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Dr. William J. Brown  
Lab Project 1  
Barry W. Lawrensen

### **On-line Media Literacy Course Critique**

Exploring the various approaches to teaching media literacy, I found the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, which claims to be “one of the oldest and most successful media literacy organizations in the USA.” The New Mexico Media Literacy Project Website is <http://www.nmmlp.org/>. While its founding in 1993 (by Deirdre Downs and her father, newscaster Hugh Downs) is a decade and a half behind the Canadian Association for Media Literacy, the New Mexico organization has developed and maintains a strong reputation in the USA.

The New Mexico Media Literacy Project (NMMLP) builds on the basis that “Media construct our culture.”<sup>1</sup> As we have already identified the power of stories in shaping individuals' lives and worldviews, NMMLP acknowledges that for many people today, the significant storytellers are no longer people in community, but rather the media, from television and film to music, video games and the Internet.

This foundation grows with the realization that the media to which we are exposed affect our thoughts and actions. As we are saturated with media exposure, subtle influences occur, with both direct and indirect effects as a result.

NMMLP maintains that media use “the language of persuasion,” whether it is presented as news or novel, documentary or drama. “Flattery, repetition, fear and humor” are identified as forms in which this language is expressed. Media can build constructive imagination, but can also motivate people to do things “unwise, anti-social, or even dangerous.”<sup>2</sup>

Because of constraints on time, combined with varying perspectives of the storymaker, media

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1 [http://www.nmmlp.org/media\\_literacy/ML\\_concepts.html](http://www.nmmlp.org/media_literacy/ML_concepts.html)

2 Ibid.

only presents a limited point of view. Media messages often contain nonverbal communication, which can be classified as “subtexts”. In television advertising, for example, these might be called “image spots”, intended to build trust in a company or organization. Hallmark creates a warm positive feeling even with their television specials, in an effort to communicate that those who “care enough to send the very best” will purchase Hallmark cards.

As Potter and other Media Literacy strategists emphasize, the background of the individual influences the meaning derived from exposure to media. Further, images have a deeper impact and are able to reach the emotional and reactionary parts of the brain, while text exposure may engage more critical thinking skills and rational integration. This power becomes reinforced when feelings are engaged, such as when an “emotionally-charged symbol (family, sex, the flag)” is included.<sup>3</sup> This can result in production style manipulation to reinforce the emotional impact of messages.

Once these characteristics of media and media messages are identified, NMMLP acknowledges that these media can be deconstructed by the media literate, recognizing “who created the message, and why.”<sup>4</sup> With education in media literacy, media consumers of all ages develop a critical eye, seeing through the surface message to the underlying purpose, persuasion techniques, and deeper meanings.

NMMLP seeks to educate not only how to consume media, but as part of its mission seeks to develop skills in producing media, from a poster or letter, to technology-based media that are within reach of most everyone today. This forms a basis for empowerment, acknowledging that those controlling media systems reflect the “power dynamics in our society.” Herein can lie support for building support for media literacy, with all people more apt to have influence when media literacy is accomplished.

NMMLP challenges that democracy is threatened, when media consumers fall into automaticity.

Access is needed to “information from a wide variety of sources, so we can make our own decisions.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In contrast, those media consumers who are illiterate become victims, “invisible people” without a voice for telling their story.

Media reform is possible, this group suggests, with people acting to “elevate human values over commercial values” and to create new opportunities for media models and understanding.<sup>5</sup>

I am impressed with this well-developed course in the way that it presents media literacy in a down-to-earth and relevant way. For example, in the “vocabulary” of the language of persuasion, techniques are described in anecdotal ways. This aids in understanding, just as we have identified in the importance of storytelling. Anecdotes can be a snippet of a story in a sentence or a phrase, which provide insight into deeper meaning that may be outside one's personal experience.

NMMLP provides practical application in developing Media Literacy, with guidelines for deconstructing media, using seven questions for a quick assessment. The course goes on to provide an on-line gallery of over a dozen powerful commercial advertisements, presented first with the assessment questions listed. Then the learner can continue to see sample deconstructions of these advertisements, which answer these questions effectively. After reviewing these examples, the learner is encouraged to submit a media example, with a deconstruction.

One weakness of the course is that it presents an overly simplistic view of Media Literacy. This may be effective for the organization's initial target audience of 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. But as their reputation and influence has grown, the Project needs to better acknowledge ways to go deeper into the subject and proficiency of Media Literacy.

While the Deconstruction Gallery provides excellent examples, with strong supporting details, the choice to narrowly focus on advertising skews the learners' perspective to think of Media Literacy only in terms of advertising. As Potter has more thoroughly presented, advertising is only a part, albeit significant part, of the media forms we must for which we must develop our skills. The gallery

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

included media examples of print ads and video clips, but could have included reference to films, television programs, documentaries, music lyrics, and others.

I appreciate the NMMLP's inclusion of "Making Media" as an important component of Media Literacy. This is supported with a limited resource list to help enable "ordinary people" to "create media messages and communicate them to others." Links are provided to alternative, independent media organizations, focusing primarily on this component of developing skills for media activism. The website and course is weak, however, in providing documentation to other expert opinions and research to back up their claims and concepts. References to other Media Literacy proponents and organizations would be helpful, providing additional credibility for their instruction as well as resources for deeper study.

With their base in New Mexico, it is fitting that the organization has a link to a Spanish-language brochure introducing Media Literacy to Spanish-speakers. However, the importance of their work in New Mexico should almost necessitate a Spanish version of their on-line course.

Besides the on-line instruction NMMLP provides, maintain a professional speaking staff available for youth and adult training. The organization also sponsors an annual four-day "Catalyst Institute" for intensive media literacy instruction to teachers, health professionals, community activists, and others. It is disheartening, however, to find their Catalyst Institute limited to 30 participants. This seems to portray a limited vision for sharing this important information.

After a careful review of their Media Literacy material, I find the New Mexico Media Literacy Project to be a viable introduction to instruction in Media Literacy. Their foundations and concepts are strong, and their organization demonstrates a commitment to developing media literacy skills in schools, community, and in public life.