



Skills & Strategies for Media Education

A pioneering media literacy leader outlines the core principles and key components of this new educational agenda.

by Elizabeth Thoman

In the recent movie *Avalon*, Barry Levinson's film portrait of an immigrant family before and after World War II, the delivery of the family's first TV set is portrayed as a significant milestone. Three generations of Krichinskys squeeze together in front of their tiny new television set and stare vacantly at a black and white test pattern. "Just wait," one of the children says, "something will happen."

And it did. Throughout the '60s and '70s, television grew from a diversion in the living room into a national obsession. From moon landings to *Leave it to Beaver*, a president's assassination to *Mr. Clean*, media images moved from the background to the foreground of our daily lives.

From the clock radio that wakes us up in the morning until we fall asleep watching the late night talk show, we are exposed to hundreds, even thousands of images and ideas not only from television but now also from newspaper headlines, magazine covers, movies, websites, photos, video games and billboards. Some are calling today's young people, *screenagers*.¹

Until recently, few questioned the increasing dominance of media in our lives. Those who did were inclined to focus on content issues like the amount of sex and violence in television and movies. Some advocated censorship, while others simply urged families to turn the TV off. But the fact is, though you can turn off the set, unless you move to a mountaintop, you cannot escape today's media culture. Media no longer just influence our culture. They are our culture.

Media's pivotal role in our global culture is why media censorship will never work. What's needed, instead, is a major rethinking of media's role in all of our lives a rethinking that recognizes the paradigm shift from a print culture to an image culture that has been evolving for the past 150 years since the invention of photography and the ability to separate an object or a likeness from a particular time and

place and still remain real, visible and permanent.²

For 500 years, we have valued the ability to read print in order to participate fully as informed citizens and educated adults in society. Today the family, the school and all community institutions, including the medical and health community, share the responsibility of preparing young people for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds.³ Call it "media literacy."

What is media literacy?

Just what it sounds like the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols we take in everyday through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and of course advertising. It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around you and not be passive and therefore, vulnerable.



**"We must prepare young people for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds."
UNESCO, 1982**

Media researchers now say that television and mass media have become so ingrained in our cultural milieu that we should no longer view the task of media education as providing "protection" against unwanted messages. Our goal must be to help people become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than

letting the interpretation control them. Len Masterman, author of *Teaching the Media*, calls it "critical autonomy."⁴

Other definitions point out that media literacy is not so much a finite body of knowledge but rather a skill, a process, a way of thinking that, like reading comprehension, is always evolving. To become media literate is not to memorize facts or statistics about the media, but rather to raise the right questions about what you are watching, reading or listening to.⁵ At the heart of media literacy is the principle of inquiry.

Learning What to Look For

What do kids (and adults, too) need to know about the media? Over the years, media educators have identified five ideas that everyone should know about media messages, whether the message comes packaged as a TV sitcom, a computer game, a music video, a magazine ad or a movie in the theatre.⁶

1. All media messages are "constructed."

Whether we are watching the nightly news or passing a billboard on the street, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably several people), pictures were taken and a creative designer put it all together. But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is "constructed" by just a few people then becomes "the way it is" for the rest of us. But as the audience, we don't get to see or hear the words, pictures or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted.

Helping people understand how media is put together and what was left out as well as how the media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is an important way of helping them navigate their lives in a global and technological society.



Skills and Strategies

2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Each form of communication newspapers, TV game shows or horror movies has its own creative language: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media language increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media experiences, as well as helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation. One of the best ways to understand how media is put together is to do just that make your own personal video, create a website for your Scout troop, develop an ad campaign to alert kids to the dangers of smoking.

3. Different people experience the same media message differently.

Because of each individual's age, upbringing and education, no two people see the same movie or hear the same song on the radio. Even parents and children do not see the same TV show! This concept turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers as just passive "couch potatoes." We may not be conscious of it but each of us, even toddlers, are constantly trying to "make sense" of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be about accepting or rejecting messages. Research indicates that, over time, children of all ages can learn age-appropriate skills that give them a new set of glasses with which they can "read" their media culture.⁷

4. Media are primarily businesses driven by a profit motive.

Newspapers lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, we all know that commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what's really being sold through television is not only the advertised products to the audience but also the audience to the advertisers! The real purpose of programs we watch on commercial TV, whether news or entertainment, is not just to entertain us but rather to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or local station can sell time to sponsors to advertise their products in commercials. Every second counts! Sponsors pay for the time based on the number of people the

station predicts will be watching. Sponsors also target their advertising message to specific kinds of viewers For example, women 20-35 who spend money on the advertised products or children 2-7 who influence their parent's spending.

Maybe it's not the way we'd like it to be but, in truth, most media are provided to us, as researcher George Gerbner says, by private, global corporations with something to sell rather than by the family, church, school or even one's native country, with something to tell.⁸

5. Media have embedded values and points of view.

Media, because they are constructed, carry a subtext of who and what is important at least to the person or persons creating the construction. Media are also storytellers (even commercials tell a quick and simple story) and stories require characters, settings and a plot that has a beginning, middle and end. The choice of a character's age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban? rural? affluent? poor?), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become "embedded" in a TV show, movie or ad. It is important to learn how to "read" all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them. Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject these messages as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

Five basic questions can be asked about any media message.

Learning What to Ask

From these concepts flow a series of five basic questions⁹ that can be asked about any media message. Note that each one could open up many layers of deeper questions:

1. Who created this message and why are they sending it?
2. What techniques are being used to attract my attention?
3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in the message?

4. How might different people understand this message differently from me?

5. What is omitted from this message?

Usually the questioning process is applied to a specific media "text" -- that is, an identifiable production or publication, or a part of one: an episode of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, an ad for Pepsi, an issue of *Seventeen* magazine, a billboard for Budweiser beer, photos and articles about a bank robbery on the front page of a newspaper, the Super Bowl telecast.

Several approaches to examining media texts are possible, depending on the setting and the age and educational level of the participants.

Sometimes a media "text" can involve multiple formats. A new animated Disney film, for example, involves not only a blockbuster movie released in thousands of theatres but also a whole campaign of advertising and merchandising -- character dolls and toys, clothes, lunchboxes, etc. -- as well as a website, storybooks, games and perhaps eventually, a ride at one of the Disney theme parks.

Uncovering many levels of meaning in a media message and multiple answers to every question is what makes media education so engaging for kids and so enlightening for adults.

How to Question the Media

The process for examining media texts will be different depending on the setting -- school classroom, after school program, summer camp, church youth group, a family at home -- as well as the age and educational level of the participants. Several approaches, from the basic to the more complex, are possible:

Core Questioning

To be a functioning adult in a mediated society, one needs to be able to distinguish between different media forms and know how to ask the basic questions and core concepts cited above. Although



Skills and Strategies

most adults today learned through literature classes to distinguish a poem from an essay, it's amazing how many people do not understand the difference between a daily newspaper and a supermarket tabloid.

Increasingly as information about national and world events is delivered to the public instantaneously via television and the Internet, individuals will need to know how to verify information themselves, how to check sources and how to compare and contrast different versions of the same information in order to detect bias or political "spin" control.

Basic core questioning about the media can start as early as three or four: make a game of "spot the commercial" to help children learn to distinguish between entertainment or news programs and the commercial messages that support them. Parents can also use children's picture books to help kids understand the storytelling power of images.¹⁰ As children grow and become able to distinguish the world of fantasy from the real world they live in, they can begin to explore how media are put together by turning the sound off during a cartoon and noting the difference it makes, or creating their own cereal box to demonstrate how advertisers package products to entice us to buy.

Close analysis

Media experiences go by so quickly that there is no time for thoughtful reflection on what is being said, how it grabs our attention and what meanings we may be taking from it. Too often our senses are bombarded for hours at a time with carefully crafted images, sounds and ideas that flow in and out of our minds, many at an unconscious or subliminal level.

While getting "caught up" in a storytelling experience has been the essence of entertainment since our ancestors told tales around the fire, the relentless pace of entertainment media today requires that at least once in awhile, we should stop and look, really look, at how a media message is put together and the many meanings that can derive from it. The method for this is called "close analysis."

The first step is to isolate a particular media message to examine. Commercials are often good choices because they are short and tightly

packed with powerful words and images, music and sounds. Find a commercial to analyze by recording not the programs but just the commercials during an hour or two of TV watching! Play the tape and look for a commercial that is particularly interesting. Replay it several times. First, write down everything you can about the visuals lighting, camera angles, how the pictures are edited together. Then turn the picture off and listen to the sound track. Write down all the words that are spoken. Who says them? What kind of music is used? Does it change in the course of the commercial? How? Are there other sounds? What is their purpose?

"The relentless pace of entertainment media today requires that at least once in awhile, we should stop and look, really look, at how a media message is put together and the many meanings that can derive from it."

Once you become familiar with the surface level then you will begin to notice more and more of what the commercial is really "saying" underneath the surface: values expressed and unexpressed; lifestyles endorsed or rejected; points of view proposed or assumed. Write down your insights along with what's left out of the message and how different people might react differently to it. Finally, reflect on whether you will accept or reject the message of this media "text," and why.

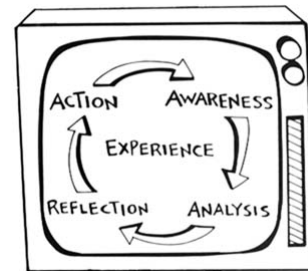
While no one has the time to subject every media message to this kind of analysis, it takes only two or three experiences with close analysis to give us the insight to "see" through other media messages in the future. It's like having a new set of glasses that brings the whole media world into focus.

Action Learning (The Empowerment Spiral)

Teachers and group facilitators have the challenge of organizing media education activities with groups of children, young people or adults. Although collections of media literacy

curricula have been published in recent years, teachers and leaders need to develop their own set of guidelines for classes and group meetings.

The Action Learning model (see graphic at right) has proven to be an excellent one for uncorking a spiral of inquiry that leads to increased comprehension, greater critical thinking and ability to make informed judgments. It also offers an opportunity for groups to organize for action and advocacy, especially in relation to the social impact of media in our lives and our culture to do something about issues like violence in the media, stereotyping of women and minorities, the trivialization of news and the decline of an informed electorate.



"We must turn the one-way system of commercial mass media into a two-way process of discussion, reflection and action."

Action Learning, based on the work of the late Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, can be summarized as a four-step "empowerment" process: Awareness, Analysis, Reflection and Action.¹¹

In the Awareness step, the group participates in some activity (like counting the number of violent incidents in a children's cartoon, that leads to the insight: "Oh! I never thought of that before."

The next step, Analysis, provides time for the group to figure out "how" an issue came to be. Core questioning and close analysis are two techniques used in this step to better understand the complexity of



Skills and Strategies

the selected media topic. Production experiences could also help the group understand "how" and "what" happens in the exchange between media producers and their audiences.

In the Reflection step, the group looks deeper to ask "So what?" or "What ought we to do?" about the identified media issue. Depending on the group, they may want to also consider philosophical or religious tenets, ethical values or democratic principles that are accepted as guides for individual and collective decision-making.

Finally the Action step gives participants an opportunity to formulate constructive action ideas actions that will lead to personal changes in their own media choices and viewing habits as well as working for change locally, nationally or globally.

Window of Opportunity

Today's media environment offers a window of opportunity for the introduction of media education not only in schools but throughout society. Already over 50% of the viewing audience has discovered other alternatives to network broadcasting. Over 80% of homes have VCR's and one in four people use the Internet at least weekly.¹² Leisure time is on the rise and "quality of life" issues are a major concern for young families and the social system (schools, churches, health care, governments) that serves them.

More critically, concern about issues like alcohol and tobacco abuse, body image and eating disorders, teen sexual behavior and the proliferation of violence have prompted teachers,

parents and caregivers to examine the role that media messages play in shaping the cultural environment in which children are growing up.

Educating young people to select their media choices, teaching people of all ages to evaluate the media's underlying values and, in general, promoting a media "consciousness" is the challenge for educators, activists and service providers who recognize that for our society to flourish into the next century, we must turn the closed, one-way system of commercial mass media into a two-way process of discussion, reflection and action with each other and with the media themselves.

Three Steps to Success: Overview of an Effective Media Literacy Program

Media Literacy" is a term that incorporates three interrelated approaches leading to the media empowerment of citizens of all ages:

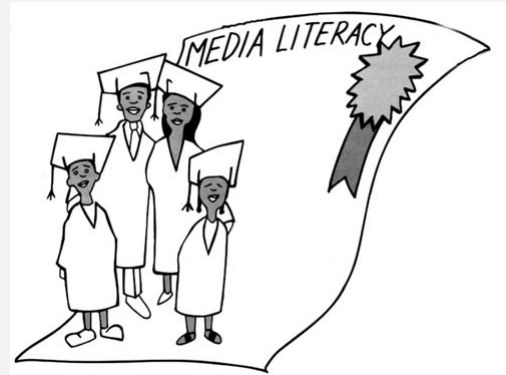
The first approach is simply becoming aware of the importance of balancing or managing one's media "diet" -- helping children and families make healthy choices and manage the amount of time spent with television, videos, electronic games, films and various print media.

The second approach is teaching specific skills of critical viewing -- learning to analyze and question what is in the frame, how it is constructed and what may have been left out. Skills of critical viewing are best learned through inquiry-based classes or interactive group activities as well as from creating and producing one's own media messages.

The third approach -- social, political and economic analysis -- goes behind the frame (through which we see media images) to explore deeper issues of who produces the media we experience -- and for what purpose? What is the impact of media in our culture and how do we approach issues such as media violence, racial stereotyping and consumerism?

Through inquiry, discussion and action projects, both adults and young people look at how each of us (and all of us together in society) take and make meaning from our media experiences and how the mass media drive our global consumer economy. This approach also can set the stage for various media advocacy efforts to challenge or redress public policies or corporate practices.

Although television and electronic media may seem to present the most compelling reasons for promoting media education in contemporary society, the principles and practices of media literacy are applicable to all media from television to T-shirts, from billboards to the Internet.



1. Rushkoff, Douglas, *Playing the Future: How Kids' Culture Can Teach Us to Thrive in an Age of Chaos*, 1996.
2. From the work of Stewart Ewen especially *All Consuming Images: Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, 1988.
3. From the Final Report, UNESCO International Symposium on Education of the Public in the Use of Mass Media, Grunwald, 1982.
4. Masterman, Len, *Teaching the Media*, 1989, chapter 2.
5. From the mission statement of *Media&Values* magazine, published from 1977-1993 by the Center for Media Literacy.
6. Adapted from media education documents from England and Canada. First published in the U.S. as "Five Important Ideas to Teach Your Kids about TV," by Jay Davis *Media&Values* #52/53; Fall, 1990.
7. Hobbs, Renee, *Tuning in to Media: Literacy for the Information Age*, 1995 video, distributed by the Center for Media Literacy.
8. Gerbner, George, "Television Violence and the Art of Asking the Wrong Question," in *The World & I: A Chronicle of our Changing Era*, July, 1994.
9. Thanks to Renée Hobbs for her work in articulating these core questions through her training and teaching.
10. For ideas and suggestions see Considine, Haley and Lacy, *Imagine That!: Developing Critical Thinking and Critical Viewing Through Children's Literature*, 1994 Teacher Ideas Press.
11. "From Awareness to Action: Media Literacy for the '90s," Center for Media Literacy, 1990.
12. *USA Today*, December 12, 1997.

Note: This article may be reprinted or reproduced at no charge for distribution by non-profit or educational organizations. Please include this credit line: ©2003 Center for Media Literacy <http://www.medialit.org/>