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**“People Don’t Always Show Up the Way You Want Them To”:
Utilizing *The Hunger Games* to Differentiate Between Persuasion, Coercion,
Propaganda, and Manipulation**

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Abstract

The ability to define and conceptualize persuasion and its nuances without engaging in coercion, propaganda, and/or manipulation can be difficult for students at first. This activity centralizes the fine points among these persuasive concepts. Students also recognize the role of their audience in the persuasive messages that they create. Rather than only having a conversation about the common characteristics of these terms and how they differ, students can observe them within the fictional movie *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014). After discussing these ideas with their classmates, students then apply what they have learned by creating persuasive messages of their own. Students ultimately apply what they have learned about persuasion and communication ethics by creating advertisements for the rebellion that demonstrate persuasive techniques.

“People Don’t Always Show Up the Way You Want Them To”: Utilizing *The Hunger Games* to Differentiate Between Persuasion, Coercion, Propaganda, and Manipulation

Intended Courses

Persuasion; Persuasive Speaking; Advertising, Argumentation & Debate; Media Literacy;
Media and Society

Introduction and Rationale

The ability to define and conceptualize persuasion and its nuances without engaging in coercion, propaganda, and/or manipulation can be difficult for students at first. This activity centralizes the fine points among these persuasive concepts. According to Rothwell (2013), “Persuasive speaking is a communication process of convincing through open and honest means. When your listeners can choose for themselves which attitude to accept or which behavior to perform, they are in charge of their decision making” (p. 399). This distinction is essential for students to understand when they first analyze persuasive messages and begin to create their own persuasive content. As Sutiú (2014) observes,

This is the significant difference between persuasion and manipulation. These two processes of communication intend to produce changes at the cognitive level, and to determine some sort of action, depending on the context in which they are released... Manipulation techniques tend to paralyze reflection, and to a mental level, they can be a form of deprivation of liberty. In contrast persuasion is built on the individual's freedom of thought and free will (p. 102-103).

Students must understand that it is their role as the persuader to convince others to adopt their perspective; their audience can reject the message. Thus, students need to recognize the role of their audience in the persuasive messages that they create. As Lebedeva and Romanova (2018) wrote “Persuasion, manipulation and linguistic coercion presuppose different degrees of the

communicants' awareness. In the case of persuasive argumentation it is the highest. The speaker is aware of the necessity to persuade the listener” (p. 30). Therefore, this activity provides an opportunity for students to engage as the persuader and the audience to better understand persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation.

Furthermore, this activity enables students to explore to what extent persuasion is effective through the compelling nature of storytelling. Beeson (2014) remarked that “A story can have a dramatic effect and can be a great source of persuasion” (p. 109). Schreiner, Appel, Isberner, and Richter (2018) studied narrative persuasion theory and concluded that persuasive arguments were very effective when placed within a typical narrative structure. Rather than only having a conversation about the common characteristics of persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation and how these ideas differ, students can observe them within the fictional movie *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014).

The plot of *The Hunger Games* franchise focuses on how revolution occurs in the fictional world of Panem. Persuasion plays a key role in that rebellion because the characters within each of the 12 districts have been convinced not to challenge the Capitol’s absolute rule; however, some of the characters are starting to rebel against the Capitol’s authority. By observing and critically evaluating how the Capitol coerces acceptance of its rule and utilizes propaganda techniques versus how the rebellion both persuades and manipulates the districts during the uprising, students can further improve their own persuasive techniques. *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014) provides an excellent vehicle for students to understand the distinctions between persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation. The narrative of this third movie continues to explore how the 12 districts of Panem can rebel against President Snow and the Capitol. Katniss Everdeen, the heroine from the previous films, is

convinced to become the symbol of the rebellion: the “Mockingjay.” This movie specifically focuses on persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation through crucial scenes in which the characters engage in these important concepts. After reviewing the movie scenes and reflecting on the distinctions between these concepts, students can demonstrate what they have learned by developing advertisements that exhibit persuasive techniques.

Objectives of Activity:

By completing this activity, students should be able to:

- Understand the definition of persuasion and how it requires free choice
- Recognize how persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation have similar qualities, yet also differ
- Apply ethical principles to persuasive examples
- Create a video example of a persuasive message geared toward a specific audience

Description of Activity

Using the movie *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014), students can observe various scenes that demonstrate the differences between persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation. After discussing their observations of these movie scenes, students then have the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned about persuasion by designing their own advertisement. Without engaging in coercion, propaganda, or manipulation, how can students persuade the other districts within the movie’s fictional nation of Panem to join in the revolution?

This movie is the third of four films in the *Hunger Games* franchise. It stars Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen, the winner of the 74th annual Hunger Games. To maintain its power and encourage obedience within the districts, the Capitol insists that each year each of the 12 districts send two teen-aged tributes, one male and one female, to fight to the death until there is only one winner. During the first movie, Katniss won the games by outlasting all of the other tributes except for Peeta, the fellow tribute from her district. Peeta (portrayed by Josh Hutcherson) and Katniss claim to be in love as an excuse for why they could both win. However, the 12 districts are starting to question the Capitol's authority because the two "winners" could escape from the games, when there is typically only one winner who has killed all of the other tributes. To suppress the unrest caused by Katniss and Peeta's joint victory, the President of the Capitol, President Snow (portrayed by Donald Sutherland), orders the winners from previous Hunger Games to fight again in the arena in the second movie. Katniss and Peeta must return and fight again to survive the arena by killing the other tributes. At the end of the second movie, Katniss is evacuated from the arena after rebelliously shooting an arrow into the force field surrounding the arena, causing an abrupt end to the games. The third film starts with Katniss adjusting to life in District 13, in which she discovers there is an underground rebellion developing against President Snow and the Capitol in this previously unknown district; despite Snow's efforts to destroy all of District 13, there are rebel residents living there who view Katniss as the symbol of the rebellion. Peeta, however, remains Snow's captor and is sending out propaganda about the benevolence of the Capitol and how those in the districts should end the fighting against the Capitol. Katniss does not want to join the rebellion or be the symbol of the revolution; however, she ultimately convinces the leaders of District 13, including District 13

president, President Coin, to give in to her conditions in exchange for her joining the rebellion as the Mockingjay symbol.

Procedure/Steps

This activity helps students understand how persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation differ. First, students should read about the distinctions between these concepts. I recommend chapter 2 from *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the 21st Century* (7th Edition) by Richard Perloff. Instructors should also obtain a copy of the movie *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014); it is available online through Amazon and also frequently reruns on cable networks.

The day of the activity, after class has begun, review fundamental ideas from the reading, including the definition of persuasion, how persuasion involves an attempt to influence, and how persuasion requires free choice. In contrast, review how “coercion occurs when the influence agent: (a) delivers a believable threat of significant physical or emotional harm to those who refuse the directive, (b) deprives the individual of some measure of freedom or autonomy, and (c) attempts to induce the individual to act contrary to her preferences” (Perloff, 2021, p. 32). Additionally, discuss how propaganda and manipulation differ from persuasion, yet also overlap in ideas. For example, while persuasion and propaganda both aspire to influence mass audiences, propaganda “refers to instances in which a group has near or total control over the transmission of information and dissent is prohibited or forcibly discouraged” (Perloff, 2021, p. 36). Moreover, “propaganda is always deceptive, presenting only one sliver of the facts – the one propagandists want people to hear” (Perloff, 2021, p. 36). In addition, while propaganda requires media channels to send its messages, persuasion can be sent through mediated,

interpersonal, and organizational contexts (Perloff, 2021). Finally, instructors should also discuss that “manipulation is a persuasion technique that occurs when a communicator hides his or her true persuasive goals, hoping to mislead the recipient by delivering an overt message that disguises its true intent” (Perloff, 2021, p. 39). Be sure to explain that persuasion is not always manipulative; if a persuader is ethical by being honest and straightforward with the receivers of their messages, they are using persuasion. While manipulation can be viewed as being underhanded, it differs from coercion because manipulation relies on free choice. A person can be manipulated, but they still choose to believe the persuader. Students should consider how different audiences may interpret these ideas. Finally, connect these ideas to ethics in communication, particularly respect, honesty, and choice. Students should consider how they would like to be treated if they were being persuaded (respect), avoid being intentionally deceptive (honesty), and value that each person in the audience can make their own individual choices (choice).

Next, play approximately the first 20 minutes of *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014). In particular, there are two scenes that are crucial to this activity. In the first scene, Peeta appears on a popular television show broadcast from inside of the Capitol. He addresses the districts and asks the rebels to stop fighting. As a prisoner of the Capitol and a captor of President Snow, students should be able to identify the moments of coercion. Peeta knows he will be harmed if he turns against the Capitol, he is trapped inside of the Capitol, and if he had free choice, he would not turn against the interests of his district to endorse President Snow’s continued reign of power. Thus, students should be able to identify that these are the three aspects of coercion identified earlier in the review of the reading. Additionally, students should recognize the television show that Peeta appears on is an example of propaganda because

it only presents the side of the Capitol. The host of the show and the messages that he sends to his audience only benefit the Capitol and President Snow's interests. By only portraying the messages that President Snow wants people to hear, the television show is an example of propaganda.

The second scene that instructors should be sure to play is the one that includes Katniss, President Coin (portrayed by Julianne Moore), and Plutarch (portrayed by Philip Seymour Hoffman). While in District 13, Katniss meets President Coin and Plutarch; the three characters demonstrate persuasion and coercion through their interactions in this scene. Katniss announces that she will be the Mockingjay and embrace the rebellion if she can have several conditions met: she wants Peeta and the other tributes who are being held in the Capitol to be rescued, and Peeta to receive a pardon for what he said on television. President Coin initially declines Katniss's conditions. However, Katniss and Plutarch are able to persuade President Coin to change her mind. Students should be able to identify that this scene uses persuasion because no one threatens to harm another character, there is the freedom to decline the offers being made among the characters, no one presents only one perspective, and the interactions take place within an interpersonal context. Students could also question to what extent Plutarch and President Coin are engaging in manipulation; the movie takes the point of view of Katniss so the audience understands her true intentions. Students may perceive that Plutarch and President Coin are hiding their true intent from Katniss, thus engaging in manipulation.

After students view these video examples, divide the class into small groups and ask them to consider the following questions:

- 1) How is propaganda demonstrated throughout the clip? Who communicates messages of propaganda and why?

- 2) Are the conditions Katniss states to President Coin and Plutarch an example of persuasion or coercion? Why?
- 3) Is Katniss being manipulative when she gives her conditions to Coin and Plutarch? Why or why not?

Following their conversations, gather the class back together to discuss their answers. Since this is a great activity to do early in a persuasion class, ask the students who have different perspectives on the examples from the film to try to persuade their classmates of their positions. In particular, the instructor may highlight how persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation are depicted in the film as noted above. Students have also frequently discussed the motivations behind the moments depicted in the film.

When students have finished this discussion, instructors should connect the ideas to persuasion and ethics. By connecting persuasion, coercion, manipulation, and propaganda to ethics, students can better understand the obvious and also subtle distinctions between them. For example, how does treating others the way that we want to be treated influence persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation? How does being knowingly dishonest factor into the distinctions between these concepts? How does free choice factor into the distinctions between these concepts? Students should consider the answers to these questions as they consider how ethics affect the persuasive messages that they create.

Finally, using this example from *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part I* (Lawrence, 2014) and the class discussions, assign the students a follow-up class activity/homework assignment with the following scenario: Imagine you are in District 13. You have been tasked with creating a persuasive advertisement to promote the revolution. This 30 sec advertisement will be broadcast to the 12 districts in Panem, but not the Capitol. Ask the students to record their

persuasive message using their phone or computer/tablet and bring it to the next class period. Have them speak directly into the camera and address the characters in the movie. During the next class, students can share the advertisements that they created. Consider dividing them back into their same small groups and ask them to play their persuasive advertisement videos for one another. This provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate the differences between persuasion, manipulation, and propaganda and discuss them with their group members. Students can also converse about how their advertisement reveals an ethical approach to persuasion by thinking about the characters' free choice, as the students create honest, respectful, and persuasive ads. Ultimately, how could they persuade the 12 districts of Panem to join the rebellion?

Debriefing

In addition to creating the persuasive advertisement, have students answer the following questions once they have produced their advertisement:

- 1) What aspects did you include and why?
- 2) What aspects did you not include and why? Would any of the aspects that you did not include be an example of propaganda, manipulation, and coercion? Explain.
- 3) How did you ensure that your advertisement is ethical? What aspects of ethics that we discussed would you consider?
- 4) How did you direct your advertisement specifically to your audience? In other words, what aspects about your audience could you use to persuade them?

By utilizing these questions, students can reflect on how they used persuasive techniques and avoided propaganda, manipulation, and coercion.

Appraisal

While using this activity in my persuasion course, students enjoy this activity because they are engaged in active learning scenarios. Previous research by Baepler and Walker (2014) demonstrated that students who were engaged in active learning classroom activities comprehended course ideas better than when they only listened to a lecture. Students critically analyze the movie examples and then apply what they have learned by creating a video advertisement to persuade the movie characters. Additionally, most students have either read *The Hunger Games* books or have seen the movies, so they are familiar with the characters and the overall plot/setting of the film. Because of the practical application of persuasion concepts to this popular film, through this activity, the movie provides students a vehicle for thinking critically about the importance of defining persuasion and understanding its subtle distinctions.

Conclusion

Since understanding persuasion as a communicative process is vital for students, it is also important for them to understand the differences between persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation. Through observing and interpreting scenes from *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014), students can connect course ideas to a film narrative in order to distinguish between these course concepts. These examples demonstrate the distinctions between persuasion, coercion, propaganda, and manipulation. After watching the two scenes, instructors should observe if students can differentiate between these concepts using the movie's narrative. Can they identify when a character is persuading, coercing, manipulating, or using propaganda?

Moreover, when students apply these concepts to their own 30 second advertisements, instructors can assess to what extent students create persuasive, ethical ads. Do the students craft honest ads that respect their audience's free choice to say no? Students should analyze the characters from the movie to determine how best to persuade these characters to join the revolution against the Capitol. As a result, this activity is an excellent introduction for students to appreciate the power of persuasion, free choice, and how persuasion and ethics can be utilized to convince an audience.

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