Think. Interpret. Create.

How Media Education Promotes Critical Thinking, Democracy, Health, and Aesthetic Appreciation

Robert Kubey is director of the Center for Media Studies and associate professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Trained as a developmental psychologist at the University of Chicago, Professor Kubey has been an Annenberg Scholar in Media Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania, a National Institute of Mental Health research fellow in the Program in Social Ecology at the University of California at Irvine, a research fellow of the Gerontological Society of America, a fellow of Rutgers' Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture, and research director of the Media Education Laboratory at Rutgers, Newark. He has also been a visiting professor at Stanford University, and served on the faculty of the Institute on Media Education at Harvard University. He edited *Media Literacy in the Information Age: Current Perspectives* and co-edited a series of research volumes on media education. He co-authored *Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience*. His *Creating Television: The First 50 Years*, a book about the creative decision-making process in the American television industry, is due out in 2003.

by Robert Kubey, Ph.D.

Media literacy education is at a watershed moment around the world. We are making the inevitable and gradual turn to changing what we do in classrooms and at home to make education more student-centered and responsive to children's and society's real-world needs.

Media Education Around the World

A growing number of countries are developing media education programs in their schools. Canada now requires media education nationwide, and Australia requires it in all grades, K–12. Media education is also on the rise in Russia, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, through nearly all of western Europe, and in an increasing number of countries in South America and Africa.

Media educators from around the world are meeting more often to share curricula, research, and strategies. The most recent conference, Summit 2000, "Children, Youth and the Media: Beyond the Millennium," was held in Toronto, Canada in May 2000. Representatives from nearly 60 countries attended, making this the largest gathering of media educators in history. In 1998, media educators congregated in Sao Paulo, Brazil for

I Congresso Internacional sobre "Communicacao e Educacao: Multimidia e Educacao em um Mundo Globalizado."

In 1998–99, the 29th General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) approved support for media education following up on UNESCO's first call for media education in Paris in November 1989. In April 1999, 41 invited representatives from 33 countries met in Vienna and made the following statement and recommendations:

> Media education is the entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, to freedom of expression and the right to information and is instrumental in building and sustaining democracy. . . . Media education should be introduced wherever possible within national curricula as well as in tertiary, non-formal and lifelong education.

The Vienna Conference went on to state that media education:

• enables people to gain an understanding of the communication media used in their society and the way they operate and to acquire skills in using these media to communicate with others;

• ensures that people learn how to:
  - analyze, critically reflect upon, and create media texts;
  - identify the sources of media texts, their political, social, commercial and/or cultural interests, and their contexts;
  - interpret the messages and values offered by media;
  - select appropriate media for communicating their own messages or stories and for reaching their intended audience.

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Media Education in the United States

Formal media education in the United States still lags behind every other major English-speaking country in the world. There are many reasons for this,[1] but one of the most interesting involves the enormous influx of U.S. media production into other countries. Australians, Scots, or Canadians often lament that what they perceive to be "American" values are permeating *their* media systems. They hope that media literacy will make their young citizens more critical and also more appreciative of indigenous programs. Such concerns, which provide a driving force for media education, are absent in the United States.

Still, many positive media literacy developments in the United States are worth noting. In addition to new national organizations promoting media literacy, a growing number of states have added media literacy goals to their education standards. In a 1999 study with Frank Baker, then president of the Alliance for a Media Literate America, we found that 48 of the 50 states had one or more elements of media education in their core curricular frameworks.[2] (By 2000, all 50 state frameworks incorporated media literacy elements.) These frameworks contribute to a growing legitimacy for media education, which was not nearly so available or widespread only a few years ago. Each state's media education standards can be viewed at http://www.med.sc.edu:81/medialit/statelit.htm.

The 1999 study surprised us, as well as many other U.S. media educators, in that so many states, working independently, had brought media education into their curricular frameworks. The findings speak to the ongoing zeitgeist that recognizes the great and growing need for media education.

The considerable presence of media analysis goals in the areas of health and consumer skills also surprised us. Seventy-four percent of states (37 states) now have media education elements in their health and consumer education frameworks. Ninety-four percent (47 states) have media education elements in English and language and communication arts frameworks, but only 60 percent (30 states) call for media elements in social studies, history, and civics.

These are important developments, and though I believe media education will eventually be part of curricula throughout the United States, it's not going to be achieved easily. Too few graduate programs train teachers to implement media education. To move things along, we need committed teachers, parents, administrators, and members of industry to push for media curricula in the schools. We also need educational leaders to recognize that the way we communicate as a society has changed enough that traditional training in literature and print communication is no longer sufficient. This is not a new revelation. The call for media education in the United States dates back to the 1950s and the 1970s, when many critical viewing programs were developed, if not back to 1916, when psychologist Hugo Munsterberg called for the serious study, in schools, of the new medium of film, which he called "The Photoplay."

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One of the significant developments in the history of U.S. media education occurred in December 1992 when the Aspen Institute brought 25 educators and activists together for a National Leadership Conference. The group established a definition of media education and a vision for developing it in U.S. education, stating that a media-literate person should be able to *access, analyze, evaluate, and produce both print and electronic media.*

The Aspen Group also proposed the following precepts:

- Media are constructed, and construct reality.
- Media have commercial implications.
- Media have ideological and political implications.
- Form and content are related in each medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes, and conventions.
- Receivers negotiate meaning in media.

Before discussing the Aspen Group's statement, let's take a first cut at answering the question: What *is* media literacy? Media literacy involves critically analyzing media messages; evaluating sources of information for bias and credibility; raising awareness of how media messages influence people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors; and producing messages using different forms of media.

Why is media education so vitally important?

Let's start with the fact that children throughout the United States, and in an ever-growing proportion of countries around the world, spend an average of three hours each day watching television. At this rate, by the time they reach age 75 they will have spent nine years watching TV. In the United States, they will have spent two of those nine years watching television *ads.*

When we add the number of hours young people spend watching movies, listening to music and radio, and surfing the Internet, they (*and we*) easily devote one-third to one-half of our waking lives to electronic media. Yet many schools still treat poetry, short stories, and the novel as the only forms of English expression worthy of study. As a result, most children are not media literate, so they are poorly equipped to engage actively and think critically about the very media that most affect their lives.

Critical Thinking

Although school systems throughout the United States are mandated to teach critical thinking, if the schools are not linking this skill to the media world in which so many students are spending upwards of six hours a day, they are leaving a potential gold mine unexplored.

Most anyone who has engaged in media literacy instruction knows that, before long, parents will report that their children are no longer watching television in the same way they did before. Indeed, parents often remark that after instruction in media literacy, their children constantly point out things while they watch movies or TV programs. They identify jump cuts, fades, and voiceovers. They detect bias and the power of words to shift meaning and of music to alter the viewer's mood. But what's happening here?

What's happening is that television viewing – which formerly involved relatively passive reception – now involves much more mental activity. Willingly, although without knowing it, the student is now spending a good chunk of those three hours of daily television viewing engaged in critical thinking. And the same thing can happen when they are surfing the Net, listening to radio, watching movies, reading the newspaper, or playing video games. This is not to say that they will be engaged in critical analysis every moment, but they will be using their higher critical faculties much more if they have been given some of the basic tools of media literacy, of media analysis, than if they have not.

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And we know of no evidence that more critical appraisal undermines one's enjoyment of television or film. To the contrary, understanding how television shows and film are made enhances enjoyment. In some cases, one's tastes may eventually run to less obvious or more sophisticated material, but there is no reason to expect that a media-literate person can't still enjoy the media and derive pleasure and information simultaneously.

If schools want students to spend more time thinking critically and practicing critical thinking skills, then they are missing the boat if they are not teaching media literacy and using the media as a site for this critical analysis.

Democracy

The Jeffersonian ideal of an informed electorate necessitates media literacy education. This is why Walter Cronkite, among other distinguished journalists, has supported media education for many years – because it teaches critical thinking skills for citizens and future

voters. Research has shown that media literacy activities in social studies classes significantly promote civic participation and increase regular newspaper readership among teenagers. With the incredible rise of the Internet and the unedited nature of many websites, students need more than ever to learn how to assess the validity and credibility of the information to which they are exposed.

> No student should leave high school without knowing the classic techniques of persuasion and propaganda, many of which have been taught for decades, but not to all students. Students should be able to recognize "name-calling," "bandwagon," and "glittering generalities" in the arguments they hear and read. But this is only the most basic of beginnings.

Our political life became increasingly mediated in the middle of the last century, and now – certainly in campaigns and elections, and in day-to-day governance – the media could hardly be more crucial to how we view politicians and our leaders, and how we think about the critical issues of the day. Should we go to war? How will we protect the environment? Will we be taxed more or less? These and every other vital question in our democracy are raised and debated, often superficially, in the nation's media. Politicians have become extraordinarily adept at using the media to their advantage. If their interests are in line with the nation's, this can result in effective government. But as often as not, well-intended or not, vast distortions take place in our public life that are partly a function of how our media systems operate.

To the degree that the media are used to propagandize or manipulate and therefore interfere with the public being well informed, we need media education to be part of our schools' civics and social studies classes. No student should leave high school without knowing the classic techniques of persuasion and propaganda, many of which have been taught for decades, but *not* to all students. Students should be able to recognize "name-calling," "bandwagon," and "glittering generalities" in the arguments they hear and read. But this is only the most basic of beginnings.

Health Promotion, Character Education, and Violence Reduction

Media literacy techniques are also being used increasingly in programs designed to promote health and prevent substance abuse among young people. Indeed, the American Academy of Pediatrics has concluded that media education represents "a simple, effective approach to combating the myriad of harmful media messages seen or heard by children and adolescents."[3] To address health threats to children and adolescents, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy have advocated teaching critical analysis of advertisements and other media presentations that promote the use and abuse of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.

A particularly useful health education assignment involves having groups of middle-school students produce a five-minute videotape on a health topic of their choice, for example, nutrition, exercise, safe sex, or alcohol, drug, or tobacco abuse. The final production is shown to the whole class, if not the whole school, or more widely via public access cable.

Here's what often happens. First, students develop more interest in the research aspects of the project because they are responsible for making a public service announcement (PSA) for their peers and for the larger community. Compared with a written report that only the teacher will see, students making a PSA become very motivated to ensure that the information they convey is accurate. The students learn organizational, research, writing, editing, and production skills. And guess whose PSA other students are more likely to pay attention to and learn from: the government's, the advertising council's, or the ones made by their peers? Such peer-driven media literacy health projects can really bring students alive and help make schoolwork more relevant.

Media literacy approaches can also be used in programs focused on conflict resolution and the reduction of aggression and violence. Middle or high school students can be asked, for example, to view part of a film depicting a growing conflict between two rival gangs in a school. The film is stopped, and the students are then assigned to groups to write the next scene, wherein the characters resolve the conflict through talk, rather than with fists, knives, or guns. The assignment prompts students to think through how a conflict might be peaceably resolved. Then, in sharing their solutions, the class has the opportunity to hear a variety of solutions. This increases the likelihood that some of

these solutions will be mentally available should students become involved in a similar conflict.

Character education and social and emotional learning goals, so important in contemporary education and society, can also be met through media education. Indeed, how would one carry out character education today without having young people think about the values being taught by the media that surround them? Media literacy lessons are readily integrated with the six "pillars" of character education: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. These lessons can help students become much more aware of the values being promulgated by the media relative to their own developing values and those of their family and community.

Now let's spend a moment considering what goals the Aspen Institute had in mind in stating that a media-literate person ought to be able to *access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media*. Why those four verbs?

- **Access.** With the rise of the Internet, access is more important than ever. Not only should students be able to access the World Wide Web, they should also receive instruction in how to assess the value and validity of websites in all areas, whether medical, political, or educational. Now that most anyone can create their own website, a great deal of freedom has been accorded citizens who choose to use it. But with the freedom of the Internet comes a new and increasing demand on our educational systems and on caregivers to help young people use the Internet and all other media – critically and thoughtfully.

- **Analyze.** Analysis involves being able to detect propaganda and to understand that people are always involved in the construction of media messages, and that nearly all media messages are designed to do something, whether it is to inform, entertain, or persuade. Young people and adults alike need to learn how the media construct our understandings of issues, products, people, gender and race, and whole nation-states. Indeed, one "law" of communication is that people are most impressionable and most easily persuaded when they know very little about the topic or issue at hand. People's impressions of other countries and of other peoples are often heavily based in what they have seen, heard, or read in the media. It follows that how people feel about aiding or making war against another country or people rests substantially on political decisions and public opinion, both of which are remarkably influenced by what people know, or *think* they know, via the media.

- **Evaluate.** For people to evaluate the media means learning to appraise the value of media products for themselves and for their society. This is arguably an even more subjective process than analysis, but it is no less important. Media literacy education ought to contribute to an individual's ability to determine the value of any given film, television program, or magazine or newspaper article.

We especially want to encourage students to become autonomous in their assessment of media and to develop their own modes of criticism, interpretation, and evaluation. We may wish to choose and supervise the media exposure of young children, but eventually parents and teachers have to let go and expect them to negotiate the increasingly complex media worlds they inhabit largely on their own. And just as there is no single, correct way to interpret all of literature, there is no single, correct way to interpret all of television or film. The goal of media education should be to provide a grounding on which students can better develop their own idiosyncratic responses.

As important as critical thinking, health, and democracy are, we should not forget that the media convey, or constitute, various forms of artistic expression. Thus, we also want students to become more sophisticated in their appreciation of art forms across all media. Indeed, the educational establishment must recognize that some film and television classics are works of substantial artistry, subtlety, and power. Students may well profit as much from serious instruction in and exploration of the complexity of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* or the masterful coherence of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* as from instruction in print versions of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Great Expectations*.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that we jettison Twain and Dickens. I *am* saying that other important modes of storytelling have developed that deserve formal study in our schools. Reading and writing remain fundamental. One way to integrate media literacy with traditional literacy is to emphasize writing skills in students' scripts and in their critical reviews of films, TV programs, advertising, and websites.

One way to increase students' interest in literature is to help them recognize that many of the same storytelling techniques used in the classics are also used in the popular programs and films with which they are already familiar. Students already respond to foreshadowing in a television series like *Malcolm in the*

Middle or a movie like *Spiderman*; they are often simply unaware that foreshadowing is a deliberate technique used to heighten suspense, drama, and irony. Knowing the terms and being able to apply them is more important than some might think. Knowing about foreshadowing, symbolism, character development, and other techniques used in literature and in film and television permits greater appreciation of the art forms.

• **Produce.** Students should also be able to produce media. First, being able to create one's own media messages is extraordinarily empowering. Sometimes for the first time in their lives, students see that they, too, can participate in making art or news, a film, a television program, or a website that affects other people. Many students involved in a media production in middle or high school report that it was among the most exciting and motivating experiences of their years in school. Second, by producing media, students learn in a more personal and profound way that media messages are "constructed."

One can show students how the simplest edits in film or television can substantially change the meaning and emotional impact of a scene or of an entire story. Students can learn how easy it is to include or edit out a particular shot, or how the choice of music can make a huge difference in how the audience experiences a character, a moment in a story, or a whole group of people. Showing students these things is an important and necessary part of media literacy instruction, but even better is for the students to become involved in making editorial decisions of their own, deciding for themselves what to leave in or leave out and in what order to present material.

Consider what students learn in the following assignment. A group of 6th graders is assigned to make an audio story about the school's new principal. They are given tape recorders and told to go out and interview the principal, teachers, other students, staff, and custodians and then come back in a week to edit the material down to a three-minute story that will be played for the student body over the school's public address system. What will the students learn? First, they'll learn to sift through one or two hours of interviews to find the few minutes of material that they want to stitch together. They will learn that the vast majority of their raw material never finds its way into the final product. They will learn that they must decide which sound bite is best to include, as well as how long it should play, in what order, and with what narration

setting it up. In a nutshell, they will learn how incredibly constructed all such media messages are – every radio or TV news story they hear or view for the rest of their lives.

Note that this assignment can be done with extraordinarily inexpensive and durable equipment. Handheld tape recorders can be purchased for under $20. And an audio editing capability is as close as any tape player with two tape drives. One doesn't need a fully equipped studio or television cameras to involve students in media production.

One obstacle to more rapid acceptance of media education is that some educators remain convinced that the only area appropriate for formal study in English and language arts classes is literature. But there can be little question that the patina of time alone will eventually make the formal study of electronic media acceptable to educational traditionalists. This is why I believe that we can expect media education to become commonplace by the middle of this century, if not before.

More than 2,300 years ago, Plato wrote that a "sound education consists in training people to find pleasure and pain in the right objects." But though most Americans now spend half their leisure time watching television and film, too few schools yet devote formal attention to helping students become more sophisticated media consumers. Let's hope that the picture continues to improve.

Most fundamentally, we need to encourage our nation's future voters and leaders to take the media seriously, to understand where media messages come from and why messages are presented as they are and to what effect. As Charles Brightbill wrote in *The Challenge of Leisure* in 1960, "The future will belong not only to the educated, but to those who have been educated to use leisure wisely."

[1] Kubey, R. (1998). Obstacles to the development of media education in the United States. *Journal of Communication, 48*, 58-69.

[2] Kubey, R. and F. Baker (1999, Oct. 27). Has media literacy found a curricular foothold? *Education Week*, p. 56.

[3] American Academy of Pediatrics (August, 1999). Media Education. Pediatrics, 104, 341-343.