

Historica Canada Education Portal

Marshall McLuhan

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the [Heritage Minute, "Marshall McLuhan."](#) McLuhan was a Canadian professor of English literature and media guru in the 1960's. He played an important role in the development of contemporary communications theory.

Aims

The McLuhan Minute is an excellent way to introduce students to media studies. By studying advertising techniques and creating ads of their own, students will start thinking about the effects of media in their lives.

Public communications interprets and selects information, then delivers its message through different media. For example, television reports a story differently from a newspaper. This activity shows how media differ.

Activities

1. Media influences

Advertisements use the techniques of mass media in clever and subtle

ways in order to sell products. A discussion of advertising techniques can help students critically analyze the messages contained in advertising.

- Ask students to look at this Ghanaian proverb: "To this fish, the water is invisible." What does it mean? How does it relate to the idea of media as "environment"? Ask students if the environment of advertising is visible to them. Do they feel that they are influenced by advertising messages?
- Conduct an informal consumer survey with the class. Have students list the items they bought in the last two weeks. What made them decide to buy what they did? How many of the items were popular brand names? Who influenced their decision? Was it friends? Family? Effective advertising?
- Ask students to describe their favourite commercials or advertisements. Why do they like them? What makes them "work"? Is it images? Humour? Jingles?
- From the discussion, brainstorm a list of some effective advertising techniques.

2. Close-up on advertising

This activity can be a follow-up to the previous discussion.

Ask students to cut advertisements from magazines and bring them to class. The image bank can be used to create a collage of current advertising. It can also be used to further analyze and classify the ads.

Students may group the ads to reflect:

- their market (by age, gender, income level, etc.)
- representations of men or women (he-men, homemakers, bathing beauties, etc.)

- societal norms (multicultural mix, gender balance, age balance, etc.)
- lifestyle images (health, wealth, attractiveness, group "belonging," etc.)

3. Making an ad

Students can apply their research findings in the creation of an original advertisement.

- In small groups or individually, students are to design and present an original advertisement. This can be a magazine ad, a billboard, or a radio or TV commercial (no longer than 60 seconds). They may use a known product or invent one.
- Students must decide on the intended market, and their ad must use some of the techniques of advertising discussed previously.
- Students present their ads to the class, and together they identify the techniques used and discuss the effectiveness of the advertisement.

4. Making the message public

- Divide the class into groups of three. Have each group come up with a news story, real or fictional, to report.

- Groups must cover their story in two different medias. They may choose a newspaper article, a radio news item, or, if cameras are available, a television news story. As students construct their stories, they will have to keep in mind the differences between the media.

- Groups then present their stories to each other and discuss the

differences within each medium. Did details change, depending on the medium? How is the information organized for a newspaper story? (There will even be differences that depend on the type of newspaper, e.g., tabloid newspaper articles tend to be shorter than other dailies.) How did students make the radio report interesting? What particular techniques were used in television coverage?

- As a follow-up, bring in a news account, a videotaped television story, and an article from a news magazine covering the same event. Using what the students have learned from the previous exercise, have them discuss the stories, summarizing the particular strengths and weaknesses inherent in each medium.

- An interesting subject for debate is, "Who is better informed?" Does the person who reads the newspapers have a better understanding of news than someone who only watches television? More people get their news from television than from newspapers. What are the effects of this? Has television news changed newspaper design and writing? How does the internet and social media affect how informed the public is?

Resources

- [Heritage Minute: Marshall McLuhan](#)

- [The Canadian Encyclopedia: Herbert Marshall McLuhan](#)