The Epistemological Equation:
Integrating Media Analysis into the Core Curriculum

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Chris Sperry gave this keynote address at the National Association for Media Literacy Education conference in Detroit on August 4, 2009. Chris is the Director of Curriculum and Staff Development for Project Look Sharp, a media literacy initiative at Ithaca College founded in 1995. He has taught secondary social studies and media studies at the Lehman Alternative Community School in Ithaca, New York since 1979. He is the co-author of numerous curriculum kits that integrate media decoding and critical thinking into the curriculum. These include Media Construction of: War, Presidential Campaigns, the Middle East, Soviet History, Africa, Economics, and Global Warming. He is the recipient of the 2005 National PTA and Cable Leaders in Learning Award for Media Literacy and the 2008 National Council for the Social Studies James M. Becker Award for Global Understanding.

I am greatly honored to have this opportunity to speak to you. I have been coming to these bi-annual conferences since 1998 to learn the language and the frameworks of the discipline that has been codified by many of you in this audience. For the last six months I have been asking myself, "What do I have to teach the leaders of the field of media literacy, to the researchers, the academics, the media producers, media activists and to the many teachers in this audience?" In this presentation, I will attempt to touch on some of these key lessons about media literacy education that I have distilled from fifteen years working with teachers through Project Look sharp at Ithaca College and thirty years of teaching media literacy to high school and middle school students at the Lehman Alternative Community School in Ithaca, New York.

The key lesson that I hope unifies this presentation is that good teaching, for all education but particularly for media literacy, requires that we as teachers continually listen to how our students make meaning of their world. I must always remember the meaning my students make of a particular media document is probably not the same meaning I am making. In order to understand their meaning-making I must learn to listen well, and I can't do that if I am always talking at them and trying to fill them up with my knowledge. Media literacy education has a particular contribution to make to contemporary educational reform in articulating a constructivist pedagogy that integrates twenty-first century critical thinking skills into K-12 standards and curriculum. Media literacy education can play a key role in educational change by developing practices and codifying methodologies that help educators to more effectively listen to the meaning-making of our students. Our discipline can enable schools to tie their curriculum to the epistemological curriculum of our students, their inherent desire to seek truth.

I have been lucky enough for the last thirty years to be in professional environments that have required me to listen well to the meaning-making of young people and teachers. I began teaching media studies and social studies at a wonderful small, progressive public alternative school in Ithaca, New York. The Lehman Alternative Community School (LACS) gave me the opportunity to integrate media literacy into multiple curricular areas free from rigid state tests and any mandated curriculum. Founded in 1974, LACS is Ithaca's public, democratically-run middle and high school of choice, with 265 students who have been drawn by lottery from our wait list. Our student population includes a range of students mixed in the same classes, from those receiving special education and ESL services to merit-based scholars. This broad academic mix of students required that I be creative and experimental in my approach to

curriculum development and instruction. The democratic culture of the school necessitated that I listen well to students. Much of the work I have been able to develop with Project Look Sharp on the integration of media literacy into the core curriculum emerged from this experience.

Current Issues in the Middle East: Public Debates

     I would like to give you a brief look at the product of one piece of that work. This is a six-minute excerpt from five hours of televised student speeches and debates about current issues in the Middle East (link below). It is the culminating public performance for a nine-week unit in an integrated English and global studies class for tenth and eleventh grade students. The Middle East unit follows ten weeks of intensive study of the Holocaust and human behavior using the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum. I developed the Middle East unit to challenge students who had just immersed themselves in an intensive study of the Holocaust to take on different perspectives as they studied controversial contemporary issues in the Middle East. Each of the twenty-two students in the class had chosen or been assigned a specific Middle East leader for the debates. The students each completed a series of research papers on the history of one or more countries in which they wrote from the perspective and in the voice of their character. The debates started with four-minute speeches followed by over three hours of unscripted debates and ended with students voting, in character, on twenty different proposals brought forward by the characters.

     In this short clip you will see students representing (in order of appearance) Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (President of Iran), Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister of Israel), Mahmoud Abbas (President of Palestine-West Bank), George Mitchell (U.S. Special Envoy), Fouad Siniora (Prime Minister of Lebanon), Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa (the Emir of Qatar), Ismail Haniyea (Prime Minister of Palestine-Gaza), Bashar al-Assad (President of Syria), Shimon Peres (Prime Minister of Israel), Barak Obama (President of the United States), and Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah (leader of Hezbollah). As you watch and listen to this excerpt from the March 2009 debates, reflect on these questions: (1) What does this clip tell you about the students and the assignment? (2) What skills, knowledge, attitudes and qualities of learning are being demonstrated?

LACS Middle East Debates clip March 2009

After the debates we spent three days processing their experience and reflecting on what they had learned about the Middle East, about war and peace, about history and culture, about the media, about rigorous academic work, and about themselves. As a core requirement for all classes, students must complete extensive written self evaluations that, together with teacher comments, are used instead of letter grades. The following comments are excerpted from student final written self-evaluations in June 2009 from the class that you saw in the video.

EB: *I learned to back up my opinions with reason and fact. I learned to listen to others and to consider opposing views, and I learned that I (perhaps too often) judge. I discovered that I find argument exciting and intellectual debate even more so. Sometimes during the debates I nearly burst out laughing, not because anything was particularly funny but because I was amazed by how much my classmates knew and how quickly and passionately they could respond.*

LK: *Through this course I have looked far into myself, questioned my morals and beliefs, and have begun to search for my place in history and my place in the world. I have now glimpsed how much there is to learn, and I am overwhelmed. I can now understand the obstacles that lie on the road to peace, and I am terrified.*

SC: *The thing I learned the most in this class is how complicated the world is. Nothing is simple, nothing is ever perfect. I am left with a feeling of confidence that I am more aware of what is going on in the world today, and how history has affected how our world is run presently. I*

am also leaving a cynic. I feel that there is no hope for true peace in the world. It's truly awful, but I'm not sorry at all that I took this class.

It is comments like this that keep me humble. It is comments like this that keep me listening closely to the meaning-making of my students. Teaching is deeply complex because it has to do with how each student we touch has a different experience. It is why I will never be bored with teaching.

AS: *I have never felt so informed about a single topic before, and felt so much pride in proving that intelligence.*

AD: *The Middle East unit taught me a lot about my limits, capabilities and inspiration as a student.*

As the film clip reveals, when students feel motivated they are capable of extraordinary academic rigor. One student you saw in the video had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for writing because he was more than two years behind grade level on state tests. That student completed a seventy-page research paper in which she/he skillfully integrated 137 different sources, using 153 citations. Authentic public performances of skills and knowledge can help drive extraordinary rigor and effort. I am certain that students would not have done this level of work if it were merely an academic exercise between each individual student and myself. The fact that all five hours were aired on local TV, covered by the local paper and that most of the school watched at least part of the debates drove up the intensity of the work.

MF: *I have a newfound desire to learn as well as be aware of the world, how it is presented to me and how I perceive it. I feel better prepared for school as well as life in general.*

Perhaps as important as the public nature of the assessment was that this exercise seemed relevant to the lives of sixteen- and seventeen-year olds. The specific focus of the debates and the preparation for them reflected the curriculum of adolescence. The debates were about what people believe deeply and why. They were about conflicting worldviews and opposing truths. The debates asked each student to understand, articulate, and defend their character's deeply held beliefs and histories in the face of an opponent whose seemingly contradictory truths question their character's very identity.

I do not think that students could have reached these understandings and been successful in this academic performance without extensive media literacy education. Repetitive, rich and complex content-based media-decoding practice established an environment in which the students could explore epistemology, the study of knowledge and truth. This is the curriculum that perhaps all of my adolescent students are willingly studying. They are trying to figure out what they believe in relationship to their parents, their peers, society; they are trying to figure out who they are. Media literacy —be it analyzing advertising techniques, producing videos about controversial issues, or studying the ways in which their text books construct history—is about enabling students to decode their own truths.

CN: *This was a very powerful experience, and it made me realize just how much power people have to change or control things, for better or worse. I, however, am not passive to this change, I can be a part of it, and affect it.*

AO: *One of the most important aspects of this class for me, was the fact that is not only made me stand by some of my beliefs, but it made me question others of my beliefs. Some of the views I have carried with me my whole life were questioned, not only by others, but by myself as well. This year at times has been a tangled maze of me trying to find where I fit. Though I am not yet sure on many of the issues we covered, I now know what must be done and I have started on a path that many struggle with for life.*

Analyzing Messages about the Middle East

A series of media-decoding activities delivered over eight weeks provided the foundation for the skills, knowledge, and attitudes shown in the video. These lessons and materials are accessible free online on the Project Look Sharp web site, in the curriculum entitled, Media Construction of the Middle East. I co-authored this with my mentor teacher and older brother, Sox Sperry. We began the unit on the Middle East unearthing student's prior knowledge about the region in a constructivist activity that can be adapted to all different grade levels.

Figure 1. Picturing the Middle East

Which of the images is from the Middle East and which is not? (answer: The photo on the left is from Dearborn, Michigan; the image on the right is from Saudi Arabia.)

After students indicate their answers concerning a dozen atypical and typical images from the Middle East, the teacher goes back to each, giving the answers and leading a discussion about pre-conceptions, generalizations, and stereotypes. To deepen students' understanding of stereotyping I showed the three-minute introduction to Disney's *Aladdin* asking students to identify the messages about the Arab world and Arab people communicated in the words and images with evidence from the text for each answer (from Unit 1, Lesson #2: *The Magic of Stereotypes*). The media literacy questions in this lesson and all our lessons emerge from NAMLE's Key Questions for Media Analysis, a framework for teaching media analysis.

Teachers should not be surprised to find significant resistance from students when you first pause the clip for discussion and analysis. Our students are accustomed to viewing entertainment as just that, and typically have strong feelings about it being cut short and transformed into an analytical exercise, particularly with Disney clips that can hold an almost spiritual quality for U.S. adolescents. But students can quickly adapt to the routine of media-decoding, with less academic students often emerging as the most enthusiastic and skilled decoders.

Next we analyzed representation of Arab and Muslim people (making sure my students understood the difference) in short clips from TV (The West Wing, 24, The Daily Show) and the feature film, *True Lies*. Students then debated the role of satire and humor in perpetuating or challenging stereotypes (from Unit 4, lesson #1: *Stereotyping Arabs and Muslims*).

These introductory lessons helped students to reflect on their preconceived or stereotypical notions about the Middle East, a task especially well-suited to media literacy education. However, if media literacy is to become integrated more consistently in all subject areas and grade levels, we need to develop methodologies and materials that use media literacy to teach essential subject-area content. I needed to develop activities that taught core knowledge about Middle East history and politics for social studies; and for English, I taught students to understand the role of perspective and voice in written language.

The next activity asked students to analyze short excerpts from two different encyclopedia entries on Islam. One excerpt is from Encarta and the other from Islam.com, an encyclopedia written by and for Muslims (from Unit 4, Lesson #2: *Islam in Brief*).

Figure 2. Compare and Contrast Encyclopedia Entries on "Islam"

Islam: Major World Religion founded by Muhammad in Arabia in the early 7th century AD. The Arabic word Islam means "submission" - specifically, submission to the will of one God, called Allah in Arabic. Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion, and its adherents, called Muslims, regard the Prophet Muhammad as the last and most perfect of God's messengers, who include Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others.

Islam: The literal meaning of Islam is peace: surrender of one's will i.e. losing oneself for the sake of God and surrendering one's pleasure for the pleasure of God. The message of Islam was revealed to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be on him) 1,400 years ago. It was revealed through the angel Gabriel (on whom be peace) and was thus preserved in the Holy Quran.

Which encyclopedia entry is from *Encarta* and which is from *Islam.com*?

In analyzing the construction and source of each article, students provided clear evidence from the texts to support their interpretations. Then, we explored the voice and tone of each entry. This evolved into a discussion of the utility of different sources depending upon one's research needs. Finally, we explored the epistemological question at the heart of this activity:

Is one of these entries more biased and one more objective? The discussion deepened to consider cultural perspective, relativity, and the nature of truth– a host of rich and complex issues that sixteen-year olds love to discuss when they are relevant to their lives.

If these media literacy activities are to be consistently integrated into social studies classes they need to also teach specific facts about history. Media-decoding can be particularly helpful when studying controversial issues such as the Arab Israeli, the war in Iraq, and September 11. Through decoding conflicting and even contradictory constructions of history, students understand that objective facts can be chosen, arranged and presented in ways that reflect and promote a particular worldview and perspective.

Over a number of weeks we studied the history of Israel/Palestine through some of the lesson plans described in Table 1. In addition, students decoded content-rich media documents such as newspaper front pages, historical timelines and television news clips to learn the history of the U.S war with Iraq.

Table 1. Exploring the History of Israel and Palestine.

Lesson	Activity
Same Land, Different Histories Unit 2, Lesson 1	Examining excerpts from children's textbooks about ancient Canaan
Same Land, Different Histories Unit 2, Lesson 2	Examining different web sites about 1948
Whose Fear and Whose Security? Unit 2, Lesson 4	Analyzing documentary film clips on the Intifada
Singing the Struggle Unit 2, Lesson 5	Listening to songs reflecting Palestinian and Israeli views on war and peace
The Politics of Maps Unit 2, Lesson 6	Examining how maps construct many different impressions of the facts of history

These are just a few examples from the hundreds of media-decoding activities I integrate throughout the year to teach the core content and skills in global studies and English Language Arts. At some point the students begin to decode media documents automatically, sometimes without me intending to do a decode. This spring I was showing a clip from *World in the Balance*, a 2004 NOVA documentary about the population crisis in Africa. I showed the clip purely to cover content information. Shortly after starting the excerpt, my students were commenting aloud about how the music,

imagery, language and editing gave certain messages about Africa. With enough practice, my students begin decoding not only documentary films, newspaper articles, and web sites but also our textbooks and even my lectures.

A few years ago, during the Middel East unit, I handed out a brief historical overview that I had written about the Arab-Israeli conflict. After a few minutes of quiet reading, the student playing the Israeli politician Ariel Sharon expressed outrage, claiming that there was anti-Israeli bias in my handout. I was quietly thrilled and asked her if she would go home and identify evidence from the document to back up her position. The next day she presented twelve different ways in which I had used specific facts, language and images that reflected an anti-Israeli bias in the reading. After she was done the student playing the Palestinian leader, Yassir Arafat, unexpectedly spoke up saying "well... I have identified seventeen pieces of evidence on the ways in which this reading was biased *in favor* of Israel and *against* Palestine."

MB: *I find myself analyzing everything I see and do by figuring out the bias behind news programs, articles, advertising, shows, etc.*

HU: *This class has taught me to look for a bias in everything that I do, and allowed me to discover my own opinions and morals.*

Digging into the Research Process: Then and Now

I started the Middle East debates in 1991. As you can imagine, the research part of this class has undergone a substantial transformation in those eighteen years. In the early years, the Iranian characters needed to sneak into a Cornell Library in order to access the Iranian government's perspective on world events through the English language version of the Tehran Times. Of course, today nearly all students have access, in English, to daily reports from newspapers or web sites that document their character's perspective on world events.

The Internet has deeply transformed the depth and quality of student research and understanding in this class, but it has also necessitated that I make changes, such as the bibliographical format that students use. I now require students to complete an annotated bibliography that notes utility, credibility and bias for each source. See Appendix A for details.

Of course, there have also been major changes in how students get the news. For eighteen years we have required students to keep up with the international news in our local paper. I enforced this requirement by giving a weekly news quiz. This spring we switched to an online portal, a student-created wiki. It includes video and audio podcasts and news reports from news outlets from around the world posted daily by a teaching assistant. The online portal has been a more successful way for most of my students to access the news, providing them with a greater range of perspectives and different media forms. It has been particularly effective for visual learners and students with reading disabilities. But my students also feel that online news has far more distractions than the newspaper. And some of them just love the ritual of reading a paper.

For years I had been trying to support student research by having them share resources with each other. Initially they would write sources on the board, typically reference materials. At some point we were actually writing URLs on the chalkboard. Then we went to an e-mail system for sharing sites. Three years ago I switched to Delicious, an online social bookmarking site where users bookmark and annotate useful web sites and tag them with key words. On our class Delicious site we have words keyed to the different characters and issues. Each student was required to edit the entries from last year that related to their character and add new ones. This way, we will continually build the most useful class bibliography, save students research time, and teach networking skills.

In the Spring 2009 semester, the web site *Taking it Global* helped us to have our first live video conference with a dozen Palestinian college students and professors at the University of Nablus on the West Bank. Every student in the class and a dozen graduates from the class showed up an hour before school to talk with the Palestinians. The personal, face-to-face interaction was thrilling for my students (much more than the online sharing in Delicious).

Recently, students have discovered the power of social networking as part of the research process. Last year, at the beginning of the unit, a few days after I announced who would be which characters in the upcoming debates, I got a call from my daughter who was in her freshman year at Indiana University. She had taken the class three years earlier. She said, "Dad, what's the deal, do *you* have a Facebook page?" (This was back when Facebook was only for teens and young adults.) I was instantly panicked. I assumed that some

student had created a bogus account for me. But then she noticed that although it featured my picture, it was not my page. The student who was playing the role of George Bush had created a Facebook page to get help in preparing for the debates by asking for advice from graduates who had participated in the debates in years past. This particular student had to research the U.S. perspective on half a dozen countries over an eight-week period. He quickly figured out that the best resource for preparing himself was to take advantage of the wisdom of those students who had gone through this in the past. Within forty-eight hours he had 22 of the 25 students in the class signed up along with 20 students who and gone through the class over the last fifteen years. Of course, this solution to the research problem would never have occurred to me without learning from my students.

Teamwork and Collaboration at Project Look Sharp

While listening well to the meaning-making of my students has helped me to develop new lessons and approaches for my classes, through my work with Project Look Sharp I have had the privilege and opportunity to also listen deeply to how teachers understand media literacy. Although we are a collective, I want to acknowledge that Project Look Sharp owes its conception, its vision and certainly its endurance to the leadership of professor Cyndy Scheibe of Ithaca College. In 1995 Cyndy brought together a group of local K-12 educators, academics and activists, including our own Faith Rogow, to figure out how to support teachers in our region who wanted to integrate media literacy into their curriculum. For the next few years, we worked with groups of volunteer teachers who saw media literacy as their mission. These folks developed creative and unique materials and approaches. The greater challenge came when we tried to reach out to the non-missionaries, in many cases excellent teachers but not yet media literacy converts.

Although the great majority of these more reluctant teachers recognized the social imperative of integrating media literacy and critical thinking, they felt that they just could not fit one more thing into their curriculum. As a World History teacher, I could empathize with that position. But my experience showed me that media literacy approaches, particularly document-decoding, could be used to teach core content

in a way that more successfully engaged all my students than the traditional approaches of lecture, watching films reading texts, and filling out work sheets.

By the late nineties we began hearing a consistent refrain, particularly from secondary social studies and science teachers. They wanted to engage their students in developing rigorous critical thinking skills related to the media but they needed the materials to be directly supportive of the core content they felt the need to cover. This is where the work of the missionary teachers came in. We started getting calls from teachers asking for the materials that these teachers had created. One such message said, "I do not have the time to develop new materials but if I can get a hold of Andrea's slides for teaching the history of the Vietnam war through decoding Newsweek covers, I can do it."

In 2005, Project Look Sharp published our first curriculum kit, Media Construction of War with the support of the Center for Media Literacy and Ithaca College. Teachers needed rich media documents that were tied to core content. They needed access to background information that students need to know in order to decode the documents. They desired key questions that both support knowledge acquisition and critical thinking. Here is one small example from the war kit:

Social Studies Content Questions:

What was the historical context that that led to this image, what event or events?

How do you know, what is your evidence?

Who are the "We" and who are "They"?
Does this *Newsweek* cover perpetuate stereotypes? Explain.

Media Literacy Questions:

Why might *Newsweek* have chosen to use this image and title?

Is it likely that *Newsweek* manipulated or even set up this image?

From the feedback on this kit we have developed our approach to media-decoding in the content area that is now used in over a dozen different Project Look Sharp curriculum kits.

Knowledge matters. In order for students to do rich decoding, students need to have background knowledge. Without such knowledge, decoding becomes decontextualized and superficial. Students may be able to analyze the lighting, graphic design and camera angles; but without an historical, political or cultural context, they cannot begin to analyze the deeper meanings and interpretations of most documents. All our lessons include background information that provide the core knowledge students need in order to effectively analyze each document. We worked to ensure that the information in the documents and the readings was likely to be what teachers felt they needed to cover for the high-stakes tests growing in importance nationwide. The War kit includes different types of tests that assess historical knowledge, critical thinking and media analysis skills.

With foundation support an incredible but tiny team at Look Sharp, headed by Cyndy (who mostly volunteers her time), our curriculum writer, Sox Sperry, our do-it-all coordinator, Sherrie Szeto, a host of rotating Ithaca College Interns and work study students, and a network of teacher advisors, we have been able to publish a dozen kits that integrate media literacy into social studies, environmental studies, science, English language arts and health.

Copyright, Fair Use and Media Literacy

When we began exploring the publication of *Media Construction of War* we assumed that we would need to get permission from *Newsweek* to publish these materials so we contacted the magazine. We explained what we wanted to do and assumed they would be supportive since it meant getting their magazine covers in classrooms. They told us that we would need to pay *Newsweek* a few hundred dollars for every cover we wanted to use, which would have meant about $10,000, but that they did not own the exclusive rights for the photos so we needed to contact the photographers of every image on any of the covers. *Newsweek* added that we would also need to contact anyone who was shown in any of the covers (e.g. Ho Chi Minh, Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden) to get their permission.

What would be the implication for education if teachers needed to get permission of the creator of all media documents before having our students critically analyze those documents? *Newsweek*, or MTV or Disney would continue to play a key role in constructing our student's understanding of the world -- but we would not have the ability to repurpose their media documents for critical analysis in the classroom without their permission. It seemed to us that this would be catastrophic for democracy.

Fortunately, our nation's founders established that the purpose of copyright was not to restrict access, but to promote creativity, innovation, and the spread of knowledge. The fair use doctrine enables educators to use copyrighted material without permission under certain circumstances, including, but not limited to, the transformation of these materials for the purpose of analysis and critique in a educational setting. So, Project Look Sharp does not ask permission for any of the thousands of copyrighted media documents that we publish online alongside with lessons for critical decoding that teachers can access freely. We claim the right to share these documents for the purpose of critical analysis in the classroom, which is fundamental to our work as educators but also fundamental to a democratic culture. The Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education reflects this consensus view in representing the perspective of media literacy educators in the United States.

The Challenge of Constructivist Pedagogy

In teaching teachers how to implement media literacy education practices in the classroom, we discovered some challenges. Instead of creating a learning environment where students analyze media messages, teachers would often do the analysis themselves. Although the teachers we worked with advocated a constructivist protocol and were trained to ask carefully thought-out questions with follow-up probing for evidence from the document, when it was their turn to "teach" they often reverted unconsciously to a "stand-and-deliver" model of imparting knowledge. Media literacy education should help teachers to shift this ingrained view of classroom practice by modeling and codifying a constructivist process of media-decoding. We must be committed to making the interactive approach that unearths student meaning-making normative for all educators.

Recognizing Our Own Biases

I do not believe that it is possible, let alone desirable, to be free from bias as a teacher or as a human being. My belief in social justice and equality, like my commitment to listening to students, shape my teaching, and I do not apologize for this. I want my students to know and identify when I am operating from these biases. But one of my greatest goals in teaching adolescents is to get them to think rigorously and deeply and independently. If I teach media-decoding that is intended to lead students to a particular value judgment, that is structured so that the ethical judgments in the decoding are simple and clear, that this view of this document is the right one and this one is the wrong one, then I suspect that my adolescent students will rebel against me. If I lead a decoding of a conservative news source but then I use a clip from a liberal source without decoding, or decode each with a different attitude or body language, I am giving a clear message about what sources are to be trusted and what source are to be criticized. Pretty soon my students will be reacting to my values, not figuring out what they believe.

I need to earn my students' trust that my primary goal is their independent thinking, not filling them up with my values. I do have clear positions that affect my teaching and my decoding. I choose what documents to bring in, what issues we will study, what questions to pose. This is a huge responsibility. I would not legitimize certain perspectives I see as racist or violent or offensive by bringing them into the classroom without being able to deal fully with these issues. Sometimes that means keeping them out of my classroom all together. But teaching is not persuading. The decoding that I do in the classroom must be open

to students sharing their own authentic interpretations, their meaning-making, without fear that the teacher will see them as wrong or bad.

Strong-Sense and Weak-Sense Critical Thinking

Our critical thinking skills are likely to be robust when looking at media constructions that we disagree with. When I watch Fox News I can easily identify the ways in which the reports use language, facts, music and interviews to push their slanted position. But then I listen to *All Things Considered* and it sounds like pretty objective news. Their biases are harder for me to see. One of our tasks in media literacy education is to help students, peers, and ourselves to beef up our critical thinking skills so that we are able to think critically about the very media we agree with.

Helping our students to recognize where their critical thinking skills are the weakest is one of the key tasks of media literacy education. In my school, I need to help students to question the assumption that everything that has gone wrong in the world over the last eight years was due to George W. Bush, that he was automatically wrong on every issue, and that his government controlled all mainstream media outlets in America. In contrast, teachers from other communities have told me that their challenge is to get their students to question the assumption that the government is always right.

"Do No Harm"

My final media literacy lesson I learned from a parent. We were working on developing curriculum material for third grade on how we see Africa. Peyi Soyinka-Airewele, an Ithaca College professor, a Nigerian woman and the parent of a third grader, was advising on the creation of the kit. When we started talking about the possibility of helping third graders to understand stereotypes about Africa through decoding images, she shared the following:

> *You may think that you will be helping these students by "decoding" stereotypical images of Africa but it is likely that you will reinforce these negative images. First and foremost you must do no harm.*

Peyi is right. Media messages can be very powerful. Do not introduce negative or potentially hurtful media into your classroom unless you can be relatively certain that the meaning you want students to take from this work is what they are getting.

Peyi's lesson of "Do No Harm" brings us back to where we started. The only way we can truly understand the impact of our work is if we develop the skills and attitudes, the methodologies and materials that allow us as teachers to listen well to our students. This means listening to for developmental capacities, listening for their cultural orientations, listening to their experiences of school and our classrooms, listening to how they understand and interpret the world. Media literacy has a key role to play in helping teachers learn to do this.

In order to teach, as Paulo Freire would say, from a pedagogy of liberation, we must base our work in our core beliefs in knowledge and the search for truth; our struggles to create sustainable communities and a sustainable global community with peace and justice; and our belief in education as a route to human liberation. But we must always temper these motivations with a keen and well developed ability to listen to our students.

To conclude, consider this comment from RP, a student with serious academic challenges. He was the last to share in reflecting on our learning experience at the end of last year. After listening to all the other students, he struggled to express this one thought. He said, "In most classes we learn about equations, but in this class I was the equation." I could not have been more proud as an educator.

References

Facing History and Ourselves (2009). Facing History: About Us. Retrieved January 30, 2010 from http://www.facinghistory.org/aboutus

Media Construction of the Middle East. Ithaca: Project Look Sharp, Ithaca College. Available online from: http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/?action=middleeast

Appendix A

Annotated MLA Bibliographical Format for Middle East Papers

Your bibliography should use the standard MLA format followed by annotations (notes) on the usefulness of the source (why and how might you use this), its credibility (why you should trust it or not), and its bias (point of view).

Examples:

Book:
MLA: Rebecca Stefoff, Saddam Hussein: Absolute Ruler of Iraq, Scholastic Press, 2002.
Usefulness – brief overview on Saddam's rule, good for background info for first paper
Credibility/Bias – published book for young people, looks like Western perspective,

Web Site:
MLA: Egyptian State Information Services, "History of the Modern Era", Feb. 4, 2009, last updated [date], www.sis.gov.eg/En/History/Modern/080700000000000001.htm
Usefulness – concise overview of modern Egyptian history
Credibility/Bias – official Egyptian government site

Newspaper or Magazine Article:
MLA: Barry, John, "Obama's Vietnam." Newsweek, Feb. 9, 2009, p. 30-34
Usefulness – analysis of Obama's challenges in Afghanistan, comparisons to Vietnam
Credibility/Bias – Major news magazine, mainstream U.S. perspective

Online Encyclopedia Article (or well known reference books):
MLA: Wikipedia, "Human rights in Syria." Feb. 4, 2009, last updated Jan. 4, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights_in_Syria
Usefulness – good, details and overview including lots on Hama, the press and elections
Credibility/Bias – Wikipedia has unknown authors but references from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and different U.S. Government sites

Online Newspaper or Magazine Article:
MLA: Smith, Bill, The Guardian Newspaper, "Iraq at a Stalemate: Where the U.S. Goes From Here," Jan, 27, 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/story/o,2748,97637,00.html
Usefulness – includes great quotes from Iraqi president to the U.S. public
Credibility/Bias – major newspaper, Nuri al Maliki's words

Online Podcast:
MLA: Zinn, Howard, "War and Social Justice." Democracy Now: The War and Peace Report, Jan. 2, 2009, www.democracynow.org/2009/1/2/placeholder_howard_zinn
Usefulness – 30 minutes, lots of good facts on how war preparation was manipulated, arguments will be helpful for 2nd paper and debates
Credibility/Bias – clear anti-Bush point of view, Zinn is respected historian, Democracy Now is a popular leftist news show