Literacy Means More Than Words On A Page

They Already Know How to Read; Now It's Time to Teach Them to Read the World
Literacy in the 21st century
by Frank W Baker

When you see or hear the word LITERACY—do you always think of words on a page? If you do, then you've not received the message: literacy is <u>more than</u> just words on a page (or screen). Being literate in the 21st century ALSO means you (and your students) understand the language of media. (Not only understand it, but also teach it). State teaching standards are slowly starting to reflect this fact. [See <u>NCTE's Definition of Literacy In A Digital Age</u>.]

<u>(Source)</u>

The media, I think we can all agree, is the world around which our students revolve. Yet, the serious examination of the media, and its incorporation into the curriculum in the US, continues to reside outside the world of K-12.

Yes, most of you teach WITH media, but how many of you teach ABOUT it? If you've been following <u>my Middleweb blogposts</u>, then you know that this is a subject near and dear to my heart. Through these posts, I've shared ideas on how you can

engage your students with and about the media.

Strengthening WHAT & HOW You Teach

I have questions so I sought out an expert: Diana Graber who is the brainchild behind the websites CyberWise and CyberCivics. (She was a [guest blogger](#) at Middleweb in 2017.) In early September [she penned this timely column](#) for *Psychology Today* magazine. She echoes what I've been saying for years: students who lack digital/media literacy skills will be ill-prepared for the media and technology world of the 21st century. (And the careers.) Yes, they may be media and technology savvy, but they are certainly not all digitally/media literate. (The evidence points this out.)

She sees a huge role for the civics educator and challenges them to consider how to strengthen curriculum instruction. [A [Fordham Institute study](#) recently surveyed all 50 state's teaching standards, finding many need to make clearer what it means to teach media literacy in the 21st century.]

During the past year or more, we have been bombarded by fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theory and more—all of which were helped along by social media and the lack of critical thinking on the part of young people AND adults. With that in mind, here are the questions I posed to Mrs Graber, followed by her responses.

1. Do you see evidence of a lack of critical thinking & media literacy education by K-12 schools?

Current research does point to a deficit in critical thinking and media literacy amongst students in K-12 schools. For example, in 2016 the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG), a research and development group based in Stanford's Graduate School of Education, set out to analyze young people's ability to evaluate online content. [Their findings](#) determined that "middle school students are woefully ill-equipped to detect

online misinformation." In short they found that "so-called 'digital natives' may be able to flit between Instagram and Twitter while uploading a video and texting a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information, they're easily duped."

After the release of this study, state and federal legislation began allocating resources for media literacy instruction and several initiatives were pursued to address the problem. However, in 2019, another report, [Students' Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait](), was conducted by SHEG. Unfortunately, it showed that these efforts had largely failed. Young people were still easily duped by information on the internet.

 If so, how can this deficiency be resolved?

I believe that media literacy can't be taught in a vacuum. It needs to be part of a comprehensive curriculum that also includes digital citizenship, online safety, and information literacy—the entirety of "digital literacy." In other words, students must understand the responsibilities of being a citizen of the digital world, this includes knowing that every time they post something online it can be seen by anyone and everyone, and it lives online forever. They need to learn how the internet works, what algorithms are and how they control the information they receive, why and how social media sites gather personal information, what filter bubbles are and how to avoid them, etc. Understanding the entire, and very complex, ecosystem of online life will help them implement "media literacy" skills successfully.

2. A recent report indicated that all of the "digital literacy" curriculum, currently in place in the US are deemed inadequate. What do teachers need to know AND be implementing in a world deluged with fake news and disinformation?

I agree. I think the problem is that schools don't have the time, or don't want to make the time to implement a

comprehensive curriculum, and that's too bad. What I have observed is that it takes time for a student to understand all the moving parts of the online world. I think that once educators understand that digital literacy is today's literacy, we'll start seeing a shift towards making time for it in school.

3. From your perspective, what are the OTHER biggest issues, right now, in education, with students and disinformation?

I think educators need to understand where and how students are "seeing" misinformation. Young people get their news about current events, largely, from the social media sites they use (TikTok, Instagram, etc.). A lot of this information is delivered by peers, influencers, and celebrities. Teens are primed, developmentally, to seek and believe information from peers, so this makes their social media sites an ideal place for them believe (and, sadly, share) misinformation. Social media companies have their hands full keeping up with all the user-made content being churned out every day, so it's sort of a perfect storm.

4. What effective strategies are you aware of that are easily implemented by teachers at elementary, middle and high school levels?

Teaching students to become critical thinkers about "media" can start at a very early age. Even with elementary school students, asking them to consider why certain illustrations or images are used within the stories they read is a media literacy moment. Ask them to consider how the image helps tell the story, or how a different image might change it. As students get older, teachers might look at some of the most viral things young people are sharing online, from a TikTok video to Instagram post, and discuss them. For example, they might ask students what the message is, whether it is supported by facts, to investigate the creator, and to discover if that person is knowledgeable about the topic.

Building in moments like these throughout their school years can help students develop the habit of thinking twice before believing or sharing information they encounter online.

5. What role can parents and other caregivers provide?

I always suggest to parents that the best way they can help their kids is by being curious. Ask them what they are doing online. Talk to them about what they see. If they stumble across a story or news piece that seems questionable, show them how to investigate the source. Ask: *Is it a credible author or an "influencer" with no expertise in the topic?* These are great conversations to have with your kids.

Conclusion
Perhaps you're reading this and saying to yourself: "this is not what I teach" or "this is not my responsibility". Au contraire my friend: you are part of an education system whose purpose is to provide students with the necessary skills to succeed. They already know how to read (print); now it's time to teach them to read everything else—their world. Your students are already enmeshed in the media and the digital worlds—and your job as an educator is to incorporate the necessary 21st century skills they need. Do you feel prepared? Now is the time.