MEDIA EDUCATION: IT'S ALL AROUND US
DeWitt Middle School in Ithaca, N.Y., Anne Bechert leads off her sixth-grade language-arts unit on Greek myths with a video. She pops a tape in the VCR, pushes the play button and up comes...actress Cybill Shepherd in a commercial for L'Oreal hair coloring. Bechert is letting the actress (“I'm worth it!”) pave the way for studying not only the myth of Narcissus, whose self-love cost him dearly, but media literacy as well. “We talk about what the myth means,” says Bechert, “how self-love can be damaging, and how the media use self-love to get us to buy products.”

Bechert is among the nearly 100 teachers integrating media literacy into their classroom curricula with the help of the three-year-old Project LOOK SHARP, a collaboration between Ithaca College and the 6,000-student Ithaca City School District, funded by the local Park Foundation. “A lot of teachers say, ‘Media literacy is great, but I just don't have time for it,’” says Cyndy Scheibe, the project's director. “Our goal is to show teachers how to build it right into their curricula. We're like computer-integration specialists— the machines just sit there unless a skilled person is around to say, ‘Know what's really cool? Let me show you these short cuts and what you can do.’ We help teachers see what they can do.”

As more educators have begun to understand what they can do to fit media literacy into the curriculum, media literacy's place in the classroom has changed. Today New Mexico, North Carolina, and Texas all mandate it for high school graduates. Many states, such as New York, include in their learning standards the ability to evaluate information from different sources—one of the goals of media literacy. Those goals have changed over the years, evolving from a protectionist model to one of empowerment.

“Teachers are already trying to help kids navigate through the world and gain the tools and skills to make their own judgments,” Scheibe says. “Media literacy fits right in with helping them learn how to use the information they receive and to be aware of their own values. It also offers a new hook for getting students to think critically.”

Working with Project LOOK SHARP, an elementary teacher has a media diary for a week as part of a math unit on data collection and analysis that also ties in media literacy. A high-school social-studies teacher got help assembling political cartoons that will couple media literacy's basic questions of purpose, intent, techniques, and values with the need to know the politics in order to get the joke.

Marcie Wyant, a family and consumer-science teacher at Ithaca's Boynton Middle School, developed a lesson in which students analyze product labels and advertisements for orange juice, laundry detergents, cigarettes, alcohol, and other consumer items. “Kids these days are bombarded with messages from television, the Internet, and magazines targeted at adolescents,” Wyant says. “Students need to think critically about the messages they see and not believe that everything is fact.”

Wyant's students also produce their own public-service announcements (PSAs) on issues as diverse as child abuse, wearing seat belts, and sports for girls. “I liken students producing their own commercials or PSAs to writing their own poems,” says Scheibe. “It's a whole lot more effective if they write their
How educators are integrating media literacy into their curricula for students immersed in mass-media messages.

By Terri Payne Butler

"I use media as a culmination of a unit," says social-studies teacher Kelly Horrocks, who team teaches with Bechert at De-Witt Middle School. "We study early civilizations and when we’re studying Egypt, for example, we’re collecting a lot of pieces of information along the way: the geography, the achievements of the culture, their religious philosophy. A video like The History Channel Classroom’s program about the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut can help them begin to see how all the little pieces fit into a living society and they come away with a mental image to hang those pieces on."

By La Patera Elementary School in Goleta, Calif., just north of Santa Barbara, teachers Chris Carrera and Loret Peterson are also integrating media-literacy lessons into their curriculum, with the help of their local Cox Communications company.

Cox Education Coordinator Joanne Plumieri visits their fifth-
and sixth-grade classrooms several times a month, bringing along local Cox programs and The Learning Channel's media literacy video/workshop kit, KNOW-TV. "I use KNOW-TV for helping students think about changing what, why, and how they watch," says Plumeri. "Then Andrew Paul, a Cox producer/director, and I start with our own local programming and work backwards. We show the kids miniatures of the sets, talk about music, and demonstrate camera angles. And we constantly ask, 'What's the message; what's the motive; who is the audience?'"

It would have been easy to stop there, but Carrera and Peterson incorporated the media-literacy lessons into their social-studies curriculum. "We felt the critical analysis our students were learning from Joanne could be applied to the way they looked at the information in textbooks, in newspapers, in videos," says Carrera. "They are beginning to see that there are different interpretations of history and this way of analyzing has opened up a lot of doors for discussion."

"We would read a chapter of the textbook and talk about the message being conveyed," adds Peterson, who has left the area and no longer teaches at La Patera. "We were doing a unit on immigration and its benefits and challenges for society. I had a very diverse class—students from Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, China, Russia, as well as many Mexican Americans—and there were many perspectives. When one student said, 'Well, immigrants have a higher crime rate,' another said, 'But look at him, he's an immigrant and he doesn't commit crimes.' A close-to-home example made them realize that what they had heard wasn't always right."

Their students also worked on video productions that capitalized on their new analytic abilities. "If a group wanted to focus on the Pyramids of ancient Egypt, they realized from what Joanne had taught them that they had to make a lot of choices," says Carrera. "They researched on the Internet, read in their textbook, watched videos from Assignment Discovery or The History Channel Classroom, and then they came up with a point of view and a script. They also had to consider their audience and figure out how to make their presentation brief and effective."

One group of Peterson's students used a newscast format to present a biography of Martin Luther King Jr. and followed it with his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, which they had memorized together. Another group created a play based on "The Rainbow Bridge," a legend from the local Chumash Indians. "I had three Mexican American girls who chose to study Rosa Parks," says Peterson. "As they worked on a play to show how she had refused to move to the back of the bus, they began to make a connection between what happened to her and what was happening in California with Proposition 227, an initiative which severely restricts bilingual education. Producing that video gave them a whole new understanding of what they were studying."

Each student in Carrera's and Peterson's classrooms worked on four to five videos over the school year, giving them a chance to apply the media-literacy lessons they had learned. "It motivates them to present their best work because they are in charge of the project," says Peterson. "Their initial giggling and silliness gives way as they are able to watch a presentation as active, critical viewers. They start to ask what the group tried to convey, how the producers shaped the content, and whether it was effective. All the questions they learned when Joanne was teaching them media literacy allowed them to be critical viewers in the best sense—not just of TV or commercials, but of their own work."

This year, Peterson is working with Plumeri to create a packet that would allow teachers throughout Santa Barbara County to follow up the Cox Communications presentations with curriculum-based activities in their own classrooms. "My dream is to reach as many students as possible," says Plumeri, "and give them the skills that would empower them to make healthy TV-viewing choices."

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