

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CREATING MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS

Peter DeBenedittis, Ph.D.

www.medialiteracy.net

1. **The Big Umbrella**—For media literacy to take hold in a community it must include all elements of the community truly concerned about changing the culture and protecting children from the harmful effects of media. You can not exclude the religious right because of its views without excluding half the parents concerned about raising healthy children. You can not exclude the left wing radicals because you would exclude the other half of parents trying to change things for the better. An effective media literacy project is inclusive. It has room for every non-industry viewpoint under its Big Umbrella.
2. **The War is Culture**—Tobacco, binge drinking, violence, body image, eating disorders, and debt are just fronts in this war. Always remember the big picture. We will never move hazardous tobacco advertising, for example, out of our culture until we change the entire system of media that delivers it. Even if you are funded to only do media literacy around specific topics, it's easier to gain access to schools and teachers if you approach them with the opportunity to present critical thinking skills to students. Use your specific topic as an example of how media manipulates us, but be sure to include general media literacy skills in every presentation. If a student learns media literacy prevention for any specific substance, they will have learned it for all of them. Knowing how alcohol ads manipulate children to drink involves the same skills as knowing how tobacco ads manipulate them to smoke.
3. **Bridge, Coordinate, and Leverage Funds**—Growing a media literacy project is like growing a garden, the plants start out as tiny shoots. Look for a small grant from a private foundation and apply for it with matching funds. Go to your schools or the health department to get the match. This builds partnerships and lets all the parties involved know they are part of something larger, something supported by the community. Once you get funding, begin to expand your reach by covering additional threats to children. When you are giving a presentation on tobacco advertising, include materials on alcohol ads. When presenting on violence, include materials on risky or premature sex in the media. This will build community links and create more and more demand for media education in a variety of venues. You will be able to leverage small grants into bigger and bigger ones by demonstrating the success you've had and the unmet demand out there.

4. Never Take Industry Money—Never! Astroturf lobbying and industry funding is already co-opting the media literacy movement to try to create public acceptance for Commercials in the Classroom or normalizing harmful consumption habits. If an industry group offers money, tell them that if they were serious about supporting media literacy, they could change the socially destructive behaviors your project is teaching people about.
5. Censorship is Not the Answer—The problem with our media system is that it is already censored. Eight corporations own 85% of all media in America (as of 1998, it will be fewer in later years). This lack of access creates most of the cultural ills media literacy seeks to correct. We can't fix the problem by adding to it. We need more voices carrying different messages in our media system, not less.
6. Media Literacy is Not Anti-Media—Consuming media has both positive and negative consequences. Our purpose is to teach both.
7. Use Media to Teach Media—For people to understand the high tech nature and powerful manipulative techniques the media uses, we must show them examples that are high tech and powerful. It's OK to use the same manipulative techniques that drug dealers like tobacco and alcohol companies use when teaching media literacy for prevention. When students question you for doing so, praise them. Their being able to question your use of techniques means they have learned enough media literacy to apply it. That's the whole point of teaching media literacy. It's not about how we carry the message, it's about fully owning the message we carry.
8. Involve the Whole Community—You'd be surprised at the types of groups that have requested media education: senior citizens, churches, social clubs, business professional meetings, doctors, nurses, and even community events at the local grocery store! If you think that the media literacy movement is dependent on just teachers or just prevention activists, think again. Our goal is to get everyday people educated about media literacy. This will create the critical mass we need to see a cultural revolution take place.

“I see a culture formed around humanity’s hearts and desires, not dictated by corporate greed. I see media and entertainment that expresses, enriches, and enhances, rather than teaches compulsive debt, substance abuse, violence and risky behavior because there is profit in it. I see a world where everyday people have the power to shape their culture because they have access to the information and communication venues upon which democracy depends.”

—Peter DeBenedittis, Ph.D.

To the Revolution! May we carry the message of hope and empowerment forward!