

Liberlit 2013

Conference Report

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The 4th Liberlit conference was held at Meiji Gakuen University January 15th.

The Liberlit conference has expanded massively in size in 2013, from ten presentations last year to twenty-four this year. This year's theme was 'Only Connect: Teacher, Student, Text.' The aim of this theme was to bring literature back into the classroom in such a way that students could share the teacher's passion for literature. Many of the presentations at this conference were wonderful in the way that they brought literature to students in inventive and original ways. Despite the relatively small size of the conference the quality of the presentations was very high, ranging from science fiction to World Englishes.

The plenary was from Professor Yoshifumi Saito, Graduate School of Education, The University of Tokyo (with one of the most fabulous English accents that I have ever heard!) Professor Saito's presentation was as entertaining as it was informative. He pointed out that the onset of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1970s had encouraged teachers to emphasize oral language over written language, with literature particularly suffering. Saito showed that the language from a textbook can be just as unnatural as any classical literature. His example, taken from a high school textbook, focused on a stilted, highly unnatural conversation between a foreigner and a high school student asking how to get somewhere by train. Saito then went on to show, by use of Jane Eyre (1847), how movies and literature can be used to show students the changing attitudes to a piece of literature. Saito focused on just one short scene when Mr. Rochester's wife is shown to Jane Eyre. In the original novel Mr. Rochester's wife was described as "That purple face, those bloated features." in the movies she gradually looks more and more beautiful. It was fascinating to see this demonstrated through the use of six movies ranging from 1944 to 2011, in

the last of which Mr. Rochester's wife looks positively exotic and sexy. This was a clear demonstration of how studying classical literature alongside movies can make texts understandable and interesting for students.

One of the most original and interesting presentations I saw was by Iain Lambert from Kyorin University. In this presentation Lambert showed students short extracts from various literary texts from around the world. These included Shakespeare, Caribbean English, Nigerian English and Glaswegian dialect. The students were asked to guess the chronological order of the texts and where the texts came from. This use of literature encouraged students to guess unknown words from context, as the texts contained many non standard English words, rather than immediately resorting to their dictionaries.

One of my favourite ideas to bring literature alive in the classroom was presented by Simon Bibby from Kwansei Gakuin University. He provided students with assorted texts from differing genres: novels, short stories, philosophical allegories, cinema for his 'Studies of society: dystopian cinema and literature' course. The interesting aspect of his classroom was that it is very student-centred. He explained the 'backward design' of the course: firstly deciding upon course Aims, planning how to Assess, then the final stage of putting Activities in place to enable students to attain the understanding level required to be assessed: an 'AAA' mnemonic. He starts the course by asking students a variety of questions to find out how students feel about modern society. Whilst the questions are fairly simple for students to understand, they may be challenging to answer. He then leads students into a discussion of texts ranging from Plato's 'The Cave' to Terminator. Through this literature he leads students into discussing dystopian societies and the future of current societies. This is

similar to many mainstream textbooks introducing global issues and policy studies.

A recurring question in presentations was, “What is literature?”. This conference seemed to show that teachers were flexible in their characterization of literature, that we do not need to stick to a view of literature as being only canonical texts. Literature could be modern, written in non-standard English or written for cinema rather than books. The important thing, which was emphasized by co-host Michael Pronko in his closing remarks, was that we should not put literature on a pedestal. The reason that the works of Charles Dickens have survived is precisely because they are great stories; Shakespeare is in turn tragic and comical, but always entertains his audience. It is this that makes us love literature and why our students would also benefit from being introduced to it.

All in all, the organizers Michael Pronko and

Paul Hullah, both of Meiji Gakuin University, should be highly praised. Despite modestly claiming that organization was not their strong point, the conference ran very smoothly. It was a pleasure to be surrounded by other literature lovers. The classrooms were well equipped, it was easy to move from room to room between presentations, and free refreshments were provided. The only complaint I heard from participants was that time limitations necessitated holding four presentations in parallel on the single day, so that a number of appealing presentations were missed.

I would encourage everyone who is teaching literature or interested in teaching literature to visit the new Liberlit website <http://www.liberlit.com> for details on the presentations, and for information regarding next year’s conference.