

Corporate Influence  
in Schools

# Using Corporate-Sponsored Materials to Teach History and Social Science Skills

Corporate-sponsored materials *can* have a place in the classroom if teachers see them for what they are and use them to meet curriculum goals.

Since there is no way teachers can insulate their students from corporate messages and hidden agendas, they should open their doors to the corporate community. In particular, teachers of history and the social sciences can integrate corporate-sponsored materials with the teaching of their subjects, providing their students real-world opportunities not just to study the disciplines but to practice them.

All information contains bias. Whether it is a pamphlet, film, kit, or video program, there is always a point of view. What are the characteristics of corporate-sponsored materials? Harty (1979) describes in detail the scope of what she labels industry propaganda: information that is free, corporate-sponsored, and usually selling a product or service, either explicitly or implicitly.

Although it is not free, certainly Channel One services should be added to Harty's working definition. Because they are also corporate-sponsored, some people would add such PBS programs as *Ethics in America*, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, *The American Experience*, and *The Constitution: That Delicate Balance*. However, the distinction I would make between the PBS type of infor-

mation and other corporate-sponsored material is that although these programs are not free and are partially corporate-sponsored, series such as *Ethics in America* encourage and stimulate viewers to examine issues in a critical manner. On the other hand, the type of material Harty refers to often has the look of being factual, authoritative, and comprehensive.

**Students need to learn that nonprint media, like print media, are composed according to certain acceptable rules.**

### Linking Materials with Curriculum Objectives

In an ideal world, all schools would have libraries and resource centers representing a variety of diverse information; no material would be excluded for any reasons (Asheim and Fenwick 1975). However, since resources are limited and the needs are many, and since there is always debate over some type of material, a selection process is necessary. In that process, the participants should use criteria that are clear and directly linked to educational aims and objectives. For example, the model articulated by Educational Products Information Exchange (EPIE) and established library and media selection guides are excellent resources. Ultimately, the value of information selected should directly relate to the needs of the clientele—the learners—and congruence should exist between what the producers of educational materials promise and curriculum goals.

However, it is important for teachers to remember that they do have a choice. After examining the relationship between their curriculum goals and corporate-sponsored material, they may decide not to use the material. If they do use it, however, they

should make it clear to their students that use does not mean endorsement.

### **Strengthening Thinking Skills**

Once corporate-sponsored material gets into the classroom, teachers can use it to teach students such critical thinking skills as how to:

- analyze and draw conclusions from statistics and graphs;
- identify and label examples of bias, propaganda, racism, sexism, and stereotyping;
- detect and record logical fallacies;
- identify arguments for and against.<sup>1</sup>

For example, teachers can use the student guide to *Energy Pathways*, a simulation kit produced for Ontario Hydro (1988), to teach students to detect bias. The students are given a scenario and a problem: A town is experiencing growth, and more electricity is needed. Where should the power towers be placed? However, one option is not open to students: "... although some individuals may be tempted to conclude that it would be better if the transmission line were not to be built at all, this is not an option that is allowed in this game." By omitting

**Teachers can exploit the fact that students will easily identify corporate logos and trademarks to encourage them to explore issues in a more critical, thoughtful way.**

this choice, the game's producers have skewed the results. However, teachers can use this game to teach the skill of identifying bias—in this case, by omission. In another section of the game, students learn to recognize stereotyping; in this case, stereotyping of the "traditional simple natives" and the minimization of the role of native people in contemporary society.

For another example, teachers might ask their students to create a time capsule of life in the 1980s. Together they can explore various questions: To what extent does material produced for McDonald's *Reading Is Fun* program reflect a contemporary historical context? To what extent does it merely image a corporate goal? Will future generations, when they open the time capsule, perceive that Ronald McDonald was trying to encourage young people to enjoy reading and not merely attempting to socialize young readers into purchasing more hamburgers? Would they accept, to paraphrase Wolin (1960) in *Politics and Vision* that educational goals had been sublimated to the needs of the corporate world? Would they perhaps conclude that in the 1980s there were two separate institutions known as education and the corporation? Or would they decide that, in fact, education was a division of industry?

An excellent guide for exploring such questions is *City as Classroom*. In this text, McLuhan and his colleagues (1977) see all information, regardless of form or content, as messengers of society. The authors' critical approach toward information will direct teachers in their use of corporate-sponsored material.<sup>2</sup>

### **Assessing Nonprint Materials**

Not all of corporate-sponsored material, however, is print. Much is in the form of slides, films, audiotapes, and videos. The critical question for teachers when using these materials is how students respond to this type of information, how they distinguish between what they see and hear on commercial media and what they are exposed to in the classroom.

One way to approach this learning

**Teachers who use corporate-sponsored material will be able to demonstrate to their students that on any given topic, there is always another point of view.**

opportunity is for teachers to develop media literacy worksheets for students to use while listening to or viewing nonprint information. These worksheets will not only direct students in recording content but also help them identify what Dondis (1973) calls *media syntax*. They will learn, for example, that nonprint media, like print media, are composed according to certain acceptable rules. Consequently, students can learn to analyze the visual composition of a cartoon, photograph, film, video program, or poster. They can also explore propaganda techniques used in various media. So, rather than passively relating to media, opportunities such as these enable students to analyze and understand how images directly affect them.

### **The Task Ahead**

Integrating the learning of history and social science skills with corporate-sponsored material is a challenging task for teachers. However, the time teachers spend in developing skill lessons from corporate-sponsored material will yield powerful benefits. Fortunately, many texts provide skill-based lessons (*Faces of America* [Thomas et al. 1982] and *Voices of Freedom* [1987], for example) and

models of how to begin the process of linking content and skills. Further, as much corporate-sponsored material is very well produced, teachers may find they need only to duplicate lessons. The teacher's primary role is to make the critical connection between content and skill development.

Moreover, by its very nature, corporate-sponsored material often deals with contemporary issues. Thus, teachers can exploit the fact that students will easily identify corporate logos and trademarks to encourage them to explore issues in a more critical, thoughtful way. In addition, teachers who use corporate-sponsored material will be able to demonstrate to their students that on any given topic, there is *always* another point of view. Surely when the premise of a curriculum program shifts from seeking right answers to critically evaluating information, what takes place in classrooms becomes more meaningful—and more interesting and relevant.

### A Final Word

If teachers know this material for what it is, can take the time to evaluate it for overt and hidden messages (both in content and in media composition), and can tightly match this information with curriculum aims and objectives, then corporate-sponsored material has a place in the classroom. However, if teachers let the corporate community into the classroom, they must be emphatic that the invitation is not an opportunity to indoctrinate students into buying products and services. Rather, the invitation is based on the intent to accomplish our educational goals. □

<sup>1</sup>For an excellent example of integrating the learning of social science skills and content, see *Faces of America: A History of the United States (Teacher's Manual)* by K.F. Thomas et al. (1982). Although the manual is directed toward a specific text, its 73 skill exercises can be used either independently or with similar material.

For a more concise document on developing cognitive skills in the social sciences, see *Curriculum Guideline: History and Contemporary Studies. Part B. Intermediate Division* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1986). The text identifies eight cate-

gories of skills—focus, organize, locate, record, evaluate and assess, synthesize and conclude, apply, and communicate—and directs teachers to lead off with skill development and subsequently use the content that best fits the acquisition of specific skills.

<sup>2</sup>In addition to McLuhan's book, there are a number of excellent media guides for teachers and students; for example, the series of primary document kits produced by the National Archives and *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Dondis 1973), a challenging but basic resource.

### References

- Asheim, L., and S.I. Fenwick, eds. (1975). *Differentiating the Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Dondis, D.A. (1973). *A Primer of Visual Literacy*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Harty, S. (1979). *Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Study of Responsive Law.
- McLuhan, M., K. Hutchon, E. McLuhan.

(1977). *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media*. Agincourt, Ontario: The Book Society of Canada.

National Archives. (n.d.). *Supplemental Teaching Units*. Boca Raton, Fla.: SIRS Publishers.

Ontario Hydro. (1988). *Energy Pathways*. Toronto: Ontario Hydro.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (1986). *Curriculum Guideline: History and Contemporary Studies*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.

Thomas, K.F. et al. (1982). *Faces of America: A History of the United States (Teacher's Manual)*. New York: Harper and Row.

*Voices of Freedom: Sources in American History*. (1987). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Allyn and Bacon.

Wolin, S.S. (1960). *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Toronto: Little, Brown.

**Dennis C. Doherty** is Assistant Head, Department of History, Frontenac Secondary School, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

## WANTED

### ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE® COURSE INSTRUCTORS

**Lee Canter & Associates is looking for dynamic instructors to teach the nationally-acclaimed Beyond Assertive Discipline graduate course.**

#### QUALIFICATIONS

- Experience using the Assertive Discipline program.
- Experience teaching courses or inservice programs for educators.
- Dynamic, motivating speaking style.
- Minimum seven years experience as an educator.
- Master's degree required.
- Availability to work some weekends during school year and summer (may require travel).
- High energy level, sustainable through five consecutive days of instruction.

Send vita, 10-20 minute VHS tape of you conducting a training session with educators/parents to:

**Linda Manuel**  
Director of College Programs  
**Lee Canter & Associates**  
1553 Euclid St.  
Santa Monica, CA 90404

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.