

## **Materials for teachers 9A** **Skills and strategies for media education**

by Elizabeth Thoman

From the clock radio that wakes us up in the morning until we fall asleep watching the late night talk show, we are exposed to hundreds, even thousands of images and ideas not only from television but now also from newspaper headlines, magazine covers, movies, websites, photos, video games and billboards. Some are calling today's young people, *screenagers*.<sup>19</sup>

Until recently, few questioned the increasing dominance of media in our lives. Those who did were inclined to focus on content issues like the amount of sex and violence in television and movies. Some advocated censorship, while others simply urged families to turn the TV off. But the fact is, though you can turn off the set, unless you move to a mountaintop, you cannot escape today's media culture. Media no longer just influence our culture. They are our culture.

Media's pivotal role in our global culture is why media censorship will never work. What's needed, instead, is a major rethinking of media's role in all of our lives – a rethinking that recognizes the paradigm shift from a print culture to an image culture that has been evolving for the past 150 years since the invention of photography and the ability to separate an object or a likeness from a particular time and place and still remain real, visible and permanent.<sup>20</sup>

For 500 years, we have valued the ability to read print in order to participate fully as informed citizens and educated adults in society. Today the family, the school and all community institutions, including the medical and health community, share the responsibility of preparing young people for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds.<sup>21</sup> Call it “media literacy.”

### **What is media literacy?**

Just what it sounds like – the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols we take in everyday through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and of course advertising.

It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around you and not be passive and therefore, vulnerable.

**“We must prepare young people  
for living in a world of powerful  
images, words and sounds.”**

UNESCO, 1982

Media researchers now say that television and mass media have become so ingrained in our cultural milieu that we should no longer view the task of media education as providing “protection” against unwanted messages. Our goal must be to help people become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than letting the interpretation control them. Len Masterman, author of *Teaching the Media*, calls it “critical autonomy.”<sup>22</sup>

Other definitions point out that media literacy is not so much a finite body of knowledge but rather a skill, a process, a way of thinking that, like reading comprehension, is always evolving. To become media literate is not to memorize facts or statistics about the media, but rather to raise the right

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19. Rushkoff, Douglas, *Playing the Future: How Kids' Culture Can Teach Us to Thrive in an Age of Chaos*, 1996.

20. From the work of Stewart Ewen especially *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, 1988.

21. From the Final Report, UNESCO International Symposium on Education of the Public in the Use of Mass Media, Grunwald, 1982.

22. Masterman, Len, *Teaching the Media*, 1989, chapter 2.

questions about what you are watching, reading or listening to.<sup>23</sup> At the heart of media literacy is the principle of inquiry.

## Learning what to look for

What do kids (and adults, too) need to know about the media? Over the years, media educators have identified five ideas that everyone should know about media messages, whether the message comes packaged as a TV sitcom, a computer game, a music video, a magazine ad or a movie in the theatre.<sup>24</sup>

### 1. All media messages are "constructed"

Whether we are watching the nightly news or passing a billboard on the street, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably several people), pictures were taken and a creative designer put it all together. But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is "constructed" by just a few people then becomes "the way it is" for the rest of us. But as the audience, we don't get to see or hear the words, pictures or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted.

Helping people understand how media is put together and what was left out as well as how the media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is an important way of helping them navigate their lives in a global and technological society.

### 2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

Each form of communication such as newspapers, TV game shows or horror movies has its own creative language: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media language increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media experiences, as well as helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation. One of the best ways to understand how media is put together is to do just that – make your own personal video, create a website for your Scout troop, develop an ad campaign to alert kids to the dangers of smoking.

### 3. Different people experience the same media message differently

Because of each individual's age, upbringing and education, no two people see the same movie or hear the same song on the radio. Even parents and children do not see the same TV show! This concept turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers as just passive "couch potatoes." We may not be conscious of it but each of us, even toddlers, are constantly trying to "make sense" of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be about accepting or rejecting messages. Research indicates that, over time, children of all ages can learn age-appropriate skills that give them a new set of glasses with which they can "read" their media culture.<sup>25</sup>

### 4. Media are primarily businesses driven by a profit motive

Newspapers lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, we all know that commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what's really being sold through television is not only the advertised products to the audience but also the audience to the advertisers!

23. From the mission statement of *Media&Values* magazine, published from 1977-93 by the Center for Media Literacy.

24. Adapted from media education documents from England and Canada. First published in the US as "Five Important Ideas to Teach Your Kids about TV," by Jay Davis *Media&Values* #52/53; Fall, 1990.

25. Hobbs, Renee, *Tuning in to Media: Literacy for the Information Age*, 1995 video, distributed by the Center for Media Literacy.

The real purpose of programs we watch on commercial TV, whether news or entertainment, is not just to entertain us but rather to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or local station can sell time to sponsors to advertise their products in commercials. Every second counts! Sponsors pay for the time based on the number of people the station predicts will be watching. Sponsors also target their advertising message to specific kinds of viewers, for example, women 20-35 who spend money on the advertised products or children 2-7 who influence their parent's spending.

Maybe it's not the way we'd like it to be but, in truth, most media are provided to us, as researcher George Gerbner says, by private, global corporations with something to sell rather than by the family, church, school or even one's native country, with something to tell.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Media have embedded values and points of view

Media, because they are constructed, carry a subtext of who and what is important at least to the person or persons creating the construction. Media are also storytellers (even commercials tell a quick and simple story) and stories require characters, settings and a plot that has a beginning, middle and end. The choice of a character's age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban? rural? affluent? poor?), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become "embedded" in a TV show, movie or ad.

It is important to learn how to "read" all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them. Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject these messages as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

## Five basic questions can be asked about any media message

### Learning what to ask

From these concepts flow a series of five basic questions<sup>27</sup> that can be asked about any media message. Note that each one could open up many layers of deeper questions:

1. Who created this message and why are they sending it?
2. What techniques are being used to attract my attention?
3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in the message?
4. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
5. What is omitted from this message?

Usually the questioning process is applied to a specific media "text" – that is, an identifiable production or publication, or a part of one: an episode of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, an ad for Pepsi, an issue of *Seventeen* magazine, a billboard for Budweiser beer, photos and articles about a bank robbery on the front page of a newspaper, the Super Bowl telecast. (...)

### Core questioning

To be a functioning adult in a mediated society, one needs to be able to distinguish between different media forms and know how to ask the basic questions and core concepts cited above. Although most adults today learned through literature classes to distinguish a poem from an essay, it's amazing how many people do not understand the difference between a daily newspaper and a supermarket tabloid.

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26. Gerbner, George, "Television Violence and the Art of Asking the Wrong Question," in *The World & I: A Chronicle of our Changing Era*, July, 1994.

27. Thanks to Renée Hobbs for her work in articulating these core questions through her training and teaching.

Increasingly as information about national and world events is delivered to the public instantaneously via television and the Internet, individuals will need to know how to verify information themselves, how to check sources and how to compare and contrast different versions of the same information in order to detect bias or political “spin” control. (...)

### Three Steps to Success: overview of an Effective Media Literacy Program

“Media Literacy” is a term that incorporates three interrelated approaches leading to the media empowerment of citizens of all ages:

The *first approach* is simply becoming aware of the importance of balancing or managing one’s media “diet” – helping children and families make healthy choices and manage the amount of time spent with television, videos, electronic games, films and various print media.

The *second approach* is teaching specific skills of critical viewing – learning to analyze and question what is in the frame, how it is constructed and what may have been left out. Skills of critical viewing are best learned through inquiry-based classes or interactive group activities as well as from creating and producing one’s own media messages.

The *third approach* – social, political and economic analysis – goes behind the frame (through which we see media images) to explore deeper issues of who produces the media we experience – and for what purpose? What is the impact of media in our culture and how do we approach issues such as media violence, racial stereotyping and consumerism?

Through inquiry, discussion and action projects, both adults and young people look at how each of us (and all of us together in society) take and make meaning from our media experiences and how the mass media drive our global consumer economy. This approach also can set the stage for various media advocacy efforts to challenge or redress public policies or corporate practices.

Although television and electronic media may seem to present the most compelling reasons for promoting media education in contemporary society, the principles and practices of media literacy are applicable to all media from television to T-shirts, from billboards to the Internet.

Abridged text

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