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Reading Media Literature with Young People

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My twelve-year-old sister Elisabeth is an accomplished, Suzuki-trained violinist. She likes to play a game in which her audience names a familiar song she has heard; then she plays the song by ear on the violin. An audience of family members and friends can be entertained for hours by her renditions of classical music, selections from Broadway musicals, and country music hits. Recently, at the end of one impromptu concert, I asked Elisabeth to play something she really liked. Her eager response was an enthusiastic mimic of Brittany Spears' "Oops! . . . I Did It Again." Elisabeth's performance included an exact replication of Spears' sexualized Mouseketeer movements from her music video and placed an explicit emphasis on the lyrics from the song's chorus, shouting the words "I'm not that innocent." Elisabeth is a smart young woman who loves studying science, practices the violin several hours a day, and lives in a home without cable television. However, she is also influenced by an image-based world where she can see the Spears video on MTV at a friend's house or on the omnipresent video monitors in department stores while she is shopping for school clothes with her mother.

Like most young people today, Elisabeth is navigating a world of images without a media sextant. The ubiquitous outlets and expressions of our mass-media culture create a sea of content whose meanings are erratically interpreted as their audience digests them. In contrast to Elisabeth's estrangement from her own world of innocence through Spears' visual and verbal expression of rejected innocence, another young woman found affirmation of those seemingly antiquated values in a different artist and a different song, but within the same media construct and context. In diametric opposition to "I'm not that innocent," Jewel's lyric of "I'm sensitive and I'd like to stay that way" from her

song "Every Day Angels" was read by a former high school student of mine as a confirmation of teaching from parents and church to embrace innocence.

Each young woman turned to mediated content to contextualize her own world; one found alienation and the other found affirmation, each conclusion being reached randomly. Both young women responded to specific production, distribution, and artistic choices, which were specifically designed to influence people in their age demographic. Each approached the content and the messengers as authoritative. The dissimilar results are characteristic of the dilemma that family and community educators face as they approach mass-media messages that can be affirmative and alienating, informative and manipulative, often all at the same time. It is a quandary that is created when adolescent experience comes in contact with corporate sophistication.

The 2000 U.S Census Report registered 31.6 million twelve to nineteen year olds in the United States (Evans 2000, 1). This is the largest generation of youth culture ever recorded and has proven to be an irresistible target for mass-media marketing executives. Teen Research Unlimited reports that in the year 2000, teens spent an estimated \$105 billion dollars and influenced their parents to spend another \$48 billion dollars (2000). We must acknowledge that the mass media have power to influence our children. Our responsibility as teachers and parents is to help students develop skills to understand the media's messages and the varying points of view the media presents as authoritative and authentic. This can only happen if we learn to respect and value both the artistic and promotional power the media have in our culture and the influence they have in the lives of our young people. The only way we can do this is to provide mediated opportunities for

students in educational settings.

Creating mediated experiences in the classroom requires that teacher evaluate their current teaching methods and make an effort to fuse media images into their classroom pedagogy. To do this, teachers must recognize that students are already bombarded with a multiplicity of images. Their school world is filled with word and paper images that encourage students to develop a sense of self by learning mostly about the past. It is in this atmosphere that I have often heard students exiting a discussion of eighteenth-century British literature, or a similar subject, asking: "What does this have to do with me?" In contrast, their life outside of school is crammed with provocative mediated images. These images are viewed as authoritative and therefore have tremendous influence over the students' world perspective.

Outside the classroom adolescents are immersed in information about their own global, popular culture with increasingly sophisticated delivery systems such as satellites, cellular technology, and cable and computer networks. Our mediated world challenges them to acquire and digest more information than in any other generation. Educators teaching in this new world of technology are responsible for giving this flood of information meaning. Students understand, manipulate, and even dominate the devices that access vast amounts of information, but are often mystified by the volume and complexity of that information. Educators could contribute significant literary meaning by providing a context for this information avalanche.

Furnishing contextual skills could be one of the most vital services that an educator might render to students who live in our constantly self-referencing culture. These contextual skills are precisely those that are part of a class curriculum that applies contemporary critical theory templates to the most popular forms of technological literature.

Create a Rubric for Reading the Media

Recently, Brigham Young University Media Arts Education students participated in a media strategies workshop with seventh and eighth

grade students from Mountain Ridge Junior High School in Utah's Alpine School District. Adolescents were asked to examine and evaluate the cover of a *Marvel Comic Book* and a Ralph Lauren advertisement taken from *Teen Vogue*. We began by asking the students to respond to a set of questions about the media images presented. Our questions assumed that all media could be a story and were presented in the following order:

- What is the story?
- Who is the storyteller?
- What techniques is the storyteller using?
- Why is the storyteller telling this particular story?
- Who is the story for and why is the story being told to that audience?
- Is the story accurate, fair or complete? If not, what information or perspectives are absent and why are they left out?

Creating a set of questions helped us generate a dialogue based on their insights regarding the popular images. From this general base, the BYU student educators guided the junior high school students to a more in-depth exploration of the aesthetic choices and marketing decisions made in the creation of the images.

The media rubric is a device that leads students to begin thinking and talking. A well-planned rubric allows them to begin a conversation with teacher that can then lead to formal, guided discussions. For example, a teacher might expand the base dialogue to include a social/cultural discussion that addresses the unique formations of individual visual literacy skills, a discussion of aesthetic values (line, color, texture, shape, dimension) of the visual image, or a review of historical information about comic book design and magazine advertisements.

The educator creating the media rubric should consider the age, race, gender, economic standing, and basic analytical skills of the students. Educators should elicit a quality analysis from the question base they create with those considerations. One substantive work on media literacy, *Literacy in Multimedia America: Integrating Media Education Across the Curriculum*, by Ladislaus Semali, suggests that five key concepts should be integrated into any

classroom discussion of the media. Semali outlines his framework, saying, "The key concepts I am talking about form the foundations of any serious analysis and an important analytic framework students can use to develop questions that engage a critical reflection of the media texts in their everyday lives" (2000, 90). The key concepts of this framework are that

- All media messages are constructions,
- Media messages are representations of social reality,
- Individuals construct meaning from messages,
- Media messages have economic, political, social, and aesthetic purposes, and
- Each media form of communication has unique characteristics.

From Semali's framework teachers can build questions appropriate for their own classroom. This structure can also be used for teachers to devise mediated classroom activities that help students practice the concepts developed in classroom discussions regarding the media.

Understanding the Construction of the Mediated Image

Educators who assume the challenge of developing a critical, media literacy in the classroom must recognize that students take educational cues from their previous learning experience. Students bring a number of valuable literate experiences as well as familiar patterns of learning to the classroom. It is the teacher's responsibility to guide students from traditional learning paradigms to a more expansive learning experience that allows them to develop their own acute observations about the global community landscape, prominent corporate groups that influence their decision making process, and popular culture functioning as art. Students who are allowed to combine these new observations with critical thinking tools established through traditional educational experience can adopt new ways of thinking that expand on their past experience to include a critical evaluation of the world they value

One way of expanding a student's critical thinking dexterity is to model an analysis of

ways in which images are constructed. A teacher should also encourage students to ask why each image is constructed the way it is. In her seminal article *Skills and Strategies for Media Education*, Elizabeth Thoman asserts the importance of students recognizing images that are created through careful planning and design. She says,

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... 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. (1998)

Thoman suggests that the best way for students to recognize the construction of media images is to deconstruct a given image in a classroom discussion. She encourages students and teachers to assess the value of the choices made by the artist or producer, and then allow the students to create their own media materials based on principles they learned from the mediated image discussed in class. Helping students develop an advertising campaign, build a web site for a product, or create a storyboard for a short commercial or film are some of her suggestions.

Educators must also recognize and value students' past experience with media texts. Before teachers engage students in new readings of media texts, they must discover how students have read those texts in the past. Teachers should value past undeveloped reading experiences as part of the students' literate

nature. They should also help students view past media reading experiences as valuable tools that will enhance future study. This can be especially valuable in a class where adolescents are allowed to study the media, a subject they feel they understand well. Teachers can then connect that revelry for the media to their core disciplines. Literature, language, art, science, and history then become more than graded exercises; they become irrevocably linked to the enhancement of students' tastes, preferences, and very lives.

Educators must invite students to listen to their own responses as they study media texts, and then help students understand where their answers come from. This process can help students identify cultural bias, encourage the exposure of hidden forms of student literacy, and develop a teacher-student learning community. By locating student responses to the text, a teacher exposes students to the idea of multiple textual readings, and demonstrates that the students as individuals who have a value system based on their own community landscape construct meaning in media texts. Discussions should encourage students to observe the unique ways that they as individuals can construct messages from media texts. Media educators should also motivate students to expand their ideas of text study to include context. Teachers should stimulate their students to see the interrelated nature of texts and community standards of evaluation. Providing this scaffolding for students will allow them to continue their study of texts beyond the classroom.

Discovering the Hidden Message or the Intertextual Dig

Students who read the media must understand that media messages often have hidden meanings. Teachers should make it a classroom quest to uncover both overt and covert meanings, as well as discover the interrelatedness of multiple texts. One approach to the discovery of hidden messages is to create a technology bricoleur, or a person (in our case individual students) who researches, appropriates, and recombines mediated materials to create their own discoveries and meanings

according to their own personal needs. In "Postmodernism", an essay from *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, Jim Collins examines Claude Lèvi-Stauss's anthropological term bricolage as it relates to a dig through mediated artifacts. He asserts,

The term *bricolage*, developed by anthropologists to describe the ways primitive tribes-people piece together random elements they encounter in their day-to-day lives, has recently been applied to the behavior of individuals in contemporary media cultures... Many television programs, films, popular songs, and other manifestations of popular culture are already the result of sophisticated forms of bricolage, already conscious of the multiple ways they might be understood. (1992, 337-8)

If we mine Collins' description of mediated bricolage for classroom lesson plans we can begin to develop activities in a intertextual dig where students appreciate the relationship between media production and their own reception of that medium. Students acting as technological bricoleurs in a classroom setting could gather information on a media product and then, through research of related cultural subjects, develop personal conclusions about the mediated subject.

For example, in the summer of 2001, media educators attending a workshop session became technology bricoleurs. The BMW automobile company recently commissioned award-winning directors to make short films as advertisements for its current product line. During the workshop the participants were asked to focus on one of the short films, *Star*, which is directed by Guy Ritchie and stars Madonna. The workshop participants were then required to discover interrelated connections of other media products to series. They were provided with magazines and newspaper articles as well as other media samples to help them in their research, but they had to make the connections. Conclusions about the information gathered were appropriately varied; each participant made valuable observations about the interrelatedness of mediated images and their effect on what is valued in our culture.

Madonna, Guy Richie, and BMW proved to be excellent subject matter for the workshop because information for the bricolage experiment was readily at hand to the adult participants that we were catering to. The subject matter for classroom practice of a bricolage discussion would require careful thought by the instructor or discussion leader to include elements that are readily available in the knowledge base of the students. Additional suggestions for bricolage assignments sprang from our discussion at the workshop. One individual suggested that the same exercise could be performed for younger students in a K-6 classroom using stars featured in advertisements for Disney Land and perhaps seen in programming on the Disney Channel or on A.B.C. or ESPN (networks owned by Disney). Another bricoleur group suggested an assignment in which students sampled and then recombined a variety of media texts that represented how students themselves fit in the world. The piecing together of various mediums would become a statement of who the students were in relation to the media. By juxtaposing a range of media objects they would be able to accept or reject themes the media presented. Seeing connections between various mediums—web sites, film, television, and print materials—helps students understand that each medium is interrelated; and, as critically literate individuals, they can, and should, define and then deconstruct messages in multiple texts. Connections discovered as technology bricoleurs can empower students to seek meaning in a variety of texts and then create their own diverse meanings as they discover the interrelatedness of individual texts.

Valuing Unique Characteristics of Individual Media Samples

While assignments like media bricolage help students see the possible economic, political, social, and aesthetic interconnections between a variety of media subjects and themselves, it is also important that students begin to appreciate each medium for its unique value as an artistic product. Despite the fact that medium-specific arguments are mostly obsolete, teachers and educational theorists interested in discussing

mass media with young people often err by lumping various media subjects into one group, thereby disregarding the inimitability of each medium. Teachers using media in the classroom must instead work to understand an individual medium's method of construction and master the basic skills necessary to use that medium before attempting to examine texts created by that medium. For example, Vivi Lachs, the writer of *Making Multimedia in the Classroom*, describes the need for her students to be aware of the devices and conventions used in computer design as well as the strategies used to develop narratives for computer games before they begin to create their own designs for the multimedia authoring projects that they create in her classroom. Understanding terminology and techniques distinctive to computer design is an integral part of the students' processes, first as observers of multimedia products, and then as creators of their own multimedia product. Like Lach, teachers creating media discussions or practice in the classroom should guide students through concepts solely related to the medium before they focus on the intertextual nature of mass media. The base of knowledge that students garner from studying media forms individually will help them as they work to see the connections and appropriations of themes and procedures in the mediated world at large.

These examples barely begin to address the potential impact that developing a media curriculum in the language arts, humanities, or arts classroom can have on young people. While I have dealt with a few theories and suggested some practice ideas, I encourage all educators to explore a variety of positions related to media education. In the bibliography I included several important texts and web sites that will help you as you begin your pursuit of media education resources. I hope the possibilities and potentials in media education can persuade parents and teachers to explore curriculum changes in which students can develop the skills that will prepare them to productively use the media that surrounds them. Our respect for, and value of, media texts could drastically improve the creative and analytical skills of students who already understand the significance of their experience as recreational readers of the media. An active pursuit of media education

experiences for young people developed by teachers and parent organizations could help

students find their way in a congested world of images.

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