CONNECT!ONS Med!aLit moments

In This Issue…

Teaching and Valuing Healthy Skepticism About Media

Last fall, media literacy educator and scholar Belinha De Abreu was leading a classroom assignment in which middle school students created PowerPoint presentations on their media interests. Many presentations included screen shots from video games. Of these, many were for first-person shooter games such as *Call of Duty*, and characters displayed in the screen shots were bristling with guns. De Abreu was unperturbed. "Guns have become controversial again after the shootings in Connecticut, but kids happen to watch programs that have guns in them. It's part of their media culture. What they're demonstrating is their likes and dislikes, and I want to give them an opportunity to share their media choices without recrimination." As the presentations progressed, some students asked whether the images of guns were 'wrong.' De Abreu's response: "If you're asking whether there's something wrong with it then you already think there's something wrong. What's the reason you think it might be wrong?"

De Abreu's response isn't necessarily a call to conscience, but it does allow students to pause for self-reflection. Moreover, there's a Socratic method embedded in her response – the expectation that learning involves a process of "inquiry." Both elements are foundational to media literacy education.

Some media educators are indeed motivated by a desire to call audiences to conscience. As our *Voices of Media Literacy* interview with media literacy pioneer Marieli Rowe revealed, many media organizations in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s worked to challenge what they believed to be the pernicious forces of media influence, especially upon children. Today, established organizations such as the Action Coalition for Media Education exhort consumers to wake up to the fact that they are being exploited by powerful multinational media companies. With this global view comes a global criticism of media producers—saying that all commercial producers seek to impose their interests and point of view on audiences. Here, too, the *Voices of Media Literacy* interviews are illuminating. At the end of his interview, Jean-Pierre Golay, a Swiss educator who pioneered media literacy programs in the Nazi era, warns of the dangers of cynicism, and argues that educators should be ". . .very cautious not to add through skeptical behavior or irresponsible criticism, an additional effect to the existing tendency of teenagers to see the world with disillusioned eyes" (p.32).

How can students be encouraged to develop a healthy skepticism about media? Converting students to a singular point of view about media—whether good or bad—isn't the only thing to avoid. Preaching rather than teaching -- delivering content about media to students without letting students have the opportunity to seek their own evidence for their own point of view -- can also be problematic. It can be tempting to present a film, curriculum or lesson with the best, most authoritative information on media. But are students being given adequate time and opportunity to ask questions about media, to reflect on what they've discovered, and apply their analytic skills? This is the invitation which De Abreu gives to her students.

Cynics assume the worst, pollyannas assume the best, but how can educators encourage neither a cynical nor a blithely optimistic approach to media? In this issue of *Connections*, we discuss some of the principles and best practices for helping students develop a healthy skepticism about media. In our first research article, we demonstrate why some media education materials are not always the best resources for developing that skepticism. In our second research article, we highlight tools and practices–some timeless, some contemporary—which can help students evaluate media with a discerning and open mind. In our resources section, we report on a new research study on media representations of girls and women released by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media. In our MediaLit Moment, your students may enjoy spending time with the "Star Wars Galaxy" page on the *Entertainment Weekly* website, but they will have to use the full force of their analytic powers to identify what media producers are hoping to gain from them.

Curricular Disincentives to Healthy Skepticism

At CML, we have insisted—for a number of reasons--that students need to learn how to critically evaluate media for themselves. Among other things, we believe that students who don't acquire these skills are more likely to depend on or reflexively reject the opinions of others about media, including those of their teachers. They may be more likely to take a singular point of view about media – whether labeled "good" or "bad." If students are to become aware of their own values, tastes, and preferences, and if they are to develop a healthy skepticism about media, they will need both training and independent practice.

For teachers, selecting the right resources is of some importance, and not every resource is ideally suited to the task. Take, for example, "Killing Us Softly 4," the Media Education Foundation's latest installment in a series on advertising's portrayal of women. Through the medium of film, feminist media scholar Jean Kilbourne delivers a multi-media presentation which is organized much like a classic expository essay. She states her thesis within the first five minutes of the film: ". . .just as it's difficult to be healthy in a toxic physical environment . . .it's difficult to be healthy in what I call a toxic cultural environment, an environment that surrounds us with unhealthy images, and that constantly sacrifices our health, and our sense of well-being, for the sake of profit." Kilbourne's presentation is compelling and informative, and the evidence presented for her argument is credible as well.

But if students are to make judgments about media for themselves, they need time and space to engage in a process of inquiry with media texts, to analyze media for themselves, develop a point of view and support it with evidence. In previous issues of *Connections*, we've highlighted the work of several organizations devoted to change in K-12 schools, among them the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Waters Foundation. Both make similar claims about the need for process skills. The Waters Foundation, which trains teachers to apply system thinking principles in the classroom, publishes a set of cards illustrating the "habits of system thinkers." One of the habits is described thus: "Considers an issue fully, and resists the urge to come to a quick conclusion" (www.watersfoundation.org). Critical thinking and problem solving are among the most important learning skills identified by the Partnership. Among the habits of mind needed for successful problem-solving: ". . .have the persistence and tolerance for ambiguity to keep searching for a solution. . ." (www.p21.org, "Framework Foundations White Paper," p. 14). Simply viewing a presentation which accumulates evidence on the damaging effects of media representations of women is not likely to encourage skills of analysis: students must learn to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with media.

Another case in point is the 2009 "Media Literacy for Prevention" mini-unit produced by the New Mexico Media Literacy Project. In many ways the unit supplies teachers with exemplary material for developing healthy skepticism about media messages; however, we noticed a few items which did not.   In one activity, students are invited to deconstruct an ad for a

"smokeless" tobacco product (i.e., chewing tobacco). Students are guided to answer ten questions. Sample answers are provided in the discussion guide to the unit, and these answers present a great opportunity for analysis, looking at authorship, techniques, audience, content and purpose. The answers themselves have many values embedded in them, and this in itself deserves to be questioned.

Here are questions 8, 9, and 10:

8) What positive messages are presented? What negative messages are presented?

9) What groups of people does this message empower? What groups does it disempower? How does this ad serve the media maker's interest?

10) What part of the story is not being told? How and where could you get more information about the untold stories?

The sample answer to the question "What negative messages are presented?" includes: "The lack of information about spit tobacco is, in itself, a negative message because we don't have any visual clues from this ad that tobacco leads to dental problems like tooth loss or diseases like cancer." The sample answer to the question "What groups does it disempower?" includes: "It disempowers those who speak out against tobacco use: health care professionals, including doctors, nurses, health prevention specialists, health organizations, and educators who try to teach others about the dangers of starting or continuing tobacco use" (p.27). In the sample answer to question 10, students are directed to the same group of professionals for more information.

These sample answers suggest a number of things: If use of the product carries health risks, advertisers should not attempt to make the product attractive to potential buyers. If health and educational professionals are disempowered by the ad, then (perhaps) the best course of action is to replace the ad with their own message on the dangers of tobacco use. And these same professionals are naturally the best group to tell the "untold story" of the ad. Answers like these essentially create a narrative of heroic struggle between good and evil, with teachers and health care professionals in the vanguard of the good, and students following closely behind. If a teacher working with this curriculum were to present these as authoritative answers to the questions, students would be less likely to come up with original responses to the ad which reflect their own values, beliefs and interests; and they would be less likely to develop an independent-minded skepticism about media.

To be clear, we believe that the New Mexico Media Literacy Project has made many valuable contributions to media literacy education over the last two decades. In our next research article, we outline some of the best practices for developing skepticism and critical autonomy in students, and curricula by NMMLP is featured there, too.

Principles and Methods for Promoting Healthy Skepticism

The CML framework is an ideal tool for self-sustained inquiry about media. The chewing tobacco advertisement at the center of the NMMLP deconstruction activity featured in the last article provides one example. Using the framework, students can conduct a discussion which is open-ended yet sufficiently focused to gain valuable insights about the ad. One student might notice that the people depicted in the ad appear to be frolicking around on a beach on a tropical island. Students might ask, why does everyone in the advertisement appear to be a tourist? -- which leads another student to ask Key Question #4: What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? This Key Question, drawn from the discipline of media studies, ensures that students continue to ask productive questions about media.

Media production activities can also help sustain inquiry and reflection. Take, for example, NMMLP's "Hands-On Media Literacy," a unit designed for students in grades three and up. The curriculum asks students to role play in groups as advertising agency staff. In their "agencies," they design and create a children's toy or product; design a logo and create packaging; create a product manual with illustrations; and design (and partially execute) an advertising campaign, including target audience, demographic information, and a media plan. With such hands-on experience, younger students will be able to develop their own understanding of how and why toy advertisers target them. As we illustrated in our issue of *Connections* on critical construction (July 2012), the CML framework can be used with construction activities such as these to catalyze student reflection on their roles as both media producers and consumers.

Some of the practices needed for the development of healthy skepticism about media have been in existence since ancient times. Take, for example, this quote from Aristotle: "It is the mark of an educated man to entertain a thought without accepting it." In his *Voices of Media Literacy* interview, Jean-Pierre Golay has something similar to say about accepting or rejecting media messages: "An increased awareness allows us to perceive what attracts, fascinates, repels us. Thus it might enable us either to restrain from unconsidered acceptance of the fantasy images. . . or decide to accept their presence in us; awareness should not necessarily mean rejection" (p.18).

Classic rhetorical skills can indeed be useful when they are applied to contemporary media texts. For example, students can underline (or highlight, with tablet computer in hand) those passages from a news story or blog post which they believe are fact, and those which they believe are opinion. Close analysis of an audio-visual media text draws on similar skills. What did we see and hear? It can be challenging—for children and adults alike—to offer objective observation rather than interpretation of the text. Another classic rhetorical exercise involves asking questions to evaluate the credibility of a speaker. In the CML Media Literacy Trilogy, we offer tools for change management in schools, including a tool to help students judge the credibility of online sources. With a checklist adapted from a MacArthur Foundation blog post

by Barbara Ray, students ask questions about the source's accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency and coverage. What if the "speaker" is a website? CML has developed a Checklist on Website Quality based on the Five Key Questions. For example, drawing on Key Question #1: Who created this message?, students can investigate whether the following is true:

- I can identify a group or individual responsible for the content on the site
- This site is maintained by a person or organization that I know is credible outside of the Internet
- This site has been updated in the past 3 to 6 months
- This site has a phone number, email or mailing address that I could use for contacting the person or organization for more information

Finally, inviting students to share their experiences, preferences and points of view about media is one of the best routes to teaching them to become healthy skeptics. Media literacy educator and scholar Belinha De Abreu, whom we mentioned in our theme article, offers these thoughts: "One of the advantages of media literacy education is that students give the teacher their knowledge base on media. They're not often asked to relay that piece of themselves because media is typically thought of as entertainment. . .We say, 'I don't want to hear about that. Stop talking about that and get down to business. Put that phone away.' Without starting the conversation and asking, 'What do you like about that?', you can't ask further questions, such as 'What is this message telling you?' You can't ask them to look more closely at how their favorite TV program has been framed for them by the producers. . .When teachers do have that conversation with students, they can ask questions to help them to think about what they've been accepting outright from media."

De Abreu's argument is one of many reasons why it's important to frame media literacy pedagogy through the Empowerment Spiral of Awareness, Analysis, Reflection and Action. When students talk with teachers about the media they're interested in, they develop skills in awareness and self-reflection--skills which can motivate them to become skeptical about media, and to apply critical thinking skills to the analysis of media. Teaching and curricula which focus on student experiences also bring the ultimate goal of media literacy education within reach: the motivation and desire of young people to continue with thorough, lifelong investigation of their media world.

Plan to Attend NAMLE 2013

The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) 2013 Conference is scheduled for July 12-13 in Torrance, California. This year's theme is *Intersections: Teaching and Learning Across Media.* Center for Media Literacy is a founding organizational member of NAMLE.

About Us…
The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

www.consortiumformedialiteracy.org

Resources for Media Literacy

Teaching Tip: Take a minute to reflect on your own views about media. Are you a cynic, a pollyanna or a skeptic? Fostering healthy skepticism in the classroom helps students to develop strong critical thinking skills around media.

Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media Releases New Research Study

In mid-November 2012, the Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media released a new study, *Gender Roles & Occupations: A Look at Character Attributes and Job-Related Aspirations in Film and Television.* The research team, led by Professor Stacy Smith at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 11,927 speaking characters for gender roles across three media: 129 top-grossing family films released from 2006 to 2011; 275 prime-time television programs across a week of regularly airing series in the spring of 2012 on 10 broadcast and cable channels; and 36 children's television shows airing in 2011 across three networks.

Five key findings emerged from analysis of the data collected. First, females are still sidelined in popular entertainment. A large percent of stories were highly male centric, casting boys and men in 75% or more of the speaking roles (50% of family films, and 39% of children's shows, and 20% of prime-time programs). In family films and children's TV, the ratio of male to female characters was greater than 2 to 1.

Second, sexiness was gendered across all three media. Females were far more likely to be depicted wearing tight or alluring apparel, showing exposed skin, thin, or referenced as physically attractive by another character. For example, 36.2% of female characters wore alluring apparel in prime-time shows, versus 8.4% of male characters. In addition, a pattern emerged when female characters were grouped by age. Across both prime time shows and family films, teens aged 13-20 were more likely to be thin than their older counterparts.

Third, females still suffer from an employment imbalance in film and prime-time TV. For example, data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that women comprised 47% of the work force in 2011, yet female characters held only 20.3% of total on-screen occupations in family films, 34.4% of all jobs in prime-time programs, and 25.3% of all jobs in children's shows. A fourth, related finding indicated that female characters were still hitting the glass ceiling across family films and prime time shows. The greatest gender imbalances were found in family films. Two female characters were referred to as U.S. Representatives, but never shown on screen, while male characters held over 45 different prestigious U.S. political positions. Not one female character was depicted at the top of the financial sector, the legal arena or journalism.

Fifth, few female characters find work in scientific fields. Among main characters in family films, not one female protagonist or co-lead is shown with a STEM career. In addition, STEM males out number STEM females in family films by a ratio of over 5 to 1. Across the fields of computer science and engineering, the ratio of males to females is 14.25 to 1 in family films and 5.4 to 1 in prime time shows.

The Geena Davis Institute publishes a weekly SmartBrief, which samples news stories of interest to members from sources across the web. The SmartBrief for November 15th features a story on the new study from *Variety* online, including coverage of a symposium offered at the SLS Beverly Hills Hotel. Two female entertainment executives in attendance—Amy Pascal, co-chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Nina Tassler, president of CBS Entertainment—expressed strong support. Tassler observed, "Until the Institute was created and the symposiums really started, when looking into the way women were portrayed on television, you really had no lens to look at the data. This really provided us with a much more focused lens through which we could incorporate that information into our commitment to diversity and to finding ways to increase and enhance the way women are portrayed on CBS shows."

The story also sheds light on Davis' strategies for change: "My theory is that if we can change what kids see--if they can see boys and girls sharing the same sandbox equally in the beginning--that will impact how boys view girls and how girls view girls later on in life. If the ratio of 50-50 starts to become the norm in what they see, then that will be something that they expect." Davis believes that such changes in expectations would completely fulfill the mission of GDIGM. She even sees institutional obsolescence as a goal: "I hope we can put ourselves out of business" (All quotes from Jenny Peters, "Geena on Gender, *Variety* online, 13 November 2012).

To access both the executive summary and the full research report, visit:
http://www.seejane.org/research/

Med!aLit Moments

Blurring the Edges of Commercial Intent

In the print era, it was usually easy to decipher how publications were paid for, and who was paying for what. Ads and subscriptions kept the publisher afloat. With web publishers, it's not always easy to distinguish between editorial and advertising content. The *Entertainment Weekly* website is one good example. If an EW.com blogger writes a glowing re-cap of last week's episode of "Arrow," is it a plot summary, or a promotional vehicle? Is it possible that CW Network paid something to the blogger? In this MediaLit Moment, your students will examine a variety of media texts on EW.com's "Star Wars Galaxy" page to gain a more refined understanding of the purposes behind commercial content.

Ask students to identify the purposes of different media texts about the same media franchise.

AHA!: A lot of what I'm seeing and reading on this web page is trying to get me to buy something, but it isn't always easy to tell!

Key Question #5: Why was this message sent?
Core Concept #5: Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Grade Level: 8+

Materials: computer, high speed internet connection, data projector, screen

Activity: Because the content on the *Entertainment Weekly* web site is constantly changing, you'll need to do a little homework on the day before you plan to teach the activity. With your browser, navigate to www.ew.com, then type "Star Wars Galaxy" in the search bar at the top right of the home page. Once you've arrived at the Star Wars page, browse through some of the content. Select three different pieces of content which reflect different purposes. Find a game or movie trailer which is clearly intended to sell a product. Find a news story which appears to simply report on developments within the Star Wars franchise (e.g., "Rick McCallum Leaving Lucasfilm"). Finally, find some content which appear to promote the franchise without selling a specific product. Interviews with SW actors are often a good choice. You may wish to include a fourth item which seems intended to generate positive attention for the franchise (e.g., the White House playfully rejects a whitehouse.gov petition for the U.S. government to build a Death Star).

To begin the activity itself, create a causal loop diagram for commercial media texts, much like the one described in our previous MediaLit Moment, "Bringing the Audience into the Loop." Ask students to name a kind of media product they like to buy. A music download? A video game? Write a triangular figure on the board. On the bottom, write "Advertisements produced." On another side, write "music tracks sold," or "video games sold." On another side, write "You," or "Audience." Complete the causal loop diagram with your students by drawing arrows to connect the items on each side of the triangle. Explain how media producers create ad campaigns for new products, which catch the eye of potential buyers like themselves. If those campaigns are successful, they lead to increased sales. Increased sales are likely to lead to more advertisements, and the advertisements will attempt to heighten (or at least maintain) their interest in the product. In finishing this part of the activity, remind students how essential they are to all these relationships.

Next, tell students that they're going to have a look at a few different media messages, some of which are advertisements, some of which are not, and that they'll need to decide what response producers hoped to receive from audiences with each individual piece. Navigate to the "Star Wars Galaxy" page on the EW.com site, and play or display the texts which you've selected. With each text, ask, who produced it? Usually the answer will be Disney/Lucasfilm, or EW.com. Was this intended to sell a specific Star Wars product? If not, what do they believe to be the purpose of the text? Draw a triangular diagram for each, this time with the name of the text on the bottom, the name of the producer on one side, and "Audience" on the other side. Write a description of the purpose of the text near the "Audience" side of the triangle, or more than one if students have offered up more than one possible purpose.

Even if the message isn't explicitly intended to sell a product, what audience responses might be valuable to *Entertainment Weekly* and/or the Star Wars franchise? Why?

When students offer up several possible purposes, you may wish to call attention to Key Question #2. What's the media format and techniques used? What kind of response might audiences have to them?

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy's MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, © 2002-2011, Center for Media Literacy, http://www.medialit.com