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## Teaching English in the 21st Century: An Integrated Approach

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Patricia Hans

# Teaching English in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Integrated Approach

It was a cover that paid tribute to an era that brought us back to 1943 when *Newsweek* first appeared on the newsstands. The words “last print issue” emblazoned across its page brought back the same feeling I had when I saw the end of *Planet of the Apes* that revealed a broken Statue of Liberty lying on its side in the sand and realized that this ape dominated land was America. On December 31, 2012, *Newsweek* published its last print issue. Gone are the afternoons curled on the couch reading, devouring words, turning the pages in anticipation. Today we scroll, not turn; today the words on the cyber-page are secondary-images, bearing the messages.

Over the years, faced with a shrinking readership, newspapers and magazines have called it a day—closed their doors and stopped printing and publishing altogether; however *Newsweek* has not stopped publishing; it has gone digital, blogging away. On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, I stood before my *Literature and Media* class, holding the last issue of *Newsweek*, and stated, “This isn’t just about the end of print journalism; it is about the end of the way we communicate— about the way we think.” The days of carrying folded books in your back pocket—freeing them at the correct hour to allow yourself to delve into inspired moments spurred by the words of Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Hemingway—are waning. In this media laden world, images overshadow words, exercising their powers of persuasion.

Over the course of 2012, particularly throughout the election campaign, the influence of the media over the electorate was considerable causing people to believe in media messages and vote against their own self-interest. The meta-narrative in political speeches and in broadcast news remains elusive to most viewers, as do those underlying messages in films that reinforce stereotypes, fueling a racially divided society entrenched in fear of imminent violence. Our students are these viewers; without education, they are susceptible viewers.

As an adolescent, trying to find who you are and what your role is in society, proves to be a complicated, if not impossible, task because media

texts have proven to be “more powerful than our own life experiences” (Hobbs, 2007, p. 6). **In this age of multiple literacies, we need a broader definition of what constitutes knowledge and literacy to teach and empower our students to become active thinkers, instead of passive ones in dealing with this explosion of media.** This requires that education, specifically how English is taught, depart from the 19<sup>th</sup> century model of literacy to an integrated approach of study, which defines a text as one that imparts meaning expanding the definition of literature to include multiple literacies. Through an integrated approach of study, students can be taught to critically analyze “the constructed nature of media texts to [assess] how media representations reinforce the ideologies of dominant groups within society” (Tobias, 2008, p. 9; Buckingham, 2003). Integrating “media literacy pedagogy into English classes is not just pragmatic,” suggests Tobias in light of Buckingham, it “implies a far reaching, philosophical and political challenge to English: it is an argument for fundamentally rethinking what the subject is about,” (Tobias, 2008). The written text does not have a monopoly on narrative; all forms of media representation contain a narrative that needs to be broken down.

**Today the texts that are studied in the English classroom should include all “forms of symbolic representation” to allow students to examine closely how media messages are constructed in a narrative form, how symbol systems use codes and conventions to shape messages, how media messages have embedded values and points of view, how different**

## Patricia Hans

**people interpret the same media message differently, and how most media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power (Hobbs, 2007, p. 41).** Approaching each media text as a narrative allows students to analyze and examine a text closely and empowers them with the ability to decode meaning to facilitate an understanding of themselves, and their roles in society. This is particularly important as television, film and news media exploit stereotypes and misrepresent groups of people whose “values and ideologies” are inconsistent with the dominant culture.

In addition to misrepresentation, the “portrayal of violence, sexuality, or anti-social behaviors in television, film, and video games justify the need for media education to help students become more aware of the negative influences” and mitigate them (Tobias, 2008, p. 7). FCC studies in 2008 have shown that viewers who are exposed to a steady stream of violence over a period of time become desensitized to violent acts. While calling for stricter restrictions to protect the young viewer, showing our students how the image is constructed to elicit its effect is one way to get them to view the image as synthetically constructed. There have been too many shootings—too many deaths—to not begin to discuss this in our classrooms.

*From Pedagogy to Education: An Historical Overview*

Because “media literacy pedagogy defies definition,” one must look to media trends to determine how media should be approached in a course of study (Tobias, 2008, p. 2). Since the 1920’s, pedagogues have studied the media carefully and have made “dire” predictions with respect to its “potential power,” and its effect on individuals. Until the 1940’s, the media was perceived as “negative” stimuli impinging directly and homogeneously on all persons receiving them” (Buckingham, 2003, p. 6). The result was to “discriminate and resist” the corrupting influence of the media (Tobias, 2008, p. 3). In the 1950’s, media education had emerged to counter what was perceived as “a powerful and persuasive influence” (Tobias, 2008, p. 3). This is what Ray Bradbury believed and in 1953 *Fahrenheit 451* was penned to address the negative influences of technology, specifically television, in providing a passive activity that bombards the viewer with negative stimuli that Bradbury deemed would lead

to the dumbing down of society and the loss of the imagination.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, the reader presumes that the world he has encountered is the world of the future; however, it is not. The world in *Fahrenheit 451* that forbids the reading of books and creative thinking, and numbs the mind through the constant bombardment of endless advertisements and slanted news broadcasts fed through public speakers, personal “seashells,” *I-pods*, and television walls is our world. How frightening it is to think that Ray Bradbury had the prescience of mind to see some 60 years into the future. Bradbury did foresee the negative impact that television would have on society particularly with respect to education in that it would take away time from reading, thinking and learning.

In 1985, Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* echoed Bradbury’s claims and argued for the need for “media literacy pedagogy by pointing out television’s negative impact on education, politics and religion” (Tobias, 2008, p. 6). According to Tobias, Postman promulgates that our culture’s “principal mode of knowing about itself” is television, and the medium’s portrayal of “violence, sexuality and anti-social behavior,” and the values embedded therein that serve to create and enforce societal myths make television dangerous.

In 1992, J. Francis Davis argued in the *Power of Images: Creating the Myths of Our Time* for the need for a critical approach to teaching media literacy to learn how myths emerge and function in a modern society. Every day, every hour, we are bombarded with media messages. After “long exposure to patterns of [media] images” we begin to create and live in a world fashioned by our perception of those images. When viewed in multiple contexts, the message in the image becomes a perceived reality, and then it becomes a myth woven into our consciousness and our cultural tapestry. Today, according to Davis, we are being sold fear. With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with terrorist alerts plastered all over the news, with mass shootings, and violence pulsating in the media, the idea that “the world is a dangerous place and we need guns, police and military to protect it” is real. It is the heightened awareness that the media creates in reporting a story to generate interest, raise ratings and sell newspapers that fuels this idea (Davis, 1992, p. 2). This is the myth of fear, which since 9/11 has

## Teaching English in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Integrated Approach

been perpetuated by some to maintain power; however, real power in materialistic America lies in the hands of corporations simply because we buy into the myth that: “the good life consists of buying possessions that cost lots of money, and happiness, satisfaction and sex appeal are imminent and available with every consumer purchase” (Davis, 1992). And to some extent, we all believe us; we are slaves to labels. Because our students are today’s largest group of consumers with fragile identities, it is imperative that we teach our students to view the media through multiple critical lenses.

### A Twenty-First Century Approach to Teaching Media Studies

Sister Souljah in the *Coldest Winter Ever* states in her commentary that follows the novel that Santiago, the exceptional businessman and drug ring entrepreneur, and father of Souljah’s protagonist, Winter Santiago, models himself after Al Pacino’s character in *Scarface* like every other young aspiring thug in the inner city. After seeing the movie many times, *Scarface* becomes his reality and how he sees himself in the world. According to Tobias, studies link “violent and aggressive behaviors in people to violent images in movies, television and video games and have given rise to what many call the cultivation effect” (p. 8). Young men raised in an inner city environment view *Scarface* as a hero figure, and after repetitious viewings come to see the movie as their world. Sister Souljah’s intent in writing the novel was to debunk the myth of the thug that *Scarface*, a product of hegemonic ideology, was deliberately created to control cultural perceptions. And this is what students need to know in order to negotiate a multimodal world in which identities are created and destroyed.

**A critical thinking approach to media studies requires that students create their own counter narratives that take the form of print ads, public service announcements, music videos, documentaries, screenplays and film, and “challenge ideologies and stereotypical misrepresentations in existing media texts” (Tobias, 2008,**

**p. 9).** This would cause students to integrate visual texts with print literature, yielding a unified package for study that counters corporate influences, and to study a visual text through an ideological lens, as a literary text would be studied. Both mediums are united by stories that contain metaphor, symbolism, point of view, tone and mood, characterizations, theme and an audience, but not necessarily emphasized in the same manner.

While it is important for students to analyze the film to become aware of changing perspectives and political commentary, it is more important for students to know how such change is effected through the medium. For this reason, creating counter narratives would instruct students in the deliberate synthesis of visual and print text, and carrying out those counter narratives would cause students to address injustices in society. This critical approach to teaching the media asks students to explore what they know, how they know it, and how this knowledge is contextually situated. From this perspective, students could study how the media works to repress, marginalize, and invalidate certain social, or racially defined, groups.

### From Theory to Classroom

In *Reading the Media*, Renee Hobbs documents the integration of a print literature based 11<sup>th</sup> grade English curriculum at Concord High School in Concord, New Hampshire with a visually based media studies curriculum. The year that Hobbs began her research and documentation was 1999. During that year, English teachers constructed integrated units that focused on enlarging their definition of the text to include all forms of symbolic representations. Today, in 2013, focused on empowering students with skills to critically analyze media texts, all 50 states have set down new media literacy standards.

Renee Hobbs’s text is a necessary for any teacher interested in integrating media education into the English curriculum as it takes us through the construction process, emphasizing how teachers can forge their own units that embrace guiding themes such as: gender, class, and race representation in advertising; film and television; propaganda and persuasion; reality and social identity in film and television; meta narratives in the news, journalism and political speeches; changing perspectives and point of views that

## Patricia Hans

arise when a literary text is made into a film, and how storytelling works in the media. While the integration process was an inspiring revolutionary endeavor, the teachers were concerned about the effect such a curriculum would have on reading and writing skills. In the end, Hobbs's data revealed that students "measurably strengthened their comprehension skills as readers, listeners and viewers in responding to print, audio, visual and video texts" (Hobbs, 2007, p. 148). Furthermore, Hobbs, in her final analysis, adds that "over all students had a more sophisticated understanding of how authors compose messages to convey meaning through their use of language, image and sound and how readers respond with their own meaning making processes as they interpret messages" (148). Based on Hobbs's study, I initiated the writing of a curriculum that could be integrated into an English curriculum, or stand on its own as a full-year course.

In the end, I developed a full-year upper level course that closely examines the role that popular culture plays in the development of identity, and how literature and media representations shape our understanding of reality, the world in which we live and our roles in it. The course was designed to develop student critical literacy and writing, to promote critical thinking, to challenge students' existing beliefs and to empower students with the tools needed to negotiate a complex global environment by examining the narrative structure and its representative symbols and messages encoded in film, television shows, news journalism, advertising, and contemporary and classical literature.

The year-long curriculum is divided into four unit segments. Units can stand alone facilitating their integration into any English curriculum at the high school or middle school levels. The first unit titled: "Journalism and the News Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" focuses on the role of journalism and the news media in fostering democracy in America. Consideration is paid to para-journalism, why the news gravitates toward entertainment and sensationalism, and the future of news reporting. Particular attention is paid to writing. Students learn how to write ledes, and study the effect a particular lede will have on a news article by writing various versions of the same article. Students learn how to distinguish between the academic essay and the news article,

which is more focused and streamlined preparing them for writing in college and beyond. Current reading selections from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, *The Atlantic* and *Harpers* are essential. Pete Hamill's *News is a Verb* is the required text. Hamill is indispensable as he raises issue with the role of journalism, distinguishes between the tabloid and the more stellar publications as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and defines the role of journalism in our lives. Teaching our students to be involved concerned citizens is the goal of this unit, but this importance must not dwarf the need to help students see how identities are constructed, and how race and gender through media representation give rise to false perceptions.

**Teaching how propaganda in a democratic society works through the art of selling, and its effect on individualism and freedom is crucial to prepare our students to be critical thinkers.** We begin with *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, and the accompanying articles that are included with the novel. Then I allow the novel to speak through student surveys and a PBS Frontline production titled: *The Merchant of Cool*. *Being There* by Jerzy Kosinski; *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; and *Team Rodent* by Carl Hiassen contribute to concluding discussions on manipulation and power. Unconscious Persuasion is an essay written by Huxley that suggests we are nothing more than the clones in his *Brave New World*. This unit allows the student to step in psychological and sociological areas as we investigate the process of individuation proposed by Sigmund Freud, which causes us to ask: how does one become an individual in a consumer-based culture?

**Critics of integrating media studies into the English curriculum fail to understand how identities, attitudes and philosophies are manufactured.** For example, today's films still work to reinforce power relationships exploiting stereotypes that were forged in the 1930s. The image of the mammy and minstrel antics were reinforced in the films of the 1930's and 1940's, and continued into the television programming of the 1950's and 60's. In 2013,

Teaching English in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Integrated Approach

African Americans are still not portrayed in roles that identify them as conflicted characters with real life problems. How is race constructed in America? A historical approach to studying race in America through film, together with readings “Mass, Media and Racism” by Stephen Balkaran, and Stuart Hall’s “Race, The Floating Signifier,” initiates the conversation. If our goal, as educators, is to ensure a future freedom of racism and exploitation, then our students need to understand how film, television, and the news create and perpetuate stereotypes by creating their own written and visual narratives. It is imperative that, as English educators, we redefine what literacy is in order to address the negative effects of a rapidly advancing technological world.

In the fall of 2012, both *Time* and *Atlantic* devoted issues to the role of women in America today, which became an interesting study in light of congressional discussions on women’s rights, violence, equal pay and abortion. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* delves into all of these issues, and together with Simone deBeauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and essays like “Motherhood Who Needs It?” by Betty Friedan,

an enticing unit on gender construction can keep any class intrigued. But what students want to engage in is discussion on or about Twitter, Facebook, and the myriad of apps that are emerging daily. What role do these play in our lives?

“Ghosts in the Machine,” was the title of the magazine section of *The New York Times*, dated January 9, 2011. Behind the white letters that emerged off of the page, like the voices on the internet that will last forever, were tiny pictures of families. On the bottom of the cover page ran the line: “It is possible to live forever on the internet, whether you want to or not.” When I die, the picture I placed on my Facebook page will still be there, as will my comments. Perhaps my blog pages will still be there, even the ones I wrote years and years ago. I will still be alive; the thought is frightening. People will still send me email messages; I can live forever on the internet. **The internet gives us life, but it also takes it away. What we have to decide is how much.**

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A 2007 New Jersey Council for the Humanities Teacher of the Year and veteran teacher at Ridgewood High School, **Patricia Hans** teaches American Studies as well as Literature, Identity and the Media. The latter class grew out of her doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, and inspired this article, which Pat hopes will encourage all teachers to teach toward the future.