

Media Representations of the Komagata Maru Incident: Separating the Sense from the Nonsense¹

Critical Task

- a. Question the biases and prejudices that existed in media representations of the Komagata Maru during the period between May 23, 1914 and July 23, 1914.
- b. Critically evaluate media representation of the Komagata Maru incident in both newspaper reports and political cartoons.
- c. Assess and eliminate the bias in these representations to be more accurate and balanced.

Overview

In this challenge, students learn to identify and deconstruct bias in media depictions of the South Asian immigration and in coverage of the Komagata Maru incident in Canadian newspapers at the turn of the century. Students begin by learning about particular techniques used in newspaper articles and political cartoons that often carry their author's bias by studying a sample text. Having identified the bias in a particular text, students are asked to rework a newspaper article or political cartoon to better reflect the reality of the time and provide a more balanced account.

To accomplish this task, students are first introduced to the techniques used in political cartooning and newspaper reporting. Teachers are encouraged to work with the class to teach students how to deconstruct one political cartoon. Individually, students are asked to rework/rewrite one article and one cartoon to remove any visual or textual exaggerations, false statements, and generalizations made about migrants. Students are asked to provide justification and evidence to support their decisions.

Note to Teachers

The examples used in this critical challenge need to be treated with sensitivity. The intent of this challenge is not to reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudices, but rather to identify and deconstruct them in order to help students understand the unfounded claims, inaccurate perceptions and misrepresentation of immigrants during this time period. We encourage you to approach this challenge cautiously with your students; encourage them to be sensitive to the ethnic diversity in the classroom. To help begin this discussion, five-minute youth videos have been created to help students' understand discrimination and prejudice. Rup's video includes a hip-hop rap about the Komagata Maru.

Rupinder Singh Sidhu: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/4793>

¹ This lesson plan was created by members of Simon Fraser University's Komagata Maru Project Management team and members of the Critical Thinking Consortium (TC2)

Teaching Suggestions

Identifying bias

First, students are asked to examine a number of contemporary political cartoons to further their understanding of cartooning techniques and stereotyping. You may wish to bring in a selection of cartoons or ask students to bring in examples from newspapers or magazines. Begin the lesson by telling students that this is the most important class for their future careers. Allow students to consider this statement by asking them if this claim is biased. Record student responses on the board by placing them in one of four unlabelled categories. These categories reflect statements that question whether the claim is (a) irrelevant (b) inaccurate (c) exaggerated or (d) omits important information. If necessary, add additional comments to ensure each category has content. Ask students to suggest what title best reflects these groupings.

Guide the discussion towards the four categories listed above. Explain to students that biased text typically contains information that is irrelevant, inaccurate, exaggerated or omitted leading to the favouring of a particular opinion over others. Suggest that supplemental facts would likely challenge the implication of biased presentation.

Examining bias in a newspaper article

BLM #2B

Explain to students that the depiction of current events in newspaper articles cannot escape bias because the choice of title, emphasis, evidence and word carry particular connotations. Place a transparency of a contemporary newspaper article on the overhead, preferably on an issue that students have recently studied or are familiar with. Allow students time to read the newspaper article and complete the *Identifying Bias in the Media* (BLM#2B) that should be distributed at the start of this section. In a teacher-led discussion, invite students to provide answers to questions surrounding the title, what issues are emphasised in the article, the evidence used in the article, and word-choice. Ask students to judge whether these techniques generate an overall negative or positive account of the issue. Invite suggestions on how one may make changes to the article to create a more objective depiction of events. Record these suggestions on a transparency.

Identify bias in political cartoons

BLM #2C

Explain to students that unlike the presumed objectivity of newspaper articles, political cartoons are known for their visual opinions and subjectivity. Direct student attention to the techniques of symbolic choice, composition, reference and distortion frequently used by cartoonists. Place the political cartoon titled, “*Are you sure you want to immigrate here?*” either on a transparency on an overhead projector or access the file directly from the website. Explain that cartoon literacy requires an adequate degree of background knowledge of the event, the issue(s), and the individual(s) represented in the drawing. Invite students to generate as many questions as they can to better understand this cartoon. Encourage students to refer to their course textbook for additional information or use this as an opportunity to supplement their knowledge of the Komagata Maru incident. Next, distribute to students the worksheet titled, *Identifying Bias in Political Cartoons* (BLM #2C) and ask them to identify the sources of bias. Students are to suggest changes in the cartoon that would create a more balanced view.

Link to cartoon: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/3308>

Eliminating bias in media depictions

BLM #2A

Explain to the class that they will examine a number of media texts (either political cartoons or newspaper articles) to identify negative media representations of South Asians during the time of the Komagata Maru. Discuss the sensitivity of the topic needed when engaging in the following types of discussions and activities. Be mindful and respectful of the diverse, ethnic backgrounds of classmates.

Print three copies of each of the following newspaper articles and political cartoons and distribute one article to each student in the class (BLM 2#A). Invite students to complete either *Identifying Bias in the Media* (BLM #2B) or *Identifying Bias in Political Cartoons* (BLM #2C) as an aid to help them identify bias of these texts. Encourage students to use their textbooks and online resources to help determine the accuracy and relevant background information surrounding the issues and stereotypes presented in the cartoon. To modify the texts, invite students to use 'white-out' to physically eliminate certain words or symbols and a pen to supplement the visuals and text. More creative students may wish to recreate the text or the image in its entirety. Encourage students to share their texts. This sharing will enable you to monitor the tone and message of the language, determine the accuracy of the analysis, and to correct any misconceptions or misrepresentations in a thoughtful and respectful way.

Evaluation

BLM #2D

Use the rubric, *Assessing the Elimination of Bias* (BLM #2D), to provide feedback to students on how effectively they performed this task. The criteria used to evaluate students are based on three elements: (a) if correct identification of features and techniques were used (b) if students accurately identified bias, and (c) if they presented a balanced and accurate reworked piece.

References

- Case, Roland and P. Clark (eds.). (1997). *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies*. Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.
- Hou, Charles and C. Hou. (1997). *Great Canadian Political Cartoons: 1820-1914*. Vancouver: Moody's Lookout Press.

Blackline Master #2A: Newspaper Articles and Political Cartoons

Newspaper Articles about the Komagata Maru

Here are a few direct links to newspapers articles about the Komagata Maru to help you prepare for your class. A selection of additional newspaper articles are also available online on the <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/newspapers> website.

1. Resolution Passed in Dominion Hall by a non-South Asian congregation for the immediate removal of “undesirable” immigrants: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/116>
2. The Dominion Hall Meeting of the South Asian Community: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/538>
3. A letter from a KM passenger about a midnight attack by the Police: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/685>
4. The Komagata Maru Riot: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/215>
5. Another perspective on the riot onboard the ship: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/3072>

Political Cartoons about the Komagata Maru

Here are a few direct links to political cartoons about the Komagata Maru to help you prepare for your class. A selection of additional cartoons are also available online on the <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/photos> website.

1. Protecting his own: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/3335>
2. So near, yet so far: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/3339>
3. Bye-bye! I've had a very unpleasant visit. Sorry I am unable to stay longer: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/3318>
4. Such is life: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/3340>
5. Are you sure you want to immigrate here: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/3308>

Additional Youth Videos

Here are a few direct links to our youth profile videos. These videos importantly talk about issues facing young South Asian Canadians and how they relate their experiences to the Komagata Maru incident.

1. Manjot Bains, Co-Founder of Jugni Style: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/4790>
2. Rupinder Singh Sidhu, Activist and Musician: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/4793>
3. Harsha Walia, Activist with No One is Illegal: <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/4792>

Blackline Master #2B:

Identifying Bias in Newspaper Articles

| <p style="text-align: center;">Observation</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Rework</p> |
|--|---|
| <p>Title: Who does the title suggest is responsible for the event or issue? Who does the title suggest the issue affects? How important does the title suggest the issue is?</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Suggest a title that would be more balanced.</p> |
| <p>Emphasis: What portions of the text is most prominence (bolded, different sizing)? What issue is given most/ least attention? What questions are not answered in the text?</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">What changes to the text would you make to provide more balance?</p> |
| <p>Evidence: Who is being quoted in the text (government officials, general population etc.)? Where are the statistics coming from? Are there any arguments that do not have any supporting evidence?</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">What quotes or evidence would you like to be included in the report?</p> |
| <p>Word Choice: Are the connotation of the nouns, adjectives and adverbs in the text positive or negative? Are there any word choices that exaggerate?</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">What changes to the nouns, adverbs and adjectives would make the text less biased.</p> |
| <p>Is this text biased? Identify (a) Irrelevant? (b) Inaccurate? (c) Exaggerated? (d) Omitted information</p> | |

Blackline Master #2C

Identifying Bias in Political Cartoons

| Observation | Rework |
|---|--|
| <p>Symbolic choice: What actors and symbols are included/ excluded in the scene? What do the titles and captions add to the message?</p> | <p>What actors/ objects/ titles would you add/ omit to make the message more balanced?</p> |
| <p>Composition: What is suggested by the juxtaposition of symbols (relative importance or strength). What is the meaning of symbolic fusions (more than one symbol combined)?</p> | <p>How would you place objects to balance the message?</p> |
| <p>References: What historical or cultural references are being made? What does the choice of colour or shading suggest?</p> | <p>What historic or cultural references would make the message more balanced?</p> |
| <p>Distortion: What is the connotation these visual exaggerations (oversized or minuscule)? What is meant by symbolic deformations?</p> | <p>How would you alter the way symbols are depicted to make the image less biased?</p> |
| <p>Is this text biased? Identify (a) Irrelevant? (b) Inaccurate? (c) Exaggerated? (d) Omitted information</p> | |

Assessing the Elimination of Bias

| | Outstanding | Well Developed | Competent | Underdeveloped |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| Correct identification of features and techniques | All techniques are correctly identified. | Many of the techniques are correctly identified using examples | Some techniques are correctly identified. | Few techniques are correctly identified. |
| Comments/ Explanations for Rating: | | | | |
| Accurate identification of Bias | Provided clear and effective examples of irrelevance, inaccuracies, exaggerations and omissions | Provided vague references to irrelevance, inaccuracies, exaggerations and omissions in the text | Provided limited and vague examples of irrelevance, inaccuracies, exaggerations and omissions | Provided some examples of irrelevance, inaccuracies, exaggerations and omissions |
| Comments/ Explanations for Rating: | | | | |
| Balance and accuracy of reworked piece | Corrected falsehoods, eliminated exaggerations and additional information to create a balanced and accurate account | Some of the corrected falsehoods, eliminated exaggerations and additional information creates a more balanced and accurate account | Some of the corrected falsehoods, eliminated exaggerations and additional information creates a somewhere balanced and accurate account | Few of the corrected falsehoods, eliminated exaggerations and additional information creates a somewhere balanced and accurate account |
| Comments/ Explanations for Rating: | | | | |