

What Do We Students To Know About The Media?

What Do We Want Students To Know About The Media?

By Frank W Baker (scheduled for publication at Middleweb.com in August 2021)

I was recently invited by the South Carolina school librarian's organization to keynote its summer institute for professional development and I decided that my theme would be the title of this blogpost.

So as I posed that question, virtually, and I received a number of good responses such as:

- check the source
- analyze for accuracy and bias
- know how to “fact check” what you see
- use multiple sources
- don't believe everything you see or read
- how to find out what is real and what is fake
- don't trust all you read

While those answers were good, they were also expected: they emanate from librarians whose background and primary focus has been “information literacy,” and not “media literacy.” (There is a big difference and through my talk, I made sure to elaborate on what sets them apart. More about that shortly.)

I offered three of my own:

First. I want students to know that media is pervasive. It's powerful and almost inescapable. [Can your students name a place where no media exists?]

Second. I want students to know that the media are persuasive and influential. It sets agendas by what it reports (and what it does not) and in many ways, tells us what to think, feel, eat, drink. [Can your students offer one or more examples of

persuasion in the media they attend to?]

Third, I would want students to know that most media exist to make money and the decisions they make are often based on profit potential.

[I like to ask students: who benefits from your purchase of a magazine?]

Last, here is one I did not previously address. Our students can use the media to produce and distribute messages that address problems and challenges in our community and our world. [See "[Student Filmmakers Document Social Justice Issues In Their Own Voices](#)"]

So after asking librarians "what do we want students to know about the media", I challenged them (and now I challenge you): How will you insure your students are fully aware of "the media" and all of its ramifications?

Information Literacy- Media Literacy Explained

Consider this definition of information literacy: ""the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand". ([Source](#))

Now consider this definition of media literacy: "It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy." ([Source](#))

My experience tells me most librarians (and most educators) have not received any real media literacy training nor professional development, so many are just now beginning to understand what it is, how important it is and how to implement it into instruction. [Be sure to see my latest book,

[Close Reading The Media](#), for ideas and resources.]

How To Address “Media Literacy” in Instruction

If you use video or images in instruction, then you should have a dose of media literacy which includes visual literacy.

Helping develop students’ critical viewing skills (CVS) is essential in a 21st century education. Most of our students view media passively—they watch with the thinking parts of their brains (mostly) turned off. Media and visual literacy encourage us to view media actively. That means being engaged (turning “on” those thinking parts). Consider this definition of active viewing:

“you are paying your full attention to one task (such as watching Television) and you are also interacting, you question what happens on screen and want answers” ([Source](#))

Examples of Engaging Students In Media Literacy Instruction

Engaging students in critical thinking about media is not rocket science. But it does take some practice. Here are some examples:

- An arts educator, displaying a famous painting to students, guides them to look beyond the superficial.
- A history teacher, projecting a photo from the Holocaust, encourages students to use inference as they look for clues in the image.
- An English literature teacher, showing students a Shakespeare play on film, calls attention to the “languages of film”— how costume and set design imply meaning.
- An elementary educator explores the use and meaning of color in signs.
- A science teacher has students explore what special-effects techniques a filmmaker used to make a scene appear authentic.
- A math teacher challenges students to consider “who benefits” when advertisers spend \$6 million for an ad during the annual

Super Bowl game.

If you're reading this media literacy blog post for the first time, you might like to know that in the past four years, I have explored media literacy's connections to pop culture and current events and what that means to teaching. (Go [here](#) to explore all of my previous posts.)

Simply using media in instruction today is not enough: we must take time to help students better understand media messages. That's where "media literacy" education comes in. It encourages us to take students through a "deep dive" into media's purposes and meanings.

Every teacher I know uses "the media" in instruction, but not every teacher teaches ABOUT the media. There are opportunities. And those opportunities exist in our teaching standards.

Media & Media Literacy in the Standards

In [a 1999 op-ed](#) I co-authored in "Education Week" Professor Robert Kubey and I elaborated on my analysis of every state's teaching standards. At that time, elements of media literacy were found to exist in most state's standards for ELA, Social Studies and Health.

Elements of Media Literacy in Teaching Standards

ELA	SS/History	Health	Arts
informational texts	propaganda	tobacco advertising	photography
author bias	role of mass media in history	body image	visual literacy
non-print texts (photos, film)	primary sources	violent media	graphic design
visual literacy	media/politics	food choice decisions & influences	analysis/creation
persuasion/argument	First Amendment (freedom of the press)	sexual messages	audio/music
advertising			

Unfortunately, the introduction of Common Core standards, wiped out many of those gains. As my colleague wrote in another Ed Week commentary:

“other than a mention of the need to ‘evaluate information from multiple oral, visual, or multimodal sources,’ there is no specific reference in the common standards to critical analysis and production of film, television, advertising, radio, news, music, popular culture, video games, media remixes, and so on. Nor is there explicit attention on fostering critical analysis of media messages and representations.” ([source](#))

If media literacy is to gain traction, new and revised standards must contain specific language that includes contemporary media and contemporary media literacy.

Gains in Media Literacy Education

Despite Common Core, many groups now recognize and recommend engaging students in critical thinking about media.

Recently, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

provided guidance to its members through various actions. Consider:

– The Definition of Literacy in A Digital Age

<https://ncte.org/statement/ntes-definition-literacy-digital-age/>

– Report on the Task Force on Critical Media Literacy (2021)

https://www.canva.com/design/DAERz0BpJyk/I4sPUxfrZlHLVys3QIVilQ/view?utm_content=DAERz0BpJyk&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=homepage_design_menu

The National Council for The Social Studies (NCSS) provided members with a [position statement on media literacy](#). As well the newly developed [C3 \(College, Career, and Civic Life\) Framework](#) contains strong media literacy elements—such as “inquiry is at the heart of social studies.”

The National Science Teaching Association (NTSA) “strongly supports students’ scientific literacy by including personal and societal issues.” ([Source](#))

Other groups recognizing the value of media literacy include the Partnership for 21st Century Skills; the Horizon K12 Report; Future Workskills 2020; and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

Conclusion

Do you feel as if teaching “media literacy” should be a priority? I do.

That’s because recent surveys and studies have made it clear: many of our students don’t think critically about the media they come in contact with, including social media. [See: [Most Students Don’t Know When News is Fake.](#)]

Many of them don’t consider “the source” of something they

read or watched on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube or elsewhere. Others don't consider the ramifications of spreading fake news or conspiracy theories.

There is no time like the present. What will you do? I invite your comments and reaction to this post.

Frank Baker maintains the nationally recognized [Media Literacy Clearinghouse website](#) for educators. In 2019 he was recognized with UNESCO's Global Alliance Partnership in Media & Information Literacy award. He authored "*Close Reading The Media*" –a book of monthly ideas and lessons–in a collaboration with Middleweb and Routledge. He invites inquiries about his media literacy trainings. Contact him: fbaker1346@gmail.com or via Twitter @fbaker