Media Literacy:

A National Priority for a Changing World

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The convergence of media and technology in a global culture is changing the way we learn about the world and challenging the very foundations of education. No longer is it enough to be able to read the printed word; children, youth, and adults, too, need the ability to critically interpret the powerful images of a multimedia culture. Media literacy education provides a framework and a pedagogy for the new literacy needed for living, working and citizenship in the 21st century. Moreover it paves the way to mastering the skills required for lifelong learning in a constantly changing world.

The Challenges of a Multi-Media World
Since the beginning of recorded history, the concept of "literacy" meant having the skill to interpret "squiggles" on a piece of paper as letters which, when put together, formed words that conveyed meaning. Teaching young people to put the words together to understand (and, in turn, express) ever more complex ideas became the goal of education as it evolved over the centuries.

Today, information about the world around us comes to us not only by words on a piece of paper but more and more through the powerful images and sounds of our multi-media culture. From the clock radio that wakes us up in the morning until we fall asleep watching the late night talk show, we are exposed to hundreds – even thousands – of images and ideas not only from television but also from websites, movies, talk radio, magazine covers, e-mail, video games, music, cell phone messages, billboards – and more. Media no longer just shape our culture. . .they ARE our culture.

Although mediated messages appear to be self-evident, in truth, they use a complex audio/visual "language" which has its own rules (grammar) and which can be used to express many-layered concepts and ideas about the world. Not everything may be obvious at first; and images go by so fast! If our children are to be able to navigate their lives through this multi-media culture, they need to be fluent in "reading" and "writing" the language of images and sounds just as we have always taught them to "read" and "write" the language of printed communications.

Author Douglas Rushkoff[1] calls the current youth generation "screen-agers" because their media use is not distinguished specifically as television or video games or movies or computers – or even telephones—but simply as a series of screens which they both access and manipulate in a constantly evolving stream of shared communication. This capability, in turn, is transforming the use and impact of media in everyday life:

- Screen-agers see media not as discrete products that can "impact" them or their culture but as elements of a multi-media mosaic that *is* their culture.

- Screen-agers "read" and "write" seamlessly using images, sounds and words.

- Screen-agers experience the world not in physical boundaries but as an instant global network of wireless connections and interconnections.

In this kind of world, the content of a specific media message is no longer all that relevant. It's only one of thousands received everyday. What *is* important is facility with analyzing new information as it's received, evaluating it against one's prior knowledge, formulating a response and ultimately communicating to others your decision or point of view.

In other words, what is important is not so much the message itself as *how we make sense of* the message and by extension, of the mediated world around us. It demands a new kind of literacy, rooted in the real world of instant information, global interactivity and messages created on multiple media platforms.

Bridging the Gap Between Learning and Life

It was communications theorist David Berlo who, 30 years ago, identified why learning must shift from knowledge *acquisition* to knowledge *processing*:

> **"For the first time in human history, two related propositions are true. One, it no longer is *possible* to store within the human brain all of the information that a human needs; we can no longer rely on ourselves as a memory bank. Second, it no longer is *necessary* to store within the human brain all of the information that humans need; we are *obsolete* as a memory bank…**
> **Education needs to be geared toward the *handling* of data rather than the *accumulation* of data."[2]**

In 2003, his insights were echoed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a public-private organization of leaders and educators in business and education, in their *Learning for the 21st Century* report outlining a vision for education in the United States. "Today's education system faces irrelevance

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[1] Rushkoff, Douglas, (1996). *Playing the Future: How Kids Culture Can Teach Us to Thrive in an Age of Chaos.* New York: Harper Collins.
[2] Berlo, David. (1975). The Context for Communication. In Hannemann and McEwen, *Communication & Behavior* (p8), Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. (emphasis added)

unless we bridge the gap between how students live and how they learn. Schools are struggling to keep pace with the astonishing rate of change in students' lives outside of school."[3]

Outlining what it will take to be successful in the 21st century work and living environment, the report goes on to challenge:

> **"People need to know more than core subjects. They need to know how to use their knowledge and skills – by thinking critically, applying knowledge to new situations, analyzing information, comprehending new ideas, communicating, collaborating, solving problems, making decisions.. (they) need to become lifelong learners, updating their knowledge and skills continually and independently."[4]**

In its 2001 publication, *Why Business Cares about Education*, the Business Coalition for Education Reform noted that today's economy is vastly different from fifty years ago, "fueled now by brains rather than brawn. In order to survive, businesses need individuals who possess a wide range of high-level skills and abilities, such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork and decision-making." [5]

Although today's media culture seems daunting, in truth, it also provides a nearly limitless resource for real world learning—from how to identify "point of view" by comparing guests on the Sunday morning political talk shows to how to determine whether medical information on an Internet site is legitimate. Students, beginning in elementary school, need to become intimately familiar with their media culture in order to take full advantage of the vast array of research tools, digital content, and multimedia communications options available to them.

Activities that involve *creating* media messages—such as writing and producing a video script complete with sound effects—not only create proficiency in writing and editing (core language arts goals) but also build teamwork skills, tolerance for another's perspective, organization and delegation skills as well as appreciation for the variety of talents it takes to complete a large scale project.

Most of all, bringing media culture into the learning environment – from kindergarten to graduate school – guarantees a high level of engagement by students. And engagement, as every teacher knows, is the key to learning success. Teens today have no memory of life without television; kindergarteners know only a world with cell phones, laptops, instant messaging and movies on DVD. To ignore the media-rich environment they bring with them to school is to shortchange them for life.

Expanding Our Notions of Literacy

In the past 20 years, the field of media literacy education has emerged to organize and promote the importance of teaching this expanded notion of "literacy."

At first media literacy was seen as teaching children about media – how advertising works or how to analyze the nightly news telecast. But in her landmark 1998 book, *Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information*, Kathleen Tyner posited that media education is more about education than it is about media. For her, media education "expands literacy to include reading and writing through the use of new and emerging communication tools. It is learning that demands the sand creative use of information." [6]

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[3] Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2003). *A Report and Mile Guide for 21st Century Skills*, 4
[4] Ibid. 9,6
[5] Business Coalition for Education Reform. (2001) *Why Business Cares about Education.* Available at http://www.bcer.org
[6] Tyner, Kathleen (1998). *Literacy in a Digital World*, (p. 196), Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Today, the field has matured to a greater understanding of its potential, not just as a new kind of "literacy" but more, *as the engine for transforming the very nature of learning in a global multimedia environment.* **"Students will spend all their adult lives in a multi-tasking, multi-faceted, technology-driven, diverse, vibrant world – and they must arrive equipped to do so."[7]** Media literacy, grounded as it is, in inquiry-based, process-oriented pedagogy, offers not a new *subject* to teach, but rather a new *way* to teach and even more importantly, a *new way to learn.*

Even today, but more so in the future, learning happens anywhere and everywhere, 24/7. Increasingly it occurs most powerfully through the convergence of media and technology. Videogames, for example, are not just mindless entertainment, but according to literacy scholar, James Paul Gee, are actually quite intricate learning experiences that have a great deal to teach us about how learning and literacy are changing in the modern world. In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* Gee identifies 36 learning principles built into good games and predicts that video games are the forerunners of powerful instructional tools in the future. [8]

It is this convergence between media and education, between entertainment and learning, that is driving major change in the sources and the content of *what* we learn and *how* we learn in today's world. Media literacy isn't needed in the future, it is needed NOW, urgently, to assure that our citizens are equipped to make the decisions and contributions a global economy and global culture demands of them.

A recent study by The American Diploma Project, an organization comprised of representatives from Achieve Inc., the Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, echoes the need for closing the gap between the classroom and 'real life.' Their research indicates that high school students are poorly prepared for college and the job market, and that employers and postsecondary institutions **"all but ignore the diploma, knowing that it often serves as little more than a certificate of attendance," because "what it takes to earn one is disconnected from what it takes for graduates to compete successfully beyond high school." [9]**

The report calls for rigorous national standards to better reflect the challenges faced by high school graduates. In the field of English, for example the Project calls not only for mastery of spelling and grammar, communication skills, writing, research and logic, but also identifies as important the ability "to read and interpret technical material, *to view media critically* and to understand and analyze literature."[10]

This is good news for advocates of media education. National standards would ensure that every child has access to this valuable instruction. Further, it would lead to a consistent, measurable definition of media literacy and to a set of competencies to guide curriculum development. Several states already include some aspect of media education in their standards, but the standards are so vague and inconsistent that it is difficult, at times, to determine exactly what is being taught under the banner of 'media literacy.'

Opportunities Beyond School

Although media literacy is ideally suited for an educational context, it is clearly not limited to children or to the K-12 classroom. Adults, too, need the opportunity to gain the skills they now find missing in their

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[7] Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2003). *A Report and Mile Guide for 21st Century Skills*, 4

[8] Gee, James Paul. (2003) *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan

[99] American Diploma Project (2004). *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*.
   Available: http://www.achieve.org (emphasis added)

[10] Ibid.

educational background. The health and religious communities as well as the business world can all make valuable contributions to educating adults.

Consider the value, for example, of a public education campaign to explain the rules and explore the marketing strategies behind prescription drug TV commercials – an advertising phenomenon that became legal only in 1997 and which has created an explosion in demand for drug medications. Coupled with an interactive website where individuals can practice applying their new decoding skills to drug advertising relevant to them, such a campaign could dramatically improve the public's ability to spot rhetorical devices, uncover persuasion techniques and challenge unsubstantiated claims. The result is both knowledge and skills that transfer easily to many other life and work issues.

Even the technology, entertainment and media industries have a valuable role to play. Media are powerful teachers.   Their power can be a key component of a successful national mandate to help all citizens become fluent in 21st century skills. "As the world grows increasingly complex, success and prosperity will be linked to people's ability to think, act, adapt and communicate creatively." [11]

Characteristics of Quality Media Literacy Practice

In her opening address to the 2003 National Media education Conference, Faith Rogow, president of the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), noted that educators are beginning to see media literacy as the best way to help students master the skills of critical thinking. Soon, she predicted, media literacy will become central to what is taught in American schools "as the glue that holds everything together."[12]

What is this glue composed of? What are the core components of quality media literacy practice? And how will it empower the citizens and scholars, the parents and workers of the future?

First, the focus of media literacy is on *process* rather than *content*. The goal of media literacy is not to memorize facts about media or even be able to make a video or design a PowerPoint. Rather the goal is to explore questions that arise when one engages critically with a mediated message – print or electronic. It involves posing problems that exercise higher order thinking skills – learning how to identify key concepts, how to make connections between multiple ideas, how to ask pertinent questions, identify fallacies, formulate a response. It is these skills, more than factual knowledge, that form the foundation of intellectual inquiry and workplace productivity and that are necessary for exercising full citizenship in a democratic society and a global economy.

Such skills have always been essential for an educated life and good teachers have always fostered them. But too often they emerged only as a by-product of mastering content areas such as literature, history, the sciences and math. Learning and process skills were seldom taught explicitly. But if we are to graduate students who can be in charge of their own continual learning in a media culture, we must "incorporate learning skills into classrooms *deliberately, strategically and broadly*." [13]

As writer Alvin Toffler points out **"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.**" By its very nature, media literacy education teaches and reinforces 21st century learning skills.

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[11] Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2003). *A Report and Mile Guide for 21st Century Skills*, 10

[12] Rogow, Faith. (2003, June), *Patience is a Virtue When You've Got What you Want*. President's Address, National Media Education Conference, Baltimore. Available: http://www.AMLAinfo.org

[13] Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2003). *A Report and Mile Guide for 21st Century Skills*, 4

Second, media literacy education expands the concept of "text" to include not just written texts but any message form—verbal, aural or visual – (or all three together!) – that is used to create and then pass ideas back and forth between human beings. Full understanding of such a "text" involves not just *deconstruction* activities – that is, taking apart a message that already exists—but also *construction* activities -- learning to "write" their opinions and ideas with the wide range of multi-media tools now available to young people growing up in a digital world.

Third, media literacy is characterized by the principle of "inquiry" – that is, learning to ask important questions about whatever you see, watch or read:

- Is this new scientific study on diet and weight valid?
- Why does that car commercial keep going around in my head?
- What does it mean when the news reporter talks about a 'photo opportunity?

With a goal of promoting healthy skepticism rather than cynicism, the challenge for the teacher (or parent) is not to provide answers, but to stimulate more questions – to guide, coach, prod, challenge the learner to discover how to go about finding an answer. "I don't know. How could we find out?" is the media literacy mantra.

Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Media Age

"How could we find out?" is a question, of course, that opens up many more questions. And how we even approach the question determines what "answers" we might find. Inquiry is also a messy process because one question leads to another and yet another. To keep inquiry on course, curriculum specialists look for a comprehensive framework to provide guidance and overall direction.

In its recently released *CML MediaLit Kit™*[14] the Center for Media Literacy, one of the pioneering organizations in the media literacy field, provides such a framework "for learning and teaching in a media age." At its core are *Five Key Questions* that, if learned and applied universally by young and old, could "change the world" by transforming the way individuals of all ages interact with and learn in today's media culture.

Based on the work of media scholars and literacy educators in the US and around the world, each of the *Five Key Questions* flows from a corresponding *Core Concept* and provides an entry point to explore the five fundamental aspects of *any* message in *any* medium: author; format; audience; content; purpose. Starting with simple versions of the questions for young children and moving on to more sophisticated analysis for adults, students of all ages can learn how to apply the questions to a wide variety of messages.

And because the questions are succinct, media literacy literature includes a wide variety of "guiding questions" to help to tease out the deepest understanding possible.

Learning to ask the *Five Key Questions* is like learning to ride a bike or to swim; it takes practice over time and usually isn't mastered the first time out. Once learned, however, the process becomes automatic as users *build the habit* of routinely subjecting media messages to a battery of questions appropriate to their age and ability.

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[14] Center for Media Literacy. (2003) *CML MediaLit Kit™/ A Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Media Age* .Available: http://www.medialit.org

Five Key Questions That Can Change the World![15]

As the cornerstone of the media literacy process, the *Five Key Questions* provide a "short-cut" and an on-ramp to acquiring and applying information process skills in a practical, replicable, consistent and attainable way. They are an academically sound and yet engaging way to begin.

Key Question #1: Who created this message?

This question addresses the *Core Concept* that "***All messages are 'constructed.'***" and explores the issue of authorship. Whether we are watching the nightly news, passing a billboard on the street or reading a political campaign flyer, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably many people), images were captured and edited, and a creative team with many talents put it all together. However as the audience, we don't get to see or hear the words, pictures or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted! What is important for critical thinking is the recognition that whatever is "constructed" by just a few people can tend to become "the way it is" for the rest of us.

Helping people understand how media are put together — and what may have been left out — as well as how media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is a critical first step in recognizing that media are not "natural" but "constructed," just like a house is built or a car manufactured. Contrary to popular opinion, media are *not* windows on the world nor are they even mirrors reflecting the real world. What they are, in truth, are carefully manufactured cultural products.

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Flowing from the *Core Concept* that "***Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules***" this line of questions examines the creative components that are used in putting it together – the words, music, color, movement, camera angle and many more.

Most forms of communication — whether newspapers, TV game shows or horror movies — depend on a kind of "creative language": scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media, especially visual language, not only helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation but it also increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media as a constructed cultural artifact.

The best way to understand how media are put together is to do just that — make a video, create a website, develop an ad campaign. The more real world the project is, the better.   The four major arts disciplines – music, dance, theatre and the visual arts—can also provide a context through which one gains skills of analysis, interpretation and appreciation along with opportunities to practice self-expression and creative production.

Key Question #3: How might different people understand this message differently from me?

Flowing from the *Core Concept* that **"Different people experience the same media message differently,"** this question examines how *who we are* influences *how we understand* or respond to a media text. Each audience member brings to each media text a unique set of life experiences (age, gender,

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[15] Ibid.

education, cultural upbringing, etc.) which, when applied to the text – or combined with the text – create unique interpretations. A World War II veteran, for example, brings a different set of experiences to a movie like *Saving Private Ryan* than a younger person– resulting in a different reaction to the film as well as, perhaps, greater insight.

We may not be conscious of it but each of us, even toddlers, are constantly trying to "make sense" of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we and others are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be when it comes to accepting or rejecting messages. And hearing other's interpretations can build respect for different cultures and appreciation for minority opinions, a critical skill in an increasingly multicultural world.

Key Question #4: What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in -- or omitted from -- this message?

This question explores the *content* of a media message and flows from the *Core Concept* that **"Media have embedded values and points of view."** Because all media messages are constructed, choices have to be made. These choices inevitably reflect the values, attitudes and points of view of the ones doing the constructing. The decision about a character's age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban? rural? affluent? poor?), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become "embedded" in a TV show, a movie or an ad. Even the news has embedded values in the decisions made about what stories go first, how long they are, what kinds of pictures are chosen, etc.

What's significant about this question is not the fact that ideas and values are embedded but that values-laden information reinforces -- or challenges -- how we interpret the world around us and the people in it. If we have the skills to rationally identify both overt and latent values in a mediated presentation, whether from the media or from a co-worker, we are likely to be much more tolerant of differences and more astute in our decision-making to accept or reject the overall message. Being able to recognize and name missing perspectives is also a critical skill as we negotiate our way *each day of our lives* through an increasingly multicultural society.

Key Question #5: Why is this message being sent?

With *Key Question 5*, we look at the *motive* or *purpose* of a media message. Recognizing the fifth *Core Concept* that "**Media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power,"** we use this line of questions to determine whether and how a message may have been influenced by money, ego, ideology, etc. In order to respond to a message appropriately, we need to be able to figure out why it was sent.

Much of the world's media today were developed as money-making enterprises. There's nothing wrong with that in theory but it helps to know if profit is the purpose when evaluating a specific message. A commercial influence over entertainment media may be more tolerable to many people than, say, a commercial influence over the news. But with democracy at stake almost everywhere around the world, citizens of every country need to be equipped with the ability to determine both economic and ideological "spin."

The issue of message motivation has changed dramatically since the Internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations – even individuals—have ready access to powerful tools that can persuade others to a particular point of view. As an exercise in power unprecedented in human history, the Internet provides multiple reasons for users of all ages to be able to

interpret rhetorical devices, spot faulty reasoning, verify sources and recognize the qualities of legitimate research.

Preparing for Citizen Empowerment

Resting on a foundation of CML's 25 years of experience in the field plus the thinking of leading practitioners around the world, the *CML MediaLit Kit™* was created to help establish a common ground upon which to build curriculum and training in media literacy as a building block for 21st century skills.

It provides, for the first time, an accessible integrated outline of the foundational concepts needed to organize and structure teaching activities across the curriculum, across cultures and across disciplines.   Through systematic professional development and parent education, adults master both the *Core Concepts* and the *Key Questions* plus gain the conceptual know-how to organize media literacy learning in school and non-school venues.

The vision of media literacy is to put all individuals, ultimately, in charge of their own learning, empowering them to take an active, rather than a passive, role in acquiring new knowledge and skills. The *Five Key Questions* and *Five Core Concepts* serve as the "big ideas" or the "enduring understanding" that curriculum specialists look for in order to generate the thinking, organizing and communicating competencies called for by the Partnership and its allies. Together they are a unique contribution to 21st century education and a powerful set of tools for preparing not only a flexible and proficient workforce but informed citizens who understand, share in and contribute to the public debate.

Now **is the time to make media literacy education a national priority in advancing 21st century skills for a 21st century world**.

Authors

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Referenced Resources available from Center for Media Literacy:
www.medialit.org/catalog or 800-228-4630:

Tyner, Kathleen, *Literacy in a Digital World*
Gee, James Paul, *What Video Games Have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy*