Introduction: Media Literacy in Hawai‘i’s Schools

–Donna Grace, Guest Editor

The media have a profound influence on the daily lives of our children and youth. Technology is increasing at a rapid rate and electronic images have as much presence in our culture as printed text. In order to prepare youth for life now and in the future, we need to ensure that they acquire the skills that will allow them to analyze the impact of the media on themselves and on society. In addition to becoming thoughtful and critical consumers of media, students need to understand how to make media productions for their own purposes. The best way to address this growing need is to incorporate media literacy into the school curriculum.

Although the U.S. produces more media than any other country, we fall short in devoting time and resources to teaching media education in the schools. Fortunately, this is beginning to change. The past few years have witnessed a growing awareness of the importance of media education in our schools. Media literacy concepts are increasingly being incorporated into state and national curriculum standards. In Hawai‘i, the Department of Education has recently developed “Media Comprehension and Interpretation” benchmarks for grades K–12. One of the National Health Education Standards states that “Students will analyze the influence of culture, media, technology, and other factors on health,” and the National Standards for the English Language Arts (International Reading Association & the National Council of Teachers of English, 1996) call for students to “apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique and discuss print and nonprint text.”

What is media literacy? As commonly defined, it is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media. Convinced of the importance of media education, many teachers in Hawai‘i as elsewhere, are doing exemplary work with their students in this area. This issue of Educational Perspectives features the voices of some of these elementary, middle school, and secondary teachers. Of course, there are many more educators in Hawai‘i, who are implementing media literacy projects in their schools, than could be included in this issue. Thus, we offer the following articles as a small sample of the excellent work that is being done across the state.

In the first article, I offer a brief introduction to the subject that discusses the “what, why, and how” of media education. My article also addresses a number of concerns about children and the media related to the perceived negative effects of television viewing. In concluding, I propose that an acquisition model of media literacy—one that engages students in producing as well as critically assessing media—is an appropriate one for achieving the media literacy goals identified in the above definition. This is the approach I take in the graduate course I teach on this topic at the University of Hawai‘i. In addition to developing skills and strategies to use with their students in critiquing media, the students also gain hands-on experience with video technology, digital editing, and the production process. With the help of the ‘Olelo Public Broadcasting staff, the students script and produce their own public service announcement that ‘Olelo airs on television.

In the second article, “Inspiring Students through Digital Media,” Irene Yamashita, DOE Teleschool teacher, talks about her experience in building a successful video program for the students at Kapunahala Elementary School. Several of Irene’s young students have won awards and received national recognition for their video work.

The third article, “A.B.C. Prunes, U.F.O. News, and Politicks: Parody in Media Literacy Education” by Ralph Ohta, a teacher at Waiau Elementary School, discusses the value of introducing students to the genre of parody through student video production. The parodies of news shows, advertisements, and public service announcements produced by his fifth-grade students clearly demonstrate their capacity to understand and critically evaluate these media forms. Ohta also addresses issues involving the intended audience, censorship, and varying interpretations of student products.

Lizbeth Smith, the media teacher at Le Jardin Academy, describes how she introduces her students to critical viewing and how she helps them develop their analytical skills. Her article outlines the components of a curriculum that teaches children to critique and deconstruct television commercials. Smith concludes that her approach not only enables students to become more aware of their own viewing behaviors, it changes the way they view media. In the words of her students, they “never look at commercials the same way again.”

In his article “Media Production at Chiefess Kamakahahl lei Middle School” Kevin Matsunaga describes his involve-
ment as a technology teacher in developing a successful live, closed circuit news show with fifth and sixth graders at Lehua Elementary and Chiefess Kamakahelei Middle Schools. Matsunaga's students write their own scripts, announce and direct their own shows, and perform all the behind-the-scenes technical work involving cameras, monitors, sound, and titles. The Kamakahelei students have also started their own TV show, aired on the local cable channel, where the students produce short news segments, feature stories, and public service announcements.

Patricia Gillespie gives a detailed account of her journey to become the video production teacher at Kamehameha High School. In her article “Shoot it Mos!” Patricia discusses the evolution of her program from its earliest days. She describes the process of teaching production techniques to her students, and some aspects of the award-winning cultural documentaries that her students have produced in different parts of Asia and the Pacific. One of her students, Kelsey Pavlosky, also reflects on her experience in the program.

In the next article, “Don’t Take it Personal, It’s Just Our Bad Ass Ways,” Cynthia Kelley Chun describes her work with teens in an alternative learning center at Waianae High School. Chun found video production to be a motivating and rewarding way to engage struggling students in the curriculum and make connections between their in-school and out-of-school interests and experiences. Although the contents of some of the students’ videos gave Cynthia some cause for concern, her perceptive analysis provides insight into the meanings made by the students and the value the videos may have had in their lives.

Angela Angel, Director of Creative Services at ‘Olelo Community Television, discusses ‘Olelo’s extensive outreach efforts to students and teachers in Hawai‘i’s schools in her article “‘Olelo’s Partnership Efforts with Teachers and Youth: More than Media Literacy.” Through these statewide efforts, numerous students and teachers have learned first-hand about the power of video production. Involvement in these programs has resulted in students becoming more involved in their communities, and many have won awards for their work in the process.

Robert Olague, President and Executive Producer of the Hawai‘i Student Film Festival shares information about the nine different outreach programs offered by his organization. Olague has been intimately involved in making a wide range of film and video experiences available to students and teachers in Hawai‘i. Many of these opportunities include mentoring from local and national television and film professionals, hands-on production experience, and actual broadcast exposure.

For the final article, R.W. Burniske, an associate professor in the UH Department of Educational Technology, outlines his perspective on the need for media education in our schools and offers his commentary on the articles presented in this issue.

Finally, as guest editor of this issue, I would like to acknowledge the influence of Joseph Tobin on the writing and work of some of the contributors to this issue. Tobin is a former UH faculty member and current Nadine Mathis Basha Professor at Arizona State University. He was my doctoral advisor, and also the graduate advisor for Irene Yamashita, Ralph Ohta, and Cynthia Chun in their Master's work at UH. His work and scholarship in media studies has been, and continues to be, an inspiration to us all.

The aim of this issue of Educational Perspectives is to raise awareness about the importance of media literacy and the need to address it in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education. In addition, we hope and expect that it will foster appreciation for the excellent work that many teachers and students in Hawai‘i are doing in this area.

References