

# Project SMARTArt: A Road to Follow

## Focus on Replication: Methods, Tools and Structure



MUSIC·CENTER  
EDUCATION DIVISION



Center  
for Media  
Literacy

*Project SMARTArt* represents a significant break-through for implementing media literacy programs within schools. A federal demonstration grant sponsored by the U.S. Dept. of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts led the Center for Media Literacy, the Music Center Education Division, AnimAction, Inc. and Los Angeles Unified School District's Leo Politi Elementary school led to a new understanding of media literacy, and to a **new guiding principle for implementation programs**: *that media literacy and the arts inform one another as disciplines for teaching and learning, and that these disciplines can be integrated with all other academic content areas, while meeting state education standards.*

With ongoing professional development and with appropriate tools, teachers are able to internalize information process skills. Once they understand these process skills, they are able to apply them to *any* media content and to transform their teaching, without the need for a "cookbook" approach, reliant only on textbooks. Instead, teachers can use fresh media content while teaching to state standards. With a deeper understanding of media literacy, teachers help their students to learn in a new way, preparing students with lifelong learning skills of critical analysis and self-expression applicable in a global media culture.

Project SMARTArt yielded steps forward both in teaching practices and in theory that impacts the fields of media literacy and the arts.

### **Practice: Implementation Steps**

By Tessa Jolls and Denise Grande-Harris

When Project SMARTArt began, the partners were grateful that the type of funding received was through a federal "demonstration grant," because this project represented a beginning in which there were far more questions than answers on how to combine media literacy and the arts in an elementary school classroom.

### **New Guiding Principle in Action**

By the end of Project SMARTArt, teachers demonstrated that combining media literacy and the arts, while meeting CA State Education standards for Language Arts (LA) and English Language Development (ELD), is very possible and fairly easy, with the right training, practice and structure. This notion was validated when, within a one-hour period, teaching teams were able to create engaging, integrated activities for classroom use, while connecting the 5 Key Questions of Media Literacy with state standards for ELD, LA, and Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA). These teaching teams were comprised of Project SMARTArt teachers and teaching artists, and divided into two groups (Grades K-2 teachers and Grades 3-5 teachers), so that the activities were relevant and could be used by the team participants.

This type of flexibility in making curricular connections is essential, since every school district in every state uses different combinations of core curricular materials. CML's 5 Key Questions of media literacy

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can apply to *any* curricular content, and the arts are used in *every* form of self-expression, in *any* project students create to demonstrate their mastery of core subject areas. Through state education standards and through an understanding of how to apply media literacy and the arts into core curricular areas, teachers now have powerful and more flexible ways of connecting their classrooms to the real world, and to providing students with the critical thinking and media construction skills that they need to represent themselves effectively.

### **Approach / Methods**

To learn from the Project SMARTArt experience, it is just as important to understand *how* the project was approached as *what* the project's goals, structure and tools consisted of. Here are some important points about the approach used:

- A clearly articulated Philosophy of media literacy was essential, so that the aims of the project were clear. The CML Philosophy of education emphasizes empowerment rather than censorship or media bashing.
- The project focused on teaching information process skills, so that individuals learn a systematic methodology of analysis that can be applied to *any* content. With such an analytic method, individuals are free to draw their own conclusions and make their own choices. Project SMARTArt used the theory articulated in CML's MediaLit Kit.
- Each arts discipline (dance, music, theatre and visual arts) was represented Project SMARTArt. Teaching artists taught core elements of each discipline, making connections to media and media literacy.
- Before teachers can teach subjects like media literacy and the arts, they must first develop knowledge, understanding and skills. Professional development and consistent practice are necessary for teachers to be confident and successful.
- Students were encouraged to learn by doing, taking a constructivist approach. Learning to apply the 5 Key Questions take practice over time, much like learning to tie shoes. Through repetition and refinement, the process becomes automatic.
- Project SMARTArt Partners were equal learners and had a respectful relationship.
- Teacher participation was voluntary. Project SMARTArt only appealed to committed teachers willing to experiment.
- Meeting state education standards was key, as well as connecting to LAUSD's scripted reading program, Open Court and CML's 5 Key Questions of media literacy. Project SMARTArt concentrated on Visual and Performing Arts Standards (VAPA), Language Arts (LA) and English Language Development Standards (ELD).
- In the national McRel standards for language arts, the four traditional strands are expanded from reading, writing, speaking and listening to also include viewing and media.
- Project SMARTArt did not rely on technology to be successful. Some classrooms were not equipped with computers or had little access to video cassette players/recorders. The activities were scaleable in terms of technology.
- Student learning was demonstrated through an ongoing production of artifacts to demonstrate learning; Project SMARTArt was not ultimately geared toward one production project.

### **Structure of Replicable Model for Implementation**

The elements that made up Project SMARTArt's structure are:

- Professional Development. At the onset of each year, Project SMARTArt provided teachers and teaching artists with training in media literacy. The training focused on CML's 5 Core Concepts and 5 Key Questions of Media Literacy, providing a good theoretical grounding and practice in applying this framework for analysis/deconstruction to teaching. In its final year, Project SMARTArt also provided teachers professional development in dance, music, theatre and visual arts as well as training on using The BOX!, a training tool developed by Animaction, Inc. for teachers to help students produce animation shorts.

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- Media Literacy Peer Coaching. Teachers had four one-hour meetings with a media literacy teaching coach. These sessions were sequentially designed to: a) answer questions and plan b) observe the coach in a demonstration lesson c) allow the coach to observe a lesson by the teacher and c) critique and plan
- Artists in Residence. Teaching artists representing each of the four arts disciplines (dance, theatre, music and visual arts) worked directly with the students four to six times, providing basic knowledge of the arts discipline and incorporating media literacy Key Questions into their work.
- Artist-Teacher Planning Meetings. Prior to the teaching artists coming into a classroom, the artist and classroom teacher had an opportunity to meet and plan, so that the artist's work was connected to the teacher's ongoing work with the children and tied into the curriculum.
- Animation. Students produced 30-second animation shorts as a culminating project, weaving elements of all four arts disciplines into the construction of a replicable media artifact. These animation shorts were created either through a one-day workshop provided by AnimAction, Inc., or through the use of The BOX!, which provides teachers with an in-class animation production studio.
- Although incorporating media literacy and the arts into assessment was not part of this project, student-based assessment could be built into future projects due to the on-going creation of artifacts.
- Monthly Teacher Meetings. Regularly scheduled meeting time supported program implementation by providing participants an opportunity to exchange ideas and information.
- Quarterly partner meetings. Consistent and frequent coordination between the partners (Leo Politi School, Center for Media Literacy, Music Center Education Division and AnimAction, Inc.) was essential to provide smooth operation of Project SMARTArt.
- Parent Outreach. Parent Outreach involved two different approaches. The first program for parents featured a special showing of student animations produced through AnimAction workshops; the second program offered parents the opportunity to participate in a Family Album Writing Workshop, where they learned about media literacy and they wrote their personal history for the benefit of their families, and learned about media literacy.
- Annual Evaluation Meeting. Teachers, teaching artists and project partners met each year to critique the project, discuss lessons learned and to plan for the upcoming school year.

### **Tools**

To provide a replicable program, specific, consistent and readily-available tools are necessary. With these tools, no "cookbook" type of textbook is needed, because (over time), teachers internalize the Tools through professional development and everyday practice. Teachers are able to make the linkages necessary to all curricular subject areas; their lesson plans are informed by this new understanding. This provides a creative way to meet standards while incorporating contemporary media content, while teaching information processing skills. If teachers consistently provide opportunities for students to apply the 5 Key Questions of media literacy, then students also internalize this methodology for thinking critically about media content (even textbooks!).

Project SMARTArt was informed by the following set of Tools, which provided guidance for the project organizers and teachers:

- Clear Statement of Philosophy. Provides ideological guide and unity, so that all participants know at the outset what the "agenda" is for the project.  
Project SMARTArt used CML's Statement of Philosophy of Education.
- Core Concepts of Media Literacy. The Core Concepts of Media Literacy have been developed through the years by academics internationally. Without the use of these Concepts, it is impossible to distinguish media literacy from any other critical thinking program. Project SMARTArt was based on CML's 5 Core Concepts of Media Literacy.

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- Key Question of Media Literacy. Although Core Concepts must be understood by teachers as the underpinning for media literacy, Key Questions provide students with a consistent entry point into a process of inquiry and analysis. Key Questions are engaging for children and are open-ended, stimulating further exploration and discussion. Project SMARTArt utilized CML's 5 Key Questions of Media Literacy (link) and CML's Key Questions to Guide Young Children.
- California State Education Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA), English Language Development (ELD) and Language Arts Standards. All academic content must meet State education standards.

Project SMARTArt focused on these content standards as an entry point for integrating media literacy and the arts into other curricular areas. Also, since Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) uses a scripted language arts program to teach reading to elementary school children, Project SMARTArt teachers tied directly into this curriculum.

- The BOX!. With The BOX! (developed by AnimAction, Inc, any teacher can turn a classroom into a professional animation studio, giving students powerful tools for self-expression that can be duplicated and disseminated through digital media. As a culminating project, animation provided an opportunity for students to apply their learning in all arts disciplines: storytelling (theatre), drawing (visual arts), movement (dance), and scoring (music).
- Artifacts for Student Assessment. Written essays, Powerpoint presentations, visual arts projects, choreography, plays and musical compositions are all examples of artifacts that demonstrate the students' mastery of content and media construction skills. Students can be taught to develop rubrics for assessment, so that they learn to set criteria for judging their production pieces.

(Note: Project SMARTArt did not build a model for student assessment. However, learning can be assessed through student produced artifacts.)

### **Supporting Sustainability**

Internalizing the 5 Key Questions of media literacy through consistent application and practice over time changes the way teachers teach and students learn. As Alvaro Asturias, a visual arts educator, commented after taking part in Project SMARTArt, "I'll never see the world the same way again, and never teach the same way again." Other teachers who participated in Project SMARTArt also shared how they have changed their approach and what they are doing to provide their students with media literacy and arts training today.

The work of replicating this program, and spreading it within a K-12 context, has just begun. Much remains to be done and learned in implementing media literacy programs. To help teachers and administrators who do not have access to a program such as Project SMARTArt, the Center for Media Literacy has focused on providing free information in its CML MediaLit Kit™ on Theory, Practice and Implementation of media literacy programs:

- **Theory:** *Literacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, An Overview and Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education.* This 35-page booklet provides a plain language introduction to the basic elements of media education. It explains the Inquiry Process, the Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions, plus How to Conduct A Close Analysis of a Media Text.
- **Practice:** *5 Key Questions that Can Change the World, Classroom Activities for Media Literacy.* This booklet provides 25 cornerstone lesson plans to help you introduce students to the Five Key Questions of Media Literacy and to master them through practice. Useful for all grade levels and across the curriculum: language arts, social studies, health, math and the arts.
- **Implementation:** *Best Practices: Project SMARTArt, A Case Study in Elementary School Media Literacy and Arts Education.* This website subsection provides a complete overview of findings and implementation work done through a three-year federal demonstration grant on discovering innovative strategies for effective teaching and student learning, connecting media literacy and the arts to language arts and English language development within Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

### **Theory: Impact for the Media Literacy Field**

By Tessa Jolls and Denise Grande

What does it mean to be “media literate?” What does it take to teach media literacy? Solid theory informs the implementation of a media literacy and arts program such as Project SMARTArt, but implementation also advances and informs the theory developed to date. Project SMARTArt provided a rich laboratory through which to explore and test ideas *and* practice.

As a starting point, Project SMARTArt was based on the idea that if you are “media literate,” you have mastered process skills that enable you to effectively deconstruct and construct media messages. As CML’s MediaLit Kit notes, these process skills are defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. The implied outcome of having such skills is that a media literate person is equipped to make more informed choices, and is able to live consciously in a media-oriented society.

A basic insight that informed the design of Project SMARTArt is that *deconstruction* could be addressed through an inquiry process, based on solid concepts for analysis, while *construction* could be addressed through the arts, giving voice to individual points of view.

The challenge in Project SMARTArt was how to provide these skills in a short period of time, and how to teach young people – even kindergartners! – these skills in an engaging way.

On a practical level, teachers need a workable method for teaching process skills.

This is particularly challenging since the present education system focuses on content knowledge instead of process skills. Before they are equipped to teach “how to access, analyze, evaluate and create,” teachers must first understand and apply these process skills themselves.

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions provide a methodology for the analysis of media, and they are a “short-cut” to teaching the process skills of “access, analyze and evaluate.” While teachers need to understand both the Five Core Concepts and the Five Key Questions, students respond more to being taught the questions, and thus learn the concepts indirectly. By focusing on the process of inquiry through the Five Key Questions, students could begin to learn how to deconstruct or “take apart” *any* media text, not just mass media. In fact, as the project progressed, it became apparent that “media” itself could be defined to include virtually *any* communication channel, including bodies dancing or gesturing, or even furniture design.

Furthermore, using the Five Key Questions gives students a *consistent* process or entry point through which to analyze media. As students practice using these questions, applying them to all types of media, they become very proficient in analysis and empowered as effective users and managers of information.

### **Alignment of Media Literacy and Arts Content**

A primary goal of Project SMARTArt was to explore ways that media literacy and the arts might inform one another as disciplines. On one level, this relationship can be described as a cycle of analysis and expression, where students engage both their heads and their hearts. Initially it was posited that media literacy content would drive student *analysis* of media, and that the arts would provide a vehicle for expression through the *creation* of media. However, the distinctions between these two purposes were not so clear cut. On a deeper level, the very processes engaged in media literacy (accessing, analyzing, evaluating and creating) are directly paralleled in the study of the arts.

**Access:** Participation in the arts allows students to access and process information, as well as demonstrate knowledge, using various learning modalities. As different art forms engage different learning styles, more students are given opportunities to be successful in the educational system. In this way, the arts provide access to learning – which might otherwise be difficult in the traditional academic environment – for many students.

**Analysis:** Quality arts education includes the component of Artistic Perception, which “refers to processing, analyzing, and responding to sensory information through the use of the language and skills unique to” the arts (1). As students develop skills in artistic perception, they are expected to

specifically articulate “the what” in communicating “the why” (for example: “the slow, steady beat of the bass drum conveyed a feeling of loneliness”). The ability to articulate “the what” to communicate “the why” is a central principle in the teaching of media literacy.

Evaluation: Aesthetic Valuing, also a key component of arts education, requires that students “critically assess and derive meaning from the work of an (arts) discipline, including their own.” (1) This emphasis on making individual judgments about what they observe (and what they create) in the arts empowers young people to draw their own conclusions and make their own choices. Applied in the broader context, this skill set directly services the conviction that a media literate person is equipped to make more informed choices, and is able to live consciously in a media-oriented society.

Creation: Through Creative Expression, “students apply processes and skills in composing, arranging and performing a work and use a variety of means to communicate meaning and intent (1)...” This component of arts education engages students in the process of creating works, providing them opportunities to explore, learn, practice and refine their own abilities to communicate a specific point of view or message.

As earlier referenced, Project SMARTArt defined “media” to include any channel of communication, and thereby identified all art as “media.” With this expanded view, works of art themselves became source material for application and adaptation of the Five Key Questions of media literacy.

### **Focus on Literacy vs. Media**

By design, Project SMARTArt was focused more on “literacy” than on “media,” emphasizing critical thinking and creative expression.. Lessons and explored the way ideas are communicated: how to recognize, interpret and convey messages. Students analyzed (deconstructed) traditional art and non-traditional media forms and created (constructed) stories, choreographies, musical scores and visual arts projects that put forward their own point of view. Direct links to Language Arts and English Language Development standards were made, allowing a continuous focus and reinforcement on basic literacy skills.

Although the animation shorts developed by students in this project could be considered a classic media arts assignment, the types of artifacts typically produced throughout Project SMARTArt were very low-tech. In fact, no others required the use of a computer for execution.

### **Application in the Elementary School Context**

According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation Report (Fall, 2003), nearly all children aged 0-Six (99%) live in a home with a TV set, half (50%) have three or more TV’s, and one-third (36%) have a TV in their bedroom. More than one in four (27%) have a VCR or DVD in their bedroom, while one in ten have a video game player, and 7% have a computer.

Children aged 8-18 live media-saturated lives, spending an average of nearly 6-1/2 hours a day with media, according to another Kaiser Family Foundation Study (March 2005) called “Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds.”

These statistics demonstrate that children need help to critically navigate the media in their lives, and to develop skills to effectively represent themselves. The fact that linkages to standards for elementary school children were made demonstrates that media literacy concepts definitely belong in elementary schools.

The Five Key Questions represent some sophisticated concepts, and so the development of Key Questions to Guide Young Children was an effort on CML’s part to break down the questions to more manageable ideas. Teachers used these questions to take complex ideas and make them more concrete for young children.

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(1) Visual and Performing Arts Framework for California Public Schools.

### **Next Steps**

As with any pioneering effort, Project SMARTArt uncovered the “next steps” needed to advance the combined work of media literacy and the arts. Among these steps are to:

- Formulate questions for guiding the “construction” process, informed by the Five Core Concepts and paralleling the Five Key Questions of media literacy.
- Identify questions for “re-construction” of media. With media today being re-used, re-mixed, and re-formulated using other media, key questions for guiding reconstruction are also needed. These questions must address intellectual property issues that relate to creation, use and distribution of media content, as well as be informed by the Five Core Concepts and parallel the Five Key Questions of media literacy.
- Determine how the creation of media relates to a student-involved assessment process. Student-produced artifacts provide opportunities for critical thinking, self-expression, and demonstration of content mastery in all subject areas.
- Development of rubrics and other assessment methods enables students to learn how to set criteria to evaluate their creations and the creations of their peers.
- Conduct research to correlate the Key Questions to Guide Young Children with appropriate stages of child development, so that it becomes clear how to best match the teaching of the Key Questions with children’s cognitive development and capacity.
- Establish and sustain a K-12 learning community for further work and research, through continued professional development, a common framework and vocabulary, a sharing of lesson plans, activities and classroom practices.

### **About the authors:**

*Tessa Jolls* is President and CEO of the Center for Media Literacy, where she has served for the past six years in designing, implementing and promoting media literacy programs within K-12 education. She consults nationally with school districts, health organizations and publishers on media literacy education.

*Denise Grande*, Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Music Center of Los Angeles Count/Education Division, has more than 15 years experience in arts education programming and implementation. Working in partnership with specific school districts, she currently coordinates and contributes to projects that strategically advance the goal of district-wide, K-12 arts education for students.