Pop Star Poster Design: Critical Analysis and Practical Application

Introduction

Visual Culture is a calculated stream of images designed to communicate specific messages to specific audiences. Texts have been consciously developed to reach people in demographic categories that are developed by gathering data about our buying habits and online activities that we ourselves provide. Students need to be aware of this not only to be a better informed consumer (or anti-consumer should they so choose), but also to develop the realization that they have a role to play and can push back if desired. By examining the production of media images, students will recognize that there is a reciprocal, influential and circular relationship between the images and the students themselves. It may seem that students often reflect the images in popular culture; however, popular culture also reflects the students themselves.

The purpose of this lesson is to facilitate the development of media literacy while providing students with an engaging assignment that provides the opportunity to explore the same intellectual and technical processes employed by professional designers. Students will engage in critical discussion about commercially produced images of pop, sports, and other media celebrities they encounter and be asked to consider what these images communicate, why they appeal to people, how they are made and what the motivations of the producers of the images might be. Students will then produce a poster that conveys a consciously constructed meaning or persona that presents the student as a celebrity. By the end of this project, students

will have increased their awareness of the machinations and motivations behind popular culture images, grappled with the construction of their own identity, and experienced first hand some of the intellectual processes, tools and technical skills employed by real-world creative professionals.

Why is it important to teach media literacy in the art class?

Tavin (2002) tell us that "the field of art education has a pressing responsibility to help students develop critical, reflexive, and meaningful approaches to interpreting, critiquing, and producing images, objects and artifacts from visual culture… art education should be understood as a critical pedagogy of visual culture." (p.38). The images we are inundated with on a daily basis comprise the Visual Culture that is an integral part of the framework in which we engage and respond and live. By increasing our media literacy and better understand the language of media, we can play a more deliberate role in choosing meaning for ourselves and contributing to the dialogue with the time and culture in which we live. However, Alvermann (1999) tells us that if we choose to ignore the relationship students have with popular culture, we are ignoring an influential reality and relinquishing many teaching opportunities. Popular Culture isn't something that is thrust upon us; it is a reflection of who we are. Therefore, it can be a forum through which we can explore critical analysis and come to better see and understand our selves.

Chung and Kirby wrote that art educators should "advocate critical approaches to media education that validate and utilize student's knowledge and skills as media users by empowering them to critically reflect upon their everyday aesthetic experiences and acts of cultural consumption." (p.34). A key component of this lesson is a dialogue that asks students to question and contemplate images they appreciate, but may otherwise take for granted. Duncum (2003) tells us that it isn't important to reach a conclusion or a

right and wrong answer; rather, the activity should use guiding questions intended to be controversial to facilitate questions and debate. The point is to raise issues rather than settle them. I want students to develop a more critical awareness of the reality behind the scenes of celebrity, without indicating there is anything wrong with students liking what they like. That's why the production component of this assignment helps students to understand, rather than reject, images from Visual Culture.   This lesson provides students with an opportunity to take control of their own message.

You mean it's not just intellectual, but practical too?

Media literacy is nice — we want students to become media literate, critical thinkers. However, we don't want this just to help them sound cool, hip and in touch with what's happening at their next social gathering. Richard Florida (2002) coined the term 'creative class" to describe those persons who work in a wide range of media, entertainment, communications and design careers (advertising, marketing, museums, theater, film, video game production and more). He tells us that collectively, the creative class comprises fully 1/3 of today's American economy. That istrillions of dollars. Art class isn't just for making pretty pictures any more! (Though I hope it never was.) In fact, developing media literacy and providing art class experiences are a crucial part of preparing students who wish to pursue these careers.

Due to today's emphasis on standardized testing, policymakers have neglected to consider the importance of stimulating and developing creativity in students. Zimmerman (2009) writes that while Americans value the characteristics of imagination, innovation and creativity, she seems to feel we are falling behind in these areas and failing to inculcate students with

these skills. (I'd like to suggest spending more time practicing for multiple-choice tests isn't the answer.) We live in a time that needs and values creative thinkers far more than it does those who will dutifully perform proscribed, repetitive tasks. I agreed with Zimmerman when I read, "In this era of testing and standards, assessment… tends to be concentrated on final products and rubrics that emphasize predicable, pre-determined outcomes. A new conception of creativity and the visual arts should foster research and development that supports art learning in which novel responses are nurtured and students are encouraged and rewarded to find and solve problems in unique ways." (p.394) When it comes time to assess this project, I'll be looking for evidence of student thinking, along with evidence of newly acquired skills and conceptual understanding. I'm not looking for perfection, though I certainly anticipate creative and interesting responses.

This lesson may seem a bit ambitious and is meant to be taught in to class that has had some level of foundational experiences or has performed other projects with the purpose of leading up to this project. (Or perhaps not… perhaps the journey should mean more than the number of projects we might finish?) Studio production might be a little messy at times. Though it won't always be easy on the teacher, I intend for students to have a lot of latitude, and I am not looking for similar results from any two students. It is process over product.

Conclusion

Since I have been studying to become a teacher, I have been constructing my own philosophy about curriculum. Part of the reason for developing a lesson that uses Popular Culture is because I believe creating connections between the curriculum and students' own lives results in deeper meaning and relevance. They can be no denying that student experience is integrated with Popular Culture. Also, I believe a good

curriculum is one that teaches for real understanding rather than putting students through empty drills that only vaguely (if at all) resemble real-world activities. I believe in teaching for depth of understanding, rather than breadth of shallow knowledge. I believe that by allowing students to engage in work that closely resembles the way work is done in the real world, students are learning with purpose. Linda Darling-Hammond is one of my favorite living educational philosophers, and regarding this idea she wrote, "Schools that teach for understanding engage students in doing the work of writers, scientists, mathematicians, musicians, sculptors, and critics in contexts as realistic as possible, using the criteria of performance in the disciplines as standards toward which students and teachers strive." (p. 55). I couldn't agree more.

The development of this lesson is my attempt at put my emerging teaching philosophy into practice. I believe any lesson that intersects art, design, media literacy and popular culture has the potential to be a fantastic vehicle for doing so. I have yet to actually teach this lesson, so I am sure there will be need to reflect and adjust for unconsidered issues, as well as the personality and needs of any given class. In addition, I've imagined a scenario in which I have all the technology I might desire — Internet access, a Smartboard, computers for all or most students (probably not typical in an art class, though I hope there would be a computer lab in the school), and expensive, professional software. I'm well aware than many schools might not have the money or facilities for all that would be desired and adaptations would have to be made.   However, my intent is to aim high to help students rise as high as they might.

References

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Curriculum Theme: Pop Star Poster Design

Teacher: David West

Grade Level: High School 9-12

State Fine Art Goals: VAH3-2.2, VAH3-3.3

State Media Arts Goals (if any): MAHS2-1.2, MAHS2-3.6, MAHS3-2.4

State Language Arts Goals (if any): N/A

General goals for the curriculum (describe in 2-5 sentences):

Much of pop culture a calculated stream of images and campaigns designed to communicate specific messages to specific audiences. Students will be made aware that items they purchase with debit cards and much of their online activity is tracked and used to market products to them based on the interests they express through purchases and information they provide on websites like Facebook and other social media. By the end of this lesson, students will recognize that there is a reciprocal, influential and circular relationship between pop culture texts and the students themselves. These texts have been consciously developed to reach students in demographic categories that are developed by gathering data about students' buying habits and online activities. Students will discover that those that track and categorize them for marketing purposes use the idea of a 'persona.' In response, students will create a persona take control of their own message about who they are through the design and development of a poster that depicts the student as a pop star or celebrity. This will be an advanced project that expects students to produce work as close as possible to the process used by real-world professionals. The class that

does this project will have need of pervious experience with a variety of production experiences and techniques.

Lesson title (name each lesson to reflect a general unit theme)	Visual Exemplars (list specific images and artists, TV shows, and/or books that you plan to use for each lesson)	Motivation / dialogue (list basic issues and questions to be explored during classroom dialogue and any other motivational strategies that you plan to use for each lesson)	Media / process (list artistic processes that your students will engage in during each lesson)	Concepts and/or design principles to be learned during each lesson	Closure (list an assessment strategy that can be used at the end of each lesson)
Lesson 1 Creating a Persona While Keeping it Real	Images of pop stars in marketing materials (CD covers, posters, ads, magazines, etc.), along with candid, unvarnished / unphotoshopped images of pop stars in real life. Teacher will ask students to name pop stars they are interested in and will try to anticipate and have images of people they name prepared ahead of time. Students will be provided with a guide sheet that lists terms, project requirements and the rubric that will be used for evaluation following the initial presentation.	Commercial Image: Do you think this image is compelling / interesting / stimulating? Why? What is this image communicating? Candid Image: How is this image different from the commercial image?Commercial Image How do you think this image was created? How many people do you think were involved? What are the motivations? Facebook: Do you think the concept of 'persona' shows in Facebook? Is it the real you? An invented you? A combination? Do you think it might be important to be thoughtful about managing your persona? Can anyone gather information about you from Facebook? How can marketers collect personal information about your likes and interests?	Students will write a description and/or a list of adjectives to describe and create the persona they would project if they were a celebrity. Students will be asked to put into words the presence / attitude / image / feelings / identity / personality they wish to visually convey about themselves in a persona. Though their persona and message can be embellished or exaggerated in their design, some truth about who the student really is should also be conveyed.	Persona Demographics	The teacher will conduct formative assessments and engage individual students as they work on the writing task to ensure they understand the concept and provide assistance as necessary.

Lesson 2 a. Review the Elements and Principles of Design b. Discuss the use of text, fonts and taglines + integration of text in design c. Planning & Design: Begin Conceptual Drawings	a. Pop culture advertisements, CD covers, magazines and posters that model the desired student outcome for their poster design. b. Same images used above + Introduction of Nick & Sara of the Half & Half (local poster / screenprint design business in Columbia that does creative work.) c. images of pre-production conceptual designs / sketches made by other designers.	a. Students are assumed to have previous experience with elements & principles of design. Students will be shown a series of images that clearly demonstrate the use of all Elements and Principles of Design in texts similar to those they will produce. b. students will be asked to consider how and why text is used in design the choice of font as a design element. c. Students will compose at least 3 thumbnails before choosing one thumbnail as the basis of a conceptual design. Students will draw the conceptual design for their poster using pencil at 100% scale on 12×18" paper. The conceptual design will be more detailed than a thumbnail, but less so than a finished / refined drawing. Students will be prepared to identify and explain the use of at least two elements and two principles in their composition. This task may be completed in the following class if necessary.	a. Identify examples and verbalize their understanding of the use of elements and principles in media texts. b. Students will analyze the designers' integration of text into images and speculate about the designers' reasons for font selection. c. Conceptualizing the integration of images, text and principles and elements of design to visually communicate with intent.	a. Elements: Space, Line, Color, Shape, Texture, Form, Value. Principles: Unity, Harmony, Contrast, Repetition, Variety, Emphasis, Balance, Proportion, Functionality b. font, tagline c. Thumbnail, Conceptual Design.	a. Teacher will assess group understanding through oral responses. b. Teacher will assess group understanding through oral responses. c. Teacher will conduct formative assessment of student understanding and provide feedback & assistance as required.

Lesson 3 Production a. Photography Review + Studio photography b. Illustrator / Photoshop review + Production c. Planning & gathering of image components needed for design	a. PowerPoint review of lighting set up for studio photography. Images that demonstrate various uses of lighting for mood and drama, as well as proper procedures for the safe and careful operation of photography equipment. b. Smartboard review of key functions and capabilities of Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. Students will also be given explanation of how to set up files to meet technical specifications for print production. (12×18" @ 300 dpi, working in rgb & converting to cmyk + reasons for doing each.) c. Resources (websites, magazines, in class, etc.) will be identified that students may use. Discussion about visualizing their process from start to conclusion.	Note: This lesson is intended to be a summative project that assumes students have previous experience with projects involving photography and Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. Core concepts for using these production tools will be reviewed in this class. Instruction for the proper care and use of equipment will be given. Following each review, students will begin studio production. At various stages throughout the production process, the teacher will demonstrate new media and production techniques that students will have the option to use when producing their image.	a. Lights and backdrops will be set up for student use under teacher supervision. Students will work in pairs to photograph one another and will be able to change lighting camera conditions. b. Students will have the option to represent themselves through vector illustration or photomontage rather than photography if desired. (If photomontage, students must have photography done. Students will scan, draw, acquire images and photocopy images as needed to create their composition. c. Students will assess their needs to execute their design and begin to acquire or create components needed to for their composition.	Photography & Lighting terms: White Balance, Key Light, Fill in Light, Kicker, Background Light Illustration & Photoshop terms: Vector, Raters, Nodes, Layers, Grouping	The teacher will be juggling multiple questions, as students will be performing a variety of production tasks at different stages. No assessment will be performed, other than self-assessment about how the teacher may be able to better manage the variety of activities performed by students.
Lesson 4 & 5 Studio Production	Image examples that illustrate 2 or 3 production and media techniques that students may wish to incorporate into their production.	The teacher will spend the first 15 minutes of class demonstrating two or three Illustrator, Photoshop, or hand production techniques that students will have the option to incorporate and use if desired.	Students will be in varying stages of production in a variety of media.	Terms related to new production techniques as introduced.	The teacher will be developing formative assessments and provide feedback and assistance as needed.

Lesson 6 Completion & Presentation	Smartboard for presentation of technical settings in Photoshop.	The teacher will review technical requirements /setup for print production. Students will complete their work and submit work digitally to the teacher. The teacher will arrange for professional prints to be made. The final projects will be matted at a minimum and framed if possible. Work will be put on display either in school or possibly in a public location. After display period, work will be returned to the students to keep.	Students will complete their projects and turn them in at the end of class.		The teacher will use a rubric to assess how students completed components of this project. (Rubric on the following page)

The teacher will conduct formative assessments throughout the project. I recognize that students have different strengths and weaknesses, and I believe the overall experience is more important that any one component in a project. Therefore, I provide all students with the opportunity to earn bonus for exceptional performance in a component that may offset reductions in points in a component they had difficulty with.

Component	No Effort	Partial or Poor Effort	Met Expectations / Minor Issues	Met All Expectations	Exceeded Expectations (Possible Bonus Points)	Total
Planning _____Student wrote a narrative or created an attribute list as a basis for persona creation _____Student made 3 or more thumbnail sketches for their design _____ Student executed a conceptual design at 100% scale on 12×18" paper that incorporates multiple elements (text, image & supporting components) into a cohesive layout / design.	0	6 pts 6 pts 6 pts	8 pts 8 pts 8 pts	10 pts 10 pts 10 pts	4	_____
Production _____Student created a design that included a photograph or illustration i.a.w. their conceptual design (deviation for evolving ideas ok) _____ Student demonstrated an understanding of production equipment, software & studio processes _____ Students prepared digital files in accordance with technical the specifications provided by the teacher	0	6 pts 6 pts 6 pts	8 pts 8 pts 8 pts	10 pts 10 pts 10 pts	4	_____
Aesthetics _____The totality of the work (imagery, text, composition) creatively and visually communicates a constructed persona and/or message _____ Student demonstrated the intentional use of at least two elements and two principles of design _____ The work exhibits good care and craftsmanship in its construction.	0	6 pts 6 pts 6 pts	8 pts 8 pts 8 pts	10 pts 10 pts 10 pts	4	_____
Class participation Student participated in class discussions and demonstrated appropriate studio behavior	0	5 pts	8 pts	10 pts	2	_____

Notes:
Total Points: _____
92+ Points = A | 84-91 pts = B | 76-83 pts = C | 68-75 pts = D

Lesson #1

Title: Creating a Persona While
Keeping it Real

Grade: High School 9-12

Teacher: David West

Length: 60 Minutes

Fine Art Goals: VAH3-2.2, VAH3-3.3

Media Art Goals: MAHS2-1.2, MAHS2-3.6, MAHS3-2.4

Objectives:

Engage Critical Thinking

Much of pop culture is a calculated stream of images and
campaigns designed to communicate specific messages to
specific audiences. Students will be made aware that items
they purchase with debit cards and much of their online
activity is tracked and used to market products to them based
on the interests they express through purchases and
information they provide on websites like Facebook and other
social media. By the end of this lesson, students will
recognize that there is a reciprocal, influential and circular
relationship between pop culture texts and the students
themselves. These texts have been consciously developed to
reach students in demographic categories that are developed by

gathering data about students' buying habits and online activities that the students themselves provide.

Students will discover that those that track and categorize them for marketing purposes use the idea of a 'persona.' In response, students will create a persona to take control of their own message about who they are through the design and development of a poster that depicts the student as a pop star or celebrity, while designing their poster to appeal to a target demographic. Students will contemplate the idea of a persona, which can be thought of two ways that relate to this lesson:

- In Latin, persona means, 'mask.' Today a persona is thought of not as a literal mask but as a "social mask" that all humans supposedly wear. This lesson asks students to become aware of and contemplate the motivations behind the big business of persona creation for pop, sports, celebrity and other media stars.
- As used in design and marketing, a Persona is an artifact that consists of a narrative describing a demographic or customer's specific behavior patterns and interests. Students will demonstrate awareness that marketers, web developers and designers create fictional characters that represent different user groups within a targeted demographic, attitude or behavior set that might use a site, brand or product in a similar way. Personas are used as a tool to segment markets and find ways to target specific groups and people.

Production

Students will write a description and/or a list of adjectives to describe and create the persona they would project if they

were a celebrity. Students will be asked to think about the presence / attitude / image / feelings / identity / personality they wish to visually convey about themselves in a persona. Though the message can be embellished or exaggerated, some truth about who the student really is should also be conveyed. Unless engaged critically rather than casually, students will be encouraged to avoid overtly sexual and violent themes and focus on other meaningful qualities about themselves.

Concepts & Vocabulary:

Marketing Terms:

Persona –

1. In Latin, persona means, 'mask.' Today a persona is thought of not as a literal mask but as a "social mask" that all humans supposedly wear.
2. As used in design and marketing, persona is an artifact that consists of a narrative describing a demographic or customer's specific behavior patterns and interests.

Demographic – The characteristics of human populations and population segments, especially when used to identify consumer markets. Can be related to socio-economic status, ethic group, personal interests and hobbies, tastes in music, fashion, entertainment and more, and any combination of those factors can be used to label a demographic group for marketing purposes.

Teacher Materials:

Smartboard, Internet, images of pop stars in marketing materials (CD covers, posters, magazines, etc.), along with candid, unvarnished/ unphotoshopped images of pop stars in real life.

Student Materials:

Lesson 1: Sketchbooks and pens / pencils

(Entire project: Other art media as necessitated by student's production interests such as colored pencils, paints, pastels, brushes pen and ink, etc.). Technology needs: Scanner, photocopier, computers with Internet access Adobe and Illustrator Photoshop.)

Procedures:

Motivation (30 minutes)

Students will be asked to identify contemporary pop stars, athletes and other celebrities that they like. The teacher will anticipate as many of these as possible and have images on hand showing these people in the context of posters, CD covers, magazine ads and other commercially produced materials.

The teacher will ask students a series of questions, with no right or wrong answers. The first questions will ask about our response to the individuals and aesthetic response to commercially created images:

- Do you think this image is compelling / interesting / stimulating?
- What do you think this image is communicating?
- What is happening in the image that communicates the ideas you perceive?
- Why do you think we like or dislike this person?
- Why do you think we react to this image?
- Can we discern any truth about this person based on this image?

Next the teacher will present candid photos of the celebrity in real life, ordinary circumstances, without sets, makeup or other than ordinary wardrobe. Questions would include:

- How is this image different from the commercially created we looked at?
- What does this image communicate about this person?
- Would you give this image a second look if were used in an advertisement?
- Based on this image, would you think this person seems remarkable / larger than life / interesting / better or different from you?
- If so, why? If not, why not?
- Can we discern any truth about this person based on this image?

Following this exchange, the teacher would return to the commercially produced image and ask:

- How do you think this image was created?
- How many people do you think were involved?
- What kinds of jobs or roles did they play?
- Do you think this person really looks like this?
- If not, what do you think was done to enhance this image and how was it done?
- What kinds of aesthetic qualities does this image have?
- What kinds of feelings does it evoke?
- Can you identify the use of Elements and Principles of Design in this image?

Following this exchange, the motivations of the image producers will be contemplated:

- Do you think this is just a picture, or do you think someone intended to communicate a specific message or feeling with this image?
- What did they do in this image to help communicate that message or feeling?
- Why might someone want to communicate a specific message or feeling?
- Do you think they have done anything that specifically speaks to or interests you?
- If yes, what appeals to you?
- Does it appeal to you because they made you like it, or did you have existing attitudes, beliefs or interests that this image just happens to appeal to?
- If it just happens to appeal to you because of your

existing interests, do you think that is only a coincidence?
- If you do like this person, what do they have to gain?
- What do you have to gain?

The teacher will next explain and discuss the concept of a 'persona' and ask whether and how the images discussed so far conveyed the idea of persona. The teacher will then go onto Facebook. The teacher will ask students:

- Do you think the concept of 'persona' exists within Facebook?
- Is it the real you? An invented you? A combination?
- Can anyone other than you and your friends see this persona?
- Do you think it might be important to be thoughtful about managing your persona?
- Can any person or group gather information about you from your Facebook page?
- How might marketers be able to collect personal information about their likes and interests?
- How they might use this very same information inside their own Facebook page.
- Do you think a marketer could categorize you into demographics based on your Facebook page?
- How might this actually be a good thing?
- How might it be a bad thing?

At the end of the discussion, and sooner if necessary, the teacher will let students know the purpose of this is not to denigrate anyone students like. The teacher will let them know the he likes many of these people as well, and students will be assured there is nothing wrong with their likes and

interests. Students will be informed that the point of the discussion is to engage students in critical thinking and awareness about the messages and images they encounter — not to put down their interests.

Introduction of the Project (10 minutes)

The teacher will distribute a handout that explains the assignment from start to finish. With the handout distributed, the teacher will discuss the assignment and answer students' questions about the assignment or the idea of a 'persona.'

Writing Assignment (15-20 minutes)

Students will write a description and/or a list of adjectives to describe and create the persona they would project if they were a celebrity. Students will be asked to put into words the presence / attitude / image / feelings / identity / personality they wish to visually convey about themselves in a persona. Though their persona and message can be embellished or exaggerated in their design, some truth about who the student really is should also be conveyed. Unless engaged critically rather than casually, students will be encouraged to avoid overtly sexual and violent themes and focus on other meaningful qualities about themselves.

Closure

The teacher will engage individual students as they work on the writing task to ensure they understand the concept and provide assistance as necessary. If class time runs out before the writing activity is completed, students will complete this task for homework and/or complete the task at the beginning of the next class. The teacher will let students know that for

the next class, they will do a brief review of the Elements and Principles of Design and begin work on conceptual drawings. The teacher will tell students to bring their sketchbooks. The teacher will ask students to begin contemplating and visualizing designs for their poster.

Back up Activity

No need for a back-up activity anticipated. If everything is completed with time to spare, the teacher would begin a review of Elements and Principles of Design.