

An Odyssey of Teaching a Literature Course through Media Technology and Course Evaluation Results

メタデータ	言語: en 出版者: 公開日: 2019-05-31 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Ikeda, Ken メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://otsuma.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/6676

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Ken Ikeda

Introduction

This report recounts the journey of teaching efforts I have undertaken to instill students' intercultural understanding of ethnic tensions in the United States through their intensive reading of a graphic novel. The instructional tool that I have used has been mainly through the graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, illustrated and authored by Gene Luen Yang, himself of Chinese descent born on American soil. I have taught this work to 3rd and 4th year university students in the Department of English Literature and Language over a period of six years as a one-semester literature course.

I share insights from an odyssey of teaching this literary work on two fronts: 1) how instructional contexts dictated learning outcomes and a gradual attuning to student needs; and 2) dealing with technological and cross-cultural impositions. Concerning instructional contexts, I have taught this book in a teacher-dictated classroom setting, later a language laboratory using the Manaba online learning management system (LMS) used in universities in Japan. This past year I returned to a classroom setting but still employed the Manaba LMS for homework purposes. The first aspect was greatly improved by allowing students who enrolled in this course to examine class questionnaire results and subsequently develop instructional

innovations to solve student criticisms. These students were able to help me revise my teaching format, assessment and lesson dynamics. The second aspect concerning the technical and cultural impositions is an ongoing concern, which causes me to wonder how to overcome student overreliance on smartphones; and likewise, how to educate students to drop their prejudices concerning Chinese people.

The Course Text

The graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (2006) *American Born Chinese* (ABC) has garnered a number of publishing distinctions, namely the 2007 Michael L. Printz Award for recognition as the best book for teens in the United States on the basis of literary quality alone, as well as being awarded as Amazon’s best graphic work of that year. For those unfamiliar with the genre, a graphic novel can be defined as “a type of text combining words and images—essentially a comic, although the term most commonly refers to a complete story presented as a book rather than a periodical” (Encyclopaedia Britannica). While Marvel Universe movies and other superhero films still garner the lion’s share of what people perceive comics to be, along the comic strip form notably known through Charles Shultz’s *Peanuts*, the graphic novel has gained popularity in recent decades as a literary form. The graphic novel has been endeared to the public readership for its immediacy and relevance to the 21st century, characterized by text embedded as bubbles or rectangular asides within pictorial images. This juxtaposition of the visual and the verbal have helped increase its appeal. Indeed, its attractiveness is created by showing events as they occur, depicted and commenting on the consequences in a narrative fashion. What gives the graphic novel its literary distinction and merit beyond its superhero comic connection is more often a heightened interest in serious themes such as the Holocaust in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991), and cancer in David Small’s *Stitches* (2009). The acclaim of *American Born Chinese* has helped swell growing acceptance of Asian descendants (as well as their

foreign-born parents) as part of the American populace as well as build popularity of the genre.

The structure of *American Born Chinese* consists of three tales of identity and prejudice interlinked with an American-born Chinese boy named Jin Wang whose adolescent angst is wrapped up with his ethnic being. His story begins in idyllic fun with other Chinese youngsters in San Francisco's Chinatown, but his assimilation-into-America-minded immigrant parents uproot him into a mostly white school. Jin subsumes his Chinese ancestry as he tries so very hard to fit in with his Caucasian classmates while harboring a severe opinion of a Taiwanese-born boy who considers Jin his best friend. His puppy-love fixation on a blond haired female classmate leads to an identity crisis between being both American and Chinese for Jin, resulting in a period of personal loss before the novel ends in understated reconciliation.

This novel mirrored my own frustrating experiences growing up as a second-generation Japanese in Southern California. I also struggled to accept myself as an American-born Asian in largely Caucasian settings, growing up with ambivalent feelings toward the Japanese visitors who flocked to the United States, as I felt their presence only accentuated my foreign-ness in the eyes of white folk. Just as Jin makes fun of his Taiwanese classmate's English speaking, I also cringed at the accents of my parents. Almost mirroring Jin's decision to switch from *wonton* dumplings to sandwiches for his schoolbag lunches, I remember distinctly to this day how my revelation of eating raw fish evoked cries of disgust from other students in my first-grade class at elementary school with a worried concern by my teacher. Yuen also shows the subtleties of difference between American-born Asians and the misunderstandings as perceived by their white counterparts. With my parents coming from Nagano, I felt isolated from other Japanese-Americans whose ancestors came from western Japan and Okinawa as well as for the historical difference that while their parents had been incarcerated during World War II, my father was in Manchuria as a soldier fighting for Japan and later incarcerated in a Soviet death camp. As

for my relations with my white classmates, I still wonder if the refusal of three white female students to join me to the senior prom in my high school was conditioned by my Asianness.

I was introduced to this novel by my wife, who had noted my interest in Asian-American identity issues. I had been looking for ways to help students to become aware of the complexity of ethnic politics in present-day America, to view it as more than just a nation of English speakers of European ancestry. Banking on the assumption that Japanese readers prefer comic-based works such as *manga*, I somewhat naively thought that students would be interested in a graphic novel.

Instructional Approaches and Contexts

The first two years I taught this course to very small classes of less than ten students. *American Born Chinese* lends itself easily to be taught as a one-semester course, as it consists of nine discernible chapters. Although the Department of English Language and Literature has a number of extensive reading courses, I decided the book should be taught as *intensive reading*, which “involves learners reading in detail with specific learning aims and tasks” (British Council, 2008). The reasoning for this was that I wanted students to understand deeply the present lives of American-born Asians in the United States, particularly what features made these characters (and likewise myself) ‘American’ as opposed to ‘Asian’, as well as grasp more fully the differences between comics and *manga*.

Concerning the timeline of the class, at the start I had students share their preconceived notions in relation to certain themes embedded in the novel. These included their assumptions of Chinese people, their knowledge with the Chinese folktale saga *Journey to the West* (its Japanese namesake *Saiyuki*), organized religion (namely Christianity and Buddhism), American people, American school interactions, and the 20th century American TV sitcom (situation comedy) with its irritating pre-recorded laugh track, which have been popular on Japanese TV with such series as *Full House* and

Friends. Relying on a glossary in English and Nihongo meticulously prepared by my wife, the students read each chapter, asked questions, and discussed themes. After finishing the novel's chapters, I had students engage in post-reflection of the novel's theme of self-transformation (and self-delusion), and about American-born Asians, which resulted in either a reflection paper about the entire novel or a presentation building upon one of its themes or about Asian American culture. I did not engage in much self-reflection other than to gauge the novel's language level difficulty, the equivalent of lower American high school level, and its suitability to the university students.

Two years later, when my department decided that more students should be enrolled in the course, I proposed to teach mine web-based, on Manaba, and I decided to have the students use computers actively in a language laboratory. By doing this, the number of seats limited the number of students that could be enrolled.

In the first year of this Manaba-based instruction, I taught the course mainly in lecture style because I was convinced that students needed a great amount of cultural input. I was greatly concerned that students needed to grasp deep understanding of the novel. For this purpose, I prepared long lists of questions to be answered in homework assignments, which consisted of detailed comprehension questions mixed with thought provokers, while also providing opportunity for supplemental feedback on lessons and online contents, to be completed on Manaba in students' own time. In addition, students took quizzes online during lessons. I put lots of material on Manaba, with links to YouTube videos and websites informing the students of the history of Asian immigration into the United States, contemporary and up-to-date matters involving Asian Americans, such as their food and drink, likes and values. I also shared media depictions of Asians in the U.S., usually from Hollywood, which has been consistently discriminatory with use of Caucasian actors in yellowface and using American-born Asians as foreign-born Asians (Adachi).

In time I became aware of a growing disconnect between my efforts and

students' satisfaction. I expended much energy and time in the lessons telling about my life in America, added extra course contents on aspects of ABA-related culture or media depictions of ABAs as 'foreign' consisting of YouTube videos and other media. In as much as students found my explanations and media resources to be entertaining, their answers on the class questionnaires revealed a deep yearning for in-class interaction.

Brookfield (1995) encourages teachers to engage in critical reflection through four lenses: self, colleagues, research literature, and students (Miller, 2010). As for myself, I saw my situation as a puzzle rather than as a problem, along the lines of exploratory practice (Allwright and Hanks, 2009). Regarding collegial experiences, I could count on my departmental peers for advice. I have offered my course almost every year as an open class for faculty development. I am also a member of the Learner Development (LD) Special Interest Group in the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) which researches practices that support autonomous learning and teaching. I read works (Barkley et al. 2005; Ashwell et al. 2014) that promote collaborative learning between students. What remained was how to elicit student opinions.

I elicited these student opinions through the course questionnaire obligatorily used in universities in Japan. Teachers often regard it as an unnecessary hindrance to their teaching, and dread reading haphazard and insensitive student comments. Nevertheless, I saw the questionnaire as the best instrument to elicit such views, as I did not need to create my own questionnaire and have to deal with privacy consent issues. I asked students to write honest and explicit comments about the class dynamics and use of the Manaba online learning management system. I received a detailed list of responses full of constructive criticisms. I felt confounded to fully understand them due to my limited Japanese language skills and sensitive ego, but I was determined to use the questionnaire as a catalyst for change.

At the end of each term I taught this course, I asked several students who took this class to go through the list of student responses in order to identify problems as written on the class questionnaire results and develop

solutions. These students were selected also in connection with either my seminar or enrolled in the English secondary school teaching license program. From the questionnaire results of the year when this solicitation of students' help was first implemented, the student helpers were able to identify two major problems. These were 1) the lack of organized class discussions, and 2) my inefficient use of the Manaba system, particularly in regards to administering quizzes, which stemmed from many false start times due to students not logging in at the precise moment. The solutions they proposed were 1) a small-group discussion activity with assigned roles, and 2) judicious use of the Manaba system with tests set to take during off-lesson times. These students presented these problems and solutions at a localized research conference called the Creating Community: Learning Together held under the auspices of the Learner Development SIG held in Tokyo at Otsuma in December 2014.

I adopted these two student-developed solutions into my 2nd year teaching this course using Manaba. Approximately the same number of students enrolled. In every lesson, I implemented the role-based discussion activity based on themes of the novel and in which partners were changed every several weeks. I also reduced the number of online homework assignments and had students take quizzes on their own time outside of the lessons. I still had students read every chapter of the novel by themselves.

For this second year as well, I asked students to write detailed answers on the course questionnaires, and enlisted students who took this year's course to read the responses and discern solutions. To my surprise, the discussion activity was negatively viewed, because there were students who came without reading the chapters and were unable to play their role in the discussion, causing their vacated roles to be overloaded on the responsible students who had prepared. Also, the discussion time allocated was too long. As for the Manaba system, there were still complaints with test administration problems and heavy workload. I had the students present their solutions at a subsequent Creating Community: Learning Together LD-SIG conferences held in December 2015.

After a one-year hiatus due to my overseas sabbatical, my course was reassigned as one focused on a special topic rather than as a literature-based one and placed in a regular classroom. I have continued to use the materials and homework assignments on Manaba while using the lesson time to expand on themes from each chapter. In addition to comprehending the reading material, I have acted on students' suggestions to role play certain scenes from the graphic novel. Notably, the course questionnaires this year were devoid of comments or suggestions, which indicate to me that either student satisfaction has been high, or that students no longer perceive the course questionnaire as an effective tool of feedback.

Impositions on the Course

This section addresses the technical and cross-cultural hurdles I have grappled with. Every time I have taught this course, I have a number of students who believe they can submit homework through smartphones, not realizing its connectivity problems. Even though I point out that it would be safer to submit homework through a computer, the allure of convenience and accessibility that the smartphone offers makes it tempting for students to ignore my warnings. This tendency to think they can outwit me by resorting to their smartphones makes me it difficult for me to comprehend their thinking.

Just as disturbing is trying to convince students to drop their lingering prejudice of Chinese people. I tell them the differences between Chinese-born Chinese who come overseas either for study abroad or sightseeing and American-born Chinese, as well as differences between mainland Chinese and Chinese from other countries such as Taiwan and Singapore. Not only are the differences due to the locale of birth, but the social class, which the affluence of wealthy mainland Chinese has impacted negatively upon English-speaking countries. One nagging phenomenon is the propensity of Chinese-born investors to buy up overseas property in cities such as Sydney, Vancouver and Auckland (Vieira et al.), which has forced local residents to

leave due to rising house prices.

Although I tell students that Jin is an American, his Chinese name convinces them that he is really more Chinese than American. This prejudicial view has been developed from their experience working with tourists in service encounters or observing them in public. But it severely hampers their learning of the themes of the novel. I try to inform students that there is as much difference between foreign-born Chinese and native-born (that is, born in America) Chinese by their attire, values, choice of purchases as there is between foreign visitors and Americans, but this does not seem to result in intercultural understanding for all. It dismays me as to why some students persist in their notions and do not absorb materials and lessons learned in class.

Conclusion

Through the lens of critical self-reflection, my teaching has improved by proactively using the university course questionnaire learner comments to engage learners to read these comments, identify problems, construct solutions, and present these in a public forum. By becoming more sensitive to the needs and preferences of students, and empowering them, I have developed new ways of seeing and taking action. This is the kind of learning that brings faculty development into active interplay with students to view their learning with the same lens as teachers, and vice versa.

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