Literacy for the 21st Century

“We must prepare young people for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds.”

UNESCO, 1982

Since the beginning of recorded history, the concept of “literacy” meant having the skill to interpret “squiggles” on a piece of paper as letters which, when put together, formed words that conveyed meaning. Teaching the young to put the words together to understand (and, in turn, express) ever more complex ideas became the goal of education as it evolved over the centuries.

Today information about the world around us comes to us not only by words on a piece of paper but more and more through the powerful images and sounds of our multi-media culture. Although mediated messages appear to be self-evident, in truth, they use a complex audio/visual “language” which has its own rules (grammar) and which can be used to express many-layered concepts and ideas about the world. Not everything may be obvious at first; and images go by so fast! If our children are to be able to navigate their lives through this multi-media culture, they need to be fluent in “reading” and “writing” the language of images and sounds just as we have always taught them to “read” and “write” the language of printed communications.

In the last 40 years, the field of media literacy education has emerged to organize and promote the importance of teaching this expanded notion of “literacy.” At its core are the basic higher-order critical thinking skills – e.g. knowing how to identify key concepts, how to make connections between multiple ideas, how to ask pertinent questions, formulate a response, identify fallacies – that form the very foundation of both intellectual freedom and the exercising of full citizenship in a democratic society.

Indeed in a time when candidates are elected by 30 second commercials and wars are fought real-time on television, a unique role of media literacy is to prepare citizens to engage in and contribute to the public debate.

It also expands the concept of “text” to include not just written texts but any message form -- verbal, aural or visual -- (or all three together!) – that is used to create and then pass ideas back and forth between human beings.

New ways of learning
This explosion in information has presented a major challenge to the world of formal education. For centuries, schooling has been designed to make sure students learned facts about the world – which they proved they knew by correctly answering questions on tests. But such a system is no longer relevant when the most up-to-date facts are available at the touch of a
button. What students need today is to learn how to find what they need to know when they
need to know it – and to have the higher order thinking skills to analyze and evaluate whether
the information they find is useful for what they want to know.

How will schools do this? First, schools and classrooms must be transformed from being
storehouses of knowledge to being more like portable tents providing a shelter and a gathering
place for students as they go out to explore, to question, to experiment, to discover!

Secondly, to use a phrase from the great Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire, teaching must be
distinguished from “banking.” No longer is it necessary for teachers to deposit information in
students’ heads. Retaking the principles of democratic pedagogy dating back to Socrates, wise
teachers realize they do not have to be a “sage on the stage.” Instead their role is to be a “guide
on the side:” encouraging . . . guiding . . . mentoring . . . supporting the learning process.
Creative classrooms today are ones where everyone is learning, including the teacher!

Thirdly, curriculum, classes and activities must be designed that will engage students in problem
solving and discovery. And today’s multi-media culture, which includes print but is not limited to
it, provides a nearly limitless resource for real world learning -- from how to identify “point of
view” by exploring how camera angles influence our perception of the subject being
photographed to how to determine whether information on an Internet site is bogus or
legitimate.

The transformation of our culture from an Industrial Age to an Information Age is why a new kind
of literacy, coupled with a new way of learning, is critical in the 21st century. This new kind of
literacy is outlined in the CML MediaLit Kit™ / A Framework for Learning and Teaching in a
Media Age.

"Most of what we have called formal education
has been intended to imprint on the human mind
all of the information
that we might need for a lifetime.
Education is geared toward information storage.
Today that is neither possible nor necessary.
Rather, humankind needs to be taught
how to process information
that is stored through technology.
Education needs to be geared toward the handling of data
rather than the accumulation of data."

David Berlo
Communication and Behavior
1975