

Briefing: Project Look Sharp's Decoding Media Constructions and Substantiality

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This article explores how teachers can integrate the theory and practice of media literacy education into the teaching of sustainability content. It highlights two lessons, one for elementary students on bottled water choices and one for high school students on climate change and agriculture, detailing lesson construction and execution. The article explains how praxis, the intersection of reflection and action, can be brought to life in classroom settings using contemporary media documents as codes to deepen understanding and to initiate involvement for change.

media literacy, bottled water, climate change, agriculture, Paulo Freire, praxis, dialogue

In his coda to *Greening Media Education*, Antonio López summarizes the complex set of skills needed “to bring ecologically oriented cultural practice into the realm of media education: systems thinking, collaborative learning, critical thinking, lifelong learning and digital media literacy.” (López, 2014, p. 181). This article offers cases studies of two lessons, one for elementary age students and another for upper level high school students, each of which was designed with these skills in mind as a way to bring López’s vision into practice in the classroom.

I’ve been a teacher for four decades now and I’ve found that my early grounding in the pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1998; 2005) has informed my every vocational niche. Freire’s brilliant insight was to help illiterate and intelligent peasant farmers learn to read the word by inviting them to read their world using critical questioning as the core of his practice. Freire describes his pedagogical process as one based on dialogue founded in a horizontal empathic relationship between equal partners. He characterizes this joint search for intercommunication as loving, humble, hopeful, trusting and critical. He contrasts dialogue with the “anti-dialogue” common to top down comunicués which he describes as loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful and acritical.

Freire initiates dialogue using codifications or codes. These are representations , often graphic in nature, that can help students and teachers to engage in a collaborative process to reveal truths about their place in culture and in history. Freire sees codes as tools for praxis, the constant interplay between reflection and action in service to the need to transform society into the empathic and loving relationships he envisions. Freire stressed that education is a process of transformation of self and society and not merely an exercise in abstract thinking.

At Project Look Sharp we use media constructions as the codes through which students learn to read their world by engaging in media document decoding. The decoding consists of questions to spark dialogue about the content of the media document (“What is the message here about sustainability?”) and about the media form itself (“Who made this and for what purpose? What is the media maker’s bias? How do my own biases inform my interpretation?”).

As we integrate sustainability as the core content for media analysis we try to use a place-based focus for our work as modeled in our collection entitled *Media Construction of Sustainability: Finger Lakes* (Sperry, 2012). Additionally, we create lessons that reflect the nuanced analyses necessary for systems thinking, a complexity that suggests integration of multiple subject areas into our teaching: science, social studies, English language arts and media literacy. These lessons reflect diversity in age-range (upper elementary and high school/college) as well as media forms (TV commercials, educational videos, governmental and NGO reports, corporate blog posts, TV news reports, webcasts and documentary film). Since collaborative curriculum development is a priority in our efforts to develop a strong community of co-learners, both lessons discussed here, ““What About Bottled Water?”” and “Climate Change, Agriculture and Sustainability,” were developed in collaboration with local educators. These two case study lessons are included in our *Media Constructions of Sustainability*

collections, available free through Project Look Sharp's website (<https://www.projectlooksharp.org/>).

Critical Thinking About Bottled Water

The first lesson, “What About Bottled Water?,” is part of the water unit in our collection, *Media Constructions of Sustainability: Upper Elementary* (Sperry, 2015). It was developed in collaboration with Ithaca City School District teacher Brian Goodman. This lesson designed for fifth grade students has three primary objectives:

- Students will analyze videos and TV commercials to discern messages, impacts and responses to media messages.
- Students will pose and respond to questions related to media messages about bottled water.
- Students will reflect on factors that influence their decisions to purchase or not purchase bottled water.

These objectives align closely with the National Council for the Social Studies C3 Framework standards in economic decision-making for upper elementary grades and the fifth grade Common Core ELA standards in speaking and listening and writing.

We began this lesson by leading a short discussion about these two questions: “*Does drinking bottled water help to protect the environment?*” and “*What advertising messages do bottled water companies use to sell their product?*” The goal is to initiate curiosity about the topic and to invite different answers without privileging one over the other. We introduce the lesson to the class saying,

In this activity you are going to be media detectives looking for clues about how buying and selling bottled water fits with being good stewards of the environment. You'll be studying two videos with very different views on this question and then working together to analyze some TV commercials for bottled water. You'll be asking questions like, “*Who does this hurt and who does it help?*” and “*What can I do now that I know what I know?*” Like all good detectives you'll be looking for answers buried in the evidence. Get out your magnifying glass and let's start the search.

We then lead a media document decoding discussion of two three-minute clips from contrasting videos, *The Story of Bottled Water* by Annie Leonard (2010) and *Bottled Water: Show Your Support*, a promotional video from the International Bottled Water Association (2010). We ask the same questions after showing each video:

- What are the messages about bottled water?
- Who might this video help and who might it hurt and why?
- What kinds of actions might people take after viewing this video?

To conclude this part of the lesson we lead a discussion about how words and images can change the way we understand an issue like the sale of bottled water, asking students to consider why the Story of Stuff Project might have chosen to portray bottled water in one way and the International Bottled Water Association have chosen such a different view.

We then move from the full class decoding discussion to work in pairs. We pre-select commercials from five different brands, each of which uses different marketing messages to sell their product (e.g. it's healthy, natural, popular, green) and ask the pairs

to come up with one message and one good media literacy question about each of five bottled water commercials. After showing all five commercials to the whole group we review student questions as a class, asking students to state why they chose the questions they did and ask them to reflect on what makes a good question about media messages.

We then ask students to write a letter to the editor stating an opinion about bottled water as a consumer choice. After reviewing student work we lead a summary discussion on bottled water as a consumer choice issue and on how advertising works as consumer persuasion. We conclude with the full class brainstorming action steps that students can take based on what they have learned during the lesson. The design of this lesson follows Freire's model of praxis in which students spiral from reflection (media analysis) to action (letter writing) and then back to reflection.

School librarian Maureen Gilroy co-taught a Social Studies unit with 3rd grade teachers at Enfield Elementary School in Ithaca, NY using this lesson. In reflecting on the experience of teaching the lesson, she notes the importance of connecting sustainability learning to real-life situations. Her extensive comment follows:

We talked about how water where we live is plentiful and mostly safe to drink, and yet many people here are drinking out of plastic water bottles that cause a huge impact on our environment. Students were very engaged in the lesson. It was an especially pertinent lesson because the school district had just found lead in the water at this particular school and had brought in water coolers and turned off drinking fountains. So, the lesson had another layer of meaning to it for students who were now able to connect to places in our world where clean and plentiful water is nonexistent. The commercials in the Water Bottle lessons were very popular, students wanted to watch them over and over again. They laughed and sang along at first but on second and third viewing were motivated to use the media questions to think about what they were watching and find evidence for the message they believed the commercials were promoting. Students were able to talk clearly about the messages they heard and had ideas of how to change people's minds about using non-reusable water bottles and checking on the safety of tap water. The media questions that Project Look Sharp's lessons have students and teachers engage in are crucial questions for students to ask in their multiple encounters with media throughout the day. I think that giving students practice asking these questions during a lesson helped build this skill of critical thinking at a very young age and made me hopeful it would become a habit.

Systems Thinking About Climate Change and Agriculture

The second lesson, "Climate Change, Agriculture and Sustainability," part of our collection, *Media Constructions of Sustainability: Finger Lakes* (Sperry, 2012), was developed in collaboration with Ithaca College professor Elan Shapiro. The focus of this collection on a particular region in Central New York is meant to be a model for teachers who wish to develop their own regionally-based media literacy lessons on sustainability. This lesson can be used with students that don't live in this region as the content focus applies everywhere that people grow food in a time of global climate change.

This lesson designed for high school and college has four primary objectives:

- Students will understand the current and potential impacts of climate change on agriculture and water resources.
- Students will understand the role of agricultural practices in contributing to climate change.
- Students will identify potential responses to climate change as it impacts food, water and agriculture.
- Students will analyze the role of media in public understanding of climate change as it impacts food, water and agriculture.

This multi-step lesson models scaffolded complexity, systems thinking and student presentation. We began the lesson with this verbal introduction:

How are climate change and farming interrelated? The reality of climate change makes it ever more difficult for farmers to predict how to deal with changing circumstances within and above the soil. In the past farmers could often look at a Farmers Almanac and know what they could expect for the coming growing season. Today, farmers are uncertain about almost everything: *When will the first and last frost come? What crops can tolerate the changing patterns of rainfall and drought? What new weeds and insects will they need to contend with?* Climate change changes agriculture. This is the new reality for farmers and for all of us who rely on farmers to survive.

It is also true that farming itself contributes to climate change. The carbon footprint of agriculture is heavy. Greenhouse gases are emitted in almost every stage of conventional farming practice from the fossil fuels required to produce fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides to the diesel fuel burned in combines, from the methane released by livestock to the gasoline used to transport the produce to market. Agriculture accelerates climate change.

This lesson asks you to study the ways in which agriculture in the Finger Lakes is impacted by climate change and the ways in which Finger Lakes agriculture contributes to climate change. You will consider how agricultural research and farming practices might help to mitigate or lessen the impacts of climate change. Finally it asks you to consider the role of media in either clarifying or confusing these complex issues.

In the first step of the lesson we ask students to read a summary from the agriculture section of the 2011 report, *Responding to climate change in New York State: The ClimAID integrated assessment for effective climate change adaptation* (Rosenzweig et al, 2011). The report was written by researchers from Cornell University, Columbia University and the City University of New York for the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA). It includes climate change adaptation strategies for water resources, coastal zones, ecosystems, agriculture, energy, transportation, telecommunications, and public health. We then ask students to summarize anticipated impacts of climate change on farming in the Finger Lakes.

We then show students a brief television news story that aired on a local news channel upon the release of the report, “Experts urge action in NYSERDA report.” We follow with a discussion on the report’s conclusions regarding the current and potential impacts of climate change on agriculture and water resources in the Finger Lakes region, and on media analysis, such as the effectiveness of television news reporting in communicating complex messages. We then shift the focus to the impact of agricultural practices on climate change by asking students to read two documents related to climate change and farming. This first is an excerpt from the Monsanto’s webpage, “Our Perspective: Climate Change Challenges,” and the second a summary from the 2009 Worldwatch Report, “Mitigating Climate Change Through Food and Land Use” (both texts are available as part of our downloadable curriculum). Each reading included information about the author’s mission and nature of the organization. Our decoding of these readings again is focused on sustainability concerns in the form of questions:

- Given the information delivered in the ClimAID report and these two articles, how does Finger Lakes agriculture contribute to climate change?
- Do you think that the contribution that Finger Lakes agriculture plays in climate change is significant or not and why?

And on media literacy, we have the following question:

- How did each organization’s proposals about dealing with climate change reflect their organizational mission?

Next, we move to the student-led part of the lesson. We explain that they will work in teams, each of which will view a different short video clip about farming practices in the Finger Lakes and then present to the class their analysis about how the model of agricultural research and farming practices in the Finger Lakes presented in their assigned video might help to reduce the impacts of climate change. The six video clips are chosen to represent very different approaches: “Jobs coming to Seneca Depot” is an internet news clip about a proposal for an ethanol production facility; “The Science Behind the Three Sisters,” is a university webcast on traditional Iroquois planting techniques; “Tapestry Garden – Women Transcending Boundaries” is a slideshow on a community gardening project; “Incubating Up-Start Farmers” is an internet news clip on an effort to train beginning farmers; “Rochester Roots: Let’s Dig In” is an elementary school video on students learning farming skills and selling their produce at a farmer’s market; and “The Promise of Biochar” is a documentary film excerpt about an indigenous strategy for soil enhancement. After each team presents their strategy analysis to the full group, we invite a collective discussion on sustainability issues by using the following guiding questions:

- Which strategies seemed most likely to result in reduced greenhouse gas emissions?
- Which strategies seemed to take into account the needs of the human community including people of varied economic means, rural and urban populations and people of different cultural backgrounds?
- Which strategies seemed to take into account overall environmental protection?
- Which strategies seemed most likely to be politically feasible?
- Which strategies seemed most likely to be economically sustainable?

We conclude the lesson with a discussion of media literacy questions related to persuasion techniques:

- Which production techniques in these videos are most likely to engage public interest – interviews with experts, testimony from citizens or appeals from children?
- Which strategies are less effective in conveying the message?
- Which media forms - the readings or the videos – most helped you to understand the complexities related to climate change and agriculture? Why?

I co-taught this class in 2012 with my collaborator on this lesson, Elan Shapiro, in his Ithaca College course, “Climate Change & Regenerative Local Food Systems.” Students appreciated the complexity of the subject matter – how does climate change impact agriculture and how does agriculture impact climate change? Since some of the students in the class wanted to become more effective advocates for climate justice, they also valued grappling with the media literacy questions on the effectiveness of communication techniques. They understood that media would play a large role in enlisting others to their cause. The class invited students to take the lead in engaging with one another on these issues as they worked in teams to identify best practices for climate change mitigation.

Media Literacy Integrated Throughout Sustainability Curricula

Since creating these two lessons, Project Look Sharp has gone on to create many more activities that invite complex readings of media documents on sustainability topics. Our continuing awareness of the urgency of action on climate justice has made this a priority for our recent curriculum development work. Recent activities in Project Look Sharp’s ever-growing collection include: “Climate Disaster: Young People Act”; “Refrigeration Management: A Global Solution to Reverse Global Warming”; “Palm Oil: To Buy or Not to Buy”; and “Environmental Justice: For Whom, How and Why.”

It’s not easy in our classrooms to integrate this level of complexity into settings where institutional demands call for us to teach to the test or to cover pre-determined content. Nevertheless, we must find ways to engage students in deep discussion about the role of media consumption and media production in any class on sustainability, mainly because our students spend such a large percentage of their time consuming and creating media messages. If we can use our students’ own platforms of knowing about the world—such as social media, web browsing, television—we can support and connect with them where they live. The essential work of sustainability education is enhanced when we integrate these media literacy strategies into our teaching and our pedagogical frames.

I’ll close by once again quoting from Paulo Friere (2005) on how co-learners spiral from reflection to action as we consider how to bring the urgent questions of our time into the classroom and then beyond:

The problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the

students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the doxa (common belief) is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the logos (logic)...

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (Freire, 2005, p. 81)

And from commitment comes an investment in sustaining their world and the fundamental work to transform self and community for the long haul.

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