

READING, WRITING, AND REALITY TV: ENCOURAGING MEDIA LITERACY AND
CRITICAL THINKING IN AMERICAN CLASSROOMS THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, Katie Barak explored critical thinking, media literacy, and the current education system in America. Critical thinking is a navigating tool that helps probe deeper into messages and question standardized ways of thinking. Considering the onslaught of messages beamed toward individuals on a daily basis, it is important that future generations be able to question, analyze, and evaluate messages. Critical thinking helps students not only probe the messages they receive, but also study their own ways of thinking, personal biases, and judgments.

Finding a method to teach critical thinking skills in secondary education is extremely important. Barak developed an intervention that furthers critical thinking and promotes media literacy, but also adheres to the benchmarks established by No Child Left Behind. The first chapter focused on the definitions of media literacy, the legislation of No Child Left Behind, and the critically thoughtful classroom. The second chapter researched teachers already combining critical thinking and media literacy within the No Child Left Behind system through personal interviews. Barak used the definition of media literacy developed in the first chapter and the teacher feedback from the second, to inform the intervention. The third chapter outlined Emerald Lens, the proposed website intervention between media literacy and No Child Left Behind. Through Emerald Lens, Barak aimed to encourage critical thinking through a website that focuses on media literacy, while adhering to current education policy.

For my Mom and Dad who inspire me daily.

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INTRODUCTION

America is a media saturated nation. While students attend school an average of 140 hours a month, Nielson reports that Americans are averaging 151 hours a month in front of our favorite three screens: television, computer, and cell phone (Semuels). Entertainment and information have blurred together and producers insist that there is nothing deeper than the surface level, while the corporate production world shrinks in ownership but grows in global distribution. In addition to time spent in front of a screen, much of everyday life is buffered by, facilitated through, or complemented with at least one form of popular media. It is difficult to understand the implications in the messages coming out of popular culture and information technologies. The internet and new media present a whole new set of questions to ask when processing message meaning.

In *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture*, Henry Giroux discusses the power of hybridity in popular culture and argues, “The hybridized space of popular culture is where the conflicts over the related issues of memory, identity, and representation are being most intensely fought over as part of a broader attempt by dominant groups to secure culture hegemony” (27). The ideological messages ingrained in popular culture are highly complex and much of what is encoded is not available at first glance. In this way, media messages are like icebergs; captains navigating ships know that what is above the surface of the water is only one-tenth of the actual iceberg. Below the surface, icebergs’ volume and underwater topography can be extremely different from how the visible portion might seem. Without looking beneath the surface and examining what lies beneath, plotting a course around icebergs would be impossible. People need tools to help assess the meanings below the surface of media messages so they may navigate their decisions, lifestyles, and understanding of the world.

Critical thinking is a navigating tool that helps probe deeper into messages and question standardized ways of thinking. Considering the onslaught of messages beamed toward individuals on a daily basis, it is important that future generations be able to question, analyze, and evaluate messages. Due to its importance, I argue that critical thinking needs to be a larger part of high school curricula in the United States and around the globe. Additionally, the ability to critically analyze a text, argument, or conversation widens an individual's scope of communication and understanding. Critical thinking helps students not only probe the messages they receive, but also study their own ways of thinking, personal biases, and judgments. Instilling critical thinking skills creates actively engaged audiences and a responsible population seeking information for assessing and improving the messages they put into the world. Ideally, this concerned and awake audience will insist upon change in the quality of media.

Unfortunately, the colloquial usage of the term "criticism" in America holds a negative connotation and has become quite separate from the idea of critical thinking held in academia. This distinction is worth noting because, of late, there is hesitation to take on the role of someone with a critical eye, especially when looking at popular culture. There is a general atmosphere and subsequent public equation of academia's criticism with disapproval, dislike, or disappointment. In short, critical thinking is widely held to be negative rather than an enriching experience. While there are negative elements, critical thinking predominantly offers an opportunity to put something under the microscope and study its attributes and flaws. Given the popular interpretation of criticism, it is only natural for this hesitation to exist, but considering its importance in technology-based communication, critical analysis needs to become part of everyday life in America.

Finding a method to teach critical thinking skills in secondary education is extremely important. This thesis argues that media literacy offers a work-out regimen to begin exercising the critical muscle. Teaching media literacy opens up the world of critical thinking by providing an arena where high school students might feel comfortable deconstructing messages, arguments, and images. Using critical thinking to analyze the messages flashing across the three screens and passing ideologically as everyday life is an invaluable skill. Not only will media literacy make future generations aware of hegemonic structures, bias, and discrepancies between media representations and reality, but it also brings critical thinking to a more obvious level in everyday life.

To me, the relationship between critical thinking and media literacy is cyclical. While media literacy provides accessible meat to carve, the evaluative properties contained in critical thinking are absolutely essential to the efficacy of media literacy. Also, a critical mind is actively engaged – questioning something allows you to handle a problem from all sides and examine its constitution. If we are not encouraging critical thinking in schools, then we are promoting passivity in life outside the education process. The promotion of critical thinking is hindered by the current standardization of education: No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB places the education system into a business model, which changes the process, expectations, and outcome of school curricula. Due to annual exams of reading and math skills that rank student and teacher abilities, there is not time or space to focus on the more inductive and discursive methods required for critical thinking. School was once likened to a greenhouse cultivating students' progress toward functioning adulthood, but NCLB has changed the tending patterns and the lack of preparation hinders student growth.

This project looks at the educational legislation of NCLB and the idea of encouraging critical thinking through media literacy. By examining current discourse from both perspectives, I will develop an intervention that furthers critical thinking and promotes media literacy, but also adheres to the benchmarks established by NCLB. In order to create an intervention that satisfies both camps, this thesis will explore the spectrum of arguments for and against each side.

The first chapter assesses the two major components of this discussion: media literacy and NCLB. Initially, I examine some of the current understandings of media literacy to help construct a definition of my own. Next, I review the tenets of NCLB, as well as review assessments of the efficacy of the program. Finally, I imagine the changes that would occur in a classroom encouraging critical thinking through media literacy. Because critical thinking is discourse-based and does not necessarily yield answers to a multiple-choice test, I question whether it could work within a NCLB classroom.

The second chapter delves into a discussion with teachers currently teaching media literacy or using media in the classroom to help teach standard lessons. I wanted to speak with teachers who were already combining critical thinking and media literacy within the NCLB system. I conducted email interviews with eleven high school teachers from across the United States about their decisions to use media literacy in the classroom, how they teach media literacy, and student responses to their media infused lessons. These interviews create a composite sketch of a few teachers' experiences and assessments of media literacy in the classroom and helped shape my intervention between NCLB and critical thinking through media literacy.

The third chapter is about Emerald Lens, a proposed intervention between media literacy and NCLB. This intervention aims to encourage critical thinking through a website that focuses on media literacy. Rather than fitting media literacy within the standard lessons in the classroom,

Emerald Lens chooses to focus on media literacy while striving to meet the established benchmarks of NCLB. Using the definition of media literacy developed in the first chapter and the teacher feedback from the second, the website intervention builds off of this research to develop a practical application of media literacy theory in the context of current education policy.

As outlined above, the media infiltrates almost all aspects of daily life. This is especially true for the present and future generations. Yet, in many classrooms, popular culture and media are still treated as the sugary desserts, rather than a solid meal to digest. Casting it as a trifle ignores the potential that media in the classroom holds for opening up the world of critical thinking. This study focuses on the United States, but considering that the rest of the world is using the capitalistic, media saturated examples set by America, media literacy as a conduit for critical thinking could potentially benefit every nation.

CHAPTER ONE

MEDIA LITERACY, NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND, AND THE CRITICAL THINKING CLASSROOM

In 1998, the National Communication Association (NCA) put forth a document titled “Competent Communicators: K-12 Speaking, Listening, and Media Literacy Standards and Competencies,” offering guidance for teachers in the new technology environment. The introduction states:

Talking, hearing and seeing are, for most people, natural physiological processes. By contrast, speaking, listening, and media literacy are learned. It is a mistake to assume that because students can talk and hear and see when they enter school, they require no systematic instruction in understanding and using communication skills ("The Speaking, Listening, and Media Literacy Standards and Competency Statements for K-12 Education")

The distinction between natural and learned processes sometimes goes without notice, but with communication technologies demanding more and more proficiency, both meaning making and interpreting messages increase in their importance. Media literacy is a way to improve these skills, but how? What constitutes media literacy? While the term is only two words, “media literacy” is like a space saver bag: when you start digging inside, you realize its volume is much larger than it seems. It can be daunting because it houses so many ideas and varying schools of thought underneath that title. In this section I will go over a few of the categorical definitions and attempt to create my own understanding of media literacy.

In *Theory of Media Literacy: a Cognitive Approach*, W. James Potter sketches out the current understandings of media literacy and lays out a simple course of action to encourage media literacy. Early on in the book, Potter points out that “when a definition covers everything, it explains nothing” (31), and this notion captures the overwhelming scope of media literacy:

sometimes its multitude of parts end up outweighing the whole. However, Potter runs into the same broadness issue when he defines media literacy:

Media literacy is really the convergence of three huge bodies of knowledge: media studies (the industries, content, and effects), human thinking (how people attend to messages and construct meaning), and pedagogy (how to help people access information, develop skills, and become educated). Media literacy is not just the overlapping intersection of these three; instead, it is the entire realm covered by all three (23).

An examination of publications about media literacy, as well as organizations advocating media literacy, reveals a struggle over media literacy's definitive meaning. In an effort to organize, I would like to present Potter's three categories of media literacy definitions: the umbrella definition, the process definition, and the purpose definition. The umbrella definition lumps everything into one category and encourages the study of "knowledge structures" to create more dynamic perspectives that supply more angles with which to examine "the multifaceted phenomenon of the media: their business, their content, and their effects on individuals and institutions" (Potter 58). Knowledge structures come from the ongoing cognitive processes of "analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstracting," factoring in elements of emotion, aesthetics, and morals. The latter three notions are keys to unlocking the media's manipulation of emotion through editing, the technical creation of messages through popular media, and the subtle formation of ideologically supportive morals. This category of definition is closely related to the literary method of examining media, particularly the elements of the knowledge structures.

Potter's second category, the process definition, expands on the idea of knowledge structures by stressing that "[people] must actively and mindfully use the information in those knowledge structures during exposures to media messages" (61). Essentially, the process definition promotes mastery by studying the elements working behind the scenes to assure the

audience correctly decodes a message, which binds this category to the communications method of understanding media. The skill set of knowledge structures has to be learned, developed, and continually renewed to keep up with the evolution of technology (Potter 59).

The final category Potter delineates is the purpose definition, which highlights the importance of being media literate in terms of agency. People need media literacy in order to construct meaning for themselves rather than passively absorbing the ingrained ideologies. Again, knowledge structures appear as the key to literacy. This echoes the works of Henry Jenkins and Stuart Hall showcasing active audiences that engage with texts as forms of agency through their various interpretations of the message and the ways audiences interact with and create texts. Additionally, the purpose category of definitions is closely linked to cultural studies methodology.

Potter's categories of definitions, although well outlined, are nearly impossible to use because many definitions of media literacy straddle more than one category. The definitions differ in disciplinary context and the kinds of media deemed worthy of study. These three approaches to media literacy can be distinguish by their methodological backgrounds: literary approach, cultural studies, and communication. Even within each of these fields there are conflicting definitions of media literacy. At the same time, there is crossover among approaches from a literary, communications, and cultural studies methodological background: the definitions are interdisciplinary. The following definitions of media literacy taken from both books on education theory and media literacy advocacy websites help highlight the hybrid nature of media literacy.

In *Rethinking Media Education: Critical Pedagogy and Identity Politics*, Wendy Wyatt and Kumi Silva delineate two paths of media literacy discourse: a protectionist perspective and a

cultural studies perspective. While the former wants to protect the younger generations from becoming media dupes, the latter wants to make people “sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers” by educating audiences not only to read the meaning of a message, but to question why the message is there at all (Wyatt and Silva 3). Similarly, in *Media and Literacy: Learning in an Electronic Age – Issues, Ideas, and Teaching Strategies*, Dennis M. Adams and Mary Hamm offer this definition: “Media literacy may be thought of as composing, comprehending, analyzing, and appreciating the multiple print and nonprint symbol systems” (4). With the focus on competencies and knowledge structures both of these definitions fit into the umbrella and process categories and use literary and communication methods.

Cornelia Brunner and William Tally’s definition from *The New Media Literacy Handbook: an Educator’s Guide to Bringing New Media into the Classroom*, along with the Action Coalition For Media Education (ACME), fit within the umbrella and purpose categories. Brunner and Tally suggest being media literate consists of more than just knowledge regarding when and how to implement new media, but also the ability to understand both their content and their structure. The focus on content and structure is a literary method. They underline the importance of knowing “how media are constructed, how they are distributed, who owns them, and how they express the values and the perspective of their authors in the way they are made as well as in what they cover” to be considered media literate (10). Brunner and Tally propose that new technology applications can achieve the goals of media literacy by “guiding students in analyzing, interpreting, contextualizing, and making sense of their findings and summarizing and synthesizing them,” which fits into a cultural studies method (2).

ACME’s mission statement outlines the importance for media literacy in an environment where “just a few multinational corporations (Big Media) own much of the media that shape our

21st century culture,” and as a result, “Independently-funded media literacy education plays a crucial role in challenging Big Media's monopoly over our culture, helping to move the world to a more just, democratic and sustainable future” (Acme Coalition For Media Education). This outlook on media corporations places it within the umbrella category. ACME also outlines the importance of supporting media education, media reform, and “democratizing our media system through education and activism.” This final point places it within the purpose and cultural studies categories.

The following two examples fall into Potter’s process and purpose categories. The New Mexico Literacy Project, a citizen action group stemming from the Albuquerque Academy, provides CD-ROM and DVD materials for teachers and parents who desire to become more media literate. Their understanding is that media literacy is the “ability to create and consume media” (New Mexico Media Literacy Project). The National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) individually defines media, literacy, media literacy and media education. NAMLE articulates a definition of media literacy that combines literary, cultural studies, and communication.

Within North America, media literacy is seen to consist of a series of communication competencies, including the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE, and COMMUNICATE information in a variety of forms, including print and non-print messages. Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language, and sound. It is the skillful application of literacy skills to media and technology messages ("About AMLA").

These definitions are aiming for similar goals, but have hairline fractures separating them from one another. In “Debates and Challenges Facing New Literacies in the 21st Century,” Renee Hobbs, a longtime media literacy proponent, looks back at her previous notion of media literacy. At one time she felt it was a “big tent where people with a wide range of different

approaches could share ideas” (437). Hobbs now feels “there are a number of different tents, each offering more or less the same set of tools, but making different claims about the values and benefits of their use” (437). I agree with Hobbs’s observation and I think the definitions from both media literacy theorists and organizations illuminate this shift from a tool to unite diverse ideas to a cacophony of factions.

Adding my voice to the uproar, I will present another definition of media literacy cobbled from some of the above understandings. I propose that media literacy is the ability to critically access, analyze, evaluate, communicate, and create information and messages through media texts. For my definition, “media” constitutes the multitude of message bearing texts: television, magazines, books, radio, internet, advertising, music, commercials, as well as the offspring from their coupling. For example, music videos, edutainment, television streaming through the internet, satellite radio and the like constitute hybrid texts rapidly emerging in this digital age. Each medium offers its own set of rules, but an aptitude for deconstructing both old and new technologies is vital in media literacy.

The second half of the term, “literacy,” is far more complex, but I appreciate NAMLE’s specific definition. Outlining with detailed action terms makes the expectations of literacy easier to fully understand and apply. I am using NAMLE’s action terms, but adding the idea of creating texts. Creation of media texts is vital to media literacy because it gives students the ability to talk back to the media and encode their own messages. Learning the skills of encoding will enable students to communicate their thoughts better, exert more agency when interacting with the media, and increase their ability to participate in the public sphere. My definition not only addresses Potter’s three bodies of media literacy knowledge, but also unites the umbrella definition, the process definition, and the purpose definition without becoming overwhelming.

Finally, my definition mirrors standard literacy definitions, which include the ability to write as well as read.

In addition, I would like to borrow from an observation of Potter: media literacy is both a continuum and a process. No one can ever be fully media illiterate; rather, there are gradients of abilities to critically analyze the media based on dexterity with knowledge structures. People become more media literate by exercising their critical skills. In this sense, media literacy is a constantly refreshing process that is continually creating analytical bearings to contextually challenge every media message barking for attention. Bearing this in mind, media literacy should be seen as an ongoing process of education.

No Child Left Behind

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is an ambitious, relatively new plan to bring all children attending public school in the United States up to speed according to the same basic standards, ideally creating a truly equal educational opportunity for all students regardless of economics, race, ethnicity, or disability. After America continued to fall behind the rest of the world on performance tests, NCLB educational legislation attempted to raise students' education performance. In *No Child Left Behind: A Guide for Professionals*, Mitchell L. Yell and Erik Drasgow outline the tenets of NCLB. Beyond providing a safe, drug free learning environment with highly qualified teachers, an important objective is to make sure that all students are graduating from high school. In addition, students who are non-native English speakers will need to gain fluency in the language. These ideals combine to form the crux of NCLB: to have 100% student proficiency in math and reading by the 2013-2014 academic year. This 100% guarantee is the responsibility of the school district, and the proficiency standards are set by each

state and outlined in benchmarks. The proficiency standards are also known as adequate yearly progress (AYP) and are also determined state-by-state. There are ten titles, each with its own content, that detail how to achieve proficiency. The titles address the specifics and outline the repercussions schools will face if they do not meet NCLB's goals.

Yell and Drasgow further outline the four overarching principles “woven into the law”: accountability for results; an emphasis on using research-based instruction; expanded local control and flexibility; and expanded parental options (13). In order to prove proficiency, annual exams are given to public school students in grades 3 – 8 in reading and math. The data gathered from student performance on the test at each school is compared to the state-determined AYP to gauge each school's proficiency level. In addition, the scores determine teachers' efficacy in the classroom. This constitutes the first tenet of NCLB: accountability. Schools that perform well are rewarded with public accolades. Schools that do not meet AYP, designated “in need of improvement” (INOI), must undergo sanctions and corrective actions. If poor performances continue, the state steps in to help by using techniques derived from high performing schools and applying them to the low performing school, which is the second aspect of NCLB: utilizing research-based, proven methods for teaching. The idea of local control and flexibility comes into play at this point because parents can choose to send their children to schools that are performing better or to receive outside tutoring, both of which are federally funded, if they are dissatisfied with their local school (Karen 17). If performance continues to remain substandard, the state may choose to replace staff, implement new curricula, and, eventually, the school will face restructuring, which means the firing of teachers and principals or takeover of the school by either the state or a private company (Yell and Drasgow 14). Clearly, incentives have been

raised for schools to maintain AYP, and people's jobs and reputations are at stake beyond daily responsibility for children's education.

The reforms discussed above predominantly apply to elementary and middle school students, but NCLB lays out a plan for high schools as well. The Department of Education outlines the goals for high schools on their website (www.ed.gov) in an article entitled "No Child Left Behind: Transforming America's High Schools." The goals are similar to those for elementary and middle school: establish proficiency standards for all high schools, measure the AYP of all schools, hold high schools accountable for graduation rates, and provide information to parents and community leaders regarding all of the above. The same consequences of becoming an INOI school apply to high schools. Additionally, the high school version of NCLB explains that \$2.9 billion is to be put into a grant program aiming to improve teacher quality, especially in high poverty areas ("No Child Left Behind: Transforming America's High Schools").

Standards-Based Accountability Under No Child Left Behind: Experiences of Teachers and Administrators in Three States allows teachers, principals, and administrators to discuss what is and is not working within NCLB. Interestingly, as you move up the chain of command and further away from the classroom, opinions of NCLB become more and more positive. Administrators believe there are benefits to NCLB but teachers do not agree that it is working, although on paper it looks well-designed and functioning to those making decisions about the business of education (Hamilton et al.).

Often, the advantages teachers attributed to NCLB in the surveys are simultaneously the disadvantages and vice versa. For example, some teachers felt that standardizing the curriculum streamlined their lesson plans; the most important ideas are extricated and personal preference

becomes moot. On the flip side, teachers felt that their autonomy in the classroom had been taken away. In particular, the joy of teaching a lesson that, while still educational, might not directly apply to a test question is gone (Hamilton et al. 42). Teachers no longer determine what is important. In some of the testimonies, teaching sounds more like the job of a current radio DJ: instead of pulling songs from an array of albums and allowing your personality to shape the sound of your hours on air, you may only choose from a dropdown bar of approved songs.

According to the teachers within the case study, there is more content within each annual benchmark than can be successfully taught in a year. Ultimately, teachers are forced to choose between incompletely covering part of the curriculum or omitting some parts all together. Adding to this issue is the continued increase in class size. Bigger classes mean more learning styles to cater to and, combined with the rising number of children diagnosed with learning disabilities, means that getting the material through to everyone is extremely difficult. NCLB does not address any of these issues. This system is not set up for children with varying degrees of ability, so if students fall behind, it is likely that they will stay behind, regardless of the claim in the program's name (Hamilton et al. 55-57). On top of increased class size, increased learning styles, and increased learning disabilities, the amount of content has increased as well, while the time to teach these lessons in a day has not; teachers are pressured to move on regardless of whether or not students master the content (Hamilton et al. 55).

"Coverage without mastery" is worth examining more closely. Students know that the tests assess their performance, so there is no incentive to pursue knowledge beyond the confines of the test. Personally, as soon as a teacher admitted that something was not on the test, I would turn my head off because there would be no receipt for the teacher to prove that I had been paying attention. In *Inside the Black Box of Accountability: How High Stakes Accountability*

Alters School Culture and the Classification and Treatment of Students and Teachers, Katie Weitz White and James E. Rosenbaum observed one INOI Chicago public school and found the practices changed “how school personnel define, interpret, evaluate, and treat students and teachers, they encourage and reward unintended behaviors, and they alter the ways decisions are made and resources are deployed” (98). Typically in schools “in need of improvement,” there is a noticeable shift in grades. With NCLB’s focus strictly on reading and math, scores from untested subjects like science and social studies drop significantly. In White and Rosenbaum’s school, history class, science class, art class and recess were “abolished,” while gym and music were “curtailed” so that more teachers could focus on math and reading (105). This moves beyond the idea of coverage without mastery and enters a realm of no coverage at all. How is limiting student exposure to the lessons gleaned from history, science, art, and play benefitting them? In addition, there are race, class, and ethnicity implications as many INOI schools are located within disadvantaged urban areas meaning that education will be experienced very differently if you are in a minority or from the working class (Booher-Jennings and Beveridge). Granted, this may have been the case to some extent already, but to have educational opportunities focus explicitly on reading and math with limited time for gym and music does not constitute a good education, nor does it reflect the equalizing intentions of NCLB.

Teachers in *Standards-Based Accountability Under No Child Left Behind: Experiences of Teachers and Administrators in Three States* believe that because of NCLB, they are more focused on student achievement than ever before (Hamilton et al. 54). I cannot help but wonder what is lost by looking at student achievement (and teacher achievement by extension) as the statistics derived from test scores. Rather than applauding students who challenge the status quo, NCLB celebrates the average. Teachers spend more time with students who are on the cusp of

passing or failing to improve their performance numbers, but they are forced to ignore students who excel and those who struggle (Hamilton et al. 56). Teachers surveyed agreed that it is nearly impossible for students who fell behind early on in their studies to catch up and become proficient (Hamilton et al. 120). There are only so many hours in a school week and teachers are forced to cater to those in the middle.

It would seem that while children may not be left behind, those performing at either extreme are done a gross disservice. At their Chicago school, White and Rosenbaum found programs strictly targeting students on the cusp of passing, those students who could help the school's bottom line regarding AYP, and diverting funds away from those who were above and below the pass levels. Comparing NCLB to the business-minded health insurance industry, they charge, "Just as health insurance companies consider unhealthy clients too expensive to cover, a businesslike school might regard students far below the pass levels as poor investments" (101).

This focus on the middle is a major criticism of NCLB. In *No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Educational Policy*, David Karen outlines some of the problems regarding lines of communication in the chain of command, problems that are continually brought up in the discussion of NCLB.

Experience to date has shown that local districts regularly plead their cases for exceptions, exemptions, and modifications to state departments of education, which in turn, negotiate with the USDOE (United States Department of Education) about how particular pieces of NCLB are being implemented in ways that do not make sense. Examples include grouping very needy special education students with students who have mild disorders; having LEP (limited English proficiency) students take the same tests as non-LEP students; and encouraging low scorers to drop out, thereby raising a school's and category's proficiency (17).

Karen explains that a sociologist of education examines the "social forces" in a person's life that affect how they learn: stretching across demographics of gender, race, and class, and moving into a three-dimensional diagram of teachers and how they learn; teaching practices; funding for

education; schools, districts, classrooms and the overlap between the three; how policies are enacted and their impact, etc. (18). Clearly, to a sociologist, there are several crucial loci determining success that stem from inside and outside the classroom. NCLB does not address the varying conditions outside the classroom. This legislation ignores many of the systemic differences existing across the lives of students in public schooling. Middle school teachers reported that students' "inadequate basic skills and prior preparation, lack of support from parents, and student absenteeism and tardiness" as well as "poverty, problems at home (including alcohol and drugs), lack of parental involvement, health issues, and special needs" contributed greatly to their performance on a daily basis, which impacts their performance on the overall proficiency test (Hamilton et al. 119-120). The result is that teachers feel they are being held accountable for things out of their control.

Personal responsibility for learning has been diminished in favor of a business model, a "customer is always right" attitude. In contrast, at the college level, students fill out performance reviews gauging a teacher's success with the material. In a complete flip from the milieu NCLB provides, students are responsible for their performance on college exams. Using a student's test score as the determining grade for a teacher ignores the multitude of elements listed above that make education a success or failure. There is only so much a teacher can do in the limited space of a school year and the limited time students are physically in the school building. NCLB uses quantitative business measures to gauge something that is far more qualitative.

Factoring in the overwhelming sense of undue blame, it makes sense that, across the board, the administrators, principals, and teachers surveyed in *Standards-Based Accountability Under No Child Left Behind: Experiences of Teachers and Administrators in Three States* agree that morale plummeted after the implementation of NCLB. Additionally, those three groups

agreed that principals suffer the most because the heaviest repercussions of NCLB rest on their shoulders and in their reputations. Surprisingly, principals said that NCLB is helping the most, while teachers claimed it is helping the least (Hamilton et al. 57). White and Rosenbaum suggest basing teacher's jobs and school survival on AYP and student's scores "[creates] a clear stigma against teachers whose efforts were not working toward that goal. The stigma was widely shared and led to vocal criticism by other teachers" (110). I do not believe that these complaints are growing pains from the adjustment to a new educational framework. There are too many factors contributing to the quality of a child's education that NCLB does not and cannot account for.

In a nation as large as America, the idea of standardized learning attempts to raise the bar for United States citizens and provide a base level of knowledge accessible to all, but as constructive as this goal is, NCLB has not provided uniform results. While the reforms predominantly impact elementary and middle school students, this information reveals that the lessons learned during those formative years continue to affect students into their high school years. As the 2013-2014 academic year approaches, the deadline for 100% proficiency, perhaps there will be new evidence showing a better educational experience for teachers, students, and the community. But that evidence will not come from a test score; only time will tell if our future generations received a solid education that prepared them for both higher learning and to become active citizens of the world. Can those results be accounted for before the students of NCLB are contributors to society and how will we account for them? Will their actions speak louder than their marks on a standardized test?

Restructuring the Classroom

While I am pushing for media literacy as a conduit for critical thinking, both media literacy and critical thinking can serve to reinforce the benchmarks in place, thus not detracting from teachers' legislated mission. In order to add this element of media literacy to the curriculum would mean that some of the basic ideologies of education might have to change. To help me with my analysis, I am using *Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture, and Social Criticism*, by Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, to find new potential in the education process. Not only do they put forth a vision of schools as a home for critiquing the status quo and accepted canons, but Aronowitz and Giroux advocate for a re-imagination of the system. This book made me realize that discourse-based learning, which is necessary for a more media literate classroom, will force changes in the system. More than just announcing that changes need to happen in the classroom, Aronowitz and Giroux offer suggestions and flesh out their ideas. This book inspired the idea of an intervention between media literacy and NCLB. Although written ten years prior to the inception of NCLB, this book speaks to issues in the education process that have unfortunately been exacerbated by standardized education.

Based on Aronowitz and Giroux's vision of schools, I began to imagine what would have to change before critical thinking through media literacy in the classroom would work. What would change as a result of increased critical thinking through media literacy? As it stands, media literacy and NCLB are incompatible, but this incompatibility does not preclude them from coexisting. I suggest there are seven areas that would be dramatically affected by the presence of media literacy in curriculum: interdisciplinary focus; increased discussion rather than lecture; shifting roles of teacher and student; lived experience as a source of validity; reexamination of

canons; technology in the classroom; and multiple literacies. The following section examines some of the changes that media literacy induced critical thinking could have in the context of NCLB.

First, the massive breadth of media literacy is inherently interdisciplinary (history, Social Studies, English, health, visual texts, communications, cultural studies, etc.). For example, the idea that the printing press linked same-language speakers and resulted in the formation of communities is absolutely necessary to understand why online communities exist (Anderson). This melding of subjects is both positive and negative. On the one hand, it helps students to see that most subjects are not mutually exclusive and that there is considerable overlap in the world. Lessons would then reinforce one another, creating bridges between curricula. On the other hand, the flexible nature that marks interdisciplinary studies means a media literacy course would have to draw on other subjects for its relevance to be fully felt, so teachers might have to work in teams or be kept abreast of the content occurring in multiple classrooms. While this makes sense, it would require hours of additional planning meetings and team teaching, which there is not time or space for within NCLB.

In *The Integration of Media into the Curriculum: An International Report Commissioned by the International Council for Educational Media*, Richard N. Tucker discusses a few of the issues involved with incorporating media literacy into classrooms in 1986. He calls the melding of subjects a process of “shaping and re-shaping” that “requires a mixture of talents; subject specialists, curriculum developers, educational technologists, media producers, evaluators, pedagogues, and psychologists. Not only should they bring their own expertise to the process but also an understanding of what each of the others has to offer and how to work together” (22). In addition to necessitating extensive communication between teachers and curriculum

developers, this process has to be ongoing because of the accelerated evolutionary progression media has gone (and continues to go) through in the past sixty years. Media literacy means constantly revising and modernizing the curriculum to keep it fresh and valid.

It makes sense that the connections being drawn across disciplines and the already topical nature of media literacy would lead to the second effect of media literacy: increased discussion. Additionally, both critical thinking and media literacy are inherently discursive. Typically, lecture receives the heaviest focus during the school day, which lends itself to the institutional gauging of productivity by NCLB. Discussion might not have the same effect as lecture. In an effort to experiment with more discussion, Hobbs noted that Concord High School switched to block schedules of 90 minute class sessions to reduce the amount of lecture experienced each week. Discussion is extremely important for critical thinking to be fully realized, but in the context of NCLB, there is not space for this kind of free time.

Along those lines, space for free discussion may not yield what a teacher is intending to drive home. Tucker explains that there is a lack of control regarding the understanding of a media message. His analysis is worth quoting at length:

Any linear medium such as a filmstrip, a film or a videotape presents information in an order with might well be a divergence from the desired information stream of the teacher. Any image carries with it the power of creating both denotation and connotation in the mind of the viewer. The use of ill considered images may readily set up, in the minds of the learners, associations which obscure or distort the original objectives...The result might then be that the learners who appear to be successful in the evaluation procedures built into the package may not have learned some aspect of the work which is essential for the larger context of the course, but which will not be revealed because it was neither being taught nor tested by the package (21).

The possibility of learners missing the point of the lesson but learning additional things that are not included on any tests is risky business. Individuals bring their own evaluative terms to the classroom, which was a benefit in the minds of Aronowitz and Giroux, but this ultimately means

that a teacher must acknowledge that with all these possible meanings, there may not be a correct understanding of the message.

In the context of standardized education, since ideas gleaned from critical thinking through media literacy will be more complex and potentially counter to answering correctly on a test, media literacy could be seen as a time waster in class. The difficult, and often unfair, realm of quantifying how much a student has learned cannot account for information outside of a multiple choice question.

The third challenging effect that critical thinking through media literacy could cause is the re-examination of canons. While incorporating media in the classroom opens up the idea of a text by including electronic and digital media, it also allows space for alternative voices to be heard regarding typically “appropriate” texts already in the canon. Giroux and Aronowitz envision literature classes as the site of textual authority exerting its power. They use the example of minorities reading Eurocentric texts and not finding themselves or their histories represented. If media texts were incorporated into the curriculum, this process of systemically silencing alternative voices might be stopped. I believe that electronic and digital texts could ease some of the issues inherent to accepted canons. Media creates a common ground for criticality and provides contexts of their own histories and traditions, as well as varying backgrounds of race, class, ethnicity, and gender. I acknowledge that media has its own problems regarding unheard voices, under-representation of minorities, and problematic representations like stereotypes, but it does offer a more comfortable realm that students might exercise control over. Popular culture texts are easier to disagree with because they do not have the same time-honored tradition that a canon does, so students, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or gender might be able to access a more critical lens of analysis. Additionally, in the time of

web speak and screen culture, media and technology are the lingua franca to both reach digitally savvy youngsters and let them reach out.

Using texts derived from the media would create an environment for critical thinking that students could relate to and engage critically. Aronowitz and Giroux believe that the categories of texts students use to “construct meaning and to locate themselves in history” are cultural resources (107). If teachers hack into student matrices of understanding and utilize those resources, they are bound to not only understand their students more, but also use those resources for educational purposes, which would also support students in “develop[ing] a sense of place, worth, and value” (Aronowitz and Giroux 103).

Aronowitz and Giroux trust that as much as textual authority can limit a student’s voice, it also has the potential to encourage vocalization. This implies a classroom where students can disagree with the text. If students are allowed to incorporate their social positions and personal histories, then these traditionally stifling texts can “enable them to speak by being attentive to how different voices can be constituted within specific pedagogical relations so as to engage their histories and experiences in both an affirmative and a critical way” (101). Given the time and space allotted for lessons, alternative readings of a text are not encouraged. In an effort to prepare students for proficiency exams, students must silence their personal lives in an effort to learn the “correct” understandings of a text. Aronowitz and Giroux see the benefit of reading a text with the grain, against the grain and then contrasting the text’s wood finish with your own wood’s finish by relating to the text (107). In a classroom encouraging critical thinking through media literacy, personal experiences, backgrounds, and examples will have to be incorporated into the dialogue.

Re-examining canons and allowing personal experience to become more of a presence in the class discussion will lead to the fourth effect of critical thinking through media literacy: rethinking the roles of teachers and students in the classroom. Aronowitz and Giroux argue that the structure of public education is set up to treat educating students like an assembly line in a factory and make teachers “mere technicians” (109). Rather than acknowledging the volatile, unique, and unpredictable day-to-day experience of learning in a classroom, NCLB expects machine-like perfection from a human teacher and human learner. Brunner and Tally also argue for new relationships in the modern classroom. They argue that schools need to be “wired humanly” in order to forge better bonds between parents, teachers, students, administrators, and the community (7). Importantly, they state, “Technologies can help create the conditions for these relationships and these conversations to happen; but a school’s rules, norms and values – especially those around who gets to speak, to whom, and for what purposes – are the more important preconditions” (7). Both Brunner and Tally and Aronowitz and Giroux argue that relationships will change when more critical thinking and media literacy are in the classroom.

Aronowitz and Giroux express concern about people’s places in an uncanonized dialogue – who is at the head of the class and who is a learner? They stress that teachers’, as well as students’, voices should be audible in the classroom. The diverse backgrounds generate “wider dialogue and critical encounter with the knowledge forms and social relations that structure the classroom,” which would once again call attention to the ideology at work shaping the classroom (104). A classroom show-and-tell that makes space for a dialogue between student and teacher would create a common ground ripe for critical thinking.

In Rose Pacatte’s Forward to *Teacher Education for Critical Consumption of Mass Media and Popular Culture*, the importance of media literacy is highlighted in two key frames.

Placatte, director of Pauline Center for Media Studies, says, “It brings into sharp focus the need for teachers and students to integrate curriculum content and contemporary culture through critical engagement; the second is because media literacy education as both content and process *per force* makes students and teachers co-learners” (Flores-Koulish *xi*). Paulo Freire also argues that the teaching method with space for dialogue between the histories of both students and teachers is a “mode of inquiry” where a teacher challenges students to produce “‘proper’ research/education or ‘critical’ analysis AND allows herself to be challenged by students’ worlds, which are then, in a dialogic fashion, critically investigated and contextualized” (quoted in Saukko 87, emphasis added). The key is to allow the space for critical discussion in the classroom without the pressures of a looming test on material that fits into multiple choice questions.

All of the effects discussed so far will lead to the fifth effect: increased importance of including lived experience as part of valid classroom discussion. Even before NCLB created massive deadlines through assessment exams that limit the time and space for alternative readings of material, typical education processes did not encourage students to question the system or refer to their own lives and experiences for data. Aronowitz and Giroux suggest, “Textual authority in the dominant curriculum discourses inscribes in the reading process classroom social relations that limit the possibilities for students to mobilize their own voices in relation to particular texts” (98). Aronowitz and Giroux promote incorporating students’ personal lives and experiences into the classroom in order to create relevance to their daily life. To keep student experiences out of the discussion not only nullifies empowerment that could be found through education, but students “learn quickly how to conform to rather than challenge the established culture of power and authority” (98).

This discussion mirrors the research by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire advocated for open ended, discourse-based classrooms to encourage students in developing their own vocabulary to help understand their world. He believes this would enable them to “name” their world, which is a catalyst for change (88). Combined with the skills gleaned from critical thinking, the outcome of a discourse based, media savvy classroom would not only be active, questioning students, but people prepared to take action in the world and reawaken the public sphere.

Encouraging critical thinking would supply what Aronowitz and Giroux as well as Freire are demanding. One of the windfall advantages that critical thinking provides is a heightened sense of analysis and interpretation. Through repetitive deconstruction of encoded messages, students are prepared to use that skill outside of school and in their own lives. Typically school functions as an ideological state apparatus; it reinforces the status quo. Alternative points of view threaten the moral authority of the state. This diminishes the possibility of students finding themselves in the educational process. Aronowitz and Giroux maintain that schools are synonymous with established cultures of power and their authority causes educational institutions to canonize what becomes deemed correct knowledge and facts. Alternative histories lie dormant, personal experience is ignored, and the powerhouse of education barrels on unquestioned. Critical thinking through media literacy not only helps students begin re-examining the status quo, but also supplies them with what kind of questions to ask to delineate answers (Hobbs, Brunner and Tally).

Multiple literacies is the final effect of adding critical thinking through media literacy to curriculum. Considering the interdisciplinary focus, increased discussion, shifting roles of both teacher and student, the inclusion of lived experience, and reexamined canons, it will be clear

that there is more than one way to view any issue. Douglas Kellner believes that multiple literacies help students better understand the world. Kellner states:

Postmodern pedagogy requires developing critical forms of print, media, and computer literacy, all of crucial importance in the new technoculture of the present and fast-approaching future. Whereas modern pedagogy tended to be specialized, fragmented, and differentiated, and was focused on print culture, a postmodern pedagogy involves developing multiple literacies and critically analyzing, dissecting, and engaging a multiplicity of cultural forms, some of which are the products of new technologies and require developing new literacies to engage the new cultural forms and media (10).

Kellner goes on to suggest multiple literacies also “involve cultural literacy, social literacy, and ecoliteracy,” which would account for and promote understanding of the numerous experiences and opinions of different groups (11). The idea of explicitly correct or incorrect answers is vital to elementary and secondary education so that students can do well on the annual exams.

Exposing students to the sumptuous gray zone of open discourse, traditionally reserved until university, is too much for an NCLB classroom on a time and space budget. Given all the effects of critical thinking through media literacy discussed thus far, it is clear that multiple literacies have to be considered for apt critical thinkers to emerge.

Increasing the number of alternative viewpoints alongside traditional understandings could be problematic in the classroom. Beyond straying from the tested curriculum, Aronowitz and Giroux indicated that alternative viewpoints are often cast as anti-intellectual. Adding to this issue is the human drive for finding one truth: the idea of one established method or understanding for all. To ignore multiple literacies is to ignore cultural differences and, they further assert, “those who are considered ‘illiterate’ bear the burden of forms of moral and social regulation that often deny their histories, voices, and suffering” (50). This raises the difficult discussion of cultural imperialism, which is usually taught through the singular viewpoint of history textbooks.

Are high schoolers able to recognize the existence of many truths? Sure, they might have experienced this in their own lives, but are they ready to approach the world with the same openness? Particularly in America, a discussion regarding objectivity is difficult because it is the current land of conquerors and the author of recent history. Re-examining past events can be difficult. For me, reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and studying Native American accounts of western expansion in college was deeply upsetting. Beyond the inhumanity and tragedy, I was shocked at my own ignorance of these alternative viewpoints. I felt like I had been lied to throughout my schooling. *Beloved* made me begin thinking about popular culture's frequent, apologetic portrayal of the white slave master as benevolent. On top of that, it is also typical of popular culture to have a disproportionate number of characters helping slaves become free. For example, the 2005 film *Batman Begins* explains the presences of a huge cave beneath Wayne Manor as part of the Underground Railroad that Bruce Wayne's forefathers had helped slaves pass through. The depiction of happy house slaves like Mammy, Prissy, Pork, and Dilecy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) shows a sort of odd couple, roommate situation between the owners of, and those owned on, Tara. The stories coming from slaves about slavery paint a drastically different picture, one that the media shies away from because it is so disturbing and unpleasant.

If people use mediated representations to create an understanding of the past, then how is an untruthful representation of the past affecting viewers? The media must be seen as an ongoing part of the narrative and could serve as a teaching tool that might enrich discussions in the classroom. Is a high school classroom equipped for this extensive, upsetting discussion? Can multiple points of view revolving around the same event (previously just a date in a book where something happened) be understood? These enriching discussions are invaluable to critical thinking but do not prepare students to circle a, b, or c and because that is absolutely vital

to standardized learning, this kind of discussion may be construed as a waste of time when seen through the lens of NCLB. Given these seven issues, I am not sure critical thinking through media literacy could work within the confines of NCLB.

Aronowitz and Giroux surmise that this kind of discussion in the classroom extends beyond epistemology and becomes pedagogical; “It is political because literacy represents a set of practices that can provide the conditions through which people can be empowered or disempowered. It is pedagogical because literacy always involves social relations in which learning takes place; power legitimates a particular view of the world, and privilege, a specific rendering of knowledge” (51). What Aronowitz and Giroux, as well as Freire, are hoping to produce are scholars ready to exercise critical thinking in their own lives outside of school and become active in the public sphere. Education is political and the more questions we can provide students in their arsenal, the better equipped they will be to make the world a better place by analyzing the way things are.

The principles of NCLB put limits on pedagogy and circumvent educational arenas. While I do believe teachers can and are encouraging critical thinking through media literacy as part of their classroom experience, given the seven effects, I do not believe there is time or space within NCLB to allow these fields to exist as separate subjects. Given the immense pressure put on teachers to perform adequately, an alternative curriculum may not be readily embraced. More research will have to be done linking media literacy to improved test scores before it will be considered as a NCLB-approved curriculum option. Also, more research will have to be done regarding the compatibility of critical thinking through media literacy and NCLB.

Conclusions

Considering how much has changed over the last fifty years and the shifting expectations and skill sets required of high school graduates, one would think the method for achieving those very different goals might have changed through the years. Life today is not necessarily harder, but it is hard in a different way. Relying on historically sound teaching practices is essential for proper education, but education could be more effective by using modern, technological teaching aids and incorporating media literacy. Aronowitz and Giroux capture this push-pull paradox well when they pronounce: “The tension between tradition and innovation plagues all who are seriously concerned with education” (32).

Looking at media literacy as the ability to critically access, analyze, evaluate, communicate, and create information and messages through media texts and within the framework of the NCLB benchmarks could yield a highly productive, better educated citizen. The effects of media literacy I have described would improve our education system and prepare students for a life where more things can be negotiated and discussed. Rather than training children to understand the world in terms of correct and incorrect answers, schools would prepare them for a life of inquiry and deeper understanding of the multicultural world on which they dwell. Most things in life do not exist in a vacuum, so an interdisciplinary focus trains students to link ideas across boundaries, whether geographic, ethnic, gender, racial, or any set of distinguishing features. Focusing on discussion rather than lecture allows students to practice articulation, valuing their lived experience, and finding themselves within their own education. I believe the thoughtful, questioning minds that would emerge from a cradle of education that

focuses on critical thinking would be set for an enhanced existence, an active engagement with the world.

Something you learn in basic art class is light and shadow. When rendering the most lit point of a still life, it is usually highlighted as such because it is touching the darkest points. Petals on a flower in full sun stand out against the shadows they cast on stem, leaves, and other flowers because of that contrast of light and dark. Light becomes such only when contrasted to dark. In education, the shadowy points – those of controversy, the losers (historically speaking), suppressed, subordinate – are ignored and we only focus on those well lit areas as constituted by dominant, and, as Aronowitz and Giroux would say, typically Eurocentric, modes of understanding. Now imagine that same flower, but minus the shadows; the image does not make sense anymore. It might be novel or unique, but it is not a representation of life or reality. That is how education functions without critical thinking: a misrepresentation of reality.

CHAPTER TWO

TALKING TO TEACHERS ABOUT MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM

There are media literacy standards already within the tenets of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), so all 50 states have frameworks for media literacy. In *Teacher Education for Critical Consumption of Mass Media and Popular Culture*, Stephanie A. Flores-Koulish explains what NCLB outlines as standards for media literacy. In general, NCLB asks that media participants demonstrate knowledge regarding media effects on their consumers and the skills required for competent communication through those media. Flores-Koulish also acknowledges that the state-determined standards are individualized, which has resulted in disparate proficiencies in media literacy. States choose the level of importance and expectations of media literacy, so they may encourage more or less of a focus beyond the two NCLB requirements (21). Not exploiting the benefits of critical thinking through media literacy performs a disservice to future generations. I believe utilizing media literacy in the classroom simultaneously aids teachers in reaching multiple NCLB benchmarks, encourages critical thinking, and creates active, decisive audiences.

As mentioned in Chapter One, there is not space in the curriculum to add more topics that will not be on the exams, so typically media literacy gets lumped with library sciences. This could be beneficial, but because library sciences are not tested yearly, media literacy has not been extensively explored. Furthermore, Meg Lundstrom noted that in many states teachers are finding little guidance for encouraging media awareness in the classroom. She explains, “Teaching to statewide testing standards often leaves little time to create independent media literacy units. In recent years, the growing trend is to teach media literacy not as a subject in itself, but as a way to approach the entire curriculum” (Lundstrom). The key for Lundstrom, and

instructors using media literacy as a teaching tool, is to use media literacy as a lens to view the bigger picture – an aid to add focus to what is already in place.

Luckily, media literacy is extremely malleable. Even if there is not time to focus specifically on it, media literacy can be taught through several of the existing NCLB standards, which means critical thinking can be exercised as well. For example, in language arts, many tests of proficiency could be achieved through incorporating media. One standard reads: “Students should be able to write responses to literature that provide an interpretation, recognize ambiguities, nuances and complexities, and understand the author’s use of stylistic devices and effects created” (“Ohio Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators”). Compared to Aronowitz and Giroux’s aforementioned wood grain metaphor, this benchmark promotes the same abilities they lauded in a discourse based, critical thinking classroom. In order to bring media literacy into this benchmark one only needs to recognize that “literature” is just one kind of text. Frank W. Baker, one of the many leaders in the media literacy movement, suggests that this particular benchmark could be achieved through critically viewing and listening to a variety of media and then distinguishing necessary and unnecessary information, fiction or nonfiction, and fact or opinion.

Themes from literature hold up over time and across venues. An example of this comes from my own experience. Ms. Iovino, my junior humanities teacher, spent two weeks on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Beyond reading the play, we took a field trip and saw a performance of *Hamlet*, watched Kenneth Branagh’s 1996 film version, and were encouraged to bring in examples of *Hamlet*’s characters or plot from popular culture. Classmates used examples like poor Yorick’s skull in Bugs Bunny cartoons, *Billy Madison* (1995), and other popular culture eddies as shorthand for invoking either the spirit or stuffed-shirtedness of Shakespeare depending on the context. For some, this assignment forced them to associate Shakespeare with their

everyday life, rather than casting his works off as literary drivel only sloughed through during school. For me and others, comparing the different versions resulted in a discussion regarding the effects of reading the play, the live action theatre, and Hollywood film depictions. It gave the 400-year-old plot proximity to our lives and made a difficult text much more accessible.

Another personal example would be *Destinos* (1992) used in conjunction with Spanish lessons. *Destinos* is an educational program set in the telenovela, or Spanish soap opera, format. Each episode taught vocabulary, verb conjugations and etiquette wrapped into an ongoing narrative. The program was engaging and I recall not only enjoying the telenovela, but really grasping those three objectives because we had to be active participants. Granted, the body language of characters revealed emotions, but in order to understand the highly complex plot it was vital to really concentrate and dissect what was happening. Beyond vocabulary and verb conjugations, the class was learning social mores, customs of Spanish-speaking nations, familial structures, and geography. In order to successfully interact with that text, you had to repeat phrases aloud, fill in a worksheet, and take episodic quizzes. Because we were responsible for the information within that program and due to the nature of that learning tool, we were active learners. This example shows how media used correctly in the classroom can accent the standard lesson. When the teacher wheeled out the AV equipment we were excited because we were engaged with the plot of *Destinos* and it broke up the week's lessons by stimulating another part of the brain.

In *Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English*, Renee Hobbs describes her experience observing a media-infused 11th grade English class at Concord High School in New Hampshire. Val Aubry, one of the English teachers Hobbs interviewed, addressed the relevance of English class in the rapidly changing world of communication as one of the primary

reasons for attempting to incorporate more media into the English curriculum. She says, “We were aiming to help students become critical thinkers in responding to the world they live in. And that was when we made this huge leap to media literacy” (27). This excerpt provides two points of insight. First, Aubry identifies the need to make education relevant to the world students are living in, which links Paulo Freire and Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux to Concord’s experiment. Second, she explicitly links media literacy as a way to encourage critical thinking. After starting this project, I decided that my almost decade old experience from high school might look nothing like the teaching happening now. After reading Hobbs’s book about an evolving English class, I wanted to understand how teachers are using media in the classroom. I decided to talk with teachers who self identify as either media literacy teachers or teachers who utilize media in the classroom. The following section will explore these discussions.

Talking to Teachers

In an effort to assess the current experience of teachers instructing media literacy I decided to interview a few willing instructors. After cold calling several schools locally to determine their involvement with media-based curricula or find teachers utilizing media to teach standard lessons and coming up empty handed, I decided to cast a much wider net. I explored the web and signed up to multiple listservs. After reading several media literacy organizations’ websites, I emailed directors explaining the project and asking if they knew of any schools that had chosen to focus on media literacy or any teachers who use media in the classroom. I joined social networking sites for high school educators, as well as sites specifically for English teachers, social studies teachers, and library science educators through teachers.net. I signed up on the Media-L mailing list, which is an email forum for discussion, announcements, and

questions revolving around media literacy. I joined English Companion (englishcompanion.ning.com), a networking site for English teachers, and Classroom 2.0 (www.classroom20.com), a social networking site devoted to creating a community of teachers “interested in Web 2.0 and collaborative technologies.” Both of these web communities allow teachers to exchange ideas and teaching strategies, as well as to vent and argue.

To make contact with teachers on the social networking sites I posted a general request on the discussion boards briefly explaining my project and asking those who were willing to be interviewed to contact me either through the site or via email. On the listservs I sent out an email with the same information as the discussion board post on the social networking sites. One of the interviews was done in person by a contact made through email.

I limited my interviews to high school teachers who either taught media literacy or self identified as actively media oriented in the classroom, meaning they used media examples to help teach standard lessons. After a brief description of my project, I asked members of the listserv or social networking sites who felt they met the specifications to email me for more information. I emailed interested parties a consent form explaining the project in more detail and asking if participants were willing to be quoted, as well as the degree of anonymity preferred. Participants could choose to remain completely anonymous, use a pseudonym, or have their name attached to their quotes. Participants then returned the consent form with their digital signature indicating one of the three privacy options. Next, I emailed participants the ten interview questions.

The interview questions aimed to determine not only what was being taught under the heading of media literacy, but how it was being taught, as well. Additionally, I wanted teachers to discuss how students were responding to a media infused curriculum and if the dialogue went

beyond the classroom. While I wanted to know if NCLB's assessment of adequate yearly progress had been affected by these classes, no direct links could be made by those interviewed. Teachers were asked to share personal experiences and teaching methods, in addition to their observations about media literacy's reception by students and parents.

The interviews were performed in an effort to further understand the experiences of a small sample of teachers. By no means is this an average, nor am I presuming that media literacy could act as a magic bullet across every teaching environment. My goal was to better understand the experience of self-identifying teachers either infusing their lessons with media or teaching specific media literacy courses.

There are eleven teachers in the sample. There are seven women participants and four men. Respondents teach in Nebraska, Michigan, California, Virginia, Illinois, New York, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and New Mexico. These instructors range from teachers of journalism and English, including British literature, to media specialists and librarians to Art and Social Studies teachers. Predominantly, this sample teaches at public schools, with the exception of one participant who teaches at a private high school. Their teaching experience ranged from three years to thirty years with varying years spent teaching media literacy or utilizing media heavily in the classroom. Most reported teaching versions of their media classes at all levels of high school, from 9th to 12th graders.

Why Media Literacy?

I wanted to determine why participants use media literacy in the classroom. Had they received any formal training on the subject? Was media literacy a side passion that leaked into their classroom naturally? Five teachers have backgrounds in Communications, Journalism, or

both. Others took courses in media literacy, film studies, and communications either during their undergraduate studies or online. Some had previous careers in advertising or journalism. One participant published a book on popular music in education. Dan Sharkovitz cited the Boston-based Media 100, software manufacturer of an editing program with the same name, for his formal training in the digital editing field. Almost all of the teachers attend workshops, seminars, or conferences promoting successful teaching through the media.

When asked what inspired them to bring more media to their lessons, the responses were varied. Some were inspired to use more media literacy based on their situation in the department. For example, Julie Rowse, an English teacher, was able to revamp the curriculum for her seniors after realizing the only framework for 12th grade English was a list of skills the students should master by graduation. In her first year of teaching, she became part of the Communicative Arts department that combined teaching journalism, speech, and English. This inspired her to create a film history and production unit to communicate the skills the students already needed to learn and, she hoped, provide some entertaining lessons as well. Rowse explains, “The timing was serendipitous, because we were overhauling the curriculum. I lobbied for – and was granted – the opportunity to create a class about media literacy. We called it Contemporary Media Issues.”

Mary Ann Smith found the motivation to use more media in the classroom from writings on GenX students and Digital Natives. Realizing that students were changing made her want to change her teaching tactics. She also cites Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, as a great source of inspiration because he focuses on the shifting terrain of business and the changing expectations of the future workforce. Her experience as a media specialist positioned her to find the tools that faculty and students needed, but Smith identifies her own inspiration elsewhere. She says, “I now realize that today’s

students think and work differently. If we want to reach them and make them effective users of information, we must employ multi-sensory technology.”

Sharkovitz also highlights the need to reach students; he offers, “I saw the impact that media literacy studies had on my students. They seem almost intuitively to feel its power...I believe in the power of media studies to keep high school seniors engaged until they graduate.” Additionally, he recalls that during his five years running a senior video project and media literacy movie night during the 1980s, it grew from 50 to 400 students. Avid student participation exemplifies engaged students and offers encouraging feedback. Experiencing a 700% increase in student involvement speaks to the “power” Sharkovitz mentioned above.

John Paulett, an instructor of Honors British Literature, has also tapped into the power of media in the classroom. Media has the power to unite disparate groups of people. He states: “My educational philosophy is based on the importance of beginning every learning cycle with a shared experience. Frequently, media provides this.” Finding common ground, a shared experience across generations and between the power structures in the classroom, can promote dialogue in the classroom. Paulett has tapped into this idea of utilizing media, which is increasingly integral to teens’ daily lives, as a starting point for a multitude of conversations.

Media Materials and Texts for the Classroom

After understanding why teachers were including media literacy in the classroom, I wanted to explore what kind of resources were being used to teach it. Considering the state-by-state guidelines legislating media literacy, it is not surprising that there is no unifying textbook for these teachers. Based on their unanimous responses, course materials are derived through personal searches, online and off, and collections of media. Participants listed things like videos,

current events, professional sources like listservs, sections from Barry's *Popular Culture and Mass Media Textbook* and the Walch Education series on media literacy, supplemental materials through the Center for Media Literacy and the Media Education foundation, and websites like Frank W. Baker's "The Media Literacy Clearinghouse" as their classroom texts. These resources are culled through and added as enhancements to lessons or provide a lesson of their own. Sharkovitz offered, "Things change so quickly these days that the world, the internet, newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, podcasts, DVDs, Facebook, etc. – these are my textbooks."

Richard Dulac also stresses "relevance" in his class. The materials gathered not only need to apply to the lesson at hand, but to interest students as well. Teachers emphasized that if you cannot keep the material fresh, then the tutorial falls apart. Karen Ambrosch underlines that she created her own curriculum using "timely resources from mass media." And Rowse believes, "For a media literacy class to be done well, it's imperative that the teacher be constantly on the lookout for additional, current resources such as news stories, blog posts, and new TV clips and print ads."

These teachers make clear that the topical nature of media literacy must be amplified to have a stronger effect. Some observers might view the very "now" nature of media literacy discussion as running in opposition to time-honored subjects, but the two are not mutually exclusive. Jennifer Clark Evans, an English teacher, says that she uses both online and offline sources to enhance her lessons on literature and writing because they help her students "learn more cooperatively and creatively, and to inspire higher levels of critical thinking." Like the addition of spices can spruce up a meal, the inclusion of alternative resources adds to the basic curriculum. In a way, media literacy can be seen as a way of keeping standard lessons current and interesting, rather than viewed as fundamentally changing the whole curriculum.

Chris Sperry, a public alternative high school teacher of both Social Studies and Art, is also a director at Project Look Sharp, an out-and-out spice rack for improving standard educational meals. Project Look Sharp is a pro-media literacy organization based out of Ithaca College aimed at aiding teacher incorporation of media into the classroom. Sperry has been a key curriculum creator for the organization, which creates media “kits” containing materials that correspond with lessons in U.S. and global history, health, the Middle East, wars, chemicals in the environment and more (“Project Look Sharp - Media Literacy at Ithaca College”). The kits are available to teachers for free on-line or, if teachers want a print version, for a nominal fee. Along with using materials from these kits in the Social Studies class that he teaches, Sperry also has students work with multiple newspapers, alternative and mainstream, which he calls “ongoing texts.” In his experience, textbooks typically evolve into “just another text” as students become more media literate and they begin to see bias in the “neutral” versions of history presented in history books.

What Constitutes Media Literacy and How Is It Taught?

When asked what was being taught under the umbrella heading “media literacy,” teachers responded with similar shades of meaning. Comparable to the media literacy websites and scholars discussed previously, there are overlapping intentions and differing approaches outlined in participants’ responses. Most teachers use media to compliment lessons, rather than teaching courses specifically about media literacy. In addition to asking what is taught, I asked how media literacy is taught. For many teachers, the responses to these two questions bled into one another and became interchangeable. I have combined these two questions in the following discussion.

For Rowse, media literacy involves teaching students to critically analyze media products like television, advertising, and the internet. She says:

The way I approach it is to tell the students that “reading” an ad or a film is no different from how I encourage them to read a novel—there is figurative language, symbolism, ulterior motives...students just think those things only exist in novels written by the members of the “canon” of literature approved for their consumption. They don’t realize we are actually teaching them transferable skills, because they have rarely been encouraged to question media.

Highlighting the “transferable” nature of the standard lessons will help Web 2.0 students embrace the multifaceted skill set that critical thinking provides.

Interestingly, in her response to this question, Rowse mentioned a distinction between the taxonomy of her class and the education system’s understanding of media literacy. She offers: “In the field of K-12 education, media literacy means ‘library skills.’ This is part of why we had to create the name of the class, ‘Contemporary Media Issues.’” Considering the interdisciplinary nature of media literacy and the multiple meanings media literacy has for different groups of people, it is not surprising that there was confusion at the bureaucratic level. Above, I outlined a few of the varying definitions of media literacy and it is clear that Rowse’s course matches many of the definitions, but because of the confusion, the name of her media literacy course had to be changed to Contemporary Media Issues.

Like Rowse, Erin Leavey, a Language Arts teacher, explains that what media literacy encompasses in her class gets tangled with the state’s understanding of what her class must cover. For Leavey, computer literacy falls within the standards taught within Language Arts. In a sense, California is already condensing media literacy inside the English curriculum. The decision to focus on technology canonizes the lessons, making it obvious to parents, students, and community that computer literacy is valid and essential to graduating students. Within her class Leavey teaches “basic word processing, internet searches, works cited/bibliography format,” and

includes “résumé formatting, MLA/APA formatting, Excel spreadsheets (basic), and PowerPoint presentations. I even include basic email/blog etiquette.” She feels her students benefit from the “real life” lessons learned in her class.

Similarly, Evans’s class focuses on “finding and evaluating credible and valid sources of information, communicating effectively online through blogging and commenting, learning ways to create a positive and safe online presence, using media to make presentations of information (both oral and written) more meaningful.” As with Leavey’s lessons, Evan’s class is utilizing media to instruct on standard English, speech, and communication skills. She also highlights the importance of working collaboratively in the development of ideas, a cooperative skill that is invaluable in any work environment or family.

In regard to how the lessons are taught, Evans says, “Mainly through a continual dialogue with my students. As tasks arise that require or develop certain media literacy skills, we experiment with them and discuss.” Some of her older students are writing research papers and the class practiced searching for credible and valid sources on the internet through websites and online databases of academic journals. She also works to teach freshman and sophomore students how to create meaningful Power Point presentations. The efficacy of Power Point depends on streamlined communication through outlines and images on slides. Evans’s students are also required to publish on the web: “This work ranges from opinion blog posts and commenting to publishing final copies of papers on wikis to working collaboratively in a group to produce a wiki page with multimedia sources to present information.”

Encouraging students to make their voices heard allows future citizens to practice speaking out, talking back, and ultimately adding new voices to the dialogue. The internet’s glut of information, much of it unscholarly, and the behavioral effects of anonymous web identities

make online ethics and etiquette lessons in the classroom increasingly important. Both Evans and Leavey focus on preparing students for digital daily life through technological skill sets, reinforcing new online etiquettes, and the creation of meaning.

Other teachers also outlined their addition of media as an accent to daily lessons. Paulett mentioned using supplemental materials like turn-of-the-century postcards and advertisements to enrich the discussions of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He scans and displays these materials through a Power Point that offers a backdrop as they read through the passage. Additionally, he has used *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, the 2000 film loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*, and had students listen to a Classical Greek reading of a portion of the Nausicaa episode. Paulett offers a strong example of successfully blending canonized literature with media alternatives ranging from popular films to theatrical performances that appeal to students. Paulett says, "I define literacy pretty broadly to extend from Virginia Woolf through Monet to Berg to text messaging. I am attempting to teach everything in terms of connections and context. I hope that media is not just candy to make the lesson sweeter. It is meant to be a foundational experience as we explore British literature." Hobbs echoes this sentiment in *Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English* when debating quality media usage in the classroom. Media wielded like a treat or a distraction is counterproductive. This kind of usage causes "passive viewing" rather than active viewing and, in my opinion, reifies the lazy but superfluous media consumption already familiar to students (Hobbs 30).

Other teachers focused on the analytical process involved with consuming media. Tricia McInroy explains that her media literacy class focuses on visual analysis. Her background in photography makes this realm easier to access. In addition, McInroy teaches at the charter school that houses the New Mexico Media Literacy Project (NMMLP). NMMLP, founded in

1993, is an organization devoted to “cultivating critical thinking and activism in our media culture to build healthy and just communities” (New Mexico Media Literacy Project).

McInroy’s focus on visual literacy is a good starting point for critical thinking in the visually-heavy realm of media. Additionally, McInroy has students practice creating media. She says, “I have an exercise where they take a favorite song and make a photo to go with it. In this way, I ask them to look more closely at the words to the songs they listen to every day,” which encourages a deeper analysis of media that might hum along in the background without much consideration.

Kara Clayton files media analysis, media studies, media literacy, and mass media as the subjects beneath the umbrella of media literacy. She acknowledges that media literacy is going to vary from teacher to teacher and program to program. For her, “a person who is media literate understands how to analyze, evaluate and produce media.”

Some teachers framed their responses around specific lesson modules and project ideas. Dulac breaks media literacy into four basic principles: media construct reality, media use identifiable techniques, media are businesses with commercial interests, and media present ideologies and value messages. In his class he says, “We deconstruct various media, analyze content and create media products.” Through each of the four categories, his class reviews the reality of media driven consumerism, camera and editing techniques, marketing and advertising, and media portrayals of gender, politics, and vices like smoking and drinking.

Similarly, Smith divides her topics into categories as well, but she focuses on two specific issues that overlap with Dulac’s but do not mirror his completely. Smith’s class uses media literacy to find, interpret, and use information from all types of media and to use

information ethically. Within the latter, her classes focus on things like citing sources properly and understanding copyright laws.

For her class, Ambrosh chooses to divide lessons by medium. She points out, “I know that each teacher’s approach to this subject may vary greatly. I am not sure there is a standard out there yet because it is not an accepted part of everyone’s curriculum.” Her class is structured around sections about television, film, internet, advertising, and the music industry. In addition to media analysis, her class focuses on production as well. She has students create their own mediated messages by filming a spoof commercial and making a CD case on a social issue. Ambrosh’s decision to include production in her course is important because she is allowing students to practice manipulating media messages, similar to Sperry’s students using their own photography as a site of analysis and manipulation. This doubly reinforces the lessons being learned about the media and prepares students to both analyze and talk back rather than passively absorbing messages.

Sperry expresses similar thoughts about what is being taught within media literacy and how it is being taught in both his Art and Social Studies classes. The former highlights media, production, and analysis. To achieve all three, students must first use photography as their predominant form of media. Secondly, production serves as visual sociology. Finally, analysis occurs when students examine both media texts and their own work. Utilizing students’ photography allows for these young learners to practice talking back to the media by creating their own texts.

Regarding his Social Studies class more specifically, Sperry aims to have them critically analyze texts and understand inherent biases in the writing and their personal reception. The discussion veered into Sperry’s personal goals for the course:

My goal is to make them think rigorously, independently and quickly, but also to push them to develop their own boundaries, to make their own choices. It's more than making them aware that everyone's got their own opinion, this relativistic place, and everyone's opinion is equally valid. We want to challenge that. We want them to take a side, take a position. Critical thinking is just one value. So is justice. So is humanity. So is honesty. So is caring. All are values that can fit with critical thinking – you know they're not the opposite. That struggle between teaching kids to hold beliefs, but also think critically is at the heart of democracy – the heart of the enlightenment.

It is clear that Sperry wants students to be able to use the critiques and analyses in their own lives. The vision he creates in this description is of a student body equipped to become active members of society, well informed on issues, able to understand modes of communication, and capable of sharing their own opinions.

Sperry shared a particularly interesting Social Studies assignment his students are currently working on as a final project regarding global history and ethnic identity. Each student is assigned either a nation's leader or a political group and required to write a research paper on the area where those leaders presided. The project is essentially a case study of cooperation between ethnic identities in the context of global history. Sperry explains:

The group uses Google docs to negotiate the thesis statement as a group of five, but each one of the five has their own individual case study that they are intensely researching to give this 15 minute presentation on their case study. But their case study must prove the thesis that the group has deemed acceptable to each ethnic identity. There is more likely to be conflict and groups do not understand or respect the cultural or ethnic identity of certain groups. Each kid's individual presentation must prove that thesis that the group has come up with, so in order to do that they have to work collectively to develop a thesis statement each person is becoming an expert.

In the second part of the assignment, students take on the role of that leader and write another research paper on the opinions of that character. From the Presidents of Israel, the United States, Iran, and Syria, to the Kings of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, to Prime Ministers of Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel, to Human Rights Representatives – students take on an impressive nineteen roles. I was able to watch the 2008 performances on the Ithaca City School District website

(www.icsd.k12.ny.us). Students dress in character and use the arguments that they believe their characters would make in order to debate one another. They debate on current event issues and make proposals in front of outside evaluators like classmates, parents, teachers and the community for six hours. They must respond to one another's proposals. Sperry brings in a list of twenty of their proposals and they have five minutes to look them over, and ten minutes to talk to one another, before they vote on which proposal they prefer. Students defend how they voted, showing critical engagement and emphasizing they understand who they are representing. The debate is also televised on local television and later is available online.

Sperry makes clear that students must also be able to determine the biases contained in the resources used to develop their understanding of a nation, the leader, and ethnic identity. During the presentation, if students make a statement as fact, raters can stop and ask where students got that information and how they know it is credible. Students must share that information with the group, thus providing further understanding of the information used to create "factual" knowledge. In addition, students' bibliographies need to reflect the same analysis of resources. For each source, students explain why the source is useful, why they believe it is credible, and the bias of the source used.

Sperry's assignment clearly combines media literacy with the standards and context of the Social Studies curriculum. Students are learning about global relations, historical conflicts, and ethnic identity, as well as analyzing resources and texts from popular culture like websites, literature, films, and television that may have shaped the understanding of those things. Students also use new media through Google docs, networking, and open source knowledge. The final component, a public debate/performance of skills and knowledge, allows students to practice

developing and executing their own messages, as well as attempting to reach a point of cooperation.

Student Responses Through the Eyes of Their Teachers

I asked teachers to evaluate student responses to lessons enhanced by media. Overall, this sample's students appear to enjoy a media presence in the classroom. Paulett states, "My students are very enthusiastic and attuned to the connections in media. When they read *Twelfth Night*, they recognize *She's the Man* and when we study Hamlet, they beg to watch *The Lion King*." Dulac noted that the media course is one of the most popular in the English department at his school. Several teachers believed that it connected deeper with the students than some of the standard lessons. McInroy believes, "Students seem to engage readily to it. It's more connected to context of their daily lives than some of the other things they typically learn in school."

For Sperry, who is now teaching the next generation of sons and daughters of a few of his former students, the responses have been extremely positive. From the feedback received in student evaluations of the course to personal thanks, Sperry feels that students are changed by the class. Students typically say they do not look at the world the same way anymore and feel capable of evaluating information and thinking critically about their beliefs. In particular, Sperry recalled a student saying, "In most classes I study equations, but in this class I am the equation." Sperry feels that the act of students critically dissecting what they believe and why they believe it fundamentally changes how they understand communication. It prepares them to examine what other people believe and how they communicate it. Regarding the student equation, Sperry says, "He was really grappling with coming to grips with his own beliefs, his own knowledge, the

‘Why?’ and the ‘What?’ in a high school social studies course. That is about the core – if you can leave kids with that deep desire to figure that out, to know...that’s lifelong learning.”

Alternatively, Smith noticed some reticence in her students. Growing up in the digital age, along with the rapid evolution of technology, might give some millennial students the impression that nothing of value could be revealed in the classroom. Smith says, “To be honest, some students are initially resistant. When I teach web site evaluation, for example, students indicate (verbally and nonverbally) that they already know how to evaluate web sites. Once we’re into the lesson and especially in the follow-up activities they realize that they can still learn a few new things.” Smith is aware that this know-it-all behavior is typical of generations growing up in the midst of technological development. She reflects, “My experience supports existing research that suggests students think they are sophisticated media users but often are somewhat naïve consumers.”

Leavey similarly reports that students typically believe they know everything there is to know about computers. She says as the class progresses and students learn “tricks” that make internet searches easier and yield more results, they “buy into the lessons more readily.” Additionally, her dual citizenship as a Mac and PC user makes her more marketable in students’ eyes because she can help them at their level with the products they have chosen. She says, “If you don’t speak their language, they aren’t going to pay attention. If a teacher only knows 1 type of operating system, using only 1 brand of product, the students won’t buy into the lessons.” I feel that Leavey’s responses highlight the fact that teachers must be knowledgeable of how to wield media in the classroom for it to benefit students or maintain relevance.

In the vein of relevance, Evans points out that the media lessons must apply to the students and not act as a distracting bauble. She feels that a media enhanced curriculum must

make a conscientious effort to explicitly detail the purpose of using media tools and the benefits derived by students. Evans says, “When on- or offline media is used as a bells and whistles attention grabber, my students are more likely to tune out and get frustrated by having to learn a new tool in order to accomplish something that could be done well with just paper and pencil.” Relevance must be demonstrated. Due to the media saturated environment and the sheer amount of information to which students are exposed, it makes sense that unnecessary enhancements would be unappealing.

Clayton reported that students typically enjoy the lessons because so much of their lives focus on media consumption. She says, “Cell phone use in school is usually frowned upon. However, when students are allowed to use their cell phones to set up their podcast through Gcast, they love it! They're doing something that might be considered as ‘taboo,’ for a legitimate school assignment.” The legitimization of students’ hobbies and personal experience speaks to Freire’s idea of the creation of personal history (55). By including cell phones, Clayton acknowledges an accessory omnipresent in millennial students’ daily life. Further incorporation into the lesson deems cell phone practices worth studying and creates a dialogue in which students can actively participate.

Rowse brings up two issues in her report of student responses to analyzing popular culture and media in the classroom. She offers:

It’s tough. Some students accuse me of “making it up,” but I think that’s an initial defense mechanism, because I am, in a sense, altering their perception of their own entertainment. But some kids really like it. The class at our school typically gets ringing endorsements. The problem we have getting kids to take it is that the state requires so many core classes, that there’s not a whole lot of room for students to take another class.

First, Rowse expresses an issue that could arise in a class not familiar with using critical analysis in everyday life. Unfortunately, for many, media is still shrouded in the unserious, entertainment

category, unworthy of deeper analysis. I feel that ignoring popular culture and media goes beyond ignoring the man behind the curtain and well into ignoring the Emerald City and the power of Oz. Media has too large of a hand in shaping our understanding of normalcy and the messages contained are worth examining with a critical eye because of the intrinsic ideological forces encapsulated within all media outlets.

It is hard for students to begin exercising criticism on things deemed inconsequential. It is harder to examine things you are a fan of or just enjoy watching. Ambrosio's response speaks to this confrontation of pleasure and school. She says, "I usually can grab students with this course because they can relate to the content and feel knowledgeable about it. Many are surprised at the depth I ask them to go with it though. They think it is an easy course at first, and then are challenged by the critical thinking I require." Some students might resent the infringement of popular culture into the classroom or vice versa. Analysis might make something that once seemed simple into something more complex and shift it from strictly entertainment to something that is difficult to consume.

Finding fundamental problems in the schematics of a treasured pastime might hamper future enjoyment. For example, when I discovered the plot of every episode of *Three's Company* (1977 – 1984) was the same, a genre lesson we all must learn, I enjoyed it a little less. But there is also a comforting quality to knowing how something is going to end, so in that sense, I appreciated *Three's Company* a little more. Hopefully students will also find manageable ground where they can simultaneously critique and appreciate the object of their criticism.

Going back to the second issue in Rowse's excerpt, she says there are too many core classes for students to have room in their schedule for a media literacy course. This speaks directly to the issue of having something as important as media literacy as an elective. Elective

status translates as optional and unnecessary. It diminishes the importance of media analysis and results in portions of the population remaining oblivious to the critical thinking that occurs as a result. Considering the interdisciplinary nature of media literacy, there is no reason it cannot be taught alongside other subjects, thus encouraging critical thinking in more areas of study.

Community Reactions

I was interested in the community responses to media in the classroom. From my research, it was clear that community support can make or break media literacy in the classroom. While a few participants had not experienced any feedback and some wished there was more support from parents, several had strong positive reinforcement from the community. Even with initial parental hesitations or objections to the class, after results were seen, the community came to appreciate the courses' offerings.

Teachers mentioned the discussions they have with families at parent-teacher conferences after a few months of media literacy and critical thinking. Parents mention a shift toward media analysis in conversation at the dinner table. Smith says that once parents see the results they “realize that it’s a ‘new world’ and media literacy leads their kids to finding better information and making better decisions, they are very supportive.” Similarly, Ambrosh has noticed the need to fully clarify what the course is and why media literacy is needed to the community. She says, “When I explain the course to parents at conferences, they think it is a valuable addition to the curriculum. Media Literacy needs to be explained before most people understand what it is and why it is important. After that, I usually have very positive responses.” Once the parents are on board and fully understand the course, they become concerned that it is not mandatory for all students. Additionally, Leavey mentions the importance of real-life skills to the parents. If they

feel like their children are genuinely being prepared for the future, then the community can embrace technology's presence in the classroom. On the flip side, some parents would prefer students not take the course due to the controversial and sometimes problematic content.

Peripheral Effects of Media in the Classroom

I wondered if students' experiences utilizing media within a classroom would be evident in other aspects of their lives. Since my interviews were strictly with educators, I depended on participants to convey their observations, and any feedback they had received from students, regarding the impact of lessons pertaining to critical thinking and media analysis. I asked if lessons utilizing media literacy affected students in different areas of their education, such as with outside projects or subject matter from other classes.

While some of the teachers did not feel they had enough information to answer positively or negatively, some teachers' experiences suggested that students were indeed using the critical thinking skills garnered through media literacy lessons outside of the class. A few teachers offered reflections on this question. You can see from their responses that many teachers are visited by former students to discuss the impact of the class on their lives and understanding of the world. I believe this feedback is extremely positive and shows that the critical thinking skills obtained through the lens of media literacy and technology can affect students.

On the basic level of formatting essays and class presentations, many teachers felt that these basic skills absolutely applied to many of the students' classes. In particular, Leavey, Evans, and Paulett commented on this. Evans highlighted the collaborations on Google docs allowing students to work together on papers, which changed their understanding of the writing process and could be used in other classes. Paulett observed his students utilizing an on-line

learning management system (LMS) creating a “constant interchange of video and other types of presentation. I nurture this and I know that they have done similar projects in other areas.”

Leavey sees Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and Power Point presentations being used more effectively in classes. She points out that English is not the only subject where students are required to write papers and knowledge of the format makes their papers look more professional. Also, students will be more prepared to apply for jobs or college. She says, “Anything that helps them become a little more comfortable and confident on the computer helps them in real life.”

The importance of “real life” preparation appeared in Rowse’s response as well. While she did not feel that she had seen evidence of students carrying the lessons beyond her classroom walls, a student did return to talk with her about the Media Issues class. She reports, “He said that he learned more from that class than any other class in high school. He said it should be a requirement, as he feels it prepared him more for real-world experience.”

Ambrosh, who also did not feel comfortable presuming students were taking lessons beyond the classroom, mentioned that students have returned to her class to discuss things they see in the media. The existence of a dialogue when the course ceases to be a requirement is exciting because it shows that students did absorb some of the lessons and are practicing critical consumption of the media. For example, one student returned to her class to say, “Thanks, now I can’t watch TV without thinking about how and why they are doing it.” This bit of sarcasm reveals that the lessons permeate into everyday life.

After taking Ambrosh’s class, some students develop an interest in studying communications, television, radio or film “quite seriously.” Sperry has had a similar experience with students coming back and reporting that they are using skills from his class in college. Many feel that their fellow students do not know how to critically analyze texts or communicate

well. Sperry says typically students engage in a discussion circulating around what they did and did not feel prepared for when they return after a few semesters of college. Sperry reports that many students feel “other college students do not know how to critically think, whereas they feel proficient in critical thinking.”

Smith is confident that students are taking the lessons outside academic institutions and incorporating them into their own lives. After lessons infused with media literacy, she feels students are “more questioning, critical, and less gullible in terms of the information they look at and the decisions they make.” In Clayton’s experience: “Students frequently tell me that they are so much more aware of media construction after taking my one semester class in media literacy. They watch for techniques used to grab their attention and are more aware of the motivation by the media to get them to connect with concepts or products being sold.”

No Child Left Behind Benchmarks and Media

I wanted to discern if teachers had noticed a change in the scores of the annual exams. I also asked if participants personally thought that media literacy was helping students reach the benchmarks established by NCLB and, if so, how. Several participants either did not respond or were not comfortable making the connection between the inclusion of media in a classroom and test scores. However, some made claims regarding the efficacy of media literacy to help students. Ambrosh’s response typifies this sentiment: “I cannot make any assumptions about my course assisting students on testing. I can say that I believe it helps them develop critical thinking skills, visual and aural literacy skills, and general communication skills, but I have no proof through testing.” Clayton provides another example. She begins by saying she “cannot” speak to test scores and NCLB, but she offers, “What I can see with complete confidence is that

students who are involved in media studies programs show: 1.) less bias about their news consumption; 2.) they are more critical thinkers; 3.) they are able to write more detailed/expressive responses to topics with which they are very familiar.”

Smith commented, “We are a district that has very satisfactory test scores; I’d like to think that our lessons in media literacy are part of the reason why.” Sperry’s school previously had a waiver and students did not have to take the New York Regents Exam, a standardized state assessment test. When they lost the waiver, his students had to take the test without having been taught the content per se. Regardless of this fact, 88% of Sperry’s students passed, which is higher than the statewide average. Through the lessons in message construction, his students could discern the inherent bias of the test questions. He says, “I don’t teach the content! But they can figure out the right answer through their knowledge of vocabulary, history, culture – they don’t need the specific facts, but they can figure out the answer using media literacy.”

Students discussed the process they used when looking at the questions. For example, they asked themselves who created the exam, for what purpose, and what was their point of view? Sperry realized, “Media literacy helps them recognize that the test is a form and there are certain qualities to it that they can assess out.” For Sperry, this proves that you do not have to teach the history of the world a mile long and only an inch deep to cover the extensive content being tested. He pointed out, “Kids are getting lower scores and teachers are covering the content that we can teach focused on engagement and depth and understanding and research and literacy and reading and writing and analyzing and thinking and be less concerned about covering the content.”

Conclusions

Actually hearing the opinions of teachers made me more concerned with encouraging critical thinking through media literacy. I feel that their responses offered a direct link in the mutually beneficial relationship existing between media analysis and critical thinking. Although my questions never broached the subject, several teachers mentioned a lack of time, a lack of resources, and occasionally a lack of support regarding their experiences teaching media literacy. These responses have helped me plan an intervention between NCLB and critical thinking through media literacy in the form of a website directed to students.

CHAPTER THREE

EMERALD LENS: A WEBSITE INTERVENTION

In the fall of 2007, Sean Watkins, a colleague, and I were discussing our college-level students' essays for an Introduction to Popular Culture class. Repeatedly, our comments on papers, and in class, consisted of "Dig deeper," or "What is the bias here?" or "What is the message?" I teach a lesson on the language of film, and after introducing the vocabulary we practice in class by watching a film segment and yelling out the terms as they apply to what is happening on screen. While a few students embrace this exercise, several told me that it was hard because they were not used to thinking while they watched something. This unfamiliarity with critical engagement of popular culture was disconcerting. I wondered why I analyze every bit of media I consume and these students have trouble thinking beyond the surface level. Perhaps it is generational; I am the product of counterculture parents. Maybe it is because I excelled in critically engaging English literary texts in high school and moved on to a media studies major within a journalism department. For whatever reason, I am ready to deconstruct media texts and my students are not. Watkins's experience was similar. We began to meet and espouse the importance of media critique, which turned into brainstorming ways to bolster critical thinking skills. Those discussions planted the seeds that eventually grew into this particular intervention.

The following section explores an intermediary that could help students achieve the benchmarks established by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), as well as assist teachers with the similar goal of student preparation for annual exams testing student proficiency in the benchmarks, all the while encouraging critical thinking through a media literacy conduit. While I strongly feel both media literacy and critical thinking deserve mandatory space in the

curriculum, there is neither space nor time to do that in America's current public education system. Too much material is already crammed into the benchmarks and I don't want to burden teachers who are already stretched thin. Keeping this in mind, I believe Emerald Lens, our proposed educational media literacy website, could assist students in meeting benchmarks, while simultaneously engaging students' critical thinking skills.

Watkins and I derived the name Emerald Lens from L. Frank Baum's book *Wizard of Oz*. When Dorothy and friends arrive at the Emerald City, they meet with the Guardian of the Gates and the following dialogue occurs:

"I am the Guardian of the Gates, and since you demand to see the Great Oz I must take you to his Palace. But first you must put on the spectacles."

"Why?" asked Dorothy.

"Because if you did not wear spectacles the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind you. Even those who live in the City must wear spectacles night and day" (Baum 80).

The spectacles are locked around the eyes of both citizens and visitors of the Emerald City.

Readers later discover the lenses were tinted green by the Wizard to cast an emerald sheen on a regular city (Baum). It is just another hoax in his manipulation of the masses. In *Wicked*, the musical that builds off of Gregory Maguire's interpretation of Baum's story, the citizens of the Emerald City voluntarily wear the glasses to avoid seeing the problems in their troubled metropolis. In both cases, the act of wearing green tinted lenses was an act of control. In the original story, control was sought by the wizard over the people. In the musical, citizens' choice to control their understanding of the world was an act of agency, for the betterment of themselves and to the detriment of their city.

Watkins and I were intrigued with the idea of lenses as tools to see the world. They offer clarity into the ideologically infused popular culture messages. While I do not think media is the great and powerful manipulator, it does affect how we understand ourselves and the world

around us. For Watkins and me, to better understand a message's constitution, its consumption, and its effects, one needs several lenses. Whether microscopic, macroscopic, infrared, or infused with cultural studies, people could benefit from actively peering at popular culture through an arsenal of lenses.

Why A Website?

The internet is frequently compared to the American Wild West for its frontier-like opportunities, as well as its lawless, and therefore dangerous, nature (Morris). On the one hand there is so much potential for a media literacy website to be successful because television, advertisements, music, films, newspapers, and their hybrid offspring all unite on the web. On the other hand, the raw data, images, and opinions found on the internet are tainted by the presence of questionable material, blatant biases, risqué themes, and several segments of society's underbelly. Due to this dual nature of possibility and pitfall, the internet cyclically acts as its own detractor. The uncertain and potentially volatile nature of new media makes it an unlikely learning annex. I believe if Emerald Lens is constructed and maintained well it could tame a small portion of the internet, harness reflexive media examples, and cocoon them in critical analysis.

Along the same lines as harnessing power, Emerald Lens would further bind the classroom to the internet, which is more and more important in a world with so many sources of information. Carmen Luke describes the ideal media literacy teacher as someone with a multitude of skills and understandings that seemingly cannot be taught or possessed by all teachers. Luke states a media literacy teacher must:

Balance critical analyses of media representations to facilitate the critical study of text, culture, and society, with the diversity of student readings and productions,

backgrounds, abilities, and creativity. And this is a delicate balance that teachers must develop for themselves for there is no teacher-proof, one-size-fits-all generic formula that would apply across the diversity of attitudes of teachers toward media and mass culture, or across age groups, content areas, or school contexts (113).

With several minds involved in the creation process, Emerald Lens has the benefit of multiple producers and several sets of fingerprints on the final product. Many minds working on a project will yield a more balanced and better rounded perspective than that of one classroom teacher. Inevitably though, a website cannot assume the role of a traditional teacher: it is merely a platform. Whereas a teacher might be seen as the sole possessor of knowledge, a website is more like scaffolding in that it raises questions and provides examples, but students have to lay the foundation and build a structure.

To start this intervention Watkins and I perused existing media literacy websites in the spring of 2008. We realized very quickly that while there are several media literacy websites, none are directed at young adults. The sites are full of information relevant to teachers, parents, or concerned citizens, but nothing speaks to students on their level. The only website we found directed at anyone under 18 is a PBS Kids site called “Don’t Buy It.” The site aims to “encourage users to think critically about media and become smart consumers. Activities on the site are designed to provide users with some of the skills and knowledge needed to question, analyze, interpret and evaluate media messages” (Malone). Based on the way information is presented, Watkins and I determined the anticipated age group of this site must be between eight and twelve. We wanted to create something that speaks to high school age students at their level. This age group is particularly important not only because they are cognitively at a point where critical thinking is practiced more frequently and becoming a requirement in their studies, but they are also very familiar with a variety of media examples.

Pros and Cons to Working on the Web

More and more students rely on media as a means to communicate, a source of discussion, and a reference point for understanding the world. Accessing the web as part of the classroom experience could enhance teachers' legitimacy as a contemporary distributor of pertinent, applicable knowledge. In Chapter Two, both Erin Leavey and Jennifer Evans pointed out students are resistant to media in the classroom when it does not clearly relate to the lessons at hand or comes off as busywork. Recognizing the importance of classroom significance, Emerald Lens should be part of the school activities, so it will not be construed as additional, unnecessary work. Ideally, it will be seen as a resource for relevant and timely examples that modernize lessons.

Another reason for choosing a web-based education tool is the time component. As mentioned above, teachers do not have time to teach the full curriculum as it is, so the addition of a stand-alone media literacy component is not currently possible. The internet is accessible outside of the classroom at any time, so a website would alleviate some of the burden of the curriculum without adding more onto a teacher's plate. Additionally, it allows education to leave school grounds and can be accessed during students' personal time.

Beyond alleviating teachers' workload, another benefit to a website as interlocutor would be the expertise behind creating such a site. Ideally, the site would be created and manned by people who are well versed in media literacy, technology, and critical thinking. While many teachers are undergoing training, attending workshops, and embracing the new technologies, new media can be intimidating (Dretzin). Some teachers do not feel comfortable with their own technology skills and may avoid using media in the classroom because of this. Flores-Koulis

emphasizes the need for “enduring” teacher education regarding media literacy because technology changes rapidly and students need to be well informed about new media (24). I completely agree with this statement, but also feel that the time lag between new technologies and their appearance in the classroom counters relevancy. Web-based lessons can be updated by the minute, so newer technologies can be addressed in a timely manner. Constructing the lessons in a way that allows students to access, study, and practice them outside of the classroom may help some teachers encourage critical thinking through media literacy without causing any anxiety about their technological expertise.

There are some issues to consider about relying on new media to distribute media literacy. First, the digital divide complicates the vision of web-based instruction. Without access, Emerald Lens will not benefit the whole of the population, only those with the privilege of internet access. Granted, some students’ homes have newer equipment and faster internet connections than school facilities, but technological inequality is undeniable. I acknowledge this disparity, but the intervention must be web-based for it to succeed. For students without computer or internet access at home there are other options: both schools and public libraries offer computers with internet access, some schools participate in laptop loans, and internet cafes also provide options for students without home access. Also, students could network with classmates and friends who have computers and internet access, which might encourage face-to-face dialogue while working through the lessons. Finally, cellular phones have access to the internet, and students may be able to utilize the website through media other than the computer.

Another issue to consider is the effectiveness of web-based education. In *Teaching, Technology, Textuality: Approaches to New Media*, Lisa Botshon describes her experiences teaching an online English course to college students through Blackboard, a commonly used web

host. Not only did half the class drop, but many of her students did not know how to optimize online learning and she felt completely disconnected without the human contact traditionally associated with pedagogy. Botshon's article brings up many valid points regarding online know-how, effective communication through the web, and human interaction.

Emerald Lens will only successfully help students if they have been familiarized with how to conduct studies on the web. This would include basic navigation skills, e-mail use, contributing to forums, commenting on posts, online etiquette, etc. Students from Leavey and Evans's classes would probably do well with Emerald Lens because they have been taught how to actively participate with, communicate through, and learn from the internet.

Ultimately, Botshon felt that because the web version of her class was "lacking in sound (discussion), visuals (beyond the texts and a few images here and there), and personal interaction" it became pale and flat (99). She charges that web learning needs to be interactive and that students need to be able to collaborate rather than look to a teacher as the source of knowledge. This ties back to some of the changes mentioned in the discussion of media literacy and its effects in the classroom.

Learning online is different from learning in the classroom. While Watkins and I intended for there to be a forum where students can comment about the site, its links, and the information it contains, this cannot replace the productivity of face-to-face dialogue. We want to make Emerald Lens more interactive than typical education websites. For example, Watkins wanted to include a section where students can pose questions they have about the media. Then, whoever is manning Emerald Lens can track down experts and offer them the chance to respond by video. I thought letting students post links of their own and upload digital photos of their experiences would help them leave their mark on the site. But all of Botshon's arguments made

me realize that Emerald Lens has to be taught in conjunction with a class. In this sense, the website will not be an autonomous learning annex and media literacy will have to have a presence in the classroom. It may enrich conversations, but students cannot be expected to go through the website's lessons and become experts. While its information can stand alone, Emerald Lens still needs the context of a physical classroom to drive the message home.

Like all education, students will only get out what they put in to Emerald Lens. If they scan over the information keeping it at arm's length, then they are not going to arrive on the other side of the site critically thinking or media savvy. This is something Watkins and I readily acknowledge, but the prospect of potentially opening the minds of a handful of students makes us both feel that the effort would be worth it. Emerald Lens would hopefully receive feedback from students and teachers that would provide corrections and new directions, and constantly evolve and improve.

Looking Through the Lens

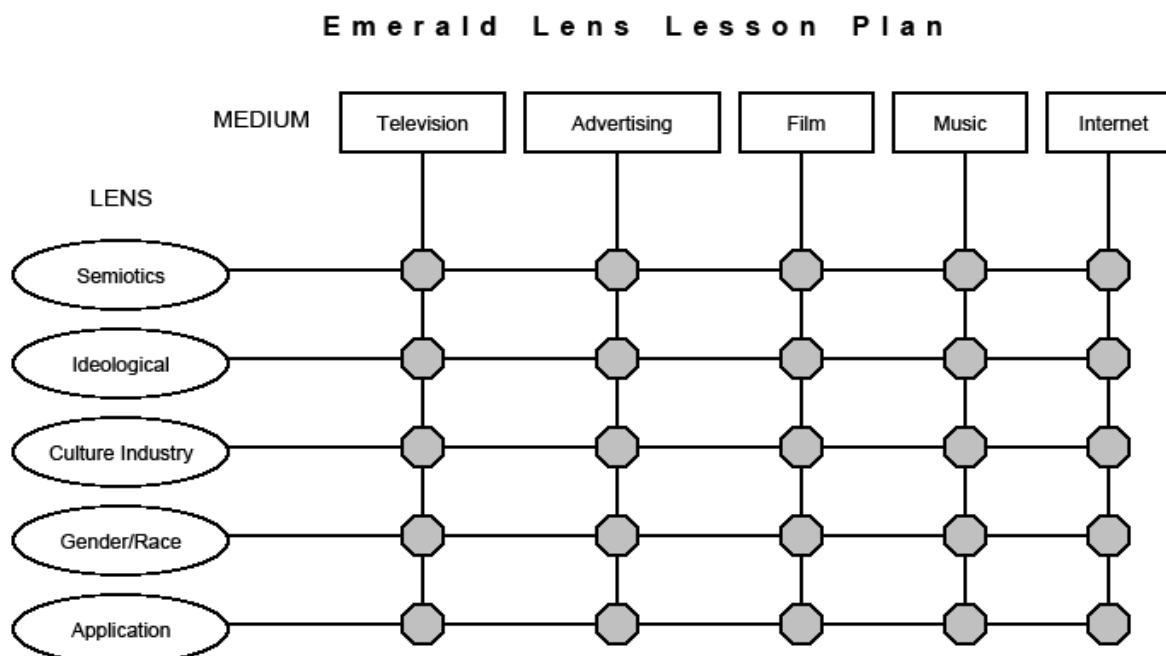
What Will It Cover?

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Project Look Sharp has created a fantastic series of books that coordinate media examples with the lessons being taught in schools. Teachers should optimize their use of the free materials offered through their website and include media examples in class. With a resource like this already available, Watkins and I agree that Emerald Lens should focus on media literacy as the core subject while still adhering to NCLB benchmarks. The website presents an opportunity to explore media literacy without the time or space constraints of the physical classroom. While I strongly believe media literacy's malleability lends itself to multiple subjects, Emerald Lens would provide a space to focus primarily on

media literacy. This is a minor but important difference in priority; school subjects will be tied to media literacy rather than the other way around. In class lessons will still benefit from the inclusion of media examples to enrich discussions and encourage critical thinking skills, but the website will offer a focus specifically on media literacy.

Our plan for Emerald Lens offers high school students a starter pack of basic lenses: semiotics, Marxist theory, ideological critique, and gender and race. The fifth lens is an application section, which offers practice exercises to help students use the lenses in their real life. Cross listed with the lenses are five media outlets. Like Karen Ambrosh and Julie Rowse (see Chapter Two), I have decided to divide lessons by media category: television, film, new media and the internet, advertising, and music.

This chart is a rough composite of the major lessons that will be contained on Emerald Lens. All of the media and all of the methods have individual pages, but at each intersection (shown here as an octagon), there is a page with both a medium and a method combined.



When brainstorming ideas for Emerald Lens, I found inspiration in Renee Hobbs's *Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English*. Hobbs created a five-step model of inquiry for students (or anyone!) to investigate institutional messages based on her understanding of the five core concepts of media literacy. She encourages people to ask: 1. Who is sending the message and why? 2. What techniques are used to attract my attention? 3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in the message? 4. How might different people understand this message differently from me? 5. What is omitted from the message? (Hobbs 41) These questions are not repeated verbatim on the website, but they were a foundational tool for envisioning how to encourage student engagement with media texts.

As far as the content of Emerald Lens, I also relied on the teacher interviews for more inspiration. In particular, it was clear current media examples were vital to maintaining relevance in students' eyes. Daily updates and content maintenance on Emerald Lens will ensure links to video, news stories, and websites remain fresh. A website's "stickiness" refers to its ability to cause surfers to linger on a site for longer periods of time (relatively speaking) (Wasko and Livingstone 469). The platform for this website is education, so I do not expect visitors to necessarily drop in on their own accord or stay for extended periods of time. Stickiness will be affected by the fact that a visit to Emerald Lens will be the result of a homework assignment or a resource for a project. Keeping the material fresh and interesting will create an environment evolving with current events and, hopefully, will encourage students to either visit later of their own accord or contribute links of their own.

One of our goals for Emerald Lens is to adhere to the NCLB benchmarks established for juniors and seniors in high school. Since the standards vary state-by-state, Watkins and I plan to use a general interpretation of the standards and they will be implicit through the media texts

used in the lessons. We will focus on English, Social Studies and Health standards. One example is the Social Studies standard for systems of government, which requires students to “identify and analyze issues related to the election process in the United States (e.g. election board policies, technology used in elections, media reporting of election results)” (“Ohio Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators”). At its core, media literacy speaks directly to this standard. Looking at the media heyday surrounding the election process and using examples from the multitude of campaign commercials, the televised debates, and the 24 hour coverage on Election Day, one can see the marriage between politics and popular culture. This is just one example of how Emerald Lens will use media links to tie itself to NCLB standards.

Experiencing the Site

My vision for the Emerald Lens aesthetic is clean, colorful, and extremely visual. While the text itself is important, too many words clutter up the page. The first page, or site entrance, will look like the television test pattern: tall, thin, rectangular blocks in several colors. The words “Enter Emerald Lens” will be positioned in the lower-middle of the screen and will take visitors into the site. The test pattern will be present on all of Emerald Lens’ pages, so there is cohesion between the pages and visitors know when they are on the site.

Based on the intended demographic and proximity to the field of education, a log-in system needs to be established. This will keep the website safe and running smoothly. On the one hand, because we encourage students to post their own thoughts, images, and videos, we do not want student contributions to be exposed to the whole World Wide Web. On the other, if students are posting inappropriate materials, bullying, or exhibiting signs of trouble, we can determine who that person is and contact their instructor. Also, a log-in system offers a way for

schools to establish an account and for teachers to track which of their students have logged into the site.

Once visitors enter Emerald Lens, they are directed to a lobby page with only two paths: one for first time visitors and one for those returning. First time visitors will be linked to a menu of links explaining the site that return visitors can skip. The menu will include how to use the site, a site map, the site's mission statement, creator contact information, a note to teachers, the glossary, and a log-in set-up page. Watkins and I also considered having a page entitled "For More Information" that would have links for more information about the lessons, vocabulary, and ideas on Emerald Lens. In a way, the information page serves as a works cited for the site and could lead visitors to additional web resources and points of interest. As far as the mission statement, contact info, and note to teachers, Watkins and I wanted to outline our intentions and provide a place for feedback. The glossary was something we both agreed upon immediately. When studying something new for the first time, I get frustrated when I repeatedly have to stop and look up words I do not understand, so I thought it would be beneficial to have vocabulary terms set up as hypertext. When the mouse hovers over a term, a definition will pop up in a text box. The glossary provides all of the difficult and potentially unfamiliar vocabulary from the site and visitors can access it from the lobby page or through a link provided on each rollover definition.

The second path is for return visitors. Each visit requires users to log in before they are taken to the hub of the lessons: the media page. From this point, visitors choose which medium they want to explore. Rather than making the lessons accessible from both the method and the medium, Watkins and I felt that having people work through the medium would supply a more cohesive lesson. If visitors did want to peruse lessons through the methods, they could access

that flow through the site map. The layout will consist of five pictures, one for each medium, that link to their respective lessons. All of the graphics on Emerald Lens will come from Creative Commons or be created in house. From the hub and on every page, patrons can also access the site map, as well as the forum.

The Emerald Lens forum is where students are encouraged to voice opinions and interpretations of the material presented on the site or raise discussions regarding other subjects. I feel the forum is absolutely vital to the efficacy of this site. In his article, “The Active Approach in Media Education,” Jose Martinez-de-Toda asserts, “Conversation with peers and group communication help to foster student activity when they confront the media” (159). Similarly, Hobbs argues that the remixing trends shaking up the standard top-down model of media production needs to be incorporated into media literacy pedagogy. She states, “Educators are beginning to celebrate the increasing convergence between authors and audiences, where meanings emerge collaboratively as people sample, appropriate and repurpose media texts within and among knowledge sharing communities” (441). As seen through teacher interviews in Chapter Two, particularly Sperry and Evans, the ability to collectively establish ideas and effectively express opinions online is of growing importance.

The forum will need some adult moderation. While students should feel free to post their opinions, a guiding hand will enhance the dialogue’s productivity. Moderators might add further questions, suggest other interpretations, or offer helpful links. Additionally, overseeing the conversation will make sure that online etiquette is practiced and there is no muckraking or bullying occurring in the forum.

In addition to moderating the forum, moderators will also keep an eye on the kinds of links posted by students and make sure those posted by the site are appropriate. As far as

resources go, it is important to note that materials posted on Emerald Lens will adhere to the PG-13 rating level. The intended demographic for the site is between 16 and 18, so texts rated R or that contain too much nudity or graphic violence may not be appropriate for this span of ages. Concern for student welfare pushed me to come up with a way students could preview the link before actually viewing its contents. For every external link on the site, an informative abstract describing what it contains will pop up as the mouse hovers over a link. For example, if Emerald Lens links to a song that contains curse words, the abstract will have prepared students prior to clicking the link. The same applies to video clips of films or television, advertising samples, or other websites. Combined with measures taken to adequately prepare students for the media examples, posting a variety of links for each example will not only give students a choice over what they experience, but it will help better support an idea by showing it in multiple contexts.

Lessons

Next, I want to look in depth at the specific lessons on Emerald Lens, as shown in the Emerald Lens Lesson Plan (see chart on page 68). Watkins and I want to give plenty of background for the cornerstones of the site: lenses and media. To achieve this in the latter, each medium will have a description that provides historical context, giving it a tangible place in time and linking it to both Social Studies and History. I agree with the Marcel Danesi's statement from *Understanding Media Semiotics*: "Any major change in how information is represented and transmitted brings about a concomitant paradigm shift in cultural systems" (15). Hopefully, a closer look at the evolution of communications technology will enhance the links between information obtained in class and on the website. The historical description of each medium will provide the year of invention, the decades it became popular, and the way it intersects with the

other media. For example, the historical context for television might read:

Television has been an important part of American life since the 1950s. Typically, homes in the United States have at least one television, but some families have a TV set in every room. Cable television became more popular in the 1980s and evolved into TIVO and DVRs, which give people more control over what they watch and when. Advertising pays for the production of the shows, which is why commercials interrupt plotlines. Now, with internet access, television can be watched through computers on network websites or Hulu.

To enhance blocks of text like this, Watkins and I discussed embedding links to YouTube videos, wikis, podcasts, and other websites that contribute to the discussion. The link will not be denoted by a button, but will appear as an option only when the mouse hovers over the word. For example, the previous dialogue would have a link to a YouTube video explaining how televisions works electronically (“The History Channel: How TV Was Invented”) as well as the history of television timeline, complete with pictures and prices (“Television History – The First 75 Years”). There would be a rollover definition on “ideological.” Additionally, rolling over the last sentence would produce an additional text box asking students:

Count how many commercials run during a half hour or hour program. Typically, 15 minutes is what is reported. Did you get the same results?

Corresponding to the media descriptions, each lens will have a brief summary presenting the basic ideas, as well as the theorists that pioneered them and those who added to the theories. Watkins and I heavily debated what kind of lenses to provide these high school students. We both agree that one of the major challenges to Emerald Lens’s efficacy is making these complex theories age-appropriate at the junior and senior high school level. The following sections will describe each lens, explain why it is present on the site, and give a sample of potential text for Emerald Lens.

The first lens students will encounter is semiotics. Watkins and I feel semiotics is a strong foundation for the critical analysis of media texts. Looking at representation in terms of semiotics can be like deciphering a pictogram; using pictures of recognizable things to piece together a hidden message. Students practicing semiotics can work backward from a message taken from a media example and deconstruct how they came to understand it in the way they did. Everything from camera angles, dialogue, music, and more can be brought into the discussion. I was drawn to this way of examining media because students do not need to learn a new lexicon of ideas, rather, they experiment with new vocabulary to focus and redefine something familiar. Semiotics, and much of media literacy, supports personal interpretation, which is not necessarily the case in standard education practices. The combination of familiarity and space for interpretation will hopefully speak to a diverse body of students, as well as incite their interest.

One media example for semiotics might be the online-only Adicolor ad created by Saimon Chow, which uses stop-animation and disturbing imagery to disorient and confuse viewers. This video will be embedded into the site followed by the questions:

What does this mean? Why do you think that?

Beneath this will be an area for students to submit their answers. I am hoping that given the open-ended nature of this media example, students will provide a multitude of interpretations, as well as respond to previous postings about the meaning.

The next lens is ideology. Watkins and I particularly wanted to highlight the normalization processes streaming through the media, making sure we can identify and adhere to the status quo. As *Approaches to Media Literacy: a Handbook* puts it, I would like students to understand, “media content as a vehicle which shapes, reflects, and reinforces ideology within a culture” (Silverblatt, Ferry, and Finan 5). This means students will be looking at how messages

are presented in the media and diagramming intended meanings. Also, through an ideological lens we can explore preferred readings, Stuart Hall's notion of audience reception theories, and subcultures. This last notion will be interesting to discuss in a high school setting because teenagers are hyper-aware of hierarchies, cliques, and how people set themselves apart from the whole. Perhaps providing vocabulary that helps identify their desires to go against ideological standards might help them through the struggle of choosing how to represent one's self. A more in depth assignment, most likely part of the Applications section (see below), would be

- Using a digital camera, construct a five picture photo essay of what it means to be a high school student today. Is it the classes you take? What you eat for lunch? Your extra-curricular activities? Your friends and teachers? What you choose to document is up to you.
- Next upload your images to Emerald Lens. Look around at what other students have posted! What's different? Is there anything the same?
- Now, would you say your high school experience is reflected in the media? How close are shows like *Gossip Girl*, *Degrassi*, and *One Tree Hill* to your life? Do they impact how you see your own high school? How?

My main goal for this project is for students to see how ideology constructs not only our personal expectations of life, but our behavior, social interactions, and understanding of the world.

Additionally, students should realize that nobody fits into the mediated concept of "normal," regardless of what the media intends. Also, I wanted to make a place where students could practice contributing to the web and display their own interpretations of life. In "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," Henry Jenkins et al. outline how important it is for students to practice creating media content and I thought providing opportunities like the forum and places where students can play with media texts might fulfill some of his vision.

The third lens focuses on the Frankfurt School's concept of the culture industry. This angle will allow students to analyze the corporate manipulation occurring through the media. The concepts of Marx and the Frankfurt School are very complex, but I believe even a shallow depth of understanding is enough to incite questioning minds. Emerald Lens would focus on vocabulary like "standardization," "pseudo-individualization," "false needs," and "commodity fetishism." These four concepts are readily identifiable in the mass media and have been hits in the classes I teach. The feedback I have received from students in class consistently reports that once you start identifying aspects of the culture industry in the media, you cannot stop! Paper advertisements for perfumes, soaps, and other hygiene products are great sources for commodity fetishism. Emerald Lens will compile a slide show of ads from the early 20th century to the present day highlighting media-created dissatisfaction. Considering this tactic's longevity and the well known catchphrase, "Sex sells," students will be able to understand commodity fetishism. A similar approach to the culture industry hopefully will make these lessons age-appropriate and well understood.

The fourth lens is a combination of gender and race studies. These subject matters are not usually explored academically until college. Watkins and I argued over their inclusion on Emerald Lens, but we felt that because gender and race are both parts of everyday life and highly represented in the media, students are aware of their importance and should have practice discussing them. These studies are outside my personal area of expertise, so I would not feel comfortable writing the lessons myself. The major themes for gender and race would be representation, stereotypes, and reality. Ultimately, we wanted to keep it age-appropriate and manageable for additional in-class discussions. While these topics will definitely encourage

critical thinking, they veer away from specific NCLB expectations, so Watkins and I decided to use an even more basic lens for these lessons. For example, a gender observation might say:

Take a piece of paper and fold it in half vertically, making two columns. In the left hand column write down ten adult female and ten adult male characters from television. Now go back and write down what their job is. In the right hand column, write down ten female adults and ten male adults you know personally like family, neighbors, and friends' parents. Also write down their occupations.

How does television compare to reality?

Little projects like this are merely there to encourage students to start thinking a little more critically about the media's gender representations. It is a five minute exercise that breaks from reading information and applying the theories to their lives and experiences.

Another gender example is based on a lesson Rowse shared from her Media Issues class (see Chapter Two). After students work through a few lessons and examples of gender in music, they would be asked to choose a genre of music: country, rock, or rap. Based on their decision, three links will pop up directing them to YouTube videos that contain misogynistic lyrics or visuals. Again, an abstract will appear prior to students clicking the link with a description of what the link contains. After watching the videos, students are asked:

How would you explain this song to a five year old?

The goal is for students to begin thinking about how gender and race appear in the media and compare that representation with reality.

Finally, the fifth section under lenses is titled "Applications." This portion of the lesson allows students to use the information obtained through the first four lenses and apply it to the media they consume in their own lives. Watkins and I decided this area should provide project

ideas and small experiments students could conduct to further analyze the media. The mini-projects and discussion questions diagrammed above are warm-up exercises for the more challenging workouts presented within Applications. There is no way to ensure that students make use of the Applications lens, but we are hoping that just reading over some of these projects will inspire them to start thinking more. Teachers could use the assignments available through Applications as part of class projects. This might also be a way to link the material on the web to the physical classroom. The following is an application example that might appear within the culture industry lens.

WHO IS WATCHING WHOM?

Watch a primetime television show, which would be something in the 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. time slot.

- Write down the name of the show and what channel it is on. Network television or cable?
- Count how many commercials there are during the breaks and which advertisers you see.
- Based on the commercials, who do the advertisers believe is their audience? Do you think the advertisers are right?
- If you were an advertiser what would you advertise during this time slot? Why?

Now, try this again during Saturday morning cartoons. What differences do you see?

Conclusions

This is the initial outline for Emerald Lens. There still needs to be more research done on the technical, educational, and efficacious aspects of the site, not to mention that it needs to be built. I am not sure how an endeavor like this would be funded, but some possibilities include

corporations, government grants, media literacy organizations. Additionally, there is the matter of assembling a team of people who are well versed in the topics and able to link media literacy to the theories. There is still much work to be done before a website like Emerald Lens makes it off the ground.

Watkins and I do not want to proselytize to the youth of the English-speaking world. Emerald Lens is not a protectionist website. While I acknowledge nothing can be neutral and everything has some bias, the information on the website should aim for neutrality. Our mission statement explains that Emerald Lens is dedicated to utilizing media and popular culture as an aid to daily education. The goal is not only to increase awareness of the complexities of popular culture, but to encourage critical thinking and act as a tool to help meet the benchmarks of a high school education. Perhaps this vision is not neutral, but I still feel it is important for students to have access to semiotic, ideological, culture industry, and gender and race lenses that would create more understanding regarding the media continually filtering through their lives.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I started this project with what I considered to be a simple task: find a way to encourage critical thinking through media literacy. The more I tried to bring this idea to fruition, the more complex things became. This is not a Gordian knot situation. The real world constraints of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education system and the pedagogy process combined with an interdisciplinary subject matter like media literacy created hurdles in this task, which I had mistakenly thought would be easy. The intricacies of this situation are impervious to bold actions. All parties involved would have to compromise their present method of doing things in order for progress to be made, but how much can you ask these long established entities to give up? How much is too much to compromise?

It was with this idea of compromise in mind that I moved forward on the idea of Emerald Lens. There is a lot of time and money invested in NCLB and although I believe it is a broken system dragging down the educations of American children, I recognize that it will be in place until at least the 2013-2014 school year, the deadline for 100% proficiency. At that time, revisions and reassessments may be made regarding the expectations and effectiveness of NCLB. There are organizations working toward removing NCLB and fighting to rethink standardized education. Teachers are taxed for time and stand to lose their jobs and reputations if students do not perform well on the annual exams. Teaching media literacy requires additional training and, although present in the benchmarks, media literacy is not the primary focus of those exams. Critical thinking, also part of the benchmarks, is part of nationwide curricula, but is trapped within the context of school; students have trouble using critical thinking on texts from popular culture and in their everyday life. In this situation, media literacy and critical thinking can compromise without being compromised.

As previously stated, media literacy is extremely malleable. It should be an automatic supplement to classes, helping to add relevance to the lessons. There is an aspect of critical thinking in every class a student encounters. Putting the two together on a website like Emerald Lens ensures students a new context for both critical thinking and the study of popular culture. The study of popular culture is important for two reasons. First, the media supposedly reflects everyday life and relatable experiences. This common belief creates a distorted version of reality that people then contort to fit into “reality.” Deeper analysis needs to be performed on these messages. Second, the prominence of media and popular culture in American everyday life makes it worthy of study. The links between media literacy/the study of popular culture and critical thinking are clear.

While NCLB cannot disrupt these links, it does make it very difficult for these subjects to enter curricula. As stated, NCLB attempts to equalize the abilities of all students. Unfortunately, the measure of success is through test scores that do not factor in the differences of class, race, ethnicity, or disability. I am not arguing for lowering the bar based on any of these factors, but I do believe that basing students’ educational progress on averages ignores the inherent differences that point to larger systemic problems. NCLB, like much of the system, not only presumes everyone should be performing the same way, but ignores the differences between people. Promoting the average simultaneously overlooks those performing above and below the middle and defines what is normal in broad strokes that cease to truly define anyone.

Pedagogy struggles with the same promotion of normalcy by focusing on canonized texts and the findings and observations of scholars. A working knowledge of how-we-got-to-here is extremely important, but students are not taught to consider themselves as generators of information. Learning how previous thinkers thought does not teach students that they can be

thinkers. Canonization causes a separation between students' lives and the theories they study. Encouraging students to verbalize their interpretations and analyze why they interpret something the way they do is an excellent encouragement for critical thinking. Cultivating a sense of power and knowledge in students brings students into the curriculum and improves their skills as future thinkers and problem solvers.

Adding to the historically problematic pedagogy is the absence of alternative histories, contrary understandings, and students' personal experiences in the classroom. Increasingly, students must be prepared to acknowledge the existence of these three things to prosper in an era with increased relations with diverse populations and massive globalization. A classroom with more inductive learning styles and a focus on critical thinking forces an evolution in the education system. Opening up the canons to include nontraditional texts from the media and popular culture has the same effect. Students will recognize the range of "truths" that can exist within a range of messages. This paints a nice picture, but with NCLB demanding uniform performances, the education system is in a predicament where alternative learning avenues cannot be explored.

Regardless of the rigidity of performance expectations, some teachers are modernizing their lessons by including media texts. The eleven teachers I interviewed come from diverse backgrounds and teach a range of subjects; they teach in both public and private schools, and have different methods for including media in the classroom. But all are attempting to make their students' interests and lifestyles part of the common ground in classroom discussion. By including the technologies and media students consume, these teachers affirm students' presence as participants in, rather than subjects of, education. Whether practicing web commenting

etiquette or critiquing the bias of a news source or using a popular film to help teach Shakespeare, these teachers are helping students find educational validity in their life experiences.

Critical thinking through media literacy has the fluidity to compromise in the educational context. Although the efficacy of web-based learning has yet to be determined, there is much potential within this technology. The internet has become so much a part of American everyday life people feel lost without a connection to the web. Emails need to be checked, Facebook pages updated, blogs read – why not create a viable education opportunity on the web?

Emerald Lens is built on the foundational assumption that students will be able to apply critical thinking to messages coming from the media, an educator, the government, or family and friends. The inherent presumption is that students will be able to take the skills and lenses from the website into any array of contexts. Emerald Lens is a vehicle for critical thinking and media literacy to gain more of a presence in the classroom. A website is accessible twenty-four hours a day, can be revisited, and evolves as new examples or terms become available. Emerald Lens provides a space for students to create content, talk back to the media, and seek out answers.

The more I worked on Emerald Lens, the more I struggled to find compromises between critical thinking through media literacy, NCLB, and pedagogy. After interviewing educators taking on media in the classroom regardless of pressure from NCLB, I realized that these teachers are blazing the future trail of education. No website can offer their support or the enhanced learning environments these teachers create through their use of media in the classroom. Their methods of educating students offer a multitude of cures for the ailments of pedagogy and the education system as a whole. While Emerald Lens stitches up the current gashes in the pedagogical process and bandages over the mutilation caused by NCLB, it is a temporary solution to putrefaction. Revascularization can only occur with teachers who are

working to improve teacher-student relations and revolutionize the way education is perceived by students, teachers, and the community. For Emerald Lens to have any effect, it must be part of the classroom experience, so its efficacy rests in the hands of teachers. While I hope to do further work with Emerald Lens, it is far more important for NCLB to be retired.

This thesis is the drafting table of Emerald Lens and these blueprints may have to change once the website is actually born. Given that this is the initial plan for Emerald lens, there will need to be modifications, new understandings will grow, and new media will continue to evolve. Unforeseeable issues may arise with technology, funding, or some apocalyptic blackout where mass culture as we know it dies. There must be space in our expectations of Emerald Lens for mistakes and progress to be made.

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APPENDIX

CONSENT LETTER

Project Explanation and Consent Form

I am studying media literacy in the classroom and its effects on students' understanding and performance from the perspective of teachers in the field. The definition of media literacy in this project comes from the Center of Media Literacy, which believes, "media literacy is an approach to education that provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society, as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy" (www.medialit.org). For my research, I am interested in learning about participants' experience in the instruction of media literacy. More specifically, I am curious about student, parent and faculty perceptions of popular culture in the classroom, as well as teacher's opinions of media literacy as a tool to encourage critical thinking. Additionally, I would like participants to describe media literacy's success or failure in achieving the standards and benchmarks within No Child Left Behind. This research will be incorporated into my master's thesis, possibly presented at national academic conferences and may be published in journals or books. I hope that my work will promote the incorporation of media literacy in American classrooms and, eventually, help to create future knowledgeable and media-savvy generations.

From now (September 2008) through 2009, I will be interviewing high school level instructors involved in teaching media literacy. The interviews are unstructured and open-ended, and may take place either by telephone or by email. The interview questions are formulated to create a picture of how media literacy is being taught. Additionally, questions attempt to determine the effect media literacy has had on your students and their studies and the community's response to this sort of curriculum. Participation in an interview indicates your consent to allow me to use your responses in my research. An interview may take anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, depending upon your wishes and your convenience. I will transcribe your comments as we talk. All transcripts of interviews will be kept secure in my password-protected computer files or in a locked file cabinet at my office, to which no one else has access. Transcripts will be destroyed upon the completion of this study.

I am trying to understand the methods of teaching media literacy and gauge its effectiveness as a tool in improving students' critical thinking abilities, as well as their test scores. I am not seeking to "prove" the statistical effectiveness of media literacy through a discussion of scores, but rather to analyze the possible attributes of popular culture, technology, and media literacy in the classroom. If you choose to voluntarily participate in this study, you may end the interview at any time, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point.

If you are willing to be quoted directly, you may choose to remain anonymous, or you may choose to have your comments attributed to you by a pseudonym or by your real name. In my writings and presentations, I will never make public any personally identifying information about you without your permission

Are you willing to be quoted? ____ yes ____ no

If yes, do you wish to be anonymous, use a pseudonym, or be identified by name?

_____ anonymous

_____ pseudonym (please choose a pseudonym: type pseudonym here)

_____ use real name: type name here

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at kbarak@bgsu.edu, or at 419-372-2848. You may also contact my thesis chair, Marilyn Motz, at 419-372-7863 or mmotz@bgsu.edu. After our interview, if you are willing, I may contact you by phone or by email with some follow-up questions. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in participating in this research, you may contact the Chair of the Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board, at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

By participating in this interview, you agree to voluntarily participate in this interview process.

Thank you very much for your participation!

Katie Barak
Graduate Student & Teaching Assistant
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Interview Questions

First, thank you for your participation in this study. These questions have been formulated to a sort of dialogue based on your experience as an instructor either teaching media literacy or utilizing media in the classroom. As mentioned in the project description, all transcripts of interviews will be kept secure in my password-protected computer files or in a locked file cabinet at my office, to which no one else has access. Transcripts will be destroyed upon the completion of this study. Depending on your approval, I may or may not use quotations from this interview and according to your preference; you may remain anonymous, choose a pseudonym, or use your real name.

Please feel free to answer to the degree you feel comfortable, or to skip any question you do not wish to answer. This research will be incorporated into my master's thesis, possibly presented at national academic conferences and may be published in journals or books. I hope that my work will promote the incorporation of media literacy in American classrooms and, eventually, help to create future knowledgeable and media-savvy generations.

1. How long have you been teaching media literacy / using media in the classroom?
2. Did you go through any formal training in this subject? If yes, what kind? If no, what inspired you to bring media into your lessons?
3. Is there a text book being used? If yes, what's the name of the text book? If no, what kind of supplemental lessons are used?
4. What is being taught under the umbrella heading of "media literacy"?
5. Based on the response to number four, how would you say it is being taught?
6. From your perspective, how do students respond to this kind of curriculum?
7. From your perspective, have you noticed the lessons from media studies helping students in other areas of their education? If yes, please share an example (or more).
8. How have test scores shifted? Do you believe media literacy is helping students reach the benchmarks established by No Child Left Behind? If yes, how? If no, why not?
9. Do you see students taking the lessons learned in class outside to other subjects or projects? How do students apply media literacy beyond class time?
10. Do you receive feedback from parents, other staff, or different schools? How does the community respond to this kind of curriculum?