

Reflection Number Two

Media Literacy and Its Value
in the Social Studies Classroom

Mark Koczij
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Prepared for: Professor Brad Porfilio
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As with any powerful area of study, media literacy is a bit of a slippery beast. Schwarz (2001) uses many definitions to attempt to codify what media literacy is and does. Terms and ideas that emerge from her survey of definitions include *analyze, codes, meaning, choose, challenge, and question*. These are terms that we associate with the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy and Schwarz drives this point home when she summarizes her attempts to find a suitable definition with the belief that "[j]ust as traditional literacy has empowered people economically, politically, and culturally, so media literacy can further empower today's American citizens". Empowerment emerges from the ability to critically assess one's environment and Schwarz is not the only theorist to make pains to highlight this fact.

Rick Shepherd's approach to advocating media literacy in elementary schools is to argue for the intrinsic value that it brings to students' every day lives. He explains that, "the study of media forms and institutions is ... directly connected to social and environmental studies—particularly if we consider the role played by media in current affairs, in leisure, in the transmission of values, in the presentation of historical information, in consumerism, and in a host of other topics". He goes on to conclude that, "media literacy is the only area in education with a framework and methodology that allows us to resist the increasing pressures on our educational system to produce consumers, rather than citizens". He argues this point very effectively as he demonstrates that media literacy can be a panacea for a new post-

industrial curriculum—one that encourages active observation and experience of the world around us as it is happening, as well as requiring critical thought about what we all see and feel in our environments. The pervasiveness of media in twenty-first century North America provides a wealth of primary sources, which can be used to stimulate a wide variety of curriculum enhancing activities and discussions.

The T.A.P. method of analysis, which Shepherd supports, seems to be broad enough to be used in myriad contexts, yet is structured enough to produce very insightful analysis. By describing and then analyzing the text (meaning the subject matter of the media communication), the audience and their relationship to the text, and finally the production issues surrounding the creation of the text, students are able to address media literacy issues in robust and satisfying way. T.A.P., with its equal emphasis on production issues, also empowers students to create their own media, to be both active consumers and active producers of media.

May & Daub (2004) touch on this very matter in their article on *Media Democracy Day*. They explain that the MDD slogan “Know the media. Change the media. Be the media” is a clarion call to all students and teachers to embrace the power of small presses, independent bookstores, virtual newspapers, zines, and other forms of independent media. They explain that the level of media concentration has gone from 50 companies controlling 90% of the North American print, broadcast and

entertainment industries in 1983 to only five companies controlling that same 90% in 2004 (195). This staggering level of concentration is not merely a business issue—it is a situation that threatens “the very substance of freedom”(195). Well put. However, as an antidote to this serious threat public libraries have gotten actively involved in the production and promotion of independent media. May & Daub explain that the Vancouver public library system has hosted large events such as Media Democracy Day and small press book fairs in an attempt to give a wide variety of voices a forum within which they can be heard.

As a teacher promoting media literacy it is clear that I have a wide variety of resources available to me from easily accessible source material to public libraries and tools to help me navigate through the many questions raised by the media we experience every day. However, questions that take students beyond the actual text they are analyzing, questions which force students to consider what they are not seeing and why that is the case is also a critical aspect of media literacy. As far as integrating these many opportunities for higher order thinking into my classroom environment Shepherd is able to guide teachers, of every stripe and subject, to consider how perfectly disciplinary and interdisciplinary a media literacy curriculum really is. He compellingly argues that media literacy is the perfect curriculum, and I find it hard to disagree. Once students are attuned to text analysis, awareness of the role of the audience, and the issues surrounding production, consideration of seemingly non-media issues are made quite simple.

I would love nothing more than to inherit a classroom of grade 9 or 10 history students who were immersed in a critical media literacy curriculum through the latter years of primary school. The ability to bring a healthy dose of skepticism to any primary material is a skill that most adults lack and, if used in a non-cynical manner, media literacy can empower students to not only understand their environment but to change it in a way that reflects their perspectives and beliefs.

The ease with which all people are now able to publish for a mass audience—the web, word processing and printing, digital audio and video—makes media literacy both vital and easy to incorporate into the curriculum of any subject area. The social studies are ripe for the analysis and use of media of every kind; and by studying all media (big and small) we give equal legitimacy to all voices. If there is a better way to engage students in the learning process, in their communities, in their own lives I'd like to hear about it.