



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
www.wsascd.org

How Do We Strengthen Democracy Through Media Literacy Education?

There’s a lot of debate about the role of technology in schools. From educator access, to student devices, to testing modality, we can’t get enough when it comes to the pros and cons of technology in classrooms. I think the debate needs to evolve. Today’s educators are faced with a mighty task that grows in complexity on an almost daily cycle: teaching their students how to identify false information, recognize credible sources, think critically, and fact-check. As researchers, journalists, and content consumers are slammed by the era of “fake news,” the rising generation must be able to discern fact from fiction.

Perhaps just as critically, they must also be able to maintain an open mind in an era of smart devices that allow our children (and the rest of us) to craft a worldview that is wholly reinforced by the customization of our almighty apps. From news feeds, to music, to entertainment, to social media platforms—our students today can craft an entire life of messages, values, and opinions that reinforce what they already believe. Like that comforting baby blanket we had as a child, our students can wrap themselves in a digital blanket that rarely asks them to consider different opinions or ideas, and almost never challenges them to defend their ideas, their biases, or their world views. We are in an age of ubiquitous information that compels educators to think more about the learning process, information sources, and critical thinking.

A 2016 study (Domonoske 2016) left Stanford researchers “shocked” by how many middle school, high school, and college students were unable to effectively evaluate the credibility of sources online. The researchers called the results “bleak” and a “threat to democracy.”

There has never been a greater need for media literacy—the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media” (Huft 2016). How do we, as educators, integrate media literacy into our everyday practice? And how do we get our students to a place where they can confidently (and correctly) verify the validity of the media they absorb?

There are some excellent resources available for all grade levels to teach media literacy. The National Association for Media Literacy Education offers resources and best practices for educators, and the Center for Media Literacy (CML) also boasts a variety of educational resources to meet a range of classroom needs. In their Media Literacy Toolkit, the CML proposes five key questions every student should ask themselves when consuming media:

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in; or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

At OSPI, we are currently working with stakeholders to update our state’s educational technology learning standards, and we are aiming to have the new standards published in February 2018. A draft of the standards, which was recently approved by the statewide steering committee, centers on technology literacy and technology fluency. The draft standards aim to have every Washington student graduate as a/an:

- Empowered learner;
- Digital citizen;
- Knowledge constructor;
- Innovative designer;
- Computational thinker;
- Creative communicator; and
- Global collaborator.

A 2016 survey showed that 50 percent of teenagers feel addicted to their mobile devices, and almost 80 percent say they check their devices at least hourly (Common Sense Media). There is no stopping the expansion of media consumption via mobile devices. So we are left with the enormous challenge of teaching our students to think critically and to maintain an open mind so the promise of a broad liberal arts education is not snuffed out by the narrowing of thought and opinion due to the ease of customization and self-selection our devices now provide.

Today’s educators face a much different (and arguably more difficult) undertaking when it comes to teaching the next generation how to consume and tailor media in a thoughtful and engaged way. Together we will have to be intentional about this work in every subject and at every grade level.

Submitted By:
Chris Reykdal
Superintendent of Public Instruction

Katy Payne
Master of Public Administration Candidate
The Evergreen State College

Sources

“Dealing with Devices: The Parent-Teen Dynamic.” *Common Sense Media*, 03 May 2016.

Domonoske, Camila. “Students Have ‘Dismaying’ Inability To Tell Fake News From Real, Study Finds.” *National Public Radio (NPR)*, 23 Nov. 2016.

“Five Key Questions Form Foundation for Media Inquiry.” *Center for Media Literacy*, n.d.

Huft, Susan. “Media Literacy is Critical.” *International Literacy Association*, 16 Dec. 2016.