

Understanding Assessment in Media Education

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A good media education programme has three components:

- **experiencing media**
- **interpreting media**
- **making media products**

Teachers need good assessment instruments, and different ones, for each of these three programme parts.

Experiencing media: Student anthologies, logs, journals and surveys would be useful evaluation tools.

Interpreting media: This requires instruments such as reports and reviews; analytical frameworks; critical or deconstruction exercises; and real-world projects and investigations.

Making media products: Assess portfolios (or course work) and/or use scales and rubrics.

In evaluating media education, teachers should make sure they are not assessing some aspect other than the ones they intend to assess. Assessment tools that emphasize students' ability to write (such as essays) may be assessing their writing rather than their media abilities. Projects that require students to draw (such as storyboards or animation exercises) may be assessing artistic ability rather than media ability. Good assessment evaluates what the course teaches, not something else.

If our way of assessing does not support the way we prefer to teach, then the assessment instrument should be questioned. For instance, it might not be appropriate to administer multiple-choice questions to assess whether students were able to respond to subtext in a media presentation. On the other hand, if we have taught a short unit on the parts and functions of a video camera, a quick multiple-choice test might be appropriate to test this kind of low-level knowledge.

Why is assessment important in media education?

Assessment is important in all programmes, not just in media education. But new programmes like media education face special scrutiny when it comes to assessment. Media education is frequently accused of being a "soft" course because it deals with material that is already part of students' everyday knowledge and experience. Some critics ask, ignoring the irony in their question, "Why would we set up a course to teach kids how to watch TV? They already know how to do that." One way of disarming this criticism is to show that the assessment in the course will be rigorous and demanding. New programme areas often have great difficulty getting established as mainstream subjects. There are many reasons for this, often connected to budget, time availability in a crowded curriculum, internecine jealousies among teachers in different departments, board politics, etc.

New subject initiatives can have a good chance of success if a number of criteria are met. Among these are the following conditions:

- Official support is provided in terms of provincial or state curriculum legislation, but the initiative to set up the course must be local.
- The building and district administrators support the grassroots curriculum initiative.
- Teachers who are not connected directly with media education support other teachers who want to implement it.
- Parents are informed and supportive.
- Resources are provided for the new programme (including time, space, training and personnel, as well as money and equipment).
- The school has a well-prepared and well-articulated programme outline.
- There is a clear plan for assessing student progress and programme effectiveness.

It is often folly to try to implement any programme without first making sure that most if not all of these items are in place. Nevertheless, many new programmes commence without adequate attention to the last of these conditions, even though parents, administrators and students all appreciate the value of a clear, valid, reliable, authentic and fair system of assessment and evaluation that is clearly set out in advance. The existence of good assessment methods can be used as a lever to bring politicians, administrators, parents and other teachers on side.

How can teachers assure themselves that their assessment is valid and reliable?

In a word, the answer is "moderation." When teachers monitor each other's assessments by exchanging materials that have already been assessed, then discussing together any issues that arise, they are taking part in one of the most valuable assessment-learning situations possible. It takes confidence and courage to set up moderation sessions, and it is better that they be teacher initiated than laid on from above. Media teachers may not be able to find a colleague in their own building to partner with in such an exercise, but there are colleagues in other schools, and professional organizations that could help. Take out a membership in your province's chapter of the Canadian Association of Media Education Organizations (CAMEO) and seek out other media teachers interested in professional development in assessment (<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/CAMEO/members/members.pdf>).

How do you assess "experiencing media"?

Experiencing media is that part of the media programme where students "read" media texts for reasons of interest, entertainment, personal curiosity, etc., rather than for academic purposes. Even so, when students respond to these media texts, they need to show that they are reacting to more than just the surface of the text; that they are indeed students (rather than merely witnesses) of media; and that they are capable of interpreting media texts (and subtexts) and connecting them to their own lives and experiences. The student's response may be delivered in a journal, a log, a talk, a seminar, etc. **There is no assumption that it should be expressed in some academic written form, such as an essay.**

ASSESSMENT SCALE FOR PERSONAL RESPONSE TO MEDIA TEXTS

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LEVEL 5

The student integrates personal feelings, experiences, hopes, fears, reflections or beliefs with the text. The personal response is rooted in the text, shows a clear understanding of the whole text and its subtext(s), and makes connections to other texts.

LEVEL 4

The student connects personal feelings, experiences, hopes, fears, reflections or beliefs with the text. The personal response refers to the text and conveys a sense of understanding of the text and a partial understanding of its subtext.

LEVEL 3

The student explores personal feelings, experiences, hopes, fears, reflections or beliefs and makes a superficial or concrete connection to the text.

LEVEL 2

The student retells or paraphrases the text or identifies devices in isolation, making only a superficial reference to personal feelings or experiences.

Or

The student writes about personal feelings, etc., without connecting to or referring to the text.

LEVEL 1

The student response makes no references to personal feelings, etc., and shows little or no interaction with or understanding of the text.

LEVEL 0

The student response is irrelevant or incomprehensible.

How do you assess media analysis?

I have recently been engaged with media educators from a number of countries in a project designed to develop an assessment instrument for determining the level of critical awareness in students' insight into a text such as a feature film. This project is based on the research of Dr. Alexander Fedorov of the Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute in Russia. Briefly, it employs an assessment scale to analyze how students talk about a text, using levelled descriptions of discourse to make assessments on depth of insight. Here is the scale used in that project. The scale has been validated in use with classes of sixteen or more students in both Russia and Ontario. The next stage I would like to pursue is to incorporate an overlay of assessment language that would include references to the key concepts of media education.

SCALE FOR ASSESSING LEVELS OF CRITICAL INSIGHT IN FEATURE FILMS

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	Plot (fabula)	Character (persona)	Author (creator)	Synthesis (adjudicator)
High level	Sees the story as one component of the author's, actor and other artists' work. Expands comprehension by connecting the story to themes, universal mythological patterns and other works.	Understands the complexity of performance and the psychology of characterization. Comprehends how performances complement other components of the work. Expands comprehension by connecting characters and performances to models in other works.	Identifies the concrete and conceptual work of the media author(s) (for example, editing, script, lighting, sound, camera placement and movement, composition, ideology). Expands comprehension by perceiving the interaction of the various artistic components of the work and making connections to different works by this author and others.	Views the work as a united and integrated whole. Is aware of and can articulate strengths, gaps, excesses and deficiencies. Cites sources to substantiate conclusions. Makes predictions based on multiple and integrated insights into the work.
Middle level	Understands the story, its development and syntax.	Identifies with character(s) – their psychology, motives, actions – as heroic figures.	Understands (some) separate components of the authoring arts, and may make occasional connections among them.	Can state and support personal preferences informally. Can make judgments based on knowledge of genre and/or the body of work of an actor or an individual artist (e.g., Steven Spielberg). Predicts outcomes based on insights or patterns of plot and character.
Low level	May not follow the entire narrative thread but naively focuses on fragments or episodes as the	Sees (one or a small selection of) characters in two-dimensional terms.	Is very marginally aware of some aspects of the author's art (e.g., special effects,	May refer to other works in simple comparison. Makes predictions based on simple plot

	principal focus or purpose of the work. Makes little distinction between representation and reality.		sound).	conventions.
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This material has been adapted from the author's earlier work on the Media Awareness Network. Readers are welcome to correspond with the author at cworsnop@cogeco.ca.