

Media Literacy

by Frank Baker

News Literacy: Engaging 21st Century Students In Issues that Matter

There is a new phrase on the education horizon: **news literacy**—and it's gaining steam at least at one institution of higher education—and soon will be at middle and high schools. This is because there is a general consensus that students don't think critically about the news they consume, whether they get it online, from Jon Stewart, or somewhere else.

You and I probably still read a newspaper, a news magazine, or watch the nightly local TV/network news. We consider ourselves to be informed citizens. Thomas Jefferson realized the health of a democracy was dependent upon an informed electorate. But the health of newspapers is in decline, with readers flocking to online news. And with the drop in readership, advertisers have disappeared too, leaving the future of print journalism in jeopardy. Recently, however, I was introduced to two "news literacy" initiatives—both designed to address the need to increase critical thinking and civic engagement in young people.

Last November, I was pleased to be among those participating in "Rebooting The News," a three-day event at Temple University in Philadelphia. Attendees came from journalism, news, education, activism and many other areas. Among the highlights was hearing details of the newly developed news literacy college course at Stony Brook University, New York. This is not about journalism education, but rather education for all. Working groups had lengthy discussions about what this might look like in American schools and why it is critical.

The Dean of the College of Journalism at Stony Brook is Howard Schneider, the former managing editor of "Newsday." His definition of news literacy is: "the ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports, whether they come via print, TV, on the Internet.... reliable information is actionable information—it allows news consumers to make a judgment, reach a conclusion, or take an action."

During the "Rebooting The News" event, participants created their own definition of news literacy: "News surrounds us and as such news literacy is an essential life skill for everyone. To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson: Knowledge of current issues is essential to informed citizenship in a democracy. We are concerned about the effects of media messages on children and others. Modern participatory culture makes every citizen a potential creator of news in social media, blogs, email and the web. We believe a literate citizen understands the purposes, processes and economics of news. Therefore, it is time for American education to include the acquisition of 21st-century, critical-thinking skills for analyzing and judging the reliability of news, differentiating among facts, opinions and assertions in the media we create and distribute. News literacy standards can be research based in multiple content areas. It can be taught most effectively in cross-curricular, inquiry-based format at all grade levels. It is a necessary component for literacy in contemporary society. "

The second news literacy project is the brainchild of former Los Angeles Times newsman, Alan Miller (a Pulitzer-prize winning investigative reporter.) Miller is recruiting current and former broadcasters and journalists to partner with middle and high school teachers to teach news literacy, the First Amendment and more.

Miller says the goal of The News Literacy Project is "to give students the tools to be smarter and more frequent consumers and creators of credible information across all media and platforms. Students (will) learn how to distinguish verified information from raw messages, spin, gossip and opinion and (will be) encouraged to seek news and information that will make them well-informed citizens and voters."

Why is all of this important? A good question might be: how is news used and/or taught at your school, if at all? Do teachers know how to properly incorporate the news into English/Language Arts or Social Studies or other subjects? Does your school or district provide any professional development that might help teachers understand the news process and how to engage students in news literacy activities?

A student advisor to The News Literacy Project wrote recently in the New York Times: "It is far easier to browse oversimplified headlines on the Internet than it is to pick up a newspaper and read an article in depth." Ease and brevity might not be the best option for understanding news—especially complicated stories like the recent US economic bailout.

Schools do have options for engaging students in news. A few examples include the excellent Scholastic/NY Times weekly in-school magazine UPFRONT. Weekly Reader's CURRENT EVENTS periodical is another option. CNN offers "Student News," a daily commercial-free newscast aimed at students. (<http://www.cnn.com/studentnews/>) Channel One, although much maligned, is a well produced newscast with strong education content.

In these tough economic times, none of the above options may work for you or your teachers. But everyday, the news offers stories and issues that are teachable moments. I hope you might consider how your students receive and understand the news.

If you want to follow developments in news literacy, please go to my web page: http://www.frankwbaker.com/rebooting_news_standards.htm

As always, I welcome your feedback: fbaker1346@aol.com



Frank W. Baker is a media-education consultant and 2007 winner of a Cable's Leaders in Learning Award. His new book, *Political Campaigns and Political Advertising: A Media Literacy Guide*, will be published in November by Greenwood Press.

The Media Literacy Clearinghouse (www.frankbaker.com) provides teachers with background information, lesson plans, teacher/student readings and links to resources that will help teach about advertising, bias, propaganda, informational texts, the language of film, techniques of persuasion and more. Classroom activities include scriptwriting in the classroom and magazine retouching. Other strategies include tips for including documentaries in the classroom. There are links to blogs related to media and media literacy, media literacy workshops, and a Media Literacy Book series.

