

# Developing Media Literacy Practice among Secondary School Students in Malaysia: Case Studies of Video Making on Environmental Issues

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*In the present new media world, it is essential for the students to develop a sense of media awareness and activism to facilitate social learning in relation to the surrounding world. In building a productive learning culture among the students, media literacy is a necessary intervention in developing critical understandings, creative abilities, and active participations. Developing media literacy practices among secondary school students on environment is important as the world is becoming less green and the environment is declining. The aim of this study was to examine secondary school students' media literacy practices in Malaysia using the case of video making on environmental issues with a focus on three core components of media literacy practice namely process, text and inquiry developed by Thoman & Jolls (2004). On the whole, the study has revealed that despite difficulties in understanding the environment and critical media inquiry, students are quick to learn and are able to engage in video making on environment in a productive way. However, the results of the study present a cause for concern, optimism and the need for inculcating active media participation of the students' voices on the environmental issues facing the country.*

**Keywords:** Media literacy, video making, environmental issues, secondary students, creativity

The media undoubtedly plays a significant role in conveying and shaping information that people receive and hear (Livingstone, 2002). Information and news about lifestyle, business, education, and government, are made available from almost an infinite amount of sources and with the existence of the internet, access to those information is worldwide. However, problems arise when the credibility of any particular information is questioned. This is increasingly true in the context of the media. For example, the source of information that could be trusted, to understand the difference between news and propaganda, to know the producer of the message and his intended purpose and finally to understand the effect of ownership of media companies on the

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information it produces or relays (Thoman & Jolls, 2005). These few questions, apart from many, all fall under the umbrella term of ‘media literacy’.

Students need to understand how to critically assess media content so that they can derive maximum benefit and minimize chances of misinformation (Lim & Nekmat, 2008). If students do not develop a good understanding of the media and their messages then the biggest concern as expressed by Potter (2004, p. 24):

“Youth may develop misunderstandings and misperceptions about their world. Media is leaving young people to faulty beliefs; either they will accept the beliefs presented to them in the media or they will construct their own beliefs which may be faulty.”

Thoman & Jolls (2005) argue that education in new media literacy should cover key questions about the media such as what, where, when, who, and how within the context of media creation, presentation, distribution, and control. Buckingham (2002a) considers media production as an important component of developing new media literacy skills among students. Among the various forms of digital media production available for the students such as still pictures, music, multimedia, web pages and so on, digital video production is considered to be a valuable option as it develops both creative and critical thinking among the students (Buckingham, 2002). For making digital videos, students need production skills such as acting, scripting, directing, audio mixing, editing, graphics and so on which has become an essential skill in this present new media world where students are uploading and downloading various kinds of digital media. Therefore, students should learn production skills not only to appreciate and create media works but also to critically evaluate the messages encountered by them in the new media (Buckingham, 2002). Altogether, it is essential that the present generation of students need to develop their new media literacy skills in the present world.

In Malaysia, the schools have given attention mostly to the curriculum issues rather than on learning skills that are required for the students in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Malaysian students without proper training and knowledge in media literacy lacked the critical competency skills to sieve through the enormous information overload in the mass media and Internet (Shanthi & Khoo, 2006). A thorough search of information related to the nation’s statements and policies about media literacy in Malaysia reveals that most of the efforts taken by the government so far are in the form of information and language literacy rather than on media literacy.

Commenting on media literacy in Malaysian schools, Shanthi & Khoo (2006, p.1) argue: Learning in Malaysia however continues to render visual media study invisible within the formal primary and secondary school settings and there is a clear case for media literacy to be developed in ways that enable young people to comprehend daily life and media experiences critically as well as to engage actively and creatively in the various spheres.

As such, it is apparent that not much effort has been put by either government, media institutions or schools in Malaysia in addressing this issue faced by the student community. Another issue would be, how to develop media literacy skills among the students in Malaysia, where there is hardly any room for introducing media education in the school curriculum. Media scholars such as Potter (2004), Buckingham (2002) & Silverblatt (2007) have developed frameworks for developing new media literacy among the students, however, one of the simplest

and more viable framework comes from Thoman & Jolls (2004) who argue that the characteristics of media literacy practice depends on three core components namely process, text and inquiry.

1. Process- explores the questions that arise when one engages critically with the media.
2. Text- includes any message form – verbal, aural or visual. The basic assumption behind this component is that understanding of a text involves not just deconstruction activities i.e. analysing a message that already exists but also construction activities.
3. Inquiry- is learning to ask important questions about whatever we see, watch or read.

This study was interested in examining new media literacy practices of secondary school students in Malaysia using the case of video making on environment. In the present times, one of the areas that require the immediate attention of the present generation of students is the environment, especially with the world getting less green and the quality of environment declining.

## **Methodology**

The following discussion presents the methodology employed to pursue the objectives of this study. It highlights the various methods employed to collect the data and analysis to examine secondary school students' environment media literacy practices in Malaysia. The methodology applied is a form of action research in that it involves students' doing short video productions on the theme of environment. For this study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilised to collect the data for exploring the core concepts of process, text and inquiry in media literacy practice (Thoman & Jolls, 2004).

Given below are the details of various stages of the research, data collected and measures employed.

1. First, to collect data on how secondary school students approached the concept of 'process' in their media literacy practice, a questionnaire survey and focus group interviews were conducted to understand students views on television programmes in particular environment TV programmes, their media consumption patterns, level of environmental awareness, their views on the influence of television and its representation of environment and their knowledge, attitude and practice towards global environmental issues in Malaysia. Students from selected secondary schools in the states of Penang, Selangor and Sarawak, Malaysia participated in the surveys. Overall, six hundred and sixty two (662) respondents' participated in the survey from various regions of Malaysia.
2. Second, to examine how students approached the concept of 'text', students were asked to make short videos on the topic of the environment. This video production activity provided data to understand students' media literacy skills, their concerns towards environment through the issues raised in their videos and also their level of environmental awareness. The measures applied here were content analysis, focus group interviews and participant observation. A total of twelve (12) short videos on the topic of the environment were produced by groups of students from various secondary schools located in various regions of Malaysia namely Penang, Sarawak and Selangor. New

Media literacy training and production workshops were conducted in the selected schools situated in the above mentioned three states of Malaysia.

3. Thirdly, to collect data on how students approached the concept of 'inquiry' in their media literacy practice, students were asked to show their videos to their peers, teachers and family members and also share it online. Later, data was collected through post-production focus group interviews on students environment video making experience and about sharing the videos with others, which provided data on how they approached the concept of 'Inquiry' in their media literacy practice.

Some conclusions can be drawn from the study on how secondary school students' in Malaysia approached the three core components of media literacy practice. Discussed below are the salient findings related to the components of process, text and inquiry in students' media literacy practices.

### **Summary of findings related to the component of 'Process' in students' new media literacy practices on environment**

'Process' in media literacy refers to the ways one engages with mediated messages (Thoman & Jolls, 2004). It is helpful to note the study focus falls on television and Internet. In this study, 'process' is examined by the following elements such as students' media consumption practices, students' views on television programmes, students' views on television and the environment and students' awareness on environmental issues.

On the whole, the data collected from both survey and focus group interviews indicates that students use television and Internet more for entertainment than for acquiring knowledge and information. Results show that students use internet more for watching videos, downloading and networking, however, it is concerning to note that majority of students don't have any experience in video production activity which has become an essential skill in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, the analysis of their views on television during focus group discussions indicates that many of them are viewing television passively without critically analysing the messages, which was quite evident as students were unable to quote any examples of inaccurate or biased representation of the culture or subject matter in any of the programmes. Furthermore, majority of students think news is real and are unable to read the inherent bias in reporting, accuracy of information, any missing viewpoints in the stories and so forth. On the other hand, the positive element noticed was students have faith in the television medium, majority of them think it provides inspiration for learning, understanding and change. And also data analysis reveals that when they identify with the characters and its plots, they are able to learn about themselves and get inspiration from the characters actions.

At the same time, most of the students agree that they learn more about the environment through television and they feel television is a good source for learning about environment and it improves their environmental awareness. In general, the students prefer watching environmental programmes on the global channels rather than the local channels as they find local television programmes on science and environment are monotonous and stereotypical in their presentation. Furthermore, the survey results on environmental awareness reveal that a

large number of students seem to have no opinion or uncertain about their role towards building better and safer environments, but are interested in some of the ways suggested in protecting the environment.

### **Summary of findings related to the component of ‘Text’ in students’ new media literacy practices on environment**

The concept of ‘text’ refers to deconstruction and construction activities where students present opinions and ideas with multimedia tools (Thoman & Jolls, 2004). To explore how students approached the concept of ‘text’, data collected in the form of short videos, focus group interviews and participant observation have been analysed to arrive at the findings.

Overall, research participants in their videos emphasised on the responsibility of student community to take care of the environment by practicing pro environmental activities such as water conservation, recycling, energy conservation, no littering and so forth. There are certain common aspects in all the themes, such as the belief that students together can make a difference to the environment, they should be environmentally responsible and students in general are wasting resources like water, energy, paper and so on. On the whole, the students need to change their practices, attitude and behaviour towards environment and there by contribute to the improvement of the environment.

The two main conflicts identified in the videos were both centered on responsibilities. One is being environmentally responsible versus having an easy time and the second is feeling responsible to change their practices towards improving the environment versus not feeling responsible to change. If the narratives are analysed in terms of how the story was told; students seemed to appeal that our environment is in a bad shape and young people are not showing responsibility towards environment and together they need to change and improve the environment.

Some common elements or patterns that were found in their narrative style were students had an intention to demonstrate what is wrong and right with regard to student’s behavior towards environment, which was dominant in all their videos. And also text played an important role in their videos; students used text to drive the story forward and used it creatively to attract the attention of the audience to the subject matter. Furthermore, glimpses of creativity could be seen in camera composition, angles, editing and choice of music.

### **Summary of findings related to the component of ‘Inquiry’ in Students’ new media literacy**

#### ***Practices on environment***

The third core component of quality media literacy practice is ‘Inquiry’ – “that is learning to ask important questions about whatever you see, watch or read” (Thoman & Jolls, p.24, 2004). ‘Inquiry’ is an important component; it builds on the understanding of the role of new media in various contexts like caring for the environment as well as developing self-expression necessary for citizenry. ‘Inquiry’ here involves the understanding that all media messages are constructed with a purpose or motive. ‘Inquiry’ also involves the understanding of the use of creative languages and production techniques to present points of view about life surrounding us. The following discussion highlights the key findings related to students’ views on ‘Inquiry’ in terms of constructed message, motive of video clips, role of new media and developing self-expression.

### ***Constructed message***

Discussing the key benefits of the project, majority of participants said through this training they have learnt that media messages are constructed. In addition, they learnt that making a digital video includes tasks such as operating the camera, shooting, editing, directing, acting and most importantly learnt how to critically analyse a video.

Understanding the constructed nature of the videos, Zen Waei, a research participant From Penang shares:

“My perception of watching television completely changed after this production, now I can differentiate between the good and bad and whether it is fake or real. What is the purpose of the programme and what they are trying to tell? Overall, I am able to judge the quality of the programmes better now.”

A few other responses were like “ Last time, I do not know how people produce a video, and now, I know, how they took different shots for making a video, “and, “ I thought TV programmes are made at one time in one shot. But after the workshop, I realised that there are lots of shots in the movie.”

Similarly, Durga, a research participant expanded by saying:

“After doing this project, when I watch television now, I know how a video is really taken. They don’t shoot continuously and it is made of bits and pieces. They just edit it together later. I learnt about direction, editing, sound mixing and many more. Now, I also know how different camera angles make things more interesting. Things look more familiar to me when I watch now”.

Overall, students expressed that the production experience has increased their understanding of the video that the messages are constructed and it is mediated reality. They also expressed that it has developed in them a sense of respect for producers and filmmakers. Most students stated that the workshop has certainly created a sense of better appreciation of the media. They responded like “After doing the production, I have learnt how to appreciate a film better. It needs a lot of hard work and team work,” and, “after this project, I see advertisements or movies in a different perspective because I know the way they make it.”

Analysis also reveals that students have constructed the messages keeping in mind their target audience for the programme. Most of them said their target audiences for their videos are more specifically younger generation like their fellow community of students.

### ***Motive of video clips***

Students expressed that the motive of their videos was to increase the awareness on the environment among the students. The main purpose of their videos is to demonstrate to the audience, how they can make a difference to the environment by saving energy, water and practicing recycling. Most of them said after the project experience they themselves are now curious to know more about the environment by reading books, watching videos and so on. A few of them mentioned that initially, their attitude and commitment towards environment was low, eventually as the project moved on, their interest, attitude and practices towards the environment improved greatly.

As Suvika, a Form IV student from Penang describes:

“Ever since the project started, there is a strong feeling in us that we have to protect our environment; also we have realized that our planet is now going through a terrible time.”

### ***Role of new media***

The following student’s responses asserted their faith in new media and its influence “media is the fastest and the easiest way to communicate about the importance of the environment to the people”, and, “I think the media plays a very important role in changing us. For example, while watching movies if I see someone spoiling or polluting the environment, I feel strongly about it and consider them as bad people”. Most of them believe that by using video we can initiate change in people, for example “Yes, I think we can make a difference with the video because it attracts more people than other media like magazines or newspapers”.

Bee Chien, a research participant shared her personal experience of the influence of the video in inducing change in oneself:

“I had watched this Chinese film revolving around three sons and a mother. It shows the family rising from simple to a successful life and then to a downfall. I cried watching the movie as it was very emotional, it really changed my attitude towards my mother and I started to take more care of her.”

The process of making the short video taught them media literacy perspectives for example, how the simplest edits in film making can substantially change the meaning and emotional impact of a scene and how the choice of music can make a huge difference in how the audience experiences a character and so on. The editing process, in particular, thought them how constructed all media messages are by learning the choices made by them in selecting the shots and structuring them. In addition, as noticed by Goodman (2010) the process of video production is similar to writing an essay, where students learnt in this project too that making a short video calls for a guiding theme, research, argumentation, editing and revision. Moreover, the video making process enabled the students to collaboratively construct deeper understanding of each other’s shared perspectives on global environmental issues of our time (Gauntlett, 1996). On the whole, the process of making the video transformed the students into active users of media rather than passive receivers (Potter, 2005).

When questioned during focus group interviews, whether they will be interested in making such videos again that help heal our planet and our communities, most of them, if given a chance were willing to produce a video on the environment in spite of realising the amount of work involved in producing a video. For example, the following responses convey their views “I think if I have the energy and time, I would do another video because I believe people will receive the message and take it seriously”, “I would like to make a video like that again because when younger generation like us make a video like that, the older generation will be attracted and will follow”. However, two participants answered negatively like “I think I will not do it again, because my interest is in other field”, “I won’t be interested in production again, I don’t have time and I am busy in studies.”

Thoman & Jolls (2005) argue that media production activity provides students new learning environment as opposed to traditional learning environment by making it student centered, collaborative, multimedia based, inquiry based, exploratory, proactive action, authentic and

providing real world context. The learning by doing in this study helped the students to explore the different ways to support sustainability. Overall, students expressed that new media is a good channel for communicating messages about the environment. They strongly believe that through video change can be brought about in student's behaviour and attitude towards the environment.

### ***Developing self-expression***

The environment media literacy project experience helped students to say what they mean or want to say about the environmental issues to their community of students. They were able to speak out their minds and express their inner feelings through performance, text, visuals, creative techniques and music. In that way, the experience provided students to develop their self – expression as discussed below.

### ***Developing performance skills among students***

It was noticed that students' developed performance skills before the camera while filming the video. Besides gathering understanding of the technicalities of a video shooting and the role of the actors and crew, students acting before the camera in the study had the opportunity to watch themselves on screen and reflect on their performance. Talking about their performance, one of the participants expressed that 'acting before the camera helped me overcome my fear and shyness'. Similarly, it was noticed during the shooting, students viewed their acting in playback and observed any facial or physical action needing correction. In that way, the experience provided scope for nurturing their performance skills and interaction among the students.

Through action rehearsal, recording and playback, students developed crucial skills for working before the camera. Although acting before the camera was a difficult process for young students, the participants in the study slowly accustomed to facing the camera and contributed their part. Many of them told they were excited and eager to act before the camera. Like, it was expressed by this student "When people are looking at our production, I feel very happy and proud because I acted in that video". In short, the study apart from engaging the students truly with the topic also provided scope for them to develop performance skills.

### ***Builds understanding on creative techniques***

Students in this project boost their creative self-expression by understanding and learning creative production techniques employed in the video making. The study promoted students' creativity by involving their mental and emotional aspects of their personality (Buckingham, 2002). The media making experience enabled students to combine their creative impulses and thoughts based on their own real world experience to produce a short video that combines visual, sound, music, graphics and text in a creative way (Gauntlett, 1996). If we examine the videos produced by the students in this project, audience are able to sense the element of novelty and worthiness in their works. Especially, creative elements were found in camera angles, designing text, editing, make up, costume and combining music.

In this project, the creation of narrative for their short video itself is a creative design process as it involved particular way of telling a story by representing events, people and objects (Mulholland & Collins, 2002). Likewise, Becta (2002) argues that digital video significantly improves the motivation and interest of the students and encourages self-expression and creativity. Some of the aspects of creativity noticed in student videos are breaking away from conventional practice with regard to visual composition, structure of the story, generating



the concepts and so on. Even the process of generating an idea for students' video involves creative element, especially the visualisation of the action demanded creative thinking among the students. According to Goodman (2010) students' exploration of the subject matter for making the video, which involves the skills of assessing, examining and interpreting, is also part of a creative process. Even finding solutions to the problems highlighted on environmental issues could be considered as an aspect of creativity.

### ***Builds empowerment among students***

Empowerment is another aspect, which boosts students' self-expression in this project. Students being able to create their own media messages about the theme of environment in this study is empowering to them. In addition, the development of new media literacy skills among students also paved the way for empowerment. According to Page & Czuba (1999, p.1) empowerment is "... multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important..." In this case study, students talked about environmental issues that are relevant to them and expressed through their videos on how student community can change their attitudes, beliefs and practices towards environmental issues. In that way, the study empowered them to decide on the topic they would like to talk about and discuss freely regarding the issues relevant to them.

Scholars (Potter, 2005 & Buckingham, 2002) of media literacy argue that to achieve empowerment in media, students need to develop their critical thinking skills. Students in this study questioned themselves critically about their practices towards the environment, their environment media consumption and put into action their thoughts and ideas on environment through digital videos to their community of students. In that way, students tried to influence change in their peer group and felt a sense of empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

Altogether, the study's findings on process, text and inquiry suggest that students in Malaysia need to improve their media literacy practices especially on the components of process and inquiry. Even though, students did reasonably well on the component of text, it is still essential to develop their media literacy practices in the present media world, which is diverse, complex and rapidly changing. As pointed out earlier, considerable level of media literacy is essential for students in this 21st century, where literacy means more than basic reading, writing, and computing skills, rather it means knowing how to use knowledge and skills in the context of modern life (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003).

A more meaningful and productive awareness on our daily practices and the environment was established when the students made short video programmes and shared them with others. More critically, this also marks a change in the students' media cultures where they progress from a 'sit-back-and-be-told culture' to more of a 'making-and-doing culture' (Gauntlett, 1996). This can be seen in the shift from television-watching to the more creative uses of interactive media, and also more broadly and in growing calls for change in the school education system (from a learning-for-tests culture to one which emphasizes creativity, questioning and exploration). Indeed bigger policies and government action on a big scale are critical in developing creative learning cultures anchored in media literacy. But government need to be persuaded that the students are willing to be flexible and make lifestyle changes in order to save the planet, which is also a challenge to be solved creatively. Creating and making media programmes can open up new perspectives, and reflecting upon things that we take for granted in our simple everyday lives and suggesting new ideas and ways of doing things.

Most importantly, the study has demonstrated that secondary schools can apply new media literacy practices such as this on other issues students face such as drugs, violence and children's rights and so on; which will provide learning opportunities and foster active community engagement (Buckingham, 2002). The study has shown how media literacy on environment could help in producing groups of student communities who share similar thoughts, information and values with regard to the theme of environment. These student groups in turn may inspire other students from their class to participate and produce knowledge and share among their community. There are many frameworks available for developing new media literacy among students; in this case study, one such possibility is explored. Hope this research, inspires other educators, researchers to take up similar action-research projects in the future.

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