Why are we watching funny videos in our pedagogy course? Deconstructing humorous videos to foster social activism in educators

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Abstract

For critical educators working towards social justice and activism, it is imperative to promote a thoughtful and purposeful examination of the privileges that spring from institutionalised practices, and the ways belief systems may deny the normalcy of views or experiences of others. By employing critical discourse analysis and framing funny videos as part of larger, cultural "mirror" that reflects widely-held values and beliefs within local, institutional and societal domains, this paper identifies specific humorous videos and lines of inquiry that have supported educators in recognising their own complicity in promoting a narrow definition of normativity, along varying and intersecting planes, including white privilege, the privilege of being a heritage speaker of English, privileged gendered behaviours, heteronormativity, and the myth of meritocracy, among others. By using online humorous video clips as a springboard for reflection and discussion, this paper describes an illumination of the ways humorous media may have been given a "free pass" and allowed it to remain un-interrogated, even though it may be quietly and insidiously perpetuating damaging perspectives. Deconstructing these layered messages embedded in humorous video clips can be useful in helping (future) educators understand their own positionality and the ways these insights may positively impact their instructional practices in ways that promote equity and work against oppressive institutional practices.

Keywords: humour, videos, pedagogy.

1. Introduction: Humour as a way to disrupt and re-orient stance

In my professional practice as a teacher educator, I see my work as very serious in nature. My graduate students are working towards their initial teacher licensure, and as such, are preparing to enter what I consider to be one of the most important, stressful, and high-impact professions on

the planet. Our work as educators and future educators focuses on providing rich, thoughtful, safe and engaging educational experiences for the next generation, and this responsibility, in no way, can be taken lightly. However, in spite of (or perhaps because of) this genuine weightiness and solemnity in our work, I have found that using humour — particularly, humorous videos — is a natural entrée into approaching big ideas with an open mind.

Adding to the seriousness of our work as educators are the admittedly bleak realities facing and framing public education these days. Although dominant-culture students (white, English-speaking, heterosexual, cisgendered middle-class students without identified disabilities) continue to thrive in our primary and secondary schools, we know that those students from further "outside the circle of privilege" face challenges related to access to qualified and compassionate teachers (Darling-Hammond 2004), curricula intended to foster critical thinking (Landsman 2004), and equitable treatment and opportunities in general (Warikoo & Carter 2009).

One of the primary challenges I encounter with my teacher candidates (my graduate students) is the issue of what I think of as "stance", which, for me, consists of two interwoven ideas. First is the idea that one's own beliefs are the best, most common, most right, or most desirable. Thus, their enthusiasm to "help people" and attempt to engage in overt cultural reproduction (often sanctified by the schooling institutions themselves) is pervasive, and problematic in the assumption that their own ideas are somehow superior and universal, while the lived experiences and views of others are deficient. Building from this, the second part of what I mean by *stance* is that many teacher candidates (like many people in general) tend to see issues of hegemony (racism, sexism, homophobia and like) as the failings and flaws of individuals — that is, racists, sexists, homophobes, and so on, all labels none would actively claim (Bonilla-Silva 2014). This stance — the metaphorical ground upon which one stands, and the metaphorical positioning of the self — frames these issues as owned by culpable people, individuals. This positioning of these beliefs upon individuals (and not institutions, families, or groups of any kind other than recognised hate groups) serves to insulate teacher candidates from their own culpability and complicity, leaving their own participation in the structural systems of inequity unrecognised and unnamed (Solorzano 1997).

Information supporting this assertion about the stance students may assume is gathered during an initial course assignment which takes the form of a critical autoethnography, wherein the teacher candidates give voice to their unique sets of lived experiences, describing the events that have shaped their views of race, culture, and privilege, and how these life experiences, perceptions, education, and family background and the media have led to their current ideas about learning and teaching *all* student populations. Questions for candidates to consider when writing this autoethnography include:

- What unearned privileges have allowed me to reach this point in my life? (In other words, how might my life have been different if I had been born into a different family, a different body, a different neighbourhood, etc.?)
- What messages did I receive growing up about what it meant to be a member of my gender, race, ethnicity, faith community, nation of origin, socioeconomic class, etc.? How have these messages — or later life situations that challenged them — informed the way I interact with others, including students, parents, colleagues, either in or out of my group?
- What are some of the issues and "-isms" with which I may still struggle? What are some of my stereotypes or prejudices? How might I confront them?
- What life experiences, or dimensions of my identity, give me a unique insight into issues of power, privilege, marginalisation, and oppression?

- What media sources currently influence my worldviews? What news sources do I trust?
- Which students, families or colleagues might be most challenging for me to work with?

My teacher candidates, on the whole, frame themselves and families as "good-hearted people", with little identification of complicity in broader concerns of racism, sexism, classism, and the like. Further, they have, as a whole, generally had a series (or even a lifetime) of positive school experiences. School was fun; school was engaging; school was welcoming; school was a place to flourish, shine, and thrive (Munier & Willis 2008). Thus, most of my teacher candidates (and most teacher candidates in general) can be thought of as "good at school". Although many "good-at-school" folks can identify some negative moments, incidents or teachers from their histories, the general tenor of school-memories is positive. This glowing and sunny set of recollections, however, is not representative of the school experience for all children. Rather, for some learners, school may have been a series of offensive or even oppressive experiences, fraught with irrelevance, boredom, alienation, or even embarrassment or humiliation (Kozol 1980). My goal is for the future educators in my courses to see that their own socially-constructed thinking (including their perceptions of reality, their notions of good and bad, their thoughts around what's funny and what's rude) may not be universal; there may be other perspectives that are equally present, equally valid, equally appropriate. There are many, many ways to see and interpret the world, and as such, I push my students to understand this two-part idea: first, that their personal views may not be the *only* perspective, and second, that their personal views may not be uniformly considered to be the best or most superior by anyone else.

My use of the word stance, then, involves not only a recognition of one's own socially constructed interpretation of experiences, but also includes an understanding of the ways inequity is enacted and reproduced. Identifying one's own culpability in the processes is part of the intention of this work.

As such, the following research questions emerge:

- What role, then, might humour play in the professional preparation of these future educators?
- How might levity, laughter or lightness serve a purpose in pushing their understandings, deepening their thinking and inviting new perspectives?

To this end, I seek the inclusion of provocative materials, positioned intentionally to stir reactions from my students, and to invite deeper thinking and reflection upon the construction of deeply held belief systems.

Although some of my students enter my courses with nuanced sensitivities to a range of issues around race, class, gender, sexuality, power, privilege and more, many come with the belief that they hold no biases — after all, they are "good people". With a bit of prompting or even nudging, typically through their composition of and feedback on their critical autoethnographies, they may concede to holding maybe one or two biases, but certainly no more. Generally, they all put themselves forward as open-minded, flexible, accepting people, willing to embrace the range of students and families they will encounter once they are certified teachers working in primary and secondary school settings.

Thus, in my courses, I rely heavily on ostensibly humorous videos, fully acknowledging that humour is subjective and defined through a vast array of lenses (Attardo 1994). As such, I have found many examples of videos that at least some people find funny that nest neatly into each course I teach in different ways. I frame this use of videos, the resulting analysis and discussion as a form critical discourse analysis, drawing from the work of Fairclough (1995: 7), who explains,

"discourse analysis is analysis of how texts work within sociocultural practice". Building on this, Bloor and Bloor (2013: 12) set forth that the main objectives of critical discourse analysis are

- to analyse discourse practices that reflect or construct social problems;
- to investigate how ideologies can become frozen in language and find ways to break the ice;
- to increase awareness of how to apply these objectives to specific cases of injustice, prejudice, or misuse of power.

Fairclough (1995: 4) provides flexibility in the interpretation of the idea of "text", stating, "texts do not need to be linguistic at all; any cultural artefact — a picture, a building, a piece of music — can be seen as a text". As such, the cultural artefact I have chosen is a series of three humorous videos.

Although critical discourse analysis crosses genres and may take a variety of forms, Fairclough (1995) describes an analytic procedure with three primary components included within the process. These are description, interpretation, and explanation. Rogers (2004: 7) builds on this, stating that the analysis should include "discursive relations and social practices at the local, institutional, and societal domains of analysis". As such, the analysis in this article weaves together each of these layers, circling back to how the educators in this study may manifest new thinking in their professional practices as teachers.

Each of the three videos described here, chosen from the seemingly infinite pool of possible humorous videos, was selected for its literal or metaphorical relevance to a key social issue or point of confusion. Each video has been used with 18 sections of graduate level courses, with a total of 436 consenting graduate student participants to date. These courses have taken place at an institution of higher education located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, and all data was collected between 2012 and 2014, inclusive.

Data were collected through class discussions and student written responses to their experiences with the videos. Further data were collected through end-of-course feedback forms wherein participants spontaneously reflected upon the changes in their thinking based upon their experiences with the videos. These data were analysed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), with open and axial coding being used to develop themes.

2. The humorous videos as a means to shift thinking

In the following section, I will describe three different videos I have used repeatedly to great effect, and will describe what elements are found to be funny or humorous by my teacher candidates. I will then explain the meta-messages the videos contain, and discuss the overarching ideas and ideals they allude to, along with the typical trajectories of the conversations in class.

Each of the videos selected speaks to three unique theories of humour, namely, relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. Relief theory (Freud (1966 [1905])) suggests that "laughter allows individuals to subconsciously overcome inhibitions" (Green 2012: 6). Given the potentially fraught and taboo nature of the topics at hand, it would follow that participants might experience feelings of inhibition, making humour a useful tool. In a different way, superiority theory (Ferguson & Ford 2008) may come into play as participants may find themselves laughing *at* subjects in a video, casting themselves in an elevated, more advanced position that those they are watching. This self-casting in a superior position can serve as a kind of diving board for plunges into deeper understandings connected to deconstructions of these ideas of dominance or

prestige. Finally, incongruity theory (Meyer 2000) is evoked in watching each of the videos, in that each contains some dissonant, unexpected aspect which is surprising, but rarely shocking enough to be repulsive or threatening.

2.1. "It's a squeal, an' it's dead!": Taboos and parental autonomy and authority

On the first day of my Teaching for Equity and Social Justice class for the last several terms, I have shown the video, "Original dead squirrel, girl, greyhound... unnexpected" [sic] (hoopeverlasting 2011). The video features a girl named Thea, around the age of three, being filmed and addressed by her father. The entirety of the video (which is about two and a half minutes) takes place just outside the front door of the family home. The first lines of the video include this dialogue between father and daughter: "Hey, what is that you have there, Thea?" The child replies, "A squirrel. It's dead!" However, the child's pronunciation of the word "squirrel" sounds more like "squeal", which typically elicits laughter among the students viewing it, along with indications that members of the class find this both adorable and endearing. The child, standing just outside the front door of their home, is dressed only in underpants and, smiling broadly, is cradling a lifeless squirrel. She grins, exclaiming, "Whee, dikka dikka dikka!" and spins around with the squirrel as her father laughs in response to her antics. She continues to dance with and nuzzle the dead squirrel, sometimes cradling it over her shoulder like a baby, and sometimes placing it (or dropping it) on the sidewalk, cooing, "Aww, sweet baby, sweet baby squeal".

After about a minute, the father announces, "Okay, Thea, we gotta put the squirrel down and we gotta go take a bath now". As he says this, Thea is holding the squirrel under her arm and is using her other hand to manipulate the head of the animal. "Look, it's nodding its head". The father laughs in response, as the mother (off camera) admonishes, "Okay, respect". The video ends with Thea saying goodbye to the squirrel, and then a close-up of the dead squirrel's face.

Reactions of students in the class to this video are typically representative of a range of perspectives — which is precisely why it is such a useful way to begin the class. As Fairclough (1995: 9) notes, "[t]he interpretation of texts is a dialectical process resulting from the interface of the variable interpretation resources people bring to bear on the text, *and* properties of the text itself" (emphasis in original). In this case, the video is seen to be both funny and provocative, a fascinating mixture that creates a fertile opportunity to get at what our deeply held beliefs might be, including those we may have never been asked to articulate before. After the video ends, I request that the students remain in silence for a few moments and think of a single-word response to what they have just witnessed. We then go around the room and have each person speak their single word in turn. Commonly invoked words are variations on hilarious, disgusting, amusing, disturbing, confusing, cute, dangerous, and repulsive. We then take a few moments in silence to consider and individually process these reactions, and then I invite students to turn to neighbours and talk first about their own reactions, and then about their responses to what they heard others in the class intone.

After a few minutes of debriefing with their small groups, I have the class come back together to elaborate on what has been discussed. I begin the conversation by focusing on the humorous aspects, as all students in my classes have agreed there is at least some part of the video that is amusing, either the pronunciation of the word squirrel ("squeal"), the child's dancing and cavorting with the squirrel, or the reaction of the mother. Some have said they laugh because the father's off-camera laughter is infectious. But just past this reaction of laughter, there is almost always some element of uneasiness; something discordant or disturbing that I want my teacher

candidates to grapple with. And it is in this space, this uneasy and pregnant tension, that our focus on issues of social justice as related to stance may begin.

The most profound response (beyond humour) that students voice, is the sense that touching dead animals is inappropriate in some way, and perhaps especially inappropriate for children. Students use words such as gross, disgusting, nasty, icky, repulsive, and dangerous. As the facilitator, I let these words move around the room, and have people respond to one another, typically affirming what they are hearing and expanding on their thinking. Most frame the touching of dead animals as "unhealthy" or "unsafe". Students are quick to bring up the risk of rabies or other unnamed parasites or infectious diseases or ailments that may be transmitted by wild animals. Most students agree that handling dead squirrels is a bad idea, and there is often outrage (ranging from mild to extreme) at the idea that the parents of the child permitted her to handle this animal - and even filmed the event, laughing. At one point in the video, the child has the squirrel against her face, near her mouth, which is often held as the most egregious example of "poor parenting" by students in my classes.

After several minutes of this conversation, I seek to clarify whether the members of the class believe touching dead animals is "wrong" in some personally-defined sense of the word. Nearly everyone agrees with this idea until I ask the next question: What did you eat for lunch today, and were there any dead animals involved?

Few students use the word taboo in describing their reactions to the video, but this is precisely what they are describing: the ways their families and communities of origin have inculcated this taboo into their thinking so deeply that it is almost impossible to see the world in a different way. Seeing the handling of dead animals as culturally inappropriate (rather than universally inappropriate) is challenging.

Another aspect of the video that students react to is the way the child, Thea, is dressed. We know from the contextual information (from the internet) that the video was filmed in Florida, and as such, we may assume the weather was warm. At one point, we see the mother of Thea barefoot and wearing shorts and a t-shirt, and Thea herself is dressed only in underpants. She is apparently unselfconscious in her appearance, and throughout the video, moves the dead squirrel from arm to arm, shoulder to shoulder, and against her neck and face, perhaps appreciating the sensation of the warmth and fur against her skin. So, while students recognise the utility and comfort of this manner of dress for a three year old while at home, some are disturbed by the fact that the parents elected to post this video publicly, where others with prurient or other age-inappropriate interests may see the child's body.

The purpose of using this video is to help my students begin to get a sense of how their own cultural values invisibly permeate their thinking, and shape their ideas of right and wrong, clean and dirty, appropriate and inappropriate. The content of the video, along with the reactions from other classmates, serves to invite students into thinking about how their own beliefs about the taboo may be different from those others hold.

2.1.1. Why is it funny?

Several facets of the video have been identified by participants as funny, including the element of dark humour threaded throughout. At root, death is typically considered to be a matter-of-fact, sombre or even sorrowful event, certainly not amusing. But in the video, the young child is brimming with delight, beaming, laughing, and even engaging in a spontaneous dance of joy. This juxtaposition of elation in the face of death is so incongruent that it becomes funny — tragedy (if the death of squirrel could be considered a tragedy) embroidered onto the innocence of a child.

Berger (2011) would describe this type of humour as *incongruity,* because it is "based on the differences between what people expect and what they get" (Berger 2011: 235).

Another facet seen as amusing is the speech pattern and intonation of the child. As nearly all of her dialogue is spoken with a prominent smile on her face, her amusement and enthusiasm are often described as charming and infectious. Special attention is given to the way she pronounces the word squirrel (as "squeal"), which is found to be highly amusing as she is attempting to approximate an adult pronunciation of the word.

Finally, some viewers respond with laughter at the surreality of the entire event. Because handling dead animals (wild animals, in particular) is so taboo, it's almost unthinkable to imagine someone not only touching one, but rubbing it against her body and face. This is so unexpected (as stated in the title of the video) that it can be experienced as amusing.

2.1.2. *How did participants reflect upon the video?*

In responding to the use of this video as a point of discussion, participants commented along several key themes, each tied to one of the humour theories previously noted. First, relief theory of humour appeared in that this video was watched on the first day of class, in the company of people not well known to one another. Wrote one participant, "I was keyed up from having just begun the term, and having just reviewed the details of the syllabus, so it was actually kind of nice to just burst out laughing, and to laugh with my new classmates". Another noted, "[t]he subject matter of the course is so serious, with racism and all being on the agenda, that I was surprised to get to laugh and it felt great. I think it helped us all relax". This maps neatly onto what Fairclough (1995) would term a *local* domain, in that in these utterances, participants held the focus on themselves.

Next, elements of superiority theory clearly manifest in the discussion around the video, serving well to highlight ways in which participants may need to self-monitor their thinking as they begin their work as teachers. In a reflection at the end of class, one student noted,

> I find myself continuously referring back to that video of the girl with the dead squirrel we watched on the first day [of class]. I knew myself as someone who was accepting of all belief [systems], and as someone who is forgiving and kind. I was shocked to realise how angry I was at the parents in the video and how much I was judging them, mostly because they were doing things different from what my own family would have done.

Other students in the course echoed the same idea, noting that they initially felt superior to, and evaluative of, the parenting demonstrated by the adults in the video, followed by a realisation that our reactions are tied to culturally (and sometimes family-specific) definitions of appropriate and inappropriate. This serves as evidence that the participants took their thinking to what Fairclough (1995) would describe as an *institutional* domain, in that they were considering their contextualised thinking within the framework of their own family units. This might also be considered a move into considering the *societal* domain, as participants considered how their own thinking layered against those of our society at large.

Finally, incongruity theory was abundantly relevant in reactions to this video, in that the idea of a postmodern framing (wherein there is no specific moment of "punchline") was initially found to be unfamiliar, but then, once understood, became a worthwhile exercise. Because the video is presented as a tool for discussing perceived violations of personally constructed definitions of taboo, this postmodern framing of this video can be, at first, confusing for some participants. "I

didn't get why we were watching it. It was weird and felt awkward", noted one participant. She continued, "[b]ut then, once I heard how the other people in the class reacted, it started to make sense. I was really surprised that some people actually thought it was gross or dirty. I just thought it was adorable". Another participant commented,

> After class ended, I went home and made my husband watch it just like we did, with no information about what was coming, just to get his cold reaction. He was so confused about why I made him watch it! But after we talked about it, how maybe *that's the point* in some way, that we all have different reactions, he was really excited to talk about it with me.

Additionally, the fact that the squirrel was indeed dead was framed by nearly all participants as incongruous, and therefore funny. "That video made me realise that I see what I want to see. I just could not fathom that it was a real squirrel and that it was dead. I just kept thinking it must be a toy", wrote one student. Another stated, similarly, "[i]t was just so absurd that she was allowed to not only touch it, but to rub it all over her body! I just couldn't imagine being allowed to do that!"

2.1.3.   What are the implications for educators?

In thinking about the cascading implications for student reactions to this video, I invite my students to consider how they might respond if this girl were a child in their class, with these parents who permitted her to engage in this activity. As educators with stated commitments to equity, social justice and a respect for all others, how might they react and respond?

The purpose of this exercise is to push students to first access their own thinking and possible biases, and then to engage in a critical examination of these ideas and an exploration of where they came from, how they were socially constructed, and how their own families and communities have served to reinforce their ideas.

This video and the subsequent conversation push participants to think about their own definitions of taboo, and where these may have originated. The handling of dead animals, the partial nudity of children in public, and the autonomy of parents in deciding what is best for their own child are all topics of exploration.

In considering the concept of taboo in general, Gay (2010: 24) speaks to this idea, stating, "discontinuities in behavioural norms and expectations [...] happen often and on many different fronts, simply because teachers fail to recognize, understand or appreciate the pervasive influence of culture on their own and their students' attitudes, values and behaviours". This disconnect or discontinuity between how my students (future teachers) and families may see and experience a range of issues is a key concept my students must grasp; their own versions of reality are culturally mediated and are no better nor worse than anyone else's versions of reality, and that thoughts on rightness and wrongness, the taboo and the acceptable, glory and outrage are all negotiable and shifting.

2.2. Technoviking: Gender, body image, violence

Within the same course, Teaching for Equity and Social Justice, we also watch the Technoviking video, originally recorded in 2000 and uploaded by Matthias Fritsch (subrealic 2007). Since uploading the video to youtube, he has masked the visual content, citing, "some ongoing legal issues" but the video, which "went viral" very quickly, has been reposted, re-made and parodied thousands of times (Fritsch 2013). For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to the copy I use in my classes, posted by Ar0n13 (2007).

For those unfamiliar with the Technoviking video, it's about 4 minutes long and features a muscular, shirtless, bearded man interacting with others and dancing on a street in Berlin. Although people are speaking in the video, no dialogue can be heard as there is a loud musical soundtrack playing techno music throughout the duration of the video.

The video appears opens on a group of people dancing in a street, with the central and most prominent figure being what appears to be a woman wearing red pants and a blue wig. Although there are others around, she is not dancing with any specific person, and seems to be part of the group.

After about 40 seconds of this dancing, a man wearing a black tank top (known henceforth as "the unruly man") suddenly enters the scene from the left and makes full-body contact with the woman, briefly embracing her in a bear hug from behind before releasing her and moving away. The impact of the unruly man's body caused the woman to stumble forward a few steps, looking back over her shoulder in response. As the man in the black tank top begins to move away, the eponymous Technoviking enters the scene and grabs the unruly man by the arm, and in this interaction, the legend of Technoviking takes root.

Although no dialogue can be heard, it is clear that there is a vivid hierarchical relationship between Technoviking and the unruly man. Technoviking (so dubbed for his Northern European colouring and features, his beard, his prominent and well-developed musculature and the Hammer of Thor necklace he wears) seems to tower over the unruly man who, in contrast, looks diminutive and chubby. Still being held by the wrist, the unruly man seems to try to explain himself to Technoviking, gesturing with his free hand towards something off camera. Technoviking then grabs his other wrist, as well, and holds the unruly man by both wrists for a moment before angrily releasing his grip and ordering the unruly man back towards the camera — back towards where he came from. With his chest heaving and stomach muscles flexing, Technoviking glares at the unruly man as he retreats out of view of the camera before raising an accusatory or warning finger at him, perhaps muttering something. One might read the body language and facial expression as something akin to, "You better not do that again", or perhaps "Stay there."

This moment is the iconic freeze-frame most commonly associated with Technoviking: arm raised, finger pointing warningly, head slightly inclined and chest and stomach muscles flexing in testosterone-fueled glory. Technoviking cuts an imposing figure, a poster boy (poster man, perhaps) for secondary sexual characteristics.

After this lingering image, the camera begins to slowly move away, and it becomes evident that the video is being filmed from the back of a truck, and that the music is emanating from speakers mounted there as well. As the camera begins to move away from Technoviking, he follows, as do others in the crowd on the street. Still gazing fixedly at what viewers intuit to be the unruly man, Technoviking is approached by another man who offers him a bottle of water by holding it in front of his face. Without really acknowledging the man, Technoviking opens the bottle, drinks deeply, and then hands it back to the man who then slowly drifts into the crowd. Fueled by this water, Technoviking begins to dance techno-style, following the camera that is slowly rolling forward. The video continues with this for the next few minutes, as Technoviking and others follow the slowly progressing camera while dancing in the street. The video ends with Technoviking walking away from the camera.

To process what they have seen and to connect this to our work, I have the students sit in silent thought for about a minute after viewing the video, and then, as with the Dead Squirrel video, I have them think of a single-word response or reaction to what they have experienced. We then go around the room and share these words, one after another.

Having shared this video with 18 cohorts of students, similar one-word responses have emerged. A typical sampling of responses includes words like funny, weird, confusing, manliness, European, muscles, gay, drugs, intimidating, jerk, beautiful, fun, and silly. As with the other video, students are then moved into small groups to discuss their own reactions and those of their peers, and to debrief their thinking. As the students chat, I replay the video with the sound off so they can make note of things the may have missed the first time through.

After several minutes of this and a bit of class discussion, I restart the video at the 35-second mark to highlight the initial interaction between the unruly man and the dancing woman. I ask, "How do you read this scene? What is happening here? What is familiar or unfamiliar, and what is your gut reaction to this part?"

After watching this portion a few times, slowed down, students typically divide over whether Technoviking admonishes the unruly man in response to his physical contact with the woman or whether Technoviking admonishes the unruly man because he has stepped away from some assigned station, perhaps on the back of the truck with the speakers and camera. This ambiguity is uncomfortable for some; the hesitation in voicing any definitive opinion might feel risky or even dangerous without knowing "the facts". Further, it is unclear what happens when the unruly man contacts the dancing woman. While it is obvious that he has fleeing physical contact with her, it is unclear as to whether this could be considered molestation or more innocent clumsiness.

This conversation serves as the perfect entree into a conversation around impact vs. intent and microaggressions (Sue *et al*. 2007). The key messages for students to understand are that when using a conceptual framework that is rooted in social justice, it is tempting to focus on the intention of an act — in other words, what the person *meant* or *did not mean* with their action or utterance. However, taking a critical stance involves focusing, instead, on the actual impact of the act. Did the act leave someone feeling violated? Demeaned? Insulted? Wounded? Ashamed? Negative in any way at all? This, then, becomes the focus and takes priority over what was originally intended. This is not to entirely discount the intentions -because these matter, too — but rather, to privilege the impact.

Further, this particular video invites exploration into a Foucauldian form of discourse analysis, in that tremendous non-verbal expressions of power are evident throughout this video. In highlighting the ways in which power structures are both situated and inscribed through various scenes in this video, participants can begin to make sense of the ways social constructivism play out across local, institutional, and societal planes.

2.2.1. *Why is it funny?*

Although not all viewers see the Technoviking video as necessarily funny, there is clearly an element of the absurd woven throughout the video. As the scene begins with the people dancing in the street, it reflects a setting and situation that even if not fully familiar, is recognisable to most viewers and not noted as humorous. However, the entrance of the Technoviking, whose appearance is markedly different not only from those around him, but from many people on the planet, is sometimes taken as amusing.

There are three parts of the video that seem to evoke the greatest comedic response. The first occurs just after the unruly man has moved out of the frame, but it is clear that the Technoviking has followed him with his gaze. When the Technoviking raises his arm and points his index finger towards the unruly man in an obvious gesture of scolding/warning, laughter usually ripples through the room, as this physical symbol of threat or chastisement seen as domination is so exaggerated — a common comedic tool. The exaggeration is multi-layered, and includes the

physicality of the Technoviking, the posture, and the juxtaposition of his presence against all of other participants, smaller, fully clothed, and practically obsequious in contrast.

The second portion viewers find amusing happen just a few second later, as the camera suddenly begins to retreat from the scene. As the camera moves away, the Technoviking begins to follow, and is approached by a much smaller (and fully clothed) man on his left, who hands him a water bottle — but upside down and directly in front of his face. The Technoviking barely acknowledges the man, but takes the bottle, drinks deeply, and then hands it back to him with no more than a glance. The man takes the water bottle back and slips it into a shoulder bag before fading into the crowd. It is the odd manner of the exchange and set of atypical interactions in this water-taking-and-giving that are described as funny. It is unusual to be offered water by a stranger, and even more unusual to be offered in this manner, and the absurdity increases with the acceptance and then the return of the bottle.

The third piece viewers have identified as funny is when the Technoviking transitions from simply walking behind the moving camera to dancing towards the moving camera, employing misdirection commonly used by professional comics. The effect is not unlike those seen in professionally created music videos, wherein a main character spontaneously begins to "bust a move" in response to a musical cue. It is unexpected, as it defies the idea that muscular and dominating men do not or would not dance, and neatly fits within what Berger (2011) would label as a type of humour linked to an incongruity.

However, as previously noted, not all viewers found the video to be amusing, and in fact found it disturbing and offensive. Everts (2003: 373), in describing the ways families frame humour, explains that because,

> Humour is not always appreciated or recognised as humour by outsiders supports the notion that contextualisation cues for marking humour, ideas about what topics are appropriate to frame humorously, and notions about what discursive forms can be employed in conveying humour are culturally relative, varying from group to group and being learned over time though the socialisation of members of that group.

Thus, these differences in the ways viewers respond to the video serve as evidence of the cultural relativity of existence, identity and conceptions of "normal", all major goals for the course.

2.2.2. *How did participants reflect upon the video?*

Just as with the previous video, responses of the participants can be mapped into the three previously described theories of humour. To begin, relief theory seemed to play a role in that in watching the video, "I thought the guy was going to pound someone, that there would be a huge fight", wrote one participant. "I was really glad it didn't go that way and it was funny when he started dancing". Another noted, "[t]he technoviking video made talking about body issues and sexism a lot easier. We were all laughing and joking, which made the serious topic somehow more approachable".

Expressions of superiority rang through student responses loud and clear, invoking superiority theory of humour in interesting ways. One male student noted,

> I just thought that guy was an a**hole for about 1000 reasons. He was showing off and without even talking, he was bossing other people around. No one likes a guy like that and I don't get why women would be even a little attracted. Sure, he works out, but he's obviously a d*ck. It was easy to laugh at him, maybe because it's a video and I knew I wasn't at any physical risk for doing so.

These expressions of both relief and superiority fit neatly into what Fairclough (1995) would term as *local* domains of reflection, in that they are centred on and rooted in the self. These might also be stretched to include reflections of *institutional* or *societal* domains, in that the video is set in a public space, and the featured actor is engaging with others in a variety of ways, each being evaluated and judged by the viewers.

Incongruity registered with multiple participants, as well. Wrote one student, "[i]t was really surprising to see him start dancing, and to do it with such a straight face!" Another commented, at the end of class, "I still chuckle when I think about that Technoviking video, because he's such a tough guy, and then all of the sudden he's Mr. Boogie Down". Both of these responses allude to concepts of gender and the body, and the socially constructed norms that govern both.

2.2.3. *What are the implications for educators?*

So what in the world might this have to do with a focus on equity and social justice, and why would I invest four minutes of class time in having students watch this video?

Invariably, this video and the discussion that follows it provoke strong reactions from participants. There is often confusion at first, with questions of, "What were we supposed to see or notice?" But then typically, others point out some of the key features of the video.

First, the protagonist in the video, the Technoviking, is only partially clothed for the duration of the video. Clad in just knee-length shorts, socks and hiking boots, his well-develop muscles are on display throughout the video, and his dancing serves to flex and highlight different muscle groups, including his abdominal muscles. This raises the issues of the male body, and the effect of the public gaze. How does this image of this iconic male affect males who view it? How does this compare to the ways the female body is fetishised and paraded? Is this uncomfortable, and if so, why?

Other issues that arise are related to the centrality of the figure that is the Technoviking. The world seems to, in some way, revolve around him, which again, provokes a series of reactions, as he is a white male of large stature, and people seem to inexplicably defer to him. Furthermore, in the video, he overtly threatens another male of lesser stature, as indicated by his garb, his physicality (shorter, pudgier), and his bodily postures and expressions. As such, some viewers of the video have reacted with outrage and disgust at the character. One woman responded with, "I f***ing hate that guy!" She went on to explain that her reaction stemmed from the ways he seemed to completely dominate the people and space around him, clearly referencing what Fairclough (1995) would describe as having an impact on this participant's sense of the *societal* domain of action.

The lines of thinking this video is intended to provoke include focus directly on issues of power — power as related to body image, power as related to gender identity, power as related to violence, and the ways these are expressed. Women's bodies are frequently the subject of public scrutiny through the media, and as such, women are perhaps invited to compare their own bodies to the airbrushed ideals put forth as idealised. With the focus on the Technoviking, the gaze is shifted to an idealised male physique, disrupting the traditional focus and in doing so, inviting viewers to notice how deeply normalised the evaluative gaze upon the female body has become (Mulvey 1992).

Further, with the suggestion of violence directed towards a woman (the possible groping) and the subsequent "saviour" behaviour exhibited at the beginning of the video, conversation easily leads to the ways power is expressed or repressed, and the kinds of aggressive acts that are tolerated by women. Also discussed are the expected or normalised reactions of men or others

with more perceived power when these kinds of events take place. Conversation is ripe for explorations around how males perceive the expectations placed upon them, and how they may choose to respond.

2.3. Charlie bit my finger — again!: Learning the rules of social and cultural reproduction

A tidy fit into conversations about the social reproduction of culture can build from a viewing of the eponymous video, Charlie bit my finger — again!, uploaded by HDCYT in 2007. The entire video, which lasts under one minute, features two young British boys, brothers, snuggled together in a soft chair. The older child, age three, is holding the smaller child, his brother, age one, on his lap, and their legs are covered with a blanket. As the video opens, the baby (Charlie) leans forward, says something like "haaaaump!" and pushes the older boy's hand into his mouth, biting it. The older boy chuckles, and says "Ha ha, Charlie". Smiling, the older child then speaks to the person holding the camera, announcing, "Charlie bit me".

After a moment's consideration, the older child then offers his index finger to the baby, positioning it right in front of his mouth. The baby eagerly leans forward and, showing his baby-incisors, bites down on his brother's finger. In the first few seconds, the older brother is amused, and chuckles again. Quickly, however, his expression shifts, and turns to concern, eyebrows lowered and mouth open. "Oh — ho!" This is followed by a tentative, "Ouch," then "OUCH!" "OUCH, CHARLIE".

Within moments, the older child yells, "AAAAAAUUUUUUUUCCH, CHARLIE!," followed by a few moments of crying, and then followed by an accusatory, "Charlie, that really hurt!" As the older child examines his wounded finger and then wipes the baby's saliva off, the baby gazes at the person holding the camera, breaks into a smile, and chuckles, revealing about eight tiny teeth. Sensing the contagion of the laughter (and probably seeing the amusement in the face of the adult with the camera), the older boy begins to smile as well, and announces again, smiling, "Charlie bit me. And that really hurt, Charlie, and it's still hurting". The video ends soon after this, as the baby grins and coos for the person holding the camera before bending forward to bite at the blanket.

Reactions to this video always include amusement, and general reactions to the cuteness of the two children. They are charming and adorable, and many comment on the sweet way in which they are snuggled together. But the interesting thing to consider is how this video might be of any use or relevance in a class focused on issues of equity and social justice. What messages or ideas are embedded, and how might these serve to deepen our thinking?

To begin, I invite the students to think about the issues around the idea of social reproduction. What are the ways we learn what is right? What is appreciated? What is valued? What is funny? What do our families do and say to teach us this, without ever having to use words, but rather, through gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal communication? And what behaviours are rewarded and which are ignored?

When thinking about cultural reproduction in these terms, it is easy to see how this is enacted in the video. The young child exchanges smiles with the adult holding the camera and laughs, and then the older child is influenced such that he moves from pain and outrage to amusement — although still attempting to cling to his outrage a bit in his restatement of the issue a second time ("Charlie bit me"). But this is not reinforced, and is treated as humour, and so he changes his tack and also finds it humorous, in spite of his pain and the fact that it "really hurts". The pain the older child feels is not apparently validated or acknowledged, but it seems that the laughter of the younger child is met with positivity.

The second big question I pose to students is around the idea of making mistakes and learning from our errors or poor decisions. The older child in the video feels some level of pain at the first bite from his brother, but not so much that he is put off from trying it again. In fact, it seems as though it might be mildly amusing, perhaps to the adult holding the camera. So, in thinking about our own conceptions of culture, how many times have we done something that we know results in our own pain or detriment, but for a constellation of reasons (some unknown to us), we return to the same activity or course of action? What compels us to do so?

2.3.1. *Why is it funny?*

As healthy adult humans, we are hard-wired to respond positively to a laughing infant, because, as pointed out in a study focusing on the role of the biological neuropeptide oxytocin, "[t]he laugh of an infant is a uniquely rewarding experience" (Riem *et al*. 2011: 1257). Laughing babies trigger something deeply responsive within the psyches of most people, and impel us to smile or laugh in return. Charlie laughs; we laugh, too. And there is also something about this physical humour that is slapstick, which Berger (2005) would identify as humorous in the broad category of "action".

Another piece found to be funny is in the shift undergone by the older brother as he begins to register pain from the bite. It is this dawning of awareness that is found to be amusing — the fading of the child's smile into a more urgent and darkened expression and finally a shout of outrage and pain. We laugh because we know that, although the child is not seriously injured, he is surprised, and being surprised is often considered funny. There is also a mildly slapstick element to the physicality of the humour.

The other facet that is considered funny in this video is the whiff of recognition most people feel when watching the repeated "mistake" made by the older brother. Most viewers resonate at some level with making a poor choice but not quite learning from it the first time, and returning to make the same mistake again — and maybe for a third time, as well. We laugh as the older brother regrets his choice to re-insert his finger into his brother's mouth, just as we experience regret at repeating our own mistakes. In laughing at the child, we laugh at ourselves.

2.3.2. *How did participants reflect upon the video?*

Like the previous two videos, the participants responded in their writings in ways that connected to theories related to humour as a form of relief and humour as indicative of incongruity. Unlike the previous two videos, participants did not voice (or write) anything that could be linked to their laughter as an expression of superiority, and tended to keep their comments rooted in the *local* (personal, self) domain and the *institutional* (familial) domains. Speaking to the idea of relief, and echoing sentiments shared by most other students, one participant wrote,

> The first time I watched the *Charlie* video, I really thought the older boy was hurt, because he screamed so strongly. His smile and chuckle made *me* smile and chuckle. I was really glad he was actually okay and just playing it up for the camera.

Incongruity was writ large in responses to this video. Noted one student, expressing a sentiment echoed by many peers,

> The funniest part was when the baby, I guess that's Charlie, starts to chortle. He has just heard his brother yelling at the top of his voice, but after just the smallest pause, he cracks that little smile, showing those teeth, and then chuckling. It's so silly and funny!

The other piece that students found incongruous, and therefore funny, was that the older boy does not seem to have learned that being bitten actually hurts, and re-offers his finger to his baby brother. Wrote one student, "I think that was so funny because you just don't expect him to do it again — but it reminded me that we all repeat our mistakes sometimes, big or small."

2.3.3. *What are the implications for educators?*

As suggested, the primary reason we watch this video is to open a conversation around the idea of cultural reproduction, cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). As explained by Tzanakis (2011: 7), "[c]ultural capital embodies the sum total of investments in aesthetic codes, practices and dispositions transmitted to children through the process of family socialisation, or in Bourdieu's term, *habitus*" (emphasis in original). In examining the ways the children depicted in the video are being inculcated with their familial habitus, so, too, may we turn the metaphorical camera onto ourselves and examine the ways we have similarly been nudged, coaxed and rewarded into holding specific beliefs and reacting in particular ways.

This cultural grooming and shaping is apparent in several dimensions of the video, and is directed towards both children. The infant Charlie has his smile rewarded and as such, chuckles and smiles even more broadly. He is being taught that making his brother yell is amusing to adults, and will be rewarded. The older brother is also being taught that it is humorous when he is injured, and upon injury, he will be rewarded with smiles warmth as well. What is interesting is his apparent sense that he should cling to his wounded-ness, evidenced in his statement and then re-statement of the problem ("Charlie bit me. And it really hurt") in what seemed like an attempt to garner sympathy for his plight. He is taught, however, that his injuries are funny or not to be taken seriously, and that his willingness to "laugh it off" will be rewarded.

3. Conclusion

We return, now, to the questions posed at the outside of this study: What role might humour play in the professional preparation of these future educators? And how might levity, laughter or lightness serve a purpose in pushing their understandings, deepening their thinking and inviting new perspectives? With each of these videos, participants nearly always register at least some level of humour along one or more of the theoretical axes described, and react with a range of emotions that serve to neatly highlight their personal frameworks and beliefs about the world, mapping onto Fairclough's (1995) domains of the local, the institutional, or the societal. Using these provocative videos as springboards for deeper conversations allows my students, future teachers, to begin to identify and suss out some of their own biases and culturally-imbued thinking, especially when provided with the opportunity to compare this to the thinking of their classmates.

One of the primary reasons I use these videos and others like them is because our individual reactions to this type of imagery can help highlight our own culturally constructed conceptions of "normal". This understanding — in a deep and nuanced way — is key for educators in diverse communities, because it drives home the fact that my own biases, stereotypes and preferences are not organically right or the best for everyone. Learning about where and how our beliefs are formed can be profoundly useful when confronted with our own reactions to the ways others communicate, parent, plan, organise, dress, react, or simply move through life. Conceptualising

how "normal" is constructed for each person can be excellent insulation against reactive or dismissive thinking about students and their families.

Another reason I include the use of videos such as this is to help my students (and myself) to begin to identify their instincts to push their beliefs onto others. Gripped with the desire to shout, "But I know I'm right!", giving voice to what Fairclough (1995) would call the local domain, watching and dissecting these videos can be useful in helping students recognise and identify moments when this belief about "rightness" emerges, and then act accordingly. Identifying these issues can help us to respectfully and openly collaborate with the families of our students, moving to the institutional and societal domains, acknowledging the differences in the ways people act and believe without imposing judgments or evaluative thinking.

Finally, I elect to infuse my courses with videos like these in an acknowledgement that the media is one of our most profoundly unrecognised teachers. We are enveloped in what Cortés (2000) dubs the "societal curriculum", which he describes as "that massive, ongoing, informal curriculum of families, peer groups, neighbourhoods, churches, organisations, institutions, mass media and other socialising forces that educate all of us throughout our lives" (Cortés 2000: 18). Cortés (2000: 19) goes on to explain that through their interactions with the mass media, people,

> learn language, acquire culture, obtain cross-cultural knowledge […] develop beliefs, hone perceptions, internalise attitudes, and observe patterns of behaviour [...]. In short, through the societal curriculum, all students receive a multicultural education [...]. The only way to avoid it is to avoid the media [...] all of them.

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