

MEDIA LITERACY STARTS WITH THE NEWS

by Jill Baptist

The stories *behind* civil wars, international trade pacts and fallen heroes can be as important as what is reported in the news. Adult readers and viewers usually have the skills to put the news into context and to recognize bias, current trends and hidden target audiences that reveal themselves through clues in the story. Knowledge, understanding and judgment are the touchstones for media literacy. But those clues aren't always obvious, especially to children. Media literacy teaches students strategies to uncover these clues and put news stories into context.

Studies show that media literacy classes bring positive results. For example, a Journal of Communications reporting on a 2012 meta-analysis of media literacy interventions had this to say:

Media literacy interventions had positive effects on outcomes including media knowledge, criticism, perceived realism, influence, behavioral beliefs, attitudes, self-efficacy, and behavior. Moderator analyses indicated that interventions with more sessions were more effective, but those with more components were less effective.

How does this translate into real life for kids? Well, a study on teen smoking released in January 2014 showed that more kids changed their minds about trying smoking after a media literacy course, compared to kids in a traditional anti-smoking class. (Study sponsored by the Program for Research on Media and Health at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.)

Media literacy has other benefits for kids; it

- inspires reading;
- gets kids interested in current events and different sides of an issue;
- gives them background for hobbies and projects;
- matches what they learn in school to the world around them.

Although media literacy is an important issue for children, and in a best case scenario would be taught by a teacher who is well trained in media literacy, media literacy specialists aren't in every school; fortunately, other resources offer assistance to classroom teachers.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation and MediaSmarts organize a *Media Literacy Week* every November. medialiteracyweek.ca

The *Media Smarts* website has a Teachers' Resources section with media education connections to each province and territory and classroom activities. mediasmarts.ca

GoGo News for Children is a news website for children but it also includes a section for teachers. gogonews.com

Teaching Kids News is an online resource founded by two teachers and a journalist. TKN has a Canadian point of view and a focus on helping teachers. The site changes daily with a current news story, written in kid-friendly language, and connected by teachers to three separate curriculum levels. A recent addition is a section on classroom activities that helps teachers prompt students to express their opinions about the news story. teachingkidsnews.com

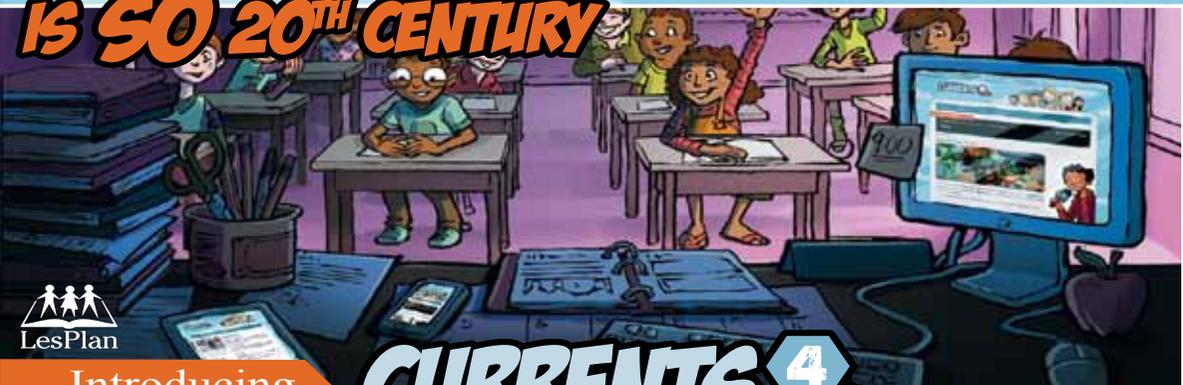
For teachers who are discussing challenging stories with students face-to-face, it often comes down to listening carefully, picking up on their cues, and asking them what they already know. Jonathan Tilly, TKN's media literacy teacher, offers these suggestions.

- "Back in" to a difficult news story. Start with background information, or even an anecdote, and lead up to the more challenging aspects.
- Present challenging information briefly and factually, without embellishment.
- Reassure kids by pointing out when an event is rare (i.e., seldom happens or has never happened before and isn't likely to happen again); or not likely to happen again because somebody (the government, for example) has made changes to prevent it from occurring again.
- Look for the hopeful angle. What good is coming out of this situation?
- Point out the helpers, like the doctors and nurses who are on the job in a disaster.
- Talk about the future. For example, if a playground is destroyed by fire, talk about how it could be rebuilt with additional features, or how rebuilding could become a community project.

Jill Baptist earned her M.A from The Institute of Child Study. Since that time, she has taught core and special education in the primary and junior divisions of the Toronto District School Board. She is now in her seventh year of teaching and is currently working with Grade Fives at Brown Junior Public School. 🍁

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