Project SMARTArt: A Case Study in Elementary School Media Literacy and Arts Education

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Project SMARTArt represents a significant breakthrough for implementing media literacy programs within schools. A federal demonstration grant sponsored by the United States Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts led the Center for Media Literacy, the Music Center Education Division of Los Angeles County, AnimAction, Inc., and the Los Angeles Unified School District's Leo Politi elementary school to a new understanding of media literacy and to a new guiding principle for implementation programs. The principle is that media literacy and the arts should inform one another as disciplines for teaching and learning and that these disciplines can be integrated with all other academic content areas while meeting state education standards.

With ongoing professional development and with appropriate tools, teachers are able to internalize information-process skills. Once they understand these process skills, they are able to apply them to any media content and to transform their teaching, without the need for a "cookbook" approach, reliant only on textbooks. Instead, teachers can use fresh media content while teaching to state standards. With a deeper understanding of media literacy, teachers help their students to learn in a new way, preparing students with lifelong-learning skills of critical analysis and self-expression applicable in a global media culture.

Project SMARTArt yielded steps forward both in teaching practice and in theory that have had important effects on the fields of media literacy and the arts.

Practice: Implementation Steps

Project SMARTArt was one of the first federal media literacy and arts grants. When Project SMARTArt began in 2001, the partners were grateful that the type of funding received was through a federal "demonstration grant" because this project represented a beginning in which there were far more questions than answers on how to combine media literacy and the arts in an elementary school classroom.

New Guiding Principle in Action

By the end of Project SMARTArt, teachers demonstrated that combining media literacy and the arts, while meeting California state education standards for Language Arts (LA) and English Language Development (ELD), is quite possible and fairly easy, with the right training, practice, and structure. This notion was validated when, within a one-hour period, teaching teams were able to create engaging, integrated activities for classroom use, while connecting the five key questions of media literacy with state standards for ELD, LA, and Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA). These teaching teams were comprised of Project SMARTArt teachers and teaching artists and divided into two groups (grades K–2 teachers and grades 3–5 teachers), so that the activities were relevant and could be used by the team participants.

This type of flexibility in making curricular connections is essential, since every school district in every state uses different combinations of core curricular materials. The five key questions of the Center for Media Literacy (CML) can apply to any curricular content, and the arts are used in every form of self-expression. In any project that students create to demonstrate their mastery of core subject areas through state education standards and through an understanding of how to apply media literacy and the arts to core curricular areas, teachers now have powerful and more flexible ways of connecting their classrooms to the real world and of providing students with the critical thinking and media construction skills that they need to represent themselves effectively.

Approach/Methods

To learn from the Project SMARTArt experience, it is just as important to understand how the project was approached as it is to understand the content of the project's goals, structure, and tools. Here are some important points about the approach used:

1. A clearly articulated philosophy of media literacy was essential so that the aims of the project were clear. The CML philosophy of education emphasizes empowerment rather than censorship or media-bashing (see table 1).

2. The project focused on teaching information-process skills, so that individuals learn a systematic methodology of analysis that can be applied to any content. With such an analytic method, individuals are free to draw their own conclusions and make their own choices. Project SMARTArt used the theory articulated in CML's MediaLit Kit.

3. Each arts discipline (dance, music, theatre, and visual arts) was represented in Project SMARTArt. Teaching artists taught core elements of each discipline, making connections to media and media literacy.

4. Before teachers can teach subjects such as media literacy and the arts, they must first develop knowledge, understanding, and skills. Professional development and consistent practice are necessary for teachers to be confident and successful.

5. Students were encouraged to learn by doing, taking a constructivist approach. Learning to apply the five key questions of media literacy takes practice over time, much like learning to tie shoes. Through repetition and refinement, the process becomes automatic (see table 2).

6. Project SMARTArt partners were equal learners and had a respectful relationship. Teacher participation was voluntary. Project SMARTArt only appealed to committed teachers willing to experiment. Meeting state education standards was key, as well as connecting to the Los Angeles Unified School District's scripted reading program, Open Court, and CML's five key questions of media literacy. Project SMARTArt concentrated on VAPA, LA and ELD. (For a list of Web sites of all partners or related parts in the project, see table 3).

7. In the national McRel standards for language arts (established by Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning), the four traditional strands are expanded from reading, writing, speaking, and listening to also include viewing and media.

8. Project SMARTArt did not rely on technology to be successful. Some classrooms were not equipped with computers or had little access to video

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TABLE 1. Educational Philosophy of the Center for Media Literacy

The Center for Media Literacy advocates a philosophy of "empowerment through education." This philosophy incorporates three intertwining concepts:

1. Media literacy is education for life in a global media world.

For five hundred years, since the invention of moveable type, we have valued the ability to read and write as the primary means of communicating and understanding history, cultural traditions, political and social philosophy, and the news of the day. In more recent times, traditional literacy skills ensured that individuals could participate fully as engaged citizens and functioning adults in society. Today families, schools, and all community institutions share the responsibility for preparing young people for living and learning in a global culture that is increasingly connected through multimedia and influenced by powerful images, words, and sounds.

2. The heart of media literacy is informed inquiry. Media literacy involves a four-step "inquiry" process of awareness, analysis, reflection, and action.

Media literacy helps young people acquire an empowering set of "navigational" skills that include the ability to
- access information from a variety of sources
- analyze and explore how messages are "constructed" whether print, verbal, visual or multimedia
- evaluate media's explicit and implicit messages against one's own ethical, moral, and/or democratic principles
- express or create their own messages using a variety of media tools

3. Media literacy is an alternative to censoring, boycotting, or blaming "the media."

Deeply committed to freedom of expression, media literacy does not promote partisan agendas or political points of view. The power of media literacy is its ability to inspire independent thinking and foster critical analysis. The ultimate goal of media education is to make wise choices possible.

TABLE 2. The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of Media Literacy

Five Core Concepts	Five Key Questions
1. All media messages are "constructed."	Who created this message?
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.	What techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.	How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.	What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
5. Media are organized to gain profit and/or power.	Why was this message sent?

players. The activities were small-scale in terms of technology.

9. Student learning was demonstrated through an ongoing production of artifacts to demonstrate learning; Project SMARTArt was not ultimately geared toward one production project.

Structure of Replicable Model for Implementation

The elements that made up Project SMARTArt's structure include the following:

Professional development. At the onset of each year, Project SMARTArt provided teachers and teaching artists with training in media literacy. The training focused on CML's five core concepts and the five key questions of media literacy, providing a good theoretical grounding and practice in applying this framework for analysis to teaching. In its final year, Project SMARTArt also provided teachers professional development in dance, music, theatre, and visual arts as well as training on using The BOX!, a training tool developed by AnimAction, Inc., for teachers to help students produce animation shorts.

Media literacy peer-coaching. Teachers had four one-hour meetings with a media literacy teaching coach. These sessions were sequentially designed to (*a*) answer questions and plan, (*b*) observe the coach in a demonstration lesson, (*c*) allow the coach to observe a lesson by the teacher, and (*d*) critique and plan.

Artists in residence. Teaching artists representing each of the four arts disciplines (dance, theatre, music, and visual arts) worked directly with the students four to six times, providing basic knowledge of the arts discipline and incorporating key media literacy questions into their work.

Artist-teacher planning meetings. Prior to the teaching artists coming into a classroom, the artist and classroom teacher had an opportunity to meet and plan, so that the artist's work was connected to the teacher's ongoing work with the children and tied into the curriculum.

Animation. Students produced thirty-second animation shorts as a culminating project, weaving elements of all four arts disciplines into the construction of a replicable media artifact. These animation shorts were created either through a one-day workshop provided by AnimAction, Inc., or through the use of The BOX!, which provides teachers with an in-class animation production studio.

Although incorporating media literacy and the arts into assessment was not part of this project, student-involved assessment could be built into future projects due to the ongoing creation of artifacts.

Monthly teacher meetings. Regularly scheduled meetings supported program implementation by providing participants an opportunity to exchange ideas and information.

Quarterly partner meetings. Consistent and frequent coordination between the partners (the Leo Politi School, CML, the Music Center Education Division, and AnimAction, Inc.) was essential in providing smooth operation of Project SMARTArt.

Parent outreach. Parent outreach involved two different approaches. The first program for parents featured a special showing of student animations produced through AnimAction, Inc., workshops. The second program offered parents the opportunity to participate in the Family Album Writing Workshop, where they learned about media literacy, wrote their personal history for the benefit of their families, and learned about media literacy.

Annual evaluation meeting. Teachers, teaching artists, and project partners met each year to critique the project, discuss lessons learned, and plan for the upcoming school year.

Tools

To provide a replicable program, specific, consistent, and readily-available tools are necessary. With these tools, no "cookbook" type of textbook is needed

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TABLE 3. Web Sites Related to Project SMARTArt

California Language Arts Standards
http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/english-language-arts.pdf

California English Language Development Standards
http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/englangdev-stnd.pdf

California VAPA Standards
http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/visperfmarts-stnd-comp.pdf

Center for Media Literacy MediaLit Kit
http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/casestudy/CMLKeyQuestions.pdf

Center for Media Literacy MediaLit Kit Orientation Guide
http://www.medialit.org/mlk_downloadorientation.html.

Los Angeles Unified School District
http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,47493&_dad=ptl&_schema=PTL_EP

McRel Standards
http://medialit.med.sc.edu/mcrel.htm.

Open Court Reading Program
http://www.sraonline.com/index.php/ home/curriculumsolutions/reading/ocr/622

Project SMARTArt Case Study Complete Text
http://www.medialit.org/ reading_room/casestudy/index.html

Project SMARTArt Classroom Vignettes
http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/ casestudy/classroom_vignettes.htm

because (over time) teachers internalize the tools through professional development and everyday practice. Teachers are able to make the linkages necessary to all curricular subject areas; their lesson plans are informed by this new understanding. This provides a creative way to meet standards while incorporating contemporary media content and while teaching information-processing skills. If teachers consistently provide opportunities for students to apply the five key questions of media literacy, then students also internalize this methodology for thinking critically about media content (even the content of textbooks!).

Project SMARTArt was informed by the following set of tools, which provided guidance for the project organizers and teachers:

Clear statement of philosophy. This provides ideological guide and unity, so that all participants know at the outset what the "agenda" is for the project. Project SMARTArt used CML's statement of its philosophy of education (see table 1).

Core concepts of media literacy. The core concepts of media literacy have been developed through the years by academics internationally. Without the use of these concepts, it is impossible to distinguish media literacy from any other critical-thinking program. Project SMARTArt was based on CML's five core concepts of media literacy.

Key question of media literacy. Although the five core concepts must be understood by teachers as the underpinning for media literacy, the five key questions provide students with a consistent entry point into a process of inquiry and analysis. Key questions are engaging for children and are open-ended, stimulating further exploration and discussion. Project SMARTArt utilized CML's five key questions of media literacy and CML's core concepts to guide young children.

California State Education Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA), English Language Development (ELD), and Language Arts Standards. All academic content must meet state education standards. Project SMARTArt focused on these content

standards as an entry point for integrating media literacy and the arts into other curricular areas. Also, since Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) uses a scripted-language arts program to teach reading to elementary school children, Project SMARTArt teachers tied directly into this curriculum.

The BOX!. With The BOX! (developed by AnimAction, Inc.), any teacher can turn a classroom into a professional animation studio, giving students powerful tools for self-expression that can be duplicated and disseminated through digital media. As a culminating project, AnimAction provided an opportunity for students to apply their learning in all arts disciplines: storytelling (theatre), drawing (visual arts), movement (dance), and scoring (music).

Artifacts for student assessment. Written essays, PowerPoint presentations, visual arts projects, choreography, plays, and musical compositions are all examples of artifacts that demonstrate the students' mastery of content and media construction skills. Students can be taught to develop rubrics for assessment, so that they learn to set criteria for judging their production pieces. (Project SMARTArt did not build a model for student assessment. However, learning can be assessed through student produced artifacts.)

Supporting Sustainability

Internalizing the five key questions of media literacy through consistent application and practice over time changes the way that teachers teach and students learn. As Alvaro Asturias, a visual arts educator, commented to one of us after taking part in Project SMARTArt, "I'll never see the world the same way again and never teach the same way again."

Other teachers who participated in Project SMARTArt also shared how they have changed their approach and what they are doing to provide their students with media literacy and arts training today.

The work of replicating this program, and spreading it within a K–12 context, has just begun. Much remains to be done and learned in implementing

media literacy programs. To help teachers and administrators who do not have access to a program such as Project SMARTArt, CML has focused on providing free information in its MediaLit Kit on theory, practice, and implementation of media literacy programs. This material includes:

1. Theory: *Literacy for the Twenty-first Century: An Overview and Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education* is a thirty-five page booklet that provides a plain language introduction to the basic elements of media education. It explains the inquiry process, the five core concepts and five key questions, plus how to conduct a close analysis of a media text.

2. Practice: *Five Key Questions that Can Change the World: Classroom Activities for Media Literacy* is a booklet that provides twenty-five cornerstone lesson plans to help teachers introduce students to the five key questions of media literacy and to master them through practice. The booklet is useful for all grade levels and across the curriculum: language arts, social studies, health, math, and the arts.

3. Implementation: *Best Practices: Project SMARTArt; A Case Study in Elementary School Media Literacy and Arts Education* provides a Web site subsection with a complete overview of findings and implementation work done through a three-year federal demonstration grant. The findings focus on strategies for effective teaching and student learning and connecting media literacy and the arts to language arts and English language development in the LAUSD.

Theory: Impact for the Media Literacy Field

What does it mean to be "media literate"? What does it take to teach media literacy?

Solid theory informs the implementation of a media literacy and arts program such as Project SMARTArt, but implementation also advances and informs the theory developed to date. Project SMARTArt provided a rich laboratory through which to explore and test both ideas and practice.

As a starting point, Project SMART-Art was based on the idea that a student is "media literate" and that he or she has mastered process skills to effectively deconstruct and construct media messages. As CML's MediaLit Kit notes, these process skills are defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. The implied outcome of having such skills is that a media-literate person is equipped to make more informed choices and is able to live consciously in a media-oriented society.

A basic insight that informed the design of Project SMARTArt is that deconstruction could be addressed through an inquiry process, based on solid concepts for analysis, while construction could be addressed through the arts, giving voice to individual points of view. The challenge in Project SMARTArt was how to provide these skills in a short period of time, and how to teach young people—even kindergartners—these skills in an engaging way. On a practical level, teachers need a workable method for teaching process skills. This is particularly challenging since the present education system focuses on content knowledge instead of process skills. Before they are equipped to teach "how to access, analyze, evaluate and create," teachers must first understand and apply these process skills themselves.

The five core concepts and five key questions provide a methodology for the analysis of media, and they are a "shortcut" to teaching process skills. Although teachers need to understand both the five core concepts and the five key questions, students respond more to being taught the questions and, thus, learn the concepts indirectly. By focusing on the process of inquiry through the five key questions, students could begin to learn how to deconstruct any media text, not just mass media. In fact, as the project progressed, it became apparent that "media" itself could be defined to include virtually any communication channel, including bodies dancing or gesturing or even furniture design.

Furthermore, using the five key questions gives students a consistent process or entry point through which to analyze media. As students practice using these questions, applying them to all types of media, they become very proficient in analysis and empowered as effective users and managers of information.

Alignment of Media Literacy and Arts Content

A primary goal of Project SMARTArt was to explore ways that media literacy and the arts might inform one another as disciplines. On one level, this relationship can be described as a cycle of analysis and expression, where students engage both their heads and their hearts. Initially, it was thought that media literacy content would drive student analysis of media and that the arts would provide a vehicle for expression through the creation of media. However, the distinctions between these two purposes were not so clear cut. On a deeper level, the very processes engaged in media literacy (accessing, analyzing, evaluating, and creating) are directly paralleled in the study of the arts.

Access. Participation in the arts allows students to access and process information, as well as demonstrate knowledge, using various learning modalities. As different art forms engage different learning styles, more students are given opportunities to be successful in the educational system. In this way, the arts provide access to learning—which might otherwise be difficult in the traditional academic environment—for many students.

Analysis. Quality arts education includes the component of artistic perception, which refers to "processing, analyzing, and responding to sensory information through the use of the language and skills unique to" the arts.[1] As students develop skills in artistic perception, they are expected to specifically articulate "the what" in communicating "the why" (for example, "the slow, steady beat of the bass drum conveyed a feeling of loneliness"). The ability to articulate "the what" to communicate "the why" is a central principle in the teaching of media literacy.

Evaluation. Aesthetic valuing, also a key component of arts education, requires that students "critically assess and derive meaning from the work of an (arts) discipline, including their own."[2] This emphasis on making individual judgments about what they observe (and what they create) in the arts empowers young people to draw their own conclusions and make their own choices. Applied in the broader context, this skill set directly services the conviction that a media-literate person is equipped to make more informed choices and is able to live consciously in a media-oriented society.

Creation. Through creative expression, "students apply processes and skills in compositing, arranging and performing a work and use a variety of means to communicate meaning and intent."[3] This component of arts education engages students in the process of creating works, providing them opportunities to explore, learn, practice, and refine their own abilities to communicate a specific point of view or message.

As earlier noted, Project SMARTArt defined "media" to include any channel of communication and, thereby, identified all art as "media." With this expanded view, works of art themselves became source material for application and adaptation of the five key questions of media literacy.

Focus on Literacy versus Media

By design, Project SMARTArt was focused more on "literacy" than on "media," emphasizing critical thinking and creative expression. Lessons explored the way that ideas are communicated and how to recognize, interpret, convey messages. Students analyzed (or deconstructed) traditional art and nontraditional media forms and created (or constructed) stories, choreographies, musical scores, and visual arts projects that put forward their own point of view. Direct links to language arts and English language development standards were made, allowing a continuous focus and reinforcement of basic literacy skills.

Although the animation shorts developed by students in this project could be considered a classic media arts assignment, the types of artifacts typically

produced throughout Project SMART-Art were very low-tech. In fact, no others required the use of a computer for execution.

Application in the Elementary School Context

According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation Report, nearly all children up to age six (99 percent) live in a home with a TV set, half (50 percent) have three or more TVs, and one-third (36 percent) have a TV in their bedroom. More than one in four (27 percent) have a VCR or DVD in their bedroom, one in ten have a video game player, and 7 percent have a computer. [4]

Children between the ages of eight and eighteen live media-saturated lives, spending an average of nearly six-and-a-half hours a day with media, according to another Kaiser Family Foundation study called "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year-Olds."[5]

These statistics demonstrate that children need help to critically navigate the media in their lives and to develop skills to effectively represent themselves. The fact that linkages to standards for elementary school children were made demonstrates that media literacy concepts definitely belong in elementary schools.

The five key questions represent some sophisticated concepts, and so the development of another booklet, *Key Questions to Guide Young Children* was an effort on CML's part to break down the questions to more manageable ideas. Teachers used these questions to take complex ideas and make them more concrete for young children.

Next Steps

As with any pioneering effort, Project SMARTArt uncovered the "next steps" needed to advance the combined work of media literacy and the arts. Among these steps are to:

• Formulate questions for guiding the "construction" process, informed by the five core concepts and paralleling the five key questions of media literacy

• Identify questions for "reconstruction" of media. With media today being reused, remixed, and reformulated using other media, key questions for guiding reconstruction are also needed. These questions must address intellectual property issues that relate to creation, use, and distribution of media content, as well as be informed by the five core concepts and parallel the key questions of media literacy

• Determine how the creation of media relates to a student-involved assessment process. Student-produced artifacts provide opportunities for critical thinking, self-expression, and demonstration of content mastery in all subject areas

• Develop rubrics and other assessment methods that enable students to learn how to set criteria to evaluate their creations and the creations of their peers

• Conduct research to correlate the *Key Questions to Guide Young Children* with appropriate stages of child development, so that it becomes clear how to best match the teaching of the key questions with children's cognitive development and capacity

• Establish and sustain a K–12 learning community for further work and research, through continued professional development, a common framework and vocabulary, a sharing of lesson plans, activities, and classroom practices

Notes

1. Visual and Performing Arts Framework for California Public Schools, http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/visperfmartsstnd-comp.pdf (accessed March 17, 2004), 13.
2. Ibid., 14.
3. Ibid., 130.
4. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Zero to Six: Electronic Media and the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers* (September 2003), http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia092304pkg.cfm.
5. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year-Olds* (March 2005), http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905pkg.cfm.

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Project SMARTArt: A Case Study in Elementary School Media Literacy and Arts Education. ABSTRACT. Save to Library. Â Page 1. SYMPOSIUM Arts Education Policy in Latin America ALICIA CRISTINA DE COUVE, CLAUDIA DAL PINO, DIANA FERNANDEZ CALVO, ANA LUCfA FREGA, and JUSAMARA SOUZA F rom Mexico down to the south Save to Library. by ana lucia frega. http://s3.amazonaws.com/arena_images-temp/uploads/cx7igi13/jolls_project_smartart.pdf. Project SMARTArt: A Case Study in Elementary School Media Literacy and Arts Education. By Tessa Jolls and Denise Grande. This research project aimed to create a constructivist learning environment with digital storytelling. The research investigated the pedagogical aspects of digital storytelling and the impact of digital storytelling on student learning when teachers and students use digital stories. A multi-site case study was conducted in one Australian school at primary and secondary levels. Â A multi-site case study was conducted in one Australian school at primary and secondary levels. In selected classrooms, students and teachers had the opportunity to engage in innovative learning experiences based on digital storytelling. Â The research involved a case study of an Australian P-12 school. It explored the use of digital storytelling within the primary and secondary curriculum.