“Where’s an English teacher when you need one?” began Dr. Robert Probst at a session I attended at a Conference on English Leadership Annual Convention. His speech reminded us that like parents, we educators should prepare our students to do without us. To achieve this we must understand two concepts we hear about in the world of education: multiple intelligences and media literacy.

Research on ways people learn and demonstrate knowledge shows that both are as diverse as the physiques of our students. Some of them learn best when they see and hear; others learn best when they manipulate something in their hands or move about the classroom. Howard Gardner, professor of cognitive psychology at Harvard Graduate School of Education, identified these phenomena as multiple intelligences. Literacy, the way we interpret what we see and read, is the foundation of education, and we hear about literacy competence in the daily news about standards, testing, curricula, and schools in general.

Educators know that in contemporary society, most of us receive information through the mass media—television, movies, Internet—sometimes accessed on handheld electronic devices. As teachers, it would be lovely to continue teaching the way we may have been taught—lecture and listen or chalk and talk styles—but teaching that way doesn’t address how our students learn best. Both Lawrence H. Summers, in a January 12, 2012, New York Times article, and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, whose work Summers paraphrases, affirm the value of active learning and integration of technology: “Not everyone learns most effectively in the same way. And yet in the face of all evidence, we rely almost entirely on passive learning. Students listen to lectures or they read and then are evaluated on the basis of their ability to demonstrate content mastery. They aren’t asked to actively use the knowledge they are acquiring.”

Both research and reality force us to reevaluate and revise our methods of dispensing the information that we teach and assessing the knowledge and skills that students learn. Educators are challenged to be realistic and practical.

Consequently, because we know that humans learn in a variety of modalities, we teachers must incorporate more diverse strategies in our instruction and offer students an array of ways to demonstrate their levels of understanding of literature and of life. Assignments ought to allow students to work in pairs, triads, and small groups; to use multi-model technologies, graphics, art, and music, as well as words to show what they think and know.

Imagine how much more insight would be revealed when a student has the option to create or choose a video clip or draw a comic; to decide the best color, size, shape, or image and layout to portray characters, setting, motivation, conflict, or theme in literature. What if one student could dramatize a scene or situation, while another student reveals his knowledge equally well using words alone?

What if we offered students the option to choose or to create music to reflect the relationship among characters or the mood of a play, poem, essay, or other nonfiction publication? Deciding the appropriate rhythm and the best key for a song requires perceptive reading, and sharing these artistic responses with classmates can increase students’ confidence and competence in communicating.
see teachers across the content areas creating assignments that teach students to read the media, discern messages in advertisements, evaluate the validity and bias in print and on the digital media, and to critique visual images on the Internet, in the movies, and on television. Students will be encouraged to use computer hardware and software to prepare and present written essays and visual and graphic projects in multi-modalities available in the 21st century.

Educators are learning through experience, from news broadcasts, and from research that young people have multiple intelligences and that students must acquire critical-thinking skills to become effective communicators. We therefore are compelled to expand our pedagogy to prepare students to become discerning as well as appreciative readers of print and graphic media while we continue to help them hone their oral and written language skills to develop precision and style.

We understand that knowledge is power—power to critique and to consume with care. We must do our best to prepare them not just for college but also for success in the world in which they live today and in the years to come. So, when they encounter any form of literature or media, our students won’t have to look around and ask Robert Probst’s question, “Where’s an English teacher when you need one?” They won’t need us to unlock the meaning and messages they receive. We will have taught them in ways that they learn best and we will have given them the keys they need; they’ll be prepared to manage without us.

We must admit that current society is less likely to turn to books for information and less likely to use a pen and paper to communicate ideas.

Being observant professionals, we must admit that current society is less likely to turn to books for information and less likely to use a pen and paper to communicate ideas. We, therefore, must teach our students media literacy, to help them become critical of information presented in a variety of formats and to become efficient users of communication technology as well.

For these reasons we should also do all we can to help parents understand that they are likely to

Perhaps equally important, electronic, artistic, and musical representations invariably expand students’ understanding of their peers—especially those who are visual or auditory learners. Multiple benefits accrue for all concerned.

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Work Cited