

Creative Engagements: Thinking with Children

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Critical Thinking, Creativity and Humorous Texts

by Jeni Mawter

My interest in critical thinking, creativity and humorous texts evolved from being an Australian author of humorous texts for children. Between 2001 and 2005, I wrote a humorous series called the 'So!' series, published by HarperCollins Publishers Australia and aimed at the 8 – 12 year old market, especially the reluctant reader. There are six books in this series with the dubious titles of *So Gross!*, *So Feral!*, *So Sick!*, *So Festy!*, *So Grotty!* and *So Stinky!* From experience most kids love them and adults fall into a love 'em/hate 'em dichotomy. From the 'hate 'ems', I was surprised to experience censorship in the following ways:

- teachers and librarians avoided the use of humorous texts
- academics dismissed them by ignoring them
- notable literary journals and magazines chose not to review or discuss them
- parents chose not to buy them
- schools banned me from visiting and talking to students
- booksellers either chose not to stock the books, or if they did stock them, not to promote them
- children's literature awards were, and still are, heavily skewed towards 'issues based' texts

Despite this huge level of resistance from adult reviewers and those working in children's literature and education the books went on to become Australian best-sellers.

For a long time I believed that not only genre, but also gender, was a big issue in this. As a female writing gross humour for kids I was certainly writing out of gender. Where a male author could get away with 'Oh, he's just being a naughty little boy', a female author was met with, 'How dare she!' What's that saying? *Boys can be boys for the rest of their lives, but girls must become women*. Over time, I developed a wider perspective and came to the conclusion that the problem lay with the fact that there is a limited understanding of 'humour'.

Alvin Schwartz, a folklorist and author, says 'humour is a slippery subject' and after researching the area, I'd have to agree. Moira Robinson, in the book, *Give Them Wings: The Experience of Children's Literature* (1987) states, 'Our personality, our mood, our particular hang-ups, all influence our response to humour, and the older we become and the more hung about with quirky beliefs or inhibitions or prejudices, the more individual our response (p 280).' One of the perplexing things about humour is that so little is known about it. Moira Robinson has said, 'Humour is the Cinderella in the world of children's literature. Volumes are devoted to fantasy, to folklore and myth, even – belatedly – to poetry, but humour is lucky to rate even an occasional chapter or article ...' (p 277). Although these sentiments were expressed 20 years ago, little has changed.

Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC) was perhaps the first to recognise that tragedy is not superior to comedy, that they are of equal importance:

Humour is the only test of gravity and gravity of humour; for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit.

It's such a shame that this insightful observation has been ignored. Perhaps humour fell by the wayside when the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* (350 B.C.E.), which concentrated on comedy and laughter, was lost and this book got lost to future generations. We have built our understanding of the world and art on Aristotle's *Poetics*, but without regarding his whole work. His theory of tragedy may have a different meaning when viewed in the light of his theory of comedy. So, we study only parts of his thoughts and maybe this is why we find our thoughts on humour today are somewhat confused, inconsistent, and lacking insight.

This was hugely perplexing because humorous texts are often much more challenging for a writer. It's said, 'Give 100 writers one hour to write something sad or serious and at the end of the hour 100 writers will have done so. Tell those same writers they have one hour to write something funny that will make people laugh and only a handful will succeed. Only a few decades ago, children's picture books were similarly misread and undervalued. Then, educators realised there were signs and significance in everything: from the white space to framing, the picture text to written text, font to word placement. Significance brought meaning and thus value. I came to

a similar conclusion about humour – that educators don't understand how to 'read' it. We don't know how to read the signs. In fact, most people don't even realise they are there. What we don't understand, we dismiss. After presenting a paper on humorous texts at the Sydney Writer's Festival in 2005 I was approached by Dr Wendy Michaels to write more. And thus began my interest in critically thinking about humorous texts.

At the same time something was happening in education that was alarming me. As a judge in many creative writing competitions and as a tutor of creative writing to undergraduates at Macquarie University I noticed a disturbing trend. Students were handing in work and assignments that were exquisitely written and crafted, but they were all the same ... Where were the innovators? Where were the risk-takers? When queried, my uni students responded that if they took risks they may 'muck up' their assignment and lose marks, something they were not prepared to do. Even when I told them that marks would be allocated for creativity, not crafting, they were reluctant to move out of their 'safe' place. I believe this is a flow-on from their education systems. I believe this is something we need to address.

It is essential that students learn to think in critical and creative ways and humour is a wonderful tool for this. Thinking involves inquiry, posing problems, acquiring and questioning information, thinking about possibilities, making decisions and forming judgements, justifying conclusions, reflecting on and refining ideas, seeing and valuing other perspectives, reasoning ethically, being aware of human existence, imagining and creating, innovating and risk-taking. Being able to show and value enterprise, being able to engage and respond to the world is crucial for human

survival. As Edward De Bono said, ‘You can analyse the past, but you have to design the future.’ (DCU Times, Page 25).

Humour requires us to be flexible in our thinking so that our minds are open to possibility and change. We must think about different opinions and different points of view. We must compare facts with alternatives, observe and interpret, use logic and reason to imply, value and judge – or not judge! At times, we must suspend logic. With humour we have to cope with contradictions, reflect and predict, and develop options. The critical thinking seen in humour means that minds are open to change (based on extra information, opinions, facts or reasoning) even when faced with conflicting information, for example, we see this in puzzles, riddles, nonsense, and ambiguity.

In order to appreciate humour, students must develop an ability to use language effectively and to critically reflect on how language works. They must learn that even the language of humour is used for a range of social purposes and varies from situation to situation, for example, a simple pun in one situation might be a sarcastic barb in another. To become competent language users and learners, students must develop knowledge and understanding of different texts and how these are influenced by context (purpose, audience, channel of communication and content). Critically thinking about a broad range of humorous texts (spoken, written, graphic and performance texts) will enable students to learn how language functions. They will also learn how texts position an audience and thus reflect and shape social attitudes.

It should be noted that the language of humour is the same as the language developed in literacy. The ability to tell stories, use metaphors, present contradictory ideas, create images, use rhythm and rhyme and metre, tell jokes etc is found in both humour and literacy. In oral cultures thinking involves the complex logic of metaphor more than it follows the systematic logic of rational inquiry. Metaphor involves representation of one thing as though it were something other. The use of language rich in appropriate metaphors can stimulate creativity. Humour is rich in appropriate metaphors.

As students move through the curriculum they can explore humorous texts of increasing complexity and variety – from picture books to novels, comics to cartoons and graphic novels, slapstick to stand-up and plays, and animation and television to film. They can progress from simple puns and word play, to incongruities such as contradictions, oxymorons, tautologies, malapropisms etc to the complex language of irony and satire. As students learn to think critically they will begin to judge and value humorous texts, form personal preferences and responses, notice and remember texts or parts of texts which are meaningful to them and that will serve as models for creating their own innovative texts.

An added bonus is that the study of humorous texts is fun, promoting student enjoyment, interaction and classroom collaboration. The seeking and giving of enjoyment establishes and cements relationships. Students will not only learn about their own creativity, they will also learn about the creative endeavours of others. The flow-on will be students who productively interact with peers, who listen strategically and who learn to speak coherently and confidently. It would be hoped that they also

develop the awareness that they ‘don’t know what they don’t know’ and thus have the flexibility to seek other perspectives and knowledge.

Humour should allow students to express their thoughts, values, feelings and ideas in a ‘safe’ environment. There is no place for rigidity or judgement. We must relax the rules of reason, accept the impossible and illogical, turn off the self-conscious and self-sensors. This is extraordinarily hard for many adults to do but is quite natural to a child. It is interesting that what is dismissed as silliness in today’s culture has been valued in the past - the court jester or fool in medieval courts.

Costa and Kallick (2000, 2001) describe 16 Habits of Mind that students need to employ when faced with intellectual challenges that require them to bring about change in their own experience. They stress it is not only important to have information, it is important to use and act on it. They point out that Habits of Mind is based on a value judgement, that they have valued one form of thinking over another. It is laudable that humour is valued as a Habit of Mind but I’d like to add a word of caution. Costa and Kallick state that: ‘Some students find humour in all the “wrong places” – human differences, ineptitude, injurious behaviour, vulgarity, violence and profanity. They laugh at others ...’ I would caution against this point. In reality, for both adults and children, a huge source of humour does come at the expense of ‘others’ whether that be on the personal level or at a more global level against society. Humour is often subversive. This is not bad. This is not wrong. This just *is*. When educators dismiss such a large source of humour, it comes at a cost. Their approach to humour becomes narrow, rigid and completely at odds with the goal of flexibility in creative and critical thinking.

I'm not declaring a field day for bullying, I am suggesting that with sensitive handling educators do not have to make judgements that censor. Humour can be a springboard to explore differences in gender, culture, age, *normal* stages in development (such as an interest in the body and how it functions), socioeconomic group, status (humour is linked to high situational status) and aggression. In terms of social alignment it can be discussed how humour asserts social superiority, subverts traditional power structures, shows cultural bias, provides an outlet for critique of dominant social groups by those less dominant, alleviates tension and creates congeniality.

Costa and Kallick advocate deliberativeness over impulsivity in their 16 Habits of Mind and warn about students who blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. Again, I take issue with this. As a person who makes their living from creativity, it is those impulsive thoughts I value, that lead me into places unknown and never dreamt of. When people tell me they couldn't possibly do anything creative the first thing I tell them is they have to give themselves permission to be creative, permission to be silly, impulsive, random, extreme, all those traits that have been socialised out of us on our path to adulthood.

In order to avoid the game of 'Please the Teacher', as observed with my uni students, we must liberate thinking and creativity by 1) accepting contributions without judgement; 2) encouraging a vast range of ideas and questions; 3) encouraging 'building' on ideas and; 4) encouraging obscure and unusual ideas.

This year in June Macmillan Education is publishing my three books titled *Critical Thinking and Humorous Texts: Ages 5 – 8*, *Critical Thinking and Humorous Texts: Ages 8 – 10*, and *Critical Thinking and Humorous Texts: Ages 10+*. These merely scratch the surface of critical thinking, creativity and humorous texts but they are a starting point for future work in this area.

Thank you.

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