ITHACA COLLEGE

TIPS FOR DECODING MEDIA DOCUMENTS

Finding Media Documents

The term "document" refers to any media example, including printed text, images, audio and audiovisual clips, comic strips, etc.

1. ***Start with a "rich" media document*** that is appropriate for your students and relates to your goals.
   - Identify both your curriculum goals and your media literacy goals
   - Get support in finding appropriate documents from your librarian or other information specialists
   - Think through how you will know if your goals have been reached through the decoding lesson
     (how will students demonstrate what they have learned?)

2. Decode ***different forms and types of media.***
   - Consider excerpts from books, TV, film, websites, maps, posters, songs, video games, advertisements, paintings, magazines, newspapers, blogs, radio, comics and editorial cartoons, etc.
   - Consider both contemporary and historic, high and low tech, mainstream and alternative, institutional and personal
   - Consider different media genre such as documentary and dramatic film; TV news, news analysis, docu-drama and reality TV; hip-hip, country, folk and classical music etc.

3. Address ***copyright issues*** appropriately.
   - Do you have copyright permission or can you apply fair-use (e.g. by critiquing the document with your students)?

4. ***Prepare background information and probe questions*** for teaching about content and source.
   - Identify and construct the background information students will need in order to effectively decode the documents
   - Plan evidence-based questions that ask students to apply core content and reflect on media construction and sourcing

5. ***Less is more.*** It's better to do a "deep reading" of a few documents than a superficial analysis of many.
   - Show short excerpts from videos or films rather than the entire thing, if at all possible (a few minutes of video content is very rich in audio and visual information)

Leading A Decoding

The key to decoding media documents lies in the use of ***questions***. Try to shoot for 80-90% of what you say being in the form of questions.

1. Set up the decoding by ***giving the context for analysis***.
   - Provide the necessary background information <u>before</u> you start the decoding
   - Typically give students a "heads-up" of what to look for

2. Always ***start the decoding with a question***.

   What are your impressions from what you see (just saw, just heard)?
   Does anyone have a response? Who wants to comment first?

   If possible, use a specific question that relates back to your curriculum goal:

   What is the message about _____? Which person do you think is DeSoto? What important event does this represent?

   Or you can begin with first set of media literacy questions:

   Who do you think made this (produced this)? What was their purpose?
   Who's the target audience?

3. Follow immediately with ***evidence probes***. You may want to clarify whether you're looking for general evidence (including from the person's prior experience), or specific evidence seen/heard in the document.

   What's your evidence for that? What makes you say that?
   What's your evidence in the document? Where do you see that?

4. ***Continue to probe*** when appropriate, especially to get at key content points and perspectives.

    Expansion: Tell me more about that. What do you mean by ___?

    Interpretations: What words might you use to describe him? How does this make you feel?

    Clarifications: So you're saying ___? Do you mean __?

    Restatements: (restate in slightly different words or while pointing to the relevant element of the image)

    Affirmations: Yes! Interesting. No one's ever said that before!

5. ***Open the discussion up*** to other participants:

    Anyone else? What else? Does anyone else have a different interpretation?
    I'm going to go around and have each of you say one word that describes ___.

    Call on people by name, if possible:
    Carol, what do you think?

6. Use ***physical cues.***
    - Get close to the audience and use arm gestures to draw them in
    - Point to people to answer.
    - Use positive affect, nonjudgmental responses as much as possible (laugh, make facial expressions, etc.)

7. ***Cautions:***

    a) Don't tell them what to see, or what the answer is, if possible. Continue to use questions to draw them to the points you want to make, or to the right answer if there is one.

    b) Help students to analyze and evaluate free from <u>your</u> judgments:
        - Craft questions that do not bias student judgment (e.g., "What are the messages about Native Americans?" <u>not</u> "How is this depiction racist?")
        - Recognize how your own biases may show up in your body language, facial expressions, language, and framing when leading a decoding
        - Decode documents that you approve of (e.g., student-produced videos critiquing media) as well as documents you are critical of (e.g., manipulative advertising or political messages by someone you would not vote for)
        - Recognize the power behind your choice of documents to decode

    c) Don't set them up to feel stupid or set traps to trick them. Or if you do, use "we" language:
        We've learned to focus on ____ and we tend not to notice ____. Why wouldn't we have thought of that?
      Or acknowledge your own tendencies:
        That's what I would have said too. When I first thought this, that's what I thought.

    d) Listen for resistance (e.g., when a student dismisses a comment by saying "you are reading into this") or for one-sided comments that are stated as truth, and probe accordingly:
        Is there only one viewpoint on that? How might other people respond differently?

    e) "Do no harm" - be aware of the power of media messages and the potential for unintended consequences (e.g., reinforcing the stereotypes or potentially harmful messages we are decoding)
        - Contrast negative or potentially harmful messages with positive media representations (decoding both)
        - Cue into and follow-up with student's emotional responses to documents
        - Listen well to the meaning making of your students

Following the Decoding

1. Assess how well the decoding experience worked to meet your goals.
    - Note how the students responded to different documents and questions
    - Note whether the activity engaged students who are not typically engaged in learning as well as those who typically are

2. Adapt the lesson as needed
    - Eliminate "great" documents that don't work
    - Learn from your mistakes and successes