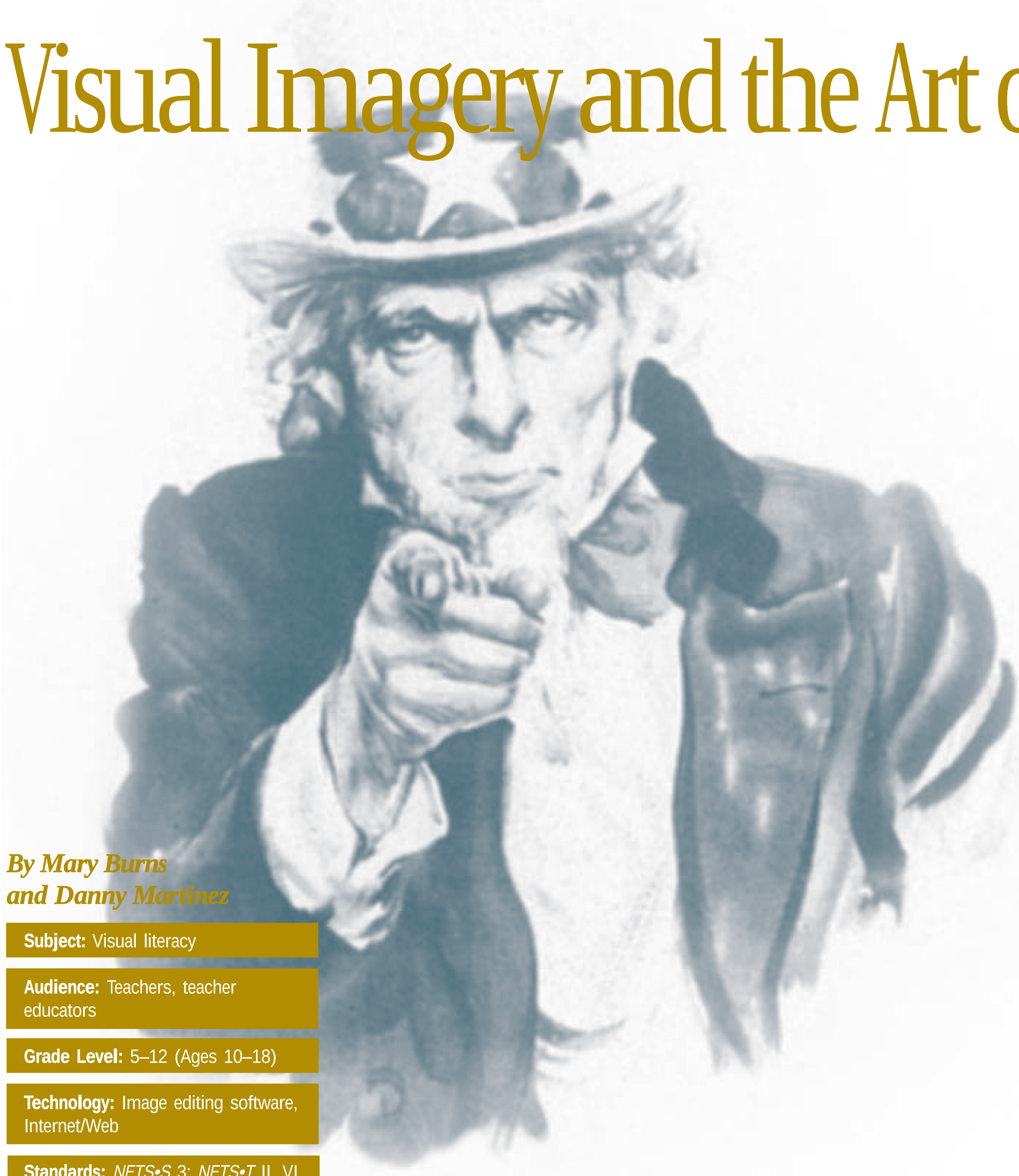
Visual Imagery and the Art of



By Mary Burns
and Danny Martinez

Subject: Visual literacy

Audience: Teachers, teacher educators

Grade Level: 5–12 (Ages 10–18)

Technology: Image editing software, Internet/Web

Standards: *NETS•S* 3; *NETS•T* II, VI (www.iste.org/standards).

Supplement: www.iste.org/L&L

A political campaign project teaches students how to read and analyze persuasive imagery.

Persuasion

Why do red lights mean stop? Though there may be a technical reason originating with the first traffic light, most people probably don't know (or care) why. Red lights just mean stop. The "why" long ago ceased to be important because we now automatically recognize certain visual indicators and assign them meaning. Just as children learn that words have meanings, they also learn that images have meanings and that these images arouse associated emotions (e.g., a smiling face brings a feeling of comfort, and an angry face prompts discomfort). As children grow, their pool of associated images widens, and they are bombarded with images from magazines, billboards, and television. They learn to ascribe meanings to the images they see (e.g., the guy in the white hat is the "good" guy, and the one in the black hat is the "bad" guy).

This connection between images and their associated meanings continues for the most part on a subconscious level and is reinforced every time they see a new movie or TV show. (How many Disney villains aren't darkly featured?) These visual conventions have become so ingrained that we no longer have to ask what things mean—the picture tells us everything.

As children of the 1960s and 1970s, our generation grew up with television. We know the theme songs from *The Brady Bunch* and *Gilligan's Island*. From an early age we were "trained" to decode the messages visually presented to us. Turn down the sound on any soap opera and see if you can get the idea of what is happening. One person turns away from the other, and we see them both, one in front of the other. The person in front looks pensive—the person behind (slightly out of focus) is listening. We know the person in front is about to reveal something very important. He or she is in focus, because we are meant to focus on that person. Then the revelation and the focus rolls to the other person, figuratively and literally.

In a book, we would get this information through text from a character or narrator, but in the visual world, we must depend on certain conventions to help us decode meaning. A couple sailing portrays an active lifestyle. A cowboy rounding up the herd portrays rugged individualism. We see the "nerd" get the beautiful girl because of the beer he drinks. Of course, intellectually these things are ridiculous, but subconsciously the images are powerful—they persuade, cajole, and induce—and when successful, it is because they have tapped into the wellspring of our subconscious desires, emotions, and values.

Teachers have been steeped in a highly visual culture, but today's students, with their exposure not only to TV but also the Internet and video games, have been deluged with this culture of images. Teenagers, in particular, look to media images for standards of dress, hairstyle, behavior, and cultural practices. Yet there is a disconnection between how students receive information outside the classroom and within. In contrast to 21st-century Western society as a whole, schools have traditionally been text focused. In almost all subject areas, students have been consumers and producers of text-based products. Difficulty in this domain has tended to mean overall difficulty in school.

The increasing prevalence of networked computers in schools has initiated a change from text-based to visually based learning within the classroom. In turn, this shift has spawned a new set of instructional challenges for teachers. Though we may be more comfortable pedagogically with text-based instruction and communication, we may feel ill equipped and unsure of how to proceed in terms of harnessing the learning potential of visually based instruction. State standards advocate "visual literacy" but offer little guidance in terms of instructional specifics. (See Visual Literacy on p. 34 for an explanation of this term.) Despite the ability of technology to accommodate more diverse learning styles and our awareness of different "intelligences," proficiency in text manipulation—reading and writing—is still the standard by which academic success is measured.

To succeed in the academic and vocational world, students must be literate—proficient in both reading and writing. But to navigate 21st-century mass culture, they must also be *visually literate*—able to decode, comprehend, and analyze the elements, messages, and values communicated by images, particularly in advertising. How can we wed literacy in both domains—text and images—to help students become critical thinkers and to encourage discourse? But first, how can we as educators learn to feel as comfortable analyzing an image as we would a piece of text?

Visual Literacy

Unlike media literacy, which focuses on the medium of the message, the focus of visual literacy is the message itself. Visual literacy uses the same competencies as phonetic literacy—decoding and comprehension—to decipher, comprehend, and interpret images, and critically evaluate the messages such images attempt to convey.

Within a reading framework, "decoding is the ability to recognize written representations of language, while comprehension is the ability to construct meaning from written representations of language" (Wren, 2000, p. 30). Decoding focuses on two elements of reading: semantics and syntax. Semantics are components of language—its "vocabulary," so to speak. Syntax is the way words are assembled to construct meaning—its "grammar." Transferring these definitions to a visual literacy framework, semantics and syntax can serve as visual elements with representative meanings—the vocabulary and grammar of images.

It is said that reading is the best way to learn how to write. If participants were going to produce a visual "document," they would first need to learn how to read such documents.

The People's Choice

Our work at the SouthCentral Regional Technology in Education Consortium (RTEC) provided us with the opportunity to directly address the second question, and by extension, the first. We create and conduct professional development for K–12 teachers, immersing them in activities as if they were students and reflecting upon the activities as teachers. The People's Choice is a multidisciplinary social studies, mass media, and psychology unit in which teachers create a series of presidential ads for an actual candidate (a current or historical figure). To do so, they had to select a candidate and his or her political jurisdiction, and research the issues important to this community, as well as its demographics and voting patterns. More important, they had to learn how to consolidate, distill, and translate this complex body of written and statistical information into a series of brief, appealing images that would communicate concepts and objectives in a powerful and persuasive manner.

Image Analysis

We began by discussing techniques of product advertising, including portions of Vance Packard's famous 1957 exposé of advertising, *The Hidden Persuaders*, and E. L. Bernays's public relations primer, *The Engineering of Consent* (1955). We discussed our favorite commercials, their degree of success in influencing our consumption patterns, and reasons for such success or failure.

We then turned to political advertising. It is said that reading is the best way to learn how to write. If participants were going to produce a visual "document," they would first need to learn how to read such documents. We gathered our materials from Web sites that house videos of political advertisements. (*Editor's note:* See the Resources section at the end of the article for URLs.) Beginning with Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 spot, *The Man from Abilene*, we asked teachers to list the elements or "vocabulary" of the ads. After much initial hesitation and prompting, teachers began to list the vocabulary (images, symbols, props, "supers" [text superimposed over images], and color) and discuss the "grammar" (the arrangement and interaction of the visual elements of the ads).

The analysis was more interesting: What was the message? How true or false were the ad's claims? What values, and whose, were being conveyed? What did the author of the ad want us to feel? What kinds of emotions did the ad arouse? In every iteration of this activity with teachers, such questions prompted rich discussions, resulting in an examination of political and cultural beliefs and an awakened interest in certain historical events.

We proceeded chronologically from "hard sell" political ads of the 1950s, focusing on logic, to the "soft sell" ads of the 1960s to the present, which aim to elicit strong emotional responses on the part of viewers. As we alternately viewed and discussed each example of a presidential ad, participants became more adept at noticing the use of colors, symbols, supers, sounds, music, actions, and clothing in conveying certain themes and messages and identifying the audience to whom this ad is directed. More important, they became adroit at manipulating the vocabulary and grammar of the ads to construct a story. For example, Lyndon Johnson's 1964 presidential ad, *Daisy*, created at the height of the Cold War, uses a little girl, a daisy, and a mushroom cloud to make us afraid of the catastrophic suddenness of a nuclear attack. By studying these ads, participants were able to gain a general understanding of visual interpretation, image manipulation, the cultural and political values of visual imagery, and the role of visual media in cultural processes. Within the structure of Bernays's advertising framework, we also discussed the strategies employed by the creators of these political ads.

Ad Creation

After analyzing video clips, participants were assigned teams and given their problem: they had been hired by a political candidate to create a series of ads for a campaign. (Because we had no access to video editing software, the ads would be still images.) The ads had to employ images and some text, and needed to make their candidate as appealing as possible to the greatest number of voters in the candidate's constituency. Participants had to be prepared to explain the structure and strategy of their ads to the candidate's campaign team and present a position paper on behalf of candidates, articulating the ad's message in text.

Teams subdivided into three smaller groups. The *market research group* used demographic, income, and voting data from the U.S. Census to determine the issues on which their candidate would focus and to tailor their candidate's issues and positions to his or her audience. The *resource group* evaluated campaign ads, gleaning tactics and strategies that could be employed in their own effort. They gathered copyright-free images from the Web, researched design and composition elements, and studied the use of psychological archetypes in advertising and advertising strategies. The third group, the *production group,* received instruction (a half-hour overview) in the use of the image editing software, Photoshop Elements.

Once all data were gathered, participants began the task of distilling this information and refining their candidate's message into a series of political ads using Photoshop Elements, a "light" and less expensive version of Photoshop. (*Editor's note:* For basic image-manipulation instructions, see the online supplement to this article at www.iste.org/L&L.) Other software such as Photoshop, Corel Draw, and Paint Shop Pro can be used, but for many teachers who were intimidated at first by the prospect of using image editing software, Photoshop Elements proved to be intuitive, fairly simple, and inexpensive (See the Adobe Web site for more information and a free 30-day version). Upon completion, ads were placed in a looping PowerPoint slide show accompanied by music. The truly challenging part of the activity was non-technical—figuring out how to condense pages of text and statistical data about the candidate, community issues, and voters' attitudes into a series of attractive and appealing images that successfully communicated a persuasive message.

Like an author carefully crafting each word of a manuscript, participants undertook the creation of their visual documents with great care and deliberation. The computer screen became the tablet on which the students worked and reworked images, aiming

Visual continued on page 52.

They had to learn how to consolidate, distill, and translate a complex body of written and statistical information into a series of brief, appealing images that would communicate concepts and objectives in a powerful and persuasive manner.

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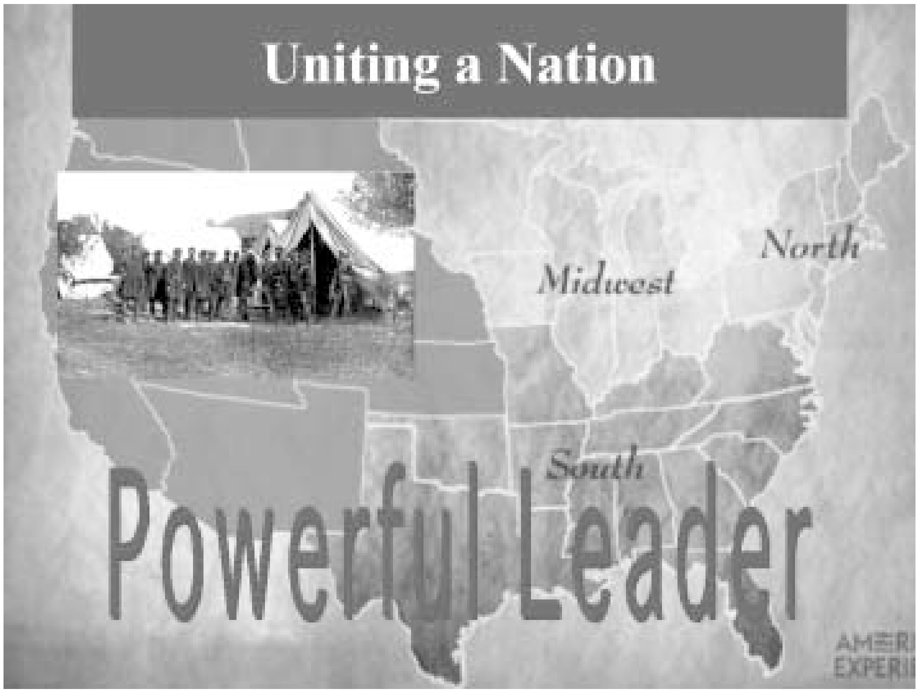

Figure 1. An example of one team's political ad for Abe Lincoln's 1864 campaign. Note the use of a pre–Civil War map, war photo, and text supers.

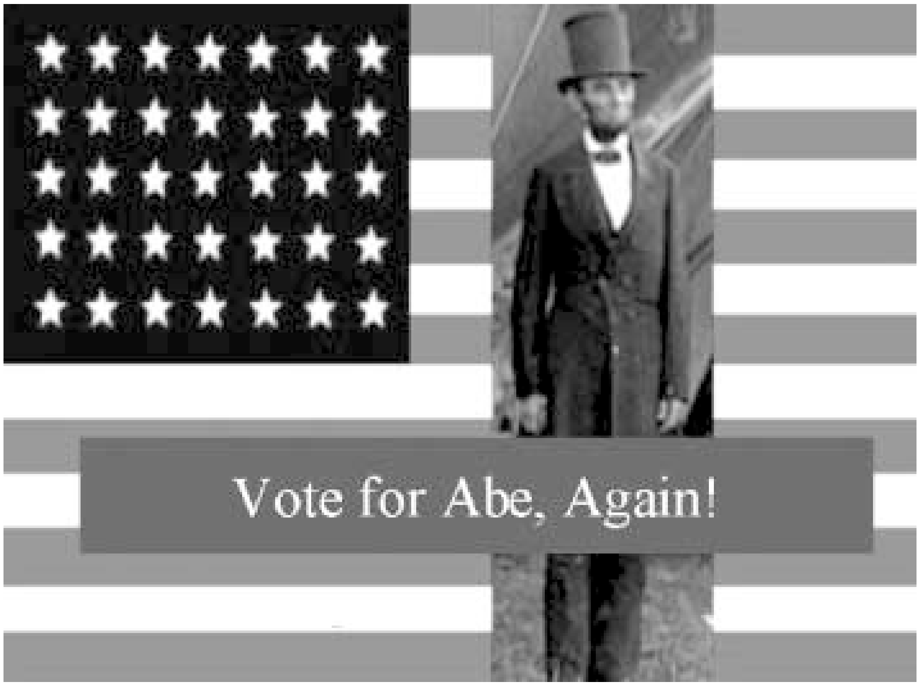
Vote for Abe, Again!

Figure 2. In this ad, from the same campaign as Figure 1, note the historical accuracy of the flag.

for the most suitable mix of light and color, and striving for the appropriate balance of supers and images to convey a point of view and message in the most efficient and captivating manner possible. Figures 1 and 2 show examples of one team's political ads.

Each team presented its ads to the whole group, and the group again employed the same analysis of structures and strategies as in the earlier ads: "Your camera angle makes the candidate really tall—you're trying to convey his sense of authority;" "The candidate in the denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up—he must be a hard working guy like me;" "I noticed the subliminal use of text to reinforce the narrator's message;" "Your ad uses a strategy of crisis: we're at an important point in history, the candidate is saying, and if you don't vote for me, it could mean the end of prosperity." As a group we discussed the ethical implications of any type of activity in which the objective is persuasion. In weaving their tapestry of images, did participants deliberately stretch or circumvent truth? Was their goal manipulation of facts or communication of facts, expediency over discourse, or misinformation at the expense of information? How did their values and beliefs influence their interpretation and communication of information? What are our responsibilities—in and out of school—as producers and consumers of text-based and visually based communication?

Technology is an essential part of the project. The Internet provides information and photos; spreadsheet software is used to import and display data; and image editing software is used to construct images. However, the true strength of this activity was not in the technology employed, but in the awareness generated on the part of participants. Teachers—and subsequently, students—developed the capacity to decode ads, consciously recognize the vocabulary and grammar of the ads, and intellectually analyze the content. A Baton Rouge, Louisiana, high school business teacher who modified this activity to focus on product ads commented, "It's really consciousness-raising. The kids get really good at pointing out colors and images and pinpointing the feelings each ad is supposed to provoke." In turn, by creating their own ads, both teachers and students learned how images serve as tools of narration and persuasion. "It really opened my eyes. I now look at ads to find the hidden messages," said a computer science teacher in Monroe, Louisiana. "I never paid attention to advertising before," said a high school consumer science teacher in West Monroe, Louisiana, "I'll never look at an ad the same way again."

Teachers who participated in this professional development and who used this activity with students have suggested and employed natural extensions of this activity. One teacher used the terrorist attacks of September 11 as an impetus for creating patriotic ads with a class. Others have suggested using these techniques on a more local scale, with state, city, or student governments. Imagine creating a campaign machine in your high school, creating advertising, tracking a candidate's popularity, polling the student body to find significant issues, and retooling your candidate's advertising to touch the "pulse" of the average student. It would be a powerful lesson in persuasive imagery and American politics.

We will be presenting this visual imagery activity at NECC in June 2002 in San Antonio, Texas, as "The People's Choice: Visual Imagery and the Art of Persuasion." As of March 1, the activity will be online at www.southcentralrtec.org/visualimagery.

Resources

Books

McGinniss, J. (1968). *The selling of the American president.* New York: Penguin. (case study on how political candidates use the media for political gains and how, in turn, their message is molded by the media)

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Cambridge: MIT Press. (examines the intersection of mass media, popular culture, and politics, and the resulting effects on individual beliefs and values)

Copyright-free images (political/historical)

American Memory: http://memory.loc.gov

Images of American Political History: http://teachpol.tcnj.edu/amer_pol_hist/index.htm

Online political advertisements

All Politics All the Time: www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/candidates/ad.archive

Political ad analysis

The Democracy Project: www.pbs.org democracy/readbetweenthelines/index.html

Point of View Dissect an Ad: www.pbs.org/pov/ad

The Thirty Second Candidate: www.pbs.org/30secondcandidate

Other

Adobe: www.adobe.com

Follow the Money: www.followthemoney.org (the biggest donors to each party by state and sector)

History Learning Site: www.historylearningsite.co.uk/ampol.htm (this British site provides an overview of the structure of U.S. government, the electoral process, the role of the three branches of government, and voting patterns by age, gender, and race in the 1996 and 2000 elections)

Project Vote Smart: www.vote-smart.org (a national library of all American candidates and political offices)

U.S. Census Bureau: www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html (downloadable voting demographics for presidential and congressional elections)

References

Bernays, E. L. (1955). *The engineering of consent*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Packard, V. (1957). *The hidden persuaders.* New York: Van Rees Press.

Wren, S. (2000). *The cognitive foundation of learning to read: A framework*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

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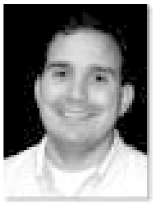

Danny Martinez (dmartine@sedl.org) works with the SouthCentral RTEC creating and conducting professional development for K–12 educators. He is also the RTEC's Web administrator and video production specialist. He is a former journalism and computer technology teacher at a special needs school, and he has a radio/television/film degree from the University of Texas.

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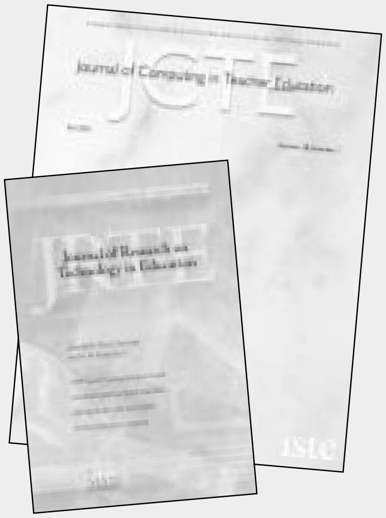

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