

Teaching **DEMOCRACY:** A Media Literacy Approach

A Media Literacy Educators' Guide for
DILEMMAS



DECISIONS

A National Youth Media Project to Explore Real-Life Issues of Democracy and Justice

Developed and Written by

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**NATIONAL CENTER
FOR THE PRESERVATION OF
DEMOCRACY**

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Glossary icon: 


Like many academic disciplines, the field of critical media literacy has developed its own vocabulary that invests what appear to be ordinary words and phrases with specific and highly nuanced meanings. We have tried to avoid using academic jargon wherever possible. But occasionally we needed to refer to the precise words used by thinkers and writers in the field. A glossary of these terms may be found on pages 57–59 and the icon  after a word signals that it has a specific definition or usage and can be referenced in the glossary.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Foreword <i>The National Center for the Preservation of Democracy</i> | 5 |
| 1. Dilemmas + Decisions: The Overview <i>An Educational Process for Empowering Youth Citizenship in a Media World</i> | 6 |
| 2. Making Media / Shaping Democracy <i>Active Citizenship in the 21st Century</i> | 7 |
| 3. Teaching the Media <i>A Framework for 21st Century Learning</i> | 10 |
| 4. Teaching for Democracy <i>A Pedagogy of Engagement</i> | 17 |
| 5. Asking the Questions that Engage the Concepts <i>Core Concept / Key Question #1</i> <i>Core Concept / Key Question #2</i> <i>Core Concept / Key Question #3</i> <i>Core Concept / Key Question #4</i> <i>Core Concept / Key Question #5</i> | 26 |
| 6. Dilemmas + Decisions: Production and Process in Practice <i>Organizing a Dilemmas + Decisions Project in Your Community</i> | 45 |
| 7. Resources and References <i>Inquiry in the Classroom: The Foxfire Approach</i> <i>Talking about Tough Topics</i> <i>Linking the Literacies: Insight from Australia</i> <i>Teacher/Facilitator Reflection Tool</i> <i>Glossary of Terms</i> <i>Resources</i> <i>References</i> <i>Biographies</i> | 51 |

Foreword

The National Center for the Preservation of Democracy promotes democratic principles and civic involvement by providing tools for living democratically in a diverse society. With an emphasis on curriculum development, educator workshops, and youth programs, the National Center partners with educators and community-based mentors to inspire youth to be active, informed participants in shaping democracy in America.

Dilemmas + Decisions and other programs of the National Center are premised upon the idea, “We, the people, shape democracy.” Democracy is not simply a hand-me-down charge of our nation’s founding documents, but is instead a dynamic work-in-progress that depends on the vigilance and engagement of all Americans. Accordingly, **Dilemmas + Decisions** was developed to engage youth, whose often-missing voices are an essential part of, “We, the people.”

This project was conceived as a national media program to give diverse youth media groups the opportunity and experience to create video segments about real-life issues that relate to freedom and democracy in their own lives and communities. **Dilemmas + Decisions** demonstrates how young people reflect America’s rich geographic, ethnic, cultural, and political diversity as they exercise their First Amendment right to freedom of expression. These youth productions will challenge youth and educators to think critically and demonstrate that young people have the power and responsibility to shape a more just world.

As the project has evolved, **Dilemmas + Decisions** has reached classroom and community-based educators nationwide via our website (www.ncdemocracy.org). Youth of all ages are gaining opportunities to use media as a social tool for participating and contributing meaningfully to civic dialogue necessary for democratic processes and institutions. Unlike many existing youth media programs, **Dilemmas + Decisions** is not meant to simply foster self-expression but seeks to engage young people in discussion and debate regarding substantive concerns that they encounter.

In our commitment to strengthening democracy education, the National Center, with the generous support of the Nathan Cummings Foundation, created *Teaching Democracy: A Media Literacy Approach* as a way to support educators in cultivating critical thinking and activism in our media culture through youth-to-youth engagement and community collaboration. This Educators’ Guide explores the relationship between media and democracy in American society and provides approaches for media analysis and production of youth-generated media in both traditional classroom settings and in alternative learning environments nationwide.

As we continue on this journey “toward a more perfect union,” we strive to support educators in building young media-makers who have thoughtful perspectives and practical skills to contribute their vision and concerns for a healthy and just democracy today and long into the future.



Irene Y. Hirano
President and CEO

1. Dilemmas + Decisions: The Overview

An Educational Process for Empowering Youth Citizenship in a Media World

“...problems are the stimulus to thinking.”

John Dewey (1963, p.79)

Dilemmas + Decisions (D+D) embodies an educational process developed at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy for use with middle and high school students throughout the United States. It’s a model for critical media literacy, involving both media analysis and media production, that aims to deepen students’ ability to *identify, analyze, and act* upon issues in their community. Engagement with community concerns and giving voice to marginal or alternative points of view contributes to the public good and thus is an important act of democracy.

As a transformative pedagogy, **Dilemmas + Decisions** uses a *problem-posing*  approach that begins with a genuine problem of student interest and unfolds, ideally, to encompass four underlying objectives:

1. **Initial analysis** stimulates critical inquiry and leads to investigating aspects of an issue that may involve social injustice and/or the breakdown of democracy.
2. Students **intellectually engage** with socially relevant subject matter and **act upon it** by creating their own alternative media production expressing their point of view.
3. **Creating a media product** gives students practice in the art of public dialogue and shaping a message to motivate others to act.
4. **Presenting their production to a real-world audience** increases the capacity to see themselves as responsible members of society capable of shaping democracy.

In this way, active, engaged citizens are born—empowered with the media skills they need to communicate effectively to both peers and others. It is such communication savvy coupled with a deep understanding of the democratic principles of equality and justice for all that will characterize the effective world citizen of the 21st century.

“Teaching kids critical literacy requires that programs value and engage them as active participants in community problem-solving and as full partners in their own learning and growth.”

Steven Goodman (2003, p.103)

2. Making Media / Shaping Democracy

Active Citizenship in the 21st Century



“What we know of the world, we learn from the innumerable screens that saturate our everyday lives—from shopping malls to hospitals and airports, from mobile phones in our pockets to our laptops or desktops at home and at work... There is no question that globalization and new technologies are already, and will be, the dominant future force of politics.”

Carmen Luke (2007, p.54)

In our 21st century media culture, it is now possible for almost anyone, with the know-how and access to a cellular telephone, a computer, or a growing assortment of handheld devices, to send and receive information to and from almost anyone, anywhere in the world.

News that once took days to disseminate can now be experienced by millions at the same time that it occurs. Entertainment that once could only be found in a book or movie is now available in multiple formats with numerous levels of interactivity and merchandising.

These changes, and many more, have reframed not only the way people think about the world they live in but also how society is structured at the local, national, and global levels. It's a far different world than that of our founders two hundred years ago whose "experiment in democracy" developed out of a struggle to mesh the abstract ideals of the 18th century Enlightenment with the realities of an agrarian economy, a dispersed population, and a vast unknown wilderness.

Compared with the newspapers and pamphlets coming out of Ben Franklin's print shop in 1760, the information we receive today comes to us less through words on a page and more often from highly constructed visual images, complex sound arrangements, and in multiple media formats.

What is the possibility for democracy in such an information-rich culture? Does the vision of a democratic society change in a global media economy?

Today, the distinctions between news, entertainment, and reality have become so intertwined and interdependent that traditional tenets of democracy are, indeed, being challenged:

- *Positioning* 📖 citizens as consumers, and civic participation as merely voting for one of the choices advertised, reduces the power of active citizens to shape democracy and cheats society of the leadership needed to build an effective government, responsive to the people.
- *Public discourse* 📖 dominated by sensational stories and sound bites turns political campaigns into theater and politics into spectacle. Voters become cynical or apathetic—or both.
- Framing information as "patriotic" or even "objective" makes it difficult to dissent or even to question news and information. The right to dissent without penalty is one of the most fundamental tenets of a free and open society.
- Budget cutbacks to generate greater profits in news organizations lead to a decline of news accuracy as well as to a lack of resources to investigate issues that the public needs to know.
- When storytelling is commercialized, the repetition of negative stereotypes and narrow versions of history (often told only from the perspective of those in power) is especially harmful to women and people of color who witness their struggles for justice and equality neglected or distorted in the public conversation and the historical record.
- The homogenization of information resulting from the consolidation of news-gathering sources means that minority opinions or *marginalized voices* 📖 are often left out—or disappear altogether—from the marketplace of ideas. But a robust democracy demands a lively and involved public discourse that covers a variety of views and opinions.

“In the very complicated world in which we live today, the need for high-quality reporting is greater than ever. . . It’s not just the journalists’ job at risk here. It’s American democracy. It is freedom.”

Walter Cronkite (2007)

DEMOCRACY AND LITERACY

American culture has long held that literacy is the foundation for citizenship and democratic participation. By this we mean much more than just the ability to read or write words on a printed page or names on an election ballot. In its truest sense, literacy is the ability to “make meaning” out of the words and/or images that are used to construct a message.

There is a need for young people today to be able to “make meaning” out of the complex media messages that are the hallmark of their culture. Increasingly, schools are introducing the concept of media literacy, even multimedia literacies that provide different lenses through which to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms—from television to t-shirts.

Students who learn to think critically about media messages, who value diverse points of view, who challenge the popular interpretation by contributing their own understanding and insights will have the skills needed to ensure the continuation of democracy—and literacy—in the 21st century. In this guide we will explain how media literacy education provides an inquiry-based framework to shape your own teaching to better serve the goals of a participatory democracy and social justice.

Now more than ever, our country and our world need active citizens who are media literate to challenge *dominant myths* 📖, represent marginalized voices, and present socially just alternatives for the vibrant democracy we must actively create together.

“Would it not seem natural and necessary that the young be provided with at least as much training of perception in this graphic and photographic world as they get in the typographic? In fact, they need more training in graphics, because the art of casting and arranging actors . . . is both complex and forcefully insidious.”

Marshall McLuhan (1964 / 1997, p.230)

3. Teaching the Media

A Framework for 21st Century Learning



When we talk about incorporating media literacy into the classroom, what do we mean by “media”?

Formally, the term media is the plural for *medium of communication*. While different people and groups offer numerous lists of what they consider to be and not to be a medium of communication, media literacy takes a broad approach that includes *anything through which information passes or reality is represented*. That would mean: television, radio, advertising, newspapers and magazines, books and billboards, movies, videos and DVDs as well as computers, the Internet and an increasing array of handheld digital devices such as cell phones, Palm Pilots, iPods, and Blackberries.

It used to be that discussions of “media” focused primarily on *mass media*, something that typically involved one-way communication and was created by a few for the consumption of many. The vast majority of mass media are created by large multinational corporations for commercial purposes (but more about that later).

As we move into the 21st century with the increasing availability of new information communication technology, students can now become creators of media messages that travel around the world to an audience of one—or millions. Indeed whole networks of new voices and messages can spring up nearly overnight, as witnessed by the phenomenal growth of YouTube, My Space, wikis, podcasts, blogs, etc.

AN ATTITUDE OF OPENNESS

Media are powerful tools with the potential for improving human society or obstructing its growth and development. Most adults have a love-hate relationship with media, especially mass media. Ask an adult what they think of “media” and they will often lament how news and politics are trivialized, entertainment caters to the lowest-common-denominator, and few aspects of human life are safe from the “creep” of commercialism.

Young people, on the other hand, are growing up in a world of countless cable channels and ever more sophisticated videogames every year. They have never known a world without cell phones, much less television or video. As educational consultant Marc Prensky (2001) has observed, adults today are “digital immigrants,” whereas our children and students are “digital natives.”

The teacher’s attitude toward media, then, is an important component in incorporating media literacy in the classroom. What is needed is for educators to embrace media culture with an *optimistic, yet skeptical* attitude.

If teachers bring to the classroom their own annoyance, anger, or fear in relation to media and use their authority to denounce media or focus primarily on its imperfections, they are, in effect, imposing *their* values on the technology and entertainment that students find attractive. Media literacy education thus loses its potential to engage, empower, and enlighten.

Media literacy is NOT about

- trashing/bashing media**, however media literacy sometimes involves criticizing media.
- fearing the media**, even though media can cause and contribute to problems.
- ensorship of media**, as empowerment depends on active engagement with media.

But if teachers respect their students’ popular culture while engaging it in meaningful inquiry, they open up possibilities for their students to critically use, analyze, and create media in the school setting.

The goal of media literacy education is not to transfer into the heads of the students what the teacher thinks about media or how the teacher interprets media culture. The goal is to help students construct *their own framework* for engaging the media culture in which they live. Media literacy activities should stimulate critical thinking by asking profound questions of constructedness, equity, and social justice about media texts, while building respect for multiple perspectives.

Media literacy education is important today because if we are to ensure the growth of a pluralistic democracy, we must depend less on censorship and more on increasing critical *public discourse* 📖 from as many perspectives as possible.

CREATING A FOUNDATION

Media literacy education is not so much a specific body of knowledge or set of skills, as it is a collection of *conceptual understandings* that help students learn how to make meaning from the flood of media messages that come their way every day (Buckingham, 2003).

Emanating from research in *cultural studies* 📖, various people and organizations around the world have generated different lists of media literacy concepts¹, but for the most part they tend to coincide with a handful of basic principles:

1. Recognition of the *construction of media messages as a social process* rather than just accepting texts as neutral or transparent conveyors of information;
2. Some type of *semiotic* 📖 *textual analysis* that explores languages, genres, codes and conventions of the text;
3. An exploration of the roles audiences play in actively “*negotiating* meanings” and how audiences contribute to *positioning* 📖 themselves in the meaning-making process;
4. An examination of the process of *representation* 📖 to uncover and engage issues of bias, point of view, ideology, omission, aesthetics, power, and pleasure in the content of the message;
5. Examination of the *institutions and systems* that motivate and structure the media industries which are, for the most part, corporate businesses whose primary goal is maximizing profit for their shareholders. (Kellner & Share, 2007)

FIVE CORE CONCEPTS / FIVE KEY QUESTIONS

In the **CML MediaLit Kit™** the Center for Media Literacy gathered these ideas from many of the leading media educators around the world and simplified them into a framework of five concise concepts with five practical questions that provide teachers an accessible entry point and structure for guiding their students in critical inquiry.²

¹ Ontario Ministry of Education’s Eight Key Concepts (1989), British Film Institute’s Signpost Questions (1989), Center for Media Literacy’s MediaLit Kit™ (2005), Len Masterman’s theoretical framework (1985/2001), etc.

² CML MediaLit Kit™ / A Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Media Age. Center for Media Literacy (2005) www.medialit.org/ Use of the Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions throughout this publication are with the permission of CML.

| <i>Five Core Concepts</i> | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| 1. All media messages are “constructed.” | 2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules. | 3. Different people experience the same media message differently. | 4. Media have embedded values and points of view. | 5. Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power. |
| <i>Five Key Questions</i> | | | | |
| 1. Who created this message? | 2. What techniques are used to attract my attention? | 3. How might different people understand this message differently? | 4. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? | 5. Why was this message sent? |

Together, the *Five Core Concepts* and *Five Key Questions* provide students with the “Big Idea” or the “enduring understanding” that can help them navigate their way through life as literate citizens in a global media culture. Together, the *Concepts* and *Questions* are an important contribution to 21st century education and a powerful set of tools for preparing youth to understand, share in, and contribute to the public debate.

FIVE KEY QUESTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

In the classroom, however, the goal is not so much to teach the *Core Concepts*, especially with younger students, but rather to focus on the *Five Key Questions* in order to help students *build the habit* of routinely subjecting media messages to a series of questions appropriate to their age and ability. Teachers, need to be thoroughly acquainted with the *Five Core Concepts* in order to structure classroom activities and curriculum connections that provide students with opportunities to learn and practice the asking of critical questions about media in their lives.

Media educators use these concepts to push their students beyond simply responding to media messages with “I like it” or “I don’t.” Using an inquiry process, students learn to question a message’s content and form, examine the multiple contexts (historical, social, economic, political, etc.) in which a message is sent and received, and reflect on how who they are contributes to the meaning they make from it.

We will explore the *Five Core Concepts* and *Five Key Questions* in several places throughout this guide. On the following pages we simply introduce each concept and question so that you can become familiar with them.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 1. | CC: All media messages are “constructed.” |
| | KQ: Who created this message? |

The first concept and question pair aims for students to understand that all media messages are created by people who must make many decisions in creating and shaping them—whether it’s a TV show, comic book, email, or the cover of a new CD. It’s liberating to realize that any one of these decisions could have been made differently. A profound insight occurs when a student grasps that because *choices* are being made all along the construction process, no media message is ever neutral or value free.

Indeed, the success of media texts benefits from their apparent naturalness; most of us turn off a production that looks “fake.” But the truth is that it’s all been constructed—even the news. Choices are made about what stories will be covered and in what order, for example. That doesn’t mean we can’t still enjoy watching a movie or listening to music. The goal of this concept and question is not to make us cynical about media in our lives. Rather it aims to expose the complexities of media’s “constructedness” and thus create the critical distance we need to be able to ask other important questions.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 2. | CC: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules. |
| | KQ: What techniques are used to attract my attention? |

The second *Key Question* explores *how* a message is constructed and the creative components that are used in putting it together—words, music, color, movement, camera angles, juxtaposition, and many more.

Because so much of today’s communications comes to us visually, it is critical that students learn the basics of visual communication—lighting, composition, camera angle, editing, use of props, body language, symbols, etc.—and how the use of these techniques influences the various meanings we can take away from any one message.

Understanding the grammar, syntax, and metaphor systems of media, especially visual language, not only helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation but also increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media as constructed “texts.”

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 3. | CC: Different people experience the same media message differently. |
| | KQ: How might different people understand this message differently? |

When you think about it, no two people really see the same movie or hear the same song on the radio; even parents and children do not “see” the same TV show! Each audience member brings to each media encounter his or her own set of life experiences (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc.) which,

when applied to the text—or combined *with* the text—create unique interpretations. A World War II veteran, for example, brings a different set of experiences to a movie like *Saving Private Ryan* than a younger person does. Each will have a different reaction to the film as well as, perhaps, greater insight about different parts of the story.

The ability for students to see how different people can interpret the same message differently is also important for diverse and multicultural education since understanding differences means more than merely tolerating one another. A pluralistic democracy depends on a citizenry who embraces diverse perspectives as a natural consequence of different experiences, histories, and cultures constructed within larger societal structures shaped by privilege and oppression. Understanding and appreciating that different people see things differently than “I do” is essential for global citizenship in an interconnected world.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 4. | CC: Media have embedded values and points of view. |
| | KQ: What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? |

Because all media messages are constructed, choices have to be made. These choices inevitably reflect the values, attitudes, and points of view of the individuals doing the constructing. The decisions about a character’s age, gender, and race; the lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors that are portrayed; the selection of a setting; and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become “embedded” in a TV show, a movie, or an ad. Even the news has embedded values in the decisions made about what stories go first, how long they are, what kinds of images are chosen, and so on.

What’s significant about *Core Concept #4* is not so much that values are embedded in media but that the values of *mainstream media* 📖 typically reinforce, and therefore *affirm, the status quo* of existing social structures. This explains two major challenges to democracy in today’s media age:

1. Less popular or new ideas have a harder time getting published or aired, especially if they challenge long-standing assumptions or commonly accepted beliefs;
2. Unless challenged by a diversity of voices, the status quo values of mainstream media can create and perpetuate stereotypes, thus further limiting our understanding and appreciation of the world and contributing to real-world consequences of prejudice and discrimination.

In working with *Key Question #4*, the goal is not to just “spot the stereotype” but rather to try to uncover the assumptions about people and events that may not be obvious at first. It also helps to expose the systems and structures that support the embedded values.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 5. | CC: Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power. |
| | KQ: Why was this message sent? |

The final concept encourages students to consider the question of *why* a message was sent and *where* it came from. Too often students believe the role of media is simply to entertain or inform, with little knowledge of the economic structure that supports it. Where once there were many media outlets in every city competing for viewers and readers, now there are fewer than ten transnational corporations dominating the global media market. This concentration of ownership threatens the independence and diversity of information and creates the possibility for the global colonization of culture and knowledge (McChesney, 2004).

While different activities are more appropriate for different developmental levels, most students from kindergarten on up have the cognitive ability to understand that the primary goal of advertising is to sell—and that advertising is the motor that runs much of our media culture. When students are aware of who created a media message—and why—they will be better prepared to recognize systemic biases and distortions.

Questioning and understanding motives is also important because of changes in technology and society. The issue of why messages are created has changed dramatically since the Internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations—even individuals—have gained access to powerful tools that can strengthen—or undermine—democracy. The Internet provides multiple reasons for users of all ages to be able to recognize propaganda, interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources, and distinguish legitimate Internet resources from bogus, hate, or hoax websites.

“It is the learning, practicing and mastering of the Five Key Questions—over time—that leads to a deep understanding of how media are created and what their purposes are along with an informed ability to accept or reject both explicit and implicit messages. If democracy is to flourish in a global media culture, future citizens must have these fundamental skills.”

Tessa Jolls (2005)

4. Teaching for Democracy

A Pedagogy of Engagement



“A critical media pedagogy can cultivate citizenship by helping form individuals free from media manipulation, capable of criticizing media culture and of obtaining information from diverse sources, allowing an informed citizenry to make intelligent political judgments.”

Douglas Kellner (1995, p.340)

Throughout United States history, a fundamental mission of public education has been to prepare students to become responsible members of society who can maintain and carry on the basic democratic principles of the U.S. Constitution.

But in today's multimedia world, what type of citizenship skills are required to form a more perfect union with liberty and justice for all? What do we mean by teaching "democracy"? How do we know if we've educated our students for it? What behaviors will be manifested in active and involved citizens?

After nearly every election, media commentators spend a great deal of time discussing the percentage of the population that went to the polls to exercise their right as citizens to vote. Of course the right to vote is a core value of democracy, but **Dilemmas + Decisions** proposes that voting is *only one* act of democracy. In the 21st century we believe that living in a democracy demands an expanded definition of citizenship that includes all of the traditional understandings as well as the right to:

- *access* information about our communities and our world;
- *analyze* how issues and concerns are represented, especially in public media;
- *evaluate* the assumptions that shape these messages and the conclusions that may be drawn as well as the perspectives that are missing or overlooked.
- *create and distribute* alternative messages in any one (or several) of a variety of media formats, thereby contributing to public dialogue.

Almost a century ago, John Dewey (1916/1997) insisted that democracy was less about government and more about citizenship in which people live and work together for the common good. The notion of a participatory and egalitarian democracy led Dewey to promote the role of public education as a transforming agent to help society dissolve the barriers that separate people and create paths for coexistence, compassion, and cooperation.

Teaching for democracy can be a challenge, especially so in our contemporary media culture where news is sensationalized, stereotyping is rampant, and political campaigns are treated like horse races. This chapter outlines three components in a pedagogy of engagement through which we can widen our students' understanding of citizenship and empower them to build a robust democracy in the 21st century.

DEMOCRACY IN THE CLASSROOM

How we teach is critical

For education to promote a vibrant vision of democracy, *how* we teach matters as much, if not more, than *what* we teach. In creating a learning environment that promotes democracy, it is important to embody principles of democracy in our own classrooms.

In the 18th century, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about the need for education to be experiential and student centered: "The goal is less to teach him [sic] a truth than to show him how he must always go about discovering the truth" (1979, p.205). Later, John Dewey (1938/1963) envisioned progressive education as a continual spiral where the teacher creates curiosity through structuring experiences for students to engage, explore, and experiment. As students actively challenge

new experiences, their inquiry continues to spiral out into more questions and connections with more experiences. These notions of the construction of knowledge through active learning and problem-solving have become essential tenets of constructivist pedagogy.

When students investigate real problems that are important to them, they become the researchers and evaluators of the content they are discovering. Students will be more motivated and strive for deeper levels of understanding when they are researching questions that genuinely interest them and when they can see the connections between their school work and their own lives.

Guides on the Side

Teachers have the responsibility to maintain a supportive learning environment, assess student needs, and guide students toward academic progress. In a student-centered environment, the teacher sees himself or herself as a *facilitator* of learning rather than the “expert” or provider of “the answers.” He or she has transformed from being a *sage on the stage* to being a *guide on the side*. This is not the abdication of the teacher’s power; it is instead a shift in how that power is used.

To evolve from a traditional top-down classroom to a democratic one is not easy nor does it happen overnight. There are many schools of educational philosophy that articulate in more detail what a democratic classroom looks like in practice. Articles from *Rethinking Schools* (www.rethinkingschools.org) and the *Core Practices* promoted by Foxfire (see pages 51–52) provide useful tools for implementing democratic pedagogy in the classroom.

Even some corporately supported educational initiatives, such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, also incorporate elements of democratic pedagogy in their vision for education in the 21st century. In the *Framework for 21st Century Learning* (2003), the mastering of core subjects such as math, science, history, language arts, etc. is “not enough.” To prepare for life in this century, students “need to know how to use their knowledge and skills by thinking critically, applying knowledge to new situations, analyzing information, comprehending new ideas, communicating, collaborating, solving problems and making decisions.” An important step in achieving this vision of education is the professional development that supports “educators in their role of facilitators of learning.”³

BROADENING LITERACY / DEEPENING INQUIRY

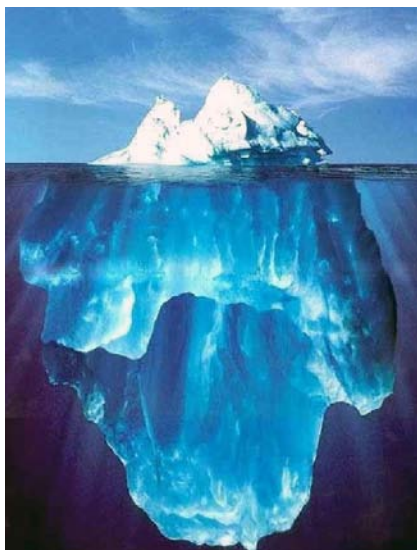
To facilitate the type of literacy skills and practices that today’s youth need and democracy requires, teachers should have a broad understanding of literacy as more than just phonics and comprehension. Australian researchers Alan Luke and Peter Freebody (1999) suggest that literacy actually involves a “family of practices” in which being able to “read and write” includes four distinct but interrelated ideas:

- the ability to decode a text
- the ability to understand and comprehend it
- the ability to use texts in the real world
- the ability to critically question the social context of a text

³ Partnership for 21st Century Skills: www.21stcenturyskills.org

These four practices are even more expansive when we consider that our *public discourse* 📖 is inundated more and more with multimedia texts. In order for educators to prepare their students to become citizens and not simply consumers, students must be able to engage with all types of texts (print and non-print) through all four practices. For more discussion of these ideas about literacy, read *Linking the Literacies* on page 55.

Delving Below the Surface



The *Core Concepts* of media literacy provide a framework to help teachers facilitate these broader literacy practices in order for students to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in multiple formats. It is this expanded and holistic notion of reading and writing that **Dilemmas + Decisions** embodies as a tool of active citizenship.

However, in order for students to become critical citizens they also need to be able to go beneath the surface of any text to ask questions about what they are doing to the text and what the text is *doing to them*. While the *Five Core Concepts* and *Five Key Questions* provide a basic foundation for inquiry, British media educator Robert Ferguson (1998a) uses the metaphor of an iceberg to explain the need for media analysis at an even deeper level.

Ferguson proposes that when discussing media, many people only look at the obvious and overt tip of the iceberg—the 10 percent they can see sticking out of the water. He suggests that what’s missing is a questioning of the social contexts that influence both media and society—economics, ideology, history, politics, and the role of language and communication to define relationship of power.

The reason this is so important is because below the surface lie social injustices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression that are more obvious to those who suffer their negative effects but less visible or of less interest to those in the *dominant positions of power and privilege* 📖.

Ferguson asserts that a surface approach to media is insufficient because the other 90 percent that “is not immediately visible is the intellectual, historical and analytical base without which media analysis runs the risk of becoming superficial, mechanical or glib” (1998a, p.2). Thus he challenges us to go below the surface to see how language, both verbal and visual, influences issues like power and domination.

The first step in eliminating these *myths* 📖 from our world is recognizing their presence and uncovering how they maintain their hold in our social psyche and how they influence actual structures and systems of oppression. Although not every media literacy exercise will lead to such underlying insights, young people nevertheless can gain much from a deep inquiry. In the next chapter, we’ll provide a number of models and exercises to help your students develop the “habits of mind” that lead to intellectual rigor and deep inquiry.

“Productive Unease”: Engaging Contradiction

While we realize that introducing issues of social justice—or injustice—can make teaching uncomfortable (for constructive strategies for *Talking about Tough Topics*, see pages 53–54), it is this type of discomfort that Ferguson (1998a) asserts we most need in education: a sense of *productive unease* 📖. The very point of the **Dilemmas + Decisions** process is to engage students in dilemmas and contradictions so they can explore and wrestle with issues that matter to them, thereby making learning relevant and meaningful. But in order for the unease to become productive and for skepticism not to sink into cynicism, students must have a sense of agency, a way to take action on the problems they have identified. The production component of **Dilemmas + Decisions** creates agency in two powerful ways:

1. Media productions give students a compelling voice in public conversation about important community issues. Young people’s fluency with visual language gives them *new abilities to create messages that argue their point of view*.
2. Participating in the creation of media for an audience beyond the classroom works to validate students’ identities as valuable members of society who have *something to say and deserve to be heard*.

Dilemmas + Decisions helps young people understand that democracy is more than voting; it’s about speaking up and speaking out, listening and learning from others, raising questions and being part of the solution. Sometimes the critical media literacy process and/or products they create will actually effect the social change it seeks. However, regardless of the results of the final product, it is the pedagogical *process* of critical media literacy that is most important. It is this process where we believe students gain the skills to question and create media and the critical consciousness to understand the social complexity of media and engage it in a productive unease.

The four video segments on the **Dilemmas + Decisions** DVD are good examples of this productive unease, since in each case youth are confronting controversial issues that matter to their community. The power of this teaching methodology is its combination of critical analysis with critical practice.

“Studying up”: A Critical Approach to Research

In the movement to broaden literacy and deepen inquiry, an important aspect of good research is including as many different sources and perspectives as possible. But where you start your research can influence both what kind of questions you ask and what kind of information you find.

Too often students (imitating *mainstream media* 📖) frame their approach to an issue from the perspectives of institutional experts, officials, or authority figures. Their research begins—and ends—with the established perspective. But much can be gained from investigations that *start* at the other end of the spectrum, with those most directly affected by an issue, and “*study up*” 📖 from there (Harding, 2004). This shift in the starting place increases the chances that students will ask more challenging questions of those in authority and will gain deeper insight into the multiple layers of a social issue, the structures of power that influence society, and the ways that information is organized and used.

Rethinking “Critical Thinking”

These new requirements of 21st century literacy also challenge us to rethink our understanding of the term: “critical thinking.”

Traditional definitions such as “the ability to raise clear and precise questions,” “think logically and rationally,” “reach well-reasoned conclusions,” etc. position *critical thinking* as a purely cognitive or psychological thought process by individuals independent of the world around them. This is misleading because no idea can occur in complete isolation from all the various contexts that human beings experience and that media literacy critiques—the social, historical, economic, political, cultural, aesthetic, and even psychological contexts.

Meaning is not made solely inside someone’s head: thinking and communicating are *social* processes. And information is neither neutral nor transparent: it is always tied to values and ideologies.

Adding a sociological perspective to a definition of “critical thinking” opens up the possibility to embrace the many social dimensions of how we think (Luke & Freebody, 1997). It also allows for a more profound understanding of the social construction of information. Linking the sociological with the psychological is essential for understanding the interconnection between knowledge and society as well as the ways that power is embedded in all acts of communication.

One of the pioneers of media literacy, Len Masterman (1994), declared that the goal of media education should be *critical autonomy* 📖—the capability and desire to think critically about media when students are on their own. The ability to make independent decisions is an important step in the process of critical thinking.

However, our relationships with media are never autonomous; they occur within social structures in which our thought process and the construction of information are interconnected. In addition to critical autonomy, British scholar Robert Ferguson calls for *critical solidarity* 📖 as “a means by which we acknowledge the social dimensions of our thinking and analysis” (2001, p.42).

Adolescence is a time for youth to explore their own identity and how they relate to others—family, friends, and the larger world. It is also a time of idealism, when young people feel a strong sense of fairness about what’s right and wrong, what’s just and unjust, in society. It is the optimum moment to teach the importance of empathy and to help young people understand how their thoughts and actions have consequences in the world around them.

Teaching for *critical solidarity* means teaching students to interpret information and communication within humanistic, social, historical, political, and economic contexts. It also means joining in solidarity with those individuals or groups who are disempowered or disadvantaged by unjust structures and systems in a world of haves and have-nots.

With young people in Boston, Beijing, and Bogotá having more in common with each other than with their own parents, media literacy education provides a bridge to self-understanding, social awareness, and global consciousness that can create a firm foundation for full and active citizenship in a global media culture.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER: ANALYSIS AND PRODUCTION

Combining the four literacy practices (decoding, comprehending, using texts functionally, and critical analyzing) with the media literacy framework provides a path for preparing youth to be active citizens who can shape democracy in the 21st century. The teaching approach that best suits the media literacy classroom is the “inquiry process.” Like a two-sided coin, it incorporates both *critical analytical (deconstruction) skills* as well as *creative communications (construction/production) skills*.

A clear understanding of the interrelatedness of analysis and production is necessary for success with **Dilemmas + Decisions**. Active citizenship demands listening as well as talking, thinking as well as acting, reflection along with strategizing. When analysis is combined with creative production, theory unites with application, thereby allowing students to discover and express their learning in an interconnected and natural process. Each enriches the other.

Since media messages are transmitted through so many different mental processes, the combination of analysis with production also provides an excellent way to incorporate multiple intelligences in the learning process. As identified by Howard Gardner (1991), human beings have at least seven, if not more, learning styles:

- linguistic/verbal
- logical/mathematical
- musical/rhythmic
- visual/spatial
- body/kinesthetic
- intrapersonal
- interpersonal

Many of the activities necessary for the completion—and success!—of a production project allow students with different learning styles not only to contribute but to be recognized and valued for the unique competency they possess. This factor, alone, has often been reported by teachers and leaders as the most rewarding reason for incorporating media literacy programs into their classroom or youth organization.

However, in their eagerness to get into the production process, some students and teachers may want to skip analysis activities and the reflective mode they demand. Others may become embroiled in analytical arguments and thus miss the insights that come from real-world application of core concepts in a media production.

Teachers and leaders must be firm in facilitating both aspects of the process and all the steps between. Both activities can happen independently, however there is much more to be gained by weaving the two into one cohesive activity of analysis and production. The following chart summarizes the many contributions of both sides of the inquiry method to the overall learning process.

Benefits of Analysis and Production in Media Literacy

Analysis Deconstruction / Decoding “Reading”

To be literate in the 21st century, students need the skills and abilities to “read” their multimedia world and understand its many layers of messages. The process of taking apart messages, whether print or electronic, is referred to in many ways: analysis, deconstruction, decoding or “reading” in the traditional terminology of reading/writing literacy. Media analysis develops *critical thinking skills* and involves all the competencies of Bloom’s Taxonomy (*knowledge, analysis, comprehension, application, synthesis and evaluation*) and is an important part of media literacy education because it


- **strengthens** observation and interpretation.
- **deepens** understanding and appreciation.
- **challenges** stereotyping—both misrepresentations and/or under-representations.
- **illuminates** bias and point of view.
- **uncovers** motivations.
- **exposes** implicit messages that are less obvious.
- **gives perspective and meaning** to the process of media production.
- **enlightens** society about the effects and implications of a message.

Production Construction / Creating “Writing”

In today’s multimedia culture, “writing” is far more complex than putting pen to paper. Today students may “write” a PowerPoint report for science class, “create” a persuasive poster about teen smoking for their health project or, in U.S. History, “express” a Native American point of view about Christopher Columbus by drawing an original political cartoon. All of these projects require the same *creative thinking* abilities as writing words on paper: *organize* your ideas; *draft* and *redraft* your words, images and/or sounds; *edit, polish,* and *present* the final product. Student production is an important component of media literacy education for many reasons—it

- **involves** the application of multiple intelligences.
- **requires** active hands-on learning.
- **increases** motivation and the enjoyment of learning.
- **generates** new avenues for alternative representations.
- **creates** outlets to communicate beyond the classroom.
- **reinforces** self-esteem and self-expression.
- **offers** “real-world” practical application of theoretical concepts.

Steps Toward Empowerment

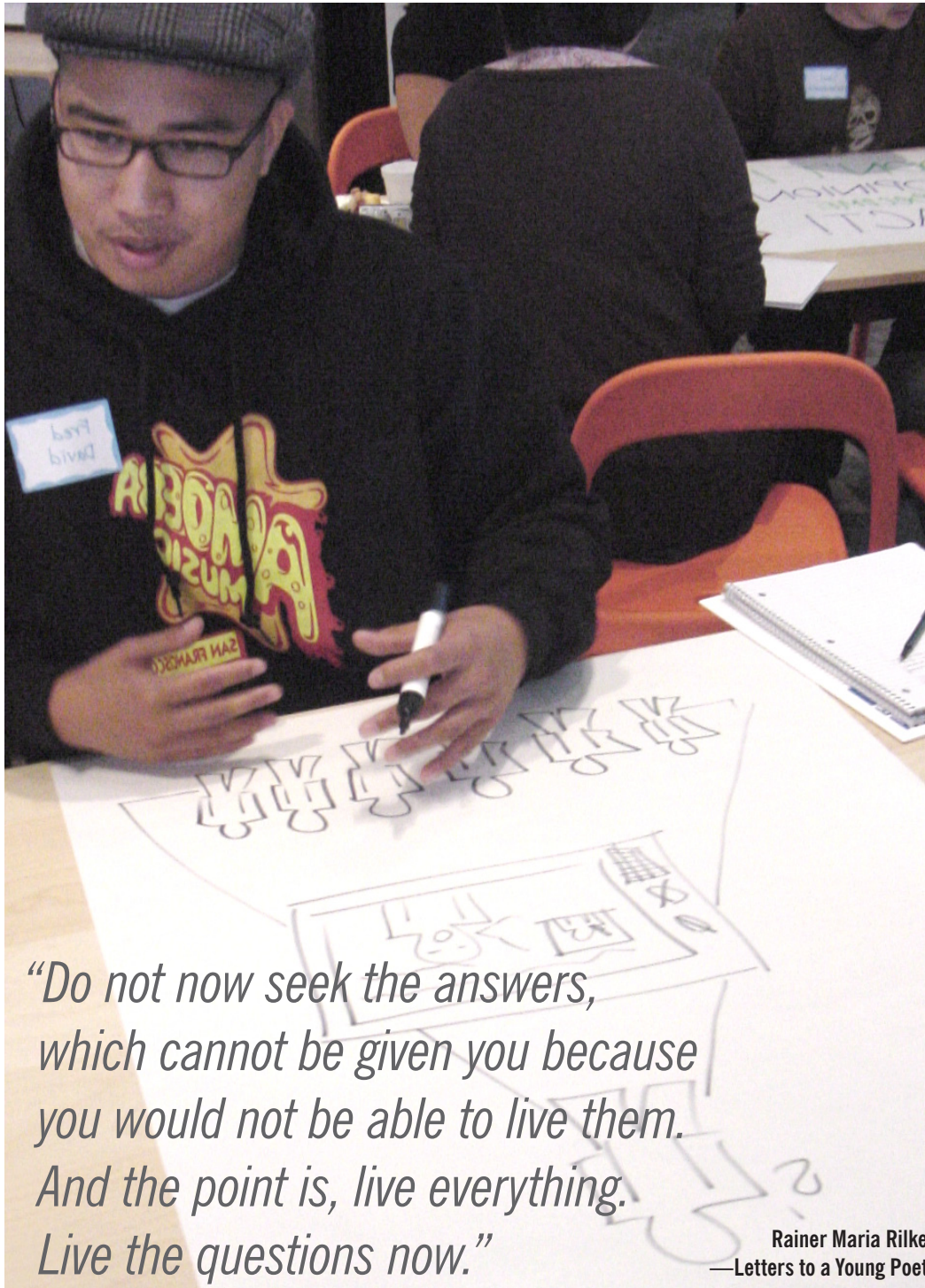
While most young people’s interactions with media production are rarely critical, they can become steps along the “empowerment” process that Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) describes as moving from being an *object* that is passively acted upon to a *subject* with the ability to act and make decisions (agency). Media and information communication technologies can be tools for empowerment when people who are most often *marginalized*  or misrepresented in the mainstream media receive the opportunity to use these tools to tell their stories and express their concerns. As students produce their own media, they position themselves as the creators of new media messages in their own voices and from their own perspectives.

Even young people from privileged groups benefit from critical media literacy since it offers the chance to learn about different social realities. Through creating *alternative media* 📖, they have the opportunity to take action to improve society.

“...critical media literacy links media analysis to production; learning about the world is directly linked to the possibility of changing it. Command of literacy in this sense. . . is a prerequisite for self-representation and autonomous citizenship.”

Steven Goodman (2003, p.103)

5. Asking the Questions that Engage the Concepts



*“Do not now seek the answers,
which cannot be given you because
you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, live everything.
Live the questions now.”*

Rainer Maria Rilke
—Letters to a Young Poet

Questions are a cornerstone of the inquiry process because the choice of questions used and the ways they are asked determine the path of inquiry.

Analyzing a media text with a class or a group can be exhilarating, with insights coming fast and furious. After the initial viewing, listening, or presentation of a text, the first question may simply be, “What did you notice?” Different people will have noticed different things so accept all answers and keep asking, “What *else* did you notice?” Continue the brainstorming until you have at least a dozen ideas to explore. Challenge any attempt to assign interpretation too early. The key to success is for the teacher or facilitator to keep asking questions. Refrain from contributing too many ideas yourself.

It’s important that analysis go deeper than just trying to identify one “meaning” in an ad, a movie scene, or a story on the news. Indeed, try to avoid “why” questions at first; they too often lead to speculation, personal interpretation, and circular debate, which can stop the critical process of inquiry, exploration and discovery. Instead ask “what” and “how”:

- *How* does the camera angle make us feel about the person speaking?
- *What* difference would it make if the images were in black and white instead of color?
- *What* do we know about a movie character from her clothing, make-up and jewelry?
- *How* does the music contribute to the mood of the story?

More than anything else, media literacy education is a “quest for meaning,” says Chris Worsnop (1999), one of Canada’s media literacy leaders. It is an exploration for both students and teachers.

Earlier in this guide we discussed the need for media literacy and critical pedagogy to insure a vibrant participatory democracy. We introduced the media literacy framework with its *Five Core Concepts* and *Five Key Questions* and we further explored the theory behind critical media education. It is this philosophical base and pedagogical framework that are necessary to transform education in the 21st century to be more relevant to student needs and more capable of empowering students to actively shape democracy.

“Whose voice is heard? Who is silenced? Whose reality is presented? Whose reality is ignored? Who is advantaged? Who is disadvantaged? These sorts of questions open spaces for analyzing the discourses or ways of being that maintain certain social practices over others.”

Vivian Vasquez (2003, p.15)

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

It is important then to learn and practice the *Key Questions* so that everyone has a common language and a common understanding about what aspect of the text is being examined—is it an issue of “constructedness” (*Key Question #1*) or are we talking about values and points of view in the message (*Key Question #4*)?

Making theoretical ideas accessible and practical is the primary goal of this guide, so in the following pages we explore in depth each of the *Five Core Concepts and Key Questions* providing a

- short essay explaining each *Core Concept* and its *Key Question*.
- group or class activity to practice each *Key Question*.
- series of Guiding Questions that flow from each *Key Question*.
- model of media analysis to explore how to question a media text.

Additional exercises and lesson plans to explore each *Core Concept / Key Question* are readily available in *Five Key Questions that can Change the World / 25 Classroom Activities for Media Literacy* published by the Center for Media Literacy as Part II of the **CML MediaLit Kit™**. It is downloadable in both English and Spanish at no charge for educational or classroom use from www.medialit.org/mlk/keyquestions.html

In order to model the inquiry method with media texts accessible to many people, we have selected segments from the **Dilemmas + Decisions** DVD compilation of student-made videos (available from the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy and online at www.ncdemocracy.org). As a collection of four different video styles and treatments, the DVD provides a variety of clips useful for exploring each *Key Question*.

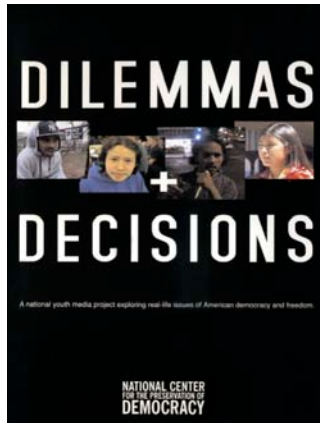
ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR ANALYSIS

1. Engage One Piece at a Time

Analyzing media can start anywhere depending on the needs and interests of the teacher and the students. Sometimes it is best to view the whole production first. But because videos/movies have such complex layers that fly by so fast, it is usually best to view and examine short segments, one clip at a time. Viewing a short clip, 30 seconds to a couple of minutes long, makes it easier for students to deconstruct production elements and question the way the content is framed and represented (*Core Concepts #2 and #4*). Since this can be quite time consuming, it is necessary to strategically choose the specific parts of a movie to analyze for the desired objectives. As a general rule: the shorter the segment, the easier to deconstruct.

2. Look Behind the Camera

Most DVDs today include extras such as interviews with the filmmakers or a look behind the scenes at the production. Such backstage perspectives can be powerful tools for helping students grasp the idea of constructedness (*Core Concept #1*). In the Special Features section of the **Dilemmas + Decisions** DVD, you can meet the makers of each of the video productions and get a glimpse of the production process. The ability to see and hear how a movie was constructed can be a valuable opportunity



to make media more transparent and empower students in the analytical process of deconstructing media. As long as students treat media as neutral conveyors of information and entertainment, critical questions are seldom asked. However, when they can see and discuss the constructedness of a media message, their analysis of the content can move to a deeper level that addresses issues of *representation* 📖, ideology, and the complexities of social contexts (*Core Concepts #4 and #5*). In the information age of the 21st century, this type of intellectual sophistication is necessary to actively participate in the democratic process.

3. Examine Packaging and Marketing

Even though we are told early on never to judge a book by its cover, we usually do because first impressions matter! An initial discussion of a media production can revolve around students' impressions of the packaging or advertising of the product: what do they expect to see in the DVD based on what they have seen ahead of time (advertising, packaging, previews, etc.)? Questioning first impressions can contribute to an understanding of the audience's role in the construction process (*Core Concept #3*) and can also be useful later when students package or market their own media products.

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of Media Literacy

| | |
|----|---|
| 1. | CC: All media messages are “constructed.” |
| | KQ: Who created this message? |

We should not think of media texts as “natural” things or as merely transparent conveyors of information. Media texts are built just as surely as buildings and highways are built and their construction shapes the message they carry.

The building materials involved vary from one kind of text to another. In a magazine, for example, there are different words printed in various sizes and fonts, different photographs composed and illuminated in an assortment of colors or shades of grey, and it is all designed taking into consideration the layout, budget, and audience. Television and movies have hundreds of building blocks—from camera angles and lighting to music and sound effects.

While we might recognize the obviousness of the construction process, we seldom consider the implications of these decisions on the content of the media we consume. Since the construction process is seldom seen, the audience never gets to see or hear the words, pictures, or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear, or read what was accepted. And what was accepted is further influenced by all the people involved in the construction process who shape the way the images and sounds are used. So it is important to remember that no matter what movie we see, song we hear, TV program we watch, or Internet site we visit, it is only *one version* of many that could have been.

This single version, which is “constructed” by a relatively small number of people, becomes “normalized” for the rest of us. The final media text seems to neutrally deliver its content, while the building blocks, like the air we breathe, become invisible and usually go unquestioned. This also means that those who benefit most from a media text see their position as the preferred or only option, while those most disadvantaged by the same text are even further *marginalized* 📖 as their perspective is either devalued or absent.

The way we understand a media text determines the questions we will ask about it. If we consider a media text as simply information or entertainment, we are less likely to question how it encourages us to feel a certain way or think certain ideas about the content. If we don’t think about a text as a construction, then the questions we typically ask about it tend to treat the content as “real” as opposed to just a single slice of a constructed “reality” that has been prepared and served to us with all the garnishes. Accepting a representation of reality as “the real thing” is highly problematic because it encourages people to believe information on face value, it creates a bias toward institutional perspectives, and it allows harmful stereotypes to pass for “common sense.”

Core Concept #1 provides an overarching understanding that all texts are constructed and shaped by people in different ways for different purposes. This realization is necessary for asking critical questions about both the content and the form of any media message. It is through the process of questioning that we gain the ability to discover how a media text functions, how the message could be understood differently, and how we can make meaning of it within a larger social context.

PRACTICE KEY QUESTION #1:

When you show someone a photograph, most people focus on just the subject matter of the picture. They overlook the fact that they are not seeing the actual subject but rather are looking at a *photograph* of the subject. Here's a fun exercise to better understand the significance that all media are "constructed."

- Show a photograph of an animal and ask the group what they are looking at.
- Encourage them to explore the question as someone charts their comments.
- Unless someone in the group does so first, reveal that what they are looking at is not the actual animal but instead a *picture* of the animal. Explore the idea that even though they "know" they are looking at a photograph, if this fact is not explicitly stated it can be easily overlooked and lead to all kinds of conclusions about the subject matter of the photograph.
- Invite new questions to be asked now that we know we're looking at a picture of an animal and not the animal itself, e.g.
 - How was the animal photographed?
 - Who photographed the animal?
 - Why did they photograph the animal?
 - What does the photographer want me to think about the animal?
 - What might be happening outside the frame?, etc.
- Then explore the implications of other media messages also being "constructed," for example, the evening news, a billboard ad, a documentary film, etc.

Guiding Questions:

- What kind of "text" is it?
- What are the various elements (building blocks) that make up the whole?
- How similar or different is it to others of the same genre?
- What choices were made that might have been made differently?
- How many people did it take to create this message? What are their various jobs?
- Whose story or what point of view is told?
- Whose story or what point of view is *missing*?
- How would the content change in a different medium? (For example: how does the same news story change when it is seen on TV, heard on the radio, read in a newspaper or accessed online)

A Model of Media Analysis using Dilemmas + Decisions: *Curfew Laws*



The point of *Key Question #1* is less about identifying the individuals who do different jobs on a media production and more about revealing the message as a construction with many individuals involved in making choices about how to build the message. In this video, we might want to explore the choice of title and how the title gives us clues about how the producers decided to frame the problem. Would the production have been different if the title

were different? For example, reflect on how the framing of the discussion changes when “Curfew Laws: Protecting Youth or Preventing Crime” is changed to “Curfew Laws: Fear of Youth or Infringement on Civil Rights.” When we ask *Key Question #1*, we are also asking how the construction positions us to think about the subject matter.

| | |
|----|--|
| 2. | CC: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules. |
| | KQ: What techniques are used to attract my attention? |

While the goal of the first concept is simply an awareness of the constructed nature of all media, this second concept focuses on *how* the message is constructed, the building blocks that are used, and how the construction elicits feelings, thoughts, and reactions in us. The fact that these reactions work at levels we may not be aware of makes the study of *Core Concept #2* full of “aha!” moments as we recognize the building blocks and the way they function.

To explore this concept, we have to accept that each form of communication—whether newspapers, TV game shows, or horror movies—has its own creative “language” that most of us learn to read at a superficial level early in life through exposure and repetition. Examples are: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal importance. Because this language is so familiar and media representations (even though they have been constructed by human beings) feel so “natural,” we tend not to notice the construction and don’t even think about questioning the medium or language that carries the message.

Learning how media is put together helps us uncover the many ways we can be “hooked” or influenced by the use of media language—especially the language of sounds and visuals that reach beyond the rational to our deepest emotional core. If we consume media messages without being able to notice how they are constructed, we lose our ability to recognize the many different ways that each message can be “read.” We just accept the content at face value and integrate it into our understanding without questioning.

To have more control in our interaction with media, we need to be able to separate what we see and hear—in the message—from what we think and feel—*about* the message (*denotation and connotation* 📖). For example, a photograph of a person’s face looks very different when the light comes from below than if it comes from above. Since we are used to light from above (from the sun), seeing someone illuminated from below looks strange to us. Therefore as a technique of visual language, lighting from below can communicate discomfort or even fear of the person in the photograph. Indeed, in the movies this technique is called “monster lighting.”

Understanding how media’s building blocks (e.g. lighting) *position* 📖 us to “read” or interpret a message in a particular way increases our ability to evaluate what we think and feel about the message. When we see how our feelings have been formed primarily by choices made by someone else (the media maker), we are in a better position to ask how it could be different. We have thus reclaimed the power to interpret the media message with a more *critical consciousness* rather than allowing it to work on us below our radar.

Without the critical lens that this concept gives us, we can unwittingly buy into attitudes about people, other countries, history, politics, human behavior, and life in general that seem “normal.” Without a

critical understanding of the constructedness of all media, what seems “normal” can easily become the “preferred” interpretation of what is “correct” or “proper.” And any other way of thinking or acting is “not normal” and is thereby devalued or marginalized.

PRACTICE KEY QUESTION #2:

A simple way to open this area of inquiry is to have students take digital pictures of each other in various exercises. This allows students to concretely experience the manipulation of the camera to portray subjects differently.

- **Camera Angle:** Photograph the tallest person in the group from above and the shortest person in the group from below. How do we feel about each person from the resulting photographs?
- **Lighting:** Photograph two students in different kinds of *lighting*—bright light from above and darker lighting from below. What is the difference in our attitudes toward each person?
- **Composition:** Photograph one person very close-up (just the face) and then from far away (alone in a large room, for example). What is conveyed about the person in each composition?

Close by showing a short clip from a movie or video (should be only a couple minutes long). Divide the group into three groups with each watching for one of the three camera techniques: camera angles, lighting, and composition. Have students look for and discuss how the techniques influenced the message and what variations of each technique they may have noticed.

Guiding Questions:

- What do you notice about the way the message is constructed?
 - Colors and shapes?
 - Sound effects? music? silence? dialogue or narration?
 - Props, sets, clothing?
 - Framing? composition?
 - Lighting?
- Where is the camera? What is the viewpoint?
- How is the story told? What are people doing?
- Are there any visual symbols or metaphors?
- What’s the emotional appeal? persuasive devices?
- What elements of the construction make it seem “real”?
- Which of the building blocks make you feel either uncomfortable or very comfortable?
- How could the message have been constructed differently?
- Who could benefit from a different construction of the same text?

A Model of Media Analysis using Dilemmas + Decisions: *Hip Hop and Violence*

The second *Key Question* encourages us to analyze the building blocks used to create a media text. For this video, we can ask:



- What music can be heard in the background?
- What background is seen behind the interviewees?
- What types of interviews are used to tell the story?

Insight might come from comparing the two kinds of interviews in this video: the person-in-the-street interview versus a more in-depth interview with one person about his firsthand experience of the shooting of his friend by

the police. What are the advantages and limitations of these two different styles of interview? What are other ways to interview people for a video? This conversation could be useful later to help students choose which type of interview would best suit their purposes and production.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 3. | CC: Different people experience the same media message differently. |
| | KQ: How might different people understand this message differently? |

Core Concept #3 turns the tables on the notion of television viewers as just passive “couch potatoes.” The fact is, our bodies may not be moving but in our heads, we’re constantly trying to connect what we’re hearing, seeing, or reading with everything else we know.

Even toddlers are unconsciously trying to make sense of what’s going on around them. To a child, the images on the television or computer screen, the music from the CD player, and the talk show on the radio are just patterns of color, shapes, and sounds that have to be sorted out by categories the child is already familiar with.

As we grow and develop to adulthood, we continually expand what we know and understand through schooling, work, life experiences and especially through the personal “filters”—our personality, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, abilities, or disabilities, etc.—through which we each uniquely experience the world. We also learn different ways to make sense of a media message by hearing how others experience the *same media*—but have a *different interpretation* because of the filters that make them the unique persons they are.

The more questions we can ask about what we and others are experiencing, the better prepared we are to evaluate the message and decide for ourselves what to think and feel about it. Hearing multiple interpretations can build respect for different cultures and appreciation for minority or dissenting opinions, an essential skill in an increasingly multicultural world.

Understanding that various people are experiencing a message differently than a given individual might be also reduces the influence of a message to its proper perspective: it is just one point of view. There could be any number of other interpretations. It is not necessarily the “truth,” and it possibly isn’t even accurate. It is a construction—made at a time and a place by people with their own biases and motives—and it could have been constructed differently.

Finally, exploring this question reminds teachers that they must not only be open to various interpretations among their students but also that students and teachers don’t experience the same media the same way either. The purpose of this concept is to remind us that media literacy is not about students ferreting out one “right” interpretation that resides in the head of the teacher. This concept is intended to help students recognize how different people can arrive at different conclusions from the same media text as well as understand how similar groups of people can arrive at the same reading of that text. The meaning of a media text is not only in the text, it is also part of who we are and what we bring to the text.

PRACTICE KEY QUESTION #3:

Explore this concept by dividing the class into groups as *advertising agencies*. Each group is to design an advertising campaign to sell the same product (choose a white towel, a potted plant, a stuffed toy, or other generic product) to a *different target audience* 📖, e.g.

- Young people their own age (girls or boys)
- Grandparents
- Mothers of toddlers
- College-age boys
- Wealthy business men
- Adult women who like sports

Each campaign should have all of the following elements:

- Strategy for how the campaign will appeal to the audience
- Theme and a catchy slogan that expresses the theme
- Recommendation for where the ads will be placed to reach the intended audience

Once each group has created their campaign, have them present their strategy to the entire group so that everyone can see how different the messages can be for selling the same product. The resulting variety of campaign messages and tactics can demonstrate understanding about how different people experience media messages differently.

Guiding Questions:

- What did you feel as you experienced this text?
- What do you think the maker of the text wants you to feel? What leads you to assume this?
- Have you ever experienced anything like this? How close does it come to what you have experienced in real life?
- What did you learn from this media text? What did you learn about yourself from experiencing the media text?
- What did you learn from other people's response—and their experience?
- How many other interpretations could there be? How could we hear about them?
- How can you explain the different responses?
- Are other viewpoints just as valid as mine?
- How do you feel about the picture(s)? What extra information does it give you?
- What prior media experiences have you had that influence your understanding of this media message?
- How could this message be understood differently by someone with whom I disagree?

A Model of Media Analysis using Dilemmas + Decisions: *Hip Hop and Violence*



By asking how different people could understand this video differently, we are seeking different possible readings. Since this DVD segment provides perspectives from people who are seldom seen or heard in the *mainstream media* 📖, it could be very interesting to investigate other people's reactions to this unique media text, such as older members from a similar community, hip-hop musicians, graffiti artists, students from rural areas, police officers, educators, gang members, etc.

Conducting surveys, focus groups, or interviews about this video essay with different audiences can provide input that even the media creators might not have considered. It can be especially important to ask about different interpretations of people who are not represented in the media text in order to gain insight into issues of class, race, and gender that are not addressed. The more people can speak on their own behalf, the less likely the discussion will slip into assumptions, generalizations, and stereotypes about what some people think that others think.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 4. | CC: Media have embedded values and points of view. |
| | KQ: What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? |

Media messages are like onions. Whether it contains words, pictures, audio, or all three together in a multimedia experience, each message consists of many layers of ideas, attitudes, and opinions that can be either obvious or subtle and either supportive or detrimental to each of us.

Key Question #4 helps to peel back the layers to reveal how the choices made in constructing a message inevitably communicate values, lifestyles, and points of view that favor some people and ideas more than others. The content of any message can therefore be analyzed through a series of questions that help students first recognize and then uncover the many ideas embedded within.

At their core, media are storytellers. Even commercials tell a quick and simple story. Stories require characters, settings, and a plot that has a beginning, middle, and end. The choice of a character’s age, gender, or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban or rural, affluent or poor), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become “embedded” in a TV show, a movie or an ad.

The understanding that all stories are told from someone’s perspective and always carry with them a set of values and points of view inherently means that still other values are *not* being represented. Being able to recognize and name *missing* perspectives is a critical skill of democracy as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

Since we often consider media to be objective conveyors of entertainment or information, we seldom consider the deeper implications of this concept. It is important, then, to learn how to “read” all kinds of media messages—to “deconstruct the construction”—in order to discover the points of view embedded in them and how to assess them as part of the text rather than merely accepting them as “natural.” Only then can we critically judge the value of the message for us and for others.

The recognition that bias is always present does not mean that the bias is bad, it just reinforces our understanding that media texts are never neutral. *Core Concept #4* aims to build an awareness of the subjectivity of media messages and the need to peel the onion of media construction. This analytical process helps to uncover the embedded values and points of view in order to question their strengths and limitations.

PRACTICE KEY QUESTION #4:

Having students create a media product from different points of view can be enlightening. The ability to take the same event or topic and demonstrate different ways of representing it can help show the bias and embedded values always present in media messages.

- Choose a single event or issue and assign students in different groups the job of taking the same topic and creating a radio news show or podcast about the topic from different points of view.
 - One group could create a fictional account while another group creates a non-fictional account.
 - Students could be divided by gender and create male vs. female versions.
 - One group could take a conservative perspective while another group could take a liberal point of view.
 - Explore other perspectives the students themselves might come up with.
- Once each group has prepared their presentation, have them present their audio production to the whole class. This can be done live as a role play or audio recorded and played back to the whole class.
- Encourage students to reflect on the differences they noticed in the various productions about the same topic. They should focus on the information chosen or omitted, the use of adjectives and verbs, any music or sound effects included, and the way the information is framed and presented. The embedded values become more obvious when students can compare the same story told from different perspectives.

Guiding Questions:

- What questions come to mind as you watch/read/listen?
- What type of person is the reader/watcher/listener invited to identify with?
- How are people portrayed? What kinds of behaviors or consequences are depicted?
- Are there any political or economic ideas that come through in the message?
- What judgments or statements are made about how to treat other people?
- If the people in the picture could talk, what would they say are the most important things in life?
- What view of the world do the creators of this text assume the reader or viewer holds? How do you know?
- What ideas or perspectives are left out? How can you find what's missing?
- What would the story be like if the main character were female instead of male? (or vice versa?)
- What historical events have been left out that can provide important information about the present?
- What is implied about large concepts such as competition vs. cooperation, consumption vs. conservation, etc.?

A Model of Media Analysis using Dilemmas + Decisions: *A Nation within a Nation*



Many popular symbols take on cultural values so completely that they become social icons, and we often forget that the link between a symbol and its meaning is a social construction. Two powerful icons for citizens of any country are the national anthem and the flag. In the U.S., this connection is so intense that some politicians have attempted to create a constitutional amendment to prohibit flag burning and have expressed outrage at a

Spanish translation of the national anthem. In this video, students have an opportunity to explore the powerful values in symbols by analyzing the use of the national anthem sung in a native language and the image of the American flag with a Native American on horseback superimposed. What ideas and values are conveyed by the Native American reconstruction of the flag and national anthem? What ideas and values are associated with the U.S. government's construction of the flag and national anthem? Connecting with *Key Question #3*, students can also explore how different audiences could possibly "read" different lifestyles and values in these two media representations.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 5. | CC: Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power. |
| | KQ: Why was this message sent? |

With *Key Question #5*, we look at the motive or purpose of a media message—and whether or how a message may have been influenced by money, ego, or ideology. To respond to a message appropriately, we need to be able to see beyond the basic content motives of informing, persuading, or entertaining and explore the principle organizing motives that are shaped by economic and political systems within which all media operate.

The vast majority of the world’s media has developed as moneymaking enterprises and continues to operate today as very large commercial businesses in which advertising is the motor to generate profit. Newspapers and magazines lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what’s really being sold through commercial media is not just the advertised products to the audience—but also the audience to the advertisers!

The primary purpose of the programs on television, or the articles in a magazine, is to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or publisher can sell time or space to sponsors to advertise products. We call this “renting eyeballs.” Sponsors pay for the time to show a commercial or the space to display a print ad based on the number of people the network or magazine predicts will see the message.

Exploring how media content, whether TV shows, magazines, or Internet sites, makes viewers and readers of all ages receptive *target audiences* 📖 for advertisers creates some of the most enlightening moments in the media literacy classroom. It also creates an excellent opportunity for students to understand how media *position* 📖 audiences toward “preferred” readings.

This *Core Concept* is most useful when analyzing the economic structure of commercial media and the ways in which capitalism and advertising steer and organize the commercial media system and its messages. But in any message, whether commercial or not, there are layers of motives from the many different people involved in the construction process—from the animator to the lyricist, the journalist to the artist.

Key Question #5 encourages the exploration of both the principal organizing motives (profit with commercial media, and persuasion or education with non-commercial media) along with the numerous other motives that shape the media construction. While searching for the author’s intent can provide insight useful to evaluate and understand the content, it is important to remember that making meaning is a social process far more complex than the mere desire of the creators.

Learning to question the motive behind a media message gives students one more instrument in their critical thinking tool kit to use as they engage in democracy as agents of change.

PRACTICE KEY QUESTION #5:

Assign students in pairs to explore different kinds of media products and determine the amount of advertising compared to the amount of “content” that informs or entertains. This activity can be done with a wide variety of print or electronic media but is most easily done with magazines.

- Have students bring in different kinds of magazines—fashion, teen, sports, news, house and home, cars, etc. Make sure you have enough different magazines so that each pair of students can have a unique magazine to examine. An interesting twist may be to have similar kinds of magazines (fashion, for instance) in different languages or appealing to different ethnic groups.
- One person on each team tallies the number of pages devoted to advertising and the other counts pages of editorial matter. (Deciding where some pages cross the boundary between advertising and editorial may provoke an interesting insight.)
- Some questions to ask after all teams have completed their counts:
 - Which media have the most advertising? The most editorial?
 - What *kinds* of magazines have the most advertising? Why do you think that is?
 - Were there any pages where advertising and editorial seem to be hard to distinguish? How did you make your decision about counting them?
 - What are some implications for society if a magazine is more interested in selling advertising than, say, reporting the news?

Guiding Questions:

- Who is in control of the creation and transmission of this message?
- Why are they sending it? How do you know?
- Who are they sending it to? How do you know?
- What’s being “sold” in this message? What ideas are being “told”?
- Are there possibly multiple motives behind the message? Do they support or contradict each other?
- What can be implied from this message about the creator of it? Can we find proof to support our assumptions?
- Who profits from this message? Who pays for it?
- Who is served by or benefits from the message—the public? private interests? individuals? institutions?
- Who could be harmed or negatively affected by this message?
- What economic decisions may have influenced the construction or transmission of this message?

A Model of Media Analysis using Dilemmas + Decisions: *Freedom on the Block?*



In this video created by the Vietnamese Youth Development Center, there are several distinct parts that were created by different people with different motives and later brought together into one final media product. Since this is not a commercial media production, the principle organizing motive is probably not profit, therefore we should ask what is the intent of the organization or funders involved with the production. And since many non-

commercial media allow the media makers to have considerable autonomy over their productions, we should also question the motives of the people who filmed, edited, and acted in each of the segments.

Freedom on the Block? begins and ends with interviews and commentary by Sammy Soeun and James Varian. Sandwiched between those are three segments: Vinh's T-Hell, Pearl's Cage, and Seyha's Brother. Start your inquiry of *Core Concept #5* with the following questions:

- What parameters or objectives does it appear that the Vietnamese Youth Development Center gave to the media makers?
- Do you think Sammy and James had the same reasons for making this DVD as Vinh, Pearl, or Seyha? What do you think were their motives?
- How did their similar or different motives influence their choices about what and how to film?

6. *Dilemmas + Decisions*: Production and Process in Practice

*Organizing a **Dilemmas + Decisions** Project in Your Community*

In **Dilemmas + Decisions**, each of the four video presents youth confronting controversial issues that matter to their community. The power of this teaching methodology is its combination of critical analysis with critical practice.

As a transformative pedagogy, **Dilemmas + Decisions** uses a *problem-posing* 📖 approach that begins with a genuine problem of student interest and unfolds, ideally, to encompass four underlying objectives:

1. **Initial analysis** stimulates critical inquiry and leads to investigating aspects of an issue that may involve social injustice and/or the breakdown of democracy.
2. Students **intellectually engage** with socially relevant subject matter and **act upon it** by creating their own alternative media production expressing their point of view.
3. **Creating a media product** gives students practice in the art of public dialogue and shaping a message to motivate others to act.
4. **Presenting their production to a real-world audience** increases the capacity to see themselves as responsible members of society capable of shaping democracy.

With these four goals in mind, the following pages provide overarching steps and ideas for structuring a **Dilemmas + Decisions** project.

AGE AND SETTING

- **Dilemmas + Decisions** could be implemented in **high schools** or **middle schools** because it dovetails with multiple educational standards in **social studies** (civics, history, government, etc.) as well as **language arts, visual and performing arts, and technology**. Indeed, media literacy should not be seen as a “new” subject to add to an already overcrowded curriculum plate. Rather media literacy is most effective when it is integrated across the curriculum bringing 21st century learning into the educational world of young people who live 21st century lives.
- **Dilemmas + Decisions** provides a process to guide **Service Learning Projects** using media as a tool for action. Media production is a perfect vehicle to achieve the goals of service learning which involve:
 - active participation in a collaborative group;
 - selection of a service-oriented project that arises from analysis and reflection by students on community needs and which also addresses content area skills development;
 - the creation and public demonstration of a final product.
- **Dilemmas + Decisions** is also designed for **teen after-school programs, community-based organizations, or other structured youth groups**. Experience with media production is not necessary because teen culture is media culture, and almost all young people are native speakers of today’s multimedia language.

FLEXIBLE FORMAT

- There is no “one way” to organize a **Dilemmas + Decisions** project. Some may wish to conduct a simple investigation that takes only a few hours. Others may have the time and resources to develop a project that explores a complex issue with an extensive media production component. See pages 49–50 for an outline of steps involved in
 - a short 3–5 hour project.
 - a more extensive project taking several weeks or even months.
- Although **Dilemmas + Decisions** was originally designed as a video production process to engage students in public dialogue about issues in their community, any one of a number of media projects is possible. For a list of possible projects, see page 48.
- There are numerous resources to assist you and your group in organizing and creating a media product regardless of the medium you select. Teens themselves may have enough technical expertise to organize and produce a short video or other media production as well as to train and work with their classmates. If further assistance is needed, look for specialized help from another teacher, parent, volunteers from the local cable channel or area media arts center or interns from the communications department of a local university or community college. On pages 60–62 we provide a list of recommended print and electronic resources on the production process.
- The adult role is to provide support and guidance—inspiring, motivating and stimulating inquiry, monitoring group dynamics and, if necessary, facilitating access to resources.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND FACILITATORS

- **Create a safe environment** in which students feel that their ideas and questions will be respected by the teacher as well as their student colleagues. See *Talking about Tough Topics* on pages 53–54.
- **Build collaborative groups** for students to work together in teams. In the beginning it might be useful to assign particular roles and tasks for each group member (leader, time keeper, recorder, reporter, etc.).
- **If needed, teach skills for brainstorming, goal-setting, problem-solving, and group decision-making** so that the project goes smoothly and students gain practical experience in these important skills. Exercises from student leadership training programs provide many excellent and engaging activities. See recommended resources on pages 60–62.
- **Transparency** is important for empowerment, therefore students need to know what are the *givens* (the requirements that are not negotiable) and the *options* (the elements that they can choose and change). Often State Standards, a specific text, or certain subject matter are a given that a teacher must cover, while how to cover it may be more open to student choices and different options.
- **The engagement with critical analysis** throughout all phases of media production is a given for the **Dilemmas + Decisions** process that students should be aware of from the beginning. Asking critical questions that probe deeply into the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts provides students more perspective about their issue under investigation. A key idea behind **Dilemmas + Decisions** is the importance of shaping democracy to be more just for more people; therefore asking questions about social justice is a necessary component of all media production.
- **Reflection** is essential throughout the production process. Media makers should continually ask themselves questions about whose voices and perspectives are missing or how might different people understand a message differently. Students might keep activity logs or journals, which can be useful for assessing the process.
- **Final presentation** is an important step not to be overlooked. By sharing their production with an audience beyond the teacher, students experience citizenship as participating in public dialogue—getting feedback on their position as well as how different people respond to their media message.
- **Process must be valued over product.** During the entire production phase, be sure that everyone understands that the learning process is more important than a final product.

POSSIBLE DILEMMAS + DECISIONS PRODUCTION PROJECTS

While “let’s do a video” may be the first idea for a group’s **Dilemmas + Decisions** production project, there are many other media production activities that may be easier to organize or require less time or resources. Other considerations might be what media students feel are most appropriate for the subject matter or the intended audience. Be sure that students consider all their options:



- PowerPoint presentation
 - include visuals and not just words
- Audio podcast—or series of podcasts
- Digital still photographs
 - arranged in a PowerPoint slide show
 - printed and displayed as a gallery collection
 - displayed in any creative way that images are used in society
- Storyboard for a video documentary or public service announcement
- Comic book or graphic novel
- Poster, series of posters, or stickers
- Editorial cartoon
- Animation
- Video game
- Print brochure, newsletter or newspaper
- Webpage
- Original music, song, or rap
 - add visuals for a music video

OUTLINES FOR DILEMMAS + DECISIONS PROJECTS

A. 6–8 WEEK TIMELINE

B. 3–5 DAY TIMELINE (INTRODUCTORY)

A. 6–8 WEEK TIMELINE

- 1. Engage students in discussion** about issues and concerns that they would like to address or investigate. Showing examples of student media productions, such as **Dilemmas + Decisions** videos, can be helpful for students to see different ideas and the potential for their work. (Other student-made videos or public service announcements may also be helpful if they were created to explore relevant issues in young people’s lives. Be aware that many student-made videos on the Internet are just for entertainment with no critical component.)
- 2. Learn and practice the *Five Key Questions* of media literacy as a beginning framework for analyzing media messages, including their own.**
See suggestions of introductory activities on pages 50 and 25 lesson plans available online as Part II of the **CML MediaLit Kit™: *Five Key Questions that can Change the World***.⁴
- 3. Choose a topic and refine it through research.**
 - Outline what you know and don’t know about the issue.
 - Identify key people to be interviewed to check what you know and learn what you don’t know (use the *studying up*  process on page 21).
 - Try to locate original sources whenever possible.
 - Develop fundamental interviewing skills: asking good questions, noticing nonverbal cues, learning to listen even if you disagree.
- 4. Apply critical media literacy analysis to the topic**
 - Collect and analyze media *representations*  of this or similar issues (movies, episodes of TV series, popular songs, websites, slogans on t-shirts, bumperstickers, video games, advertisements and commercials, newspaper or magazine articles).
 - Conduct an analysis of news media coverage of this or similar issues.
 - Apply what you learn as you develop *your* media message.
 - how is the issue typically framed?
 - what techniques are used? (*Key Question #2*)
 - how do you want your media production to be different?
 - what did you learn about the topic? About media coverage of the topic?
 - what’s missing from mainstream media?
 - Maintain ongoing reflection that involves students in the process of critically questioning the media they see as well as the media they are creating.

⁴ http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article661.html

5. Select, organize and produce a media product that expresses the students' consensus point of view on the chosen community issue.

- Decide the focus of the production; identify your purpose and point of view
 - decide the primary audience; other possible audiences
 - choose your medium and genre
 - develop a shared vision of the project and commitment to the production process (be realistic in choosing your project)
 - explore with students the benefits and challenges of the project
- Develop a comprehensive plan for producing the project:
 - outline a treatment
 - identify resources needed for the production—and learn how to get them review
 - legal issues (permissions, copyright, etc.)
 - enroll support from administrators, other teachers, parents
 - create the media production and edit it for presentation

6. Present finished production to an audience beyond the teacher and engage them in the issue.

B. 3–5 DAY TIMELINE (INTRODUCTORY)

1. Have students select a topic about which they already know something (a subject they have already studied or discussed).
2. Learn and practice the *Five Key Questions*: apply the *Five Key Questions* to recent media coverage of the selected topic.
3. Through discussion and media analysis, decide the group's point of view, the audience to be addressed, and a strategy to engage the audience through a media project that can be completed within the time available.
4. Produce the media project.
5. Present to an audience not involved in the project.

7. Resources and References

Inquiry in the Classroom: The Foxfire Approach

In the mid-1960s, a frustrated teacher in the north Georgia mountains challenged his students to think of a way to learn that would interest and engage them. To his surprise, they decided to create a magazine about their mountain culture. The name they chose was Foxfire and the magazine captured the imagination of people in the community and around the nation. It also led to an ongoing series of publications, a national teacher's network, and to a more progressive approach to teaching. Core Practices of Foxfire include the following:

- **The work teachers and learners do together is infused from the beginning with learner choice, design, and revision.**
The central focus of the work grows out of learners' interests and concerns. Most problems that arise during classroom activity are solved in collaboration with learners, and learners are supported in the development of their ability to solve problems and accept responsibility.
- **The academic integrity of the work teachers and learners do together is clear.**
Mandated skills and learning expectations are identified to the class. Through collaborative planning and implementation, students engage and accomplish the mandates. In addition, activities assist learners in discovering the value and potential of the curricula and its connections to other disciplines.
- **The role of the teacher is that of facilitator and collaborator.**
Teachers are responsible for assessing and attending to learners' developmental needs, providing guidance, identifying academic givens, monitoring each learner's academic and social growth, and leading each into new areas of understanding and competence.
- **The work is characterized by active learning.**
Learners are thoughtfully engaged in the learning process, posing and solving problems, making meaning, producing products, and building understandings. Because learners engaged in these kinds of activities are risk takers operating on the edge of their competence, the classroom environment provides an atmosphere of trust where the consequence of a mistake is the opportunity for further learning.
- **Peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork are all consistent features of classroom activities.**
Every learner is not only included, but needed, and, in the end, each can identify her or his specific stamp upon the effort.
- **There is an audience beyond the teacher for learner work.**
It may be another individual, or a small group, or the community, but it is an audience the

learners want to serve or engage. The audience, in turn, affirms the work is important, needed, and worth doing.

- **New activities spiral gracefully out of the old, incorporating lessons learned from past experiences, building on skills and understandings that can now be amplified.**
Rather than completion of a study being regarded as the conclusion of a series of activities, it is regarded as the starting point for a new series.
- **Reflection is an essential activity that takes place at key points throughout the work.**
Teachers and learners engage in conscious and thoughtful consideration of the work and the process. It is this reflective activity that evokes insight and gives rise to revisions and refinements.
- **Connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond the community are clear.**
Course content is connected to the community in which the learners live. Learners' work will "bring home" larger issues by identifying attitudes about and illustrations and implications of those issues in their home communities.
- **Imagination and creativity are encouraged in the completion of learning activities.**
It is the learner's freedom to express and explore, to observe investigate and discover that are the basis for aesthetic experiences. These experiences provide a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction and lead to deeper understanding and an internal thirst for knowledge.
- **The work teachers and learners do together includes rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation.**
Teachers and learners employ a variety of strategies to demonstrate their mastery of teaching and learning objectives.

The reprint of the Foxfire Core Practices is with permission from The Foxfire Fund, Inc. and available online at: <http://www.foxfire.org/teachi.html#core>

Talking about Tough Topics

The creation of a safe learning environment where students can discuss important ideas, respectfully disagree, and constructively challenge one another begins the first day students assemble in a classroom and meet a new teacher. Over the years, educators and psychologists have found strategies that promote an environment conducive for groups to raise controversial issues or discuss tough topics. Here are five basic guidelines plus some tips on how to introduce and facilitate a controversial conversation in the classroom.

Guideline #1—Speak from your own experience.

- Students are requested to work with their own experience rather than quote secondary sources, whether parents, media, another student, or others. Encourage students to preface remarks with *“In my experience. . .”*

Guideline #2—How you speak creates the space for everyone to speak.

- *“Be careful of the words you use—no name calling, no insults.”*
- *“Be careful how you speak—don’t cut people off or interrupt them.”*
- Teaching students to address one another by name and look at each other eye to eye helps conversation stay focused and promotes respect for one another as persons.

Guideline #3—It’s okay to disagree / Nobody’s wrong.

- Disagreeing with someone is not being rude or mean, it’s just expressing a different idea or another perspective. Cultivate an environment where differences are viewed as opportunities to explore ideas, rather than aberrations from some preconceived norm or “right” answer. *“We all realize that we each are entitled to our own perspectives and opinions, but that doesn’t make them more ‘right’ than anybody else’s.”*
- When disagreements arise, have students practice citing the exact point of disagreement and offering a counterpoint to keep them “idea based” rather than “person-based.” A good habit to encourage is to have students learn to say: *“I respectfully disagree with Rachel’s suggestion that . . . but I think . . .”*

Guideline #4—Talk about other persons or groups as if they were in the room.

- We often feel more comfortable criticizing a group or a person when they are not present. Avoid scapegoating or stereotyping by asking students to frame every comment as though people they are describing or are speaking about are in the room.

Guideline #5—The best discussions are when we build on each other’s ideas.

- Rather than repeat what others have already said, acknowledge what others have contributed and build on their ideas. This means we have to LISTEN carefully to one another and let them finish what they want to say without being interrupted. *“Adding to what Jane just said about X and what Jaime mentioned earlier about Y, I . . .”*

How to begin:

“We’re going to be talking today about some ideas that may be controversial—some will agree with them, others will disagree. The discussion will be most fruitful if we can focus on listening respectfully to all points of view. My job as facilitator is to see that everybody can speak freely and that everybody feels heard. Your job as participants is to be thoughtful in the way you participate so that everyone feels comfortable expressing his or her thoughts.”

Other group facilitation tips include:

- Try not to let one or several students dominate. Encourage everyone to participate.
- Have the group sit where they can see each other face to face—circles are best.
- If class is large, break group in half and create an “inner” and an “outer” circle. Only those in the inner circle may speak. Outer circle listens. Set a time limit for the first “round” and then groups switch circles and the new “inner” circle speaks. Switch back and forth as the conversation progresses.
- Don’t rush to fill silence. And don’t assume that silence means there’s nothing more to be said. A time of silence gives everyone time to think over what’s been said and then the best ideas come forward. Count to 30 before prodding a group.
- When recording student ideas on newsprint or board, use their own words as much as possible. Teachers should hesitate to express their opinions, especially at first. You are there not to engage in debate with students but to facilitate *their* conversation.

Linking the Literacies: Insight from Australia

Increasingly scholars around the world are broadening the concept of literacy by asking what kind of “reading” and “writing” skills are needed to communicate and participate in a global multimedia information society.

In their literacy research in Australia, Alan Luke and Peter Freebody (1999) have been developing a dynamic understanding of literacy as a set of social practices that are interrelated and interdependent. In their Four-Resource Model, they frame literacy as a “family of practices,” (a set of competencies), and suggest that multiple practices are necessary and none alone are enough.

These practices are not hierarchical or linear; rather they are just different aspects of the communication process. According to Luke and Freebody, the following four practices should replace our current limited understanding of “literacy” in order to better prepare students for living in a multicultural, multimedia world:

CODE BREAKING: How do I crack the code of this text?

Code breaking is a practice that in most classrooms occurs often with print-based texts since phonics and grammar have been institutionalized for many years. However, breaking the code of non-print-based texts, such as television, music, or video games, is something now needed in classrooms around the world.


TEXT PARTICIPATING: What does this text mean to me?

Exploring the meaning of a print text is known to most teachers as teaching comprehension. In some ways comprehension is taught in all subject areas from art to zoology but is often limited to making sense of print-based texts, typically a textbook. When we expand our notion of a text to include multimedia, then this practice requires new skills such as analyzing effects of camera angles, lighting, sound, etc. *Key Question #2* is useful in learning to understand the construction of multimedia texts.

TEXT USING: What can I do with this text?

If the first two practices have traditionally been “reading,” then this literacy practice might be paralleled to “writing.” Using texts functionally involves exploring the purposes of texts and creating messages for meaningful communication. When educators embrace this practice through critical media literacy, analysis and production unite to create powerful student media productions that can have an audience beyond the teacher.

TEXT ANALYZING: What does this text do to me?

The fourth literacy practice occurs too seldom in traditional schools but it is the heart of the **Dilemmas + Decisions** process. The practice of critical analysis involves asking all of the *Key Questions* and requires contextualizing the text through questioning the social, historical, cultural, economic, and political construction. This practice aims to unveil the point of view of the text and its ability to *position*  the reader to a preferred reading. Through critical inquiry, students gain the understanding that all messages have been constructed by human beings with their own biases and subjectivities, and that therefore no text can ever be neutral.







These four intertwining practices reinforce the multidimensionality of literacy in the 21st century and establish learning as a lifelong enterprise. They also create the possibility and tools for invigorating public discourse so necessary for a vibrant democracy.


Teacher / Facilitator Reflection Tool


The following questions are intended to assist teachers and facilitators to reflect on their own teaching practices and rate themselves on key pedagogical aspects of critical media literacy.


1. **Do my students read and analyze both print- and non-print-based texts?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
2. **Do my students write and create texts using both print- and non-print-based media?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
3. **Are my students talking more than I am?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
4. **Do my students work collaboratively?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
5. **Does student work have a real-world audience beyond the teacher?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
6. **Do my students analyze texts from different perspectives?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
7. **Do my students attempt to solve real problems that affect them and their community?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
8. **Does my curriculum emerge from student interest?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
9. **Are issues of social justice discussed openly and critically?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often
10. **Is there an understood norm where everyone participates and is listened to?**
0 1 2 3
Never Rarely Sometimes Often


Glossary of Terms


-  **Alternative media production**—videos and different multimedia productions that challenge the dominant myths that are often part of mainstream media, thereby providing an alternative perspective from most mass media.
-  **Cultural studies**—a multidisciplinary field of critical inquiry that began over a century ago in Europe and continues to grow with new critiques of media and society. From the 1930s through the 1960s, researchers at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research used critical social theory to analyze how popular culture and the new tools of communication technology induce ideology and social control. In the 1960s, researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham added to the earlier concerns of ideology with a more sophisticated understanding of the audience as active constructors of reality, not simply mirrors of an external reality. Applying concepts of semiotics, feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodernism, a dialectical understanding of political economy, textual analysis and audience theory has evolved in which media and popular culture can be analyzed as dynamic discourses that reproduce dominant ideologies as well as entertain, educate, and offer possibilities for counter-hegemonic alternatives.
-  **Critical autonomy/Critical solidarity**—two goals of media literacy that have been promoted by prominent media educators in England. The notion of *critical autonomy* (Masterman, 1994) encourages students to become independent critical thinkers in their relationships with media both inside and outside the classroom. *Critical solidarity* (Ferguson 2001) promotes a more sociological understanding of the relationships between knowledge and power, as well as a more empathetic attitude toward people most marginalized or subordinated by media representations. If *critical autonomy* is combined with *critical solidarity*, the goal of media literacy can aim to create independent and interdependent socially conscious critical thinkers. See page 22.
-  **Denotation/connotation**—terms used often in semiotics to refer to the ability to read dual meanings of signs: *denotation* (the more literal reference to content) and *connotation* (the more associative, subjective significations of a message based on ideological and cultural codes). With younger students the terms can be simplified into separating what they *see* or *hear* (denotation) from what they *think* or *feel* (connotation).
-  **Dominant or privileged positions**—refer to locations people inhabit of more power and privilege in comparison to subordinate or marginalized positions. For example: in the United States white people have more privileges than people of color, men have more privileges than women, and rich people have more power than poor people.
-  **Dominant myths**—ideas that a society has taken as “common-sense,” sometimes referred to as hegemony or master narratives and often involve harmful stereotypes. Dominant myths are ideological and carry many embedded values that are rarely questioned since they are accepted as natural, such as the idea that the man should be the master of the house, that women are naturally better care givers, or that homosexuality is a disease.


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Mainstream media—typically large multinational corporations that mass produce messages such as blockbuster movies, popular music, national magazines, etc. In spite of the myth of the liberal media, most mainstream media tend toward a conservative leaning and favor the economic interests of their owners.


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Position—when used as a verb, this refers to the way in which media encourage (or position) people to read or understand messages in certain ways. An active notion of the audience suggests that “reading” or understanding a message is a complex process in which meanings are negotiated along a spectrum of reading positions from preferred or dominant to oppositional or counter-hegemonic.


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Productive unease—the opposite of “unproductive complacency” is something that Robert Ferguson calls *productive unease*. He asserts we need to recognize that dilemmas and contradictions are key elements of media education and students need the strength to doubt. Ferguson writes, “So media education is about debate, disagreement and the negotiation of dilemmas and contradictions” (1998b). See page 21.



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Problem-posing/Problem-solving—*problem-posing* is a pedagogical approach that Paulo Freire writes about where problems are brought to the students for them to wrestle with and use as vehicles for learning. This is slightly different from John Dewey’s *problem-solving* approach where students learn by solving problems that may arise in their learning. Freire’s notion is more political in the sense that the teacher motivates students and guides their inquiry by bringing problems to them that are part of their community and culture for them to engage in actions that attempt to improve a bad situation or find resolutions to controversial social issues.

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Public discourse—refers to the issues discussed in public and the notion that a democracy needs a public space for citizens to discuss, debate, and dissent. In the 1960s, Jurgen Habermas wrote extensively about the importance of the public sphere and democracy. As fewer corporations own more of the public airwaves, information communications technologies, and even the physical gathering spaces (malls, bookstores, coffee shops, etc.) there are new pressures and limitations being placed on the ability of citizens to be able to engage in a free and open public discourse.

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Representation—any time reality is presented through a medium of communication it becomes a representation of the real. This concept is essential to media literacy because as messages are re-presented they are changed by the people doing the representing and by the medium through which the information presented.

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Semiotics—the theory and study of signs and symbols—including words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. The study of semiotics attempts to answer the question of how we construct knowledge, information, and communication. It involves the exploration of what we refer to as “signs” in everyday speech as well as anything that “stands for” something else.

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Studying up—feminist standpoint theory notion of beginning all inquiry from a subordinate position in order to expose systems of power. This is a research methodology aimed to strengthen objectivity. See page 21.

-  **Marginalized or subordinate positions**—refer to locations people inhabit of less power and privilege in comparison to dominant positions where people have more power and privileges. These positions are often created and maintained as a way of controlling many people by the few who control the resources and institutions of power. Patricia Hill Collins writes about intersecting oppressions when referring to how some people, like African-American women, inhabit multiple positions of marginalization making them even further subordinated and discriminated against.
-  **Target audience**—the intended recipient of a media message. Often media makers market their products to very specific target audiences that fall within a precise age range, preferred gender, and socio-economic level.

Resources

MEDIA LITERACY THEORY AND THINKING

Teaching the Media by Len Masterman (1985/2003) London: Comedia Press, ISBN: 0745628303

Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information by Kathleen Tyner (1998). Erlbaum. ISBN: 0805802267

Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture by David Buckingham (2003). Cambridge: Polity Press / Blackwell. ISBN: 0415039746

Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change by Steve Goodman (2003). New York: Teachers College Press. ISBN: 0807742880

A People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn (1980). New York: Harper Perennial. ISBN: 0595395864

Representing 'Race': Ideology, Identity and the Media by Robert Ferguson, (1998). New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0340692391

Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern by Douglas Kellner, (2001). London: Routledge. ISBN:0415105706

CML MediaLit Kit: A Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Media Age

Part I: Learning for the 21st Century: Overview and Orientation to Media Education

Part II: Five Key Questions That can Change the World: Classroom Activities for Media Literacy Education.

Published by the Center for Media Literacy. Part I introduces and explains the Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions. Part II provides 25 lesson plans—five on each Key Question. First copy free for educational use at www.medialit.org. Site also contains a wealth of resources about media literacy education.

ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

Alliance for a Media Literate America www.aamlainfo.org

National membership organization providing leadership, information exchange and website services for members and media literacy educational leaders in the US. Sponsors National Media Education Conference in June of odd years.

Action Coalition for Media Education www.acmecoalition.org

Organization focusing on activist issues in the media field.

Just Think www.justthink.org

Resources on youth media production and teaching with popular culture.

Project Look Sharp www.projectlooksharp.org

Provides teacher training and develops curriculum resources.

Rethinking Schools www.rethinkingschools.org

A nonprofit, independent publisher of educational materials that focus on social justice teaching.

Teaching Media Literacy www.teachingmedialiteracy.com

A media literacy referral site containing links to hundreds of resources and activities.

Media Literacy Clearinghouse www.frankwbaker.com

This website is a goldmine of links on a broad range of media literacy topics.

HOW-TO-DO-IT PRODUCTION RESOURCES AND PRACTICAL HELP

The Groovy Little Youth Media Sourcebook: Strategies and Techniques from the Listen Up!

Network (2001). A project of Learning Matters, Inc., 6 E. 32nd St., 8th Floor, New York, NY 10016

www.listenup.org

The Director in the Classroom: How Filmmaking Inspires Learning by Nikos Theodosakis

(book + CD-Rom) 2001. ISBN: 1930870116 www.thedirectorintheclassroom.com

Boston YWCA: Youth Voice Collaborative www.ywcaboston.org/programs/yvc

After-school program in media literacy and youth media production.

Lights, Camera... Leadership! www.vermontcommunityworks.org/vrp/vrpnews/LightsCurricGuide.pdf

An innovative high school curriculum to develop leadership through the process of making and premiering a video on local community issues. Provides valuable exercises for motivating students and building teamwork along with guidance on all aspects of production. 80-page PDF (downloadable).

Youth-Powered Video: A Hands-on Curriculum for Teaching Documentary and YO-TV

Production Handbook www.evc.org

Lots of ideas, production tips and group process suggestions by New York youth. Produced by and available from Educational Video Center, New York.

Project-Based Learning with Multimedia <http://pblmm.k12.ca.us>

A rich site developed by San Mateo County Office of Education with excellent resources. Note especially the following:

- **Production Activities** <http://pblmm.k12.ca.us/PBLGuide/Activities/Activities.html#production>
Practical ideas on organizing video projects from storyboarding to public showing.

- **Getting releases** <http://pblmm.k12.ca.us/PBLGuide/Activities/GettingReleases.html>
How to properly obtain permission to use published materials and photographs or recordings of people.
- **The Video Guide** <http://pblmm.k12.ca.us/TechHelp/VideoHelp/VideoGuide.html>
A thorough list of how-to's for educators to guide classes and groups through every step of the video production process.
- **Storyboarding** <http://pblmm.k12.ca.us/TechHelp/Storyboarding.html>
Storyboarding is a basic skill to all production activities.

Youthlearn www.youthlearn.org

Resources and tools developed by Educational Development Center to help educators create learning projects with technology. A bit text-heavy but still a rich site with thorough articles on all aspects of production, especially for after-school groups. Valuable sections include:

- **You Oughta Be in Pictures: An Introduction to Making Videos**
<http://www.youthlearn.org/learning/activities/multimedia/video.asp>
Outlines a 30-minute, weekly program that teaches students to develop concepts and create storyboards, as well as the technical aspects of video production.
- **Teaching Kids How to Make a Presentation: It's About the Story**
<http://www.youthlearn.org/learning/activities/multimedia/presentations.asp>
An overview on how to teach presentation software such as PowerPoint; emphasizes story and concept development through mapping activities and the importance of introducing the software slowly.

Kids' Vid http://kidsvid.altec.org/nav__pages/teaching.html or <http://kidsvid.altec.org>

Kids' Vid is a two-part site (one for teachers; one for kids) providing guidance on video production in project-based learning. The teacher's section gives specific plans to guide students through the entire process from preproduction to distribution.

PowerPoint in the Classroom www.actden.com/pp

A basic introduction to creating slides, adding images and charts, adding sound, etc.

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Jeff Share worked for ten years as a freelance photojournalist documenting situations of poverty and social activism on three continents. He spent six years teaching bilingual primary school in the Los Angeles Unified School District. After spending several years as the Regional Coordinator for Training at the Center for Media Literacy, he earned his Ph.D. in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA. His current research and practice focuses on the teaching of critical media literacy in K-12 education.

Elizabeth Thoman has been a pioneer in media literacy education for almost 30 years. Starting out as a high school English teacher she has gone on to become a leading writer, editor, speaker, teacher, and strategist in the U.S. media literacy movement. In 1977, she founded *Media&Values* magazine and in 1989, she founded the Center for Media Literacy which published some of the first generation of teaching materials for media literacy in U.S. classrooms. A graduate of the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California, she is a founding board member of the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA). In 2006 she was awarded the cable industry's Leaders in Learning Award for innovation and leadership in the field of media literacy education.

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Ann Du is Education Developer at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy where she creates curricular resources, delivers professional development workshops for teachers, and implements school programs around democracy education. She formerly taught Language Arts for the New Media Academy at Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, California, where she specialized in developing interdisciplinary curriculum that integrated language arts, social studies, and media technology. Prior to joining the National Center, she was a member of Teach for America. She holds a M.A. in Secondary Education from Loyola Marymount University, and a dual B.A. in English and American Studies and Ethnicity from the University of Southern California.

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