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Teaching the Humanities in a Media Age

An innovative program helps teachers discover how to integrate media literacy concepts into high school humanities instruction.

*E*ducators have a love-hate relationship with mass media and new communications technologies. Although they appreciate the instantaneous access to current events, the diversity of programming choices, and the ability to access information through the Internet, they also have important concerns about television, mass media, new technologies, and the rest of media culture.

Some teachers see how the rise in celebrity culture has changed the role models available for youth. Others are concerned about the emphasis on materialistic self-gratification or about how gender representation in the media affects the attitudes of developing adolescents. Some teachers are troubled by the anonymity fostered in Internet chat rooms or by the sensational and repetitive hype in newspapers, magazines, films, and television programs. Still other teachers are annoyed by the "entertain me" attitude that some students have, hating the idea that teachers compete with TV and other electronic media for their students' attention.

Nearly all agree that media culture has affected the work they do in the classroom. Nearly all agree that media culture is an ingredient in young people's lives that can be mobilized to support classroom learning.

In an essay about some of the "unspoken silences" in public education, Ted Sizer (1995) wrote,

All of us know that the minds and hearts of our children are influenced in ever increasing ways by the information and attitudes gathered far outside the schoolhouse wall, from an insistent media and commerce that depends on it. . . . How the schools do, do not, or should connect with the newly insistent media world is rarely mentioned. We live in an information rich culture, one controlled by commerce, but we plan the reform of our educational system as though the schoolhouses were still wholly encapsulated units. (P. 83)

Increasingly, educators have begun to integrate media literacy activities into the context of the K–12 language arts, social studies, health, vocational education, or arts curriculum. In Texas, for example, 12th graders are expected to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in many forms, including the ability to compare and contrast among media genres and the ability to produce a short documentary. Many other states are beginning to recognize that the ability to critically analyze and create messages using media and technology are essential skills for life in a media-saturated society (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1996).

To explore how media analysis and production can be integrated into existing secondary curriculums, we developed an ongoing program especially for secondary-level teachers, The Re-Visioning Project. The program began with a week-long institute in August 1998, "Teaching Humanities in a Media Age," held at Clark University and supported by grants from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and the AT&T Foundation. A diverse group of 50 teachers from school districts including Los Angeles, Atlanta, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Worcester, Massachusetts, met for the institute and continues to meet in regional teams during this school year. Follow-up activities include regular study groups, opportunities for peer observation, and the sharing of lesson plans and samples of student work on a Web site.

The program was based on the essential features of rich professional development experiences (Darling-Hammond, 1998). First, we emphasized the activities of learning and teaching, including designing and planning lessons, evaluating student work, and developing curriculum. Second, we emphasized the analysis of practice, looking at and demonstrating sample lesson plans, critically reviewing video cases of other teachers' work, and reflecting on participants' own experiences with
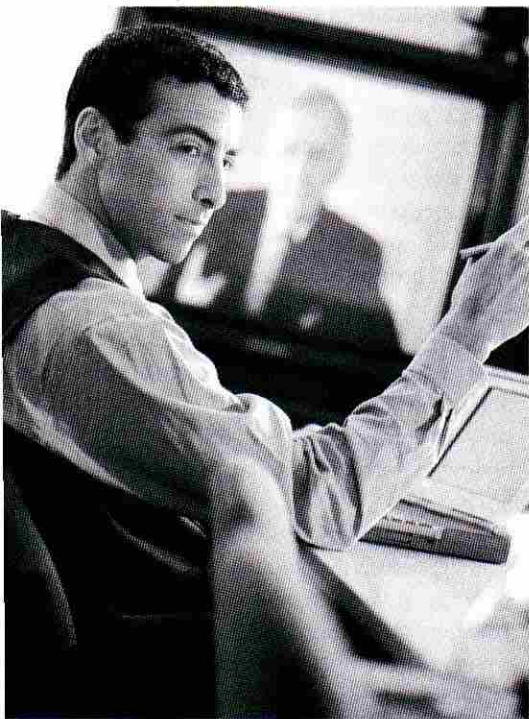
media and technology in the classroom. Third, we emphasized the development of a collaborative sharing of knowledge and experience, encouraging regional and school-based teams to engage in a multiyear program of continual learning.

A Pedagogy of Inquiry

Elizabeth Thoman, a faculty leader for the Re-Visioning Project, emphasized that in the secondary curriculum, media literacy is not so much a process of teaching students about what they don't know about media industries. Instead, media literacy is a pedagogy of inquiry, a process of asking questions about what we watch, see, and read. Often, media literacy in secondary schools is an elective, with units of instruction on newsmaking, advertising, violence, and so on. Notes Thoman,

> It is important to embed the basic ideas of media literacy into all the subject areas—especially in the humanities. By doing this, educators can ensure that all young people gain the skills to understand the media culture around them while simultaneously building skills in writing, reading, reasoning, and world knowledge.

Analyzing Nonfiction

Cheryl Chisholm, another faculty leader for the project, spearheads media literacy initiatives in Atlanta under the auspices of the National Black Programming Consortium. Chisholm emphasizes the importance of helping teachers explore ways of demonstrating how *point of view* shapes the facts we get about news events in contemporary society:

> It's important for high school students to understand how information is presented through lenses which may validate existing power relationships and inequities in the culture.

Such experiences help teachers look at the world from multiple perspectives and gain awareness of their own assumptions and values (Delpit, 1995).

In one sample lesson, teachers viewed three versions of the Philadelphia MOVE bombing story, from the TV newsmagazine *20/20*, a *Frontline* docu-

mentary, and the work of an independent filmmaker. After viewing the opening five minutes of each program, participants analyzed how the language, visual images, editing, and composition affect our interpretations of news events. By viewing different versions of the same event, teachers could identify the points of view that were missing from various messages. Media literacy skills can help high school students recognize how the news media may shape representations of "justified violence" in ways that reinforce power imbalances in our society.

To explore the uses of film and video in studying the past, participants viewed and discussed the Oliver Stone film *JFK*. Through an interactive process of asking questions and making inferences from information presented through language and images, teachers analyzed different Web sites about the assassination. They compared and contrasted sites that document the accuracies and inaccuracies in the Oliver Stone film. Teachers identified the different strategies that Web designers use to enhance the authenticity and authority of a message. With the increasing use of the Internet as a research tool by high school students, it is essential to identify a set of critical questions to help students analyze information and build their tolerance for complexity.

Angles of Vision

Catherine Gourley, another faculty leader, described the process of research for nonfiction books, based on her experience as an author of works for young adults. When authors use primary source materials, those primary sources are media messages—and they also need to be critically analyzed. Gourley demonstrated a lesson that compares two primary sources from the 19th century: a printed advertisement inviting men to sign aboard a whaling ship and a letter from a sailor aboard a whaling vessel. Noted Gourley,

> Media literacy is not just about television. Asking questions about print media invites students to get involved not just as decoders, but as critical thinkers—and that is an

essential component of teaching reading at the secondary level.

A major topic of the summer institute was the role of the mass media in the development of personal, social, cultural, and ethnic identity. Karon Sherarts, a media education consultant from Minneapolis, led a session to help teachers appreciate the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives. According to Sherarts, including perspectives of individuals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds can enrich students' understanding of voice and point of view and can help students better understand themselves and the world around them.

Frankenstein Through a Media Literacy Lens

Through a presentation of a model lesson with an analysis of the instructional process, participants explored how media literacy themes connect to the study of English literature. Participants discussed the themes of technology, gender, power, and control as relevant in 19th century Britain and how these issues relate to the role of mass media and technology in our lives today.

Small groups of teachers critically analyzed versions of the Mary Shelley novel *Frankenstein*. Some teams analyzed the novel; others looked at the documentary, a feature film, and Web sites on Frankenstein; still others reviewed comic book adaptations of the novel.

Another activity was designed to help students recognize and use their understanding of visual symbol systems. Teachers viewed projections of the covers of 10 comic books based on *Frankenstein* from the past 50 years. Teams of participants reviewed the covers carefully, looking for visual clues about the time period in which they were created and placing them in chronological order. Teachers discovered that Frankenstein of the 1950s resembles Charles Addams's *New Yorker* cartoons, whereas in the early 1960s, Frankenstein looks distinctly Western in orientation, with chaps and a cowboy hat in a desert landscape. By

the late 1990s, Frankenstein has tattoos and body piercings.

Creating media messages provides opportunities for hands-on problem solving that, in turn, promotes deeper analysis. Teams of teachers designed half-hour animated television programs, using one of the Frankenstein comic book covers as the visual representation of their character. They determined the target audience for the program, created a title, and wrote a one-line "log line" of the episode's plot. Using various dimensions of characterization, they wrote about different components of their Frankenstein character.

After completing their brainstorming, team members presented their ideas as a pitch, a short persuasive presentation used to sell a television program to a network. All these components were subject to rigid time pressures and deadlines, which media industries routinely face. The electricity was palpable as teachers brainstormed, played, laughed, argued, and wrote out their plans for their first episode of a new animated television show featuring Frankenstein. According to Kathleen Tyner (1998),

> The goal of student production is not self-expression, nor vocational job readiness for future jobs in media industries, although these may be important by-products of production in the classroom. . . . The primary emphasis of hands-on production is to inform analysis. (P. 200)

When High Schools Get Media Attention

Many educators have acquired their attitudes about the mass media as a result of receiving media attention, both wanted and unwanted. Re-Visioning faculty leader Frank Dawson, a former media executive and now an English teacher at Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, shared an experience faced by students and faculty when the media descended on the school. ESPN featured the school when it scheduled its first night football game since a drive-by shooting at a game years before caused

the cancellation of the evening schedule. After viewing the ESPN story, teachers shared their perceptions of the reality represented in the media, the information omitted from the story, and the personal experience of being reported on. Considering how the media stereotypes urban high schools

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in particular, and high schools in general, teachers recognized the ways in which media producers control how we see the world and how parents and community leaders see high schools.

Literacy for the Information Age

Many educators are beginning to recognize the powerful connections among literacy theory, critical pedagogy, and principles of constructivist learning. Scholars called the New London Group advocate literacy teaching that encourages students to become social change agents by using various symbol systems of communication. They recognize that the skills of literacy operate within the historical and social contexts in which people send and receive messages in a culture (New London Group, 1996). The Re-Visioning Project is one effort to empower high school teachers with greater understanding of ways to build students' critical, reflective connections between the world of the school and the media culture that they experience in their daily lives.

At the conclusion of the institute, teachers from Concord, New Hampshire, reported on their school district's decision to integrate media literacy into the high school by revising the grade 11 language arts/English curriculum to

emphasize communications/media. According to principal Tim Mayes,

> It's vital that the skills of critical analysis, reasoning, and communication be connected to the world in which we all live—and that is now a world where media and technology play a major role.

The rigorous yearlong curriculum for the more than 400 11th graders at Concord High School includes the study of nonfiction and fiction, film, video, advertising, print and television news, as well as persuasive and business communication.

Recognizing the deep and varied connections between students' experience of the mass media and the essential themes of the arts and humanities can be energizing. Said one teacher who participated in the Re-Visioning Project's summer institute,

> I learned that after 28 years of teaching I can become excited about new ideas—it's as if I were just beginning. ■

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