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was the discovery that year 9 students are capable of sophisticated text
analysis. Also the research clearly demonstrated that critical literacy and
functional grammar complement each other as approaches to literacy education.
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CONSTRUCTING GENDER: FEMALE IDENTITY REALISED IN POPULAR CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This workshop combines critical literacy and functional grammar and is intended for educators who may not be familiar with either pedagogy. The unit of work was designed for a Year 9 English class and focused on how females have been constructed in pop songs since 1950 and how that construction has changed over the last half a century.

The most significant result from the research was the discovery that Year 9 students are capable of sophisticated text analysis. Also the research clearly demonstrated that critical literacy and functional grammar complement each other as approaches to literacy education. During the workshop there will be opportunities to see video clips of the students in action and after listening to the pop songs engage in some of the activities undertaken by the students.

KEY WORDS

Critical Literacy, Functional Grammar, Popular Culture.

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

I am a middle school teacher at Marymount College. I have been involved in teacher research for the past five years focusing on how the explicit teaching of functional grammar significantly improves student literacy. The research has shown that students can transfer knowledge about language across learning areas and from one year level to the next. My interest now is in supporting teachers wishing to include functional grammar into their learning area and introducing critical literacy into the English curriculum. Critical literacy is another pedagogical tool I am learning about and experimenting with.

As part of this workshop I would like to share with you;

- an explanation of functional grammar and critical literacy

- a thumbnail sketch of a unit of work incorporating both pedagogies

- engagement in some of the activities undertaken by the students

- video clips of the unit in action

- reflections, evaluations, difficulties and triumphs

FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

Functional grammar recognizes that all language is ideologically based, which means that the worldview of the speaker or writer is inherent in the text. Functional grammar differs from traditional grammar in that there is not one 'right' way to speak or write, however the grammatical and lexical choices the speaker or writer makes are dependent on the context. Teachers, for example, would make different grammatical and lexical choices when reflecting on the poor behaviour of the same student in these situations;

- at a party with very close friends

- a written end of year report

- a formal meeting with the principal, parents and student

Functional grammar improves student literacy because it makes explicit the appropriate genre, grammar and vocabulary for the task. It makes clear the distinction between spoken and written language and provides guidelines for students who are having difficulty shifting from language more at the spoken end of the literacy continuum to language more at the written end of the literacy continuum. It also supports students whose only access to formal standard Australian English is in the classroom. Functional grammar provides students and teachers with a metalanguage, a language to talk about language.

CRITICAL LITERACY

Critical literacy has a diversity of forms and therefore resists a simple definition, (1). Critical literacy is concerned with power relations, who has a voice and who is silenced, what is said in the text, what is assumed and whose interests are served. Critical literacy is about deconstructing ideologies within texts and uncovering and interrogating power relations inherent in language. Critical literacy requires that teachers leave the comfort zone and move into unexplored areas where the outcomes are uncertain.

THE RESEARCH

The research was based on work by Peter Wignell, *'A woman's place: a discussion of the place of linguistic analysis in critical literacy in the upper primary school'*, (2). Wignell deconstructs three popular songs from between 1950 and 1980 and focuses on the actor, (subject of the clause), process, (verb or verbal group), process type, (action verbs, being verbs, thinking verbs, and positive and negative verbs), and goal, (object of the clause), to see how power is realized in the grammatical structures.

Analyzing who had the power in these songs offered an insight into how gender was constructed in popular culture at that time. It allowed the students to see that gender was a social construction and that it changes over time. This unit of work provided a vehicle to show how status, power and privilege are realized in the grammar and that assumptions about gender could be challenged.

To help students relate gender construction to their world I built into the unit a further task where each student selected a contemporary song by a female artist that constructs the female gender in some way and taped a video clip that accompanies the song. As students followed contemporary music culture far more closely than I, they would be the experts in this part of the teaching learning cycle. My role would be to frame questions they should be asking when deconstructing their lyrics and visual texts and to listen carefully to their answers.

ASSESSMENT

An interesting question that arose early in the unit was how can critical literacy be assessed? In this age of increasing accountability what does critical literacy assessment look like? How do you report on critical literacy? Another aspect of critical literacy that interests me is how an understanding of language that has been informed by functional grammar can be used most effectively to discuss power and privilege?

With these issues in mind I developed an assignment sheet outlining the tasks;

- *a written response in the genre of discussion, comparing and contrasting constructions of gender in popular songs over the past fifty years.*
- *an oral presentation discussing the lyrics and supporting video clip of the song selected by the student highlighting similarities and differences in the meaning.*

and the assessment criteria

- *understanding*
- *schematic structure*

- *language features*
- *editing*
- *appendixes*
- *visual and oral presentation*

DIFFICULTIES

The main difficulty the students faced with this unit was in identifying processes, (verbs or verbal groups). Their limited knowledge of both traditional grammar and functional grammar meant that many of them did not recognize processes like 'is' and 'was'. This problem was compounded by the fact that song lyrics tend to be in the more spoken mode, where most of the meaning is realized through the process rather than the noun groups. Often the verbal group could be made up of four or five verbs. This year I have taught the unit again to a group of Year 9 students and this group has found identifying the process and actor an easy and rather fun activity. Identifying the processes and actors in the song lyrics in 2000 took the Year 9 class two lessons for each song. By contrast the Year 9 class of 2001 identified the verbal groups and actors in twenty minutes with minimal teacher input. This significant change in the students' grammatical confidence is largely due to the work they did with their science teacher in the preceding term where they focused on process types used in scientific biographies. As students' knowledge of functional grammar grows the analytical skills they have at their disposal increase markedly.

Another unexpected complication was that there was a high incidence of ellipsed actors (subjects of the clause that have been omitted, for example, the clause 'give it to me' where the process is 'give' and the actor, 'you' has been ellipsed), which meant students initially could not detect the actor once they had identified the process. Eventually students became quite confident in identifying clauses with ellipsed actors.

OUTCOMES

Text Analysis

The most significant outcome of the research was the discovery that Year 9 students are capable of sophisticated text analysis and that given a suitable topic they are committed to giving their very best effort even though the work is pushing them well beyond their comfort zone. The fact that the students were part of the research process and there were no certain answers to many of the questions posed gave this topic a life of its own. Furthermore images of females had particular meaning for the students as this was an all girl class.

There was an interesting shift in the class dynamics as the unit progressed. In the early stages of the unit when we were deconstructing popular song lyrics from the past, I was the expert. As the discussion moved onto present day popular culture we entered an area of high student interest and they were undoubtedly the more expert group. The students valued being the expert and this was obvious in their reflections. Jasmine explains how being an 'expert' alters students' perceptions of themselves as writers;

> *"I think that when we knew more about the subject than the teacher*
> *it made us explain our reasons and justify ourselves more. If the*
> *teachers know as much or more than us then we can get away with*
> *not explaining ourselves very much, but this definitely made us do*
> *that." (23.11.00)*

Functional grammar is an ideal tool for identifying ideologies within texts and most students made comments similar to Nora;

> *"I would say the most valuable aspects (of the unit), were learning*
> *actor and goal because it really helps you understand the meaning of*
> *the song." (23.11.00)*

This unit also allowed students to appreciate how the status of women changed in the twentieth century.

> *"When critically analyzing popular songs from the past I discovered how much the woman's role in society has changed over the years. I also learned that a woman still highly depends on males............ women aren't as dependent on men as they were about fifty years ago. But they still rely on the men to make their lives complete."* (Stephanie, 23.11.00)

> *"From analyzing songs from the past I learnt a lot about the changing roles of females. I became more aware of how power and status of both men and women are reflected through popular culture."* (Tanya, 23.11.00)

Most students thought that the unit influenced how they view video clips to some extent, and this is reflected in Tarah's comment;

> *"I have found that video clips for popular pop groups are influenced a lot by sex and they don't have much to do with the song at all."* (23.11.00)

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy requires that educators move into areas where outcomes are uncertain. The students and I found this a rather exciting aspect of the research because it involved discussing a variety of issues including;

- Images of females today are generally more assertive and sometimes exploitative of males.

- Females are much more likely to be the actor now in both the popular lyrics and video clips.

- Student discomfort with some of the values and ideologies in the audio and visual texts studied.

- Why song lyrics and accompanying video clips are often unrelated.

- How sexuality in video clips is quite blatantly used as a marketing tool.

- The need for popular singers today to be slim and beautiful first, a singing ability is a bonus.

Research is about finding answers to questions, but invariably the answers lead to more questions. Some of the questions that the students and I had at the end of the unit were;

- How western females might be constructed by popular culture in the future?

- How do male singers construct gender?

- Do males construct gender differently now than they did fifty years ago?

- Are gender ideologies of male and female singers compatible?

- How are males and females constructed in other media for popular consumption?

CONCLUSION

Functional grammar and critical literacy provide students with a sophisticated analytical framework for deconstructing texts to understand how meaning is being made in the world in which they are living. Critical literacy and functional grammar complement each other as approaches to literacy education because they do make a difference and because they are about setting up a more dynamic and relevant classroom where every student can participate. Critical literacy and functional grammar furnish students with the skills to recognize the ideologies inherent in texts and thereby critique them.

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