

The Elementary Bubble Project: Exploring Critical Media Literacy in a Fourth-Grade Classroom

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Popular media texts such as advertising give teachers the opportunity to bring to their classrooms dialogic instruction that focuses on critical media literacy.

Cecilia stared at her paper as the 17 other fourth graders in her class busily wrote at their tables. When I (Jesse, first author) approached to see if I could help, she held up a full-page magazine advertisement for a Dora the Explorer doll that sings in English and Spanish and said, “There is nothing wrong with this. I think it is a good toy. I’m not sure what to write.”

Cecilia (all student names are pseudonyms) and her classmates were involved in a project focusing on the ways advertising and other mass media communicate messages that can influence the way people think. Their writing assignment, which will be explained later, was to “talk back” to the ads. When we (the authors) designed the unit, we hoped to guide students to become more critical consumers of mass media. Although we tried to be careful not to crush the pleasure children get from their popular culture (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), and we tried not to be too heavy-handed as we guided the students to become critical readers of advertising, Cecilia seemed to have received the message that critical media literacy simply involves finding fault in mass media texts. Cecilia asked me what I thought she should write. I told her that I thought it was fine that she liked the toy, and I encouraged her to respond in a way that reflected her approval of it. She placed a speech bubble coming from the mouth of the Dora doll and wrote, “My name is Dora. I am a great toy. Someone bought me and said: It works. It works.”

A great deal of advertising is directed at young people and is even embedded in their popular culture (Evans, 2005; Tobin, 2004; Vasquez, 2003). Mass media texts, including advertising, reflect certain values even when they appear to be neutral (Giroux, 1999) and such texts can influence people’s thinking (King, 2007). Therefore, having students interrogate commercialism in their environment, including popular culture, is a compelling site for a critical dialogic curriculum (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kellner & Share, 2007; Trier, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to examine how children in a fourth-grade classroom responded during a media literacy unit that focused on critically reading advertisements. We highlight some of the tensions that arose when we tried to balance social critique with students’ pleasure in popular culture. As in the example of Cecilia, we often found ourselves uncertain in our role as teachers when attempting to “teach” students to engage in critical cultural inquiry. At times we felt we were too leading, and other times we wondered if we were guiding the students to be critical at all. After describing the context of this project, we will discuss our efforts to guide a fourth-grade class in critical media literacy activities we call the Elementary Bubble Project.

School Context and Authors’ Positionality

Dawson Elementary is located in a city in southwestern United States. The ethnic and racial make up of the student body includes 86% Latino, 8% African American, and 6% White. The majority of the students at the school are from low-income families, and 88% are on free or reduced-cost lunch.

The first two authors have been or are currently working as teachers at Dawson. Jesse is currently working at a local university but previously taught for 8 years at Dawson. Nancy is in her 7th year teaching at the school, and this project took place in her classroom. Tim has over 10 years of elementary and pre-school teaching experience. We share the view that literacy learning is most powerful when it stems from the lived experiences and background knowledge of students. As teachers we push ourselves to open space in our curriculums to share “expert” status with our students. This means that we often find ourselves in situations where our students know more than we do about a given topic. We firmly believe that this style of constructivist pedagogy fosters an environment of critical collaborative inquiry in our classroom communities.

Like most teachers today, we are familiar with the pressures of “accountability” and the narrowing of curriculum that often ensues (McNeil, 2000). Too often in schools serving high percentages of children of color and children of the working poor, test pressure results in low-level, skills-oriented instruction at the sacrifice of higher order critical thinking (Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007). We do not wish to fall into this trap and therefore have made conscious political and pedagogical decisions to emphasize critical thinking and to open curricular spaces for dialogic instruction.

Critical Media Literacy

Although there has been increased attention given to the fact that young people spend significant time engaging with multiple forms of media, this has not translated to wide-scale pedagogical changes in the way we teach literacy in schools (Kellner & Share, 2007). Given the changing face of literacy in the 21st century, it is imperative that educators consider ways to help students develop the skills required to read and write using multiple text forms including but not limited to traditional typographic print (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Increasingly, educational researchers are calling for schools to teach students to read, write, question, and understand multiple forms of media.

Critical media literacy within the field of cultural studies offers a way for teachers to scaffold students’ learning as they explore and analyze multiple forms of texts. What distinguishes critical media literacy

from other forms of media literacy education is the emphasis placed on ideological factors relating to the relationships of texts, readers, and power (Kellner & Share, 2007). Like Kellner and Share, we believe “power and information are always linked” (p. 62). Critical media literacy pedagogy scaffolds learners as they begin to question common assumptions embedded in the messages of mainstream media. This style of pedagogy pushes students to explore whose voices are privileged in media texts and whose are not heard at all. Additionally, critical media literacy pedagogy offers students opportunity and space to use media tools to create their own texts and make their own voices heard. Therefore, when students and teachers work together to critically analyze texts—including media—a path is opened for transformative pedagogy. Such critical analysis during reading is more urgent now than ever, given the way new technologies have increased our access to so much unfiltered text (Leu & Zawilinski, 2007).

Critical media literacy starts with the assumption that all texts are value laden and privilege some voices while denying others (Semali, 2003). However, this does not mean that audiences—or readers of media texts—passively accept messages found in mass media. Contrary to traditional notions of young people as exceedingly vulnerable to the “dangers” of media influences, Sefton-Green (2006) argued that consumers of mass media are active meaning makers and sometimes read texts in oppositional ways that counter dominant ideology. Such oppositional readings—or counter narratives—are at the heart of critical media literacy.

The transformational potential of critical media literacy pedagogy is increased when students are given opportunities to use media and information technology tools to tell their own stories and express their own concerns. Thus, a key component of critical media literacy is the opening of space in curriculum for students to create their own media (Kellner & Share, 2007; Semali, 2003). The process of creating their own media messages can help students “understand how media acts as a frame and a filter on the world while appearing as a clear window” (Goodman, 2003, p. 6).

Unpacking Advertising

Advertisements and other forms of mass media offer great potential for teachers and students to unpack

layers of textual meaning and question relations of power and knowledge at work in the texts (Luke, O'Brien, & Comber, 2001). Advertisements are particularly useful sites for such work because they are persuasive texts designed to "add to shaping of identities...that consumers wish to take on...as part of their everydayness" (Albers, Harste, Vander Zanden, & Felderman, 2008, p. 70). While recognizing the agency of students to construct meaning from advertising and other media, teachers interested in fostering critical literacy of students can help develop classroom environments that invite an interrogation of rampant consumerist messages found in today's society. The concept of "unpacking" refers to the careful investigation of meanings and hidden meanings of a given idea or text; for instance, when one "unpacks" the text in a soft drink ad, she might find that the images can be "read" as conveying certain ideas about gender expectations or stereotypes (McIntosh, 1988).

The idea that classrooms should be places where students are encouraged to critically analyze media messages in general—and advertising in particular—is supported by the fact that a great deal of marketing is directed at young people (Goodman, 2003; Tobin, 2004). In a study of fifth-grade children's and pre-service teachers' understandings of critically reading advertisements, Albers et al. (2008) found that although most of the young people in their study did not respond in oppositional ways to advertising texts, they did possess abilities to critically interrogate the ways in which ads presented consumerist messages. Therefore, critical media literacy pedagogy is not a one-shot deal and it does not start from scratch; it builds on abilities many young people already possess.

Some teachers open space in the school curriculum to help students critically read media. One example can be found in the work of Chung (2005), who explored visual literacy and art as modes for junior high students to critically deconstruct tobacco advertising. Chung (2005) stated that visual and textual manipulation by media advertising create "ideological sites embedded with powerful discursive sociopolitical meanings that exert strong influences on the ways in which people live their lives" (p. 24). In other words, the students in Chung's classes viewed media as subjective and potentially influential texts but not as direct encodings of reality. The students in this project found artistic ways to respond to advertising messages.

Although a great deal of advertising is geared toward adolescent youth, they are not the only young people targeted by mass marketing. People of all ages are targets of advertising and are never too young to begin thinking critically about such texts (Albers et al., 2008; Evans, 2005). In the book *Negotiating Critical Literacies With Young Children*, Vasquez (2004) demonstrated how children as young as kindergarten can critically unpack advertising messages geared at them. In this case, 5-year-olds considered McDonald's Happy Meals as text and analyzed how the marketers of such products created gendered texts and pushed sales of food products via packaging and other marketing tactics.

The Bubble Project

The Bubble Project (www.thebubbleproject.com) is an example of anticorporate activism often known as "culture jamming." This form of activism takes on a variety of styles but shares a critique of the widespread incursion of corporatism into the daily lives of citizens, especially in areas of health care, education, culture, and government (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). More examples of such activism can be found online at Adbusters' Culturejammer Headquarters (www.adbusters.org). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) explained how remixing ads, a form of culture jamming, is a literacy practice. "By turning media images in upon themselves through deft remixing, the Adbusters' culture jamming campaigns show how Photoshop remixes can be socially-aware new literacy practices for everyone" (p. 132).

Similar to the campaigns of the Adbusters group, guerrilla artist Ji Lee initiated the Bubble Project in New York and online. He has called it a "counterattack" allowing people to respond to the pervasive advertising of environmental print. The manifesto posted on the project's website explains the purpose: "Our communal spaces are being overrun with ads.... Once considered 'public,' these spaces are increasingly being seized by corporations.... We the public, [sic] are both target and victim of this media attack" (www.thebubbleproject.com).

By placing blank speech bubbles on ads, Lee encourages others to write responses to the advertising. According to Lee, this process transforms the original advertisement into something more dialogic and inclusive. It should be noted that this form of reader's response is illegal and therefore should not

be blindly embraced by teachers as a curricular tool. However, the interactive nature of the “bubbling” and the space such practice opens for potentially critical dialogue is evident in the examples that are posted on the Bubble Project website. Additionally, “bubbling” is not a new concept in the area of reading comprehension instruction. Based in research on think-alouds, Wilhelm (2001) used thought bubbles to help students develop metacognition and comprehension strategies while reading. In a similar way, we asked our fourth graders to use speech bubbles in hopes of developing critical thinking when reading media texts.

The Elementary Bubble Project

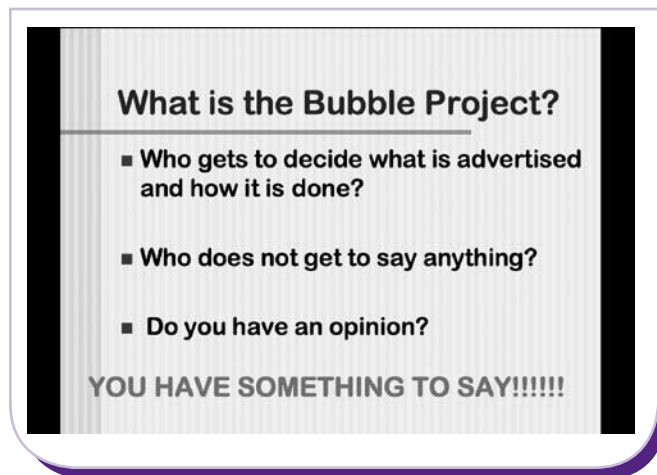
Interested in ways to incorporate students’ popular culture into curriculum and hoping to find ways to encourage critical dialogue between students, popular culture texts, and ourselves, we devised a plan to adapt the Bubble Project for classroom purposes. We decided that a good way to initiate dialogue would be to have a group discussion about advertising and commercialism in mainstream media. From there, we would guide students as they created their own speech bubbles to “talk back” to advertising directed at young people.

Getting Started

We created a PowerPoint presentation to help stimulate discussion that would lead into the students’ critical media literacy work. Our first slide addressed advertising and planted seeds for ideas on why some people are critical of it. One bullet asked students where they find ads. The class brainstormed a list including television, magazines, newspapers, billboards, and the sides of buses. We commented that some people, including us (the teachers), do not like the messages of many advertisements. We asked the students to think about what advertisements and other mainstream media typically tell us about topics like beauty, gender, and products we do not necessarily need.

The purpose of the class discussion around this slideshow was to highlight the fact that we see advertising in many places and that there is often more to such texts than meets the eye. In other words, media texts are value laden and often reflect the ideology

Figure 1
A PowerPoint Slide to Help Initiate Student Discussion



of those in power (Giroux, 1999). When reading, we hoped students would consider the ways messages are constructed and how the images selected (or omitted) communicate meaning.

Our next slide (see Figure 1) posed a question to delve into issues of power and media images. The question, “Who gets to decide what is advertised and how it is done?” provoked some response from the class. One student said, “Grown-ups are the ones who make the ads.” Another student added, “Rich people who own companies make them.” A third student commented, “Most of the ads you see show mostly white people.” When asked to explain why this is significant, the boy referred to the previous slide and critiqued the underlying message that he interpreted as whites are considered more important. Our students began to analyze issues of class, race, and ethnicity in mainstream media—issues that often remain beneath the surface.

We hoped our short introduction to critical literacy would help springboard the students’ critical thinking as we delved deeper into concrete examples. After a brief overview of Lee’s Bubble Project, we shared examples of actual “street bubbles” from New York (www.thebubbleproject.com). As students viewed the examples, the class discussed the meaning behind each one. We selected seven examples from the website that we felt would push students’ thinking in terms of social critique and also were appropriate for fourth graders. We chose to introduce this concept using examples from Lee; however,

teachers interested in trying a similar lesson could create their own examples by simply downloading photos and inserting speech bubbles using common computer programs such as Word or PowerPoint. We were careful to elaborate to the students that these practices are illegal and that we do not condone vandalism.

The first few examples were advertisements for clothing and perfume. The comments written in speech bubbles included a critique about how beauty is represented in mainstream media. One of the ads, for example, features a full shot of a heavily made-up woman wearing a bikini top and miniskirt. Interestingly, it is an ad for shoes, which are barely visible in the picture. The photograph has been digitally distorted so that the woman's head is out of proportion with the rest of her exposed, pencil-thin body. The text of the speech bubble reads, "I am hideously deformed!" While the vocabulary was difficult for some of the fourth graders, through discussion they were able to understand how this ad and many other media images objectify women and propel unrealistic and unhealthy visions of beauty. In another example, an ad for a health maintenance company displays an image of a smiling young family. The speech bubble coming from the mouth of the man says, "Why doesn't the government insure our health?" This example led to a class discussion about health care and the debate over universalized health insurance. Although this topic was above the head of many students in the class, two students had recently experienced firsthand the harsh reality of the health care system when uninsured family members struggled with expenses of needed care. These two students made connections that helped their peers understand the message of this example.

Discussing examples from the Bubble Project helped students deepen their understandings of the ways images in media carry meaning beyond face value. The examples facilitated the students' understandings of ways to critique underlying messages often found in media. Next, we provided students with examples of advertising with blank speech bubbles (from www.thebubbleproject.com) and asked them to offer ideas of what could be written in them. One example, an ad for a pillow, shows a photograph of a woman sleeping. A student raised her hand and in a sarcastic voice offered, "I always do my hair and put on makeup before I go to sleep." Through her sarcasm, this fourth grader communicated the absurdity

of a media image that depicts a woman completely made-up even though she's supposed to be sleeping. This led to further discussion of the ways women are often objectified in media, and students connected this with other examples, including the shoe ad discussed earlier. Another example depicted a sign for a psychic reading service offering a \$10 special. A blank speech bubble had been placed on the palm of a hand depicted on the sign. A boy in the class suggested it should say, "In your future you will waste \$10." This student, who did not believe palm reading to be a good use of money, used humor to critique the message of the advertising text. Again students discussed how this ad and others are trying to convince people to buy a product they felt is of little or no worth. The class continued with 10 more examples of advertisements, ranging from breakfast pastry boxes to moving trucks.

By the end of the PowerPoint slideshow, the students were eager to try their hand at "bubbling." The discussion and the concrete examples seemed to help raise students' awareness of possible underlying messages in media. Additionally, the discussion helped model potential ways for individuals to resist media messages. Next, we discuss how students engaged in critical media literacy using the Bubble Project as a guiding example.

Students Create Their Own Bubbles

After the PowerPoint discussion, we allowed the group to cull through magazines geared for young people. Popular magazines contain a great deal of advertisements and other forms of text marketing products and style based on television, movies, and music. In these magazines, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between advertisements for specific products and sleek glossy photographs that purport to be the *text* of the periodicals. The same pop star icons are featured prominently in each text type and both work to sell style. In this vein, we considered such texts as part of the students' daily out-of-school *reading* and a form of virtual environmental print worthy of unpacking.

Each student, equipped with blank speech bubbles, glue sticks, and pencils, began "talking back." One of the first things we noticed was the highly interactive way students engaged with the materials. Unlike many reading activities where students work independently, this activity seemed to demand social

interaction. Figure 2 shows an example of students sharing ideas about their work. While working, students actively sought one another's opinions and eagerly shared their ideas for speech bubbles.

Student Responses

The fourth graders read between the lines of the advertising when they created bubbles to “talk back” to the texts of the magazines. Similarly, we had to read between the lines as we interpreted meanings in the student-made bubbles. Although we do not claim to be experts in the students’ popular culture, in order to comprehend the new texts we needed to be somewhat savvy about the popular culture the students were drawing on in their work.

Three categories of responses emerged from the students’ work. We found that the fourth graders

interacted with the texts of advertising and popular culture mainly through humor, social critique, and a final category we call “pleasure.” This last category catches the examples that did not fall neatly into one of the first two categories and is defined by evidence of the students’ sheer enjoyment of the subject in question.

Out of a total of 35 student-made bubbles, 17 employed humor as a means of interacting with the texts. One such example made use of an advertisement featuring a photograph of the popular singer Shakira with a speech bubble reading, “I shook it too much in my video and my hips broke.” The joke is a reference to her song “Hips Don’t Lie” and to her famously agile dancing. While the humor may not seem funny to many adult readers, these fourth graders greatly appreciated the joke. In another example of humor, one student selected a photograph of a bulldog whose

Figure 2
Two Students Consult While Working on Bubbles



Note. Photograph by Nancy Valdez-Gainer.

droopy face stares straight ahead. The student-made speech bubble coming from the dog's mouth reads, "Don't mess with Big Dog. You don't want to see the look on my face when I'm angry." Again, the quality

Each example challenges the primary message of the respective ad by highlighting a subtext with an alternate viewpoint.

of the humor is debatable, but the fourth-grade author did intend to induce laughter by poking fun at the look of this dog's breed. While he achieved his goal (many of his classmates chuckled when they read his work), as teachers we admittedly felt disappointed at what we perceived as lack of cultural critique in the above examples.

Eleven of the students' work samples contained elements of critical cultural inquiry, and we grouped these in a second category we call "social critique." In these examples, students critiqued advertising and other images found in magazines in numerous ways, ranging from the high cost of movie tickets to sugar and fat content in snack foods. In one such example, actress Eva Longoria is seen smiling and holding a popular soft drink. The speech bubble added by a student reads, "Pepsi is no good. It makes your teeth rotten." The student who created this bubble also blacked out one of Longoria's front teeth to accentuate the point that the sugar contents of soft drinks can lead to rotten teeth, something that is not addressed by those advertising the product. In another example from this category, a student selected an ad for a video game featuring Bratz dolls. The speech bubble coming from one of the Bratz states, "Don't buy our game. It is Boring." Although it is not stated outright, the statement connects to a common theme found in the world of gaming, critiquing video games targeting girl audiences as passive and thus dull. A third example features an ad for a popular brand of tennis shoes. The speech bubble coming from one of the shiny white shoes states, "We won't always be clean and white, we'll be brown." While this seems like simple logic, the student demonstrated an understanding of consumerist values put forth in popular media, like the show *MTV Cribs*, where stars boast closets full of brand new clothing and vast shoe collections, often with price tags still attached, demonstrating that they have never even been worn.

All three of these examples of social critiques represent attempts by students to "talk back" to advertising in critical ways. Each example challenges the primary message of the respective ad by highlighting a subtext with an alternate viewpoint. Although the social critique could perhaps have been stronger, the fourth graders who created these responses demonstrate that they do not blindly fall for the ploys of advertising conglomerates.

Seven examples fell into a final category, "pleasure," because they include elements of the first two categories but are distinguishable by the way they are situated in the knowledge of the popular culture they reference. It seems that the creators of these bubbles were engaging in acts of pleasure derived from the popular culture texts. We believe it is especially important to highlight this category, because—as teachers promoting critical cultural inquiry in schooling—we recognize that students may find pleasure in popular culture texts we may not appreciate. In these cases students may be hesitant to critique the texts too strongly.

One example from the pleasure category shows Disney's Cheetah Girls posing with trendy accoutrements such as leopard print dresses and dangling jewelry. The speech bubble placed on the photograph reads, "We SO have good fashion tips!!!" While this example could be construed as sarcastic, the voice used in the bubble also authentically represents the way these young actress-singers speak. Therefore, it is possible that the bubble is seriously representing the opinion that these particular stars do indeed have admirable style. In another example from this category, a student selected a photograph of pop star Chris Brown and added the bubble: "I'm cute but I can't sing and I got moves." While there is a slight critique of his ability to sing, the student's response seems to reflect an admiration for this star, who is attractive and a good dancer. In these examples, as with other responses that fit into this category, students seem to identify strongly with the subjects in the media images; therefore, we believe they were less likely to critique the texts.

In a culminating activity, students displayed their work throughout the room for a "gallery walk," where they had opportunities to view and discuss the work of their peers. As might be expected, the examples that employed humor or pleasure of popular culture were most popular with the students. The sample of singer Chris Brown received attention from a group

of girls during the gallery walk. After reading the bubble, Iris declared her disagreement stating, “Chris Brown *can* sing and dance.” Samantha chimed in with, “I know, right? And he’s cute, too.” The two girls then began to sing one of his songs aloud. This drew a response from Tanya who yelled, “He’s no good. He’s not all that.”

Although students seemed drawn more to the examples using humor, some students critiqued the subtext of the advertising messages. In one example, two boys looked at an ad for a credit card. The ad showed a young couple in a movie theater, sharing popcorn as they watched the screen. Jason, one of the boys, had placed a bubble over one of the people in the ad: “Why don’t they let us pay less for movies?” Edgar, another boy in the class, looked at the work, and the two boys had the following conversation:

Edgar: We don’t really go to the movies.

Jason: I know. It costs too much money.

Edgar: Why do they charge so much?

Jason: They are just trying to make a lot of money even though they know a lot of people can’t afford it.

This example, like many of the students’ conversations, points to the fact that they were able to think critically about the messages in mainstream advertising. They did not blindly buy into the lifestyle offered in the ad; instead they questioned the motives behind the creators of it. Clearly these fourth-grade students were beginning to read critically, but this does not mean the job is done. In this example, the students made a connection between overspending and the lifestyle promoted in the images of the credit card advertisement. With more experience and guidance using critical media literacy to interrogate texts, perhaps they might take their critique deeper into the subtext. For example, in reading a similar credit card ad, there is a possibility for a discussion of the issues involved in how lines of credit are opened, and for whom, or the hidden dangers of racking up debt in a consumerist society.

Next Steps

This project represents only the beginning for our students’ and our own explorations into critical media literacy in the classroom. In the process, we enjoyed some feelings of success and also saw areas

where we would have liked to dig deeper with the social critique. Based on our classroom experiences, we believe that the inclusion of popular media texts such as advertising has great potential for teachers interested in dialogic instruction focusing on critical media literacy.

Like Sefton-Green (2006), we believe that “understanding media culture is a key element of any kind of child- or learner-centered curriculum” (p. 294). Media texts are abundant in our lives, and rarely are students equipped with necessary tools to decode and transform them. As did Albers et al. (2008), we found that “critical conversations matter” (p. 81) and that, when given opportunities to view, discuss, and talk back to media texts, our fourth-grade students were quite able and willing to read between the lines of mainstream messages. Students’ responses to advertising during our unit of study show initial steps toward becoming “media literate citizenry that can disrupt, contest, and transform media apparatuses” (Semali, 2003, p. 275). As teachers, we realize that we must continue to provide space in our curriculum for students to proceed on this path to developing critical media literacy.

Through our explorations of advertising using the Bubble Project as a tool for critique, we initiated critical media literacy discussions in our class. It is imperative that we continue what we have started and expand beyond the critique of advertisements in magazines. Though much can be gained from critical analysis of magazines, it is important to recognize that not all young people regularly read them. While we believe that the critical seeds that were planted in our students will spread to their engagements with many other text sources, we believe it would be beneficial to broaden the lens and include many other media sources in the curriculum. We live in a time when technology is constantly changing, and our literacy pedagogy must change to address this. Any critical media literacy project must allow students opportunities to explore multiple forms of media texts and incorporate technology as much as possible. Should we do this project again, we would adapt it to include more technology and more media sources such as Internet sites, television, radio, and others. In fact, this project lends itself to the usage of technology since digital photos and speech bubbles can be used with simple software readily available on computers found in most schools.

Although we feel our students learned something about reading media texts through this investigation, we plan to expand our endeavors into critical media literacy pedagogy. As we do so, we plan to continue to ask ourselves the important question: How should a teacher determine the line between respect for students' pleasures and pushing for critical narratives from students? Perhaps there is no definitive answer to this question. We have come to believe that the self-reflection on the part of the teacher that is required of this type of question is necessary for the maintenance of student-centered dialogic curriculum. Therefore, we will always cross-check our pedagogical decisions against such questions and likely never settle on an answer because the answer is in the journey. To paraphrase the words of Horton and Freire (1990), we believe we make the road of critical media literacy by walking.

The Road Winds On

Thinking back on the opening vignette of Cecilia and her dilemma when "bubbling" the Dora the Explorer doll ad, perhaps a teachable moment was missed. We were so concerned about not hampering her pleasure with popular culture that we neglected to challenge her to articulate *why* she liked the doll. Was it because she identifies with Dora, one of the few Latina and bilingual characters in children's media? Or maybe there was a different reason she showed a preference for the doll? Perhaps we could have offered our own analysis of the Dora doll as worthy of praise, critique, or both. The point is, we treaded on a delicate area, and even though we consider ourselves to be constructivist teachers attempting to use critical and dialogic approaches to education, we did not fully go there with Cecilia. It was not for lack of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). We were not trying to "cling to the guard rail of neutrality" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 106). The reason we veered off the critical road was related to our desire to remain student-centered—and more importantly to avoid a didactic finger-pointing pedagogy that positions students as clueless dupes of mass media. In this vein, we conclude by asserting that we have more questions than answers as we attempt to learn about critical media literacy and its place in our teaching. We have not arrived, but we hope we are going in positive directions as we make the road by walking with our students, reflecting on theory and practice as we go.

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