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Analyzing advertisements in the classroom

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What does it mean to 'Be Advise'? analysing the use of advertisements for children's media literacy

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Assumptions about children, young people and advertising are very common. In many academic, school or family settings, the idea that children are *more vulnerable than adults* to the effects of the media gets taken for granted. If we view children as being in need of greater protection from advertising than adults, this might mean that we ignore their complex cultural responses to particular advertisements. If we think children are more vulnerable to advertising influences than we are, we might also assume that all children respond in the same ways to advertisements. Unfortunately, and despite the fact that most children live with adults and gain some of their ideas from adults, adults' competence and vulnerability within the same commercial world is less often examined. On the other hand, if we view both children and adults as thoroughly competent consumers and if advertising is about *nothing but selling products*, then the need to regulate advertisers appears to diminish, and the rationale for teaching about advertisements might be different.

Previous research

In my overview of the research literature on children and advertising, I have found very little discussion about precisely how children's thinking in the area of advertising develops. Gunter et al (2005) argue that the development of children's capacity to think in abstract ways about advertising needs to be factored into discussions of their ability to judge the facts, opinions and persuasive content of advertisements. However, these writers also raise serious concerns about the dangers of generalizing conclusions from studies of children and advertising carried out without careful consideration of the ages and cultural backgrounds of the children being interviewed.

But Sonia Livingstone and Ellen Helsper suggest that 'there is evidence that children of all ages are affected by advertising' (2006: 571). This simple finding should lead those of us who are teachers to further questions of how or even whether children 'of all ages' are affected any more by advertising than adults are.

Some researchers suggest that previous studies of children's understanding of advertising messages have relied too heavily on asking children of all ages the same sorts of questions, which require them to read survey questions and say or write their answers before they can properly express themselves in ways that their literacy levels might not support. Owen et al, writing in 2007, argue that younger children may actually be able to think things about advertising that are much more complicated and knowledgeable than the language they are able to use to express their thoughts. They also suggest that the way researchers or teachers phrase questions and ideas can be off-putting and confusing for younger children and prevent them from expressing the understanding they have.

Teachers therefore need to take care in choosing appropriate methods and materials that will allow children of different ages to express what they think and best show what they understand about advertisements. It is also worth bearing in mind that, as researchers

caution, showing an understanding of advertising's intention to persuade does not guarantee that children have an understanding of the complex profit-based factors involved in relationships between big businesses, consumers or television companies. So, for those of us who believe that media literacy and teaching about the media has an important contribution to make to children's learning at primary school, how might all these issues be tackled with children in an age appropriate manner?

To explore these issues, I undertook a small-scale case-study on how two primary schools in vastly differing areas used a pack of advertising related materials. This case-study was part of a larger evaluation project (Buckingham et al 2006). 'Park Hill Primary' was in an inner city West London location with a culturally diverse and socially working-class population. 'Sea Haven Primary' was in a small town in Kent, with a socially mixed but primarily White English intake. The children were aged nine or ten. The smallness of the sample – a total of fifty-four children in two classes of 27 – and the short-term nature of the research mean that I can't claim it as representative or make generalizations. What is most relevant is the snapshot it provides of the many different ways in which culturally varied children *of the same age* engage with similar television advertisements. It also reveals the potentials, as well as the pitfalls, of using pre-scripted curriculum materials to approach the topic of advertising.

Teaching advertising: pedagogy, purpose and active learning

I carried out interviews and observations in both schools as a "participant researcher" over two terms in the spring and summer of 2006. At times I was a teacher-researcher, facilitating the lessons and questioning children; at others, I was an observer, sitting at the back watching the interactions of children and noting the directions taken by discussion of particular advertisements. I made extensive notes, digital recordings and taped interviews as well as photographs and video data to help me recall and describe the children's perceptions of particular advertisements and their thoughts about advertising in general.

In discussions which took place before the introduction of the teaching pack in both schools, approximately half the children in each class of 27 displayed intermittently what I believe can be called a sophisticated and critical understanding of different types of advertising. They commented on the aim of the advertisements and/or their positioning; the selling of ideas; the notion of dissuasion; an awareness of promotional gimmicks and assessments about how advertisements use visual space in the world at large. Additionally, the possibility of consumer rights, the possibility of advertising hype being misleading and the issue of redress for such misleading labeling of products were all raised at least once in each group.

Sea Haven Primary: focus-group discussions about question 'what is advertising?'

Girl 1: I think advertising is where you try to persuade someone to do something, like if you wanted someone to buy an idea or an object, you could use really persuasive words like 'It's the best around', 'you won't find this anywhere else' and-

Girl2: -yes and then you could also persuade people by asking ‘em to try ‘em and then if it doesn’t work out you get your money back or something...

Girl 3: And then there’s advertising that’s trying to persuade someone not to do something

Girl 1: Yes like the Road Safety Campaign, ***THINK!***

Girl 3: That’s trying to persuade you to think and not just run out into the road, so advertising can be about that, like that there are good things, and also to inform you that there are BAD things.

Girl 2: If you don’t like something, then it isn’t how they say on the ad. Sometimes, things aren’t how they say they are, they are bad.

Girl 1: And sometimes advertising can be trying to persuade you to do something or not to do something, not just to *buy* some product.

Arising from the class discussion, the teacher noted the following points mentioned by children:

- advertising is everywhere
- it is often eye-catching and sometimes shocking or scary
- it persuades you to do something or to buy something
- it tries to sell a product
- it can try to ‘sell’ an idea not a product
- it can try to dissuade as well as persuade
- it can inform or sell, it does not have to sell
- it can be written or spoken or visual or all three
- it may be found in a whole range of places, from newspapers, bus hoardings, product packets and television to supermarkets, the radio and the internet
- it can use writing or music or visuals or spoken words

During several initial discussions I observed confusion about liking for an advertisement *versus* liking for a product. This distinction is one that is often ignored in the studies of advertising and young children. Indeed, the multimodal pleasures of advertising are frequently ignored in favour of a content-focused approach, which seeks to prove or disprove negative effects. During this study, most children were open about having their thoughts on specific subjects altered in specific, usually time-limited ways by particular advertisements; however, further extensive discussions revealed that this ‘effect’ was also usually related to an existing partiality for the product (not the brand) arising from experience or from discussions with friends and parents. All of this is not that dissimilar to the way in which most adults relate to advertisements and products. We should remember, additionally, that many children also report finding the advertisements irritating as they interrupt programmes they are watching and enjoying. Several reported that younger siblings would start to cry or misbehave during advertising breaks in

programmes, and there was little evidence of an inability to judge the difference between entertainment and advertising content.

The children were highly engaged during discussions initiated by the teaching materials about *competition* between different products. However, in Park Hill Primary particularly, this was understood (or misconstrued) as being based on actual features of products rather than as an aspect of advertising rhetoric and the commercial world in Park Hill Primary, there seemed to be sharply different reactions to the Oxo soup cube ad campaign¹: at least fifteen children explained that they did not like it. This was mainly because it was seen to depict a white middleclass family and to make people from ‘other cultures’ seem strange or exotic. Interestingly, this resistance came as a surprise to the teacher, who in response attempted to emphasise the ‘healthy eating’ and ‘multicultural food’ aspects of the campaign, thus showing that teaching about advertising can involve a complex balance for adults too, between displaying cultural competence and undertaking textual critique.

Comments by a range of children showed a multiplicity of perspectives from ‘What’s the joke?’ when watching the a family tease a father for keeping a picture of a female pop icon in his wallet, to ‘How is it healthy to boil all the vegetables so much? Doesn’t it kill all the vitamins: that’s what our teacher told us’ to ‘That’s not *real* Chinese/curry/Italian’ or ‘I wouldn’t be able to digest my food if my parents were touching each other like that’ or ‘I’d never speak to my parents like that; I’d get beats’. Many researchers might have ignored or passed over these responses as aberrant readings or missed them altogether because of the seeming naturalization of whiteness both for advertisers and for researchers in this area (Burton 2009). Several of the children viewed the Oxo advertisements as part of an alien narrative, to be critiqued and distrusted. This was evidently the opposite of the advertisers’ intentions. Had the advertisements not been explored within the educational space of the classroom and time for such discussion provided, such critiques would not have been articulated; nor would the teacher have known what a critical stance to advertising existed alongside what he decried as the children’s ‘brand-obsessed’ culture.

In terms of the design and content of advertising-related teaching materials for primary age children, this had several implicit pedagogic repercussions: many of the children in the ethnically diverse school did not enjoy the ads depicting monolithic cultural spaces, and were disengaged during their viewing, unlike in Sea Haven Primary, where the preponderance of white children made the scenarios portrayed a little more familiar. Some children’s satirical reception of some advertisements and their joking recasting of the supposed ‘messages’ almost pitched the teacher into the role of justifying and making successful ads that were failing to captivate a majority of the children. In line with this finding about the openness of interpretation within the child audience when faced with advertisements and no adult framing, teaching materials using closed approaches such as the sentence: ‘The most important shot in the ad is’ or ‘the message of the ad is ...’ are both dangerous in their tendency to accept the advertisements’ message on its own terms and to inhibit children’s discussion and interpretations.

Concomitantly, it can be seen to be crucial to children’s understanding if teachers are willing to experiment and allow open-ended activities that do not simply rely on a skills-based notion of acquiring proficiency in the language of advertising as it already exists..

¹ See Media Smart Be Advise 2, Materials, London: Mediasmart.

During the production of story-boards for an imaginary Fish Oxo cube in Park Hill Primary, instead of using the teaching materials' designated cut and paste activity that would leave the white middleclass Oxo family intact, children who were dissatisfied with the original campaign and with the activities shown, were encouraged to design alternatives. Some of the ideas that came out clearly showed differences in culture and value at work in the reception of advertisements while also demonstrating serious technical learning taking place in relation to the uses of shot types, humour, lighting, camera angles and edits.

Two Moroccan boys presented a storyboard for FISH OXO. Shot 1: Medium Long Shot, a room, with dim light, father and son sitting at opposite ends of a bed watching a television. Shot 2: son is cooking, father watching TV. Shot 3: close up, father looking sad; Shot 4: close up: son looking sad; Shot 5: close up, son crumbles fish OXO cube into the pot; Shot 6: father and son sitting facing each other smiling, eating fish OXO meal. Shot 7: big close up, Fish OXO cube – SLOGAN: *Little Cube: Big Smile*

The two boys presented and explained their idea to the class as being based on a situation in one of their households. All the other storyboards were interesting but the class voted this one the best based on a combination of humour and the success of its persuasive message.

In another much-liked ad, two toddler-twins are shown going missing. Their parents search for them in a frantic manner. At the end of the storyboard, the toddlers have laid the table themselves and called their parents for dinner. The slogan reads 'FISH OXO – so simple even your baby can use it.'

Again, those of us who are teachers need to be aware of the tendency of some curriculum materials to close down on imaginative reinterpretation by initiating one-size fits all tasks. The use of 'cut and paste' stills from the original ad actually discourages such innovative and alternative perspectives as the ones described.

A comment by one of the teachers in Park Hill Primary shows that teacher expectations of quiet or low-achieving children are challenged by their creative production work:

Teacher: The few children that I thought wouldn't be engaged at all, were actually the ones that were the most eager. I was so surprised. Even though a few had to be moved, after that they were really interested and took a really active role. So clearly this type of media work appeals to them and plays to their strengths.

In this regard, a simulation activity, the making of an advertising campaign for the school using digital cameras, drew in the children for whom speaking English proved challenging. The planning and framing of shots or sequences, the attendant praise when a shot came out well and the contribution their efforts to a group end were crucial in raising confidence. Obviously, these are features of media production work that are transferable across genres and could be linked to the teaching of film or television. Indeed, many teachers might prefer to avoid advertising in the classroom given that as one teacher told me, 'they get enough of that rubbish at home'. However, consciously teaching about advertising with primary school children can stimulate discussions that would not otherwise have taken place. Notably in relation to non-commercial advertising

– perceived as being more about *ideas* than *products* – the children in this study revealed a sophisticated grasp of intention and emotional content:

Boy 1: I started watching advertisements quite young, I think maybe three years old with my parents.

Boy 2: Me too.

I: Any particular ones you want to talk about?

Boy 3: I remember these ones about a kid getting kicked by his dad. You might've started to watch it, yeah, and not known what it was about and kept watching.

Boy 2: Yeah, right, it was scary, I mean, for little children; they might've not known it was an advertise. Child abuse (very soft).

Boy 4: That's what the advertise company wants! To make it seem real. In that the kid is in the corner, and his dad is just coming towards him, to hit him, and... it's about child violence, and it's telling us that this happens, this is real so give money to help these children...It's no use if none of us gives money. It's about making us aware.

Boy 1: But they shouldn't've gone so far, I don't think. With the kid, and in this with the axe and the legs and all. It could give small kids nightmares....

I: Small kids? I noticed that a lot of you flinched. Does that make it a less or more effective ad would you say?

Boy 4: But sometimes it has to be like that, to have an impact. Otherwise no-one would do anything.

Teacher-interviewer: But do you think that some advertisements do go too far and show things that they should not given that they are going to be watched by children?

Boy 2: Yes.

Boy 1: Yes, but like he says, it's like that to make us think. Make us do something, or not do something. Like I really like the Nicorette ones, with the cigarettes lying everywhere it's *so disgusting* but when I watch that I never want to smoke. And I want everyone to stop.

This extended discussion with its references to 'impact' – both positive and negative – to shock tactics, to motivation and action as well as the protective stance towards younger children, suggests that discussions of *effects* also need to focus more on non-commercial advertising, which is often simply ignored in the rush to relate all advertising effects to the commercial world.

Obviously...what is learnt is not always what is taught

The teachers involved reported their own 'success' at teaching about advertising in terms of children becoming more aware of the persuasive appeals of advertising, their use of 'media language' (such as camerawork and music), and awareness of how consumers are targeted in both commercial and non-commercial advertising. Furthermore, teachers viewed advertising literacy as important due to their perceptions of advertisements as a powerful influence on children and, interestingly, on their parents. The children, on the other hand, were attracted by the idea of knowing technical details about camera techniques and by the opportunities for discussion and practical work. The participant observations showed that these ten year olds already possessed considerable general knowledge about advertising and were positive and enthusiastic about discussing particular advertisements. A number of children certainly were confused about the association between a product and the endorser or between one product and another when one was being used to enhance the appeal of the other. Perhaps most important was the observation that some children were culturally and/or socially alienated by the authentic advertisements in the teaching materials, drawn from the UK media. Where the pedagogy allowed for open-ended discussions, the children began to develop critiques of the representations of race, childhood and class therein. However, there were occasions when the materials used did not aid such discussion, and lent themselves to didactic and text-centred teaching, thus silencing some children's experiences and knowledge and holding back the learning of others.

Conclusions

There is still little agreement amongst policy-makers, academics and researchers about the complicated ways in which children from different cultural contexts relate to and interact with the ideas and representations in advertisements. This lack of understanding is not a good thing, either for children or for adults. I have attempted to shed light on a number of questions: What kind of cultural learning takes place when children from different backgrounds interact with advertisements? Do children see advertisements merely as vehicles for products or do they serve other functions in children's cultural lives? And what kind of media literacy work, if any, might enable children to a) challenge social and cultural representations within the advertisements they watch on a daily basis and b) to feel comfortable about the pleasures (humour and music, for instance) which are on offer in some advertisements? In the time-constrained context of real classrooms we often choose to ignore what we all know: that children learn a lot more when they are actively engaged in doing or making something rather than simply in discussing or answering questions. Sadly, production work, with all the mess and noise it brings during the planning, negotiation and execution stages appears to be somewhat stifled by more controlled primary school environments. But where it *is* carried out, it is one of the most successful aspects of teaching and learning about advertising, and facilitates different kinds of learning and success for children side-lined by those of us who place our emphasis mainly on talk or writing that displays 'media' or 'consumer' literacy. Children's increasing sophistication in their thinking about advertising and advertisements needs to be explored at different ages, and through methods that do not confuse or exclude certain groups of children, particularly the younger age groups. We also need to be clear about the reasons for teaching about advertising. Do we want to train children to be discerning consumers, or do we want to rescue them from consumerism, to inoculate them, so to speak, by exposing the actual worthlessness of particular products or the

duplicitous motives of advertisers? To answer the question in the title of this chapter, it is important for us as teachers not to detach advertisements from the contexts in which they are made and interpreted. Helping children to be 'Adwise' involves approaching advertisements as complicated social and media texts, unpicking their narratives in the way we might themes in fictional media, including books and stories. It can also involve inviting children to consider related questions about other forms of persuasion (for instance, within families or by politicians), about justice and inequality.

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