

Media Influences

Background Information and Activities to Increase Media Literacy

Background Information for Educators

Individuals learn about their role in the world from many sources and one of the most powerful teachers is often the media. Television, DVDs, films, internet, magazines and other sources blatantly dictate acceptable social behaviors and gender roles. Given the tremendous number of commercials and images aimed at the public the media has a major impact on an individual's view of themselves. These messages can impact the career choices that young people make and lead them away from making choices that aren't traditional for their gender. This limits options both for individuals and for society.

Commercial advertising does much to create gender stereotypes. In order to sell all manner of products to a consumer society, advertisers sell an idealized image of what a person should have or how they should look. With computer technology, advertisers can also create and distort images, morph looks and scenery so that everything and everyone looks perfect and "fantastic". Obviously, the average persons can never look, act or behave like the scenes in commercials and advertisers may hope that people will feel insecure enough to buy their products.

It is estimated that we see as many as three hundred ads each day. Bombarded at a critical time of personal development, the messages aimed at teenagers can be particularly damaging. Educators can assist students to become media literate individuals who are better able to decipher the complex messages they receive from:

- television
- radio,
- Internet.
- newspapers,
- magazines,
- books,
- billboards and signs,
- packaging
- marketing materials

Media literacy skills can help one understand not only the surface content of media messages but the deeper, and often more important, meanings.. By promoting media literacy we can encourage students to make choices that truly reflect the individuals and lead to wider options and greater satisfaction for both men and women.

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Examples of Media Influences at Different Life Stages

Birth to Kindergarten Messages

Nursery rhymes and children's picture books and some children's television often reflect roles and behaviors from the past. These images do not support current cultural, economic and social norms. For example: women today are not princesses who are waiting for prince charming to rescue them and live happily ever after.

Fact: Today, most women will have to support themselves, and/or their children, sometime during their lifetime.

Grade School Messages

Toys, video games, computer access, television, and movies often reinforce materialism, super powers, fantasy worlds, and violence. There is little attention given to cooperative behavior.

Fact: Most of the future jobs will require the ability to get along and work well with others.

Teenagers and Young Adult Messages

Music, television, movies, internet and magazine advertising, and mass marketing all reflect a focus on spending money to look, be, and have what is considered "cool". These are often sexualized and stereotyped messages and they often portray an unrealistic, easy life with easy money. The necessity to work hard and achieve in school is often down-played. Those who take school seriously may suffer rejection by their peers, and be labeled "nerds" and outcasts, partially as a result of these marketing approaches.

Fact: Young people who can trust their own judgment and see how education can lead to higher paying jobs are more likely to succeed.

Activities to Use in the Classroom

Activity for Adults and Older Students

Who and What Influenced You?

Ask students: Consider your career choice. Who, or what, inspired you? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. What are your earliest memories about the world of work?
2. What did you want to become when you grew up?
3. Did you follow fashions/ styles that you saw in magazines or on television?
4. Who, or what, influenced your choice of career?
5. What did your parents/family expect you to become?
6. Were these influences traditional or nontraditional?
7. Were you ever discouraged by peers and family when you made a suggestion about a line of work?
8. Did you see others like you in media when you were growing up?

Explain how the media played a role in your career decision

Activity for All Students

Magazine Analysis

Choose a popular mainstream magazine to review. This may be done in groups or in pairs. Use a variety of magazines.

.Look at the cover of the magazine.

1. What age group and gender is the magazine targeting?
 - In general, what is the focus of the articles that the magazine chose to highlight on the cover?
 - Does it have a model, what does he/she look like?
2. Look at the Table of Contents.
 - In general, what are the articles about?
 - What is the focus of the "Departments"?
 - Scan the magazine for the advertisements.
 - What messages are the advertisements sending to the reader?
 - What types of products are they advertising, in general?
 - How are they persuading the reader to buy the products?
3. What is the overall message the magazine is sending to the reader?
 - What occupations are portrayed for women? For men?
 - Are there any examples of nontraditional roles?

Activity for All Students

Media Scavenger Hunt

Using a variety of media forms try to find articles, images, advertisements that depict the following topics. Ask students to find something in the media piece that depicts the following:

4. African American Community
5. Asian Community
6. Crime
7. Economic Issues
8. Elderly People
9. Fashion
10. Fuel Efficiency
11. Health Care And Medicine
12. Healthy Food
13. International News
14. Latino Community
15. Native American Community
16. Nontraditional Workers
17. People With Disabilities
18. Pop Stars Or Celebrities
19. Science, Technology Engineering Or Math (STEM)
20. Space Program
21. Sports Teams Or Players
22. Women's Issues
23. Ways To Save Energy

Ask students:

For how many categories did you find media representations?

What were the easiest categories for which to find examples?

What were the most difficult categories?

What does this tell you about what the media chooses to focus on?

Another Source of Media Influence: Language

What we say can add to the problem of gender bias. Educators and students need to be aware of gender bias in language. The workplace will seek employees who are aware of the importance of gender neutral language.

According to studies with elementary, secondary and college students, when generic terms such as “mankind” and “you guys” are used, people envision males, even when the content or discussion implies both males and females. Research has shown that when male nouns and pronouns are used to describe jobs, female students describe the jobs as less attractive to them than when gender neutral terms are used.

*“Language is our most common tool. It not only mirrors our thoughts, it also shapes them.”
Anonymous.*

Guidelines for Eliminating Gender Bias in Language

1. Don't use masculine pronouns (he, his, him, himself) generically. Instead, make the subject of the sentence plural, or use gender neutral terms such as “technician”, “flight attendant” and “mail carrier”.
2. Use terminology that includes both women and men. Avoid such phrases such as “you guys” or “ladies”.
3. Whenever possible, use substitutions for words that begin or end with “man”, for example: chairman=chair, workman=worker, foreman=supervisor
4. Avoid the use of “girl” unless referring to a female child.
5. Use parallel terms for women and men (for example, men/women or girls/boys).
6. Refer to women by name in the same way that you refer to men.
7. Don't refer to women in terms of their roles as wife, mother, sister or daughter unless the context indicates that these particular roles are significant.
8. Avoid placing either gender in a special category by saying “female welder” or “male nurse”.
9. Eliminate unnecessary physical descriptions, for example, “attractive lady welder” or “handsome nurse”.
10. When talking about occupations, use language that does not reinforce limited views of men's and women's career choices. For example, say “the chemist works with compounds that will enable her to ...” or “the dental hygienist prepares his equipment by...”

Source: National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity. See www.napequity.org

Language Awareness Activities for Students

Provide students with a list of sex linked job titles or phrases. Ask students to brainstorm and suggest gender neutral alternatives

See the following examples:

Airline Stewardess Businessman Cameraman Chairman Congressman
Fireman
Founding father
Maiden name
Mailman Manhole Man-hours Man-to-man Manmade Manpower
Policeman Repairman
Salesman Spokesman
Statesman Weatherman

1. Ask students to review newspaper reports and advertisements to identify biased language.
2. Ask students to discuss various ways in which language affects our perception of reality.

Adapted from Michigan Center for Career and Technical Education, Michigan State University.

Other Resources for Appropriate Language Usage

1. *California Department of Education Style Manual, 2006*, CDE Press, California Department of Education, 1430 N Street, Sacramento, CA 95814-5901, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/st/documents/stylemanual.pdf>
2. Casey, Miller. *The Handbook for nonsexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers (Second Edition)*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988
3. Goode, Janet and Bingham, Mindy. *Possibilities: A Supplemental Anthology for Career Choices*. Santa Barbara, California: Academic Innovations, 1991.