there are still only seven states that mandate media literacy as a separate strand in their state standards (Baker, 2004), and even those states have had difficulty grappling with how to assess media literacy as part of standardized state testing.

Kubey and Baker (2000) have noted, however, that nearly all states do refer to aspects of media literacy education as part of the mandated state standards, although they do not typically use the phrase *media literacy*. In New York, for example, media literacy is clearly reflected in requirements that students “evaluate importance, reliability and credibility of evidence” (Social Studies Standard 1, No. 4) and “comprehend, interpret and critique texts in every medium” (English Standard 2, No. 1). In California, social studies standards for Grades 9 through 12 specifically refer to evaluating “the role of electronic, broadcast,

print media, and the Internet as means of communication in American politics” and “how public officials use the media to communicate with the citizenry and to shape public opinion” (Kubey & Baker, 2000, p. 9). Many states include specific references to media issues in their health standards, especially related to tobacco and alcohol use, nutrition, and body image.

In taking a curriculum-driven approach to media literacy integration, it is crucial to explicitly lay out these connections between media literacy and state or district learning standards. Teachers then feel more comfortable about taking class time to teach the basics of media literacy and to weave a media literacy approach into their overall teaching practice. Media literacy can also be used to develop “parallel tasks” for students to build and practice their skills in analyzing information from different sources, listening and taking notes, and supporting their opinions with evidence in written essays—all of which are key components in standardized testing.

BEST PRACTICES FOR USING MEDIA LITERACY IN THE K-12 CLASSROOM

Various writers have described key concepts of media literacy (e.g., Hobbs, 1997) and basic questions to ask about any media message (e.g., Thoman, 1999). We have found the following set of questions to work well with students from elementary school through college:

1. Who made—and who sponsored—this message, and what is their purpose?
2. Who is the target audience and how is the message specifically tailored to that audience?
3. What are the different techniques used to inform, persuade, entertain, and attract attention?
4. What messages are communicated (and/or implied) about certain people, places, events, behaviors, lifestyles, and so forth?
5. How current, accurate, and credible is the information in this message?
6. What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

Introducing these questions at the beginning of the school year as standard practice for evaluating any information or image that is part of the classroom experience promotes general critical-thinking and analysis skills. Other best practices include the following:

- Beginning the school year or the exploration of a new unit by developing an *information plan* in consultation with the students. What types of media and other information sources will the class be using? Where could students go for information on a particular topic, and what might be the strengths and weaknesses of each source? This overlays media literacy questions on the typical K-W-L pedagogical approach to teaching a new topic: What do you already *know* about this topic and where did you learn about it? What do you *want* to know, and where could you find

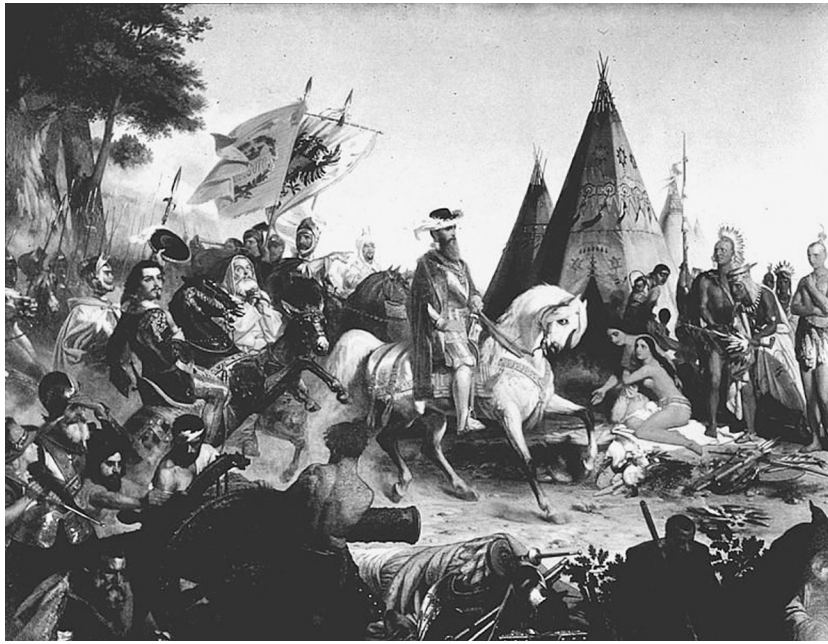


Figure 1: DeSoto's *Discovery of the Mississippi*, painted by William H. Powell. The event occurred in 1541; the painting was commissioned by Congress in 1847.

SOURCE: Retrieved from http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/rotunda/discovery_mississippi.htm

out about it? Reflecting back at the end of the unit, what did you *learn*, and what sources were most (and least) useful?

- Encouraging students to pay attention to both print and visual elements in media sources, noting information that can be learned from the images themselves. This includes, of course, attending to the images in their textbooks. The painting of DeSoto's *Discovery of the Mississippi* shown in Figure 1, for example, is often included in history texts at both the elementary and secondary levels and makes for a fascinating collective reading by students in history or art classes. (Which one is DeSoto, and how do you know? What makes him seem powerful? How are the Native Americans portrayed? Who commissioned the painting, and why? Who painted it, and how did they know about the events that took place?)
- For any media source (including textbooks, videos, and Web sites), making sure the students know who wrote or produced it and when it was produced or published. If appropriate, discuss the implications for its usefulness in your current exploration. (What perspectives might be included or left out? What information might be out of date?)
- Training students to learn from videos (and other traditionally entertaining forms of media) in the same way that they learn from teachers, books, and other sources. When showing videos or films in the classroom, show only short segments at a time rather than the full film without interruption, leaving the lights on—if possible—to facilitate active viewing and discussion. Before showing a video, let the students know what things they should be looking and listening for. If appropriate, encourage students to take notes and to raise their hands during a video if they do not understand something they saw or heard.

- Building elements of media production into the classroom experience by encouraging students to scan or download images into reports and term papers, making sure that they use images as part of the research process by including captions and citing the appropriate sources.
- providing options for individual or small group presentations such as using PowerPoint, audio or videotape, or desktop publishing.
- emphasizing an awareness of the six media literacy questions as part of the production process (e.g., What is *your* purpose? Who is *your* target audience? What information will *you* leave out, and how will that bias *your* message?).

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR CURRICULUM INTEGRATION

In working with a range of teachers and curriculum areas, we have also developed 12 basic principles for integrating media literacy and critical thinking into the K-12 curriculum (Scheibe & Rogow, 2004). Discussions of 4 of these principles follow.

Identify erroneous beliefs about a topic fostered by media content. This is particularly relevant to curricular areas that emphasize “facts,” such as science and social studies. Even young students bring existing assumptions and expectations to the classroom situation, and it is critical to examine those assumptions with the students to correct misperceptions and identify the media sources involved. Many adults, for example, believe that tarantulas are deadly or that lemmings follow each other blindly and commit mass suicide by jumping off cliffs into the sea. Both of these erroneous beliefs have been reinforced by the media, such as the 1957 Disney movie *White Wilderness* that showed lemmings falling off cliffs into the sea (they were actually herded off the cliffs by the production crew off camera; see <http://www.snopes.com/disney/films/lemmings.htm>).

Develop an awareness of issues of credibility and bias in the media. This is critical in evaluating how any information is presented and has increased in importance with the rise of the Internet as the dominant source of information students now use in preparing papers and reports. It also applies to math, especially with respect to media reports of statistics (particularly in misleading graphs in advertisements). Although math teachers already emphasize the importance of having both the x-axis and y-axis correctly labeled, for example, a media literacy approach would go beyond that to ask why those producing the graph (or reporting the statistics) would leave out such important information.

Compare the ways different media present information about a topic. Many English/language arts teachers have students compare the same story or play when presented in different media formats or by different directors. Approaching this from a media literacy perspective, the teacher might ask the basic six

questions about each presentation, comparing the purposes and target audiences of each and identifying what is left out—and what is added—in each case and why. The same principle can be applied easily to the study of current events at nearly any grade level. Instead of having students cut out newspaper articles reporting three different events, for example, a teacher could have students identify *one* event that is reported in three different sources (e.g., English language versions of newspapers from different countries). The resulting report about the event would then draw from all three sources and could include an analysis of how the three sources differed and why.

Use media as an assessment tool. There are a number of ways to use media as part of authentic assessment at the end of a curriculum unit. For example, students can be shown an advertisement, a news article, or a short video clip and asked to identify information that is accurate (or inaccurate) in what they see (e.g., showing a clip from the movie *Twister* following a unit on tornadoes or a news report on the results of a political poll following a unit on statistics). Students can also work in small groups to produce their own media messages (e.g., a newspaper article, an advertisement, a digital video) illustrating their knowledge and/or opinion on a topic.

RESOURCES AND CURRICULUM MATERIALS

There are many excellent media literacy resources and materials that can be used within the context of teaching core content in K-12 education. Some media literacy curricula are designed with clear links to many subject areas, such as *Assignment: Media Literacy*, which was developed in line with Maryland state learning standards and features connections to language arts, social studies, math, health, and the arts (Hobbs, 2000). Other materials are excellent resources when using a media literacy approach to a specific subject area, such as *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (Carnes, 1995). There are several good Web analysis resources. The two we have found most useful for teachers and librarians are both online: Canada's Web-awareness site (http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/special_initiatives/web_awareness/) and Alan November's site (<http://www.anovember.com/infolit/index.html>). One outstanding resource for curriculum-driven media literacy lesson plans and ideas is Frank Baker's *Media Literacy Clearinghouse* Web site (<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/>).

Project Look Sharp has recently begun developing a series of media literacy kits that take a curriculum-driven approach. The first of these kits, *Media Construction of War: A Critical Reading of History* (Sperry, 2003), uses slides, print, and video materials to teach core historical information about the Vietnam War, the Gulf War of 1991, and the War in Afghanistan following Sept. 11, 2001. Figure 2 shows the cover of the kit with 3 of the 49 *Newsweek* magazine covers that make up the bulk of this curriculum. After students read short histories of each

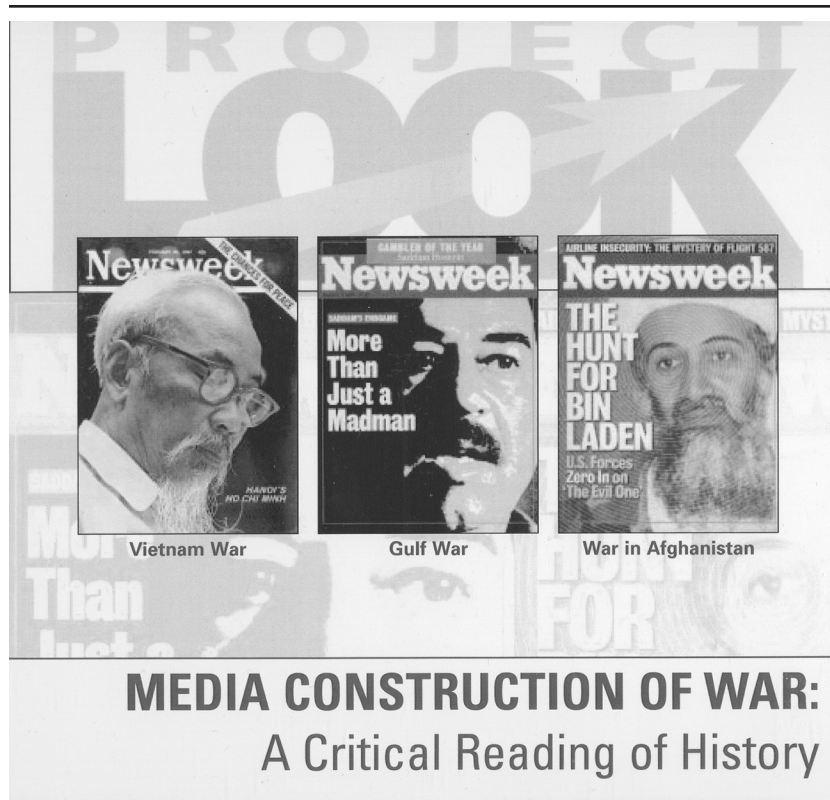


Figure 2: Cover of *Media Construction of War: A Critical Reading of History*, featuring *Newsweek* magazine covers from the Vietnam War, the Gulf War of 1991, and the War in Afghanistan following Sept. 11, 2001.

SOURCE: Sperry, 2003.

war, teachers lead collective readings of each image, discussing the overt and implied messages in each and relating the images back to core content that is part of their history curriculum. Among the multiple assessments included in the kit, students are asked to compare these three images of the opposition leaders during each war, discussing who each figure was and how each is portrayed by *Newsweek*.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Project Look Sharp has begun conducting empirical studies of the effectiveness of media literacy integration using this type of curriculum-driven approach (reported elsewhere). Some of these studies involve pretest/posttest designs collecting data directly from the students, and some involve assessments of

student-produced work. From a program evaluation standpoint, however, we have found it most useful to solicit qualitative feedback from the teachers themselves. They repeatedly say that media literacy lessons evoke active participation on the part of students, especially students who are nontraditional learners or disenfranchised for other reasons. Teachers also report that after adopting a media literacy approach to teach specific core content, they gradually find themselves weaving media literacy into other aspects of their pedagogy. As one teacher put it, "Oh, I see. You're trying to get us to change teaching practice!"

We also sometimes send home questionnaires to parents of students who have participated in a media literacy lesson or unit to assess what we call the "trickle up" effect—when students come home and talk about what they have learned and even change their behaviors related to media issues. Some parents have said that the "media literacy stuff" is the only thing their child has talked about related to school all year; many say their children raise media literacy questions when they are watching television or reading newspapers at home.

We believe that it is this ability for media literacy to empower students in so many ways that, in the end, will lead to its growth and stability in K-12 education. By meeting the needs of teachers and administrators, of parents, and of the students themselves, we can indeed foster a deeper sense of literacy in our children.

REFERENCES

- Baker, F. (2004). State standards. *Media literacy clearinghouse*. Retrieved February 24, 2004, from <http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/statelit.htm>
- Carnes, M. C. (Ed.). (1995). *Past imperfect: History according to the movies*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Hobbs, R. (1997). Expanding the concept of literacy. In R. Kubey (Ed.), *Media literacy in the information age* (pp. 163-183). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Hobbs, R. (2000). *Assignment: Media literacy*. Bethesda, MD: Discovery Communications.
- Kubey, R., & Baker, F. (2000). Has media literacy found a curricular foothold? *Telemedium, The Journal of Media Literacy*, 46(Spring), 8-9, 30.
- Scheibe, C., & Rogow, F. (2004). *12 basic principles for incorporating media literacy and critical thinking into any curriculum* (2nd ed.). Ithaca, NY: Project Look Sharp—Ithaca College.
- Sperry, C. (2003). *Media construction of war: A critical reading of history*. Ithaca, NY: Project Look Sharp—Ithaca College.
- Thoman, E. (1999). Skills and strategies for media education. *Educational Leadership*, 46(February), 50-54.

CYNTHIA L. SCHEIBE, Ph.D., is an associate professor in developmental psychology at Ithaca College. She is the director of the Center for Research on the Effects of Television, which she founded with John Condry at Cornell University in 1983. She is also the executive director of Project Look Sharp, a media literacy initiative of Ithaca College, providing support, resources, and training for K-12 teachers and support staff to integrate media literacy and critical thinking across the curriculum.