



Help prepare students for state assessment with lessons torn from the pages of today's culture.
by Sue Lockwood Summers

Media Literacy Makes for Critical Thinkers

Ask any teacher what the driving force is behind educational decisions within his school or school district and the answer is always the same: the state assessment. All states have developed standardized tests that are administered annually to specific grades. However, even teachers in the grades not being tested are feeling the stress. The stakes are huge and the pressure is real. But how can teachers and media specialists prepare students at all grade levels for the content of the upcoming tests?

Essentially, every state assessment tests critical thinking. As a media specialist for 22 years, I have collaborated frequently with classroom teachers as well as with teachers of art, music, physical education, G/T, and special education. Together, we offer students opportunities to trigger higher-level thinking.

The concept of media literacy—critical thinking applied to media messages—initiates new and compelling reasons for collaboration between the media specialist and the teachers at any school. Over the years, my students have been involved in media-literacy lessons that caused them to transfer their thinking beyond the school's walls to the culture in which they lived. They were indeed being prepared for the state assessment, but more important, for life.

Media literacy can be part of each lesson plan to ensure that activities are authentic and focused on real-life examples. The introduction of such items as cereal boxes, magazine covers, TV newscasts, websites, podcasts, advertisements, and even messages on clothing as content to be studied will spark student interest. The more dynamic the exchange of ideas, the more involved students are in their learning.

Not only did my students get excited, so did the teachers. The preparation for the state assessment

became transparent, as the real focus of the lessons became thinking about the content, distribution, and impact of the messages of our culture: past, present, and future.

Lessons in Critical Thinking #1

Skill: Determine the author's purpose

Collaboration lesson: Media specialist and classroom teacher

Every time students read, hear, or view a message, ask them to determine the author's purpose. Remind students that this is more than a guess; this is an educated hypothesis based on the content, format, target audience, and ideas expressed. Use a multitude of media messages and repeat this lesson throughout the year.

Be sure to include every type of media (e.g., books, newspaper or magazine articles, websites, videos, poems, songs, bumper stickers, signs, advertisements, and posters) to reinforce this concept.

Test question: Nearly every state assessment includes a question such as, "What is the main purpose of this passage?" Students will be prepared for these questions because of the many occasions they have been asked this question in class and in the media center.

Media literacy can be part of each lesson plan to ensure that activities are authentic and focused on real-life examples.

Sue Lockwood Summers' latest book is *Get Them Thinking! Use Media Literacy to Prepare Students for State Assessments*. She was selected as a 2006 Cable's Leaders in Learning Award winner in the Media Literacy category.

Lessons in Critical Thinking #2

Skill: Differentiate between fact and opinion

Collaboration lesson: Media specialist and classroom teacher

Have students use dictionaries to locate the definition of the words “fact” and “opinion.” In small groups, have students create examples of each. Throughout the school year, share advertisements from a variety of formats (including pop-up ads on the Internet, direct-mail promotional pieces, and political leaflets), as well as news versus op-ed articles or TV news programs versus documentary videos. Have your students find and discuss their own examples of facts and opinions.

Test question: Mario needs to write a research paper. He first decides to brainstorm about some topics he might choose. Which of his topics would NOT be a good topic because it might require Mario to give opinions rather than facts?

- A. solar energy
- B. icebergs
- C. awesome athletes
- D. how insects help people

(*Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, Spring 2002, Grade 6, page 32, #33*)

Lessons in Critical Thinking #3

Skill: Deconstruct the message

Collaboration lesson: Media specialist and G/T, special education, or art teacher

Introduce the idea of deconstructing a message. Show students how to carefully examine each of the composition’s elements, such as background, color, text, white space, graphics, people, animals, message, slogan, purpose, point of view, humor, and target audience. During the year, offer a variety of posters, advertisements, artwork, movie and CD covers, signs, magazine and book covers, and other such objects to deconstruct. Allow students time to discuss how each composition could be improved, thereby stimulating creativity and interaction.

Test question: Many state assessments provide posters or advertisements within the test booklets and ask specific questions about them. One test showed an ad for Conquest Racing Helmets. The students were asked why the depicted organization endorsed the helmets, to identify the slogan, and to determine the ad’s purpose. (*The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Exit Level Test, July 2004, page 12*)

RELATED RESOURCES

A&E Classroom: Media Literacy
www.aetv.com/class/medialiteracy

Alliance for a Media Literate America
www.amlainfo.org

Center for Media Literacy MediaLit Kit Handouts
www.medialit.org/mlk_handouts_bw.html

Get Them Thinking! Use Media Literacy to Prepare Students for State Assessments
Sue Lockwood Summers (Linworth Publishing, 2005).

Discovery School’s Kathy Schrock’s Guide for Educators school.discovery.com/schrockguide

Media Alert!
www.mediaalert.org

Media Literacy Clearinghouse
www.frankwbaker.com

Media Smart/Media Literacy for Educators
www.ciconline.org/enrichment/medialiteracy

Partnership for 21st Century Skills
www.21stcenturyskills.org

PBS Kids Go!: Don’t Buy It: Media Smart
pbskids.org/dontbuyit

PRIIME TIIME TODAY
www.primett.org

THE “THREE Rs” OF MEDIA LITERACY

by Terri Payne Butler

For Sue Lockwood Summers, media literacy is as close as the cereal box on the breakfast table each morning. “Look at all the messages on the box,” she says. “They tie in to fitness tips, to wellness tips, to a new movie. Why are they there? When I work with teachers, I want them to see that cereal box with new eyes, to understand there’s more to it than selling the cereal in the box.”

In the mid-1980s, Summers was a library media specialist in Lakewood, Colo. At home, she was discovering her kids were often more interested in watching television than spending time as a family; at school, she encountered television’s effects as well. “Kids were imitating what they saw. They were willing to accept without further discussion or investigation the attitudes, language, and behavior they were watching. I began to realize that tel-

evision had a greater influence than we were giving it credit for, and decided I wanted to learn more about that.”

Twenty years later, Summers is a 2006 winner of a Cable’s Leaders in Learning Award for her work in media-literacy education and her leadership, with founder Donna Shepherd, of PRIIME TIIME TODAY (Parents Responsibly Involved in Media Excellence and Teens Involved in Media Excellence), a nonprofit designed to help parents, teachers, and kids become more media savvy.

“Our kids live in a democracy where they will have to make decisions and choices that affect our culture,” says Summers. “To be active citizens, they need to know how to review, reflect, and react—the three Rs of media literacy. What did you actually see, hear, and read? What is your opinion about it? What, if anything, are you going to do about it? I want



The author, Sue Lockwood Summers (left), and Anna Weselak of PTA at Cable’s Leaders in Learning Awards.

everyone who works with kids—parents, teachers, camp counselors—to take a piece of this. If we do, I think we’ll watch the dropout rate fall, and by the time our kids are 18, they’ll be discerning critical thinkers ready to be citizens in a democracy.”