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Literature and social change: engaging students with current issues in our midst

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Abstract

In this action research, we relate literature with everyday realities. Students have the perception that literature is something remote and unconnected to their lives. By determining the awareness and sensitivity of students about current news relating to gender issues, which is the focus of the course “Gender Identities: Malaysian Perspectives,” they will then be taken through a series of tasks to show connections between texts and society. More importantly, at the end of the action plan programme, the students are capable of identifying issues which can bring about social change in their communities.

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1. Introduction

In the first semester of the third year, Bachelor of Arts undergraduates majoring in literary studies at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, take a compulsory course entitled “Gender Identities: Malaysian Perspectives” which covers theories of gender identities with an orientation which would allow them to see constructions of gender from different standpoints which may include religious perspectives, racial norms and practices, political affiliations and personal convictions. The course stretches over fourteen weeks which include weekly lectures and tutorials. The assessments comprise individual essays, oral presentation, and two projects one of which requires the students to work in pairs, and another task which requires them to work in groups of four. They are also required to sit for a final examination at the end of the semester. Therefore, a wide range of literary texts from local and abroad which form the syllabus, and activities which encompasses individual and team work as well as oral presentation ideally should allow for students to refine their writing, speaking and collaborative skills before their graduation.

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Prior to commencement of class, the students were asked about their awareness of current events related to gender issues which they have read either in the newspapers, blogs or any other medium. Based on their responses, many of them were unaware of several important issues such as domestic violence, drug mules involving women, trafficking of women, sex reassignment and its problems in Malaysia as well as the glass ceiling involving women in decision-making positions. Many of these issues appear daily in the newspapers but the students paid scant attention to these matters.

2. Literature Review

As teachers with feminist convictions, it is important to deal with some of these issues in the literature classroom to raise their awareness of current situations which will become critical in the future if their young minds are insensitive to these issues. As Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2011: 89) argues, “what we teach in class be it literature or languages should coincide with issues that act in response to many burning problems in the world today”. Similarly, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Noraini Md Yusof, Shahizah Ismail Hamdan and Raihanah M. M. (2011: 420) have also stressed that many of the students are “well acquainted with various Western theorizing, but they are not able to adapt these theories to local texts.” More importantly, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Imran Ho-Abdullah and Noraini Md Yusof (2011: 1857) have shown that

“pressing” matters such as attention to the mechanics of texts is privileged over awareness of social issues in our daily lives. This situation is not entirely unjustified, given that in a literature classroom, students should be taught the skills to analyse texts in terms of their plots, points of view, narrative styles, characterization, use of symbols and themes. Since literary works are mimetic of the realities of our daily lives, they actually present an excellent opportunity to relate texts with current contexts.

With this current scenario in mind students’ engagement with current issues and the inculcation of a critical and meaningful response to these issues were incorporated in the group projects assigned to the students in the course.

Teaching literature can be combined with raising awareness of students. In his literature class, Mark Jackett (2007) teaches a young adult novel written by Laurie Halse Anderson entitled *Speak* which describes a story of a ninth-grade girl, Melinda, who has been raped by a senior boy. A Jackett (2007:102) argues:

I would rather have them experience a little awkwardness in a ninth-grade English class than find themselves in a situation in their lives similar to Melinda’s. I want students to be able to identify and prevent sexual harassment in their school and community. I also want them to know how to respond if they or someone they know is raped or sexually assaulted.

Jackett’s initiative arises out of the concern with rape statistics in America. By discussing the difficult issue through a literary text, he was able to inspire his students to open up and to be aware of dangers lurking within their surroundings. Also, David H. Stringer (1984: 32) has proposed most eloquently that “in our changing yet narrowing world, the teaching of the humanities finds one powerful justification, it teaches students how to think.” Therefore, it is imperative that the literature classroom takes on the role of an agent of change which raises awareness and nurtures social change for the betterment of society.

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