Media Literacy Across the Curriculum

An Australian, David Considine moved to the United States 25 years ago to study mass media, as a result of watching the influence of U.S. media on his Australian students. He is the author of *Visual Messages: Integrating Imagery into Instruction.* He also coordinates the graduate program in Media Literacy at Appalachian State University and is serving as chair of the National Media Education Conference, scheduled for Baltimore in summer 2003. He has served as a media literacy consultant for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy for the Clinton and Bush administrations.

by David M. Considine, Ph.D.

If we regard truth as something handed down from authorities on high, the classroom will look like a dictatorship. If we regard truth as a fiction determined by personal whim, the classroom will look like anarchy. If we regard truth as emerging from a complex process of mutual inquiry, the classroom will look like a resourceful and interdependent community.

From *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, by Parker Palmer [1]

Exactly two decades ago, in his book *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt presented a compelling argument that challenged the business and education communities to respond meaningfully to America's transition from an industrial society to an information society. Despite a potentially revolutionary wave of hardware and software, Naisbitt argued that we were, as a nation and a society, "drowning in information but starved for knowledge."[2]

Twenty years later, we live in a media-saturated society. Young people in the United States have access to more forms of information and entertainment than any culture in the history of the world. The information contained, carried, and conveyed in traditional and emerging media formats may either support or subvert children and adolescents on their odyssey to adulthood.

If they are to fully harness the power and potential of exciting new technologies and multimedia, our students must be offered the critical criteria and information skills necessary for them to become intelligent, competent consumers and creators of media messages.

In short, they must become media literate.

The ability to access information does not make one media literate. Knowledge and information should not be confused. Knowledge implies critical awareness: the ability to comprehend, evaluate, verify, validate, compare, contrast, accept, or reject information based on clearly defined critical criteria.

It also includes the ability to recognize and understand patterns, themes, and relationships, whether manifested in a novel, a play, a motion picture, or in the ebb and flow of political discourse and debate that marks a healthy democracy.

In *Megatrends*, Naisbitt wondered if the media helped or hurt the way we saw ourselves and the wider world. "We seem," he said, "to be a society of events, just moving from one incident – sometimes, even crisis – to the next, rarely pausing (or caring) to notice the process going on underneath."[3]

Megatrends fired an early volley in what became the school reform/restructuring movement. It was followed in 1983 by *A Nation at Risk*, which described a rising tide of mediocrity in U.S. schools, and in 1986 by *A Nation Prepared*, which outlined changes that needed to take place if American schools, American students, and American citizens were to remain competent and competitive in an increasingly global economy.

Despite such reports and recommendations, evidence continued to accumulate that a gap existed between what students actually knew and understood and what schools assumed they were learning.

In 1987, a national study called *What Do Our 17 Year Olds Know?* concluded that the younger generation was at risk, "ignorant of important things that it should know, gravely handicapped by that ignorance upon entering into adulthood, citizenship and parenthood."[4] Fifteen years later, on May 10, 2002, *USA Today* ran a front-page story on the 2001 U.S. History Report Card results, which found U.S. high school students ignorant of their nation's history and society. The headline read, "Kids Get Abysmal Grade in History. High School Seniors Don't Know Basics."

> Rather than lacking rigor, media literacy instruction necessitates critical inquiry, and my students (whether online or in my classroom) will tell you that media literacy absolutely requires print literacy. We read and read and then read some more.

Tools and Schools

The news this year has not been all negative, however. In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer observes that "everything depends on the lenses through which we view the world."[5] From one lens or point of view, our students are actually doing quite well.

Who are these young people? Some refer to them as "media savvy." To others, they are the new pioneers of "cyberia." Whatever we call them, a new report, *The Digital Disconnect*, puts it simply: "[U]sing the Internet is the norm for today's youth."[6]

Published by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, *The Digital Disconnect* reports that 78 percent of middle and high school students use the Internet. According to the researchers, students believe that "the Internet helps them navigate their way through school and spend more time learning in depth about what is most important to them personally."[7]

While the most experienced of these students look upon the Internet as "a virtual study group" and "an important way to collaborate on project work with classmates," they also report frustration with the limited ways their teachers use today's technology. From the students' point of view, too many of their teachers ignore the dynamic interactivity of the Internet as a teaching tool, opting to use it instead as some form of electronic textbook. The report also comments that some students view the Internet "as a mechanism to plagiarize material or otherwise cheat."[8]

While more young people have access to the Internet and other media than any generation in history, they do not necessarily possess the ethics, the intellectual skills, or the predisposition to critically analyze and evaluate their relationship with these technologies or the information they encounter. Good hand/eye coordination and the ability to multitask are not substitutes for critical thinking.

What Do Our 17 Year Olds Know? made a similar point. The study observed that "this generation has been weaned on television and movies…," adding that "it takes more than a textbook and lecture to awaken their interest and grab their attention."[9] It did not, however, assume that mere exposure to these media rendered such students thoughtful or reflective consumers.

In a series of significant questions, the researchers asked, "Can they make sense of what they see and hear? Do they have the perspective to separate what is important from what is trivial …can they interpret the significance of the day's news?"[10]

Those same questions can today be formulated to address information encountered on the Internet. This new technology certainly promises much. Students who log on to www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages, for example, will find 128 front pages from newspapers in 22 countries. On www.newslink.org they have at their disposal not only every major newspaper from across the United States, but also from around the world. What remarkable resources for social studies teachers!

On the downside, the Internet can give them access to sites that deny the Holocaust ever happened or claim that eating disorders are simply lifestyle preferences. Clearly, having access to information without the ability to analyze and evaluate that information is problematic at best, leaving us still "drowning in information and starved for knowledge."

Alan November, author of *Empowering Students with Technology*, knows there's a better approach. This approach harnesses the potential of the tools, uses students as knowledge producers, and ultimately changes roles and interactions in the teaching/learning process. Just as important, it provides young people with critical criteria for thinking about media messages.

Since the Internet has become the personal medium of young people, says November, "we are faced with the consequences of not teaching our children to decode the content. The growing persuasiveness of the Internet will lead to more and more students potentially being manipulated by the media."[11]

This view is consistent with that of the Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, which supports "training in media literacy skills...in community and youth development programs…to imbue teenagers with critical habits of mind…to help them become effective users of technology, restoring personal control."[12]

> Failure to guide students toward media literacy incurs the very real risk of preparing them for a world that no longer exists.

Literacy in a Multimedia Age

The move toward computer literacy and information literacy has often obscured the connections to media literacy. In reality, teachers, librarians, school media specialists, and students need a common set of skills that will enable them to **access, analyze, and evaluate** information in any form. Teaching young people to think critically about the Internet is only part of the picture. Those skills need to be applied to all their sources of information, including newspapers, magazines, radio, television, advertising, and film. These media are all part of the communication culture we live in – a fact understood by most English teachers, who now recognize that the term *text*, once restricted to print media, today includes numerous nonprint formats.

The critical criteria young people can learn to apply to the media include an understanding of media language, genre, codes and conventions – whether the content is in picture books or PowerPoint. They learn to consider media audiences; media ideologies; and media representation, including depictions of race, class, gender, and disability.

It is apparent that the ability to read print is no longer sufficient when much of the information we receive, including on the Internet, consists of a fusion of sound, text, images, and video. Each of these elements has discrete characteristics and attributes, and cumulatively they contribute to a complex form of information that looks deceptively obvious in a world that is still too willing to assume that "seeing is believing."

Sometimes misunderstood as "dumbing down" the curriculum by teaching about popular culture, media literacy is in fact a life skill; a critical thinking skill that by definition requires the ability to both analyze and evaluate media messages. During 30 years of teaching, the most consistent phrase I have heard from my students – whether teenagers, young adults, or mature-aged students – is that media literacy instruction has been "an eye-opening experience." More to the point, it is also a mind-opening experience.

Rather than lacking rigor, media literacy instruction necessitates critical inquiry, and my students (whether online or in my classroom) will tell you that media literacy absolutely requires print literacy. We read and read and then read some more.

By doing so we begin to see that media literacy is an evolutionary, logical, and necessary response to the changing forms of communication in our society. Failure to guide students toward media literacy incurs the very real risk of preparing them for a world that no longer exists. Let us also be clear that developing media literacy does not require that we relinquish either the pleasure or the power of the printed word.

What media literacy does require is healthy skepticism – a questioning mind and the ability to look under every rock in an attempt to evaluate information in terms of its balance, bias, and accuracy. Understanding the pervasive and persuasive power of media messages also requires an awareness of the context and constraints in which media messages are created and consumed. In the case of broadcast news, for example, students would need to comprehend the constraints of a 30-minute block of time, as well as recognize how assumptions about the audience (identified as 40 years and older) might shape the way stories are selected, rejected, and presented.

While the current manifestation of media literacy is only now beginning to attract widespread attention in U.S. schools – showing up in state frameworks and standards from language arts to library science and health – it is much more entrenched in the classrooms and curricula of Canada, the United Kingdom, and my native Australia, where it has been taught for more than 25 years.

In the United Kingdom, the new millennium saw the publication of two major documents to integrate the study of media into the classroom, *Making Movies Matter* [13] and *Moving Images in the Classroom*.[14] The latter argued that "the moving image is a shared and

vital global language…critical understanding of film, video and television is becoming an integral part of literacy and the spread of digital technologies means that the ability to make and manipulate moving images will become an ever more important skill."

> Media literacy is a logical, even necessary match for social studies standards that address global connections, individual development and identity, and individuals, groups, and institutions.

Curriculum Connections

In the past decade, media education has slowly begun to find its way into curriculum frameworks and standards throughout the United States. For the most part, media education has meant integrating the concepts and skills associated with media literacy into existing areas of the traditional curriculum. Though there is some evidence of media literacy being offered as an elective or stand-alone subject, the dominant pattern has been one of integration rather than isolation. The integrated, interdisciplinary approach is consistent with the one many library media organizations use in their approach to information literacy, and it is certainly consistent with the curriculum connectedness so valued by the National Middle School Association.

In California, the English Language Arts Standards include the following objectives:

• Compare and contrast points of view expressed in broadcast and print media.

• Identify, analyze, and critique persuasive techniques in media messages.

• Analyze media as sources of information, entertainment, persuasion, and transmission of culture.

On topics such as eating disorders, diet, nutrition, childhood obesity, sexuality, and substance abuse, young people are exposed to media messages that can support or contradict classroom instruction. Therefore, the National Health Education Standards state that students need to "analyze the influence of culture, media, technology and other factors on health."[15]

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also acknowledges the role of media in shaping our attitudes and behavior in the area of human health.

Healthy People 2010, in language reminiscent of definitions of media literacy, defines health literacy as the capacity "to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions."[16]

Having utilized this approach in curriculum development and training for groups such as Arkansans for Drug Free Youth, I believe that media literacy can be an effective tool, although not a panacea, to help young people detect and reject potentially deceptive marketing campaigns or media messages that glamorize risky lifestyles and promise consumption without consequences.

Perhaps nowhere is media literacy more logically located than within the social studies, with their emphasis on civics, citizenship, community, and the process of locating, gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information.

Media literacy is a logical, even necessary match for social studies standards that address global connections, individual development and identity, and individuals, groups, and institutions. Along with the family, schools, and churches, mass media must surely be considered major agents of socialization and therefore worthy of study.

Recognizing this connection, Wisconsin last year introduced media literacy into the state's social studies standards. "A major change in the way people get information has occurred in the last 40 years," the authors wrote. "Most citizens and students now get much of their information about their own country and the wider world from electronic media."[17]

The Wisconsin approach positions media literacy as a means of critical social inquiry to foster knowledge and understanding about individuals and institutions. It develops process skills that include the ability to analyze the authenticity and validity of sources and the ability to analyze sources for gender bias and stereotypes

Further validation of the link between media literacy and social studies was offered last year when the White House published *Helping Youth Navigate The Media Age*. A crucial statement emphasized that media literacy "may offer young people positive preparatory skills for responsible citizenship. For example, media literacy can empower youth to be positive contributors to society, to challenge cynicism and to serve as agents of social change."[18]

Any attempt to prepare young people for responsible citizenship must surely include consideration of the way

the media depict the political process, the work of our legislatures, the person and office of the presidency, and the political parties – including respect and equal time for minor parties. With more and more Americans identifying themselves as political independents, rather than as Democrats or Republicans, state and national media have an obligation and responsibility to recognize alternative voices in the political landscape.

The Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) has embraced the concept of recognizing and respecting young people by validating their voices and their visions. At its conference in Austin, Texas, last year, the organization featured youth media makers who traveled across the country to record the event and to showcase their own productions. Instead of creating a conference focused narrowly on what media does *to* young people, AMLA also explores what young people do *with* the media.

As both creators and consumers of media, our young people have a unique relationship with the industry. Their disposable incomes make them lucrative targets, but there is a fine line between marketing and manipulation.

In this nation, giant communication conglomerates are afforded the privilege of First Amendment rights, but along with those rights they should assume responsibility for producing and distributing products and programs that do not exploit the young or other impressionable groups in our society.

Used ethically, the mass media can play an important role in preparing young people to be productive workers and informed, responsible citizens. Misused, the media can be a source of misinformation and manipulation from which our children need to be protected. They are also, one should never forget, a source of pleasure, escape, fantasy, and engagement that enriches our lives.

In the open marketplace of ideas represented by a democratic capitalist system, we witness a precarious balance of rights, roles, and responsibilities. As our world faces an uncertain future and our global connectedness plays itself out in the struggle to form international coalitions of concern, there is already a debate about the public's right to know and the government's need for security and secrecy. This focus on literacy and liberty is in fact the theme of the National Media Education Conference scheduled for June 2003.

If our democracy is to avoid entropy and decay, we as citizens and consumers must be conscientious about the role the media play in our lives. In short, to be literate in a multimedia era raises complex questions about our dependence upon, our independence from, and our interdependence with the media. How we formulate and answer those questions might well determine not only the safety and health of ourselves and our families, but also the health, vitality, and strength of our democracy and the body politic.

> To be literate in a multimedia era raises complex questions about our dependence upon, our independence from, and our interdependence with the media.

Recommendations:

Is the media literacy glass half empty or half full? While it is true that media literacy is beginning to show up in state standards, that innovation should not be equated with classroom implementation or practice.

Beset with often competing and conflicting priorities, including time-consuming, high-stakes accountability testing, teachers often ask how they can attend to media literacy in addition to everything else they are doing. Until that question is meaningfully addressed by the modeling of effective and efficient classroom practice, media literacy may well remain what one British proponent described as "the province of the enthusiasts."

Below are suggestions for bringing media literacy to the forefront and supporting educators' efforts to fully integrate media education into the curriculum.

- **Link the Literacies**
  Articulate common processes and critical literacies involved in accessing, analyzing, interpreting, comprehending, and creating messages in a multimedia era. This strategy encourages an interdisciplinary focus on literacy, with common skills being reinforced across the curriculum.

- **Match Mission Statements**
  Demonstrate how media literacy is compatible with key goals of U.S. education, including the ability to develop productive workers and to create responsible citizens for a democratic society. Media literacy can be connected to the mission statements of various disciplines, such as the National Council of Teachers

of English and the National Council for the Social Studies. A developmentally appropriate model can also be used to connect media literacy to a middle school philosophy and mission.

- **Train Teachers**
  Pre-service and in-service workshops and training are necessary if teachers are to embrace media literacy in their subject areas. Identify management models used by institutions such as Appalachian State University that have integrated media literacy into teacher training. Work with CESAs (Cooperative Educational Service Agencies) and RESAs (Regional Educational Service Agencies) to develop local and state training in which media literacy is aligned with state standards and frameworks.

- **Provide Resources**
  One of the most consistent requests from teachers is for relevant resources they can use in their classrooms. Identify and disseminate relevant resources to support classroom teachers. Two excellent starting points are the Media Literacy Clearinghouse, www.med.sc.edu:1081/, and the one-stop shopping afforded by the Center for Media Literacy's recommended resources at www.gpn.unl.edu.

- **Encourage Evidence and Evaluation**
  Provide educators with means to document, through portfolio assessment and other tools, evidence of outcomes that demonstrate the impact of media literacy on the way students conceptualize information. One useful area to document is the ability of media literacy to engage reluctant readers and at-risk students, potentially stemming dropout rates.

- **Nurture Partnerships with the Media Industry**
  Canadian and Australian experiences demonstrate that media literacy can grow through mutually beneficial partnerships with the industry. The private/public partnership in Maryland, where the State Department of Education teamed with Discovery Communications to produce *Assignment Media Literacy,* is one example of what can be achieved.

- **Support Parent Partnerships**
  The National Middle School Association recognizes that schools are more successful when they team with families. Media literacy cannot simply be practiced in the classroom but should be reinforced in the living room, where parents and children engage in co-viewing. PTO/PTA groups are allies that can facilitate this process.

- **Engage, Don't Enrage**
  Finger-pointing exercises and the blame game do not serve the interests of media literacy. Thoughtful, reflective criticism and respectful dialogue are part of a healthy democracy in which consumers and communication conglomerates come to understand each other's nature and needs. One excellent model that brings teachers and journalists together is the Media and American Democracy Institute at the Shorenstein Center, www.teachingdemocracy.gse.harvard.edu/.

- **Spotlight High-Profile Supporters**
  Many educators and parents remain unaware of the significant support that developed for media literacy throughout the 1990s, from such figures as Richard Riley, then U.S. Secretary of Education. Media literacy has been endorsed by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, and the National Middle School Association, among other prestigious groups. Document this support and use it to promote the media literacy movement.

References

[1] Palmer, Parker (1998). *The Courage to Teach : Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[2] Naisbitt, John (1982). *Megatrends*. New York: Warner Books, p. 24.

[3] Naisbitt, p. 2.

[4] Ravitch, Diane, and Chester Finn (1987). *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* New York: Harper and Row, p. 201.

[5] Palmer, p. 26.

[6] Levin, Douglas, and Sousan Arafeh (2002) The Digital Disconnect: *The Widening Gap Between Internet-Savvy Students and Their Schools.* Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project, p. ii.

[7] Levin et al., p. ii.

[8] Levin et al., p. 6.

[9] Ravitch and Finn, p. 202.

[10] Ravitch and Finn, p. 202.

[11] November, Alan (2001). *Empowering Students with Technology*. Arlington Heights, IL: Skylight, p. 2.

[12] Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995). *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation, p. 118.

[13] British Film Institute (1999). *Making Movies Matter: Report of the Film Education Working Group*. London: BFI.

[14] British Film Institute (2000). *Moving Images in the Classroom*. London: BFI, p. 4.

[15] Summerfield, Liane M. (1995). *National Standards for School Health Education*. ERIC Digest. ED387483 http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed387483.html

[16] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000). *Healthy People 2010: Understanding and Improving Health*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, pp. 11–20. http://www.health.gov/healthypeople/document/.

[17] Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2001). *Planning Curriculum in Social Studies*. Madison: WDPI, p. 24.

[18] Office of National Drug Control Policy (2001). *Helping Youth Navigate the Media Age : A New Approach to Drug Prevention*. Washington, DC: ONDCP, p. 8.