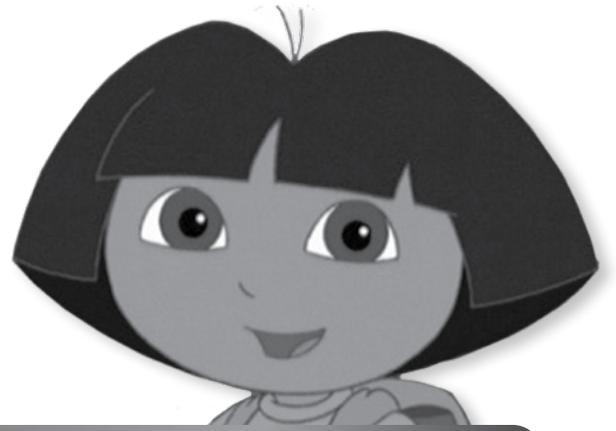# Exploring the Media with Dora

A PRE-SCHOOL INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA LITERACY

BY CARLOS E. CORTÉS, MARIANA DIAZ-WIONCZEK, AND VALERIA LOVELACE

"We did it!"

With those now iconic words, millions of young viewers each day join Dora the Explorer to celebrate the collaborative completion of a problem-solving television adventure. And they do it through media—actively and interactively.

Dora the Explorer made its Nickelodeon television debut on August 14, 2000. One of the most-watched pre-school television shows in the United States, it quickly developed into a social phenomenon (Diaz-Wionczek, Lovelace, & Cortés, 2009).

Children throughout the United States now proudly proclaim, "I'm learning Spanish from Dora." And they applaud Dora's fearless female activism. But, as a pre-school educator, Dora goes much further. Among its many achievements, *Dora the Explorer* has drawn young viewers into the world of the new me-

dia literacy using two main strategies: multiple intelligence-based interactivity and computer-based iconography.

Dora's teaching effectiveness did not occur by accident. Here's part of the story as viewed by the three of us, all part of the *Dora* team (Diaz-Wionczek, Director of Research and Development; Lovelace, Research and Curriculum Development Consultant; and Cortés, Creative and Cultural Advisor).

Dora is based on a carefully-constructed program format with a clear linear structure. At the beginning of each episode, the Map (Figure 1) lays out a sequence of challenges that Dora, her friends, and viewers must deal with in order to reach their ultimate goal. In the process, they engage in activities that contribute to their sense of media-related empowerment.

INTERACTIVITY

Interactivity fosters young viewer interest and facilitates learning (Linebarger & Walker, 2005). To capture and hold viewer attention, each *Dora* episode features a linear narrative shaped around a high-stakes adventure with serious consequences. It calls upon viewers to interact with the television to help Dora overcome a series of structured challenges. Mused co-creator and co-executive producer Chris Gifford, "It's amazing to see the satisfaction it gives kids to help Dora solve a series of high-stakes problems. They're like proud partners who believe Dora couldn't have done it without them! (Gifford, 2008)"

After considering various program concepts, the creative and research teams developed an interactive pre-school curriculum based on seven of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences: logical/mathematical; musical/auditory; bodily/kinesthetic; interpersonal; intrapersonal; spatial; and linguistic (Gardner, 1993). Media literacy in *Dora* involves drawing upon young viewers' personal capacities in each of those seven areas to interact with the media.

Viewers use linguistic intelligence (in Spanish and English) to solve problems, while The Map encourages viewers to use spatial intelligence. One parent wrote about her daughter (nearly 3) that "her speech has come on leaps and bounds with the repetition, and also her counting has improved" (Nick Jr., 2003).

Children use their bodily/kinesthetic intelligence as they physically model actions in which Dora and other characters are engaged. According to co-creator and co-executive producer Valerie Walsh, "One of the things I love most about the show, and something that makes it unique, is that viewers are asked to be active participants, not only by asking questions, but by getting off the couch and moving their bodies" (Nick Jr., 2000).

Interactivity, then, an essential feature of learning with the new media, is a core element of *Dora*. And, by drawing upon Gardner's multiple intelligences, *Dora* stretches the traditional boundaries of media interactivity and, inevitably, media literacy.
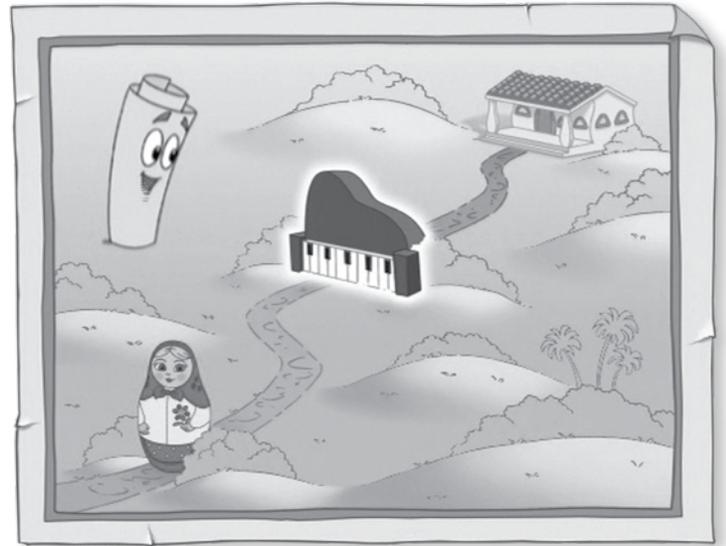

FIGURE 1
The map encourages spacial intelligence.

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DORA'S COMPUTER WORLD

Along with featuring interactivity, *Dora the Explorer* also fosters media technological literacy. This process begins with the very world in which Dora lives, a computer/fantasy world teeming with icons of computer technology and replete with computer conventions.

Cursor arrows (Figure 2) aid in problem solving. They function as cognitive organizers, helping young viewers focus and, in that way, become more effective in overcoming the challenges that are presented. Arrows draw attention to critical elements of the problems being addressed. They click, highlight, and drag objects as part of the problem-solving process.

FIGURE 2
Computer Iconography: the cursor arrow. Computer-based iconography—"click on the arrow"—draws young viewers into the world of new media literacy.
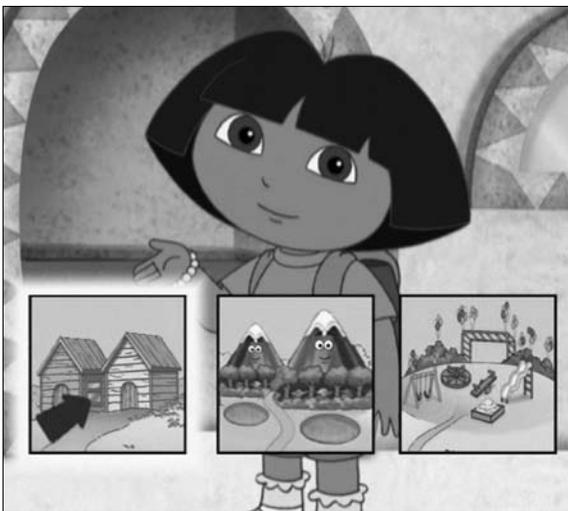

FIGURE 3
Dora and Boots are demonstrating their musical (teaching a song) and kinesthetic (winding the music box handle) intelligence.

In many respects, *Dora* episodes take on the characteristics of a computer game itself, something children might play in an arcade or on their home computers. Participating in a *Dora* show, in other words, with its computer features and conventions, helps young viewers become more familiar and comfortable with the new media, preparing them for a future of computer-based learning.

DORA THE EMPOWERER

Research has shown that children feel more empowered if they can interact successfully with televised challenges (Anderson, Bryant, Wilder, Crawley, Santomero, & Williams, 2000). In that respect, *Dora* helps empower young viewers. This empowerment includes introducing them to and involving them in elements of the new interactive media literacy.

It is impossible to predict with certainty the exact course that schools will follow in the decades ahead. History is littered with the mistaken projections of past prognosticators. However, it is quite likely that more of future school learning will involve literacy and competency with the new media. If so, then the *Dora* experience may well prove to be a significant, if maybe unsung, contributor. *

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