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The Basics of Teaching Media Literacy

Jill Wurzer
University of Northern Iowa

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The Basics of Teaching Media Literacy

Abstract

According to the Media Literacy Online Project (1998), American children and adolescents spend 22-28 hours a week viewing television. By the time today's children reach age 70, they will have spent 7-10 years watching television. Now, more than ever, schools are being called on to deal with the effects of the growing influence of the media in students' lives. Media literacy and media education are even getting attention in the English Language Arts Standards by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). So, what is media literacy? What materials are available to teach it, and how can teachers justify teaching media literacy to parents and administrators?

THE BASICS OF TEACHING MEDIA LITERACY

A Graduate Journal Article Paper

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by

Jill Wurzer

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Date Approved

Deborah L. Tidwell
Graduate Faculty Reader

4/27/13
Date Approved

Rick C. Traw
Graduate Faculty Reader

4/30/13
Date Approved

R. Muffoletto
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

According to the Media Literacy Online Project (1998), American children and adolescents spend 22-28 hours a week viewing television. By the time today's children reach age 70, they will have spent 7-10 years watching television. Now, more than ever, schools are being called on to deal with the effects of the growing influence of the media in students' lives. Media literacy and media education are even getting attention in the English Language Arts Standards by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). So, what is media literacy? What materials are available to teach it, and how can teachers justify teaching media literacy to parents and administrators?

The NCTE provides a strong rationale for even including media literacy into the elementary classroom curriculum. The NCTE has set forth standards for English Language Arts that address media literacy. Three standards specifically discuss media literacy. These standards deal with the variety of print and nonprint texts students should read and understand, the strategies used in writing to communicate for various purposes, and knowledge of language in creating, critiquing, and discussing texts (NCTE/IRA, 1996). A Media Commission of the NCTE (1997) issued ten recommendations

in media literacy which vary from students portfolios to teacher resources from copyright laws to accreditation standards.

Besides the NCTE recommendations, teaching media literacy can easily be integrated into the regular classroom curriculum and involves higher level thinking skills. Before getting into the curriculum materials available for teaching media literacy, a definition is helpful.

Defining media literacy is not easy. Like so many other topics in education, it is defined by many people in slightly different ways. Many literacy organizations have agreed on media literacy as the ability to perform the following skills: access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in various forms (Pungente, 1996). The Ontario Ministry of Education expanded this definition to include a media literate person as one who critically understands the nature, techniques, and impact of the media along with the ability to produce media (Pungente). Another definition out of Canada is simply understanding and evaluating all the symbol systems in a society (Bowen, 1997). Lloyd-Kolkin and Tyner (1991) define media literacy as the understanding mass of media, how mass media produces meaning, the organization of

mass media, and wise use of mass media. A common thread in all these definitions of media literacy is the critical thinking aspect.

Other than the benefit of thinking critically, why else should media literacy be taught? Considine (1995) traces the technological advances in our society. Because of these advances he feels media literacy should be taught so citizens can question the authentic and accurate nature of media forms and also because all citizens will need media literacy skills in the workplace in the 21st century. Duncan (in Bowen, 1997) comes up with more political reasons. He feels media literacy should be taught because of the dominate force media has in our lives, the powerful models media gives for values and behavior, the influential nature of media, and the amount of information that is connected to the media. Duncan also asserts that understanding media literacy will let us enjoy media and be active participants of media. Focusing more on academic reasons, media literacy should be taught since it involves collaboration, a holistic approach, student centered learning, and reflection (Masterman, 1997).

The next step in teaching media literacy is looking at the curriculum materials available. Unfortunately, there are not many

materials for the regular elementary classroom teacher. However, from an elementary teacher's perspective, I will look at all available resources on teaching media literacy with the following criteria:

- teaches the student to question the authentic and accurate nature of media
- looks at the powerful models of value and behavior media present
- write connected with media
- allows students to study and create media
- active viewing skills

I will also include the audience the resource is intended for and additional comments.

CRITIQUE OF CURRICULUM MATERIALS

Educating the Consumer of Television: An Interactive Approach

(1992) Splaine

Audience: elementary regular classroom teacher of grades 5-9

Question the authentic and accurate nature of media: This is broken into 10 chapters on how to critically view different

types of media: commercials, game shows, news, television series, sports, music videos, soap operas, cartoons, and movies.

The emphasis of the entire book is teaching students how to question media.

Powerful models of value and behavior: Chapter 2 deals specifically with commercials and looking at the purpose and audience of commercials. This lesson goes into detail on how advertisers market their products.

Writing connected with media: Each lesson has a study guide. This is the only opportunity the students have to write. The classroom teacher could definitely come up with some writing activities to extend the concepts of each lesson.

Create media: In chapter 4 on the news, students actually produce their own news show; they also conduct interviews.

Active viewing skills: In almost all of the units, student are asked to keep logs of their viewing. Again, the focus of this book is on critical viewing, so the students are looking for specific things in each of the types of programs (cartoon violence, tone of reporters, types of products advertised during programs, etc.)

Additional comments: This book includes a separate teacher's guide which had additional activities, questions, expanded glossary along with bibliography, and a guide for obtaining videos and addresses of networks and services. The objectives are easily laid out in each chapter. The student questions are on a variety of levels. This book seemed easy to adapt into the existing language arts curriculum with all the writing activities available.

Video Projects for Elementary and Middle Schools (1995) Kyler and Curchy

Audience: K-8 media specialists

Question the authentic and accurate nature of media: This resource does not have material to allow students to question the media. However, this could be brought up indirectly in some of the production lessons.

Powerful models of value and behavior: Again, this book does not directly address this; it could come up in some of the lessons.

Writing connected with media: Students are writing when they produce videos. They have to write scripts, write interview

questions, and gather background information to complete some of the production assignments.

Create media: This entire book is focused on production so there are plenty of opportunities to tie in the regular curriculum. Some sample lessons include: Science-“Story of a seed”, Language arts-“Another great book”, Math- “Making it Metric”, Social Studies-“Nation Exploration”.

Active viewing skills: There is no opportunity for active viewing in this resource.

Additional comments: This book is geared toward media specialists. The lessons would be very hard to incorporate into the regular classroom without the help of the media specialist.

Television Production for Elementary Schools (1994) Kyler and Curchy

Audience: elementary media specialists

Questions the authentic and accurate nature of media: One lesson on news programs, “Where do they get the news?”, looks at questioning the media.

Powerful models of value and behavior: There are no opportunities to look at the models media presents with this resource.

Writing connected with media: This book contains a few opportunities for some writing extension activities along with several worksheets with answers to fill in.

Create media: One part of the book has the students creating a news program. The students could be responsible for all the production of this.

Active viewing skills: This book has no lessons on active viewing skills.

Additional comments: This is a resource for the previous mentioned book for media specialists. This book will tie in nicely to the regular classroom curriculum but will need the help of a media specialist. It has eight lessons on careers in television and four lessons on physical science concepts of production. No other resources I looked at had career connections, so this would be a nice resource to have for that aspect. This also had very detailed information about equipment that may be helpful in starting up a program.

Media and You: An elementary media literacy curriculum (1991)

Lloyd-Kolkin

Audience: elementary regular classroom teacher

Questions the authentic and accurate nature of media: In the unit on entertainment, there were several lessons that dealt with students questioning the nature of media. These dealt with the world of television, developing a critical opinion of media, and looking at the informational media.

Powerful models of value and behavior: Students look at advertising techniques and think about the impact of media in their own lives in several lessons. There wasn't a specific lesson on the models media present, but many lessons indirectly dealt with this topic.

Writing connected with media: All five units have a tie to the language arts curriculum. Some examples include: writing advertisements, media critiques, newspaper articles, and completing worksheets.

Create media: The students study production techniques, but they do not actually produce videos. They create a flip book, sound effects, advertisements, and crop pictures.

Active viewing skills: The students keep a media log. They also create rules for selecting media to view. They learn how to develop a critical opinion of shows, compare print and nonprint media, and compare and contrast news coverage on different types on media.

Additional comments: The worksheets seem geared toward the lower elementary. Many directions are to color in or cross out pictures. They would have to be re-made or directions modified to include upper elementary. There are sample letters, additional resources, and information on copyright laws. The units are laid out with plenty of background information that include objectives and activities. Even a teacher with little background on media literacy can feel comfortable with teaching this. The terms are well-defined; the lessons have preparation steps and a materials list with clear directions for carrying out the activity.

Primary Media Education: A Curriculum Statement (1989)

Bazalgette, ed

Audience: curriculum guide for regular classroom teachers for students ages 5-11

Questions the authentic and accurate nature of media: The section on media representations (how media presents the subject) directly ties in with questioning the nature of media.

Powerful models of value and behavior: The study of media audiences covers the models and values. This includes who receives media and how they make sense of the message.

Writing connected with media: This guide has performance objectives and drafting and re-drafting are included in several areas.

Create media: The students have opportunities individually and with a group to create cartoons, videos, and the like. They are also taught how to operate media equipment.

Active viewing skills: Students are encouraged to identify the different contexts media is used in.

Additional comments: This guide explains 6 areas of study under media education: media agencies, categories, technologies, languages, audiences, and representation. Each area has performance and knowledge/understanding targets for both levels. This curriculum statement also has suggestions on how to integrate media education into 11 different curriculum areas. The

sample lessons have been carried out by classroom teachers.

This is a curriculum guide so there are not many lessons. This would be used along with another teaching resource for media education.

Visual Messages (1992) Considine

Audience: regular classroom teachers of grades K-12

Questions the authentic and accurate nature of media:

Two chapters deal especially with this topic. One discusses using the television effectively. Some topics for study include: images of women, minorities, family life, and violence in the media. The other discusses interpreting the news- where we get the news, biases, and the connection between advertising and the news.

Powerful models of value and behavior: The chapter on advertising goes in detail on the types of models the media presents- advantages and disadvantages to advertising, advertising and youth, and marketing research. Many of the other lessons tie into this topic also.

Writing connected with media: There are no worksheets in this text, so a teacher has the opportunity to let the students write

responses, design advertisements, and respond in any ways to connect with the lessons.

Create media: The teacher has the freedom to develop production assignments to complement these lessons. A few I found were creating a television political campaign, developing game shows, and creating advertisements.

Active viewing skills: The focus of many of these lessons is critical viewing. Students are asked to analyze the opening of programs, keep logs, compare story elements between a movie and a book, and list conflicts from programs. These are just a few of the activities that will develop active viewing skills.

Additional comments: This book is not as teacher-friendly as some of the other resources I reviewed. The lessons are mainly suggestions divided into three levels-elementary, middle, and high. The teacher would have to create study guides, assignments, etc. to fit the individual classroom. This book does offer background information and support on why to teach media literacy.

Getting the Most out of TV (1981) Singer, Singer, and Zuckerman

Audience: regular classroom teacher of grades 3-6; it can be

adapted for grades 7-8

Questions the authentic and accurate nature of media: One of the lessons focuses specifically on studying the real and pretend/reality and fantasy nature of television. This book also includes lessons on stereotyping, prejudices, questioning the violence used in television, and analyzing news programming.

Powerful models of value and behavior: Students analyze the characters of television, they also view commercials critically, and look at the messages sent both directly and indirectly with television. Students study the influence television has on their lives. Also the stereotypes, prejudices, and violence study would tie in with this topic.

Writing connected with media: There are many opportunities for student writing. Some examples include: writing summaries, stories and poems based on television, categorizing programs, interviews, reactions to programs, advertisements, and letters to sponsors of television.

Create media: There are no production lessons in this book.

Active viewing skills: Students track their viewing habits, complete a character study, compare and contrast television news

and newspapers, and track commercials.

Additional comments: The lessons include worksheets, definitions, objectives, background information for the teacher and a lesson written for the student. Many activities and extensions are included in the lesson. This resource would be very easy to implement into the regular classroom with many fun activities.

In conclusion, the most effective resources are the sources that include

- teacher resources: definition, rationale for teaching, activity suggestions, bibliographies, and book and program resources
- student lessons: information written in student language, topics for writing, and enrichment ideas
- integration ideas: practical ways to combine media education into the existing language arts curriculum

The best resources will allow students to question the authentic and accurate nature of the media, look at the powerful models of value and behavior media present, write connected with

media, study and create media, and actively view media. From the current literature, it is clear that there exists a need for more effective curriculum materials in teaching media literacy that address teacher resources, student-friendly language, and practical ways to integrate media literacy into the current language arts curriculum.

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