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Title: Teaching Critical Reading: Media Literacy in the High School Classroom

ABSTRACT

The present qualitative Action Research study was conducted to examine student-participant perceptions and performance in a Critical Media Literacy unit in an Advanced Placement English Language and Composition (AP ELC) classroom. Critical Media Literacy skills and, specifically, Rhetorical Analysis skills, are tested on the end-of-course AP ELC exam. The teacher-researcher designed a four-week Unit, Reading Mass Media, and implemented it with 38 student-participants in two sections of AP ELC taught by the teacher-researcher in a racially and economically diverse rural South Carolina high school. The purpose of the present Action Research is to describe student-participants’ performance and perceptions during the implementation of the Unit that included Rhetorical Analysis of several popular culture texts (e.g., print advertisements, commercials, and movie trailers) as well as an investigation of issues of representation in the media. Though various types of media texts were used in the Unit, print advertisements were prioritized because student-participants from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have had limited access to online texts, which could affect their readiness to apply and develop new literacies. Action Research methodology was used to answer the research question: What is the impact of a Rhetorical Analysis unit using Critical Media Literacy on an Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class? Data collection included a pretest and pre-instruction survey, classroom observations, a posttest and post-instruction survey, and a focus-group interview. The pretest and posttest examined changes in student-participant performance, and the pre- and post-instructional surveys examined changes in student-participant perspectives. Classroom observations and the focus-group interview were used for polyangulation. Findings
include the following themes: the Unit improved student-participants confidence and performance with the skills of Rhetorical Analysis, increased student-participants’ sensitivity to patterns of representation and stereotyping, promoted the critical reading of media texts, and encouraged active student-participant engagement. Overall, student-participants enjoyed the Unit, describing it as interesting, relevant, eye-opening, and useful in developing the skills of Rhetorical Analysis. The teacher-researcher used these themes to develop an Action Plan, which includes updating the Unit for use with future AP ELC classes, developing a professional development session to share findings and strategies with other AP ELC teachers, and working with district officials to design a Media Literacy course.