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Towards the global postgraduate: dynamic teaching-learning environments for optimum transfer of knowledge

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Abstract

Traditional methods of assessment at the postgraduate level have often concentrated on the expanded essay as well as oral presentations of critical discussion of course material. Within the context of literary studies, the central focus of such assessments is on the ability to critically analyse a set of reading material, often in form of novels, poetry and drama. However, the horizon of literary studies has moved beyond such traditional means, and many literary programmes are now incorporating multimodal cultural texts. The Postgraduate programme in Postcolonial Literatures in English conducted by the School of Language Studies and Linguistics reflects such multimodal incorporation in course content. This paper will report on the preliminary stages of a research that focuses on the ways in which the incorporation of both multimodal texts as well as multimodal assessments is able to transform the traditional classroom into a dynamic teaching-learning environment. The primary aim of the research is to determine whether such strategies of teaching and learning are able generate optimum transfer of knowledge for the inculcation of higher order thinking skills in the postgraduate classroom, through various combinations of analysis, application, synthesis and evaluation. It uses as its sample the syllabi of a postgraduate course on the application of Literature in the real world.

Keywords: Higher order thinking skills; learning; literature; postgraduate; teaching

1. Introduction

The gap between formal knowledge transmitted in the classroom and the practical application of such knowledge has led to inquiries into the role of higher order thinking skills. The main aim of the study upon which this paper is based upon is to determine how higher order thinking skills might be better inculcated into the classroom curriculum to optimize learning outcomes. Traditional methods of assessment at the postgraduate level have often concentrated on the expanded essay as well as oral presentations of critical discussion of course material. Within the context of literary studies, the central focus of such assessments is on the ability to critically analyse a set of reading material, often in the form of novels, poetry and drama. While these assessments unarguably focus on critical skills such as in analyzing, synthesizing, applying, and evaluating information, the presence of higher order thinking skills that entail the application and adaptation of these skills in a wide variety of contexts and situations would not be attended to.

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Examples in the traditional literary classroom would draw on textual excerpts and the embellishment of argument and discussion with other texts, mainly scholarly references. These assessments have for many decades deemed adequate for the preparation of literary graduates for a career in academia or the publishing world.

However, the horizon of literary studies has moved beyond such traditional means, especially when taking into consideration that not many literary postgraduates fall back onto the traditional career path of the hallowed hallways of academic scholarship. Also recent development of Higher Education in Malaysia emphasizes Outcome-Based Education (OBE). The purpose of OBE is to equip all students with the knowledge and competencies needed for future success. At the postgraduate level, these expectations are tenfold. The mark of a truly successful postgraduate programme is its ability to create dynamic social environments for the development of the global learner who is knowledgeable, critically competent and possesses higher order transferable skills.

How then does one make viable a discipline that many feel is only relevant for the teaching path? How does one push back the margins of perception and create new frontiers for graduates who are interested in the field and wish to venture beyond the world academe? This paper reports on a research project conducted to study the ways in which one could intervene and transform the traditional postgraduate literary classroom into a dynamic teaching-learning environment. The ensuing discussion will present the main research aims of the study, th research questions that were formed to lead the investigation, a review of related literature on the subject of higher order thinking skills as well as a report of the preliminary findings of the research.

The main aim of the research project mentioned was to determine whether the generation of higher order thinking skills could lead to the creation of a more global mindset in the local postgraduate, who would subsequently be able to transfer skills learnt for a more informed and practical application in the real world. Its main objectives were as follows:

1. To introduce a range of multimodal texts as well as multimodal assessments within the course.
2. To identify the perceptions of students towards the incorporation of multimodal texts as well as multimodal assessments within the course.
3. To identify the extent to which such strategies of teaching & learning are able to inculcate higher order thinking skills in the postgraduate classroom.
4. To ascertain whether such teaching-learning strategies are able generate optimum transfer of knowledge.
5. To identify the overall strengths and limitations in the incorporation and implementation of such strategies to create a dynamic teaching-learning environment.

These objectives led to a method of enquiry that was led by a number of key research questions, as the following section indicates.

The methodology of this research was structured around an action research model, where a pre-task was set to determine the problem at hand. After this was ascertained, the research proceeded to an intervention stage, which was based on the hypothesis that the transformation of the traditional mono-modal postgraduate literary classroom into a multimodal environment would be able to generate higher order thinking skills for practical application in real situations. To test this hypothesis, the intervention strategies were structured based on the following research questions:

1. What are the existing perceptions of students towards multimodal assessments within the postgraduate literary classroom?
2. What are some of the significant ways of incorporating multimodal texts as well as multimodal assessments that generate higher order thinking skills within the postgraduate literary classroom?
3. What is the extent to which such strategies of teaching & learning are able to inculcate higher order thinking skills in the postgraduate classroom?
4. What are the ways in which such teaching-learning strategies effectively generates optimum transfer of knowledge?
5. What are the overall strengths and limitations in the incorporation and implementation of such strategies in the creation of a dynamic teaching-learning environment?

Before we proceed with the preliminary findings of the research, it is necessary to first outline the existing scholarly discussions on the issue of higher order thinking skills within the classroom environment.

2. Related Literature

A survey of research studies in this area has yielded the following research foci: teachers' thought paradigms and pedagogy, students' learning strategies, learning activities and assessment. This section presents the conceptualization of higher order thinking skills, pedagogy, learning strategies, learning environments, multiple literacies, forms of assessment, and tangential considerations for future research. Lewis and Smith (1993) traced the evolution of the concept of critical thinking and linked it with problem solving skills. They differentiated higher order thinking and critical thinking by proposing that higher order thinking encompasses "problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, and decision making" (p.136). To this end, they saw higher order thinking as occurring when a person integrated or interrelated new information with stored information to generate possibilities in a given situation. On the same note, Miri, David and Uri (2007) in their study on the use of critical thinking in the classroom conceptualized critical thinking as a part of higher order thinking, arguing that critical thinking is non-linear, reflective, complex and capable of generating predictions, decision making and problem solving. In more familiar terms, Miri et al. have linked critical thinking skills to those described in Bloom's Taxonomy. In their study which focused specifically on students' critical thinking skills, they suggested that critical thinking requires the learner to comprehend, question, generalize and evaluate given information in order to make informed decisions or solve problems.

The premise of traditional classroom pedagogy is the unilateral transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student. Current teaching practices have shifted the emphasis from the teacher to the student. This shift is echoed in the way teachers have expanded the curriculum to accommodate multimodal texts in addition to more traditional book-based material. Such a curriculum reflects a more constructivist approach to learning and teaching whereby the teaching and learning of a particular area of study is couched in real-world situations and presented to the learner via various modals. The implications of higher order thinking in the classroom include the understanding that higher order thinking and lower order thinking differ from one individual to the next, basic recall teaching strategies are helpful only at lower order thinking stages, and that failure to help students make connections between textbook information and real world phenomenon could lead to learning difficulties (Lewis & Smith, 1993).

In a study on students' critical thinking skills, Miri et al. described a teacher's teaching strategy based on helping students make connections between the topic learned and life outside the classroom. This teacher created learning moments for students to question, investigate and draw assumptions of how scientific phenomenon is used and replicated in real life. Another teacher in the same study created learning opportunities by introducing multimodal representations of information in addition to the information available in textbooks. Both teachers also made use of material from popular culture and introduced hands-on learning opportunities as well group assessments help their students stay connected with the topic within and beyond the classroom. Uri et al. noted that these teaching strategies were characterized by these underlying three concepts: (a) real world connections; (b) questioning; and (c) group inquiry. Their study showed that students exposed to these teaching strategies showed improvement in "truth-seeking, open-mindedness, [critical thinking]-self confidence, maturity" (p.363) as well as evaluative and inferencing skills.

The connection between real life and classroom learning was explored by Skerrett and Bomer (2011) in their study on how students' in-class performance was improved when teachers associated students' out-of-school literacy activities with reading activities in the classroom. The researchers termed the intersections between in-class literacies and beyond-school literacies borderzones. They discovered that when teachers utilized these borderzones to expand students' engagement with classroom material, they were able to hold their students' interest and expand their reading skills in the classroom. This approach to teaching, identified as multiliteracies pedagogy, creates scaffolding from students' real life experiences and utilizes them to help students build meaningful formal learning experiences in the classroom. The key elements of multiliteracies pedagogy are: "situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice" (p.1259). Skerrett and Bomer noted that these elements corresponded to the four pedagogical processes outlined by Kalantzis et al (2005): "experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing and applying knowledge" (p.1259). In their study, Skerrett and Bomer documented the use of material drawn from different domains in the students' life beyond the classroom: "texting, social networking, watching movies, graffiti,

music, [and] magazine reading" (p.1265). They discovered that the use of these materials to augment and inform students' formal reading material in tandem with the application of the four pedagogical processes identified by Kalantzis et al., helped learners significantly improve their reading abilities. A multiliteracies approach encompasses not only the material used as texts but also a reinterpretation of the classroom environment.

The ensuing section will present what may be termed as a reinterpretation of the literary classroom via a multimodal environment, that was based on the research questions identified earlier. It uses as its sample a course that focused on literary studies in the real world, convened by the Postgraduate Programme in Literature at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the National University of Malaysia.

3. Methodology, Findings and Discussion

At the beginning of the course, students were asked to provide their perspective of what an innovative literary classroom environment would entail, and also to present their thoughts on what would constitute as innovative kinds of assessments. They spoke about the integration of socio-cultural issues into essay topics, rather than ones which focused only on textual analysis; the use of technology to enhance the presentation of assigned tasks; the use of real world examples to explicate theoretical issues; the integration of real world situations technology to enhance the presentation of subject matter and the benefits of industrial placements . However when asked specific examples, the students were not able to provide these and the reason for this can be linked to the mainly traditional assessments that they had been accustomed to heretofore. As soon as this was established, the stage of intervention commenced, and students were introduced to the ways in which concepts that they had learnt in their critical theory class could be transferred and applied in the real world, through a multimodal course content that incorporated multimodal texts as literary material as well as multimodal course assessments. These were aimed to inculcate higher order thinking skills and the creation of a more global outlook. What follows is a presentation of the preliminary findings of the research, based on observance of the delivery of student assessments and evidence of higher order thinking skills.

The course content covered four significant areas that reflect the operations of literature in practise, being mainly 1) Literature and Popular Media 2) Literary elements in Commercial Media 3) Literature and the Larger Community 4) Literature and Education. For each of the topics, the mode of delivery saw the introduction of multimodal material. At the end of each topic, students were given a task that involved the analysis of a particular multimodal material for ways in which it revealed a particular critical concept. The assessment objective of each task was to evaluate the ways in which the students employed higher order thinking skills to transfer modes of analysis usually applied to the traditional written text to multimodal texts.

In the first topic students were introduced to the ways in which concepts that they had learnt in their critical theory class were applicable in popular culture. The seminar began with a background to multicultural issues and proceeded with reflections of multiculturalism in a popular music. Samples used were the compilation "Asian Groove" by the production house Putomayo which focused on contemporary music by the South Asian diaspora, a contemporary Malaysian music artiste, the African diaspora as well as the Middle Eastern diaspora. Once students were able to recognise that such popular music reflected similar issues seen in multicultural literary texts, they were then guided towards preparing a research paper on Contemporary Malaysian Songs And Music Videos As Expressions Of Multicultural Engagement. The assessment required them to present the following:

   a.   An Introduction to Multiculturalism in a general context.
   b.   A review of Multiculturalism in the Malaysian context.
   c.   A review of Multiculturalism in Global popular music.
   d.   A review of multiculturalism in the history of Malaysian Popular Music.
   e.   An analysis of a selected Malaysian popular music video that reflected engagement with multiculturalism.

In this way the research paper called for the development and subsequent assessment of higher order critical creative thinking skills, as opposed to mere synthesis and review. The creativity was reflected in the ways in which the end products submitted for assessment revealed the ability of the students to conduct in-depth research into the history of the Malaysian popular music industry, reaching far back as the 1960s. They produced reviews of the visuals of album covers and presented the ways in which the music industry showed a progression from

Occidentalist influence of British bands such as the Beatles and the Kinks in the early sixties to the awareness of Asian identity in the late sixties and more specifically Malaysian identity and nationhood in the 70s and eighties. The students also drew connections with similar trends in the rise of postcolonial literary history. The culmination of the research paper was the analysis of the contemporary music videos which revealed interesting points about the different depictions of and engagement with multiculturalism within the country, especially with regards to class and gender.

In the second topic, students were guided towards recognising literary elements in real world products. This entailed paying attention to the interaction of the Visual and the Verbal Elements in the advertising of commercial products, with particular focus on the ways in which language used in the products were linked to the visuals used. Students were thought to ponder upon the use of specific words, phrases and connotations and determine their corresponding element in the visuals used. They were also directed to make connections with critical issues such as cultural identity, gendered discourse, centering or marginalisation of cultures, exotification amongst others, thus promoting the development of higher order critical thinking skills. The assessment called for the presentation of a particular product and to reveal the ways in which literary elements were used by the company in question to persuade customers towards its purchase. The presentations revealed interesting aspects with regards to the use of persuasive cultural ideology, semiotics of Orientalism, cultural symbols and dramatic impact as well as globalisation and class. These were in relation to products such as confectionary, automobiles, sport shoes and beverages.

The third topic led them to the arena of literature in the educational context and here, students were guided towards thinking about the changing nature of literary studies. They were given samples of course syllabi from a number of departments that offered undergraduate degree programmes in literature and were led to think about whether the courses retained a focus that kept to the traditional pathways of literary studies, i.e whether the focus was on canonical texts or the preference of a certain region or genre or form. Students were then asked to compile a Critical review of the Teaching and Learning of Tertiary Literary Studies in Malaysia. In order to complete this assignment, the students required to review the following material:

I)   The full prospectus /Programme Details for the BA in Literature Programme offered by an English Studies department in a Malaysian university, complete with programme objectives/aims as well as the learning outcomes, as per MQA requirements.
II) A list of all courses offered under the Programme, together with the brief course descriptions.
III) The course proforma of ONE course, with the following details:
    1) The course description
    2) The course objectives
    3) The course learning outcomes
    4) The course schedule (topics per week)
    5) Assessment modes (ongoing/formal exam)
    6) Assessment Schemes (where possible)

Here the skills acquired included that of critical selection, communication skills when corresponding with a the course convenor at the selected institution, critical analysis and synthesis of knowledge and critical application and transference of theoretical knowledge onto a workplace (here classroom) life situation.

4. Conclusion

To this effect, the process and the final products revealed the ways in which the students comprehended the various problems, selected material, questioned the incorporation of some and proceeded to critical selection, generalized the background of each situation, evaluated the material selected and made informed decisions on the ways in which each material revealed aspects of the given problem and in their various conclusion solved the problems and made reference to limitations seen. These are but clear manifestations the development of higher order thinking skills. As the literature classroom expanded its horizons, more and more complex ideas were explored through various combinations of analysis, application, synthesis and evaluation. Such strategies of teaching and learning are necessary for the inculcation of higher order thinking skills in the postgraduate classroom and thus lead

to the opening of the portal of an optimum transfer of knowledge. Through such multimodal environments, students were also made aware of the vastness of resources that could be procured from Literary Studies.

We conclude at this point in anticipation of the next step of the research methodology, with regards to the analysis of the assessments delivered by the current students as well as the focus group interview with both cohorts. This will best ascertain whether the incorporation of both multimodal texts as well as multimodal assessments within the classroom effectively enabled the transformation of the traditional classroom into a dynamic teaching-learning environment. Interview questions are being prepared based on the key elements of higher order thinking skills. At the end of the intervention period, students will be interviewed to determine their perceptions of the incorporation of multimodal texts as well as multimodal assessments within the course.

Acknowledgement

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