

# Looking at World War I Propaganda

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During the next four years marking the 100th anniversary of World War I, we will undoubtedly read about the ways in which The Great War still reverberates today. But to teach effectively about the history of the last century, we need to use classroom methodologies that prepare our students for the twenty-first century.

As high school social studies teachers, we are always struggling to “cover the content” while addressing an ever expanding set of additional demands. The Common Core expects literacy instruction to be incorporated into social studies. NCSS’s new C3 Framework emphasizes teaching students to ask questions, evaluate sources, and communicate conclusions, in addition to applying the skills and knowledge of various social science disciplines.<sup>1</sup> To fit it all in, many of us react with counterproductive strategies (like speaking faster and handing out more readings). What we need are new classroom methodologies that integrate twenty-first century literacy with student-centered pedagogy. We need to engage all of our students with rich social studies content while they are developing the skills and desire to continually read their world.

Our students are learning new information nearly every waking moment, much of it from mediated messages. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation’s study of teen media use in 2009, eight to 18-year-old Americans spent, on average, more than seven and a half hours a day engaged with media—outside of school and school related activities.<sup>2</sup> Our students remember an extraordinary amount of (often inaccurate) information from their time with media and forget much of what we

delivered in the classroom. According to a 2006 Zogby poll, only 42% of American adults could name the three branches of government, yet 74% could name the three stooges.<sup>3</sup> Social studies teachers may “cover the content” repeatedly, but we are not nearly as successful at filling students up with facts as those popular culture messages.

## Constructivist Media Decoding

Constructivist media decoding integrates popular culture with Common Core and C3 literacy instruction and rigorous content knowledge. It requires a shift in approach and self-definition as a social studies teacher.

Constructivism recognizes that every learner constructs her or his own meaning from the information we deliver. Constructivist educators must be humble, endlessly probing for the meaning our students take away from every lesson, and never assuming that they have internalized what we intended. We know that students within a classroom (operating at similar developmental levels) are often better able to communicate key concepts to each other than we can. As constructivist teachers, we serve as orchestrators of learning—including acquisition of deep and complex knowledge. While it is still our role to share content, most of our precious classroom time must be spent demanding a sophisticated application

of content knowledge to challenge our students’ thinking—continually pushing them towards greater complexity in both understanding and skills.

Classroom decoding leverages the power of mediated knowledge through integrating media literacy with core social studies content. We use questions to prompt students to apply and value their knowledge while practicing critical thinking. According to Scheibe and Rogow in their book, *The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy*, critical thinking includes five essential qualities: **Curiosity**: the desire and motivation to question; **Inquiry**: consistent and continual questioning; **Skepticism**: knowing what questions to ask; **Logical Thinking**: valuing good reasoning; and **Open-Mindedness**: questioning one’s own assumptions.<sup>4</sup> We can teach and motivate our students to integrate these critical thinking orientations into their lives, both inside and outside of school, through the integration of constructivist media decoding activities in our social studies classes.

## The Curricula of Adolescence

The analysis of media messages taps into the epistemological curricula of adolescence. The high school students we teach are working hard to develop their own perspectives and opinions on the world. Their growing cognitive abilities enable them to separate their perspectives from the views of their parents, school, peers, and society—to challenge themselves to figure out “What do I believe?” Media decoding taps into our students’ internal motivation for truth seeking.

## Reflections of three 10th grade students on media literacy integrated into history:

*This class has taught me how to think, how to question. It taught me that everything has a bias, and to never accept anything as the only truth, because there is never only one side of the story.*

*I have a newfound desire to learn as well as be aware of the world, how it is presented to me and how I perceive it. I feel better prepared for school as well as life in general.*

*This was a very powerful experience, and it made me realize just how much power people have to change or control things, for better or worse. I, however, am not passive to this change, I can be a part of it, and affect it.*

*Who produced this poster, for what purpose?*

*Who or what is depicted?*

*What messages are communicated?*

*What techniques did the producer of the poster use to convey those messages?*

*What action did the producers intend to provoke?*



*Evil Hun, 1918, Australia, Norman Lindsay*

## World War I Posters

The study of World War I can provide an excellent opportunity for integrating media analysis into the curriculum through the decoding of propaganda posters. The governments of Europe made unprecedented use of mass media to spread jingoistic propaganda to the often illiterate peoples living within the fault lines of competing nation states. These visually compelling and content-rich posters can be used to teach both historical knowledge and critical thinking skills through constructivist media decoding.

## Leading a Media Decoding

While the choice of documents and initial questions are critical for a successful decoding, the teacher needs to develop the skill of probing student responses so students teach one another through their replies. For example, when analyzing the poster called “*Evil Hun*,” students can discover how governments perpetuated nationalist hatred to unify their people against a common enemy. Asking the question: “What techniques did the

producer of the poster use to spread those messages?” is a good start, but the teacher must also probe student thinking in a targeted way to help students explain to each other this key concept. The following hypothetical interaction might follow an initial conversation about the purpose, and messages within the propaganda poster *Evil Hun*.

**Teacher:** *What techniques did the producer use to spread nationalism?* [ask questions about media construction]

**Student:** *The Australian government showed Germany as evil.*

**Teacher:** *How did they communicate that?* [probe for evidence]

**Student:** *The German is a monster with red hands.*

**Teacher:** *What makes you think the monster represents Germans?* [probe for evidence]

**Student:** *The hat has the spike.*

**Teacher:** *Why would the producers show Germany as a monster?* [probe for understanding of key concepts]

**Second Student:** *To dehumanize the enemy.*

**Teacher:** *What do you mean by that?* [probe to have student explain analysis to the rest of the class]

**Second Student:** *They made the Germans into animals.*

**Teacher:** *Why would they want to do that?* [probe for a more thorough explanation]

**Third Student:** *They were trying to get Australians to enlist in the army.*

**Teacher:** *Yes, but why would they portray Germans as monsters?* [keep probing for understanding of key concepts]

**Third Student:** *By showing the enemy as less than human it made it easier for Australians to fight and kill them.*



*Daddy, What Did YOU Do?*, 1915, Great Britain, Saville Lumley



*It's Up to You*, 1917, U.S.A, C.S. Duncan

**Teacher:** *Very good. [support student responses] And how might that promote Australian nationalism? [probe for key understanding]*

**Fourth Student:** *By unifying the country against a common enemy.*

**Teacher:** *So the government of Australia depicted Germans this way to dehumanize the enemy, encourage enlistment, and unify the country in the war effort [restate key understandings]. Can you think of other examples of governments using dehumanization to unify a people? [you could choose to use this document-based analysis to help students connect this concept to other historical or contemporary examples].*

The decoding process differs from other visual analysis strategies in its focus on teaching knowledge and concepts. While the students provide the interpretations, the teacher uses probe questions to keep the discussion moving towards factual and conceptual understandings that emerge from analysis of the document. If our content and literacy goals are not clear, we risk spending precious time on unproductive conversations. Our role is not to provide the analysis, but to facilitate the active learning of key concepts and skills. Our students must have authentic agency in their thinking and sharing. We provide the classroom structure for that thinking and sharing as we continually listen to the meaning making of our students.

#### See Media Decoding Examples:

To see a five-minute video of the author leading high school students through a decoding of these three posters go to [www.projectlooksharp.org](http://www.projectlooksharp.org), click on the **Videos** button on the home page, and select **Media Decoding Examples**, where you will find the *WWI Posters* video along with many other annotated demonstrations of constructivist media decoding.

#### Three high school students comment on using media decoding in social studies classes.

*You get shown a lot of images in classes because teachers believe that it is going to help you to see the reality of stuff, but if you are only looking at that image and taking in the war scene that is right in front of you, I don't think you are getting as much as when you can look at that image and say, Oh this image was published here, during this part of this war by these people who had this going on and this had just happened. You are tracing it back and you are able to put it in context and I think that that is the most important thing about being handed a news article or an image or anything like that.*

*Not only is this much more engaging than a traditional social studies class, it allows you to apply it to so many other areas in your life. I feel like in so many other previous social studies classes I have learned about dates and about specific events and specific times, but I haven't really felt like it has contributed to my life or my view of the world in any way. But when you look at media, when you look at different biases that you are seeing in the world, it allows you to apply to all different areas of your life no matter what you are interested in.*

*Like you said, it is really engaging; it involves the students in the discussion. I feel like you learn a lot more when you are having a discussion about something than when things are being just taught at you.*

My students consistently comment that media decoding engages them more than traditional social studies methodologies. These comments can also be viewed at [www.projectlooksharp.org](http://www.projectlooksharp.org) (click on the Videos button and then Media Literacy Testimonials).

## Help Students to Internalize Key Questions

By asking students a similar set of questions throughout the school year and with different types of media (from posters and video clips to websites and textbooks), we can help them develop their life-long habits of inquiry. Rather than integrate media decoding into a singular unit, social studies teachers should incorporate progressively more complex questioning across the curriculum.

The National Association for Media Literacy Education developed the following list of media analysis questions. If these questions were consistently incorporated throughout social studies and other subject areas, from kindergarten through 12th grade, we would have stu-

dents and citizens who are critical thinkers and better prepared for the demands of the twenty-first century.

## Address Historical Knowledge as well as Literacy Skills

Our students are “digital natives,”<sup>5</sup> practiced in accessing information quickly and fluidly from the Internet and other mediated sources. As social studies teachers we need to challenge and deepen their thinking, give them skills in applying information, train them to ask questions about the credibility, currency, and accuracy of their sources, and help them to make informed, rigorous and thoughtful judgments. When decoding documents, they need to have key background information to apply to


their analysis, but that knowledge should not be the ultimate goal of their learning. Rather it is the application of that knowledge, the analysis of information, and the students’ valuing of good reasoning and learning that should be driving our instruction.

Prior to any decoding, you will need to provide students with the information they will need to respond to your questions. This can be in the form of a reading or brief presentation or information presented in the document itself (e.g., in a documentary video clip or website). Our tendency as social studies teachers is often to give too much background information that may numb our students before they can get to do their work: thinking about the document. Instead, we can and should give them just enough information to engage from an informed position—let your questions provoke questions on the part of your students. When students have their own authentic questions they will learn more quickly and effectively.

## Teaching Key Concepts of Media Analysis

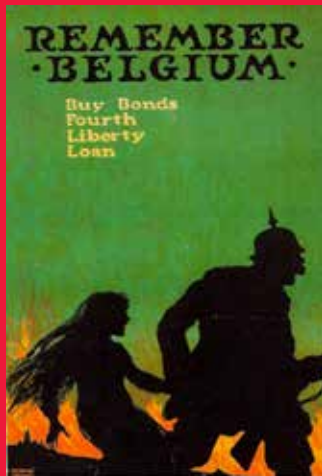
Students, like adults, often fail to recognize the constructed nature of mediated messages. My bright 10th grade students often start the year thinking that “the news” is something that people just uncover, or worse, that our government decides “the News.” Consistent and progressively more complex decoding over the year teaches students to recognize, analyze and evaluate the constructed nature and impact of media messages (see concepts one, three, four and six within the box at the right). By the end of the year in my 10th grade global studies class, students are independently initiating the critical analysis of the film clips I show and the print excerpts I assign, and they are even questioning why we are studying what we are studying (thus decoding the curriculum itself).

With each new form of media (posters, songs, websites, video games, etc.), I ask students to discuss the qualities of that form: Do you prefer watching

 <b>KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN ANALYZING MEDIA MESSAGES</b>			
formerly AMLA ( <a href="http://www.NAMLE.net">www.NAMLE.net</a> )			
<b>AUDIENCE &amp; AUTHORSHIP</b>	<b>AUTHORSHIP</b>	Who made this message?	
	<b>PURPOSE</b>	Why was this made?	
		Who is the target audience (and how do you know)?	
	<b>ECONOMICS</b>	Who paid for this?	
	<b>IMPACT</b>	Who might benefit from this message? Who might be harmed by it?	
Why might this message matter to me?			
<b>MESSAGES &amp; MEANINGS</b>	<b>CONTENT</b>	What is this about (and what makes you think that)? What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied? What is left out of this message that might be important to know?	
		<b>TECHNIQUES</b>	What techniques are used? Why were those techniques used? How do they communicate the message?
			<b>INTER- PRETATIONS</b>
	<b>REPRESENTATIONS &amp; REALITY</b>	<b>CONTEXT</b>	
<b>CREDIBILITY</b>			Is this fact, opinion, or something else? How credible is this (and what makes you think that)? What are the sources of the information, ideas, or assertions?

This document is an appendix to NAMLE’s Core Principles of Media Literacy Education – [www.NAMLE.net/coreprinciples](http://www.NAMLE.net/coreprinciples)

## Examples of Questions that Emphasize Historical Knowledge



*Remember Belgium, 1918, U.S.A., Ellsworth Young*

*Who are the two characters? What historical event is referenced in the title and image? What are “bonds”? How might this poster have helped to sell bonds?*



*Food Will Win the War, 1918, U.S.A., Charles Edward Chambers*

*What Americans are targeted by this poster? Where were most immigrants to the U.S. coming from in this time period? What is the goal of the poster? Why Wheat?*



*Sow the Seeds of Victory, 1918, U.S.A., James M. Flagg*

*Whom does this poster target? What age women? What is the goal of the poster? What is meant by “Every Garden a Munitions Plant”? How did War Gardens help the war effort?*



*Lest They Perish, 1918, U.S.A., W.B. King*

*What is the goal of this poster? Where is the “Near East”? What was happening in Armenia at this time?*

a film or reading a book? Why? What is it about gaming that can be so addictive? Compare reading a print newspaper with following the news online. What are the qualities of political posters that were particularly attractive to governments during World War I? How is social media shaping your generation? Through repeatedly reflecting on the unique qualities of the different media forms we decode in class (concept two), my students are internalizing Marshall McLuhan’s concept, the Medium is the Message.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the year, they are able to make thoughtful choices about what media forms to use for their (required) final performances and portfolios of skill and knowledge.

### Key Concept Five

*People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.* This is

perhaps the most challenging media literacy concept to teach but often provides the most powerful personal insights for my students. As we deepen our reflection on how and why media messages influence society, my students begin to recognize how their interpretations are

influenced by their own unique set of lenses. They see how their age, gender, geography, family, culture, race, political perspective, and a host of other factors have shaped their understandings and interpretations of what they see, hear, and read.

### Key Concepts of Media Analysis<sup>6</sup>

1. All media messages are “constructed.”
2. Each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique “language” of construction.
3. Media messages are produced for particular purposes.
4. All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.
5. People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.
6. Media and media messages can influence beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors and the democratic process.

The Key Concepts of Media Analysis are part of the National Association for Media Literacy Education’s Core Principles of Media Literacy Education available at: <http://namle.net/publications/core-principles/>

Here is an example from a 10th grade student during a decoding of the video, *The Great Global Warming Swindle*:

*What I think is interesting is our reactions to it. I think that we all have a lot of opinions on [climate change]. We think that our opinion is the right opinion. So as soon as we see something challenging that, we are immediately going to start to say that it is propaganda or start disregarding it. I think we could do that for "An Inconvenient Truth," which is supportive of our opinion, mainly. We could look at that and start calling that propaganda as well. I mean, personally, I really dislike this video. I think that there is a lot of lies but the immediate thing that comes to my mind is, who made this, what is their purpose, what are my own biases and how is that informing my own opinion of this video?*

When we can help students begin to decode their own meaning making, we have taught them how to think not just *what* to think.

### Diversifying Our Use of Media Documents

The Common Core Literacy standards for social studies call on us to integrate the analysis of multiple forms of media into our curriculum. When studying World War I, government posters are one easily accessible, visually dynamic and content-rich form for classroom decoding. But students need practice

decoding diverse types of media applied to different content. Consider using excerpts from music, TV, advertisements, film clips, websites, and video games, as well as textbooks, political cartoons and print documents to teach both content and literacy skills in your classroom.

### C3 and the Future of Social Studies Education

NCSS's new C3 Framework points the way for our vocation in the twenty-first century. The advent of the Internet has changed the way we gather and process information and it necessitates a change in our pedagogy. Our primary role as social studies educators should no longer be to provide our students with information, but instead to help them to learn how to think about and evaluate the endless barrage of messages (most of it mediated) that they experience daily. This shift in the history of learning requires that we emphasize our students' ability to ask questions and plan inquiries (C3 dimension #1), that we teach them to evaluate sources and provide evidence (dimension #3), and that we require students to draw and defend conclusions and take informed action (dimension #4). We still need to teach them the tools and concepts that are the foundations of our discipline (dimension #2). But we need to do this through the framework of 21st century learning. If we can show our students a relevant and engaging path towards reading their world, we will instill a motivation for life-long learning. 🌍

### Notes

1. NCSS's C3 framework can be found at [www.socialstudies.org/c3](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3).
2. Toplines of the 2009 study can be found at [http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/8010\\_appendixc\\_toplines.pdf](http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/8010_appendixc_toplines.pdf). Media activities considered in the study included television, video games, listening to music, using computers, and reading newspapers, magazines, and books.
3. Full results from the Zogby Study can be found at [www.palmcenter.org/files/active/1/ZogbyReport.pdf](http://www.palmcenter.org/files/active/1/ZogbyReport.pdf).
4. C. Scheibe and F. Rogow, *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin/Sage, 2012).
5. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," in *On the Horizon* (MCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001).
6. A PDF version of these Key Concepts and information on Media Literacy can be found at [www.projectlooksharp.org/Resources%20202/6MLConcepts.pdf](http://www.projectlooksharp.org/Resources%20202/6MLConcepts.pdf)
7. Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message" (1964) in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 129-38.

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The complete "World War I through Posters" lesson can be accessed through a free registration at Project Look Sharp, [www.projectlooksharp.org](http://www.projectlooksharp.org), in the Economics in U.S. History section of the Curriculum Kits & Lesson Plans category.

### Project Look Sharp

For the last 15 years Project Look Sharp, a not-for-profit media literacy initiative at Ithaca College, has responded to teacher requests by posting hundreds of lessons using over 2,000 media documents with questions and background information for students, all free on our website, [www.projectlooksharp.org](http://www.projectlooksharp.org). You can find the lesson for decoding the World War I posters above in the Project Look Sharp kit, *Economics in U.S. History* (under Curriculum Kits & Lesson Plans). In our kit *Media Construction of Peace*, we use excerpts from songs, film clips and other visual media to teach key concepts about peace movements during World War I and seven other U.S. wars. You can also create your own media decoding lessons using documents and resources on the web, most notably from the Library of Congress's Teaching Primary Sources website.\* See the list of Resources for Social Studies Teachers on the Project Look Sharp website.\*\*

\*[www.loc.gov/teachers/](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/).

\*\*[www.projectlooksharp.org/?action=webresources\\_socialstudies](http://www.projectlooksharp.org/?action=webresources_socialstudies).