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Media Literacy

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THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

The biggest stumbling block trainers face when teaching media literacy is to “tell” audiences what is taking place in the media being deconstructed.

Most people have already spent a lifetime attributing meaning to the media they consume. It’s ridiculously vain to think that you can “tell” them anything about a subject they already have a life long relationship with.

Of course, the goal of any media literacy training is to get people to see and react to media differently. But this is not done by telling people what they should see in an ad or how they should react to it. The skillful media educator will invite people to adopt a new point of view through the art of asking questions.

When you tell a person what they’re supposed to see, chances are pretty good that you will alienate that person for the remainder of your talk. Never, ever, ever tell people how they’re supposed to think about an ad. Instead, describe the ad in detail, and then ask them what they think something like this means. Remember, meaning is personal. It’s not something you give to others. Meaning is something people form for themselves. When people are already in the habit of ascribing meaning in terms that media corporations dictate, they will not only disagree with the meaning you’re trying to assign, but also resent you for trying to impose your will about something they plainly see another way.

Take a moment to study this image and determine how you would describe it.



Prevention



Critical Thinking



Self Esteem



The above image is from a Sprite commercial that shows a family taking a road trip. Later in the commercial, the occupants of the back seat are revealed. One son is shown to be bored and annoyed by his parents, the other is happily listening to a CD on head phones while he's drinking a Sprite.

A savvy media educator would simply describe the scene and then ask questions that invite people see what's there in a different light. For example, you could describe this scene by saying: "Here we see parents. They're dressed up in out of style clothes and are sporting goofy looks while they're singing. The way this scene is filmed, the parents end up looking really dorky."

After setting the stage with your description, you could then ask questions that help guide your audience to seeing how this ad is designed to manipulate them. The questions could be simple, like: "Why are the parents here shown to be dorks?" Or the questions can be more complex, like, "We know that everything shown in an ad is made up. The actors get paid to look and act a certain way. Why are these actors portrayed this way? What message is Sprite trying to send kids about parents?"

Questions like these allow an educator to later in the presentation ask even more enlightening questions, such as: "Ads purposely show parents as being stupid. Why do advertisers want teens to believe that their parents are stupid?"

After audience members have had a chance to answer this second question, then you can finally make the claim that: "Advertisers want teens to think their parents are stupid because they don't want teens to listen to their parents. If they can get a teen to think his parents are dumb, then it's more likely that teen will listen to an advertiser telling him to do something his parent's would disapprove."

To be successful in shifting a person's point of view, it's important that you let the ads you're deconstructing do the talking. The more exact you can be in your descriptions, the more questions you'll be able to ask about why an ad is constructed to the way it is. And, consequently, you'll be able to ask more questions about the possible meanings that these ads create for viewers.

If you simply try to tell somebody what an ad means, it's very likely you're going to fail. It's important to not jump ahead of your audience's level of understanding. If you skip over describing the ad, or skip over asking questions about it, you'll miss your chance to have audience members invent new meanings. Since you already know what meanings advertisers try to get audiences to adopt, these descriptions and questions may seem really obvious to you. It's important to ask them anyway. To your audience, this is new territory. This method is your best shot at opening up new vistas in perception, while by-passing a person's natural tendency to defend their current perceptions.

Thinking about meaning as a "construct" rather than an "innate" characteristic of a message is a skill that's entirely new to most audiences. Be the guide on a journey to understand how meaning is created, and people will learn from you. Attempt to be the dictator of their meaning, and people will rebel against you.

