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COMMENTARY

Why Core Standards Must Embrace Media Literacy

By Richard Beach & Frank W. Baker

Today's young people are growing up in a world full of smartphones, texting, YouTube, Internet access, and instant entertainment and information. But while they may be media-savvy, we maintain that they are not necessarily media-or digital-literate.

Multiple studies have shown that many young people lack the media and information-literacy skills they need to be competent communicators in the 21st century. Many don't venture beyond the top result when searching online and lack the critical skills to assess the validity of online-search results and identify the sources of information from both online and other media.

"Kids and Credibility: An Empirical Examination of Youth, Digital Media Use, and Information Credibility," a 2010 study funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, surveyed 11- to 18-year-olds and found that 89 percent believed that "some" to "a lot" of what they found on the Web was believable. They failed to challenge the ideological assumptions inherent in dramas, news broadcasts, or product and political advertising.

Throughout much of American education's history, there have been calls for more attention to fostering media literacy—the ability to access, evaluate, produce, and critically analyze media and media messages. More recently, the sharp increase in the use of digital tools for constructing and communicating ideas using online databases, blogs, Twitter, wikis, texting, podcasts, image repositories, and digital videos has involved a completely new set of digital literacies that not all students necessarily possess.

In 1989, Ernest L. Boyer, then the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and former U.S. commissioner of education, noted: "It is no longer enough simply to read and write. Students must also become literate in the understanding of visual images. Our children must learn how to spot a stereotype,

isolate a social cliché, and distinguish facts from propaganda, analysis from banter, and important news from coverage."

In 1996, the National Council of Teachers of English, or NCTE, of which we are both members, endorsed a resolution that "viewing and visually representing are a part of our growing consciousness of how people gather and share information. ... Teachers should guide students in constructing meaning through creating and viewing non-print texts."

In 2008, the NCTE's executive committee recognized the importance of new digital/media literacies: "Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies [and] many literacies."

Being media-and digital-literate means having the ability to access and assess online information, share knowledge, connect texts, collaborate with others, build networks, create and remix multimodal texts, and participate in online simulations or games.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills specifically lists "media literacy" as one of the vital and necessary skills today's students must have to be competitive in a 21st-century workforce. Media literacy is embedded in the P21 curriculum-skills maps for English language arts, social studies, arts, and other disciplines.

For the past three years, the K-12 Horizon Report published by the New Media Consortium has declared that the top challenge for schools in the 21st century is "a growing need for formal instruction in key new skills, including information literacy, visual literacy, and technological literacy."

Unfortunately, despite these consistent calls for more attention to media/digital literacies, many of the policy initiatives associated with the federal No Child Left Behind Act and increased use of standardized reading and writing tests continue to perpetuate a focus on teaching print literacies, at the

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expense of teaching media/digital literacies.

The strong focus on teaching reading-comprehension skills for print texts to prepare for standardized reading tests has ignored recent research indicating that understanding online texts requires the ability to locate icons or links related to one's purpose for reading, necessitating a set of comprehension skills quite different from those used to process print texts. But those skills are not being taught because the focus is on preparing students for texts based on print literacies. And, because many state writing tests still require that some answers be handwritten, many teachers discourage the use of computers for writing to prepare students for these tests.

Meanwhile, the Common Core State Standards, currently adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, frame uses of media/digital literacies primarily in terms of comprehending and communicating information. For example, one of the reading standards for grades 6-12 says students should be able to: "synthesize and apply information presented in diverse ways (e.g., through words, images, graphs, and video) in print and digital sources in order to answer questions, solve problems, or compare modes of presentation"; and, one of the grades 6-12 writing standards: "use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and interact with others about writing."

This focus marginalizes uses of a range of

other media/digital literacies associated with social-networking sites, blogs, wikis, digital images/videos, smartphone/tablet apps, video games, podcasts, etc., for constructing media content, building social networks, engaging audiences, and critiquing status quo problems.

And, other than a mention of the need to “evaluate information from multiple oral, visual, or multimodal sources,” there is no specific reference in the common standards to critical analysis and production of film, television, advertising, radio, news, music, popular culture, video games, media remixes, and so on. Nor is there explicit attention on fostering critical analysis of media messages and representations.

A 1999 national survey of state standards found elements of media literacy in almost every state’s teaching standards. As states adopt the common-core standards, the result may actually be a reduced focus on media and literacy instruction formally contained in state standards.

We therefore recommend four ways to address the common standards’ limited focus on media/digital literacies:

1. Add additional standards for media/digital literacy. The Common Core State Standards Initiative allows states to add their own standards for use in their schools (up to 15 percent of additional standards over and above the common core standards). We recommend that states focus on media/digital literacies involving both critical analysis of media/digital texts and the production of media/digital texts. For example, the media/digital standards added in Minnesota expect 11th and 12th graders to understand, analyze, evaluate, and use different types of print, digital, and multimodal media; evaluate the aural, visual, and written images and other special effects used in mass media for their ability to inform, persuade, and entertain; and examine the intersections and conflicts between visual (e.g., media images, painting, film, graphic arts) and verbal messages. The Minnesota standards emphasize both analysis and production, recognizing that, through production, students learn about media/digital texts. And, through analysis of media/digital texts, students develop criteria for assessing the quality of their productions.

2. Build on the common-core standards to develop curriculum and instruction designed to integrate print and media/digital literacies. The common standards formulate instructional goals; educators can then use those goals to develop curriculum and instruction designed to integrate print and media/digital literacies. For example, in fostering critical responses to

literature, students can use blogs and wikis to facilitate the sharing of responses and to link to other texts, authors, themes, or issues evoked by a text, as well as to create digital video adaptations of literary texts. In teaching argumentative writing, teachers can require students to formulate pro and con positions on an issue as part of an online role play.

3. Push for assessments that include measures of media/digital literacies that employ media/digital tools. Two consortia, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, which includes 30 states, and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, which includes 25 states, are developing computer-based assessments that will be implemented in 2014. Because these assessments will dictate the curriculum and instruction associated with implementation of the common standards, it is essential that they include some assessment of media/digital literacies. Assessments could require students to critique examples of media representations of race, class, or gender, or to engage in accessing and assessing the quality of online information.

4. Support and fund professional development for teachers to help them incorporate media/digital literacy into instruction. For busy classroom teachers, there is a need to provide in-service instruction. Already, several national groups, such as the International Society for Technology in Education, are poised to provide this training, but it must be offered and implemented regionally and locally.

The time to consider what’s missing in contemporary schools is past. We cannot afford to ignore students’ levels of engagement with digital-communication tools and popular culture in all subjects. Teachers need to demand that the implementation of the common-core standards includes a focus on teaching media/digital literacies in ways that make schooling relevant and meaningful and that better prepare students for life in the 21st century.

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