



Tying Television Comedies to Information Literacy: A Mixed-Methods Investigation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 January 2014

Accepted 25 February 2014

Available online 15 March 2014

Keywords:

Information literacy

Popular culture

Library instruction

Television comedies

ABSTRACT

Many components of Information Literacy (IL) are too massive to be addressed in a single instruction session, yet an introduction to these concepts is essential for students' academic careers and intellectual development. This study evaluates the impact of applying excerpts from television comedies that illustrate ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* to library instruction sessions for first-year students. Pre- and posttest results from 193 subjects and interview data from two focus groups indicate that television comedies can be integrated into one-shot instruction sessions to demonstrate IL concepts in an accessible and dialogue-provoking manner.

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INTRODUCTION

Three students gather in their library's group study room to prepare for a Spanish exam. The students are in their first semester at a Colorado community college and are struggling to adapt, but they have taken a proactive approach by creating a study group and selecting the library as a central meeting place. The blackboard in the group study room reads, "SHHHHHH....people are trying to study" in large bold letters. One of the students comments on their location by referencing a classic movie set predominantly in a library. "Hey, this is kind of like *Breakfast Club*, huh?" One of the student's study partners dryly replies, "We *are* in a library." This scene from the first episode of the TV sitcom *Community* depicts student use of the library in an engaging manner, and is one of many films and television programs that have used libraries as vehicles for humor. By implementing excerpts from popular media in the classroom to stimulate dialogue, various challenges to effective undergraduate library use may be brought to light. This study seeks to provide insight into whether televisual media has the capacity to illustrate information literacy (IL) concepts in action.

Beyond introducing opportunities to discuss the importance of effective information seeking and information literacy skills, there are a number of potential benefits to using film to increase student awareness of IL. Visual media, and television comedies specifically, may be capable of fulfilling numerous tasks simultaneously, such as connecting

students through a mutual interest, providing a theme for the instruction session, invoking emotional learning, and acting as scaffolding for challenging concepts. Television, a medium that many students have a shared interest in, is an appealing format for considering the significance of information literacy in settings beyond the library or campus. This type of engagement with what Detmering (2011, p. 265) terms "the cultural contexts of information literacy" can result in the recognition of IL as the ability to use information in everyday life, and not simply a theory associated with a class or assignment. Using students' familiarity and comfort with television comedies as a basis, more complicated or conceptual subjects can be addressed. As Springer and Yelinek (2011, p. 79) has found, "Using the right popular culture reference will evoke strong reactions in students, and these emotions allow deeper learning to occur." Film and television create strong emotional responses in people, and this same effect can be applied when attempting to create a memorable classroom experience. Laughing at a television show, for example, can help to create an emotional connection to what library instructors want students to learn (Peterson, 2010). By relating to characters on an emotional level students are more likely to understand the information environment these characters inhabit, and by extension, their own.

The foundation of many instructors' and institutions' delivery and assessment of information literacy instruction is the Association of College and Research Libraries (2000) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (IL Standards), currently in the process of revision. The highly influential IL Standards continue to provide important guidelines for instruction and assessment, due in part to detailing the set of abilities an information-literate person must demonstrate. Using ACRL's IL Standards to guide and evaluate information literacy instruction has proved fruitful for a number of researchers (Emmett & Emde, 2007; Magnuson, 2013). The motivation for this study stems

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from the possibility that, as Detmering (2011) and Peterson (2010) hypothesize, specific learning outcomes may be met by using the powerful influence of multimedia and popular culture. It is the author's expectation that by seeing characters from *Parks & Recreation* struggle with ideological bias or by hearing Stephen Colbert's remarks on "Wikilobbying," students can better situate IL concepts that are notoriously difficult to grasp within their own academic worlds. First, the literature provides context for the use of popular culture, television media, and humor in the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the use of television and film to teach information literacy is infrequently documented, popular culture as a means to facilitate literacy has appeared occasionally in the LIS and educational literature since the early 2000s. Within this subset of the literature a variety of instructional settings and popular culture texts are represented. In libraries, particularly academic institutions, a variety of media have been used to foster students' information literacy skills, most notably music and short stories (Blackburn & Molidor, 2011; Brier & Lebbin, 2004). Brier and Lebbin (2004) argue that narratives are ideal vehicles for giving meaning to and aiding memory of content that is otherwise challenging to comprehend, an observation also applicable to television media. Friese (2008) advocates for the inclusion of popular culture materials in school library collections and instruction to support the development of students' media literacy. Analyzing the content of three popular films, Detmering (2011, p. 265) posits that judiciously selected films are an exceptional medium to "contextualize the access, use, and interpretation of information within a political and social framework" for politically engaged information literacy instruction. Peterson (2010) uses selections from three different films as a means to demonstrate to students the practice of research skills. Adopting the reality TV program *Jersey Shore* as a theme for information literacy classes, Springer and Yelinek (2011, p. 85) found through survey responses that 95% of students felt engaged during class.

Popular culture has also been incorporated into non-library curriculum. Most notable is Alvermann, Moon, and Hagwood's (1999) *Popular Culture in the Classroom*, an overview of teaching media literacy to students using popular culture examples. This guide for instructors provides an array of practical strategies for incorporating popular culture into classes. In particular, the volume addresses the teaching of critical media literacy, a concept closely linked to that of information literacy. In regards to television comedies Gray (2005, p. 225) makes use of *The Simpsons'* frequent parodies of other popular culture touchstones to communicate media literacy and rhetorical devices employed by mass media, and advocates creating a student-centered learning environment by means of "students' own experiences of and responses to media texts as a touchstone for education." Beyond the use of popular media to involve and inform students, the topic of humor to improve library instruction provides further underpinnings for this research. Arnsan (2000) and Trefts and Blakeslee (2000) discuss the importance of humor as a tool to facilitate learning and reduce stress. Trefts and Blakeslee (2000) identify several advantages to incorporating comedy into classes, including fostering camaraderie, drawing attention to the instructor, and making learning more enjoyable. Walker (2006) employs humor in an attempt to mitigate student library anxiety, and furnishes practical techniques for instructors seeking to cultivate humor in the classroom. Vossler and Sheidlower's (2011) *Humor and Information Literacy* provides a basis for the efficacy of humor as an instructional tool and offers pragmatic advice on how librarians can use humor to teach IL. With this review of the literature on the benefits and applicability of popular culture examples and humor in library instruction in mind, the research questions for creating lessons that connect television comedies to components of IL concepts were devised.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to measure student learning in relation to popular media, specifically television comedies, when used in an instructional setting to introduce information literacy concepts. It is hypothesized that student learning in regards to selected IL concepts, as expressed in ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards*, among an experimental group receiving instruction with three excerpts from television programs in conjunction with group discussion will be higher than that of a control group which participates in only group discussion. This research is designed to address the following research questions:

1. Are popular culture examples, such as excerpts from television comedies, an effective means of increasing student learning in one-shot instruction sessions?
2. Does student familiarity with and understanding of IL concepts increase when popular culture examples are tied to these same concepts during one-shot instruction sessions?
3. Do students prefer instruction that utilizes popular culture examples compared to solely group discussion?

More broadly, this study investigates whether popular media can serve as an effective means of information literacy instruction. Before these questions are explored, excerpts from three television comedies pertinent to IL concepts are identified for incorporation into library instruction sessions for first-year students.

INFORMATION LITERACY IN TV COMEDIES: THREE EXAMPLES

Based upon prior knowledge of television comedies and online searches for relevant examples, the author identified excerpts from popular TV programs that contain themes pertinent to at least one standard from ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards*. Additional criteria considered during the process of excerpt selection gave preference to those of short duration and containing widely accessible humor. Brief descriptions of the excerpts and their corresponding IL Standards follow.

Excerpt 1 "Wikilobbying" – *The Colbert Report*, Jan. 29, 2007. *The Colbert Report* is a satirical late-night news program that parodies conservative pundit shows. The series began in 2005 and is currently in its ninth season. Actor and comedian Stephen Colbert plays a fictional anchorman who is unafraid to make poorly informed and hyperbolic statements. *The Colbert Report's* satirizing of current events has resulted in several Wikipedia-related topics, including one entitled "Wikilobbying." This term refers to the act of compensating others to edit Wikipedia entries in order to more positively portray one's company or commercial product. In the selected excerpt Colbert discusses "Wikiality"—reality becoming what the majority agrees upon—and in particular Microsoft's hiring of a computer expert to alter Wikipedia entries referencing Microsoft's products to enhance their public image. Brumm et al. (2007) concludes with an insightful statement that prompts reflection: "When money determines Wikipedia entries, reality has become a commodity." This excerpt corresponds directly to Standard Five: "The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally" (ACRL, 2000, p. 14). Performance Indicator 1 for this Standard states: "The information literate student understands many of the ethical, legal and socio-economic issues surrounding information and information technology," which are the issues *The Colbert Report's* "Wikilobbying" segment speaks to.

Excerpt 2 "Ron and Tammy" – *Parks and Recreation*, Season Two, Episode Eight. *Parks and Recreation* is a comedy series on

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