

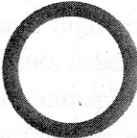
LINKING THE LITERACIES: Teaching & Learning in a Media Landscape

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"Children growing up with electronic miracles are different. They live in a world of vast media and technological input that entertains and influences them in conscious and unconscious ways...The information they listen to influences the make up of their personalities and values, and ultimately, influences how they see and interact with the world." (Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain, Caine & Caine, 1994).

"Because of the Internet, kids today are able to multitask like no other generation. But with that frenetic multitasking, comes easy distraction and the shrinking of already-short attention spans." (R U Online? The evolving lexicon of wired teens, Axtman, 2002)

nly slightly more than a year ago, the *Christian Science Monitor* (Axtman, 2002) reported on the impact computer technology was having on today's students. The article entitled, "The Evolving Lexicon of Wired Teens," characterized adolescent engagement with new technologies as both focused and frenzied. Significantly, they also described the impact interaction with the Internet was having on adolescent language and literacy. Like earlier generations of teenagers, today's youth are developing their own slang, lingo, and cryptic communications, such as,

writing "R U Online?" instead of asking "Are you online?" (Axtman, 2002).

How kids communicate with each other personally, during their online time, is one thing. When, however, those modes of discussion set the standard and become the norm, there are implications for educators. As *Christian Science Monitor* put it, "their grammar is becoming atrocious and Net lingo is starting to show up on school assignments...they talk with abbreviated words and run-on sentences with no punctuation."

Like it or lament it, such changes, while new in their manifestation, simply represent a continuation of a phenomenon, noted by Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan who told us in the 1960s that "the medium is the message." More than 30 years have passed since McLuhan argued that new forms of media and technology shape and influence the way we access, perceive, process, and comprehend information about ourselves and our world.

For McLuhan (1967), this was more than a technological revolution. It was a sensory revolution. Young people raised in the TV era, he suggested, could no longer be reached by chalk and talk alone. The student of the 60s, said McLuhan, is "growing up absurd." Such children, he said, spend half their waking hours stimulated by the ever-expanding, electronic "allatonceness" of the global village. The other half of their waking hours is spent in school "where

information is scarce but ordered and structured by fragmented, classified patterns, subjects and schedules.” (McLuhan, p. 18).

Digital Disconnect?

What would McLuhan think if he could see us now? Clearly, he would be impressed by the inventory of hardware and software our schools have stockpiled since the first wave of the computer revolution washed over us in the early 1980s.

But, would he conclude that these interactive tools have resulted in profoundly more effective and efficient ways for teaching and reaching today’s young generation? Or is it possible after almost a quarter of a century of spending on traditional and emerging technologies, our schools still tend to use this equipment as electronic envelopes, mere delivery systems for presenting the same old curriculum, unaware that *new technologies require new skills for both comprehending and creating information.*

One simple example is PowerPoint. Most teachers have seen their fair share of bad PowerPoint productions. These presentations typically so overuse the special effects, bells and whistles, that viewers are overwhelmed with the wow and have almost no sense of what the presentation was about. Effectively using PowerPoint means more than production skills; it requires an understanding of design and delivery.

An illuminating and recent national report documents a clear generation gap between the way students interact with media and technology beyond the classroom and the way their teachers utilize such technologies. *The Digital Disconnect* examined middle and high school students and their teachers. The students described teacher use of the Internet as “poor and uninspiring,” expressing a desire for “more engaging Internet activities that are relevant to their lives” (Levin & Arafeh, 2002).

Our failure to fulfill the potential of computer technology is not unexpected; it is, in fact, the norm, rather than the exception. This is well documented in Paul Saettler’s classic, *History of Instructional Technology* (1968) and in Larry Cuban’s, *Oversold and Underused: Computers in Classroom* (2001).

The presidential report on technology also concluded

that while information technologies “have had enormous impact within America’s offices, factories, and stores...our country’s K-12, educational system has thus far been only minimally affected” (President’s Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology, 1997, p. 113).

No matter how much money we spend on equipment for our schools, a true transformation of the teaching/learning process can only come about when we realize that what matters most is not the hardware or the software, but the “underwear.” That is to say, for a true transformation to occur, most important are the underlying policies, procedures, and pedagogies with which we both acquire and apply these tools.

The Visible and the Vulnerable?

If our failure to fully benefit from media and technology in our classrooms is a problem, it is matched by the increasing challenge of providing young people with the technical and intellectual skills necessary to understand the media. They encounter this media in their living rooms and, increasingly, in their bedrooms, those wired worlds and cabled cocoons where they have access to today’s communication cornucopia with all its promise and perils.

Alan November, author of *Empowering Students with Technology*, argues that “we are faced with the consequences of not teaching our children to decode the content. The persuasiveness of the Internet will lead to more and more students potentially being manipulated by the media” (2001, p. 2).

The American Academy of Pediatrics believes that “children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the messages conveyed...which might influence their perceptions and behavior” (2001, p. 423). Indeed, while educators typically view media in terms of their ability to contribute to the student’s cognitive development, today’s mass media appeals to our students on an emotional or affective level, frequently missing in the classroom. It also has the ability to impact them physiologically, whether promoting fast food, developing hand-eye coordination, or encouraging a sedentary lifestyle.

This fact is frequently neglected by proponents of so-called Information Literacy. Two central weak-

nesses of information literacy are: (1) The fact that most working definitions focus on narrow technical skills and sources of information; therefore, excluding, for the most part, the mass media that surrounds young people, and (2) They stress the cognitive process which, in and of itself, ignores the highly emotional power of mass media. In the process, it ignores emotional intelligence and the entire realm of social and emotional learning.

In short, classrooms and curricula that continue to stress cognition and facts do nothing to prepare young people to recognize and resist emotionally manipulative media messages whether contained in news coverage or political advertising.

For those who think such teaching is best handled by parents, it may well be time to think again. We cannot assume parents are helping their children understand the media they encounter at home. A recent Public Agenda study reported that 73% of parents are concerned about media messages and "believe they are swimming upstream against a strong current of harmful messages to children" (Peterson, 2002). Despite such concerns, research says, "parents do little to control or influence the messages their children receive from the mass media" (Austin, Weintraub, et al., 1999, p. 176).

Fortunately, the National PTA has a commitment to helping "parents and families make informed choices about TV programs." Their President, Shirley Igo, has recently written that the "national PTA recognizes the importance of media literacy as an essential life skill in the 21st century, and we know that parent involvement is a key to its success" (2002).

Students in other nations, including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, have for some time been able to integrate media across the school curriculum. In the U.K. it has been argued that mass media constitute "powerful forces in children's socialization, in some ways more powerful than parents and schools" (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995, p. 3)

Support for Media Literacy Grows.

Throughout the 1990s, media literacy began to garner the support and endorsement of prestigious individuals and institutions, including then Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, and the Carnegie Council

on Adolescent Development. In their 1995 report, *Great Transitions*, the Carnegie Council said that the world of the adolescent cannot be understood without understanding their media environment. They also said that media literacy efforts in classrooms and communities deserved to be supported (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

Published in Madison, Wisconsin, *Telemidium: The Journal of Media Literacy* is a major resource for anyone wishing to approach literacy from a holistic perspective. A recent issue, for example, focused on media literacy and middle grade students. Reflecting on the increasing support for media literacy within middle school education, National Middle School Association's (NMSA), Executive Director wrote, "There are many opportunities to address media literacy throughout the school day, whether in language arts, science, social studies, math classes or through art, computer technology or health and physical education classes. Spending faculty professional development time to discuss media literacy and its impact on your students and to address it within your school's curricula would be especially worthwhile" (Swaim, p. 7).

While media literacy can be connected to the nature and needs of adolescents, to their developmental level, if you will, it is also possible to integrate this approach to literacy, within traditional subject areas such as social studies.

Interviewed for this article, incoming National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) president, Denee Mattioli (2003), articulated the relationship between literacy, liberty and citizenship. "Our Founding Fathers understood that a democratic republic could not survive without an informed participatory citizenry. It is essential in our citizenship role to view critically, analyze, ask powerful questions and draw our own conclusions. Media literacy then is essential to the citizenship role."

Curriculum Connections

Formally defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in a variety of forms, including print and non-print, media literacy is by definition a critical thinking skill that

can be applied to newspapers and broadcast news, advertising, the Internet, motion pictures, and, of course, television.

The goals of media literacy are also compatible with the broad goals of U.S. education, including the creation of responsible citizens and productive workers. *Visual Messages: Integrating Imagery into Instruction*, which has been described as this nation's first comprehensive media literacy textbook, identified three key purposes for media literacy: (1) preparation for citizenship and the workplace; (2) protection from the potential harmful effects of media messages; and (3) pleasure or appreciation of the art, technology and narratives evident in our media industries (Considine & Haley, 1999, p. 22).

These elements were also articulated in the recent White House publication, *Helping Youth Navigate the Media Age*, which argued that "media literacy can empower youth to be positive contributors to society, to challenge cynicism and apathy, and to serve as agents of social change." (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2001, p. 7)

Groups like the National Council for Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (<http://www.readingonline.org>) recognize that today's complex media messages, which combine text with sound and moving images, require sophisticated new comprehension skills. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards includes both media production and media analysis in the new English Language Arts Standards for students ages 14-18.

Media analysis involves much more than merely recognizing or reading the media message. It includes an understanding of the content, intent and context in which these messages are produced and consumed, including their target audience. One simple formula for addressing this complex process is to ask:

- Who,
- Says What,
- To Whom,
- In What Way
- With What Effect, and
- Why? (Lasswell, 1948)

These questions can be applied to a website, a newspaper report, any television program, movies, and, of course, advertisements whether selling potato chips or presidential candidates. Any attempt to understand network news, for example, requires recognizing the relationship between the stories told and the products sold. The demographics of the target audience will not only shape what products are pushed during the news (Viagra, painkillers, or antacids), they will increasingly shape the stories that are told, which is evident in the increasing coverage of health issues targeting the 45 and older population that watches national network news.

When they engage in this type of analysis, students are also highly likely to be more involved. The process eschews what David Buckingham describes as "teacher preferred" or "teacher imposed" readings of media texts that leave little room for individual opinion or interpretation. Instead, it embraces the idea that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed. While the author, producer, or director may have intended a particular message to be received and understood, audiences select, filter, read, and reject media texts based on their own experiences. This does not mean reading and understanding are reduced to a matter of relativism in which any interpretation is as valid as another. Students are expected to explain and defend their readings and responses (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995).

As Gordon Pradl notes, it offers a liberating experience of literary and media texts. "Textual interpretation," he says, "lies at the heart of democratic relationships" resulting in "the creation and mediation of a rich cacophony of narratives" (Pradl, 1996, p. 9).

If our schools are to achieve the goal of creating informed, responsible citizens who exercise their franchise and participate in the democratic process, our students must understand their relationship with this media environment. As the National Council for Social Studies standards frame it, "How am I influenced by institutions? How do institutions change? What is my role in institutional change?" (NCSS, 1994, p. 25) Such questions are crucial in a democracy in which public perceptions and national policy are frequently shaped by complex interaction with today's media messages.

Born into an era in which a picture is literally worth a 1000 words, our students must be taught to be competent consumers and creators of media messages. This is not only a life skill for the 21st century; it is a necessary component of a healthy democracy in which literacy and liberty are more than ever related.

Useful Resources for Media Literacy.

Alliance for a Media Literate America: Host of the nation's premier media literacy conference (<http://www.NMEC.org>).

Mastering the Media: Media literacy and teacher education at the graduate and undergraduate level (<http://www.ci.appstate.edu/programs/edmedia/medialCoit/>).

Media Literacy Clearinghouse: Includes lesson plans (<http://www.med.sc.edu/medialit/>).

Telemedium: The Journal of Media Literacy: Special issues include media literacy and teens, global issues, pre-schoolers, and art (<http://www.NationalTelemediaCouncil.org>). To subscribe to The Journal of Media Literacy, you may also write to Marilie Rowe, the Executive Director of the National Telemedia Council, at (NTelemedia@aol.com)

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