

## 7 Developing quality education through imaginative understanding using literature

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### 1. Introduction

This article describes a literature workshop carried out in 2016 in higher education with future teachers/translators of English. It introduced an intercultural citizenship and human rights perspective in a regular language course through the reading of specific novels, short stories and films. It rests on the notion of the ecological university (Barnett, 2011), which links the learning that takes place in higher education with the community, in this case through the development of democratic values and competences and also by encouraging learners to take social or civic action beyond the classroom. This vision of the university resonates with an educational orientation in language learning in higher education beyond the purely instrumental (Byram, 2008; Byram, Golubeva, Han & Wagner, 2017) that encompasses citizenship and human rights perspectives (Osler & Starkey, 2010). Building on new conceptualisations of reading in the digital age (Allington & Pihlaj, 2016), the workshop combined critical thinking, imaginative understanding, and intercultural citizenship to provide “quality education” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 385).

We begin by outlining some key features of literature, in particular the narrative genre, related to the intercultural dimension of language learning. After that, we link this framework with the notion of narrative imagination proposed by Nussbaum (2006) and articulate how it contributes to the development of democratic values and competences. This development represents an ecological conceptualization of higher education (Barnett, 2011). We then describe the workshop, designed as case study, and present our findings.

## **1. Literary reading and the narrative genre**

Because this project is a literature workshop which is part of an ordinary language course, we state our assumptions around literary reading. We acknowledge that there exists extensive literature on the psychological, textual and other processes involved in reading literature and also that no literary text can be seen as simply related to a specific cultural context. Furthermore, “the reading of literature is determined by the learners’ response as social actors with specific cultural identities. Thus, each learner individualizes the learning experience and comes to very different conclusions about the meaning of a common text” (Byram & Grundy, 2002, p. 194). Consequently, “there can never be any definitive interpretation” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 24; 2003). Widdowson (2011, personal communication) explains: “[W]ith literary texts authorial intention is, even when known, of little if any relevance. Such texts also tend to be thematically complex (...) literary texts are of their nature subject to variable and unregulated interpretation: what is significant for one reader may be very different from what is significant for another, depending (...) on a range of individual and social associations (...) With literary texts, readers can engage in creative appropriation and open-ended interpretation.” More recently, Belsey (2014), Green, Chatham and Sestir (2012), Janssen, Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam and van den Bergh (2012), Janssen, Braaksma and Couzijn (2009), Simpson (2014) and others have shown the consensus in the field regarding the centrality of reader flexibility in literary reading. Finally, following Allington and Swann (2009), literary reading can be seen as social practice, and can also be studied as social practice. One way in which this can be done is by engaging in analyses of understanding by real or actual readers as we do in this study.

The narrative genre was chosen because it is a course requirement and the literary focus was chosen because literature is a key pillar in language education with an intercultural orientation (Burwitz Melzer, 2001; Byram & Grundy, 2002). Literary texts foster self-awareness but also transform individual experience in collective experience through the exploration of what motivates characters, how different characters interact, and how their objectives and ways of reaching them conflict, for instance (Bruner, 2002). Moreover, stories are always told from a particular perspective or standpoint, which allows for intercultural understanding because the uncovering of a certain perspective simultaneously reveals another one (Bruner, 2002). Narratives allow readers to become aware of alternative perspectives and to de-centre their own thinking by placing themselves in somebody else’s shoes and therefore to critically examine, and understand, the reality of this ‘other’. De-centring and perspective-taking are two essential skills in intercultural citizenship (Byram et al., 2017). Literature provides “this imaginative leap that will enable learners to imagine cultures different from their own”

(Kramersch, 1995, p. 85) and can therefore “be used to develop an understanding of otherness” (Burwitz Melzer, 2001, p. 29; Matos, 2005).

## **2. Culture, literature and imagination**

Literature then is one key pillar in language learning together with culture and imagination “for it is literature that opens up ‘reality beyond realism’ and that enables readers to live other lives – by proxy” (Kramersch, 1995, p. 85). Emotion and affect are a key aspect in this imaginative dimension of culture (Dewaele, 2013). The argument is not new and twenty years ago Shanahan (1997) pointed out the need to foreground imagery, emotion and affect in language learning through literature: “The cultural features of literature represent a powerful merging of language, affect, and intercultural encounters and often provide the exposure to living language that a FL student lacks” (Shanahan, 1997, p. 168). More recently, Carter (2010, p. 116) referred to “the primary authenticity of literary texts and of the fact that more imaginative and representational uses of language could be embedded alongside more referentially utilitarian output.”

## **3. Narrative imagination to develop democratic competences in higher education**

In language education, Byram (2008; Byram et al., 2017) proposed an educational orientation beyond the purely instrumental that encompasses citizenship and human rights perspectives (Osler & Starkey, 2010). In higher education, this perspective (described as ‘intercultural citizenship’) resonates with the notion of the ecological university (Barnett, 2011), which links the learning that takes place in higher education with the local community and the wider world, in this case through the development of democratic values and competences and also by encouraging learners to take social or civic action beyond the classroom. Attitudes of curiosity and openness to otherness, criticality, and the skills of de-centring and perspective-taking, are essential in this conceptualisation.

In the field of education, Nussbaum (2006) proposed that higher education can and should contribute to the development of democratic values and competences by focusing on three dimensions in the classroom: critical thinking, imaginative understanding and world citizenship. In this way, “quality education” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 385) is provided. Criticality involves analysis and reflection on oneself and others, and dialogue to bridge difference. World citizenship (what Byram calls intercultural citizenship) involves the ability to see oneself as member of a global community (beyond particular groups and local communities) with a sense of humanness that brings people together. Finally, imaginative understanding or narrative imagination, best cultivated through the arts and literature, “means the ability to

think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (Nussbaum, 2006, pp. 390-91). These capacities are central in intercultural citizenship in language education (Byram, 2008; Byram et al., 2017) and Nussbaum (2006) herself recognises language learning, literature and the arts as powerful vehicles in the provision of quality education understood in this way.

#### **4. The case**

The workshop was designed as case study, planned as a task and theme based project within the language course, and addressed human rights concerns.

Participants were 45 second year students, aged 18-22, with a B2/C1 level of English according to the CEFR. Data include teacher field notes, multimodal representations of the literary works, descriptive logs of each representation, and final individual reflection logs. Data were analysed using content analysis (Mertens, 2015).

A multimodal representation is an adaptation of a visual representation (Porto & Byram, 2017) in which students transform a text using multiple and varied semiotic systems in order to provide a personal interpretation or perspective. This representation involves bending, a form of reader response for the digital age. More specifically, "bending is one form of restorying, a process by which people reshape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 313). Restorying involves imagination, empathy and understanding of otherness, and can have aesthetic purposes (e.g. pleasure) but also activist purposes (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Here we understand 'activist' as a form of political engagement where political does not mean adopting a certain ideology but working in collaboration with others to take action in the world (Byram, 2008). There is then an explicit link here with intercultural citizenship theory in language education (Byram et al., 2017), with imaginative understanding and world citizenship in education (Nussbaum, 2006) and with a human rights perspective in education as students relate to and reflect upon themes of concern for humanity (Osler & Starkey, 2010).

#### **5. Findings and discussion**

Data were analysed qualitatively focusing on content analysis (Mertens, 2015). Particular attention was given to the three capacities that lead to quality education in higher education, namely, critical thinking, imaginative understanding and world citizenship. Findings show that

students engaged in critical imaginative understanding, an essential capacity in the development of democratic citizenship (Nussbaum, 2006).

There were 45 multimodal representations, one per student, which can all be categorised under one form of bending called transmedia storytelling (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). It means transforming a written story to art work and in this case it comprised a variety of options such as drawings, paintings, cartoons, collages, comparative charts, acrostics, quotes from famous people, and quotes from characters in the novels, films or short stories read. Students used varied materials including paper, cardboard, cotton, glitter, pencils, colour pencils, watercolours and canvas. They resorted to several techniques leading to several outcomes such as handmade painting, handmade art crafts, digital artwork, details in 3D, black and white artwork, and flyers.

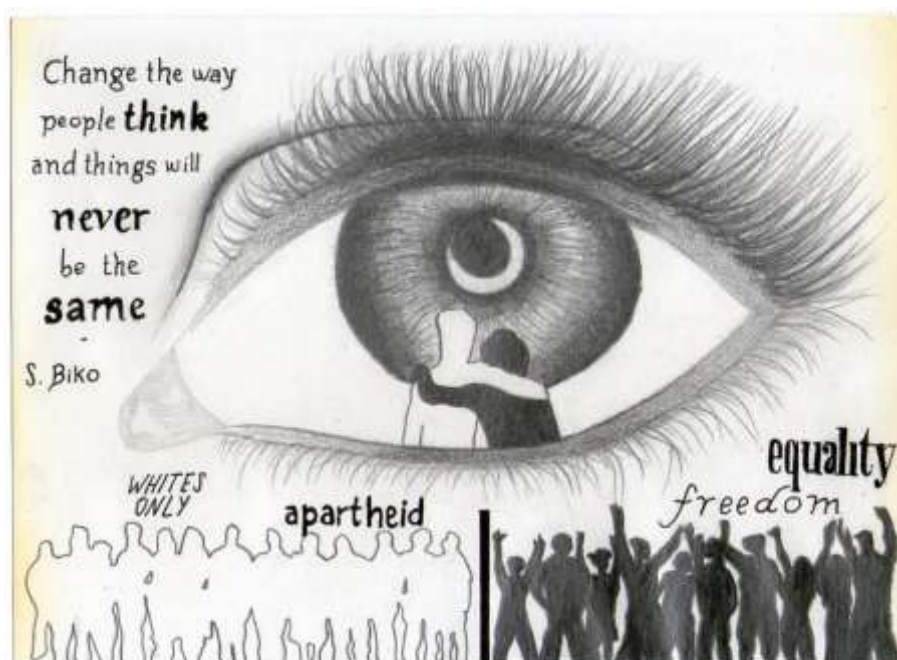
The comparative perspective, essential to allow self-awareness and awareness of otherness, was pervasive and this perspective is a key element in intercultural citizenship theory in the language classroom (Byram, 2008), in the development of citizenship competences in students as it stimulates criticality (Nussbaum, 2006) and also in human rights education as here there is, among other things, a continuous and critical examination of the ways in which human rights are respected or violated in different contexts (Osler & Starkey, 2010). For instance, on the basis of *Cry Freedom*, one student created a collage using a picture of a character, a quote and headlines from American newspapers of the time. Another one designed a collage of pictures of South Africa from 1952 to 1978. Yet another one made a comparative chart involving a sign from those times (“White area-Blanke gebied”) and a current controversial tweet by South African singer and songwriter Steve Hofmeyr stating that “Blacks were the architects of Apartheid” (2016). In the descriptive log accompanying this representation, the student expressed that “It seems that *some people believe* there is no such discrimination against black people *because* apartheid ended in 1994 and *that’s not true*. For example, Steve Hofmeyr, the South African singer, claims black people caused the apartheid”. The italicised expressions are indicative of this student’s capacity for criticality, i.e. her ability to observe reality (‘apartheid ended in 1994’), critically reflect on a perspective (‘some people believe’), challenge it (‘that’s not true’) and support it (‘for example’). Similarly, another student juxtaposed a photo of an adolescent in 1960 holding a sign that reads “We won’t go to school with negroes” and a current photo of a banner in a street demonstration with the slogan “murdered by police” and showing 27 images of black people who have lost their lives in police incidents in the US. In her descriptive log, she stated her conclusion: “The picture shows us that discrimination, segregation and violence against black people remains in 2016”.

In their representations, the students transformed text (novels, short stories, and films) through mode as shown before (e.g. to art work), but also in terms of time and place (juxtaposing the past narrated in the texts and their own present times, for instance in the example of Steve Hofmeyr and the current demonstrations in the US against the police due to racial prejudice), perspective and identity (by taking the side of slaves or blacks in absolutely all representations and bringing to their art work their own identifications with what matters in their view (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016).

To do this, students needed to engage in imaginative understanding or narrative understanding (Nussbaum, 2006), i.e. the ability to place oneself in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes. This ability is essential in intercultural citizenship education in the language classroom (Byram, 2008) and involves the skills of de-centring (i.e. moving away from one's own positions and perspectives) and perspective-taking (i.e. see through new lenses). In the descriptive logs, this ability is shown not only in the fact that students portrayed the perspectives of slaves or blacks but also in the sense of empathy that they developed. Linguistically, this is revealed for instance through the use of adjectives and expressions reflecting the harshness, cruelty and injustice the characters were undergoing: "the *cruel* way they were treated", "all the *spilled blood* of that black people", "the chains mean the *feeling of imprisonment* of the last ones [the powerless]". In imaginative understanding (Nussbaum, 2006) and intercultural understanding (Byram, 2008), emotion and affect play a key role in this process of 'imagining' the 'other' (Dewaele, 2013; Kramsch, 1995).

Finally, the third capacity for democratic citizenship that we observed is world citizenship, defined as "an ability to see themselves [students] as not simply citizens of some local region or group, but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 389). All 45 students departed from the texts but moved beyond by reflecting on humankind in general. For example, in the following representation (Figure 1), this student set out from a quote by Biko in *Cry Freedom* in order to contrast segregation and violation of rights in the Apartheid and the values of equality and freedom. She represented these values in the image of the two characters, Biko and Woods, hugging in unity and "they are inside the eye as something that, by then, is just an illusion since they live in Apartheid" (descriptive log).

Figure 1. Multimodal representation based on *Cry Freedom*.



This student closed her descriptive log with a message that restores the humanness that she sees as missing in the film (captured by the illusion suggested by the eye): “this thing of racism and people thinking in terms of superiority is seen everywhere (...) I think that if people could see things in a kinder way, EVERYTHING would be different in a lot of aspects” (her emphasis).

In the representations, some students portrayed the message they wished to transmit resorting to signs (“End racism thru unity”, Figure 2; “[Stop] Racism”; “integration not segregation”, Figure 3) and the use of imperatives indicates that they were addressing a general audience with the aim of instilling change by raising the awareness of people today about the values that matter in a democratic society.

Figure 2. Awareness-raising multimodal representation

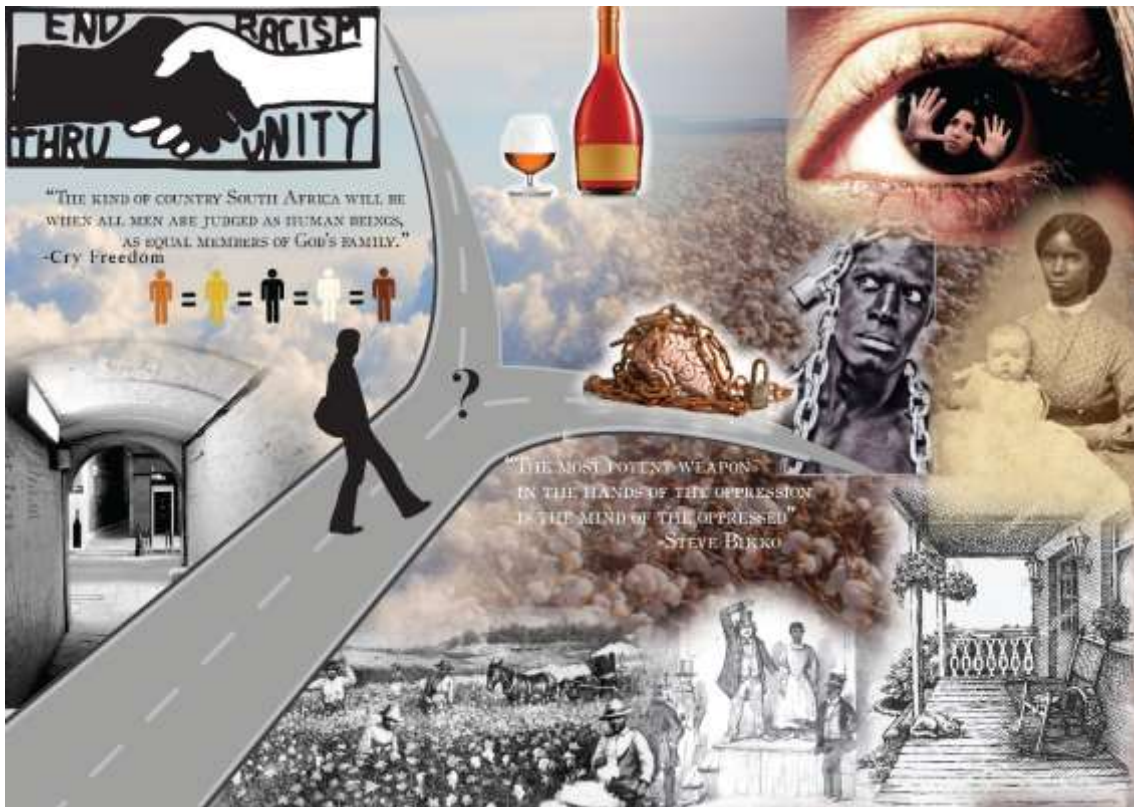


Figure 3. Multimodal representation with a call for unity



Overall, our study contradicts Thomas and Stornaiuolo's (2016, p. 330) observation that "there is little emphasis on the creative capacities of making meaning beyond the limitations of the four corners of the text" as this project revealed "the ways young people engage in



reading practices that position them at the centre of their literate worlds (p. 318). In our project, the three capacities for the development of democratic values and competences that lead to quality education in higher education, namely criticality, imaginative understanding and world citizenship (Nussbaum, 2006), were embodied in a pedagogy that frame[d] teaching and learning as centrally concerned with nurturing the language, literacy, and cultural practices youth bring with them, moving beyond the four corners of texts to explore the intersections between identities, contexts, and author/reader/text transactions” (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 330). This is the “creative appropriation and open-ended interpretation” referred to by Widdowson (2011, personal communication).

Finally, Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016, p. 323) “characterize bending as agentive reader responses” that might have activist purposes. Activism here is a form of political engagement through which students, working in collaboration with others, take some civic or social action in the world (Byram, 2008). In this project, this action in the world was materialized in the multimodal representations that students created, which were intended to raise the awareness of people today about human rights violations in the past and at present. At this point, Byram’s (2014) educational view of language teaching (beyond the instrumental) explicitly links with Barnett’s (2011) ecological conceptualisation of higher education that bridges the university with the community. The students took part in *Circo Poético*, a poetry exhibition and fair organized for the first time by their university in 2016 with the aim of building bridges between poetry and art (understood as performative and multimodal) and the local community. The representations and descriptive logs were displayed in a special corner of the students’ building at the School of Humanities and Sciences of Education on November 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Students welcomed peers, teachers and the community in general and shared their project. In so doing, they contributed to restoring the humanness lost in the novels, short stories and films they had read as part of their language course by addressing issues of human rights both locally and globally, across perspectives, times and places, in a variety of modes.

## **6. Conclusion**

This literature workshop introduced an intercultural citizenship and human rights perspective within a regular language course for future teachers/translators of English at a local university in 2016. Designed as a task and theme based project and case study, findings show that students engaged in critical imaginative understanding, an essential capacity in the development of democratic citizenship and the provision of quality education in higher education.

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