



*Elif Bengu* illustrates how the success of manga and anime in the Japanese classroom is an example for all language arts educators

### What is Popular Culture?

The word “popular” was originally a legal and political term, from *popularis*, which is Latin for “belonging to the people” (Westerhuis, 1995). The first association many people have with cultural studies as a field is the study of popular culture, which includes analyses of movies, television, books, magazines, advertisements, and electronic media (Hyttén, 1999). But unlike more narrow understandings of popular culture, Casella (1999) viewed popular culture in three ways that are always intimately connected: first, in the traditional sense, to refer to movies, books, videos, magazines, and other media objects that are a product of businesses that produce popular culture; second, referring to popular activities or events, such as weddings, proms, and graduations; and finally, referring to places where consumerism, culture, entertainment, education, and leisure come together, sometimes under one roof.

Popular culture is, simply, everyday culture. In Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter’s (2003) study, those who favor this definition of popular culture reject notions of mass media producing mindless audiences. Instead, they see audiences as understanding that media-produced popular culture contains images, sounds, symbols, and the like that appeal to different audiences in different ways. Popular culture does not simply provide passive entertainment or value neutral information; it contributes significantly to how people read and understand the world, how they voice opinions and how they perceive possibilities, as also indicated by Hyttén (1999).

### Popular culture and education: How to integrate into curriculum

Morell (2002) pointed out in his study that social context and cultural diversity significantly affect the literacy process. As Morell (2002) contin-

ued “often, the failure of urban students to develop ‘academic’ literacy skills stems not from a lack of intelligence but from the inaccessibility of the school curriculum to students who are not in the ‘dominant’ or ‘mainstream’ culture. New literacy theorists believe that such students are literate but that their literacy has little connection with the dominant literacy promoted in public schools. These theorists argue that educators need to examine non-school literacy practices to find connections between local literacy and the dominant, academic literacy.”

Both Morell (2002) and Xu (2002) mention that researchers found strong connections between the literacy practices of urban youth with popular culture and the types of literacy required in schools. Popular culture texts are part of students’ everyday literacy; they hold powerful and personal meanings for students, as supported also by Alvermann et al. (2003). Instead of “resisting” and “trashing” student popular culture (Xu, 2002), teachers need to seek creative ways to use popular culture as a tool to make connections between classrooms and students’ lives. Hunt & Hunt (2004) state that any texts that can help to build those connections between classroom and students’ lives deserve time and space in the classroom. When those connections exist, educators along with their students have the opportunity for powerful learning (Hunt & Hunt, 2004).

Hyttén (1999) critiqued that “The electronic media — television, movies, music, and news have become powerful pedagogical forces, veritable teaching machines in shaping the social imagination of students in terms of how they view themselves, others, and the larger society. It is therefore critical that educators investigate the ways in which popular culture affects students’ lives and the ways in which they interact with knowledge and classroom learning.” Since popular culture appeals to students, it is irresponsible for educators to ignore it



and to keep educational systems as traditional as possible (Fain, 2004). Cultural forms that motivate students to become responsive and active learners need to be integrated into the curriculum. For that reason, the first and most important step for teachers integrating students' popular culture interests into literacy teaching and learning is to try to understand what their students do with popular culture and what it does for them. Lewis (1998), Alvermann et al. (2003), and Hunt et al. (2004) argue that educators who are interested in building connections with students should spend time in their cultural worlds to learn about children's experiences with popular culture. Educators need to know what students are watching. If educators wish to understand students' references, their role models and anti-role models educators must be in touch with the popular culture that influences their students (Passe, 2002). Hunt et al. (2004) point out that this knowledge can help teachers find new and exciting ways to teach the literacy skills students need while building mutual respect between educators and students. When students see their teacher's interest in their world, they might show the same interest in the teacher's world.

Fain (2004) mentions that educating youth has always been a challenge, and it is no different today. He recommends that "educators will be more effective if they integrate the study of the popular culture with traditional education. Educators need to do more than just teach facts and mathematical formulas; they need to provide an education to which students can relate."

Educators need to grab the attention of students who live in today's world of entertainment media, popular novels, and music that they own. Fain (2004) argues that integrating traditional education with the issues in society that students see as important will motivate them to learn and Huddleston (2003) supports this view especially for struggling students. He says that the "context of popular culture can make learning more relevant and, attainable than traditional approaches do."

Popular culture texts — found on magazine racks, at comic book stores, and on late-night television may not always contain useful ele-

ments. Educators need to choose them just as carefully as they would choose any traditional text for their classroom. Incorporating popular culture into the traditional classroom requires a teacher to monitor and orchestrate content carefully, but in the end, the effort is worthwhile (Huddleston, 2003).

In their studies' Hunt et al. (2004) and Vetrie (2004) came up with the questions an educator might ask before bringing any cultural elements (movies, television shows, comic books, web sites, popular music, etc) into the classroom;

1. Is this the right material to meet the needs of these students at this time?
2. Does it fit into what the learner knows about the world?
3. Can I read/watch/listen this material in such a way that students won't see it as "boring"?
4. Is this a film/television show/comic book/cartoon/book I enjoy?
5. Does this material meet my instructional purposes?

In the questions mentioned above question number two and number three are critical because as educators integrate students' popular culture interests into literacy teaching and learning they need to be aware of their own and children's experiences with popular culture. It is important to include popular culture without debasing students' pleasure in the process (Mahar, 2003).

#### Using Pop Culture in the classroom setting: Cartoons/Anime and Comics Books/Manga as an introduction to a new language and culture

A cartoon is a common name used in the U.S. for a film made by photographing a series of cartoon drawings to give the illusion of movement when projected in rapid sequence (Princeton University, 2006) and is called anime in Japan. A comic book is the common name used in the U.S. for a magazine or book containing sequential art and is called manga in Japan. In this piece, these descriptions are used interchangeably.