Pop Culture and ESL Students: Intertextuality, Identity, and Participation in Classroom Discussions

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Patricia A. Duff

Through my interactions over the last year with two toddlers (my twin nieces), my world has expanded to include a new circle of "friends" I'd never encountered before: Steve, Magenta, and Blue; Arthur, Francine, and Muffy; Madeline, Miss Clavel, and Pepito; and many others. These fictional characters represented what was, for me, an unfamiliar world of pop culture and videos for young children. I came to understand who these characters were and their relationships to one another and to themes and storylines through direct observation and also by asking about them. I could, in turn, incorporate the characters into my interactions with the children as well, allowing me to participate in their evolving play-world culture in different ways. The characters clearly capture the imagination of the girls and have become important fictional figures in their lives, discussions, role-playing, and understanding of the world around them.

Perhaps it is unremarkable that pop-culture icons such as Blue (a dog), Arthur (a boy-like animal), and Madeline (a little French girl) and the commercial products associated with them (e.g., Blue's Clues T-shirts, Madeline dolls, books) are so meaningful to young children. After all, pop culture is ubiquitous in contemporary society, and these characters and storylines are just the first of many thousands these children will encounter, inevitably, throughout their media-saturated lives. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which children's identification with these characters and their narratives eventually influence their talk and literacy activities within classrooms—and not just in their activities at home or on the playground (Dyson, 1997). Children bring these fictional characters and stories with them to school as part of their background knowledge and cultural repertoire—as part of who they are—and teachers in language arts, social studies, science, and other subjects are now trying to capitalize on this situation by bringing pop culture into the curriculum for a variety of educational purposes (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Buckingham, 1998; Stevens, 2001).

Children (and adults) who have grown up with the same narratives draw freely on them in their interactions with others as a means of establishing their in-group membership. However, those who have grown up in other cultures or in different generations without these particular referents or stories— but with others— may have difficulty being included in the social worlds of their new local counterparts. English-language learners, for example, must master the complex linguistic and academic content of their school subjects, plus the unfamiliar but pervasive pop-culture symbols and scripts. Newcomers lacking the necessary cultural schemata and linguistic skills to interpret the texts may be denied access to the narratives and social networks of their local peers at school, a phenomenon that seems to increase as students move from elementary to secondary school.
Negotiating pop culture and other literacies in current-events discussions

Recent research I conducted in Canadian classrooms reveals the extent to which pop-culture texts enter into "mainstream" classroom discussions even at the high school level and some of the ramifications of this for ESL students and teachers (Duff, 2001, in press). The focus of my research was language socialization in mainstream content areas. ESL students represented about 50% of the students in the school and school district. I observed two Grade 10 social studies classes at one school for about half a year each and interviewed the students and teachers, one class had 18 ESL students and only 10 local students, and the other had 7 ESL and 17 local students. I will discuss the weekly 1-hour "current events" discussions that took place in the second class. The ESL students came primarily from Taiwan and Hong Kong (with one student each from Korea and Japan) and had been in Canada for roughly 1-4 years. In contrast to these newcomers, the local students had mostly grown up in the same neighborhood and had attended the same elementary school; as a result, they had vast pools of shared cultural knowledge and experience.

The following excerpt illustrates the pervasiveness of pop culture in classroom current-events discussions. Mr. Jones (all names are pseudonyms), the 30-year-old teacher, read to the class a short newspaper article on "cyber ethics" connected with the spread of malicious gossip on the school district's e-mail system. The article made an analogy between Internet postings and bathroom graffiti, which led to a discussion about gendered graffiti practices: comments about the television series *Ally McBeal*, where employees share coed bathrooms; American television announcements of the past directed at parents; and then a reference to an episode of *The Simpsons*, in which Homer appears to respond to a television announcement by saying that he doesn't know where his children have been for 2 days. (Transcription symbols not included.)

Mr. Jones: (Reading from newspaper) "Cyber ethics have raised questions about cyber ethics and respect. It's high-tech graffiti said Mr. M, school vice-principal. Some things posted...are very hurtful...to adolescents who are still trying to figure things out." Then it goes and...says um..."you see the content of a lot of this is the kind of stuff that ends up on bathroom walls, but it gets publicized a lot further on the Internet, plus somehow people still—"

Sue: We don't write on bathroom walls anymore.

Mr. Jones: "Plus somehow people still believe more..." You know there was once a study done by some people at the University of British Columbia. They wanted to study the quantity and the nature of bathroom graffiti, male versus female.

Sue: Way more males?

Mr. Jones: Way more males.

Male student: Oh yah.

Mr. Jones: And the male graffiti—here were their findings. It was kind of interesting. A lot of people said, well, that's not a valid topic of study. I thought it was interesting.

Sue: Kind of cool.

Mr. Jones: Um, here's what they found. They found that the male graffiti in general, and it was a study done by two women who wanted to do it so (some laughter) they had to get access to men's bathrooms, right? Like after hours and stuff, and uh, they found that male graffiti was nastier.

They discuss their experiences in boys' versus girls' bathrooms and graffiti, then Sue exclaims that she has been in boys' bathrooms "so many times." The teacher responds in the following excerpt.

Mr. Jones: Well, you guys live like in the *Ally McBeal* generation. Right?

John: What?

Mr. Jones: Where they share a bathroom.

Male student: No way.

Mr. Jones: Right? On *Ally McBeal* but when I—

Sue: Did you hear about the transsexual who sued? (She was referring to a local lawsuit in which someone contested her lack of access to a women's washroom.)

Mr. Jones: When I grew up it was more strict. Wait! Let's finish this article.

Mr. Jones: (Several turns later) It's very hard with the Internet isn't it? Uh, and he continues on to say, "all these schools block it out of their school websites, but the school board thought that it would be best not to publicize it and it would just die down in interest," right?

Mr. Jones: (Some turns later) "You know the saying from the 1950s 'Do you know where your chil-

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*Media & Pop Culture*
Mr. Jones: Great. Doug and Shh! (to someone else)

Doug: It was on The Simpsons.

Mr. Jones: Quiet. (said to other students who are chatting)

Doug: Homer’s like eating TV dinner and it's like an announcement and then he says, “I told you yesterday I don’t know.”

Students: (Laughter)

Mr. Jones: Uh, The Simpsons. They're so good.

The pop culture and other media and textual references in this excerpt come from the article read in class, and from Sue, Doug, and Mr. Jones. To participate in this discussion, students needed to (a) comprehend the newspaper article and the issue being presented; (b) make quick connections between the Internet, bathroom graffiti, and Ally McBeal; (c) discern the relevance of the television announcement and the Homer Simpson anecdote; and (d) feel that this was legitimate classroom content and talk worthy of their input and attention. References to pop culture in excerpts like this provided connections to the contemporary cultural worlds of students and, more subversively perhaps, enabled students to prolong and provoke discussion and forestall their return to potentially less engaging lesson content (e.g., history and economics). They could also test the boundaries of permissible topics (e.g., Sue’s topic that got sidetracked). However, the textured, pop-culture-laden talk was alluring but dense for the ESL newcomers, a complex, sometimes bewildering form of both sociolinguistic and cultural play and work. While Mr. Jones and the local students wove together their nonacademic and academic texts, and responded enthusiastically to one another’s contributions, the ESL students almost never spoke because of the rich intertextuality and hybridity of the discourse, the speed of turn-taking and topic nomination, and their lack of required cultural schemata and confidence in speaking.

This infusion of pop culture into this classroom’s discussions was very common. A week earlier, for example, after a student’s serious presentation of a news item about a new diagnostic test for breast cancer, the following elements were interpreted into the free-flowing discussion that ensued: a George Burns joke by Mr. Jones about sneezing (after he sneezed) and someone else’s comments about Homer Simpson and serendipitous discoveries (e.g., in medical research), an observation about Prince Charles’s left-handedness, an announcement about the trading of Wayne Gretsky to another hockey team; an extended discussion about the Barbara Walters interview earlier that week (in March, 1999) with Monica Lewinsky; and, finally, comments about Seinfeld, John Lennon, Catcher in the Rye, and the rock band AC/DC. They also continued to discuss the issue of breast cancer research, proactive interventions, treatment types, and so on.

In another lesson a month earlier, after current events presentations on the Guatemalan Truth Committee and a U.S. naval captain’s punishment for sending sexually explicit e-mail from his defense department computer, the following media networks and programs were incorporated into the discussion: The Price is Right, Entertainment Tonight, Net Vivo (the school Internet system), Fox TV; The Simpsons; NBC shows; Inside Edition; the Stanley Cup and the World Cup; and America’s Most Wanted. These were not presented as a list; rather, they were referred to in connection with other current events.

Discourse, identity, and participation in classroom communities

Discursive practices such as these united, engaged, and often delighted the local students and Mr. Jones, allowing them to display and coconstruct their identities, knowledge, interests, past experiences, sense of humor, and sociocultural affiliations. Unfortunately, the practices also excluded most of the ESL students from the local English-speaking discourse community and positioned them as outsiders or outcasts. They spoke only when required to do so, and then only minimally. Without the cultural referencibility points that might facilitate their comprehension, they had difficulty understanding what their classmates were talking or laughing about. However, asking for explanations in class or attempting to enter into discussions might open them up to ridicule and confirm their difference and otherness. Silence protected them from humiliation but it did not help them gain access to the valued cultural capital and practices of their English-speaking peers. Intertextuality involving pop culture (most often connected with movies and television programs from the U.S.) was a powerful resource for displaying, maintaining, and sometimes contesting teachers’
and students’ disparate social and cultural identities and networks at school (Duff, in press).

Although the examples I have provided may give the impression that nothing substantive was discussed in any depth in the course, or that pop-culture talk was always superficial and uncritical, that was not the case. Mr. Jones was a highly regarded teacher who was considered progressive and very knowledgeable; he presented historical and contemporary social issues from multiple perspectives, often in innovative ways. But his training and several years of teaching experience had primarily been with native speakers of English. What he had not resolved was how best to integrate ESL students into discussions or how to assess their levels of interest and comprehension in current-events discussions without putting them on the spot. He assumed that they remained silent by choice, in order to learn from their classmates, although he found their reticence mildly frustrating. Nevertheless, he was aware of their academic and linguistic capabilities, which were in some cases above average. Less obvious was that the discourse practices that appealed most to him and local students were themselves alien and alienating for ESL students. They were consequently seen as permanently peripheral or marginal participants, shy, communicatively incompetent, and uninterested in the local pop culture vaunted by the others, with identities thus defined by their nonparticipation and disengagement (Wenger, 1998). Their own sense of humor, pop-culture alignments, talents, social affiliations, and wit were invisible and inaccessible to others.

**Different pop-culture worlds**

In interviews, I asked all the students about their extracurricular sources of information about the world, including news and pop culture, and also about social issues at school that might affect classroom communication. Most of the local students said that their families subscribed to daily English newspapers, and they watched the local news channel at dinnertime. Almost without exception, the local girls listened to one particular youth oriented pop music radio station that also had news coverage in the morning hosted by two announcers, and the boys (and I think Mr. Jones) almost always listened to a different radio station that featured more rock music, as well as morning news and humorous anecdotes that sometimes were repeated in class. The local girls said they read *People, Teen Magazine, Seventeen, Teen, Elle, Vice,* and snowboarding magazines, and the boys *Source, Blaze, Sports Illustrated, Hockey News, Popular Science, Time, Newsweek,* and video game magazines. Both male and female students said they watched *Seinfeld, The Simpsons,* and *Friends,* and Mr. Jones also watched them and taped short segments to show in the final minutes of class if students were cooperative.

In comparison, many of the ESL students were preoccupied with hours of extra English tutoring each week, afternoon and evening classes, and band or violin practice, and had less time to engage in the consumption or production of pop culture. Their families watched or listened to Chinese (or Japanese or Korean) television and radio programs and subscribed to daily or weekly newspapers in their home languages, which had their own weekend entertainment magazines, as well as other magazines or comics (e.g., Japanese *manga* sometimes in translation) that dealt with music, cars, or sports. The most common element shared by the ESL students and local students was their widespread use of ICQ (up to 8 or more hours per week), an Internet chat network that links up groups of friends anywhere for spontaneous online discussions about many topics, including pop culture. However, ESL students' chat was primarily in Chinese with friends in Canada or elsewhere, and the local English speakers used ICQ almost exclusively with their local school friends.

Furthermore, most of the ESL students revealed that they did not have Canadian-born English-speaking friends, and conversely, local students said they did not have friends who were not born in Canada—there would be too many barriers to overcome, too much explaining to do. As Sue, an outspoken but quite open-minded local girl, commented,

> Most of the [ESL] students in this class don’t sit down and read the paper or anything...for the popular culture aspect, like the movies and even things like radio songs and stuff. Different types of radio. They’re missing a lot. And I think that might be one of the spots where the segregation starts between ESL students and us because they don’t have the same radio stations, and they don’t watch the same movies and they’re not as absorbed by the same pop culture that we are. You know? They have their own. And it’s definitely there. It’s really apparent but it’s a different one.

Mary, an ESL student from Hong Kong, said she read the Chinese newspaper every day, watched the local TV news with her father, and also listened to the radio station that was very popular among the local girls, yet she still could not understand what movies, actors, or events were being discussed in class. She desired entry into their pop-culture world but could not seem to gain it. Nor could she suggest topics for class connected with Asia or with Hong Kong or Chinese (pop) culture(s), because she felt that “the Canadians” would not be interested.
Some implications for teachers and teacher educators

Pop culture is a potentially rich and powerful classroom resource but one that is perhaps less globally accessible than is often assumed and should therefore be examined carefully. By including pop culture in their lessons (either consciously or unconsciously), Mr. Jones attempted to make discussions more interesting, relevant, and appealing to his adolescent students and, I suspect, for some easily distracted males especially; it also enhanced his rapport with them. For the same reason, current-events discussions were included in the Grade 10 social studies curriculum, which otherwise deals mainly with late 19th- and early 20th-century Canadian history. However, in public schools, as in workplaces (Norton, 2000) and contexts with young children and their friends, relevance and access cannot be taken for granted. People often do not share the necessary sociocultural and psycholinguistic repertoires, practices, and abilities, and need assistance from others to understand them.

For newcomers to a discourse community, references to dominant local pop culture are often both intriguing and confusing, especially in highly intertextual or hybrid oral texts. Before doing this study, I not only didn’t know who or what Blue’s Clues was, but I had never heard of ICQ, Teen People, Source, Blaze, and Vice, or some of the movies, television programs, or sports teams and celebrities that were referred to in Mr. Jones’s class. I had no idea that the two local FM radio stations mentioned appealed to different audiences along gender lines, because I listened to neither of them. However, I had the distinct advantage of being able to ask participants freely about these things, without fear or embarrassment, and I was already familiar with enough other aspects of the local pop culture (e.g., Ally McBeal) because of widespread pop-culture coverage in newspapers, news and entertainment programs and magazines, and radio stations to make sense of the classroom discourse. In other words, I had many resources to draw upon in my interpretation of pop-culture talk. I could also differentiate between main topics and scintillating, but mostly inconsequential, tangents and aside. Being a fully proficient local English speaker I doubt helped enormously.

Some conclusions of this research are that more work needs to be done (a) to explicitly raise teachers’ and students’ awareness of the elements of pop culture that are important to people from different backgrounds and which permeate their talk; (b) to explore how pop culture contributes to the coconstruction of knowledge, social and cultural identities, and participation patterns (e.g., inclusion/exclusion) at school; and (c) to ‘unpack’ hybrid texts such as those examined here so teachers and students can better understand the (socio)linguistic and semiotic forms and functions of texts and also the obstacles they pose for some students (Fairclough, 1992).

For classroom teachers specifically, a number of strategies could be used in connection with the first implication. When I asked students whether they had ever talked about media literacy in their classes, most said they had not or that they had begun to do so only recently in an English class taught by a student teacher. One practical suggestion, then, is that teachers could devote more attention to (critical) media literacy. For example, a media survey could be conducted near the beginning of the year, asking students to fill in information on short anonymous questionnaires about their favorite television shows, Internet chat rooms, radio stations, movies, actors, bands or singers, magazines, and newspapers (any of which could be in English or other languages, but described in English).

The survey would be similar to the question I asked students: Where do you get your information about the world, about current events, and about pop culture? The teacher could then compile the results and share them with the class. Students could discuss the results in small heterogeneous groups to identify those items they were most or least familiar with, what they are about, why they like them, who their audience is, perhaps categorize them, and then report back to the class. This in-class task could also become a project in the school or community, if the class chose to undertake it. This sort of activity would raise the awareness of teachers and students about the many forms of media and pop culture considered significant in them. Those most commonly mentioned could be singled out for special analysis, and teachers could ask whether those pop-culture phenomena appear in other countries as well.

Second, during regular in-class discussions (e.g., about current events), when pop culture is mentioned the teacher could jot down the name of the celebrity, character, or program in a pop-culture column on the chalkboard. I found that teachers rarely used the chalkboard to support students’ comprehension during current-events discussions. Brief but explicit elaboration could be provided by the teacher or by students to help newcomers understand the content and relevance of the comment; extended discussion and elaboration might be counterproductive unless that is the main focus of the lesson. ESL students, in this way, could take note of the topics and then, if not during class time, after class could seek more information about them from friends, the teacher, the Internet, or ICQ. Another column on the board, current events, could
be reserved for names or topics connected with news reports.

Third, the teacher could initiate ongoing critical reflection about the credibility or bias of different sources of news and pop-culture reporting and the need to interpret information accordingly. This strategy, like the others, is also consistent with one of the aims of contemporary social studies education, which stresses that events and accounts (evidence) should be examined from different perspectives and using different sources of information and that underlying ideologies and potential bias should be uncovered as part of the interpretive process (Duff, 2001).

Effective, innovative, and sensitive ways of encouraging ESL students and reticent local students to bring elements of their home (pop) cultures, media, and news items into class are clearly needed.

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REFERENCES

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