

“I Don’t Buy It”: Critical Media Literacy in the Fifth Grade

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Technology and the media have a powerful and pervasive presence in students’ lives long before they enter the classroom. A 2011 national survey found that two thirds of all children, ages zero to eight, watch television every day, while over half have access to digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and other portable media players.¹ By the time they’re ten, children are exposed to a constant stream of messages across multiple forms of media for almost eight hours every day.² Teaching students how to critically approach and read this information is an essential part of preparing students for informed, active and engaged citizenship in the 21st century.

Critical media literacy expands the traditional notions of reading and writing to include other forms of communication such as music, films, podcasts and websites.³ It begins with the assumption that media texts are never neutral; rather, they are purposefully constructed to implicitly or explicitly convey certain values and influence people’s thinking.⁴ Students become active readers as they interrogate the texts with questions, such as:

- Who created this message, and for what purpose?
- Who is the intended audience?
- Which values and points of view are represented, and which are absent?
- How does the text attempt to influence the reader?

These questions support both Dimension 3 of the C3 Framework⁵ (Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence) as well as Common Core Standards (Anchor Standards for Reading).⁶ When students engage in critical analysis of media texts, they are also learning an essential civic skill: how to assess sources and information in order to make informed decisions and take action.

Critical media literacy can be integrated into elementary social studies curriculum in a variety of ways that support students’ critical thinking abilities and align with national standards. The upcoming presidential election provides social studies teachers with rich opportunities for teaching critical media literacy. Political advertisements can be an especially powerful and effective resource for engaging students in authentic civic learning experiences.

This article describes a small critical media literacy project conducted with students in a fifth grade social studies and language arts class in a Texas public school. The project required two 70-minute lessons over two days. The purpose of the first

lesson was to teach students how to identify common persuasive techniques used in commercial advertisements. For the second lesson, students applied that knowledge as they analyzed 2012 presidential election advertisements. Although the lessons were oriented towards social studies learning, they also supported Mrs. Davis’s language arts instruction in persuasive writing and point of view, two concepts she had included on her reading and writing word wall.

I guest taught these lessons in a fifth grade social studies and language arts classroom of 21 students in a Title I elementary school in a rapidly growing suburb in Texas. The demographic makeup of students in this fifth grade class was approximately one quarter African American, one third Latino/a, and the rest white.

Media-Savvy Students?

A great deal of advertising targets children. By the time they reach the fifth grade, students already have some degree of schematic knowledge as consumers of media, and the initial activity activated those preexisting understandings.

I first asked students to think about specific commercials that stood out in their memory. After sharing with a shoulder partner, students engaged with the whole class to create a list of how these commercials might persuade viewers to buy their product. Students quickly identified some of the different strategies advertisers use, including using catchy music, unfavorably comparing a rival’s product to their own, and creating a sense of urgency with temporary sale prices. Micah noted, “For toys and games and other stuff like that for kids, a lot of advertisers will try to use bright colors and loud noises to get our attention.... They’re usually funny or have some bit of a joke. That’s how I remember them. Kids are interested in that kind of stuff.”

One of the key concepts of critical media literacy is that media messages are constructed for specific reasons. Students intuitively understood that advertisers deliberately use different strategies designed to make their products appealing to consumers, and they were able to describe a number of those strategies, which is the first step in becoming more critical media consumers.

Recognizing and Naming Persuasive Techniques

An ad can use multiple types of simultaneous communication to convey messages. For example, a cereal commercial may show a mother serving the cereal to her family, while a cheerful jingle

plays; at the end, the name of the cereal is prominently displayed, as a voiceover explains that it is part of a balanced breakfast.

The purpose of this hypothetical commercial seems straightforward: the advertisers want the viewers to buy their product, an end they hope to achieve with persuasive techniques, hidden within the text. The jingle, the design of the cereal box, and the smiling faces of the children make the commercial memorable and appealing to younger audiences, who may, in turn, convince their parents to buy that brand of cereal. The commercial is designed for parents as well, as it states that the cereal is part of a balanced breakfast; therefore, a parent who serves this cereal to his or her children must be a good and responsible person who cares about his or her family's health. A critical consumer who questions those messages and reads the nutrition label before buying the cereal will likely find that, like many children's cereals, it contains a large quantity of sugar and few nutrients.

Using commercials that are familiar to students situates notions of critical media literacy within their own world. Clearly, these fifth graders knew a number of anecdotal strategies used in advertising; our next step on the path to being critical media consumers was to explicitly name those strategies. Students received a graphic organizer (**HANDOUTS A and B** in the Pullout that follows this article) with the names and definitions of seven popular persuasive techniques, such as mudslinging, emotional appeal, and testimonials, which they referred to as they watched six different commercials.

After viewing a commercial, students shared their observations. While the class discussed an Allstate commercial for car insurance that featured a slow motion car crash, Bianca noted, "You see [the driver] hit the brake, but he's still moving and can't stop it. ... he looks scared." Zara added that the crash was "really loud, like the glass breaking and crunching. It's bad!" I asked the class why they thought that the advertisers used those particular images and sounds. Jeff commented, "It makes it more scary... you get scared to be in a crash like [the driver]." His analysis led Corina to identify a strategy: "I think [the advertisers] used emotional appeal because, like Jeff said, all those things make you scared. ... it's a feeling, emotion." Other students agreed and marked the "Allstate" ad on the graphic organizer as an example of the emotional appeal technique.

The class seemed unsure if other techniques were used, so I wondered aloud why the advertisers chose an ordinary man as the subject, instead of a racecar driver or an action movie star. Sarina replied, "'Cause he's just a regular person." Students labeled this as the "plain folks" technique on their graphic organizers. Andrew explained why: "It shows the crash can happen to you, too."

Students struggled to identify intended audiences, an important component of critical media literacy. In future activities, I would address this difficulty through scaffolding questions, such as: What does the product do? How is the product used? Is there anyone in your family who would use this product, and why would they do so?

Connecting the Dots to Civic Learning

The next day, the fifth graders transitioned to civic learning as they applied their critical literacy skills to presidential election advertisements. To introduce students to the process, I used Beyoncé's Letter to Michelle Obama from the 2012 presidential election.⁷ I knew that an advertisement featuring Beyoncé would be an engaging way to move students from the familiar to the unfamiliar. (Examples from the Romney campaign would be introduced later in the lesson.)

Students analyzed the advertisement as a class, using a graphic organizer (**HANDOUTS C and D**) to examine different aesthetic elements (images, music and other sounds), the content of the narrative, and the intended audience of the ad. Connecting the advertisement to aspects of their own lives, students were particularly interested in the parts that showed Michelle Obama interacting with children. Nataly remarked, "She's doing a lot with them ... dancing, planting food. The dancing's a little silly. She looks happy; it's fun." Brandon added, "She's exercising with them, eating healthy. If parents are watching, they want [Obama to be] First Lady because they want their kids to grow up healthy." Through their analysis of the media text, students became aware of how the advertisement conveyed implicit messages, e.g., Michelle Obama is good for children, and that it was designed to appeal to a specific audience: parents. Peter added another intended audience: "Beyoncé's really popular right now, and so people know her; younger voters might know her more than they know [actor] Morgan Freeman or someone."

After we finished filling out the graphic organizer, I put it on the document camera as students discussed which persuasive techniques the advertisement used. "Beyoncé's one of the important people," Allison said, "she says that she's in awe of [Michelle Obama], she takes care of people. It's a testimonial." Michael noted that, many times, Michelle Obama was interacting with non-famous people, which he identified as the plain folks technique.

As they analyzed the advertisement, students practiced critical literacy skills. They identified how images, sounds, dialogue, and other elements were purposefully used to convey messages, appeal to specific audiences, and attempt to persuade the viewer through different techniques, which they used as evidence to support their claims, as emphasized in Dimension 3 of the C3 Framework.⁸ This activity was also a particularly clear example of Common Core ELA/Literacy Anchor Standards for Reading, including drawing inferences from the text with supporting specific textual evidence, interpreting how words and phrases can shape meanings, and assessing how point of view can shape the content and style of a text.⁹

Becoming Critical Consumers... and Citizens

For the last activity, students applied their critical media literacy skills to another 2012 political advertisement as they worked in small groups. Students accessed political advertisements from The Living Room Candidate website,¹⁰ which is an outstanding resource for teaching social studies. The site features both

Republican and Democratic presidential campaign commercials from the 1952 to 2012 elections, including transcripts, as well as related lesson plans and links to other online resources.

Before the lesson, I preselected three Romney and three Obama political advertisements that used at least two of the persuasive techniques we had been learning about. Each group chose a different advertisement to analyze, using a written transcript of the advertisement and the same graphic organizer (HANDOUTS C and D) to describe the aesthetics (images and music), content of the narrative, and intended audiences of an ad.

One group chose “Firms,” an anti-Romney attack ad that features the candidate singing *America the Beautiful* off-key while accusing him of tax evasion and outsourcing jobs to other countries. By now, students understood that political advertisements use different strategies to persuade voters. As students wrote down three things (on the graphic organizer) that they learned about the candidate, they discussed why they thought the advertisers accused Romney of tax evasion. Bianca thought this information was included to make the candidate seem “cheap” and “hypocritical,” writing on the graphic organizer, “He’s not paying for the government that he wants to own!!!” Corina helped identify the persuasive technique by considering which points of view were represented and which were absent: “Maybe Mitt Romney is shipping jobs to Mexico and China and India, but maybe he’s also giving a lot of jobs to American people. So the Obama people who are making this commercial are showing all the bad parts. They’re mudslinging him.”

As they shared these observations, students realized how different elements worked together to convey messages and impressions. One student noted that the colors went from “dreary” to “happy” when featuring Obama at the very end. Romulo enjoyed poking fun at Mitt Romney’s singing and explained how it contributed to the overall negative impression of the candidate: “Well, he’s singing *America the Beautiful*, but I don’t buy it. It sounds like he doesn’t care, like he’s not putting any effort into it. I’d put a lot more effort in that song and it would sound a lot better.” Although the students laughed, they were also demonstrating awareness of how visual and audio elements can convey ideas and impressions depending on tone.

Another group chose “Failing American Workers,” an anti-Obama attack ad that accuses the president of losing jobs to China. The group quickly identified the mudslinging technique. They focused on the language of the advertisement, noting that “cheating” is mentioned three times, as well as visually displayed over an image of Obama. Following along with the transcript, Jeff pointed out that the advertisement “doesn’t call Obama a cheater. It says China’s cheating, and Obama’s failing to stop it. It makes them both look bad.” Through a close examination of the text, students could specifically identify how the advertisers used written and spoken language to create negative impressions.

Students examined the narrative of the advertisement as well. “Failing American Workers” stated that over half a million manufacturing jobs were lost under Obama. Looking back at the definitions for the difference persuasive techniques (HANDOUTS

A and B), Sarina identified the authority technique as well, explaining that “the advertisement is using these numbers to show how we lost these many jobs under Obama, plus it says he refused to stop cheating seven times.” Andrew commented, “It’s still mudslinging though, because it’s making Obama look bad... plus, it’s going to make people scared that they’ll lose jobs too.” After some discussion, students identified this as an emotional appeal technique used by the advertisers.

As a final project, students used their graphic organizer and the advertisement’s transcript to create a poster that summarized their findings. At the end of the activity, the fifth graders were able to analyze political advertisements to successfully identify persuasive techniques. Several students were eager to continue the lesson by investigating the validity of the claims. As Bianca put it, “I want to learn more about if he really is a terrible person, or if it was just a really good commercial.”

Conclusion

The outcomes of these lessons suggest that advertisements can be relevant and engaging resources for teaching critical literacy skills. Students’ familiarity with how commercial advertisements attempt to persuade viewers provided a strong foundation for teaching how to critically analyze and identify persuasive techniques in presidential election advertisements.

The 2008 NCSS position statement on teaching and learning in elementary social studies states, “The purpose of elementary school social studies is to enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world.”¹¹ Teaching students how to critically analyze and make sense of media texts is an essential part of that process. The 2016 presidential election provides educators with a multitude of resources for authentic, relevant, and powerful civic learning. 🌐

Notes

1. “Zero to Eight: Children’s Media use in America,” (Common Sense Media), www.commonsensemedia.org/research/zero-to-eight-childrens-media-use-in-america.
2. “Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds,” (Kaiser Family Foundation), kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/8010.pdf.
3. Jeff Share, *Media Literacy is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically Read and Create Media* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 10.
4. Jesse S. Gainer, Nancy Valdez-Gainer, Timothy Kinard, “The Elementary Bubble Project: Exploring Critical Media Literacy in a Fourth-Grade Classroom,” *The Reading Teacher* 62, no. 8 (May 2009): 674-683.
5. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
6. Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading” (2012), www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCR/RA/.
7. “Beyoncé’s Letter to Michelle Obama,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1qpZkA6tQ.
8. NCSS, *Next Generation* (see note 5).
9. CCRA Standards for Reading (2012), R.1, R.4, & R. 6 (see note 6).
10. “The Living Room Candidate,” www.livingroomcandidate.org.
11. NCSS, “Powerful and Purposeful Teaching and Learning in Elementary School Social Studies” (Position Statement, 2012), www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerfulandpurposeful.

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