



Reading and Writing Connections Using Media: Addressing the Literacy Needs of Students in Intermediate and Middle Level Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Students in intermediate and middle level grades are often caught up in the exciting visual images and auditory stimuli that are a part of all their everyday communication and learning experiences. As a group of students who are growing intellectually and socially in the midst of, and through, predominantly media messages, they require reading and writing activities that integrate these forms and support connections between their in and out of school experiences. Research indicates that media can be used to facilitate literacy learning. It is important for preservice and practicing teachers to consider the reasons and framework for including media in literacy activities, the forms and applications that are most productive for learning, and the processes for integrating media for reading and writing lessons. The purpose of this article is to provide insight into planning everyday literacy instruction using media forms.

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Traditional language arts curricula often tend to restrict their reading selections to print texts, frequently limited to works from the literary canon. However, some teachers are beginning to integrate both print and non-print texts into their instruction (Falk-Ross, Rajski-Dzuryak, Rogers, Waste, Rizzato, & Alarcon, 2008; Hobbs, 2007). When adopting this expanded view of literacy resources, texts encompass non-print forms of material, or *media*, that communicate messages, including visual and aural media (i.e., television programs, movies, music), electronic sources (i.e., websites, instant messages, video games, text messages), student-generated texts (i.e., zines, school publications, notes in class), as well as people's life experiences and social/cultural events (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Semali & Watts Pailliotet, 1999). These forms of text are not neutral; they are complex constructions with print, images, color, gestures, sounds, facial expressions, motion, music, and camera angles which transmit selected cultural, economic, political, and historical meanings and values. Construction of media's



meaning occurs when readers encounter texts and form their idiosyncratic interpretations based on variables such as gender, age, social class, race, sexual orientation, and familiarity with other texts (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Buckingham, 2003; Mackey, 2007; Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000; Semali, 2003).

Media literacy can be defined as “the process of critically analyzing and learning to create one's own messages in print, audio, video, and multimedia” (Hobbs, 1998, p. 16). When teachers incorporate instruction with media texts, they deepen their students’ cognitive development by increasing their knowledge of key concepts or terms and helping them to become critical thinkers (Scharer, 2003). Approaches to integrating media activities into literacy lessons include those that use reading and reflection to evaluate media in the classroom and those that use media to support reading and writing events. The former provides critical lenses for young adolescents to understand the subtle messages that may be conveyed through non-print resources and their influences on our interpretation of the text. The latter approach incorporates popular culture forms that have become second nature to most young adolescents. These approaches are explained in more detail in the next sections.

Questions for Critiquing Media

More specific to the study of media, Thoman (n.d.) suggested that questioning is at the heart of examining media, “What is important for media literacy is not to know all the answers, but to *raise the right questions* about what you watch, read, or listen to...” (italics in original, p.4). For example, Hobbs and Frost (2003) guided teachers’ media instruction by using the Five Key Questions (Share, Jolls, & Thoman, 2007) developed by the Center for Media Literacy.

- Who created this message?
- What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
- How might different people understand this message differently?
- What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
- Why is the message being sent?

These five questions were designed to be used by teachers to help guide students as they seek answers related to the authorship, format, audience, content, and purposes of media messages.

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) provided similar questions which they developed to help students critically analyze texts and enhance their comprehension. Their questions also focused on authorship, audience, and purpose, but they additionally examined voice, alternative representations, and the use of content information for promoting equity.

- Who is in the text/picture/situation? Who is missing?
- Whose voices are represented? Whose voices are marginalized or discounted?
- What are the intentions of the author? What does the author want the reader to think?
- What would an alternative text/picture/situation say?



- How can the reader use this information to promote equity? (p. 41)
Kempe (2001) posed questions that asked readers to examine their thoughts and feelings and to think about how their interpretations were mediated by their backgrounds as they read popular magazines. These types of questions required students to acknowledge the manner in which media texts create emotional responses and to take notice of the cultural values and lifestyles being promoted.
- What are you thinking about or feeling while you are reading? How are these thoughts and feelings influenced by your background, your experiences, and other texts you have read?
- What is the text asking you to think or feel? Do you agree with the point of view offered by the text? Why or why not?
- What view of men/women does this particular magazine promote? How is this different from the views constructed in other magazines? Why is it different?

All these questions have the similar intent of helping readers look more deeply into the authors' purposes and readers' responses. A good example of using questions to guide thinking during reading is provided in descriptions of classroom activities by Linder (2007, 2008b) focusing on the design of an advertisement web (Appendix A).

An Application of Questioning Strategy Using Media

These types of questions provided the basis for design of an advertisement web (Linder, 2007, 2008b) that was constructed by students as part of their study of magazine advertisements, and that provides an example of integrating media into classroom literacy frames. Prior to the advertisement web project, the students had viewed videos and engaged in activities which provided background knowledge in advertising (e.g., vocabulary, advertisement techniques, target audience). First, to introduce the project, the author presented a web that she had completed using an advertisement featuring a candy bar that was being advertised by a celebrity basketball player. She described each element of the web, explaining how she had analyzed and responded to the advertisement. Next, using a cologne advertisement taken from a popular teen magazine, she then went through the process with her classes, using students' comments as examples for each part of the web. Both advertisement webs were kept on display as models for the students.

For the project, each student was assigned a partner. The intent was to pair up students who had different backgrounds, interests, or genders in order to set up the conditions for differing interpretations of the same advertisement. Next, the students selected their own advertisements and sketched their rough drafts on notebook paper, writing the responses they would include on their webs. After the author had checked the rough drafts, the students transferred their ideas onto posters. Finally, the completed webs were shared with the classes and displayed in the classroom.

Overall, the students' webs reflected a solid understanding of the intended audiences and advertising techniques, but they found it more difficult to identify elements that were omitted from the advertisement. As anticipated, the pairing of the partners produced some differing interpretations of the ads. For example, in one project featuring the rapper 50 Cent in an ad for milk, the African-American girl wrote, "What a hottie!"



Love the muscles,” but her Mexican-American male partner responded, “Put a shirt on, don’t like it.” These revealed very different reactions to the same milk advertisement. The advertisement web activity allowed these seventh grade readers the opportunity to examine popular magazine advertisements in a more critical manner and to compare/contrast their reactions to the selected ads. (The web activity may be found in Appendix A).

Other Suggestions to Spur Media Integration in Literacy Events

Other representative activities follow that may be applied to individual classrooms to enhance critical thinking within reading and writing classroom-based activities. Each uses different media forms to enhance students’ learning.

Online information networks. Students could utilize sites that provide specific vocabulary for content areas of specific interest to middle school students and are necessary for literacy activities typical of grades 4-9. Examples would include almost-encyclopedic reviews of social studies information on the History Channel (<http://www.history.com/>) and earth science information on NASA’s site, For Kids Only: Earth Science Enterprise (<http://kids.earth.nasa.gov/>). Another suggestion is this area would be use of Internet Workshop (Leu, 2002), which provides a research frame for posing questions, locating information, sifting through text for important facts, and composing a solution or resolution. Students later share their work, questions, and new insights.

Magazines, newspapers, and printed texts. Students can be encouraged to critique printed texts using the types of questions listed previously in this article. The texts could include magazines and newspapers of their selection but could also extend to the novels, textbooks, and other printed materials used in their classes. Students can also compare and contrast the print and electronic versions of newspapers and magazines. An examination of the amount and content of advertisements would allow students to document and discuss the pervasiveness of marketing in their lives. A sample format (Linder, 2008b) is provided in Appendix B. Writing activities could include the production of student-generated magazines, newspapers, or advertisements for the class or the school. Students concerned about the content of magazine advertisements may want to enter the Bad Ad Contest sponsored annually by the New Mexico Media Literacy Project (http://www.nmmlp.org/what_we_do/contests.html). Additional resources for teachers’ professional development and activity ideas for the classroom are provided by Media Literacy.Com (<http://www1.medialiteracy.com/home.jsp>) or by EdSelect’s Media Literacy site (<http://edselect.com/media.htm>).



Films / Videos. Options for reading and writing activities might include videotaping activities, such as interviews or performances for language interaction/individual conferencing using specific question routines and vocabulary enrichment activities. Another use of a popular print-based strategy could be applied to media. RAFT activities are a great way to help young adolescents examine and respond to texts from multiple perspectives (Linder, 2008a). The example provided in Appendix c utilizes a television program, but this could be adapted for other visual media forms as well. First, preview a television show that you will share with the class. Next, construct a RAFT template to supply students with choices for their responses. The Role selections provided on the RAFT template represent many different perspectives in relation to the television show that will be viewed, and the Format selections offer different modes for presenting responses (e.g., writing, role playing, demonstrating). Refer to the example in Appendix C. Finally, view the program with the class and then have the students select the perspective they wish to write about or present.

CDs and MP3 devices. Students can use musical compositions (e.g., songs, raps) of their own creation or previously recorded material to analyze or summarize the content. For example, have each student print out the lyrics from a popular song using a website such as Song Meanings at <http://www.songmeanings.net>. The lyrics can serve as a basis for a number of reading and writing activities. Students can then write their interpretations of the messages they believe are being conveyed by the authors of the lyrics. A more critical approach would be to have the students examine what values and lifestyles are being communicated through the words, what feelings the song evokes in them as the listener, and explain why they chose this particular song. As a follow-up activity, they could write additional stanzas to the songs, or compare/contrast the pieces with other songs by the same artist, a song by a different artist, or a song from a different period of time such as the 1980s.

Discussion

It becomes the teacher's responsibility to intercede and mediate the deeper (i.e., socially and politically charged) thinking and understanding of text by all students (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). Giroux (2000) argues that "... educators' responsibilities cannot be separated from the consequences of the knowledge they produce, the social relations they legitimate, and the ideologies they disseminate" (p. 25). To this end, the integration of critical thinking incorporating media strategies to develop reading and writing competencies is an important endeavor. Critical framing of text and the knowledge within that text has been suggested by the New London Group (2000); the applications are left to the discretion of each teacher. As important as these activities are for upper intermediate and middle level students, they also provide several engaging approaches to meeting students at points of interest. Students need to connect to the reading and writing of text, i.e., feel comfortable and challenged by its form and content, in order to engage in deeper consideration of the content. Integrating media in the lesson applications will facilitate this critical thinking and set them on the path to lifelong learning.



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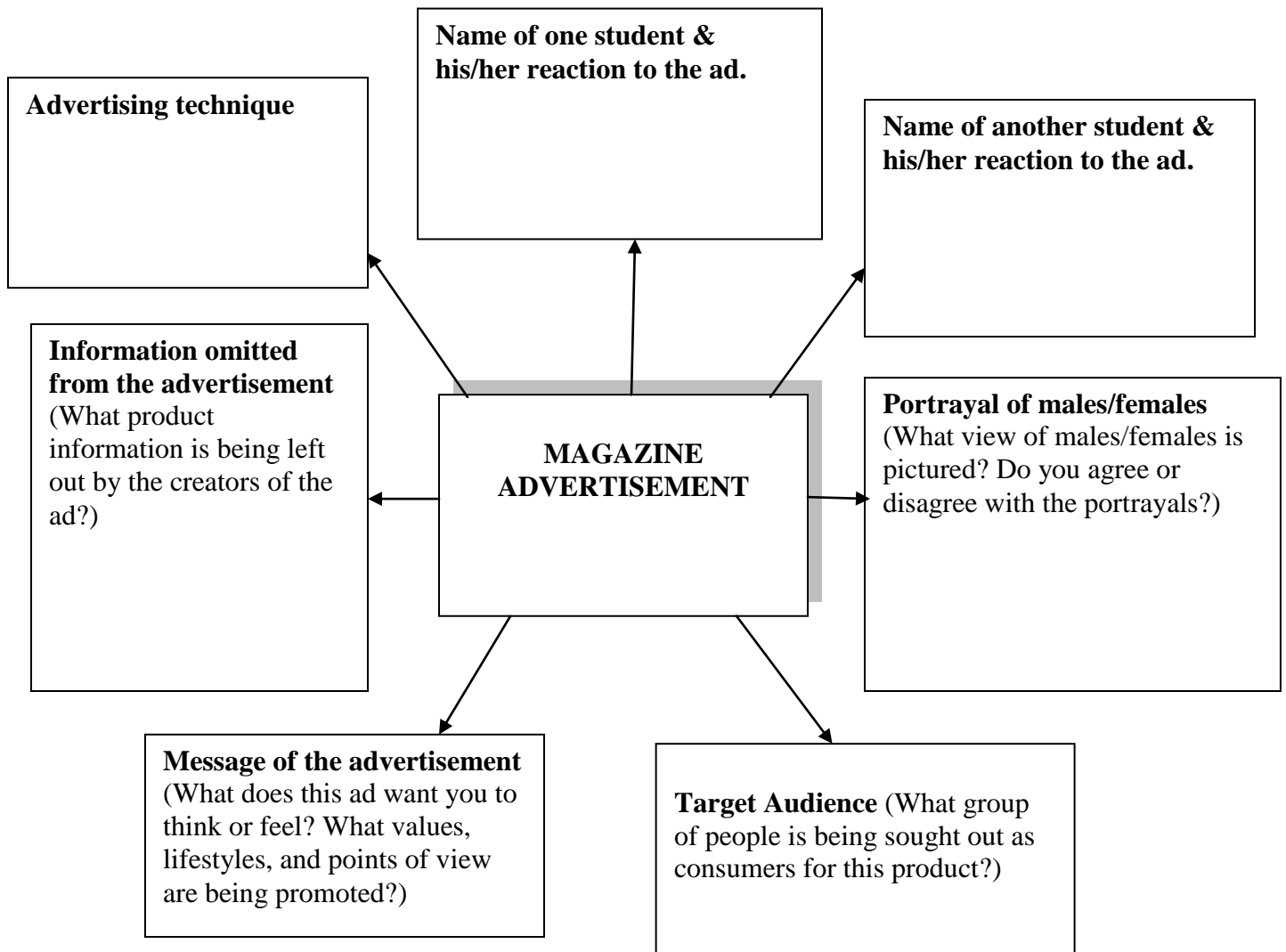


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Appendix A

ADVERTISEMENT WEB



(Linder, 2008)



Appendix B

DATA COLLECTION SHEET FOR MAGAZINES AND THEIR ADVERTISEMENTS

Student _____

Title of magazine _____ Date _____

Number of pages _____

Amount of page covered by ad(s)	Tally	Your math computations
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1/4 page _____

1/2 page _____

3/4 page _____

1 page _____

2 or more pages _____

Type of product featured in ad	Tally	Your math computations
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Type of people featured in ad	Tally	Your math computations
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(Linder, 2008)



Appendix C

RAFT Activities for a TV Show

ROLE	AUDIENCE	FORMAT	TOPIC
Male teenage viewer	Male friends	E-mails	Responses to the show
Female teenage viewer	Female friends	Instant Messages	Responses to the show
7-year old sibling	Parents	Begging/whining to parents	Wants to be allowed to view the show
Parents	Other parents of teenagers	Letter to the Editor	Want the show cancelled due to the content
Creator(s) of the show	TV station executive	Oral presentation explaining why the station should run the program	How the show appeals to today's teens
TV station manager	Concerned parents	Response to the parents who are concerned about the program being shown on the station	Freedom of speech
Star(s) of the show	Fans	Interview published in popular teen magazine	Topics of interest to the fans
Company who wants to advertise during the show	TV station executive	Demonstration of an idea for a commercial	Popular brand of clothing

(Linder, 2008)