

Cultural Data Sets

Cultural data sets are everyday texts (e.g. music lyrics, clips from movies, t.v. shows, advertisements, etc.) with which students are already very familiar and that pose interpretive problems similar to the ones students will meet in the canonical texts we will be teaching. The focus of examining cultural data sets is to support students themselves in generating strategies for noticing and interpreting problems of symbolism, irony, satire, and unreliable narration. The assumption is that students are already using these strategies tacitly as they make sense of the satire in a comedy film or t.v. show or the symbolism in music lyrics they value. The process of supporting students in examining cultural data sets moves beyond having students articulate what they understand from these everyday texts (e.g. what meanings they derive from watching or listening to them). While students are expected to talk and write about what meanings they make of these everyday texts, the ultimate goal is to help them to articulate what drew their attention to particular features of the texts and what strategies they used to construct their interpretations. Lee (1995, 2007) refers to these as metacognitive instructional conversations, discussions in small and whole groups where students make public strategies they use to notice and strategies they use to infer meanings about what they notice.

Students will typically describe the strategies they use in local terms, referring to the particular details of interest in the target cultural data set. The teacher's goal is to re-voice (O'Connor and Michaels 1993) the local explanations of students into academic language (Short and Fitzsimmons 2007) of rules or heuristics. For example, students may say 'People at Burger King don't wear masks' in response to a question about one of the stanzas in the Fugees' The Mask or 'roses don't grow from concrete' in Tupac's The Rose That Grew From Concrete. What they mean by these local explanations is that they paid attention to these details because they were in a prominent position (e.g. in the title and repeated across stanzas) and that a literal interpretation either doesn't make sense or is not sufficient to understand what the author is trying to say. See chapters x and x from Lee's Culture, Language and Literacy for detailed explanations and illustrations of supporting students in examining cultural data sets in order to derive strategies for noticing and interpreting. In these chapters, Lee articulates strategies for reasoning about symbolism and satire. Michael Smith (1989, 1991) articulates and demonstrates strategies for reasoning about unreliable narration and irony.

There are two important caveats with regard to this core practice for teaching literary interpretive processes. We need to make a distinction between strategies for noticing details and patterns in a literary text that are likely to be important for interpreting the texts, particularly beyond simple literal understandings of plot, strategies for constructing interpretations of what we think those details may signify. The examination of cultural data sets is intended to help students articulate both strategies for noticing as well as strategies for making sense

or attributing meaning to what we notice. The targets for noticing have to do with details that go beyond the literal and that signify that the author may be intending to convey meanings that are symbolic, ironic, satiric, or imply unreliable narration. Here we draw on distinctions made by Rabinowitz (1987) between what he calls “rules of notice” and “rules of signification.” It is necessary to remember that having strategies for noticing salient details does not tell the reader how to make sense of what the reader notices.

Students then move from cultural data sets to apply those strategies for noticing and for attributing significance or meaning to the canonical texts that make up the unit of study. In Project READI, we have developed worksheets for students to use to

- follow characters
- follow plot
- identify unusual details they notice and explain why they noticed
- structure processes for interpreting that which they hypothesize may be symbolic or satiric, or ironic, or evidence of unreliable narration.