Creating and measuring media literacy: a case study

Darin M. Johnson
University of Northern Iowa

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Creating and measuring media literacy: a case study

Abstract

Seven years later, I stood before high school students in Ames, Iowa, with the proposition that we study media as a collection of cultural artifacts. Behind many of our discussions was the assumption that media convey values and that these values influence our personal values. What was missing from my instruction was an organizational structure that would help students see the necessary patterns, methods and stereotypes in order to better comprehend the values in these messages.

After a summer of contemplation, I decided thematic instruction would most naturally allow us to examine important media while capstoning themes from the required classes in the ninth and tenth grades. I began revisioning the curriculum around these themes: Schools and Learning; Friends and Family; Men, Women and Society; Taking a Stand: A Look at Heroism. I hoped that students could more easily see patterns in media if we narrowed them into thematic categories. In this way, students could have a definite purpose as they looked for the patterns, methods and stereotypes in the media around us.

But my desires in refining the curriculum went beyond the comprehension level. I also wanted my students to build skills which would help them negotiate and participate in various messages in our media-rich environment. In addition to refining the curriculum, I also wanted to measure my students' growth in literacy. This paper describes my attempts to refine the course and measure student literacy growth.

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Creating and Measuring Media Literacy: A Case Study

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Division of Computer Applications in Education
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in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Darin M. Johnson
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Richard H. Fehlman
7-31-97
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

Sharon E. Smaldino
July 31, 1997
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

Greg Stefanich
7-31-97
Date Approved

Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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CHAPTER 1
Introduction

Experience in Austria

In the winter of 1990, I flew to Klagenfurt, Austria, with a group of UNI students to begin an intensive semester of learning German. Although I did not fully comprehend the great changes that would occur in my life, that experience provided numerous opportunities to explore such profound questions as "Who am I?" and "What does it mean to be an American?" While it may seem foolish that a young Iowan had not given extensive consideration to such basic questions until his junior year in college, being in another country provided countless opportunities to consider these two questions.

During one retreat our Austrian professor asked members of our group to explain the cultural context of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start The Fire" (1989) to the Austrian students who had joined us. Our Austrian professor had chosen this medium for us, and it proved to be both a pleasurable and a challenging experience. I watched with amazement as these Austrians redefined their concepts of Americans through this song. Word by word, the young Austrians attempted to better understand our culture through what they considered to be a legitimate cultural artifact.

Seeing a vaguely familiar song viewed by others as a cultural artifact was illuminating. A few weeks later when a group of us confronted negative stereotypes about Americans after watching Dallas and Dynasty with several Austrian students, the concept of redefining a culture through their media became more solid in my mind. Not living in our culture, they assumed the values conveyed in this medium were not only common but were generally accepted American values. After several hours of discussion, I knew that I would never watch television in the same way again. I also knew that I would never view American culture the same way.
Refining a course

Seven years later, I stood before high school students in Ames, Iowa, with the proposition that we study media as a collection of cultural artifacts. Behind many of our discussions was the assumption that media convey values and that these values influence our personal values. What was missing from my instruction was an organizational structure that would help students see the necessary patterns, methods and stereotypes in order to better comprehend the values in these messages.

After a summer of contemplation, I decided thematic instruction would most naturally allow us to examine important media while capstoning themes from the required classes in the ninth and tenth grades. I began revisioning the curriculum around these themes: Schools and Learning; Friends and Family; Men, Women and Society; Taking a Stand: A Look at Heroism. I hoped that students could more easily see patterns in media if we narrowed them into thematic categories. In this way, students could have a definite purpose as they looked for the patterns, methods and stereotypes in the media around us.

But my desires in refining the curriculum went beyond the comprehension level. I also wanted my students to build skills which would help them negotiate and participate in various messages in our media-rich environment. In addition to refining the curriculum, I also wanted to measure my students' growth in literacy. The next chapters describe my attempts to refine the course and measure student literacy growth.
CHAPTER 2
Literature & Theory

Myers and literacy

One day I was talking to my colleague and mentor, John Forssman (personal communication, November 8, 1996), about changing the media course when our conversation moved to the need for students to have multiple perspectives. Part of this came about because I was then teaching one class of Perspectives in Literature (an elective American literature course). We discussed the power involved in giving students multiple perspectives to comprehend and shape their world. Our discussion helped me better understand some of the concepts NCTE Executive Director Miles Myers presents in his Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and literacy (1996).

The first section of Changing Our Minds shows the different historical stages of literacy in America. Briefly, Myers emphasizes the cultural variables that lead to the literate needs of citizens in each era. In the 1600s, standards of oral communication were needed to maintain oral traditions and records. Sometime around 1776, people’s needs changed from needing oral proficiency to signature literacy. An emphasis on recitation followed the Civil War, and decoding unfamiliar texts became important during and after World War I (Myers, 1996).

From 1983 on Myers believes that we have been adapting to what he calls a Translation/Critical literacy. The purpose of this literacy is to “develop multiple perspectives, translations of culture, negotiation of differences, flexibility among speech agents” (Myers, 1996, p. 57). These literacy concepts became the foundational elements of the course. Central to all else, I wanted my students to realize that multiple perspectives coexist within our post modern world. The ability to recognize multiple worldviews is essential for students living in the modern world.
The challenge in a course like this is to move the students away from a variety of media and then give them certain tools with which to examine this media. For many students, the concept that they should be thinking about the impact a television show is making on humanity is a new idea. Once this media distancing is achieved, students can begin negotiating differences by asking questions. How does this media representation differ from previous representations? How do you relate to this difference? Why do others in our group have different reactions? Why do we have similar reactions? These last questions help to foster a student response-centered classroom.

Considine and media literacy

Myers' suggestions were not radical or new to me. In fact, some of his ideas reminded me of David Considine’s keynote address at the 1994 Conference on Media Education in Madison. In his address titled “Reading Words and Reading Worlds: Redefining Teaching and Texts in a Media Age,” Considine emphasized that teachers must change their teaching methods to better reach today’s students. Because television has become “the principal shaper of culture,” teachers must recognize the importance and necessity of shifting paradigms to include meaningful discussions of media. While Myers book provided a general foundation, I hoped Considine’s book would construct the essential scaffolding. To create that scaffolding, I returned to Considine & Haley’s book *Visual messages: Integrating imagery into instruction* (1992) to find what they had written about the need to reveal multiple perspectives to our students. They wrote:

Central to media education is recognizing and helping students understand that media mediate, which means the media do much more than merely record reality and reflect it. Media—including film, television, advertising, and the news—create representations of reality.
Although the images and the stories may seem real, or ‘true to life,’ they are always structured to represent a particular point of view, perspective, ideology, or value system (Considine & Haley, 1992, p. 12).

What seemed essential here were thoughts surrounding and supporting multiple perspectives. Deep down I knew I did not want to teach my students that media reflect reality. My own experiences suggested that any media representation, like art, is an attempt to represent a reality.

Combining some of Myers’ ideas on literacy and Considine and Haley’s ideas on media literacy created these central tenants/scaffolding for this course: Media create representations of reality; Media represent a particular point of view or world view; Media represent certain ideologies or values; Every medium was created in a context and is interpreted within another context. Supporting these tenants was a firm belief that instruction about media should seek a balance between the text, context and reader/viewer/listener.

The need to balance text, context and R/V/L was an educational mantra I had learned during my graduate studies in media at the University of Northern Iowa. Such a belief system seemed to be a natural extension of my education. As a high school student I learned to worship the text. As an undergraduate studying English, I learned to balance reader response with issues surrounding a text. And as a graduate student, I added contextual studies.

"In studying the media students should look internally at the form and content of the image, but they must also look externally and think about the impact media messages and media technologies have on society as a whole and on audiences and user groups" (Considine & Haley, 1992, p. 13). Being able to discuss the impact of media and the personal transaction one has with a medium also seemed important. An additional area within the context would be for my students to find personal meaning and ask themselves: How do I make meaning from this message?
Patterns, themes and ideologies

Central to this concept of having a personal response-centered classroom was the idea of better understanding how others interpret the same message. Myers also lists literacy education "as construction and reconstruction and translation of past and present" (Myers, 1996, p. 57). Linking the past to the present, one context to another, requires students to understand the historical context and the zeitgeist. A literate person understands that the same message can produce a wide variety of responses over time.

Having found several core concepts was not enough, however. How could I convey these concepts to my students? I looked through two editions (1980 & 1986) of Understanding Mass Media by Jeffrey Schrank. While they were heavy into teaching about media as texts to study within certain contexts, they lacked building personal responses between the medium and the reader/viewer/listener.

My objective was for students to be able to find personal meaning in today's media. I returned to Myers' book for help. "Knowledge, in order to be knowledge, must have a design or structure which distinguishes it from information and which connects it to the codes of social formations" (Myers, 1996, p. 138). Given that the amount of information in our culture is growing exponentially, I knew that I needed to create a structure that would help my students make sense of the many perspectives while giving balanced treatment to media texts, contexts and personal responses.

Considine and Haley (1992) also recommended looking at the cumulative nature of communication by examining the recurring patterns, themes and ideologies. The idea of looking at recurring patterns, themes and ideologies appealed to me. Given that there are so many media messages, I knew that looking at a select few was the best we could do in a one semester class and that narrowing our search to essential patterns, themes and ideas would help my students well into the future.
Such strategies would equip them with ideas, knowledge, tools and attitudes to sift through future media messages in order to help them make sense of our culture and our world.

**Shared narratives**

Shared narratives would form the educational scaffolding for my students. As Postman points out in his *The end of education: Redefining the value of school:* "The idea of public education depends absolutely on the existence of shared narrative and the exclusion of narratives that lead to alienation and divisiveness" (1995, p. 17). Some of these narratives I decided should come from the existing curriculum from grades nine and ten. I wanted to emphasize the narratives of the heroic quest and the search for family and show how these themes could be found in other media besides *The Odyssey* and *Summer of My German Soldier*.

Because of my desire to promote narratives within a thematic structure, I decided to emphasize film, television and print. “Some facility with shifting among the modes has become part of the curriculum, and one result of this flexibility is that narrative forms assume a new importance, a new status as a way of knowing” (Myers, pp. 220-221). Although our district Curriculum and Instruction Department worried that English language arts teachers were putting too much emphasis on narratives, I decided that narratives should dominate the media presented and created in class. Several writers besides Myers had convinced me that narratives are essential to our lives. One such person was British educator Barbara Hardy. Hardy contends:

“narrative . . . is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life. . . . For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.” In order to live, “we make
up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future” (Gere, Fairbanks, Howes, Roop & Schaafsma, 1992, p.150). Beach and Marshall in their discussion of knowing literature include these words by Jerome Bruner: “In ways we seldom consider, stories are central to our lives. We use narrative to construct our personal histories, to instruct our children, to entertain one another, to provide examples for our arguments, to record the history of our culture and our world” (1991, p.269). Emphasizing narrative would also allow us to focus on issues while exploring American culture.

The last step was to find media which comfortably fit into the four themes and which would allow students to discover the core concepts. Many, but not all, of the media I would choose would be narrative. The themes and the chosen media are briefly outlined on the next page.
# Brief Outline of Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Unit Topic</th>
<th>Film (s)</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Print</th>
<th>Assessments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education: What is learning?</strong></td>
<td>Mr. Holland's Opus</td>
<td>NBC news</td>
<td>Selected articles from Time &amp; U.S. News</td>
<td>Paper 1, Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends &amp; Family: What are the ties that bind?</strong></td>
<td>A River Runs Through It, Fried Green Tomatoes</td>
<td>Situational Comedies on ABC</td>
<td>Periodicals</td>
<td>Paper 2, Journal, Formal Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taking a stand: How can I make a difference?</strong></td>
<td>Stagecoach, Red River, The Searchers, Dances with Wolves, When We Were Young and Colored</td>
<td>Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman</td>
<td>Weekly periodicals, NPR transcripts, &quot;Talking Peace&quot; by Jimmy Carter</td>
<td>Paper 4, Redefining course (final)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3
Method & Data Collection

Reducing the central tenants described in Chapter 2 down to single words, I chose the following words as literacy markers to help in the analysis of student writing: represent, view, context, zeitgeist, value, and “I.” At the end of each unit, students were asked to write an analysis paper. Using the computer, I would search for each of the six literacy markers in the student papers and tally the results in order to record growth.

Students were given information about each paper approximately one week before we went to type them in the computer lab. The first paper gave students these directions: “Using information from the clips, write an essay that answers this question: ‘How do media represent schools?’ Your Paper cannot be over 500 words. Your intended audience is other high school students who are familiar with some of the clips we viewed.” The only difference with Papers 2, 3 & 4 was the changing of the word “schools” to “friendship,” gender” and “people.”

Paper 1 was given during week 2 of the semester. The only core concept introduced at that time was the representational quality of media. Paper 1 was given to students at the start of week 2 to create a baseline of the number of times they used the literacy markers. Prior to the essay, students read reports about schools from Time and U.S. News and World Reports, viewed two segments about schools from NBC news and watched clips from two television shows which focused on schools. The unit culminated with the viewing of Mr. Holland’s Opus.

Students were instructed to bring at least an essay in a rough form to the computer lab because they would only be given one class period of 43 minutes in which to complete their essays. Students handed in printed essays for evaluation and saved their essays on each hard drive for data analysis.
Paper 2 was given during week 6. Core concepts during that instructional
time included the representational quality of media and activities emphasizing
point of view and world view. Discussion focused on how friends and family can
provide strength and healing.

Media in this unit included three NBC “In-depth” reports, newsmagazine
stories on the American family, a 20/20 segment on two parents working and what
it means for contemporary families and situational comedies like Roseanne, Home
Improvement and Grace Under Fire. Core concepts during this time were the repre­
sentational quality of media and how each medium has a point of view and world
view. In addition to the activities mentioned above, students also assumed a charac­
ters point of view in a writing activity after viewing A River Runs Through It. The
unit ended with students looking for strength and healing in Fried Green Tomatoes
and discussing the differing points of view in that movie. Students were asked to
write an analysis paper about how friends and family were represented in Fried
Green Tomatoes.

Paper 3 was given after looking at the evolution of romantic comedies. Core
concepts during that time were the zeitgeist, or mood of the times and the contextu­
al nature of each medium when it was produced and as it is presently received.
Students watched clips from My Man Godfrey, The Palm Beach Story, The Seven
Year Itch, The Graduate, Tootsie and The American President. Prior to looking at
the movie clips, students had viewed situational comedies, drama and science fic­
tion television shows dealing with the relationship between men and women.
Students focused on doing simplistic content analyses by examining the power
structures in each narrative and discussing how each medium represented life in
the 1990s. In between these content analyses, students read several psychological and
sociological articles discussing the differences between men and women.
Students ended this unit by using their understanding of the zeitgeist of each decade as they viewed westerns. The westerns then served as a bridge to the final unit. Paper 4 was given at the end of the semester and was much more open than previous papers because of its use of the word “people.” This paper was given after a unit titled “Taking a stand: Moving beyond stereotypes.” Core concepts during this time included finding stereotypes and their underlying values and recognizing the personal impact media have in our lives.

Ten students were chosen after the close of the semester. Students who had completed all four papers were considered for analysis. Of the 26 students in the class, 12 had completed all four papers. Of these 12, I chose five females and five males. Nine of the students were seniors and one was a sophomore.

After choosing the 10 students, I recorded the number of times each student used one of the literacy markers in his/her paper. The following chart records the number of times the ten students used each of the literacy markers in their papers. The letters after the paper number indicate which concepts (representation, view, context, zeitgeist, value and use of “I”) were emphasized during that period of instruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Totals</th>
<th>Represent</th>
<th>View</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Zeitgeist</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>“I”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper 1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper 3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper 4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4
Analysis and Discussion

Analysis

Literacy marker results varied considerably by marker and by paper in that growth was not linear. Paper 1 had high marker results with the represent, view and "I" markers but no student used context, zeitgeist or value in their papers. Paper 2 had drops in all literacy markers except a very minimal rise in the use of "value" by one student.

Paper 3 scored above the baseline in three categories (represent, value and "I"). Paper 4 shows a decrease in the use of represent and view with an increase in the use of zeitgeist, value and "I." The graph printed below illustrates the relationship between the different markers and papers.

[Graph showing literacy marker results with markers for Papers 1 to 4 and categories for represent, view, context, zeitgeist, value, and "I" along the x-axis and literacy marker totals along the y-axis.]
The data from this graph suggests that instruction prior to Paper 2 actually had a negative effect on the students. Their use of the "represent" in their papers decreased 55 percent between Paper 1 and Paper 2.

In addition, instruction prior to Paper 3 emphasized the mood, zeitgeist and context of media representations of gender. Throughout this unit students analyzed film clips from romantic comedies from six of the last seven decades. Not one of the ten students used either of the literacy markers meant to measure the core concepts being taught in class. Either the concept was too difficult to be articulated, the information was ineffectively taught, or these markers did not measure true growth. However, there is minimal growth in the total number of literacy makers in Paper 3. This might suggest that it takes much longer for key concepts to become a part of a students vocabulary and that the testing and the teaching follow each other too closely in order to be conclusive.

Paper 4 shows the most growth in the concepts being taught and in the total number of literacy markers. Other papers showed moderate growth. For example, emphasizing the concepts of media conveying values and the importance of making personal meaning significantly increased the number of times students used those literacy markers in their writing.

Discussion

All of these interpretation are dependent upon the idea that these literacy markers accurately measure literacy growth. While the overall concept is certainly worthy of consideration, from a practical point of view, these six markers did not sufficiently measure literacy. The many variables underlying literacy could not be reduced to six markers.

Students wrote Paper 1 at the end of the second week of instruction. The original intent of this paper was that the presentation of key concepts would be kept to a minimum so that this paper could serve as a baseline for the other papers.
However, such a task proved to be very difficult for me. In the end, the students received some instruction on the representational qualities of media.

In addition, the very question of "How do media represent schools?" focused students on the use of the word represent. Many of their previous academic writing experiences when given an essay-type question dictated that they parrot the question back in the form of a thesis statement. Three introductions from student essays help illustrate this parroting effect.

One student began her paper: "Everyday our lives are consumed by the views the media presents to us. School is one of the numerous subjects the media entertains us with. Media gets their representation of schools from ideas they gather of real life observations. But when these ideas are presented to us, they may be watered down or spiced up. The ideas may be presented to us partially to inform us, but the main objective is to entertain."

Another student began: "Often times when the media represents schools it does it accurately; sometimes it is even based on real events or a real story. However, the media seems to focus on the bad things about schools, or inner city schools; this gives people unassociated with education an unrealistic view of the school system."

A third student wrote: "Media shows many different representations of school whether it be from the eyes of students, parents, teachers, or administrators. One idea that seemed to be universal between all of the groups is that school is a place that provides education and direction to students so they can be successful later in life."

Further problems with the literacy markers can be found in Paper 2. The literacy marker data suggests that students were not learning the key concepts being taught; however, there are several fundamental problems with the teaching of these concepts. First, teaching students about point of view and world view and then ask-
ing students to discuss how “friendship was represented” in *Fried Green Tomatoes* was impractical. Second, expecting students to better understand point of view is reasonable, but to expect them to freely add it to their everyday vocabulary after five weeks of instruction was naive and artificial.

In addition, point of view can be expressed in many ways, and reducing this concept down to one word was not effective. For example, one student wrote: “*Fried Green Tomatoes* makes its viewers evaluate their friendships. Viewers, especially women, may enjoy it if they can relate to the women’s situations.” Although this student used “viewers” in her conclusion, she did not write point of view, yet it is clear that she is developing a sense of point of view.

Relating to a character’s situation and judging the impact of a text on its audience required her to adapt her point of view to that of the character. Relating in and of itself is a legitimate habit of the mind, but her response also demonstrates that she is moving toward an evaluative stance of this film. And this is one direction in which we want our student to be moving.

Another student wrote: “As Idgie recalls her life, she tells Evelyn, ‘The most important thing in life is friendship.’ Idgie recognizes that the material things most people strive for, money, power, and possessions mean nothing because at eighty-two years old, all you have left are your friendships and memories.” This student recognizes a point of view other than his own. He is beginning to understand the point of view of an eighty-two-year-old character, yet the literacy markers did not record any sense of point of view.

Additional literacy marker problems can be found in the measurements of Paper 3 which showed no growth in the concepts of zeitgeist or context. For example, one student began his essay: “Since the early 1930's, when romantic comedy movies were first introduced with the Screwball Comedy, men and women have been portrayed in different ways depending on the time periods.” Later he wrote:
"This nervous character may have been created by influences from the Korean War and the American concern for the spread of communism." Although this student does not use "context" or "zeitgeist" in his paper, he is beginning to understand and articulate the ways in which the zeitgeist influenced the film clips that we watched. Applying a rigid scientific analysis of his paper did not account for the potential of his personal expression.

Further examples of a contextual understanding can be found in other responses. "You can look back on our society and see how it has changed as far as the gender roles. Events that happen within the realm of our society dictate the roles' men and women play." Although not as clear as many English teachers would like, this student's response is an attempt to explain how the mood of the times influenced the medium. In his mind, events have dictated the acceptable roles men and women have taken in each medium.

Another student wrote: "The battle of the sexes has been going on as long as anyone can remember. In each time period the representations are different. I found that relationships are represented by what's going on in real life at that time. I am going to focus on the movies from the 1960's up to the 1990's." While literacy markers showed no growth, this student is using the necessary skills of a person in a translation/critical literacy.

Another student translated his conception of zeitgeist in this way: "Representations of the sexes in romantic comedies has evolved considerably since the dawn of the "Screwball Era" in the thirties. I'll be focusing on a few movies that I feel represented the feel of the genders since the thirties."

All of these examples show students struggling to understand a text. They are being literate users of our language and of our culture. "Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical and creative users not only of print and spoken languages but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial
and political advertising, photography, and more (Greer, Smith & Erwin, 1996, p.5). Expecting students to somehow find their way to six hidden literacy markers denied them of creative responses to media. While the six literacy benchmarks suggested that the students were not building fluency in literacy, a closer examination of their writing suggested that these students were indeed learning and exploring a translation/critical literacy.
CHAPTER 5
Conclusions and Recommendations

While the idea of literacy benchmarks continues to draw some of my interest, such simplistic evaluative techniques cannot give accurate measurements of the complexity surrounding literacy growth. Restricting measurement to such narrow behaviors defeats the entire concept that we live in a post modern world where multiple perspectives not only exist but are cherished. In short, simple assessments cannot be used to measure complex behaviors.

There are several possibilities for improving literacy markers. To more accurately get a reading from the markers one could emphasize their usage to students, yet I believe this would solve one problem while creating another. Giving such explicit directions to students purely for the purpose of assessment seems contradictory to a classroom where personal responses are highly valued. As Noam Chomsky pointed out: “That by diminishing the range and complexity of materials presented to the inquiring mind, by setting behavior in fixed patterns, these methods may harm and distance the normal development of creative abilities” (Steiner, 1993, pp. 72-73). Such an activity over time might lead students to believe that the purpose of the language arts is to find certain key words and use them successfully.

Other possibilities are more appealing. An in-depth analysis of each paper and the creation of a scale to measure if they understood the concept behind the marker could be done. Perhaps such an assessment would have no set of markers but would only use markers as suggestions of ways in which students in the past have demonstrated different levels of literacy proficiency. Such an assessment could use a holistic rubric to gauge the level of literacy.

Being aware of and attempting to measure student literacy is a worthy goal. Although we face difficulties in finding valid criterion-referenced assessments for literacy, it is essential that we do not stop moving our students to a
critical/translation literacy just because it is difficult to measure. The lack of a “quick fix” assessment cannot prevent us from moving forward and transforming our classrooms.

As I translate my own teaching culture, I am worried about the incessant demand thrust onto English/language arts teachers to standardize their assessments and measure growth with visible, behavioral and “objective” forms. While it may be appealing for some to make all experiences and classrooms equal, I worry that in our quest for objective fact, we will lose the art of teaching and the art of learning. In teaching, art and science must complement each other and find a balancing point. For me, this research has illustrated the danger surrounding any attempt to simplistically forge scientific measurement onto the expanding complexities of students experiencing media in this translation/critical literacy period. I would not sound the alarm, except that I see other similarly simplistic assessments being used to make significant educational decisions.

The answers to nurturing learning in a critical/translation classroom require scholarly and informed preparation, action and reflection. On a more positive note, I see fellow English teachers and students breaking free of traditional categories of teaching and learning and using their knowledge of literature, media, art, music, history, sociology, anthropology and psychology to create meaningful learning in the classroom. I see reflective students and teachers translating our culture and asking critical questions in their search for knowledge, yet improvements must be made as we continue to adjust to this critical/translation period.

Measuring growth will certainly be a part of these improvements. Although I had difficulty creating a valid instrument for measuring literacy growth, the desire to measure growth was a sound educational decision. I recommend that this case study continue with modifications in method and measurement. Given the complexities surrounding literacy and language, future approaches should move in a
more qualitative direction and adopt an ethnographic approach. Such an approach would allow the teacher a greater understanding of the many complexities in student responses to media.


