Chapter 8

“I’m not Always Laughing at the Jokes”: Humor as a Force for Disruption

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ABSTRACT

Humor in popular culture plays with our perceptions and sense of dislocation. The inherently ambiguous logic of humor allows for multiple interpretations of social phenomena, and constructs the world as arbitrary, multiple, and tenuous (Mulkay, 1988). At the same time, humor is one of the central elements of much of what young people find appealing in popular culture. Exploring the potential of humor to interrogate cultural assumptions, Australian and American students participated in a cross-cultural television study. The student cohorts then communicated on line, developing their reading of the sitcom in a cross-cultural forum. Their responses highlight the disruption to accepted patterns of social order that the play upon form, or parody, delivers. Through exploring ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ readings of a television parody, this chapter explores how humorous conventions function to reflexively position readers, and thus invite critical readings of popular and engaging texts. It also examines broader questions of the role of the US in producing and distributing popular culture, and how readers might find creative and critical ways to deal with culturally disparate world views.

INTRODUCTION

Although engaging students with popular culture texts continues to gain slow acceptance in literacy education, it remains a disruptive act in the classroom. The cultural status of popular culture texts, as easy to understand, pleasurable, and reliant on emotion and narrative, often runs counter to standardized, dominant views of academic discourse. In addition, popular culture in the classroom also disrupts dominant pedagogical practices by engaging with texts in which students feel more ownership and expertise. It
changes the relationship of who understands and interprets texts and engages student involvement and investment. Yet the use of popular culture can still address important issues about audience, interpretation, authorship and context.

Humor in popular culture, in particular, plays with our perceptions and sense of dislocation. The serendipitous ‘logic’ of humor allows for openness of interpretation and an understanding of the contingency of ways of knowing. At the same time, humor is one of the central elements of much of what young people find appealing in popular culture. Exploring the potential of humor to interrogate cultural assumptions, Australian and American students participated in a cross-cultural television study. They viewed an Australian sitcom, *Kath and Kim*, asking to what extent a knowledge of the sitcom’s cultural norms was fundamental to an appreciation of the intended humor of the series. The student cohorts then communicated on line, developing their reading of the sitcom in a cross-cultural forum. Their responses highlight the disruption to accepted patterns of social order that the play upon form, or parody, delivers.

The study then asks how humor and popular culture could work in literacy classrooms as a disruptive pedagogy. The culturally contextualised nature of a local situation comedy works to suggest that accepted patterns have no necessity (Douglas, 1975) and that knowledge in this sense is always contingent. Juxtaposition, exaggeration or adopting an unexpected point of view in comedy throw ‘natural’ practices into relief, disrupting accepted patterns of social order, Through exploring ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ readings of a television parody, this chapter will explore how humorous conventions function to reflexively position readers, and thus invite critical readings of popular and engaging texts. It will also examine broader questions of the role of the US in producing and distributing popular culture, and how readers might find creative and critical ways to deal with culturally disparate world views.

As literacy educators, we chose to use the collaborative ethos of online discussions of popular culture to explore concepts of literacy and context in cross-cultural settings with students. We felt confident that when given the opportunity to discuss, question, and debate television programs with students in another country, the students in our classes would engage in collaborative meaning making that would encourage them think about issues of reading texts across cultural boundaries.

Humor, because of its strong reliance on cultural context, seemed a particularly fruitful choice to challenge students to think about how cultural context influences literacy practices. Although the form of the sitcom might be familiar to both sets of students, the contexts for the humor within the form would require students to work together to make meaning, highlighting for them the situated nature of the text. At the same time, discussing sitcoms would offer a low-stakes conversation embedded in texts and forms with which they could feel confident and comfortable in their interaction. Moreover, appreciation of comedy depends to a large extent on levels of cultural understanding – how do semiotic elements such as language, accents, issues, stereotypes, class-based and regional references and even local production styles influence the ways we respond to comedy, particularly satire made for television? Collette (2006) highlights the role of television as a powerful mediator of ‘a postmodern world … of surfaces and appearance’ (p. 861). By having students have to confront and negotiate meanings with students from other cultures, this project disrupted students’ ideas of textual stability and forced them confront culturally situated nature of all texts. Humor – parody in this case - offered us many possibilities for extending levels of critical thinking.
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