Defining Media Literacy

In a media-saturated society, the definition of literacy, which traditionally focused on reading and writing text, must be expanded to include the full range of media (Daley, 2003). Media literacy is a "fundamental competency for literate citizens" (National Communication Association [NCA], 1998), which empowers citizens to actively engage with media messages and fully participate in media culture (Jenkins, 2003).

A word about the use of "media": For the purposes of this document, media has two distinct meanings that are referred to by two different terms. "Mass media," "the media," and "media organizations" refer to commercial media outlets such newspapers, television stations, radio stations, and web providers that produce media messages in a variety of formats. "Communications media" refers to medium of these messages—"variety of fomats"—and may include print, visual, audio, video, and multimedia, which refers to a combination of these formats. Historically, media messages have been created by the mass media, but they are increasingly being produced by individuals as access to communications media is becoming increasingly available and at a reasonable cost.

The Definition

Media literacy is the ability to access, enjoy, interpret, analyze, produce, and evaluate messages in all varieties and combinations of print, visual, and digital formats. Media literate individuals can use communications media to solve problems. They have a critical, informed understanding of the way that both individuals and organizations construct media messages. In addition, they recognize the role of the audience in both processing those messages and creating meaning from them. They are aware of the political, social, cultural, economic, and educational role of the mass media in society including knowledge of how media organizations operate. Through these understandings, media literate individuals are able to assess their own relationship to the media, and assign value, worth and meaning to media use and media messages (NCA, 1998).

This definition implies certain standards and skills that should be incorporated into regular classroom instruction.

Access: Media literate students are able to locate and use information from a variety of sources for a variety of purposes.
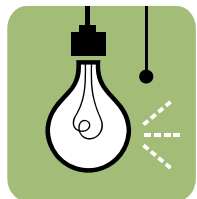
Media literate students
    A. Identify the characteristics and components of mass media organizations and explain how those organizations operate (ie, newspapers, radio stations, television stations, websites)
    B. Know various types of communications media and their main formats and characteristics (ie, print, visual, audio, video, multimedia)
    C. Recognize that different communication media have different purposes and that different types of communications media affect coverage of events and issues
    D. Determine appropriateness of sources for particular purposes

Enjoy: Media literate students understand that individuals have different relationships with the media.

Media literate students
    A. Explain how people use communications media and mass media in their personal and public lives
    B. Identify personal media practices related to both communications media and mass media
    C. Explain personal media preferences related to both communications media and mass media
    D. Identify those elements of different types of media which appeal to them

Interpret: Media literate students construct personal meaning from media experiences.

Media literate students
    A. Use strategies appropriate to different communications media to comprehend a variety of media products
    B. Recognize that media messages are open to multiple interpretations and explain how audience members interpret meanings
    C. Identify techniques used by the mass media to influence or appeal to a particular audience
    D. Explain the complex relationship among the audience, the communications media and the media-maker

Analyze: Media literate students understand the historical and contemporary ways in which the media constructs messages that influence people's personal and public lives.

Media literate students
  A. Identify ways in which media-makers use symbols, images, sounds and conventions to construct messages for a variety of purposes
  B. Identify the political, social, cultural, economic, aesthetic, and educational purposes of media messages
  C. Consider the political, social, cultural, economic, aesthetic, and educational influences on the construction of media messages
  D. Explain how communication of ideas is related to the media, techniques, and processes used to construct messages
  E. Explain the role of the mass media in society

Evaluate: Media literate students use a variety of criteria to evaluate media messages and productions created by both themselves and others.

Media literate students
  A. Apply content criteria (effectiveness, validity, reliability and accuracy, clarity, sincerity, credibility and bias) to media messages.
  B. Apply aesthetic criteria (appropriateness of media selection, use of color, form and line, effective integration of images and text, and use of conventions) to media productions.

Produce: Media literate students use a variety of media and formats for different purposes in communicating information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences.

Media literate students
  A. Select appropriate media for audience and purpose
  B. Use processes and techniques appropriate to selected media and format to create effective products

C. Incorporate multimedia into informal and formal presentations
D. Use hardware and software efficiently and effectively in media production

References

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National Communication Association. (1998). K-12 speaking, listening, and media literacy standards and competency statements. Washington, D.C.: National Communication Association. Retrieved October 25, 2006, from http://www.natcom.org/NCA/admin/index.asp?downloadid=119.