

DRAWING POLITICAL CARTOONS

Lesson Overview:

The purpose of using political cartoons is to develop both factual knowledge and interpretive skills. Students must have background information before they can analyze a political cartoon or drawing, so it is easiest to teach this skill using a current event. Once the students have mastered the analysis of current events, they should be able to approach similar tasks with historical cartoons and drawings.

Length of Lesson:

Four 45-minute periods

Instructional Objectives:

Students will:

- analyze visual and language clues to determine the meaning of contemporary and historical political cartoons.
- create a political cartoon based on a current event.

Supplies:

- Paper
- Ruler
- Thin markers

Instructional Plan:

Introduction

Read the following quote to the class:

"A cartoonist is a writer and artist, philosopher, and punster, cynic and community conscience. He seldom tells a joke, and often tells the truth, which is funnier. In addition, the cartoonist is more than a social critic who tries to amuse, infuriate, or educate. He is also, unconsciously, a reporter and historian. Cartoons of the past leave records of their times that reveal how people lived, what they thought, how they dressed and acted, what their amusements and prejudices were, and what the issues of the day were." (Ruff and Nelson, p. 75; see teacher references below).

Tell students that they will be creating a political cartoon based on a current event, providing them with their own opportunity to leave a record of their time.

Procedures

Display a variety of cartoons about a current event that the students are familiar with as an introduction. Be sure that the cartoons represent opposing positions about the same topic. Explain to the students that political cartoons are prejudiced and biased because they represent the artist's point of view, as does an editorial. They are intended to be controversial and characterized in nature. Their meaning is conveyed by both visual and verbal clues.

Distribute the Vocabulary handout and talk about some of the elements present in the cartoons: caption, caricature, symbolism, proportional size of objects and people, and personification. Help students identify the personalities in the cartoons you have displayed and ask them what issue or event they think the cartoon is about. Ask the students what clues they used to determine their answer.

Divide students into small groups. Distribute a political cartoon to each group. Ask them to identify the elements in, and context for, the cartoon. Ask each group to share their drawings and their findings with the larger group.

Explain to the class the following project assignment: Students will research a current event issue of their choice and create a political cartoon over the next week. Students should brainstorm possible issues using an editorial section from a newspaper or magazine. Ask students to identify other sources for material: television, Internet, etc.

The following are suggestions for analyzing cartoons:

- Every cartoon should be placed in a historical and geographical context (i.e., time and place).
- All personalities represented in a cartoon should be identified.
- Cartoon analysis should finish with a description of the overall message of the cartoon.
- Students must be taught how to interpret symbols, the visual clues sent out from the cartoon, as well as how to interpret captions, the verbal clues sent out from the cartoon.
- Students need to pay attention to size and placement of people, objects, symbols, and writing on the cartoon.
- Teachers should select cartoons according to the students' knowledge and ability level.
- Teachers should get the class to brainstorm ideas to evoke different responses. Divergent answers should be accepted. Interpretation must be open-ended.

Closure

After the completion of the project assignment, students will share their cartoon with the class, briefly describe the issue involved, and identify the key elements.

Sources:

Ruff, Thomas P., and Jennifer T. Nelson. *Classroom Ready Activities for Teaching History and Geography in Grades 7-12*. Needham, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.

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