Faith Formation in a Media World

Mary E. Hess

One of the many gifts this journal has brought to public conversation is a vibrant sharing of "best practices" in various forms of faith formation. I wish I could begin this essay on media and faith by listing such a set of best practices in the digital media sphere. But two challenges make that difficult. First of all, media is such a pervasive element of our culture that it makes little sense to write about media practices as separated in any way from practices of faith more generally. Secondly, digital tools are being invented and changed at such a rapid pace that almost the instant you begin to describe a particular form of media it has already shifted to a different format or context.

It's hard to imagine that the Web did not even exist until 1992. Yet while an older generation is just now coming to learn how to use e-mail, many members of the younger generation are abandoning e-mail in favor of sending messages through mobile devices, and via social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Mobile computing—that is, accessing the Web through handheld devices such as "smart" phones (think iPhone and Blackberry)—is now growing rapidly the world over, and it's not inconceivable that there may be an end to computers as we now know them.

In an effort to provide something of use in the midst of such change, I'd like to offer in this article a conceptual framework by which to develop and assess our work within a media culture.

Seeing Clearly

During the Easter season this past year, I was struck anew by the juxtaposition of two very familiar Gospel stories: the tale of doubting Thomas, and the tale of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The story of Thomas, you'll remember, is about a disciple who wasn't around when Jesus first appeared after his resurrection. Thomas was the one who wanted to put his fingers in Jesus' nail holes, and his hand in Jesus' wounded side. I can hear him in the echoes of children's voices today—show me! show me! I want to see! Perhaps a little of that impulse remains even in the hearts of adults, who are charged with helping children learn how to practice their faith.

In the week following the Thomas story, we heard the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Here we have two of Jesus' disciples walking with weary feet and heavy hearts toward Emmaus, not yet believing

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what they were told by the women who had seen the empty tomb. Along the way, the men encounter a stranger and tell him the story of what they've been going through. Far from being amazed, Jesus turns around and reinterprets Scripture for them. They invite him to join them for dinner that evening, and in the breaking of the bread they suddenly recognize the stranger as Jesus—at which point, he vanishes. They then exclaim, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke to us?"

These Gospels present us with two very clear stories of "show and tell," stories that can be of enormous help as we chart a path that connects the tools of our culture, particularly media, with our work as religious educators. What does it mean, for example, to "show and tell" in this fast-paced, mediated world we live in? What does it mean to share the stories of our faith, the stories of our lives, with children and each other?

For many people, trying to live and share faith in a media culture can be both frightening and tiring. Consider an e-mail I received recently from the Minnesota Family Council, an invitation to an educational event. In it they suggested:

> The great battle of our age—indeed, of every age—is the battle over the minds of our children. God's word tells us we must love him with all our mind, be transformed by the renewing of our mind, have the mind which is in Christ, be of a sound mind, and set our mind not on earthly things but on heavenly things. This is the mind we are commanded to build in our children. Against this mind comes the popular culture. The news and entertainment media, and particularly the secular education establishment, seek to build an entirely different mind in our children. It's not easy to carry out our most important task under such a barrage of hostile fire. But we know it can be done. We know it must be done.

Sounds like quite the challenge, yes? The language of the e-mail is fierce: a battle we must engage, a command we must follow to build an "entirely different mind," and one we must fight "under hostile fire." I don't want to belittle the fearful feelings this type of talk may engender, because many people feel it strongly. But I *do* want to ask us to think a bit about such fear, and what our responses as Christians really ought to be.

How are we—who live in a world of facile sound bites, in an age of war and terrorism and famine and global climate change—to witness to the resurrection? We are an Easter people, but often, it feels like we're on the road to Emmaus and have not yet met the stranger. The fatigue and fear that can set in on the journey is doubly hard for Christian educators, especially if we work with children, because if we can't keep up our own energy and sort through our own challenges, how are we to lead others? How are we to "show and tell"?

Rather than riding out to face the enemy, let me propose another approach. Why aren't we asking our children what they are learning from the media culture? Here is fertile territory, an opportunity to look at what it is they are learning from the world around them, then taking that information and fashioning an appropriate response. Because in truth we must ask this question: Is everything that is presented by the media to be avoided? Or is there something our children have found there that might be lauded and used to the advantage of effective faith formation?

Most children have a keen ability to be fully present to the moment; this ability can be useful for us to use as we explore the positive and negative effects of media. As Jesus so clearly tells us: "Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 18:3–5).

Being present to the moment is an attitude that takes time to develop once we have moved beyond the relative innocence of childhood. Yet in order to be aware of both the dangers and possibilities offered by media, we *must* be present to its reality in our world today. Relearning how to be present in the moment can assist us in seeing clearly our role as religious educators, and the ways we can best use the tools at hand today.

Responding to the Challenge: Technical or Adaptive

How are we to understand and live with the challenges presented to us by the digital age? How do we to respond to what's available to us and to our young people, and discern what is beneficial and what is detrimental to spiritual health? How do we help our congregations, from young to old, live faith-filled lives and grow along their spiritual path in light of the resources available to them? We have to start by acknowledging there are no clear or precise answers to these questions.

Ronald Heifetz, one of the world's leading authorities on the subject of leadership, makes an important distinction between "technical" challenges and "adaptive" challenges. The former has to do with very clear problems that have very clear solutions.

One example of this is breaking a bone cleanly. Here one needs a doctor who can set the bone well: you want a doctor with the best technical skills. Your role as patient is to be as cooperative as possible in order to allow the expert to do what needs to be done. It's a clear problem, with a clear solution.

Most people today couldn't imagine living in the world without media. How many of us would be willing to give up our televisions, our computer, our cell phones, or our music systems? Yet why are we so reluctant to engage media in our teaching?

An adaptive challenge, on the other hand, is much messier, one without clear definition, borders, or obvious solutions. Perhaps you go to the doctor and discover you have a chronic disease, whose symptoms can be improved by changing your diet and exercise. Here the doctor must work with you to help you adapt to your disease, and learn how to make appropriate changes in your life. But there is no clear answer to dealing with the disease. You might have to try a few different medications and work out an effective diet and exercise plan. Even then, there may be no cure—just fewer symptoms. That's an adaptive challenge.

Living with faith in media culture is an adaptive challenge. Unfortunately, far too often we in the church tend to treat it like a technical problem.

Remember the e-mail I quoted earlier? It was aimed at mobilizing people to attend a training event in order to learn specific ways of battling the media. Many of us who work in Christian education are familiar with this kind of search for a technical response. "Our summer program is having problems; let's look for a new curriculum." "Our Sunday school is not drawing as many kids as last year: let's switch curricula." "I know, let's try video clips!" or perhaps even, "let's add a projector to worship!" Sometimes finding a new curriculum *is* the right answer to catechetical conundrums, and I'm all for utilizing digital tools if they serve your mission and vision. But these are technical responses to basic problems.

Far more often what we're facing is an adaptive challenge, and what we need to find is a way through it, a way in which we can participate together and collaborate on a process that works toward a solution.

AKM Adams, a priest and theologian, wrote that we need to

> discern how to make affirmations in a world of ambiguity, how to deal with uncertainty in an uncertain world. That involves reliance on God, not because God resolves our ambiguities into clear-cut, iron-clad certainties that circumvent our travails, but because in turning to God we enter a Way that promises forgiveness for the missteps we make in earnestly endeavoring to draw nearer to God. We follow in that Way—we don't determine it ourselves. We offer forgiveness as a condition of our presuming to ask forgiveness. We commit ourselves to pursuing a truth we don't control, a truth that may lead us to conclusions we don't like, may oblige us to change our minds.

It is this way, this path, this journey that we strive to follow in our search for what it means to live with faith in the midst of a media culture.

How do we apply the theory of adaptive challenge to a religious context? Within a community of faith this means doing our best to stay grounded in our faith while remaining open to new ways of teaching and of living out the faith. Being adaptive means helping each other share and explore our core faith stories in ways that are open and honest and full of authenticity.

What are the mainstream researchers teaching us about kids and media? They show us, for instance, that no matter how much we worry about content, what's far more important are the *practices* in which that content is embedded. Is watching TV (or DVDs or film or whatever) something you do together, as a family? Or is it something family members do alone? Do your kids work on the computer in the midst of the rush of family life, in a common place, like a kitchen or family room? Or are they huddled away in the corner of a room all by themselves?

Think about your church settings. Is popular music a regular part of conversations about faith? Or is there an unspoken agreement that certain kinds of music or content are not allowed into conversations about religion? Do you help the kids in your church programs engage the media they play with? Better yet, do you help them *create* in those media? Are you working in narrow, technical ways, or working in an adaptive way to see the full range of possibilities present in sharing the faith?

Three Elements for Religious Education in a Media Culture

There are three crucial elements we need to remember in our efforts to develop effective religious education in a media culture.

1. **We need to remember that engaging with media is a daily reality.** There is truth in what the Minnesota Family Council says in their e-mail noted earlier: media and pop culture are always present, everywhere. As religious educators, do we try to hide from their influence and create safe spaces they can't enter? Or do we incorporate elements of contemporary media into the learning process?

2. **We need to be open to encountering strangers.** The communities of which Jesus was a part, the communities from which the disciples were drawn, had a fundamental commitment to hospitality. You not only encountered the stranger in the road, you walked and talked with him, and invited him to dinner. Imagine what might have happened if the disciples had crossed over to the other side of the road to Emmaus instead of engaging the stranger in conversation? Far too often we do the same with media and pop culture. Instead of being open to what the media and pop culture have to offer, we try to exclude them from the "conversation." Yet God is present in and speaks to us from all places in our lives. Being open to what the culture has to offer as a tool for catechesis only broadens the opportunity to engage our listeners in active faith formation.

3. **We need to remember that our practices matter.** If we listen to kids' music only to tell them how wrong or bad it is, we teach them there is only one way to hear something. If we listen to kids' music and ask them questions and help them articulate what moves them and connects them with that music—then perhaps helping them connect that to their faith—we teach them something very different. But remember: our goal as educators isn't simply to affirm what children and youth are engaged with, rather, to develop a set of practices that can help all of us navigate through the pervasive presence of media in our world today.

Moving from a world with few digital tools to one that is flooded with them is an adaptive challenge. Meeting that challenge involves active communication to take our thoughts and ideas about media and pop culture, and turn them into concrete patterns of practice.

The point is to find the ways God continues to be revealed in our world today. As Scharer and Hilberath note, "the authentic *theological* places where God shows God's self to human beings in history include not only their biographies but also their interaction and communication. The Christian belief in the One and Triune God, who is personal relationship, makes every human communication a theological challenge" (Sharer and Hilberath, 147). Using all the tools available to us and our students allows us greater latitude in effectively communicating the ongoing revelation of God in our midst.

Knowledge and Skills for Learning in a Media Culture

Contemporary researchers in the field of education are clear about the skills today's children need in order to be successful in learning. For instance, an influential policy paper suggests children should be competent in "play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multi-tasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation"(Jenkins, 2006). These twenty-first century literacy skills are not easily taught with paper and pencil exercises, but rely increasingly on computers and other "screened" devices. Jenkins further writes that:

> students can no longer rely on expert gatekeepers to tell them what is worth knowing. Instead, they must become more reflective of how individuals know what they know and how they assess the motives and knowledge of different communities. Students must be able to identify which group is most aware of relevant resources and choose a search system matched to the appropriate criteria: people with similar tastes; similar viewpoints; divergent viewpoints; similar goals; general popularity; trusted, unbiased, third-party assessment; and so forth. If transmedia navigation involves learning to understand the relations between different media systems, networking involves the ability to navigate across different social communities. (Jenkins, 50)

The skills needed to succeed today emerge through collaborative and constructive learning, and require participatory strategies—ones that engage a full range of resources. Yet many communities, particularly communities of faith, have historically

been very worried about the use of screened devices (televisions, computers, and so on) in the process of education. Jenkins further says:

> The [often-prevalent] focus on negative effects of media consumption offers an incomplete picture. These accounts do not appropriately value the skills and knowledge young people are gaining through their involvement with new media, and as a consequence, they may mislead us about the roles teachers and parents should play in helping children learn and grow. (Jenkins, 11)

Those of us who care about lifelong learning in faith, who take seriously God's active agency in the world, must begin to see the potential media holds for religious education. Imagine setting up a social networking site, like MySpace, then helping kids write a page for each biblical character they are learning about. What would a MySpace page look like for David? Who would he "friend" and what plug-ins would he keep on his site? Instead of complaining about the time children willing spend online, while at the same time begrudging any time spent on church activities, why not find constructive ways to help kids utilize this media in a religious education context?

Engaging Media as a Faith Practice

One of the most prevalent assumptions in religious education is that there is some expert knowledge out there we simply must hand on to our learners. Parker Palmer is perhaps the most eloquent of the writers to take this idea to task, arguing instead for something he calls "the community of truth." (Palmer's critique and proposal are most clearly elaborated in his books, *To Know as We Are Known* and *The Courage to Teach*.)

The other model, or what Palmer calls the "objectivist myth," assumes that the authority or expert on a given topic is the best person to teach something. This model suggests that such interaction always goes in one direction, from the teacher to the student. Yet consider how problematic this is for religious education. If we, as educators, are the only ones who hold the truth to be shared, what if we are wrong, or if we fail?

It seems to me that some of the negative energy felt in discussions of media and faith in various church contexts grows out of this inadequate model. As long as we are "held" by this assumption and think that it's the only way we can teach religion, we cannot properly engage media culture.

We have all too often seen the negative and destructive images and stories afloat in commercial media. On the other hand, if meaning is made in the process of passing from the media-producers to the media-receivers, then we have the opportunity to contribute to what is being learned there. Indeed, engaging media might be its own form of faith practice. And by engaging media, I don't mean simply critiquing it for why it is bad, or refusing to use it at all, but rather creating it and participating in the meaning being made with it.

Part of the challenge I face in my own attempts to work with faith issues and the media comes from this unexamined assumption of the objectivist myth. Religious education programs modeled on schoolroom classes with paper and pencil texts, or confirmation curricula heavy on doctrine and light on faith practice, disparage any attempts to bring contemporary media into the discussion.

> **What might our faith** formation programs look like if the natural ability children have to play and to create, to attend and to participate, were harnessed in the service of telling their stories through the media with which they are increasingly fluent?

Perhaps an analogy to art education is apt. Most art educators will argue that children are natural artists, but they become schooled away from their creativity in classroom settings where they learn to "draw within the lines." Religious educators who spend thoughtful and engaged time with young children will tell you they are natural evangelists, asking deep questions of the world around them, and attending to its intricacy and beauty in ways few adults can match. But these same children learn to let go of such questions, and thin their attention to such a degree that by the time they are in confirmation class, their faith too often has shrunk down to a commitment to "get through the hoop" so their parents are happy.

When we add to this the notion that popular media—particularly television, music, films, and the Web—are somehow not a fertile environment for practicing faith, or perhaps even damaging to such practice, we create a context in which young people face the choice of either giving up their faith practices

or giving up media practice. It does not surprise me how many of them choose the first.

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Most children today are learning rudimentary media skills in their school classrooms. Far from being paper and pencil-based learning, increasingly, regular classrooms are places of creation with tools such as Keynote and PowerPoint, digital video, basic Web pages, and so on.

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Why not pass around a digital camera and ask children to take pictures of places where they can feel God's presence? Such pictures could then be combined into a short presentation and shared with friends and the church community. Then imagine what could happen if adults gathered around them and "caught" some of their natural enthusiasm, and started to talk about ways in which they, too, have felt God's presence in the world around them. Imagine those stories caught and shared, interwoven in a creative way with the larger story of God found in the Bible. Then imagine the resulting media pieces published on the Web for community access.

Media is about the culture. Perhaps we can think about the word "culture" in terms of a medium in which something is grown, like the medium used in biology labs. What teachings and faith practices can we "grow" within the media "culture?" What are the ways and means by which we are present in this medium, this culture? What kinds of engagement with media might be transformative in our faith formation programs?

Using Online Social Media to Enhance Faith Sharing

Sharing one's faith with a friend is hard enough, let alone with a stranger. But there are creative ways to engage people in expressing their thoughts and ideas about faith.

Sharing faith can be enhanced and made more accessible through digital tools. Imagine setting up a church blog, led by a pastoral leader, that invites frequent comments about where one finds God (for an example, see http://pastorpam.typepad.com/living_word_by_word). Or imagine a Web site where people from all around the world are gathered virtually to pray the same text (see http://www.sacredspace.ie/), or one where people can comment briefly on where they have found God today (see http://www.other6.net/).

If media culture invites us into sympathy, religious education invites us into empathy. What media producers know is how inviting people into other people's stories through images, music, and movement inspires sympathetic identification with those stories. What educators know is that learning involves growth and transformation, and sharing our stories and experiences can facilitate this process.

For all of the concern about the negative effects of social network Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook, there are many positive ways young people are using them to address challenges in their lives and in the world. For example, young people were contacted via the Web to participate in the immigration rallies in Los Angeles. Note too the widespread use of social networks by today's political candidates, who, along with disseminating information about their campaigns, encourage voter registration and awareness of the issues. Social networks allow people a far-reaching to show their care for each other, particularly when friends are in trouble or die.

Christianity constantly pushes us beyond sympathy to empathy. Sympathy involves being able to imagine oneself into another's position by using one's experiences to "feel" with them. Although it involves an "other," sympathy does not really stretch beyond oneself. Empathy, on the other hand, involves being able to feel with another even if one has never had the same experience. Empathy involves self-differentiation and compassion that is other-oriented.

This distinction is very clear in many of the Gospel stories. Jesus is asked "who is my neighbor?" and replies that, in fact, one's neighbor might even be one's enemy (Luke 10:29). In Matthew 20, the parable of the workers in the vineyard, *every* worker is paid the same, even the ones who only worked an hour or so. The outrage of those who worked a full day comes from sympathy: "Shouldn't I be paid more because I worked longer?" But paying all the same

wages regardless of their hours spent working grows out of an empathic sense. Might the worker who spent most of the day waiting to work have suffered in doing so, without hope they would see a day's wages?

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As lifelong learners in faith, we must be ready to support each other, to keep each other afloat in a sea of changes and possibilities, to find the ways to nourish learning that can meet the adaptive challenges the media culture places in front of us.

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Resource on Media Literacy: Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org)

A pioneer in its field, the Center for Media Literacy (CML) is an educational organization that provides leadership, public education, professional development and educational resources nationally. Dedicated to promoting and supporting media literacy education as a framework for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating and participating with media content, CML works to help citizens, especially the young, develop critical thinking and media production skills needed to live fully in the 21st century media culture. The ultimate goal is to make wise choices possible.

The CML web site provides a variety of materials that you can download and purchase. One of their primary resources is the *CML MediaLit Kit*™ which provides both a vision and an evolving guide for navigating today's global media culture. *Five Key Questions That Can Change the World: Deconstruction* is a classroom activity guide with 25 core lesson plans for K-12 media literacy.

About Media Literacy

Media literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate using messages in a variety of forms—from print to video to the internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.

Five Key Questions for Media Literacy

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently?
4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

Five Core Concepts of Media Literacy

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

Practice Ideas

Media @ Home

Mary Hess

(*This page may be reproduced for use in your church.*)

- Ensure that media engagement is never done in isolation. Watch television together, and ask religious questions about the characters and situations you're seeing.
- Share the task of choosing programs to watch with children, respect and engage their choices and expect them to do the same with yours.
- Ensure that media engagement is never simply with commercial media. Search out and enjoy alternative media, too; the rise of independent and foreign films has provided an especially broad mix of additional media in this category.
- Provide opportunities for kids to raise questions and to initiate conversations; just giving them the room to do so will raise religious issues.
- Limit or stop watching live television. Instead make choices using TiVo or another service that gives you the opportunity to choose what will be viewed in your household.
- Have children tell you stories that build on the stories they've seen in the media. For example, if they love a particular character in a TV show, have them tell a new story starring that character.
- Tell stories that put characters children love in religious situations: take SpongeBob SquarePants to church, build a church from Legos, have the X-Men meet Jesus.
- Respectfully listen to and engage your children's media, even if your first reaction is negative.
- Let your own religious questions be audible.
- Search out stories of those who are marginalized in popular mass mediated culture.
- Deconstruct the news, and then reconstruct it, especially locally.
- Really listen to others, that is, embrace conversation.
- Do a television fast for Lent; turn-off the TV for the 40 days.
- Add music to a dinner prayer (this should include adding so-called "secular" recorded music that resonates with your prayer concerns).
- Make a point of muting television commercials and use the time as an opportunity to ask questions about the shows you're watching.
- Learn how to make videos and have your kids interview each other, friends and neighbors about religious questions.
- Add DVDs with explicit religious themes to your typical film/TV practices.

Practice Ideas

Incorporating Media Literacy and Critical Thinking into Any Curriculum: 12 Basic Principles

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Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, critically evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms. At Project Look Sharp we define "media" very broadly to include books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies, videos, billboards, recorded music, video games, and the Internet. The following 12 principles are general guidelines for thinking about ways to integrate media literacy into any curricular area. For each principle, media literacy can be incorporated through the use and analysis of existing media content and/or through media production. The activities listed for each principle are meant as examples only.

General Media Literacy Practices

When engaging in critical analysis of any media message, it's useful to ask some or all of the following questions:

1. Who made—and who sponsored—this message, and for what purpose?
2. Who is the target audience, and how is the message specifically tailored to that audience?
3. What are the different techniques used to inform, persuade, entertain, and attract attention?
4. What messages are communicated (and/or implied) about certain people, places, events, behaviors, lifestyles, etc.?
5. How current, accurate, and credible is the information in this message?
6. What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

Twelve Basic Principles

1 Use media to practice general observation, critical thinking, analysis, perspective-taking, and production skills by

- encouraging students to think critically about information presented in any media message (including the information from their textbooks or the popular media they use at home)
- pointing out ways in which media messages might be interpreted differently by people from different backgrounds or groups
- fostering observation and general memory skills by asking students to look for specific things when they view videos or read print material, and then asking them about those things afterward
- allowing students to go beyond the curricular issue at hand to identify and comment on incidental aspects of a media message (e.g., the characteristics of the people presenting the material, the techniques used to attract attention, and the ways in which advertising and product messages intrude into other types of media content)
- fostering creative skills through encouraging the production of media messages about a topic

2 Use media to stimulate interest in a new topic by

- showing an exciting or familiar video clip or reading a short book or story (fiction or nonfiction) about the topic
- having students work in small groups to read, analyze, and discuss a controversial magazine, newspaper, or online article about the topic
- using a short video, magazine illustration, or brief article to stimulate discussion, encouraging students to express what they already know or their opinion about a topic
- showing students how to search for information about the topic on the Internet
- encouraging students to plan and design a media product (a montage of pictures, a video, a newspaper or magazine report, or a Web page) about the topic for other students to view

3 Identity ways in which students may be already familiar with a topic through media by

- giving examples from popular media content to illustrate what students might already know about a topic or things they might be familiar with that relate to the topic
- drawing links between the way a topic is typically treated academically and how it might be used in popular media (e.g., written

poetry versus song lyrics or advertising jingles)
- clarifying the way specific terminology related to the topic might be used differently in an academic sense than it might be in the popular culture
- building on the intuitive knowledge students have gained from media about the content area (e.g., about story and character development, problem solving, terminology, rhyming)

4 Use media as a standard pedagogical tool by
- providing information about the topic through a variety of media sources (books, newspaper/magazine articles, instructional videos, websites), comparing the usefulness of different media, and addressing conflicting information that may come from different sources
- using media to convey information more richly and effectively than would be possible with a standard classroom discussion or demonstration
- encouraging students to follow (and write about) current events reported in the media about a topic
- using media content as assigned homework (reading material, searching for information about a topic in newspapers or magazines, etc.)
- encouraging students to share information in class that they have gotten from various media sources (inside or outside of class)

5 Identify erroneous beliefs about a topic fostered by media content by
- analyzing media content that misrepresents a topic or presents false or misleading information about a topic
- identifying misleading ways in which data are presented in the media (citing statistics incorrectly, drawing false conclusions from misleading data, presenting unclear figures and tables, etc.)
- identifying false beliefs held by students about a topic that may have come from fictional media content
- encouraging students to create their own false or misleading media messages (PSAs, commercials, digitally manipulated print advertisements, etc.) and then having them present the message and "debunk" it for the other students in the class

6 Develop an awareness of issues of credibility and bias in the media by
- teaching how to recognize the source (speaker)of a media message and the purpose of producing the message, and how that might influence the objective nature of information
- clarifying the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in different types of media reporting on a specific topic
- identifying ways to decide what are credible sources about this topic within different types of media (e.g., books, magazines/journals, the Internet)
- emphasizing the importance of getting information from many different sources and how to give weight to different pieces of information (e.g., if the information is based on research or other evidence versus personal opinion)
- producing media messages about this topic, emphasizing ways in which bias can be introduced through the words and tone used to present the topic, sources of information used, what is selected to be presented and what is left out, etc.
- exploring how media messages reflect the identity of the creator or presenter of the message and how the same message might come across differently if it were presented or created by someone of a different background, age, race, gender, etc.

7 Compare the ways different media present information about a topic by
- contrasting ways in which information about a topic might be presented in a documentary, a TV news report, a newspaper article, an advertisement, or an educational children's program (what is emphasized, what is left out, what techniques are used to present the information, etc.)
- comparing the amount of time/space devoted to a topic in different media from the same time period (and discussing why the difference occurs)
- analyzing different conclusions that might be drawn by people exposed to information presented in one medium versus another
- discussing the strengths of different media to best get across a particular message
- producing reports about the topic using different forms of media, or manipulating the same information and visuals to convey different messages

8 Analyze the effect that specific media have had on a particular issue or topic historically and/or across different cultures by

- discussing the role that the media have played (if any) in the history of this topic (i.e., ways in which the media have changed the nature of this issue or topic)
- discussing how people of earlier generations might have learned about this topic, what sources of information were available to them compared with sources available to us now, and what difference that would make in people's lives
- exploring the level of knowledge about a topic in different cultures and how that knowledge is influenced by the media available
- identifying media forms that are dominant or available in other cultures that may be seldom used in the United States, and vice versa

9 Use media to build and practice specific curricular skills by

- using print media (books, newspapers, magazines) to practice reading and comprehension skills
- substituting excerpts from existing media content for standard story problems or practice examples (e.g., to practice math skills, to correct grammar or spelling, to identify adjectives or adverbs)
- using media production to practice specific skills (e.g., grammar, poetry, math used in timing and proportions of media messages, scientific principles involved in calculating size, distance, and lighting)
- preparing examples for practicing skills that include media literacy information (e.g., comparing the lengths of news stories about different topics, computing the Nielsen ratings for different shows, analyzing the ways in which two products are described in advertisements)
- fostering computer skills by encouraging students to search for information on the Internet, develop multimedia projects, and use computers to present information about a topic

10 Use media to express students' opinions and illustrate their understanding of the world by

- encouraging students to analyze media messages for distortions and bias issues of particular interest to them (e.g., messages about sex and gender, messages promoting harmful behaviors, race and age distortions in the "media world" compared with the real world, and advertising targeted to people their age)
- encouraging students to express their feelings and knowledge through media messages that they produce
- encouraging thoughtful critiques of various media productions
- promoting discussion of different points of view about popular media articles and productions

11 Use media as an assessment tool by

- having students summarize their knowledge about a topic in a final report that employs other forms of media beyond the standard written report (e.g., computer-illustrated reports, audio or video productions, photographic illustrations)
- encouraging students to work in groups to illustrate their understanding of a topic by creating mock media productions (e.g., newspapers, advertisements, news reports, live or videotaped skits)
- presenting, at the end of a unit, a media message (e.g., from a newspaper, magazine, or video) that contains false information about the topic and seeing if students can identify what is correct and what is incorrect in the message

12 Use media to connect to the community and work toward positive change by

- finding collaborative possibilities for projects with community institutions (e.g., museums, libraries, galleries) that may involve students analyzing or creating media messages
- having students contact community service agencies related to the curricular area and offer their assistance with production (e.g., photography, video, design and layout, or computer skills) to help with agency projects
- encouraging older students to teach production techniques or media literacy principles to younger students in the same school
- using media forums (e.g., local community access TV, newspapers, and magazines) to communicate messages or share research projects about the topic

Practice Ideas

How to Use Digital Storytelling in Education

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Storytelling is a vital skill with seemingly unlimited applications. Done well, it can have a magical effect— moving, enlightening, or entertaining audiences of any size. We tell stories to woo lovers, calm children, or reassure ourselves. Lawyers rely on the power of storytelling to vividly re-create crimes to juries, archaeologists conjure former civilizations, and teachers make abstract concepts real to their students.

In today's digitized world, visual storytelling is a favorite classroom tool, and the affordability and accessibility of technology such as iMovie provides opportunities not imagined a decade ago. Joe Fatheree and Craig Lindvahl, two teachers who have made seven films between them and who teach filmmaking workshops to educators, say that even when teachers are comfortable with the technology, they don't often feel confident about teaching the art of storytelling. But they probably know more than they think, say Fatheree and Lindvahl, who offer the following advice to help teachers:

1. Learn from what you watch.

Think of movies you adore, movies you could watch again and again. What makes them so effective? Is it the dialogue, the character development, the way shots are framed? Likewise, consider movies so bad they make you squirm. Just why are they so excruciating? Work with your students to dissect several well-known films; you'll soon find yourselves with several categories that fall under the rubric of storytelling techniques. You will be amazed at how much you already know.

2. See technology as a storytelling tool, not as a teaching goal.

Though students need some knowledge of how to use equipment, teaching about technology should never be the focus of the curriculum. Simple editing programs such as iMovie are intuitive and easy to learn. If you have a camera and a computer with FireWire, you're ready to go; your creative aspirations will drive your technology learning curve. Once you think of an element you want to include that requires more advanced software or gear, you'll be compelled to learn how to use it.

3. Allow your students to push you (and lead you).

Don't be intimidated if your students learn faster than you do. Many of them are accustomed to quickly absorbing technology. Use their aptitude to your advantage by letting students teach each other; you'll find that they show their strengths fairly quickly. Within a class, you'll have great writers, editors, camera operators, and technicians. They can improve their weaker points while using their strengths to help others (including you).

4. Learn by trial and error.

Accept the fact that you will spend a portion of your time scratching your head, wondering, "Why won't that work?" Seek out resources where you can post questions and get answers quickly. (Creative Cow is an excellent online destination; it has sections for virtually every kind of production and post-production software and hardware.) Every glitch will build your technology savvy until you get to the point where you can anticipate the kinds of problems students will have. Take heart in remembering that most great filmmakers come from a creative background, not a technical one; they depend on others to make technology work on their behalf.

5. Give your students freedom, but hold them accountable.

Kids are not used to the kind of freedom they'll need to do great creative work. Some will thrive in that environment, others will require close supervision to make sure they complete their projects. One good way to do this is to have students pitch a one-paragraph description of their project and provide a production schedule. In essence, it's a work contract.

6. Consider yourself the executive producer.

Work with your students as a partner learning about technology and storytelling, but don't forget that you call the shots. You have to be the arbiter of good taste and the studio boss who decides whether an idea is production worthy. Serving in this role as a teacher is

actually much easier than it is for a real-live executive producer, because students naturally look to you for leadership.

7. Don't forget to celebrate your students' work.

Whether you show completed projects to the class alone or to the entire school or even the whole community, present the stories your students tell. There's a good chance their work will be much more professional than you expect, and light-years beyond what your community might anticipate. A great side benefit of public showings is that your students will take their work very seriously. The knowledge that others are going to see it (and you can't hide C-quality work on a big screen) has been the source of tremendous inspiration for filmmakers for a hundred years.

Try This!
Youth Voices: Tell Your Students to Speak Up

Try this project with children or youth in your church. Just modify the question to fit your focus.
The idea was developed by Edutopia.org

Be sure to check-out all of the resources on Edutopia.org, The George Lukas Educational Foundation.

Edutopia.org wants to hear from you about which skills you think your school should teach to help you succeed in life. Young people are experts on the modern digital world, and we think it's time adults listened. Create a video stating your opinion, and submit it by October 15—we'll publish our favorites on Edutopia.org.

It's simple—there are just five steps:

1. Create a video, no more than one minute long, answering this question: "What do you think is the most important skill to learn for your future—and why?" The footage could consist of straightforward talking to the camera, or something more creative.

2. Introduce yourself with your first name only.

3. Obtain parental consent for taping and posting on the Internet if you are younger than eighteen years old.

4. Post the video on YouTube and tag it "edutopiaskills." (Note that YouTube users must be at least thirteen years old.)

5. Send an email to skills@edutopia.org, telling us your name, age, parental contact information, and hometown, and include a link to the video.

6. You'll need a (free) YouTube account to do the upload. Find YouTube's instructions for uploading and directions for tagging.