

A Seven-Power Lens ON 21ST-CENTURY LITERACY:

each of us may define thinking differently: as a balance of analytical, creative, and practical abilities; as intellectual habits of mind like open-mindedness; or as mental processes specific to a discipline. However we define it, we must agree that today's students, our future citizens, should be able to marshal thinking skills to spot "eye-witness news...a twinkie of the airwaves" (Bennett, 2001) or "manufactured news" (Postman, 1992) if they are to reason intelligently about societal issues and draw meaningful conclusions about political candidates.

Explicit teaching of 21st-century literacy metaskills can position students to analyze and evaluate news reporting in today's visually drenched world. In the model in Figure 1 at right of cross-teaching three literacies together—visual literacy, news media literacy, and information literacy (American Association of School Librarians, 1998)—students learn to ask important questions and engage in discussions central to democratic society.

By sequentially focusing seven increasingly strong lenses on the news media, beginning with a close-up look at a news photo, students learn to apply powerful cross-disciplinary skills of visual, news media, and information literacy to analyze current political issues. (See Figure 2 at right.)

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Figure 1

Concepts to Understand	Questions to ask
The visual "language" of the news can be read. News-media literacy includes elements such as grammar, syntax, metaphors, and codes, which are analogous to other forms of literacy.	How do elements such as color, perspective, and icons communicate to "readers"? Why is a photograph chosen? Why do print and online layouts differ? What governs the design of segments and sequences in television and cable news?
Norms govern the culture of reporting and reading the news.	What makes something newsworthy? What expectations do news readers have?
News is shaped by contexts , such as the news medium's audience and the history behind the event.	Who is the audience for this information? What has preceded this?
News is shaped by lenses. News is truth shaped by an author and editor.	Why did the author write the story this way? Why did the editor choose this photo? How does news differ when reported by a columnist, an anchor, or an embedded reporter?
News needs authentication.	How are facts verified? How does the reporter develop in-depth background? What is the reader's role in verifying authority or checking accuracy?
The medium is the message.	What constraints operate within a particular medium? How does the medium change the message?
Citizens make informed choices using the news. News provides a marketplace of ideas in which future news is created.	Why does understanding of the news matter? How does news impact future news?

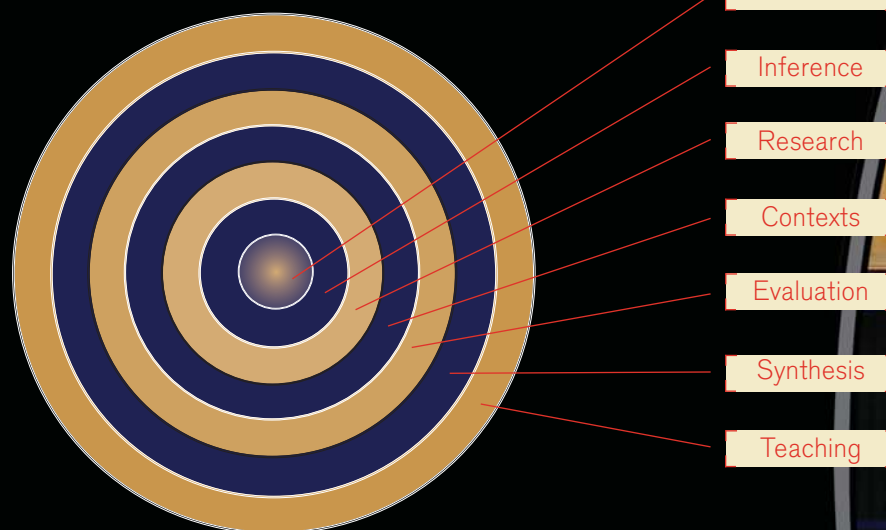


Figure 2

Instilling Cross-Disciplinary Visual, News Media, and Information-Literacy Skills

OPTICAL 3X

TEACHING
SYNTHESIS
EVALUATION
CONTEXTS
RESEARCH
INFERENCE
SENSES

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Tim Sloan/AFP/Getty Images

Figure 3 President Bush responds to the anti-war demonstrations in February.



Figure 4 The official flag of the presidency.



Figure 5 The presidential seal.

**Lens #1 Close Observation:
The Power of the Senses**

Learning to look without drawing inferences is a powerful observational tool that can gather rich visual data for the observer. Consider the photograph in Figure 3, which appeared with an article entitled “Bush Says Worldwide Protesters Won’t Change Approach to Iraq,” by Joel Brinkley, in the February 18, 2003 international edition of *The New York Times* online [<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/18/international/worldspecial/18CND-IRAQ.html?ex=1064744697&ei=1&en=26a4ef057dbc8807>].

In it, we see the President of the United States flanked by two flags—the U.S. flag and another one that students may not initially recognize as being the official flag of the Presidency—Figure 4. A seal bearing the words “The President of the United States” is affixed to the front of his podium—Figure 5. The President wears a blue shirt, red tie, and dark suit with a U.S. flag on the lapel. His hand, eyes and head are raised, looking off to the right. The photograph has been taken from below, angled slightly upward. Behind him hangs a painting of another U.S. President, Theodore Roosevelt, whose identity and background will probably initially elude most students.

**Lens #2.
Drawing on Prior Knowledge:
The Power of Inference**

Visual literacy is a learned “reading” of images. Semiotics is the study of how the reading of signs and symbols together communicate complicated ideas in the form of codes (Lester, 2000). Just as basic textual literacy uses vocabulary, metaphors, and genres, visual literacy employs colors, icons, and various media to communicate ideas and feelings to readers. Grounded in the senses and surrounded by a context, both basic and visual literacy rely on active construction of meaning through a process of interpreting codes and signs.

The President’s serious face, with a hand raised as if in explanation and his eyes looking out above the audience, suggests to the reader that he’s talking about beliefs rather than practical, down-to-earth strategies. Body language codes are specific to cultures; this hand position, posture, and eyes would be read quite differently in a less egalitarian culture. At the same time, he is flanked by the President’s special podium with its seal (White

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House, 2003) and the flags of his office and of the United States—images to be read individually and collectively as symbols of his authority and power. He wears blue, a color that photographs well and is often worn by television anchors (Harris, n.d.), and red, an attention-getting color associated in Western culture with power (Lester, 2000). Together, these colors suggest patriotism to American readers, an association that is reinforced by the U.S. flag at his right hand and on his lapel. All public figures make conscious use of such icons, and most reporters notice them. For example, when then-President Clinton was described by a reporter as balancing “his usual dark suit with a stylish deep-blue shirt, topped off by a red tie emblazoned with United Nations symbols,” the reporter was commenting on a President dressed for a particular interview concerning his foreign policy legacy (Baker and Harris, 1997).

Students need a visual analysis worksheet, such as “Reading Media Photographs” (see Figure 6 on page 34), to structure their thinking about observations and inferences. Each observable element can be interpreted from three distinct perspectives. First, students can respond as “readers” on the basis of their prior experience and own intuition. Next, students can stand in the President’s shoes: Why might he choose to deliver this speech to the press in this setting? What, students can speculate, might be the main point that the President wants to convey? Finally, from the stance of the International News editor of *The New York Times Online*, why select *this* particular photograph from the many that were taken of this event? What tone and point of view might students expect the accompanying article to use?

Lens #3. Gathering Information: The Power of Research

For this particular speech, President Bush and his staff decided to position

his podium in front of a painting of Teddy Roosevelt. Using information-literacy skills, students can learn from an encyclopedia, history text, or biography that Roosevelt’s name is associated with nationalism and expansionism. Hoping to rekindle America’s pioneering spirit, Roosevelt wrote to a friend, “In strict confidence...I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one” (Zinn, 2001). During the Spanish-American War, Roosevelt led the “Rough Riders” to victory in Cuba, making the U.S. the undisputed power in the Caribbean and a significant force in the Pacific. His “big stick” policy thrust the U.S. into a more aggressive foreign policy.

Lens #4. Deepening Knowledge: The Power of Contexts

What message was the President delivering that day? What was the context in which he was acting? How was it reported for *The New York Times*? Applying lens #4, we move outward from the photograph to the news article and research the historical context in which this image and news report were created. We learn, by examining the online news for the preceding days, that it was a 3-day “President’s Day” weekend. There had been huge anti-war protests in the U.S. and elsewhere that were featured prominently in the press (Hendrix, Podger, & Rubenstein, 2003). The reporter for *The New York Times* alludes to this in his article:

In his first public comments on the protests, Mr. Bush was dismissive, saying “that democracy is a beautiful thing, and that people are allowed to express their opinions.” But allowing the protesters to influence him, he said, would be “like saying I’m going to decide policy based upon a focus group.... The role of a leader is to decide policy based upon the security of the people,” Mr. Bush said.

—Brinkley, 2003

Over the weekend, newspapers and television had been full of the photo-

ops from the anti-war protests—children and veterans carrying peace signs, and scenes of marches in Paris, London, Seoul, Toronto, and other major cities. A media-literate student knows that such dramatic news draws an audience. Reporters, photographers, and readers favor spectacles or crises because they are more exciting to read about than chronic, long-term problems. The President is reclaiming the nation’s focus; his words are vivid, an assertive speech given against the backdrop of another colorful President’s image.

A reassertion of power fits with the ethos of news reporting that often frames a story in terms of who takes charge (or doesn’t) rather than providing an extended analysis of the nature of a problem. News stories follow familiar “guiding templates,” such as the conflict between order and disorder or good versus evil. These universal myths resonate with news readers as familiar explanations of events. Readers think, “I’ve heard that before. That makes sense.”

Thus, a portrait emerges in words and images of a President attempting to regain control of media attention after days of eye-catching scenes of anti-war rallies. His message conforms to the *Times* headline: “Bush Says Worldwide Protests Won’t Change Approach to Iraq.” The reader thinks, “I know this scene—a leader in control.”

Lens #5. Gaining Understanding: The Power of Evaluation

What else can students do to deconstruct our text and photo? Using information literacy, we can evaluate the “authority” of the reporter. A simple search in Google on “Joel Brinkley,” the reporter’s name, reveals that he was a “former *New York Times* bureau chief in Jerusalem during Intifada I and the Gulf War who won the Pulitzer for international reporting on the Pol Pot genocide and its aftermath” and author of a muckraking book on the

Figure 6

Visual Literacy: News Media
Reading Media Photographs

WHAT DO YOU SEE? (Observations)	WHAT DOES IT MEAN? (Inference)
Nonverbal gestures (arms, hands, fingers) Facial expression (head, eyes, mouth) Body language (distances, code matching) People (age, gender, ethnicity) Clothing (type, color) Background (objects, setting) Camera angle	

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<http://www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/newsmedia/polphoto.pdf>

development of high-definition television (Berenger, 2002). The reader thinks, “He’s a credible reporter with good references.” Yet, let’s see what he missed and why.

In this particular news article, Brinkley reported that the President would continue to press for another resolution in the United Nations Security Council while simultaneously asserting that this measure wasn’t really necessary because U.N. resolution 1441 already gave the U.S. authority to attack Iraq. However, news reporter Brinkley did not comment on the portrait behind the President. Consequently, he did not explore the obvious similarities in foreign policy between Bush and Roosevelt. Here is evidence of another characteristic of news reporting. Under a tight deadline, a reporter may omit historical background that could help a reader understand the larger context of the news. By way of explanation, Brinkley wrote to me in an e-mail, “If you pulled it off the Web, that means it was an early version written very quickly for immediate use on the Web. I would bet I wrote that version in a very few minutes.” An opportunity for a reporter to provide context, background, and depth for the online reader is lost—an omission under time constraints. Students will find that such omissions are common in news reporting.

There are other news pitfalls that media-literate students should be ready to identify. Reporters operating under a time crunch may overly rely on controlled information from a press briefing managed by the press secretary. Or, because of a lack of

expertise in economics or science, news reporters may use a press release composed by a corporate publicist without checking the information through other sources. In such cases, sloppy reporting rather than accidental omissions are to blame.

In other cases, omissions may actually be a result of the reader’s perception of a missing “template.” For example, while 600 embedded reporters in Iraq beamed news back 24/7, it seemed to viewers and readers that something was lacking. Perhaps we were looking for a “governing template” that could provide us with “simple and conclusive portraits of what ‘really’ happened.” Instead, we received daily data from embedded observers, a slice of “reality observed firsthand...filled with complexity and room for doubt”(Murray, Schwartz & Lichter, 2002). We felt unsatisfied because years of reading the news had conditioned us to look for a neat story—a simplistic, satisfying narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

Lens #6. Generalizing Learning: The Power of Synthesis

News and its images are always selected truth. Notably, during the recent Iraqi conflict, most news editors chose to omit brutal visual images in favor of long-distance bombing scenes—a decision that was debated later in the press. While some applauded those news editors’ sensibilities, others asked if readers *should* be so distanced from the consequences of war. Such questions are clearly worthy of discussion with students.

Selection at its worst can create the “FOX Effect” (Rutenberg, 2002), exemplified by opinionated, nationalistic reporting. Regrettably, FOX’s huge ratings coup during the Iraqi Conflict may signal to other broadcasters that objective reporting loses audience share. Citizens must understand that a news story is always constructed by choosing from the information given, shaped by the “lens” of a particular writer or photographer, written for a particular audience, and told from a particular setting.

Teachers can make this selection process concrete by comparing how newspaper “real estate” is assigned or how broadcast minutes are used. Students can clock both the 6:00 p.m. broadcast and cable news segments on the same evening. Their pooled data in an Excel spreadsheet shows graphically how much time is spent on certain types of news or on particular stories. Or, they can compare how news is treated in various countries by examining both the layout and the selection of news stories using the “Today’s Front Pages” examples from 28 countries (Newseum, 2003). How many inches does this story have? What differences exist among audiences throughout the world? The area “above the fold” in a print newspaper and the area on the computer screen visible without scrolling down in an online newspaper are considered prime space. Editors allot time and space to stories they believe will draw the most “eyeballs.”

Lens #7. Student Learning: The Power of Teaching

We know that 75 percent of American adolescents are online (U.S. Census, 2002) and 85 percent of all Internet users expect to find key news information online (Horrigan and Rainie, 2002). Yet “the adolescents of the nineties are more isolated and more unsupervised than other generations” (Hersch, 1998). The tools of visual, media, and information literacy must be taught in school because they will (or won’t) be used at home.

Teaching must capitalize on students’ preferred literacy behaviors online. For example, since we know that students are speed-reading and skimming online, that they prefer clicking

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to scrolling, and that they will rarely read below the “fold” (Nielsen, 2002), we can teach quick ways to assess authority and credibility. Simple techniques, such as cutting back the URL, or pasting the author’s name or an asserted fact into a search engine, can validate authority or confirm bias. Since we know that students don’t visually distinguish between content and advertising—they click on ads as just another content source (Nielsen, 2002)—we can explicitly point out the difference in an online news article like the one we’ve been discussing.

In *Intelligence Reframed*, Howard Gardner contends that “literacies, skills, and disciplines ought to be pursued as tools that allow us to enhance our understanding of important questions, topics, and themes” (Gardner, 1999). By applying cross-disciplinary literacy skills and systematically using the “Seven Powers,” we can help students see their own power as future voters in our democratic society.

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