

Learning From Calypso

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Well, the so-called “Carnival Season” is upon us again and, true to form, so are the annual controversies. The earliest to emerge for 2003 are those associated with the calypsoes that were composed by Impulse in the genre of double entendre. The particular string of words in the chorus of “Cashier” sung by Crazy, and the emphasis on the Creole pronunciation facilitate the double meaning. I have not yet heard “Confirmed,” so I am uncertain about the device employed to facilitate the second meaning. However, these compositions have spawned many comments from priest and public alike.

As expected, many of the comments about these calypsoes have been negative. There are prevailing concerns about the decaying moral fabric of society and about the influence of these calypsoes on the young mind. The positive statements focus either on the “fun” or “entertainment” value, or use the argument that the genre is not new so what’s the fuss about. It seems, however, that so far we have missed the important messages that Impulse has been sending--messages that we often seem to ignore, but which have implications for many of the activities that engage our attention in the sphere of education--formally through the school and informally through media reporting. These lessons include the following: what people say is often not what others hear; simple reporting of “facts” is often impossible, from the point of view of both the reporter and the audience, because prior knowledge plays a significant role in the messages we receive; language is subject to interpretation, and careless construction by the person sending the message means that, in many instances, the message is not stated as intended. In other words, ideas are not transmitted passively from sender to receiver. The listener plays a very active role in constructing the message received. Let us look at some examples/effects of these lessons.

There is a simple exercise that is often done in science classes to illustrate that the listener plays an active role in constructing/receiving a message. The students are made to sit in a circle, and one student whispers a short message in the ear of the student to the right or left. The message is passed around and the last person states the message received. It is often substantially different from the one that was sent initially--depending on the length of the message and the complexity of the issue. We can recognize that this is the means by which the end product of gossip bears little relation to the original item of information. The humour associated with children’s comments is an effect of the difference between what is said and what is heard. I remember an example of an advertisement for a soft drink/soda or, in local parlance, “sweet drink,” in which the phrase “Zero in, zero in on a” was sung. A parent laughingly recalled that her young son would sing “Seegobin, Seegobin...” Obviously, the product name was familiar based on his prior knowledge, but not the phrase “zero in,” which means to approach a target.

We can easily conclude that people try to make sense of what is said, and they often substitute for words or phrases that are either not heard at all or not understood. Additionally, as illustrated by the calypsoes, the juxtaposition of words can create ambiguity--double entendre. The relevance for oral communication in the classroom is clear. Just what do our students hear as we attempt to communicate meaning? What do

we hear when students communicate with us? What is the prior knowledge that is invoked as we attempt to make sense of students' utterances? What is the prior knowledge invoked as students attempt to make sense of the teachers' words? The issues raised in the debate on the double entendre should make us more conscious of issues involved in the use of language as we go about our daily activities.

This debate, then, has the potential to make us look more closely at the very important issue of language use and communication, but it is important for even more fundamental understandings. We have the opportunity to engage in the process of values clarification, not merely about the topics under discussion but more fundamentally about our sense of self-worth. One caller to a TV programme lamented that other songs (foreign) are played throughout the year and nobody says anything. While her comments may be inaccurate, she did address an important concern.

There is the perception that citizens of Trinidad and Tobago cannot produce anything worthwhile, and that there is the tendency to use any opportunity to reinforce these views. What are the assumptions that guide our actions with respect to local and foreign products? We may assert that we are concerned about standards and that we focus our attempts at "constructive criticism" in order to raise standards and/or maintain high standards. This is a laudable intention, but often comments move beyond the specific example or class of songs to the entire art form. What might be the psychological effects of comments that continually attack an entire art form based on a few selected examples, with few attempts at "bigging-up" the culture? Do we use the calypso or other local performing arts to address self-esteem issues? What does our continuing refusal to use local forms of knowledge such as the calypso, rapso, dance, chutney, and pichakaree in the formal school system, for the interrogation of our values and to aid our self-knowledge, say about us?

As we reflect on the controversies that emerge, we may find that calyposes can teach us a great deal that we can apply to the formal education system, and that we can learn quite a bit about ourselves in the process.

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