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MEDIA LITERACY: THE LIBERATING ALTERNATIVE

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Every student, in addition to being able to read and write, must also be able to intelligently manage the images, words and sounds of print and electronic communication. This chapter contains practical applications of media literacy techniques and strategies appropriate for the secondary level student. The focus is upon extending the curriculum, not limiting it, to lead students to a heightened consciousness and a healthy skepticism when approaching all texts, including mass media sources. Emphasis is upon teaching critical viewing skills and comparative analysis of print and electronic texts.

Ten adolescent males hover around the hearth of an eight-inch computer screen, reminiscent of primordial ancestors who hold their hands to the fire, but it is the joystick and not the flame that creates the energy. They stare, eyes fixed, mostly silent except for an occasional sober comment. The object of such intense concentration is a video game aptly named *Mortal Combat*. The stakes are high; the loser faces decapitation, electrocution, disembowelment, or annihilation of equivalent brutality.

After the bloodletting, the students willingly answer my questions about their experience of the game. The answers vary: "It's a catharsis; helps me get rid of stress." "It's fun because it's different; not like reading or going to a movie." Another chimes in, "It's fast, tension builds; it's the mounting excitement." I inquire, "What might it mean that the nine combatants are male and equipped with an array of death-dealing capabilities, while the lone female's lethal weapon is conveyed with a kiss?" No response from the group. I remind myself that it is early in their training and recognize that awareness of sexist typecasting and formula-driven storytelling are skills yet to be honed. These are no video

game junkies, but Princeton High School students interested in media literacy, who voluntarily meet after class to further investigate their own media issues.

If anyone had told me four years ago that I would be using the media to extend and enrich the curriculum, I would have spurned their suggestion. A member of the "settled adult" generation, I taught literature the way I was taught. Like my colleagues, I revered printed text, respected the literary canon and thought television was something to be ignored. While I did use movies and videos as rewards for reading a book, I otherwise treated media as if it were aspirin--to be used only in case of necessity.

But compelling events in technology, the phenomenon of "instant history" via television news, sophisticated imaging and editing techniques, combined with the mounting research on the negative effects of the unconscious use of the media influenced me to reconsider what and how I taught. And I no longer was able to deny the changes I saw in my students. I found that each year I did more work to enable students to connect with the literature in a meaningful way. Each year the number of disengaged students seemed to increase. Neil Postman might be right, that the curriculum of the school is in conflict with the curriculum of television--and television is winning the battle (Postman 1985). Unsure of solutions to the problem, I did know that ignoring the issues no longer worked. I decided that it was time to do something about it.

I Began a Dialogue with My Students

We talked about their media consumption, especially television, radio, MTV, programs they liked and disliked, what newspapers and magazines they read. It was not long before I realized that for many students, television was their primary source of information about the world. Those students who were previously difficult to motivate became animated and quickly joined in the discussions. The general response indicated a keen interest in pursuing the topic. So excited were the students that I needed to exert more structure when talking about this subject. Suddenly, everyone became an expert!

I learned from our discussions. The students taught me that their lives outside of school involved a considerable amount of time spent with media, especially television. I was surprised to find that what they experienced and the way they experienced it was quite different from my own. It amazed me that students who were skilled at literary analysis often did not transfer these critical and evaluative abilities to their television and movie viewing. When attention turned to the screen, not only did different thinking modes become automatically employed, but students' general affect noticeably changed; passivity, slumping and slouching prevailed. Worse yet, they were quite unaware of their behavior. Media expert George Gerbner's observation, "The more we live with television, the more invisible it becomes," (1991) came to mind. Missing from the students' viewing experience was a critical consciousness; the majority of responses gave scant evidence of reflective judgment. I knew that it was important for them to learn to mediate the media in order to recognize just how invisible their environment had become.

Goals and Objectives

Much the same way as I would organize a unit on *Macbeth*, I began to determine some goals and objectives related to developing a curriculum which would include media analysis. Some questions served as a guide: How can I best support my students in becoming competent critics of all media texts? What new skills are needed? In what sequence? How do I structure the class? Am I comfortable in changing my role from a content authority to a facilitator-learner? I grappled with the issues alone until fortune interceded. Gerbner came to Princeton to do a presentation on "The Media and Society" at the request of the Parent-Teacher Organization. In response to my request for information on media analysis, he invited me to attend his course on the subject. It was the beginning of an incredible journey, my personal inquiry into the complex system of mass produced symbols and messages communicated by technology. I was on my way to reframing the way I thought about teaching and learning.

Gerbner's storytelling perspective enabled me to recognize that television had become our culture's primary common source of socialization (Gerbner 1986). No longer are children reared solely upon the stories told by family, church, and school, but also from a centralized, distant electronic storyteller, with mass produced stories which have more to do with selling than with telling! This revolution in acculturation seemed to me to be at the root of many of our problems with schooling. The average school age child spends more than sixteen hours per week with television as their teacher (*Strategies for Media Literacy* 1993). This is not necessarily good or bad in itself, but it is unfortunate if the child has no adult to mediate the media's messages, to guide the

viewing. If our educational objectives are to prepare students to be effective managers of their world, then certainly we must responsibly include competency with all texts, including the mass media. With excitement and rekindled interest, I extended the curriculum of my eleventh grade course to include the study of the media as a text.

Expectations and Guidelines

Venturing into new territory, I knew that it was necessary to establish clear expectations with my students about when, why, under what circumstances and how we would utilize the media as one of our texts. Early in September, I presented the guidelines for the course and discussed the rationale for extending the curriculum to include media education, that is using the media to teach about the media. We discussed some basic facts: that the media are a business; that they construct and shape reality; that we, as media audiences, negotiate and create our own meaning; and that as citizens and consumers of the products of mass media, we have rights and entitlements under the law. I urged the students to consciously extend the same analytical and critical thinking skills they use when addressing literature to the study of the media. The students needed reassurance that the goal was not to teach them what to think about the media, but to give them the critical skills and resources which lead them to discover meaning for themselves.

Consciousness Raising--the First Step

Most people know how many books, newspapers and magazines they read during a week, but few can recall with any specificity how much media they have consumed. The class reviewed and discussed the implications of recent research findings related to media consumption in the United States, including the following facts: television is on in the average American home for more than seven hours a day, six to eight violent acts per hour are committed on prime time television, with twenty-five acts per hour on children's programming; and the number of references to sexual behavior on the three major networks in a typical season is 14,000, in contrast to the number of references to sex education information, which were 165 (*Strategies for Media Literacy* 1993). The information evoked more than raised eyebrows. Reactions ranged from denial, "This has no effect upon me," "No way in Princeton," to expressions of concerns and questions about the overall impact upon society.

The Students Develop a Media Diary

They begin by logging their personal media use for seven days and then make pie charts illustrating the data: the percentages of different media genres--radio, television, print, video games--and the amount of time spent. We created a "preferred format poster," citing our media favorites: news, talk shows, self help, dramatizations, sports, cartoons, music and advertising. We logged and then examined the conditions under which media consumption occurred--settings, circumstances (alone or with people, while doing homework, while not doing homework). After gathering this data, the students formulated hypotheses as to what this

data revealed about their patterns, preferences, and frequency of media use. The exercise provided us with useful facts; the extent to which we compared with national norms heightened our awareness of personal habits. With raised consciousness, we lifted the curtain a bit upon the invisible media environment. We were ready for the next leg of our journey.

Critical Viewing Skills--An Important Foundation

Critical viewing means being able to analyze, interpret and evaluate visual images, to read the screen with the same critical and analytical purpose as one reads a literary text. Preliminary training in the analysis of a single image, a still picture, lays a foundation for the more complicated task of analyzing moving images. The aim of visual analysis is to cultivate a process of conscious seeing, to train the students to not only view, but to scrutinize, to ask as many questions and to make as many observations as they would when analyzing a meaningful print text. I cautioned the students to override mechanical reactions to the visual stimuli, to recognize that what they see is affected by their prior knowledge and beliefs (Berger 1977).

I used Gerbner's framework (1991) for Image Analysis and decomposed a single image into three categories: assumptions, context, and point of view (ACPV).

1. Assumptions are the "facts of the case" (what we believe to be true).
2. The context involves the setting, the situation, the relationship between the whole to its parts (background and foreground).

3. The point of view involves the observer's perspective, as well as the meaning evoked by the camera through the use of different camera angles and lighting techniques.

The class analyzes a series of slides beginning with simple magazine ads featuring two persons, after which students independently select images for the application of the ACPV formula. After deconstructing the picture, unraveling the complication, the students compose a new and more personalized meaning in which they apply their analytic findings. The students write up their analyses, reveal the overt and covert message, interpret the results, and judge what are the most significant and least significant facts.

A separate paragraph is developed to determine what relevant information is missing from the ad. Why might the admaker choose to omit such information? Does the ad provide the prospective consumer with sufficient facts? Does the ad's cast reflect a multicultural population? What are the explicit and implicit values embedded in this message? An interesting, meaningful title is created, making connections with the hidden messages of the advertising content.

Moving from Print to Electronic Texts

From Image Analysis of a still picture, we progress to the analysis of television and movies, a more complex proposition because of the evanescent quality of moving pictures. A workshop on the special features of television is fundamental before working with moving images. If possible, visit a television studio where students experience video and editing techniques: zooms, cuts, wipes, audio effects; how camera work

and audio manipulations affect the meaning of the message. Discuss the codes and conventions of television production: the need for fast-paced storytelling; how commercial interruptions compromise the integrity of a good script; and how institutional bias impacts upon programming decisions. Again, the students need to consider how these media constructions create text.

Media Literacy is More About Questions Than Answers

Draw students' attention to the fact that critical reading of the screen entails suspending prior viewing habits and assuming a deliberately skeptical attitude. Emphasize that what you see ought not always to be believed, that questions may be more important than answers. A four minute scene from Robert Redford's movie adaptation of *Ordinary People* by Judith Guest, a required reading in our tenth grade, works well, as it has an especially strong illustration of visual metaphor. Missing from the novel, Redford built the family portrait scene into the movie in order to emphasize the estrangement of the family members by using visual conventions. Students are given worksheets for recording body language, blocking (positioning of characters) and properties. The students look for metaphors (the broken plate, symbol of the broken home, the family photo); they then observe how camera angles and individual shots are framed. (Considine, 1992).

Following this exercise, I show "Hollywood Endings," five minute final scenes from two feature films, *Pretty Woman* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Both films provide the opportunity to explore issues surrounding closure and mythology. The students generate their own questions: Why might the directors choose to end the movies as they did?

Are the conclusions plausible or inconsistent with the storyline? What ending might create a more satisfying effect? These snippets, also rich in metaphor, contain hair imagery reminiscent of the Grimm's fairytale, "Rapunzel." The heroines in each film become "undone," literally and figuratively, and express their relinquishment by letting their hair down before being swept away by their suitors.

Media Analysis Opens Up Different Routes to Personalized Meaning

Critical viewing and listening encourage more thoughtful processing of the literary text. The concepts of metaphor and symbol may be reinforced through visual and auditory exercises. Media adaptations of a print text present the opportunity to investigate, as Marshall McLuhan recognized, how the medium constructs and shapes the message. For example, the poem *Richard Cory* by Edwin Arlington Robinson evokes heightened response when linked with Paul Simon's musical version of the poem. The entertainment value of the song sweetens palates and encourages receptivity to the analysis of the poetry. For some, the more concrete, accessible musical adaptation leads to stronger responses, but, in every case, the approach creates a climate of interest and establishes more relevant connections with the text.

Comparative Analysis of Print and Electronic Texts

Now we embark on the last leg of the journey, the analysis of the American family through short stories and television. This unit of study is based upon the assumption that these texts, print and electronic,

mirror changing values, standards of social behavior and relationships within the family, and refer to society, as well. The goal is to identify family values, lifestyles and attitudes, and uncover stereotypic notions. Through the lens of a series of ten classic short stories presented in historical context, including works by Kate Chopin, Theodore Dreiser, Tillie Olson and John Updike, and four television family portrayals, the students conduct an ongoing investigation. I chose two of the television sources: *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Brady Bunch*, representative of the 1950's and 1960-70's and the students selected sources for the 1980's and 1990's, *Beverly Hills,90210* and *Roseanne*.

Cooperative Learning--the Vehicle for Investigation

Student groups research the historical context of the story settings before reading the texts. The stories serve as reflections of the times in which they were constructed. The students read, view, record and analyze story content--identifying explicit and implicit evidence of family values, themes, roles and relationships. Despite the fact that the television shows were characterized by conspicuous consumption and watered down plots, the students uncovered valuable data, especially related to race, social class, power relationships and gender.

In response to the question of who or what is missing from the stories, the students noted the absence of different perspectives, a consequence of the relatively constant point of view, that of the middle class, white, educated version of the American family. One short story was centered on a middle-class black family's struggle, and three stories featured females as heads of household. In some cases, stories in both

media dispelled myths and misconceptions related to the identity of the American family, while other stories perpetuated myths and created new stereotypes. The study involved more information than I can recount in this writing. The work provided both my students and myself with valuable insights. The curriculum must now be revised to reflect more democratic perspectives consistent with our multicultural society.

Extending the Definition of Literacy

We live in the most media-saturated country in the world. It is crucial that we provide our young with the critical and analytical tools to understand, interpret and produce media content. Most people form their core attitudes about racial, ethnic, national and sexual minorities, gender, persons with disabilities and senior citizens at a very young age. Those attitudes are largely driven by media portrayals. Thus, by acknowledging the central role played by mass media in shaping our cultural environment, by teaching students how to recognize and evaluate media stereotyping and agenda setting which impinges upon tolerance and respect for others, media literacy education serves as an important means to teach the principles of fundamental democratic rights.

Techniques and Strategies for Extending the Curriculum to include the Study of the Media as a Text

- Begin by thinking how to think about the media, especially television, as the mainstream of our cultural environment.

- Consider consciousness-raising through the assessment and evaluation of personal media consumption, including viewing habits, as a fundamental step.
- Establish clear expectations; identify goals and objectives and determine student guidelines for the use of the media as a text.
- Provide students with a rationale for including the media as an extension of the curriculum, presenting some basic facts and statistics about the media.
- Teach critical viewing skills; move from the analysis of a still picture to the analysis of moving pictures. Use analytic frameworks which help students to more clearly discover, through their own research, the embedded meaning and message.
- Visit a television studio or a print publishing company to illustrate how production and editing techniques affect the resulting program or product.
- Discuss and analyze how media images affect our notions about society and help to shape our cultural environment.

The implications of my work in curriculum development and in the classroom with my students clearly demonstrate for me that media

literacy has a vital place in the school. We have a choice. We can continue to maintain the status quo, regard the existing literary canon as sacrosanct and employ the same classroom and programmatic structures which give us essentially the same results, or we can opt for change. By extending the curriculum to include competency in understanding and using the media, we provide students with valuable critical and cultural tools to better equip them in their roles as citizens, social beings, and consumers. By electing to teach students to be media literate, we liberate both the curriculum and our students.

Resources for Teachers

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