Bakhtin and the carnival : Humour in school children’s film making
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Bakhtin and the Carnival: Humour in School Children’s Film Making

Abstract

While humour and laughter create conditions that are conducive for learning, different forms of children’s humour have been given little attention in research of digital media, literacy learning, and multimodal design. Applying a Bakhtinian lens, we analyse carnivalesque videos created by elementary students as part of the formal curriculum. We argue that they functioned as playful, spoofing counter narratives within the serious context of schooling. Three key findings emerge from analysis that show different forms of carnivalesque humour in their texts: i) Clowning in children’s carnivalesque performances was used to break perceived tensions; ii) Grotesque humour arose spontaneously, subverting the seriousness of films by drawing attention to lower, bodily functions; and iii) Ambivalent laughter was instantiated in the video texts as a carnivalesque view of the world. We argue that the deliberate curation, editing, and selecting of these funny moments for an intended audience enabled spaces for digital play in film making within the remit of the formal curriculum.

Key words: multimodal, literacy, digital media, film making, humour, Bakhtin
Reading and writing of paper-based texts is necessary, but not sufficient, for communicating through contemporary technology platforms. The multimodality of communication has become a key area of literacy research amid cultural diversity of global economies and the availability and convergence of new technologies (New London Group 2000). We use multimodality to describe communication practices that use two or more modes of meaning (Mills 2016). Language and literacy practices are inherently multimodal because communication combines spoken or written words, visual images, sound, silence, movement, gestures, posture, or touch (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Paterson 2007). The affordances of people-driven digital media and textual production are associated with an exponential rise in the circulation of multimodal texts in digital contexts. Indeed, multimodal text production has become a central part of everyday life for people across the whole of the life course, and for many cultures and societies. This has been enabled by the ubiquitous production and sharing of digital content via the Internet and mobile technologies, and via YouTube, Instagram and other social media sites (Leander, Phillips and Headrick Taylor 2010; Mills and Unsworth 2017).

Recent research has shown how children consume and curate others’ humorous videos (cf. Dezuanni 2017) in networked digital spaces, but little work has focused on humour in video production in the classroom. In this article, we analyse different forms of carnivalesque humour and laughter in elementary students’ video creations in two different educational sites in the USA and Australia. Our focus is on short, unofficial texts or humourous videos that were appended and used as supplements to the meanings created in students’ official videos. Taking a Bakhtinian (1981, 1984a, 1984b) perspective, we analyse these ‘carnivalesque’ texts to theorise the types of humour in youth’s digital media
practices. Such an understanding is especially critical given the ubiquitous circulation of funny videos on the web, many with large audiences.

The positive place of humour and laughter in learning has been demonstrated in psychology and educational research (Lugan and DiCarlo 2016). It has been an object of psychological research on memory, cognition, and language (Chapman and Foot 1976), and problem solving, creativity, and play (Martin 2007; McGhee and Goldstein 1983). Humour is a form of mental play, thought to have a fundamental role in cognition (McGhee 2015), the maintenance of classroom cohesion (Senior 2001), and learner interaction in digital play (Kim and Ho 2018). It is linked to social critique (Janks 2010; Mora, Weaver, and Lindo, 2015) and performances of racial identity (Carpio 2008).

However, there is little research on the nature of humour in middle childhood (Huuki, Manninen, and Sunnari 2010; Martin 2007). There is even less research on humour in students’ multimodal texts within multimodal literacy research. One example is Vasudevan’s (2015) research on laughter in adolescents’ unscripted play with digital media texts. Sipe and Ghiso (2004) used Bakhtin’s discussion of Rabelais’ work to describe the subversive, playful “carnivalesque romps” they saw in children’s performances during picture book reading. From the extant literacy research, we see that humour itself is often sidelined, or even disallowed, in official classroom texts and discourse (Lensmire 1994, 2011; see also Bell and Pomerantz 2015). The relative dearth of research suggests a need to attend to humour in digital media practices and texts, during the filming of video, in classroom multimodal design contexts.

Carnivalesque texts, laughter, and humour in school

Our analysis of children’s videos is undergirded by Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984a, 1984b) theorisations of laughter in carnivalesque texts. When children make a funny video text in
the context of school video production, they are often stepping out of bounds, going beyond the teacher’s requirements, making carnivalesque texts filled with various types of humour. Echoing the breaking down of physical and linguistic barriers that occurred in carnivals of the Middle Ages, such texts show a different side of life, a picture of ‘life turned inside out’ (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 122). The upside-down world Rabelais depicts is ephemeral, and its qualities are quite specific. Indeed, such carnivalesque texts generally have four shared characteristics (Bakhtin 1984b).

First, they highlight moments of ‘free and familiar contact among people’ (p. 123) who might not normally engage directly. This albeit temporary flattening of hierarchical structures affords space for laughter and jokes in classrooms and in texts, where teachers usually attend to the formal business of schooling (Comber 1997).

Second, carnivalesque texts allow for ‘eccentricity’ that not only frees people ‘from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property)’, but also allows them to forge new relationships with others (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 123). In carnivalesque moments, children who might not otherwise befriend each other may do so (Tallant 2017); children who might not normally laugh together do so, making jokes and enjoying a ‘new mode of interrelationship’ (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 123). We saw this eccentricity in videos where children interviewed their teachers, for instance, and laughed and giggled alongside teachers in those interviews. In the carnival, Dentith (1995) argues, we see ‘official certainties… relativised, inverted, or parodied’ (68); laughter is one of the byproducts of that parody.

Third, they may feature ‘mésalliances’ that combine ‘the sacred with the profane, the lofty and the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid’ (123). Ideas and people who are normally separate and ‘self-enclosed’ (p. 123) can be temporarily paired or united in carnivalesque texts.
Finally, and perhaps most importantly for our discussion of humour, carnivalesque texts sometimes feature profanation, in which the sacred (in this case, schooling is akin to the sacred) is brought low, and vice versa. The ultimate act of profanation is the ‘mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king,’ (p.124) an act that foregrounds ambivalence, joyful relativity, and the cyclic nature of the carnival—everyone and everything that has been crowned can be decrowned.

Taken together, these characteristics make carnivalesque texts prime locales for laughter, particularly since they feature a temporary flattening of hierarchies in classrooms, which are generally controlled, hierarchical spaces. Bakhtin (1984b) sees laughter in Rabelais’ and Dostoevsky’s writing as a deep, freeing force which ‘liberates not only from external censorship but…from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power’ (p. 94). This liberating quality makes laughter something free and easy, but also full of power, deep, and located close to powerful truths. Bakhtin theorises that laughter reveals ‘the world anew in its gayest and most sober aspects’ and remains ‘a free weapon’ in the hands of ‘the people’ (1984b, p. 94). Mocking or poking fun at phenomena positions students in a cultural anti-world, during which process the strangeness of their circumstances is reduced and becomes less frightening. As we describe below, where Latinx and White children were opposing the closing of their Spanish-English dual immersion school, humour was a key element in their oppositional and somewhat nonconformist stances (Yancey and hooks 2015).

Bakhtin’s carnivalesque theory attends to folk humour, from which we drew important parallels in our analysis of children’s texts by attending to three sub-themes of the carnivalesque: clowning, grotesque humour, and laughter (1984a). These themes, prominent in Bakhtin’s theorising of the carnivalesque, were observed in the children’s carnivalesque performances. Clowns and fools played an important role in the festivals of European feudal
culture, mimicking serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. These concepts can be related to life in schools as sites of colonisation. Grotesque humour is a principle that invokes materiality and the body; it appeals not only to the individual, but ‘to the collective ancestral body of all the people’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 19). With regard to the third theme, of laughter, Tallant (2017) argues that ‘laughter appears to be the driving force of a carnivalistic awareness of the world, and arguably the backbone of the theory of carnivalesque’ (p. 71). These elements of carnivalesque performances enable the building of a second, albeit temporary, life beyond official discourses.

Ultimately, to examine humour in the contemporary social practice of children’s film making at school, we have asked one specific research question: How do children’s self-authored videos function as carnivalesque texts? In the following sections we discuss research methods, before turning to findings about the functions of humour and the implications of our findings for educational research and practice.

Methodology

The following section outlines the research methods, context, and participants for each site separately, and then describes data collection and analysis of the combined data sets. Data collection and analysis were performed within a unified study design, highlighting the congruence of patterns in the data across diverse contexts in two countries, and strengthening the applicability of the findings.

Contexts and participants

Esperanza Elementary (all names are pseudonyms), was the site of a four-year, design-based (Cobb et al. 2013) project—a publicly funded dual immersion Spanish-English charter school in California, in the USA. In the larger project (Pandya, 2018), the researcher and teachers worked together to design video projects embedded in classroom language arts
or social studies units. At the time most of the videos we analyse here were being made, the school was under threat of closure because of its low standardised test scores and poor financial status. Parents, teachers, administrators, and students wanted the school to stay open, as it was one of very few that honoured the Latinx community and focused on teaching Spanish as well as English to the mostly bilingual families it served. The school administrators had appealed the district’s final decision to the district, which rejected the appeal; and to the county, which also rejected it. The third and final appeal, to be made soon after these videos were produced, was directly to the state’s Board of Education.

Children had been asked to write letters about their school to the school board explaining why they wanted it to stay open (if they did). These ‘save our school’ letters were used as the bases for scripts for videos that students went on to make. The school was in a state of mild chaos by the time the research team helped children make these videos, and children had the most freedom they had ever had to make their own choices about content and structure. Meanwhile, teachers were applying for new jobs, or already had them, and were managing their own emotions about leaving a school at which most appreciated and enjoyed working. It was in this carnivalesque context, where life was about to be ‘turned inside out’ (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 122), that students made their ‘save our school’ videos which are the subject of our analysis.

Site two was a school for students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, who were from the Yuggera, Jagera, and Ugarapul language regions of Australia. The school has been operating for two years at the time of the field work, overseen by Indigenous Elders (Mills et al. 2016). Data was collected as part of cross-cultural, participatory research conducted in the second year of a three-year project. Cross-cultural participatory research entails authentic collaboration between the community and the research team, where the research relationship is characterised by cultural difference to
address an identified area of development in the community (Mills et al. 2016; Stoecker 2005). The White researcher had built up a history of collaboration with the Aboriginal principal that spanned seven years. The researcher spent several months prior to beginning the research to build positive relationships with the Aboriginal teacher participant, the students, and other teachers in the school, such as regularly visiting the school to join in cultural celebrations. The location was accessible for the researcher to engage in a sustained way with the community, which is a requirement of Indigenous research ethics (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2012).

Following the principles of participatory research, the focus of the research was negotiated with the Elders and leaders of the Indigenous school community, rather than directed by the White researcher. Multimodal and digital literacy practices were identified as a target area for potential growth (Mills et al. 2016). The student participants were from Years 5-6 (9.5—11.5 years) in a large composite class, and they engaged in multimodal film making lessons and semi-structured interviews. The principal, classroom teacher, and a visiting media artist were involved in designing the multimodal literacy practices with the university researcher. A media artist assisted with directing, shooting, and editing the film that was co-produced with the class. The teacher contributed to the planning meetings, organising the curriculum content and selecting resources, and assisting with the collection of ethics consent forms from parents and students.

*Data collection*

Two data sets were collected to help researchers understand the central themes of carnivalesque humour in students’ texts and discourse at both sites: i) Multimodal artefacts (films and paper-based graffiti profiles) produced by the students; and ii) Semi-structured interviews with the students about their multimodal texts. The 33 multimodal artefacts—the film segments—all included moments of humour, from out loud laughter to slapstick, as we
describe below. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 consenting students across grade levels using interview protocols focused on children’s meanings in their multimodal texts and practices. Example questions included: ‘Can you tell me about your film?’ ‘Why did you include these parts [e.g. laughter] in the film?’ Semi-structured interviewing was chosen to be responsive to the unique features of the students’ texts, and to allow new ideas to be examined during the interview. Semi-structured interviewing also allowed the researchers to ask about participant beliefs and viewpoints in culturally responsive ways (Mills et al. 2016; Raworth et al. 2012). The blooper reel from the second site is available here: https://goo.gl/jS1pBx. The main edited film from the scenes performed in the second site is here: https://youtu.be/nMJWzdr2BBA. Ethics approvals only permitted sharing videos in site two.

Analysis of student video and interview data from sites one and two

Analysis of students’ videos and graffiti drawings began by attending to the multimodal transcripts of the films themselves (Flewitt et al. 2009). These were collated as a series of screenshots or film scenes, to which we added student dialogue and interview data where relevant. This was especially when students talked about their reasons for including specific humourous moments and their interpretations of those moments (see Figure 1). Seeking students’ personal clarifications of events enabled the White researchers, who have passed childhood, to gain an appreciation of students’ cultural frames of reference as young people.
In reviewing the transcripts, we saw irony, slapstick, parody, and other techniques of humour, which we interpreted as akin to the carnivalesque in several respects. We began to note and categorise these humourous moments in their texts and their particular hierarchical worlds, trying to understand children’s meaning making emically (Erickson 2004), marking the attention they paid to sacred objects and moments that were ripe for profanation. We applied concepts from Bakhtin’s (1981, 19841, 1984b) theorisation of carnivalesque texts, looking for clowning and grotesque humour that flattens hierarchies, and seeing instances of the power of laughter has in worlds turned temporarily upside down. We mapped these concepts on to the images, postures, gaze, gestures and other body language of participants and their interactions represented in the films (Jewitt 2013). We grouped these first-level codes into main interpretive themes that serve to describe the types of carnivalesque humour that we observed, which we describe next.

Findings: The function of children’s humour in carnivalesque videos

The following is a summary of the key findings that emerged from analysis of the films and interviews, as seen through a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque perspective.

i. Clowning arose spontaneously in children’s carnivalesque performances, to break perceived tensions;
ii. Grotesque humour subverted the seriousness of the texts by drawing attention to lower, bodily functions; and

iii. Ambivalent laughter instantiated in the video texts presenting a carnivalesque view of the world.

We elaborate on these findings in relation to samples of video as supporting evidence for our theorisations in the next section.

i. Clowning to break the tension in carnivalesque performance

In our analysis, we found that students used carnivalesque techniques of clowning to subvert or break the tension or orthodoxy of the filming process. Bakhtin stipulates that clowning and fools are ‘characteristic of the medieval culture of humour’. Clowns and fools were seen as ‘constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 8). In these studies, the children’s humorous videos embody the idea of carnivalesque performance as acts of clowning—funny, foolish or anti-authority acts of the rogue, such as subversive physical and slapstick humour. For example, in Figure 2 below, in the foreground, Ella is seen blurrily leaping in front of the viewfinder during the filming of a regular scene. She initiated this clowning act immediately after the teacher had complimented the straight-faced student in the background with the encouraging comment ‘Nice!’

*Figure 2 Clowning—Subversive physical humour*
In many other instances, the students deliberately filmed themselves playing clowning tricks on one another, such as making popular bunny-ear hand-signs behind unknowing peers, making the other the ‘fool’ behind their back (Figure 3). In carnivalesque texts, clowns represent a sense of ‘standing on the borderline between life and art’ (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 8). Similarly, in these films, children could integrate their spontaneous emotions and life into the video as art, with the humour segments positioning them to act out various funny roles of their own choosing.

Figure 3—Clowning to make others the “fool”

In the example in Figure 3, Sophia, Mia and Ella fool around in a way that reflects their uninhibited and open playfulness with familiar friends. The girls’ clowning acts also mirror Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of human contact in the carnival as ‘a special form of free and familiar contact’ between people. While these three children were friends, we saw other instances of children who were not friends ‘clowning around’ together. That is, these carnivalesque contexts enabled temporary relationships ‘among people who were usually divided’ (p. 10). As shown below in more detail, Bakhtin’s theorisation of ‘carnival character masks’—the rogue, the clown, and the fool whose actions can be plotted on a continuum of naïveté—is relevant here.

Ironically, Mia, who is performing in the middle in Figure 3, is both tricking and being tricked behind her back in just such a moment of naïveté, suggesting she played the
role of the clown. The clown oscillates between the playful deception of the rogue and the utter stupidity of the fool. Such moments in the carnival prompt the audience to wonder who exactly is the main subject of the carnival subversion, and may lead the viewer to wonder whether they now also form a part of that target. Ella, on the far right in Figure 3, is like the rogue with an audience, understanding the ways in which trickery targets both fellow performers and the audience. In other words, one mocks, but is not mocked (Williams 2015).

In another example from Esperanza, three girls act out a scene from their video titled ‘No bullying allowed,’ while a fourth student films. Anna and Marisol enact a dance scene while Jennifer scrambles over a nearby chair. The dancing girls fall down, when Anna pops up to ask, alarmed, ‘Wait, are you filming this?’ As she waves her arms at the camera, all three girls start laughing, and the clip ends. The question ‘are you filming this?’ accompanied by laughter suggests that the girls were primarily occupied with entertaining themselves. Here, clowning is visible in the positions of their heads and bodies, rotating, climbing, jumping and falling down, all actions which symbolise the collapsing of official truth(s).

All of the videos that contain humourous footage index a willingness to entertain peer audiences, but some clips were obviously made for peers. As Crystal, Violet and Jayda made their video about whether or not the district should renew their school’s charter, they created several blooper clips, some of which were really bloopers, and some of which were staged, or choreographed accidents. These, which the children explained in interviews were left in to entertain audiences, included Violet sitting on a chair and someone off-camera throwing a large bean bag at her (Figure 4). Violet’s chair tipped back, and the viewer can hear her and at least one person off-camera laughing as the clip ends.

*Figure 4—Bean bag tossed at Violet*
In another scene, Keisha is interviewing a teacher and then a smile begins to form on Keisha’s face. Suddenly, Violet pops up in front of the camera and grins, saying “I’m here!” while the teacher and Keisha erupt with laughter, and they all laugh together some more. These clips are overlain with a loud popular song, so that the words are almost indiscernible until the the loud ‘I’m here!’ followed by laughter. Like carnival laughter, this laughter ‘builds its own world in opposition to the official world’ (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 88). Clowning heralded non-feudal, non-official truth. As with the rotating heads and other clowning acts discussed above, these examples mirror the humour of carnivalesque clowning, which would involve cartwheeling, falls, jumps, and other movements in which the buttocks displace the position of the head. The rotation of the body at times symbolised a hierarchy and the nature of official truth figuratively turned upside down. In a similar way, we observed grotesque humour, another technique of the carnivalesque, which functioned to rupture official truth and invoke laughter. In the following section, we define and discuss observed instances of grotesque humour.

ii. Grotesque humour and ‘lower’ bodily forms
Our second finding focuses on how students made grotesque references to ‘lower’ bodily forms, such as poking out the tongue, which is normally concealed from view in social settings. According to Bakhtin (1984b):

*The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth... the nose* (p. 26).

This is evident, for example, in Figure 5, first frame, where Charlotte ‘pokes fun’ at the camera by pulling a humorous facial expression and gestures, extending her tongue down and to the left. At the same time, her thumb of the right hand touches her ear with fingers splayed outwards and upwards, while the left hand points to her own head as the object of silliness. Accompanied by a smile and open mouth, the protruding tongue suggests playfulness. Charlotte does not want to be taken too seriously and is ‘acting the fool’. In a similar but intensified display of grotesque humour, Charlotte opens her mouth wider in the second frame and pretends to swallow a lizard, a form of entertainment meant to amuse, and perhaps even shock or disgust, the viewer (Figure 5).

*Figure 5—Grotesque bodily humour to ‘poke fun’ at self*

These lower bodily forms, such as the muscles of the mouth and tongue, are usually tightly
controlled in non-nonsense contexts like schools, where, for example, the students were reminded to maintain a ‘serious face’. Like grotesque humour of the carnivalesque, both scenes focus on the orifice of the mouth, and either the world entering into the body or something emerging from it.

We see a similar grotesque in effect in the blooper reel of a video created by four girls at Esperanza. Olivia, who had appeared poised and articulate in the official video, appears with a unicorn mask on her face. She proceeds to prance around the hallways of the school, giggling and posing. One of her co-composers says, ‘This is gonna be in the bloopers!’ as Olivia laughs and moves around in various positions (standing, lying on the floor, etc.) for thirty-three seconds of the 2-minute blooper reel. Olivia wears her mask, acting the clown ‘in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 123), enacting at the same time her own instantiation of an ‘open and unfinished body’ (1984b, p. 26).

*Figure 6*—Olivia with unicorn mask on the floor

Each of these examples utilises a form a humour that moves away from official school culture to descend into the carnivalesque and grotesque culture of the so-called lower bodily stratum, harnessing avenues in film-making for degeneration, but with a view
towards a regeneration (Bakhtin, 1984b). The grotesque scenes emanate from freedom of
the students in both school sites. Olivia and her peers felt ‘freed from the authority’ (Bakhtin
1984a, p. 123) of the school hierarchy due to the school’s impending closure. In the
Indigenous school site, there was a release that comes from a new-found sense of cultural
self-determination instilled in the students, which was declared in the chorus of the class
film: ‘We are the People of the First Nation… culture, nature, self-determination.’

In these scenes that echo the grotesque in carnivalesque texts, Olivia’s face becomes
distorted with a protruding horn and cross-eyed facial expression. Charlotte’s wide-open
mouth, an orifice of the body, and the banal function of eating, are both elevated to high
status. Contrastingly, the very prescriptive and stress-inducing culture of schooling and
academic performance is undone, along with any falsity or pretentiousness, as the children
momentarily express freedom and rupture the relations between their bodies and the official
nature and performance of schooling.

iii. Ambivalent laughter as a carnivalesque view of the world

Our third finding relates to the ambivalent laughter we saw in several videos. Some
ethnographers of literacy have captured laughter during textual production (Dyson 1989),
and others have described the significance of laughter in writer’s workshop (Lensmire 1994)
and in discourse in filmmaking classes (Tierney 2017). However, laughter is not easy to see,
capture, or analyse in written textual products. However, laughter was a recurring feature in
the children’s films in both school sites.

During video recordings, students were often unable to contain themselves as they
burst into uncontrollable laughter, resulting in the need for repeated recordings of the same
scene. We can see this in Figure 7 below, which was taken as the teacher cautioned ‘Don’t
laugh!’ Bakhtin reminds us that laughter itself is ‘an objectified, socio historical, cultural
phenomenon, which is most often present in verbal expression’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 236).

Figure 7—Uncontrolled laughter while looking at peer

Laughter occurred at other times when the teacher had casually requested a ‘serious face’. Requests for seriousness repeatedly evoked the opposite response—laughter, as seen on Jack’s face as he poses in Figure 8 below. In any of laughter’s many linguistic forms, ‘there is a continual passing beyond the boundaries of the given, sealed-off verbal whole (one cannot understand parody without reference to the parodied material, that is, without exceeding the boundaries of the given context)’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 237). We see these instances as attempts to subvert the requested solemnity, and as part and parcel of the carnivalesque texts children created and inhabited. Their laughter referenced and parodied school rules while exceeding them, therefore exceeding the boundaries of their given assignments.

Figure 8—Give me a serious face
The children’s laughter cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the very weighty nature of the original film, which in the words of students at site two, was about ‘our culture’; about ‘respecting yourself, family, and Country…things that are sacred to you’. It was about the ‘community that is home to you’ and about Indigenous ‘self-determination’ and a celebration of the ‘beautiful land that we live on’. At the same time, students directly stated that the video was about ‘friendships’, and about ‘being yourself’, which is reflected most strongly in the funny excerpts. In Figure 9, the four girls burst into laughter upon missing the teacher’s cue to start drumming on the correct count.

*Figure 9—Uncontrolled laughter at the drums*

In the videos we can see, hear and analyse the laughter present in children’s carnivalesque texts. In an example from Esperanza, three boys, Juan, Daniel, and Joaquin, reveal the nature of their friendship through laughter in their blooper reel. Daniel and Joaquin are seated across the table from the videographer. Daniel begins the scene with the greeting, ‘Hey, my name is…’, but is interrupted by Juan who moves into the filming area. Daniel exclaims, ‘Oh my God, Juan, no!’ Daniel pretends to push Juan away, and Joaquin becomes caught up in the play fight, as the three boys jostle one another. They attempt to sit together while unsuccessfully containing their laughter. The segment ends with all three laughing uncontrollably, an ambivalent, carnivalesque laughter from the unofficial side of language.
Carnivalesque laughter was reflected on multiple occasions in the funny videos, such as when Marley laughed aloud after striking a mask on a wall during her speech about the school. It similarly occurred when Anthony laughed at himself after mispronouncing a Spanish word, later correcting himself. In each of these instances, laughter erupted spontaneously and freely, sometimes following clowning and grotesque humour, and contrasting the seriousness of the intended film as artwork. Entering into a space characterised by a carnival spirit of laughter enabled the students to experience the truth or ‘Pravda’ of ‘free and familiar contacts’ (Bakhtin 1984). Pravda is ‘individual truth’ that is both ‘artistic and irresponsible’ (Bakhtin 1993). Bakhtin argues that there was no place in Europe, no ‘single official genre or style serving either the church or the state’ where ‘laughter was sanctioned’ (1981, p. 236). This is true of laughter ‘even in its most watered-down forms, humour, and irony’ (p. 236). He argues that laughter, therefore, ‘could not be deformed or falsified’ and thus ‘remained outside official falsifications’ (p. 236).

The individual truth, or Pravda, of laughter is apparent in the bloopers, in which children knowingly placed their laughter outside the bounds of the official script or the official video (see also Grant 2014, p. 49). We might interpret laughter as one speech act over which children have control in the classroom (in their daily lives and in these films). Teachers asked for and received formal texts in which laughter was not sanctioned. However, the children also found opportunities to let laughter emerge, and to create for themselves spaces free of authoritative discourses, spaces where they could spoof the seriousness of school.

Use of curated humour for an intended audience

This research on elementary students’ students’ self-authored carnivalesque funny videos or blooper reels in their multimodal film production across two continents
demonstrates the vital functions of humour and laughter as it erupts against the staidness of schooling. Utilising simple and unrehearsed forms of clouting, grotesque humour, and carnivalesque laughter, carnivalesque moments in students’ videos functioned to rupture official truth, temporarily pushing back against what they perceived as oppression, and temporarily rearrange hierarchies. Seen against the backdrop of the very real context of potential school closure and historical struggles of colonising cultures for Indigenous students, carnivalesque humour and laughter emerged as central to relationships, creativity, and learning in students’ multimodal film-making or video creation. These findings are central given the increasing formality of schooling, as the pressure of global, national, and state accountability systems weighs heavily on administrators, teachers, and students (Comber 1997; Comber and Nixon 2009).

Despite the increasingly high incidence of anxiety among school students in pressurised systems of high-stakes accountability (Segool et al. 2013), school violence (Shapiro 2018), school closures, and the prevalence of bullying, victimisation, and aggression (Rigby and Smith 2011), there remains a dearth of educational research on humour and laughter in schooling to counter the multiple threats to emotional well-being, academic performance and social health. As Tierney (2017, p. 45) suggests, ‘there is important social work taking place in the backstage talk and laughter of classrooms,’ and it is work from which we can learn.

Likewise, multimodal text production, such as viewing and making videos, is increasingly taking centre stage as one of the most prevalent kinds of everyday literacy practices of children and youth, quickly replacing television, assisted by the rise of video sharing websites, such as YouTube (Burges and Green 2013). Albers (2017) argues that ‘the use of audiovisual means to display their creativity becomes more and more natural for children. They are quick adapters of formats and like to play with them. They love to be
hilariously silly and dead-serious alike. Unfortunately, neither media nor education
acknowledge, value or support this immense creative potential as they should’ (Albers 2017,
p. 189). The multimodal composition of carnivalesque texts is a key site for supporting
laughter, a freeing force for learning that can rupture the silence and solemnity of schooling.
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