



KEEPING CURRENT

Celebrating National Literacy Month: Media Literacy

by Frank Baker

"Our students are growing up in a world saturated with media messages, messages that fill the bulk of their leisure time... yet, they receive little or no training in the skills of analyzing or re-evaluating these messages, many of which make use of language, moving images, music, sound effects, special visual effects, and other technologies that powerfully affect our emotional response."

Renee Hobbs in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, February 2004

There is reason to believe that media literacy is gaining a higher profile in schools across the United States. For the first time, most states' teaching standards include elements of media literacy and textbook publishers are beginning to include media education. Two major national organizations, the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), and the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), both claim hundreds of members and hold regular conferences. A new organization, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, is calling for a renewed emphasis on "information and communications technology (ICT) literacy."

There appears to be renewed emphasis on ensuring that young people are not only civic minded and good citizens, but also understand the global issues that drive our world and be critical thinkers at the same time.

Canada, Australia, and Great Britain now require media education in public schools. Organizations such as the British Film Institute (BFI) and the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) exist to support both classroom teachers and students.

In my home state of South Carolina, the English Language Arts standards were revised recently (2002) to include "viewing," in addition to the traditional reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This is a tremendous step forward, in my opinion, and follows the 1970 National Council for Teachers of English resolution, urging its

members to include "nonprint" texts in teaching.

The inclusion of "viewing" and media literacy presents school library media specialists with a challenge and an opportunity: how to assist teachers who wish to begin to include "media literacy" in their instruction.

It is important that school library media specialists be able to make the distinction between *information literacy* and *media literacy*.

First, let's determine what we mean by "media literacy." The Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) defines it this way:

Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language, and sound. It is the skillful application of literacy skills to media and technology messages. As communication technologies transform society, they impact our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and our diverse cultures, making media literacy an essential life skill for the 21st century.

The Center for Media Literacy (CML) has put forth five core concepts of media literacy, derived from the Australian, British, and Canadian versions:

- All media are constructed.
- Media use unique languages with their own set of rules.
- Media convey values and points-of-view.
- Different people see the same messages differently.
- Media are about power and profit.

At the same time, CML proposes a set of key questions that are aligned with the core concepts. Critical inquiry skills and the questions listed here can be an important starting point for student understanding of the media:

- Who created the message?
- What techniques are used to attract my attention?
- What lifestyles, values, and points-of-view are represented or omitted?
- How might different people understand the message differently than I do? How might other people think/feel about it?
- Why was this message sent?

Secondly, let me say what media literacy is not:

Fred Baker is a Media Educator and Consultant on standards based media education in Columbia, SC.
E-mail: fbaker1346@aol.com

- It is not media bashing. Some media literacy organizations are highly critical of media producers. That is not my form of media education. I would not, for example, criticize Howard Stern. I would tell educators that his radio show attracted a “target audience” and thus delivered millions of dollars in advertising (Core concept #5: Media are about power and profit).
- It is not TV/video production. Learning media production skills is important, but it is a small piece of the media literacy pie.
- It is not just about television. In 2004, we must consider video games, instant messages, cell phones, motion pictures, ad creep, product placement, and more.
- It is not teaching *with* media, but rather teaching *about* the media.

So what can the school library media specialist do to help teachers introduce media literacy? Here are some recommendations:

- School library media specialists should survey their teachers to determine what resources they have and what they might need. I offer some suggestions at *Media Literacy Clearinghouse* (<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081>). In order to do this survey, school library media specialists should be familiar with which standards include media literacy. I refer you to my study in which elements of media literacy were found in the standards for English/Language Arts, Social Studies/History, and Health of all fifty states (<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/statelit.htm>).

- Inventory your student and professional collection. It has been my experience that many school library media specialists don't have much that could be defined as media literacy. So where would you locate such material? Begin with the Center for Media Literacy (<http://www.media.lit.org>). They are the nation's leading supplier of media literacy education materials. Another source is The Media Education Foundation (<http://www.mediaed.org>).

- Consider joining a media literacy organization. Both AMLA (<http://www.amlainfo.org>) and ACME (<http://www.acmecoalition.org>) are involved actively in sponsoring regular conferences and have regular communications through an international Media Literacy List serve, operated by New Mexico State University. Another organization, the National Telemedia Council (NTC), recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. By becoming a member of NTC (<http://www.nationaltelemediacouncil.org>), you will receive the well-respected *Telemedium* journal.

- Write an article for a local, regional, or national newsletter. Many times in education we feel as if we operate in a vacuum when the opposite is the case. By contributing to the national dialogue, we tell others what we are doing and we share our

success stories. In South Carolina, Jean Power is the school library media specialist at Georgetown High School. Her acquisition of films (and film texts) for teacher use is driven by matching standards to the film's theme. Her story captured the attention of *Cable in the Classroom*, which profiled her in the January 2004 issue of *Access Learning* magazine (<http://www.ciconline.org>).

- Create a bulletin board dedicated to media and media issues. Look at how much the media is a part of our world. The Internet, video games, personal digital assistants, digital television, advertising, and product placement are all part of students' experiences, both inside and out of the classroom. Each of these “new” technologies has advantages and disadvantages.

- Production is another key part of media education. Students at the earliest ages should be involved in media production, from developing storyboards and cereal boxes, to producing their own movie posters, web pages, and public service announcements. For some time, I have been conducting tobacco advertising workshops with young people, in which they produce original tobacco ads, but their message is a counter-advertising one. Our students are not only children of the media, but they are also media savvy and when we give them the opportunity to produce media, they learn valuable skills.

- Media literacy education should not be done in a vacuum—collaborate. An English teacher might partner with an arts instructor as they examine newspaper or magazine photographs; a health educator might work with the school library media specialist to identify tobacco ads and how they target teens; a social studies teacher might want the school library media specialist to record a CSPAN special on political campaign advertising; the TV production teacher might have students write and produce their own public service announcements. These are just a few examples.

- Get to know a media professional. The world of media is fascinating. Students should be given the opportunity to visit a TV news operation or see how a magazine is put together. At the same time, schools should invite media professionals (print and nonprint) to share their stories with students. Partnerships can be explored for internship possibilities and use of professional video equipment.

The following URL, prepared by the author for the South Carolina State Department of Education, is a two-page handout containing a number of valuable links and articles (<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/elahandouts.htm>).

Reference:

Kubet, Robert W. and Frank W. Baker. “Has Media Education Found a Curriculum Foothold?” *Education Week* (27 October 1999). 🖱