

quately conceptualized, much less solved. Will we develop some form of entitlement scrip for access to communication technology in low-income households? Will there be an attempt to at least keep local schools and child-care centers modernized with the latest technology, regardless of average community income? Will there remain a strong "free" television structure, available to everyone, for educational series like "Sesame Street"?

"Sesame Street," through its design and management process, its research and its outreach, is reaching and helping low-income children who have a narrower range of educational opportunities in the critical preschool years. This program and educational television generally are important elements in a national strategy for reaching our educational goals for the year 2000. If the true cost-benefit analyses could be calculated—not only for what we gain when we succeed educationally with young children, but also for what we lose when we fail—the case would be even stronger for ensuring that these powerful tools remain universally available, even as new communication technology gets increasingly beyond the reach of the poor. Furthermore, history portends that serving low-income children through the power of media will have to depend on something other than raw market forces to make it happen.

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## Teaching Media Literacy— Yo! Are You Hip to This?

RENEE HOBBS

**W**ALKING DOWN THE CORRIDORS of a middle school in suburban Massachusetts, the distinctive blare of a television commercial stands out against the more traditional patter of classroom noises:

*Yo! Are you hip to these? Are you in the know?  
Cause here's where Eggo Minis are made to go—  
In Yo' Mouth!  
Who needs a plate?  
In Yo' Mouth!  
Cause they're made to fit your face!  
In Yo' Mouth!  
They're mega-yum.  
In Yo' Mouth!  
The taste is pure fun!*

Inside the 7th-grade classroom, a teacher is leading a discussion about this particular TV ad; on the blackboard, a list of all the computer graphics and other images in the ad—more than 30 different descrip-

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• *Mes.* *What mass media industries sell audiences to advertisers is a powerful new concept to many American adults, who are barely aware of how a newspaper can be delivered to the doorstep for 35 or 50 cents a day or how television can enter the home at no cost at all. Teaching this concept to young people, of course, can be sticky, for how you teach about it depends on your ideological perspective on advertising, market economics, the industrial revolution and late-20th century capitalism. Individuals employed by giant media companies might not feel comfortable with the idea of high school teachers and students analyzing their ownership patterns and acquisitions, looking critically at their annual reports and reading their trade magazines. But any meaningful critical discourse about media messages must include a careful and systematic examination of the economic and political contexts in which films, TV shows, newspapers and news programs are produced.*

• *Individuals create meaning in media messages through interpretation.* While a U.S. family still may occasionally sit down to watch a TV program together, the meanings they derive from the program will differ. Based on contemporary scholarship in literature and the humanities that examines the intersection between the reader and the text as the source of meaning, this perspective focuses on recognizing and critically analyzing the pleasures and satisfactions that readers and viewers get from the experience of media consumption. For example, in one English class, a 10th-grade student submitted an essay on "The World Wrestling Federation," analyzing the powerful symbols of good and evil embedded in the setting, costume and music of the program, interpreting the typical impotence of the referee as a defense of vigilante justice, and describing his own comfort in knowing the good guy will always win. After reading this young viewer's thoughtful, creative work, who can say that WWF is trash television? While not being completely relativistic, media literacy advocates often refuse to line up with those individuals who have a more traditional perspective on children's TV, those who are very comfortable intoning the merits of public broadcasting and the evils

of popular, mass audience fare, championing the "good" shows and decrying the "bad" shows. It may not be so important what you watch, media literacy advocates say, but how you watch it.

FOR YEARS, MANY EDUCATORS (and some parents too) have stood like ostriches, sticking their necks in the sand and trying very hard to ignore media culture. To many of us, television was the enemy of the fine arts, culture, history and all that is best about civilization. The reasoning went like this: If only we ignore television, our children will ignore it and all will be as it was before television.

Now that the culture is almost totally transformed by the compelling electronic and visual experiences that enter our living rooms (and nearly all other parts of our daily lives), the ostrich stance seems more and more ridiculous. It's time to face up to the media culture we have created and the media culture we have consumed. It's time that parents and teachers begin to help our children to embrace and celebrate the messages worth treasuring, to analyze and understand the economic and political forces that sustain the media culture, and to develop the skills and new habits we all need to think carefully and wisely about the messages we create ourselves and the abundant messages we receive.

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tions—ears on the blackboard, written in a student's handwriting.

"Who's the target audience?" asks the teacher.

"Boys—our age," responds a student. "They only showed boys in this ad."

"And the music—it was like rap music, sung by boys," chimes in another. "It's sung in a kind of aggressive way, and the words 'In Yo' Mouth'—that reminds me of 'In Yo' Face!'"

"What's a synonym for 'In Yo' Face?'" asks the teacher, feigning ignorance.

The class erupts in laughter, and a chorus of replies follows as children call out their synonyms. The teacher flips open the thesaurus and adds some additional words: defiance, bravado, dare.

The teacher changes the pace. "In your notebooks, everybody take five minutes and write down one or two reasons why the producer chose this phrase for the Eggo Mini Waffles campaign." Notebooks fly open, pens are located and students quickly get down to writing. This is clearly something they have been doing regularly. After five minutes, he asks students to read their ideas aloud. Six hands are in the air.

A dark-haired girl begins to read. "The producer wants to show that eating Mini Waffles is a way of showing independence, being defiant."

Says another, "The producer wants kids to think it's cool to eat breakfast on the run, not with a plate, not sitting down."

"The producer might want to link Eggo Mini Waffles with the attitude of 'In Yo' Face!' because that daring attitude is so popular with kids nowadays," says another boy.

After a few more such interpretations, the teacher wraps up the lesson. "So sometimes commercials can use people's feelings—like defiance—to link to their products. For your critical viewing project tonight at home, I'd like you to look for a commercial that uses bravado, especially kids defying adults. If you find one, write down the name of a commercial and be prepared to describe it to us tomorrow."

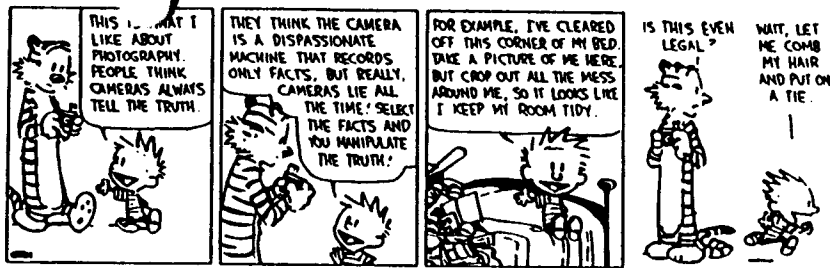
Then, the teacher switches gears to *Flowers for Algernon*, the short story the class has been reading, and notes Charlie's growing defiance toward his new friends at this point in the story. The whole media liter-



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acy enterprise this day, clearly a regular part of this middle-school English classroom routine, has taken up about 10 minutes of the period.

**I**N MORE AND MORE CLASSROOMS in the United States, educators are beginning to help students acquire the skill they need to manage in a media-saturated environment, recognizing that in its broadest sense, "literacy" must include the ability to skillfully "read" and "write" in a wide range of message forms, especially considering the dominance of image-based electronic media. In fact the powerful concept of literacy was the driving force that led leader in the media literacy movement to adopt a comprehensive definition of media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms" in a conference sponsored by the Aspen Institute in 1992. Put simply, media literacy includes the skills of literacy extended to all message forms, including those little black squiggles on white paper. Media literacy encompasses reading and writing, speaking and listening, critical viewing and the



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ing the scut work. Many young people who are disillusioned or cynical about student journalism programs in high school point to their inability to take real responsibility for the choice of message content in the paper. Similarly, plenty of video magazine programs are produced by students who are coerced into making promotional messages for the sports program, the foreign-language program, or whatever programs the grown-ups approve. Such is more or less standard educational fare in our schools.

Such practices occur because to truly empower children and youth with the ability to design the content and form of their own messages would entail tremendous risk to the current educational system. The issues that concern our teen-agers today—sexuality, classism and racism, drug use, violence, the environment and the nation's future—are topics that most educators are unprepared to bring into the classroom. Teachers and parents in a community often find the voices of young people very uncomfortable to hear and nearly impossible to respond to.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST FAILURES of contemporary journalism education has been in defining its mission as the cultivation of interest in the profession, focusing on developing young people's interests in careers in journalism. This goal is far too narrow, considering the oft-expressed and imminent danger of losing the next generation of news consumers. Journalism educators must begin to carve out a larger and more productive goal, one that reaches all our children: helping young people develop the citizenship skills to be effective, skillful and critical news readers and viewers.

Such skills are essential for full participation in a democratic society, yet they are skills that few young people get the opportunity to develop. When newspapers are used in American classrooms, too often they are used for vocabulary practice and reading comprehension, and not to strengthen students' critical understanding of newsgathering practices, their reasoning or analytic skills.

As an effort to reform current educational practice, media literacy advocates explicitly aim to link the skills of analysis with student production activities, in many of the same ways that language arts educators link reading and writing as interdependent skills. But what exactly are the skills of analysis? And what kinds of media analysis are most appropriate for children of different ages? Most media literacy programs stress the following key concepts, adapted from British and Canadian educators:

- *Messages are constructed.* 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 construction of a message helps one become a more critical, questioning reader and viewer—but this kind of noticing doesn't come naturally to the process of reading or watching TV. It is a learned behavior.
- *Messages are representations of the world.* The reason why media messages are so powerful is that viewers and readers depend on them for their understanding of the culture. 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 police officers really like the guys on "Cops"? Are high school students really as cool as the ones on "Beverly Hills 90210"? Is our community really as dangerous and violent as it appears from reading the newspaper's Metro section? Understanding how media messages shape our visions of the world and our sense of ourselves is a central concept in media literacy.

ability to make your own messages using a wide range of technologies, including audio technology, billboards, cameras, camcorders, and computers. But media literacy is not a new subject area, and it is not just about television—it is literacy for the information age.

Educators find numerous reasons to introduce media literacy as part of the curriculum. Some see it as a tool to build relevance into contemporary education, building links between the classroom and the culture so that students will see how important themes and issues resonate in popular culture just as they do in the study of literature, history or social studies. Some see it as a citizenship survival skill, essential to be a thoughtful consumer and an effective citizen in a superhighway-driven media age. Some see it as a kind of protection for children against the dangers and evils engendered by the excesses of television, and they also see it as an antidote to manipulation and propaganda.

Others see media literacy as a new kind of English education, learning to appreciate and analyze ads and sitcoms and films with the same tools used to study poetry, the short story and the novel. And then there are those who see it as a way to give children the opportunity to tell their own stories and better understand the power of those who shape the stories of our culture and our times.

But there are other visions of media literacy, more narrow and more problematic. Unfortunately, some see media literacy as an option for low-performing, underachieving students whose interest can be piqued by television and nothing else. Some see it as a kind of vocational education, where kids can learn to make TV and head for careers like the grown-ups they see on the screen. Some see it as a chance to play with sophisticated electronic tools, like character generators, video toasters and wave-form monitors. Still others see media literacy as a way to make children aware of the web of "false consciousness" that capitalism has woven into our psyches. Some think media literacy is just about making "good choices" about what to watch or read. And many simply think the curriculum is already too crowded and teachers already too incompetent, burned out or overburdened to make room for media literacy. It is because American educators have so many diverse perspectives on the benefits and value of media literacy and the best strategies for

implementation within public education that its last 20 years of growth have been so slow.

Outside the United States, by contrast, media literacy has gained some measure of official status; within Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Scotland, Spain and other nations, it is a required part of language arts programs in grades seven through 12. Most of the training U.S. teachers now receive is strongly patterned after models provided by British scholars; including Len Masterman, David Buckingham, David Lusted and Cary Bazalgette, as well as British and Canadian teachers who have written about their experiences teaching media analysis and media production to young people.

With this nation's renewed interest in children and education in the 1990s, there have been significant signs of recent growth in the movement emerging in the United States. In the state of North Carolina, for example, media literacy is included in both the communication skills (English) and information skills curricula. In many communities, educators have begun the process of thinking seriously about expanding the concept of literacy to include media. While there was only one teacher-training program in media literacy in 1993, in 1994 there were 12 different programs held across the United States. In most communities, however, media literacy exists due to the energy and initiative of a single teacher, not because of a coordinated, communitywide programmatic plan of implementation. The community of Billerica, Mass., is developing a comprehensive media literacy program that reaches all students across the curriculum in grades K-12.

AT CIRCLE TIME in a kindergarten class, the teacher shows the children two samples of television programs: an ad and a cartoon. "How are these different?" she asks.

"The first one was shorter," says a little brown-haired girl.

"The first one had real people and real cereal," says a boy.

"The second one was a cartoon," says another.

The teacher notices that her students do not spontaneously use the word "ad," "commercial" or "advertising," so she introduces the words to them: Ads are messages that are trying to sell a product. Over

the next days, they look at a few ads, and after each one, the teacher asks the children to describe how the ad tried to sell the product.

"By making it look real big," says one girl.

"By using music to make it exciting," says another. "By having a story with cartoon animals and birds."

Then the teacher invites a parent into the kindergarten to make a home video of the kindergarten. The parent tapes about 10 minutes of the morning class. At the end of the day, the children watch the tape and sit, transfixed in rapt attention by the familiar images of themselves and their classmates made novel by the camera's presence.

"Did this tape show everything that happened in our class today?" asks the teacher.

Heads nod in agreement. "Yes," they intone in unison.

"It showed us putting our coats on hooks."

"It showed Tim and Kimitha in the loft."

"Was there anything that happened in our class that was *not* shown?" the teacher asks again.

The children look thoughtful. Arthur raises his hand slowly. "I came in late today," he says. "It didn't show *me* putting my coat on the hook."

Gradually, a flurry of hands go up. All the children can think of things that weren't shown. The teacher carefully listens to all the responses and explains to the children that a camera can never show everything at a scene. She notes, "A camera can only ever show *part* of an event, and it's the person who uses the camera who decides what to show and what to leave out."

WHILE MEDIA PRODUCTION is not offered in every school, most have production facilities or equipment of some sort. Videotaping student sporting events and dramatic performances has been routine since the 1970s. According to teachers, it's coaches who often have the most modern video production equipment and playback facilities. And, of course, parents are out in force with their video cameras documenting school plays, recitals and all gatherings that highlight their children's genius.

Student-generated production activities are and less frequently in American schools but are more and more evident at the secondary level, where students, instead of reading the ubiquitous morning announcements over the PA system, may create their own morning news program. High school students make their own music videos, tape commercials for their school plays, perform satirical "Saturday Night Live" skits in after-school programs, deliver critique of the new principal using computer publishing programs, and hand in class assignments (and college entrance essays) on videotape or via modem. Of course, student production in journalism and the performing arts has long been an important part of secondary education.

In a culture that values technology as the mark of progress and the completion of professional quality media programs as a sign of success, "doing stuff" with video (or better yet, with computers and video) is sometimes touted as cutting-edge education. It is for this reason that educators often jump on the media technology bandwagon. But student-based media production activities do not necessarily build media literacy skills. Sometimes, adults' preoccupation with media technology, and their own ego investment in the product interferes with a child's engagement in the complex process of learning to create meaningful messages.

One young teacher working with 8- to 12-year-olds eagerly showed off the students' final videotape in a public screening at a private school's summer arts program. It was a satiric takeoff of "Planet of the Apes," with students taking the on-camera roles and reading lines obviously scripted by the teacher. The camera work, editing, sound effects and music selection were all clearly the work of the teacher, someone who was undoubtedly headed for graduate school in film production. Conversation with the children participating in the program revealed that they learned quite a bit about taking direction from a filmmaker, but little about the process and skills of filmmaking itself.

It's not surprising that in an educational environment that values product over process, media production classes (in both print and video) can become playgrounds for creative grown-ups who make all the important decisions about the construction of the school newspaper or class video project, then set young people on the task of finish-