

Media Literacy: Awareness and Analysis

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Academic Setting

School Setting

I teach 7th grade Language Arts and Literature at Ernie Pyle Middle School located in Albuquerque's South Valley. Ninety percent of my school's population qualifies for the federal free or reduced cost lunch programs, which means the majority of the students are at or below poverty level. My students are very diverse in their academic ability. Reading levels in my classes range from 1st grade to 12+. However, the majority of my students struggle academically; poor attendance, lack of parental support, and lack of motivation are key factors contributing to this struggle. The student population is approximately 95 percent Hispanic, with many having limited English skills. Approximately one third of the student population at Ernie Pyle is in need of special education services. Having to create individualized or modified lesson plans for students with learning disabilities is very common for all teachers at Ernie Pyle.

Class Setting

My class is a 7th grade regular education class. Some students are transferred to my class after being in the English as a Second Language class. Therefore, they come to me with minimal writing skills and 1st and 2nd grade reading levels. My class is a 70 minute blocked Language Arts/ Literature class. I work with a team of teachers, which means I share the same group of students with the science teacher, the social studies teacher, and the math teacher. My team and I work together very closely and plan many integrated units. We try to provide consistent rules and consequences, and we meet regularly to discuss issues concerning our students.

Unit Objectives and Rationale

In the Albuquerque Public School district, middle school dismisses at 3:00 p.m. Many parents work beyond 5:00 p.m. Therefore, many of my students can passively watch television with little or no supervision every day. Furthermore, since the majority of my students are reading below grade level, they rely more heavily on television for information and entertainment. My students would greatly benefit from classroom activities that will give them the tools necessary to critique the media they are watching. I want my students to

understand that advertisements are constructed from someone else's viewpoint and perspective. I want them to understand that specific techniques are used to create emotional effects and these techniques are easily identifiable. I hope that they will begin to propose questions to themselves about the accuracy of content and to seek alternative sources of information. I want my students to think more critically about the messages contained in the media, especially messages containing gender and cultural stereotypes. Stereotyping can lead children to form false impressions of various societal groups, and I want my students to recognize when stereotypical images are being portrayed in the media, and understand how these stereotypical images can influence their ideas about real people in their communities. These skills of analysis will empower my students to move from being passive consumers of media messages to critical thinkers. Finally, but probably most importantly, I believe media literacy is a subject in which I can incorporate the academic skill my students urgently need - reading, writing, computer, and speaking skills - and yet will be entertaining and interesting to my 7th grade students. With these goals in mind, I submit the following objectives:

- Students will understand the various types of mass media and their origins, and realize their various functions in our lives
- Students will track personal media use and personal responses to media. They will think critically about the role of television in their lives and generate ideas about alternatives to watching television
- Students will understand various promotional and persuasive techniques in advertisements
- Students will utilize skills of persuasion to create media
- Students will deconstruct media images, and explore and evaluate the media's underlying messages and values
- Students will learn the meaning of stereotype and identify examples in various forms of media. Students will distinguish between stereotypical characters and real-life people
- Students will produce media

Background

To meet the goals of this unit, I believe teachers must first have a

good understanding of the history of mass media, so that they can convey to their students how forms of communication have always impacted culture. Secondly, they must understand some key concepts of media literacy.

Historical Overview

In pre-literate societies most communication was face-to-face, and this fact helped to construct their oral culture (Baran). Knowledge and information needed to be passed on orally. Therefore skilled people such as farmers and hunters held special status. Storytellers were held in high regard, for they passed on what was important to the culture. As a result, pre-literate cultures consisted of close-knit communities. People relied on and trusted one another. Roles of leadership were clearly defined.

More than 5,000 years ago, alphabet symbols began to develop in different parts of the world. Ideogrammatic (picture-based) alphabets appeared in Egypt (as hieroglyphics), Sumeria (as cuneiform), and urban China. The syllable alphabet as we know it today slowly developed, aided by ancient Semitic cultures, and eventually flowered in Greece around 800 B.C. (Baran 37).

With the coming of literacy- the ability to comprehend and utilize written symbols- the cultural rules of the pre-literate societies began to change. People could now gather and save knowledge to transmit from one generation to the next. Power shifted from those who could show others their special talents (farmer, hunter) to those who could write and read about them. The communities were no longer close-knit. Members of the community could survive not only by hunting or farming together but also by commercial, political, or military expansion.

Johannes Gutenberg perfected printing and the printing press in or around 1446. With the printing press came profound effects on culture. Now written communication was available to a larger portion of people, and the need to become literate became necessary for the lower and middle classes. For example, butchers needed to understand the king's shopping list. Soldiers needed to be able to read the emperor's orders. More and more types of people learned to read. The dominant authorities were less able to control communication. No longer was political discourse limited to accepting the dictate of Crown and Church. Printing gave ordinary people a powerful voice. Printed materials were the first mass-produced products, speeding the development of capitalism.

The arrival of mass-market newspapers and magazines, motion

pictures, and radio changed American society tremendously in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Newspapers and magazines were simple to read and full of pictures and cartoons, accessible even to immigrants who could barely read, and uneducated former slaves. Movies provided immigrants a vehicle through which to be entertained and gain knowledge with little or no reading ability required. For the first time in history, an entire population was provided the opportunity to participate in cultural communication. These forms of media rapidly unified a pluralistic, multi-ethnic country. It also created the U.S. middle class and solidified the roots of the U.S. consumer economy.

Key Concepts

Media Construct Our Culture

Earlier every major advance in mass communication technology has affected the cultures that use it. Just as the printing press changed Western Europe, today many experts argue that television is equal in influence. George Gerbner, the dean of the Annenberg School of Communication for 25 years and America's most distinguished media researcher, developed the Cultivation Analysis theory to explain this phenomenon. Cultivation Analysis theory basically says that television "cultivates" or constructs a reality of the world that, although sometimes inaccurate, becomes accepted because we as a culture believe it to be true. We then base our actions and reactions in the world on this cultivated reality provided by television (Barran 42). Gerbner would argue that the constant images of violence in television are creating a "mean world syndrome." He contends that heavy viewing of TV violence can cause viewers to overestimate their chances of encountering violence. They begin to believe their neighborhoods are unsafe and assume crime is rising whether or not these are facts.

Today's youth see 350,000 advertisements by the time they reach age 18 and watch about 28 hours of television per week. I believe Gerbner's cultivation analysis could be applied to this type of heavy viewing as well. Young people begin to expect real life to mirror what they see in movies, television and magazines. Girls, and boys, begin to have unrealistic views of beauty and relationships.

All Media Are Constructions

Media products are carefully crafted. A great movie intrigues us because filmmakers spend years learning techniques to influence us. So do advertisers. Flattery, repetition, fear, humor, powerful words and sexual images are some of the most effective techniques of media

persuasion. Techno effects - computer graphics, music, camera angles, framing, audience reaction shots and quick-cut changes of scene -enhance the emotional effects of media, but the creators never want us to think about the images; they discourage conscious analysis. Emotion or "feelings" replace thinking.

To convey this idea to students you may want to discuss the commercial, the backbone of television in America. The CPM (cost per mil) is the cost to an advertiser for each thousand (mil) people reached by a commercial. For example, if the CPM of an evening news show is \$5.10, that means the advertiser must spend \$5.10 to reach each thousand people watching (Postman).

Naturally, programs with high ratings are attractive to advertisers because they want to reach as many customers as possible. But audience size is by no means the only factor advertisers are interested in. Even more important are demographics. Each news program, for example, has a demographic profile or a statistical image of the age, sex, and income of those who habitually watch the program. Advertisers of skateboards will tend to advertise on programs with young viewers; advertisers of arthritis medicine will place their ads in news programs with "older demographics." Each commercial has a specific target audience.

It is estimated that each rating point is worth \$8,000 for each thirty-second network commercial (Postman). It is also estimated that NBC, ABC, and CBS take in at least \$4.5 billion a year in primetime sales. With so much money being spent for airtime, advertisers want their messages to be effective so they bring in an army of specialists. Through months of work, artists, statisticians, writers, researchers, musicians, cinematographers, lighting consultants, camera operators, producers, directors, set builders, composers, models, actors, audio experts, executives, and technicians will plug away to make a commercial. Time and talent costs can be a half-million dollars for a short commercial.

Today the price of commercial time continues to rise, production costs for programming continue to increase, the number of commercials on the air continues to grow, the air time available for advertising continues to expand, and as a result, the length of commercial spots continues to shrink, which means we have more and more spots crammed into one commercial break.

All Media Are Owned

As George Gerbner says, "Stories are no longer being told by parents, churches, or communities, but by a shrinking group of global

conglomerates that have nothing to tell but a lot to sell." Ownership of media companies is increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Through mergers, acquisition, buyouts, and hostile takeovers, a very small number of large conglomerates are coming to own more of the world's media. For example, in 1999 Viacom bought CBS for \$37 billion, creating a company owning 34 television stations; 173 radio stations; a notional television network; cable television networks such as MTV, USA, Nickelodeon, Showtime, Comedy Central, and the Sundance Channel; publishing houses such as Simon and Schuster; the world's largest outdoor advertising company; and Paramount Pictures, one of the world's leading movie studios.

The potential impact on the mass communication process from this kind of concentration of media industries into an ever-smaller number is massive. What will happen to shared meaning when the people running communication companies are more committed to the financial demands of their corporate offices than they are to their audiences? The concentration of media will limit perspective and information. Media critic Ben Bagdikian argues that media conglomeration limits the voice of the people and places enormous power in the hands of the media monopolies.

Media Contain Ideological And Value Messages

Media contain value messages both direct and indirect. These messages can be positive or negative and target specific groups. For the purposes of this unit, I will discuss how stereotypes are portrayed in the media. Stereotypes are not actual people but widely circulated ideas or assumptions about particular groups. Based on sociological theory, the process of stereotyping is something which everybody engages in out of necessity (Branston and Stafford). In order for us to make sense of the world quickly, we all go through a process of pre-judging and categorizing things. We all belong to groups than can be and are stereotyped. It is important not to fall into the trap of thinking that all stereotypes are bad, nor to think that all stereotypes remain static and unchanging over time.

Medhurst provides us with a useful way of understanding the process of stereotyping. The first step is the selection of a particular set of attributes for a particular group; secondly, inflating or exaggerating that selection of attributes in to the defining group; finally, establishing this as the most easily recognizable representation of that group after repeated use (Medhurst).

Mass media use stereotypes constantly in order to quickly establish "character." Stereotypical association can be triggered by a whole series of physical, verbal and non-verbal signs. For example, the

"dumb blonde" stereotype includes a whole list of characteristics: innocence, humor, childlike nature, bloneness, and strange logic.

Although stereotypes do not describe actual people they do involve a categorization and evaluation of the group being stereotyped. This is because the stereotype takes some easily understood traits and implies that all members of the group have these features.

It is often claimed that the stereotypes are maintained because they include "a grain of truth" (Branston and Stafford). For example, Branston and Stafford use the stereotypical idea that women are dangerous and erratic drivers. Historically, one could find examples of this stereotype throughout media content. However, this "grain of truth" can be seen as relating to historical and social factors such as the expense of cars, male and female occupations, and the idea of what is feminine (Branston and Stafford). Branston and Stafford use this example to show how this stereotype has gone away in recent years. You can see this for yourself if you view recent car advertisements. This change has come about because the social and cultural status of women has changed over the last 15 years. Women now account for 50% of all drivers, and they represent the fastest growing section of employed labor. This suggests that the media cannot convey this woman driver stereotype because it no longer has the "grain of truth" element.

However, some theorists believe that powerful media institutions are able to perpetuate stereotypes even when no "grain of truth" remains. Medhurst argues that stereotypes are something done by powerful groups to less powerful groups.

Critical Cultural Theory could be used to explain Medhurst's argument. This theory comes from European scholars of media effects. This theory is the idea that media operate primarily to justify and support the status quo at the expense of ordinary people (Baran). This theory is rooted in neo-Marxist theory, or the belief that those who own the factories and the land oppress people.

Gender stereotypes are one of the most prevalent of stereotypes found in advertisements today. A typical male stereotype, for example, is of the "real man" who is adventurous, masterful, intelligent, and unshakable. Erving Goffman found that when men are shown with children in advertising it is usually with a boy and involves some sort of "pushing into manhood activity" such as arm wrestling. Such sex-role stereotypes are intended to present viewers with a character they can easily recognize and relate to. The danger, however, is that if seen often, they can affect the way a viewer perceives men in general (Graydom 1). Male stereotyping can narrow one's notion of what men

can be and do; it can affect women's and children's expectations of men and it can even shape men's and boys' own views of themselves and of how they should behave.

While commercial television has improved in its portrayal of females, many of the women featured on TV continue to be depicted as someone's wife (apron-clad) or girlfriend (barely clad). Goffman extensively researched images of women in advertising in comparison with the male image. "Relative size" was one of Goffman's many areas of concentration. He found that males are shown as superior over females because they are most often greater in height. He also looked at the "feminine tough." Goffman found that women are seen more frequently than men cradling or caressing an object with their fingers and hands. This signified that women are seen as delicate, even in their touch. Television children are generally cast in gender-related roles (the girls playing with dolls while the boys play at sports) and all are cutesy and talk as though they are insightful adults. The message the female child gets from commercials is that she should be ready for a life of purchasing cosmetics, clothes, and other things that will make her more appealing to men (O'Connor).

Culture stereotypes are also prevalent in television. For instance, consider the new Budweiser commercials. The "black" version depicts the African American men as laid-back, fun, cool guys. The "white" version depicts the Anglos as stuffed-shirt snobs. As explained in the cultivation theory, this can have a tremendous impact on young minds if they are continually exposed to such fixed images of people.

Implementation

The lesson plans for this unit cover four weeks with five 70-minute class periods per week. Week one will guide students through media awareness. Students will engage in activities and discussions about the meaning of the word media, how media impacts society, and they will also examine their own consumption of media and the functions of media in their lives.

During the second week, students will learn about the techniques advertisers use to persuade audiences, learn how advertisers and marketers target specific groups, and ultimately deconstruct commercials. The third week will be dedicated to stereotypes in the media. Students will investigate the use of stereotypes by advertisers, and analyze how these constant messages can affect their own perceptions about people in their communities. Finally, in week four students will work in cooperative groups to create their own commercials. Students will make decisions about music, persuasion techniques, costumes, emotional effect and target audiences.

Assessment of this unit will combine both traditional and alternative methods. Student will be quizzed on historical background and vocabulary terms and write compare and contrast essays. They will use their "Media Journal" for various narrative responses to reflection questions - it too will be an integral part of the assessment process. Most importantly, students will produce their own commercials, which will allow me to assess their understanding of key concepts.

Classroom Activities

Week One - Media Awareness

1. Story-Telling Presentation - Objective: Students will learn about oral forms of communication in pre-literate society (V.1)

A storyteller from a pueblo can come to class and give a presentation. This activity will serve as the "attention-getter." After the presentation, we will discuss communication in pre-literate societies.

2. Historical Review- Objective: Students will make a timeline depicting the history of communication (III.1)

Present information in lecture fashion to students about the history of media. Students will take notes and then be required to create a timeline showing the methods of communication throughout history. A wonderful field trip to go along with this activity, either before or as reinforcement, is The Center for the Book (a non-profit program sponsored by the APS library).

3. Media Journal - Objective: Students will become aware of their own media consumption habits by reflecting and writing daily (V.1)

Students will need a notebook for recording information. Begin the activity by decorating notebooks. Explain that this will be their "Media Journal." First brainstorm with your students the various types of mass media such as TV, radio, books, CDs, videos, comic books, ads - including billboards, bus benches etc...

Have students label one page for each form of media. Give students time to write about their favorites in each category.

Homework assignment: Have students make daily journal entries explaining how many mediums they used each day. Tell them to reflect at the end of each day about the ads, signs, sitcoms, and commercials they saw.

4. Functions of Media- Objective: analyze visual media as information, entertainment, persuasion, and interpretation of event (V.4)

You will need various samples of mass media: taped segments, ads, newspapers, magazine articles etc. Explain how the media have three purposes:

- To inform us
- To persuade us
- To entertain us

Take each sample and discuss with students how each function for them. Does it function just one way?

Week Two: Deconstructing Advertisements

1. Introductory Video- Just Do Media Literacy

Objective: Introduce students to key concepts of media literacy (V)

Activity guide available online at <http://nmmlp.org>. This activity guide offers discussion questions, vocabulary and extension activities

2. Introducing Key Concepts/Persuasion Techniques- Objectives: Students will analyze advertisements and participate in group activities

Using examples from the *Understanding Media* CD-Rom (available from the New Mexico Media Literacy Project) review the four key concepts of media literacy that I outlined earlier and the advertising persuasion techniques with your students. To assess their understanding of the persuasion techniques, have students work in groups to create "advertising collages." Each group will be required to make a collage on butcher paper. Explain that each ad should identify the persuasion technique used and the target audience. An abbreviated list of persuasion techniques is included in the documentation portion of this unit. The CD-Rom with sample review questions is available online at [http://www. NMMLP.org](http://www.NMMLP.org). If unable to obtain a copy, you will need to tape several commercials or bring in several advertisements.

3. Deconstructing Advertisements- Objectives: Students will identify persuasive and propaganda techniques used in media and analyze what impact literary elements have on the meaning (V.5, V.6)

For this activity you will need the "Deconstructing Advertisements" worksheet from the documentation portion of this unit. You will also need several examples of taped commercials. First show several commercials, and after each commercial guide students through the questions on the worksheet. To assess their understanding, show another commercial and have them complete the worksheet

independently. Discuss answers.

Week 3: Media Messages

1. What is a stereotype- Objective: To familiarize students with the idea of stereotyping through the use of literature (I)

Have students brainstorm words to describe a princess. She will probably be portrayed as young, pretty, beautifully dressed, and rich. Point out that they have created a stereotypical princess.

Read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* to your class. After listening to the story, have your students answer the following questions in their journal:

- How do the characters of the wolf and pigs differ from the usual version of this story?
- Even animals can be stereotyped. Can you name some other animals that have been labeled as evil in movies?
- What qualities in animals determine how they may be stereotyped?
- Do we do the same things with people?

Next have your class brainstorm traditional fairy tales where there are traditional or stereotypical portrayals of characters. Divide the class into groups. Each group will select a story from the list they brainstormed and act out the story without the use of stereotypes. For example the stepmother must not be evil.

2. Spotting Stereotypes- Objective: To familiarize students with stereotypes and help them to understand the role that stereotypes play in television's portrayal of life (V.8)

Show segments from three or four programs in which actors play stereotypical roles. After each segment ask these questions and have students respond in the media journal:

- What type of character did you see (e.g. dumb blonde)?
- What phrases best describe him or her?
- Did the character's actions tell you something about him or her?
- How was the character dressed?
- Is the character unrealistic or true to life?
- Is this character a stereotype?

Have them create a drawing depicting these TV stereotypes such as scientist, teenage girl, etc... Then have them draw and describe some real-life characters.

3. Compare and Contrast Essay- Objective: The student writes

effectively for different purposes (III)

Have your students do a comparative analysis of advertising appeals directed toward men or toward women in two different magazines. For example, compare the advertising in *Sports Illustrated* and *Young Miss*. Do advertising appeals directed at a given sex differ, depending on the magazine?

4. Stereotypes in our Community- Objectives: Compare what they know about immigrants to the facts presented in video (V.2)

First ask your students what words come into their minds when you say the word "immigrant." List answers on board. After this activity show the video *Teen Immigrants: Five American Stories* (available online at www.pbs.org). After the video have the students compare the list on the board to the facts about immigrants in the video.

Week Four: Producing Commercials

Objective: Students will understand the complexity of the creative process involved in developing a television commercial. Students speak effectively for different audiences (IV. V.9)

The class will become an "ad agency" this week. Divide into cooperative groups. Assign each member a role in the process of creating a skit which illustrates the creative process of developing a television commercial. Decide on an issue, service or product to be advertised. Assign the following roles to students: actors, sound technicians, costume designers, camera operators and account manager. Each group will need to use one or two persuasion techniques in its commercial, decide what audience they want to target, and use music to evoke emotion.

Applying the State Standards

This unit has applied the New Mexico Language Arts Standards and Benchmarks. The list below corresponds with the parenthetical citations which follow the objectives above. For a complete description of each standard visit

<http://www.aps.edu/aps/standards/index.html>.

I - The student employs appropriate reading strategies to read and interpret increasingly complex texts for a variety of purposes

III- The student writes effectively for different audiences and purposes (e.g., to describe, narrate, express, explain, persuade, and analyze) using appropriate writing strategies and conventions

III.1-Demonstrates increasing proficiency in using the writing process to create a final product

IV - The student speaks effectively for different audiences and purposes (e.g., to describe, narrate, express, explain, persuade, and analyze) using appropriate speaking strategies and conventions

V.2- Compares and contrasts details, main ideas, conflicts, action, and main characters from a variety of viewed and oral selections

V.5 - Analyzes the effect of sound, images, and text of electronic journalism and mass media on the viewer

V.6 - Identifies persuasive and propaganda techniques used in media; identifies false and misleading information, analyzing what impact literary elements have on meaning

V.8- Interprets universal values and conflicts in auditory/visual presentations

V.9- Participates in group activities

Documentation

Techniques of Persuasion

1. Symbols - can be words, design, places, ideas, music, etc... They can symbolize tradition, nationalism, power, religion, sex or any emotional concept
2. Hyperbole - exaggeration or "hype." Uses impressive language that is vague and meaningless.
3. Humor - a powerful emotion. If you can make people laugh, you can persuade them.
4. Big lies - Most people believe what they see. Lies work on cereal boxes, ads, and news.
5. Maybe - Outrageous claims are fine, if preceded by "maybe, might, or could."
6. Testimonial - uses famous people to sell a person, idea or product, They need have nothing in common.
7. Repetition - drives the message home many times. Even unpleasant ads work.
8. Plain Folks - promotes oneself or one's product as being of humble origins, common/one of the guys/gals.
9. Flattery- telling or implying that your target is something that makes them feel good or, often, what they want to be.
10. Bribery- seems to give something desirable. We humans tend to be greedy. Buy a taco get free fries.
11. Denial - Avoid attachment to unpopular things.

12. Band Wagon - insists that "everyone is doing it."
- 13 Scientific Evidence - Uses science for "proof" which, of course, often is bogus.

Deconstructing an Advertisement Worksheet

1. Pick a commercial to deconstruct/analyze for this activity.
2. Describe/summarize what happens in this commercial.
3. Name one or two persuasion techniques used in this advertisement, and tell how you know that technique was used.
4. Was there music in the commercial? What emotions did it bring about?
5. What is the "message" the company wants you to get from the commercial?
6. Who is the target audience of this advertisement?
7. What values are taught in this commercial?

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