

OVERVIEW OF THE KIT

MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF WAR

Overview, Objectives, Pedagogy and Practice

OVERVIEW

This kit provides teachers with the materials needed to engage students in a dynamic, interactive, and constructivist process of reading and interpreting history. Through use of slide, print, and video materials, students will develop critical thinking skills while learning core historical information about the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War in Afghanistan. Using the accompanying slide and video scripts, and the training guide, *Decoding Visual Messages*, the teacher will lead students through a deep reading of images and text examining *Newsweek* magazine coverage of each of the three wars. Student history handouts and glossaries stress key concepts and vocabulary and can be used as study guides for the tests. The assessments will enable the teacher to evaluate students' knowledge and vocabulary as well as their critical thinking and media literacy skills.

OBJECTIVES

- to teach core information about the wars in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan
- to develop critical thinking and citizenship skills and attitudes
- to train students to ask key media literacy questions and identify bias in the news
- to teach visual decoding skills and have students practice critical reading of historical documents
- to give students an understanding of how media influence public opinion of current events

- to have students struggle with historical, political, and ethical issues involving government influence of mass media during times of war
- to engage visual learners and typically quiet or disinterested students

LEARNING STANDARDS

The content and materials in this kit, although designed for the social studies classroom, address learning standards in many different disciplines. They teach core historical content and vocabulary for social studies and they develop students' understanding of the events of these three wars in the context of global connections, economic relationships, governance, and civic ideals. They also build general critical thinking and analysis skills necessary for responding to document-based questions, and they foster shared understanding of different viewpoints.

These activities also address specific National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) standards. Students learn to apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate print and non-print texts. They apply knowledge of media techniques, figurative language, and genre to critique and discuss print and non-print texts. And students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. Many of the concepts and skills developed through slide analysis and identified in the

section on *Decoding Visual Messages* address Arts standards for analyzing visual media.

Furthermore, these activities address many of the core learning skills that have been identified as essential by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a partnership that includes the National Education Association (NEA) and the U.S. Department of Education. Specifically, these materials address:

- **information and media literacy skills:** analyzing, accessing, managing, integrating, and evaluating information in a variety of forms and media
- **critical thinking and systems thinking:** exercising sound reasoning in understanding and making complex choices, understanding the interconnections among systems

MEDIA LITERACY AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The founding fathers of this nation articulated the need for a literate citizenship as core to the development of a deep and enduring democracy. We live in an age in which the most influential messages about pressing social issues and events are delivered through mass media such as television, magazines, and the Internet. It is essential to the success of our democracy that young people consciously and consistently analyze and evaluate those messages. They need to be taught to seek out current, accurate, and credible sources of information. They need training in identifying and using various techniques for communicating messages in different media forms (see *Decoding Visual Messages*). They need to understand the influence of these messages on their understanding of the world. They need to be taught to ask key questions about all media messages (see media literacy handout at the end of

this guide). Without these critical skills we risk losing the diversity and freedom of thought that underpins a culture of true democracy.

COLLECTIVE READING OF MEDIA MESSAGES

These materials are based on the classroom practice of collective reading in which the teacher leads the class through the process of decoding images and text as a way of developing a range of critical thinking skills while teaching core knowledge. This constructivist approach encourages the development of moral reasoning as students clarify their own interpretations, listen to the analysis of their peers, and discuss ethical issues. Decoding of visual messages from the 38 slides of *Newsweek* coverage of the three wars will help train students to distinguish fact from opinion, analyze point of view and identify bias, interpret historical documents, and use evidence to back up a thesis. The classroom reading process is particularly effective in involving students who rarely share their opinions about print-based material, including students with reading disabilities, visual learners, and students for whom English is a second language. The teacher should consider calling on students or going around the room to ensure participation by all students in the collective reading process.

ENCOURAGING MULTIPLE READINGS

Although the slide scripts include answers to the probe questions, the teacher should encourage multiple readings and a diversity of responses. The answers given in the slide scripts are intended to reflect typical responses that address key historical and media literacy concepts and information. However, it is important that students recognize that all people do not interpret media messages the same way. Depending upon each reader's background including life experience, age, gender, race, culture, or political views, he or she may have very different interpretations of a particular text. The collective reading experience

provides the opportunity to explore these differences and discuss the important concept that readers interpret messages through their own lenses (see the handout: *Six Questions and Five Key Concepts of Media Literacy*). Although diverse and even conflicting interpretations should be encouraged, teachers should require their students to consistently provide evidence from the documents (visual or written) to back-up all interpretations.

READING BIAS

A major theme of these materials is the recognition that media messages come from particular points of view and have biases that reflect the intent and perspective of the authors and sponsors. With these slides and probe questions, teachers can train students to recognize bias and point of view. The summary activities and assessments are designed to have students demonstrate these critical thinking skills. The teacher should encourage students to ask critical questions about *Newsweek* coverage but also about these materials. Who wrote these histories and assembled these slides and for what purpose? Are they biased or one-sided? What is left out? See the *Summary Discussion Questions* section for culminating activities focused on these critical thinking questions.

WHY *Newsweek*?

These materials use only one news source (*Newsweek* seemed as appropriate as any) so that students could compare coverage from the same periodical during different time periods. The particular slides were chosen as being representative of general patterns of coverage, for their use in illustrating key historical knowledge, and in raising media literacy issues. It is important to note that the bulk of the *Newsweek* coverage presented in these slides is on covers. Although most readers see covers as news, they are also perceived by the publishers as advertisements for the product.

Thus covers present a particularly important yet unique topic for news analysis and scrutiny. Although students will be decoding *Newsweek*, the skills and knowledge they develop as a result of these lessons is applicable to other news sources and different types of media.

WAR IN IRAQ - 2003

Newsweek coverage of the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War in Afghanistan had clearly identifiable and contrasting patterns. Much of the Vietnam era coverage was critical of the war while coverage of the Gulf War reflected the successful U.S. government campaign to manage media coverage. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 had a profound and discernible impact on *Newsweek* coverage of the resulting War in Afghanistan. In contrast, *Newsweek* coverage of the 2003 War in Iraq did not follow an easily identifiable pattern. Although three *Newsweek* covers from the War in Iraq are included in the assessments in this kit, they reflect both pro-war and anti-war sentiments. What was most notable about media coverage of the War in Iraq was the role of embedded reporters, the proliferation of domestic and international news sources, and the impact of the Internet and other new communication technologies on news coverage. These issues could not be explored effectively using only *Newsweek* coverage. Project Look Sharp is currently working on a new curriculum kit that will include classroom materials for teaching about media coverage of the War in Iraq as well as the Arab/Israeli conflict and Islamic fundamentalism.