

CENTER FOR SOCIAL MEDIA HOSTS PANEL AT AMLA

How do social change and advocacy materials fit into a classroom standing in the shadow of standardized testing?

By Pat Aufderheide

That issue was raised on June 29, 2003, when the Center for Social Media hosted a panel, Using Media for Social Change in the Classroom, at the Alliance for a Media Literate America convention in Baltimore, MD. Chairing the panel was Center director Pat Aufderheide; panelists included Nicole Betancourt, executive director of Mediarights.org; Ronit Avni, program associate at Witness.org; and Alyce Myatt, multimedia director of Oneworld.net. Respondent was Jessica Tomback, a sixth grade teacher at John Eaton School in the District of Columbia.

Each organization has learning tools designed for educational use. Mediarights.org links users with social issue documentary films on hundreds of issues, has toolkits for educational use, and links to other classroom resources. "Please tell us how you're using what you find there, and we'll tell your story to others!" said Betancourt.

Witness' site links video that documents human rights abuses with resources to learn more about the issue and ways to take action to defend human rights. You can view video online at the website, and also get VHS copies for classroom use. "Video is only one dimension of a process," said Avni. "You need to know more about the complexity of any human rights issue, and you need to know what you can do. Otherwise, compassion fatigue sets in." She also reminded the audience that Witness also features human rights issues within the U.S., such as prison reform featured in the video Books Not Bars.

Oneworld.net links 1,500 organizations with social justice mandates in a network that provides a news service and access to deeper resources on a broad range of social concerns, in ten languages. Its new online TV service offers a chance not only for people anywhere to upload audio and video, but a way to link non-governmental organizations and filmmakers, so that issues and actions can be documented.

"The Internet was born with great promise, and it broke down walls to communication. But how do we ensure that the walls stay down in a global media environment? It's incumbent on all of us as citizens to make sure there is an international public sphere," said Myatt.

For educators, she said, the real challenge of teaching will be to help students discern, in a cluttered and noisy media environment, what is truth and what is reality.

Jessica Tomback agreed. "I'm impressed to see so many tools available on these sites, to help us overcome the frustrations we have with the technology. And it's very important for us as well to see the indexing and links here, that help us find out what resources are out there to support our media literacy work. It's exciting to see that teachers are in this loop of interactivity.

“This approach is where our students are. They are soaking up media in all forms, on every screen, all the time. And this interactivity lets them do something with what they learn.”

Audience members agreed, and quickly pushed past to questions of use. One of the most discussed issues was how to manage potential controversy, with students, administration and parents. Audience members had many suggestions, including telling parents and administration from the beginning what topics and resources would be included. “Building relationships with allies is key,” agreed Betancourt.

“You need to meet people where they are,” Tomback added. “This is an alternative literacy. And then it’s amazing how quickly people can shed their hostility to critical thinking once they becoming critical thinkers.”