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 GIFT ARTICLE

**Critical Thinking as a Pedagogical Approach:
Using Critical/Cultural Studies to Analyze Music Videos**

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Abstract

Teaching undergraduate students how to critically analyze a text is an important experience. However, it is not easy to do this because readings are often dense, and the process of writing and presenting a critique can be challenging for some students. In light of this, we have developed an assignment where students critically analyze music videos for their ideologies. In the assignment, students select three specific overt or latent content pieces from a music video and explain how those manifestations influence a particular ideology in a paper. Then they are asked to show the music video to their peers and give a synopsis of their paper. Finally, as students listen to presentations, they create a critique log to continuously analyze their peers' arguments.

Courses

Introduction to Mass Communication, Media Studies, Rhetorical Theory/Criticism, Critical/Cultural Studies, Research Methods, Communication Theory

Objectives

- To demonstrate critical thinking skills through the analysis of a text.
- To reveal the deeper cultural and societal meanings that are embedded in texts.
- To articulate an intellectual position through the spoken and written word.

Introduction and Rationale

Critical thinking is an imperative skill in any college students' education because the ability to think critically equips learners with the tools to obtain a deeper understanding of complex ideas (Franco, et al., 2018). Furthermore, critical thinking is recognized by the National Communication Association as a critical ability that any communication studies major should be

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able to demonstrate (Dannels, 2016; Kidd, 2015). In courses that emphasize critical-cultural studies approaches, communications students and researchers engage in critical thinking to uncover the latent messages that reinforce and perpetuate power structures through a text (Lull, 1995; Martinez-Guillem, 2013). These critical thinking skills can be useful for students as they transition into careers in a democratic society (Snyder & Snyder, 2008; Switzer & Ryan, 2002).

However, in spite of its importance, teaching critical thinking skills in a communication course can be difficult to achieve. For example, in an upper level Rhetorical Criticism or Cultural Studies course, articles such as Richards' (2009) epideictic critique or Watts' (2005) analysis of Eminem's *8 Mile* are impressive but also dense readings. These critiques can be overwhelming for undergraduates and potentially can create more confusion than understanding. Such an experience can lead to students becoming disinterested in critical/cultural studies and critical thinking (Switzer, McNamara, & Ryan, 1999). The challenge for the instructor, with each new group of students, is to create a lesson that is palpable for a novice learner, while at the same time bolsters student interest in cultural studies and critical analysis. Music videos represent an approach that all levels of learners can relate to and can increase students' understanding of these perspectives (Sciullo, 2014).

We have found that using music videos for critical analysis can be very effective in enhancing students' critical abilities. Music videos while entertaining (and widely consumed by students) contain a great deal of overt and latent content. In the process, students not only gain a greater understanding of critical theory, but they become much more perceptive to how music videos perpetuate ideologies, power relationships, and representations. While scholars have critically analyzed music videos (Aubrey, Gamble, & Hahn, 2017; Lena, 2008; Prody, 2015; Williams, 2012), few take an instructional approach that explains how to critique music videos to improve students' analytical skills. Therefore, over the past several years we have developed an assignment where students critically analyze music videos to unlock embedded meanings. The work the students complete is rigorous but an enjoyable learning experience.

Description of Activity

The following definitions are critical to understanding the purpose and execution of this activity.

- *Critical Theories*: Approaches that examine social reality to reveal oppressive power relationships in order to address and overcome oppression.
- *Critical Analysis*: A systematic examination and evaluation of a text.
- *Hegemony*: When one ideology is accepted over other ideologies creating a worldview that is valued over others.
- *Ideology*: A set of ideas that construct a group's worldview, understanding, and perception of reality.
- *Latent Content*: The underlying meaning of a text.
- *Overt Content*: The dominant meaning of a text.
- *Political Economy*: A system of power relationships that comprise the production, distribution, and consumption of resources.
- *Power*: The ability of an individual or group to influence the actions, beliefs, or behaviors of others.

- *Representation:* The use of language, images, or signs which stand for abstract concepts/ideas.

Activity

The primary goal of this assignment is for students to have first-hand experience critically analyzing the latent content of a text and to acknowledge that texts can have many layers of meanings that may influence ideologies. Music videos are exemplars to analyze as they contain ideologies, power relationships, representations and many other cultural symbols that hold meaning and can contribute to analysis. Our music video assignment takes place over several class periods and includes the following four parts: learning critical theory, writing the critique, presenting the critique, and writing the critique log.

1- Learning Critical Theory

First, before students can complete a critical analysis, they must learn about critical theories, their assumptions and key concepts. By covering a critical theory such as cultural studies, students learn about key concepts such as hegemony, ideology, representation, power relationships etc. that they can employ in their critical analyses. Over the years, we have found that leading the students in a group analysis of a text where they apply the concepts from a critical theory further enhances their understanding of the critical theory and how the concepts can be applied to a text to reveal its embedded meaning. In particular, before students are asked to choose their own music videos, the instructor should conduct a critique of a music video with the entire class. In doing so, the students gain experience in analyzing the latent content of the music video to reveal the ideologies embedded in the text.

2-Writing the Critique.

After learning about critical theory, the second part of this assignment is for students to write the critique. Writing the critique is an involved process that includes choosing an official music video from a recording artist, creating a thesis statement, and writing a paper that critically analyzes the content of the video. In order to do this, students are asked to find an official music video on YouTube, and consider how a particular ideology or stereotype is being perpetuated, reinforced or challenged in the video. At this point, we often have to remind students that they might not be able to identify a particular ideology until after they have viewed the video more than once. Also, depending on the level of the course, the instructor may have to give more or less guidance in music video selection and identification of the ideology. For example, in a lower level course, we sometimes give students a list of ideologies to choose from, such as neoliberalism, colorism, or classism so that they can find a music video that contains images, lyrics, and other content that are manifestations of the ideology.

Once the music video is selected and students have an idea of the ideology that is constructed, students can then begin working on their thesis statement. In a lower-level undergraduate course, students will likely need help crafting their thesis statement which is paramount in creating a sound argument. A good practice is to not only give examples of concise thesis statements from scholars' manuscripts, but to offer usable templates that students can fill in. For example: "In this paper I will argue that (insert music video title) reinforces (insert ideology)." This template gives a novice learner a thesis statement that they can continuously

refer back to as they work through their analysis and it assists them as they later identify specific examples that support the thesis.

Next, students are to watch the music video many times and critically analyze the content by identifying specific examples from the video that reinforce their argument. We remind students that the more examples they identify from the music video the stronger the argument they are constructing in their paper. Once the students have identified enough examples, they can begin writing their critique by starting with an introduction that leads into their thesis which is then supported by their specific examples in the body of the paper. The goal of the paper is for students to explain their critique in a systematic and concise manner. In the body section, students are asked to choose three specific examples that best reinforce their argument. For each example, they must write a paragraph that describes the particular content example from the music video for the reader, explain how that content reinforces their argument, and discuss why this example is important, before transitioning to the next paragraph.

The written assignment varies depending on the level of the course. As with the thesis statement, students in lower-level courses receive a template for writing the manuscript which outlines the necessary parts of the introduction, body and conclusion. In upper-level classes, they will receive less guidance and more freedom to craft their ideas in a variety of creative ways.

3- Presenting the Critique

The third part of the assignment is for students to give a presentation about their thesis and analysis. In order to do this, students begin by showing the class their music video, followed by a 5-10 minute presentation discussing the specific ideology and the examples that illustrate the ideology. Students are asked to give concise presentations that clearly state their thesis and provides specific examples that support their argument. These guidelines ensure that the assignment does not take up too much class time, but also aids students in synthesizing their complex ideas into easily understandable messages for their audience.

4- Writing the Critique Log

The final part of the assignment is for each student in the audience to keep a critique log. As students watch their peers present, they are asked to pay attention to each presentation, take notes on the argument, and to offer their own argument or counter argument about the music video. At the end of all the presentations, students compile their critiques and submit for credit. In order to do this, students are asked to either write a paragraph to extend the presenter's thesis, offer a counter argument by pointing to specific elements that might contradict the presenter, or offer an entirely different argument that is centered around an ideology that the presenter did not discuss.

This part of the assignment helps to accomplish several goals. First, it gives an incentive for students to attend every day of class and to actively listen. Second, it creates a cohesive learning environment where the whole room is engaged as students support their peers. Finally, it gives students even more experience with critical thinking because they are assessing their peers' arguments as well.

In its present form, this assignment is not designed for a large group of students. Generally speaking, this is best suited for a class size under 20, but we have implemented the assignment for groups as large as 32. Depending on the number of students, an instructor could put students into groups or partners. Regardless, the assignment will likely take up several days of class time to incorporate each part and to give enough time for each student to present. We

have used the music video critique as a final assignment for courses, and generally leave two weeks in the course calendar for it.

Debriefing

After all the papers, presentations, and critique logs are finished, it is important for the instructor to give detailed feedback to the students. Feedback is necessary not only because of the amount of work the students completed but because they need positive reinforcement of their critical thinking abilities to encourage them to continue to embrace such perspectives. Also, it is important for the instructor to provide additional insights and observations to illustrate the complexity of latent content and/or intertextuality such as the historical context and cultural significance of lyrics, images and symbols.

At the end of the assignment period, instructors should have a debriefing discussion with the students about what they learned from the experience. The instruction should have several goals in mind during this discussion. First, it is important to connect the content of the initial lesson to the presentations given by students. Asking the students questions about how notions of hegemony, or political economy can be seen throughout the presentations will help them make more specific connections in others work and their own. Second, the discussion should illuminate why the assignment is important and what the students can take with them after the course is over. At this point the instructor can explain that the tools learned in this lesson can be used by students in their daily media consumption. We remind students they can critically analyze any media content to identify the embedded ideologies they are consuming. These discussions further solidify for students the critical thinking skills they gained from the assignment. It can also create a lively class discussion about specific music videos to further their learning experience.

Appraisal

Based on conversations with students and grading this assignment over the past several years, the effectiveness of the music video critique often manifests in two specific ways. First, students can bring the process of critique and critical thinking skills into their personal media consumption habits. Some students have said that they can never watch television or music videos the same way again and they now find themselves critically analyzing everything. Also, they have expressed how they are able to discover the latent content of messages and recognize the layers of meaning conveyed in media content. Second, students say the assignment is an overall enjoyable experience because they are able watch music videos in class while simultaneously learning and receiving credit. Third, students' enjoyment with the assignment underscores the effectiveness of the student-centered approach to teaching (Brown, et. al, 2016). Our assignment is student-centered as students become active participates in their learning where information is shared and generated among students with the instructor participating as a member in the class. The assignment promotes a collaborative approach to learning that enhances the learning experience of students.

One of the limitations that we have encountered is that some students treat this assignment like an English paper, in the sense they simply identify the metaphors of the lyrics or imagery. When this happens, the students' presentation and paper will not focus on revealing ideologies. Instead, the student will describe overt content, and explain the dominant meaning of

the text. Thus, it is important when an instructor uses this assignment that they anticipate such submissions and work in advance to teach students how the metaphors contribute to the construction of an ideology.

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