Forum report

Choosing and Teaching Texts of Discrimination and Diversity

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The author has recently taught courses in the Language Education and Research center and in the Department of English Literature at a university in Tokyo. In the former, teaching freshman students, the author was tasked with a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach, which is conducted akin to an English literature course. In the latter, teaching senior students[1], the author could freely select texts to study. In both courses, the focus was on texts relating to discrimination and diversity, as experienced by English-speaking narrators who are ethnic minorities in different parts of the world. The focus of these courses, in addition to English Literature, could also be placed under the umbrella of "Cultural Studies," in as much as it engenders critical thinking about struggles of discrimination and diversity in different parts of the world and deals with the ways in which people view themselves and others. This paper outlines the reasons the author chose this particular focus, the texts selected for study, as well as the importance of selecting appropriate ones, and some class activities related to the readings. The essay concludes with a brief discussion of practical and theoretical considerations of teaching literature of discrimination and diversity.

What are the particular benefits of an English literature course focused on discrimination and diversity? The first is that literature study is potentially a useful academic pursuit for broadening students' perspectives on and awareness of important issues outside of their own frame of reference. Kumashiro (2004) noted that some students' tendency is to fall back on familiar ways of making sense of the world, with an accordant "resistance to learning other things, especially things that reveal the problematic nature of prior knowledge" (p. 24). Engagement with challenging themes that require critical thinking through analysis and discussion of literature encourages students to confront and challenge their established perceptions. The second benefit of this focus is that issues of discrimination and diversity often have an aspect of personal interest and relevance to students who are invested in overseas study, English language study, international issues, or the like. In the author's case, a large proportion of his students had either lived and studied overseas previously or were planning to do so. By studying narration of or about the social identities of ethnic minorities, students may come to appreciate that engaging with various and diverse perspectives allows a broader understanding of the complex international issues that may affect them, or that they may have already been affected by. With this in mind, presenting a broad range of perspectives on discrimination and diversity (male and female, East and West, old and young, oppressed and oppressor, etc.) is recommended. Kumashiro (2004) has noted that "exposure [to the writings of different groups of people] is especially important when we ask students to find connections between the text and their own life experiences" (p. 71). A wider range of experiences and perspectives in the texts may engage students who might otherwise not see themselves reflected in their course-assigned readings (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 71). Generally then, as Pohan (2000) notes, teachers of literature have the opportunity to broaden students' views of themselves, others, past and future events, and human society in general.

This paper in no way suggests, however, that radically changing students' positions, morals, or actions is enabled by the study of discrimination and diversity in literature. Nor is this necessarily desirable. The purpose of discussing and writing about such topics is not to change students *per se*, but rather to expose them to new and different viewpoints that will challenge them and encourage them to address their own positions about important issues (whether their positions change or not).

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[1] In both courses, the students' English levels were approximately Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) B2, with some approaching C1.

It is generally the case that the growth and change of fundamental values and beliefs is a slow, ongoing process, which is unlikely to be observable to a classroom instructor over the course of a single semester or academic year. As Thein, et al. (2007) noted in a study about teaching multicultural literature to white students in the USA, an "increased willingness to 'try on' different perspectives" (p. 55) may occur slowly through such a course of study. Thein, et al. (2007):

> by encountering tensions and trying on new perspectives, students experience changes that are often subtle, usually transitory, and frequently contradictory, that increase their understandings of *how* their beliefs and values are formed and *why* other people think differently. They therefore acquire the *capacity* itself to engage in and value perspective-taking through their literary experiences. (p. 55)

It is perhaps realistic to imagine literary studies about discrimination and diversity as opening new and sometimes challenging perspectives to students, but not as changing their thinking into any particular direction, including the instructor's.

There are, of course, many suitable texts available for a focus on discrimination and diversity. A novel employed by the author over the past few years is *Obasan* (1981) by the Canadian writer Joy Kogawa. Shorter texts also discussed here include the story "Indian Education" from Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1994), the episode of the library card from Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), and George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (1936). All four texts invite discussion of discrimination (and diversity, especially in the case of *Obasan*), and each is narrated from the perspective of a member of a minority group.

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* concerns both the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II and their displacement and mistreatment for years after the war. This particular novel provides, for Japanese students, a comfortable position of intersectionality. The narrator, and central character, is a Canadian girl of Japanese ancestry whose older relatives are caught between Japanese and Canadian cultural values, partly depending on their generation of ancestry (*issei*, *nisei*, *sansei*), and who are forced into an impossible position by mass and systematic anti-Japanese discrimination during wartime. There are many familiar Japanese cultural aspects for students to connect with, even though the events of the story occur almost entirely in Canada. The novel is written in the first-person perspective, which gives students the viewpoint of the female narrator as she grows from around age six to 17, with a framing narration by her at age 36. Because discrimination stories often focus on men, *Obasan* is notable for having a female author and central character, as well as the female titular character (an *issei*) who represents Japanese silence and tradition, and the aggressive *nisei* aunt who represents Western directness and aggression.

One of the fascinating aspects of teaching *Obasan* in Japan is that Japanese students are confronted by the characters' (and this author's) perspective of the Japanese-Canadian characters as entirely "Canadian," regardless of cultural background. By contrast, some Japanese students tend towards thinking of the Japanese-Canadian characters as "Japanese" and the white-Canadian characters as "Canadian." This lends itself to discussion about the discrepancy between perceptions of what nationality itself means to people in different parts of the world, and how this can relate to discrimination and diversity.

The three shorter texts mentioned are also written in the first-person, inviting students to see the world through the narrators' eyes. Sherman Alexie is a Native American author, and the "Indian Education" story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is the experience of a young American Indian's life "education" from the first grade through high school graduation and class reunion at two schools – one on, and one off, the reservation. The many experiences of discrimination faced by Native Americans in daily life are easily comprehensible for students and provide numerous starting points for discussion. As an example, when the narrator, Victor, is a teenager at a majority-white school, he is as yet unaware that he has diabetes. As a consequence of it, he briefly collapses on the basketball court during a game, prompting a Chicano teacher to comment that he has probably been drinking alcohol. The narrator learns the lesson that "sharing dark skin doesn't necessarily make two men brothers" (Alexie, 1994, "Indian Education", "Ninth Grade"). In class discussion, students often focus on this specific comment, and those who have lived overseas and experienced being a minority often have a personal connection to it.

From Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, the author presents students with the passage regarding teenage Richard's request to borrow a library card from a white coworker because African Americans in the south, in the

1920s, could not use public libraries. Having done so, and having successfully fooled a white librarian into thinking he has borrowed the books on behalf of his colleague, Richard immediately becomes obsessed with fiction and literature written by whites. Students can easily see how and why this opens up a new world to this "black boy" who has been segregated from the mainstream of American society, and who is desperate to educate himself. This selected passage ends with Richard weighing over the five or six possible future paths his life could conceivably take (e.g., fighting southern whites; submitting and giving up; transferring his anger onto other blacks; finding release in alcohol), and rejecting them all as unacceptable. It is instructive to ask students which of these options they would select, and why, had they been in Richard's shoes at that time and in that place.

The third shorter text is George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant", set in Myanmar (Burma) and again narrated in the first-person. Students experience the perplexing ambiguity the young Orwell feels as a British police officer at the center of imperialism. Orwell recounts that, though he did not want to, he was impelled by the expectant crowd of Burmese who followed him through the streets to shoot a runaway elephant that was rampaging and had killed an Indian coolie. Orwell concludes by stating that he did this merely to avoid looking like a fool. There are consistent metaphors of the stage and theater embedded in the narrator's description of the event for students to break down, and inevitably the symbolism of the elephant itself is a common point of debate and discussion. But the most fascinating point of this story is the depiction of power relations between colonizer and colonized, as it remains unclear who is truly in control of this situation of imperialism. The author's observed experience is that students understand this unstable power relation quite well in their first or second reading of the story. Then, the instructor's challenge is to push students deeper into thinking, writing, and talking about what this instability might suggest about imperialism in general, or about specific historical efforts of colonizers to unsuccessfully convert locals to their own way of life.

Written response questions, which are regularly assigned as homework, are particularly good for eliciting students' individual thoughts in response to critical thinking questions. Examples of questions assigned for written responses are as follows:

- The title of the story is "Indian Education". What does the word "education" mean in the context of this story? What are some examples of the education Indians (like Victor) receive? How does Victor, as narrator, feel about the education he received in his youth?
- In "Shooting an Elephant", George Orwell states that he dislikes British imperialism, and that he supports the Burmese. However, we know that Orwell served for years in the British Imperial Police and in the story he talks strongly about his dislike for "the natives." How can Orwell both support the Burmese and dislike them at the same time? And what might this tell us about Orwell's views on imperialism?
- Consider Chapter 22's six Japanese boys torturing a (white) chicken, and consider Chapter 23's bathhouse events. Who is doing the discriminating in these scenes? Why are they doing it? Then, what might Joy Kogawa be suggesting about the nature of discrimination?

In class, group discussions on these and other topics give students some "safe space" in which to chat with one another, rather than to the teacher or to the whole class, which is advisable given the sensitive nature and weighty tone of much of the literature[2]. Students are also assigned individual presentations throughout the semester, and generally around three students will give a presentation on the same passage. Occasionally role-plays are used, during which students assume the position of a character in the story and need to imagine a realistic response or action of the story's narrator in a given situation.

Debate is also a familiar and effective means of having students defend a position logically or rhetorically, including positions they are sometimes uncomfortable with. For example, near the end of the author's CLIL-style course with freshmen, students receive the content of Figure 1.

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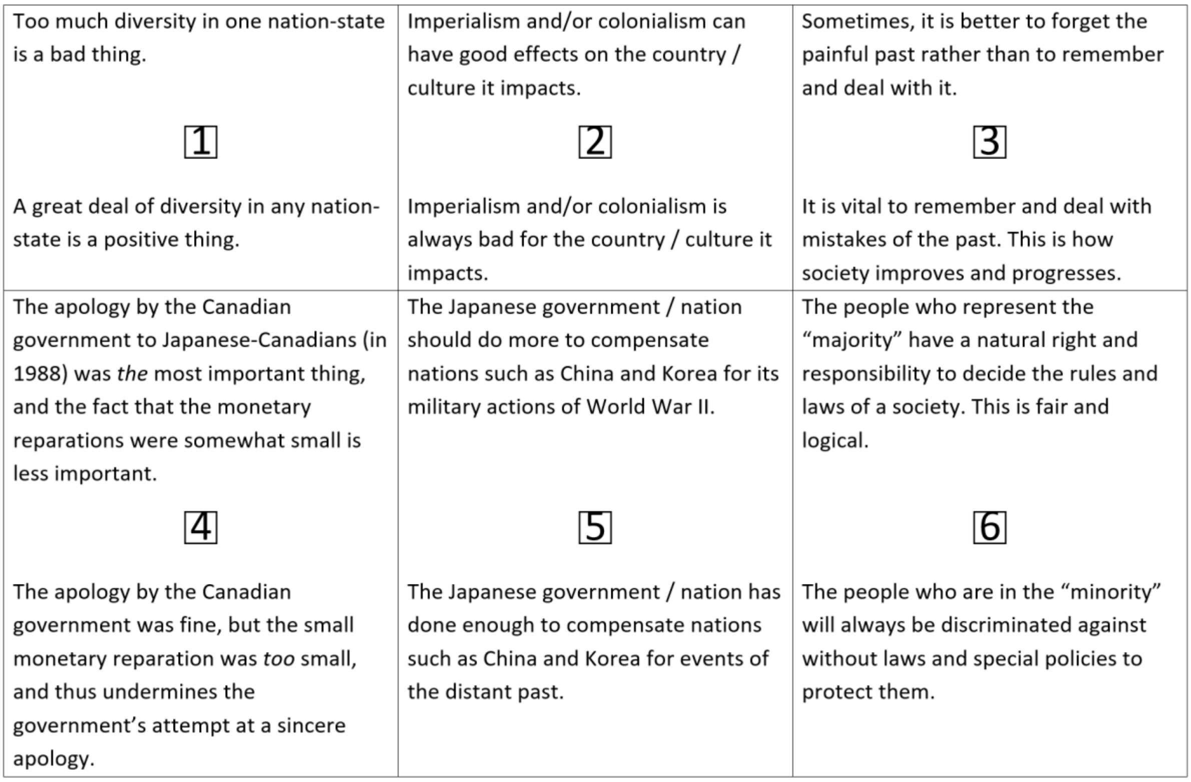
[2] *Obasan*, for example, deals not only with Japanese-Canadian discrimination, but also the sexual abuse of children, marriage-less women, children's trauma of growing up without parents, and the issue of whether fighting against institutional racism is even a worthwhile pursuit.

Figure 1

Handout given to students after studying the novel 'Obasan'



Too much diversity in one nation-state is a bad thing.	Imperialism and/or colonialism can have good effects on the country / culture it impacts.	Sometimes, it is better to forget the painful past rather than to remember and deal with it.
1	2	3
A great deal of diversity in any nation-state is a positive thing.	Imperialism and/or colonialism is always bad for the country / culture it impacts.	It is vital to remember and deal with mistakes of the past. This is how society improves and progresses.
The apology by the Canadian government to Japanese-Canadians (in 1988) was *the* most important thing, and the fact that the monetary reparations were somewhat small is less important.	The Japanese government / nation should do more to compensate nations such as China and Korea for its military actions of World War II.	The people who represent the "majority" have a natural right and responsibility to decide the rules and laws of a society. This is fair and logical.
4	5	6
The apology by the Canadian government was fine, but the small monetary reparation was *too* small, and thus undermines the government's attempt at a sincere apology.	The Japanese government / nation has done enough to compensate nations such as China and Korea for events of the distant past.	The people who are in the "minority" will always be discriminated against without laws and special policies to protect them.

Figure 1 shows opposing positions regarding discrimination issues. (Topics 3, 4 and 5 relate directly to *Obasan*.) Students are sometimes assigned specific positions on Figure 1 and asked to debate with another student who defends the opposing position. Needless to say, gentleness and carefulness on the part of both the teacher and students are required to discuss the issues. There will inevitably be students who present unpopular or "politically incorrect" opinions, and teachers must treat these perspectives with the same respect shown to others.

Though the author does not – with the exception of Figure 1, topic 5 – address Japan itself or Japanese domestic issues in class, it is hoped that the Japanese students will reflect on discrimination experienced in their own lives or observed within their larger society. Instructors must, of course, judge for themselves the readiness or suitability of a particular class to discuss such topics in a careful yet open way. It is the author's happy observation that many Japanese students exhibit consciousness of a continuum of discrimination, within all societies, including their own. While it is not the author's intention to push students towards a more critical view of their own society, it is a positive result of literature studies of discrimination when students have the opportunity to reflect on themselves and their own culturally-shared experiences through careful, critical thought. Carey-Webb (2001), in discussing a similar course approach in which his students read a novel relating to South African apartheid[3], noted that his students brought the subject of the literature back around to themselves:

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[3] *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) by Alan Paton

> While I had an opinion, in this discussion it was important for me to hold it back, to let students explore the complexities and make up their own minds. We didn't come to a consensus… [but]… as they learned about apartheid keeping White and Black people ignorant of each other in South Africa, my suburban middle-class White students began to ask about the segregation that was still evident in our community. (p. 5)

The author has observed the same thing. For example, in class or small group discussions, students have voluntarily brought up historical matters such as Japan's ill-treatment of Southeast Asian workers, historical treatment of Koreans, or the like. Similarly, the author has observed Japanese students challenging other Japanese students' defense of Japan's actions in regard to these matters.

Pohan (2000) suggested that "the most effective and culturally responsive teachers are those who see opportunities to infuse multicultural content, issues, or multiple perspectives…into everything they do" (p. 24), while Boyd (2003) stated that "multicultural literature in the overall English Language Arts curriculum…is…[a] positive change to the study of literature [and] offers teachers and students a more realistic reflection of society, history, education, and schools" (p. 461). It will now be evident that the author agrees with these points, but it bears remembering that there can be a danger of reinforcing stereotypes in literary studies of discrimination and diversity, particularly for those instructors teaching in non-English-speaking countries where students often see only stereotypical images of minority groups from English cultures. Kumashiro (2004) notes that "Some writings can merely repeat stereotypes or create new ones by glossing over complexities, contradictions, and diversity, thereby suggesting that an entire culture or a group is *like this*" (p. 71). Indeed, the author has paused to question himself when presenting to students a broad history of African American oppression. Is it more harmful than beneficial to students' knowledge of the United States and African American culture by potentially reinforcing their school and media-saturated image of the oppressed African American? After consideration, it is the author's contention that well-chosen literature largely resolves this dilemma. Richard Wright's narration, for example, is not that of a passive victim, but rather of a highly intellectual person struggling, unyielding, within and against his oppression. Likewise, though scholarly debate exists about the sarcasm and humor of Sherman Alexie's depiction of Native American life, the author's experience is that Japanese students recognize Victor's efforts to elevate himself above the disadvantaged station that American society assigns him, and they find this effort very admirable. Teachers who wish to teach with texts narrated by the marginalized but who are concerned about reinforcing stereotypes could choose books, stories, poems (or other) that depict an anti-oppressive struggle and that focus on the dignity of the oppressed. Further, teachers in Japan might simply select texts well outside of Japanese students' collective familiarity, so that students will approach it with few preconceptions. Wartime Japanese-Canadian discrimination, for example, is generally less familiar to Japanese students than, say, images of the African American struggle. The plight of the Burmese under British colonialism is another historical situation rarely encountered by the author's students.

Finally, it should be noted that some teachers may find it rather dark and depressing, for themselves and for students, to teach a course with the theme of discrimination and diversity. Teachers may also be wary of discussing the sensitive and controversial nature of its relevant themes with young students. The author's contention, however, based on his own experience, is that students respond well to the serious academic challenge this presents. As Carey-Webb (2001) has shared, in regards to his similar concerns about students' emotions after studying texts on the Holocaust or apartheid, and about possibly undermining students' enjoyment of literature study:

> When such units are over I usually feel positive about the result, and discover yet again that careful reading, discussion, and writing about powerful subjects increases rather than numbs my students' human sensitivity. And I know that they can't wisely participate in the world unless they clearly understand it. (p. 19)

While the author would not want to make any grandiose claims about his own courses, his experience with such weighty texts and subject matters has also been very positive. No angry disputes in class discussions, nor negative feedback about course content from students, has been observed or received. As mentioned, however, instructors must judge for themselves what is suitable for their own particular students and courses, both in terms of selecting appropriate texts and in terms of class tasks.

Author Biography

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