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Empowering Digital Citizens Through Media Literacy Education

Many educators use the terms *technological literacy*, *digital literacy*, *media literacy*, and sometimes *digital citizenship* almost interchangeably. It's important to understand the differences among these literacies, however, so that you can see how each one lends itself to a student's ability to navigate the digital world, and then purposefully foster each one in your own classroom. Here, I'll define each of these areas and explain how media literacy can help in the development of participatory digital citizens.

Technological literacy is the ability to operate a device, set up accounts, move around a particular platform or interface, and troubleshoot problems when necessary. It's the most basic of the literacies that students need to possess before entering a digital community.

Digital literacy includes more than the ability to operate a device. While a variety of definitions and frameworks for digital literacy exist, the most commonly agreed-upon competencies are the ability to find, evaluate, and communicate information through digital platforms.

Media refers to any set of symbols used to transmit messages to a broad audience. These symbols can be letters, musical notes, pictures, numbers, and more. Books are a form of print media. Logos are a form of visual media. Music is an auditory medium.

Media literacy, then, is the ability to critically consume media in all forms, analyzing and synthesizing their messages. Media-literate people can also produce their own mediated messages and reflect on the impact of mediated messages on the world. While traditional and digital literacies help students access and understand digital information, media literacy helps students critically think about the information they find.

A curriculum rich in media literacy has benefits for students. According to the research, media literacy education:

- teaches individuals to become active, engaged media producers and users rather than passive consumers (MediaSmarts, 2015)
- engages students in real-world issues that allow them to be active citizens and make contributions to civil debate (Jenkins et al., 2009; MediaSmarts, 2015)
- deepens young people's understanding of diversity, identity, perception, and the connections between popular culture, their choices, self-image, and role in their community (MediaSmarts, 2015)

In a digital world, media literacy becomes even more vital as we are inundated with media all day long. How can our brains handle the influx of headlines, soundbites, video clips, and comment sections unless we begin training them to do so from an early age?

Media Literacy for Digital Citizens

Media literacy isn't new! It is probably already part of your curriculum in some way, shape, or form. We often ask students to critically examine books, images, films, speeches, and articles, and encourage them to seek out new information in their school libraries and online. Media literacy can become an important part of the digital citizenship conversation, though, when we help our students view the interplay between media, technology, and humanity.

Media-literate digital citizens should have age-appropriate knowledge and skills related to these enduring understandings from the *Edvolve Framework* (Lindsey & Mattson, 2021):

- Effective search strategies can help us more easily locate information online.
- Digital information varies in value, quality, and reliability. We must consume with a critical eye as we analyze for credibility, perspective, and bias.
- Media influences both our personal and collective perceptions of the world.
- Media influences both our personal and collective actions within the world.
- Technology can be used to express and amplify ideas, but we must responsibly consume, create, and share content.

CONNECTING TO THE ISTE STANDARDS

The following ISTE Student Standards can provide more guidance as you consider this work:

- Standard 1.3.a says that students "plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits."
- Standard 1.3.b states that "students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data or other resources."
- Standard 1.7.a recognizes that students can "use digital tools to connect with learners from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, engaging them in ways that broaden mutual understanding and learning."
- Standard 1.6.b says that "students create original works or responsibly repurpose or remix digital resources into new creations."

In addition, the Educator Standard 2.3.b says our classrooms should foster a "learning culture that promotes curiosity and critical examination of online resources and fosters digital literacy and media fluency."

Media literacy requires us to both actively and critically consider all the messages we encounter each day, whether we seek the media out or it passively exists in our environment. From billboards to TikTok videos, there is plenty of content for us to practice with.

The Basics of a Media Literacy Lesson

When using media in the classroom, many of us feel trapped into asking the same types of questions to our students. "What does this vocabulary word mean? What did you learn about the concept? What do you think the author/illustrator/creator is trying to say? Can you identify the literary device? What does that symbol mean?" We often focus heavily on whether our students can decode the message within the media, which is an important first step. Media literacy, however, requires us to go a bit further.

Through our questioning, we can help students dive into questions around media authorship and ownership, message format and technique, personal bias and perspective, credibility, personal and societal responses to the media, and so much more. Now, we certainly cannot cover all those bases with every piece of media that we use in the classroom, but adding new questions to our lessons can prompt very different types of critical thinking from our students.

Five Key Questions

There are many questions we can add to our toolbox to prompt critical thinking from our students, but there are five key questions that most media scholars agree will help us look at media from different perspectives (Hobbs, 2021):

1. **Who is the author and what is the purpose?**
   By asking this question we acknowledge that all media messages are designed for different reasons and from various perspectives. We can examine the motivations of the author and their experiences with the world. In addition to questions of authorship, we can consider how factors like the publication date, the platform it's published on, or whether the message is sponsored will impact the audience's interpretation.

2. **What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?**
   Every form of media has its own vocabulary of construction. Whether we are examining how clickbait relies on sensationalized adjectives to pique our curiosity or a filmmaker uses light and shadow to create suspense, these techniques influence what messages we pay attention to and how we interact with them.

3. **What lifestyles, values, and points of view are depicted?**
   Oftentimes we ask students to identify bias and that leads to conversation about whether a source is left-leaning or right-leaning. However, we can ask about lifestyles, values, and points of view to help students recognize a variety of societal constructs—not all of which are inherently political. Because our lives are limited, we rely on media to develop an understanding of the world.

4. **How might different people interpret the message?**
   Media literacy is as much about interpreting media as it is about interpreting media's effect on the world. To do that, we want to encourage students to think from a variety of perspectives. Are there references in this media that someone may not understand? Is this message appropriate for people of all ages? How might someone from a different religious background or political party interpret this message? Thinking through questions like these reminds us that people interpret media based on their own lived experiences.

5. **What is omitted?**
   This is personally one of my favorite questions because it helps me consider perspectives that might be missing from the message in front of me. What part of the story might I not have? Why did these elements make it into the article while others were deemed less important? Media reflects reality and impacts our worldview, so it is important to consider the partiality of each message. We want to help young people understand the impact of the narratives that are both told and untold.

Five (+3) Core Concepts

When we begin using the five key questions with our students, we help them understand five core concepts that scholars agree are true of all mediated messages:

1. **All media messages are "constructed."**
   That's right; media isn't made in a vacuum. An individual or group of people decide they have a message worth sharing. That message is then crafted from the experiences, thoughts, viewpoints, and unique motivations of its creators.

2. **Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.**
   We teach students to analyze and produce printed messages by giving them a foundation of punctuation names, grammatical rules, and literary devices. It is much easier to critically analyze a message when you know the vocabulary of that medium.

3. **Different people experience the same media messages differently.**
   We all bring our own life experiences, perspectives, and biases to the message with us. We can even personally experience the same message differently upon a 2nd, 3rd, or 20th reading. Who hasn't been surprised at those lyrics we were belting out in middle school when we listen to the same songs with adult ears?

4. **Media have embedded values and points of view.**
   See number one. The mere act of creating establishes a point of view. When we create, we decide what to include and exclude from the narrative. Our experiences, perspectives, and preferences get embedded into our messages.

5. **Most media messages are part of an economic or political system.**
   Media is a commodity, whether we are buying books or selling our attention to a social media company. Media is also part of culture and functions as an agent of socialization and politicization.

Media professor Renee Hobbs (2021) has a few more key theoretical concepts to consider. Her list encompasses the five core concepts above, but I appreciate her additions to the list, especially in today's media-saturated environment:

1. **Messages are selective representations of reality.**
   Even a primary source is a select representation of reality. When I film something with my iPhone, I must make decisions about what to include and exclude from the frame. I may even stop my recording before the entire event plays out. Media messages can show us pieces of our human existence but can never fully encompass the depths of reality.

2. **Messages impact people's attitudes and behaviors.**
   Media messages are not created in a vacuum, and they are not consumed in one either. If you have ever encountered a conspiracy theorist, you know that fictional or sensationalized media has played a role in that person's attitude and behavior toward a topic.

3. **People judge the credibility of messages using features like authority and authenticity.**
   The tricky part about this core concept is that not everyone agrees on indicators of authority and authenticity, especially in recent years. As teachers of media literacy, it is important that we not only teach how to identify misinformation, but that we also teach indicators of truthfulness.

Help your students go beyond basic comprehension by asking questions that require critical thinking and reflection.

A basic way to get started with media literacy in the classroom is to take a few moments and identify pieces of media you already use in your lessons. This media might include images from picture books, video clips, political cartoons, or short paragraphs of text. Help your students go beyond basic comprehension by asking questions that require critical thinking and reflection.

FEATURED ACTIVITY
Visual Literacy with the Big, Bad Wolf

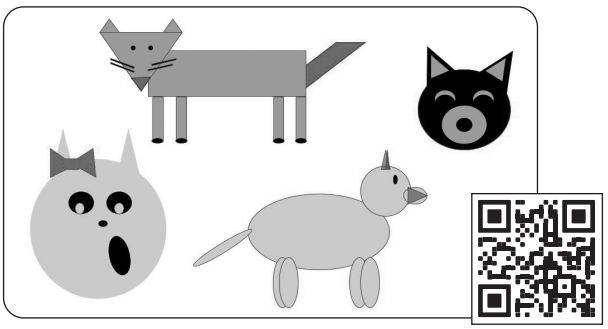
GRADE LEVEL: Elementary

During my undergrad studies, I was introduced to the book *Picture This: How Pictures Work* by Molly Bang (2016) in an art class for elementary educators. In the book, Molly tells the story of Little Red Riding Hood using basic shapes and three colors to teach readers about the principles of design. The book is the inspiration for this hands-on activity I've used to introduce students of all ages to visual literacy concepts and vocabulary.

Each student needs four pieces of paper: one white, one red, one black, and one light purple. Students also need scissors and a glue stick. Tell the students their job is to create a wolf using only red, black, and purple paper cut into geometric shapes: squares, circles, triangles, etc. They can cut and layer as many shapes as they need, gluing them onto the white paper to create their wolf. Here is the twist: half of the class needs to create the biggest, "baddest," scariest wolf they can imagine. The other half of the class must create a friendly, lovable, approachable wolf using the same materials and instructions. Alternatively, students could complete this activity on a Google slide as I've had folks do in virtual learning sessions.

When the students are finished, display the bad wolves together in one place and the friendly wolves in another. Ask students to look for patterns among the wolves in each group. Most times, students will notice that the bad wolves are created using sharper angles and points,

whereas students tend to use softer shapes like circles to create their friendly wolves. Color also comes into play. The scary wolves use much more of the black and red paper whereas the friendly wolves use more of the purple paper. I've seen plenty of red eyes and dripping red teeth on the scary wolves while the friendly wolves tend to have less ferocious black or purple eyes and the red paper is used for accessories like hair bows or neckties. Students may also recognize differences in size. The bad wolves might have larger teeth or eyes while the friendlier wolves have smaller features. The friendly wolves also tend to take up less space on the page, in general (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).



bit.ly/42hoz03

Figure 4.1
These four friendly wolves were created on Google Slides using only geometric shapes in purple, black, and red. Scan the QR code to see how the use of color helps communicate "friendliness."

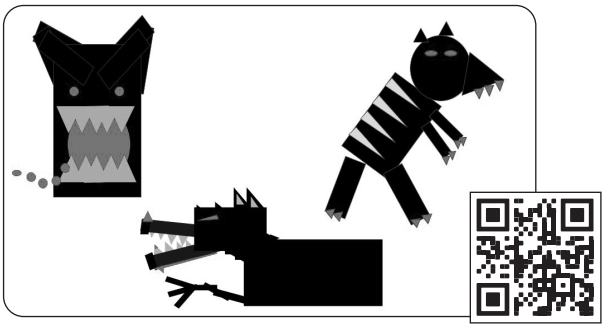


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Figure 4.2
These three big, bad wolves were created on Google Slides using only geometric shapes in three colors. Scan the QR code to see how color can help make the difference between friendly and scary wolves.

After naming patterns, ask students why they think the individual artists among them chose to use the same visual techniques to communicate "scariness" or "friendliness" even though they were not working together. Ask students to make connections to other "scary" or "friendly" images they've seen and what elements those have in common with the images the class created.

In follow-up lessons, ask students to use the vocabulary of shape, color, distance, angle, depth, and size to talk about how illustrators communicate messages and feelings. Over time,

you can introduce new visual vocabulary and concepts like positioning, perspective, light and shadow, space, vector, and more. Wordless picture books are a great tool for this type of visual analysis, too.

FEATURED ACTIVITIES
Kobe, COVID, and the Slap!

GRADE LEVEL: Secondary

When students are young, it is important to teach them how to critically think about individual pieces of media. For people to truly understand the impact of media on our society, they need to analyze collections of messages around the same topic. There are lots of interesting ways to do this work. Here are just a few examples to inspire you.

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Words Matter: The Death of Kobe Bryant in the Headlines

When NBA star Kobe Bryant, his daughter, and seven others died in a helicopter crash in January 2020, the story was big news. Insider.com curated 23 of the biggest newspapers around the United States and the world to show how Kobe Bryant's death was covered (Perrett, 2020). My students examined words and phrases across the entire set of headlines to answer the questions:

- How is Kobe Bryant portrayed? How is he likely to be remembered?
- Who has power in these stories? Who is minimalized?
- How does the portrayal of this event reinforce and/or challenge societal norms?

But I couldn't just pose those questions to students without providing tools to aid in their analysis. Since we would be looking specifically at headlines, I wanted to help my students understand how words can reinforce narratives.

I introduced these four concepts to students with examples:

> **Classifications.** How are people organized and grouped? When media explicitly groups people, it draws attention to the specific characteristics of folks in the category and

can reinforce or challenge stereotypes about the group. Grouping can also be used to reinforce power structures (doctors/patients, teachers/students, adults/kids) and create outsiders. For example, using the terms *boys* and *girls* in an article discussing the social and emotional needs of middle school students does not take non-gender-conforming students into consideration. In this article, students who do not fit neatly into either group are completely ignored as part of the conversation. People can be organized and grouped by age, height, skin color, religious background, level of education and so much more.

Collocational Patterns. How do groups of words used in relationship with one another over time help develop a concept? In the workplace, a man who takes charge is often called a leader, while a female displaying the same traits might be labeled as bossy or assertive. But how do we get these stereotypes? It can be from certain words being paired together so frequently over time that it becomes a "truth."

Word Connotations. What feelings do the words or phrases carry with them? In the dictionary, *house* and *home* have nearly the same description, and yet we go to someone else's "house," and we go to our own "home." The two words carry very different feelings even though they are both describing a dwelling place.

Overlexicalization. The overuse of words and phrases can help forward a concept as true. Overlexicalization happens when a limited set of words dominates the conversation because of habit, lack of vocabulary, or a desire to emphasize certain ideas. If you've ever tired of a middle schooler calling all his friends "bruh" or "blood," you've experienced overlexicalization!

Once students understood the examples, they worked in small groups to observe the 23 headlines about the death of Kobe Bryant. Using a simple table, (see Table 4.1) students tracked examples of classification, collocational patterns, word connotations, and overlexicalization in each headline. Then it was time to look for patterns across the set. Once students identified a pattern, they had to run it through each of the guiding questions presented at the start of the task: "How is Kobe Bryant portrayed? How is he likely to be remembered? Who has power in these stories? Who is minimalized? And how does the portrayal of this event reinforce and/or challenge societal norms?"

Students recognize that Kobe and his daughter Gianna are often grouped together in the headlines and the other victims are lumped together and unnamed. This pattern indicates that Kobe and Gianna's deaths are the "real story" and those unnamed "others" just happened to be on board the helicopter as well. This example reinforces the notion that people with money, fame, or other indicators of social status are often considered more worthy of time and attention than those without.

Table 4.1 Headline Analysis

Headline and Subheading	Observations
Kobe Bryant Dies in Crash *Lakers legend, daughter and 7 others killed in helicopter accident*	• Collocational pattern: Kobe Bryant is called a legend • Collocational pattern: use of both his first and last name together • Classification: daughter and 7 others go unnamed, listed after Bryant • Word connotation: *killed* feels active and intentional whereas *accident* feels passive and unintentional
Helicopter Crash Kills NBA Star Known to All as Kobe	• Collocational pattern: Kobe used without last name • Word connotation: *crash* feels violent; *kills* feels very active and intentional • Classification: daughter and 7 others not mentioned at all
Kobe Bryant: The Death of a Legend *Teen daughter, seven others also killed in California*	• Collocational pattern: the word *legend* is associated with Kobe • Classification: other victims are relegated to the subheading and their names are not mentioned
Lakers Legend Dies *Helicopter crash kills Kobe Bryant, daughter*	• Collocational pattern: the word *legend* is associated with Kobe • Word connotations: *crash* and *kills* • Classification: daughter mentioned but no other victims

Students also recognized the overuse of words like *tragedy*, which affirms our belief that the death of a young person is worse than the death of someone who has lived a full life. They noted how frequently Kobe's name was tied to words like *legend* and *superstar*, affirming his athletic greatness while simultaneously overlooking dark spots in his life, like his sexual assault case in 2003. The headlines also focused so heavily on his NBA career that Bryant's roles as a father, husband, son, friend, or neighbor were deemed trivial. These choices reinforced the idea that Bryant existed for the public's entertainment and consumption and that the fullness of his life was wrapped up in that role.

Through this exercise, students were able to see how media can help create and forward power structures, universal truths, and societal norms just as easily as it can create and spread pop culture.

Images and Emotion: Magazine Covers During COVID-19

In an exercise like the Kobe Bryant one, students examine a collection of magazine covers from the early days of COVID-19 which were curated by media scholar Frank Baker (n.d.). Students were asked to examine the words, phrases, layout, content, and colors of the magazine covers and watch for recognizable patterns. This time, we focused on the emotions we felt as we examined each cover, how the editor was able to create that emotion, and why it was valid to audiences.

Immediately students identified fear as a primary emotion in the magazine covers. Fear was forwarded through large, close-up images of the very spiky COVID virus. The use of red, a color typically symbolic of danger, was overwhelmingly obvious. Headlines and captions used words like *panic*, *crisis*, *survive*, and *lockdown* and compared the virus to an enemy we were at war with. Students recognized that fear resonated with audiences because we were all facing the unknown. When we feel afraid, we often want as much information about a threat as possible so that we can fully prepare for that threat. Many of the magazines were tapping into our fear centers to sell a product.

Hope is a powerful emotion that also draws us in. Another theme among the covers was portrayals of COVID's heroes, from the doctors, nurses, and other frontline workers to politicians, teachers, and parents surviving lockdown with their kids. Inspiring headlines like "We will get through this together" and "Together we stand!" fit neatly alongside cover art featuring Rosie the Riveter in a mask. From rallying cries to "pull together" to human interest stories thanking everyday heroes, these magazine covers served as inspiration during a time of despair for many.

Students also recognized how many of the covers featured people wearing face masks. When we spoke about the importance of that imagery, students pointed out how the mask had become synonymous with COVID, which is reinforced by these media pieces. When we dug into questions of emotion, though, the conversation became divided. Students recognized that as the pandemic continued, the mask mandates and eventually vaccines became very politicized. For some, the masks on these magazine covers might be symbols of solutions and create feelings of hopefulness. For others, the masks might be seen as symbols of government overreach and invoke feelings of anger and resentment. The mask example allowed us to really dive deeply into the core concept, "different people experience the same media differently."

Framing and The Slap Heard 'Round the Internet

Another aspect of media literacy I teach to secondary students is framing. A frame can be described, in its simplest form, as the choices made by authors, editors, and creators in the presentation of their message. Newspapers and newscasts use common angles that we are all familiar with:

A frame can be described, in its simplest form, as the choices made by authors, editors, and creators in the presentation of their message.

Conflict Frame: centers on conflicts between individual people, groups, institutions, etc.

Human Interest Frame: adds emotion or a human, personal side to an issue or event

Responsibility Frame: attempts to hold someone or some group responsible for a situation

Economic Frame: looks at the economic consequences of a situation in the news

Moral Frame: applies moral or religious beliefs to a situation.

I usually use current, non-political events, like the Taylor Swift Eras Tour, to show students how the same story can be presented through these different frames. You can challenge students to choose their own current event and find examples of various types of frames within the headlines.

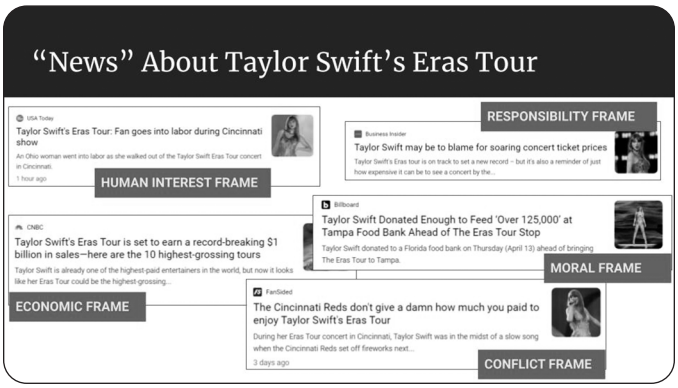

Figure 4.3
News outlets can present the same topic through a variety of frames.

While news stories have consistent frames for the subject, or focus, of a story, there are still many decisions that writers and editors must make within the framework they've chosen. Who will they feature in a human-interest piece? Will they cover the conflict only, or will they cover proposed solutions? When choosing a morality lens, whose morals are being applied? Who are the "good guys" and who are the "bad guys"?

We examined these questions and more using screen-grabbed headlines about the moment actor Will Smith slapped comedian and host Chris Rock at the 2022 Academy Awards ceremony on live television. While every headline chose a conflict frame, the way the conflict was presented differed. Students were asked to observe the headlines with these questions in mind:

- What narrative was being reinforced through the framing?
- What stylistic choices and elements helped create the frame?
- What do these frames exclude from the conversation?

Students noticed how physical contact was described using different words like *slaps*, *strikes*, *hits*, and *confronts* and how those words carry different weight about the severity of the incident. Students also noticed that Will Smith's actions were more frequently centered than Chris Rock's, even though it was a joke he told about Smith's wife that prompted the incident. Students also noticed that Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, was markedly absent from the headlines, which some found strange considering Will Smith was apparently defending his wife's honor. Even the thumbnails chosen to go with the headlines seemed to reinforce the narrative that Smith was the bad guy, Rock was the victim, and Pinkett Smith was a non-player in the conflict.

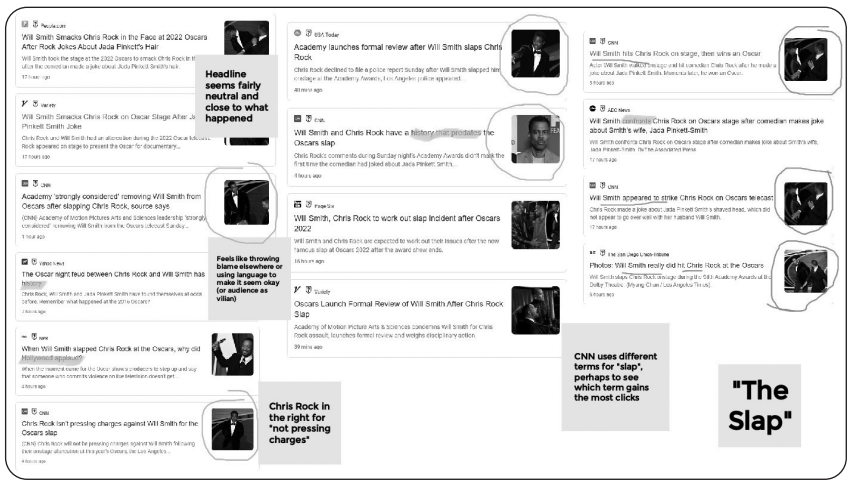

Figure 4.4
Students annotate headlines to identity the elements that solidify a frame.

Asking students to analyze headlines for frames and stylistic choices is not about casting a judgment. Perhaps some students think Chris Rock got what he had coming to him. Maybe

others think the Academy should not have given Smith time at the microphone after winning his Oscar that night. In this case, though, we are not looking for student opinion. The goal of the activity is for students to understand that all media messages are constructed and that they all have embedded values and points of view.

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SPOTLIGHT STORY

THINK BIG

Elaine McDonald, a teacher at White River High School in Buckley, Washington, has one overarching expectation in her World History and AP Government classes: THINK BIG. This mantra applies to all sorts of learning opportunities, but when Elaine engages her students in conversation about digital citizenship, the motto is easy to reinforce.

Elaine teaches her students that in both physical and digital communities, it is easy for humans to get caught up in silos of thinking. People are naturally drawn into friendships with those who have similar life experiences. Online, we make conscious decisions about what to read and who to follow and are unconsciously trapped in echo chambers through the digital algorithms that feed us more of the content we interact with most.

Learning to Engage with Others

Elaine helps her students see how easy it is to get caught up in a space of "us versus them," especially when we join conversations online and are suddenly confronted by ideas very different from our own. Instead of sheltering her students from conflict or simply reminding them to be nice online, Elaine challenges teens to THINK BIG; that is, to engage in conversations that might be outside of their comfort zones and to explore complex topics and problems that do not have easy answers.

So how does Elaine accomplish this monumental task? Not with a single mini-lesson. Not with one major assignment or assessment. In Elaine's classroom, relevant deliberation through research and the challenging of one another's ideas is part of the classroom culture she fosters from day one.

All year, students practice generating authentic research questions, evaluating the credibility and relevance of the information they find to answer those questions, and presenting claims to one another that are backed by solid evidence. It isn't uncommon to hear students ask each other, "Where did you find that source?" or "Are you sure those statistics are reliable?" as they present their ideas to one another. In whole-class Socratic seminars, students wrestle with questions such as, "Can a biased article or piece of evidence still be credible?" Elaine finds herself having these types of challenging conversations with her students while supporting them through daily opportunities for interaction and deliberation.

Applying Authentic Learning in the Community

After a full year of practicing these skills in the classroom, Elaine gives her students an authentic assignment requiring them to THINK BIG and use the skills they have acquired to contribute in both the local community and in a digital one.

Students in Elaine's class, as well as students in two other teachers' classrooms, are instructed to go out into the community and gather questions people have about history. They then bring the questions back to their class, research answers, and write articles to present answers back out to the community through publication on Google Sites.

Before the articles go live, however, students are expected to digitally critique the articles written by students in another class. The three teachers model how to make value-added comments, as well as how to respectfully leave feedback that is specific and meaningful, something the students innately struggle with. Elaine helps students make connections between the digital community and the physical one by inviting them to reflect on the ways their comments and suggestions would be helpful or meaningless in face-to-face collaboration. At the conclusion of the project, each group's final articles are published and shared with the community members who originally asked the question.

Elaine feels that in the end, it is the job of educators to challenge all students to THINK BIG—to realize they are part of an interconnected, global community full of people with varied viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives. Students must be given opportunities to recognize their biases, thoughtfully consider what they see, and contribute to larger societal conversations in ways that add value to their physical and digital communities.

You Can Do It!

Media literacy might be one of the easiest aspects of digital citizenship to hack into our already busy days because anytime we are using a form of media in the classroom, we can ask students to think critically about its message and its impact as well. Up the ante by offering students a variety of media to consume in the classroom, using traditional lessons you've done with paragraphs of text and seeing if students can apply skills to video, audio, and images too. Adding new questions to your list of go-to prompts can help students explore media from different angles and perspectives.

If media literacy feels like an aspect of digital citizenship you'd like to explore further, scan the QR code to check out a Wakelet board—organized into grade-level bands—I've curated with resources to use with your students.

bit.ly/3Sbqq1N

Some amazing media literacy books for practitioners have influenced my thinking over the years. Scan the QR code for a list of my favorites.

bit.ly/3UlBxYC