Media Education In the United States: Is A Media Literate Society Possible?

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Tracy B. Robison

Thesis Advisor

Michael Gerhard

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1995
Purpose of Thesis

This discussion of media education in the United States is composed of two parts. The first is the thesis itself, in which the history of the media education movement in the U.S. is traced from its infancy up until the present day. Specific examples of theories developed inside the U.S. are provided along with the media education theories developed abroad that have impacted efforts within this country, plus, the most recent definition of media literacy. It concludes with a discussion of the importance of media education and the hurdles that advocates will likely face as they fight for this type of education in U.S. schools. The second part is an appendix that consists of activities based on the inquiry model of active viewer media education. It serves as a basis for a beginning discussion in media education and helps to illustrate exactly what the inquiry based model is all about.
Media Education In The United States: Is A Media Literate Society Possible?

Introduction

The United States is a media rich society in which virtually every aspect of its culture is dissected in public view. We are endlessly bombarded by news, gossip, entertainment, advertisements, and, at times, combinations of two or more of these approaches. It's no wonder educators have been concerned for quite some time with the effects media saturation has on individuals.

Violence in children has raised public concern over the violent content of some popular television programs they watch and recent elections showed the effect media manipulation by candidates in all parties influenced the electorate. Media not only serve to inform the public, they also shape meaning in individual minds. What can Americans do to help combat such hostile forces? Men like Reverend Douglas Wildmon have gone as far as organizing product boycotts to pressure advertisers into withdrawing their support from programs he feels are lacking any redeeming social or moral qualities. Other's simply stress proper education above everything else.
Considering the fact that the United States is responsible for a large percentage of television and film production in the world, wouldn’t it be important to provide proper education regarding these and other powerful media. Society would benefit as a whole from proper media education. Knowledge could ultimately translate into more power over the content of media products.

The history of media education points to the long and difficult road many advocates have traveled. However, recent concerns over television and its role in our lives and the wave of conservatism that has washed over the country has created a promising atmosphere that may allow serious discussion over the variety of solutions that currently exist. Media education is certainly due for the respect of educators and politicians in the U.S.. Broader support is necessary if the educational agenda in the U.S. is ever going to change.

When Did It All Begin?

Concern over electronic media messages is as long standing as the history of electronic media itself. Probably one of the earliest examples of media related controversy is Orson Welles’ 1936 radio broadcast of “War of the Worlds.” Many listener’s had no idea they were listening to a fictional
news broadcast. Some reports even showed that farmers in New Jersey had armed themselves in order to defend their farms from alien attack. The public all at once realized that something was needed to prevent further panic from erupting throughout the countryside. Since the early days of broadcasting, at least three distinct strategies for protecting or empowering the public have emerged because of public concern. Some people believe the regulation of program content is the best answer while others think placing pressure on advertisers is the proper means to their end. The final strategy finds the best solution for empowering individuals in media education.

What each of these three strategies share is a common assumption that something is wrong with mass media. The public must either be protected against media or empowered so that the negative effects mass media has are lessened while the positive effects are enhanced. However, the history of the media education movement emphasizes just how ideal that strategy is for our democratic society.

Early media education fell under the protectionist model, which essentially states that the public must be protected against the media. It assumes the public is unable to protect itself against the negative effects of media. People are seen as Pablovian creatures who consume media
messages only to regurgitate them at a later time upon request. Individuals fighting for regulation, those who like to pressure media creators, and early media educators, tend to perpetuate this concept.

The empowerment model, in contrast, assumes people are continuously negotiating meaning as they listen, watch, or read. This view also maintains that individuals with media have the ability to share the power and determine the influence of media. A major shift from media activism to media exploration is gradually occurring in the United States as this idea of viewer empowerment begins to take hold.

**Media Activism**

Author David Buckingham has identified three distinct strands of reasoning used to encapsulate widespread concern about the effects of media: 1) Moral panics, 2) the plug-in drug, and 3) consciousness industries (12-35). Each of these perspectives are widely embraced by various groups and share the belief that audiences are virtually powerless against media messages and are in need of enlightened activist protection.

1) **Moral panics** refers to perspectives which see the media aiding in eroding moral values. The primary
concerns in this approach are promiscuous sexuality and violence. Although studies have been inconclusive in linking the two, there is widespread public support for this idea.

2) The plug-in drug refers to Marie Winn's book of the same name, in which she voices her concerns regarding the effects television viewing has on family dynamics and children. It is filled with anecdotes which illustrate ways television lowers mental ability, promotes laziness, and numbs emotions.

3) Finally, British media educator Len Masterman believes television prepares us to be consumers by constantly bombarding us with advertisements and images of desirable items. This constant repetition by media is referred to as consciousness industries. Buckingham takes Masterman's assertion a step further by suggesting television promotes such ideas as male-dominant gender roles and racist attitudes.
Media are basically seen as contributing to the
perpetuation of a number of objectionable ideologies.

Buckingham's argument is concluded with the following passage:

Most arguments for Media Studies begin with two
significant assertions. The first concerns the amount of
time children spend with the media. Statistics on
television viewing, for example, suggest that children
today spend more time watching television than they
spend in school. The second assertion appears to follow
inexorably from the first. If the media are such a major
element in children's lives, it seems self-evident that
they must exert a very powerful influence on their ways
of thinking about the world—and as such, [we] simply
cannot afford to ignore them (12).

These assertions seem to play very well when placed against the
United State's political backdrop. Those with right-wing views, who preach
their "moral panic" ideologies, as well as those on the left, who see the
media perpetuating objectionable ideologies, are seemingly united in a view of the media as a powerful force with predominantly negative influence.

In Britain and other countries, this collective understanding has helped in establishing media education programs and it's more than likely that it can help establish effective educational programs in the United States. However, Buckingham points out that the distinction must be made between "simpler, more rhetorical arguments which may be of use in promoting Media Studies, and the more complex understanding which should inform classroom [and community educational] practice (13)."

Basically, the media influence argument is useful in establishing an understanding of the need for media education, but in practice it is likely to create a rather protectionist stance instead of giving students the tools necessary in an interactive relationship with media. Empowering individuals with the ability to guide themselves must be the focus of practical media education efforts in the United States; active exploration should be encouraged instead of activist protection.
The Protectionist Model

Traditionally, educators in the United States have focused their efforts towards a more protectionist view of media. This is due mainly to the public's negative view of media in general. We realize that prolonged exposure has inevitable consequences and have tailored school curriculum to raise our awareness, but have done little to stimulate any thinking otherwise. There are two principal variations on the protectionist model in existence that make this point a little easier to understand.

A. Teaching "True" Art

Schools often stress an understanding of "true" art, literature, and music, as opposed to the popular art promoted through media. This stance places a vast gulf between these forms of expression simply because the former has stronger ties to classical culture. In turn, media education concerned with a more contemporary focus is seen as unimportant. People have tended to equate a piece of art's importance in education with it's reputation in the art world. In other words, if television had a better reputation, we would be exposed to more information regarding its impact on our lives. But the reason television has such a bad reputation is also the reason why we need effective media education in the first place.
For example, David Sirota, a consultant to one of the four U.S. Office of Education-funded media education projects that were developed in the late 1970s, and a professor at New York University's School of the Arts, stated that "from the vantage point of those who are most concerned with television as corrupter of culture, i.e. the arts, [television's] introduction into mainstream school life would be a disaster (5)." Though he admitted that "developing a critical viewer, a more prudent and vigilant viewer is a noble ambition, for by better understanding television and its structure, its influence might be mitigated (4)."

Neil Postman offered another view of this situation in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. He argues that reading is a logical process requiring concentration and judgment. To read, we consume ideas left to right, making continual judgments of truth and falsehood. Watching television, however, is completely different. By nature it is discontinuous: Heart-wrenching stories of natural disasters are followed by happy people wearing deodorant. Through this process of disconnected stories and emotions, habits of logic and thinking are numbed.

Postman also admitted, however, that there is merit in the idea of media education—though he questioned its practicality. Postman stated:

"Bertrand Russell used to utter a lovely phrase. He said that the purpose of
education was to teach each of us to defend ourselves against the
'seductions of eloquence.' In the realm of the word, we learn the specific
techniques used to resist these seductions: logic, rhetoric, and literary
criticism. What worries me is that we have not figured out how to build
defenses against the seductions of imagery (47).”

B. The Discriminating Viewer

The second variation of the protectionist model offers much more promise. It is more sympathetic towards media, arguing that mass media can, and often do, create worthy art. In this view, the goal of media education is to promote the positive things that our apparent in media. Thus, media educators have been able to teach discrimination among media, looking for the best and avoiding the worst.

These goals were attempted early on by means outside the schoolroom, for example, by pressuring advertisers through the threat of boycotts or by encouraging regulation. The goal was to simply get the worst programs off the air. One organization as far back as 1935, however, took a different approach.

The American Council for Better Broadcasts was the name of this organization, which focused on raising the level of thinking and taste of the
public so that it would, in turn, demand higher quality programs. FCC Commissioner Abbott Washburn summed up this idea well at the annual ACBB Conference in 1979: “TV literacy is the road to excellence. The solution is long-range. It will take years to develop a literate, critical-demanding audience. But the process, happily has begun... . The end result will be more programs of lasting value. The increased number of discriminating viewers will mandate this. If fluff isn’t watched, it won’t be on.” Although this idea is possible, it would literally take years to complete, due to the complexity of the United States educational system.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s this ideal of discrimination was an important part of every media education project that originated in the U.S.. This era is important to those interested in U.S. media education efforts because numerous ideas developed due to several development grants awarded by the government. One example comes from the Idaho Department of Education in 1978. It identified critical “receivership skills,” necessary, in part, so that viewers would be able to “identify and understand motives and purposes for attending to TV programs,” in order to “be more receptive to some content and less open to other ideas and images (Brown, 70).” Another project was a primary school curriculum developed by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)
beginning also in 1978. It listed as one of its goals that students be able to "make judicious use of viewing time (Brown, 96)." A related project designed for high school students sought to enable youth to become "discriminating television viewers," making choices--"in viewing and among content."

These examples provide a good illustration of the centrality of the discrimination model in U.S. media education. However, it is important to note that the ideal of discrimination still suggests a basically passive role for the viewer in the process of deriving meaning from media. That's precisely why in the discrimination model, it is so important to watch only the best shows: because media are so powerful (and viewers so weak in comparison) that their influence is irresistible.

The most obvious examples of this passive viewer model is in research and curriculum involving younger children. Research by Dorothy and Jerome Singer is one of the most famous of these projects. It showed connections between television watching and aggressiveness, as well as between television watching and positive behaviors such as cooperation, creativity and language development. The most important finding, however, was that children's attitudes and behaviors related most closely
to "the presence and behavior of parents when the television was turned on (Brown, 155)."

A study done by SEDL showed the implications this finding had on media education for children. It found that when watching an educational television show, mediation by a teacher significantly increased children’s learning (Corder-Bolz, 107). As a result, in the first four projects funded by the United States Office of Education (USOE) in 1978, SEDL emphasized adult mediation of television as central to effective media education for primary school children. Adult interaction with television, apart from simple adult presence while children watch, was seen as necessary for significant learning. Children were seen basically as passive viewers without adults present. But it was the idea that media-users are basically passive that was challenged by bringing television and other mass media in the classroom.

These challenges surfaced in various projects funded by the USOE in 1978, as well as in other projects around the same time. Some of these were a project developed by Far West laboratory in San Francisco for high schools, a project developed by WNET/13 in New York designed for junior high, a project called Television Awareness Training (T-A-T), developed by the Media Action Research Center, and the Idaho Department of
Educational project. The National PTA and several other organizations, in turn, used these materials in local media education efforts (Sirotta, 5).

**The Uses & Gratification's Theory**

The uses and gratifications theory has served as the basis for each of the projects mentioned in the previous paragraph. While they all include viewer discrimination as an important element in reaching their desired outcomes, the uses and gratifications theory represents an important step toward an understanding of a more active viewer. It's an understanding that television does not do things to people, people do things with television. The content of a show is only important if it helps attain some gratification for the viewer. James Anderson describes these approaches:

[They] first direct students toward their motives for viewing television. Next, they help students develop standards by which television use can be evaluated as a gratification for those motives. Finally, they provide practice in the process of making decisions about media use (66).
In order to help students develop standards, critical thinking skills need to be developed and then applied to media. Some projects included activities designed to recognize main ideas, classify details, recognize and interpret literary elements (characterization, plot, conflict, setting, mood, tone, theme, point of view), identify symbolism, distinguish fact and opinion, identify stereotypes, recognize dialects, determine effects of media, and develop criteria for evaluation. These skill-building exercises are designed to give students the proper background for making their own decisions about the television programs they watch, rather than imposing the teacher's standards.

The written materials for these projects, in fact, make a point to caution teachers against imposing their values on students. In the curriculum guide developed by the Idaho Department of Education concerning commercials it reminds teachers: "Children are capable of making market decisions to meet their needs. Their criteria may not agree with ours but are usually justified."

The increasing acceptance of the uses and gratifications theory is illustrated by a change made in 1983 by the National Telemedia Council (formerly the American Council for Better Broadcasts) in their listener-viewer opinion poll. Originally the project was called the Look-Listen
Opinion Poll, and it basically collected viewers opinions about programs. However, in 1983 they replaced it with Project Look-Listen-Think-Respond. It was no longer a simple opinion poll, it became a tool for reflective and critical thought about media. As in the previous projects, the purpose of the new format was to help children develop their own criteria for viewing and listening.

Critical thinking applied to media began to show up occasionally in college mass media courses around this same time. College Professors, however, were responsible for developing coursework due to the lack of appropriate textbooks and publicized discussion in this area. Most simply combined critical thinking with their already-existing media production classes. One could still manage to graduate from most colleges today with little or no training in critical thinking about media, simply because media education doesn't receive as much attention as other ones.

This is mainly due to the fact that funding for the four USOE seed grants ended in 1982 (let's here it for the Reagan era) and progress in media education in the United States came to a virtual standstill. USOE projects were mocked by lawmakers in Washington and labeled as wastes of government funds. Many believed students were only learning how to watch television instead of actually receiving useful knowledge.
**Subsequent Advances in Media Education Outside the U.S.**

In Australia, Britain, and Canada, at least two additional strands developed in media education. The first, cultural studies, is related to the concept of media as "consciousness industries" discussed earlier in this paper. This view is primarily protectionist because it implies citizens must be protected against objectionable ideologies like sexism or consumerism. In Britain, where the educational climate made it easier to implement, the cultural studies approach developed quickly. There media education drew heavily on a view which saw media decisions related primarily to economics. Len Masterson, in turn, felt justified addressing the 1990 Media Literacy Conference about his belief that the single most important area of study for media education is advertising, whether its television ads, t-shirts, public relations stories or planned news events (12).

Media arts organizations began to emerge in the U.S. during the late 1960s and early 1970s. They, too, questioned the economic underpinnings of media. The monopoly on filmmaking held by the major networks and major film production companies, as well as a desire to give disparate cultural voices a platform to speak out, was enough to create this growth. A media arts organization in Eastern Kentucky named Appalshop was
originally created to counter the stereotypes seen in numerous media renditions of “hillbillies” (Tyner, 1).

Media arts organizations spread their message by combining community education efforts with the showing and production of alternative films, teaching political and social analysis of media as well as media production skills. In this way we are able to provide a critique of American culture by presenting something other than mainstream perspective in media products. Independent filmmakers and media arts organizations have also worked on simply expanding the definition of media art, by offering new avenues of artistic expression to the audience.

This idea of cultural studies positions media education as necessary for political awareness and, therefore, democracy. Len Masterman simply stated, “It is no exaggeration to say that party leaders are now packaged and presented to us as though they were packets of soap or cornflakes (12).” Masterman believes media education is needed in order to deconstruct packaged politicians and insure an informed citizenry. One simply needs to look back at the aggressive, and rather negative, campaigns launched during the 1994 elections. Mud slinging was the norm, instead of the exception, as candidates attacked their opponents in order to make themselves look better. They discovered the importance of
television in the political process, and used it to their advantage whenever it was possible.

By no means is the cultural approach limited to only political or even economic questions. George Gerbner suggests that media study is in fact "tantamount to reinstituting liberal education, for it liberates the individual from an unquestioning dependence on the immediate cultural environment by looking forward and backward to science, arts, the classics, and the achievements of human kind (Brown, 17)." His idea suggests that cultural studies broaden the meaning of the word "culture" to include the entire social environment. For example, a Chemistry textbook becomes an object for analysis, using other texts, cultural understanding of science, and the show "Beakman's World" to judge the accuracy of its usefulness. These kinds of connections became routine in the cultural studies model of media education efforts in Canada, Britain and Australia during the 1980s.

Another media education strategy developed outside the United States is known as audience theory. According to Barry Duncan (President of the Association for Media Literacy), in places like Ontario, Canada, teachers who taught media education regularly began to notice the flaws in the protectionist model. Students weren't necessarily interested in quality
television programs. More often than not, they preferred to discuss their favorite programs. The ideals of critical thinking, with constructs such as “receivership skills”, though useful, sometimes seemed irrelevant. Various production techniques and stereotypes used by media producers were easily identified by students, but these skills had little impact on their eventual use of media. Concerning the cultural studies model, most students had little choice but to mimic the teacher’s viewpoint because the media “texts” chosen by the teacher were obviously slanted in one direction or another.

A new theory of active viewership was emerging around the same time in places like Australia under men like John Fiske. He remarked about media education strategies: “A convenient place to start is with the simple notion that television broadcasts programs that are replete with potential meanings(1).” Fiske’s main argument was the fact that television gains whatever meaning the viewer brings to it, regardless of the meaning the producer intends to convey.

David Buckingham feels comfortable pointing to the fact that students may be more sophisticated in their understandings of media than previously believed. He states:
Teaching about teenage magazines, for example, has rarely advanced beyond the routine condemnation of ‘sexism’ to investigate the complex and contradictory ways in which they are actually read, particularly by girls. The possibility that the magazines may serve positive functions for girls, or that they might already be read in a relatively distanced or critical way, is effectively discounted. Underlying the seemingly open invitation to analyze and discuss is the implicit assumption that the magazines are responsible for imposing false ideologies on their readers, and that readers simply swallow them whole (8).

A successful compliment to the active viewer theory is the inquiry model. In it, a teacher guides his or her students through an exploration of a media “text” with no preconceived agenda. For example, the teacher may show a television program to a class and then ask “What issues are raised in this?” Students are forced to come up with their own questions of the “text”. The next step is to make educated guesses as to correct answers, followed by an assignment aimed at proving or disproving their
hypotheses. An activity close to this is part of the Social Responsibility class offered at Ball State. Students watch a news stories or television programs and write a reaction paper discussing issues raised in them. Refer to this paper's appendix to see a inquiry based model of the active viewer theory.

It's about time educator's in the United States looked at the work done by their colleagues abroad. The information is available regarding the various techniques previously discussed, however, priorities seem to disallow any progress to take place in this area within the U.S.. But some people have begun to pay attention.

Media Literacy, The Goal of Tomorrow

Media literacy is the on-going movement to expand traditional notions of literacy to include the powerful forms of media that dominate the information age. It was defined at the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy as the ability to analyze, augment and influence active reading (i.e., viewing) of media in order to be a more effective citizen.

The media literate person is able to recognize that he is actively negotiating meaning in the media he or she is exposed to. Media literacy
makes the viewer aware of a few things, including what that person may want to gain from a particular media and personal factors like gender, race, and skills that affect that negotiation. The media literate viewer is also aware of text-related factors like the medium through which it is presented, its ideology and the underlying motivations of the producers of the text.

Media literacy not only allows the viewer to analyze what he or she is watching, it also gives the viewer an understanding that allows him to be able to locate appropriate resources that may help him understand a topic of interest even further. This ability includes being able to effectively use appropriate technology such as computers, VCRs and other related video equipment, to gather firsthand knowledge of things.

Finally, media literacy gives a person the ability to deliberately change the impact or the meaning of messages. For example, if a news report generalized about a specific group or culture, the media literate person would automatically know not to take it as an absolute until it's widely supported by evidence. With the appropriate evidence (or lack of evidence) a media literate person can then create a meaning that either supports or refutes a specific assertion.
The central concept behind media literacy is the goal to create citizens who are able to analyze and use media messages as well as create their own messages. Media literacy training emphasizes rage widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence. Unfortunately most of this training is aimed towards adults and is rarely thought of in terms of children. Educators have to realize that media literacy is not just an extension of the active viewer concept discussed earlier. It also adopts favorably within the other concepts of media education in the United States. Perhaps further discussion amongst educators will point to these shared goals and initiate the creation of a national agenda in media education.

**The Obstacles**

There are many obstacles preventing media education from taking hold in the U.S., including political conservatism and a decentralized educational system. At the Conference on Media Education in 1992, communications professor Robert Kuby placed the blame on *cultural factors* like the escapist, anti-intellectual approach in America toward media and the fact that media education is the only thing that is “booming”
in a national school system that is in crisis. Media education is held back by *educational factors* such as school district politics, the de-skilling of teachers, and the unresponsiveness of schools of education. *Government factors* like the fact that there is less funding for media education today than ten years ago, the politicization of funding for "culture", and the perception that media educators are leftists, have all helped to deter the growth of media education in recent years (Starenko, 5).

However, Kuby did manage to list a couple reasons why media educators in the U.S. should be somewhat optimistic. He believes that "literature hard-liners will soon retire," making it possible for media educators to take their place. He went on to note the fact that environmental education is accepted despite environmentalists being seen as leftists and perhaps media education could be similarly acceptable in a few years (Starenko, 5).

A more plausible assessment of media education's opportunities was presented at the same conference by Charles Suhor, a member of the National Council of Teachers of English. He produced six reasons why media education has a better chance today than in past attempts:
Media education is more than just a fad; media education has more thoughtful champions now, with more scholarship; media equipment is more successful yet less expensive; we have a better theoretical base for understanding and teaching media; the process-writing movement, which stresses written communication across the curriculum, has paved the way for media education; and there is currently widespread interest in interdisciplinary studies (Starenko, 5).

Perhaps these six reasons can serve to arouse the discussion necessary to reach the goal of a media literate society in the U.S.. However, some hard fought battles are going to have to be won if this dream is ever going to become a reality.

**Implementation of Media Education**

There are a number of strategies that the obstacles and opportunities stated above suggest may allow media education to gain influence and authority within U.S. public schools. However, implementing media education programs would involve plenty of work on the part of its
advocates simply because the school system is an extremely complex organization in a changing social environment which demands equally complex ways of making the necessary changes. If the goals of media educators are ever going to be reached, the complexity must be studied and the uncertainty of strategies most likely to succeed must be identified. For these reasons, only three strategies seem to exist in the current movement.

The first strategy shared by some media educators is the call for legislating or mandating media education in the schools. Many advocates simply feel that the government is the only sure way to implement media education across the board. However, these wishes are rarely followed by an analysis of the legislation process, nor by the development of any plan of action.

The second strategy aims to expand current practices that either bring media educators into schools, or bring students and/or teachers into media education centers. This may be a more palatable way of implementing media education because the instruction will be providing training in production and criticism to students and teachers outside of the school context.
The third strategy aims to bring media education to school children by training their teachers how to teach it. It aims to influence the complicated process of teacher education and certification. Media educators believe requiring future teachers to take courses regarding media literacy would create a healthier environment for students and teachers to explore issues regarding media and their influence.

Unfortunately, most education schools neglect media education. "Media" is rarely looked upon as an official school subject, one that requires state certified professionals to teach it, so there is no economic incentive for ed. schools to offer courses or internships in media education. Therefore, public schools have no reason to recognize "media" as a school subject. Ultimately the responsibility for proving the need for media education rests on its believers and the large amount of supporting evidence that exists on the subject.

**Conclusion**

There seems to be no better time for parents and educators to demand media education in U.S. schools, considering the amount of public concern over the content of the things we watch, read, and listen to in this country. Audiences are more active than in the past, people are starting to
realize certain problems television contributes to. The public should realize, however, that media education requires a setting different than the traditional reading, writing and lecture-centered American classroom, thus suggesting major reforms in the current system. Thankfully, the media education movement is growing and getting stronger in the U.S.. This will provide the necessary momentum required when drastic changes are eventually made in the current system.

Advocates must make it a point to convince others of the importance of media education. The media influence theory provides a solid understanding of media and it offers the most promise in convincing the American public and its more conservative leaders about the need for media education. The underlying concern implied in the media influence theory is a concern for values, parents are concerned that media are teaching immorality, racism, etc. Media education encourages children to challenge and question the values and messages with which they are confronted.

Media education also exposes students to emerging technologies in the learning process. Computers are gaining more acceptance in the classroom, and it seems likely programs or CD-ROMs will come into existence that could aid in media education. The information super-
highway is more than just a buzz word, it's the future of information
distribution in our society. The merging of digital technology and media
make it appropriate and essential to include computer training, as well as
media production training, in schooling. It is very likely that today's
student will be exposed to these technologies in a future workplace or in
his or her personal life.

Like it or not, the necessity of media education is becoming
increasingly apparent in the United States. We can no longer deny existing
evidence that shows its need. The control media currently has over the
public will be weakened when a more informed public exists, thus
lessening the concerns that originated the need for educational reform in
the first place. Media literate individuals will be able to take advantage of
the media they come in contact with in their lives, giving them more
control over what they see and how they see it. It's up to us to spread the
word and assure that someday, in the near future, the United States will be
a media literate society.
Appendix

Classroom Activities Designed to Promote Media Literacy

The following activities are based on the inquiry model of active viewer media education and are designed for use with students eleven years of age and older. They allow teachers to aid students in properly understanding the nature of media messages. The medium these activities focus on is television; primarily because students are certain to have been and will continue to be exposed to a great deal of television in comparison to other media. Each activity aims to enhance one or more of the three skills that a media literate person is required to have according to its current definition.

However, any media education instruction must be preceded by a self-examination conducted by the teacher. Some suggestions of important things an instructor should do are:

1) List and reflect upon personal experiences concerning media, specifically television. For example, the number of hours of television he or she may watch, the types of
programs watched, and possible experiences with the production of programs.

2) Be familiar with current issues and theories of media education discussed in this paper. Information is available from a variety of resources like the National Telemedia Council, the Center for Media Values (and its magazine Media & Values), and the Association for Media Literacy. Books, articles, and lecture material by prominent scholars in the field like Erving Goffman, Kathleen Tyner, Dennis Davis, Neil Postman, are just a few people one can find. Most libraries have computer systems in which subject searches can be run, producing results in a matter of seconds.

3) Identify any personal bias' that may underscore any discussion of media issues. For example, have a peer observe your technique and note any instances in which favoritism may be apparent (i.e.- boys being called on more than girls). It's important to keep everything on a
level playing field, making certain students feel alienated would distract from their exploration.

4) Allow the students to come to their own conclusions. Encourage discussion and reassure them that no issue is any more important than another. Keep a light atmosphere that lets students feel at ease. If they are comfortable with the class environment, better learning can take place.

**Activity One**

Have the students decide on a program they would like to analyze by a majority vote. The program they choose will be viewed in its entirety (possibly viewing multiple episodes of a single program) to aid in the exploration of the differences between reality and television. Students will not only note the content of the program, but also the way in which the program was constructed.

1) Begin by leading a discussion about the characters in the program. Have the students answer questions like: Do I
know anyone like the characters in this program? Do they depict the characters in a realistic manner? Does the program rely on popular stereotypes (This question will likely require a background discussion over those stereotypes)? Have the students discuss other popular media figures that may share similar characteristics.

2) Discuss time factors affecting television programs. For instance, if a half hour sitcom is the text for the discussion, ask the students whether the events depicted could have actually taken place during the allotted time (on average 22 minutes per one half hour). Story features like flashbacks or incomplete action must also be taken into consideration. They would obviously control the representation of time within a program.

3) Discuss the types of shots used in the program. Do they help shape our impression of the program? Are special effects used to emphasize anything? Are some techniques used more than others?
4) Conclude the activity by eliciting the conclusions drawn by the students following the exploration. Were there any surprises along the way? Would they be able to apply what they learned to their personal viewing habits? Are there any areas that need further exploration?

Activity Two

Have individual students or groups of students choose a character from a familiar television program or advertisement. They will be responsible for preparing a report in which they'll discuss the character in comparison to an equivalent individual in the real world they research and interview if it is possible.

If the character is a banker, for instance, require students to provide examples of what similarities they share with their television counterparts? Any differences should also be noted. Discuss how these false impressions may shape how people view a real person. Finally, have the students provide a list of changes they would make to improve the television character, if they feel improvements are needed.
This activity is designed to make students research television messages by utilizing other media. Understanding reality and television's version of reality will make students conscious of the way truth is commonly manipulated in the creation of television programs and advertisements.

Activity Three

This activity requires that the class is divided into groups of four or five students. Each group will then be provided a script consisting of a scene of dialog from a fictional program. The students must come up with a physical description of the characters, a design for the set, and a storyboard of the camera shots used in the show. A complete discussion of these requirements, along with individual examples, will be required because students may not be familiar with things like storyboards.

Following the completion of the projects, each group then must present its version of the scene to the entire class. Explanations of why things were done a certain way must be included. By sharing their creations, the students will see how one scene can be produced in more than one way. Understanding that television is medium that contains no absolutes is an important step in creating media literate individuals.
Further Information

These activities are by no means meant to serve as a complete training course in media literacy. They simply provide a springboard for further exploration. Students who find a great deal of interest in media literacy will continue to explore it in further detail. Teachers should not be afraid to recommend books to students who are interested in the subject. Students who might not feel compelled to understand media education any further will at least gain some benefits from the exposure. Their minds may be a little more open to some issues that might have remained unnoticed.
Works Cited


Bibliography


