

Teaching about Starbucks and Consumer Literacy

Joan Malczewski, Debra Plafker-Gutt, and Robert Cohen

One of the great challenges social studies teachers face is promoting economic and consumer literacy among their students. Fostering such literacy helps students to think critically and independently about their own roles as consumers as well as about the claims and promises the corporate world makes through mass advertising and the branding of the spaces that surround us. With our students, we chose to focus our consumer culture lesson on a company that students are exposed to all the time because of its presence in their neighborhoods and its connection to youth culture: Starbucks.

The idea of using Starbucks to explore consumer literacy with students seemed a natural one in part because of the ubiquity of this company's coffee houses. Even a short walk from the Manhattan high school where this lesson was taught would lead to at least three different Starbucks. And this does not include the one tucked inside the local Barnes & Noble bookstore, a popular after-school hangout. So Starbucks is more than close by; it is a part of youth culture. Cups often rest on students' (and teachers') desks in school, and teens can be found at the coffee outlet for study sessions.

In referring to this lesson as promoting consumer literacy, we mean that we were seeking to teach students to read corporate and consumer behavior, to look behind the messages conveyed to youths (and adults) by advertisers, and to assess the trends and fads that surge in consumer culture. We wanted students to think about how global companies operate, appeal to, and manipulate consumers. The lesson aimed to develop their ability to assess corporate motivations and truthfulness, analyze the claims

of companies about their products and social responsibility, and foster critical thinking about how, whether, and why consumers buy into the messages that corporate America transmits.

This lesson was taught to an 11th grade American Studies class—a combined history and English humanities class—by Debra Plafker-Gutt. Professor Bryant Simon, who has written a book about Starbucks, participated in the class. The lesson can be used with classes in social studies, language arts, current events, media studies, and history for grades 9–12.

Preparation for the Lesson

Prior to the lesson, students were prepared for this consumer literacy session via several activities assigned as homework. These included:

1. Conducting an Internet search of sources that defend, critique, or even mock Starbucks. (Among the most popular of their net discoveries were blogs and animated skits bashing the coffee retailer, dictionaries that defined the



drink orders, business articles that discussed Starbucks's business strategy, and the company's own website);

2. Working as "urban anthropologists" visiting a Starbucks, observing the environment and collecting artifacts such as a cup, a napkin or printed material—which they were to analyze and bring to class;

3. Reading the introduction to Bryant Simon's *Everything But the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks* at www.everythingbutthecoffee.net. To focus the students' reading, they were asked to imagine an opportunity to sit down with the author and discuss his study (see pp. 144–147 for Simon's analysis). What would they like for him to clarify or expand? The students had to come to class prepared with questions relating to the reading;

4. Reading "Black Gold: The Economics of Coffee" at PBS's Independent Lens website, so that students could consider how daily coffee consumption in their neighborhoods related to the lives of coffee growers and pickers;

5. Responding to questions on Starbucks as part of the class poll we conducted at SurveyMonkey.com. This free website is a fantastic resource for teachers to gauge student opinion through open-ended, multiple choice, and rating questions and offer open-ended writing prompts. The

resulting survey, titled “American Studies on Caffeine” asked students to

- comment on what images come to mind when they think of Starbucks;
- comment on what kind of image they think Starbucks is trying to project to the public;
- consider how many times they frequent Starbucks in a typical week;
- evaluate whether they think Starbucks is a good company, and offer a comment explaining their assessment;
- rate how much they enjoy frequenting Starbucks.

6. Exploring the economics of coffee on a global scale, students determined how much of the \$3.50 for a Starbucks grande latte with a shot of mint was distributed to coffee growers in Latin America.

Thus by the time students arrived at class for the consumer literacy lesson they had examined Starbucks from multiple angles. They had learned the views of Starbucks’s fans, detractors, scholars; they had also articulated their own impressions of Starbucks in the class survey, which built upon their observations at Starbucks outlets.

Studying Starbucks

The lesson began with a discussion of how one studies corporate and consumer behavior. The students had gone out and observed the way Starbucks outlets operated, much as Bryant Simon did in the research for his book. Since both had been engaged in an ethnographic study, the lesson began with a discussion of ethnography. For his ethnographic study, Simon had spent five years observing Starbucks, visiting hundreds of its stores, a process that required him to write everything down from these visits. He sometimes took people with him who could provide alternative perspectives, including teenagers, interior designers, and coffee drinkers. He also spoke with Starbucks workers whenever possible. The result was a comprehensive ethno-

graphic study that provided the basis for his book.

Language and Belonging

Students shared the artifacts and information that they had collected through their own ethnographic work. This led to a discussion of the Starbucks-specific language that students noted. Students pointed out that in most places consumers order “small,” “medium,” or “large” beverages, yet Starbucks does not use that terminology. One student told the class that the first time she went to a Starbucks, when she tried to order a “large,” her friend treated her as though she was ignorant, since at Starbucks the term used for large is “venti.” Students shared a variety of observations. One said that some consumers take pride in rebelling against the language by ordering a “small,” “medium,” or “large.” Another student recognized that if a small is called “tall,” consumers feel as if they are getting more. Simon commented on the size of the orders and explained that the coffee is generally supersized—a medium, or “grande” in Starbucks parlance, is (with regard to caffeine content) equivalent to taking three No-Doze.

The person serving the coffee is also accorded a special foreign sounding name: “barista.” These language issues may initially seem confusing. Indeed, though the coffee shops are run like a typical McDonald’s, with fast-food production behind the counter, online sites exist to teach consumers Starbuckspeak so they can learn how to order.

Students were asked to consider why a company would set up an elite-sounding system of discourse in what is actually a mass production, fast-food modeled coffee house. One student observed that the use of the right language seemed to make consumers at Starbucks feel like “insiders.” Simon agreed, noting that the concept of “insiders and outsiders” was important at Starbucks. Another student said that he felt the process enabled consumers to feel that they were more cosmopolitan than the average American,

since the Starbucks terminology was European-sounding. Simon agreed, noting that the ability to participate in the sales process made consumers who were “in the know” at the center of coffee knowledge, and denoted belonging and sophistication.

The class discussed how Starbucks appeared to be promoting a luxury product for a primarily middle-class target audience. Simon agreed with another student who observed that the Starbucks system made consumers feel as though they were not simply buying coffee, but a lifestyle. Starbucks allows consumers to say, “This is who I want to be,” and signal it to others. It is an everyday form of affordable status making. Four dollars is a relative bargain if it allows you to associate with something with cachet; and the company overcharges to create this impression.

Starbucks and the Environment: Reading Corporate Claims and Consumer Desires

Among the Starbucks artifacts students brought to class were cups, a napkin, and java jackets. Simon brought attention to the side of the so-called venti cup, which read: “You are a pioneer in using recycled cups.” Simon shared slogans that he had recorded in his research, including “Everything we do, you do,” and “It’s what we can do because of what you do.” A student observed that with the cups, consumers were being sold promises; Simon added that consumers were also being sold desires and wants. The student said that in the case of the cup, consumers were being sold ecological awareness. Starbucks, Simon pointed out, does extensive market research, and there is considerable evidence that people are concerned about the environment. Consumers want their companies to have a smaller environmental footprint.

A student asked whether consumers actually desired ecological awareness, or whether Starbucks created that desire.

continued on page 148

CONSUMER LITERACY *from page 143*

Simon suggested that this was the great conundrum: are we dupes, or agents? Some say that consumers are merely dupes. For example, when we shop in supermarkets, we are forced on a particular path that leads us to purchase more items. Simon, however, argued that consumers were actually agents, to a certain extent, in that we all have a particular set of concerns, and such businesses as Starbucks merely capitalize on them.

One student considered that the environmental wording appeared to reward people for drinking Starbucks. Simon agreed, but added that the subject really was not the environment—as individuals could conserve more by bringing in their own mugs to Starbucks; and many other businesses use a much higher percentage of recycled products and actually recycle their waste. Simon said the subject was really about “you,” the consumer—and more consumption. While Starbucks will give back ten cents if you bring in your own mug, the plastic-lined paper cups actually cost the company about 20 cents. Despite all the environmental messaging, these cups (because of their plastic linings) are not recyclable. The fact that Starbucks cups go to landfills is not publicized. On the environment, this means that, as Simon noted in his book, consumers get “innocence by association,” but we all have to pay for it. With almost 50 million customers a week, Starbucks waste pollutes the environment and private citizens subsidize it.

Consumer Literacy

The lesson concluded with a discussion on consumer literacy and how to assess both corporate and consumer behavior. Students observed that consumers do not always act in ways driven by their economic self-interest and that company messages should be read with care, that even the most benign slogan could be more style than substance. This does not

mean, of course, that all ads are false or that one should become cynical, but rather that consumers ought to be as critical in reading company claims as citizens are in assessing the promises of politicians.

Through writing prompts, students reflected on the lesson about Starbucks and the role of consumers in capitalist



societies. We would encourage teachers to carefully develop questions that require thoughtful analysis, as opposed to visceral reactions. Debra Plafker-Gutt asked students to write about how their image of Starbucks changed as a result of the lesson. Much to our surprise, many students wrote rants against Starbucks. We believed this was due to the fact that this was the first lesson students had ever had that probed deeply into corporate behavior and revealed a gap between company rhetoric and reality. In other words, the novelty of discovering that there was not always truth in advertising, even from a company that students had thought politically enlightened, led some students to assume that there was never any truth in company claims. The challenge for teachers is to enable students to see that there is a difference between being critical and cynical—that it is just as intellectually lazy to dismiss all corporate claims as false as it is to accept them all as true, and that such claims ought to be analyzed in light of objective inquiry and evidence.

This issue seems so important and loomed so large in the student writing that we advise teachers to anticipate it

as a natural part of this type of lesson and thus prepare to discuss it after the homework assignment is completed. As part of such a discussion, teachers might challenge students to consider the agency of both companies and consumers in decision-making. Students might be asked to consider whether some level of honesty and product quality is necessary in order to earn consumer loyalty—that if companies do nothing but lie in their ads they risk losing credibility and patronage.

Plafker-Gutt’s second question offered students a hypothetical activity, querying them about what they would ask the C.E.O. of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, if they were to interview him. The responses displayed a very critical sensibility, as the overwhelming majority of students offered questions challenging Schultz on Starbucks’s commitment to the environment. While we came away with concerns about the need to work toward more balanced student assessments of companies such as Starbucks, it was evident that the lesson had promoted a new type of questioning among students about the economic institutions that surround us in twenty-first-century America. We believe that this venture in economic literacy—which the students embraced enthusiastically—fostered significant student learning. 🌱

JOAN MALCZEWSKI is assistant professor of history and social studies in the Department of Teaching and Learning and in the Department of Humanities and the Social Sciences in the Professions at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development at New York University.

DEBRA PLAFKER-GUTT has been a public school teacher for more than 10 years. She is a member of the social studies faculty at Stuyvesant High School in New York City, where she develops and teaches courses in American Studies, women’s history and world history. **ROBERT COHEN** is the director of New York University’s Social Studies Program, co-editor (with Diana Turk, Rachel Mattson, and Terrie Epstein) of *Teaching U.S. History: Dialogues Among Social Studies Teachers and Historians* and author of *Freedom’s Orator: Mario Savio and the Radical Legacy of the 1960s*.

WINNERS

C-SPAN'S STUDENTCAM

2011

\$50,000 in prizes. 75 winners.

GRAND PRIZE



Carl Colglazier
8th Grade
The Great Compromise
Cary, NC
Home School

C-SPAN's annual competition asked students to make a short video on this year's theme: "Washington, DC, Through My Lens."

FIRST PRIZE HIGH SCHOOL



Matthew Wicks
After the Storm
Parkersburg, IA
Aplington Parkersburg High School

FIRST PRIZE MIDDLE SCHOOL



Sara Atkins, Melissa Yu, & Katy Becker
Net Neutrality: The Federal Government's Role in Our Online Community
Knoxville, TN Farragut Middle School

SECOND PRIZE HIGH SCHOOL



Daniel Yehieli, Sara Gabriele, & Jarek Bakken
The Price Tag of the American Dream
Cedar Falls, IA
Cedar Falls High School

SECOND PRIZE MIDDLE SCHOOL



Laura Seitz, Megan Mills, & Sinclair Richards
LEEDing the Way
Racine, WI
McKinley Middle School



Rachel Leonard & Emily Irvin
The Drive to Save an Industry
Jenks, OK
Jenks High School



Ian Hodge, Daniel Hong, & Chunyang Ding
ORN! The Lab That Made the City
Knoxville, TN
Farragut Middle School



Jake Lipson, Danny Miller, & James Harkins
The Border
Phoenix, AZ
Arcadia High School



Ani Perumalla, Kai Smith, & Alex Guard
Calming the Economic Storm: The Bush Tax Cuts
Knoxville, TN
Farragut Middle School



Madison Richards & Samantha Noll
Have Gun - Will Carry
Racine, WI
Horlick High School



Leo Pfeifer
Homelessness: An American Crisis
Seattle, WA
Salmon Bay Middle School

See all 75 winning entries at www.studentcam.org.



CREATED BY CABLE. OFFERED AS A PUBLIC SERVICE.