

Applications in the Classroom: Pop Culture and Ed Psychology: What I Learned from Larry David, Rick Grimes, and Hank Hill

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ABSTRACT

In teacher education courses, it is common to teach educational psychology concepts using case studies. Many publishers provide these case studies in textbooks and/or in ancillary materials, and there are many advantages to using them. For example, an instructor does not have to spend extra time finding or writing the case studies, both of which can be very time consuming. In addition, if students have the textbook, they have immediate access. One major disadvantage, however, is that students may find themselves uninterested and disengaged with the cases, depending on the students' interests and the cases. This paper argues that studying fictional characters in popular culture provides a fun and engaging alternative to textbook case studies. Most students enjoy talking about popular culture, and many already know a great deal about it. Some students might even consider themselves experts in popular culture.

What makes popular culture case studies not only fun, but also highly effective, is they are often hyperbolic, which is what ultimately makes that form of culture so funny/sad/engrossing in the first place. Because the examples are hyperbolic, students can easily identify the educational psychology concepts being studied. This paper explores three examples of how an instructor can use popular television to teach key educational psychology concepts. Specifically, this paper will examine Larry David's moral development in HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the characters' needs in AMC's *The Walking Dead*, and the father-son relationship in FOX's *King of the Hill*. Discussion and assignment ideas are also provided.

KEYWORDS:

Educational Psychology; *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; *The Walking Dead*; *King of the Hill*; Moral Development; Hierarchy of Needs; Discourse Communities, Abraham Maslow; Lawrence Kohlberg; James Paul Gee

Students can learn a lot from Larry David, Rick Grimes, and Hank Hill, and it is not just how to kill a herd of zombies with one bullet or how to successfully fight a citywide mandate on the installation of low-flow toilets. In fact, David, Grimes, and Hill are pretty good teachers. As David would say, “Pretty, pretty good.”

When working with future teachers, it can be helpful to illustrate different concepts in educational psychology and learning theory by using popular culture examples. Studying fictional characters protects the privacy of real individuals, and it provides a safe space for students to explore concepts like moral development, self-actualization, and Discourse communities. Most students also enjoy talking about and critically analyzing movies, television shows, and music. Rather than using the examples and case studies often found in textbooks, instructors can use examples in popular culture. Popular culture examples can provide entertaining and “fun” examples of some very complex theories.

Popular culture also provides students with a topic they may already know a lot about. In 2009, the Kaiser Foundation found that 8-18 year-olds were exposed to 10 hours and 45 minutes of media of all kinds during a typical day (Taylor 149). Instructors can use this exposure as a resource, a talking point, in their classrooms. Meg Callahan and Bronwen E. Low believe that popular culture encourages complex thinking because it “provides a site where students can experience competence at the same time that teachers provide appropriate challenges through careful support, reframing, and questioning” (57). Because of their familiarity with popular culture, students can feel confident entering the classroom discussion and extending the conversation. On a similar note, Greg Dimitriadis believes that the use of popular culture in education has decentered “the presumed and presumptive authority of the educator” because it uses the investments students already have in popular culture texts (26).

What makes popular culture examples not only fun, but also highly effective, is they are often hyperbolic. Hyperbolic examples are a perfect starting point for those just learning a concept or theory because when the concept is so exaggerated to elicit an emotional response from the audience, it makes it easier to identify. For example, much of Larry David’s morally corrupt behavior in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is over-the-top—almost unbelievable. It is hard to imagine anyone acting that way in “real” life. His hyperbolic behavior provides a perfect example of Lawrence Kohlberg’s lowest level of moral development, a level not often seen in “real world” adults. In an educational psychology class, students could watch an episode of *Curb* to better understand this stage. Students could also watch several clips of *Curb* and debate exactly what level David’s character is in as he occasionally occupies other stages of Kohlberg’s moral development.

Instructors in a variety of fields can use popular culture examples; it is not limited to those who are teaching educational psychology courses. For example, in the healthcare professions, an instructor could ask students to dissect healthcare-related television shows like *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy*. Students could evaluate the show to see how accurately the show portrays the care being provided. With the plethora of crime dramas on network television, criminal justice instructors could do the same; students could watch *Criminal Minds*, *Law and Order: SVU*, or *CSI* and examine the accuracy of an investigation. In addition, instructors could use clips of the shows to highlight some theories in criminology.

In this article, three popular culture examples are explored; educational psychology instructors can use these examples to teach key educational and learning theory concepts. For example, in addition to using *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to discuss Kohlberg’s moral development theory, instructors can use *The Walking Dead* to explain Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Finally, this article explores how instructors can use *King of the Hill* to explore father-son relationships through the lens of James Paul Gee’s Discourse communities.

CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM AND KOHLBERG’S MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Throughout eight seasons of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David has been confronted with several

moral dilemmas, all of which play out in a hilarious 30-minute sequence of events. His decisions, while mostly self-serving, can be categorized using Kohlberg's three levels and six sub-stages of moral development. Many of David's choices, unsurprisingly to avid fans, could be described as examples of Kohlberg's first level, second stage of moral development, a stage typically occupied by small children and characterized by a "looking out for number one" attitude.

Kohlberg's three levels, preconventional, conventional, and postconventional, are an expansion of Jean Piaget's theory of moral reasoning and are typically covered in introductory educational psychology courses. In Kohlberg's preconventional level, physical consequences often determine the "goodness or badness" of any given situation. Most people at this level, mostly children, are concerned with only their own needs and the needs of others if it also benefits their own agenda (Slavin 54). More often than not, we see David in this stage. A perfect example to provide to students is in season five, episode five when David refuses to donate a kidney to his friend Richard Lewis because Lewis, David justifies, is really more of an acquaintance ("Lewis Needs a Kidney"). In reality, the viewer knows that Richard is much more than an acquaintance; David is thinking only of his own health. Students would not have to be avid watchers of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to recognize this.

David yo-yos through Kohlberg's three levels throughout the series, and because of this, instructors can use a variety of episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to illustrate Kohlberg's theory from the first to the last stage. In one particular episode in season four, "The Car Pool Lane," David exhibits moral reasoning from each of Kohlberg's levels and would be a great case study for students. After a close analysis of the episode, students should be able to identify all stages of Kohlberg's moral development theory.

After weaseling out of jury duty, a prime example of Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage, later in "The Car Pool Lane" episode, David moves to the conventional stage, as he picks up a hooker because he wants to use the carpool lane. In the conventional level, people are concerned with pleasing others and maintaining social order/obeying the law (Slavin 54). While picking up a hooker seems like another selfish move, David is adamant that he will not use the carpool lane, as he explains to his friend Jeff, unless he has another person in the car. At least in this case, rules are rules. He even tells an acquaintance, "I didn't pick her up for sex; I actually picked her up so I could use the diamond lane" ("The Car Pool Lane").

Viewers see David occupy this stage in other episodes as well. In season three, for example, David reluctantly attempts to create a real-life manger scene around Christmas time, despite being Jewish, to please his in-laws after an earlier faux pas. In this case, his actions are all in the name of keeping the peace ("Mary, Joseph and Larry"). Because all of these examples are so hyperbolic, students should be able to better understand Kohlberg's stages.

Finally, in "The Car Pool Lane," viewers see a glimpse of David's compassion, as he moves into the post-conventional stage. People in this stage, unlike the conventional stage, believe that laws can be rewritten and changed for the good of society; in addition, decisions made by people in this stage are often driven by self-chosen principles or their conscience (Slavin 54). In the postconventional stage, people define their values by ethical principles they have chosen to follow.

For example, Larry approaches a drug dealer to obtain medical marijuana for his ailing father. He tells his father, whose vision is so deteriorated he can no longer complete crossword puzzles or watch television, "I have no idea how I will get it, but I will." He reasons that even though it is illegal (neither he nor his father have a California medical marijuana card), it is the right thing to do because it might help his father and ease his suffering. The awkward exchange between David and the drug dealer makes one thing clear: David is not accustomed to buying *any* sort of illegal substance.

Drug Dealer: OK, now walk away!

David: Any particular direction?

Drug Dealer: Just walk!

David: OK.

(He walks away)

Drug Dealer: Jesus Christ.

(Larry comes back and walks by him the opposite direction)

Larry: I actually have to go this way.

David's reasoning behind buying medical marijuana is a great example of the postconventional stage for students.

This is not to say that David's post-conventional intentions do not go awry. The marijuana purchased, unbeknownst to David, ends up with an acquaintance, an acquaintance that is quickly mauled by drug-sniffing dogs at the airport. As he stands before the judge who dismissed him from jury duty, David must ultimately decide if he should admit the drugs are his. This is clearly a difficult situation for David. What level is David in when he accepts the drugs are his? This is a great question for instructors to ask students. Instructors could require students to free write a response, requiring students to cite theory to support their answer, or they could ask students to reach a consensus as a group.

In HBO's hit comedy, protagonist Larry David is presented with an onslaught of moral dilemmas in each episode. While often criticized as egotistical and narcissistic, David offers several glimpses into a much kinder, more moral, version of himself. Kohlberg's theory of moral development provides students a theoretical framework to analyze and understand David's behavior and decisions. After analyzing David's behavior in one episode as a class, students could analyze his behavior in another episode individually or in groups. If an instructor does not want to use *Curb*, he/she could use *Family Guy* or *The Simpsons*. Both cartoons have many episodes in which the morality of a character is called into question.

THE WALKING DEAD AND MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Another common human development theory discussed in introductory educational psychology courses is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow describes the different types of needs all human beings have by using a triangle; according to Maslow, the needs at the base of the triangle must be secured in order to move to the next tier. The triangle is as follows: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Maslow 372-82). In order for students to understand the tiers, examples often need to be provided.

AMC's hit television series, *The Walking Dead*, provides an excellent lens in which to examine this theory. *The Walking Dead* follows a group of humans as they try to survive the walker apocalypse and is widely popular. According to *Time*, the season five premiere had 17.3 million viewers without counting DVR recordings and encores (which brought its viewership up to 28 million last season) (Poniewozik). The show set a viewing record, and it is likely many students would be excited to discuss it in class.

Because of the apocalyptic setting, viewers see characters continually fighting for the most basic of needs. In many episodes, however, we see the main characters bounce from tier to tier. To help students understand Maslow's hierarchy, instructors could ask students to watch one episode, or even part of an episode, and determine which stage each character is in. In a good percentage of the episodes, characters work endlessly and tirelessly securing physiological needs like food, water, and air. It is a primary focus of the show. According to Maslow, "For the man that is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food" (374). We see this extreme desperation in season five when the main characters come across another group of people who have resorted to cannibalism ("Strangers").

After physiological needs are met, a person's focus turns to safety needs, needs that focus on security of the body, mental health, and resources (Maslow 376). For example, during much of season three and part of

season four, this is where one could describe Rick, the once strong and capable leader of the group. In season four, the group secures a former prison, seemingly has an adequate water supply, and has started to grow their own food. For many characters, this is the first time since the apocalypse that their physiological and safety needs are met. Rick, however, is reeling from the loss of his wife Lori (“Home”). Despite the physical security the prison provides and the water and food available, he struggles to cope with her death. At times, he even sees Lori, and it is clear that his mental health is not what it should be. Because of his mental illness, he is unable to move past the security stage in Maslow’s triangle. Students would likely be able to see how mental health issues can, without adequate care and help, prevent a person from moving up the triangle, a point often made by Maslow.

The next tier, once security needs are met, is love and belonging (Maslow 380). It is in this stage that humans can focus on friendship and intimacy. For most of characters at the start of season four, they feel secure, and with security, there is routine. Characters such as Glen and Maggie are likely in the love and belonging stage. Throughout the show, viewers see their bond form, moving beyond sex (physiological stage) to intimacy (love and belonging stage), particularly once the prison area is secured. They consider marriage and what their future looks like together (“The Sorrowful Life”). An instructor, for example, could show the scene in which Glen proposes to Maggie in the prison yard. It is a reciprocal relationship based on “both giving *and* receiving love” (Maslow 381).

In season two, Herschel provides shelter and care for the group; he becomes a caregiver of sorts. He did not, however, hesitate to ask the group to leave when he felt his own way of life and his physiological needs might be threatened. As soon as he realized Rick and his group viewed the walkers differently, that they wanted to kill them, he wanted Rick and the group gone. He only remained with the group, however, when walkers threatened the farm. An instructor could show a clip when Herschel asks the group to leave (“Pretty Much Dead Already”).

After the love and belonging stage, the next stage is esteem (Maslow 381). Esteem needs focus on respect and building and gaining confidence: respect for others, respect and confidence in oneself. Daryl, at this point in the series, season five, could be in this stage. Some might argue this point, but Daryl is forging relationships with other group members and gaining confidence in his own abilities to lead. In this stage, Maslow argues that “desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom” is paramount (Maslow 381). At one point, Carol tells Daryl, “Give the stranger sanctuary, keep people fed, you’re gonna have to learn to live with the love (“30 Days Without an Accident”). With Rick grieving his wife in season four, Daryl takes on a more prominent leadership role in the group. More importantly, he is learning to value and respect himself—something that he has struggled with because of past abuse from his brother Merle and their father.

The final stage is self-actualization (Maslow 382). There are very few characters in *The Walking Dead* that have achieved such a status, if any, making it an interesting talking point for students. Is self-actualization possible in the apocalypse? The key to self-actualization is simply an acceptance of oneself and of the situation. Carol consistently, throughout season four, makes difficult choices, but choices that reflect her awareness of the situation and her desire to protect herself and the group. After the death of her abusive husband, she has come into her own, as a leader in her own right. According to Maslow, “What a man *can* be, he *must* be” (383). Carol is meant to lead.

It is worth noting that *The Walking Dead* may not be appropriate for *all* classrooms. Unlike *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, it is hard to tease out some of these concepts by watching only one short clip. Generally speaking, it is more difficult to follow if one is not an avid fan. Students would likely have to watch longer scenes, and possibly full episodes, in order to understand how Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs can be applied to the show. In addition, *The Walking Dead* can be very gory, so it would be important to warn students about the violence

ahead of time. There are, however, some shorter, violence-free clips available (like the ones noted above). In addition, for example, instructors could show the scene in which Daryl and Beth are talking about Daryl's abusive childhood in season four, episode 12. This scene is free of violence, and it provides a starting point for discussing how physiological and safety needs are important in order to achieve esteem and self-actualization.

The Walking Dead provides a great case study for students. Stages for each of the characters, at many points in the series, are not necessarily cut-and-dried. Students could argue for one tier or another, which makes this show perfect for understanding this theory. If an instructor did not want to use *The Walking Dead*, he/she could use the television series *Lost* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as the vampire development in *Buffy* mirrors Maslow's hierarchy.

KING OF THE HILL AND DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

For thirteen years, Mike Judge's *King of the Hill* was a staple of FOX's Sunday night animation domination line-up, rivaling Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* in popularity. Part of the show's appeal was that it was easy to relate to the characters, which makes it an excellent cartoon to engage students in classroom discussion. Unlike four-fingered, yellow-as-the-sun, Homer Simpson, Hank Hill looks—and acts—like most t-shirt-wearing-middle-class dads in America. The same could be said for mother Peggy, son Bobby, and niece LuAnn.

Throughout thirteen seasons of *King of the Hill*, viewers watch Hank struggle to build a relationship with Bobby, and this struggle is often the centerpiece of each episode. At its simplest, the conflict in Hank and Bobby's relationship is a conflict of their interests. Hank enjoys what is often thought of as traditional masculine activities: watching sports, working with power tools, and drinking beers with the neighbors. On the other hand, Bobby is very comfortable indoors with his mother Peggy, exploring and honing his interests in comedy, magic, and bubble baths.

For the most part, Bobby is happy with himself and comfortable with these differences, but these differences, and the fallout from these differences, make a fascinating case study. At its core, *King of the Hill* is a story about Hank and his troubles and triumphs as he awkwardly, yet often successfully, navigates multiple Discourses, all in the attempt to build a relationship with his son.

Linguist James Paul Gee argues that there are "instructions on how to act, talk, and often write" for anygiven Discourse (526). In Gee's work, discourse refers to "connected stretches of language" (p. 526). When combined with other social practices (words, acts, values, beliefs, etc.), Gee calls these connected stretches of language Discourse, WITH A CAPITAL "D." This can often be a difficult concept for introductory students to understand. *King of the Hill*, however, provides a platform to explain and explore this concept.

Each Discourse has an identity kit, and with that kit, there are certain expectations or guidelines on how to act. Growing up in the Southern United States and raised by a very strict and sexist father, Hank's primary Discourse, his initial Discourse used to make sense of the world, is a Discourse that supports very traditional family and gender roles. In one episode, after Hank expresses his admiration and love for his male boss, Hank's veteran father, Cotton, cringes. Cotton is disgusted by Hank's openness and views Hank's behavior as feminine and thus unacceptable. This scene provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their own primary Discourses and any conflict they have experienced.

Bobby, a witness to Hank and Cotton's conflict, naively explains the situation to his mother, "Why did Dad have to act like a woman in front of Grandpa? Grandpa hates women" ("The Father, the Son, and J.C."). The ridicule from his father, and Bobby's subsequent reaction, forces Hank to confront the values with which he was raised. By expressing his love publically, he has gone against the expectations of his father and his Discourse community. As Gee argues, "Failing to fully display an identity is a tantamount to announcing

you don't have that identity; that at best you're a pretender or a beginner" (525). It is not just ridiculing Hank faces. He also faces possible exile from the community. Students may have had similar experiences, and this episode would give them the opportunity to reflect on this. Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, asking students to write individually on this topic first is generally best. Teacher education students could also discuss on what happens to the students they will be teaching when the students' primary Discourse communities conflict with the Discourse communities found in schools.

Another example of conflict instructors could use is in the eighth episode of the series. In this episode, Cotton attends Bobby's birthday party where he begins teaching Bobby some alarming habits. Initially, it is hard for Hank to intervene, but after Cotton takes Bobby birthday shopping for prostitutes, Hank intercedes and questions his father. While difficult, Hank knows it is the right thing to do. A young boy shopping for prostitutes is far from acceptable—even in Hank's more traditional primary Discourse community. Because Cotton is so extreme in his actions in this particular situation, it is clearly easier for Hank to say something. Here students could discuss times they have gone against their primary Discourse community because of their own moral convictions, much like Hank did.

Secondary Discourses can also be difficult for students to understand. According to Gee, Secondary Discourses are Discourses that we interact with and acquire outside of the home and are associated with "institutions in the public sphere, beyond the family and immediate kin and peer group" (Gee 527). While there may be some overlap between a person's primary Discourse and secondary Discourses, there can be a schism between them as well. When this is the case, tension and conflict can ensue.

In another episode that highlights the conflict between primary and secondary Discourses, Bobby asks to go to theater camp. Hank tells Bobby he would rather have him work with him instead of going to camp. While Bobby finds Hank's work tedious and boring, he does find amusement in using the store's propane accessories as comedy props. Although initially irritated, after seeing the jovial reaction of his boss, Hank encourages Bobby to write more skits and put together an entire comedy team called the Propaniacs ("Meet the Propaniacs"). In order to develop routines, Bobby must learn more about propane, and in the process, Hank learns more about comedy. He also begins to appreciate Bobby's talents. This episode is an excellent example of *both* Bobby and Hank successfully navigating two Discourses and, in many ways, melding them together to create their own. Students can discuss the growth of Hank and Bobby's relationship.

This particular episode is also a good example of what Gee calls mushfake. Gee explains, "Mushfake Discourse' means partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to 'make do'" (533). Reflecting on the time they spent together, Hank tells Peggy, "Yup, those were some good times. Bobby tells me something about comedy, and then I'd teach him a little bit about propane" ("Meet the Propaniacs"). Bobby's growing knowledge of propane helps him to gain access to Hank's Discourse community and vice versa. They both were able to mushfake. With his new knowledge, Bobby is able to gain acceptance. He is not only able to "make do" in the community, but also build his relationship with Hank, which is really what he has yearned for all along. This is not the only time this has happened, and students could work to find additional examples in the series.

For example, in a very appropriate series finale, Hank and Bobby finally find an activity they both love and enjoy: grilling. Over dinner, Bobby impresses Hank with his knowledge of cuts of beef. This is an appropriate end to the series because we finally see the Hill men engaging in an activity they mutually enjoy. Any of the clips mentioned above provide a starting point for discussion; in addition to these, there are many others that students could find. If an instructor did not want to use *King of the Hill*, he/she could use examples from *Mad Men* or *Community*.

Don Draper, the main character of *Mad Men*, adopted another man's life after the Korean War. Throughout the series, he struggles with his conflicting Discourse communities. Specifically, students could

examine how Don responds to the conflict that arises because of his primary and secondary Discourses. Does he successfully mushfake? In the television show *Community*, Jeff Winger, a suave lawyer, is forced to go back to community college to finish his bachelor's degree. His conflicting Discourse communities (lawyer and student) are often a centerpiece for conflict in the sitcom.

In this article, three examples of how educational psychology instructors can use popular television to teach key educational and learning theory concepts were provided. Instructors, however, across all disciplines can use popular culture examples to engage students. Film, television, and music are all great conversation starters. Not only can instructors use popular culture to illustrate different educational psychology concepts, but popular culture also can be used as a platform for classroom writing assignments and debates. There are many other in-class activities instructors can use in conjunction with popular culture.

- Students can watch a clip of a television show and can engage in a debate in regard to a character's behavior or situation.
- After providing students with examples, students can bring in their own clips to teach a course concept to the rest of the class. For example, one student might bring a clip from *Breaking Bad*; what stage is Walter White's moral development in season one?
- Students can write a letter, drawing on course concepts, from one character to another. What would Walter White say to his son at the end up *Breaking Bad*?
- For larger assignments, there are many different possibilities as well.
- Students can write a review of an episode of their choosing, citing course concepts for support.
- Students can create an individualized education plan for a fictitious character.
- Students can create fictitious Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram accounts for certain characters. What would Carol tweet, for example, during season three of *The Walking Dead*?
- Students can work together, creating a class archive, by bookmarking different popular media examples in regard to a certain concept. Students can then compare and contrast examples from different sources. Moving beyond popular culture, students can then collect academic materials on each of the concepts.

The possibilities are endless. By starting with popular culture, instructors are providing a safe space for students to examine complex course concepts. Because many students are interested in popular culture outside of the classroom, talking about popular culture is not only fun, but also may encourage students who are more apprehensive to speak up because of their familiarity with and interest in popular culture.

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