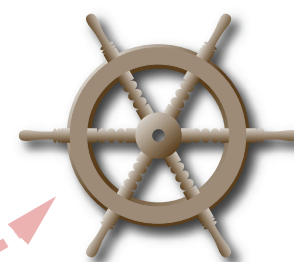


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Media Literacy in Canada

BY BARRY DUNCAN AND CAROL ARCUS. ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN *FORUM* MAGAZINE, PUBLISHED BY THE ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOLS' TEACHERS' FEDERATION.

Teachers from many disciplines have exploited the teachable moments which surface so readily from the immense territory generated by media and popular culture and the new digital media – discussing 9/11, Katrina, Britney Spears having a psychic meltdown, or debating the pros and cons of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt engaging in celebrity diplomacy in Africa. In this discussion, it's easy to dismiss youth's involvement in the media, especially because of the bad rap given to social networking and video games.

Until recently, popular culture has always been contrasted with 'high culture.' Opera, Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo would fall in this category, whereas Beyoncé, Harlequin romances, blockbuster films and reality television were 'low culture.' The distinction is obviously arbitrary, obscuring rather than illuminating debate and discussion. Media and pop culture are ubiquitous and inhabit the lives of our students. Cultural critics want to make the term *culture* refer to popular culture as well as to that culture we associate with the so-called classics. Cultural critics are as likely to write about *The Simpsons* as they are to analyze Macbeth. They want to break down the boundary between high and low, and to dismantle the hierarchy that such a distinction implies. They also want to discover the reasons why a certain kind of aesthetic product is more valued than others.

A cultural critic writing on a revered classic might concentrate on a movie or even a comic strip version. Or she might see it in light of some more common form of reading material (a novel by Jane Austen might be viewed in light of Gothic romances or ladies' conduct manuals, showing how texts move back and forth across the alleged boundary between "low" and "high" culture). We need to recognize that in the last 20 years cultural studies departments have gained a strong



foothold on North American campuses, offering rich academic opportunities for students. The courses on offer focus on the dynamics of gender, race and class; and on the social, economic and political issues surrounding the media, including the importance of ownership and control of the media industries.

To navigate our multimodal world, students need multiliteracies and media education strategies to survive. Mark Bauerleine, author of the *The Dumbest Generation*, a sadly reactionary rant on media and computers, is a key source liberally quoted by Don Cowans in his *Forum Magazine* article *The Reading Mind*. Both critics contrast popular culture with traditional culture, denounce those immersed in the quest for relevance and make the case against digital media as having sabotaged 'the great tradition,' leaving educators hanging dry. Above all, the notion of a happy co-existence of both domains never enters their minds. (It should also be pointed out that kids on the net are reading/text messaging. Surely this should count?) Cowans recommends that computers be pulled from the library and the classroom replaced with books. To banish media educators, he would eliminate the media strand from English.

Initially a "movement" of enthusiastic teachers, it was not until the 1990s, largely due to the proliferation of digital media, that Canadian media education began to be taken seriously by education policy makers. In 1986,

Ontario became the first jurisdiction in North America to make media literacy a mandatory part of the curriculum, from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Following that decision, the widely acclaimed Media Literacy Resource Guide was conceived by the Ontario-based Association for Media Literacy (AML) and published in 1989 (www.aml.ca).

By 1997, the rest of Canada had followed suit and media literacy was embedded in provincial policy guidelines for all English/language arts programs. Regrettably, few teachers are adequately trained to teach media literacy. As more teachers receive in-service training, schools will feel comfortable in including it as an essential part of the curriculum. While English teachers are the only ones required to include media literacy in the curriculum, there are some marvelous opportunities to infuse it in subjects such as history, geography, health, sociology and gender studies.

Teachers will welcome the media literacy in their classroom, not as an add-on but as a creative and culturally relevant opportunity for learning. In several provinces, media studies is offered as a complete stand-alone credit, usually at the Grade 11 level. University professors in the humanities tell us how pleased they are with the quality of critical thinking skills manifested in high school grads who have taken media literacy courses.

Media education is concept-driven and there is an international consensus on identifying the areas needed to be covered. These key concepts become the organizing elements that give our work the required intellectual coherence and academic rigour. These include the following:

N.B. To make this list relevant, imagine discussing a Coca Cola commercial or a beauty product with a class and trying to apply the key concepts.

Media Codes and Conventions – Technical codes such as camera angle and distance, and how they shape the message.

Values and Ideology – A set of beliefs about the world. Typical questions raised: Who has power? Who does not and why? How are stereotypes used in this text?

Media and Industry – The commercial implications of media need to be recognized, especially since most of the world's information and entertainment industries are owned and controlled by a handful of media conglomerates.

Media and Audience – Used in two different ways: 1) How we as consumers become target audiences; 2) How we as active participants make sense of the media.

English teachers are usually the ones who are required to implement media studies even though it could be positioned equally comfortably within the social sciences. Good documentaries are needed in history; media and gender studies should be part of sociology. The crucial point here is that these subject-based endeavors need more teaching 'about' and not just 'through' the media, otherwise

we neglect the use of important critical tools developed by media educators.

Media education should be seen as an entitlement both for our students and for the community at large. While many educators insist on denigrating the mass media and popular culture and wish to shield young people from its alleged harmful effects, we should make the case that **our endeavor is not about protection but rather about preparation**. Now that much of our media use now is for creative or social networking purposes, media education has become participatory and collaborative and, let's admit, it can be fun: the days of the zoned out media loner are coming to an end.

*N.B. Some of the material in this article has been taken from the OISE publication *Orbit Media Literacy*, issue 2005.*

There are plenty of media literacy resources available. Here is a sample

Resources for Getting Started

Media Awareness Network has an extensive website dedicated to media literacy, with excellent resources and classroom lesson plans. Over 300 teaching lessons from K-12, searchable by topic and grade or province and learning outcomes; over 100 essays on topics such as gender, racial and Aboriginal stereotyping, media violence, online hate, electronic privacy and Canadian cultural policies; and extensive web awareness resources including several educational games for kids with extensive teachers' guides, all accessible online (www.media-awareness.ca).

Orbit, OISE's magazine for schools, produced a Media Literacy issue in 2005 which provided a comprehensive overview of the field (www.orbitmagazine.ca).

David Buckingham's *Media Education: Literacy, Learning Contemporary Culture* (2003) (Blackwell is North American distributor) is the best general background book to address the numerous debates in media education. It covers all the hot topics from ideology to using the new digital media.

Mass Media And Popular Culture (Version Two) Toronto: Thomas Nelson 1997 by Barry Duncan, Janine D'Ippolito, Cam Macpherson and Carolyn Wilson is another good resource. There is also a set of four videos, *Scanning Television* Parts One and Two, which correlate with the themes of the text.

Media Awareness Network (MNet) and the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) have chosen Gender and Media as the theme for Canada's 5th Media Literacy Week – November 1-5, 2010. As co-hosts of the annual event, MNet and the CTF are encouraging teachers, parents, and professionals working with young people to explore issues related to gender representation in media.

This year, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union is an associate sponsor of the week, which will also include the conference: *Breaking the Mold, Breaking the Silence, A National Conference on Body Image*, organized by Mount Saint Vincent University's Nancy's Chair in Women Studies. The conference will take place November 4 and 5 at the Mount. (See more on page 10.)

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NSTU member Andrew Stickings who teaches, Grade 5 at Grosvenor Wentworth Park School in Halifax was a featured Media Awareness Network's Media Literacy Week educator. Stickings creatively incorporates filmmaking into his daily classroom activities to engage his students in relevant learning opportunities. The projects center around inspiring students to become excited about learning. He believes that learning increases when students are engaged in meaningful activities such as filmmaking. His students brainstorm, research, write, storyboard and film their own projects. With his guidance and encouragement, his students have created many films on the environment and local history. They have received national and international recognition for their films which have taken them to film festivals in Chicago, Toronto, Ottawa and most recently to Japan. Stickings' "Reel History Project" was nominated for the Governor General's Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History in 2009 and again in 2010. He has received the Democracy 250 Award from his community for his teaching and has recently been selected as an Apple Distinguished Educator for his work in film.