

# Using Generic Imagery and Groups to Encourage Student Dialogue

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## **Abstract**

*This paper evaluates the ongoing effectiveness of a set of EFL classroom materials for use in groups, which were developed to encourage student dialogue in Korean General English university classes. The analysis draws upon retrospective student surveys: two solely quantitative, and one having qualitative, components. This specific lesson was part of the regular curriculum, and taught in exactly the same procedural manner for each research period; utilizing time-efficient social group rotations in combination with innovative materials partially composed of conceptual artwork. By incorporating local culture into the artefacts' design, students were required to use language in context, and were able to personally relate to the topic through the process of combining concepts with their own funds of knowledge. The student data confirmed that this particular type of personally engaging process used at the beginning of the semester had overall positive effects on student confidence and speaking levels, along with showing evidence of learning. As such, a model is proposed with specific tasks and methodology that may inform English language teachers in other countries of an effective lesson and materials' design.*

**Keywords:** *CLT, EFL, speaking, group-work, materials-development, teacher-research*

In EFL contexts it has often been noted that students are reluctant to speak in English during class, and situations where students have problems being unable to communicate effectively in English are common throughout the Asia-Pacific region (Littlewood, 2006; Ansarey, 2012; Talandis & Stout, 2015). Korean students arrive at university with usually ten years of prior English education, yet at this stage they have scarcely any confidence in either speaking or writing. Their past learning background, as with many other Asia-Pacific students, has mainly been one of passive rote memorization and grammar rules (McClintock, 2011; Lee, 2014; Brown and Muller, 2014; Amin, 2016), with material content in past courses originating from inner circle countries, drawing upon cultural models that are often based upon American and British imagery and not reflective of their own culture (Kachru, 2006; Lee, 2011; Kim, 2012; Song, 2013). It has also been noted that a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model has prevailed over Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) models throughout EFL countries (Waters, 2011).

Teachers using CLT globally, in order to encourage students' communicative competence, have struggled to develop locally relevant and engaging methods and materials (Butler, 2011; Okazaki, 2005). There have also been numerous calls for research concerning lessons that did not focus on the culture of English speaking countries (Fitzpatrick, 2010; Tomlinson, 2012; Amin, 2016). Sakai's (2012) overview of the problems with EFL textbooks in Japan also calls

for “templates” to be created that other teachers could follow. There is a significant shortage of methods that are presented in other than vague and general formats, without banks of models, detailed procedural instructions, and outlines. Without appropriate examples and resources, it is exceedingly difficult for large numbers of teachers to bring about changes in how their classes function, and what their students are able to benefit from.

### **Background**

The authors have also encountered problems with prescribed teaching materials and have endeavoured to make our classes dialogic and suited more to the local setting, Korea, which is part of the expanding circle where English has no historical background, but still plays an important role as a lingua franca (Kachru, 2006). This research investigates an open-ended process, as opposed to the PPP model, based on its appropriateness for university level instruction. Korean students have arrived at university already possessing a large amount of vocabulary in many instances, and knowledge of many grammar rules; however, they have been mainly passive listeners in their past educational experiences and they lack what De Saussure termed “parole”: practical knowledge of the way language is used in speaking and writing (Platt, 2006), or what Hymes (1984) termed “communicative competence”: the understanding that there are “diverse ways of speaking any single language” (cited in Cazden, 1993, p. 203).

Korean students, with their absence of past speaking experiences, lack proficiency in using the forms of language they have been taught because they have not had the chance to develop them. The authors believe that it is within the dialogic classroom that students will acquire and internalize new vocabulary and language components, strengthen their overall English capabilities, and develop confidence in expressing their thoughts and opinions. In this paper the use of dialogue relates to several of Bakhtin’s ideas regarding the “complexities of finding a voice” (Cazden, 1993, p. 203).

Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue has begun to appear more now in SLA and is considered by some to be an essential element in the psychology of learning, and in pedagogy (Musa et al., 2012; Devlin, 2014). Lin and Luk’s (2005) analysis of a Hong Kong English class case study also drew upon Bakhtin’s ideas about the importance of acknowledging individual voices, as well as voices from the students’ cultural world. By way of teacher-student dialogue, students were encouraged to voice their opinion. They responded to the dialogic approach and were engaged in the carnivalesque/light-hearted and entertaining atmosphere, which was a change from their past educational experiences of choral repetition and drills. In this research the authors also “helped to create a space for students to engage in such carnival creative work and laughter” (Lin and Luk, 2005, p. 89).

The overarching question that this paper addresses is: How do different groups of students react to a lesson that is dialogic and not culturally restrictive, that does not require them to translate, or complete decontextualized grammar exercises, but rather is personally engaging, and in what ways could a lesson utilizing generic images in groups be deemed to be pedagogically effective over time?

## Method

The authors investigated how students reacted to a lesson that was not culturally located, utilized generic images, and had high personal engagement, by surveying student reflective attitudes both quantitatively and qualitatively in 2007, 2012, and 2015. The major difference between the first two research periods was that the 2007 survey only utilized basic quantitative questions, whereas the 2012 survey posed qualitative questions in order to include the students' voices. The 2015 survey ranked, through use of a Likert scale, references to areas that the students had made in the 2007 and 2012 surveys in order to ascertain overall levels of satisfaction with speaking in groups. All three research groups were from the same university with 76 students participating in the 2007 survey, 24 students participating in the 2012 survey, and 46 students participating in the 2015 survey. Surveys were carried out in follow-up classes. Moreover, all surveys were anonymous and voluntary and the students' informed consents to use the results were obtained.

The 2007 survey questions asked students to rank, in terms of "not at all," "a medium amount," or "a lot," their opinions of the overall process and whether they felt that it was helpful in terms of increases in vocabulary, grammar, and confidence.

The 2012 survey questions asked students to write their opinions concerning the following questions:

1. Describe what you did during the activity and how you felt about it.
2. What did you think of the old pictures of the movies? How were they useful for you in helping you think of things to say?
3. Did you talk about any real-life movies? How many were Korean movies? How many were from a different country? Can you list the names of the movies you mentioned?
4. How is this activity different from what you have done in other English classes?
5. What were some unusual, interesting or memorable things you heard today?

The 2015 Likert survey asked students to rank four areas that had been referred to by students in the 2007 and 2012 surveys. The question inquired into how useful speaking in groups about the topic before writing was, and asked students to rank the following areas from 1-10 (1 being not useful to 10 being very useful):

- a. Making speaking easier
- b. Grammar
- c. Learning new vocabulary
- d. Getting new ideas from other students

The authors wanted to see if there was some measure of consistency over time with respect to the students' reaction to this particular lesson in terms of their levels of confidence and speaking, and to learn what they believed was the most important part of the process being used in groups. The artefacts used were designed by the primary author in 2005 following a predictive evaluation (Ellis, 1997) of using something new, post teacher-reflection concerning perceived textbook inadequacies. Classes for all research periods went for 75 minutes and

were randomly selected. There was also randomness within the classes in that students were self-enrolled, not placed there by administration. In all research instances, students' English levels ranged from basic to high intermediate and they ranged in years from freshmen to seniors.

### **The Materials' Design and Methods**

The movie artefacts were carefully designed worksheets specifically constructed to encourage student dialogue, and included generic images as well as questions and a structured layout for answering and noting their own and other students' answers. The students drew upon their own resources with which to convey their opinions. This can be challenging for students who are accustomed to being in institutions where silence is considered an educational virtue and where willingness to cooperate (WTC)/motivation is highly culturally influenced. Liu and Park (2012) observed that, with respect to Korean culture, "social evaluation plays an important role in one's self-value, and one's self-esteem is built upon the basis of others' evaluation" and "fear of being ridiculed by others" in English classes where they have more chance of making mistakes "may have a controlling effect on Koreans' behavior" (p. 49).

The authors believe that if educators are going to reduce anxiety levels, increase WTC, and encourage student dialogue it is essential to have teaching methods that include the creation of classroom processes and practices that lead to fully engaged classroom conversations. The authors have also noticed, over the course of a combined total of forty plus years of teaching experience, that as student confidence in speaking develops, more difficult lessons, in terms of linguistic complexity and subject matter, can be presented. Near the beginning of the semester these particular artefacts, such as those discussed in this paper, help students form ideas and also gave specific kinds of personally engaging questions aimed at drawing in their lives, their cultural contexts and their own opinions; their funds of knowledge (Singh and Han, 2010). At the beginning of the semester, when students are most worried about speaking in English, appropriate non-threatening topic selection is crucial.

The topic chosen for the classroom materials was movies. The authors found that movies included in textbooks become stale rather quickly with limited student dialogue potential, and thus decided not to present specific movies as examples. By not using "real" movies the generic images can be interpreted in any manner a student relates to them through his/her experiences. The illustrations are partly representational, partly symbolic, and most importantly, do not define/restrict the students' thinking. Furthermore, the images stimulate talking about movie genres, but students themselves bring their own experience-based knowledge to the discussions. For the first type of artefact, the movies marquee artefact (MA), the authors used three A4 sized pages and a collection of pictures from royalty-free clipart to create six different movie titles on each page that corresponded with movie genres, but were not actual movies. (See Appendix A for page one of the MA set.) They included imaginary titles such as "Cowzilla" with a picture of a cartoon cow stomping on buildings. These titles provided the symbolic or socially encoded elements of the process. The second artefact was a set of grids with questions and spaces for students to collect answers from their peers in the classroom conversations. (See Appendix B for student-to-student survey artefact.) In effect, the artefacts are tools for making an in-class qualitative survey fitted to a topic.

In all research periods the students were told that they were going to choose a movie from those playing at their local theater. The laminated pictures-with-titles handouts, allowing these materials to be recycled, represented what a person might actually see on a theater marquee. By way of contrast, in many textbooks students are given film reviews or receive detailed information about each movie. The artefacts used in this class provided no additional information. Instead, students were given three imaginary social situations where they would be going to the movies. These were: for a date, to pass the time alone, or with their parents. In this respect this process presented students with plausible real-life situations and encouraged them to come up with their own ideas. A person does not always have all of the information about something before they have to make decisions. The students had to make their choices based upon what they liked and what they believed other people might like based upon their personal experiences with these individuals. The students were told that they would be discussing three different sets of movies, and that they would be looking at all of them one group rotation at a time.

The authors then showed the MA artefacts and introduced the student-to-student survey artefact modelling what they should do. The first thing they would do is look at the movie page in their first group and see what movies were currently playing. They were then to fill out the section of the student artefact that pertained to them (Me) first. This would be the movie that they would see, the movie that they would see with their boyfriend or girlfriend, and finally the movie that they would see with their parents. Complete sentences in the “why” sections were not necessary. Prompt words that they could refer to later were sufficient.

After ensuring that everyone understood what they would be doing, the class was divided into groups of three and the students moved into their first triangle-shaped group (▼ students sit at the points and this is important as it best fits a natural, intimate, sociopetal/encouraging conversation group setting). The following chart (See Figure 1) and classroom diagram (See Figure 2) detail and illustrate the steps taken in running the class:

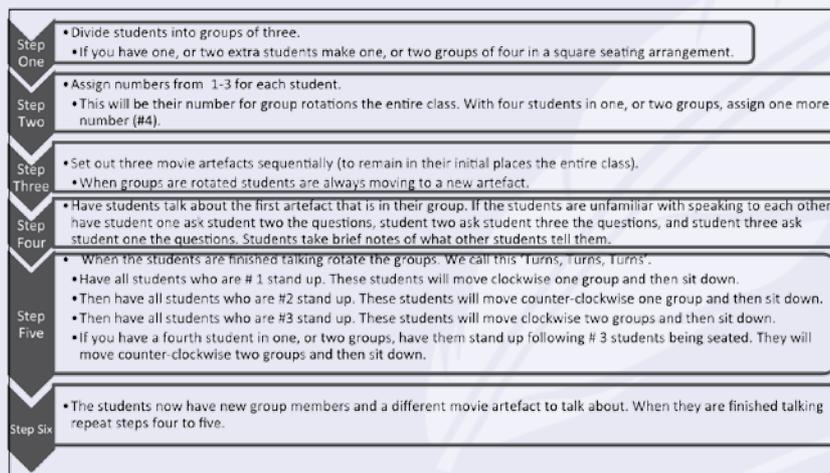


Figure 1: Procedural Steps for Running the Class

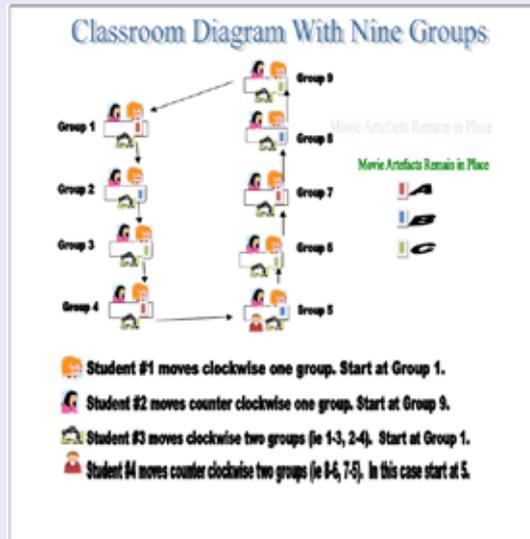


Figure 2: Classroom Diagram Noting Group Moves

With each new group, students had opportunities to recycle language that they had used before or had learned in past groups, with repetition of language being an accepted component of language acquisition. Notes are important not only for remembering new vocabulary, but also as a means to create active listening. Nunan (1997) noted that EFL students spend over 50% of their time in conversations on listening and that:

there is evidence to suggest that listening, that is, making sense of what we hear, is a constructive process in which the learner is an active participant. In order to comprehend, listeners need to reconstruct the original intention of the speaker by making use of both bottom-up and top-down processing strategies, and by drawing on what they already know to make use of new knowledge (pp. 5, 6).

In the present study, notes were used for future writing assignments. During each rotation the teacher could easily walk from group to group, join in conversations, respond to questions about vocabulary, listen for possible pronunciation or syntax-grammar problems, and give students personalized assistance and chances for them to ask questions that they may have felt too uncomfortable posing in front of the entire class. The move into groups only took a few minutes and students have never had any problem quickly grasping the instructions. The average time per group rotation was 15 to 30 minutes with the faster moves being with students who lacked enough linguistic proficiency to extend group conversations, to the longer moves being with students who had fewer conversational problems.

### 2007 Findings and Discussion

In the authors' observations of the movies process, basic to low-intermediate learners provided one- or two-sentence responses with minimal conversation, and their group rotation lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Upper-intermediate students provided more details and

carried out more elaborate conversations with average turns here being about 30 minutes. The authors noticed that the students talked about movies and almost everything related to them, including their families, their past experiences and what they wanted to do/see in the future. All students were engaged. Conversations from shortest to longest were animated. A “carnival type of laughter” (Lin and Luk, 2005, p. 89) erupted several times as humor was discerned on the movie artefacts, and further developed with references to their own culture and experiences. There were also smiles everywhere, which the authors interpreted as signs of student comfort, confidence, and satisfaction.

What was noticed were encounters throughout the class between different students as they each recounted their choices, which in turn had been mediated by the pictures of the movies, along with the cultural and psychological affordances inscribed into their conceptual designs. Moreover, their thoughts had to be expressed in English, thus stretching their conversational capabilities.

Student responses to the survey questions asking them to rank the following areas (overall interest level of the process, importance of speaking to other students, and vocabulary and grammar acquisition) were as follows. All students (N=76) reported some benefits from the process, albeit some more than others. Of the 76 students, almost ninety percent (N=68) reported that they were helped with their overall English abilities at least for a medium amount. Another question asked if the other students’ comments were helpful for their English. In response, sixty percent (N=46) said that it gave them an average amount of help and twenty-five percent (N=19) noted that they had helped a lot. Students were also asked whether they felt they had gained in vocabulary, grammar, and confidence. Overall, eighty-eight percent (N=67) of the students noted that they had experienced gains in all areas.

The 2007 data revealed a mixture of reported benefits across all ability levels. The authors’ qualitative research findings in the 2012 surveys drew in the students’ reflective thoughts about the lesson’s usefulness, and to ascertain whether the rather simple clipart was still sufficiently engaging for students who now had access to more engaging computer graphics and technology.

### **2012 Findings and Discussion**

In 2012, following the lesson’s introduction and putting students in their first group the authors noticed that there were a few moments when some students were quite serious as they introduced themselves to each other. However, during this same timeframe, it was noted that more electronic dictionaries were used, a noted difference from the 2007 research period when iPhones were unavailable. Soon there were the beginnings of quiet conversations and giggles related to one of the pictures. At one point, one student was heard to refer to “funny movies” and then self-correct to “fun movies,” a syntax point that had been addressed two weeks prior to this class. While the authors did not tape the students’ conversations, or take any photos during the class, the following are excerpts of intermediate level student responses to questions they were asked, jotted down in field notes while running the class, with significant references to the students’ personal lives, including:

- “I wouldn’t go to ‘Rock Lives’ with my parents because my parents enjoy classic music than rock.”

- “I wouldn’t like to take my parents to a documentary, but I might see it alone.”
- “I wouldn’t go to ‘Until the Next Day’ with my parents. My parents would like it, but my elder brother and I would sit with our arms crossed.”
- “My mother especially doesn’t like murder [mysteries]. She always wants to see beautiful scenery. My father wants to, but my mother is stronger in my family. She decides.”

More semantic corrections were also made following hearing students make errors with such words as intimate, and the difference between “I’m scared” and “I’m scary.” In both the 2007 and 2012 research periods, the authors noted significant cooperation between group members, with a lot of gesturing, engagement, and laughter. Hirschkop (1986) noted that laughter draws objects into positions where they can be examined with familiarity (p. 103 as cited in Vice, 1997, p. 81). In the authors’ teaching situation, laughter also led to increased conversational length. Students made eye contact more often, smiled more, provided more detailed answers, and asked more follow-up questions.

In general, student responses to the follow-up qualitative survey revolved around the themes of experiencing increased confidence, linking the social setup of the class to being able to speak more, and the ability to draw upon numerous movies, both Western (American primarily) and Korean, that would appear to suggest greater freedom to choose what the students, themselves, wished to speak about. The authors also received data from student responses in terms of mediation and scaffolding.

With respect to question #2: “What do you think of the pictures of the movies? How were they useful for you in helping you think of things to say?” evidence of mediation was found in relation to the artefacts. More specifically, the pictures provided a focus for the sharing of ideas/experiences. Student 2 wrote that: “It helps me think about why I like it and why I hate it. The pictures gave a big example about thinking.” When the student says that “It helps me think,” it shows the scaffolding nature of the artefact. When the student says “think about why I like it and why I hate it,” it illustrates the ordering of thoughts that the artefact brought about, and also the importance of thought being involved in the production of language in an EFL context.

The generic pictures engaged Student 2 through being drawn into the process of students having to think about not only what they personally liked/disliked, or what they hypothesized others they knew would like, but that, based upon this information, the students, such as Student 2, had to share personal thoughts regarding the posed questions in a social forum. In order to do this the students had to stretch their language abilities, find the words that they needed to express themselves as they desired (this would be seen numerous times in ongoing dictionary searches), and find satisfaction with what was said.

Other student comments included references to the usefulness of the artefacts:

- “I think that when I think of movie, the pictures of the movies very useful. They represent their character and I am easy to choose movie” (Student 6).
- “It is so helpful to me. Pictures are helping me think more detail” (Student 7).
- “Create my imagination” (Student 5).

Student 14's comments were both surprising and interesting. The student began by assessing the process somewhat negatively, but appeared to have a change of opinion later on. Initially, Student 14 stated, "I don't think this movie activity, 'what movie will I see?' is very good to us" and added that "If I have seen real movies name I could tell my experience more easily." Even though this student apparently preferred literal pictures, as did two other students who noted they liked movie posters, Student 14 noted that the social process and use of artefacts were also very useful:

There are more group activities than before. I can talk about anything in English. At first, I was shy so I can't speak English well. However, as time goes and all people in this class talk with me, I can speak with more confidence (Student 14).

Perhaps Student 14's comment that the lesson was not very good for students was because it was not what they had been accustomed to in previous English classes. Nonetheless, Student 14's following comments were positive, and acknowledged that the pictures of the movies enabled the student to choose movies from their own culture and that this was more "stimulating." Stimulating could be taken to mean more interesting, but it could also mean more stimulating for generating conversations. Student 14's comments additionally show that the process enabled social interaction to occur, and that the opportunity to use material from the local culture appears to have been beneficial for students' English language usage. Student 14 reflected that:

I watch so many kinds of real-life movies such as [three Korean titles supplied] etc. movies about real-life from more drastically and stimulating to people than other country [i.e. than movies from other countries] (Student 14).

Another student also gave simultaneous positive and negative feedback, in that "It really work! The pictures of the movies help me to describe my thinking but the picture is so old" (Student 1). Given that the clipart was over seven years old at this point and still engaged students is noteworthy. As with the research data from 2007, the class appealed to all levels with each student finding something about the process that they enjoyed or felt that they had benefitted from; however, in the process of writing this paper the authors still had questions about several areas that the students had mentioned, especially as they related to the importance of the students talking in groups.

### **2015 Findings and Discussion**

Two classes (46 students) were surveyed to rank the usefulness of speaking in groups as the movie artefact's process could have easily been carried out with partners. The question inquired into how useful speaking in groups about the topic before writing was by ranking the following areas from 1-10 (1 being not useful to 10 being very useful): a. Making speaking easier; b. Grammar; c. Learning new vocabulary; and d. Getting new ideas from other students. As Figure 3 illustrates, the lowest ranking was afforded to "Grammar" (5.08 – an average amount) and as grammar was never directly taught teacher-to-class during the group discussions this is interesting and may indicate that the transmission of one teacher-correction given to one group to other groups by the students themselves. Similar rankings were given to "making speaking easier" (6.39 – a bit above average) and "learning new vocabulary" (6.43 – a

bit above average). Given that this class was carried out near the beginning of the semester it is understandable. The highest ranking, and one that clearly shows the social element of the classroom process, was in “getting new ideas” (7.54 – above average). This clearly shows the social component of using groups and as to the new ideas that the students received, they did so through using English.

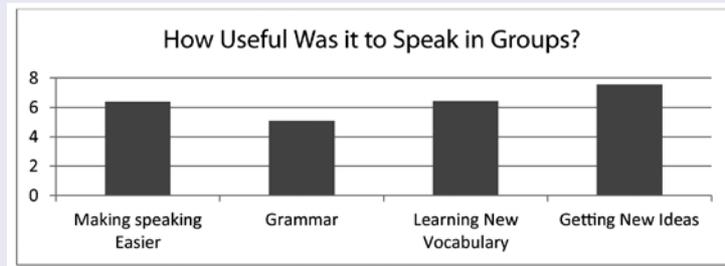


Figure 3: Usefulness of Speaking in Groups

### Summary and Conclusion

This study evaluated the ongoing effectiveness, from 2007 to 2015, of a set of EFL classroom materials. By extending the research timeframe the authors examined what was happening in this particular lesson in greater detail and what was gleaned may act as a contribution to Sakai’s (2012) call for CLT lesson templates, and be useful to ELT classes in other countries.

The mainly genre-symbolic movies’ artefacts stimulated the students to mediate their own thoughts in English. Their intention was to be listened to and understood. Curiosity about what other students were thinking also played a significant role. The authors received evidence that the artefacts were the focus of the conversation, and held the students’ focus both individually and in groups. The artefacts were not about facts and content, but had a social basis and brought in the students’ own funds of knowledge. The question: “What movie would you take your parents to?” was not just about movies, but involved students reflecting upon, and then verbalizing, their understanding of their own culture’s values, and as in the instance of Korean parents, probably traditional ones. However, when students were asked what movie they would take their boyfriend or girlfriend to they could reference contemporary popular culture, which in the case of Korea, is now reflecting European and American preferences in particular. Finally, when asked what movie they would see on their own and why, students were given the opportunity to express their own ideas and personalities. As Gu and Tong (2012) noted “Interactions in any given space are embedded in and draw meanings from larger linguistic, social, cultural and historical patterns” (p. 503). By allowing students to only focus on their own culture and personal experiences they were able to put their thoughts into words, and share them without having a foreign cultural perspective thrust upon them (Yim, 2003; Kachru, 2006).

This movie lesson also worked well with all groups, at various levels and over time, from the point of view that students were engaged in vigorous interlocutor conversations. The nature of the personally-directed questions created a space for students to use whatever movie they thought of, and the authors often heard references to Korean movies in English. Thus there was

no cultural dominance of Western movies as topics of choice. In the past it has always been difficult to find English movies that every student had seen/liked. The artefacts eliminated that problem entirely. The movies do not exist. Consequently, everyone was equal in their ignorance, and this thought is also represented in Bakhtin's carnivalesque in that: "carnival and carnivalesque create an alternative social space, characterised by freedom, equality and abundance. During carnival, rank ... is abolished and everyone is equal" (Robinson, 2011). The questions allowed all students to speak freely about themselves, their families, and anyone else in their lives. Moreover, while the subject matter of their conversations differed as times and circumstances changed over the extended research period, the questions and artefacts still engaged students with the same degree of personalization and relevance.

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Appendix A

**Murder is a Crime**



**Mystery Theater**

**Harabogus Goes Country!**



**The Best Musical**

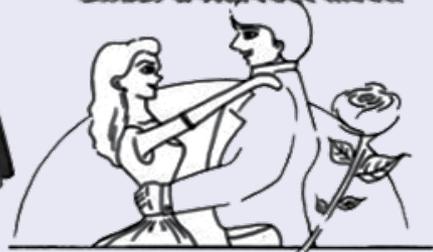
**Cowzilla**



**A**

**You will never stop laughing!**

**Under a Harvest Moon**



**Romance is in the Air**



Source: Commissioned artwork, by Yuyi.



