Questioning the Media

“At the heart of media literacy is the principle of inquiry.”
Elizabeth Thoman, CML Founder

To be a functioning adult in a mediated society, one needs to be able to distinguish between different media forms and know how to ask basic questions about everything we watch, read or hear. Although most adults learned through literature classes to distinguish a poem from an essay, it’s amazing how many people do not understand the difference between a daily newspaper and a supermarket tabloid, what makes one website legitimate and another one a hoax, or how advertisers package products to entice us to buy.

Simple questions about the media can start even at the toddler stage, planting important seeds for cultivating a lifetime of interrogating the world around us. Parents, grandparents, even babysitters can make a game of “spot the commercial” to help children learn to distinguish between entertainment programs and the commercial messages that support them. Even children’s picture books can help little ones grasp the storytelling power of images – “And what do you think will happen next?”

As children grow and are able to distinguish the world of fantasy from the real world they live in, they can explore how media are put together by turning the sound off during a cartoon and noting the difference it makes, or even create their own superhero story using a home video camera and easy to use editing software on the family computer. When students begin to use the internet to research school projects, they can compare different websites and contrast different versions of the same information in order to detect bias or political “spin.”

Usually the questioning process is applied to a specific media “text” — that is, an identifiable production or publication, or a part of one: an episode of Power Puff Girls, an ad for Pepsi, an issue of People magazine, a billboard for Budweiser beer, photos and articles about a bank robbery on the front page of a newspaper, the SuperBowl telecast, a hot new videogame.

Sometimes a media “text” can involve multiple formats. A new animated Disney film, for example, involves not only a blockbuster movie released in thousands of theatres but also a whole campaign of advertising and merchandising — character dolls and toys, clothes, lunchboxes, etc. — as well as a website, storybooks, games and perhaps eventually, a ride at one of the Disney theme parks.

Uncovering the many levels of meaning in a media message and the multiple answers to even basic questions is what makes media education so engaging for kids and so enlightening for adults.
Essential Questions for Teachers

1. Am I trying to tell the students what the message is? Or am I giving students the skills to determine what they think the message(s) might be?

2. Have I let students know that I am open to accepting their interpretation, as long as it is well substantiated, or have I conveyed the message that my interpretation is the only correct view?

3. At the end of the lesson, are students likely to be more analytical? Or more cynical?

--with thanks to Faith Rogow, PhD

“From the clock radio
that wakes us up in the morning
until we fall asleep watching the late night talk show,
we are exposed to hundreds
-- even thousands --
of images and ideas
not only from television
but now also from newspaper headlines, magazine covers,
movies, websites, video games and billboards.
Media no longer just shape our culture. . .
they ARE our culture.”

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