

Chapter 5

Riding Critical and Cultural Boundaries: A Multiliteracies Approach to Reading Television Sitcoms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the impact of new technologies on young peoples' literacy practices, with a particular focus on humour as text. Acknowledging ways in which rapidly-changing cultural and technological conditions have reshaped how people work and play, the authors work within expanded definitions of literacy, or multiliteracies. Exploring the potential of humour to interrogate cultural assumptions, Australian and American students participated in a cross cultural television study. They viewed a 'foreign' sitcom, asking to what extent knowledge of the sitcom's cultural norms was fundamental to an appreciation of the intended humour of the series. The student cohorts then communicated on line, developing their reading of the sitcoms in a cross cultural forum. The study asks how the students' multiliterate practices, including their critical interpretations of television comedy, hold implications for literacy education.

INTRODUCTION

Popular media texts offer high levels of engagement for viewers, as well as providing generative texts to study concepts connected to multiliteracies. Appreciation of comedy depends to a large extent on levels of cultural understanding – and one could ask how do such elements as accents, issues, stereotypes, class-based references and even local

production styles influence the ways we respond to television humour? How might these elements be read by cross cultural audiences?

This study investigates the interaction between graduate students in the US and Australia, exploring the cultural dimensions of humour, as well as political aspects of distribution in a globalised entertainment market. A group of American students viewed a popular Australian sitcom, *Kath and Kim*, while a similar cohort of Australian students

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-673-0.ch005

watched the US series *Arrested Development*, discussing separately, then online together, their responses to the two programs. The extent to which ‘local’ humour crosses cultural borders was examined by participants in relation to a cultural background, combined with number of different modes of meaning making, specifically cultural stereotypes, language, genre and production elements. This chapter contextualises popular viewing practices in a fast and global world and asks what the implications are for the contemporary literacy classroom. It explores ways that a critical reading of humour might disrupt acceptance of ‘natural’ cultural practices, and how laughter serves to reinforce or challenge group cultural identities.

MULTILITERACIES AND THE NEW LEARNER

The rapid proliferation of ICT, globalisation, and increasing social and cultural diversity has contributed to the notion of multiliteracies, or multiple modes of communicative competence. Students are able to create and maintain a variety of these texts, and personas, for a variety of different audiences. As Thomas (2007) notes about young people’s multiliteracy practices, the “transition between roles is quick and spontaneous, [with] many young people ... able to engage in multiple scripts, playing multiple roles (both online and offline) simultaneously” (p. 168). She suggests that a linear, print-based approach to teaching literacy will no longer meet the needs of what Camille Paglia described as teenagers’ ‘multilayered, multitrack ability to deal with the world’ (Paglia, quoted in Birkerts, 1994, p. 8). Young people growing up with computers and communications technologies – Mark Prensky’s (2001) ‘digital natives’ – process multiple semi-otic systems in multiple modes from a very early age. Formal schooling, working from narrow, print-based pedagogies, thus requires learners

to ‘power down’, and consequently constraining student engagement and learning.

Anstey and Bull (2004) point to a second aspect of multiliteracies: the multiplicity of social and cultural influences on ways that literacies are constructed and used. According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000), “Cultural differences and rapidly shifting communications media mean that the very nature of the subject of literacy pedagogy [is] changing rapidly” (p. 5). Words, images and video can now flow across national borders instantaneously. The ease with which texts can be transmitted across borders does not mean reading and writing happen without the influence of culture. Rain falls without noticing borders but the cultures on either side of a border may describe the rain in very different ways. Yet this world of rapid cross-cultural communication is the world in which our students will be reading and writing. In fact many students, through email or instant messaging or online games, are already engaged in reading and writing with young people in other countries. Their literate lives will be increasingly lived in contact with people in countries they may never visit. Their literate identities will be read by people in cultures unfamiliar to them.

How, then, do we teach reading and writing in a digital age of cross-cultural communication? As global connectedness challenges traditional geographic and cultural boundaries, technology has the potential to blur (or support) previously distinct group identities. Severing the link between physical location and physical settings, ICT may also create new ones, for example through online discussion forums and MSN chat rooms.

Meyrowitz (1985) argues that electronic media have the potential to create a feeling of sharing and belonging as well as one of exclusion and isolation. The relationship between group identity and group territory was tied traditionally to the relationship between place and information access. Electronic and now digital media, by severing the link between physical location and physical settings, blur previously distinct boundaries and

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