

Lesson Plan 1

Defining Propaganda

Students examine different definitions of propaganda and explore where to find propaganda in news, advertising, public relations, entertainment, advocacy and education.

Rationale

Propaganda techniques are designed to attract and hold people's attention. It's important to be able to recognize and resist persuasive techniques that can be used to shortcut or block critical thinking.

Essential Question

- What persuasive techniques tend to shortcut, block or interfere with critical thinking?

Learning Outcomes & Key Messages

- Recognize four common techniques used in propaganda
- Identify examples of propaganda in news advertising, public relations, entertainment, advocacy and education
- Appreciate that even though the term 'propaganda' may have negative connotations, it found nearly everywhere and is present in all aspects of contemporary social life

Preparation

In a low-tech classroom, make copies of Worksheets 1.1 and 1.2 for all students and have poster paper and markers available for student use.

Activity 1.1. "A Television Commercial for Communism"

Imagine that the world's last five remaining *communist* countries decided to unite forces and hire the world's top advertising agencies to re-brand and create a resurgence of interest in Communism.

Prepare:

Q: What is communism? Which countries are communist?

A: Communism is an ideology of equality through common ownership and the elimination of private property, money and the state. Current communist countries include: China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

View:

TV Commercial for Communism

<http://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/rate/684>

This commercial shows a highly idealized vision of the positive values of communism. Encourage students to analyze the video by discussing these five critical questions of media literacy. You may want to view the video multiple times with students in order to observe how it is constructed and how it communicates a message.

Ask these five questions:

Q: Who created this message and what is the purpose?

A: A group of artists (who are also professional creative advertising professionals) created this TV commercial. The video was shown as an art installation at the Guggenheim Museum. The purpose of this commercial is to provoke viewers to consider how ideas and ideologies are “sold” through advertising.

Q: What techniques are used to attract viewer attention?

A: The happy white people in white clothing, frozen in action, look perfect and pure. The camera movement and the music have a feeling of energy that is appealing. The spoken language sounds similar to public foundational documents like the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution. The red and white logo is corporate looking and optimistic in spirit.

Q: What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented?

A: This video communicates positive feelings about people’s different social relationships -- in the family, with friends, and in the workplace. We see young people and older people working together. They are all dark-haired, light-skinned attractive, thin and healthy-looking people. Because they are all wearing white, it makes them feel like they are all members of the same team. The paper cut-out world they inhabit is flat and unrealistic, and this might be designed to activate viewers’ feelings of skepticism or anxiety. The icon used for communism is like petals on a flower and this communicates a feeling of togetherness.

Q: How might different people interpret this message differently?

A: Some people may feel positive feelings about communism after watching this video. Other people will be unnerved by the video, feeling uncomfortable by the images of frozen, nearly-identical looking people in an idealized and “fake” paper-world type display. Some will be surprised at the way Communism is made to seem positive because this contradicts other messages they have received about the topic. Because people interpret messages differently, this message may be harmful or beneficial depending on the audience, setting and context.

Q: What is omitted?

A: This video doesn’t give information about the countries and cultures where Communism is currently practiced: China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. It doesn’t give information about formerly Communist countries which were part of the Soviet Union: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

Beneficial or Harmful? Conclude this activity by using a pair-share reflection, inviting students to discuss whether this particular message is beneficial or harmful. After discussing different points of view, you may ask students to make a personal judgment using the “beneficial – harmful” scale and compose their explanation of their reasoning using the [MIND OVER MEDIA](http://www.mindovermedia.tv) website. While on the website, students should appreciate that there can be many different points of view about whether the TV Commercial for Communism is beneficial or harmful.

Activity 1.2. What is Propaganda?

Read the six different definitions of propaganda on Worksheet 1.1 and ask students to identify key elements of each definition that could be used to explain why “Television Commercial for Communism” is art, advertising and propaganda. In discussing the definitions and the example of propaganda, these seven key ideas should emerge:

- Propaganda appears in a variety of forms
- Propaganda is strategic and intentional
- Propaganda aims to influence attitudes, opinions and behaviors
- Propaganda can be beneficial or harmful
- Propaganda may use truth, half-truths or lies
- To be successful, propaganda taps into our deepest values, fear, hopes and dreams
- Propaganda uses any means to accomplish its goal

Activity 1.3. Where is Propaganda Found?

Students break into six groups, reviewing one of the six different sites of propaganda and generating a list of specific examples. After discussing various examples, students collaborate to create a poster to represent their examples or they may use a digital poster tool like [Padlet](#) to create a digital poster. Encourage students to defend their choices and examples by using the key elements of the definition of propaganda in their reasoning. Large-group sharing will help students appreciate that propaganda is everywhere!

Teacher Reflection

Through discussing an example of propaganda and comparing and contrasting various definitions, students learn that propaganda appears in a variety of forms and is strategic and intentionally designed to influence attitudes, opinions and behaviors. Propaganda can be beneficial or harmful, and it may use truth, half-truths or lies because propagandists may use any means to accomplish their goals. But propaganda doesn't always work. To be successful, propaganda taps into our deepest values, fear, hopes and dreams. Propaganda is an integral part of a democratic society as people use the power of language, image and sound to inspire and motivate human behavior: that's why its part of advertising, entertainment, politics, government, journalism, advocacy and even education.

Evaluation

Students should be able to identify the features of propaganda and know that there are six locations where propaganda can be found.