Understanding Pain by Working It Out: Teaching Literature Interactively to Build Resilience

Amy Lee, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong SAR

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Abstract
Young people have to face a range of different kinds of stress in their journey of physical and emotional growth. Before the pandemic, educators and other stakeholders have already put in place a lot of measures in the educational experience to help young people understand and face these challenges. As the global world has been struggling with the challenges posed by covid-19 in the past two years and many "normal" practices have to make way or change their mode of operation, we are even more aware of the substantial stress that young people are facing. In many ways, the content and proposal of this presentation is not new, but in view of the sharpened challenges young people are facing, and also the very changed mode of communication used in education, the presenter would like to propose something more specifically relevant to our time and our way of life. Literature, often seen as an elite subject for those who have the gift (at least in a place such as Hong Kong), can be taught in an interactive, and "practical" way to be the tool for understanding our emotional responses to the external environment. Moreover, by learning it in an interactive way, learners can find mutual support among themselves during the process. This presentation is a sharing of some examples of how world literature/culture can be taught in an interactive way at the undergraduate level to facilitate emotional and self-understanding by the learners through carefully designed in-class and post-class activities.

Keywords: Interactive Classroom, Literature, Cultural Texts, Emotional Wellbeing, Online-Learning, Connection And Isolation

Introduction

When the proposal for this paper presentation was written, the global world was still very much in the grip of the covid-19 pandemic. In Hong Kong where I work and live, the new wave of omicron strain outbreak happened soon after the Lunar New Year, and caused unprecedented cases of infection and death. Two years after the first appearance of covid-19, my home city saw increasing disruption of daily routines including closing of public venues, limited public and social services, restriction of opening hours in restaurants, and most relevant to our discussion here, the suspension of face-to-face teaching once again, the fourth time in three years.[1] Although the exact type and length of precautionary measures adapted in different countries are different, there is a general concern that teaching and learning have been adversely affected during these few years, and learners across the world have suffered in various ways as a result.

Discussion in relation to this disruption of teaching and learning has also moved together with the development of the pandemic situation across the world. During the initial stage of the pandemic, the urgent need was to find a way of continuing the teaching and learning without face-to-face contact. Time was thus spent on adjusting to the online mode of delivery – not just to ensure that the syllabus was covered, but also that the teaching and learning processes took place sufficiently as compared to the face-to-face mode. When various online meeting softwares were available and users in the education sector had generally mastered this mode of delivery, attention was drawn to other aspects of the learning experience. Depending on the actual conditions of different countries, moving the formal component of education online did not replace the entire educational experience for learners across age groups. In fact, even within the academic profession, many would agree that having online conferences is not quite the same as having face-to-face conferences, for discussion and for knowledge exchange.

In Hong Kong, while learners in the primary and secondary schools still manage to cover the curriculum and public examinations were still conducted as planned, parents and teachers alike noted a difference, which may be described as an "incompleteness" of the educational experience for the learners. While the academic aspect of the teaching and learning is taking place via the online platform (many would argue that even this aspect is discounted without face-to-face interaction), the non-academic learning, usually taking place during the co-curricular activities, and also among learners during their collaboration in in-class activities or even during recess and lunch-breaks, is missing during the online classes. In higher education, although students are more mature and have more independence in how they organize their own learning, the reduction of face-to-face interaction has resulted in reduced connection among peers, and in turn brought about a heightened sense of isolation and loneliness.

University education is an important phase of personal growth not (only) because these few years of learning will directly or indirectly put a young person in a certain profession (or pave

[1] The Hong Kong government announced the advanced summer holiday to primary and secondary schools at the beginning of March 2022. This meant that schools had to stop all teaching and learning activities from mid-March until the end of the original Easter Holiday in late April, and re-open to allow half-day schooling then. Schools which had achieved a good rate of vaccination among pupils would be allowed to have full-day teaching and extra-curricular activities. This "advanced" summer holiday meant that the summer school term will extend into late July or early August, to give a relatively short summer holiday for school pupils in August 2022.

a way for further academic and professional development). More importantly this is the threshold of adulthood – students in Hong Kong typically enter university at the age of 18 and graduate at 22 – when young people learn to establish their place in the world. This is the time when they officially emerge from parental guidance and take over their own responsibilities: what kind of person to be, what talents to develop, how they want to interact with other people and the world, and what kind of life they prepare for themselves. University education, or experience in the university, should offer help to young people in these daunting tasks during this transitional (and hopefully transformative) period before they enter society fully as a working adult.

Even under the most "normal" conditions, the university experience for young people is full of challenges as they come to learn about themselves and try their best to connect and work with other individuals in this expanded world while they are equipping themselves professionally at the same time. Frustrations from human relationships is a constant challenge for young people during this phase of their lives, even without the added impact of communication disruptions by the pandemic. In response to the pandemic reality, and the increased sense of isolation and loneliness felt by university students, I would like to suggest an approach of teaching and learning in the area of literary studies (which is my academic background) that could make young people relate to the subject in a more practical and relevant mindset. In other words, I hope to present the literary and cultural texts not only as disciplinary materials, but also as "case studies" where findings will directly benefit us in our everyday life.

The following is a few selected examples of literary and cultural texts which I have used in my teaching to discuss not only literary features but also issues that are important to young people in their journey of self-understanding, emotions management, and learning of interpersonal relationships. The emphasis here is not the value of these pieces in the formal curriculum, but rather how they can be used to create a learning experience that inspires students to ask and (hopefully try to) answer questions about themselves as individuals in the world. These examples are drawn from different courses that I taught in the university setting in Hong Kong over the past years; I suggest that an interactive lesson design can facilitate a mutually beneficial learning experience for the instructor and the learners, which addresses a need that is always present in university education, but more acutely felt during these past years of pandemic situation.

To Create is Human: "The Great Automatic Grammatizator" in the Age of AI

"The Great Automatic Grammatizator" is the titular story of Roald Dahl's 1954 short story collection. The main character Knipe is a computer genius, and creates a calculating machine which earns a lot of money for his boss, Mr. Bohlen. During his well-earned holiday, Knipe creates a writing machine which has the capacity to generate short stories from pre-loaded data. After his holiday, he proudly presents this writing machine to his boss, claiming that they can turn it into good business by sending the stories generated from the machine to various literary magazines which pay handsomely. When the originally skeptical Mr. Bohlen sees that creative fiction is really good business, he demands something more substantial from Knipe, and wants him to enhance the machine so that it can generate huge volumes of fiction which he feels are more important than short stories. Knipe follows his instructions and comes up with the Great Automatic Grammatizator which can tailor-make novels based on the huge database pre-loaded.

With the success of this second phase of the machine, Knipe constructs an even more sophisticated business plan. He starts an agency and goes around offering book contracts to current writers, not to publish their works but to borrow their names to be listed as the authors of works generated from the writing machine. In return these writers agree not to write and only collect earnings from these publications with their names on the cover page. Ironically this business plan is extremely successful and the agency has bought up a large portion of market share. At the end of the story, readers see an unnamed writer painfully trying to decide whether to sign such a contract while starving children are "howling" in the next room. The story ends with a prayer by the unnamed writer, but no answer as to whether the "golden contract that lies over on the other side of the desk" (Dahl, 1954) is accepted or not.

This story was taught in a course entitled "Language and the Humanities"[2] and I chose this short story to illustrate some of the roles of language in the human world. Although the story was written at a time when the computer was not a common personal device, the narrative has posted serious questions concerning AI, in the form of the writing machine that is being used to replace human beings in one of their most valuable assets – creativity that cater to human needs. I feel that this simple story has a lot to offer to young university students who are beginning to find their own position in the world, who may still be doubtful about themselves, and who are still uncertain about their future path – as human beings and as professionals. The text was placed in the eLearning platform at the beginning of the semester, and to make sure that they read before they came to the lecture, I announced a short quiz for the lecture.

After giving the students the responsibility of reading and knowing the facts of the story, I used the lecture to conduct a number of in-class activities in relation to the text. One of the most successful in-class activities of this story is asking the students to role play the negotiation of the contract between Knipe (the agency) and the individual writers. I asked the students to get into groups of 5 or 6 (usually there were around 45 students in this course) and the groups would either play the role of the agency or the individual writers. The agency would need to draft a contract which could entice the writer to give up writing and let it use the name for publications generated by the machine; while the writer would need to decide what terms are acceptable and what not. After 20 minutes of discussion, I would pair up a writer-group with an agency-group and see how they negotiate based on the draft contract. The class would witness the negotiations.

It did not matter whether the negotiation of the contracts was successful or not. It did not even matter whether the terms they came up with were reasonable or not. The entire setting was fictional, and the purpose was not to learn how to set up a contract legally. It was the content and essence of humanity – creativity in particular - that was the heart of the reflection. The course was a required core in the Humanities Programme, and to reflect on what makes us human, what our needs are, how we communicate as well as fulfil those needs, and finally the price we are ready to pay in order to safeguard what we believe in are the main objects of my in-class activities. In the process of group discussion, students got to hear what fellow classmates had to say about the role they were assigned; and in the negotiations with the partner-group they had the opportunity to listen to other human beings

[2] This is a core course of the undergraduate programme BA in Humanities at the Hong Kong Baptist University. While there are a number of course intended learning outcomes, the content of the course will differ every time when it is offered, depending on the instructor.

arguing from a different position about these values. From the several attempts I made with this story, the learning process was both fun and thought-provoking.

To Live for Oneself: "Story of an Hour" and the Age of Gender Equality

"Story of an Hour" is a famous short story by American author Kate Chopin, published in 1894. It is a short narrative talking about the hour-long experience of the main character, a young wife called Louise Mallard. At the beginning of the story, readers are told that Louise suffers from heart trouble, therefore her friend is very careful in breaking to her the bad news of her husband's death in a railroad accident. Hearing the news, Louise surrenders herself to great grief, and soon retires to her own room upstairs. There, in the quiet and intimate personal space, her attention is drawn to the outside world she sees through her window. Visions of life, energy and enjoyment are evident everywhere, and this wakes up something which has been deeply and painfully repressed in her heart. The sounds of new life draw from her the deep yearning for freedom which has not been possible all this time.

While this emotional struggle is going on inside Louise, her sister Josephine becomes increasingly worried about her quietness and starts banging on the door. Fearing that Louise will do something to harm herself when grieving for her husband, Josephine urges her to open the door and show herself. Now Louise has accepted the yearning for freedom that has been buried inside, and she walks out of the room a new person, looking like the goddess of Victory, who is sure of herself and who looks forward to a new life dedicated to herself and herself only. Although she does not know the reasons for the change, Josephine welcomes her newly affirmed sister, and the two young women walk down the stairs to join Richards, the friend who brings the news. At this happy moment, someone opens the door and Brently Mallard, the supposedly dead husband, walks in. Richards tries to block Louise's view but he is too late. At the end of the story, readers have a comment from the doctors that it is "the joy that kills" the weak-hearted Louise.

I have taught this story in numerous occasions, including an introductory course on feminist literary studies, and as introduction to humanities in undergraduate programmes. I have also used this story in a class of gifted secondary students (aged around 15) as an introduction to literature, and more recently in a sharing session with university students as a co-curricular activity during the covid-19 pandemic. In all these occasions, the focus of the lesson is the emotional drama that Louise Mallard experiences in the course of that one hour – when she believes that her husband, the cornerstone of her life, is gone, and her future days will be days on her own. Louise's experience is a wonderful depiction of the tension between social expectations on a person's behavior and one's true feelings and wishes for life. The doctors' comment at the end of the story, describing Louise's cause of death as joy, is particularly ironic and enlightening, in view of this underlying tension.

As the story is relatively short, asking students to read the story in class is not a problem. In fact, it is quite a nice experience to watch the students as they follow Louise's emotional change when they move through the story. After making sure that they all agree on the basic facts of the story, a short role play of the two sisters is an interesting activity for students to feel how one's behavior is often influenced by social expectations and moreover how one's values are shaped by those of the establishment. Another in-class activity, which students can do individually, is to write diary entries for Louise. In this most personal and intimate space, Louise can speak frankly about her feelings of marriage, of always listening to her husband, and of being perceived as the fragile and delicate female who always needs protection.

Finally, I also asked my students to give Brently a voice by role playing a conversation/interview between Richards and him, after the death of his wife. This may extend the interest of the story so that we can imagine the feelings of the husband in a patriarchal society.

The irony of having the wife shocked to death at the end of the story when it starts with news of the husband's death is not lost to my students. The role play between the two sisters proves to be effective for students to realise how the two different positions may result in two very different feelings towards the same piece of news. To related parties, the death of the husband is tragic in the sense that the wife will have no one to rely on, and will be helpless in facing her future. For the student stepping into the shoes of Louise, it will simply be a matter of finding a way to support herself from now on. It is not difficult for young female university students today to come to such realization, but it is certainly an enlightenment for them to try to view the situation from a female perspective more than 100 years ago. The final comment from doctors strengthens students' understanding of the possible gap between social expectations and one's true feelings and experience.

Loneliness and Connection: *The Red Balloon* and a Global Community

The Red Balloon is a short film (34 mins.) directed by French film-maker Albert Lamorisse in 1956. The "story" revolves around a nameless young boy (aged 5 or 6) who one day rescues a red balloon from a lamp-post. The red balloon proves to be animate and follows the boy around the Parisian streets. The boy is happy to have acquired this new companion, and takes the balloon with him wherever he goes, and communicates with it as if it is a pet/an animal that has understanding. The film spends a large part of its time showing us the interaction between the boy and the balloon – on the street, in school, on the tram, and even at home when the boy simply "hides" the balloon outside the bedroom window. Towards the end of the film, a gang of street urchins spot the boy and his balloon, and close in to them on top of a hill. The poor balloon is deflated, to the boy's great sadness. Miraculously at this moment, as if heeding the call of the dying balloon, all colours of balloons fly from across the city to come and "join hands" to lift the boy up to the sky.

I have talked about this film with students in different occasions, including an introductory film culture course, and a recent informal sharing with students – a kind of outside discipline learning activities during the covid-19 pandemic. The film text is very user-friendly because it is relatively short, and there is not much dialogue. Although it is a French film, one does not need to know French to understand the film – the actions are simple and clear, although the feelings are authentic and appeals to most audience. The greyness of the post-war Parisian streets sets off a great contrast with the rich redness of the balloon, as well as the rainbow colours of the multitude of balloons in the final moments of the film. The loneliness and isolation felt by the boy before he meets the balloon, as well as his joy in the companionship with the red balloon is clearly visible and audible in the colour and the music.

In my experience sharing this film with the students, "sharing" indeed plays an important part. As the film is a very simple narrative about the lonely boy's encounter with the red balloon, and their experience together, living this experience of loneliness and friendship together with other audience (in this case my students) is essential for our discussion. Hearing my students' laughter when the balloon tricks the boy, and their shocked grief when the balloon slowly creases up and is left on the ground is a fundamental part of our journey of emotional understanding together. Sharing the same physical space in the room when we

witness the boy's adventure gives us the chance to come face to face with our own vulnerability to loneliness and our need for connection with other people. Also at the end of the film, the final miraculous appearance of the colour balloons gives us hope that somewhere and somehow our needs will be fulfilled in the most wonderful way. This "ritual" of companionship with my students is already the best path into the understanding of the film.

Another in-class activity that has proved useful for students to reflect more about our emotional needs and how to achieve well-being is a simulated conversation between the boy and the balloon. It is interesting in the film that the boy is not the only person who seeks/needs the companionship of a balloon; they encounter a girl on the street with a vividly blue balloon, and there is an exchange of mutual understanding between them. In the students' imagined conversation with the balloon, they get the chance to identify their own emotional needs, and to be brave enough to reach out to build a connection with another. This in-class exercise allows students to search inside themselves and share what they find in a relatively safe and companionable setting. In many ways, this is almost a therapeutic session for all concerned as no one is beyond the human condition, and the communication via the film is inclusive given the dearth of dialogues.

We Are in It Together: Understanding Pain through Interactive Exercises

In the above examples, the teaching of literary and cultural texts has been done in such a way to involve all students in class, in the reading/viewing of the texts, then followed by extended discussions that draw on the texts as examples of human experience. This interactive teaching approach makes the students pay more attention, as they have to get involved in the discussion one way or another, and helps also to draw the personal into the learning experience. Although the above teaching and learning experiences come from a range of university classes, and some of them during the face to face mode, I believe that this approach of teaching can be and should be adopted in whichever mode of teaching being conducted. The main benefits of this teaching and learning experience go beyond the disciplinary knowledge related to the texts, and reach out to the intimate centres of the young people sitting in the classroom (or on the other side of the zoom screen).

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, what is being proposed here is not something entirely new. The learning and teaching of literature and cultural texts within their disciplines should certainly continue. What I am suggesting is only to further engage the university learners by inviting their understanding of the characters through reflecting on their own experiences and finding commonalities and differences. Through this kind of sharing, the literary and cultural texts become a kind of "case studies" of human emotional experience/pain, where students can refer to as precedents, and shed some light on their own experience. This creates a chance for understanding the emotional experiences (very often pain) and opens a way to address these problems.

While it is an effective learning and teaching approach during "normal" times, the presentation suggests that it is even more important to adopt this kind of approach during unusual times such as the world situation in the pandemic. Besides the disruption to normal economic and social activities, the pandemic has also created a lot of barriers to different kinds of communication, resulting in loneliness and isolation, both physically and emotionally. While the world has been trying to continue educational activities online, teaching literature and cultural texts in an interactive way (given the restrictions of online

communication) is perhaps an effective tool not only in the pursuit of subject knowledge, but also in enhancing mental and emotional health, as well as promoting a kind of moral education in a multi-disciplinary context.

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Contact email: awslee@hkmu.edu.hk