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## Voices from the Field

# Linking Learning: Connecting Traditional and Media Literacies in 21st Century Learning

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“If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.”

-John Dewey

Today’s youth are failing to meet measures of traditional literacy, but they are quickly and easily acquiring skills using new tools for communication. Several national surveys show a striking picture of adolescent literacy in the U.S. today:

- 24% of high school seniors tested at or above proficient in writing (NCES 2007);
- 38% of high school seniors tested at or above proficient in reading (NCES 2009);
- 85% of teens use new forms of communication, like text messaging, at least occasionally (Lenhart et al. 2008, ii);
- “Teens tend to uphold traditional definitions of writing such that the socially oriented writing they do using electronic devices is considered ‘communication’ (and not ‘writing’) even though it is text-based” (Lenhart et al. 2008, 3).

These results indicate that many youth today fail in traditional measures of literacy, but participate in new forms of communication, and see those worlds of “literacy” and “communication” as completely separate from one another.

Given this situation, many have called for an “increased use of standardized reading and writing tests [that] continue to perpetuate a focus on teaching print literacies, at the expense of teaching media/digital literacies” (Beach and Baker 2011). Like many students, educators also tend to view literacy and communication as separate skill sets, so schools emphasize the testing regulations and demands focused on traditional literacy. As a result, today’s educational environment is moving

away from the inclusion of media literacy education in academic literacy instruction even though youth need media literacy skills at an ever-increasing rate.

Today’s society is bombarded with messages in different forms of media, and although young people are increasingly able to use these new forms of communication with ease, they do not necessarily have the abilities to fully analyze and evaluate media messages (Beach and Baker 2011); that is to say that they are not necessarily media literate. Media literacy, the abilities “to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in a variety of forms” (NAMLE), is necessary to help people understand the information presented to them and make informed decisions. However, despite decades of work to include media literacy education in academic learning (Hobbs and Jensen 2009), American education continues to emphasize its focus on testing of traditional literacy. While there must be continued efforts to teach new literacies in mainstream education, it is also crucial for educators to understand how traditional literacies can be supported by media literacy in ways that meet the demands of today’s high-stakes testing environment. This article strives to do just that: detail key links between literacy in its most traditional sense and how people are reading and writing in the 21st century so educators can immediately help learners build media literacy skills while developing traditionally tested skills and critical thinking abilities demanded in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative. After a year of qualitative research at two out-of-school media literacy programs for adolescents in the Philadelphia area, I identified important connections between these two generations of literacy. Based on the experiences and understandings of the youth participants in the programs, these links include:

1. Media literacy as a gateway to more frequent use and practice of traditional literacy;
2. Media production as a method to build on traditional writing skills; and
3. Analysis of media as a way to enhance traditional critical reading skills.

These findings will be explained in more detail after positioning them within my larger research context. First, this research must be situated within the larger body of media literacy education research. Second, there are several key assumptions about learning and literacies that informed this work. Finally, the research took place at two specific sites, The Philadelphia Student Union and Chester Voices for Change, each of which sets a particular context for an examination of literacy. With these understandings in place, the research findings and implications for how educators can use them to make immediate changes will be discussed.

### **Media Education as a Tool for Literacy Learning**

There is already extensive evidence of how media can be used as a tool for students to learn traditional literacies. Throughout its history, media literacy education has emphasized using media to engage students in academic learning (Considine, Horton, and Moorman 2009; Hobbs and Yoon 2008; Hobbs and Jensen 2009; Barrance 2010). In addition, examinations of the connections between new and traditional literacies are becoming increasingly common (Alvermann 2002; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris 2008; Hobbs 2010; Gainer and Lapp 2010; Buckingham 2003). However, despite the extensive literature available on these two topics, I will argue that today's learners need help making the connections between new and traditional literacies. Educators must better support students by explicitly linking literacies while actively working to incorporate media literacy into today's educational context. This will help learners to engage and see the importance of both forms of literacy in today's society.

For a number of educators, a main reason to teach media literacy is to motivate reluctant learners in academic learning. Considine, Horton, and Moorman (2009) explain that engaging curricula involve and respect students' existing interests and that the use of media helps to connect students to the content. Similarly, a recent publication from the British Film Institute said that film is being used to re-engage and motivate learners with more frequency (Barrance 2010, 2). This use of media in education seems to stem from a "long-standing and widespread argument ... about the need

for education to be relevant to the lived cultural experience of students with mass media and popular culture" (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 5). However, as Hobbs (2010) explains, "Although educators know that motivation and engagement are enhanced when mass media, popular culture and digital media and technology are incorporated into learning, this is not (and should not be) the sole rationale for implementing digital and media literacy into the curriculum" (31). Indeed, there is further evidence that media literacy can help students learn traditional literacies. In a review of research about literacy development in out-of-school programs, Moje and Tysvaer (2010) note that youth who use literacy outside of school appear to have "high levels of proficiency in reading and writing sophisticated texts, even among youth identified as 'struggling' in school" (39). Furthermore, Hobbs (2010) notes that good media literacy instruction "can support the acquisition of literacy competencies including comprehension, inference-making, analysis and predication. Concepts like audience, purpose, and point of view must be applied to messages from digital media and popular culture as well as printed texts" (31).

As such there are connections between out-of-school literate practices and traditional academic literacy skills, but given that 60% of teens do not see new forms of communication as writing (Lenhart et al. 2008, 24), the links between new and traditional literacies have yet to be established for the majority of learners today. As Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, director of national programs and site development at the National Writing Project, said, "We know that students often don't make connections between the writing and publishing they do on their own and their work in schools. So that's a connection we [as educators] need to help them make" (Live web chat, April 4, 2011). Clear, specific links between traditional literacy and the new literacies students use in their lives outside of school must be made by educators to help youth use their existing knowledge to be prepared as effective communicators and critical thinkers in the 21st century. To support students' learning and help them master multiple literacies, this study highlights existing connections so educators can recognize the links and better support learners to connect multiple literacies in today's educational environment.

### **Key Assumptions**

In order to fully contextualize my work, there are five key assumptions that must be explained be-

cause they greatly inform my understanding of and approach to examining the learning of new and traditional literacies.

*Assumption: Literacy is about the communication of ideas.*

At its core, I understand literacy to be about communicating. Defining literacy as reading and writing in a strictly traditional sense limits our understanding of how ideas and information can be conveyed to an audience. Writing shares ideas and reading allows people to understand information. Recognizing reading, writing, and literacy as ways to communicate and share with others allows for changes in the specific methods of sharing. People's ways of gathering information, distributing ideas, and answering questions are shifting, as evidenced by the 85% of teens who used electronic communication in 2008 (Lenhart et al. 2008, ii). These shifts in communication create new ways of using literacy, and media literacy is one logical extension of our fundamental definition of literacy.

*Assumption: Schools today tend to emphasize traditional literacy.*

In the United States, measures of academic learning in reading and writing are focused on more traditional definitions of literacy. State examinations and most literacy-related assignments in schools emphasize reading and writing in print form, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative highlights the essential parts of this traditional literacy. The CCSS include vital literate practices like being able to understand words in context and use evidence to support arguments, but the standards also emphasize what is at the core of literacy – what is important for students to learn now and in the future. In recognizing the CCSS as standards that measure traditional literacy while offering guidelines for the future, I offer connections to the CCSS throughout my findings as ways to demonstrate the connections between new and traditional literacies and to help teachers find ways to incorporate and justify media literacy in schools that are currently focused on traditional literacy.

*Assumption: Thoughtful writing is a process.*

Although it is not the same for everyone, I believe that all writing is a process. Most often, this process involves brainstorming, researching, drafting, revising, sharing, editing, and producing a final product, but the order, timing, and route between stages can

change from person to person or from product to product. Although some communications do not follow this process, I assume that thoughtful writing with details, explanations, and organization requires the author to go through a writing process. This is the quality of writing that is most often valued in schools and jobs because it demonstrates careful thought and analysis, and as such, I use this idea of a writing process as an important aspect of literacy learning and media production.

*Assumption: Learning occurs within a community.*

Informed by the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), I think that true learning happens when learners are part of a community of practice. True learning is when a student fully engages, practices, and masters a skill, set of knowledge, or practice—the kind of learning that leads people to remember, use, and build knowledge. I believe real learning happens in communities with specific goals and ways of communicating, which newcomers must learn and practice as they join the group. Within the community, there are experienced members or experts who teach new members how to participate in the group through a sort of apprenticeship. These experts lead by example and provide feedback to students before stepping away to allow the apprentice to become a new expert. As such, I approached this study by viewing both of my research sites as communities of practice, and I tried to identify how each community interacted and apprenticed new members into the group.

*Assumption: Learners are active producers of content and knowledge.*

Finally, I also firmly believe that learners are producers. This is closely tied to the idea of a community of practice, which asserts that new members actively contribute to the production of the community through their increased involvement. Moving beyond this, I believe that students are producers of culture and knowledge. Rather than seeing learners as empty vessels to fill with knowledge, I contend that students and teachers create knowledge and learning together and that learners play a key role in that process. Because youth in this study are producers of media as well as contributing producers in their communities of practice and, at a larger scale, makers of youth culture, I often refer to them as “young producers” to recognize them and their power as creators.

### The Study

As a Stoneleigh Junior Fellow<sup>1</sup> at Research for Action<sup>2</sup> in Philadelphia, I spent a year researching how urban youth learn during out-of-school media literacy programs. This qualitative research was conducted at the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU)<sup>3</sup> and Chester Voices for Change (VFC)<sup>4</sup>, with observations and interviews conducted within the programs. These case studies took place from the summer of 2010 through the winter of 2011. Although both sites involved adolescents in media literacy education programs outside of school, they were distinct from one another and required slightly different research methods, which will be explained in more detail.

### Research Sites

The Philadelphia Student Union is a youth organizing group that has worked for improvements in the city's public education system since 1995. A youth-led organization, PSU's workshops, trainings, campaigns, and actions are organized and carried out by young people from across the city. PSU members, primarily high school students, collaborate to improve education by organizing around issues like nonviolent schools and funding equity. PSU teaches media literacy to members as part of its organizing work. This includes opportunities for critical analysis of media and media production. With several hundred members in the whole organization, PSU has youth-produced written journalism, music, video, and radio. My research followed PSU's radio program, *On Blast*, which has an online podcast<sup>5</sup> and a live radio show on a local low-power radio station.

Voices for Change started in 2009 in Chester, Pennsylvania, a city about 15 miles southwest of Philadelphia where youth also face issues connected to poverty and failing public schools. I founded and led VFC while pursuing undergraduate studies at Swarthmore College, running it first as a six-week summer program in 2009 and later as an afterschool program twice a week in the fall of 2010. In my role at VFC, I worked as the primary instructor with a small number of volunteer college instructors and local middle and high school participants. There were 10 members in 2009 and five in 2010. In both versions, VFC participants worked to-

gether to write, act in, film, produce, and edit their own short film based on teen issues.<sup>6</sup> The program's main focus was to foster positive youth development through media literacy, specifically through the use of video production.

### Research Methods

This work is based on qualitative research involving two case studies and some cross-case analysis. Each case study required slightly different methods according to the site. At PSU, I was an outsider and newcomer with the sole purpose of conducting research. I used interpretive research methods over my seven months with PSU, taking detailed field notes during my observations coupled with deliberate reflection on emerging themes throughout that process. Drawing on interpretive methodology, I first focused on understanding the organization as a whole before moving to examine the radio program specifically. This was accomplished by observing a summer leadership training and talking with PSU staff members, both of which provided an overview of PSU's work before going to specific radio trainings or meetings.

In contrast, at VFC, I was actively involved in the development of the program. As the main program instructor and researcher, I utilized practitioner inquiry, so both theory and my practice informed my work. I also looked for ways to improve the program in a more immediate way, using my field notes and reflections to inform future practice. In addition, my field notes were taken immediately after the program rather than during the activities because I was often teaching in program time. Despite these differences in my position in the organizations, the research at both sites involved detailed notes on the interactions, conversations, and activities of the participants.

In addition to program observations of a wider number of participants, I interviewed a select number of participants. Demographic data for the interviewees is included in Table 1.

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Stoneleigh Foundation, go to <http://www.stoneleighfoundation.org>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about Research for Action, go to <http://www.researchforaction.org>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about PSU, go to <http://www.phillystudentunion.org>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about VFC, go to <http://www.chestervfc.wordpress.com>.

<sup>5</sup> To hear PSU's podcasts, go to <http://www.onblast.podomatic.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> To see VFC's videos, go to <http://www.youtube.com/user/chestervfc>.

Table 1: Interviewee data

Organization	Interview Type	Grades	Male : Female Ratio	Self-Identified Race(s)	Types of Schools Attended	Notes
PSU (1)	Focus Group	9 - college	5:4	6 – Black or African American only 3 – Black or African American mixed with at least 1 other race or ethnicity	6 – neighborhood 3 – magnet (all within School District of Philadelphia - SDP)	
PSU (2)	Focus Group	9 - 12	2:4	5 – Black or African American only 1 – Hispanic or Latino	1 – neighborhood 5 – magnet (all within SDP)	2 interviewees participated in both PSU focus groups
VFC (2010 members)	Focus Group	7 - 11	1:2	3 – Black or African American	3 – magnet or charter schools (all within Chester Upland School District - CUSD)	3 of 5 total participants interviewed
VFC (2009 members)	Individual Interviews	8 - 12	1:4	5 – Black or African American	1 – neighborhood (outside of CUSD) 3 – Catholic (outside of CUSD) 1 – charter (within CUSD)	5 of 10 total participants interviewed

All field notes and interviews were transcribed fully and analyzed by coding for common themes. The coding list<sup>7</sup> was developed while reviewing the transcriptions upon completion of the data collection, and it included different aspects of the learning process students used in the programs, the development of their communities of practice, and the myriad motivations found among the participants. The coding process helped identify ideas, goals, interests, and actions or activities that were shared between individual interviews, observations, and the two sites while also signaling the variations between them.

However, there are some characteristics of the research that place specific parameters on the application of these findings. First, the data involves youth who were actively involved in the programs, and the interviews were voluntary and likely drew from participants who were more engaged and positive about PSU or VFC. As such, these findings may reflect selection bias, but they still represent the realities experienced by youth involved in these programs. In addition, these case studies relied on limited access to the participants' lives beyond their participation in the programs. Without access to the students' school performances or their

development outside of the programs, the findings are specific to these programs and their effects on the participants. Although these findings may be limited, it is important to recognize the voices and experiences of the youth participants as a way to build the research on the connections between new and traditional literacies in ways that can be applied immediately in academic situations.

### Findings

The results of this study detail the experiences and understandings of young producers to build on existing research focused on using media literacy to engage learners or help students learn and practice literacy-related skills. First, this study reaffirmed the existing knowledge that, for some youth, involvement in media literacy programs can spark interest to engage in literate practices. However, beyond motivating some learners, this work shows that media literacy can support traditional literacy skills like:

1. using the writing process (CCSS ELA6-12 W5)<sup>8</sup>
2. targeting a specific audience (CCSS ELA6-12 W4)
3. understanding perspective (CCSS ELA6-12 R6, 9)
4. evaluating arguments (CCSS ELA6-12 R7, W8).

<sup>7</sup> The full coding list can be found in the appendix.

<sup>8</sup> When referring to specific standards from the CCSS, the following format will be used: CCSS (Common Core State Standards) + ELA (English/Language Arts for Grades 6-12 + W (Writing) or R (Reading) + # (number of standard as listed by the CCSS).

Interviews with youth participants and observations of program activities at PSU and VFC provided evidence that these media literacy programs can offer opportunities for youth to strengthen traditional literacy competencies while producing media. Based on these findings, I suggest that media literacy includes a number of activities that can support the mastery of skills outlined in the CCSS, indicating connections between new and traditional literacies. By highlighting some of the specific ways that media literacy can engage learners, develop writing abilities, and hone reading abilities, this article aims to help provide K-12 educators with a window to out-of-school media literacy and push them to bring the lessons of afterschool programs into their classrooms so they can better support students in learning and linking their skills in new and traditional literacies.

### **Media Literacy for Engagement**

This study further supported the existing argument that media can help motivate some students to engage in literate practices. For some youth participants, experience in PSU or VFC sparked an interest in reading or writing. Given that both programs are out-of-school activities where youth develop stories and write interviews or scripts in their spare time, the voluntary and sustained participation from young people indicated that media literacy may be one way to interest, engage, and educationally support adolescents in their lives beyond the classroom. However, beyond this, participation also helped some youth engage in literacy-related activities conducted on their own more frequently.

Most commonly, youth noted their increased motivation to write; although some mentioned more interest in reading as well. For example, one radio producer from PSU explained:

I think my involvement in radio made me more eager to read the newspapers and blogs online. I also get the impulse to write down my ideas for music and other inspiring things. ... Radio taught me the value of recording ideas and working them out so now I record all of my creative ideas on my free time hoping that one day I can turn them into full projects. (PSU member, personal communication with author, April 29, 2011).

In this case, radio sparked some new interests and motivations to read and write beyond the program or school. Similarly, for some youth in VFC, their participation in the program helped them “discover a passion” that led

to more writing on their own. Two VFC members from 2009 explained how this happened to them:

It [VFC] made me want to write more. I’m starting writing now my own screenplay. ... [VFC] has really inspired me to start getting out and start making films. (VFC member, interview by author, January 13, 2011).

I actually had a [sic] idea of like, well, me and [another VFC member] were just actually talking about like writing a movie or something. ... But like, before then [VFC], I wouldn’t’ve thought about actually doing it (VFC member, interview by author, December 8, 2010).

VFC helped inspire these young producers to write films on their own, outside of school and the program itself. PSU members also talked about wanting to write more for their own interests after being involved in media production at PSU (interviews by author, January 3 and March 10, 2011). In addition to the PSU member quoted above, members wrote poems or music to be used in radio pieces or as part of PSU’s music production program. These youth all demonstrated how opportunities in media literacy programs can engage and motivate some youth to write more frequently on their own, which is one reason many educators include media in their curricula.

Although some would argue that writing scripts, poems, and songs are not the most important aspects of literacy, for students like those quoted above engaging in these kinds of writing was interesting and inspiring. This newfound motivation to write and develop pieces on their own engaged them in literate practices like brainstorming, writing, revising, and editing. When students are motivated to express themselves in writing, it can help teachers focus on supporting and challenging students, rather than simply working to engage students at a basic level. Although this engagement in literacy learning is very important for both educators and learners, as Hobbs (2010) noted, “this is not (and should not be) the sole rationale for implementing digital and media literacy into the curriculum” (31).

### **Media Literacy for Writing**

Beyond the sparks in students’ motivation that often accompany the use of media literacy education, in learning these skills, students can also develop their traditional writing skills. There are myriad connections between traditional academic writing and the writing

involved in media education, including both process and skills-based links. Specifically, media literacy education at PSU and VFC helped students meet at least two of the CCSS for English Language Arts in grades 6-12, one focused on the writing process and another on writing for different audiences.

In both new and traditional literacy, writers must go through the process of brainstorming, gathering information, drafting, revising, re-drafting, and editing, which is demanded by the CCSS. The CCSS English/Language Arts Standards for grades 6-12 call for students to “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach” (CCSS, 2010, 41). One vivid example of how the revision part of this process occurs in media literacy education involved a radio producer at PSU. This producer, Celine<sup>9</sup>, revised with the adult radio coordinator, Megan:

For a while, Megan and Celine worked on her [Celine’s] narration together. Celine would write and then read something out loud, and they worked on transitions, wording, and moving things together. ...They started to listen through all of the segments that Celine had laid out for her piece... Megan then said that Celine should listen to all the pieces and decide which ones she was actually going to keep. Celine deleted some segments, and then crossed out some of her [handwritten] narration that had accompanied that piece. They kept revising, with Celine asking about ideas and Megan asking about what she [Celine] already had covered in the piece and where things would fit in (Field notes, October 15, 2010).

In this instance, Celine spent a lot of time thinking through ideas and working to revise, rework, cut down, and explain parts of her piece. Throughout this process she revised and edited with audio segments and handwritten narration, which she recorded later. She navigated both the interview clips and her own plans for her voiceover, identifying how to use the interviews as evidence and writing her narration to help tie ideas together and offer analysis or background. In the process of revising, Celine practiced the same skills that students should use in academic writing: connecting ideas, using evidence, and developing a main theme or story throughout the piece. Revising during the writing process was a crucial part of media production at PSU

and VFC. In both programs, students critiqued along the way, gave each other feedback, and re-edited scenes as they wrote, recorded, and edited. Students’ involvement in activities and programs like this, which allowed ample time for students to work through the writing process, has the potential to help students recognize the value of the writing process, gain experience moving through it, and become more comfortable with the different steps.

The youth in PSU and VFC gained practice in meaningful writing process activities, which helped some understand why the process is important in all writing. As one PSU youth explained, “In school, when a teacher tells you that you have to have a main idea and supporting points, it didn’t use [sic] to seem that relevant to me. But when I started making radio pieces, I learned about why it’s so important to structure your main points and make a strong message” (PSU member, personal communication with author, April 28, 2011). By making these skills important and relevant while also providing opportunities to practice those skills, PSU and VFC strengthened students’ traditional writing skills. These activities supported one of the CCSS for writing, the ability to “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach” (CCSS ELA6-12 W5). By offering opportunities to plan, research, draft, revise, edit, and rework media pieces, PSU and VFC met this standard and supported traditional literacy through media literacy education.

Additionally, activities in both programs also met the CCSS goal to “produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (CCSS ELA6-12 W4). During the production process in PSU and VFC, participants were frequently encouraged and reminded to consider their products from the audience’s perspective, working to readjust and adapt their pieces to better reach their intended audience. At PSU, the radio program had developed worksheets to guide students through the process of writing a piece, which typically included considering audience from the beginning of the process as they framed their pieces and decided who to interview. PSU also had media literacy workshops for the entire organization that encouraged youth to consider how point of view and target audience work together, challenging them to present an argument or write a short news article given a specific perspective and a particular audience (Field notes, August 9, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The names of all students have been changed.

At VFC, college instructors and youth participants challenged each other to consider the audience throughout the process of developing their product. They did this by questioning how to film specific scenes during script writing, trying to figure out what the audience would expect to see in the video and what kinds of shots would best convey the information that the audience needs (Field notes August 5 and November 9, 2010). VFC members also told each other as actors to “get real” in rehearsals (Field notes, November 18, 2010), challenging each other to ensure that the emotions and experiences of the characters were effectively felt and shared by the audience. Finally, students in VFC also offered suggestions during the editing process, encouraging each other to think about scene transitions, using different shot angles, or adding in music or special effects to enhance the audience’s experience (Field notes, August 24, 2010). These activities helped students think concretely about how the audience would see, hear, and relate to the product, supporting their understanding of having an audience and how to best convey ideas to a specific group.

Throughout the media literacy education in PSU and VFC, adolescents were given opportunities to learn, practice, and hone skills involved in both new and traditional literacies. By creating their own media pieces, youth were able to go through the writing process from start to finish: brainstorming, drafting, revising, and creating a final product. This supported participants in developing the skills to move from one stage to another and go back and forth between phases to effectively create a coherent piece. Media literacy education also challenges young writers to be aware of their audiences and recognize that “people use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages” (NAMLE, 6). Since media products developed in PSU and VFC were shared with a wider community and posted online, the students were forced to consider who would read or consume their products and what steps they needed to take as authors to ensure that their messages were reached the audience. Both of these skills, writing process and understanding audience, are important in writing for traditional and new forms of communication. These strong connections between traditional writing and the writing of media at PSU and VFC indicate that media literacy education offers important opportunities for youth to build on and further develop their academic writing skills.

### **Media Literacy for Reading**

In addition to the connections between different kinds of writing, there are a number of ways that media literacy can encourage students to develop reading skills that are also used in traditional literacy. In media literacy education at PSU and VFC, students learned what is involved in creating a product, examining how ideas are conveyed and what components of a video or audio piece contribute to consumers’ perceptions and understandings of the message. In essence, they learned how to analyze and break down a media text much like skilled readers do to newspaper articles, novels, and reports. By practicing and developing these skills in media education, students in PSU and VFC also honed their understanding of perspective and bias and their ability to assess an argument, helping them to become critical thinkers and readers of media texts. These both meet standards in the CCSS (CCSS ELA6-12 R6, 9, W8), demonstrating how media literacy education supports skills used in traditional literacy.

Some of the core questions of media literacy focus on understanding messages, who sends them, and why they are sent in a particular manner, which pushes readers to think about how arguments are conveyed and manipulated in the media (NAMLE). VFC members did this by analyzing types of shots and angles used in videos (Field notes, November 4, 2010) and thinking about how to use music and sound effects to create a particular mood or feeling (Field notes, December 14, 2010). This helped them see how filming and editing can create different arguments. In PSU, they spent time listening to different kinds of radio pieces to see how genre can affect the information presented (Field notes, January 19, 2011) and looked at how different authors conveyed the same information in written texts (Field notes, August 9, 2010). These activities encouraged youth to think critically about what is included, what is excluded, and how everything is edited together, helping them evaluate the producers’ arguments. This supported their abilities to “delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence” as outlined in the CCSS (CCSS Reading, 2010, 10). Being able to assess and analyze arguments is a core part of both traditional and media literacy education.

In addition, involvement in these media literacy programs helped students meet another standard outlined in the CCSS, the ability to “assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text” (CCSS Reading, 2010, 10) while also challenging them



to develop skills that are essential parts of media literacy (NAMLE, 6). In both PSU and VFC, adolescents learned how to do this as they examined examples of media texts to help them understand the tricks of the trade and learn from experts in the field. After learning these skills through radio production and reading other media products at PSU, one youth radio producer explained:

I think in high school, one of the major things they want you to do is kinda read between the lines, and it [radio] really helps you do that. Like the skills we learn really help you do and understand that, and understand themes and motives, and things like that in stories (PSU member, interview by author, March 10, 2011).

Using what he learned in radio, this producer was better able to “read between the lines” and figure out what authors mean, why they choose particular words, and what they hide between the lines of a text. This ability to critically examine messages in media texts supports traditional literacy’s focus on understanding authors’ points of view because the readers are better able to recognize how the authors’ positions or perspectives influence their writing. Thus, work in media literacy at PSU and VFC helped students identify, understand, and analyze perspectives, as outlined in the CCSS. Through exercises like this, media literacy at PSU and VFC encouraged students to think critically about media texts and understand how and why they are constructed, making it easier for some students to apply the same skills to traditional texts, building and developing their skills in multiple literacies. Throughout the reading and writing in media literacy, youth at PSU and VFC strengthened and honed skills that are also used and valued in traditional academic literacy. Both forms of literacy encourage young people to critically examine perspective, analyze arguments, practice the writing process, and learn to write for specific audiences.

### **Making Media Literacy a Priority in Education**

The experiences of participants at PSU and VFC demonstrate how media literacy can build from and further strengthen skills used in traditional academic literacy. For some participants, media literacy helped them “discover a passion” and inspired them to write creative works in their own time, an important step in engaging learners in mastering literacies. Furthermore, in both PSU and VFC, young producers gained experience in reading and writing media texts, which pushed them to

develop skills in understanding perspective, analyzing arguments, practicing the writing process, and writing for target audiences.

However, these links between generations of literacies must be more explicitly connected in the minds of teachers and learners to help youth build skills and proficiency in both. Rather than simply advocating for increased use of media literacy throughout curricula, stakeholders in education must also make connections like those detailed earlier explicit in order to promote both traditional and media literacy immediately. Youth need help understanding how these varied forms of communication are related and how they can support one another. Teachers, both in and outside of school, must help students understand these connections while also analyzing and producing new media in their current literacy instruction. By understanding and emphasizing these existing connections, teachers can help prepare students with the skills they will need in the 21st century while also meeting the demands of the CCSS and the high-stakes testing environment they are faced with today.

In addition to this shift in curricula with teachers using media literacy and helping students link their literacies, there must also be an accompanying change in our forms of evaluation to ensure that evaluations measure true learning and mastery in a subject or skill. It is impossible to fully judge how well someone can produce a video or host a radio show through a multiple choice examination. Instead, evaluations must become more performance-based, offering opportunities for students to fully demonstrate their varied literate skills. By expanding both curricula and evaluation measures, education can better prepare students by developing 21st century literacies and strengthening more traditional literacies simultaneously.

Finally, researchers must continue to look at these connections between new and traditional literacies. More research is needed to examine relationships between students’ mastery of media literacy and their abilities in traditional literacy. To help build a solid and widespread understanding of how new and traditional literacies are connected, there must be more studies that follow students’ literate practices in both in-school and out-of-school settings and more research focused on schools or classrooms that already incorporate media literacy into their curricula. Stakeholders in education must continue to demand and support quality instruction that will effectively engage and challenge students

while preparing them for the literacy demands of the 21st century. As educational philosopher John Dewey said, “If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow,” and education and literacy instruction must adapt to meet the needs of students now. Pushing for continued and extended work in media literacy education is one important way to ensure that today’s youth are motivated and learning the skills needed to read, write, and communicate effectively. However, more immediately, educators must help students understand and embrace the connections between new and traditional literacies while challenging administrators to recognize the importance of building these competencies in multiple ways.

For more information about this research, visit <http://www.researchforaction.org/content-areas/media-literacy>.

## Appendix: Coding List

*Teaching & Learning* – How they learn and practice media literacy skills

- Experiential/Hands-On – When/ how/why they’re using equipment, practicing skills in real situations/contexts, or rehearsing
- Real Products – student comments about the importance of having real products
- Student-Centered – When/how/why youth’s experiences, thoughts, opinions, etc. are asked for, used, and valued in the learning process
- Apprenticeship – When/how/who is involved when modeling, coaching, fading, what signals the movement from one stage to the next
- Practice – examples of students using and developing skills
- Peer-to-Peer – learning from fellow participants

*Community of Practice* – Describing and establishing the context in which this all occurs

- Formation – Signals/signs or ways of showing that a group is established and exists, what it means to be part of that CoP
- Entrance – How newcomers join, who they interact with, how they engage
- LPP – Legitimate Peripheral Participate, how they engage when they first join the group and what takes them from LPP to full participation
- Relationships – notes on importance of relationships/friendships with peers and adults in organization
- Contrasts – How VFC (a new community) and PSU (an established community) differ
- Mentors – Who is a mentor to youth, how the relationship between mentor and mentee works and develops

*Motivation* – Why they join, stay, and decide to participate in media literacy/production

- Initial – How they hear about it and decide to get involved
  - Friends/Family – suggested/connected via friends or family members
  - Existing Interest – general interest in topic/idea
  - Learn New – excitement and interest in learning something new and different
- Shared (both organizations) – motivations that seem to hold true across PSU and VFC
  - Positive activity – it’s something positive to do with their time, wouldn’t be doing anything else
  - Raising voice – desire to be heard, why that’s important
  - Future skills – useful skills to be used later in life
  - Unique opportunity – special chance for youth or a specific community (often disadvantaged)
- Organizing – use as a tool for organizing, spread ideas, gather support
- Interest/Development – use as way to gain skills for future use for a job

*Skills* – What skills and abilities they developed through participation in the programs

- Collaboration – how to work with others on projects, shows, etc.
- Communication – how to communicate with others (peers, adults, authorities, etc.)
- Confidence – pride and personal belief in oneself, one’s ideas, the ideas/power of youth, etc.
- Critique – ability to effectively analyze one’s own work and the work of others
- Dedication – commitment to one’s work and projects
- Diversity – moments relating to (and often challenging youth to examine) issues of diversity like race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.
- Independence – ability and confidence to work and think individually
- Leadership – willingness to lead others and take on responsibility/ownership of a project
- Literacies – skills directly related to literacy formation
  - Reading – skills in reading media, analyzing information, and connections to traditional reading
  - Writing – skills in writing, interest in writing, etc.
  - Process – opportunities to develop skills in the writing process
  - Perspective – understanding, analyzing, and using perspective in media
- Patience – ability to deal with difficult situations in a controlled manner
- Perseverance – willingness to keep working through difficult situations and work towards end goals
- Personal Development – growth as a person, which is attributed (in part) by the youth to their participation in the program
- Political Education – understanding and development of critical thinking skills as it relates to political issues (used for PSU)
- Responsibility – willingness to take on responsibility for one’s work, decisions, etc.

*Advice for Adults* – ideas suggested by youth for adults who work with young people

*Possible Selves* – ideas suggested by youth for what they will do/who they will be in the future

*School vs OST* – how youth view school and compared to afterschool programs

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