Talk about laugh: Situation comedies

Secondary Lesson Plan

This lesson plan was developed by Curriculum Corporation.

Source
Teaching Viewing and Visual Texts: Secondary (page 33)

Learning area
English

Level
Early secondary (Years 7–9)

Unit description
An examination of work in this area gives students opportunities to study language, narrative structure, characterisation and comedy. Situation comedies are an intensely verbal form of television, and often have a circular story structure, based around stable and consistent character types.

Purpose
To explore some of the techniques used in situation comedies.

Lesson duration
40 minutes

Possible outcomes
In relation to English — a curriculum profile for Australian schools, work in this area could lead to the achievement of outcomes in the following strand:

- Reading and viewing
  Linguistic structures and features

There will also be links with other learning areas such as Studies of society and environment.

Materials required
- 1 videotaped episode of a current situation comedy
- a weekly television guide
Procedure

1 Class discussion

Situation comedies have been the mainstay of television since its inception. Ask students to name their current favourite situation comedies (the television guide can be used here), and ones they remember from the past. Write the titles on the board.

Discuss the characteristics of the genre:
- What do the programs have in common?
- What are the situations around which they are built?
- How can these situations be categorised?

2 Introduce a current situation comedy

Play a video of the opening credit sequence from a current situation comedy. Stop the tape and discuss:
- What tells you this is a comedy?
- What information does the title sequence give you about the situation?
- What information does the title sequence give you about the characters?
- Make some predictions about what might happen in the episode.

Play five more minutes of the tape with the sound turned off. Discuss the students' reactions:
- Did they find it funny?
- What happened in the sequence?

Replay some of it again, this time with the sound on. Discuss the sources of the humour.

3 Explore the narrative structure

Write the following brief description of narrative structure on the board:
- Stable state
- Disruption
- Stable state

Discuss with the students the opening 'stable state' in the situation comedy.
- What will be the likely disruption?
- Does the disruption usually come from inside or outside the family/work group of characters?
- How is the disruption introduced?
- Will the effects of the disruption be permanent?

Some long-running situation comedies offer narrative progression in that the children grow up and the 'situation' changes. Discuss the differences between static situation comedies (those in which neither the situation nor the characters change) and the more evolutionary sitcoms (such as Rosanne).
Extension activity

View the video of the situation comedy up until the 'disruption' element is made clear. Stop the video.
Ask students to predict how the disruption will be resolved.
Complete the viewing of the episode.
How accurate were the students' predictions?

Suggested follow-up activities

Have students compare British and American situation comedies. Time the length of scenes in each sitcom over a four-minute span and discuss the pace of each sitcom.

Students can examine in detail the types of humour employed in a situation comedy. They will need an explanation of the terms *pun*, *slapstick*, *irony*, *insult* and *one-liner*.

In *American television genres* (1985) Stuart Kaminsky and Jeffrey Mahan make a distinction between two types of situation comedies — the family sitcom and the institutional comedy. Institutional comedies, they argue, base their humour on what the audience already knows about the institution or organisation. Ask students to name comedies (past or current) that are linked with the following institutions: school, prison, hospital, television station, court, church. Discuss how the institutional setting limits and/or creates possibilities for plots and characterisation.

Related resource

*In the Picture* by Rod Quin, Barrie McMahon, Robyn Quin (published by Curriculum Corporation)