

## Humour, Literacy and Literature

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Literacy is embedded in a complex range of social, political, and ideological contexts. As such it is important to utilise as many tools as possible in the classroom to assist students in attaining literacy competence. Humour is one of those tools.

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.

Yet, our culture tends to dismiss humorous literature as lightweight and unworthy. Humour is seen as subversive in children's literature and thus threatening to adult authority whereas the more serious issues-based texts are seen as literary and more worthy. When June Factor studied children's folklore she found that all collectors of folklore omitted humour. The same omission occurred in literature. When the Brothers Grimm started to collect and record folk tales they deliberately left out comic stories. Yet, young children love the incongruity of exaggeration, as well as the slapstick of Dr Seuss.

Older children love linguistic play and reading for fun. Roald Dahl, for one, was able to capture the impossible, the absurd and the bizarre. Kids love his quiriness and his fun with language. The same can be said for such Australian authors as Paul Jennings, Morris Gleitzman, Andy Griffiths, Terry Denton and the only female in the line-up, J.A. Mawter. Children value the intricate significances that most adults can no longer see nor appreciate. Because humour is extraordinarily diverse with a hierarchy of complexity the less sophisticated reader can share a joke with a more sophisticated reader, even if their depth of understanding differs. What a wonderful tool to use in a class of ranging abilities and development.

The exploration of humour enhances thinking skills and broadens our awareness of the world in a relevant, enjoyable and challenging way. Humour requires us to be flexible in our thinking. We must consider multiple perspectives, compare established facts with alternatives simultaneously, observe and interpret, reason and infer, value and judge (or suspend judgement) as well as tolerate paradox, predict consequences and develop options. The critical thinking seen in humour means that minds are open to change (based on additional information, opinions, data or reasoning), even when faced with contradictory information.

When students think critically they:

- become pro-active readers/listeners/viewers predicting, hypothesising, inferring and deducing, and checking for evidence which either confirms, extends or refines expectations;

- become reflective readers/listeners/viewers developing awareness of text-types, understanding text purpose and organisation, and relating texts to one another in a way that will improve their own writing;
- judge and value texts, forming personal preferences and responses, noticing and remembering texts or parts of texts which are significant, building a repertoire of known or accessible texts as points of reference for comparing, criticising and as models for composing their own new and novel texts.

Inferential thinking not only involves guessing or surmising what something means, it also involves reading between the lines and taking into account other factors than the words or the images in a picture. Inferential thinking requires us to use our own experiences as well as contextual cues. It allows us to deal with ambiguous language (saying one thing and meaning another). We can also infer humour from visual evidence in cartoons, comics and graphic novels as well as facial expressions, gestures, body language, appearances.

There are very few studies that have been done on the use of humour to improve literacy. There is also very little written about humour and literature. Yet humour is a fantastic tool for getting children to read. The language of humour is the same 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. Given this, it makes sense to use the features of one to assist the other. Humour can flag for the budding reader cognitive tools to construct meaning and sense.

The great power of stories is that they communicate information in a memorable form. They can also orient the listener's feelings about the information being communicated. Humorous stories can orient the reader to not only understand what is being read, but to enjoy the process of reading as well. As the author of the 'So' series published by HarperCollins Publishers Australia most of my fan-mail starts with, 'I hate reading but I love your books' for which I am delighted. Titles include *So Gross!* (2001), *So Feral!* (2002), *So Sick!* (2003), *So Festy!* (2004), *So Grotty!* (2004) and *So Stinky!* (2005).

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 metaphoric language. In literacy, however, there is more reliance on rational logic and less on the logic of metaphor. Perhaps the metaphor of humour can enrich the student's transition to literacy?

Creativity is central to every aspect of literacy development. Creativity disposes us to explore, play with and invent language and to evolve more effective ways in spoken and written expression. Creativity is an important element of thinking. A willingness to explore and invent patterns and connections, is the root of generalisation, investigation and rule construction, while the capacity to suppose, pretend, adopt roles and suspend belief are at the heart of imaginative and logical thinking. Using humour students can explore creativity in all sorts of texts (poems, plays, cautionary tales, nonsense verse, folktales, myths, legends, picture books, comics, cartoons, graphic novel, film and

television) and in the various humorous language devices (word plays, jokes, poems, word games, absurdities, assonance, rhyme, rhythm, ambiguity, puns, banter, imagery, metaphor, parody).

The ability to distinguish difference in the form of contradiction, together with the ability to perceive resemblances, is basic to both humour and literacy and can be a powerful tool in the teaching of literacy. Literacy moves language from a medium connected uniquely to the ear to one also connected to the eye. Literacy enables us to reflect on, and become conscious of, language in a new way. Humour techniques also draw attention to language.

With the development of language came the curious discovery that words could be used to generate images in the mind. Imaginative thinking in humour also creates pictures or images in the mind. This image-generation is a cognitive tool for teaching literacy.

This topic is dealt with in greater depth in:

Mawter, J.A. and Michaels, W. *Focus on Integrating Text and Thinking 1) Ages 5 - 8, 2) Ages 8 – 10, and 3) Ages 10+* to be published by Macmillan Education Australia in 2006

A deeper analysis of humour in literature for children can be found on my website at [www.jenimawter.com](http://www.jenimawter.com) as well as details on how to contact me. I am a tutor at Macquarie University as well as a presenter who runs workshops, gives talks, and has a fun time.