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Hathaway Brown discovers the power of media literacy for students in the 21st century

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Today, globalized media has the potential power to replace parents and schools as socializing agents for children. Media literacy instruction helps students “filter” media messages through accepted community norms, and prepares them to evaluate risks, make wise choices, define their own ethical principles, and participate as members of a democratic society.

Critical thinking skills are the central tools through which to acquire and apply content knowledge in the disciplines. With its inquiry-based and process-oriented pedagogy, media literacy offers a systematic framework for acquiring new knowledge across all disciplines. Media literacy helps students acquire the critical thinking skills they need to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and participate with the powerful images, words, and sounds through which much information is delivered in the 21st century.

Hathaway Brown School (HB) was undergoing a quiet but very real crisis. As the Upper School’s media literacy teacher, Terry Dubow, said: “We’re a girls’ school that was founded with the motto ‘We learn not for school but for life.’ But we came to the realization that we were not doing nearly enough to prepare our students for their lives as young women. Nothing shocking had happened. Instead we noticed that too often our work was not always as powerful as the work done by the average producer of the average reality show. We found that entirely unacceptable.”

Dubow, who has taught media literacy courses to seniors at Hathaway Brown since 2001, consulted with other staff to recommend an expansion of the school's existing media literacy program. In listening to the group's observations over a number of meetings, HB Head Bill Christ realized that while media literacy had not been part of the core curriculum at any time in the past, it was now an essential skill.

"Just as the printing press revolutionized medieval Europe, an explosion of information is transforming our society now, and global media are at the center of these changes. Our students are receiving an exponentially increasing number of messages across all media channels, and they urgently need media literacy skills to sensitively read what they're seeing and hearing today," he said.

HB administrators and staff set to work on an expanded curriculum with at least two objectives in mind. HB Associate Head Sue Sadler and many other staff members were concerned about the effects of media messages which emphasize unrealistic feminine body images and role models, and in the early stages of planning decided to design the entire curriculum around the theme of "Women in Media" as a means for empowering all girls in the school.

"Our students need to gain critical perspective on the mediated culture they inhabit. In acquiring media literacy skills, they'll have powerful tools at their disposal that can help them form an image of themselves as competent individuals who have important contributions to make to the world they will live in," Sadler said.

Fostering students' critical thinking skills was also a priority. Dubow noted that the school's "basic premise is not that media is bad, but that media is relentless, and there is a purpose and a sender behind every message that we see." School leaders hoped to design a program in which students could analyze and create media messages in developmentally appropriate ways.

In the fall of 2008 Sadler and her colleagues contacted the Center for Media Literacy (CML) in Los Angeles for assistance with teacher professional development. Sadler was particularly interested in the uniform teaching methodology contained within CML's instructional framework. Sadler wanted to place the framework at the center of the school's professional development efforts, with the intention of maintaining consistent support for the systematic integration of media literacy instruction into the curriculum of the entire school.

"The CML framework, with its Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions, was designed precisely for this purpose. Together they provide curriculum developers with a useable structure that can be applied to any subject and open up a manageable pathway to 21st century skills," said Tessa Jolls, CML's president.

Promising results

Working within the CML framework, Hathaway Brown designed engaging, innovative curricula. For example, fifth grade curricula focused on the social construction of popularity. What is it? Who gets it? At what cost? Fifth graders debated the issue while reading *The Secret Language of Girls*, which explores the forces that drive what's "in."

In addition to working with the book, students drew on their own experiences with teen magazines and television to investigate the relationship between consumerism and popularity, and traced the impact these have on their personal relationships. “These experiences really opened the girls’ eyes and minds to the way media influences their everyday lives,” said fifth grade teacher Frannie Foltz. “I was impressed with their interest in the topic, as many of them came to class the following week with articles, advertisements, and other media resources for us to analyze.”

Hathaway Brown made a preliminary quantitative assessment of the curriculum’s effectiveness by administering a school-wide pre-post test (with some questions simplified to accommodate reading levels) through Survey Monkey, an online survey program. Post-test responses to the true/false statement, “Media messages affect me,” were among the most encouraging. In the center’s experience with media literacy implementations worldwide, students who have not received media literacy training almost universally believe that media do not affect their decision making and perceptions. “True” responses to the statement increased by 9.8 percent among primary school students, and seventh grade students made an even larger gain, at 12.1 percent.

Implementation background

After consulting with Jolls, Sadler and her colleagues arrived at a train-the-trainer strategy for professional development. Key faculty volunteers were identified to provide leadership and facilitation for the school-wide effort, and the implementation of the work was “seeded” through these volunteers and other faculty who stepped forward during the course of the implementation.

In December 2008, Jolls trained twenty volunteer facilitators in basic use of the Five Key Questions of Media, contextualizing them for teachers with sample hands-on activities. In January 2009, the entire faculty had a second training with Jolls. Volunteer facilitators led several activity sessions for colleagues.

In February and March 2009, teachers modified existing curricula to make use of the analytic framework of key questions and core concepts, and designed and implemented short media literacy units. The final school-wide meeting scheduled in March, which included a parent workshop and a session for faculty to share experiences with projects delivered and lessons learned.

After three months: A diamond in the rough

When the media literacy units had been completed and the data collected, it became clear that Hathaway Brown had brought many strengths to the task of implementing the program. From the board, to the head of school, associate head, and key personnel, all had lent their time and expertise to ensure its success. Support was also forthcoming from parents, who actively participated in an educational session held for them. Many teachers responded enthusiastically to the challenge of adapting their curricula to facilitate acquisition of media literacy skills, and students actively engaged with the new lessons, reacting positively to their experiences and letting their thoughts and feelings be known.

The ways in which the leadership of Hathaway Brown conceptualized and structured learning at

the school also became an asset to the implementation. Sadler is a vigorous proponent of the “systems” approach to instruction evoked by the framework, and school officials have begun to explore possibilities for integrating the school’s media literacy program with programs at the 13 interdisciplinary centers which comprise the Institute for 21st Century Learning, such as the Center for Girls’ and Women’s Leadership and the Science Research and Engineering Program.

Time pressures were a constraining factor in the implementation process. Though planning for the launch of the project had been extensive, the implementation itself was relatively short in duration. An expanded schedule would have facilitated adoption of the CML framework across all subject areas in the Upper School, afforded greater opportunities for peer coaching, and allowed more time for individual teachers to internalize the process of using the Five Key Questions to teach critical thinking skills.

Training teachers in media literacy instruction without reference to specific underlying content was also something of a strategic experiment for Hathaway Brown. Success has already been demonstrated with training teachers in teaching media literacy skills with a common curriculum. For example, a UCLA longitudinal evaluation of the CML violence prevention curriculum *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in Media* (2006) revealed that middle school students of teachers who were trained for one day were more likely to mitigate their media consumption, reduce their aggression, and agree that media violence may cause adverse effects. The introduction of a common curriculum could possibly have lessened the challenges of first-time training of faculty in media literacy teaching methods, because the faculty would have a model to follow.

“We’re building on the foundation that we’ve laid,” Sadler said. “Plans for the 2010-2011 academic year include grade-level media literacy classes at fourth and seventh grades, and full integration of media literacy skills into the school’s existing health curriculum .”

“Embedding media literacy into the curriculum and more importantly, into the habits of mind of our students is a multi-year process, but Hathaway Brown is a school with a mission: We learn not for school but for life .”

For more information, visit [Hathaway Brown](#) and the [Center for Media Literacy](#).

Tessa Joll is President and CEO of the Center for Media Literacy, a position she has held since 1999. Her primary focus is working in partnership to design and implement school and community-based implementation programs for media literacy education.