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Improving Reading Comprehension by Using Media Literacy Activities

Think of the students who sit in your classrooms ready and eager to talk about books—those they’ve read and those they want to read. Now think about the other students, the students we sometimes call reluctant readers or unmotivated students. These are the ones who aren’t ready and eager to talk about the books they’ve read—or were supposed to read. They are noticeable by their lack of engagement, their disinterest and lethargy when it comes time to read and write, and sometimes by their negative attitude toward school in general, not just reading. These students appear to believe that nothing that happens in your classroom is important or relevant to their lives. Some estimates place nearly 40% of seventh graders in this category: students who have tuned out intellectually. Even though they may (or may not) be going through the motions, doing the assignments, getting along, many of our students have lost the curiosity and internal motivation to be genuine learners. The spark, the fire, the genuine openness to learning is missing.

These unmotivated students are sometimes also unskilled readers. These students often fail to grasp the author’s use of details, skip too many words, resist interpreting longer sentences, and fill in gaps in understanding by using their own personal experience rather than information presented in the text. Worst of all, “when such students realize that their limited understanding is not sufficient . . . , they merely press on, reading word by word, and hope that clarity will somehow magically emerge” (Block, 1999, p. 100).

Learning to read and write well requires such a huge investment of energy, dedication, persistence, and practice that it’s no surprise that many of our students have opted out of this difficult task. And who can blame them? To some of them, it may appear that print literacy is a relatively unimportant life skill. From our students’ point of view, television, video, radio, the Internet, and other new technologies seem to have eclipsed books and print media. Want to learn about history? Watch a movie. Want to escape to an imaginary world? Play a video game. Want to learn what happened in the world today? There’s always Dateline: NBC, Comedy Central, or the Today Show to watch. And all of these choices and thousands more are available at the touch of a button, ready for instantaneous consumption. For middle-school students who don’t read well, media and computer technologies seem effortless and more “natural” as compared with the laborious process of decoding print symbols and forming images in the mind’s eye. By age 12, many have already decided—consciously or unconsciously—that the time, effort, and patience needed to be a skillful reader just isn’t worth the effort.

All this has led some teachers to view media and technologies as the enemy. Some teachers blame overindulgent parents who refuse to limit the endless array of videogames and TV shows,
while others see Hollywood’s glitz and glitter as working against the goals of helping students to be reflective, critical thinkers. Still others see Madison Avenue as promoting the values of consumerism and immediate gratification in ways that work in opposition to the patience and active engagement needed for young people to become good readers, curious about new ideas and responsible for their own learning. Such attitudes are unproductive in helping students to develop the motivation and encouragement necessary to become skillful readers and writers.

“Viewing and Representing” as Media Literacy

Many teachers have found that media and technology can be allies, not enemies, in the struggle to help reluctant readers in the middle school years develop high-level literacy skills that are now, more than ever, so essential for success in the world outside the classroom. In fact, educators are beginning to recognize that the powerful skills of literacy—accessing, analyzing, evaluating, and communicating—must be extended to include those visual and electronic messages that now saturate nearly every aspect of daily life. Increasingly, literacy scholars and practitioners recognize that films, Web sites, television programs, magazines, newspapers and even music are simply other forms of “texts” that communicate and carry meaning to “readers.” A publication of the International Reading Association recently included more than 60 research articles about the use of visual and communication media as tools in the development of literacy skills (Flood, Lapp, & Heath, 1998).

Including a range of diverse narrative and expository texts from the realms of film, television, popular print media, radio, and the Internet helps create authentic learning environments that connect the classroom to the living room. As Diamondstone and Smith (1999, p. 198) point out, “When we allow students to bring their home institutions into class . . . , we are enacting a Deweyian vision of democracy . . . [challenging] teachers to consider the impact of their teaching on their students’ immediate experience rather than on some future goals.” Media analysis activities help create instructional contexts that engage and motivate reluctant readers, enabling them to build comprehension strategies that bring the complex process of meaning-making more directly under their full control.

Recently, the state of Texas identified these skills within the context of English language arts as “viewing and representing” skills. The Texas frameworks for viewing and representing emphasize the value of incorporating media and technology messages into the canon of texts studied in school and the importance of providing opportunities for students to use media formats and technology tools—like video cameras, microphones, presentation and graphic design software—to create their own media messages. Such a conceptualization encourages teachers to build connections between the complex processes of becoming a skillful reader and writer and the parallel processes involved in the skills of reading and creating visual media messages. Media literacy advocates encourage students, teachers, and the larger society to envision literacy not only as helping preserve and pass on our cultural and literary heritage, but as an essential tool to enrich all the uses of the increasing diversity of messages that are now a part of contemporary life in an information-rich and technology-saturated society.

Richard Vacca has talked about how an important part of engaging students with literacy involves helping them build patience for appreciating the written word (Vacca and Vacca, 1998). In a culture that puts forward immediacy and instantaneousness as central values, this is no easy task. To build patience, one must slow down, engage in reflective thinking, monitor one’s own intellectual processes, and take time to notice details. To enter actively into the reading process, readers...
must be able to visualize, making the leap to transform printed symbols to actions, events, and ideas that are clearly visible in the mind’s eye. A skillful reader does all this automatically, but this experience is unfamiliar to many of our middle school students. Kylene Beers has identified the characteristics of reluctant readers and discovered that these students do not spontaneously visualize what they read (Beers, 1998). These are the students who need guided opportunities to practice the comprehension strategies of reflective thinking, self-monitoring, close observation, and visualization. Some educators are beginning to use media literacy activities in their English language arts classrooms to promote these skills as a bridge to help middle school students internalize comprehension strategies so they become natural and automatic. With reluctant readers, we can begin by helping students to apply specific comprehension strategies using accessible and familiar messages from visual media sources. From there, students can employ the same comprehension strategies using literary forms. Such approaches can help students actively use and internalize a wide range of specific comprehension strategies—using prior knowledge, predicting, active interpretation, visualizing mental images, paying attention to details, and question-asking.

**Inside the Classroom**

Take, for example, this snapshot from Helen Rochester’s seventh-grade class in a rural Maryland community. Using an activity she received as part of the *Assignment: Media Literacy* curriculum, developed in collaboration between the Maryland State Board of Education and the Discovery Channel (Hobbs, 2000), Mrs. Rochester tries to help students understand how an author develops a character, wanting students to see how descriptive writing is used to create an intensely real mental image in the mind of the reader through details about appearance, setting, behavior, speech, thoughts, and feelings. But first, students have to learn about what these concepts mean and how to identify details and make close observations. Using a scene from *The Nutty Professor*, a comedy featuring Eddie Murphy, she gives students an opportunity to learn how character development occurs in visual media. “I show a 45-second scene, featuring an interaction between the professor, his students, and the pretty new teacher. Of course, students enjoy seeing this scene. Then I introduce the character wheel, a graphic organizer that identifies six characteristics of character development,” she explains (see Figure 1). Dividing the class into six teams, she asks each student to focus their attention on one aspect of the character wheel that has been assigned to their team: 1) setting, 2) behavior/actions, 3) thoughts, 4) physical appearance, 5) others’ reactions, and 6) speech-dialogue. Students watch the short visual sequence again. Each group of students makes notes about specific details of the scene. They are encouraged to look for details that shed light on the different dimensions of the character of the professor. What does the arrangement of chairs in the classroom suggest about the teaching style of the professor? What clues are provided to suggest what subject matter he teaches? What do we learn about the professor’s personality from the way his students react to him? From the way he opens his desk drawer? From the way his thoughts are suggested through the filmmaker’s use of music and camera angles?

Next, students share their lists with other team members, and then form jigsaw groupings. (A jigsaw grouping is a two-stage small-group instructional technique designed to promote collaborative learning and communication skills. Students work to solve one part of a larger problem in four to six teams. When they have completed this task, new teams—jigsaw teams—are formed by bringing together one member from each of the original teams. The task for each new team is to share the
problem-solving ideas from the original groups and produce a written summary, a visual display, or other artifact to represent their learning.) When students share their lists, they discuss the meanings other students generated through careful attention to details. After discussion, they look at the short sequence for a third time. Students add additional details that they might not have seen earlier. Sometimes called “transactional strategies instruction,” this approach is a vital component in developing comprehension skills; it “stimulates interpretive dialogues in which strategic processes are used as interpretive vehicles, with consistently high engagement by all group members” (Pressley, 1999, p. 93). In Mrs. Rochester’s classroom, her specific goal in using this activity is to help students internalize the process of noting how details are used to create a complex character. According to Rochester, “Students are often surprised that so many details can be found in even the shortest visual sequence. It’s just a matter of looking carefully, slowing down, and taking the time to notice details.”

When Mrs. Rochester asks if students can contribute other details about the professor not displayed in the film excerpt, students’ hands are in the air. Many who have seen the whole film are eager to share. Middle school students often experience a genuine thrill when they have the opportunity to provide information about something they know well—and since many students will have had thousands and thousands of hours of film and TV viewing experience to draw upon, this opportunity can activate contributions from those students who might not participate regularly. Engaging students and providing meaningful opportunities for them to contribute their experiences is an important strategy in creating a learning environment that is effective for reluctant readers.

There are some key elements of this activity worth reviewing: 1) select a short (two minutes or less) sequence from popular film or television that introduces a character; 2) use an organizational rubric that activates students’ use of a specific comprehension strategy; 3) use repeated viewing of the same scene to encourage students to have patience with the text and engage in close reading; 4) employ the process of writing down details as a way to document the close observational experience; 5) use discussion and collaborative learning with team members to recognize similarities and differences in “attentional” processes; and 6) use ac-

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**Figure 1. Character wheel**

- **Physical Description:** Describe the physical appearance of the character using words that appeal to one of the five senses.
- **Setting:** Describe a particular place and a time inhabited by your character, such as a city, a cave, a bedroom, or a school gymnasium. The time could be the future, the present, or the past.
- **Behavior:** Describe your character doing some action.
- **Speech:** Provide examples of how the character talks.
- **Reaction of Others:** Describe your character through the eyes of another character, capturing that person’s attitude.
- **Thoughts:** Describe your character’s thoughts, such as desires, fears, or regrets.
When we use film and television in the classroom, it is important to do so in ways that promote active, critical thinking. For reluctant readers, activities using media texts can help internalize specific comprehension strategies and build awareness of the importance of metacognitive strategies that they often lack. It also encourages students to have patience with texts in general and to recognize how details are used to build vividness, realism, and complexity in a message.

However, it is especially important to resist the urgings of our middle school students who will (inevitably) beg their teachers to see more of any scene used in this manner. When we use film and television in the classroom, it is important to do so in ways that promote active, critical thinking. Often we may inadvertently reinforce the expectation that visual media are “just entertainment” when we use video as a reward for work well done, or when we darken the lights, or when we ask kids to sit on the floor, and especially when we show long sequences or even whole films.

Without careful instructional support, it is unlikely that middle school students watch films in the classroom any differently than they would at home, where television in particular is routinely used as “background noise to life.” Effective use of film and television in the classroom should always make use of specific activities that emphasize the idea that these visual media are also types of “texts” deserving close examination, reflection, and critical appreciation. Too often, films in the classroom may inadvertently reinforce passive mindlessness instead of promoting active, critical engagement. Instructional strategies that use film and television excerpts to model the active application of reading comprehension strategies are far more relevant and engaging to middle school students than an hour of flickering images in a darkened classroom.

The Viewing-Reading-Writing Connection

To make the connection between close analysis of a media “text” and close analysis of the written word, Mrs. Rochester provides students with a short two- or three-paragraph excerpt from a work of contemporary young adult literature. She selects a passage where a character is first introduced to the reader. She reads aloud the passage as students follow along with their copy. Working in the same teams and the same process as used with the film text, students underline the specific verbal passages that correspond to their assigned component of the character wheel. When they share these lists of phrases, students discover how descriptive writing is used to create complex images of a character’s actions, emotions, and experiences.

Sometimes Mrs. Rochester asks students to draw pictures of the mental images they create in their minds of a character. Or she may invite students to discuss what kinds of actors they might use if they had the opportunity to cast this scene for film or television. According to Rochester, “I’m trying to support students as they practice visualizing what they read.” For many of her students, visualization is not automatic, so she looks for opportunities that get her students to make the effort needed to form and hold a clear mental picture of something as they read.

With repeated opportunities to practice these skills, students develop patience for looking closely at text. Students feel more confident and more motivated to do this with written works when they can first develop the skill using a more familiar medium—film or television. Students discover the power of meaning-making through close reading and experience the pleasures involved in looking carefully at a text’s construction.

In an extension/reinforcement activity, students also enjoy the opportunity to select their favorite character from film or television, videotape a specific short (one minute) sequence featuring the character, and describe that character in writing using the character wheel graphic organizer. Students bring in videotapes with these
short selections, show them, and display their character wheel posters or drawings, making a brief oral presentation about the specific details they noticed about the character’s behavior, action, appearance, and emotions. Many students will enjoy a short-story writing activity that asks them to develop a new story featuring this character. It is especially useful to ask students to place the character in a different setting than his or her usual environment, which reduces students’ tendency to borrow a storyline from a previously viewed episode. Even the most reluctant middle school students enjoy this writing activity.

Students are energized by this experience in part because it gives them the opportunity to make the connection between the classroom and the intensely pleasurable experiences of media consumption in the home. It is important to recognize that students bring an enormous wealth of experiences from the thousands of hours of stories they have viewed on the multiple screens in their homes. For reluctant readers in the middle school years, it is valuable for teachers to acknowledge the genuine pleasures associated with media consumption, and to provide opportunities for students to make connections between what they view and what they read.

Good prewriting activities make an important contribution to writing and reading processes when they help students construct mental images with detail and precision. The character wheel can be an excellent prewriting tool because students can visually represent their own imaginary characters using the graphic organizer. In writing a short story, students can begin by imagining characters using at least three specific details for each of the dimensions of the character wheel. These details help the students clarify a mental picture of the characters, setting, and context of the story.

Rather than ignore, dismiss, or trivialize students’ fascination with popular media, teachers can use the energy students bring to these topics to help them develop the close observation, visualization, and reflective thinking skills that are prerequisite components of effective reading. Too often, we turn up our noses at the reading choices of middle school students. We subtly show our contempt for their interest in books and magazines that feature athletes, celebrities, popular musicians, and classic topics of universal interest in adolescence: UFOs, romance, true crime, horror. We make it clear that talk about music, TV shows, films, and the pleasures of storytelling in nonprint forms are not appropriate topics for the classroom. This approach has silenced many students in our classrooms without making a meaningful dent in their fascination with contemporary media.

It turns out that these kinds of attitudes on the part of both teachers and parents may even have a negative impact on students’ behaviors and attitudes. A study of the reading habits of children 12–17 found that while 78% claim to engage in reading at least occasionally as a leisure activity, more than 40% of students believed that their parents or teachers would disapprove of their reading choices (Moffitt and Wartella, 1992). More than 1.6 million teens read Teen People each month, and books about teen music idols like Britney Spears sell nearly a million copies (Maughan, 2000). Rather than view media culture as an enemy to our work as literacy educators, it’s important to find creative ways to motivate reluctant readers by using popular media as tools that can help students internalize effective reading comprehension strategies and allow them to build connections between the classroom and culture.

References


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One useful strategy for developing students’ word power through knowledge of roots is the vocabulary tree. The specific root is written at the base of the tree. The target word the students are studying is placed in the trunk. Students fill the branches with as many other words containing the same root as they can find. Branches will vary from student to student. Students should be encouraged to use the word in a sentence, with its source, if possible.