

Revising Teaching Components of an American Literature Course with Students

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This presentation will show how a literature course which I taught to 3rd and 4th year English majors evolved over four years' time, from being a small discussion-based class taught the first two years, to a medium-sized computer-based class using the manaba online instructional system being implemented in universities in Japan. I also show how the course moved from being teacher-fronted to one more attuned to students, who helped me revise my teaching format, assessment and lesson dynamics.

The graphic novel "American Born Chinese" by Gene Luen Yang (2006) consists of three tales of identity and prejudice interlinked with an American-born Chinese boy's childhood years, first in San Francisco's Chinatown and later in a mostly white school setting. This novel mirrored my own experience as a second generation Japanese in California. I regarded the book to be taught as intensive reading, which "involves learners reading in detail with specific learning aims and tasks" (British Council, 2008), as I wanted students to understand deeply the present lives of American-born Asians in the United States and grasp more fully the differences between comics and *manga*.

The first two years I taught this course to very small classes of less than ten students. Students read each chapter, asked questions, and discussed themes. I did not engage in much self-reflection other than to gauge the novel's language level difficulty, which is the equivalent of early American high school level. Two years later, when my department decided more students should be enrolled, I proposed to teach it as a web-based course, which required the use of computers and limited the number of students in such rooms.

In the first year of web-based instruction, I taught the course mainly in lecture style because I was convinced that students needed a great amount of cultural input. I put lots of material online, with links to YouTube videos and websites. Students completed chapter comprehension exercises and took quizzes online during lessons. In time I became aware of a growing disconnect between my efforts and students' satisfaction.

Brookfield (1995) encourages teachers to engage in critical reflection through four lenses: self, colleagues, research literature, and students (Miller, 2010). As for myself, I saw my situation as a puzzle rather than as a problem, along the lines of exploratory practice (Allwright and Hanks, 2009). Regarding collegial experiences, I could count on my departmental peers for advice. I have offered every year my course as an open class for faculty development. I am also a member of the Learner Development (LD) SIG which researches practices that support autonomous learning and teaching. I read works (Barkley et. al 2005; Ashwell et. al 2014) that promote collaborative learning between students. What remained was how to elicit student opinions.

I elicited these opinions through the course questionnaire endemically used in universities in Japan. Teachers regard it as an unnecessary evil obstacle to teaching, and dread reading haphazard and insensitive student comments. Nevertheless, I saw the questionnaire as the best instrument to elicit such views. I asked students to write honest and explicit comments about the class dynamics and use of the manaba learning system. I received a detailed list of responses full of constructive criticisms. I felt confounded to fully understand them due to my primitive Japanese language skills and sensitive ego, but I was determined to use the questionnaire as a catalyst for change.

I asked several students who took this class to go through the list of student responses in order to identify problems and solutions. The students identified two major problems: the lack of organized class discussions, and my inefficient use of the manaba system, particularly in regards to administering quizzes. The solutions they proposed were 1) a small-group discussion activity with assigned roles, and 2) judicious use of the manaba system with tests and content pages. The students presented these problems and solutions at the initial Creating Community: Learning Together LD-SIG conference held in Tokyo in December 2014.

I adopted these two student-developed solutions into my 2nd year teaching this course using manaba. Approximately the same number of students enrolled. In every lesson, I implemented the role-based discussion activity based on themes of the novel and in which partners were changed every several weeks. I also reduced the number of online homework assignments and had students take quizzes on their own time outside of the lessons. I still had students read every chapter of the novel by themselves.

Again, I asked students to write detailed answers on the course questionnaires, and enlisted students who took this year's course to read the responses and discern solutions. To my surprise, the discussion activity was negatively viewed, because of students who came without reading the chapters and were unable to play their role in the discussion. Also, the discussion time allocated was too long. As for the manaba system, there were still complaints with test administration problems and heavy workload. The students presented their solutions at the 2nd Creating Community: Learning Together LD-SIG conference held in December 2015.

Through the lens of critical self-reflection, my teaching has improved by proactively using the university course questionnaire learner comments to engage learners to read these comments, identify problems, construct solutions, and present these in a public forum. By becoming more sensitive to the needs and preferences of students, and empower them, I have developed new ways of seeing and taking action. This is the kind of learning that brings faculty development into active interplay with students to view their learning with the same lens as teachers, and vice versa.

References

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Bio: Ken Ikeda belongs to the Department of English at Otsuma Women's University in Tokyo. His current research interests are on second language identities of Japanese learners and undergraduate thesis supervision in Japan. He would like to have more time writing stories, playing the piano, and enjoying his wife's company.