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Cultural politics in the English classroom: Textually dangerous territory?

by Claire Charles

Cultural politics involves the struggle over 'naming' and the power to redescribe ourselves (Barker & Galasinski 2001, p 56).

Cultural politics centres on the struggle to define the world and make those definitions stick. Consequently, cultural politics concerns the multi-faceted process by which particular descriptions of the world are taken as true. This includes forms of cultural and institutional power (p 61).

The plastic and changeable character of persons marks the cultural politics of subjectivity and identity as being concerned with the power to name and represent what it means to be male, female, black, white, young, old, etc. Cultural politics can be conceived of as a series of collective social struggles organized around the nodal points of class, gender, race, sexuality, age, etc. which seeks to re-describe the social in terms of specific values and hoped for consequences (p 61).

[A] progressive cultural politics [is] one that links knowledge and power to the imperatives of social change (Giroux 2000, p 17).

How might one approach cultural politics in the English classroom? What might the role of the class text be in these discussions? Here is a snapshot of my journey from a pre-service English teacher to my most recent experiences of English teaching, which are part of my PhD research.

Cultural politics, English teachers and the media

Media reports often remind us of the scrutiny under which English teachers work. The likes of Kevin Donnelly appear to lament that the textual 'skill' work associated with reading and writing is being neglected in favour of 'postmodern/feminist/ Marxist claptrap' (Lumby, 2005). There is an idea that learning about how texts work and becoming 'literate' is somehow not commensurate with the culturally political work of critiquing the power relations through which identities are shaped and understood. The curriculum, according to this argument, has become too 'political'. What does this mean for the pre-service English teacher, and indeed all English teachers, who must somehow navigate their way through these various arguments about what 'literacy' is? How do they make sense of the different messages about what it means to be culturally 'literate' and how English teachers should go about fostering literacy in their students? Undoubtedly they develop a variety of attitudes and approaches, which may differ markedly from their peers.

My pre-service pedagogy

A presentation I gave to my English Method class indicated what I will call a 'minimization' of the role of the text in unpacking cultural politics. At this time, 6 years ago now, I was very interested in the idea that 'it's not what we read, it's how we read'. In being interested in 'how' we read, I was convinced that an important part of the role of English teaching was about cultural politics, about encouraging young people to unpack and critique the way the world is socially, culturally and politically organised.
such that certain identities are seen as normative and others are seen as deviant. I set up an activity for the English method class, whereby I was attempting to demonstrate that constructions of masculinity could be talked about in relation to two texts which were dramatically different in genre and content. The first, Tyro, is an edgy dark story of a young man’s ‘initiation’ into hegemonic masculinity in the workplace. The second, Wunderpants, is a Paul Jennings story from one of his many compilations of quirky amusing tales. The story involves a young man who is given a pair of underpants with fairies on them by his mother. After much embarrassment and attempts at covering them up in front of his friends, he finds out that they have magical powers.

My purpose in developing this workshop for my peers was to demonstrate that very different texts could be used to spawn culturally political discussion related to constructions of masculinity and specifically, what is considered to be ‘normal’ masculine behaviour. Whilst I still believe this is true, my thinking at the time appeared to suggest that the discussion of constructions of masculinity was more important than the actual deconstruction of the text, and the teaching and learning that might take place in relation to how texts are created, used and manipulated. This is what I mean by a ‘minimization’ of the text. The text itself was overshadowed by the important points that I was intent on making.

The results in practice
My first year out teaching was in a remote rural school. I was teaching Year 11 English and we were reading The Bloodling by Nadia Wheatley. The Bloodling, like Tyro and Wunderpants, concerns a teenager who is coming to terms with what it means to be a ‘man’ in the remote logging town in which he lives. Wheatley elegantly weaves various constructions of masculinity and femininity into the narrative despite the fact that the young man, Col, is the only narrator. His father, a logger, is portrayed as representing hegemonic masculinity and does not appear to value the forest in the same way that Col does. Col’s appreciation of the forest, under the immanent threat of logging, is tied up with his Grandfather who represents a contrasting masculine identity to that of his father. Col becomes increasingly involved with a group of ‘greenies’ who are camping in the town to protest the logging, all the while fearing the retribution of his local friends. He develops a romantic attachment with a young woman, Jade and eventually will refuse to climb out of a tree in protest. The tree is bulldozed down by Col’s father, resulting in a long period of hospitalisation. In fact, most of the narrative is told in retrospect, interspersed with snippets of his experiences in the hospital, in which he befriends an older man, Nick, who migrated to Australia as a youth. Col meets Gary, who is gay, before he is hospitalised. Upon leaving hospital he stays with Gary in the city, wondering if he may be gay himself.

In the weeks following our reading of the text I recall comments made about rape and homosexuality by some of the boys in the class. One boy commented that ‘women who get raped are dick teasers’. My approach was to engage in a loose discussion, which did not make particular reference to the text, although the text had been the initial impetus for the comments. In another example, students were asked to produce a storyboard on a particular section of the text. One boy, a different one this time, depicted a scene where Col’s Dad picks him up from Gary’s house. He changed the scene, however, to include a ‘fag bashing’ in which Col’s Dad bashes Gary, who was pictured in a pink dressing gown in the student’s representation. Col’s Dad is pictured looking like something out of a cross between an action and a horror film. Evil red eyes are set deeply into a furrowed face twisted in rage. The
tendons on the neck stand out and clenched fists are shown, ready for the ‘fag bashing’ (See Figure 1).

I see this approach as about ‘maximization’ of the text rather than ‘minimization’, which is where my pedagogy was perhaps positioned during my pre-service experiences. If I were to teach The Blooding again I might ask students to write about how Wheatley constructs a variety of representations of both masculinity and femininity in the text and I would try to make it clear to them that this was NOT an invitation to vent their personal opinions about sexed and gendered identities or practices. This may be a means to both teaching how texts work and allowing students to practice writing, and potentially managing dangerous discussions in a more productive way. I have no doubt this is what many experienced English teachers do on a regular basis.

My most recent English teaching experiences have been part of the data collection for my PhD research on girls’ education. I am interested in the way elite girls’ schools portray young women in promotional materials. I am particularly interested in looking at this material in relation to other cultural representations of young women that are sometimes associated with ‘girl power’. ‘Girl power’, as I understand it, stems from two linked phenomena, which can both be related to ‘post-feminism’. The first is the idea that ‘traditional’ social roles no longer define girls’ opportunities and that middle class girls in particular are the ‘success stories’ of education systems. The second is the interest and debate around sexualised representations of young women in the popular media, particularly in icons who promote ‘girl power’ such as the Spice Girls, Britney Spears and, more recently, Paris Hilton.

I am interested in generating insights into what students do with girl power discourses in the textual work they undertake during English, and to what extent this might generate a critical perspective on the ways in which they are positioned as girls by both their school and popular cultural discourses.
of girl power. I am interested in the idea that students might have greater agency in critiquing girl power when they are given the freedom to express their creativity and critique through developing their own texts.

I now briefly explore the possibilities and limitations of developing student-centred pedagogies in order to undertake culturally political work in the English classroom. I will do this by working with David Buckingham’s (2003) paper on media education.

Buckingham outlines the differences between what he conceptualises as ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern’ approaches to media education. The modernist tradition, which he argues still holds considerable sway, positions teachers as knowing, critical ‘missionaries’ whose purpose in media education is to help students come to realise and critique the politics behind the pleasure they take in engaging with media texts:

[Like education in general, media education could be seen as part of the modernist project. It is effectively premised on the cultivation of rational thinking and the possibility of well-regulated public communication. As media educators, we set out to produce well-informed responsible citizens who will be able to take a distanced stance toward the immediate pleasures of the media (p 313).]

He outlines some pedagogical issues induced by this understanding of media education, suggesting that where there is a distrust of children’s pleasures on the part of media educators, traditional notions of what counts as valid knowledge may be re-inscribed. He asserts that ‘teachers’ attempts to impose cultural, moral or political authority over the media that children experience in their daily lives are unlikely to be taken seriously’ (p 314).

I believe the same observations could be made in relation to non-media texts and they seem particularly pertinent to my experience of The Blooding. Wherever a conflict in values arises, the teacher is not likely to be taken seriously for attempting to ‘convert’ or ‘correct’ students’ values, or even for merely challenging them to reflect on their values.

Buckingham suggests that the post-modern media environment in which the boundaries between ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ are becoming increasingly blurred raises serious questions for media educators. He suggests that educators may need to make space for ‘more playful forms of pedagogy that engage directly with young people’s emotional investments in the media and with their sense of agency ... particularly through students’ media production’ (p 314).

Steinberg & Kincheloe (1998) also remind us of the pleasure students may experience in their engagement with the ‘cultural curriculum’ (p 4). They write that popular culture ‘is primarily a pedagogy of pleasure and, as such, cannot be countered merely by ostracizing ourselves and our children from it’ (p 5).

Taking this one step further, Buckingham suggests that the pleasure or ‘play’ aspect of popular culture might be usefully transferred into classroom settings in order to engage with media texts in culturally political ways. He observes that when students imitate media texts ‘it frequently involves parody, that is, a self-conscious and exaggerated use of dominant conventions for the sake of comic effect or ridicule’ (p 320).

Not wishing to over-state the potential of such pedagogies, Buckingham is quick to discuss the limitations of subversive parody. He points out that we cannot be sure what learning is actually occurring in parodic moments, or how students conceptualise the politics of their own projects:
Simply celebrating the pleasure of such work as a form of subversion or transgression of dominant norms fails to recognize that it can also reinforce existing inequalities and forms of oppression. It is difficult to ascertain what kind of learning might be happening here, and how that learning relates to any kind of political consciousness (p 322).

Buckingham goes on to describe some examples of students producing media texts such as Slutropolitan, a parody of the women’s magazine Cosmopolitan, and works through some of the limitations of this kind of parodic reproduction of conventional media genres.

In the light of Buckingham’s considerations of playfulness and parody, I now discuss the literacy practices of some students I have worked with. I compare teacher-centred pedagogy, focused on deconstruction of texts with a more student centred, playful pedagogy, where students took the class text into their own hands, reading their priorities into it through developing and performing role-plays in class, and participating in discussion outside class time.

**Constructions of femininity in teacher and student centred pedagogies**

During my time in a year 10 English class at a girls’ school, students undertook text response work on the film Muriel’s Wedding (Hogan, 1994) and additional response work on images of women sourced from popular culture. I found these experiences somewhat frustrating. I felt that there were significant limitations placed on my ability to explore constructions of femininity with the students through text work due to the culture of the classroom being geared toward success in the end of year exam.

Upon reflection I feel that the teacher-centred pedagogy myself and the class teacher exercised in relation to text response work prevented deeper discussion and exploration of constructions of femininity. The following is an example of some teacher-centred class work undertaken by Ruby. The task was a detailed analysis of a particular scene in the film:

**Q:** What do you notice about Muriel and Rhonda’s clothing and appearance? How are they contrasted?

Muriel’s appearance has changed as she has cut and coloured her hair. Muriel is in a wedding dress, and Rhonda is wearing black, so there is a contrast of black and white between the two characters. The white signifies virginity, purity and innocence. The black signifies evilness and darkness of the person or the person’s personality.

It is evident that Ruby has successfully identified the elements of the film text that enable her to answer the question adequately. I would have liked to go further with this particular question and discuss the ways in which white and black might signify differences in the sexual practices of Muriel and Rhonda. The idea of this would have been to engage with how we understand ‘acceptable’ female sexuality and the stereotypes that might shape how women are viewed. However, I felt constrained by the need to be brief and stick to the text itself, pointing out how the different elements worked together to create meaning.

In another activity I tried to engage more directly with how individuals? Gender? are constructed as either male or female. I drew two stick figures on the board, closely resembling those found on toilet doors. One was male and one was female. I asked the students which one was the girl and how we can tell when someone is a girl. Following a whole class discussion, which I felt did not dig very deeply, students were asked to write individual answers to some questions. Here are Ruby’s answers to the questions:

**Q:** What ‘makes’ someone a girl?
- a girl has feminine features such as her face and hair and her emotions are different to a boy's emotions. The physical appearance is a huge part of what differentiates girls and boys.

Q: Why do we have different things for boys and girls? (eg: schools + toilets)
We have different schools for girls and boys because from personally being at a co-ed school you find it harder to concentrate as you are usually attracted to the opposite sex. (hahahah this is funny stuff – sorry)

Assumed heterosexuality and a binary conception of gender are evident in Ruby’s responses. This occurred in all but two responses out of the 22 students in the class. The activity left me feeling frustrated that we hadn’t gone more deeply into the various ways in which gender is a regulatory and binary inscription, feeding into compulsory heterosexuality.

Student-centred interpretations of the class text were also worked into the unit. These were based around discussion with me outside class time and the development of parodic role-plays based on a particular scene of the film chosen by myself and the class teacher. Students were asked to rewrite the scene in a setting that reflected their own priorities, interests and experiences. These opportunities seemed to open up more direct engagement with ‘girl power’ and constructions of femininity.

In the discussions outside of class time students were prompted with further questions in relation to the activities completed in class. This usually resulted in them taking the discussion in directions that were not anticipated by me. Ruby, Jane and Susanna drew on experiences in sites outside school in discussing sexuality and the construction of heterosexuality as normative:

Jane: What’s like really confusing is you can have like friends holding hands, like two girls holding hands and that’s ok but when you have two guys holding hands you’re like ...

Susanna: But that’s like, I went to Nepal in year 7 and there were all these teenage boys walking around holding hands. It’s culture, like it was acceptable. You’d even see like little four year old boys holding hands.

Ruby: I was in a kindergarten [doing work experience] and you always see the girls holding hands but you never see two boys holding hands and I think it’s just something that’s set in when you’re born that ‘boys don’t do that kind of thing’ but girls do show their emotions and stuff. And then it’s really cute when the boys do hold hands, you’re like ‘Oh!’

It is evident that Ruby is moving outside the writing she completed during class time in response to my questions about the construction of gender. Here she appears, along with Jane and Susanna, to draw on a location outside school in an exploration of normative constructions of masculinity and how these relate to sexuality. The disparate locations, drawn on by all three girls, appear a critical resource in discussing constructions of gender and how these may be part of a construction of femininity (and in this case masculinity).

Similarly, in developing their role-plays some students played on the narcissistic ‘image’ based elements of girl power discourses in the popular media, making them into exaggerated parodies of female friendship and group politics. Here is an example from Ruby’s group:

Ruby: you’re embarrassing us!
Erin: Go and dance over in the corner with all the other losers
Cath: Oh, ok...(walks over to her other friends with her head down)
Erin: (Walks over and changes the song back)
Ruby: Oh my god she doesn’t even buy the right drinks, she’s fat, she
dresses like a loser and cannot dance!
Erin: I know, I think it's time to tell her we
don't want her in our group anymore
Ruby: ok

The work here is different from her answers
to the questions in the close scene analysis.
Although she is eliciting similar features
in her enactment and exploration of techni
es of exclusion in a friendship group,
there is a sense of irony and parody in the
role-play not afforded by answering ques
tions on film techniques.

Buckingham (2003) warns that we cannot
be sure as to how the students would con
cceptualise the politics of such a role-play,
oberving that 'parody potentially offers a
freedom in which nobody can be held ac
tountable for what they say' (p 320). In
making girl power into a parody I cannot
assume that students were wilfully decon
structing and contesting the normative pa
rameters within which girl power appears
to operate, even though that is how I might
want to read their work.

Similarly, although the story board on The
Blooding may have been exaggerated and
parodic, it nonetheless made me feel as
though I was not engaging the students ef
cetically in culturally political work. How
was I to know whether or not the boys re
sponsible 'really' held such views or not?

In conclusion
I am still leaning toward the importance
of close textual analysis as the 'safest' way
toward engaging in culturally political con
versation about constructions of gender and
sexuality in media and non media texts. If I
were to do this kind of work again I would
probably collate a series of contrasting rep
resentations of masculinity and femininity
from a variety of sources including popu
lar culture. I might then develop activities
based around undertaking textual analysis
of the constructions of gender and sexuality.

I might ask students to identify the different
elements in the texts that create meaning,
and compare similarities and differences
between texts. With the students I taught in
the rural school in my first year, this may
have been the only way of ensuring a safe
non-‘dangerous’ classroom environment.

However, with the students at the girls’
school I feel that the slightly more ‘danger
ous’ territory of class discussions and ‘play’
worked more effectively. The students drew
on disparate spaces in their discussions,
which proved to be critical resources in dis
cussing gender as a social and cultural prac
tice, rather than a fixed identity. I remain
unsure as to the exact learning occurring
through discussion and role-play in re
tion to culturally political work on gender
constructions, because I cannot read my
students’ minds. However, in this instance,
I was comfortable with the ‘play’ I allowed
the students, and the results that came from
it. I felt confident that they were being criti
cal and ironic, rather than dangerous.

It is important to question why, for exam
ple, the story board of The Blooding made
me feel so uncomfortable and why it did
not seem possible that the boys in question
may also have been engaging in self-parod
ic ‘play’. As one participant at the con
ference suggested to me, it is possible that the
boys were ‘testing’ me as a young, first year
teacher. This is indeed probable, in which
case, the boys may have been exaggerat
ing, rather than expressing what they ‘re
ally’ think. Whilst it is important to reflect
critically on such student-produced texts as
a teacher, it is equally important not to feel
you must always reinvent the wheel. After
tall, the very act of teaching is a culturally
political practice whereby power relations
between students and teachers, in all their
complexities, are pertinent to this kind of
textual work.

* All names have been changed to protect the anonym
ity of research participants
Some useful resources for media analysis and media literacy

http://www.wsu.edu/~amerstu/pop/text.html
This site positions texts as central to cultural politics and the power of naming and representation. Lots of great links to articles and a sections on advertising and other genres.

http://www.genderequity.org/medialit/contents.html
A site dedicated to the advancement of media education, this site takes learning about and using media to be central to engaging students. It has a ‘tour for teachers’ and links to activities.

McKee, A. (no date) ‘A beginner’s guide to textual analysis’, Metro Magazine, No 127-128, pp. 138-149. (There is a link to this resource on the first website above)


References

Hogan, P. (dir) (1994) Muriel’s Wedding, Australia, Roadshow Entertainment