

MEDIA LITERACY, GENERAL SEMANTICS, AND K-12 EDUCATION

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WHEN THE Norrback Avenue School in Worcester, Massachusetts, opened its doors in a new building in September of 1999, it had reinvented itself as an innovative magnet school program designed to integrate the study of communication into the elementary school curriculum. In this school, six communication themes are emphasized: public speaking, dramatics, publishing, media analysis, media production, and telecommunication. In the primary grades, children analyze a wide range of different communication forms, including books, newspapers, magazines, e-mail, advertising, videotapes, radio, and audiotapes. They learn to appreciate that images are constructed messages, that photographs, films, and television media have teams of creative people who "author" each work. They distinguish between fiction and non-fiction media messages, recognizing the different purposes of media messages. Storytelling activities combine dramatics and public speaking, and performances are sometimes videotaped by older students. Students create their own quarterly class newsletter using combinations of images and language to inform parents about their learning experiences.

During the school year, teams of students in grades five and six create a daily television news program which features family and community leaders as

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part of a social studies lesson, or they write and perform original radio plays which portray the lives of historical figures. They may learn the basics of debating social issues with a lawyer as coach. They communicate via e-mail with students in another geographic location, and participate in a collaborative data gathering project in science. Students learn how to critically analyze advertising, and they plan to create their own public service announcements to be aired on a local cable access television. They publish their book reports in the format of a magazine, using digital cameras and word processing software, creating several versions to experiment with how graphic design elements affect the viewer's perception and interpretation of a message. In learning about the function of the news media, students visit a local newspaper, meeting with reporters and editors to understand how journalists create and select the news.

This brief portrait of one school illustrates one vision of media literacy that is now occurring in many American elementary and secondary schools across the United States. It's clear that students are "accessing, analyzing, evaluating, and creating messages in a wide variety of forms," according to one widely used definition of media literacy. It's also evident from this portrait that media literacy is not a separate subject, but integrated into the English language arts, social studies, health, and fine arts curricula. Even though some may still consider the phrase to be oxymoronic, media literacy is an expanded conceptualization of literacy. What that means is that the ability to 'read' and 'write' using the symbol systems of visual and electronic media is deeply connected to reading, writing, speaking, and listening—the traditional literacy skills. Media literacy is literacy for an information age. The students at the Norrback Avenue School are learning to be literate using the forms of expression and communication that are part of contemporary culture.

Of course, not all those who advocate media literacy embrace this particular vision and definition. The term 'media literacy' is used by people from a wide range of occupations, disciplines, and fields. Medical and public health professionals tend to view media literacy as a tool to protect children and teens from the negative influence of media upon attitudes and behaviors. Media literacy is sometimes conceptualized as a tool for violence prevention or substance abuse prevention by promoting critical thinking about messages and fostering self-esteem, so that, for example, middle-school students may have opportunities to discuss how music lyrics affect their attitudes about drug use, learn how alcohol ads shape their attitudes about the social aspects of drinking, or design and create their own public service TV ads that discourage bullying or promote non-violent conflict resolution.

Still others who use the term 'media literacy' intend primarily to instruct students on the negative aspects of the commercial mass media system. Some-

times, this takes the form of a watered-down version of a college course in media or communications, where students learn about the history, economics, and politics of mass media institutions. Sometimes, this approach focuses on the genres of news and advertising, showing students how they are manipulated by both. These educators often aim to change students from passive consumers into active, engaged citizens who take on the oppressive media system and help to transform it. Still others refer to the term 'media literacy' without any reference to children, youth, or education, simply using the term to refer to different methods of analyzing media content or media genres.

Regardless of the particular approach to media literacy that is used, there are some key unifying principles that embody the work of most media literacy educators. These include:

1. All messages are constructions. The construction process is invisible to the readers of newspapers or the viewers of television. Awareness of the choices involved in the making of media messages sensitizes readers and viewers to the subtle shaping forces at work—in the choice of photo or cutline in a newspaper, in the images, pacing, and editing of a TV news program. Noticing the constructedness of a message helps one become a more critical, questioning reader and viewer. Just as general semanticists point out the distinction between signal reactions and symbol responses, this principle of media literacy is essentially a form of heightened increasing awareness of the symbolic world all around us.
2. Messages are representations of the world. Media messages are thought to be powerful because they reveal aspects of the society to people who do not experience these aspects directly. One reason why children are thought to be more vulnerable to media influences is because they have less direct real-world experience to compare with the representations provided by television and mass media. Are mafia guys really like the ones we see on *The Sopranos*? Is our community really as dangerous as it appears from reading the newspaper's Metro section? Understanding that media messages are not reality, but several levels of abstraction removed from reality, is a central concept in media literacy.
3. Messages have economic and political purposes and contexts. Understanding that mass media industries sell audiences to advertisers is a powerful new concept to many American adults—let alone students—who are barely aware of how a newspaper can be delivered to the doorstep for 35 cents a day or how television can enter the home at no cost.

Any meaningful critical discourse about media messages must include an examination of the economic and political contexts in which films, TV shows, newspapers, and news programs are produced.

4. Messages use languages and conventions. Being a skillful communicator means paying attention to one's audience, purpose, and format, as well as to the content of the message. Knowing how to use colors effectively when designing a graphic is a component of media literacy, as is appreciating how tone of voice affects perceptions of credibility, or recognizing the emotional power of "snarl words" and "purr words."
5. People interpret messages differently. Just as general semanticists show us that beauty, as a quality of being, is not in the object, but in our responses to it, media literacy educators emphasize that the meaning of a media message is not a property of the message, but results from the interaction between the viewer or reader, the 'text,' and the 'context.'

Over the past ten years, media literacy educators have developed a wide range of tools and materials to introduce these ideas to children and youth. Many of these materials are commercially available through the Center for Media Literacy (<http://medialit.org>), the largest U.S. distributor of media literacy resource materials. More than ever before, mediamaking is becoming a central dimension of media literacy, as educators provide opportunities for children and young people to create and distribute their own messages using digital cameras, camcorders, web design software, and more. The objective is not simply to train kids to become producers, of course. But there is so much to learn about yourself and the media system that surrounds you—and some of this learning occurs best through practical experience, working in a team, creating a real media message for a real audience.

It's important to note that there is an emerging body of research demonstrating that media literacy does make a difference in the lives of kids, such as studies that show how it strengthens reading and writing skills (Hobbs and Frost, 2003) or those showing its impact on health and prevention (Eisen, 2002). And a young generation of scholars is also emerging, coming from fields including education, media studies, communication, and literary theory, firing up some of the old debates, introducing new problems, and shedding light on thorny real world challenges associated with the implementation of media literacy in and out of schools.

Two national organizations exist to support the work of media literacy educators, too. The Alliance for a Media Literate America (<http://amlainfo.org>) is a broad-based group that hosts the bi-annual National Media Education Confer-

ence, the largest national gathering of media educators in the United States. And the Action Coalition for Media Education (<http://acmecoalition.org>) connects media reformers with media literacy educators to fight corporate media power.

When S. I. Hayakawa wrote about the relationship between poetry and advertising, he provided an elegant media literacy lesson about the authentic personal value that comes from reflecting on the symbolic world around us. Instead of vilifying advertising for its "half-truth, deception, and outright fraud," Hayakawa urges us to see the parallels between advertising and poetry, to recognize how advertising works as it strives to "give meaning to the data of everyday experience...to make the objects of experience symbolic." Like poetry, advertising matters because it works to enter into our imaginations. As a result, it shapes "those idealizations of ourselves that determine our conduct." In so many ways, media literacy owes an enormous debt to the work of those in general semantics, who invite us to gain control over our interpretive processes by recognizing the way symbols shape our understanding of ourselves and our lived experience of reality.

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