



Beyond Books: Media Literacy by Don Jones



Don Jones

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There are numerous sources to tell us the extent to which students interact with mass media and technology, using it as their main source of information about the world...much more than books (see References page 3). Educators are challenged to find a place for these more contemporary forms of communication in schools, to help our students with literacy in their lives. The question becomes, how do educators deal with media literacy? Typically, the literature divides the skills of media literacy into three areas:

- critically understanding media (viewing);
- understanding how forms and techniques used in media impact messages;
- creating media texts (representing).

Core Concepts and Key Questions of Media Literacy

There are useful concepts to help frame instruction. Adapted from Ontario's Association for Media Literacy, these interrelated concepts provide a useful framework for teaching media literacy.

1. All media are constructions.

Likely the most important concept in media literacy education is that the media *re-present* reality for specific purposes. They are finely crafted constructions that often appear to be reality. Because they are so familiar to our students, they seem to be a natural extension of reality. The challenge for educators is to help children to understand how different media represent reality, to understand the techniques used in media texts, and to apply those techniques with increasing agility and effectiveness in communicating through the construction of media messages. How is this message constructed? How well does it represent reality?

2. The media contain beliefs and value messages.

The mass media help to legitimize and reinforce certain values and beliefs. We are so immersed in the beliefs and values of familiar media that it is sometimes hard to see how deeply embedded they are. Consumerism and affluence are common values favourably presented in media. Representations of gender, age, lifestyles, body image, culture, and violence are often portrayed with a degree of bias. There is often considerable peer pressure to identify with particular media products that partially define personal and social identity. The challenge for educators is to help students to uncover these beliefs and values, looking for alternative perspectives and points of view, and to compare the

messages to their own experience and knowledge. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from this message?

3. Each person interprets messages differently.

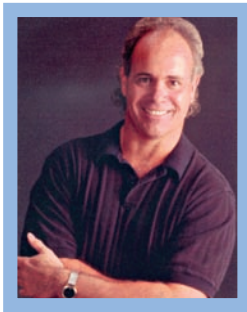
Everyone brings unique background knowledge and experience to interpreting a media text. The content is not static. The challenge for educators is to help students learn to “negotiate” their own meaning, but also to develop sensitivity to the ways others may interpret messages. This helps students to think broadly about media messages, suggesting alternative interpretations and points of view that may or may not be overtly represented in the media. How might others understand this message differently?

4. The media often have special interests (commercial, ideological, political).

Most media products are advertising in some sense – for products and also for ideology. They are often highly charged with persuasion. Most mass media is paid for by getting something back from consumers. Commercial television is a vehicle for an audience to watch the ads and hopefully buy the products advertised. Websites and other current information sources are often funded by ads or sponsored by groups with



Considering Instructional Trajectory



Frank Serafini

By way of introduction, I am Dr. Frank Serafini, an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education and Children's Literature at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). I spent nine years teaching intermediate students (Grades 4-6), and three years as a Literacy Specialist in Arizona, before moving to UNLV four years ago. Along with teaching courses in Children's Literature and Literacy Education at UNLV, I have been working with Heinemann in the United States to create a series of professional development resources, and conducting workshops on Literacy Education, in particular, workshop approaches to reading and writing, for the past five years. I am currently working with Pearson

Education Canada as an advisor for elementary language arts, including conducting presentations and workshops across the country. Another way of sharing ideas with teachers is through Pearson's *In the Loop* literacy newsletter, in which I speak frankly, pun intended, about research and issues dealing with literacy education, especially reading workshops and reading comprehension.

[Frank's newest book *Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days* is now published and available.]

Numerous educational publications of late, including my last two books, have described in arduous detail the characteristics or components of effective reading comprehension lessons. These descriptions have featured lists of resources, including children's literature and other texts, lesson plans, instructional approaches, and even suggestions for assessment techniques to ensure students are understanding what they are reading. However, one aspect of these comprehension lessons seems to have gone unnoticed: what these lessons should do for novice readers in the future, after the lesson is over. As classroom teachers and literacy educators, we need to consider the residual effects or the consequences of our reading comprehension lessons. It is this residual effect that I am calling "Instructional Trajectory."

Instructional Trajectory is a concept that looks at the effects of a lesson to consider what range, depth and support these lessons provide. Let me explain in more detail what I mean by Instructional Trajectory, and then I will provide some brief examples for further clarification.

Instructional Trajectory is a consideration of the lasting effects a lesson may have, and the types of supports the lesson may offer.

Instructional Trajectory has several components. First, the range of a comprehension lesson considers in how many future contexts individual lessons will support readers. Effective lessons in comprehension should work in a variety of contexts, enabling novice readers to comprehend a variety of texts, for a variety of purposes. I don't mean to imply that these lessons are "universal strategies" that readers simply apply every time they encounter a text. What I mean is that the focus of our lesson should be its future uses with texts yet to be encountered, not only those texts being read at one particular moment. For example, the lesson I have entitled "Approaching a Text" has an extensive range because it can be used with virtually any text a reader selects, for a variety of purposes. A lesson that focuses on how to read a single Haiku poem may be effective, but it certainly has a limited range for most readers.

Second, lessons should be examined for their relevance. By this I mean lessons should prepare novice readers to use strategies that will help them in reading events they will encounter in the world, not just in school. Some lessons seem to prepare readers solely for school-based literacy events, not those that occur in the world outside school. Learning how to construct a mobile based on a book

character may help students garner approval in some classrooms, but I strongly doubt it will help them effectively perform in any literate events once outside the school grounds. Our lessons have to be relevant to the literacies of our lives.

Lessons should also be examined for their ability to help students generate interpretations before, during, and after reading, or what I would call the lesson's Interpretive Focus. In other words, this might be considered the depth of a particular lesson. The goal of comprehension lessons should be comprehending texts. This may sound redundant, but I have seen some lessons that stop short of the goal of comprehending. We need to keep our "eye on the prize," so to speak. In this case, the prize is making sense of what we read. An example I have used in some recent workshops speaks about a classroom where the focus of the lessons was on learning how to predict. Although I would agree that prediction may help in comprehending some texts, in some particular contexts, the goal is not to get good at predicting. The goal is to get good at using predicting to make sense of texts. Our lessons need to keep the focus on generating interpretations, not the isolated use of the strategy itself.

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commercial, political, ideological, social, or even personal agendas. The media have a convincing and repetitive voice. The challenge for educators is to help students sort fact from fiction, to seek alternative sources and voices for information, and to think critically about who profits from the messages they experience. Who created this and why? Who benefits if the message is accepted? Who may be disadvantaged?

5. Each medium has its own language, style, form, techniques, conventions, and aesthetics.

Media are pleasurable. Enjoyment of media can be enhanced by an awareness of how pleasing form and effects are created...appreciating technical artistry. Students become more aware of techniques when they have tried to use

them. They also seek out fresh techniques when they are engaged in the creation of a message through creative media. The challenge for educators is to help students to understand how techniques are used to communicate effectively, while providing outlets for students to experiment with creating media products using some of these techniques. Most creations can be kept at the design, draft, or mock-up stage without the need for the painstaking skill, technology, and time required to complete a finished product. It is hard to compete with the highly polished media they typically view. What techniques are used and why?

Teaching With and About Media

Using media in the classroom is relevant and engaging for students. It helps students

to explore and understand contemporary topics and issues portrayed in the media... This is teaching *with* media. Teachers can also take advantage of those moments by using the core concepts and key questions to help students understand how and why those messages are conveyed... This is teaching *about* media. Both are critical for our students' literate lives. ■

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Another example is the creation of classroom charts or artifacts during some comprehension lessons. In many, if not all of the lessons that I have written about describing effective teaching, I have included the creation of charts to support the focus of the lessons being taught. These charts serve as an “audit trail” of where the lessons have been and allow teachers to build upon these foundations in subsequent lessons. But the goal is not to create beautiful charts. The goal is to use charts to extend thinking and discussion. These charts are just a thinking device used “in service of meaning,” not the primary focus of the lesson.

The fourth, and certainly the most important component of Instructional Trajectory, is whether our lessons help change and improve the way teachers and students think, talk about, and respond to what they are reading. This is called Sustainability. A lesson should not just be about what happens that day, but

the changes it affects in the students' future readings and thinking. Quality lessons should have a sense of “teaching forward.” In other words, the effectiveness of the lesson is measured in what happens after the lesson, not during it.

The primary goal of the Reading Workshop instructional framework that I have been developing over the past decade is to help novice readers and teachers see texts in new ways, talk about texts in more meaningful ways, and comprehend what they read from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Although this is not easy to define, assess or predict, it is the primary consequence for our lessons and should be used to judge the quality of the lessons we provide.

At this point, you might be asking, “Where does one find evidence that any of these things are occurring?” I believe that we may find evidence of the residual effects of our lessons in the writing our students do in their reader response logs, the discussions of texts we have in whole class settings and literature study groups,

the strategies our readers employ when reading independently, and the growth we observe during our comprehension strategy groups. Our lessons should help students manage the challenges they encounter as the texts they read become more complex, and the knowledge base required to understand becomes more substantial.

It is not enough to say that one has taught a certain strategy. It is more important to consider whether that strategy is effective in developing the types of readers we want to support, and whether there is evidence that our lessons are being taken up by the readers in our classes. Our lessons should be coherent demonstrations of the types of literate behaviours we want our students to develop in their reading lives. Quality lessons should include and address the four aspects of Instructional Trajectory described above, namely Range, Relevance, Interpretive Focus, and Sustainability. These are the essential components of Instructional Trajectory. ■



When students are viewing a media text, it is often helpful for them to begin by understanding that different audiences make meaning in different ways. Students can employ reading comprehension strategies to explore literal and inferred meaning from various points of view. They take on the role of “code breaker” to determine how the meaning is conveyed through the codes and conventions of the media and how the form affects the message.

**Try these Media Literacy activities with your students
Complimentary from Pearson Education
Download at: www.pearsoned.ca/languagearts/intheloop**

GLM 35: Analyzing a Media Text

Name: _____ Date: _____

- Who made this? _____
- What does the producer want you to think, learn, or do? Explain how you know.

- What kinds of feelings does the producer want you to have while you watch? How can you tell?

- Why should or shouldn't you believe or trust this producer?

- Tell about two features or techniques the producer used to add interest or impact to the message.
a) _____
b) _____

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LM 8: Media Alert! Analyzing Superheroes

Name: _____ Date: _____

In the first column of the chart, list all the superheroes you know.

Put check marks in the boxes to show which superheroes

- are in movies, in comics, or on TV (some superheroes might be in all three places)
- are male or female
- appeal to different age groups (some might be for more than one age group)

If your list of superheroes is too long for the chart, you can use another piece of paper.

Name of superhero	Where do you find this superhero?			Male (M) or female (F)?		Age group the movie, comic, or TV show appeals to		
	Movie	Comic book	TV show	M	F	5-7 yrs old	8-12 yrs old	13 yrs or older

Write two conclusions you can make from the check marks in the chart.

What other categories could you add to your superhero chart? How could these categories help you to understand who is called a superhero and who is not?

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LM 9: Forming and Supporting an Opinion

Name: _____ Date: _____

Issue: Should the media have to tell us when they use a photo that is not real?

1. Work with a partner or a small group. Write your reasons to the question above in the boxes. Try to fill in some ideas on **both** sides before you make your final decision.

Reasons to say YES	Reasons to say NO

2. Work together to agree on an opinion. Write your final decision and reasons below.

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