Framework for Creating a "Reading the Street" Activity
Virtual and On-ground Ways to "make the familiar strange"

Purpose: to understand media as an environment that contains ideologies, commercial and economic implications, through experiential learning.

Media Environments

Students and teacher(s) will go on an on-ground or online 'walking' tour of deliberately selected community environments. These can be commercial spaces, residential, or a mix of both, e.g.: a cemetery, business district, a community of cultural significance (Chinatown, Greek Town etc.), a market or town square.

Community environments are media environments because they use visual constructs to communicate (eg, architecture, signage, property designs, etc.). For example, in a typical "Reading the Street" walk, we may go through a cemetery, a business district, a community of cultural significance (Chinatown, Greek Town etc.), a market or town square, etc.

Teacher As Guide

In-person, students often travel in groups and meet up at designated intervals. If the whole class is moving together, having prompt questions based on the key concepts is an integral part of the experience. How might we "make the familiar strange" in order to help students think critically about these environments?

ABAR lens

The teacher must do some research for the route taken. There are many apps that can help you to bring out places and moments of significance for students. Street names, for example, are not neutral. In colonized environments, we can not ignore the significance of the places we visit to Indigenous populations. You must consciously build ABAR into activities for students in order to have them think critically. These resources will help:

NativeLand.ca: https://native-land.ca -a beautiful map with overlays that include treaties, Indigenous nations' lands and territories, languages spoken and more. It is updated frequently and goes far beyond Canada.

Driftscape: https://www.driftscape.com -this app has markers with sites of significance to BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, Heritage Sites and more. A very rich resource for uncovering the history of the spaces you visit.

Ontario Black History Society: http://blackhistorysociety.ca/services.html If you're in the GTA, the Ontario Black History Society has guided walking tours, plus many more resources on their site.

Production/Metacognition/Reflection

This activity addresses all 8 media literacy key concepts:

1. Media construct reality
2. Media construct versions of reality
3. Audiences negotiate meaning
4. Media have economic implications
5. Media communicate values messages
6. Media communicate political and social messages
7. Form and content are closely related in each medium
8. Each medium has a unique aesthetic form

Teachers should use these key concepts to prompt students to reflect on the experience. Sample inquiry questions can be simplified according to Grade Level:
- where do we see expressions of culture and identity? (how do people tell each other who they are and what is important to them? are there groups that are omitted from the 'picture'? do you see your culture? explain why or why not.
- how can you tell the difference between public and private spaces? (who owns this space/building & how can you tell? how might that affect how people behave there? how do signs communicate culture & community values?)
- how does architecture convey ideologies? (describe the different styles of buildings & how they suggest their purpose & relationship to the people who use them)

In person, students should document their learning as they go through these spaces with their teacher. Afterwards, teachers and students can decide how to demonstrate that learning, using media production.
Possible forms could include: short video, podcast, collage etc.
See this aml.ca resource for more ideas.

Online students can document the experience through screenshots, videos, research and more. Some resources to help include: Google Earth, Google Street, Google Tour Builder, satellite views, etc. This affords additional inquiry into physical design of communities (grids, etc.), and the cultural ethics of community design. They can compare and contrast different neighbourhoods, inquiring into intersections of race, culture, and urban planning; they can restrict their inquiry to local spaces, or move across the world, e.g., the new Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg as media environment. Google Maps as a construct also offers inquiry into commercial purposes (e.g., why do some businesses appear on the map while others do not?)

Online production forms can include: a democratic re-imagining of Google Maps; a slide show with screenshots, eg, a collaborative inquiry into cultural representation by online museums; a podcast.

Additional Examples:

Indoor school walks such as this one from Chelsea Attwell:
https://aml.ca/media-environment-scavenger-hunt/

Sample Street Crawl for Gr 11: https://aml.ca/fish-out-of-water-deconstructing-branding/