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Rhetoric Unit

Visual Rhetoric

Visual Rhetoric Through the Years

Abstract:

This exercise gives students an introduction to some of the language and terminology of visual rhetoric in a brief teacher-guided discussion. Following the discussion, students, in small groups, will find both a vintage print advertisement and a current print ad within the same general category and examine how different forms of appeals have evolved through time, how ads now target their specific audiences, and, in general, how ads have changed, and why. Groups will present their findings to the class. Having the opportunity to see what in advertising has changed (as well as what has not changed) will allow students a hands-on introduction to the utilization and evolution of visual rhetoric.

Common Core Standards:

SL.9-10.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

SL 9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

RI.9-10.6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

Procedure:

Students will benefit from a brief class discussion including some of the terms and parameters of visual rhetoric. While they may initially be stymied by the use of the term "rhetoric," reminding them that they are constant consumers of visual rhetoric will help. Students should already be familiar with the rhetorical triangle (ethos, pathos, logos) and types of appeals. A discussion can begin with a broad question such as: "How are we influenced through images?" Through the discussion, the teacher should emphasize some particular aspects of visual rhetoric that the class must consider in print ads (target audience, claims made in the image, evidence for the claim, and use of color and symbolism, etc.). In asking the class and compiling a list to answer the following question: what kinds of elements are crucial for analyzing images, the following elements are beneficial to consider:

- Who is the target audience?
- What claims are made in the image?
- What's the evidence provided?

After the group discussion, teachers may find it helpful to show a few striking examples of ads (vibrant use of color, use of black and white, ads which focus on text, creative ads, etc.) and walk through an analysis of those with their class. This will help students see how to perform an analysis of an ad (as well, they will see how they can analyze an ad as a form of a "text.")

In small groups, students will then search through database of vintage ads (there are many such databases available for free on-line. One great option is through the Duke University Libraries: <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/>) and select one ad of a certain category (“travel” “beauty products” etc) to examine.

When looking at the actual ads, students should consider:

- What catches the eye?
- What is the central image?
- What’s the relationship between the images used?
- How is color (or lack thereof) used in the image?
- Is there any use of symbolism?
- Are there any cultural assumptions or ideas utilized in the ad?
- Does the ad show a use of rhetorical appeals?

Students will also use the internet to find a modern ad which corresponds to that same category. Students could even be guided to seek out a modern ad from the same company, or for the same product, to examine side-by-side. Once they have selected their two ads, students should consider:

- What has changed about the way this product (concept) is marketed to consumers? Why?
- Can those changes be solely attributed to a different era?
- How does the company acknowledge, through the ad, the way that consumers respond to visual rhetoric?
- Which ad is more effective, and why?
- Use of specific images, text, color, lack of color, etc.

When groups have finished their discussions and come to some decisions about their ad, several options are possible. If technology permits, the teacher can have each group project their selected ads side-by-side, and present their findings to the class. Students could also post their ads and their responses to the questions to a class website. Small groups could combine and present to each other. Groups should be directed to include the visual rhetoric aspects in their presentations or written responses. Students may be surprised to see how much (or, in some cases, how little!) has changed in how consumers are marketed towards. (One such marked difference students should notice is how much more text was previously utilized in print advertisements.)

Materials:

This activity is most easily conducted in a computer lab—or in a situation in which groups of students could each have access to a computer with internet access. If necessary, the lesson could also be done with copies of advertisements brought in by the teacher.