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Advertising Across the Curriculum

Tabatha Otto

Trying to prepare lessons for the fourth chapter of our eighth-grade social studies book, I again caught myself wondering *why* I had agreed to take this unique language arts and social studies teaching position. “Only 48 students per day!” my principal had gushed. “You can combine social studies and language arts whenever you wish, and even use block time instead of 50-minute periods.” Okay, so I understood the concept and was even excited about the amount of cross-curricular opportunities there might be. However, trying to combine the “Thirteen English Colonies” with the current required language arts curriculum of informational and persuasive writing seemed impossible, or at best, positively boring. Impossible, that is, until I accidentally overheard two girls arguing over their near-matching sweatshirts.

“Yours is a copy cat; mine is the real thing,” one girl haughtily exclaimed. “Even the fabric feels cheaper than mine. I found mine in the J Crew catalog and would never buy anything else; their material is real quality stuff.”

Thoughtfully, the other girl replied, “Just because you ordered it from a catalog doesn’t mean it is any better than mine. I see this on MTV all the time and you can’t tell where VJ bought it.”

Walking away, I found it humorous that neither girl had mentioned if she even liked the sweater, just simply the materialistic reasons why the purchase had been made. J Crew magazines, MTV, VJs; I was amazed by the power advertisements and the media had over these two students. Suddenly, it seemed that could be just the spark I needed. Why not use the students’ adolescent desire to belong, along with advertisement propaganda/persuasive writing, to create a travel brochure that entices would-be travelers to the New World?

The Lesson

The average person in the United States is bombarded by thousands of advertisements each week. Powerful messages to buy products, utilize services, and travel to new places come to us on TV, through the radio, in junk mail, newspapers, and magazines, and on billboards. Students of all ages are a target audience from elementary school through college. From toy companies to shoe manufacturers, advertisers spend large amounts of money. Using this common experience in the classroom can illustrate another form of writing in the “real” world.

To prepare for this activity, I have the students bring in age-appropriate advertisements and junk mail for one week. Then I distribute at least two samples to each student and instruct them to examine both pieces for common elements. Students quickly discover many tactics that advertisers use, including bright colors, slogans, the use of models or famous people, and even promises of quick results. This simple, initial activity leads us into a discussion of *just what does make an advertisement work?*

Although advertisements may vary in content and form, all have common points. Most advertisements:

- Attract attention through headlines, color photos, or illustrations. Ads may show people using or needing a product or service or dedicating themselves to a cause, or status, or success.
- Arouse interest by promising benefits to the target audience. Good ads show how purchasing the product or service can help the individual.
- Create desire by showing the target audience why it needs to accept what the ad is selling. This is done through solid writing that uses

strong appeal words and phrases such as best, easy, free, fresh, new, improved, guaranteed, save, inexpensive, help, proven results, change your life, invest in your future and so on. Words that appeal to one's self-esteem, personal satisfaction, and the desire to make a life change are often used.

- Call for action by telling the target audience to buy now, order today, or make a commitment as soon as possible. Some ads include offers of free gifts or discounts as incentives.

Good advertisers, just as good writers, always remember their purpose and their target audience.

Following this brief discussion, students form small groups and choose one advertisement or piece of junk mail to analyze for the above criteria. Each group records its findings on large paper to present to the class. After presenting the results for each of the above criteria, the class attempts to guess which ad was being described. From this activity, we discuss further why we remember some common advertisements and not others, as well as how certain ads convince a person to try a new product.

Finally, I introduce different types of travel brochures. Applying the same basic principles of advertising discussed above, we try to establish the difference between selling an object or item to "selling" a place. We examine the ratio of words and pictures, and even the unique methods of folding brochures; some are designed to actually open to become an entire map of an advertised area. We discuss the testimonials given by previous visitors, and what common features are highlighted such as travel methods to reach the destination, various accommodations available, area attractions and so on.

The Assignment—Part One

Students are introduced to the idea of creating a brochure for a portion of the 13 colonies before actually beginning their research. This provides students with a purpose for reading the textbook, not simply for information, but also for material for the persuasive writing element of the brochure. As we read and research, I encourage students to take notes that would address the issues of:

- Where would a traveler actually be coming? Perhaps a detailed map of the area might be something to consider for the brochure.
- Why would some one want to leave an established country to come to New England? The Middle Colonies? The Southern Colonies? What are the advantages?
- What would a newcomer find in the various colonies? What resources are there? What type

of government? Schooling? Religious freedom?

- Who else is already there?

- How would someone get to the New World?

What should he/she bring?

When students begin to read the textbook and later as they use additional resources, I have them take notes while they are reading on bookmarks—long pieces of paper cut thin for the convenience of taking notes. The students enjoy the novelty of recording key information onto the bookmarks. After reading the social studies text, I bring in additional resources from our school library such as books on each of the colonies as well as a series devoted to particular topics like colonial craftsman. Students download some information from the Internet as well.

The Assignment—Part Two

After the initial researching, collaborative groups are formed to compare and combine their notes and observations. Next, the group decides which section of colonies it wishes to represent—New England, the Middle Colonies, or the Southern Colonies. I encourage the students to be creative and use their knowledge of advertising tactics and persuasive writing to create a convincing brochure.

The brochures the students create are a mix of interesting facts, pictures, slogans, and often maps. One group of students who created a brochure on the Middle Colonies wrote the following about why people should come to their colonies:

In the Middle Colonies there is religious freedom. Any religion is welcome. People in the Middle Colonies are not concerned with their neighbor's religion. Every religion is welcome.

The front of this same brochure asks: Do you need a little get-away? Then come to the Middle Colonies!"

Another brochure boasts: "Here in New England there are many sights and people to see." Later the same brochure tells its readers what they might do for entertainment, like going to a summer circus or shopping. The third fold of the brochure shows a setting sun with this text:

Before the day is over come and take a nice refreshing walk on the ocean shore and see the sunset, and imagine the fun and excitement there will be tomorrow and the days after.

When the brochures are completed the students share the highlights with the class.

Results

Students not only enjoy this assignment, but use their creativity in an effort to be persuasive. The placement of pictures and the selection of just the right word become very important. Eventually, each

class wants to vote on the best slogan used in a brochure. "The best is in the middle," gained so much popularity it became the catch phrase for the marking period.

This type of activity accommodates a variety of learning styles. Students who excel in art or drawing have an opportunity to share these talents in an academic task. Students who enjoy the sounds of language make plays on words and incorporate them into their pamphlets.

Finally, because the students are given a purpose for reading, they are more engaged with the information being presented, even within the textbook. Obviously, brochures are a creative diversion from the structured essay. However, the importance of the writing cannot be missed. Any kind of mistake or confusion for the reader could lead to the loss of a potential customer or "traveler." Looking at this in a real-world way, we discuss how that could mean the loss of thousands of dollars for any company.

Adaptations

I have seen brochures work in a variety of settings and subject areas. My team partner who taught math and science had students design a travel brochure for a space vacation to a particular

planet during a solar system unit. As the students were learning about the solar system in science, our language arts goals were to teach the students how to write dialog. We were able to use the information the students were learning in science, particularly the information they were researching for their brochures, to write scripts for commercials.

Narrative brochures provide a great way for students in a new class to get to know one another when each student creates a brochure about him/herself. The students can begin the work on this type of brochure by journal writing on several different topics such as childhood memories, likes, dislikes, hobbies, and future endeavors. Then students choose their favorite pieces of writing to include in their brochures. Setting up the design of the brochure with photographs and student writing makes this an engaging assignment during the first few weeks of school. I usually make one myself. The brochures help us get to know one another, find the things we have in common, and set the stage for other engaged learning in the year to come.

About the Author

Tabatha Otto, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, teaches eighth-grade language arts at Greenville Middle School.