

### In This Issue...

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*In this issue of Connections, we spend some time examining the founding principles and 'big ideas' of media literacy which Len Masterman developed to prepare students for life in the 21st century.*

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## Theme: Len Masterman and the Big Ideas of Media Literacy

As CML's [Voices of Media Literacy](#) interviews reveal, many American and Canadian pioneers of media literacy became active in a time and place where negative views of television were commonplace. The challenge for them was to persuade parents and teachers that television was a medium to be studied rather than demonized or dismissed. On the other side of the Atlantic, British media literacy pioneer Len Masterman faced a somewhat different challenge--countering a decades-old tradition rooted in literary studies which involved students in the task of "discrimination"—that is, judging between quality media texts and those deemed of less value.

From the beginning, Masterman was acutely aware of the issues of authority inherent in this tradition: ". . .teacher views become discriminatory judgments, while pupil preferences, lacking either authority or an acceptable language code, remain at the low-level status of preferences" (*Teaching About Television*, 18). In this model of media education, teachers were tastemakers, and students expected to absorb the criteria by which teachers judged the value of media.

The revolutionary element in Masterman's developing theory of media literacy was the extension of this thinking to media texts. In the past, media teachers had asserted their interpretive authority over students. But the media, too, are teachers in this mold--because all media texts point audiences towards a specific set of emotional, social and intellectual responses. It's for this reason that Masterman repeatedly referred to Roland Barthes' 1957 book *Mythologies* as a founding text for media literacy studies. Barthes takes French popular culture as his subject, from staged wrestling matches to toys to detergent advertisements. In all of these, he finds evidence of a society which encourages members to "read" and respond to its material culture in particular ways. At times his lens is sharply focused on media. In an essay on "Shock Photos," Barthes comments on photos of war atrocities. In one exhibit, two adjacent photos juxtapose images of a crowd of soldiers and a field of skulls. In Barthes' analysis, the photographer ". . .has almost always *overconstructed* the horror he is proposing, adding to the *fact* by contrasts or parallels, the intentional *language* of horror. . .as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us" (116, emphasis in original).

Many readers have approached *Mythologies* as a textbook analysis of the social, political and ideological "grounds" to the cultural products of Western societies. In doing so, they have ignored the fact that *Mythologies* is a personal and sometimes lyrical exploration of Barthes' chosen subjects. He takes pleasure in reading against the "grain" of any object or text which attracts his attention. Masterman was clearly inspired by this personal aspect of Barthes' text. While he was dedicated to the task of developing students' analytic skills so they could better understand how media texts positioned them as audiences, he was most interested in affording them the freedom to explore their interests in media. In *Teaching About Television*,

Masterman's book on his initial efforts in teaching media literacy skills, he writes, "A 'skills' curriculum actually hardens the teacher-pupil hierarchy; the teacher possesses the skills and passes them down to his pupils. But we were involved in something completely different. As one girl put it, 'We're not really learning anything new; you're just making us more aware of what we really know already.' I had certainly been responsible for increasing *awareness* of the multiplicity of ways in which television pictures communicate their meanings, but the abilities developed by a student. . . emerged *from the student himself* through the way in which he shaped and handled his growing awareness." Masterman observed that this awareness emerged more or less haphazardly "through the sparking of an interest or the kindling of an enthusiasm from which pupils would wish to 'take off' on their own." To begin by trying to teach skills, Masterman argued "was to place the teacher in the position of the man who seeks happiness. If it becomes his primary aim he will never succeed, for like skill, it emerges out of involvement in something else. The task of every teacher is to seek that 'something else.'" (45).

In this issue of *Connections*, we explore Len Masterman's founding contributions to the field of media literacy education. In our second research article, we illustrate the relevance of his initial work as a media educator to the practice of media literacy education today. In our resources section, we report on the release of a new online game based on the book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, and discuss its contributions to the growing genre of social impact games. And in our MediaLit Moment, your high school students will engage in comparative media analysis to approach the topic of physical disability from new perspectives.

## Research Highlights

### Masterman and the Synthesis of Education and Media Studies

In the 1960s through the 1980s, media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, George Gerbner and Neil Postman used a variety of methods to argue that the form of media messages could matter as much, if not more than their content. None of the luminaries of this era applied their theoretical work to the discipline of education. Len Masterman, however, saw that *teaching about media* takes a different understanding and skill set than simply *understanding and using media for oneself*.

Masterman arrived at a conceptual framework for teaching students about the medium of television through an inductive process. As Masterman reflects in his interview for [Voices of Media Literacy](#), "The problem was this: if you are studying TV, then in successive weeks you might be looking at news, documentary, sport, advertising, soap opera, etc. How is it possible to study such a diverse range of topics in a way that would be focused and disciplined? . . . I suppose the big step forward was to recognize a truism: that what we were actually studying was television and not its subject contents. That is, we were not actually studying sport or music or news or documentary. We were studying *representations* of these things. We were studying the ways in which these subjects were being represented and symbolized and packaged by the medium. . . It might have been based on a truism, but it directly challenged the way in which television invited its audience to see the medium: as a window on the world, a transparent glass through which we can see the "reality" and judge it for ourselves. . . What that denies is human agency, the fact that these images are actually produced: selected, edited and packaged" (5).

Masterman's discoveries were punctuated by a growing list of questions : ". . .if we are looking at TV as a representational system, then the question inevitably arise as to who is creating these representations. Who is doing the representing? Who is telling us that this is the way the world is? That their way of seeing is simply natural?" (ibid.). Other questions emerged: What is the nature of the world that is being represented? What are its values and dominant assumptions? What are the techniques that are used to create the "authenticity" of TV? How are TV's representations read and understood by its audiences? How are we as an audience positioned by the text? What divergent interpretations exist within the class? These questions eventually became the basis for the core concepts of media literacy, that Masterman first articulated.

To underscore the importance of Masterman's discovery of the study of representation as an organizing principle of media literacy education, it's useful to jump ahead in time to the arrival of new media technologies. In 2007, Henry Jenkins and his colleagues at the MacArthur Foundation published a white paper titled "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." One of the opening sections is titled "Why Teach Media Literacy?: Three Core Problems." One is dubbed "The Transparency Problem."

An example given by the authors is the way that a group of students responded to the use of the real-time strategy game *Civilization III* in world history classes. Students were adept at formulating “what if” hypotheses, which they tested through game play, yet lacked the conceptual vocabulary needed to critique the way the game itself constructed history. The authors comment: “. . . there is a difference between trying to master the rules of the game and recognizing the ways those rules structure our perception of reality. It may be much easier to see what is in the game than to recognize what the game leaves out” (15). Even in an age of new media, the “traditional” media literacy issue of representation remains a core concern; it is foundational.

While Masterman’s research brought conceptual clarity to the field, his experience as a teacher assured that the discipline would be grounded in a practical knowledge of student motivations. As we mentioned in our theme article, Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* had an inspiring influence on Masterman’s priorities for media education--students should not only be able to conduct detailed analyses of media representations, but should be able to pursue their individual interests in media, and even have fun in the process. Another foundational text for Masterman was Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Inspired by Freire, Masterman was intent on designing an approach to media education which could allow students to experience their own power.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* elaborates on the pedagogical and philosophical approach Freire developed as he taught literacy skills to illiterate *campesinos* near Recife, Brazil in the early 1960s. Writing in opposition to traditional methods of teaching, Freire uses the term “banking concept” to describe the model these methods embody: teachers possess knowledge which they deposit into students’ minds via a narrative mode (telling, instructing) within a hierarchical teacher-student relationship. Freire argues from this premise that the purpose of traditional education is to encourage the passivity of students: “. . .the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (60).

Masterman believed that media education should have similar aims: “The really important and difficult task of the media teacher is to develop in pupils enough self-confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgments to media texts *which they will encounter in the future* (*Teaching the Media*, 24, emphasis in original). In *Voices of Media Literacy*, Masterman declares, “Media education is nothing if it is not an education for life” (10). Masterman also believed that it was important for students to identify, if not challenge the point of view from which media texts are produced. If the point of view from which the text is produced is left unrecognized, students might passively receive it as a source of knowledge about the world: “That idea that there is a point of view which is no point of view is deeply embedded in the ideology of television” (*Voices of Media Literacy*, 7). Television or not, media literacy teaching recognizes that point of view is ever-present.

Finally, Masterman believed that students need to be empowered within the educational process itself. Freire argues that the “narrative” mode of banking education needs to be replaced by a dialogue in which teachers are learners, and students are also teachers. In *Voices of Media Literacy*, Masterman comments, “In media studies information is transmitted laterally, to both students and teachers alike. The teacher’s role is not to advocate a particular view, but to promote reflection upon media texts, and develop the kind of questioning and analytical skills which will help students clarify their own views” (11). In Freire’s description of his field work, students engaged in a process of dialogue, reflection and action to address the perceived limits of the social reality they lived in. In *Teaching the Media*, Masterman comments: “Dialogue. . .is genuinely a *group* process. . .in which members recognize the power which can be generated through co-operative learning, group action and reflection. . .” (33, emphasis in original). CML’s Empowerment Spiral of Awareness, Analysis, Reflection and Action is based on both Freire’s and Masteman’s work.

Here, then, is Masterman’s contribution to media literacy education. He recognized the importance of McLuhan’s argument that “the medium is the message,” and applied that finding to the design of a method of analysis which all students could use. But he didn’t stop there. Adapting the work of Barthes and Freire, he grafted a philosophy of education to that method which fulfilled students’ needs—for enjoyment, freedom and power.

### Masterman and Method

Many of Len Masterman’s “big ideas” seemed to fit tongue-and-groove with his teaching methods. In other cases, his methods became a source of big ideas in the field decades later. The most notable marriage of concept and method was his decision to focus on the medium of television. This choice fulfilled his desire to teach “laterally” rather than hierarchically. If he had made newspapers or film the object of instruction, he would have been the expert. But his students knew more about television (at least the content of television programming) than he did. As a result, Masterman took the role of facilitator rather than instructor. In the words of the student quoted in our theme article, “We’re not really learning anything new; you’re just making us more aware of what we really know already.” Even today, television – screens – remain the dominant technology in homes.

The method of close analysis which he pioneered in media education was informed by several complementary ideas. The method demands that students suspend personal judgment for the duration of the analysis. The simplest justification involves the dynamics of classroom discussion: “. . .the objective of arriving at value judgments closes up rather than opens out discussion. . .it is too easy to obtain evaluative responses from pupils, and thereafter too difficult to move beyond them” (*Teaching About Television*, 19). More importantly, Masterman asked students to exercise their critical thinking skills by subjecting the text to a thorough investigation through a process of inquiry: “. . .what is it possible to say about the text? How does it work?. . .Where has it come from? What is its intended audience? It was an attempt to study the text more scientifically. What is this strange object

and what can we say about it that we might all agree is true?" (*Voices of Media Literacy*, 7).

In addition, the method of close analysis was informed by Masterman's recognition that the apparently seamless depiction of reality offered by television posed a problem for the educator: "Television pictures present the viewer with an enormous amount of information, most of which he processes at a level where he does not see it as having 'meanings' at all. . .if the television image is seen as unproblematic, and programs having only one meaning—that embodied within their narrative of events—then discussion becomes superfluous" (*Teaching About Television*, 43). Stated in Freire's terms, television is a teacher offering a narrative to be passively accepted. Masterman responded to the challenge with a variety of games, puzzles and exercises, some to help students grasp the significance of non-verbal communication (e.g., observing eye contact between two classmates in a discussion), and others to demonstrate how the process of perception can be fraught with problems and uncertainty. Next came detailed, careful, analytic investigation of individual texts. Students learned to engage in the process of describing what images were communicating at the literal, denotative level; exploring the connotations suggested by images and analyzing their figurative and metaphorical elements; and finally, asking questions about the larger social and political assumptions underpinning the text.

Masterman's belief that non-verbal communication skills needed to be addressed in the media education curriculum also presaged the arguments of media literacy educators for the transformation of English as a school subject into the wider study of communication. It's the same impulse which prompted George Lucas to argue, "If students aren't taught the language of sound and images, shouldn't they be considered as illiterate as if they left college without being able to read or write?" (Daly, "Life on the Screen")

On the face of it, Masterman preferred not to take a sociological approach to media simply because his students would likely not be interested in learning about the organizational structure of media industries. It seems likely that Masterman took a macro-level, systems approach because he intuitively understood that this level of analysis would reveal something to students about the relationships between producers, audiences, and media texts. For example, in *Teaching the Media*, he writes at some length about the reliance of television broadcasters on government agencies as sources of information. The result? Major networks such as the BBC would be less likely to produce news programs critical of the government if it wanted to maintain access to sources of information which most television audiences believed to be authoritative (117-125).

Finally, in *Teaching About Television*, Masterman makes a few telling observations about teaching the production of television news. He notes the "manifest content" of instruction: students will learn firsthand what producers leave on the cutting room floor as they select, package and present their own news material. But there is also a "hidden curriculum" of television production. Production necessarily involves teamwork and the acceptance of personal responsibility and decision-making within the group. Playback of recorded material

offers opportunities for the development of self-reflective skills: “The educational ‘message’ most effectively communicated by the medium is. . .that success and disappointment, far from resting upon the personal and often arbitrary judgments of teachers, are, in actuality, an organic part of any learning process” (81-82). Communication skills are developed through spoken presentations, interviews, writing and revision of scripts, camera work, art work, production and editing. All the skills identified in this ‘hidden curriculum’ have been identified as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and most of them fall within the “4Cs” of creativity, collaboration, communication and critical thinking.

In short, Masterman was not just the originator of big ideas. Several concepts were implicit in his early experiments with teaching methods, and these have become defining ideas in the field of media literacy education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Voices of Media Literacy interviews are available [here](#).

**Voices of Media Literacy** is a collection of interviews conducted in 2010-2011 with 20 media literacy pioneers who were active in the field prior to 1990. These pioneers represent the English-speaking countries of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States. Their views not only shed light on the development of media literacy, but also on where they see the field evolving and their hopes for the future.

The project was presented by Tessa Jolls, Dee Morgenthaler, and Barbara Walkosz at the NAMLE conference in 2011.

**CONSORTIUM**  
for **MEDIA LITERACY**

*Uniting for Development*

**About Us...**

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

<http://www.consortiumformedia literacy.org>

## Resources for Media Literacy

**Teaching Tip:** Take on the role of facilitator rather than instructor during media analysis activities to allow your students to express their views without judgement. In other words, become the guide on the side!

### Half the Sky Movement Launches New Online Game

*Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, the book which was produced as a PBS documentary, became a transmedia phenomenon earlier this month with the release of a new Facebook game of the same name. In 2009 *Half the Sky* authors Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn conceived the game while attending the Games for Change Festival, an event organized by a group that facilitates the creation of social impact games. The initial plans led to a partnership with Games for Change, which executive produced the game. Major funding support was provided by the Ford Foundation and Zynga, one of the leading providers of online social games.

The game begins with an Indian character named Radhika, who must decide whether or not to confront her husband about the need to procure medicine for her daughter, who is seriously ill. Other decisions follow. How much time and energy will she spend harvesting mangoes and bringing them to market to help pay for the medicine? Will she negotiate for an expensive taxi ride to the hospital with her daughter or earn more money? Players confront similar tough choices as they make a global journey across Kenya, Vietnam, Afghanistan and the U.S. As players determine the best course of action throughout the game, they receive prompts to donate to real-world NGOs and to learn facts about the issues. Some of their actions may also trigger donations from corporate sponsors. For example, collecting a sufficient number of school books in the virtual world can lead to a book donation from Pearson Longman. From a media literacy stand point, the game reinforces the Empowerment Spiral of awareness, analysis, reflection and action while encouraging thoughtful participation from its viewers.

While the game has received widespread attention, it has not garnered universal acclaim. For example, a *New York Times* game review argues that *Half the Sky*, like other Facebook games such as *FarmVille* and *SimCity Social*, attempts to motivate players more through moral coercion than intrinsically satisfying mechanics and interactivity (Video Games, *New York Times* 12 March 2013).

*Half the Sky* has advanced the development of social impact games, however. In 2006, *Darfur is Dying* invited players to navigate through the challenges of life in a Sudanese refugee camp. The game reached about 800,000 players, but the sole option for real-world participation extended to players was an e-mail application for sending messages to members of Congress. In a video interview with *Huffington Post* game reviewer Marc Lamont Hill, WuDunn asserted, "Every single quest taken by Radhika is mapped to a cause, and to partners" (embedded in

Prois, “‘Half the Sky’ Facebook Game”).

While the Facebook game has been aimed at users in the industrialized West, Games for Change has recently released a number of *Half the Sky* mobile game applications for users in Kenya. For example, the interactive soap opera “Family Values” is designed to enhance the perception of a girl’s value to a family, with an emphasis on girls’ education. The move to distribute these games in Kenya comes with a view to the possibility of wider dissemination across the rapidly expanding African cell phone market.

The *Half the Sky* game may be accessed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/HalftheGame?ref=ts&fref=ts>

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### Recommended:

Masterman, Len. “Media Education in the 1980s.” *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35.3 (1983): 44-58.

## MediaLit Moments

### When Disability is in the Imagination of the Beholder

A single photographic image can convey a metaphoric resonance which speaks of something larger than the image itself. By the same token, it can deliver a shorthand message which becomes little more than a stereotype. Such is the challenge of representing an individual with a physical disability. In this MediaLit Moment, your students will compare depictions of amputees across different media. In the process, they'll learn how to articulate the differing responses each representation elicits from them.

**Have students compare a still image of an amputee with an animated story about someone who lost a limb.**

**AHA!:** When I look at the news photo, I focus on the missing limbs. When I watch the cartoon documentary, I imagine what that person is thinking and feeling!

**Core Concept #4:** Media have embedded values and points of view.

**Key Question #4:** What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

**Core Concept #2:** Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

**Key Question #2:** What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Materials:** computer, high speed internet connection, data projector, screen

**Activity:** Begin by asking students what comes to mind when they think about people who have lost a limb. Tell them that they're about to see a news photo of an amputee. You may want to assure them you're not going to show them anything gory. As you display the photo, ask, whose point of view is represented? What does the photo seem to "say" about the subject? What are their responses to it? Covering the caption can aid students in the process of visual analysis. (The people shown in both media have been victims of landmines or cluster munitions, so there is plenty of narrative context to discuss later on). You'll find the photo at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2012/06/afghanistan-may-2012/100310/> Look for photo number 7 in the series.

Next, show them a sequence from cartoonist Patrick Chappatte's "Death in the Fields," an animated documentary on the dangers that unexploded cluster munitions pose to civilians living in southern Lebanon. The sequence tells the story of Chappatte's visit with Rasha Zayoun, and begins at about 5:20 into the video, and ends at about 7:00:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KFfP4wiluA&ref=patrickchappatte>

Ask, how is her amputation depicted? From whose point of view is the story told, and where is audience attention directed? How are Rasha's wishes and dreams conveyed? What are their responses to this sequence? How do these compare with their responses to the photo?

Extension:

Most depictions of amputees convey a sense of tragedy or triumph against the odds. Ask students to search for and comment on pictures and stories which break these stereotypes (or to produce their own).

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