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Music? Yes, MUSIC!

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Abstract: Question: "Do you like music?" Response: " Doesn't everybody?" This recent exchange with a college student characterizes a familiar pattern whereby popular music infuses the lives of our society's youth. Through targeted song selections, this teaching activity guides students to examine explicit and implicit messages found in the lyrics. Two structural options are offered. Students explore and compare either (1) specified types of expressed and/or implied statements in reference to the interpersonal values and the persuasive (rhetorical) goals reflected in the language (i.e., lyrics) of contemporary popular music, or (2) the messages and social reality reflected in the language (i.e., lyrics) of the music popular during a particular time period. Students present their findings both as a written report and an oral presentation.

Students deconstruct the implicit and explicit verbal messages contained within four songs of their choice. As such, they engage with one of their most popular entertainment media in more analytical ways. Students are encouraged to draw on their previous studies in language, aesthetics, and cultural artifacts in order to explore relationships between the messages disseminated within song lyrics and the norms, values, and the sociological dynamics of the larger communication context.

Pedagogical Rationale

This Great Idea for Teaching Students is designed to increase students' awareness of the ways in which aesthetic artifacts such as music contribute to the communication and management of impressions on both the interpersonal and the sociological levels.

Procedure

Each student who selects this project (which is part of a larger learning activity) chooses to complete either version A or B, both of which entail the discussion of four songs.

Version A

The objective of this version is to increase understanding of the interpersonal values and the persuasive (rhetorical) goals reflected in the language (i.e., lyrics) of contemporary popular music.

Instructions to Students

(1) Select one song that represents some aspect of the characteristics/values of interpersonal communication (as discussed in the text) with which you **agree**.
Consider: Why do you agree with these particular characteristics/values?

(2) Then select one song that represents characteristics/values of interpersonal communication (as discussed in the text) with which you **disagree**.
Consider: Why do you disagree with these particular characteristics/values?

(3) Select one song that seems to represent a particular "culture" within the United States. How is that "culture" being presented and what might this representation imply about the dynamics of communicating with members of this culture? (i.e., What does the song seem to be saying about how to communicate with that culture/co-culture?)

(4) Select one song that affronts, challenges, or might be offensive to a particular "culture" in the United States. What is the affront and what are the implications of this song in respect to communicating with members of this culture?

Discussion/Write-up

Ask the students to use material from the text and class discussions (especially in reference to language/culture) in order to develop the descriptions, explanations, and conclusions that they draw from the four songs. Remind them that song lyrics are a type of "rhetoric" in which the **writer** (who may/may not also be the performer) expresses his/her implicit or explicit values structured in a way as to influence the desired audience. They should submit all of the full song lyrics as evidence of the conclusions they draw in their analysis.

Version B

The objective of this version is to explore and compare interpersonal messages and social reality reflected in the language (i.e., lyrics) of the music popular during a particular time period.

Instructions to Students

(1) Select a particular time period for investigation:1930s,1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, or early 2000s.

(2) Research songs related to the specific years within your chosen decade—noting attitudes and messages implicitly *and* explicitly reflected in the lyrics.

(3) Select four representative songs to analyze and evaluate by applying various interpersonal communication concepts. (Be aware that four songs

out of a whole decade is a very small research sample, so choose wisely, but objectively.)

Discussion/Write-up

Note to students that this project is actually an examination of the techniques of verbal communication (i.e., language and rhetoric). Ask them to use material from the text and class discussions (especially language/culture) to help them explain any patterns they may notice about the ways in which lyricists use language to express their view of the reality in a given decade and how they try to communicate that reality to the listeners. Much has been written on the effects of the messages in music. Students may want to do some reading in mass communication sources to help them develop their conclusions about the four songs. They should submit all of the full song lyrics as evidence of the conclusions they draw in their analysis.

Typical results

Many students profess a love of music, so this is a particularly popular project choice. However, depending upon an individual's critical thinking skills, final submissions often are more descriptive than deeply analytical in terms of accomplishing the required discourse analysis of the messages. Nevertheless, in their post-paper oral presentations, students often report experiencing a greater appreciation for the communicative nature of popular music and the messages that lie "in between the lines." In addition, those students possessing pragmatic musical backgrounds often include commentary about the moods created by the musical notes themselves, thus creating an opportunity to integrate nonverbal communication.

Typical Challenges

As an outside-of-class, analytical project, students often need to be guided to resources as needed—concepts such as: connotation and implicative language, figurative language, historical knowledge about societal eras, media richness theory and multi-channeled communication. On an individual basis, it often helps to guide them toward such keyword searches as "music sociology" or "language and culture."

The exploration of music as an interpersonal communication medium for self-expression, empathy, self-reflection, cultural identity, etc., is dense enough for a whole course, rather than a single project. Therefore, as a single project, this learning objective should be broad and focused on heightened awareness rather than on definitive insights and proficiency development.

References

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