



Motivating with Media

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Abstract

This reflection was written by a student teacher working in a middle school classroom downtown Los Angeles. He reviews his work bringing movie making into a 6th grade English/History class. This experiment became a wonderful opportunity for him to see the positive effects that media literacy can have with middle school students.

Motivating with Media

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As a student teacher at a middle school in downtown Los Angeles, I collaborated on a media literacy project with my guiding teacher. In this 6th grade English/History class I was fortunate to work with a guiding teacher who valued the California curriculum standards regarding media literacy, and included the analysis and production of media as part of the unit on persuasive writing. We began the project by analyzing mainstream commercials together and finished with the students creating their own commercials for products they invented themselves. During the first several lessons, students viewed mainstream commercials for soft drinks and fast food, which we analyzed together to determine the emotional responses the commercials were trying to elicit, as well as the video and audio techniques used to achieve these results. Some of the commercials students had seen on TV, others were from Latin America and in Spanish. Ninety-seven percent of the students involved in this project speak Spanish at home, so I incorporated commercials from Latin America to boost student engagement. Even though we were watching and discussing commercials, something most of them enjoy doing in their spare time, there was resistance to analysis. Most students were inclined to say that the commercials were for entertainment only, and that they were not trying to make the viewer think or feel anything, just to make them laugh. As we started to break down some of the commercials together, however, students became more adept at seeing the subtler messages embedded in each commercial. Students began recognizing messages about fitting in to their peer group through products, or feeling young even as they get older.

As some students began to understand subtler messages in advertising, there was still a great deal of student resistance. In this particular 6th grade class, there were several students who seemed entirely alienated from school - never doing any work during class, from the most basic assignment to the most complex. Three of these students had been evaluated for learning disabilities and other social or relational disabilities; however, none had been diagnosed with anything that would impede their learning or interacting with other students in class. The behavior of one student, Mario, was so severe that he was unable to sit at a table with other classmates and work in a group. All the seating is arranged for group work at this middle school as the administration supports a social constructivist understanding of how learning takes place, yet Mario was always seated alone. Mario was often unresponsive to verbal commands, instructions, or even chitchat. Seeing him in the halls, however, was a different matter. There he would be greeting friends and chatting openly, appearing to be on track developmentally. The specialists who evaluated Mario agreed that there was nothing amiss other than a total disengagement from school.

Mario was the most extreme example of several students in the class. Seeing the change in him over the course of our project together was not only inspiring and hopeful, but also a testament to the power of integrating media into the classroom. As we started the project, Mario was his typical uninvolved self, handing in none of the early assignments for the project, such as storyboards for soda commercials. Once students began to make their own commercials using the laptops, however, Mario came to me asking to join a group. He was aware that this would involve completing all of the earlier work on the project, which he did with the help of his new teammate. Once he started working with a partner, he continued to sit with other students

throughout the project, even when we were not working on this project, and even in science and math with his other core teacher.

Many of the lower-performing students who struggle with reading, writing, and expressing themselves in English became technology experts in the class. I saw students who never raise their hand, eagerly volunteering to explain something to the whole class or to individual classmates. As English Language Learners, the task of explaining how to complete technical procedures provided a natural opportunity for students to practice their English. Students were motivated to stretch their abilities to communicate in English because of their interest in the topic and their desire to convey technical knowledge to their classmates. The energy in the class during project time was palpable, with students on-task much more of the time than during any typical assignment. This project also provided natural differentiation because of the open-ended nature of the assignment, and the desire of each student to make an interesting, entertaining commercial for their peers. In future projects I would like to focus more on the effects of advertising on youth, however I was very pleased with the depth and breadth of learning that took place in a fairly organic way during my first media literacy project with middle school students.