

Focus

READING OTHER WORLDS, READING MY WORLD

In this article, **Carmel Hinchion** and **Jennifer Hennessy** reflect on a project undertaken by the Ubuntu Network in partnership with pre-service English teachers and their lecturers at the University of Limerick. The project was set in the context of an English pedagogy course as part of the undergraduate initial teacher education (ITE) programme where student English teachers prepare for teaching in post-primary classrooms. Their article focuses on a literature unit where ‘culturally salient’ texts were chosen to promote, not only a reading of the word but of the world (Freire, 1970). A culturally salient text, as understood by Kress (1995), is one that allows us to ask questions about its significance in its own cultural domain and for other cultures. Drawing on the metaphor of a ‘reconstitutive mirroring experience’ (O’Loughlin, 2009), literature acts as a reflexive and reflective medium in shaping a world view.

Introduction

This article briefly explains the reading model employed with student teachers for the Ubuntu project, and then looks at the value and purpose of reading literature. It examines the place of reading as an element of literacy learning, where literacy is framed by the Freirean idea of freedom and empowerment. This perspective is theorised with reference to both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate English Syllabi in the Republic of Ireland. The article will go on to describe how the theme ‘Similarities and Differences’ underpinned a pedagogical model with student teachers as they prepared to teach literature, in this instance the novel, in their English classes. It explores how reading literature offers an opportunity to develop cultural awareness and provides a critical lens for problematising texts. The pedagogical model of dialogic and participatory practice is described and finally the authors offer some reflections on issues of cultural diversity relevant to the Irish school context.

Reading and understanding text

McCormick (1994) explains three competing models of reading: the cognitive (which privileges the text); the expressivist (which privileges the reader's life experiences); and the socio-cultural (which privileges the cultural context). However he also contends that all three models are interconnected. A reader approaches texts with their own experiences, assumptions and viewpoints while texts intrinsically contain their own messages and viewpoints, all of which are mediated by historical and cultural contexts.

Hubard agrees that '... the understanding of a text is reached when the horizon of the spectator (their background, experience, personality, cultural and historical situation, and so forth) and the horizon of the work (what the object puts forth to the spectator) fuse into a new larger horizon' (Hubard, 2008). It is this fusion of horizons which underpins this model of reading. Foregrounded also in this understanding of reading is the concept of critical literacy which will be addressed in more detail later.

According to the Junior Certificate Guidelines for Teachers, 'reading is an act of making meaning' (1990:32); it is a creative interpretative process which happens through interaction between the text and reader with the text offering 'a spectrum of possibilities' (1990:46) to the reader. In keeping with the belief that knowledge is not a fixed entity but a continuous creation, then no reading is absolute. Rather reading is a process of building a relationship with a text where there is understanding, lack of understanding, remembering, forgetting, intimacy and distance, all shaped in a contextual space. Texts are always open to re-reading and reconstitution.

The value of reading literature

Literature is a symbolisation of experience in language. Literature can be an artistic symbol where a literary encounter may be 'transformed into expressive realisation' (Webb, 1992:1) or a cultural symbol, a microcosm of a social world, or it can be one or both at the same time. However, it is literature as a culturally significant symbol that is the focus of our explorations. Literature is never a neutral or a value-free creation as a cultural force (Peim, 1993) and the teaching of literature also involves a consideration of values, morals, ethics and a context of 'some social philosophy' (Rosenblatt, 1995:16).

Culturally salient texts can act as a mirror which allows us to consider and reconsider ourselves in the world. They can help us to escape reality and crawl through the looking glass like Alice in Wonderland, and they can also help us to re-establish our position in the world. We can vicariously experience both reality and fantasy between the covers of a book. Literature tells a story, of which we become a part. Our own story is drawn forth as we read another person's story. Bakhtin describes this as dialogism where 'everything means, is understood as part of a greater whole - there is a constant interaction between meanings' (1981:426). Reading literature becomes a way to encounter experience, feel a response, think about situations, form perspectives, extend possibilities and critique our world.

Reading literature is an act of imagination and in turn requires empathy, for when looking at the 'what if's of life or viewing things from an alternate perspective, we need to take a leap into the minds and hearts of the storytellers or characters. Webb writes that reading literature is a reflective act as 'imagination enables us to connect with experience in ways simply not available in the moment or duration of experiencing itself. Imagination is, from the beginning, a reflective cast upon experience' (Webb, 1992:xii).

Literature can help us discover that across time, place and cultures, people share certain fundamental traits, desires and problems. At the same time, literature affirms the great diversity that co-exists with shared human commonalities. Literature from different socio-cultural contexts portrays a 'myriad of ways in which people of different times and places and cultures have dealt with the problems of human existence' (Bishop, 2000:76). It helps us to think about character, human motivations, relationships, moral dilemmas, traditions and heritage and many other themes and issues.

Reading as literacy: The English syllabi in Ireland

Literacy is embedded in cultural norms and power relations. To participate effectively in the world there are many literacies to be learned (Mullins, 2002). These include reading, writing, speaking and listening in different contexts, and for different purposes. These are not separate and discreet or fixed attainments, but overlapping and dynamic evolutions for optimising strengths in life. New literacies are always emerging, especially technological and visual ones in the present era. The English syllabi in Ireland has centrally positioned literacy as the force for personal growth and

socio-cultural competence. Even though there are a number of English syllabi in the Irish schooling system (Junior Certificate Schools Programme, Leaving Certificate Applied, Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Vocational Preparation Programme), this article concentrates here on Junior Certificate English and Leaving Certificate English.

The Junior Certificate English Syllabus is premised on a personal growth model of education. It aims to enable students to become empowered in the world through reading, writing, speaking and listening in the domains of personal, social and cultural literacy. Personal literacy emphasises the expression and validation of the personal language register; social literacy emphasises the functionality of language; and cultural literacy emphasises the importance of the aesthetic uses of language.

The Leaving Certificate English Syllabus builds on the Junior Certificate aims and is premised on a socio-cultural view of the world where individuals understand themselves as constructed through social interaction. 'Text' is understood as any communicative product constructed in social and cultural milieus. Language in this context is not a neutral medium of expression and communication but an embedded signifier. It is also, according to Mullins, 'a living, cultural entity subject to permanent change and development in the mouths, pens and computers of its users' (2000:118). Mullins advocates a flexible approach to language development where students learn a wide range of 'discourses'. This approach is considered to be a significant political act as 'it places literacy development in a rich framework of social practices and invites students to play their role in our democracy as free, responsible, citizens' (Mullins, 2000:120).

Both the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle syllabi essentially promote a concept of literacy which is values-based. These values include promotion of individual growth, promotion of citizenship and the promotion of a critical perspective of our world. The Senior Cycle Syllabus especially encourages this questioning stance where students are required to develop higher order thinking and evaluative responses to texts. Students are encouraged to problematise texts and challenge assumptions. This 'critical literacy' involves asking three broad questions: why was this text written?; how was this text written?; and are there other ways of writing this text? Critical literacy encourages students to see texts as 'opportunities for dialogue and speculation' (DES, 2009:8). In reviewing the approaches to reading, Fisher

states that critical literacy is not just about deconstruction and response but also ‘about making a difference, moving the book out of the classroom, developing an awareness of the book as an artefact and giving the children a real voice in discussing text’ (2008:20).

Reading critically undercuts efforts to essentialise beliefs and gives literature a subversive and transformative capacity. Following the liberatory model of education, our consciousness about the world is raised and there is a ‘constant unveiling of reality’ (Freire, 1970:64) so that we are not just receiving objects but active participants.

Reading cultural context

The concept of culture is multi-layered and complex. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment defines culture as ‘the beliefs, behaviour, language, and entire way of life of a particular group of people at a particular time’ (NCCA,2006). According to Giroux, ‘culture is the medium through which children fashion their individual and collective identities and learn in part how to narrate themselves in relation to others’ (2002:187-8).

Both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabi are explicit in their promotion of cultural awareness in the classroom advocating that ‘a range of resources will be selected from different periods and cultures and students will be encouraged to approach them in a comparative manner’ (Department of Education and Science, 1999:3). Research into the development of students’ awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity has highlighted the necessity for a pro-active rather than re-active stance in the teaching of cultural texts (Burns, 2002; Hickling Hudson, 2003; Tuomi, 2005).

In the Comparative Literature section of the Leaving Certificate English Syllabus, students are asked to read the cultural context of a number of texts. According to the Draft Guidelines for Leaving Certificate English, this is not a sociological study but ‘it means taking some perspectives which enable the students to understand the kind of values and structures with which people contend. It amounts to entering into the world of the text and getting some insight and feel for the cultural texture of the world created’ (1999:72). This implies looking at the family, social, religious, economic and political structures embedded in this setting (DES, 1999:73).

Calder (2000) asserts that all of our experiences are filtered through lenses and stresses that if we believe what we see through our own individual lenses or our 'cultural filters' to be global reality, we may begin to act in a manner which leads to injustice for others. The study of cultural texts as part of the English syllabus highlights to the student the mono-focal parameters of their own individual experience and invites them to share in a multi-focal experience, taking cognisance of the cultural dissonance which often prevails in diverse societies. It allows literature to become a site for dialogue and cultural awakenings where the text might be positioned as a mirror, a window or a sliding glass door (Bishop, 2000).

Dialogic and participatory pedagogy

According to Alexander, '...there is growing recognition that dialogic forms of pedagogy are potent tools for securing student engagement, learning and understanding' (2006:3). For him, dialogue is an educative process that, among other things, 'involves the ability to question, listen, reflect, reason, explain, speculate and explore ideas...[I]t involves a willingness and skill to engage with minds, ideas and ways of thinking other than our own' (Alexander, 2006:5).

The Ubuntu project aspired to a dialogic pedagogy to encourage student participation. Like Burbules, it understood that dialogue is relational where there is commitment and a spirit of engagement. Burbules suggests that the success of communicative relationships depends on 'communicative virtues', including patience, tolerance for alternative points of view, an openness to give and receive criticism and the willingness and ability to listen thoughtfully and attentively (1993).

As part of the exploration for this project, these 'communicative virtues' were discussed with student teachers, who consented to monitor the level of difficulty they encountered by writing about the process in their reflective journals. Time was allotted at the end of tutorials to consider this with student teachers in pairs and subsequently as part of a larger group if they so wished. However, the aspirational and enacted curriculum is always in tension.

As one of the students wrote in his journal:

“I am learning a lot about tolerance and patience. I find it very hard to really listen as I want to jump in with my opinion. I notice also that Carmel was tending to take over the class today so we will have to remind her about listening” (Student C).

These tutorials also aimed to create a pedagogical atmosphere where students felt free to work together and participate in active learning methodologies, such as the creation of ‘prop bags’ for characters and other drama-in-education techniques. We aspired to create an atmosphere of intellectual and emotional security. The pedagogical approach employed reflected many of the key components of development education as advocated by the Ubuntu Network, namely advancement of knowledge about the world, development of skills such as critical thinking, reflection and communication and a nurturing of attitudes such as appreciation, respect, empathy, self awareness and responsibility.

Louie’s framework for teaching culturally salient texts

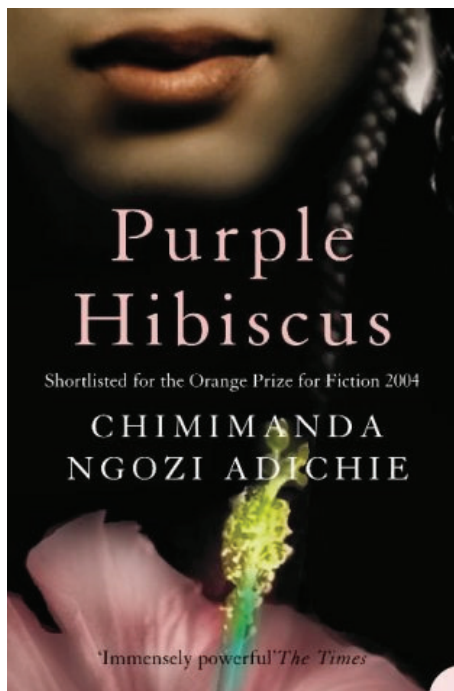
To promote interculturalism in the classroom, Louie (2006) employed the use of the audio-visual text Walt Disney’s *Mulan*, in conjunction with four variants of the story from textbooks. Louie found that when an effective and comprehensive framework for teaching of the film was constructed and implemented, students demonstrated critical understanding, empathetic understanding, and conceptual understanding of the story. From this research Louie asserted that a similar framework for teaching can be applied to the study of such texts in the classroom. Louie’s framework for the teaching of cultural texts outlines seven key methodological requirements: check the text’s authenticity; help learners understand the characters’ world; encourage students to see the world through the characters’ perspectives; identify values underlying the characters’ conflict resolution strategies; relate self to the text; use variants of the same story to help students build a schema; and encourage students to talk, write and respond throughout.

We adopted Louie’s framework for our study over a two year period with both a second and third year English Pedagogy class, using a number of novels selected to support our project work. These texts included the novels *True Believer* by Virginia Euwer Wolff, *Rabbit Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, *Lies of Silence* by

Brian Moore and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Following Louie's methodological requirements these novels were considered authentic in their cultural domain and significant in promoting cultural awareness. For the purpose of this article we will focus on the approach used to explore the novel *Purple Hibiscus*.

***Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

Purple Hibiscus is based on the life story of fifteen-year-old Kambili and set in a time of great political turmoil in Nigeria. Kambili's family is also in turmoil due to a religiously fanatical father who tyrannises Kambili, her mother and her brother Jaja. The novel is centred on their domestic life but deals also with broader cultural themes such as tribal traditions, worship, conflict and the aftershock of colonisation. Despite the sadness in the novel, hope is sustained. Jaja symbolises the resistance to oppression and in the words of Kambili, 'Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunt Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do' (Adichie, 2004:16).



Reading approach

The following section presents an overview of the methodological approach employed in the reading of this novel with student teachers. The approach was based on dialogue and participation, and used Louie's framework for reading culturally salient texts and a critical literacy stance to inform our pedagogy.

Primary explorations

We began our work on this novel by looking at its cover and asking students to describe what they saw, e.g. people, objects, colours, words. We then asked them to consider any suggested meanings the semiotics of the cover might have for them. Ideas emerged about the colours black and pink; black suggesting Africa, sadness, oppression, and pink suggesting female, fragrant flowers, softness and subtlety. From the cover it was also obvious that a young black girl with braided hair was part of the story. Her position in the frame was observed where her eyes were not in view but her lips were prominent. Students commented that the lips and the pink flower and its stamen had sexual undertones and that the cover of the book itself exuded a type of seduction. We wondered about this young girl's life. We wondered why the title *Purple Hibiscus*? We considered the author's name and played with its pronunciation. We talked about our own names. Why were we named this way? What is it like if someone forgets our name or mispronounces it? We imagined that the novel was set in Africa because of the author's name, one of her previous publications titled *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and the colours used. The discussion about the cover set up our expectations and we moved on to find out more about the writer and Nigeria, where the novel is set.

Development

Students then read the story facilitated by the lecturer's interventions. They kept a response journal recording some of their thoughts and feelings as they read. This journal was a type of 'personal scrapbook' (Department of Education and Science, 1990:40). Students commented on their responses to characters and situations, leading to many memorable discussions. Students showed strong emotion when Kambili's father was cruel and tyrannical in his behaviour, but were encouraged to consider his motivations, his religious fanaticism and his hypocritical nature. We considered how we all have the potential to be cruel in our actions and how we can oppress people. We felt

the brittleness of Kambili's mother as she polished the glass ballet-dancing figurines after a beating from her abusive husband. We admired Jaja's courage and wondered whether we would have the same courage to speak up to dogmaticism. We wanted to get to know Aunty Ifeoma as we loved her colourful personality and understanding nature. We filled 'prop bags' with artefacts and symbols representing the characters, role-played moments from the text and talked about both the happy and tragic happenings. We tried to understand the characters' world.

The following questions were used to guide our reading:

1. What are the habits and rituals of everyday life in *Purple Hibiscus*?
2. How are these same or different to your own life?
3. Would you like to live in the world of this text?
4. What are the relationships like in this text? How do people get on with each other?
5. Who has power in this text and who are powerless? Why?
6. How is language spoken in this text? What is the tone of this text? Is it a liberating form of language? Is it a disempowering form of language? How do characters speak their lines? What effect has this on other characters? How is language influenced by culture in this text?
7. What is your view of the characters in this text? Would you like any of them as friends? How is their culture influencing their behaviour and attitudes? What feelings do you have for the characters? Who do you most empathise with? Who are you least empathic towards? Would you have made some of their choices? What restricted them in making their choices?
8. Is there any other text (written, visual, spoken) that reminds you of *Purple Hibiscus*? What are the similarities?
9. As you read the novel what themes and issues emerged in the storyline?
10. Did you enjoy reading this novel? Why?
11. What the symbols of their culture are evident in the novel? What are symbols of your own culture?
12. Why do you think this novel was written?
13. Why was it written in this way?
14. In what other way could this novel have been written?

15. When you close the covers of this novel having read it what feelings are you left with? Explain.

Final discussion

Once they finished the novel, the student teachers created a ‘tableau’, a still image worked in collaboration. This tableau was a dramatisation of the overall journey of the characters through positioning ‘on stage’, facial expressions and gestures. The pathos as a result of the destruction of a family was the evident motif here but nonetheless the tableau expressed hope through the characters of both Jaja and Kambili. Rising from the ashes of tyranny were the beginnings of a new world. We discussed with students the cultural forces that created this picture and the cultural forces which might change it. We considered the title of the novel and looked again at the picture of the purple hibiscus flower. We considered if *Purple Hibiscus* was now an apt title having read the story. We asked the class to create alternative titles and to choose a symbol which captured the meaning of the novel for them. The following is an extract from a student’s journal entry:

“I think the title *Tongues of Fire* is apt for many reasons. It captures the turmoil in Nigeria with all the military coups, the fire of the father’s religious words and the fire of his temper. It also captures Jaja’s courageous words of defiance and Kambili’s growth as a woman and as a person finding her strength. The symbol I would use would be two hands clasping each other as they emerge from red flames” (Student A).

This section outlined the general approach to reading those literature texts which have cultural potency. There are many areas that could and should be further developed from this exploration including an evaluation of the learning outcomes from this approach and a consideration of the tensions experienced in trying to enact a dialogic pedagogy. However sharing our experiences with the reader becomes part of a reflective pedagogy for us as the project developers.

Conclusion

Irish schools are currently endeavouring to promote intercultural education in response to the increasing socio-cultural diversity within Ireland. In the

Guidelines for Intercultural Education in Post – Primary Schools
intercultural education is understood as:

“(a) an education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all parts of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us and (b) as education which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination and promotes the values upon which equality is built” (NCCA, 2006).

In June 2009, the Economic and Social Research Institute released findings based on the first comprehensive nationwide investigation into how Irish schools are adapting to the changing make-up of our student population. This paper, entitled ‘Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students’ (Smyth, et al., 2009), documents the experiences of schools in catering for immigrant children and young people and highlights key areas for development needed in order to meet the demands of the evolving student community in Ireland. The research draws on a survey of 1,200 primary and second-level schools as well as detailed case studies of twelve schools.

The research conducted by Smyth, et al. (2009) acknowledges a willingness amongst students to empathise with their non-national classmates on the difficulties they perceive facing them in their transition between countries, schools and cultures. Critically, the report also reveals that Irish students admit a lack of awareness about the cultures of their non-national counterparts.

The report also notes that in the provision of teaching strategies which promote cultural diversity, it is equally important that the culture of the native student is not overlooked. It has been asserted that the promotion of cultural awareness in certain situations has led to a sense of ‘culturelessness’ among ‘native’ students (Glazier & Seo, 2005). Therefore in the development of cultural understanding amongst students it is important to highlight the culture not only of the non-national student but also of the Irish student.

Also as highlighted by Gleeson & O Donnabhain (2006), the focus on performance indicators and tangible measurable outcomes emphasises a

bureaucratic model of accountability in education rather than a focus on process outcomes of a social, attitudinal, cultural or political nature. The latter focus is essential if we are to help students to develop ‘awareness and appreciation of cultural values’ (The Teaching Council, 2009).

According to Peim the modern school is at a critical point in the cultural field, representing knowledge and promoting certain practices but doing so through its own ‘cultural ambience and habitat (2003:31). Schools represent culture (values and knowledge) and enact culture. As educators we have a responsibility in this regard. If teaching is about values, ethics and intentions then we have to be open to self-inquiry and open to challenging our own cultural stances and belief systems.

By engaging student teachers and ourselves in the process of ‘reading’ culturally salient texts and engaging in a process of dialoguing these texts through salient questions, we are affording ourselves the opportunity to become more culturally aware and sensitised. More difficult, of course, is the idea of encouraging a maturity of response to complex and contested issues which are ingrained, entrenched and dominant in our psyche. However small steps in the right direction can lead to greater progress in our goals of cultural awareness and acceptance.

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Carmel Hinchion is a lecturer in Teaching, Learning and Assessment in the University of Limerick. Her research interests include the study of the identity development of student teachers, English pedagogy, reflective practice, literacy, and the arts in education. The project described was delivered in conjunction with the Ubuntu Network. The term Ubuntu is of Zulu origin. It expresses an African philosophy that describes togetherness and solidarity. The Ubuntu Network is made up of teacher educators and researchers from multiple Education Departments, with The University of Limerick being one of its founding members. The aim of the Network is to integrate development education (DE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) into post- primary teacher education.

Jennifer Hennessy is a postgraduate research student at the University of Limerick. Her research interests include poetry studies, arts in education and continued professional development.