DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 808 IR 020 681

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TITLE Lessons in Media Literacy and Students' Comprehension of Television and Text Advertisements.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising; *At Risk Persons; Educational Development; *High Risk Students; High School Students; High Schools; Information Literacy; *Mass Media; *Television Commercials
IDENTIFIERS *Media Literacy

ABSTRACT

A Media Studies program enhances the goals of formal schooling by providing every student with knowledge and skills to wisely select, access and use the communications and information tools they will need to be responsible citizens in a free society. All students deserve a good media education. This paper provides a model to address this need through the successful implementation of a Media Studies program with students who are identified as "at-risk" and who need a special education. This study employed a non-equivalent control group design, identifying one treatment group, and one control group within the same high school. Students enrolled in a "Reconnecting Youth" special program and were taught 15 formal lessons in media literacy. The control group was composed of six males, and the treatment group was composed of five males and one female. The six students in the treatment group were all selected for the "Reconnecting Youth" special class because they wished to make changes in their drug and alcohol use, school attendance, or mood management. The control group students, considered to be mainstream students, were randomly selected from the "Reconnecting Youth" teacher's other classes. The study's findings provide empirical evidence that students benefited from these formal lessons in media literacy. It can be argued that the media literacy lessons helped the treatment group to better comprehend television advertisements and text advertisements. (Contains 33 references and 4 tables.) (AEF)

Lessons in Media Literacy and Students' Comprehension of Television and Text Advertisements

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A paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) 2001 Annual Meeting, April 10 – 14, 2001, in Seattle, Washington.

Introduction:

Much has been written about the media's profound influence on children and youth; it is hard to deny the impact. The media's influence is particularly strong regarding messages emanating from commercial television, film, and computer games (Gathercoal, 1989; Gathercoal & Quin, 1993). Commercial media messages invariably influence children and youths' concept formation through the models of socialization and culture they provide. Their dramatized portrayals of ways of living contribute to hypotheses about the world and influence the way we live (Gerbner, 1987; Riley, 1999).

Formal schooling aims to develop in students:

- ✓ the habits of critical thinking,
- ✓ intensive practice in reading and writing, the primary medium for intellectual discourse,
- ✓ the ability to intelligently discuss important issues and to make formal presentations, and
- ✓ the ability to reflect on the values inherent in a particular body of knowledge, to recognize the social, moral and ethical implications of that knowledge, and to move toward intellectual, emotional and relational commitments.

A Media Studies program enhances the goals of formal schooling by providing every student with knowledge and skills to wisely select, access and use the communications and information tools they will need to be responsible citizens in a free society.

Today, more than ever, there is a need for students to learn to use and critically evaluate the media and their messages. Students need:

- ✓ to be empowered to use the media to enhance and extend their living and learning environment,
- ✓ to be aware of the media's capabilities for manipulating information and communication, and

- ✓ to develop an ethical sensitivity towards the social, cultural and personal implications associated with the selection, access, and use of information and communications via the media and their messages.

Central to teaching about the media and their messages is the idea that the media **are not** neutral in their means of disseminating information, communication, and entertainment.

> Crucial questions are: who is formulating the information on the screen, on what ideological and political basis are the selections made and for what purpose is the information and entertainment conveyed? When these issues are understood children will have the power to make informed and ethical decisions about the messages they receive and transmit. (Gathercoal & Quin, 1993, p.84)

When commercial media messages define one's culture, it is nearly impossible to think about that culture in a critical way. The media present all of us with messages representing worlds of fantasy and reality. These representations are constructed and embedded in a complex language framework. Symbols are employed which utilize both visual and aural modes. And these symbols are deliberately selected and juxtaposed to provide both affective and cognitive information. As a result, media messages can simultaneously arouse emotion and stimulate thought.

To *critically read* commercial media messages, especially those delivered through television and digital communications, a complex symbol code must be learned. Learning to critically read this code and its conventions has been likened to learning to read and write conventional text. There is a body of literature which supports a positive relationship between processes involved in learning to read visual media messages and written text (Weaver & Rosner, 1975; Kossack & Bader, 1980; Luke, 1985; Masterman, 1985; Sinatra & Venezia, 1986).

The influences of commercial media messages transcend social and cultural boundaries inasmuch as the media present the same message to all. Yet, individuals interpret that same message differently because each places the message in his or her cultural and personal context. Hence, the influence that a media message may have on individuals varies, depending upon their perception and interpretation of the message, their aspirations, and their knowledge of the world.

Media literacy can be taught in schools (Singer, Zucherman & Singer, 1980; Baron, 1985; Masterman, 1985; Watkins, Sprafkin, Gadow and Sadetsky, 1988; Gathercoal, 1990). There is ample evidence that the study of media literacy through *content* has been effective, even though short lived due to the changing nature of the media and their messages. The challenge seems clear: to design and implement lessons in media literacy that are *process* oriented.

Students who participate in a process-oriented media studies program will learn to utilize new and more powerful ways of communicating by employing conventional visual and audio techniques to construct their own media messages. They will learn the value of using Close-ups to highlight emotion and/or important information when constructing sequences of shots and the use of appropriate music and sound effects to create a certain mood. They will learn that constructing media messages takes considerably more preparation time than it takes simply to record the visuals and sound. They will know that film and television messages are composed of sequences of shots that are usually scripted and then recorded, shot by shot, over and over until the shots are near perfect as

planned. All Media Studies lessons should be taught using a methodology that acknowledges and values the student's culture and individuality; and practices the theory that children learn best when they are actively involved in the process of investigation.

Without metalinguistic and metacognitive capabilities, learners have little hope of fully understanding their favorite commercial media messages. Conventional wisdom suggests that children first use acquired language framework and symbol systems at a tacit level to encode and decode interpersonal, intrapersonal and mediated communications. By employing a personal language to describe their language framework and symbol systems (metalinguistic awareness) and consciously monitoring their cognitive processes (metacognition), children's tacit knowledge about language use is elevated to a conscious level (Temple & Gillet, 1989; Gathercoal, 1990). Schooling provides an opportunity for children to explore the rules and conventions of language at a conscious level, beyond tacit cultural ways of knowing (Smith, 1982; McNeil, 1984; Baker & Brown, 1984; Temple & Gillet, 1989). As a result, children learn to describe the language framework and symbol systems, as well as the conventions for social and cultural use.

Schools have a responsibility to provide students with the skills and understandings to be responsible makers and consumers of any media message. Media Studies is critical thinking. It is reading and writing, intelligently discussing important issues, and reflecting on the values inherent in a particular body of knowledge; it is recognizing the social, moral and ethical implications of that knowledge, and the moving towards intellectual, emotional and relational commitments. Media Studies achieves the ends of formal schooling through the primary media of discourse in the twenty-first century. All students deserve a good media education.

Our paper provides a model to address this need through the successful implementation of a media studies program with students who are identified as "at-risk" and who need a "special education." This study indicates that students who are taught fifteen lessons in media literacy can significantly comprehend television advertisements and text advertisements better than students who have not been formally taught about media literacy.

Methodology:

This study employed a non-equivalent control group design, identifying one treatment group, and one control group within the same High School. Since a nonequivalent control group design is quasi-experimental in nature, true randomization was not practiced. Instead, a pretest was used to determine if the two groups were probably equal. Students in one "special class" associated with a program called *Reconnecting Youth* were assigned as the treatment group. An equal number of students from other classes that the *Reconnecting Youth*'s class teacher taught were selected at random to be the control group. There were six students in each group.

The design employed a pretest, treatment, and posttest. The treatment, or independent variable, consisted of fifteen formal lessons in media literacy. The pretest and posttest measured the dependent variable "comprehension" of television advertisements and text advertisements. All students in the treatment and control groups were administered the pretest, except one student in the treatment group. The student missed the text advertising pretest because of a late start to the semester. Then, in fall of

2000, the fifteen lessons in media literacy were taught to the treatment group. At the end of the semester, all students in the treatment and control groups were administered the posttest. The treatment and control groups' pretest and posttest results were compared for significant differences.

The Population:

This study was conducted at Santa Barbara High School, Santa Barbara, California, where students enrolled in a "*Reconnecting Youth*" program were taught fifteen formal lessons in media literacy. All students in the treatment and control groups were enrolled in classes with the teacher responsible for implementing the treatment in the fall of 2000.

The students ranged in age from 15 to 18 years old. The control group was composed of six male students, and the treatment group was composed of 5 males and one female.

The six students in the treatment group were all selected for a "special class" (*Reconnecting Youth*) because they wished to make changes in their drug and alcohol use, school attendance, or mood management (which includes violent behaviors and gang involvement). Five students in the treatment group were working on substance abuse, all were working on school attendance goals, and five were working on controlling their moods (which included their gang involvement). Four students in the treatment group were on probation with the law at the time.

The treatment students' family structure consisted of one student with a single parent, one student with divorced and remarried parents and four students with both parents living with them. All of the treatment students were eligible for a free lunch program and their socio-economic status would be characterized as low. Five of the students' parents never had contact with the teacher and the sixth student's parents had at least two contacts with the teacher. One student had a grade point average below 1.0, four of the students had a grade point average above a 2.0 and one had a grade point average higher than a 3.0.

The six students in the control group were all randomly selected from the *Reconnecting Youth*'s teacher's other classes at the time. These six students were all considered mainstream students and were not identified as "at-risk" of graduating from high school. The students' family structure consisted of one student with a single parent, two students with divorced and remarried parents and three students with both parents living with them at home. None of these students were on a free lunch program and their socio-economic status is characterized as moderate to high-income families. Five of the students' parents were very involved in school/parent activities, with multiple contacts with the teacher throughout the year. The sixth student's parents had at least two contacts with the teacher. Four of the students had a grade point average above a 2.0 and two had a grade point average higher than a 3.0.

The Treatment:

The treatment consisted of fifteen formal lessons in media literacy. The treatment consisted of a range of activities, organized to provide for sequential development of concepts about the *process* of communication through the electronic media. The lessons

were designed to enhance students' metalinguistic awareness and metacognitive skills. The lessons were based on open-ended inquiry and lent themselves to enrichment activities and to a wide range of teaching styles. The scope of the treatment embraced notions of visual and audio design, sequencing, framing and composition, production techniques, editing, presentation/publication and social uses of conventional aspects of media language and motivation. The treatment was implemented and taught by the *Reconnecting Youth* teacher.

The Instrumentation:

The instruments for measuring comprehension of television advertisements and text advertising were adapted from Gathercoal's (1990) research *Media Literacy and Children's Comprehension of Television Advertisements and Persuasive Written Text.* The pretest instruments were administered on two different days to the treatment and control groups. The instruments were applied to three television advertisements and three text advertisements. The pretests and posttests were administered by the classroom teacher. Students were instructed to respond to all the questions in writing and to give their best response.

The first question in the instrument required students to identify the target audience for the advertisement. Students were shown a television advertisement or a text advertisement and then were instructed to place an "X" next to all the groups of people at which the advertisement was aimed. Their response sheets provided a list of demographically separate groups of people. The groups of people were separated by age factors and described in terms familiar to the students. Students were informed that they could identify one group, all groups or some groups of people who were listed on the response sheet. Adjudicators did not score this item, but simply used it to ensure that students had some notion of target audience and with whom the advertisement was mainly trying to communicate. If the student had no idea who the target audience was, then their response would not be counted.

After the students responded to the target audience question, they were shown the advertisement again and asked about the advertisement's appeal to the target audience, i.e. what would the target audience like most? Students were asked to respond in writing and adjudicators scored the students' responses from the following range.

3 points = *Critical Level Response*, e.g., "Because you will get a lot of dates when you wear Lee jeans and they will be cute dates."

2 points = *Inferential Level Response*, e.g., "Lee jeans are good."

1 point = *Literal Level Response*, e.g., "Lee jeans."

0 points = Miscomprehension of intended message or no response.

When students had finished responding to the appeal question, they were asked about the advertisement's intention, e.g., what does the advertisement want the target audience to do? Again, students were asked to respond in writing and adjudicators scored the students' responses from the following range.

3 points = *Critical Level Response*, e.g., "Think that if you wear their jeans you'll attract cute dates."

2 points = *Inferential Level Response*, e.g., "Buy Lee jeans."

1 point = *Literal Level Response*, e.g., "Wear Lee jeans."

0 points = Miscomprehension of intended message or no response.

When students had finished responding to the intention question, they were asked about the advertisement's ploy or persuasive tactic, e.g., what does the advertisement want the target audience to believe? Again, students were asked to respond in writing and adjudicators scored the students' responses from the following range.

3 points = *Critical Level Response*, e.g., "Other people will like the way you look if you wear Lee jeans."

2 points = *Inferential Level Response*, e.g., "That the product is good."

1 point = *Literal Level Response*, e.g., "That the lady is wearing Lee jeans."

0 points = Miscomprehension of intended message or no response.

The classroom teacher then asked students to place an "X" next to their best response after a question asking if they thought the advertisement was a good one or not. This question indicates whether or not the students could make a definite value judgment about the persuasive nature of the advertisement. Adjudicators scored each student's response from the following range:

1 point = A "Yes" or "No" response.

0 points = An "I can't decide" response or no response.

The last question on the instrument was designed to have students articulate the criteria they used to evaluate the advertisement. It was an open-ended question that asked what the target audience would like most about the advertisement itself. Adjudicators scored each student's response form the following range:

2 points = Mention of an appeal **and** a technique used by the advertiser, e.g., "The music was good and I think the people in the commercial were good actors and it sort of seems like they're saying girls will be nice to you because you look cute in Lee jeans."

1 point = Mention of an appeal **or** a technique used by the advertiser, e.g., "Girls will be nice to you because you look cute in Lee Jeans," or "They didn't focus on the jeans enough."

0 points = No response or miscomprehension of the advertisement's intended message.

The student's responses to these questions were quantified and a comprehension score was assigned for students' comprehension of television advertisements and text advertisements. The instruments yielded pretest and posttest raw scores for all students participating in this study.

All raw scores for both treatment and control groups were compared using a Mann-Whitney U Test for two independent samples. The researchers chose the less familiar U test because the sample population was too small to use a t-test. The U test is a common replacement for the t-test when the sample population is small and whenever it cannot be assumed that the sample population is normally distributed with equal variances.

Alpha was set at .05 level of significance and a U test for independent groups was used to determine if there was a discernable bias between the treatment and control groups' pretest raw scores for comprehension of television and text advertisements. Again, with alpha set at .05, the posttest raw scores were tested to ascertain any significant differences between the groups' comprehension of television and text advertisements. It was expected that there would be no discernable difference between the groups' pretests, but that the treatment group would score significantly better than the control group on the posttest.

Results:

The pretest for comprehension of television advertisements indicated that the control groups' scores were significantly better than the treatment groups' scores [U(12) = 4, p = <.05*]. The two groups were probably not equal in their abilities to comprehend television advertisements. The treatment and control groups' pretest distribution of scores for comprehension of television advertisements is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Pretest: Television Advertisements Comprehension Scores of Students in Control and Treatment Groups.

Range of Scores	Control (N = 6) N	Control (N = 6) % of Total	Treatment (N = 6) N	Treatment (N = 6) % of Total
7 – 9	0	0	0	0
10 – 12	0	0	1	17
13 – 15	0	0	1	17
16 – 18	1	17	4	67
19 – 21	4	67	0	0
22 - 24	1	17	0	0

The pretest for comprehension of written advertisements indicated that the two groups were probably equal. The treatment and control groups' pretest distribution of scores for comprehension of text advertisements is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Pretest: Text Advertisements Comprehension Scores of Students in Control and Treatment Groups.

Range of Scores	Control (N = 6) N	Control (N = 6) % of Total	Treatment (N = 6) N	Treatment (N = 6) % of Total
7 – 9	1	17	0	0
10 – 12	1	17	1	20
13 – 15	0	0	1	20
16 – 18	1	17	0	0
19 – 21	1	17	2	40
22 - 24	2	34	1	20

The posttest for comprehension of television advertisements [U(12) = 5, p = <.05*] and text advertisements [U(12) = 3, p = <.01**] indicated that the treatment groups' scores were significantly better than the control groups' scores. The treatment and control groups' posttest distribution of scores for comprehension of television advertisements is presented in Table 3 and their posttest distribution of scores for comprehension of text advertisements is presented in Table 4.

TABLE 3. Posttest: Television Advertisements Comprehension Scores of Students in Control and Treatment Groups.

Range of Scores	Control (N = 6) N	Control (N = 6) % of Total	Treatment (N = 6) N	Treatment (N = 6) % of Total
4 – 6	1	17	0	0
7 – 9	1	17	0	0
10 – 12	2	34	1	17
13 – 15	0	0	0	0
16 – 18	1	17	0	0
19 – 21	1	17	1	17
22 - 24	0	0	1	17
25 - 27	0	0	2	34
28 - 30	0	0	1	17

TABLE 4. Posttest: Text Advertisements Comprehension Scores of Students in Control and Treatment Groups.

Range of Scores	Control (N = 6) N	Control (N = 6) % of Total	Treatment (N = 6) N	Treatment (N = 6) % of Total
4 – 6	2	34	0	0
7 – 9	0	0	0	0
10 – 12	0	0	0	0
13 – 15	0	0	0	0
16 – 18	2	34	0	0
19 – 21	0	0	1	17
22 - 24	2	34	3	50
25 - 27	0	0	2	34

Discussion:

The study's findings provide empirical evidence that students benefited from these fifteen formal lessons in media literacy. It can be argued that the fifteen lessons in media literacy helped the treatment group to better comprehend television advertisements and text advertisements. This supports the theory that reading comprehension can be taught through the study of electronic media messages and individually and critically applied to messages emanating from another object medium, such as text. The implications of these findings may be better understood if we consider the benefits inherent in better comprehension of television and text advertisements.

Classically, better comprehension has preceded better use of information and this has in turn led to individuals making higher quality decisions (McCormick, 1988; Bartine, 1989). It can be argued that the students who were taught fifteen lessons in media literacy could be expected to make better use of advertising information and higher quality consumer related decisions.

Theoretically this study is significant in that it provides support for the notion that a "transitional grammar" assists readers to attain higher levels of reading comprehension. The fifteen lessons in media literacy may have allowed students opportunities to acquire a new language about the conventions of communication via television (metalinguistic awareness) and it may have allowed them to consciously monitor thinking about communication tasks, their role in the communication process and self-evaluation of their performance (metacognitive strategies). It this was the case, then it fits with the theory that metalinguistic awareness and metacognitive strategies are needed for higher levels of comprehension when reading. It can be argued that these students were using their newly acquired metalinguistic awareness and metacognitive strategies as part of a personal "transitional grammar" employed while reading television and text advertisements.

In addition, this study's findings support the notion of transferability of skills and understandings about the process of communication from one medium to another. Students who were taught the conventions of constructing television messages seemed to apply those understandings to reading text advertisements. As a result their comprehension of text was significantly better than students in the control group who did not receive instruction in media literacy. This finding has implications for future research and reexamining our current assumptions about how we should teach reading comprehension. Possibly, student can achieve the same or greater reading comprehension if they are taught through other media, like television, which seems to be of more interest to and more popular with today's youth than reading from textbooks.

Interpretation of Qualitative Data:

The fifteen formal lessons in media literacy generated numerous artifacts as students constructed oral, written, and video responses to the lessons. The students' work showed that they were learning to use new and more powerful ways of communicating by employing conventional visual and audio techniques to construct their own messages. They learned the value of using close-ups to highlight emotion and the use of appropriate music and sound effects to create a certain mood. They learned that constructing television messages took considerably more preparation time than it took simply to record the visuals and sound. In addition, they learned that television messages are composed of sequences of shots that are usually scripted and then recorded, shot by shot, over and over until the shots are near perfect as planned. All of these lessons and more were taught using a methodology based on the premise that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process of investigation.

As part of the formal fifteen lessons and as enrichment, students generated many projects including:

- Drawn storyboards shot with video camera while adding music and voice-over.
- Graphics and video credits created in PhotoShop and edited on to videotape.
- Raw video was captured, WAV files were created and videotapes were constructed using Premiere

Some of the student made videos included:

- "Smack, Crack, Pot," an anti-ad for drug use and attendance
- "Marijuana," an anti-ad for drug use
- "Snowboarding," a documentary of the student's learning while at snow camp.
- "Camping," a documentary of student's learning while at beach camp.

- "White Water Rafting," a documentary of student's learning while at river camp, and
- "The Blair Witch Project," a student scripted and directed dramatized production on videotape.

The students were able to write, shoot and edit an original video that contained very creative ideas. Some of the emotions that they expressed were surprising to the teacher. Gang members were crying on video, and fear was portrayed. An interesting artifact from their production activity was the realization that fear can lead to anger. These students, many who were on anger management programs, had never thought of anger in that light before.

The students really enjoyed working with the cameras. Yet, one of the students would not touch the camera for two weeks because as he informed the teacher, "I never got to touch something that good, that costs that much, in school. I can't do it." The teacher was patient with the student and he eventually learned to trust his own abilities and skills with the equipment. The equipment used by the students was high-end consumer quality equipment. The students took excellent care with the equipment and they were very protective of it.

Four of the six students were seniors at the time of the treatment. None of the seniors were on track to graduate on time. We are happy to report that all four graduated on time, and are currently doing well. One has a job designing bumper stickers and signs and he arned the job as a result of the skills he learned using PhotoShop.

All students have copies of the videos they made during the course. It is a pleasant reminder of their struggles and successes as students in the *Reconnecting Youth* program. Parents and relatives of these students never come to "Back to School Night," for parents and caregivers. But, when they heard there was going to be a video show of what the students had been doing, all the students and their relatives came to the "Back to School Night." It was fascinating evening as the teacher looked across the room to see long-time Eastside Gang members sharing their sons' accomplishments with long-time Westside Gang members. These are gangs that for years have fought over turf in Santa Barbara and then, there they are sitting in the same room together, and at school.

Students enjoyed and appreciated the activity approach to teaching and learning. There were many positive comments recorded in the students' journals. They include:

- "Making the movie was the most fun thing we did on our camping trip."
- "When my parents saw the video, they want to go camping too"
- "When we do these projects, we don't ever think about using [drugs]."
- "The fight scenes were the most fun."
- "We can do stuff that even the smart kids can't do!"
- "We can do stuff that our teachers can't do."
- "Other kids want to be in this class to learn to make movies like we did."

Suggestions for Future Research:

Several areas in which research is needed are suggested by this study.

1) Investigation of the notion of transferability of skills and understanding from one message system to another is not fully exhausted. This study provides evidence of the transfer of criteria for evaluating television advertisements to text

advertisements. It may be of interest to know if, given more time and practice, students could transfer skills and understandings concerning other aspects of comprehension to their daily lives.

2) A longitudinal study could indicate whether students who participate in formal lessons in media literacy are able to retain the ability to comprehend television and text advertisements better than students who have not had formal instruction.

3) Further research is needed to ascertain whether better comprehension of television and text advertising does lead to higher quality consumer related decisions. More research is needed to investigate whether these students apply their higher-level understandings to make higher quality decisions.

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Title: MEDIA LITERACY AND COMPREHENSION OF COMMERCIAL MESSAGES.

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Publication Date: APRIL 2001

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