

Studying Selfies, Week One: Goffman and Identity

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Context

This lesson is intended for use in a special topics course I developed, titled Studying Selfies: A Critical Approach. It is a 30 minute lesson designed for use in the beginning of the semester. The content and material covered serve as an introduction to ideas that will be built upon in each subsequent lesson.

Rationale

I have found myself in frequent discussions with other teachers regarding the difficulties in finding effective ways to engage today's undergraduates in necessary, foundational—but “old” and sometimes dense—material. How do we encourage them to take the challenge? How do we get them interested enough to read it in the first place? These queries are not unique to my professional circle; many humanities scholars are working to find curricula and pedagogical strategies that both induce student interest and help students make connections while developing the literacies needed to navigate their academic, professional, social, and political futures (Morrell, 2002). This lesson, and the course it belongs to, are designed to address this task by specifically engaging students in their own current cultural moment—instead of sprinkling “pop culture” examples into a theory-centered lesson, why not MAKE pop culture the lesson, bringing the theory to life?

This lesson seeks to engage the class in a full investigation of the “selfie” as a cultural object. For the purposes of this lesson, a “selfie” is any photograph an individual or group takes of themselves, regardless of whether that photo is privately held (or is thought to be privately held), transferred to others, or is displayed via social networks like Facebook and Instagram. The fact that “selfie” was Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year for 2013 (Brumfield, 2013) and the title of a 2014 primetime show on the major television network ABC (Breger, 2014) indicates that the selfie is a topic of popular interest, and one that students will be familiar with and readily able and eager to engage in discussion. The students will learn, as scholars and as producers and consumers of culture, the importance of thinking critically about selfies as cultural objects that speak to and about our current cultural moment. More information, such as learning objectives, can be found in the lesson plan below.

Execution

This lesson, and all lessons in this course, are designed and executed using Madeline Hunter's (1984) seven-element “method.” I put method in quotes here, because while it is useful to think of it as such, Hunter meant for her model to operate more as a guide, or a set of suggestions that should be considered together in planning for effective instruction, rather than as a set of steps to be explicitly followed or evaluated by (Wolfe, 1987). In other words, not all elements belong in every lesson, and they need not necessarily happen in order, but using the seven elements as a guide has proven effective in holistically structuring effective lessons and increasing the probability of student success in reaching the learning objective (1987). The method consists of the following elements:

1. *Anticipatory set*: Activating students' prior knowledge and experience, focusing attention
2. *Objective*: Making clear the overall purpose of the lesson
3. *Input*: Disseminating new information through lecture
4. *Modeling*: Demonstrating the skill/competence for the student
5. *Checking for understanding*: Activities which examine the student's comprehension
6. *Guided practice*: Supervised direction of the students as they practice on their own
7. *Independent practice*: Practice assigned to be completed without supervision

As you will see in the following lesson plan, appropriate elements of the Hunter method are used to structure the lesson in ways that facilitate the student's introduction to, guidance in, and practice of the learning objectives put forth.

Specific to this lesson is an introduction to the selfie via a theoretical discussion of Erving Goffman's (1959) thoughts about presentation of self as an act of "everyday performance." Goffman explained that individuals actively participate in directing and controlling the impressions they "give off" to each other in everyday interactions. Observers "glean clues" from the conduct and appearance of the observed, which inform the impression the observer develops (and re-develops) of the observed. Goffman compared daily interactions to a theatrical experience in which individuals perform an identity by giving off expressions meant to control the responses others have to the individual in a given situation. These expressions are usually nonverbal, often visual, and are staged in a way that is meant to seem consistent with the individual's "real," "authentic" performance of self. Because Goffman's analysis focused on the types of interactions possible in 1959, exploring the working components of his theory through the lens of selfies as cultural objects engage the students in the material on its own terms, while also allowing them to begin addressing the ways in which our current cultural moment necessitates complexifying how we think about "presentation of self in everyday life" (p. 1).

Using a recent popular online news article from *Vulture* titled "At Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie" (Saltz, 2014), the students will be introduced to the genealogical history of the selfie. The lecture will trace its still unclear, uncodified existence in the larger historical genre of portraiture, which will serve as a base for discussing the selfie as a rich, historical, and cultural object worthy of critical analysis. We will then discuss our own experiences and knowledge of selfies using aspects of Goffman's theories of self-presentation. The students will then be guided through an analysis of a collection of selfies. Finally, the students will engage in their own active analysis, looking at examples of selfies in small group discussion. In closing, thoughts resulting from the small group discussion will be shared to synthesize findings and check for understanding. More details for each of these elements are provided in the lesson plan below.

Studying Selfies: A Critical Approach

COMM 356-101

Summer 2015

M-F 3:15-4:45

Monday, May 13, 2014

LESSON PREPARATION	
[Before the lesson]	
Topic: Selfies: Identity and Interpellation	Assigned Readings: J. Saltz: At Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie E. Goffman: Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Introduction chapter)
<p>Primary Objective(s):</p> <p>Selfie as discourse: After this lesson, the students should be able to discuss the history (or histories) of the selfie via the Saltz reading, and be able to articulate its potential to function in contemporary media and scholarly discourses about self-representation.</p> <p>Selfie as performance/presentation of self: After this lesson, the students should be able to analyze the tension between spontaneity and staging in the way that selfies serve as a performance and presentation of self in global and social media contexts. They should also be able to cursorily articulate the relationship between the expression of self and that expression's moral claim with regard to what selfies say about us.</p>	
<p>Materials:</p> <p>Have power point ready</p> <p>Have http://richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com/ pulled up</p> <p>Bring Goffman reading for reference</p> <p>Remind students to bring computers</p>	
<p>Technology Integration:</p> <p>Will have students examine online images during guided practice as a case study</p> <p>Will have students examine http://richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com/ on their own computers in pairs for discussion</p>	
<p>Lesson Format:</p> <p>Anticipatory Set/Hook, Input, Modeling, Check for Understanding, Guided Practice, Closure, "For Next Time"</p>	
LESSON PRESENTATION	
[During the lesson]	
Anticipatory Set/Hook	<p>Time: 2 minutes</p> <p>Content:</p> <p>Welcome (30 seconds)</p> <p>Take Attendance (1 minute)</p> <p>Housekeeping questions (30 seconds)</p>

	<p>Set/Hook: “For today you read the Saltz reading on the history of the selfie, and the Goffman reading on presentation of self in everyday life. Today, I want to overview that history with you, talk about that history in terms of its relevance to the selfie being a cultural object that invites questions about what the selfie says about us and about our culture, and then I want us to dig into the Goffman reading and start to grapple with some of those questions, beginning with the very basic question of what we are doing when we take a selfie.”</p>
<p>Input</p>	<p>Time: 10-12 minutes</p>
	<p>Content: (Participatory Lecture) Lecture slides:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction 2. Selfie Definition 3. Selfie as an aesthetic genre 4. Selfie: Form 5. Selfie: Function 6. Selfie: History 7. Van Gough 8. Warhol 9. Escher 10. Parmigianino 11. Selfies as social phenomenon 12. Goffman 13. Modeling analysis (see next block) 14. Guided practice analysis questions (see next block) 15. Closing (see next block)
<p>Modeling</p>	<p>Time: 2 minutes</p>
	<p>Content: Case study:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Walk through the context of each selfie 2. Have students answer guided questions 3. Validate their analysis

Check for Understanding	Time: 2 minutes
	Content: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pause for questions 2. Introduce guided practice activity
Guided Practice	Time: 5 minutes
	Content: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have students examine http://richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com/ 2. Have them discuss/jot down group answers to discussion questions on slide
Closure	Time: 5 minutes
	Content: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have students discuss findings with the class, reiterate main points they touch on 2. Go over work for next time 3. Preview Althusser for next time! 4. Questions? 5. Dismissal
For Next Time	(On slide)
	Content: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading for next time: L. Althusser: Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus 2. Reading Application: the “Women Laughing Selfie” meme and be ready to discuss with regard to theories from Goffman on the self as performative and Althusser on interpellation.
Notes: <i>(student appointments, emails, reminders)</i>	

LESSON REFLECTION

[After the lesson]

Describe the outcome of the lesson.

Describe student performance and state any particulars about students who achieved the objective.

Describe what you might do differently next time you teach this lesson.

References

- Breger, E. (2014, November 4). "Selfie" has—despite all odds—become a good show. *New Republic*. Retrieved from <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/120116/selfie-abc-has-become-great-show>.
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- Morrell, E. (2002, September). Toward a critical pedagogy of popular culture: Literacy development among urban youth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46(1).
- Wolfe, P. (1987). What the "seven-step lesson plan" isn't. *Educational Leadership*, p. 70-71.