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THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

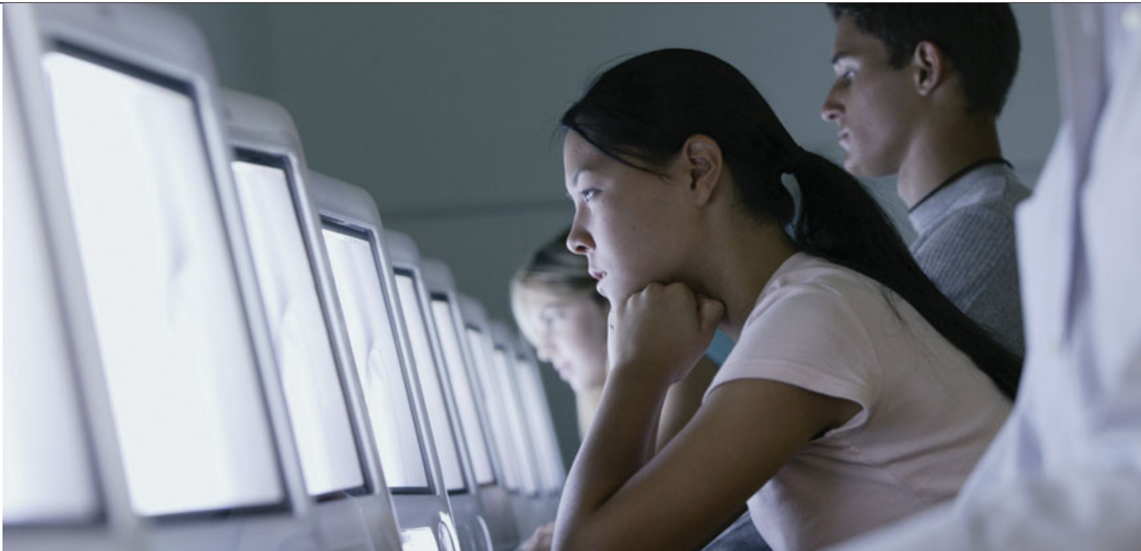
Teaching media literacy, core content, and essential skills for a healthy democracy.

At the end of last year, one of my 10th-grade students commented that our English/global-studies class had been very difficult for her. It had led her to question everything and lose her idealistic innocence—but she was grateful because she felt that she now had a more accurate view of reality and was prepared to make the world a better place. She was followed by a self-described cynic, who said that the practice of critical thinking had the opposite effect on her—it forced her to reject the simplistic notion that everything is screwed up and there is nothing you can do about it. She said the power of rigorous, informed, and reasoned thought could help her to identify better and worse decisions. I beamed, because both these students were describing the impact of media literacy.

I am proud to be an idealistic teacher. It is important for me to remember the moral motivations and visions that first brought me to the profession. But after 25 years in the classroom, I have internalized the daily realities, pressures, and compromises that temper those ideals. Media literacy has helped me negotiate the dance between pragmatism and idealism. It enables me to help my students think honestly, rigorously, and independently. It helps motivate them to push themselves intellectually, creatively, and academically. It facilitates teaching for authentic democratic citizenship. And it has given me the tools to engage all of my students more effectively in developing the essential (and mandated) skills and knowledge that I am charged with teaching.

I teach English as well as social studies and media studies at a public secondary school. I love literature and expect books to be an inspirational and educational source for my students. But I also know that books are not the most significant source of mediated information for most of them. The 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation's study, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds,* found that young people spend an average of 6.5 hours a day interacting with media—often using multiple media simultaneously. Only 43 minutes are spent reading, nearly four hours watching TV, an hour and 44 minutes listening to music, and over an hour on the computer. It is just plain foolish not to use this ocean of mediated information to help address our curricular goals. Our centuries-old experiment with democracy is predicated on developing an informed and literate citizenship capable of making critical judgments about the most pressing issues of the day. Given the ever-expanding forms, influence, and sophistication of mass communication and the simultaneous consolidation of mass-media ownership, we risk the very foundation of our democracy if we do not include a diversity of contemporary media forms in our commitment to literacy.

Fortunately, media literacy is a vibrant and dynamic discipline that is pioneering new forms of critical thinking and literacy skills throughout the K–12 curricula. Media literacy teaches students to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media. The term "media" refers to *all* forms of mass communication—including television, film, radio, and photography; print media such as


Media Bakery

"My job is not to teach my students what to think, but to make the act of decision-making so excruciatingly unavoidable that the only way out is through rigorous, deep, and informed thinking."

newspapers, magazines, and books; and newer digital technologies, including the Internet, video games, and yet-to-be-developed forms that mediate messages to a mass audience. Like traditional print literacy, media literacy should not be a relegated to a periodic unit in an occasional class. Students must be taught, from the earliest grades, to ask key questions about *how* we know *what* we know. In addition, as with print literacy, students need to actively produce communication using many different media forms.

CLASSROOM REALITIES AND CORE CONTENT

No matter how imperative media literacy may seem to those of us in the field, most teachers are unlikely to integrate media literacy approaches and materials unless they clearly support already existing classroom needs. Media literacy can, and should, help teachers to address learning standards, prepare students for tests, engage typically hard-to-reach students, and enliven the classroom without taking time from the core curriculum. In New York State, where I teach and lead teacher trainings, I hear the common refrain, "I don't have enough time as it is to address the mandates and cover the material; I can't conceivably add anything new." The work of Project Look Sharp, the media-literacy integration initiative at Ithaca College that I co-direct with Cyndy Scheibe, has emerged out of that very real concern.

Although media literacy can be integrated effectively into all subject areas and grade levels in many different ways, we have found certain patterns of integration in our work with K–12 teachers. For instance, high-school social-studies teachers often seek out document-based materials to teach historical content through the critical decoding of media messages. Art teachers quickly appreciate the integration of contemporary media forms into instruction about elements of composition. The health curriculum often requires teaching media-literacy skills related to drug and alcohol use, body image, and

SIX QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY MEDIA MESSAGE

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, etc.?
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?

other health content. Math and science teachers are typically interested in issues of credibility and accuracy, while English teachers are often more open to integrating media-production projects into their curriculum. Integration approaches also vary with grade level. The elementary curriculum lends itself to interdisciplinary approaches, while secondary teachers usually need materials designed specifically for their content area. With appropriate approaches, materials, and training, teachers and school districts can effectively use media literacy to help address core content and skills.

One of the current challenges of the media-literacy field is to gather hard data on the effectiveness of media-literacy approaches in addressing core skills and content.

PROJECT LOOK SHARP'S CORE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ALL MEDIA MESSAGES

1. Media literacy is an expansion of traditional literacy that includes both analysis and production of all mediated forms of communication, from books to web sites.
2. Media literacy can and should be integrated across the K–12 curriculum at all grade levels and in multiple subject areas.
3. Media literacy helps teachers to more effectively address existing learning standards and engage students with varied learning styles.
4. Media literacy teaches critical-thinking skills such as understanding bias and credibility through rigorous analysis of appropriate media documents.
5. Media literacy empowers students to express and communicate their own ideas through multiple forms of media production.
6. Media literacy is essential for the development of informed, reflective, and active citizens in a democratic society.

Yet experiences by numerous practitioners, including Project Look Sharp, suggest that media literacy *can* effectively support heterogeneous classes through the use of dynamic materials that engage multiple learning styles. The interactive decoding of print and visual media messages, hands-on media-production activities, and the use of a variety of different media sources in the classroom—when added to reading, writing, and speaking activities—increase the likelihood of engaging all students. These approaches can be particularly effective in reaching visual learners, many special-education students, and students for whom English is a second language. For instance, the New York state elementary social-studies standards include "understanding of cultural and historical perspectives." Teachers in our region have found it more effective to teach this sophisticated concept by comparing Native American and colonial paintings of "first contact" than by using text sources. Media documents such as maps, cartoons, drawings, and photographs are particularly useful for designing document-based questions that prepare students for state tests.

We must always prioritize precious classroom time based on our core learning goals. While media production, for example, can be an exciting, motivating, and empowering curricular tool, it can also take a tremendous amount of time. Yet there are myriad ways to integrate both low- and high-tech forms of media production into the curriculum. Video production can be a terrific way to teach students to sequence words and images logically to communicate an idea, and today's digital video-editing software allows fourth-grade students to learn in a few hours what used to take my high-school students months to learn. But if I don't have the time or technological infrastructure, I can also address that skill by having my students write scripts and draw storyboards. In the future, students will need be able to produce progressively more complex, interactive, multimedia demonstrations of their learning. Pencil and paper will not disappear, but they will play a smaller role in the educational environment. Although media production is a core component of media literacy, all media literacy does not require production.

MEDIA, CURRICULUM, AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

I teach a yearlong combined English and social-studies class for 25 10th-graders, in which we practice different forms of media analysis every day. Although the content is world history and literature, the underlying curriculum is the search for truth. The adolescents I work with are passionate about figuring out who they are, what they believe, and why they believe it. Their willingness to invest considerable energy, time, and passion into their studies (including writing, writing, and more writing), depends upon my ability to facilitate a meaningful and genuine exploration of those essential questions. My students are willing to test their academic limits, but they

need the curriculum to be "real." Media literacy can help provide the connection to their cultural experience and can offer dynamic learning formats that stress intellectual depth. Throughout the year, students decode and discuss conflicting perspectives on world history from textbooks, web sites, magazine covers, film clips, and news reports. They demonstrate their ability to articulate the historical and cultural perspectives of others, and they discuss their own views backed up with both knowledge and reflection on the sources of their own thinking.

Teaching students to think critically is at the heart of media analysis. It trains young people to understand different perspectives, to recognize the constructed nature of ideas, and to rigorously define and defend their own thinking. Media analysis assumes that all media messages are constructed and reflect bias. The active decoding of media messages trains students to identify and discuss point of view; teaches them to question credibility, accuracy, and authorship; and requires them to make evaluative judgments based on evidence—ever more essential skills in our web-based culture. Media analysis asks students to articulate their own interpretations of media messages, while the document-based evidence required for their analysis keeps their focus on the specific content chosen by the teacher. This highly interactive process can help focus a heterogeneous group of students on core knowledge while teaching them how to think for themselves.

To paraphrase the journalist Daniel Schorr, my job is not to teach my students what to think, but to make the act of decision-making so excruciatingly unavoidable that the only way out is through rigorous, deep, and informed thinking. If my students suspect that I am trying to teach them which media messages to believe and which to reject, I will break their trust. My behavior in the classroom must communicate that I value independence of thought backed by sincere and informed reflection. I must be open to their interpretations and views of different media constructions, and I must be balanced in my classroom choices. However, I do set clear limits to the discussion (e.g., providing evidence from the document to back up conclusions and respecting the feelings and opinions of others).

My commitment to critical thinking is not to be confused with objectivity. Like all teachers, and all media constructions, I have biases. If I have trained my students well, at some point they will begin to notice and name the views and values that I bring into the classroom. They will recognize that I favor some media critiques over others. They will be able to name how the words in my lectures and handouts, and the films I bring into class, reflect my point of view. They will be able to name the themes and concepts that I consistently stress. If I am truly committed to critical thinking, I must celebrate my students' perceptiveness and acknowledge my own biases, while insisting that they provide specific evidence to back up their claims. When seeking truth with adolescents, there is little room for hypocrisy.

In short, media literacy can help teachers to do a better job of educating our students while addressing the deepest ideals of our profession. We live in an era of profound growth in the forms and influence of mass media. Schools have a central role to play in training students to ask fundamental questions about all media messages. This process can support not only core content and standards, but also essential skills and attitudes for democratic citizenship. Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "Self-government is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight." The integration of media literacy throughout the curriculum is an imperative if Jefferson's vision of authentic participatory democracy is to be realized.

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RESOURCES

Action Coalition for Media Education. www.acmecoalition.org

Alliance for a Media Literate America. www.amlainfo.org

Center for Media Literacy. www.medialit.org

"Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds." The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905pkg.cfm

Media Literacy Clearinghouse. medialit.med.sc.edu

November Learning. www.anovember.com

Project Look Sharp. Ithaca College. www.ithaca.edu/looksharp