BIG DRAMAS second edition

Scrambled Eggs

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Suitable	Suitable for Year 8
Difficulty	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
Genre	Social issues drama
Themes	Attitudes to work, personal responsibility and accountability, life priorities
Literary and dramatic techniques	Slapstick, symbolism, archetypes, *reductio ad absurdam*
Cast	11 characters

Why choose this play?

Scrambled Eggs is a brief but thought-provoking comedy about a school Life Skills exercise. It questions the usefulness of school knowledge—so it deals with a situation familiar to every student, and about which they probably have strong opinions. The play dramatises a lesson in which students are asked to care for an egg as they would a baby, exploring issues of responsibility, priorities, compromise and accountability, all of which students are likely to be negotiating as they enter mid-adolescence. The egg makes an interesting symbol of the fragility and perfection of babies, and should give students an idea of how parents (ideally) see their own children. There is ample room for English classes to explore how a play's verbal character acts as a counterpoint to visual slapstick, and the characterisation of the adults offers well-rounded and relatable models. The play provides an opportunity for teachers to relate to students in an authentic way as they explain their own philosophies about work and personal engagement with the material they teach.

Practical considerations

As a social issues drama, although a light-hearted one, the play may touch on sensitivities about parents, priorities and accountability. Students who have poor family relationships or who have not been treated with the care given to the eggs in the play may find this a difficult or triggering text.

Plan for 50 minutes to read through the text and around 100 minutes to set up and act it out. This lesson takes around 100 minutes to teach, including a class read-through of the play.

Teaching *Scrambled Eggs* by Sue Murray

Learning objectives

Students will:

- practise finding textual evidence for argumentative claims

- understand the difference between inference and implication, and use the appropriate term accordingly

- use metacognition to understand the thought processes involved in inferring

- discover that literary characters can be representative of social or cultural groups without being crude stereotypes

- recognise how authors manipulate characters' verbal and non-verbal language in order to persuade audiences towards a particular point of view.

Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

Year 8 content descriptions	Literacy: Interacting with others	ACELY1730	Interpret the stated and implied meanings in spoken texts, and use evidence to support or challenge different perspectives.
	Literature: Responding to literature	ACELT1628	Understand and explain how combinations of words and images in texts are used to represent particular groups in society, and how texts position readers in relation to those groups.
General capabilities	Intercultural understanding		Students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. The capability involves students in learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect.
	Personal and social capability		Students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. The capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships.

1. Approaching the text

Perform a class read-through of the text, paying attention to how a director might interpret the text (particularly the slapstick moments). You can move students out of their comfort zone by giving Mrs Benson's lines to a boy and Mitchell's lines to a girl.

2. Introducing ideas

i) In social issue dramas, characters are often representative of social groups and of opinions or attitudes towards an issue.

Clarify that the four topics dealt with in this play are:

- attitudes to work
- personal responsibility
- negotiating your priorities
- the usefulness of school life skills lessons.

Understanding activity

Ask students to work in groups or pairs. Each group should choose one character and decide which social group they best represent. Ask students to create a visual representation of their character—if you have access to the internet, students could 'find a face' for their character from actors on IMDB or the cast of a familiar Australian soap-opera, or create their own speaking avatar using digital tools such as Voki. Students should then create a list, poster-style, of features of the social group the character represents. Such features may include:

- personal values
- attitudes to gender roles
- prospect or desire for social mobility
- understanding of the role or value of formal education
- attitudes to the concept of work and how it contributes to the individual's attempt to define themselves
- capacity for independent or transgressive choices in the face of peer pressure
- ability to articulate rights and responsibilities in a family setting.

When they have listed each character's features, they should be able to determine a social group (for example, single father, idealistic teacher, disillusioned teacher, non-academic but sporty adolescent boy, prematurely burdened teenage girl, and so on) which they represent.

ii) We can characterise these groups' views by selecting appropriate textual evidence.

Understanding activity

Students can check their attribution of a social type by finding a 'sound bite' for their character on each of the four topics the play covers (some characters don't deal with all four, but all characters deal with at least three). You can set it out as a table like this, for example (a blank, editable version is available to download):

Character	Social group/ type	Attitude to work: Evidence	Attitude to responsibility: Evidence	Attitude to personal priorities: Evidence	Attitude to school Life Skills lessons: Evidence
Mr Osmetti	Disillusioned but experienced teacher; single male	It's purely a means to make a living: *'Another day, another dollar.'*	Limited—he doesn't really recognise Miss Ryan's sense of responsibility to her egg (and the exercise as a whole): *'… Forget it.'* *'I will if you will.'*	What he wants is his first priority, and it's good if it benefits someone else: *'We'll see a movie, have a bite to eat … But just you. No egg. I want you to relax.'*	Dismissive— thinks it has little academic value: *'We never fail anyone doing life skills.'*

iii) To extract meaning from texts, we often use a process called inference.

Explain the concept of 'inference' to the class: sometimes we don't have every single piece of evidence needed to draw a conclusion or make a decision, so we have to add in things that we know from life or common sense, and then we make a decision based on the sum of that knowledge.

The following scenario is a good example of this to give to students:

Ben and Tom go out for dinner, and after the meal Tom tells Ben that he doesn't have any money with him. Ben concludes that Tom would like him to pay.

This is an inference on Ben's part. Ben knows that paying requires money; Tom doesn't have any; it is bad manners to ask someone to pay. Ben adds in his own knowledge or reasoning (i.e. that he does have money, and it's required, and they're friends) and concludes that he will pay.

Inferring is *only* done by the listener. Implying is *only* done by the speaker. For example, if a friend comments that you're looking 'well-nourished', you might be offended because you *infer* that she means you look fat. She, however, may only have been *implying* that you look well.

Understanding activity

Ask students to go back through the table they created for their character. How much of their textual evidence for the character's views actually involves inference? For example, the table above uses Mr Osmetti's comment that *'We never fail anyone doing life skills'* as evidence that he thinks the subject lacks rigour and authenticity. But that's actually an inference—we're adding a piece of our own knowledge or reasoning, i.e. that academic rigor is proven by high standards of assessment, evidenced by some students failing. We further infer that Mr Osmetti believes that only academically rigorous subjects are useful or worthwhile.

When students have located one or two examples of inference, ask them to draw the process of their reasoning (downloadable template available), making explicit the gaps in the evidence which they filled in with their own material, e.g.:

> **The character said**: 'We never fail anyone doing life skills'
>
> **I infer from this that**: he thinks that Life Skills is a waste of time
>
> **I think this because my experience has made me believe that**: when no one fails, it means a subject's too easy
>
> **And that**: subjects that are too easy are useless in preparing you for life
>
> **From this inference I conclude:** Mr Osmetti is implying that 'Life Skills is too easy to be useful'.

It may prove a tricky exercise for students to unravel the process by which they arrive at what seems 'obvious' from what a person says. Inference is a valuable human survival skill but few people are aware of the thinking process they use every day.

3. The learning activity

Now that students understand how they infer characters' attitudes from their statements, they can examine how Murray positions the audience in relation to these attitudes. Give pairs or small groups one scene, and ask them to determine:

a) What they infer from the text about the characters' attitudes to responsibility—they should consider what characters say, what they are doing while they speak, and how it might be presented on stage. The totality of these aspects makes the scene—it's important to recognise that many aspects inform our inferences.

b) Whether students support or reject the character's perspective, and why.

c) The precise aspect of the scene that persuades them to form this opinion.

For example, in Scene 9, the character Mitchell seems to fob off his responsibility onto little Phoebe: the difference between their understanding is expressed by his joke about the 'free-range egg', which Phoebe doesn't understand. The social type that Mitchell represents is the sports-mad, emotionally immature male who abnegates responsibility to younger or more mature females. We infer that he is exploiting her youth because he knows that she doesn't understand; lies about the nature of the object and the task; and vanishes in a rush. His control of the language and swift disappearance positions us to disapprove of him, and since Phoebe has more stage-time, we are disposed to approve of her.

Students could make notes about their reading of the scene their findings as shown above, then write a structured paragraph explaining how the social types and audience inference helps dramatists to position the audience's opinions of their characters.

4. Rounding up

Ask the class how much of their decision-making each day is actually governed by the process of inference—hopefully they should recognise that it's a lot. Writers rely on their readers having relatively similar processes of inference and a shared body of knowledge from which to build these inferences, but it's hotly contested! Look at the 'cultural differences' advertising campaign by HSBC which shows how the same object has entirely different connotations based on culture. If you have time, look again at students' responses to their scene and ask them how they would present it to position the audience differently.

Assessment ideas

i) Use an extract from an appropriate text in which characters belong to, and represent, different groups (such as *Chariots of Fire, The Dark Crystal, Galaxy Quest, Lousy Little Sixpence, Shrek* or *The Princess Bride*). Select a scene where a conflict or difference between groups is made clear. Students should identify the conflict and which views are articulated by each group. Drawing on the features of social groups discussed in the lesson, students could identify aspects of the character which make them representative of their social group. They should then use the strategy for analysing words and images discussed above to show what elements of the scene position the audience to respond to the character. This can be presented as a series of short answers or a number of paragraphs, but should be assessed on:

   a) the accuracy of their observations

   b) the clarity with which they describe the scene or aspect

   c) the correlation between the evidence and the claim they make from it.

ii) Present students with a number of claims or interpretations about a text (a film text from the list above, or extracts from a prose text such as Anne Frank's *Diary*, Roald Dahl's *Boy*, or Zlata Filipovic's *Diary*) for which they must find textual evidence. When they have the claim and the evidence, they should evaluate the claim and decide whether they agree or not, stating their reasons. This can be presented as a table or a series of structured paragraphs.

iii) Give students four short scenes to read, each one featuring a misunderstanding. These can be easily written by teachers and turned to a number of different uses afterwards. Students must identify the source of the misunderstanding, whether an ambiguity in verbal reference, tone of voice, or cultural reference. Using the process of reasoning chain explained earlier, students should trace the characters' thinking and identify where they erred in their inference. For a more challenging assessment, ask students to explain how the author relied on the audience's shared knowledge and better inferences to ensure that it was a comic moment.

Using the play with other resources

It is possible to combine this play with other Macmillan resources if you have them in your collection. The exercises in the following workbooks provide useful warm-up activities with which to differentiate the concepts in this lesson. Students could attempt one or two of the exercises at home as a preparatory exercise for this lesson.

	National English Skills 8	Unit 1: Culture and identity, pp1–6
		Unit 16: Drama, pp139–44
	English Workbook 2 (3rd edn)	Unit 1: Connections with place pp19–35
		Unit 3: Language, purpose and audience, pp87–89

Further reading

- An article published by the National Council of Teachers of English (US) explaining how one teacher used literature to teach inference and how it can be powerful for a number of curricular areas.

Linked texts

Scrambled Eggs could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 4 (among many others)

- *Catherine, Called Birdy*, Karen Cushman
- *Life Bytes*, edited by Alwyn Evans
- *Lockie Leonard, Legend*, Tim Winton
- *Way Home*, Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers
- *My Family and Other Animals*, Gerald Durrell
- *Tough Stuff*, Kirsty Murray, illustrated by Harry Harrison
- *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline Yen Mah

Acknowledgements