

MCK041030

Barbra McKenzie
Faculty of Education
University of Wollongong
Wollongong NSW 2522
AARE Melbourne 2004.

‘Building on Children’s Literacy Resources in Early Grade Classrooms’

Abstract

This practical and interactive session will demonstrate and discuss how early grade teachers may effectively build on the diverse resources that children bring to their classrooms. Opening the classroom door to home and community texts will be seen to be an important part of recognising and capitalising on children’s expertise. Doing so will further be seen to provide critical stepping stones for learning about texts and literacy practices that are important to children’s current and later school success. Framed by a Social Model of reading and Writing (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2001 & 2003), an inclusive approach that accounts for literacy as multi-faceted practices will be explored and applied to early grade classrooms.

Popular Culture: Hero or Villain?

What is Popular Culture?

What are the negatives with respect to popular culture?

What are the positives with respect to popular culture?

How can I use it to promote literate behaviours in the classroom?

What is Popular Culture?

Trying to define popular culture is difficult because it is so much a part of our everyday lives. As Taylor and Overmier (1996) discuss it involves such mundane aspects as food and beverage choices for example McDonald's, Pepsi, Coke; our clothing, Nike, Reebok; the types of entertainment we choose, Football, Wrestling, Video, Internet; the types of commodities we select, mobile phones, cars, beer; the types of lifestyles we aspire to, a Sea-change or a Tree-change. In fact popular culture impacts upon many of the life choices we make.

There are various ways that popular culture has been described in order to locate and discuss it. Some of these include comparing it adversely to 'high culture'. As several researchers discuss (Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter, 2003; Marsh & Millard, 2000) there are certain types of cultural markers that are considered to be high culture. These are identified as certain types of writing such as those for example of Dickens and Shakespeare. Then there is low culture, that is the type of culture that appeals to the masses, is viewed as non-educational, linked to leisure and often advocated and delivered by mass media for example watching a soap opera (Taylor & Overmier, 1996). The assumption here is that high culture is intrinsically of more value and worth in our society and that the audience lacks the ability to interpret the types of messages that the mass media produces.

Popular culture is also at times viewed and discussed as folk culture, a term that some (Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter, 2003) link to a particular cultural world-view, while others use this term to identify '...a naïve, simple and unsophisticated set of practices' (Marsh & Millard, 2000:15). Another view is that of popular culture

as everyday culture where consumers understand that the mass media markets products designed and manipulated to appeal to differing audiences. These audiences in turn impact upon this popular culture by deciding what and if to make a purchase.

‘Children are agents in the construction of their own culture at the same time as being subject to hegemonic discourses of profit and consumerism. They both accept and reject the products offered to them’ (Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter, 2003: p2)

What are the negatives with respect to Popular Culture?

Classroom teachers express a range of valid and compelling concerns against the use of popular culture texts in their classrooms. Some teachers feel that many children’s popular culture texts are inherently violent and cite computer games, television shows, films, toys and comics that involve a high level of violent behaviour that involves children in either a passive or at times a more interactive role. As a result children are often discouraged from utilising their cultural capital or their knowledge base with respect to many forms of popular culture and applying it within a classroom context. In fact many schools routinely disallow a range of activities and the related artefacts of popular culture at school.

Popular culture texts also appear to be strongly divided in a gendered sense with products such as Barbie and My Little Pony and those such as Spiderman and X Men marketed towards specific genders (Marsh & Millard, 2000). This division in popular culture assists in building and maintaining the gender regimes that children construct as they grow and develop (Millard, 1997; Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Of late, texts such as Bob the Builder appear on the surface to be less gender specific until the roles performed by the female members of the team are examined, then we see that they are still relegated to such female tasks as mixing and organising to feed and care for other team members.

Also of concern to some teachers are issues connected to racism and the way this is represented in popular culture texts. Tavin and Anderson identify the ways

by which Disney animated films create this impression by portraying non-White characters

‘...as stereotypical representations of “the other” who are often inferior, grotesque, violent or unscrupulous. Dark skin usually signifies “dark” intentions’ (2003:3).

They go on to detail this racial stereotyping as occurring also via the use of the accents and inflections assigned to the characters such as those in *The Lion King* and *Aladdin*. The baddie in these animations are also often racially and stereotypically identified and assume a minor role in the storyline (Marsh & Millard, 2000).

There are also other issues connected with the ‘Disneying’ of the world as it occurs through popular culture that have been deemed a concern. These include those connected with the revision of history, for example the way the Disney version of *Pocahontas* re-storied the narrative to create a romantic link between the main characters (Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Of issue also in connection with Disney is its powerful corporate role as oligopoly that impact upon its popular culture offerings across a diverse range of products that connect to consumerism. Due to Disney’s powerful and complex corporate connections

‘...Disney promotes itself through spirals of referentiality. In this sense, Disney refers back to itself through its own media outlets and subsidiaries in an effort to advertise and advance its own cause’ (Tavin & Anderson, 2003:2).

We see this often of course beyond Disney where the latest video refers to the website, refers to the action figures, refers to the fast food outlet, refers to clothing companies etc. Here we have seen a range of popular culture trends become fashionable such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Tamagotchi*, *South Park*, *The Simpsons* and *Pokemon*.

There is also concern among teachers with respect to the access that all children have to popular culture forms and that this may result in a climate similar to that linked to the digital divide connected to the use of computer technology. Although

it is true that many children lack access to specific computer technology and therefore the ability to experience playing a particular game or viewing a specific movie or video the intertextual aspect of popular culture allows them access to a wide range of related products or materials (Marsh & Millard, 2000).

The proliferation of popular culture texts across a wide area have also raised concerns regarding a move away from print based texts towards new media forms and the effect this may have upon school-based literacy. At issue here is that the types of literary experiences that children are exposed to prior to school may disadvantage some children and advantage others. Those children whose home experience exposes them to the types of literacy practices and forms used in the school context often have access to increased knowledge and understanding (Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2001; Marsh & Millard, 2000). One of the ways to address this issue is by incorporating a range of community and popular culture texts into classroom discourse to create a bridge between home and school literacies.

What are the positives with respect to popular culture?

As we indicated at the beginning of this symposium the Social Model of reading and writing that support our stance with respect to popular culture texts is based upon a particular model of reading (Freebody, 1992; Luke and Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Luke 2000). Here we located and discussed the roles that Context of Culture and Context of Situation play in identifying the diverse contexts in which children experience literacy (Harris et al, 2001; Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2003). The children in our classrooms experience literacy in a wide range of very diverse settings and are impacted upon by a wide variety of texts as they move among and between these settings. To return to an earlier point ably illustrated by Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter, children are not necessarily mindlessly manipulated, but rather play an active part 'in the construction of their own culture' (Marsh & Millard, 2000:41). To this end some popular culture offerings are accepted while others are firmly rejected. With respect to this point, teachers

can tap into the types of popular their children are currently engaged with as a means to promote greater awareness of literate practices across home, community and school settings (Taylor & Overmier, 1996). This locates the use of popular culture texts to promote literate practices firmly in the context of critical literacy (Luke, 2000; Comber, 2000) and invokes the use of the text analyst role as demonstrated earlier via our model (Harris et al 2003). Teaching children to utilise these aspects of literacy provides them with tools to engage with texts in a variety of contexts.

How Can I Use Popular Culture to Promote Literate Behaviour?

Before using some or a range of popular culture texts in a classroom context it is an interesting exercise for teachers to reflect on the many ways they use popular culture in their own lives. A series of questions could produce some surprising results. What type of popular culture texts do you use? When do you use these texts? How do you use these texts? What are the literate behaviours needed to access, understand and manipulate these types of texts? What are the current 'fads' with respect to popular culture? After understanding how you as a teacher use popular culture a classroom survey regarding their use by class members will provide the teacher with some very useful information regarding the literate habits of their students.

This is the type of activity that Marsh and Millard (2000) identify as used by three classes (two K-1 and the other Year 3) in two schools of children from diverse backgrounds in England. The classes established a home-school lending library based on comics where children were allowed to borrow one comic per week over half a term. Results demonstrated greater reading interactions at home based around the comics and identified a range of communal reading experiences by family members. Teachers capitalised upon these experiences in class by using comics for sequencing work, looking at characters and settings as well as stereotyping. They also used unique aspects of the genre such as

puns, onomatopoeia, assonance and alliteration to work at the word level of the text.

Computer games require high levels of visual literacy in order to interpret the multi-modal nature of the genre. They also require a range of literacy skills to enable the de-coding and interpretation of the written instructions or prompts on screen. Computer games are based on a narrative genre containing all of the elements indicative of this text type. Although there are many similarities between narratives in a textual form and those on computer, there are also some major differences that may explain the popularity of computer games. Berger cited in Marsh and Millard (2000) has identified these differences and they appear in the table below. It may be a useful exercise to explore the types of narratives that certain (non violent) computer games replicate and using the information in the following table, to discuss the ways by which they achieve this. Some type of book/computer review exercise linking both text and non-text forms such as 'If you liked x computer game then you'd also like x book' may also prove interesting.

Print Narrative	Electronic Narrative
Linear & multilinear	Non linear/multidirectional
Author 'tells', reader 'listens'	Reader/player is part of story
Low in participation	High in participation
Words basic	Images and sound basic
Reader guided through territory	Reader/player explores territory
Interior world basic	Exterior world basic
Imagination	Immersion
Strong characterisation	Weak characterisation

Endings strong	Endings weak/problematical
Reader external to events	Reader/player internal to events
Participation by identification	Actual participation in narrative
Illustrations relatively simple	Graphics, music, sound powerful
Construction of story hidden	Construction of story discovered

Videos that are firmly located in popular culture are also useful resources to use in the classroom to explore critical literacy or the text analyst role. Here such videos as Aladdin, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast could be explored in a range of ways. As suggested by Tavin and Anderson (2003) some of these include comparing the video with the text. Given our previous discussion regarding Disney, it may also be insightful to compare the video and the (usually) accompanying text with a different version of that text and discuss a range of issues related to characters. This leads to questions such as who are the main characters? What do they look like? How do they behave? This will also link to questions regarding secondary characters and protagonists as well as those involving setting.

Cartoons are also another form of popular culture text that can be used for literacy purposes in the classroom. As Dyson (1997) has discovered children appropriate a range of superheroes into their writing tasks that they draw from a range of diverse areas. These interests can be utilised in a number of ways to promote literate behaviours as Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter (2003) identify. Year two children were surveyed by their teacher as to their favourite superheroes, the resulting information led to work around the lack of female superheroes, the characteristics of superheroes, the connection between superheroes and others in our community and the ways superheroes related to other characters.

Although this paper has primarily focussed upon ICT forms of popular culture, the following workshops will provide opportunities to explore and discuss the ways a range of print based popular culture texts can be used in the classroom. These workshops will revolve around the use of a range of questions like:

- What are the literate assumptions that underpin this text?
- What types of knowledge and understanding would a user of this text need to successfully negotiate meaning?
- What type of semantic knowledge would a user of this text need to have or attain in order to successfully decode this text?
- If I wanted to re-create this text, what type of information and skills would I need?
- How does this text use literacy to promote its message?
- What type of language mode does this text use to interact with the reader/viewer?
- Are there aspects of this text that I can use to teach reading, writing, speaking, listening

Reference List

Alvermann, D., Xu, S and Carpenter, M. (2003). 'Children's everyday literacies: Intersections of popular culture and language arts instruction.' *Language Arts*, Vol. 81, Issue 2, pp 145-154.

Comber, B. (2000). Critical literacy: What's it all about?

<http://criticalliteracy.org/readings/comberwi.htm>

Dyson, A. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture and classroom literacy*. London: Columbia University Teachers College Press.

Freebody, P. (1992). A socio-cultural approach: Resourcing the four roles as a literacy learner. In Watson and Badenhop, *Prevention of Reading Failure*. Sydney: Ashton-Scholastic.

Harris, P., Turbill, J., Fitzsimmons, P. & McKenzie, B. (2001). *Reading in the Primary school years*. Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press.

Harris, P., McKenzie, B., Fitzsimmons, P. & Turbill, J. (2003). *Writing in the Primary school years*. Tuggerah, NSW: Social Science Press.

Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Vol. 43, Issue 5. pp. 448-461.

Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1999a) A map of possible practices – further notes on the four resources model. *Practically Primary*, Vol 4, Issue 2. pp 5-8.

Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1999b). Further notes on the four resources model. Reading Online. www.readingonline.org

Marsh, J., Millard, E. (2000). *Literacy and popular culture: Using children's culture in the classroom*. London: Sage.

Millard, E. (1997). *Differently literate: The schooling of boys and girls*. London: Falmer Press.

Tavin, K., Anderson, D. (2003). 'Teaching (popular) visual culture: Deconstructing Disney in the elementary classroom.' *Art Education*, Vol. 56, Issue 3. pp 21-35.

Taylor, R., Overmier, J. (1996). 'Mirror, mirror on the wall: Reflecting the best in popular culture.' *Emergency Librarian*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, pp 12-15.