

Media Literacy

A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies. This position statement was prepared by Chris Sperry (Project Look Sharp, Ithaca, NY) and Frank W. Baker (Media Literacy Clearinghouse, Columbia SC).

Every social studies educator who uses images and video in instruction will be interested in how media literacy approaches to teaching can enhance student understanding while engaging them in critical thinking, a key 21st century education objective. The deluge of unfiltered information that streams through the Internet has necessitated a change in our pedagogical orientation—forcing us to focus more on teaching students to analyze and evaluate information rather than to remember it. In social studies, this has meant a shift to teaching critical thinking skills including the abilities to ask key questions, compare competing claims, assess credibility, and reflect on one’s own process of reasoning.

While print literacy continues to be a key priority in K-12 schools, there is a growing consensus that this new information landscape requires new approaches to teaching and learning. Our discipline has an opportunity to lead the way in teaching students to both analyze and produce rich, complex, diverse and engaging mediated messages.

Today’s youth are making media in unprecedented ways. The participatory nature of new media forms (such as gaming and social media) gives our students the expectation of being involved in choosing, manipulating, and producing their own social messages. Social studies educators should provide young people with the awareness and abilities to critically question and create new media and technology—essential skills for active citizenship in our democracy.

Today’s predominant storytellers are enormous transnational corporations that are appropriating public and private spaces. Less than 10 corporations own the majority of the world’s media, creating a small group of wealthy individuals with tremendous power to decide who and what will be represented and what lessons will be taught. Social studies for the 21st century requires that we teach students to understand the roles that media technologies have and do play in U.S. history, economics and civics.

At the core of learning is Literacy—the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce communication. Media literacy expands the traditional concept of literacy to include the forms of communication that dominate the lives of our students. If our students are to be literate, we must teach them the skills and habits of literacy for print and non-print mediated messages.

The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies*, and the *C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards* both neces-

sitate shifts in teaching practice towards more inquiry-based and constructivist approaches that emphasize the teaching of critical thinking using texts. Both documents encourage close reading of diverse media documents, careful evaluation of sources, evidence-based analysis, and well-reasoned thinking-skills taught through media literacy. Media analysis provides an inquiry-based methodology that explicitly teaches to C3 standards. Through the decoding of content-rich media texts in the social studies classroom, students learn and practice the habits of asking key questions, applying historical analysis, identifying perspectives, assessing credibility, providing text-based evidence, drawing conclusions, and reflecting on their own process of reasoning—key abilities emphasized in the four dimensions of C3. Media production in the social studies can engage students in an empowering process of communicating their thinking with compelling evidence as a form of thoughtful action—exemplars of Dimension 4.

Media literacy models a constructivist approach to document-based analysis that asks the students to apply key content to a focused and complex analysis of messages, meaning, authorship, audience, representations and reality.

At the core of constructivist media analysis is critical inquiry: the asking of key questions, both by the teacher and by students. The “Key Questions To Ask When Analyzing Media Messages,” developed by the National Association for Media Literacy Education, can provide social studies teachers with a template for the types of questions that can be incorporated into any and all content areas.

Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages:

Audience & Authorship

- Who paid for this?
- Who made this message?
- Why was this made?
- Who is the target audience (and how do you know)?
- Who might benefit from this message?
- Who might be harmed by it?
- Why might this message matter to me?
- What kinds of actions might I take in response to this message?

Messages & Meanings

- What is this about (and what makes you think that)?
- What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied?
- What is left out of this message that might be important to know?
- What techniques are used?
- Why were those techniques used?
- How do they communicate the message?
- How might different people understand this message differently?
- What is my interpretation of this and what do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation?

Representations & Reality

- When was this made?
- Where or how was it shared with the public?
- Is this fact, opinion, or something else?
- How credible is this (and what makes you think that)?
- What are the sources of the information, ideas, or assertions?

There are many considerations that social studies teachers must make when planning and delivering a constructivist media analysis, including the choice of media document (e.g., web page, book excerpt, photograph, film clip, painting, Facebook post, etching, etc.), the background information needed for the decoding, the key questions to ask, and the probing plan for

Recommended Curriculum Resources

Project LookSharp www.projectlooksharp.org/

Media Literacy Clearinghouse www.frankwbaker.com/mlc/social-studies/

Handout: Key Questions To Ask When Analyzing Media Messages <https://namle.net/publications/core-principles/>

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Digital Social Studies, ed. William B. Russell III (Information Age Publishing, 2013)

Vincent W. Youngbauer, “Application of Media Literacy & Cultural Studies in K12 Social Studies Curricula,” *The Social Studies* 104, no. 5 (2013): 183-189

Steven Reid, “Visual Literacy in Social Studies” (2012) <https://prezi.com/snqpfuoub-nn/visual-literacy-in-social-studies/>

Frank W. Baker, *Media Literacy in the K12 Classroom* (International Society for Technology in Education, 2012)

Frank W. Baker, *Political Campaigns & Political Advertising: A Media Literacy Guide* (Greenwood, 2009)

Greg Nielsen, “Media Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom,” *Education Digest* 76, no. 7 (March 2011): 43-45.

Alan S. Marcus, Scott Alan Metzger, Richard J. Paxton, and Jeremy D. Stoddard, *Teaching History with Film, Strategies for Secondary Social Studies* (Routledge, 2010)

Laura Stein and Anita Prewett, “Media Literacy Education in the Social Studies: Teacher Perceptions and Curricular Challenges,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Winter 2009)

Digital Age: Technology Based K-12 Lesson Plans for Social Studies, eds. Linda Bennett and Michael J. Berson (NCSS Bulletin 105, 2007)

Robert Kubey, “Media Literacy and the Teaching of Civics and Social Studies at the Dawn of the 21st Century,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no.1 (2004): 69-77.

Media & American Democracy, eds. Veronica Burchard and Claire McCaffery Griffin (Bill of Rights Institute, 2005) www.billofrightsinstitute.org/educate/educator-resources/institute-curricula

Jeff Share and Elizabeth Thoman, “Teaching Democracy: A Media Literacy Approach,” National Association for Media Literacy Education (2014) <https://namle.net/2014/11/01/teaching-democracy-a-media-literacy-approach>

classroom analysis. These considerations should all be driven by the primary goals for each activity—including the content and literacy standards being addressed. But the success of a media analysis activity will be dependent upon the facility of the teacher in listening to student meaning making while facilitating collective understandings about core concepts and the development of literacy skills. This requires experience and reflection on the process of leading a media decoding. Media literacy provides professional development models for this work (see *Curriculum Resources*).

Social studies teachers, particularly new practitioners, will also struggle to find the time to develop the materials needed to deliver media analysis activities tied to their specific content. A growing number of free online resources provide both raw material and full-fledged lessons that integrate inquiry-based media analysis into all social studies content at all grade levels.

Here are a few examples of activities that integrate C3 standards and inquiry-based media analysis into the curriculum at different grade levels and for different social studies content.

1st grade—Heroes—students compare picture books and short film clips of heroes who have worked for a cause, asking questions and producing their own messages.

3rd grade—Africa—students analyze their own pre-conceptions (stereotypes) of Africa and then identify information about the diversity of the content through guided analysis of paper money from dozens of nations.

4th grade—the Revolutionary War—students compare an etching and memoir about the Boston Tea Party to evaluate the accuracy and credibility of the sources.

6th grade—Civil Rights—students decode dozens of different media documents about Martin Luther King Jr. (graphic novel, billboard, record, website, etc.) to identify meanings and messages while learning about the history of the civil rights movement.

8th grade—Economics—students analyze representations about labor and capital in U.S. history through decoding messages in film clips and TV shows from Charlie Chaplin to *The Simpsons*.

9th grade—USSR—Students learn and discuss the history of the USSR through analysis of dozens of Soviet government posters from 1917-1989.

10th grade—Middle East—students grapple with conflicting histories of Israel/Palestine through comparing and analyzing websites, children’s books, maps and songs from Israeli and Palestinian government sources.

11th grade—U.S. History—students decode historical media documents throughout the school year from dozens of presidential campaigns, applying knowledge and developing questioning and critical thinking skills.

12th Grade—Climate Change—students develop their own well-reasoned conclusions about global warming through critical analysis of . . . diverse media messages, sourcing and sponsorship, and their own biases and reasoning.

Above are examples of social studies materials for media literacy integration available free online (see www.projectlooksharp.org).

Media production enables students to apply their analytical and creative capacities to communicating their own well-reasoned thinking about a topic. Through the process of researching, planning, constructing, and reflecting on their own media messages—in video, website, slide show, poster, etc.—teachers can lead students through an engaging process of planning inquiries, applying the tools of social studies, evaluating sources, providing evidence, drawing conclusions and taking action—all of the dimensions of the C3 Framework.

By incorporating media literacy, both analysis and production, into the social studies we expand our classrooms to include the modes of communication that dominate the lives of our students. This is particularly important for non-print oriented students who are sometimes alienated from their academic experience. 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 and write their worlds. 🌐

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