

Integrating Media Studies into an Existing 8th Grade Curriculum

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History

The idea for this project began when Jessie Dockter and I agreed that there is no consensus as to how or when media literacy should be taught in our middle school. One 7th grade teacher has her students create imovies, but other than that, media literacy skills and concepts are not being covered. This is partly because most teachers have not been taught how to teach media literacy, and partly because it has not been emphasized as an important part of a language arts curriculum. Particularly after taking this course, we feel that a curriculum that does not include media literacy is outdated and out of touch. The students live in a media-rich world, and it is important to acknowledge this in the classroom and to create a learning environment that the students can understand and relate to. Not only does a media-infused class help engage students, but it speaks to them in their own language; it makes the learning more concrete and more authentic.

We also considered that the new Minnesota language arts standards include media literacy, so we agreed that some curriculum definitely needs to be created. This paper is an effort to address these standards, as well as a way to integrate media literacy into a curriculum that already exists. Our goal is not to make unrealistic demands on teachers' current courses, but to logically and seamlessly incorporate media literacy into what is already being taught. The content standards for media literacy in 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

Description of the Existing Course

8th grade is still a survey English course. We focus on a variety of literary genres and apply our knowledge of literary terms (plot, theme, characterization, etc.) to these pieces. We learn about and then write in several different genres: creative, persuasive, critical analysis and narrative. We study poetry and poetic devices and write poetry in a variety of different forms. Grammar, spelling and usage are integrated into the course's writing units. The major pieces of literature we study are:

The Outsiders, S.E. Hinton

Tom Sawyer, Mark Twain

Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury

Somewhere in the Darkness

"The Diary of Anne Frank"

"A Midsummer Night's Dream," Shakespeare

Beginning the Year: Thematic Connections

I always start the year with a thematic literature unit. Last year I used our new textbook (Holt), which divides its literature thematically. “We all need somebody to lean on” is the theme of the first unit, and I plan to open the year with this unit again. This unit helps me get to know the students through lots of discussion and quick-writes, and they enjoyed the first assignment of bringing in a photograph of them “leaning on” someone else. Most of the photos were pictures of smiling students with their arms around each other—my first bulletin board of the year was a big hit and I believe it helped set a comfortable, safe tone for the classroom.

Integrating television or film clips would be a logical way to explore this theme beyond the pages of their textbook. Middle school students relate to this theme well; friends are the most important aspect of their lives at this point. Rather than show an entire movie to illustrate this theme, I think I would bring in some television episodes that the students may not have seen. “The Wonder Years”, “Malcom in the Middle” and “My So-Called Life” are all high quality shows that the students would enjoy watching and then talking about in terms of portrayal of our theme. Since the understanding of theme is a core objective in the 7th grade curriculum, this first unit is a logical way to transition into 8th grade.

Comparing the book to the movie

One of the students’ favorite units is *The Outsiders*. This engaging novel by 15 year old S.E. Hinton is a classic story of friendship and street survival. The 8th graders quickly come to love the tough but endearing Curtis brothers and their Greaser friends, and the descriptive rumble scenes don’t hurt the book’s popularity! I have always shown Francis Ford Coppola’s 1983 film adaptation, and the students enjoy it nearly as much as they enjoy the book. In the past, I have shown the film as the classic teacher “reward” for reading the whole book. As it is early in the year and we haven’t covered film analysis yet, I think I would still let them watch the film without a task in front of them.

After the film is over, I introduce the 5 paragraph essay format and ask the students to write an essay with the following thesis: “I think Francis Ford Coppola’s movie “The Outsiders” is/is not an accurate representation of the novel.” What I’m really asking is if the movie is a faithful adaptation of the book. It’s not literal; the students immediately want to point out all the scenes that were taken out. But though they don’t use the discourse, they do usually come to the conclusion that it is indeed a faithful adaptation. The themes that we discussed while reading the book are still present and beautifully (my word, not theirs) woven into the action of the movie. “Stay gold” is our favorite theme, and Coppola splashes his film with reds, oranges and golds—this is not lost on the 8th graders. After our film unit later in the year, the students will pull this essay out of their portfolio and re-work it, using appropriate terms and language.

Website Credibility

The issue of website credibility is a sticky one, because it can seem so subjective. The sites that I want my students to explore are not necessarily the sites that they think are the most interesting or informative. Their very favorite site is, of course, is askjeeves.com. According the 8th graders, no site has more credibility than askjeeves. But what this site does is just pull up sites that might possibly answer their question, much like google or yahoo. Because it came through askjeeves, students assume each site is accurate and credible.

Creating a random unit that attempts to teach how to evaluate websites didn’t seem very meaningful. But when taught in the context of a large literature unit, it becomes much more logical. Standard 8th grade curriculum includes the Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett play “The Diary of Anne Frank.” Historical

context is completely necessary for the understanding of the work of literature, so I spend at least a week teaching about World War II and the Holocaust before we even open our literature books. I continue to integrate information and history lessons throughout the whole unit, so we never allow ourselves to forget the reality of the story we're reading.

One of the lessons I created as a result of this course was a webquest. It isn't a real webquest—it's really just a list of websites for the students to navigate and answer questions about. The day in the computer lab went well, and the students' curiosity was satisfactorily piqued. To address the state's requirement for teaching internet credibility, this lesson could easily be expanded to include the critical evaluation of websites.

There is an excellent introductory lesson at www.closeup.org/ncss-stu.htm that has the students brainstorm factors and criteria they use to evaluate the relevancy and credibility of print publications (books, pamphlets, magazines). They should write out these factors and criteria and then think about how they apply to the web. Are there additional criteria when thinking about the web? Do any factors or criteria not apply? This activity could lead into a meaningful discussion on website credibility, where the students have actually done most of the work themselves.

After this discussion, I would give the students a list of websites to navigate and evaluate. Some would be credible sites—ones I used this year were annefrank.nl, ushmm.org, annefrank.org, and historyplace.com—and others would be less credible sites, like a personal homepage belonging to a student doing a project on Anne Frank. In addition to the individual learning that naturally occurs when students browse websites, the students could fill out a “website evaluation criteria” like the one on the Springfield Convent Junior School's website. This chart includes four main categories for evaluation: design features, ease of use, content and credibility. I would obviously be the most concerned with the students' understanding of content and credibility, since this lesson would decidedly not be about web design. Still, good design and easy use can be helpful indicators of a credible website.

Production of Advertising

A writing unit is a logical next step after three literature units. The persuasive essay is a Minnesota Graduation Standard, and I have always chosen to include research in this paper. During this unit, we read newspaper editorials and discuss how the authors communicate a bias through word choice and tone. For the final paper, each student chooses a controversial topic and takes a stand on one side of the issue, using research to support his or her opinion. After this unit, it would make sense to transition into an advertising unit. I like the idea of integrating media literacy as much as possible into my existing units, but I decided that a separate unit on advertising makes the most sense. In 7th grade, the students will do an in-depth study of print and television advertising, focusing on the terminology and how to analyze ads using this knowledge. We thought that 8th grade should apply this knowledge in the form of production. I teach 90 minute class periods, and would create this as a 2 week, 5 class unit.

Lesson 1

Objective: Students will develop ability to recall persuasive techniques and recognize these techniques in existing television and print advertisements.

1. Review techniques of persuasion, using both the “common messages” worksheet from the “Critical Consumerism” website: www.210.pair.com/udticg/lessonplans/consumerism/

and an overhead of “The Language of Commercial Advertising” (Christel and Kruger 2001, 22.).

This will be a review from 7th grade as well as a review from the most recent unit on the persuasive essay.

2. Show 5 television ads and 5 print ads (one at a time). Have students fill out worksheets 6 and 7 from the “Critical Consumerism” website as they watch or look at each ad. Lead a large group discussion about how the ads are effective, how they are positioning us as consumers, what popular persuasive techniques they are using, etc.

Lesson 2

Objective: Students will develop ability to discover an ad that uses a specific persuasive technique and then evaluate the effectiveness of this technique.

1. In pairs or groups of 3, have students look through magazines to find one print ad that uses a clear persuasive technique. The students should be ready to present the ads, explain the persuasive technique(s) being used, and evaluate whether or not the ad is effective.
2. Choose partners for the ad production project. Students will work in pairs to market a product or a service, using both a print and a television ad. Partners spend the remainder of the hour brainstorming a product to market and persuasive techniques they could use.

Lessons 3 and 4

Objective: Students will develop ability to apply knowledge of persuasion in both print and television ads to create their own products, and will show an understanding of what makes an ad effective.

1. Students will spend these two days creating their television and print ads. The teacher may decide to allow students to either make their print ads on the computer or using other mediums. Television ads will obviously need to be made using digital cameras, which the media center will loan to us. Students will need to have written and rehearsed their ads before the actual taping, so that each pair has a chance to record their ad during these two class periods.

Lesson 5 - Assessment

Objective: Students will develop ability to critically evaluate the effectiveness of their peers’ advertisements, using the same criteria they used earlier in the unit (worksheets 6 and 7).

1. Students will present their ads to the class, and the audience will evaluate their ads based on the same criteria we modeled in lesson 1. Students’ grades will be based both on their peers’ evaluations and a teacher evaluation.

Critical Analysis of Media Representations

In 7th grade, the students will study the different ways teenagers are represented in the media. They will look at many different forms of media—television, ads, music, movies—and how these different media portray and create teenagers' identity. In 8th grade, we'll built upon this understanding of media representation by having the students do a formal, critical analysis of one group of people. I am planning this unit for four days, about a week and a half.

Lesson 1

Objective: Students will develop ability to understand how the intended audience shapes media representations.

1. After reviewing what students remember about the representations of teenagers in the media, put students in groups of 3-4. Give each group a category: women, men, adolescents, mothers, etc. Each group should list some common representations portrayed in the media (for example, mothers: nurturers, homemakers, working women, etc).
2. Give each group several magazines intended for different audiences (Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, The Atlantic Monthly). Have students leaf through the magazines and keep a running tally of how many times the group is represented in each of the ways.
3. Have each group present their findings to the class and discuss why certain audiences (specific magazines) seem to be receiving certain images or stereotypes. Discuss how and why audience shapes media representations (Tammy McCartney and Kimberly Sy).

Lessons 2 and 3

Objective: Students will develop ability to work in a cooperative group to analyze media representations of a particular group.

1. Students will work in teams of 3-4. Each group will select a media representation they want to investigate. I will give them a list to choose from, but they are welcome to come up with their own. My list: race, class, gender, specific occupations, families, mothers, fathers, gays, teachers, bosses, working women, the elderly, schools, love, sports. Each group will need to determine how this type is portrayed in three of the following formats: films, television shows, television/radio commercials, magazines, newspapers, websites, books or music. Their task is to come up with results of their research that they can present to the class. Two class periods will be spent doing this research, discussing findings from outside of class, and beginning to put together a 2 page formal paper and a powerpoint presentation (see worksheet 1).

Lesson 4 - Assessment (this lesson may come a week or so after lesson 3 to give students time to prepare)

Objective: Students will develop ability to present their findings to the class through a formal critical paper and a powerpoint presentation.

1. Present powerpoints, turn in papers.

Genre

Each quarter, the students are to complete an outside reading project. I have always given them many different options for this project, attempting to cater to different learning styles and different individual interests. First quarter they read a novel and complete a project that generally deals with plot; most students choose to re-write the ending of the novel or write a short story sequel. Biography is the genre for second quarter, and the project is a poster that represents their person. I always give them considerable amount of choice third quarter—they can choose any genre they want for the book, and then they have about ten different options for the project. Some of these options include creating a website, making a video of an important scene, writing a book review or turning a novel into a children’s book with illustrations.

I thought that media literacy, in the form of studying movie genres, could easily be turned into an outside reading project. One quarter the project could be to choose a book and a movie that are in the same genre and write a final paper that analyzes how the characteristics of the genre manifest themselves in both the film and the book. Before assigning the project, I would create a powerpoint to introduce the students to major film genres and their common characteristics. Some of the genres I would include in the powerpoint are: action/adventure, western, gangster/criminal, detective, comedy, fantasy/science fiction, horror/monster, sports, coming of age and romantic comedy. The students could choose which genre to delve into, keeping with my philosophy that the outside reading project allow individual choice. Though we wouldn’t be covering the topic of genre in great depth, it would be a fun introduction to the concept for the 8th graders.

Film Adaptations

While I don’t think I would teach a separate unit on film adaptations, we could discuss the concept after reading both *Fahrenheit 451* and “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and then watching the film adaptations. The students inevitably come to the conclusion that the 1967 film of *Fahrenheit 451* is terrible, but we could go into greater detail about what “terrible” means, discussing the idea of a faithful analogy and how the movie attempts to be this, though ultimately failing at our idea of a “good” movie. I have always shown the 1999 Kevin Kline “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” scene by scene as we read the play together, and though the film isn’t fabulous, it is a fairly faithful analogy (though a displaced setting) that reinforces the students’ understanding of the plot.

Production of Film

Sometime earlier in the year, I might do a small film analysis unit, focusing on techniques and elements (long-shot, tilt, sound, etc). The assumption, however, is that they will have learned these film techniques in 7th grade and it will be just a review in 8th grade. Near the end of the year, the students, in small groups, would get the opportunity to make their own film based on a novel or short story that we had read sometime during the year. Depending on the knowledge of the students, I would first teach them how to use digital cameras and then to put their footage into imovies. Then, in order to show that they understand elements of film, the groups would be required to make their own video segment that uses at least five of the techniques they have learned. The film could be a “sequel” to a short story we’ve read, a missing chapter from a novel or just a re-enactment of a key scene.

Once they are finished with these movies, the students would present the videos to the class, explaining the techniques they chose to use and why they made those choices. A short reflection paper could also be required, discussing how specific film techniques enhanced their understanding (or the audience’s understanding) of the text (Kathy Connors and Amy Gustafson).

Conclusion

As Jessie and I talked about the direction of this scope and sequence, we wanted to make sure that the 8th grade media literacy curriculum builds on what they learned in 7th grade. We decided against having 7th grade be the “advertising” year and 8th grade be the “film” year, for example. As middle school teachers, we know that there is no such thing as over-teaching; introducing the key concepts in 7th grade and then reviewing and building on them in 8th grade made the most sense to us. We also tried to address the students’ intellectual needs by emphasizing analysis of concepts in 7th grade and then the application of these concepts through production in 8th grade.

Our hope is that we can introduce this scope and sequence to our department and be met with willingness to implement media literacy into our curriculum canon. When students learn by using and discussing media, the learning is guaranteed to be more authentic—students *use* media outside the classroom. They don’t necessarily read classic novels outside the classroom. In her introduction to the book *Seeing and Believing*, Mary Christel writes, “The trend toward giving students ‘real life’ experiences in the language arts classroom comes to fruition in an extremely powerful way.” She is right; using media in our classrooms is becoming the increasingly necessary way to connect with our students and to instill in them a love of learning.

Works Cited

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Appendix

Worksheet #6

Advertising Analysis

Directions: Please answer the following questions (on a separate sheet of paper) for each television advertisement you see. You may need to watch the ad more than once!

1. *What is the product, service or idea being sold?*
2. *Who is the target audience?*
3. *What images appear on the screen? Do these images supply specific information about the product/service?*
4. *If “no” to the last question, what do the images communicate?*
5. *Note the body language of the people in the ad. What does it say?*
6. *Is music used in the commercial? How does it make you feel?*
7. *Does the ad play on the emotion of envy or anxiety? How?*
8. *What things should someone know about this product/service before buying it? Is this information supplied? Why or why not?*
9. *Does the ad “work?” Would you like to buy the product?*
10. *What techniques are most heavily used: logos, pathos or ethos?*

Worksheet 7: Print Advertising

Advertisement What Works

Dove Soap	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Beautiful, dignified woman• Positive language: <i>strength, beauty</i>• Catchy slogan

Language Arts 8

Step 1: Your task is to choose a specific group that is represented in the media and do a critical analysis on **how** this group is represented. We discussed teenagers in class, so you will need to choose a different group for this project.

Here are some ideas, though you may come up with your own:

- race
- class
- gender
- specific occupation (teacher, doctor, etc)
- families
- mothers
- fathers
- gays
- bosses
- working women
- the elderly
- schools
- love
- sports

Step 2: After you have chosen your group, you will need to choose three media formats to analyze. Here are the formats to choose from (remember, choose **3**):

- television shows
- movies
- television/radio commercials
- magazines
- newspapers
- websites
- music
- music videos

Now you have a research question for your paper. An example might be: **How is love portrayed in music, in magazine ads and in movies?**

Step 3: Your group is to present your findings in a 2-page formal paper **and** a powerpoint presentation. When presenting your findings, think about questions like:

How is this group most frequently portrayed?

What stereotypes are being perpetuated?

How would I feel about these portrayals if I were in this group?

Who is the intended audience in these media formats? How does the intended audience contribute to the representation?

How do these representations shape society's perception of this group?

This project is due _____