

# Media Literacy Skills: Interpreting Tragedy

RENEE HOBBS

THE GIRLS ARE working on a project in Mrs. Jacobsen's<sup>1</sup> seventh grade social studies class, and by their intensity, you know that they are under deadline pressure to get this project done soon. Their voices have a touch of urgency as the teacher wanders the room, observing students as they work in teams of two or three. "But this one fits better in the 'victims' category," one student says to the other. "It's got details of the people on board the Russian airplane attack, see?"

"But what about the 'international' category?" responds her partner. "We're putting all those together over here."

These middle school students are sorting and organizing a dozen news shorts, all related to the September 11th terrorist attack, clipped from the index of yesterday's *New York Times*. Their task is to sort the news clips by identifying similar themes among the different stories. Then they must write short headlines to name each category. They organize the clips on paper, cut and paste them into position, and write the headlines. In a few minutes, their teacher will call "time," and students will share their work. There are many different ways to organize media themes, Mrs. Jacobsen explains as she takes note of different patterns evident among students' work. She concludes the lesson by asking which one news story they would be most interested in reading about. Hands shoot into the air. Through the process of reading and organizing, students have thought carefully about information regarding the friends, the foes, the fears, and the future of the September 11th terrorist attacks, and this activity has spurred students' curiosity. They want to learn more.

Mrs. Jacobsen's rationale for this activity stems from her interest in helping students manage the increasing complexity of information. "The magnitude and scope of this event can be overwhelming—this activity lets us create order from the chaos of information by strengthening classification skills," she says. In this activity, students identify connecting themes across various information sources, strengthening their ability to use multiple sources of evidence to understand a contemporary event.

Many of Jacobsen's colleagues have said that they can't do anything with this event, that it's too complex, too emotional, too soon. It's so unlike any other current event in recent history. Each day brings unexpected information about unfolding military, political, and diplomatic events. On top of everything else in their busy lives, it's easy for teachers to feel just as overwhelmed as their students.

But Jacobsen feels an obligation to stretch students' tolerance for complexity with activities such as this one. She says,

Since the attack, it has been easy for students to disconnect from it. Most students don't have an effective knowledge base to aid them in organizing ideas—how can they gain these skills unless teachers and parents help students put them into action?

### Learning through Media Literacy

The military, political, and diplomatic events after the September 11th attack have renewed an interest among many social studies educators to employ classroom discussion and learning activities that strengthen media literacy skills. Defined as "the ability to access,

analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms," media literacy has grown in importance in the past five years. Media literacy emphasizes the skills of critical thinking about media messages—applying a process of inquiry to "ask critical questions about what you watch, see, listen to, and read." The analysis skills that teachers most generally emphasize in K-12 classrooms include

- ▶ identifying a message's author, purpose, and point of view;
- ▶ recognizing how language, sound, and images are used to construct a message and how values and ideology are communicated through the skillful use of symbolic expression;
- ▶ appreciating the economic, social, and political contexts in which media messages are produced and consumed;
- ▶ understanding how individuals interpret a media message on the basis of their unique background and life experiences; and
- ▶ gaining an awareness of the unique characteristics of various symbol systems of communication, including images, language, sound, and electronic technology.<sup>2</sup>

Advocates of media literacy emphasize that it is an expanded conceptualization of literacy that connects literacy across all subject areas. That's why media literacy practitioners include not only the practice of critical reading but also the process of writing media messages, allowing students to create their own media messages using video, cameras, sound technologies, computers, and multimedia.<sup>3</sup>

Many states have embedded media literacy directly into social studies curriculum frameworks. For example, in Texas, social studies skills are defined



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broadly as the ability to apply critical thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of print and non-print sources. Specific objectives for student performance include identifying ways that social scientists analyze limited evidence; locating and using primary and secondary sources, including media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts; analyzing information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions.

Students are also expected to explain and apply different methods that historians use to interpret the past, including the use of primary and secondary sources, points of view, frames of reference, and historical context; use the process of historical inquiry to research, interpret, and use multiple sources of evidence; evaluate the validity of a source on the basis of language, corroboration

with other sources, and information about the author; identify bias in written, oral, and visual material; and support a point of view on a social studies issue or event.<sup>4</sup> Comparing the similarities between social studies skills and media literacy skills shows the important overlap—clearly, media literacy skills are consistent with and support K-12 social studies skills.

Still, in the days following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, most teachers were unprepared to apply these kinds of skills to the rapidly escalating tragedy. Months after the attack, teachers are inventing ways to integrate media literacy concepts to more deeply explore the ongoing aftermath of the September 11th attacks and the international response. The examples below illustrate some ways educators are rising to the challenge of helping students build critical thinking, analysis, and communication skills in social studies classrooms.

### **A Media Literacy Timeline**

Like many teachers, Mr. Alghieri started the timeline activity about a week after the bombings, tacking up a long string around the perimeter of the classroom walls of his fifth grade class. He brought in the front page of the local newspaper for September 11th, securing it to the string with laundry pins that he brought from home. Over the next month, he explained, students could bring in newspaper articles with new information on the terrorist attacks. But this timeline activity included a media literacy twist.

Each day, as Mr. Alghieri and his students brought in clips, they spent a few minutes discussing them. Alghieri established a rule: They could place only one article per day on the timeline, and students voted to select the most important story of the day. The individual who had brought in the story would then pin it on the timeline, writing his or her own name on the laundry pin. The stories not selected were placed in a box,





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because, as Mr. Alghieri explained, as time went on, some of these stories may become more important, depending on what other events happen in the always unknowable future.

The challenge of selecting one story each day led to some meaningful and rich discussions among children. Alghieri enjoyed watching students defend the clips that they brought in. When he helped students recognize that a photo or graphic could qualify for the string timeline, there was a flurry of submissions, as students brought in photos, graphics, or maps that they had clipped from news magazines that struck them as important, inspiring, or informative.

On the last day of the month, Mr. Alghieri surveyed the string timeline, laden with more than two dozen newspaper and news magazine clips, images, and print-outs from the web, and announced to the class that only six clips could stay on the timeline. Which ones should be omitted? “I wanted to give my students the experience of doing what historians do—to make choices about what information is most significant and meaningful,” he explained. “We’ve talked about journalism as the ‘first draft of history.’”

After students made their selections, Mr. Alghieri led a discussion about students’ responses to the winnowing of information. He validated the feelings of frustration and challenge that students

experienced, explaining that, over time, historians would go through an exercise similar to the one that the students conducted. “They might pick different stories than we did,” noted one student, “since they’ll know how things turned out in the future.”

Mr. Alghieri had planned this activity to last just one month, but it is still running in this fifth grade classroom. Why? “Students keep bringing in clips, and there’s a sense among students that we’re constructing something important with our string and clothespins.” The activity has channeled some of the students’ fears and uncertainty about the future into a

more positive outlet. Plus, other students in the school have been in to look at it, notes the teacher. “It’s become a way to document contemporary history in the making in our own school.”

### Using Close Analysis with Critical Questions

One of the most important components of media literacy is its emphasis on asking questions about what you watch, see, and read. Often, when social studies educators use magazine articles, newspaper clips, or video in the classroom, they place exclusive emphasis on the informative content of these messages. Educators often emphasize the diverse and rich opportunities for information available through interactive technology and its potential to bring diverse perspectives into the classroom.<sup>5</sup> Teachers who show a video documentary about Afghanistan, screen a segment from CNN, read an article from *Time* magazine about the search for the terrorists, or display an Internet website about Islam are certainly providing a more lively and interesting classroom environment for their students.

Social studies faculty, however, are sometime accused of using such information materials uncritically; these accusations are based on the assumption that websites, documents, newspaper articles, or video documentaries “offer a relatively unhampered passage



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to experience.”<sup>6</sup> Media education scholar Len Masterman warns, if these sources of information are not subjected to critical scrutiny in the classroom, then “an entirely mystificatory view of the media, and of knowledge, will have been smuggled in under the guise of educational progressivism and relevance.”<sup>7</sup>

The increasing diversity, quantity, and quality of information now available on the Internet has intensified the need to develop classroom activities that build critical analysis skills. Media and technology can enhance students’ active problem solving and analysis skills.<sup>8</sup> Students need repeated opportunities to identify points of view, subtext, bias, and other communication techniques. They need practice exploring a wide variety of messages, asking the question, “What makes this message believable (or not)?” When students learn how credibility and authority are constructed by authors and interpreted by readers, they gain increasing control over their interpretations of messages. Widespread internalization of such critical thinking skills promises to have a profound influence on the long-term practice of democracy.<sup>9</sup> But in the short-term, media literacy activities may also enhance the quality of teacher-student communication, which is a key dimension for measuring the quality of learning.<sup>10</sup>

For example, ever since she returned from the National Media Education Conference,<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Chan has been using some critical media literacy questions with her eleventh grade world history students every Friday, when she brings in an audio or video clip she’s taped off-air from public radio, CNN, or the national network news. Of course, the terrorist attack and its impact around the world provide a powerful connection to Chan’s focus on world history. Friday has become “media literacy day” since the terrorist attack, because Chan is concerned that adults are not actively helping students analyze the barrage of media messages about this tragic and complex event. “For the rest of their lives, students will be receiving most of their information from television news,” notes Chan, “so becoming a critical consumer of TV news is an essential life skill.”

Before attending the conference, Mrs. Chan used video and print media in the classroom, but she couldn’t anticipate how the quality of classroom discourse would improve when she focused on just one or two media artifacts and used the whole class period to analyze them in depth. For example, Mrs. Chan started class by showing a ninety-second ABC news segment about Afghan refugees and the serious drought there, and she asked students first about their feelings after viewing it. She listed on the blackboard the “feeling” words that students used, including pity, superiority, sadness, regret, and helplessness. Chan knows that it is important to begin the process of analysis by identifying students’ emotional responses to media. Video images can stir people’s feelings in complicated and personal ways. She emphasized to students that individuals respond differently to media messages—we don’t all have the same experience when we watch the same documentary, for example. After acknowledging the power of images to effect an emotional response, Chan asked students to consider how the news segment was constructed to achieve this effect by analyzing the artifact using five critical questions.

1. Who created this message and what was the purpose?

This question helps explore the concepts of authorship, point of view, and the corporate nature of contemporary mass media. Chan explained, “Many students just say ‘they’ made it—they aren’t aware of the roles of camera crew, sound technicians, researchers, scriptwriters, video editors, correspondents, producers.” Students discussed how newspapers and TV networks make money during times of crisis, when people’s need for information is great. “They recognized the intertwined nature of informing and entertaining when it comes to TV news,” said Chan. When students identify the “authorship” of media messages, they realize that messages are not neutral—all media messages have a point of view.

2. What techniques are used to attract and hold your attention?

Mrs. Chan likes to have students view

video clips twice or three times as they list specific attention-getting techniques. This question helps students appreciate the constructed nature of media artifacts. For this particular video segment, students listed the following: mountainous location shots; graphics, maps, and charts; specific facts about the problems with well-drilling; the use of sound; aerial photography; interviews with local people; small, sad-looking children; pictures of dead animals; and close-ups of depraved living conditions. By strengthening students’ close observational skills, this activity helps them develop a more precise vocabulary for describing the structural “grammar” of audio-visual messages. Sometimes called “deep viewing,” this approach helps students build connections among texts, recognize their own and others’ points of view, and explore present social realities.<sup>12</sup>

3. What values and points of view are represented?

At this level, students synthesize, extend, evaluate, and apply interpretations generated from the earlier questions. Mrs. Chan asked students to view the short news package again and discussion emphasized identification of various points of view. Students recognized some patterns that suggested the theme, “experts are solving this problem,” evident in the selection of the on-camera interviews with water engineers, emergency relief coordinators, Pakistani charity leaders, and U.S. State Department authorities.

Students also recognized how specific visual images in the broadcast communicated an “individual initiative” theme. For example, a shot featuring an Afghan father pushing a wheelbarrow filled with water jugs toward his village, with his small son perched atop the barrels, suggested a point of view that Afghans are coping with the water shortage themselves. This is a very different choice than that of an image (not shown) of an exhausted mother and her small baby languishing outside a small house, which would have suggested the inadequacy of solutions for managing the drought. When Douglas Kellner writes that the “material of media culture is so

polymorphous, multivalent, and polysemic that it requires sensitivity to different readings, interpretations, and perceptions of the media's complex images, scenes, narratives, meanings, and messages," he acknowledges the contribution that media literacy can make to better historical understanding and sociopolitical sensitivity.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. How may different individuals interpret this message?

Mrs. Chan says that this question challenges her students. It requires imagination to consider how others may respond differently to a particular media message. To prompt students, Mrs. Chan modeled some responses, role-playing the part of, for example, an Afghan American who has family still in Kabul or a well-drilling specialist from the United States. As students grasped the concept, they referred to their own unique perspectives on the attacks, including young people whose parents are in the military or who are of Middle Eastern descent. For educators teaching in diverse classrooms, this approach recognizes and honors a multiplicity of interpretations of media messages. As Kathleen Tyler has noted, media literacy can turn "the 'problem' of classroom diversity into an opportunity for growth that authentically honors students' individual cultures and prepares them for a society that will demand that they can navigate both the diversity and the commonalities of American society with a high degree of sophistication."<sup>14</sup>

#### 5. What is omitted from this message?

This question provides a different opportunity to reflect on the constructed nature of media messages and the patterns of representation that communicate values and ideology.<sup>15</sup> According to Mrs. Chan, when students first started to brainstorm what was missing from the ninety-second news story, they couldn't identify anything. But after a long pause, when one student finally commented that this news segment did not include an Afghan government official responding to the situation, students generated a flood of ideas. Suddenly, they could see a range of perspectives

that were omitted from the broadcast. Others chimed in by sharing unanswered questions that lingered in their minds after viewing. Some students noted that there was no information about whether wealthier Afghans could purchase water as a commodity, how deep the wells must be drilled to reach water, how many people would be forced to flee to Pakistan if the drought continues, and how many people live in Quetta, the drought-stricken city mentioned in the story.

"It's not easy for students to detect omissions," explained Mrs. Chan. "This activity always generates some rich discussion about the point of view that we receive from mainstream American news media." Learning to identify the complex structuring of meanings and points of view in an informational text is a skill that students (and teachers) need to practice.

#### **Making Media Messages**

There's no telling how many young people responded the way that fifteen-year-old Andrew did to the crisis of the terrorist attack. After school, in the days following the terrorist attack, Andrew created a four-minute music video using video editing software on his iMac. He taped eight hours of news coverage in the days following the attack, then found suitable music and edited the most compelling images together to capture his own sense of shock and outrage at the tragic destruction of the World Trade Center. Then he posted the four-minute video on the Internet, with the help of his dad, a computer professional. He shared the web address with his friends at school so they could view his creative expression.

"I made it to share my feelings about the whole experience," said Andrew. But people have reacted to his video in unexpected ways. "Some people who have seen it have cried, while others think I was trying to incite a war or something." In recent days, he has become much more aware of the challenges of creating a video that communicates clearly the author's intentions. He now even wonders whether it is ever possible to accomplish such a goal.

In many school districts, social studies teachers have designed experiences for students to demonstrate their learning through writing, publishing, and media production activities.<sup>16</sup> In one school district, students wrote letters to the editor of a newspaper or journal in response to a particular news story or editorial; created mock radio or video interviews in *Larry King Live* style, where students role-played historical characters or contemporary political leaders from around the world; produced multimedia slide shows with images and voice-overs to summarize their learning of a particular topic in geography, civics, or U.S. history; and wrote short film treatments to create a fictional story based on a specific historical event.<sup>17</sup>

It's not difficult to imagine the instructional value and levels of student engagement in activities that emerge in learning about history, economics, or geography through creating a TV talk show, an advertisement, a pamphlet, a diary entry, a video news release, a letter to the editor, a radio interview, a series of photographs, a collage, a book cover for an imaginary new nonfiction book, a website, or a video documentary. Imagine students' enthusiasm in creating some of these media messages to explore the history of terrorism, Islam, U.S. intelligence-gathering operations, the al-Qaeda organization, Palestinian resistance, the Iranian revolution, the political economics of Saudi Arabia, the cultural and political symbolism of the Pentagon or the World Trade Center, government support of the airline industry, or any of a number of topics connected to the September 11th attacks and U.S. counterattacks.

For teachers to provide such learning experiences requires us to let go of our fears about controlling classroom discourse. When students have the opportunity to communicate, they may say things that make adults feel uncomfortable. Having students write letters to the editor, develop presentations, use video cameras to create public service announcements, or design websites can increase the likelihood that students will "talk fast, loudly, and often."<sup>18</sup> In the



“watch what you say” climate that has been building in the months following the September 11th attacks, it takes courage for teachers to create learning environments that give students opportunities to communicate genuinely. It’s the kind of courage that comes from feeling responsible for helping students develop the skills to be citizens in an information age. 📖

**Notes**

1. The names of teachers and students in this article have been changed.
2. Kathleen Tyner, *Literacy in a Digital World* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998).
3. Cornelia Brunner and William Tally, *The New Media Literacy Handbook* (New York: Anchor, 1999).
4. Texas Education Agency, *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies, High School*. Available at [www.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113c.html#113.31](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113c.html#113.31).
5. Peter Martorella, ed., *Interactive Technologies and the Social Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

6. Len Masterman, *Teaching the Media* (London: Comedia, 1985).
7. *Ibid.*, 65.
8. Jeremy Roschelle, Roy Pea, Christopher Hoadley, Douglas Gordin, and Barbara Means, “Changing How and What Children Learn in School with Computer-Based Technologies,” in *The Future of Children* 10, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000): 76-101.
9. Renee Hobbs, “Building Citizenship Skills through Media Literacy Education,” in *The Public Voice in a Democracy at Risk*, eds. Michael Salvador and Patricia M. Sias (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998).
10. Arthur N. Applebee, *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Gregory Michie, *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and his Students* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).
11. The Alliance for a Media Literate America is a national non-profit membership organization that hosts a biannual conference for educators interested in improving the practice of media literacy education. Information about becoming a member is available online at [www.amlainfo.org](http://www.amlainfo.org).
12. Ann Watts Pailliotet, “Deep Viewing: Intermediality in Preservice Teacher Education,”

in *Intermediality: The Teachers’ Handbook of Critical Media Literacy*, eds. Ladislaus Semali and Ann Watts Pailliotet (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1999).

13. Douglas Kellner, “Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogy in a Multicultural Society,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 1 (1998): 103-122.
14. Tyner, 170.
15. Cary Bazalgette, “Key Aspects of Media Education,” in *Media Education: An Introduction*, eds. Manuel Alvarado and Oliver Boyd-Barrett (London: British Film Institute, 1992).
16. Richard T. Vacca and Jo Anne L. Vacca, *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum*, sixth edition (New York: Longman, 1999).
17. Renee Hobbs, “Media Literacy in Massachusetts,” in *Teaching the Media*, ed. Andrew Hart (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998).
18. Michie, 174.

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