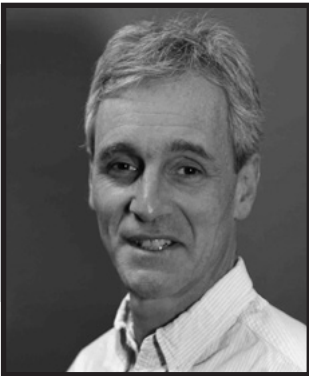


Constructivist Media Decoding in the Social Studies: Leveraging the New Standards for Educational Change

by Chris Sperry



Chris Sperry is the Director of Curriculum and Staff Development for Project Look Sharp, a not-for-profit media literacy initiative based at Ithaca College. Chris has taught social studies and media studies at the Lehman Alternative Community School in Ithaca New York since 1979.

The Common Core ELA standards for secondary social studies and the new C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards present unprecedented opportunities for promoting the integration of media analysis through the social studies. Both documents aim to shift teaching practice from lecture-based methodologies of instruction that aim to fill students up with knowledge to more inquiry-based and constructivist approaches that emphasize the teaching of critical thinking. Both documents encourage close reading of diverse media documents, careful evaluation of sources, evidence-based analysis, and well-reasoned thinking—core skills to media analysis. The introduction to Common Core ELA makes clear that literacy must be expanded to include “reading” and “writing” using the diverse media forms of the 21st century (although this is not always reflected in the language of the specific standards). Social studies has traditionally included the analysis of non-print media such as political cartoons and “propaganda.” The explosion of new media forms gives our field of media literacy the opportunity build on this foundation. While print literacy will continue to be a key priority in K-12 schools, educational stakeholders from parents and teachers to the authors of the new stan-

dards are recognizing that the information landscape has changed in fundamental ways. We can no longer see intelligence as merely remembering facts or literacy as merely being able to read printed words. Digital access to unlimited knowledge requires a pedagogical shift to teaching the analytical skills for processing information. In social studies this has meant a shift from teaching information to teaching thinking skills, including the abilities to ask key questions, compare competing claims, assess credibility, and reflect on one’s own process of reasoning. If implemented, the new standards will modernize teaching practice and enfranchise a generation of students through a relevant and empowering approach to literacy.

This article will explore the role that media analysis can play in educational reform tied to the new standards. It will highlight constructivist media decoding activities available for free on the Project Look Sharp web site that align to specific standards while teaching NAMLE’s media literacy frameworks—*Key Questions* to ask when *Analyzing Media Messages* and *6 Key Concepts in Media Analysis*. The article will also explore professional development tools that support shifts in instructional methodology and the role of assessment in

these changes. This article will focus exclusively on the opportunities for integrating media analysis into the social studies leaving media production for another article. A short history of Project Look Sharp's media decoding work will help to put the opportunities that these new standards present in context.

Project Look Sharp was founded by Dr. Cyndy Scheibe at Ithaca College in 1996 with the mission of supporting educators to integrate media literacy throughout the curricula. Early on in our work we heard a consistent plea from secondary social studies (and science) teachers: "I want to integrate media analysis into my curriculum but I don't have the time to find the specific media documents, questions and background material that I can use to teach my core content through critical thinking." With support from the media literacy community Project Look Sharp responded and today we have over 200 lessons using 2000+ media documents on line for integrating media analysis into a diversity of subject areas and grade levels.

As educators we see our students internalizing simplistic, stereotypical, biased and often false information from their media saturated worlds. Even without the new standards, a growing percentage of educators and administrators are recognizing the need to take the time to teach the skills of critical, well-reasoned and metacognitive thinking. Until recently the tests that evaluated aptitude in the social studies have primarily focused on memorization and essay writing but that is beginning to change as well. Less and less are we hearing the old refrain, "I would like to integrate media literacy but I just don't have the time." The new Common Core and C3 standards made it explicit that secondary social studies teachers will be held accountable for teaching students to do close evidence-based analysis of diverse texts, to compare conflicting claims, and to evaluate the point of view and credibility of sources. If the new social studies tests that are being developed today reflect these outcomes, as promised, the integration of media analysis will become a mandated necessity.

While Common Core standards have been rolled out only for Math and English Language Arts (ELA), the ELA standards include strands that in-

tegrate literacy into secondary social studies and science. Box #1 shows just a few of the outcomes in the *Common Core ELA Standards for 11-12th grade History/Social Studies* that apply to media literacy.

Excerpts from ELA Common Core Standards: Reading for History—grades 11-12

- *Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources...* (CCSS.ELA.RH.11-12.1)
- *Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source...* (CCSS.ELA.RH.11-12.2)
- *Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.* (CCSS.ELA.RH.11-12.6)
- *Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media...* (CCSS.ELA.RH.11-12.7)

The Common Core Standards alone would be a boon to media literacy integration but the new College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards goes even further. The National Council for the Social Studies rolled out C3 in 2013 partly in response to the national emphasis on math and English. C3 lays out four core dimensions that emphasize teaching students to ask and respond to questions, evaluate sources, provide evidence, and communicate conclusions, in addition to applying the skills and knowledge of various social science disciplines (See Box #2).

Dimensions in the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- #1: *Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries*
- #2: *Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts*
- #3: *Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence*
- #4: *Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action*

Media Literacy can play a key role in providing social studies educators with the methodologies and materials to make the shift from a fact-oriented pedagogy to a thinking-oriented philosophy of teaching civics, history, economics and geography. The fol-

lowing examples from Project Look Sharp kits will show how classroom media analysis in social studies can teach CCSS and C3 standards while addressing core media literacy concepts and processes.

* * *

Lesson 24 in the Project *Look Sharp* kit, *Media Constructions of Sustainability: Finger Lakes*, uses three different media forms—scientific diagrams, video from documentary film and television and Google search results - to examine the controversial natural gas extraction process of hydrofracking. In this complex lesson students are asked to use critical thinking skills to explore a compelling content question: What role should hydrofracking play in our national energy policy? In the process of media decoding students are also asked to consider these key media literacy questions:

- Who paid for this message?
- What are the sources of the assertions about hydrofracking?
- Is this fact, opinion or something else?

The lesson begins with some basic background information about aquifers and groundwater from an Idaho Museum of History webpage accompanied by the listing of sources and references for the ar-

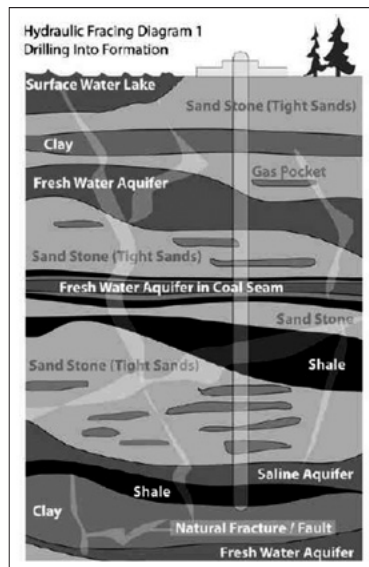
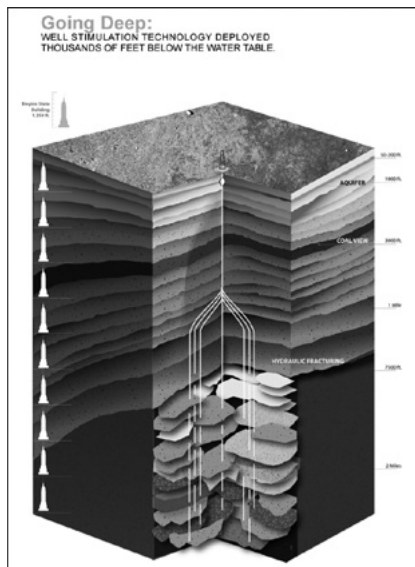
ticle. The accompanying questions probe both for content information (“What is an aquifer?”) and for information about sourcing (“What organizations published the source information?”) Next, students view two scientific diagrams of the hydrofracking process, each leading to very different conclusions about the safety of the process, and consider the source of the diagram. (See below)

As students reflect on the producers of these media documents they are also asked to consider what questions they might ask about the diagrams. This is an opportunity to extend the class discussion based on the students’ own curiosities and observations.

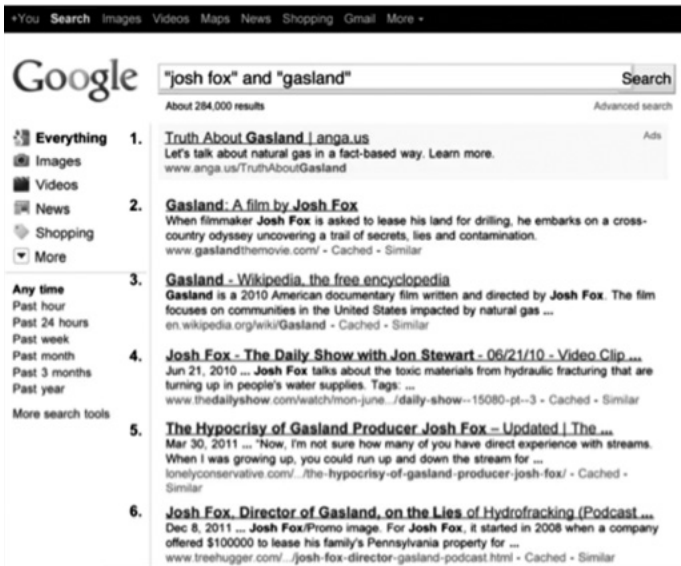
The lesson continues with three video clips with very different perspectives on hydrofracking. Students view a short clip from the Academy Award nominated anti-fracking documentary, “Gasland” by filmmaker Josh Fox, a clip from the film “The Truth about *Gasland*” sponsored by America’s Natural Gas Alliance and finally a clip from Josh Fox’s appearance on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

After each clip students are asked:

- What are the messages about natural gas drilling?
- What techniques are used to convey the message
- Do you consider this to be a credible source? Why or why not



Which diagram was created by the natural gas industry and which by an opponent of hydrofracking. What is the evidence in the document to support your guess?



The goal of this questioning is not to lead students to some predetermined “correct answers” but rather to prompt them to analyze the content, construction and credibility of media messages. In the process students can become strong sense critical thinkers, able to put their own assumptions to the test and to change their point of view as evidence warrants.

The lesson concludes with students viewing excerpts from a Google search for the terms “Josh Fox” and “Gasland” including a wide and contradictory set of sources. The decode question asks “At first glance which sources would you consider more credible and which less credible and why?” Once again this is an opportunity to deepen students’ understanding of how they base their own judgments about credibility as a means to develop their own habits of inquiry whenever they encounter media information.

This complex activity addresses many Common Core standards including:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2

Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

Similarly there are many possible alignments to the C3 dimensions. Here are three from the first dimension—Developing Questions And Planning Inquiries:

D1.1.9-12. Explain how a question reflects an enduring issue in the field.

D1.2.9-12. Explain points of agreement and disagreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.

D1.5.9-12. Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of view represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources.

As this complex lesson shows, media analysis can effectively target many specific Common Core and C3 standards through the decoding of rich and diverse media documents. As the next example shows, even a brief media decoding activity can teach metacognitive capacities that address and then go beyond the new standards.



3 min. excerpt from: *The Yankee Years*
a 1985 PBS Frontline documentary



3 min. excerpt from : *The Panama Deception*
a 1992 Empowerment Project documentary

Do you think this clip presented a generally positive, negative or neutral message about U.S. involvement in Panama? What facts, words, images and sounds are used to give that impression?

* * *

Lesson 3 in the Project Look Sharp kit, *Economics in American History*, uses two short video clips about the building of the Panama Canal to address a range of Common Core, C3, and media literacy outcomes while teaching core content about US and Latin American history.

One of the most sophisticated media analysis questions to ask about any document is “What is left out?” (see NAMLE’s *Key Questions to Ask about Any Media Message*). To answer this question students must be able to apply significant background knowledge of the subject to an analysis of the text. By presenting two conflicting texts on the same subject, students with little other background knowledge can compare constructions and reflect on the choices of what the authors included and what they left out.

To most US students (and adults) the four-minute excerpt from the PBS *Frontline* documentary on the building of the Panama Canal will likely seem quite objective, balanced and non-biased. By contrasting that clip with a short excerpt from the documentary, *The Panama Deception*, also about the building of the Canal, students are confronted with very different content choices made by the two films. While *The Panama Deception* focuses on US imperialism and the imposition by the US government of racist Jim Crow laws in Panama, the *Frontline* documentary presents a more positive view on US power

and does not mention the issue of race. By leading a media decoding activity comparing the two excerpts students can reflect on and discuss the constructed nature of history with evidence-based responses.

This simple activity addresses a number of Common Core and C3 standards including:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.6

Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3

Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

C3 Social Studies

D2.His.11.9-12. Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

D3.3.6-8. Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.

D4.1.9-12. Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

The lesson can be expanded to help develop student deeper metacognitive abilities through leading a discussion on the question: “Which documentary do you think is more accurate or truthful? What makes you say that?” Skillful probing on this question will address the core media analysis concept: *People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.* (see 6 Core Concepts in Media Analysis).

Both Common Core and C3 share the language of *argument* and *explanation*; *claim* and *counterclaim*; *information* and *evidence*; and *point of view* and *opinion*. Media literacy encourages students (and teachers) to not only analyze the claims and choices made in divergent texts but to analyze our own interpretations, to reflect on the biases and limitations of our own reasoning. In this way media literacy not only reinforces the critical thinking skills emphasized in CCSS and C3 but also leads the way towards more complex metacognitive thinking on the part of our students that goes beyond the new standards.

Media decoding can help students and educators to understand the power that media play in shaping our individual and cultural beliefs as is reflected in NAMLE’s core Concepts #4 and #6.

One of the challenges of classroom decoding is to use the power of media as a catalyst for student engagement while being thoughtful about the poten-

tial negative impacts of certain messages. The constructivist foundation of this work helps us to plan and facilitate our lessons with Key Concept #5 in mind: each of our students will interpret the media we are decoding from their own unique perspective. This will cause us to pause when decoding potentially harmful messages, even when we have the best of intentions, as is evidenced in the next example.

* * *



The New Yorker magazine cover by artist Barry Blitt published July 21, 2008 during the first Obama presidential campaign.

- Who is portrayed and in what setting?
- What stereotypes has the artist used?
- How might different people understand this message differently?

The Project Look, Sharp lesson entitled “Political Satire or Libel” in the 2008 election collection from the Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns kit uses a controversial magazine cover as the basis to explore the use of stereotypes while asking teachers and students to consider the idea of “Do No Harm” both in classroom discussion and in media production.

The lesson begins with this caution to teachers: “Due to its use of disturbing stereotypes this

6 Key Concepts in Media Analysis

1. All media messages are “constructed.”
2. Each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique “language” of construction.
3. Media messages are produced for particular purposes.
4. All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.
5. People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.
6. Media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors and the democratic process.

image may be offensive or uncomfortable for some students. Teachers should always evaluate the appropriateness of working with stereotypical documents with particular students and assess their impact should they choose to use them in the classroom. If we do not teach students to analyze these images and words in our classrooms, our students are unlikely to decode their meaning, critically evaluate their messages and understand the cultural context of their power outside the classroom. Used appropriately, critical decoding on media messages can teach students to understand and evaluate the sources and the impact of racist and stereotypical messages.”

In order to provide a critical context and greater understanding of the complex arguments and interpretations of this image students read and reflect on excerpts from six news reports and editorials concerning this cover. These short readings provide a wide range of pro- and con- arguments related to the choice to publish this cover ranging from comments by candidate Obama himself to defenses of the cover by the artist and editor to strong critiques of the cover from a representative of the Council on American-Islamic Relations and a commentator on Asia Society.org.

The discussion questions following these readings can move in a number of different directions based on the teacher’s judgments about the readiness of their students to deal with contentious material in a mutually respectful manner. These include possibilities for self reflection (“Which of the writings reflected your opinion about the cover and why?”), for social reflection (“Why do you think the cover generated such strong feelings?”), for reflections on identity (“How does one’s personal history and identity influence one’s perspectives about media representations of race, religion and political belief?”) and on civic dialogue (“What is required for constructive dialogue about issues such as this in the media? In the classroom?”)

The key media analysis questions raised by this cover and the text responses include:

- Who might benefit from this message and who might be harmed by it?

- What kinds of actions might I take in response to these messages?
- What values are overt and implied in this cover and in the responses?

In addition to addressing all of the 6 key concepts in media analysis, this activity teaches Common Core standards about story elements (e.g. RL.11-12.3), claims and counter claims (WHST.11-12.1B) and C3 standards relating to perspective taking (e.g. D2.Civ.14.9-12).

Professional Development

While it is important to create media literacy materials that align to the Common Core and C3 standards, it is also important that media literacy educators consider the unique contribution that we can play in giving teachers the methodological support and training they need to make the shift in instructional methodologies and pedagogy that 21st century education demands. The pioneering work of media literacy in codifying how to lead students through constructivist decoding of diverse messages can help clarify the path towards broader pedagogical changes in our classrooms.

As teachers we often wish that we could simply fill our students up with knowledge, but we know that our students interpret what we tell, show, or give them in many different ways. The role of the teacher in constructivist media analysis is as the facilitator of a complex collective process of learning, rather than as the didactic deliverer of information. But this pedagogical shift, encouraged by the Common Core and C3 standards will not be easy to achieve. The skills and knowledge developed by media literacy education can help to inform this shift.

Developmental theory tells us that students are more likely to model their thinking on their peers than on their teachers (or parents). As teachers we can leverage that developmental orientation by structuring constructivist decoding activities that have students listening to the interpretations of their peers. When students are intellectually ready, their reasoning will gravitate towards greater complexity modeled by some of their classmates. We probe for content knowl-

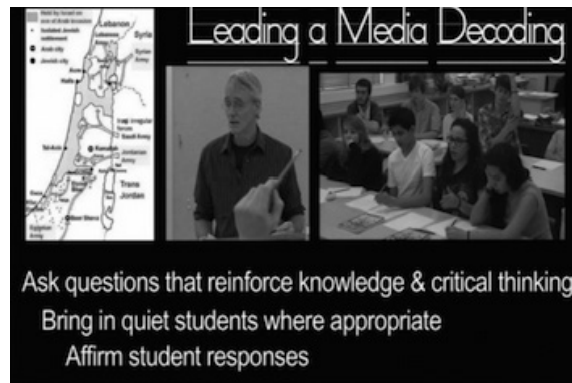
edge, conceptual understanding and literacy skills not only for the student whom we are questioning but so that her/his reasoning or knowledge can be modeled to the rest of the class. Teachers need to be prepared to respond to some comments by asking, “What makes you say that?” or “Tell me more about that” and to other comments by asking “Does anyone else have a different interpretation.” Teachers need to make the students do the work by probing for content knowledge rather than telling students the information. They need to teach core concepts by having students discover the ideas through skillful questioning by the teacher. The teacher needs to be able to keep the discussion fluid and improvisational while still focused on key content and literacy goals. Social studies teachers need to see the facilitation process modeled, they need training, they need to practice and be coached to lead an inquiry-based decoding process

Research by Renee Hobbs and others has shown that teachers who use question-based materials, like Project Look Sharp’s lessons, often fall back on the stand-and-deliver methodology that we are all so familiar with. They may start with a question but do not follow-up with targeted probe questions. Even teachers who advocate inquiry-based instruction often default to using media documents as illustrations of content. Media literacy can play a key role in codifying the constructivist process of media analysis/decoding that shifts the emphasis in learning to the student while maintaining our goals of teaching social studies knowledge and concepts

To support this shift to more constructivist decoding for teaching social studies Project Look Sharp has developed Video models that codify the process. Each video, typically from 5 to 10 minutes, includes multiple screens that simultaneously show the teacher, the class, close ups of students, and a running narrative on the teaching strategy.

Before continuing this article watch the 5-minute video *High School Social Studies: The Politics of Maps—Israel Palestine* that illustrates a decoding activity with 10th grade students. Go to www.projectlooksharp.org, click the *VIDEOS about Project Look Sharp* button and *Media Decoding Examples*.

The goal of this activity includes student un-



**Five min. video—Classroom Media Decoding Example.
The Politics of Maps—Israel/Palestine**

derstanding and applying core knowledge about the history of the Arab Israeli conflict. It asks students to move beyond the simplistic assumption that fact-based documents (like a map) are free from bias and to understand that all information can be used to support a particular point of view. The brief activity uses an inquiry-based methodology to address Common Core and C3 standards including: determining central ideas, comparing documents, evaluating sources and different points of view, understanding fact and opinion, applying evidence, and communicating conclusions.

Assessments That Reflect Our Goals

As is shown in the preceding examples from materials and professional development, media analysis can be an effective tool in addressing the standards for social studies. However, the structure of social studies tests will be the driving factor in shifting teachers’ classroom methodology. If the exams continue to test memorization of social studies facts, most teachers are likely to continue to prioritize rote coverage of the content. Tests that ask students to analyze diverse media documents can provide models for assessing the critical thinking standards in the Common Core and C3 social studies standards.

The Project Look Sharp model for media analysis was used this spring at the Lehman Alternative Community School in Ithaca NY to develop a Common Core aligned test for the school’s teacher evaluation assessment. It was delivered to every 9th through 12th grade student to assess the school’s progress in teaching the Common Core literacy standards in ELA, social studies and science. The

test was based upon student analysis of 3 documents about Genetically Modified Organisms—a 3 minute video by Greenpeace, excerpts from a *New York Times* Op Ed: *How I Got Converted to GMO Foods*, and a web site critical of GMOs.

The first set of questions assessed each student's ability to analyze and compare the documents for messages and bias and to identify techniques used by the creators of the video to communicate their perspective. Students were then given excerpts from the mission statements of Monsanto, Greenpeace and the Cornell Alliance for Science and asked to give evidence that linked the organizations to each document. The next set of questions assessed students' understanding of credibility (a standard in ELA, social studies and science) by asking them to write questions about each document that would help them to assess its credibility. The ability for students to ask questions is a core component of the new C3 standards for social studies. The final question asked students to "identify how your views on the issue of GMOs might influence how you understand and interpret these documents." This question reflects one of the greatest contributions media literacy can play in educational reform —teaching students to reflect on how they think and the potential limitations of their own reasoning.

Nothing will have a greater impact on shifting teaching practice in social studies towards the critical thinking standards in the Common Core and C3 than future tests. If media literacy can be built into state tests teachers will integrate media literacy. We in the field should be promoting media literacy materials, methodologies, and the inclusion of diverse media documents into new assessments in order to support the shift to the new Common Core and C3 standards. In the process we should push those who will be revising the standards and creating new tests to incorporate progressively more complex metacognitive abilities taught through media analysis. Imagine a future where students are assessed on their ability to identify how their own biases influence their judgments and tested on their ability to create and reflect on their own media productions. The new standards give us an opportunity to bring media literacy to a broader

audience and for media literacy to play a key role in helping education to live up to its mission of fostering the growth of individual and collective consciousness.

Reading the World

The final contribution that media literacy can make to educational reform is to expand the notion of literacy and our conception of intelligence. As a child I lived in the shadow of "brilliant" men who had mastered the ability to remember discrete facts (from sports to politics) and apply them with timely wit. Their authority also came from their literary capacities as both readers and writers of printed word. I, on the other hand, spent countless hours watching TV and making Super 8 animations and surfing films. While I was developing the abilities to gather and apply information about the world (from TV), to communicate original ideas (through film), to create art (in photographs), and to think critically about my mediated world—in school I felt consistently stupid. The classroom privileged a certain kind of knowledge and a particular form of media. If not for economic privilege that enabled me to go to college to study filmmaking, I doubt that I would have shifted that self-perception.

Media literacy can help bring an expanded sense of both literacy and intelligence to educational reform. We can help teachers to bring out the cognitive and creative capacities of all our students through decoding rich and continually expanding forms of communication. Much of our understanding of the world is mediated through new (and old) technology. Social studies teachers have the charge of teaching students how to negotiate that dynamic ecology. The discipline of media literacy enlarges the worldview of social studies to enable us to teach our students to read their worlds. The new standards give us a unique opportunity to bring that expansive worldview to the field of social studies through classroom materials, teachable methodologies, better tests, and an expansive pedagogy that builds on the core promise of education. ✱

Special thanks to my colleague, mentor and brother Sox Sperry for his contributions to this article.