

Using Reality Television to Explore Ideology and Identity

Elizabeth Read

Reality television is a genre of television programming presented as an unscripted program usually featuring ordinary people competing for prizes or placed in situations for the enjoyment of the

viewing public. The genre has been around for decades most commonly in the beginning of television history in the form of game shows. More recently since the beginning of the 21st century the genre

has become increasingly popular through the broadening into subgenres such as Documentary-style, Competition, Self-improvement, Renovation, Social Experiment, Dating Shows, Talk Shows,

Hidden Cameras, Supernatural, and Hoaxes. Reality television is unavoidable when watching television in this day and age because every station features at least one subgenre of reality television.

Television is a form of entertainment that everyone encounters on a fairly regular basis and with the prominence of reality television in the television viewing experience most people have experienced watching reality television at some point in their lives. Reality television is one of the highest ranked viewing genres in television so it could be said that it is a guilty pleasure that people experience whether they want to admit to it or not. For the purpose of my curriculum focused on high school students I will explore reality television aimed towards this viewing audience through shows aired by

MTV. MTV, originally marketed and aimed towards selling and exposing people to various genres of music, has a variety of reality television shows that teenagers watch on a regular basis.

In order for students to understand that reality television promotes certain ideologies based on the concepts the show presents the students must first understand ideology terminology. When trying to explain the importance of ideology through popular culture I believe the best way to approach defining it would be to reference Storey's (2006) first two definitions of ideology. Storey (2006) believes the first definition of ideology is a set of ideas held by a group of people. When teaching this definition to a group of students I would use political campaign slogans or propaganda posters from various political parties throughout history to show how ideologies change and progress without jumping into reality television ideologies. Storey's (2006) second definition describes ideology as a masking, concealment, or distortion and in this respect using the campaign slogans and propaganda posters from throughout history would also be relevant to teaching students about ideology. "They produce what is sometimes called 'false consciousness,'" as stated by Storey (2006, p.2) about ideologies.

I believe reality television shows can be introduced at this point, after clarifying to the students what ideology is, as promoting certain ideologies based on the subgenre and concepts trying to be conveyed. Depending on what a person believes they are attracted to certain reality television that promotes their beliefs for example The Biggest Loser promotes living a healthier lifestyle through its self help genre and Survivor promotes the idea of the survival of the fittest through its contestant focused genre. Duncum (2008, p.112) describes the relevance I see in teaching ideology through reality television best when he states "I contend that in considering visual images, no matter of what kind, art

educators need to deal with both the sensory reasons audiences are drawn to them, to understand their sensate appeal, their lure, and, at the same time, to confront the sometimes dubious ideas they impart." By showing students that all reality television is promoting some type of ideology they can begin to explore what ideologies are being presented and if they agree with them. Alvermann (1999, p. 39) believed that instead of forcing students to except what we as teachers believe to be true a better way would be to guide students through the process of learning how to question their own pleasures which I have hopefully created through this curriculum.

An important part of reality television is the casting of the "ordinary people" who will be on the show. Mills (2004, p.79) believes making entertainment out of the weaknesses of others has been a selling point for most television throughout history. Mills (2004) refers to reality television as humiliation TV because it represents a rise in popular culture in which taking pleasure from others misfortunes is the ultimate aim. Mills (2004) states, "Today's humiliation TV is a different story. The financial stakes are high, and participants are subjected to prolonged exposure before the camera. Their failings- whether of looks or character-are discussed in front of them, and if they can be made to cry, so much the better" (p.79).

While doing research for the casting of reality shows I found a website, <http://www.videojug.com/interview/reality-show-casting-secrets-2>, where an Executive Producer described how and why people are cast for reality shows. Executive Producer Richard Hall explains Producers are looking for strong personalities or strong characters. Producers do not like inexpressive and inarticulate people. They are looking for people who are willing to open their mouths and tell people what they think. The Producers are looking for personalities that will conflict with each other. The first project my students will create is

parody casting videos, in groups of two, trying to be cast in a reality television subgenre of their choice. The class will look at and discuss casting videos made by people online to come up with ideas for the parody and what kind of identities they will create to be cast. I believe the students will enjoy this activity because as Duncum (2009) states:

Transgression is highlighted by a practice common in media education of having students work in teams, where carried away in a spirit of camaraderie, students produce parodies not only of popular culture genres, but their immediate, shared environment, namely, school life and their teachers. Buckingham (2003) notes that with parody students can simultaneously acknowledge the ideological imperative of their teachers while disavowing any commitment to them. Parody offers a safe space in which flirting with what students know to be politically incorrect is sanctioned. (p.236)

The final concept the students will explore through this curriculum is whether or not reality television could be considered “real” when there are many factors which manipulate the outcomes and behaviors. In order to explore how “real” reality television is the class will examine the very popular reality television shows targeted for their age range, Jersey Shore and The Real World. Jersey Shore and The Real World are both reality television shows promoted to be voyeuristic social experiments where a group of young people are brought together to live in a house. Botz-Borstein (2006) explains best that if a group of young people are shut in a loft or house together does this really represent “reality” of any kind. Botz-Borstein (2006) states:

The situation is to a large extent created and there it comes already dangerously close to a piece of fiction. Further, even though there is no author in the conventional sense of the word, authority has not been left entirely in the hands of the

protagonists who are supposed to play their real lives.
(p.185)

Botz-Borstein (2006) believes reality television is an escape from the boring reality of the viewer's life. He calls reality television surreality television because he believes it is a produced environment that lacks the realness of everyday life. If the students can connect the casting process of reality shows looking for contrasting "characters" and the manipulated situations the cast are placed in then I believe they will be able to see how "real" reality television shows such as Jersey Shore and The Real World are. For the last project the students will create a conflict scenario, which is seen on a regular basis in reality shows such as Jersey Shore and The Real World, using the characters they created for the video casting parody. In order to create these scenes they will use a website called Xtranormal.com where they can write a script and direct the characters through animation.

In conclusion my students will learn about ideologies and identities used in the reality television genre. The students will first understand what ideologies are through an explanation of different ideologies promoted throughout history. The students will then be able to recognize that ideologies are promoted through various genres including reality television. The students will be able to understand that people watch and respond to different types of subgenres of reality television based on their own personal ideologies. After the students are able to identify ideologies and reasons people are drawn to them through reality shows the students will explore how "real" reality shows actually are. Through a process of exploring how casting reality shows is accomplished and how shows manipulate circumstances and situations the students will decide for themselves the "reality" of reality television.

References

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Curriculum Theme: Using Reality Television to Explore Ideology and Identity

Teacher: Elizabeth Read

Grade Level: High School level/ Grades 9-12

State Fine Art Goals: VAH1-3.3, VAH1-4.5, VAH1-6.2

State Media Arts Goals: MAHS1-3.6, MAHS1-4.1, MAHS1-5.2

State Language Arts Goals: N/A

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

In order for students to recognize important concepts like ideology and identity they must be given examples from everyday life and popular culture. To make ideology and identity relevant to the students' lives they must first learn the terminology and then associate the concepts to what they experience in their everyday lives. For the purpose of

teaching ideology and identity to high school students I have related the concepts to the casting process and creation of reality television. Reality television promotes the idea of filming “real life” situations through unscripted and ordinary people which in most cases are not true. The students will learn how to look deeper and more objectively through creating parody casting videos and confrontation scenes. The students will create these projects based on reality television casting information and ways the television shows manipulate situations to boost ratings.

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 (class period) 1	Shepard Fairey's Obama HOPE poster Barbara Kruger's I Shop Therefore I Am and Buy Me I'll Change Your Life artworks Propaganda posters from Popular Advertisements	The teacher will ask the students if they know what ideologies are. The teacher will give examples from everyday ideologies presented in popular culture throughout history to give the students an understanding of the concept.	The students will discuss in groups how images portray ideologies through word use and composition. The students will brainstorm about ideologies they have and why they have them.	The students will learn about what ideologies are and how they relate to their lives through popular culture.	The students will share with the class what they have brainstormed.

Lesson (class period) 2	Logos from popular reality shows for example Survivor, Amazing Race, Big Brother, The Biggest Loser, and Wife Swap.	The teacher will ask the students if they can see what ideologies are being represented through various reality show concepts. The teacher will present examples of shows who have obvious ideologies promoted.	The students will examine the logos of popular reality shows who often incorporate the concepts promoted in their shows through their logos for example Big Brother incorporates cameras into their logos to show it is a voyeuristic documentary style show.	The concept that will be learned is there are a number of reality television shows that are made to promote different ideologies. The students will learn about subgenres of reality television and ideologies promoted in each.	Through group discussion the class will discuss reality shows that interest them and ideologies the shows may be promoting.
Lesson (class period) 3	Producers of reality shows telling how people are cast in reality shows. Casting videos of people trying to get on reality shows.	The teacher will ask the students what characters they believe make for good casting in reality shows. The teacher will show "characters" from reality shows and ask the students why they may have been cast.	The students will view casting videos in groups online to decide what kind of character they would want to portray in their own casting parody video. The students will be encouraged to create characters with explosive opinionated personalities.	The concept learned is there are certain types of people cast for different reasons and purposes in the reality show genre. People with strong opinions who are willing to engage in conflict for their beliefs are obvious choices when casting reality shows.	The students will begin thinking about what they want to do for their parody casting video for a reality show of their choice.

Lesson (class period) 4	Continued from lesson 3... Producers of reality shows telling how people are cast in reality shows. Casting videos of people trying to get on reality shows.	The teacher will ask the class what kinds of characters they have created to make their casting video parody. The teacher will ask the students why they have chosen to create characters certain ways and what they are hoping to portray through the character's personality.	The students will develop scripts for their casting parodies and decide on costumes (if applicable) they would like to dress up in to help convey the character they would like to portray. The students will begin filming their casting videos in groups of two.	Continued from lesson 3... People with strong opinions who are willing to engage in conflict for their beliefs are obvious choices when casting reality shows.	The students will share the scripts and ideas for characters with the teacher and be prepared to film during the next class if they haven't already begun.
Lesson (class period) 5	Continued from lesson 3 and 4... Producers of reality shows telling how people are cast in reality shows. Casting videos of people trying to get on reality shows.	The teacher will walk around asking students questions about their parody characters and seeing if they need help.	The students will continue to work in groups of two to film their parody casting video.	Continued from lesson 3 and 4... People with strong opinions who are willing to engage in conflict for their beliefs are obvious choices when casting reality shows.	The students will continue to work in groups to film their casting parodies while the teacher walks around checking to make sure they understand.

Lesson (class period) 6	Continued from lessons 3-5....Clips from Jersey Shore and The Real World if there is time.	The students will be asked to present their casting video parody for a reality television show and explain why they chose the characters they chose.	The students will present their casting video parody to the class and watch the parodies from other classmates.	Continued from lessons 3-5...Successful casting videos portray people with strong opinions who are willing to engage in conflict for their beliefs are obvious choices when casting reality shows.	The class will have a group critique of the casting video parodies, why they were successful or not.
Lesson (class period) 7	Clips from Jersey Shore and The Real World. Clips from the first episodes introducing the housemates and their first meetings with the other housemates. Clips from confrontations in later episodes between housemates.	The teacher will discuss the concepts explored through the subgenre of Voyeuristic/Social Experiment/Documentary reality shows like Jersey Shore and The Real World. The teacher will begin a discussion with the class about why they think the housemates were cast in this subgenre of reality television.	The students will begin thinking about a script to write portraying their parody casting video character in conflict with a fictional housemate from a Jersey Shore or Real World scenario.	The concepts learned will be there are no "real" reality television shows. The characters chosen for the shows and situations they are placed in are not "real life" scenarios. The shows are manipulated to create programs the public wants to watch.	The students will discuss in groups how Jersey Shore and the Real World casts opposing characters and places them in situations to create conflict for better ratings.

Lesson (class period) 8	Continued from lesson 7... Clips from Jersey Shore and The Real World.	The teacher will ask the students to share ideas they have for their confrontation scene in the reality television subgenre Voyeuristic/Social Experiment/Documentary.	The students will begin making their confrontation scenes using Xtranormal.com.	Continued from lesson 7... The concepts learned will be there are no "real" reality television shows. The characters chosen for the shows and situations they are placed in are not "real life" scenarios. The shows are manipulated to create programs the public wants to watch.	The teacher will walk around asking the students about their scenes and observing them using Xtranormal.com.
Lesson (class period) 9	Continued from lesson 7 and 8... Clips from Jersey Shore and The Real World.	The teacher will walk around asking students questions about their conflict scenes.	The students will finish their confrontation scenes using Xtranormal.com. The students will chose the camera angles, characters, and edit the scene through this program.	Continued from lesson 7 and 8... The concepts learned will be there are no "real" reality television shows. The characters chosen for the shows and situations they are placed in are not "real life" scenarios. The shows are manipulated to create programs the public wants to watch.	The teacher will walk around asking the students about their scenes and observing them using Xtranormal.com.

Lesson (class period) 10	Continued from lesson 7 -9... Clips from Jersey Shore and The Real World. Artists who use Voyeuristic/Social Experiment/Documentary subject matter in their work. For example Cindy Sherman, Vito Acconci, and Oliver Herring	The students will be asked to share their confrontation scenes with the class and discuss why their character from the video casting parody would be the next reality television star.	The students will present the confrontation scenes to the class.	Continued from lesson 7 -9... The concepts learned will be there are no "real" reality television shows. The characters chosen for the shows and situations they are placed in are not "real life" scenarios. The shows are manipulated to create programs the public wants to watch.	The class will have a group critique of the scenes made in Xtranormal.com, why they were successful or not. The class will decide which characters would be the next reality show star.
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Lesson # 3

Parody Casting Videos: How reality shows cast shows

Grade: 9th-12th

Teacher: Elizabeth Read

Teaching Date: December 1, 2010

Length: 45-60min

State fine arts goals met by lesson objectives:

VAH1-3.3, VAH1-4.5

State media arts goals met by lesson objectives:

MAHS1-3.6, MAHS1-4.1, MAHS1-5.2

Objectives:

Creative/productive objectives:

The students will create a character they would like to create a parody casting video with. The students will write a script, dress up, up and film a casting video for a reality television show of their choice. The students will work individually developing the characters and then film the casting videos in groups of two.

Multicultural/historical objectives:

The students will learn the history of reality television programming and explore the subgenres. The students will learn what Producers have typically looked for when casting for reality shows and aim to create a parody casting video that will cast them on a reality show. They will use the internet to look at previous reality stars casting videos.

Affective/expressive:

Students will experience from their own parody casting experience how to create characters that reality shows aim to cast. The students will recognize the importance of emphasizing certain personality traits to become a reality star.

Concepts and Vocabulary:

Creative/productive objectives:

Parody- a work created to mock, comment on, or makes fun at an original work.

Casting video- a video used to be cast in a certain role.

Reality television- a genre of [television](#) programming that presents purportedly unscripted dramatic or humorous

situations, documents actual events, and usually features ordinary people instead of professional actors in a contest or other situation where a prize is awarded.

Genre- any category of forms of art or based on some loose set of stylistic criteria.

Subgenre- a subcategory within a particular genre.

Affective/expressive:

Popular culture- is the totality of [ideas](#), [perspectives](#), [attitudes](#), [memes](#),^[1] [images](#) and other [phenomena](#) that are deemed preferred per an informal [consensus](#) within the [mainstream](#) of a given [culture](#).

Teacher Materials:

- A SMART Board and Computer with Internet

Student Materials:

- Pencil or pen
- Paper
- Video camera
- Costumes

Motivation:

1. Students will discuss in class what types of characters they see in reality television shows.
2. Students will view casting videos from previous reality stars to see what characteristics they possess.
3. Students will watch a video of a Producer of reality talk about the types of people who are cast in reality

television.

Procedure:

1. Discussion on reality television (30 min):

- The teacher will ask the students what characters they believe make for good casting in reality shows.
- The students will discuss what they believe.
- The teacher will show “characters” from reality shows and ask the students why they may have been cast.
- The students will tell the teacher why they think the “characters” have been cast.
- The teacher will show Producers of reality shows telling how people are cast in reality shows.
- The teacher will show casting videos of people trying to get on reality shows from the internet.
- The teacher will tell the students about the assignment to create a parody casting video for a reality show.
- The students will ask questions.

1. Brainstorming and Research (15-30 min):

- The students will brainstorm about characters they want to portray.

1. Cleanup and Homework Assignment (5 min):

- The teacher will assign the students to think about their scripts and if they want costumes to bring them in from home.

Preparation Time:

- Research and gathering- 2hrs
- Gathering videos to view- 1hr
- Lesson Plan Writing- 1.5hrs

Estimated time for activity (Discussion): about 30-45 minutes

Casting Video Assessment:

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1	Score
Concept	Has a clear picture of what they are trying to achieve. Can describe what they are trying to do.	Has a fairly clear picture of what they are trying to achieve. Can describe what they are trying to do overall.	Has brainstormed their concept, but no clear focus has emerged.	Has spent little effort on brainstorming and refining a concept. Unclear on the goals.	
Script	Script is complete and it is clear.. Script is quite professional.	Script is mostly complete. It is clear what the actor will say and do. Script shows planning.	Script has a few major flaws. It is not always clear Script shows an attempt at planning, but seems incomplete.	There is no script.	

Sound Setup	Microphones are positioned optimally to ensure that important sounds and dialogue are captured. The team has made every attempt to anticipate and filter out unwanted ambient noise in the recording.	Microphones are positioned optimally to ensure that important sounds and dialogue are captured.	At least one microphone (in addition to that on the camera) is used to ensure that dialogue is captured.	Little attention was paid to ensuring quality sound during the shoot.	
Equipment Preparation	All equipment (sound, light, video) is checked \ before the shoot to ensure it is operational. A backup plan is developed to cover possible problems with power, light, etc.	All equipment (sound, light, video) are checked before the shoot to ensure they are operational. A backup plan is developed.	All necessary equipment/supplies are located and checked to ensure they are operational. There may or may not be a backup plan.	Needed supplies/equipment are missing OR were not checked before the shoot.	