

## ALERT

# ADOLESCENT LITERACY: ENGAGING RESEARCH AND TEACHING

## Make room for EVALUATING PERSPECTIVES AND BIASES

### DID YOU KNOW?

All texts carry perspectives and biases, but the creators of those texts do not always make those perspectives and biases explicit. Uncovering perspectives and the biases they contain requires a bit of detective work. It requires looking at clues, that is, using inference, a key comprehension skill, to find implicit information in order to understand the values, assumptions, possible motives and underlying messages that texts may be presenting, suggesting or imposing on the reader.

In some cases, the authors (or creators or directors) of a text may be intending to influence or even manipulate the reader or viewer of the text. Helping students to evaluate perspectives and biases strengthens students' skills to think more independently, to analyse the validity, credibility and reliability of information, and to 'actively' make decisions about what to do with the texts. These decisions may include accepting the messages contained in the text (e.g., and using it to support their own ideas), dismissing the text because of its overt bias, or challenging the ideas and creating a response to the text or to the author of the text.

Students benefit from learning how to 'interrogate' texts, identify biases, seek alternate perspectives, and take appropriate responses to the text, especially in a time when they have access to so much information.

*"I always consider things that I take in with the questions: 'Who wrote this? Who pays them? And what would happen if I believe them?'" - Madeline, Grade 11, 2012*

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ADOLESCENT LEARNERS?

Opening up opportunities for students to evaluate bias and perspective, although beneficial for learners at any age, aligns well with where adolescents are in their development. During adolescence, teens' understanding of knowledge and facts shift, and they begin to see that "individuals exposed to the same facts can draw different conclusions, calling into question the absolute nature of 'facts'" (Stepping Stones, 2012). They also begin to grasp that 'right answers' may depend on a variety of factors and criteria.

Adolescents also develop a deeper understanding that people have points of view that may differ from their own, and they have greater capacity to imagine someone else's perspective (Steinberg, 2008). Adolescents begin to think about and question facts and ideas, and think more critically about the reliability, validity and credibility of the information sources. The questions "Is that really true?", "Can I really believe this?", "Which perspectives are represented?" and "Which perspectives are missing?" take on new emphasis for adolescents. They also understand more fully that "'neutral' perspectives on a situation are rare, and that everyone's perspective is coloured by their context, beliefs and background" (Stepping Stones, 2012, 48). This is not only important as students encounter a wider variety of sources of information, but also in how they interact with others.

*"[S]tudents who are critically literate are able... to determine what biases might be contained in texts, media, and resource material and why that might be, how the content of these materials might be determined and by whom, and whose perspectives might have been left out and why. Students would then be equipped to produce their own interpretation of the issue."* - Ontario Curriculum, Social Studies Grades 1-6, Geography and History Grades 7 and 8, 2013

## IN THE CLASSROOM

### GETTING STARTED

- As a teacher, begin by reflecting on your personal perspectives and biases, and how they may influence your work with students.
- Establish a safe and inclusive classroom environment that celebrates diversity and promotes risk-taking and inquiry. Ask students to monitor voices within their own classroom community that may be dominant or silent, and to, for example, invite 'quieter' voices into group conversations.
- Incorporate thought-provoking texts, including media and social media texts, that connect to and extend curriculum, and that allow students to discuss and question.
- Explicitly teach vocabulary related to critical literacy, such as perspective, stance, bias, impartial, context, source, valid, reliable.
- Examine a text for the power of words, for example, antagonist versus activist.
- Prompt students to examine the writer's perspective and how it may have influenced his/her position and/or bias (intentionally or unintentionally).
- Prompt students to examine their own perspectives, and how their perspective may influence how they view and act on a particular topic or issue

### *A Note about Texts*

The Adolescent Literacy Guide considers texts in broad terms. "[T]ext refers to any form of communication that uses language and images to present information and ideas to an audience. This includes print and non-print media, verbal and non-verbal communication, visual, graphic, audio and digital works."

### TRY IT OUT: MASKING

Masking allows students to examine how their own points of view and perceptions change as they access additional information on a visual text.

- Select a visual or media text (e.g., photograph, painting, print ad, website, video) that has a variety of elements to consider (e.g., words, images, music, setting).
- Mask or cover portions of the text to reveal a starting focal point (e.g., if using a film clip, omit sound for first viewing).
- Have students discuss with partners what the purpose, audience and message of this text may be.
- Increase the viewing field to reveal more of the text (e.g., reveal more of the picture, add the sound of a film).
- Have students talk about how their perspectives change with this new information.
- Consolidate by discussing how people often draw conclusions based on very little information; they need to be flexible and able to adjust their points of view as new information is revealed.

Adapted from Think Literacy: Subject-specific, Media, Grades 7-10

## POSING QUESTIONS TO EVALUATE PERSPECTIVE AND BIAS

Posing critical questions from a variety of angles, such as about the author, audience, purpose and content, helps students evaluate sources of information for perspective and bias. Questions, such as those in the graphic below, could be posted as anchor charts, used as a placemat, and/or distributed as a guide for students to continually reference. Students can use a variety of these individual questions, and once they have generated answers, can draw conclusions about the perspective and bias.

*"[R]eaders need to understand that they have the power to envision alternate ways of viewing the author's topic, and they exert that power when they read from a critical stance" - McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004*

## TEXT

### Author/Creator

- Do you know if the author is a researcher, an expert, or a reporter?
- What do you know about the author's values and interests?
- What credentials does this author have? Have you seen the author's name cited in other sources or bibliographies?
- Is the author a group, organization, institution, corporation or government body? Is there an image you think the author is trying to promote? Are there values or ideals that the author (e.g., organization) seems to hold or promote?

### Purpose

- Was the text created to inform, educate, sell, and/or advocate a particular view or position?
- What do you think the author of the text wants you to know or do after you have encountered the text?
- Has the text made you change your mind? Do you think the purpose of the text is to persuade you to think a certain way?
- Who might benefit from the text? Who might be disadvantaged?

### Content

- Does the text contain facts, opinions, and/or research? Are there opinions that are presented as facts?
- Are the images inflammatory or show individuals in a negative light?
- Is this information credible, reliable, valid, accurate? Can the information be verified using other credible sources?
- Is there any information that is over-simplified, exaggerated or that triggers strong emotions?
- Is there information missing that you think should be included?
- Does the text use inflammatory or provocative language? Are there descriptions of people and events that are balanced or are they overly positive or negative?
- What context (e.g., local/global, current/historical) frames the information?

### Audience

- Is the publication aimed at a general or a specific audience?
- What possible interpretations might readers or viewers take?
- How does the message fit or not fit with your own interests, values and beliefs?
- Are there biases that some readers or viewers may overlook?
- What may result if any overt biases are ignored or not detected?

## PERSPECTIVE ANNOTATION

Perspective annotation, outlined by Daniels and Steineke (2011), requires students to take on a perspective outside of themselves while reading. As Daniels and Steineke note, asking students to take on alternate perspectives reminds them “that everyone does not interpret information the same way – or even recognize the same details as important” (Daniels and Steineke, 2011, 100).

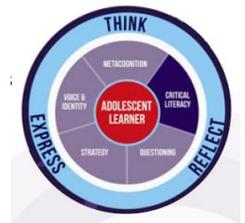
Some possible areas for this type of annotation include exploring the perspectives of various stakeholders related to the introduction or passing of a new law (Civics), key figures in an historical event (History), the various interests involved in fighting for and fighting against a new natural resource development (Geography), the various audiences of an advertisement (Language/English), and the possible reactions to sensational statistics or skewed data graphs in a campaign (Mathematics).

To use perspective annotation:

- Select a piece of text related to the learning goals of the lesson.
- Determine the perspectives (or roles) that may be related to the topic of the text (e.g., use the perspectives of a parent, retailer, and advertiser for an article on teen spending patterns). The list of the roles may be co-created with the students.
- Form groups and assign a perspective to each group. In groups, students brainstorm what their perspective might identify as important in relation to the topic.
- Students read or view the text from the perspective they are assigned. As they read, they underline and/or note information that is important, surprising, puzzling, or thought-provoking from that perspective. Once students have noted parts of the text, they jot brief notes about the sections they identified, with the goal of explaining their roles’ thoughts, opinions and questions.
- Students discuss, in like-role groups, the parts of the text they noted, as well as ideas, opinions and questions that were raised.
- Students convene in groups representing mixed perspectives to share their notes. In groups or a whole class discussion, students discuss how the different perspectives compare, and any new understandings that emerged as a result of exploring the text from the various perspectives.

Adapted from Daniels & Steineke, *Texts and Lessons for Content-area Reading*, 2011.

The outlines components which support students’ abilities to think, express and reflect. Critical Literacy is one of the components to which this ALERT connects. Evaluating perspectives and biases is one part of critical literacy.



## IN BRIEF

When teachers purposefully incorporate opportunities to evaluate texts for perspectives and biases, they show students that there are a variety of points of view and positions related to most topics, whether they are in textbooks, advertisements, or in classroom conversations. Explicitly teaching adolescents how to evaluate for perspective and bias helps them become more competent in navigating their information-rich world.

## REFERENCES

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## FOR MORE ON...

### **Adolescent Literacy**

Literacy GAINS. (2012).

*Adolescent Literacy Guide: A Professional Learning Resource for Literacy, Grades 7-12*.

### **Critical Literacy**

Literacy GAINS. (2012).

*Practice and Research Connections: Engaging Students in Critical Literacy*

### **Critical Literacy Lesson**

Literacy GAINS.

*Taking Multiple Perspectives*