Youth and Popular Culture: From Theory to Practice

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Perhaps more than ever before, elementary reading teachers are required to follow the National Reading Panel’s recommendations to focus on specific elements of literacy instruction in their curricula. This paper presents suggestions for incorporating Peabody Award winning children’s television programs into literacy instruction that is aligned with NRP recommendations. The suggestions offered in this paper are focused on creating engaging, rigorous lessons that will draw upon elements of popular culture and students’ unique cultural contexts to help teachers craft lessons that will engage students in standards-based literacy instruction that is attentive to the diverse cultural contexts present in 21st century classrooms.

The influences of standards and mandated assessments have been so great over the last 25 years that we are likely to label this period in the history of education as the “standards period” (Marshall, 2009, p 113). A significant side effect of the standards period has been a narrowing of the curricula that can be found in many literacy classrooms (Applebee, 1996; Hillocks, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Perhaps more than ever before, elementary reading teachers are feeling compelled to follow the National Reading Panel’s (NRP, 2000) recommendation to focus on five areas of instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. The challenge facing teachers is finding ways to make focusing on these areas of instruction engaging for their increasingly diverse student populations. We believe that teachers can draw upon elements of popular culture in children’s television programming to incorporate the NRP recommendations in engaging classroom instruction.

Navigating Diverse Cultural Contexts through Popular Culture

It would be much easier to design classroom instruction based upon the recommendations of the National Reading Panel if every student arrived in the classroom with the exact same cultural contexts. However, this is simply not the case. The reality is that every social group creates a distinct language and cultural frame of reference (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2008; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). The varied cultural frames of reference that students bring to
the classroom can complicate teaching. In order to communicate with students, teachers must be aware of the ways that their students’ cultural experiences influence the way they understand language and the world around them. Bakhtin (1981) argued that outside of “the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet unqualified world with the first word,” there is no escaping the influences of previous utterances (p. 279). Teachers who are able to recognize and build upon their students’ cultural contexts and experiences are likely to engage their students in authentic learning.

The diverse student populations that exist in 21st century classrooms make teaching and learning a complex endeavor. As classroom populations continue to grow more diverse, teachers must learn to navigate the nuances in language and ways of viewing the world that students bring to the classroom. Finding ways to incorporate students’ funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) in daily lessons can be challenging. Teachers cannot expect all students to come to the classroom with the same cultural knowledge, and teachers must consider how those variations in frames of reference influence teaching and learning. Gee (2008) argued that “meanings are ultimately rooted in negotiation between different social practices with different interests by people who share or seek to share some common ground” (p. 12). The tricky bit, then, is finding ways to negotiate common ground in the reading classroom.

One way to negotiate common ground may be to draw from students’ shared popular cultural experiences. An increasing body of research (e.g., Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008; Hunt & Hunt, 2004; Marsh, 2006) suggests including elements of popular culture in literacy instruction can be an effective means of making connections across cultural contexts. Millard (2003) described the development of a “literacy of fusion” that draws upon students’ cultural interests to motivate them to write (p. 3). Millard’s work, which seeks to combine students’ home interests with school requirements, demonstrates how teachers can explore the similarities and differences between cultural contexts. To explore how a “literacy of fusion” could be applied to elementary reading classrooms, we investigated how literacy practices found in award winning television programs for children can help preservice and inservice teachers make connections between school literacies and popular culture.

Although some research-based curriculum mandates suggest that standard methods of instruction will work best for all students, teachers work in the real world—a world where individual differences must be addressed for instruction to be effective. With this concept in mind, we have explored twelve Peabody Award winning children’s television programs (see Appendix A) in order to offer teachers some suggestions for considering how they might draw upon them to blend students’ knowledge of popular culture with standards-based instructional practices, such as the NRP’s recommendations to focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

**Methods**

This project was not designed to be a formal research study. Instead, we offer a theoretical piece based on our observations of these television programs to discuss how they might be used to draw upon popular culture to bridge the cultural divide that is present in many classrooms. We wondered if the winners of the Peabody Award could be used to facilitate teachers’ efforts to draw upon elements of popular culture to create engaging lessons that were aligned with NRP recommendations. In order to facilitate our inquiry, we reviewed the list of Peabody Award winning televisions programs from the last 40 years and selected programs that
familiar to many elementary school students. In a sense, these television shows themselves are a part of popular culture. Television programs like *Dora the Explorer, Blue’s Clues,* and *Sesame Street* are popular culture icons with which many children identify. These shows often make references to other elements of popular culture that teachers might use to connect with their students’ cultural contexts. Therefore, we see much value in incorporating them into lessons, which are designed to draw upon students’ cultural funds of knowledge.

As we each viewed twelve episodes from different children’s programs, we completed viewing sheets (see Appendix B for an example) in order to note examples of references to popular culture and elements of the NRP’s recommendations that teachers can use to facilitate literacy instruction. Both authors viewed and completed the same episodes while completing a viewing sheet for each program. After we had viewed all of the episodes, we compared our viewing sheets to note similarities and differences. Although our viewing sheets were similar as we identified the five domains of effective literacy instruction, we noted more discrepancies in the area of references to popular culture. We determined that these discrepancies were most likely related to generational differences, and we have provided a brief discussion of these differences later in the paper. We believe that the discrepancies highlight the importance of exploring cultural differences.

*Context of the Study*

The Peabody Awards are prestigious awards given annually to exceptional programs in television and radio. We viewed 12 award-winning episodes to ascertain how elements of culture and popular culture can be drawn upon to engage students in reading instruction that addresses the NRP’s recommended areas of focus for reading instruction. In the following sections, we will discuss the opportunities we see for teachers to utilize children’s television programs as tools for effective literacy instruction. First, we will discuss how these programs can be used to engage students in instruction that addresses the recommendations of the NRP. Second, we will highlight the importance of being attentive to multiple cultural frames of reference. Additionally, we will focus on how elements of popular culture found in these programs can be used to increase student engagement in daily instruction. It is our hope that this research project will be useful for teachers who are interested in learning more about drawing upon television and other forms of digital media to engage students in rigorous, engaging literacy instruction.

*Highlighting NRP Recommendations*

As we viewed each of the children’s television programs, we noted occurrences of literacy practices aligned with the recommendations of the NRP (See Table 1). We noted that phonics, comprehension, and vocabulary were the most common literacy practices that occurred during these programs. While we did see elements of phonemic awareness and fluency in these programs, they appeared relatively infrequently. Therefore, we have chosen to focus on how teachers can utilize these programs to address phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension.
Table 1

_Literacy Practices in the 12 Peabody-Award Winning TV Episodes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observer</th>
<th>Phonemic Awareness</th>
<th>Phonics</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Phonics Instruction in Sesame Street_

Phonics instruction may often be a dry part of a reading lesson, and the very nature of focusing on the relationships between letters and sounds can lend itself to instruction that is lean on context. However, this type of instruction does not have to be dry or devoid of context. For example, an episode of _Sesame Street_, which won the Peabody Award in 1989, includes a segment that provides an excellent opportunity to focus on phonics instruction. As a choir sings, the letter M appears on the screen and then the words _My Music_ come on the screen with the letter M underlined. This portion of the program offers teachers an opportunity to put letter-sound relationships in the context of a choir. Teachers could build upon this lesson by asking students to share their favorite music in a follow-up activity and identify common letter patterns in the written lyrics that accompanied this music. Doing so would facilitate the integration of students’ knowledge of popular culture in literacy instruction. We believe that providing teachers with creative ways to engage students in literacy activities is more important than ever before, given the many forms of media that are competing for children’s attention as we move further into the digital age. Students and teachers have increased opportunities to learn from one another when multiple forms of media are brought together to create a literacy of fusion, instead of remaining isolated from one another.

_Vocabulary Instruction in Sesame Street_

Creating engaging vocabulary lessons can often be a challenging task for teachers, but episodes from popular children’s TV shows such as _Sesame Street_ can be used to create engaging vocabulary lessons. For example, during one segment of the same 1989 episode, jaguars, leopards, and giraffes appeared on the screen while children called out the names for these animals. This segment provided an interactive way for young students to learn to connect these visual images to new vocabulary words. On the screen, perhaps more so than on a word wall, these images come alive. More complex words, such as parts of the respiratory system, were integrated into another segment of the program as they appeared on the screen while a character explained the breathing process. Both of these segments of the program functioned as opportunities for students to make connections to these vocabulary words. As Bakhtin (1981) argued, each word we use is influenced by the contexts in which it has been used in the past. If
students are not engaged in lessons that will help them build contexts for the new words they are asked to learn, they are unlikely to develop meaningful connections to those words. Teachers and students can build upon the visual images and the contexts provided by the program to discuss how these new vocabulary words can be connected to students’ lives.

*Comprehension Instruction in Blue’s Clues*

Many students come to the classroom well-versed in the literacy of watching television. The skills children develop to follow the action and plot of a television programs can be transferred to the act of reading texts if teachers can find ways to make these practices explicit. The 2001 episode of *Blue’s Clues* serves as an excellent example of how teachers might do so. During this episode, Steve, who is the host, asks viewers to predict what gray clouds might mean for the weather on the hike that he and Blue hope to take that day. Steve is asking the viewers to draw upon visual clues to ask them to predict what might happen. Teachers who are viewing this episode with their students might take this opportunity to stop the program and talk with students about how they might draw upon clues in a text to predict what might happen next. In this way, teachers can draw upon the television literacy skills that students possess to help them make connections to the processes they need to be successful readers.

*Highlighting Differences in Cultural Frames of Reference*

Our experience of viewing these programs highlights the need to be attentive to differences in cultural frames of reference. We can, after all, learn much from exploring cultural dissonance. As we viewed the programs, we each began to notice different cultural elements in them. For example, *Mother Goose Rock and Rhyme*, which won the Peabody Award in 1990 includes an allusion to the 1954 Marlon Brando film *On the Waterfront*. We noticed that only Observer 1 picked up on this reference during our discussion of the viewing sheets we had created. Observer 2 had not known that this was a reference to Brando’s famous line, “I could have been a contender.” Generational differences may account for the discrepancy. What we began to realize as we went through the viewing sheets is that teachers must also consider generational difference in their daily lessons. If teachers can take the time to consider how their students’ experiences differ from their own, they are more likely to find ways to begin to bridge generational gaps.

When teachers are looking for programs to use in their classrooms, they will need to be attentive to cultural differences. It is also important to realize that students will bring knowledge to the classroom that does not fit with teachers’ frames of reference. We offer the following suggestions for navigating these different frames of reference present in the classroom:

1. Build students’ background knowledge about cultural differences before viewing a program that includes cultural references that might be new to students.
2. Present students with opportunities to discuss their interests and take on the role of guide in the world of popular culture.
3. Ask students to create a list of cultural references they noticed while viewing the programs. Have students work in groups to compare their lists and ask the groups to share what they have found with the rest of the class. This activity would lend itself to discussions on how different people have different backgrounds to bring to discussions, and how students can all benefit when they learn from each other.
DJ, Bring the Hook: Popular Culture in Literacy Classrooms

Perhaps one of the most exciting things about bringing elements of popular culture into daily instruction is that it creates opportunities for students to become the experts who teach the teachers (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008). Students can be excellent sources of information about the dynamic world of popular culture—where references to popular music, TV shows, movies, and celebrity icons change almost daily. As students and teachers share aspects of their cultures through sharing their popular cultures, the literacy classroom can be a place where students’ interests are piqued and where teachers and students build positive personal connections with each other.

Creating engaging lessons for diverse student populations is no mean feat. Teachers are being asked to work with students whose cultural frames of reference are becoming more diverse than ever before, and they are doing so amidst the pressures of high-stakes testing. However, it is possible to provide effective literacy instruction without allowing worksheets and scripted instructional materials to dominate instruction. Television programs, such as Dora the Explorer or Blue’s Clues are significant elements of popular culture of many students. Using these programs can be an excellent way for teachers to incorporate the popular culture knowledge that many students bring to the classroom as they work to create instructional activities that are aligned with NRP recommendations. We hope that the suggestions we have offered can provide teachers with alternative solutions to the complicated problem of creating instruction that is tailored to meet the needs of students’ diverse cultural contexts while remaining aligned with the recommendations of the NRP.
References


Appendix A
List of Observed Programs

Lassie, 1956
Sesame Street, 1969
Big Blue Marble, 1975
The Muppets, 1978
321 Contact, 1988
Sesame Street, 1989
Mother Goose and Grimm, 1990
Carmen San Diego, 1992
Animaniacs, 1993
Wallace & Grommet, 1995
Blue’s Clues, 2001
Dora the Explorer, 2003
## Appendix B
Sample Viewing Sheet

**Sesame Street, 1989**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References to Popular Culture</th>
<th>Literacy Practices Observed</th>
<th>Cultural Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Masterpiece Theatre with the Cookie Monster</td>
<td><strong>Print</strong>&lt;br&gt;● Signs in background&lt;br&gt;● B- letter on screen shown on both upper and lowercase- could also be seen as modeling for writing&lt;br&gt;● Signs in background in hospital and in restaurant&lt;br&gt;● “Amor” on screen as song plays with singer repeating word&lt;br&gt;● “Stop” appears on screen as kid say stop and dancers (80’s guy and ballet girl) stop dancing.</td>
<td>● Having baby in hospital&lt;br&gt;● Racially diverse cast; also a deaf cast member&lt;br&gt;● Pay phone- something many kids today may not have seen or be used to seeing&lt;br&gt;● Walking on the beach&lt;br&gt;● Parents reading to children&lt;br&gt;● A topic for the show is “Why does everyone get so excited about a new baby?”&lt;br&gt;● <em>The Sound of Music</em> parody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Grover says “Hard to dance to but I give it a six” I know that’s a reference to some old show</td>
<td><strong>Letter/sound relationships</strong>&lt;br&gt;● M appears on screen as choir makes the sound of letter m&lt;br&gt;● Two words that start with M appear on screen “My Music”&lt;br&gt;● Letter M appears on screen and words that start with M appear on screen as they are read&lt;br&gt;● Letter be appears on screen and then images of words that start with B come on screen and the kids say the words that the images represent&lt;br&gt;● Alphabet song is sung as letter of alphabet appear on screen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Popular 80’s music style used for song about above and below. Don’t know the song, but I know I heard the melody in a lot of movies.</td>
<td><strong>Phonemic awareness</strong>&lt;br&gt;● Syllables and sounds for word Ernie are repeated without print</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 80’s and ballet dancing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 80’s song “Hip to be Square” is adapted for song about shapes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>