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Why Digital and Media Literacy

What You'll Find in This Chapter:

- Students' at-home media use habits are generally unknown to their teachers.
- Young people need opportunities to engage with adults in making sense of the wide variety of experiences they have with mass media, popular culture, and digital technologies.
- Teachers' own love–hate attitudes about print, visual, sound, and digital media shape their uses of media and technology in the classroom.
- A process model for digital and media literacy includes these components: access, analyze, compose, reflect, and take action.
- Learners thrive when teachers move beyond the textbook to include real-world texts in a wide variety of forms.
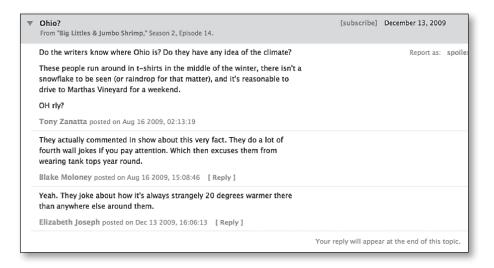
Lesson Plan:

Four Corners on the Media: Reflecting on Our Love–Hate Relationship

When Tony's not in school, he's on the computer. And when he's not playing video games or doing his homework, he's watching Hulu. "It's great to be able to watch your favorite shows whenever you want," he explained. These days, he's been watching the first two seasons of *Greek,* an ABC comedy about a girl who navigates her way through a sorority at an Ohio university. Her party life is turned upside down when her younger brother arrives on campus and insists on rushing a fraternity.

But Tony doesn't just watch TV shows online; he "reads the boards." All the shows on Hulu have a discussion board, where people make comments and participate in discussion about issues related to each show. He's posted his two cents on the longstanding debate about the sex jokes on *Family Guy.* He's clarified a plot point or two on the *Bones* discussion board, answering people's questions about why a character acted a certain way. Now he's got something to add to the board about why *Greek* doesn't seem like it's set in Ohio:

Figure 1.1   Discussion Board for ABC Family's *Greek*

> ▼ **Ohio?**   [subscribe]   December 13, 2009
> From "Big Littles & Jumbo Shrimp," Season 2, Episode 14.
>
> Do the writers know where Ohio is? Do they have any idea of the climate?   Report as: spoile[r]
>
> These people run around in t-shirts in the middle of the winter, there isn't a snowflake to be seen (or raindrop for that matter), and it's reasonable to drive to Marthas Vineyard for a weekend.
>
> OH rly?
>
> **Tony Zanatta** posted on Aug 16 2009, 02:13:19
>
> They actually commented in show about this very fact. They do a lot of fourth wall jokes if you pay attention. Which then excuses them from wearing tank tops year round.
>
> **Blake Moloney** posted on Aug 16 2009, 15:08:46   [Reply]
>
> Yeah. They joke about how it's always strangely 20 degrees warmer there than anywhere else around them.
>
> **Elizabeth Joseph** posted on Dec 13 2009, 16:06:13   [Reply]
>
> Your reply will appear at the end of this topic.

One thing is clear: Tony is no couch potato. He has analyzed some elements that make the show unrealistic, as shown in Figure 1.1, and he's active in an online conversation with others who have strong opinions about the show. By reading reactions to his post, Tony can learn from other users about concepts like the *fourth wall,*

which refers to the boundary between any fictional setting and its audience. When actors speak to the audience directly through the camera in a television program or film, it is called "breaking the fourth wall."

Tony's high school English teacher would be pleased to see Tony engaged in this kind of literacy practice. She works hard to get her students to appreciate literary concepts in epic poetry and mythology. But she doesn't generally spend time talking with students about their favorite movies or TV programs. She is too busy covering all the classic works of literature that students read in college prep classes.

As it turns out, many teachers are unfamiliar with how students actually watch movies and television today. Kids are using video streaming websites like Netflix (www.netflix.com) or Hulu (www.hulu.com). Netflix not only will mail movie DVDs to your door, but it offers video streaming direct to your computer or to your TV through an Xbox or Wii video game system. Hulu was founded in 2007 as a collaborative venture between FOX, ABC, and NBC. It offers television programs to viewers online through an advertising-supported model. Videos are available for unlimited streaming. In the United States, people can watch favorite shows and edited video clips over and over, for free. Advertisements appear during normal commercial breaks. For teens, it's the second most popular website destination (after YouTube) in terms of minutes of use.[1] And most teens use Hulu to rewatch their favorite episodes of shows they've already seen on TV.

What's to love about ABC's *Greek?* Tony explains it this way: "The characters are likeable and complicated—at least the male characters. And some of these stories show you what college life is like, even if the comedy elements add a lot that's unrealistic. The clothes and appearance of the characters are definitely not realistic."

What's to hate about watching this show? Tony admits, "I like watching them in a marathon session. Sometimes, it's really not a great use of my time." Like many people, Tony plays video games and watches TV instead of doing the things he *should* be doing, like homework and chores. "I waste a lot of time this way," he smiles sheepishly. When Tony's done watching episodes of *Greek,* a computer algorithm on Hulu suggests other shows he might also enjoy watching, including *The Secret Life of the American Teenager, Ten Things I Hate About You,* and *Ugly Betty.* Of course, Tony and his friends are also listening to music, playing video games, watching

YouTube videos, updating their social networks, and using cell phones. But for about four hours and twenty minutes per day, it's TV viewing on a traditional set, usually in the bedroom.

The Uses of Media and Technology in Grades 7–12

Many teachers already use movies, videos, mass media, and popular culture in the classroom. In middle-school health class, a Discovery Channel video on nutrition helps kids understand how food choices affect health. In world history classes, a teacher may show clips from *The Gladiator* or *300* to discuss Greek and Roman warrior culture or examine how the film's visual depictions of the ancient world compare with what is known from written historical accounts. In English, a teacher may use lyrics from a pop song to help students understand meter in poetry or a clip from *The Simpsons* to explore the concept of intertextuality. In biology, a PBS documentary on the Amazon basin may help spark interest in the genetic diversity of species. In government class, teachers may use an episode of *Law and Order* to discuss the dangers of pretrial publicity.

Computers are used in widely different ways in American schools. Students may go to the computer lab when writing their research papers. They may use drill-and-practice software to learn math or play educational simulation games to explore global conflicts in Latin America or the Middle East. In some schools, students are using computers as an ordinary part of classroom learning. But while plenty of teachers use digital media, mass media, and popular culture in the classroom, the instructional strategies they use may (or may not) support the development of students' knowledge, critical thinking, and communication skills.

Sometimes digital technology is used as a babysitter. There's the teacher who lets kids bring in DVDs from home to watch on the Friday before the holiday. There's the one who takes her kids to the computer lab for a project but doesn't notice when they're distracted and off task. Then there's the one whose classroom is always darkened, with a movie screening and kids' heads on desks.

Now there's a topic teachers don't like to talk about. In American public schools, for over two generations, watching movies has long been used *as a break or a reward.* These practices are so typical and so ordinary that we take them for granted. But in some

schools, watching videos can become a crutch: it can be used as a way to fill time and keep students in their seats. In my work with teachers, I've found that these habits may interfere with developing more imaginative and innovative uses of media and technology for learning.[2]

Other educators use popular culture as a motivational bait and switch, a way to get bored and disengaged youth to gear up for digging into *King Lear.* For example, a business teacher might use clips from the film *Wall Street* to introduce ideas about risk and return in finance. A math or science teacher may use a clip from the CBS show *NUMB3RS* to help students see the wide-ranging impact that math can have on their daily lives. A physical education teacher might "warm up" a class by playing some pop music to get kids moving. In nearly any subject, a clip from a YouTube video or talking about Oprah, local sports, or *World of Warcraft* can get kids to pay attention at the beginning of class. And who doesn't sometimes leave the substitute teacher a movie to play in class?

Make no mistake about it: using popular culture, mass media, and digital media motivates and engages students. And students need to be motivated and engaged—genuine learning simply doesn't happen without it. But this book isn't about simply using superficial strategies for getting kids to pay attention. Instead, this book explores the truly transformative power of digital and media literacy education in Grades 7–12 to connect the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences to mass media, digital media, and contemporary culture.

The position paper on digital and media literacy developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) explains that changes in society challenge teachers to change both how and what we teach:

> Whether we like it or not, this media culture is our students' culture. Our job is to prepare them to be able to critically participate as active citizens with the abilities to intelligently and compassionately shape democracy in this new millennium. Media literacy offers us the framework to build upon their entertainment and social experiences with media so as to provide our students with meaningful academic, civic, and public experiences that are critical and empowering.[3]

Educators can't afford to ignore or trivialize the complex social, intellectual, and emotional functions of media and popular culture in the lives of young people. In order to reach today's learners, educators need to be responsive to students' experience with their

culture—which is what they experience through television, movies, YouTube, the Internet, Facebook, music, and gaming.

When you learn more about students' choices, the first thing you'll notice is how different your students are from you. When it comes to media and technology, every two years brings a new set of changes in the landscape of their daily life. Even if you're only a few years older than your students, there may be important differences because technology tools are changing so very rapidly. That's why educators need to gain the latest information about the media and technology choices students make at home (and at school) each day.

Understanding Today's Learners

Kids are using media and technology from before breakfast until bedtime and beyond. They're sending text messages, listening to music, updating their social media profiles, and playing video games at the same time, squeezing in 200 hours of media and technology use into each month.[4] Contrary to popular opinion, most teens ages 12 to 19 are *not* abandoning movies and television for the Internet; when they go online, they're updating their Facebook profiles and watching YouTube videos but generally not creating videos, blogs, podcasts, or computer programs. Only 8% of teenagers use Twitter, for example.[5] Despite all the attention given to teens and online media in the news media, television programs and movies continue to be significant sources of entertainment in the lives of young people. A Nielsen study in June 2009 shows that only about 3% of the 100 hours per month that teens spend using television is done online. Actually, teens watch more TV than ever, up 6% over five years. And teens actually spend about one third less time online as compared with adults, using the Internet about 11 hours a month as compared with adults, who spend 29 hours monthly online.[6]

Way back before cable television and online video streaming brought us a 500,000-channel universe, it was easy for 20th-century teachers to integrate discussions of favorite TV shows into the classroom—after all, there were only three or four networks. Back then, discussions about mass media emerged naturally as a result of shared exposure to celebrities, politicians, athletes, and musicians. Of course, teachers still have viewing experiences they can share with their students. Many teens and teachers love *American Idol*, for example. Both teens and teachers may watch sports as well as local and national news.

But today, the media worlds that students inhabit are often very different from the preferences of educators, parents, and other adults. Teachers and students are both "using the Internet," but they are having very different experiences when online. When teachers use the Internet, for example, it's often to check e-mail or surf the web for information related to career, health, or hobbies. When teens use the Internet, the purpose is for socializing or entertainment, generally by playing games, watching videos, searching for and listening to music, and interacting with friends through social networks like Facebook or Myspace.

As important as digital media and technology are in the lives of children and young people, research shows that 80% of teens have little to no interaction with parents or other adults about their use of media and technology.[7] So most young people get very little opportunity to have serious conversations with adults about the complex mix of entertainment, socialization, and information that is a substantial part of everyday life.

But it is through digital media, mass media, popular culture, and technology that we will get most of our information and entertainment across the span of a lifetime. Shouldn't students get some meaningful opportunities to analyze and evaluate the way these messages and experiences work in contemporary culture?

Keep a Media Diary

Increase your awareness of each time you come in contact with print, visual, sound, or digital media for a three-day period. You can create your own method for keeping track of your usage habits, but please note the following:

- Type of media text (print, visual, sound, or digital)
- Title or name of the media text
- Amount of time spent using it
- Motivation for using it (homework, socializing, relaxation, mood management, etc.)
- Context and situation (where and why)

After three days, review the chart to look for patterns. Write a short essay describing the patterns and reflect on your thoughts and feelings regarding media use choices over this period of time. In the essay, address these questions:
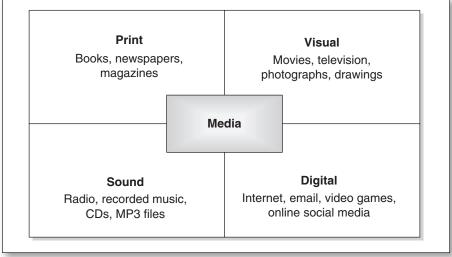
1. What medium do you use the most? What do you use the least? Why?

2. Was your media use during this period of time more or less typical for you? Why or why not?

3. Reflecting on your behavior over the three-day period, which medium could you live without, if necessary? Which medium would be most difficult to live without? Why?

4. Which types of media do you use as part of a social activity and which are used mostly when you are alone? What factors explain this?

5. How do you use different types of media for work, social communication, and leisure purposes?

6. Is there anything about your consumption of media that you would like to change? Why or why not?

Our Love–Hate Relationship With Media and Technology

The word *media* has only been used to refer to communication since the 1920s, when it started to be used as the plural form of *medium,* which was used to mean "an intervening agency, means, or instrument." The term was first applied to newspapers, then radio, and then television. Now we use it to include many types of digital communication, including websites, e-mail, and social networking. (Because it's a plural form, we say, "Media are. . . .") These days, media are usually categorized in four formats: print, visual, sound, and digital media, as shown in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Types of Media

Print
Books, newspapers, magazines

Visual
Movies, television, photographs, drawings

Media

Sound
Radio, recorded music, CDs, MP3 files

Digital
Internet, email, video games, online social media

Categories for defining media types have become blurry as more and more of our media are expressed in digital forms. For example, an audio book represents the convergence of print, sound, and digital media forms. Online social media bring together elements of both mass communication and interpersonal communication. Every day, it seems, there are new digital media resources and tools that attract the interest of K–12 educators. That's because a vast network of designers and creative professionals are generating lots of new tools for online media, hoping to change the world or just strike it rich (by creating the next Facebook, Wikipedia, or even just a new puzzle video game for the cell phone, like Angry Birds). Some of these new tools have enormous potential for education. For example, Voice Thread (www.voicethread.com) is a way to collaboratively comment on images. Jing (www.jingproject.com) is a tool that lets you make a digital file of still or moving images on your computer screen. Every week, new products and services are being introduced for use at home, too. For some educators, being first to use a new technology tool is a personal obsession. For many others, this holds little attraction or appeal.

But because we use many types of media routinely as part of everyday life, most people have a love–hate relationship with print, visual, sound, and digital media and technology. These perspectives come from our roles as individuals, as parents, as educators, and as citizens. And because our attitudes about media and technology will inevitably shape our decisions about using media in the classroom, it's important to reflect on our own beliefs and attitudes and consider what matters most to us.

Were Tony to interview his teacher and her school colleagues about their attitudes about digital media and technology, he might find these diverse views:

- Print media are superior to digital media.
- Cell phones are like having a computer in your pocket.
- The celebrities and athletes we see in mass media are a form of cultural glue that holds our society together despite our different backgrounds.
- Digital technology lets anyone be an author!
- Media and technology firms are giant corporations just out to make money.
- Cell phones are essential today, but they do interfere with real life.

- Making your life public on Facebook makes you feel like a celebrity.
- Media are a tool of political power: By controlling information and entertainment, you control the world.

Add your own ideas to this list. Now consider what a great variety of perspectives are possible. There's no doubt about it: Teachers' attitudes about media and technology shape their curriculum choices. Who would be surprised to find that a teacher who views media as an art form would make different use of movies, newspapers, or websites in the classroom than one who is convinced that the Internet is going to revolutionize the world, or another who sees mass media as a tool of political control, or another who thinks it's just a form of superficial entertainment?

At the end of this chapter, you'll find a lesson plan to unpack how your own students understand their love–hate relationship with print, visual, sound, and digital media.

Students have lots of things to say about this because media and technology are so important to them. Some are using genres and formats that many of their teachers and parents don't even recognize (web comics, discussion boards like 4chan, and fake Wikipedia sites, for example). Some teens will have thought deeply about media and technology in terms of the positive and negative functions, while others just take it all for granted.

When teachers and students are asked to reflect on their perspectives to prioritize the dimensions of their relationship with print, visual, sound, and digital media, they clarify their values. Such reflection is a vital part of participating in contemporary society today, and it is the first step in the pedagogy of digital and media literacy education.

Essential Dimensions of Digital and Media Literacy

In this book, you'll meet middle-school and high school teachers, principals, library/media specialists, and technology educators from all across the United States, people that I have had the privilege to know over the course of my career. By sharing my experiences observing in their classrooms, interviewing them, and reviewing their students' videos, writing, multimedia, websites, and other creative work products, I hope to illustrate the complexity, depth, and

richness of the practice of digital and media literacy in secondary education. To organize the many different types of instructional practices, I present a process model for digital and media literacy that emphasizes five communication competencies as fundamental literacy practices that are now part of learning across all the subject areas.[8] The essential dimensions of digital and media literacy include these five elements:

1. **ACCESS.** Finding and sharing appropriate and relevant information and using media texts and technology tools well.

2. **ANALYZE.** Using critical thinking to analyze message purpose, target audience, quality, veracity, credibility, point of view, and potential effects or consequences of messages.

3. **CREATE.** Composing or generating content using creativity and confidence in self-expression, with awareness of purpose, audience, and composition techniques.

4. **REFLECT.** Considering the impact of media messages and technology tools upon our thinking and actions in daily life and applying social responsibility and ethical principles to our own identity, communication behavior, and conduct.

5. **ACT.** Working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace, and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, national, and international levels.

This five-part process is fundamental to how we learn and communicate today. One metaphor for digital and media literacy is to consider it as a huge constellation of stars in the universe: Each star reflects different skills, habits of mind, and competencies. But because this literacy constellation is so vast, educators often focus on just one part of the universe. Or else they may paint a picture of the whole night sky in a once-over-lightly fashion. As I see it, the digital and media literacy universe has five distinct dimensions that spiral together in an interconnected way.

The Access Dimension: Using, Finding, and Comprehending

Access is the first step in literacy—learning how to find, comprehend, and use symbolic resources. In preschool, we may sometimes need

to teach a basic access skill for using books. For example, we teach children how to hold books, open them, turn the pages, and notice the relationship between the words and pictures. Decoding printed words into meaning through comprehension is another kind of access skill.

Access is always media-specific: each media form has a distinctive group of things you need to know in order to make sense of it. When it comes to using a computer, there are numerous such kinds of basic competencies involved. For example, to contribute to a wiki or blog, people need to understand file management, how to edit, and how to use formatting tools. To find information online, there's another set of specific skills, including generating appropriate keywords and selecting appropriate search engines. To participate in online social networks, you may need the ability to interact socially using avatars, or the ability to adapt material from one context and use it in another, or to use multitasking to get things done. And while you may be able to acquire some of these access skills on your own (just by messing around), you'll go farther with a knowledgeable person nearby, available to help you out when needed.

Consider how access competencies are part of your curriculum:

- *Using technology tools.* Do students get to use technology tools for finding information, problem solving, self-expression, and communication? Do assignments progressively deepen their capacity to use tools well? Or is going to the technology lab simply a matter of following directions on a worksheet? Or worse, is it a break from real learning?
- *Gathering information.* Do you model effective strategies for finding information from diverse sources? Do you give students opportunities to work independently? Do you give students choices? Or do you make most of the selections on their behalf?
- *Comprehending.* Are students challenged to make sense of texts? Do you create a learning climate where students' multiple interpretations are respected, valued, and shared? Or do you do most of the work of interpreting and explaining?

These skills embody the new Common Core Standards where research activities and information texts are emphasized, both through short, focused projects and longer-term activities. But the access dimensions of digital and media literacy can be intimidating. People can't be experts at everything. Library media specialists are

masters of online database searching tools. Many social studies teachers know how to find historical documents using online archives. Most English teachers have mastered the finer points of word processing software. The technology teacher often knows how to use a lot of different software tools for creating websites and sharing ideas.

But don't ever feel guilty or inadequate about access skills you have or the skills you lack. There's no way most of us can keep up with the changing pace of technology. Most of us tend to learn the access skills we need to use on a day-to-day basis. Feelings of guilt and inadequacy may contribute to the kind of avoidance that can discourage exploration and experimentation. Since that's the case, both teachers and students need time to play with new tools, messing around and exploring so that they can continue to develop particular access skills when they need them.[9]

Analyze: The Critical Thinking Dimension

An important dimension of the literacy universe is the capacity to analyze messages, considering the author, purpose, and point of view to understand how they are constructed and the assumptions that underpin them. When we evaluate, we consider the value and worth of ideas by reflecting on them within a social, political, historical, economic, and cultural context. Canadian high school teacher Rick Shepherd talks about helping students develop an informed, critical understanding that involves examining the techniques, technologies, and institutions involved in media production; being able to critically analyze media messages; and recognizing the role audiences play in making meaning from those messages.[10]

Good questions are key to stimulating analysis and evaluation competencies. But vocabulary and background knowledge are also needed to situate knowledge and ideas within various contexts. For example, consider a teacher who is exploring the essential question: Why do humans share stories?[11] To get at this question, students might analyze a recent news story like Google's decision to digitize library books to make out-of-print books more widely available. To do this, it would help to have a solid understanding of the role of technological change in the publishing industry, the cultural and economic structure that has made Google so profitable, and even the relevant provisions of copyright law.

A different teacher might take on the same theme of why humans share stories and use it to analyze the spoken word movement in hip-hop poetry. To accomplish this, a good understanding of the characteristics of performance art would come in handy. Knowledge about the golden era of rap and the role of artists like Public Enemy and De La Soul would support practices of musical analysis. It could even be useful to know about the earliest traditions in spoken word poetry: Homer, the famous poet of ancient Greek culture.

As is obvious, the more we know, the deeper our questioning becomes, and the more likely that our analysis and evaluation will lead to gaining new information through a path of interrelated questions and discoveries. It is this fundamental process that leads to the creation of new knowledge.

Consider how analysis and evaluation competencies are part of your curriculum:

- *Asking good questions.* Do you ask open-ended questions that have no right or wrong answers? Do students' answers matter in your classroom? Do their questions matter?
- *Gaining knowledge.* Do your assignments and activities promote curiosity? Do students get to apply and use the knowledge they are gaining? Or is this knowledge mostly just a matter of memorizing what's needed to pass high-stakes tests?
- *Contextualizing.* Have you framed your curriculum around an essential question, one that touches hearts and souls, one that helps to define what it means to be human? In doing this, do students get to explore how political, social, economic, and cultural contexts shape the way we send and receive messages? Or are students only vaguely aware of the value of what they are learning?

Some educators shy away from activities that involve analyzing and evaluating because these competencies inevitably involve issues of *values and ideology.* The practice of analysis always has an embedded point of view. When teachers' values are substantially the same as the school and community values, this isn't generally a problem. But when teachers work in communities where families have values that are different from their own, analysis and evaluation practices can activate students' questioning in ways that make some parents and school administrators uncomfortable.

For example, in some communities, parents and teachers may have a shared concern about how materialistic values lead some

young people to be obsessively concerned about brand names and other status symbols. But in other communities, a focus on the negative consequences of materialism might be seen as un-American or even elitist and snobby.

There's no doubt about it: A focus on analysis and evaluation is an essential part of the reading process, because as Robert Scholes explains, it enables students "to situate a text, to understand it from the inside sympathetically, and to step away from it and see it from the outside, critically."[12]

Communicate: The Expressive Dimension

Today, the shape of writing has changed, as students compose for meaningful purposes and real audiences, not just to complete a homework assignment, explains Troy Hicks, author of *The Digital Writing Workshop.*[13] Young people are composing on computers, and they are using video, sound, and interactivity. English teachers must help students pay attention to the discourse norms that exist in different contexts and communities. For example, students can learn that it's OK to use smiley emoticons when sending an e-mail thank you note to Aunt Laura but not OK to use them when writing an e-mail to the school principal.

Digital composition is also increasingly collaborative, as teams work together to conceptualize, rehearse, perform, and edit elaborate video productions that require people with a range of different talents and abilities.

Rhetoric is the term generally used to describe the process of helping students to speak and write effectively. Today, we can see how the principles of rhetoric are at work in helping students to acquire *textual power,* a term used by Scholes to describe the interconnection between analysis, evaluation, and composition.

Every teacher must consider how communication and composition are part of their teaching goals:

- *Expression in multiple modes.* Do students get to use different genres, including narrative, persuasive, and expository forms? Do they get to use image, language, sound, graphic design, performance, and interactivity to get their message across?
- *Authentic audiences.* Do students get to use literacy practices in ways that are meaningful forms of communication? Do they

"talk back" to texts? Or do they primarily summarize and reproduce the ideas they encounter? Does their work reach real audiences, or is it created as an exercise for the teacher to grade and return?

- *Content and form in relation to purpose and audience.* Do students get to shape a message's content based on their purpose and intended target audience? Or do students learn only standard forms, like the lab report, the research paper, the worksheet, or the five-paragraph essay?

Reflect: The Social Responsibility Dimension

All communication involves ethical and social values. We are constantly making choices about how to treat people whenever we interact socially. We are aware of how other's expectations for us may shape our own behavior. Nearly every secondary educator has heard stories about or personally experienced adolescents who may have made some poor choices when it comes to texting and social media. And even with school filters, some students manage to find ways to play online games in the computer lab on the sly, when the teacher's not looking. Throughout life, we all make choices whether or not to apply social responsibility and ethical principles to our own identity, our communication behavior, and our conduct.

Today, the Internet creates complex new ways for people to interact socially. Some characteristics of digital media—the instantaneousness, for example—may encourage impulsive behavior. A student may take a picture of a friend, and when he sees that the picture looks stupid (perhaps the kid has one eye closed and one eye open), impulsive action may lead to the photo being shared on Facebook. And because it's sometimes difficult to predict the consequences of an action, the student may find that the photo has been interpreted in many different ways. The friend may be annoyed, angry, or delighted. Others who see it will make their own judgments, too.

Privacy, copyright, fair use, attribution, and new forms of sharing offer other opportunities for rich conversations about ethical issues. Issues of representation come into play when people use digital images of themselves and their peers to represent their personal and social experiences. There's no doubt about it: What we do online affects our identity, our self-esteem, our relationships, and our future.

Teachers can support students' ethical, social, and emotional development when they do the following:

- *Encourage multiperspectival thinking.* Do students get to imagine the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of others? Are they encouraged to move beyond either–or thinking? Do they get safe opportunities to share their feelings and listen to others? Do they practice building empathy by reflecting on the experience of standing in someone else's shoes?
- *Predict consequences and use hypothetical reasoning.* Do students get to investigate the genuine conflicts they experience each day in the world outside the classroom? Do they get to apply reasoning skills to the challenges of daily life, especially in relation to communication and social relationships?
- *Talk about power and responsibility.* Do students get to examine how social status, hierarchy, respect, and power are exercised through communication practices, including praise, criticism, rumors, and gossip? Do students get suspended from school when they engage in poor judgment or do they get to reflect with their peers and their teachers on how their own communication behaviors shape the way they are treated by others?

Act: Make a Difference in the World

There's a relationship between education and citizenship—which is why media literacy education includes the concept of taking action. Educational theorists like Paulo Freire and John Dewey have shaped our thinking about how the classroom can be a place where students develop needed skills for engaging in genuine *ethical democratic citizenship.* Dewey asserted that learning cannot be standardized because it always takes place against the backdrop of the learner's particular knowledge and life experiences. For this reason, he suggested that teachers tie new material to their students' individual perspectives and give them the freedom to subject it to testing and debate.[14]

However, there are some scholars in the field of education who use the ideas of Paulo Freire and the concept of "empowerment" to refer to a highly abstracted and politicized form of cultural criticism that is disconnected from instructional practices of the classroom, the institutions of education, or the real-world practice of democracy. This is not what I mean by empowerment. Teachers whose form of social action is to "liberate" their students by helping them see the

oppressive structures of capitalism and the superiority of a particular (leftist) critique may just be employing another type of propaganda instead of encouraging true dialogue that is necessary for civic action.

When students' ideas and thoughts move toward specific and concrete forms of social action, it can be energizing for young people and adults alike. When taking action is valued as a *communication competence* in Grades 7–12, students and teachers share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace, and the community. Teachers create learning environments that are connected to local, regional, national, and international issues, helping students see a role for themselves as contributors to their own well-being and the lives of those around them.

- *Connect the classroom to the world.* Do classroom activities connect to relevant social issues, debates, and controversies in the world outside the classroom? Do students take action to address meaningful real-world problems that require solutions?
- *Support leadership and collaboration.* Do students get to use problem-solving skills to influence more than one person toward a goal? Do they recognize how to leverage the strengths of others to accomplish a common goal? Or do students just follow carefully described steps in a process already laid out by teachers?
- *Develop integrity and accountability.* Are students held accountable for their actions? Are situations and opportunities provided that enable students to discover how personal values like honesty and courtesy benefit the individual, the group, and the society?

Messages in a Wide Variety of Forms

Many teachers use a specially selected set of texts that are considered appropriate for the classroom. These might be textbooks, works of classic literature, or other materials that are easily recognizable as educational in nature. In some school districts, they may be selected by state school boards or vetted by a panel of experts. In some communities, questions about "what's appropriate" can become a political tug-of-war. In response, textbook publishers, testing agencies, professional associations, states, and the federal government have succumbed to pressure groups of left and right. That's because both right-wingers and left-wingers may "demand that publishers shield children from words and ideas that contain what they deem the

'wrong' models for living. Both assume that by limiting what children read, they can change society to reflect their worldview."[15]

Fortunately, in other schools and communities, teachers have great latitude to select resources and materials for use in the classroom. They don't need to use preselected books or get advance permission to show a video. In these communities, teachers are entrusted with professional responsibility to make wise choices.

Using a broad array of media texts and technology tools is an essential dimension of digital and media literacy education. It's a way of connecting the dots between the classroom and contemporary culture, helping students transfer skills between school and home. Consider how messages in a variety of forms are part of your curriculum by reviewing this list of different types of texts:

- *Daily Life.* These are the texts, tools, and technologies we encounter as part of ordinary life. We read brand names on our cereal boxes and our clothing. We may read an instruction manual online to install a cell phone app, look at a bus schedule, or fill out job application forms.
- *Academic.* These are the school-sanctioned texts in language arts, science, history, and math that introduce the subject matter to students or are used for learning purposes.
- *Professional.* These are the texts created by people in the world who work with ideas and information as part of their job. They might be a website, something from a professional magazine, or a research report.
- *Historical.* These are the texts of the past: newspaper articles from long ago, old-time radio dramas, historical artifacts from an archive, movies like *To Kill a Mockingbird,* and books from our parents' and grandparents' generation. Classic works of literature like *Romeo and Juliet* are also considered part of this category.
- *Mass Media and Popular Culture.* These are the texts that circulate as information and entertainment commodities. They are generally highly visible in contemporary culture. Articles from *The New York Times* or *Newsweek, Gossip Girl* episodes, scenes from movies likes *Avatar,* video games, pop music, and other forms of entertainment and information are examples of these types of texts. Most forms of mass media are produced by companies as a means to sell audiences to advertisers.
- *Alternative Media.* These are texts created by organizations that don't see their work as a commodity designed to maximize

profits. PBS is an example of alternative media, as are magazines like *In These Times* and TV shows like *Democracy Now.* Alternative media provide perspectives and ideas that aren't readily available in the profit-driven media world. There are alternative newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and film, as well as nontraditional media, such as zines, web-based publications, street theater, and murals.

- *Digital Culture.* There is no consensus yet about how to classify the many different types of digital content found on websites, blogs, wikis, and the many types of social media networks. Examples include collaboratively created sites like Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) as well as editorially vetted informational websites like Finding Dulcinea (www.findingdulcinea .com). Digital culture is vast—there are 10 billion photos on Facebook and 20 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute.[16]

What this list reveals is the full range of authentic texts that people use as part of their social and cultural lives. All these forms can and should be used for teaching and learning—from kindergarten to college. Review the aforementioned list to consider how you make use of these various texts types in your own life—and in your classroom.

Research shows that using a wide variety of text types, including informational, historical, mass media, and alternative media texts, helps young people engage in more out-of-school reading and writing and create more linguistically complex texts.[17]

However, it takes practice to become comfortable using a wide range of informational texts in the classroom. Texts from mass media and popular culture may challenge and disrupt the routines of the classroom, shifting authority and power relationships between students and teachers. That's because when we use mass media and popular culture texts, students themselves have more knowledge and opinions to share. It's one of the *great debates* in media literacy: Should literacy educators include a focus on popular culture texts?[18] In this book, the answer is a resounding "yes," considering the obvious reason: Preparing students for life in contemporary society requires being knowledgeable about the role of media and technology in the daily lives of young people, activating all five digital and media literacy competencies, building bridges between the knowledge domains of school and home, and placing critical focus on the texts of popular culture, especially news, advertising, information, and entertainment.

CHAPTER 1 LESSON PLAN

Four Corners on the Media:
Reflecting on Our Love–Hate Relationship

Overview: Students participate in a conversation about the pleasures and troubling aspects of print, visual, sound, and digital media moving through the classroom in a "four-corners" activity. They then reflect on their own attitudes about these media by composing a reflective essay and share their writing with peers and the class.

Time: 1 class period plus homework

Resources Needed: Craft paper, colored markers

Learning Outcomes:

- Gain knowledge of the distinction between media texts and media types
- Recognize the value of personal experience as a form of knowing
- Strengthen listening and small group discussion skills
- Practice note taking as a way to organize and examine relationships between ideas
- Build awareness of discussion as a form of prewriting
- Strengthen public speaking and writing competencies

Preclass Preparation: Before class, put up sheets of craft paper in four corners of the room. Label each corner: PRINT, VISUAL, SOUND, and DIGITAL.

Introduction: Draw a picture of a heart and a devil's pitchfork on the board as you introduce the idea of a *love–hate relationship,* the idea that people can love something and hate some aspects of it at the same time. Preview the activity by explaining that students can reflect on their love–hate relationship with media and technology through small-group discussion to capture key ideas.

Explain Media Texts and Types: Explain that a text doesn't have to be written. A pop song is a text. So is a movie. *Texts* can be defined as

symbolic expressions created by humans to share meaning. Then review the four types of media (print, visual, sound, and digital) by asking students to give specific examples of texts that fit into each category. Encourage students to be specific. Write their examples on the board. As they offer examples, you should note that the categories are blurry. For example, "audiobooks" could be placed into several of these categories.

Group Discussion: Break students into four groups and have each group move to one of the four corners of the room and discuss the positive and negative aspects of the one media form that's listed on the chart paper. Depending on the needs of your students, you may want to have students select a recorder to make notes or ask all students to contribute to making notes on the chart.

Rotate Groups: Every five minutes, move the groups to a different corner of the room and ask them to first review the notes made by the previous team, noting their agreement or disagreement with plusses and minuses. Then, encourage them to add more notes to the chart paper to add new ideas and offer nuance and depth to the ideas already on the chart paper.

Summarize: At the fifth rotation, students will arrive at their original corner of the room. Now they see that the chart they started has been transformed by other people's ideas. Ask students to read through the ideas and discuss the comments that were added. Have one or two students offer a summary of the most interesting ideas.

Homework: Explain that writing and thinking are related and as a result of sharing ideas with others, this activity has prepared students to express their unique point of view. Offer these choices to students:

> **Option 1.** Write a personal reflection of your own love–hate relationship with one of the four media forms, considering some of the key ideas that emerged from the classroom conversation.

> **Option 2.** Select one specific media text (like ABC's *Greek,* for example) and offer reflections on what you love and hate about it.

Expressive Options: If you prefer, students may complete this assignment as a blog entry or as a spoken word performance.

Read, Respond, and Share: Have students select a favorite sentence from their homework to read aloud. Then ask students to partner with a peer and read each other's work. Ask the partner to select a different favorite sentence and have that student read it aloud.

Whole Group Discussion: This writing assignment should stimulate more rich conversation about our love–hate relationship with media and technology. Encourage students to comment or offer a thought.

Summarize: Offer some reflections on your own love–hate relationship and point out how powerful it is to share and discuss the many paradoxes associated with the print, visual, sound, and digital texts that are part of our lives.