

What's Relevant for YouTubers?

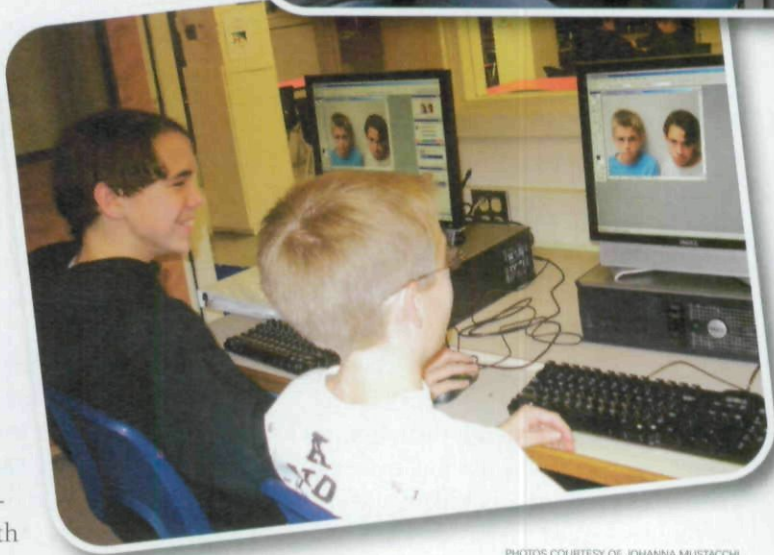
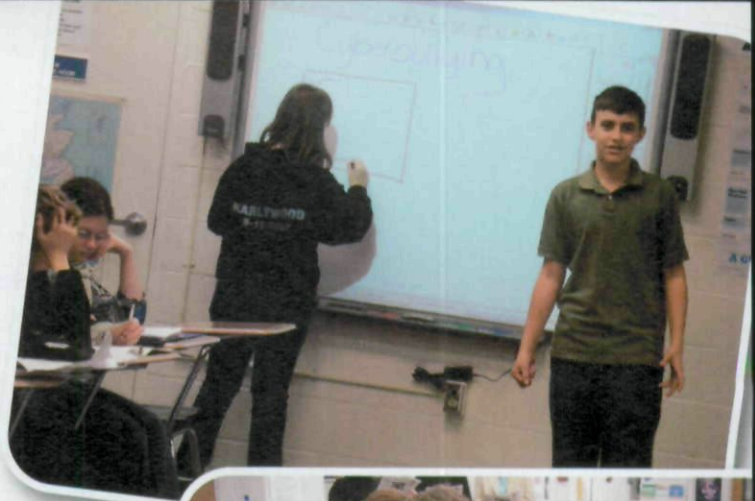
The media doesn't have to be a distraction. It can be a tool for learning that students will carry with them throughout their media-saturated lives.

Johanna Mustacchi

If you're going to connect with today's media-savvy students, you'd better know about their friend Tom and about OK Go's treadmill dance. And although you may not understand or approve of Fergie's lyrics, you should at least acknowledge the power of "Fergalicious."¹ I realized this recently when I delicately trod the path from elementary school to middle school. I had gathered numerous useful pointers during my middle school extension certification courses, but the golden nugget of those lessons was that an intimate familiarity with Disney's *High School Musical* was crucial if I planned to relate to my new charges. Recognizing the power and influence of the media on my students, I decided to develop a curriculum that would help them become informed consumers of mass media.

The Case for Media Literacy

Students today are immersed in mass media, particularly television and the Internet. According to a study by the Kaiser



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHANNA MUSTACCHI

From top: Eighth graders deliver a presentation on Internet safety. Sixth graders admire their work at a newspaper publishing party. Sixth graders manipulate digital photographs in PhotoShop.

Family Foundation (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005),

- The average U.S. 7th grader watches three hours of television each day.

- 30 percent of young people say they either talk on the phone, instant message, watch TV, listen to music, or surf the Web for fun "most of the time" while they are doing homework.

■ 75 percent of children willingly share personal information over the Internet.

■ Children view an average of 40,000 TV ads each year.

■ 70 percent of the 20 most-watched shows among teens include sexual content.

■ 63 percent of U.S. families keep the TV on while eating dinner.

Given the time they devote to television and the Internet, students are clearly interested in what these media have to offer. Teachers who are not up-to-date with these media may seem hopelessly out of touch.

Teachers can make use of students' interest in the media while helping them become more intelligent viewers and users. In this age of ubiquitous electronic communication, a report from the McArthur foundation notes that students

must acquire a basic understanding of the ways media representations structure our perceptions of the world; the economic and cultural contexts within which mass media is produced and circulated; the motives and goals that shape the media they consume; and alternative practices that operate outside the commercial mainstream. (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotoma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006)

Students need to develop a critical eye, and schools need to teach them how to become literate in the multimedia experiences that routinely bombard and sometimes exploit them.

The middle school years may be the most fitting time to tackle this subject because these are the years of identity development, when students begin looking away from hearth and home to the outside. And today's middle schoolers are influenced not only by voices in the school yard, downtown, or at the mall, but also by those coming from much farther afield. Students today are able to access information from around the entire globe more

freely than students of any previous generation. Through what lens are today's students gaining their new worldview? The mass media, of course.

The Origins of a New Curriculum

The village of Croton-on-Hudson is located in Westchester County, 32 miles north of New York City. The Croton-Harmon Union Free School District currently enrolls 1,745 students in its three school buildings: K-4, 5-8, and

9-12. In May 2006, I pitched my idea for a media literacy curriculum for the district's middle school students to Marjorie Castro, the superintendent of schools.

Learning how to rate the veracity and worth of online information is a key point of instruction.

"We'll come at the media from two perspectives," I explained, unable to control my enthusiasm as my arms spread to show the two angles. "We'll look at media from a critical analysis point of view, as well as from the production side."

Dr. Castro responded by giving me her full support to produce a new required "special" for the middle school to begin in fall 2006. Each year, all 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students would take a media literacy class for 13 weeks, one-third of the school year. I spent the summer writing the three-year curriculum and preparing my classroom space, which consisted of a large classroom, a medium-sized computer room, and a small television studio.

An Enlightening Experience
To begin the media literacy course, I decided to open students' eyes to the power of the media and the importance of a critical study of all mass communi-

cations. I used this activity with all students in the first year of the program and repeated it with 6th graders in subsequent years. During the first week of the course, students arrived in my classroom to find sponges and colored markers strewn all over the tables. I told them to draw themselves on a sponge. Next, I produced three large plastic cups with faces drawn on them. They were filled with water. I explained that the people

on the cups were the media moguls who orchestrate and control the mass media, and the water represented the media they produce.

I then placed a large plastic basin on the center of the table. All the students were gathered around, holding their sponges. I poured the water from each "media mogul" cup into the basin, reminding students that the water represented all the media to which we are exposed.

"Do you know what these media moguls think of you guys?" I asked them. Most students seemed unaware of what I was getting at. But then, one student grinned knowingly and slowly held up his sponge. I took the sponge and dropped it into the basin of water. It soaked the water up immediately.

"We're sponges! We're sponges!" the students all started to shriek, throwing their sponges into the basin. When the delirium began to fade, I asked them to reflect on their new revelation—that the media is controlled by only a handful of people who have the power to entertain, inform, and manipulate. As their faces began to brighten with understanding, I heard a calm, collec-

tive sigh of realization. They were ready to begin.

Sixth Grade: The Power of Print

Each class of 6th graders begins its study of the media with a focus on print, including popular magazines targeted specifically at the preteen and teen markets. After an extensive analysis of print advertising, including instruction in imagery and persuasive language, students create their own print ads on subjects related to our school, such as clubs, sports teams, school lunch options, and Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE).

Students also make a detailed study of newspaper journalism, which culminates in the creation of three eight-page newspapers each year (one newspaper for each 13-week class session). Every 6th grade student contributes to one of these three issues, which are professionally printed on tabloid newsprint, lending authenticity to the project.

In our first year, articles included hard news stories about our search for a new principal and assistant principal; photo features on fashion and on famous athlete look-alikes within the student body; movie, television, and book reviews; and comics. Our editorials ran the gamut, too. Our first issue explored the pros and cons of school cliques; our second issue offered an eye-opening view of body dysmorphic disorder, an eating disorder that afflicts many teenage girls; and our final issue included an opinion piece about how the school's lunch aides treat students.

Seventh Grade: Video Production and Analysis

The 7th grade curriculum focuses on video, including television commercials



Sixth graders explore print media targeting their age group.

and broadcast news. We discuss sexism in television shows and commercials, violence in the media, whether television promotes conspicuous consumption, and whether it contributes to the "dumbing down" of society. Most of the course, however, is hands-on work.

The first of students' two main projects is creating a 30-second television commercial for something related to our school, such as clubs, sports programs, school district apparel, recycling, and even the water fountains! The time-consuming editing process (using Apple's iMovie) is particularly eye-opening for students. As 7th grader Sarah said,

I was surprised to actually see how difficult it is to produce the somewhat simple-looking results. In the future when I am watching a commercial, I will look at how many scenes there are or what angles the scenes are shot at, maybe even without realizing, just because I now know how they are produced.

Following the commercial project, students create a television newscast. Those who want to anchor the news have to take screen tests; the best are chosen on the basis of their ability to relate to one another and the camera as

well as their articulation and ability to ad lib when necessary. All other students are involved in field reports. We create three full newscasts each year, one for each 13-week course; our finished newscasts are aired on our school district's cable channel, available to all area residents.

Feedback from administrators, parents, students, and community members has been positive. In fact, the Croton Free Library commissioned my 7th grade students last year to produce television commercials for the library. Their eight 30-second commercials aired on three cable television channels.

Eighth Grade: Taking It Online

For 8th grade, our focus is the Internet. Learning how to rate the veracity and worth of online information is a key point of instruction at the beginning of the class. Students participate in an in-depth analysis of Wikipedia and the concept of wikis as a whole.

Students also spend two weeks studying social networking, a study that has been one of the most enlightening experiences of the course for both me and my students. Students learn the origins and purposes of social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, how they work, their pros and cons, and most important, their dangers. By making this new medium, so close to these youngsters' hearts, the very fabric of our lesson, I have their attention, which is no mean feat with a room full of 13- and 14-year-olds.

To keep students busy and engaged, I intersperse the lessons on social networking with instruction on how to build and maintain Web sites, which becomes a major project for the 8th

grade students. Students have created Web pages for many of the teachers and other adults in the school, as well as personal Web pages on topics that interest them.

Finding Hooks

So, what has worked? What hasn't? Almost everything I've tried has worked because I have allowed my students to guide me. Students begin the course by identifying their strengths and affinities. Since media content can revolve around just about any passion, this has been a perfect fit. And by understanding and accepting students' affinities, I have been able to employ certain lesson elements as useful hooks.

One specific affinity I have encountered among many of my students is sports. I have encouraged 6th graders interested in sports to write sports articles for the newspapers. Students in 7th grade have created sports-related ads or written sports reports for the newscasts. Several 8th graders developed Web sites for the school's sports programs.

Another common affinity was art and design. Students interested in these areas have created cartoons for the newspaper, become storyboard artists for commercials and public service announcements, and put their talents to use in designing aesthetically appealing Web sites.

The Internet has been an important source of many of the hooks I've used to engage students. The power of YouTube has been too mammoth to miss. I realized quickly that opening my class with a music video had students running to my room!

I have also discovered an immense wealth of information in the technology section of the *New York Times* Web site. Almost daily, I find relevant articles about YouTube, MySpace, media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, and advertising that infuse my lessons with an immediacy that students appreciate. Because we

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begin each lesson with a current media-related event, students feel that *their* world is valued. Opening discussion topics have included News Corporation's purchase of MySpace, Google's acquisition of YouTube, Yahoo's unsuccessful bid for Facebook, and the media's role in exposing the public and private behavior of Howard Stern and Alec Baldwin.

Speaking to the Next Generation

The students' universal response to our courses has included amazement at learning so much that they never knew about the media. This current and relevant curriculum speaks directly to this digital and media-oriented generation.

Students' comments have revealed changes in perspective. In a reflection at the end of the course, 6th grader Daniel noted, "Before this course, my opinion of the newspaper was [that it was] boring and dull, but after this course I love it. In the future, I might go into writing because of this course." Jolie, a 7th grader, said, "Things that we thought we knew about—magazines and TV shows—were reintroduced in a new way, making us learn to take a double-take on everything we see." The way the media structure our perceptions of the world is precisely what Jolie and her classmates are looking at more closely. Sarah, an 8th grader, had this to say:

I used to think that if you hid information on the Internet, then it couldn't be used against you, but I've learned that there are

ways for anyone to find out your information on the Internet. . . . I used to think that Wikipedia was just an online encyclopedia, but I've learned that you can't always trust the information on Wikipedia because anyone can edit it.

Students have also learned literacy skills that they can use throughout their lives. Perhaps 6th grader Grace summed up her experience the best:

In the future, I will look more closely into ads and articles and headlines to find the hidden detail. I have learned so much in this course and will keep it with me for the rest of my life.

Another 6th grader, Brendan, said the media course "should be taught all around the world." Are courses like this taught in other schools around the world? If not, they should be, and soon. **EL**

¹ Tom is Tom Anderson, founder of MySpace and every MySpacer's first "friend"; OK Go is a band whose video for the single "Here It Goes Again," which features the band dancing on treadmills, became a YouTube favorite; Fergie is a female recording artist whose hit single "Fergalicious" is popular among the prepubescent set.

References

- Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotoma, R., Robinson, A., & Weigel, M. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation.
- Roberts, D., Foehr, U., & Rideout, V. (2005). *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8–18 year-olds*. Washington, DC: Kaiser Family Foundation.

Author's note: For a curriculum outline and samples of student work, including our 6th grade newspapers and student reflections, visit www.croton-harmonschools.org/pvcweb/communications/communicat/home2.html.

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