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BGCA Independent Study Write Up

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General media is a plethora of messages, ideas, social depictions, and stereotyping. Today we have no choice in the ways we consume media, and children are exposed to more media than one would like to think. Children must be taught media literacy skills at a young age in order to preemptively arm them against the negative side effects of media consumption. Our mission was to supplement a Boys & Girls Club Clay Tech program to help some students increase their media literacy skills. Over the course of the two weeks we were with the students, we were able to engage them on the topic of media literacy and learn just how much they knew about the subject. Genre, message construction, and stereotypes were major topics that were discussed and themes that activities were planned around.

Our textbook has a section specifically for tips in media literacy education that we took into consideration for the way we approached the students. One major thing that is very important when teaching kids is emotion, and the text insists that “a media education classroom must be entertaining, and students must feel like they are central to the process of investigation” (547). The students were always greeted with a chipper, “good morning!” in the mornings and an upbeat mood was maintained by the teaching staff to ensure positive emotions. Laughing is emphasized in the text, noting “great teachers have a sense of drama and a sense of humor [and] they laugh with their students [and]...move

around the room” (547). Flexibility is also stressed and was utilized within our classroom “to meet the changes in students’ level of interest” (547).

Our group of students included an eleven-year-old boy, Student 1, an eleven-year-old girl, Student 2, and a twelve-year-old boy, Student 3, attending the Boys & Girls club. Student 1 had the most advanced computer skills of the group, included some of the instructors, and this made him very important in the creation of the Claymation film. He was able to use his computer skills to make himself essentially the leader of the group of students because he knew what he was capable of on the computer and knew what he would be able to add or manipulate to enhance the film. He was by far the most talkative student and we could tell that he was very comfortable in the tech environment. A family member asked how he was doing in the program because he is usually picked on or bullied in The Boys & Girls Club. She was surprised and very happy to hear of his leadership and confidence in our classroom because of his tech skills. Others usually pick on students for having these skills, but in our classroom they were appreciated and praised which greatly affected his attitude. Student 2 was the only other girl in the program, aside from myself, and she was quite intimidated by the boys. She kept to herself and it was very difficult to draw conversation out of her, or even answers to specific questions. Towards the end of the two-week program she had still only barely opened up and was still extremely shy. The only time that we saw her really enjoy herself was when she was working with the clay. She was by far the most capable person, including the instructors, with the clay and made the most detailed characters, including the lead character, Sydney. We tried to get her to open up, but we saw little progress. Student 3 recognized Student 1 as the self appointed leader of the group and followed

him around and agreed with whatever he said. He was very shy when it came to answering questions, only slightly more willing to answer questions as compared to Student 2.

Genre is one of the core constructs behind media literacy. One must understand that certain movies or television shows are created around the preset notion of a certain genre in order to begin to develop the groundwork for media literacy. The students' initial knowledge of genre was that it was a type of category of a film or television show and two students included examples in their pretest answers. Within our activity we asked the students to sort flashcards with popular show character's on them into different genre categories. For the most part this was a fairly easy task given that we had been discussing different popular genres like action, sci-fi, western, and comedy. The students found characters from sitcoms to be a little more difficult to categorize because the nature of the comedy within the show.

We also focused on different concepts within genre like the objects, people, and actions of various genres, and the students seemed to pick up on those fairly well. They knew that spaceships and advanced technology were a part of the sci-fi genre and that car chases were a part of the action genre. Student 2 gained knowledge of what makes up a genre based on her pre and posttest answers. In the pretest she answered the question: What things do you see or hear in a movie or TV show that tells us it belongs in a certain genre? with "people see what is happening and hear what reaction is happening to know it belongs in a certain genre." This answer changed in the posttest to "they see what the characters and [the] setting looks like and hear what emotion there is for it to be in a certain genre." This demonstrates that she gained the specific knowledge of genre to be

able to give general examples of objects, people, and actions. The other two students included examples in both their pre and posttest indicating they already had an idea of what makes a particular film or television show fall into a particular genre.

After we established that films and television shows are created around a set of genres we moved onto message construction. The things to consider within message construction are target audience, framing, and the music within the scene. Understanding that film and television show makers literally construct their message based on their audience is a big concept to understand within media literacy. When we discussed the concept of target audience with the students we asked them how you could tell if a show was made for adults or children. They said that adult shows have violence, weapons, and “serious problems” whereas children’s shows have funny stuff, cartoons, and the characters are younger than in adult shows. This shows that they understand the basic differences between adult and children’s programming and can therefore understand the concept of target audience. They decided that they wanted their target audience to be the children of The Boys & Girls Club and that they would target them by making the movie funny.

Framing to construct a certain message was also a topic that we discussed. We showed the students a cropped image of a group of young girls screaming at a concert and asked them what the story behind the picture was. They responded that since the girls were in Justin Bieber shirts and were screaming they must be at a Justin Bieber concert having fun. When the second photo was shown with the dads plugging their ears in the background the students updated the story to include that the fathers took the girls to the concert and were not having a good time. They agreed that the second photo didn’t

change the story of the first photo, merely added to the story of the screaming girls.

Looking at the pre and posttest answers, Student 3 seems to have been the only student that truly understood the concept behind framing a shot. All of the pretest answers were centered around how framing is a part of editing, and Students 1 and 2's answers in the posttest were still similar to the pre test answers, but Student 3 answered, "if you frame the shot a certain way it could show something different than the whole scene." This demonstrates that he understands that you can manipulate what is shown in a shot by changing the framing.

Metacognition is beginning to develop in the age group of the children that we were working with, but the ability to realize that a film or television show is attempting to manipulate you by using certain production tools is necessary for media literacy. Our text points out that "older children are better able to consider their own thought processes while attending to a television program" and can therefore realize when they are attempting to be manipulated by the media (33). During our music activity we asked the students to watch a popular, high emotion Indiana Jones clip with no music and asked how the students were feeling. They answered that they didn't really feel any emotion, but when we watched the same scene again with the music they responded that they felt anxious and excited. When asked about how the Imperial March from Star Wars made them feel they answered that they felt a little scared and nervous because the music was dark and the tone of the music along with the horns used. We then had the students play around on a music clip website and asked them to pull up different clips and describe how they made them feel. Student 1 found a song that he thought was "happy" because of the light music and the use of a flute, which he considered a happy instrument because of

the sound that it makes. Student 3 found a song he thought was “actiony” because of the fast tempo. By the end of the exercise the students understood that music can manipulate your emotions, and they proved this by choosing or creating music clips for their movie that coincided with the intended emotion that they were trying to draw out from their audience.

Stereotypes were also a big subject that was discussed in our classroom. Looking at the pretest answers, the students didn’t really understand what exactly a stereotype was or why they were used. Student 1 thought that a stereotype was “something that describes a person” which was close, but not quite complete. In our stereotyping activity we asked the students to sort the same set of character flashcards into any group that they saw fit, attempting to get them to sort the characters into stereotypes they didn’t even realize that they knew. They had categories like: superheros, funny people, nerds, vampires, strong characters (physically), and weak characters. When asked about their personal favorite character, Students 1 and 3 answered with Daryl from The Walking Dead. We drew a connection between the characteristics of Daryl and the characteristics of Sam Witwicky from Transformers to draw out the point that different films can have essentially the same characters. Student 2’s favorite character was Agent Romanoff from The Avengers. When asked why she was her favorite, she answered that she is “tough and can take on anything.” It can also be assumed that she identified with this character because The Avengers was her self-proclaimed favorite movie and Agent Romanoff was one of the only females within the movie. We then drew connections from Agent Romanoff and Daryl and pointed out that even though the characters have different genders, they can

still be similar to each other and play into the same stereotypes of being a hero and strong.

Gender stereotypes were also discussed in the classroom. We asked about Sam Witwicky, Shia LaBeouf in Transformers, and what made him “manly” and the students answered that he (in the picture) was wearing a grungy hoodie and has a big scar. They clarified that small scars do not make people manly, only big scars because those hurt more. When asked what would happen if Sam acted girly in the movie the students answered that people would think that he was weird because a boy acting like a girl is not normal. When we asked what made Hannah Montana “girly” they students answered that she is bubbly, likes girly things, and has long hair. Interested in what they would say, we asked them what would happen if Hannah Montana didn’t act girly. The answer was quite surprising. Student 1 said that if Hannah stopped acting girly then people would stop watching and her show would get cancelled because she wouldn’t be teaching girls how to act. This shows that the students believe the gender stereotypes that girls watch girl’s shows and boys watch boy’s shows to learn how they should behave. This is a major reason why teaching media literacy is so crucial. Children need to know that they are not bound by their own gender and that they truly can do or be whatever they want to be.

We also did a small activity based on setting stereotypes to compliment the character stereotype activity and to show that stereotypes are everywhere. This activity was blended into conversation the best and followed the advice of the text by “insert[ing] information into the discussion in a way that seems natural” (547). While the students were building their characters, I was building a giraffe to help introduce the topic of setting stereotypes. We asked the students what they thought about when they thought of

Africa and Student 1, without missing a beat, answered, “starving.” This is clearly a strong association in the student’s mind and showcases how stereotypes can take one thought and spread them over an entire concept, like Africa. The students went on to list things like grasslands, dirt, giraffes, lions and elephants. When we showed them pictures of downtown Johannesburg and Nairobi they were surprised and even suggested we change the setting of the story to Africa. Showing the students that stereotypes apply to settings just like they apply to people helped show them that they should not be so quick to judge.

This project was an eye-opening experience as compared to the Children & Media course in the spring. During the course we learned about how children process the media, but in the program with the students we were actually able to ask them questions about stereotypes and genres to get a better understanding of how they process media. The most surprising was definitely Student 1 thinking that Hannah Montana’s show was supposed to teach girls how to act. It is this kind of misconception that media literacy can help eradicate and allow children to identify with whatever or whomever they admire. Students need media literacy at a young age to help with their development of personal identity. There can certainly be improvement made to our initial supplemental curriculum, but the need for a program like this is apparent.