

Secondary English Teaching Resource

Strand 1: Consuming Critically

Writer: Greta Caruso

Introduction

If the media is unregulated then anyone can produce its artefacts. Just as this may be a liberating concept for some, it also means that media can be produced by the most dubious elements of society. And for this very reason the media has been manipulated by powerful, unscrupulous and mercenary moguls. Josef Stalin said “paper will take anything that is written on it”, meaning that words may seem to have credibility simply because they are written down.

The same is now true for electronic media, and perhaps the availability and accessibility makes Stalin’s comment even more salient. Access to the internet has produced a plethora of comment and opinion taken and presented as fact. Each person has the ability to write and publish whatever they wish and to draw an audience of supporters to their cause from across the world.

While lies, hoaxes and rip-offs are deserving of special awareness, perhaps more important is the need to be able to identify the values implicit in all texts. Media that is mischievous or insidious can be exposed and dealt with. Identifying underlying prejudices and proclivities is a more complex issue. In increasingly mediated world, a sense of the social context of the media we consume is increasingly important. Some important new communication technologies worthy of consideration include websites and search engines.

Thinking and consuming critically applies to all media, even media that is not aimed at making a profit. The most sincere and worthy media still has an agenda, or a set of underlying values. It directs an audience to a distinct message supported by professional and engaging delivery, addressing ethical and legal parameters.

Secondary English Teaching Resource

Strand 1: Consuming Critically

Writer: Greta Caruso

Overview

Developing critical thinking with students has been a major focus for the English curriculum and English teachers. A common pedagogical approach for teachers is to instruct students in clear thinking, analysis of the language of persuasion and critical literacy. In line with the evolution of English pedagogy is the importance of critical understanding, especially how texts set out to manipulate their audience. The additional text content that digital mass media generates focuses on visual language and multi-mediated literacies. Media texts are now accessible and available in extraordinary number and frequency. Media consumers need to be discerningly aware not only of how the language operates to position the audience, but how the still and moving images/graphics combine with the language to communicate meaning.

Wikipedia is a publicly, collaboratively built encyclopaedia. The very fact that it is branded with the “pedia” suffix lends credibility to the site. Some teachers criticise **Wikipedia** as invalid, being written by and appealing to those without expertise. The advocates of **Wikipedia** defend it as a site continually under improvement due to its inherently democratic nature. Authority and accountability is returned to the anonymous public audience. Quality control rests as much with the consumer as the creator and of course is variable. Indeed **Wikipedia** itself has a whole section dedicated to the criticism of **Wikipedia**.

Wikipedia, *Criticism of Wikipedia*:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Wikipedia

There are a range of websites, newspaper, radio and television productions that re-view and monitor the media, for example, Australian Broadcasting Commission’s (ABC) **Media Watch** and **Crikey.com**. This microscope on the media attempts to expose the prejudices of network/corporation bias and offer another voice about the news and current affairs. The assumptions and facts of current affairs broadcasts are challenged and a more independent viewpoint is seemingly adopted. Such services often take the side of the underdog and claim to represent social integrity.

Our Community, *Communities in Control*:

http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/article/view_article.jsp?articleId=581

The **ACTF's** production, **Crash Zone**, is an example of how media bias is represented on television. Ethics and values are present, even in the most subtle forms. In **Crash Zone**, a computer company owned and run by a young woman employs five young characters to test computer games. The producers included three girl characters and three boy characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds. While the characters might be considered outside of the 'mainstream', they are certainly ambitious, active, enterprising and clever. Thus, from the beginning the television series opens up questions about stereotypes. **Crash Zone** raises questions about the assumptions behind television production.

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *Crash Zone Series 1*:

<http://actf.com.au/education-programs/crash-zone-series-1>

Encouraging students to develop critical skills for reading and viewing media is very important today as many advertisements, films and TV programs can be explicitly and implicitly deceptive. A famous deception in media history was Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio play. In 1938, he read a play about a Martian invasion of earth. The radio performance was complete with new flashes and on the spot reports. The play created mass panic in the UK and eventually a retraction and apology was issued. This event showed the power of broadcasting to convey explicit and intentional meaning regardless of truth.

Wikipedia, *The War of the Worlds (radio drama)*:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_War_of_the_Worlds_\(radio_drama\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_War_of_the_Worlds_(radio_drama))

About.com, *War of the Worlds Radio Broadcast Causes Panic*:

<http://history1900s.about.com/od/1930s/a/warofworlds.htm>

Some modern day media personalities have run a side business in what seems to be tongue in cheek self-deprecation. One of the most well-known of these is Peter Jackson, director of the *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy. His mock-documentary, *Forgotten Silver*, is a fiction about the supposedly famous New Zealand filmmaker, Colin McKenzie. Audience responses varied: some appreciated the mockumentary as a satirical practical joke but others felt resentment at being played for fools. In an echo of the Orson Wells experience the filmmakers were forced to make a public retraction and apology.

Waikato, *Hoax documentary smart idea which turned sour*:

<http://www.waikato.ac.nz/fass/mock-doc/documents/paper8.shtml>

Thus, while these hoaxes might at least start with little more than an experimental comic agenda, they often offend the sensibilities of the public. Convincing the public of this after the fact seems a little more delicate.

The ACTF's telemovie from the **Winners** series is titled **Top Kid**. This production exposes the deception behind TV quiz shows and how winning is orchestrated for the *popular* candidate. Gary has brains and a photographic memory! He could be a rich kid but can he stay silent when he knows the show is rigged. Gary has a difficult decision to make.

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *Winners and More Winners*:

<http://actf.com.au/education-programs/winners-and-more-winners>

Secondary English Teaching Resource

Strand 1: Consuming Critically

Writer: Greta Caruso

Beaut Ideas for the classroom

1. For students aged 14-16

Ask students to

compare the mission statement of the Australian Children's Television Foundation to the mission statement of the Children's Television Workshop,
evaluate how effectively to feel each company provides these objectives.

The ACTF will continually raise the stakes in children's media production, driving higher standards of creativity and innovation, based on the assumption that we should never underestimate children's desire to be informed and challenged as well as entertained.

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *About Us*:

<http://actf.com.au/about>

Sesame Workshop, *Our Mission*:

<http://www.sesameworkshop.org/about-us/our-mission/>

2. For students aged 12-14: Considering gender

Reading critically involves exploring the choices made in the media.

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *The Learning Centre*:

http://actf.com.au/education/learning_centre

Ask students to

look at the ACTF productions **Sky Trackers** and **Spellbinder**,

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *Sky Trackers*:

<http://actf.com.au/education-programs/sky-trackers>

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *Spellbinder*:

<http://actf.com.au/education-programs/spellbinder>

make a quick list of the views and values about gender that seem to have been the intention of the producers.

3. For students aged 12-15: Considering a multiplicity of cultures

Ask students to

View the website:

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *Worst Best Friends*:

<http://actf.com.au/education-programs/worst-best-friends>

read the lesson plan titles and short descriptions of what the lessons aim to achieve,

identify what values are made explicit and what values are implied?

4. For students aged 12–15: Evaluating websites

Ask students to

work as a class to list criteria they would use for evaluating the reliability and validity of selected websites. These criteria may be used when evaluating written materials derived from the Internet:

interest and suitability to students for class level;

understanding and use of language and ideas;

suitable use of language, appropriate to the particular genre;

alignment between the print resource and learning area/s of the curriculum;

relevant, reliable and balanced information sources, that are not prejudiced or biased (unless you have specific reasons to consider them).

Is the site dynamic? Does it offer animation, sound and graphics that combine with print material to provide a learning opportunity not found in print sources?

Are there activities connected with the site that offer opportunities to develop multiliteracies? (These could include participation in online discussions and postings on bulletin boards, manipulation of symbols to create meaning and navigation of sites for specific information retrieval.)

Issues related to the use of technology.

How well is the site organised? How easily can it be navigated?

Search for sites related to contestable topics such as *genetically modified food*,

work in pairs to write an evaluation of the reliability of a site they have found.

They should include at least 4 of the terms listed below.

partisan	objective
prejudiced	reliable
biased	vested interest
partial	stakeholder
unfair	

Special note to teachers: there are many websites that are involved in little more than entrapment. Students need to be aware of the entrapment devices that they might encounter. There are a great many websites that seem very innocuous from the homepage but reveal their more dubious purposes as the links are followed. Of particular concern are racist sites and sites dealing with inappropriate and even illegal sexual behaviour.

5. For students aged 12-16: Review a website

Ask students to

conduct a website review and upload it at the following site:

Landmark Project, *Digital Index Card*:

<http://www.landmark-project.com/evaluation/dic1.php>

Note that this evaluation tool asks the user to nominate the purpose of their search. This activity involves students in actually publishing their evaluations on-line, and so validates their opinions and encourages them to write with care and thought. The teacher can construct a dummy site on the school intranet if web uploading is not possible at your school.

6. For students aged 15-17: Critical surfing

Ask students to

read the following article on critical internet use:

Reading Online, *Teaching Students to Evaluate Internet Information Critically*:

http://www.readingonline.org/editorial/edit_index.asp?HREF=december2001/index.html

use the information and ideas presented here to compose a short letter to the editor on the topic:

“Schools have a responsibility to vet the information they put before their students.” (suggested length 300 words)

7. For students aged 15-17: Not what it seems to be

Ask students to

View the websites:

Havidol, *Home Page*:

<http://www.havidol.com/>

(This website was not set up as a hoax. In fact, it was set up as a work of art by Justine Cooper for an exhibition in New York. She decided to parody a marketing campaign by inventing a disease and a drug to cure it and then building a website to promote it. The exhibition took the form of a marketing campaign for a drug, called Havidol, which is a treatment for Dysphoric Social Attention Consumption Deficit Anxiety Disorder (DSACDAD). The problem arose when despite all disclaimers people took the website seriously and tried to order the medication.)

The Age, *Last Laugh: Better living through chemistry*:

http://blogs.theage.com.au/entertainment/archives/2007/02/last_laugh_bett.html

Explain why so many people are so willing to believe the information, respond to what exactly about the site makes it so appealing and believable?

Secondary English Teaching Resource

Strand 1: Consuming Critically

Writer: Greta Caruso

Lesson activities for the secondary classroom

ACTIVITY 1: Lower secondary

Reading on the Internet

(a) Media myths

Ask students to

1. Consider the metaphor “surfing the net”.
2. Compose a diagram or flow chart to show the difference between reading a novel, a history textbook and a website. Use arrows, lines and images to show the possible progression of the reader.
3. Look at the home page one of Australia’s most media exposed and well qualified scientists:

ABC Science, *Dr Karl*:

<http://www.abc.net.au/science/k2/default.htm>

4. Using:

Wikipedia, *Urban Legend*:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_legend

Well-known topics of urban legends sort the myths into three groups: those that are entertaining, those that are scary, and those that are unbelievable. Survey the class to find if these myths have been heard before. Consider which ones are most likely to be retold.

5. Discuss how it can be that truth is not bound by the possibilities of life.

Thinking It Over

Ask students to evaluate

What thinking processes were necessary to complete each activity?

Which thinking processes were the most difficult and state why?

(b) Mike the Headless Chicken

Ask students to

view and read the following website:

Mike the Headless Chicken, *Home page*:

<http://www.miketheheadlesschicken.org/>

answer the following questions:

1. What has the author done to convince the reader of the authenticity of the story?
2. This story is written in conversational style. List three examples of this style of writing from the website.
3. *"It seems that Mike could do just about anything that any other chicken could do, if you exclude all of the functions of his head."* What do you think the hens thought of that?
4. Find the dictionary definition of the words below:
Huckster
Reflex
Jugular
Humane
Gizzard
Oesophagus
5. *"As you can probably imagine, Mr. Olsen was the one whacking the heads off while Clara plucked and cleaned the birds."* What does this indicate about the gender roles?
6. Explain this statement in your own words: *"Apparently, Mike forgot to read the rulebook for playing the game of Life."*
7. How did people react when they heard the news of Mike?
8. Write one paragraph starting with the sentence: *"America is home of the entrepreneur."*
9. If you wanted to verify the story how would you go about it?

Thinking It Over

Ask students to list, from the activities above, those that require:

thinking about the meaning of words or phrases in their context

thinking about social issues

further research.

ACTIVITY 2: Middle secondary

Reading on the Internet

(a) Believing the unbelievable

Ask students to:

1. Consider historically significant bogus texts such as:

The Museum of Hoaxes, *The War of the Worlds*, 1938:

http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/archive/permalink/the_war_of_the_worlds

The Museum of Hoaxes, *The Swiss Spaghetti Harvest*, 1957:

http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/archive/permalink/the_swiss_spaghetti_harvest

and photographic images that fooled literary greats and spawned many stories about the Cottingley Fairies, in particular, '*Frances and the Fairies*', July 1917, taken by Elsie:

The Museum of Hoaxes, *The Cottingley Fairies*:

http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/photo_database/image/the_cottingley_fairies/

2. View the website

Olin & Uris Libraries, *Evaluating Web Sites: Criteria and Tools*:

<http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/webeval.html>

This website brings together many questions that can help students evaluate websites. It also provides a checklist that can be used to evaluate a website's features. Ask students to devise an evaluation schema might be most useful for their purposes.

Thinking It Over

Hyper-texts are texts the have links to other text and other parts of the text. Of course this has always been possible, but up until recently few texts have actually been designed to be read in such a fashion.

Ask students to:

Complete the following table to show what reading and thinking behaviours are built into hypertexts. For example:

Text type Hypertext Reading	Thinking Behaviours
Hypertexts link to other texts	
Links often lead to other links	
A recording of visited links can be kept	
There are often many choices or branches	

(b) The Chicken and the Egg Conundrum

The question “*Which came first, the chicken or the egg?*” has been discussed by evolutionary scientists, creationists and philosophers for many centuries. It contains the kernel of the question of the beginning of life and is seemingly unanswerable, and thus endlessly debatable.

Ask students to

consider why the question is often used as a metaphor in discussions of logic.

view the website: The Ova Prima Foundation *Home Page*:

<http://www.ovaprima.org/>

Answer the following questions:

1. After viewing the main page of the website, explain briefly what type of website you are looking at?
2. Examine the *Mission Statement* of the Ova Prima Foundation. What is their purpose?
3. Follow the *News* link. What news is presented from Sri Lanka? What style of writing is used? How do the images and graphics build the site?
4. There was a fight at the conference in Tulsa. What was the fight about and who was it between?
5. Scroll down further to the section *Oogeneticist Honored*. Follow the link “*American Journal of Archaeological Oogenetics (AJAO 132(10):342-346; AJAO 132(11):625-632)*”. What area of research is presented here? What are the findings?
6. Return to the *News* page and scroll down a little further. Describe the wedding cake of Georg and Tiffany.
7. Follow the *Education* link. Follow the *Ova Prima Lesson Plans Databank* link. Under the *Social Studies* category follow the link to *The Egg and Chicken Controversy: evaluating primary sources (grades 10-12)*. What issues are the students asked to discuss?
8. Research how much money is available in grants?
9. Write one paragraph about the website using the following words: Sceptical, dubious, incredulous, deceitful, suspect
10. Explain why would anyone make such a website?

Thinking it over

Ask students to respond to:

On a scale of 1-10, therefore from **gullible** to **cynical**, where would you place yourself?

How did your personal disposition affect the way you read this article?

At what point did you start to think about the credibility of the article?

(c) The improbable

Ask students to

(a) view the following website:

Improbable Research, *Feline Reactions to Bearded Men*:

<http://www.improbable.com/airchives/classical/cat/cat.html>

(b) respond to the following questions:

1. What is this site about?
2. What style of text writing is used?
3. List the headings used on the site.
4. Look under the *Method* section. What was done to ensure that unconscious cues from the assistant were eradicated?
5. Scroll down to *Notes*. What other animals are mentioned?
6. What is the full name and article title of the second last reference given in the bibliography section?
7. What is the social relevance of this information?
8. What is the ostensible purpose of this site? What is the real purpose of this site?

Thinking it over

Ask students to respond to:

- o Why are people so gullible and quick to believe the unbelievable?
- o What elements make a good fiction story and internet site?
- o Compare this story to a current affairs web site and note the similarities.

ACTIVITY 3: Upper secondary

Reading on the Internet

(a) Yolgnu Boy

Ask students to view the website:

Australian Children's Television Foundation, *Yolngu Boy*:

<http://actf.com.au/education-programs/yolngu-boy>

1. Click on the link *Images & Clips*
2. View the film trailer
3. Answer these questions:
 - How is modern, western culture represented in the footage?
 - How is traditional, aboriginal culture represented in the footage?

Ask students to view the website:

Yolngu Boys, *Home page*:

<http://www.yolnguboy.com/directory/htm/frameset3.htm>

1. The description states:
"Botj is walking on the wild side, a lost soul in search of a place to belong."
How does this statement, about the character, position the viewer/reader to see Botj?
2. Read the biography of each of the four main cast members. Jot down important quotes to show how each biography
 - normalise the actors,
 - celebrate the actors' achievements,
 - imply a tone of optimism.
3. Explain what social, political and historical factors within Australian life make these three biographical factors important for aboriginal actors.
4. Read through the comments about the film by the director, Stephen Johnson.
"The situation that's occurring out there is incredibly tragic. As much as I derive a great deal of energy and inspiration from these people, I believe that in some ways indirect genocide is still taking place. Alcohol abuse and petrol sniffing continue to be problematic. There are also instances where the current generation is perhaps not as effective with their kids as they could be, although this is hardly surprising when you consider the level of external interference parents have to negotiate. Consequently, there are many youngsters out there who are totally lost and confused and find themselves juxtaposed between two contradictory lifestyles."

Thinking it over

Ask students to respond to:

What values underlie Johnson's presentation of some of the issues that face these characters? In your answer refer to history, responsibility, blame and culture clash.