

Integrating Media Literacy — 7th Grade

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Introduction

The idea for this project came when Anne Holmgren and I were talking about the lack of direction for teachers in our district when it comes to teaching media literacy. At the same time, committees of teachers have been working hard to align our district language arts standards with the new state standards. While teachers in our district are expected to incorporate the concepts of media literacy into our existing curriculum, there is little already available in the way of assessments and activities to modify and apply. In addition, the language in the state standards themselves is too vague to offer much guidance.

Therefore, Anne and I thought that it would be time well-spent if we created a media literacy scope and sequence for 7th and 8th grade language arts. When finished, our intent is to share what we've created with other teachers in our building and district. Although teachers have great autonomy to create and implement their own units to meet these standards, the essential assessments, once decided by a district committee, apply across classrooms. What we create will not work in every teacher's curriculum, but we hope that our ideas will be easily modified, and if nothing else, they will spark discussion about how we teach media literacy in middle school classrooms districtwide.

The content standards for media literacy, as deemed by the state and the Bloomington school district, in 7th and 8th grade are as follows:

- evaluate the accuracy and credibility of information found on internet sites;
- make informed evaluations about television, radio, film productions, newspapers and magazines with regard to quality of production, accuracy of information, bias, purpose, message and audience;
- evaluate the content and effect of persuasive techniques used in print and broadcast media;
- identify distinctions in how information is presented in print and non-print materials;
- critically analyze the messages and points of view employed in different media, including advertising, news programs, websites, and documentaries.

The difficulty with these standards is that there is little distinction between them. Making informed evaluations about quality, accuracy, bias, purpose, message and audience is much the same as critically analyzing messages and points of view. These, in turn, are similar to evaluating persuasive techniques and credibility. At the same time, this lack of distinction offers freedom for teachers to meet the needs of their own students. Another problem with the standards at the state level is that they remain virtually the same at each grade. Our district, on the other hand, takes the standards a step further by breaking them down into what is “essential,” “important,” or “enhancement” for each grade level. The only difference, however, is that most of the media literacy standards are merely “enhancements” in 7th grade while they are identified as “important” in 8th grade. Enhancement implies that it is not necessary that the standard be met at that level; while important means that teachers incorporate the standard, but there is no districtwide assessment for it. Anne and I took this into consideration when thinking about our assessments and units in 7th and 8th grade, but we felt that media literacy needed more attention in 7th grade than just getting to it if time allows.

Anne and I took two approaches to implementing media literacy study into our curriculum. First, we wanted to integrate as much as we could into the units and assessments that we already use. This course has offered a wealth of ideas for using media to enhance the learning of the concepts that we already teach. Second, we knew that some of the standards for media literacy would have to be met by creating separate units around the new concepts that we wanted to teach. Thus, this paper will have two sections: 1) integrating media literacy into already existing units, and 2) creating new units around important skills related to media study.

Integrating Media Literacy into 7th Grade Curriculum

Poetry and Figurative Language

I start the year in writer's workshop. This allows me to get to know my students through their writing, and my favorite aspect of the writing unit is the study of poetry. Objectives: In this unit students identify figurative language, analyze it for its metaphoric meaning, and write poetry using non-literal, figurative words and phrases. 7th grade students are very concrete thinkers, and working with abstract ideas, like figurative language, can often be difficult for them. Therefore, an improvement to my current unit would be to incorporate the study of visual images — something more concrete than just words. Poetry is a form that revolves around simplicity and careful word choice. Studying visual images would force students to think in the abstract and choose the words carefully to describe that image.

As an introduction to the poetry unit, I would show a series of photographs to students from the National Geographic magazine or website. Students would then choose the words that describe that image — careful and exact word choice would be the key. Next, students would take those words and make them into metaphoric statements. For example, an image of a misty landscape might become “a blanket of mist covered the land.” Each image would then become the inspiration for a poem.

Before writing, I would ask students to think about the framing, placement, angles, and arrangement in each image. I would use the questions that Krueger and Christel offer for studying still images:

- What is the first element of the image that you notice? What draws your attention to it?
- Close your eyes and look at it again. What do you notice on second viewing? Why is your eye drawn to that aspect of the image?
- Why are elements of the foreground, middle ground, or background the most dominant?
- How does lighting and/or color draw your attention to specific aspects of the image? (2001, p. 4).

This same sort of close analysis must take place when studying a poem, and students would then turn their attention to analyzing poetry in the same fashion. What's missing from the image may also be important, and likewise, great poems leave out as much as they include.

Assessment: Just as images can inspire words, words can inspire images. Krueger and Christel also offer a great culminating activity for my poetry unit. They suggest that students select a theme (alienation, searching for identity, the American dream, etc.) and “tell a story illustrating that theme without words.” (2001, p. 20) I would modify this a bit by having students illustrate the meanings and ideas behind the figurative language in their poetry. Having studied photographic images as an introduction, the final project would require that students use digital cameras to capture the images that fit their poems. I would evaluate students on how well their images capture the meaning behind the language.

Short Story (Elements of Fiction)

Studying the elements of fiction is an important focus in our 7th grade curriculum. I have always started this unit by having students read short stories. Objectives: Students analyze and write about setting, characters, plot, conflict, mood, foreshadowing and point of view. A great way to improve this unit is to have students study the elements of fiction in TV and film as well.

After studying still images, students can take their understanding of frame, lighting, placement, and angle into the study of moving images. Initially, students will need to develop a film vocabulary by applying terms from Teasley and Wilder's *Glossary of Film Terms* (1997) and by identifying cinematic elements in film clips. *Hands-On*, the guide from the New York Board of Education, is also a great tool for modeling camera shots, and students would analyze examples from that resource as well.

Since we are looking at the elements of fiction in the short story format, it would also be appropriate to use short TV segments. The stories that we study are coming-of-age stories with adolescent characters (e.g. "Thank You M'am" by Langston Hughes, "Sucker" by Carson McCullers, and selections from *House on Mango Street*). *The Wonder Years* is perfect for this unit in several ways. First, students will not be familiar with the show and will have to pay close attention to the segment we watch instead of making assumptions. Second, the setting is not contemporary, the characters and their relationships are dynamic, and the themes match those in the coming-of-age stories we are reading. Lastly, Kevin's first person narration allows us to study how point of view affects the story. Not only would students actively view the clip to answer open-ended questions about setting, character, plot, mood, and conflict, they would also address each of those story elements as they relate to cinematic elements. Questions might include, for example, how does the camerawork help establish point of view? How do visual/verbal clues help establish the setting? (Krueger and Christel, 2001)

Assessment: Written language and visual language have much in common. Describe how *The Wonder Years* and the short stories we've read define growing up. In your essay, include analysis of the setting, characters, plot, mood, conflicts, and point of view. Address, as well, how an author and a TV director are alike. What decisions do they have to make about how the story is told, and how do those decisions affect the message that the story portrays?

Literature Circles

After studying the elements of fiction in short stories, students apply that knowledge to the study of a novel. In 7th grade, we do this in the form of literature circles where groups of three or four students read the same book. The book choices include *Esperanza Rising*, *The Skin I'm In*, *Necessary Roughness*, *Scorpions*, *Miracle's Boys*, *If You Come Softly*, and *Children of the River*.

Objectives: Students will continue to analyze important elements of fiction and will begin to develop critical questions about their novels. In addition, students use their questions to determine the focus for student-led discussions. Since each novel addresses issues of identity and belonging, another objective is to analyze how each book, in its own way, defines this theme.

There aren't any film adaptations of these novels, but there are several ways in which I might incorporate media into this unit. First of all, I could pair the books with films that incorporate the themes of identity and belonging. Teasley and Wilder (2001) offer several suggestions for films that explore this theme; David Selzer's 1986 *Lucas* and Tony Bill's 1980 *My Bodyguard* both look at the lengths to which adolescents will go to fit in. Students would record their thoughts, after viewing "meaningful chunks," using Teasley and Wilder's viewing form, noting the literary, cinematic, and dramatic elements (2001, p. 28).

Assessment Options: I would offer three choices as assessment options. First, students could write a final essay on how the novel and the film address the same theme. Do the protagonists eventually belong to the group or do they decide to remain outside of it? Why or why not? Given that this assessment is much like the one used in the short story unit, a second option, after watching the film and reading the novel, is to have students choose or create a theme song that fits both genres. Students would present their songs to the class and explain how the mood and lyrics of the song fit the moods and themes of both book and movie. This final assessment would include a written explanation as well.

A third assessment option for the literature circle unit is to have students create movie trailers for their books. This assessment would require that students determine which elements of the novel to highlight based on the message and audience for their book. Students would look at several movie trailer examples beforehand to determine criteria for an effective trailer. Students would work within groups to complete this project.

Nothing But The Truth

Nothing but the Truth is often described as a “documentary novel” because the story is told in school memos, diary entries, letters, radio talk show transcripts, and dialogue. (Weber, 2004) The main character, Philip, doesn’t like his English teacher Miss Narwin, and he is a major goof off in her class. The ‘D’ that she gives him keeps him from trying out for the track team, and he gets his revenge by humming the National Anthem during morning announcements when students are supposed to stand at “respectful silence.” Eventually, he’s suspended for his actions and his story makes its way to the national media where he’s deemed a hero for standing up for his right to display his patriotism. As things get out of control for Philip, the school, and Miss Narwin, readers wonder just who is telling the truth. Objectives: Students will explore the complex nature of truth, and they will analyze how the same information differs when it comes from various sources.

Media is an important aspect of this novel because it demonstrates the way in which information is often distorted and left out. Two ideas for incorporating issues of media into the study of this novel come from Heidi Weber’s page on the TeacherView website (2004): 1) Philip was interviewed by the media, but no one tried to get Miss Narwin’s side of the story. Have students write questions to ask Miss Narwin in an interview. Then have students pair up and conduct interviews with each other as if they were interviewing Miss Narwin. 2) This novel is an excellent example of how an issue can have two sides, but only one side is presented by the media. Have students find an article in a local paper that is about a controversial issue. In groups, have them identify what side the article is presenting. Hopefully, their article will represent both sides, however, if it does not, have the students rewrite the article to present both sides.

Assessment: Since *Nothing But the Truth* is a “documentary novel” that explores the nature of truth, the final assessment for this unit will be to have students create their own documentaries. In groups of three or four, students select a school-related topic (school lunch, the Pledge of Allegiance, school gum policy, etc.) and determine the “truths” behind it. Then, they must establish the ways in which they will gather information that will allow them to get at heart of the issue — options include still images of documents (letters, memos, etc.), interviews, and other “found” footage. After looking at examples of documentaries from the PBS website for American High and the website for the Educational Video Center, students will use iMovie to create their documentaries. The final production, presented in class, must include a written description of the group’s process for getting at the truth. The written response must also evaluate how successfully the group feels their documentary analyzed the issue, which will lead into a class discussion after viewing each group’s work.

Downriver

Another novel that I use in my classroom is *Downriver* by Will Hobbs. In this novel, a group of teenagers have been, for various reasons, sent to a wilderness therapy camp. They each begin to take on a role in the group that forms, jock, outsider, mediator, punk, space cadet, and whiner. When the self-proclaimed leader of the group decides that they should take off without the counselor, the dynamics of the group shift and they begin to see each other differently.

Objectives: The main objective in reading this novel is for students to trace the development of characters as the plot shifts. We look also at the ways in which people label one another and how individuals react to those labels.

Students connect well with this book because they see in their own lives how people are labeled and how within groups, they play certain roles. To help illustrate the the function of these groups, I would use film clips that demonstrate similar group situations. *Goonies* and *The Breakfast Club* both explore the roles that teens play within a group of outcasts.

Assessment: I usually offer a menu of final assessment options for this novel, and an addition to that list will include the opportunity to compare and contrast the roles of characters in *Downriver*, *Goonies*, *The Breakfast Club*, or other films. Students will examine the roles that adolescents play and consider what makes them act in or out of their roles in both the book and the films.

New Media Literacy Units

In addition to the units that are already part of my curriculum, there are two others that I will add, adolescent representations and analysis of the news. Both of these units will set the foundation for activities and assessments in 8th grade language arts.

Adolescent Representations

Although I would most likely teach this as a separate unit, I would also want to integrate it in to my curriculum directly before or after teaching the novel *Downriver*. In 8th grade, students will analyze media representations of various groups; in 7th grade, students will analyze media representations of their own group — adolescents/teenagers.

Objectives: To evaluate the accuracy of media representations of adolescents with regard to bias, purpose, message, and audience.

Activity 1: To introduce this concept, I would first share images of teenagers with my students from print ads, TV clips (*Joan of Arcadia*, *Malcolm in the Middle*), magazine articles (*Seventeen*, *Teen People*), and film clips (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *10 Things I Hate About You*). With each separate image, I would ask students to list words that come to mind when they observe each teenager. Then, we'd list those words on the board, and in groups, students would answer these questions:

According to the media, what does a teenager want, think about, feel like, and believe?

Based on what you've observed, is there one definition that fits a teenager? Why or why not?

For homework, students would watch a TV sitcom or drama that focuses on teen characters, and answer the following questions about that show:

- Describe a typical problem or conflict that the teens face on this show.
- How is the problem solved?
- Is this the “real” way that teens deal with this kind of problem? Why/why not?
- Describe the main characters in the show.
- Are the teen characters exaggerated or stereotyped in this show? In what way?
- Which characters are portrayed positively? How?
- Which characters are portrayed negatively? How?
- Would you want to be like any of the characters on this show? Why/why not?
- Why do you think teenagers watch this show?

Activity 2: Students will complete a webquest looking at websites created for teenagers (www.smartgirl.org and www.nick.com are good examples to use). Students will answer these questions about each site:

What do the creators of this website assume about teenagers?

Are those assumptions accurate?

Which design elements does the website use to get and keep the attention of teenage users?

Does this website present any bias? If so, what and how?

Not only are these questions designed to evaluate the representations of teenagers, but also to evaluate the credibility of the websites themselves. Students will share their responses in classroom discussion.

Activity 3: Students will analyze representations of male and female teenagers in magazines. Students would bring in their favorite magazines, and in groups of boys and groups of girls, they would identify characteristics of the opposite gender depicted in those magazines (O’Sullivan, 2003). Students will create posters with examples that support their claims. Finally, students from the opposite gender will write a response to the presentations answering this question:

What message about your gender do teen magazines give to readers of the opposite gender? Is this message accurate?

Assessment: After a few days of exploring and discussing these representations, students will create their own idea for an original teen sitcom or drama. In groups of two or three, students will write a proposal for their show, depicting the characters, their typical dilemmas, and the intended audience. Then, students will storyboard their ideas and present them to the class. The class will evaluate each group’s work on how well it matches the purpose and demonstrates accuracy with or without bias. These projects will lead

to an interesting discussion about what it means to be a teenager and about whether entertainment needs to be accurate.

Analysis of News

Although a stand alone unit, this would fit well before or after teaching the novel *Nothing But The Truth*, since news reporters, in their own way, explore the nature of truth as well. Objectives: Students will analyze point of view, bias, and purpose in print and non-print news.

Activity 1: Within a group, assign members to watch the 6 o'clock news on different stations (channels 4, 5, 9, and 11) and to keep a viewing log of each story and its length. The next day, students will compare their viewing logs and determine differences in the shows that they watched. Then, in new groups where all students have watched the same show, students will evaluate and describe its format and production devices. In that group, they'll answer these questions: What makes this show effective? Who is the intended audience? How do the producers of this show attempt to attract viewers? Students will then watch clips from each production, and as a class, we will predict which stations are most popular and why. Finally, I'll share with students information about ratings and the history of each station. The activity will end with a response to this prompt: How has your new knowledge changed your view of the TV news? Which channel will you continue to watch, if any at all? Why?

Activity 2: This is a similar activity to the one above, but this time involving newspapers. In groups, students will examine the layout of the *Star Tribune*, *Pioneer Press*, and *Bloomington Sun Current*. After listing the characteristics of each paper, students will determine and discuss the audience and appeal of each. They will count the number of stories on the front page, and note the differences in what is included and left out, headline wording, and picture placement. Again, I'll share some history and facts about each paper, and we'll look at some international layouts on the Newseum website (www.newseum.org) as well. Finally, students will read the same story in different papers. Then, they'll answer these questions: Whose perspective do you get in this story? Whose perspective, if any, is left out? Which details are the same and different in each story? Do you sense any bias in these articles? If so, what?

Final Assessment: Students will create either a front page of a newspaper or a TV news program. Gathered from current events, I will give groups of three or four students fifteen or so news stories. From those, each group must select the stories that they deem most important or attention-grabbing to fit into the limited space of their front page or limited time of their TV news program. Students may modify the stories in any way they see appropriate, but they cannot go beyond the confines of their time and space. This assessment requires that students make decisions about audience, purpose, and perspective. Students must write a one page explanation of their process and the decisions they made, and finally, each group will present their work to the class. When all groups have presented, we will identify and discuss the distinctions between information presented in the different mediums.

Resources

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