

Let's Perform: Making Literature Education Alive

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Abstract

The benefits of using performance in literature education are well documented. However, many teachers are hesitant to implement them in their classrooms. Commonly, this is because these teachers feel they don't know enough about how to fairly assess a student's performance (Airasian, 1994). This paper delineates and discusses strategies for making literary texts accessible by appealing to the learner's imagination, as well as to develop insights related to the use of performance in literature education. The aim is to go beyond the choice of handy, traditional theatre scripts or monologues and to make any genre of literature more "dramatic" by looking for the basic ingredients usually associated with a theatrical performance. This will include the use of various performance activities including readers' theatre, choral reading, jazz chants, puppetry, dramatization, story telling, role play as well as spontaneous improvisations. The study use a qualitative approach to deepen the understanding of the participants experience and perceptions of using performance to activate meaning making with various interpretation of the texts.

The benefits of using performance in literature education are well documented. However, many teachers are hesitant to implement them in their classrooms. Commonly, this is because these teachers feel they don't know enough about how to fairly assess a student's performance (Airasian, 1994). This paper delineates and discusses strategies for making literary texts accessible by appealing to the learner's imagination, as well as to develop insights related to the use of performance in literature education. The aim is to go beyond the choice of handy, traditional theatre scripts or monologues and to make any genre of literature more "dramatic" by looking for the basic ingredients usually associated with a theatrical performance. This will include the use of various performance activities including readers' theatre, choral reading, jazz chants, puppetry, dramatization, story telling, role play as well as spontaneous improvisations. The study use a qualitative approach to deepen the understanding of the participants experience and perceptions of using performance to activate meaning making with various interpretation of the texts.

Keywords: literature – performance – aesthetic – creativity - collaborative

Introduction

Finding new ways for students to explore, experience, and analyze literature poses a continual challenge for most teachers of literature (Corcoran, 1987). Teachers need to develop stimulating literary experiences to create divergent and critical thinkers. Students' exposure to different literature-based activities

helps them to '*understand that there are many ways to know texts, to read and interpret them*' (Rosenblatt, 1978). However, most teachers and students believe that learners of literature require a set of sophisticated language skills and language proficiency in order to comprehend literary texts. As for the meaning of the texts, it is believed that the teachers' interpretations are the most correct and acceptable answer.

Along with these sets of beliefs towards literature, Carvalho and Coutinho's (2001) studies indicated that most students do not appreciate the reading of literary texts and they build an emotional and critical distance towards literary texts. These findings may be true whereby fear towards literature creates anxiety in the teaching and learning of literature. However, Zyngier (2000) argues that the problem is that the teaching of literature has remained on the instructional level, on '*how to do things with the texts using certain tools, without asking the students to question and position themselves in relation to what they (have) experience(d)*' in their reading. These discussions are similar to Miall's (1996) claims that '*teachers are laying waste students' experience of literature*' and most teachers '*cut (off) every shoot of literary interest*' in students. As Miall (1990) states, effective teaching of literature must be based on a better understanding of the process of the readers' responses.

Research in higher education (Becker, 1997; Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Bradford and Peck, 1997; Hake, 1998; Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991; McKeachie, Pintrich, 2002; Silberman, 1996) shows that effective instructors select alternative strategies that involve students as active participants in the learning process. However, in relation to teaching literature, most educators may resort to the use of comprehension questions and essay writing in making students understand and appreciate the literary texts studied (Wilhelm, 1997). Some may feel that these are the only ways to demonstrate students' understanding. As a result, some students may think that literature is a subject that requires good language proficiency in order to display their comprehension. Thus, the lack of language proficiency may inhibit some students from expressing their appreciation of the texts through either verbal or written form. However, literature could be appreciated in many different ways for instance through the use of visual representation. As Corcoran (1987) suggests, the use of '*picturing and imaging*' as well as '*mental picture*' accentuate meaning making and help readers to make sense of the text read.

According to Hymes (1972), the emphasis is from what is possible in communication to what is appropriate or what is performed. Where literature has been introduced into the foreign language classroom as a means of furthering language development, it has also influenced by theories of language acquisition stressing the importance of attention to meaning rather than the form. Guy Cook (1994) adds that the literary experience is not associated with any particular text, but with the interaction of text and individual. As Bohm (1998:86) says, each human being is artist, scientist and mathematician all in one, in the sense that he is most profoundly concerned with aesthetic and emotional fitting, with practical and functional fitting, with universal rational fitting and more generally, with fitting between his world view and his overall experience with the reality in which he lives.

Chomsky (1972:100) states that the normal use of language is, in this sense, a creative activity. This creative aspect of normal language use is one fundamental factor that distinguishes human language from any known system of animal communication. The commitment to 'creativity' and 'aesthetic' as common and inclusive is anticipated in some areas of social science research. Paul Willis and others' *Common Culture* (1990) derives from a collaborative action research and participant observer project premised upon what the authors call 'grounded aesthetics'. This is defined as 'symbolic activity and transformation in concrete named situations' (Willis et. al 1990:21-6) and serves to underpin a thesis on 'everyday life and symbolic creativity' (pp 128-52).

Robert Sternberg (1993:3) claims that creativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. adaptive concerning task constraints). Harrington in Runco and Albert 1990:143-69 claims that creativity basically means 'operating together' and can be more precisely defined as working and playing with and with respect to others. Willis (1990) agrees that it is a common culture and involves 'working and playing' and 'work as play'.

According to Rob Pope (2002), genres are kinds, categories or types of cultural product and process – including texts. There should be same basic similarity of form and function in the kinds of cultural product or activity, notwithstanding all the differences there inevitably are between one item and another. The term 'work at play' represents lives which are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols through which the individuals and group seeks creatively to establish their presence, identity and meaning. He suggested a working model of the texts as products and processes.

Papers will outline the issue addressed and research questions, the literature and background to the topic, the analytical frame, the methodology and the research results.

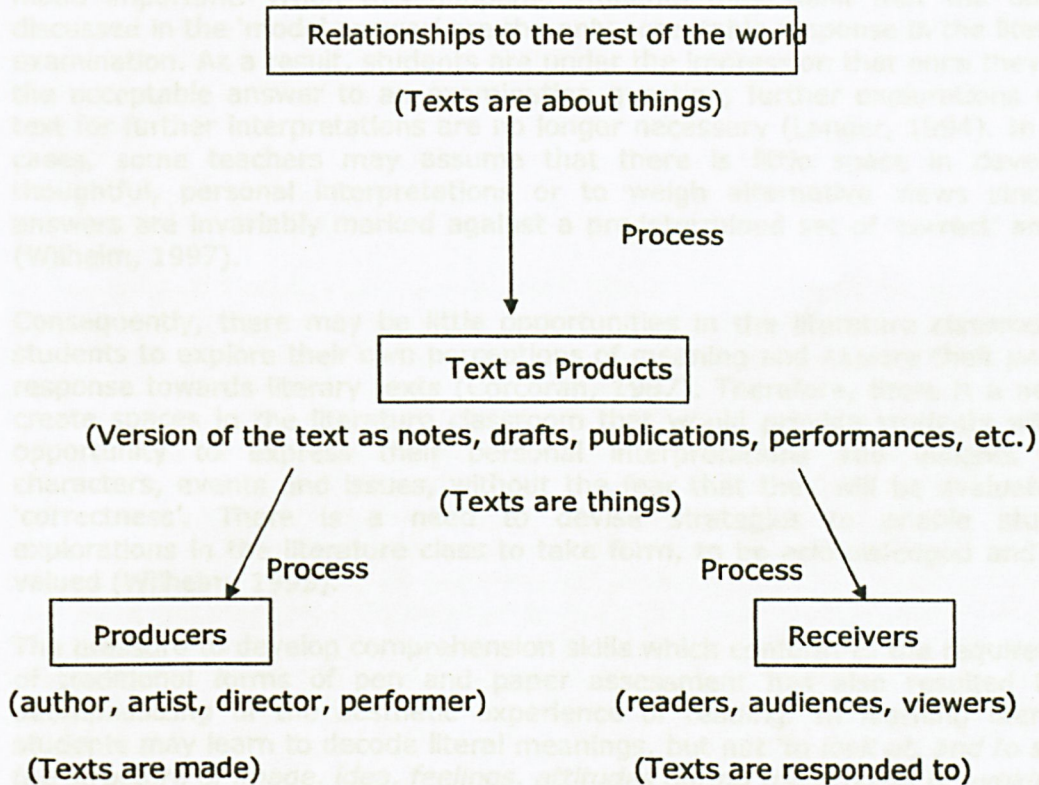
1. The Study

Literature is read to understand the human experience across time and place (Corcoran, 1987). Although students may be familiar with literary genres such as poetry, short story and drama, some may claim that they do not fully enjoy or understand the literary texts read. This may be true because they have not yet learned strategies for reading a variety of literary texts (Wilhelm, 1995). These students may think that reading literature merely involves identifying plot, setting, characters and themes.

Students need strategies that help them to read not only the words on the page but also read between and beyond the lines (Wilhelm, 1997). They need to know the specialized language of literary texts. Figurative language, writing style, irony, point of view and theme take on particular meanings when employed in literary genres. Therefore, reading and understanding literary texts are two complex processes and students need certain tools to help them to comprehend the content and further appreciate the texts read (Wilhelm, 1997). Hence, the researcher intended to use performance to help students to develop their

understanding and response towards literary texts. It is hoped that these intentions would enhance students' perspectives towards literary texts and extend their interpretive abilities. Teachers could assist students to get the most out of literary texts and eventually enjoy reading them.

Figure 1: A working model of the text as products and processes



Based on the conversations with the teachers in a secondary school, they felt that the students encounter difficulties in comprehending the content of the literary texts. Some students are unable to visualise and respond to the content of the literary texts. In relation to this, Ghanaguru (2005) states that '*the manner in which (students) dissect and analyse the text is entirely based on their understanding (of the) content and language*'. Therefore, there is a need to find ways to help them to comprehend and visualise the content of the literary texts and assist students to overcome this problem.

In addition, there is relentless pressure faced in preparing the students to 'get it right' for the examination (Wilhelm, 1997). This situation, where a right answer takes precedence over literary exploration is hardly unique. Research in literary pedagogy has indicated that literature is often taught and tested in a non-literary manner, as though there is only one right answer after reading a literary text (Langer, 1994). Purves (1993) supports these findings whereby literature tests

often treat literature as content which consists of factual answers, rather than plucking out possibilities to ponder over or interpretations to develop and questions to defend. Another research conducted by Applebee (1993) has indicated that literature is often taught with the assumption that there is a point or predetermined interpretation that the reader must build upon.

Thus, in preparing students for the literature examination, some teachers may compel students to read for comprehension, instead of exploring their responses and developing interpretations as the primary focus of the literature lesson (Wilhelm, 1997). During revision, some teachers may suggest 'model answers' for students to memorize whereby revising the content of the literary texts are made important. When this happens, students may think that the answers discussed in the 'model answer' are the only acceptable response in the literature examination. As a result, students are under the impression that once they learn the acceptable answer to an examination question, further explorations of the text for further interpretations are no longer necessary (Langer, 1994). In some cases, some teachers may assume that there is little space in developing thoughtful, personal interpretations or to weigh alternative views since the answers are invariably marked against a predetermined set of 'correct' answers (Wilhelm, 1997).

Consequently, there may be little opportunities in the literature classroom for students to explore their own perceptions of meaning and explore their personal response towards literary texts (Corcoran, 1987). Therefore, there is a need to create spaces in the literature classroom that would provide students with the opportunity to express their personal interpretations and insights about characters, events and issues, without the fear that they will be evaluated for 'correctness'. There is a need to devise strategies to enable students' explorations in the literature class to take form, to be acknowledged and to be valued (Wilhelm, 1995).

The pressure to develop comprehension skills which conform to the requirements of traditional forms of pen and paper assessment has also resulted in the deemphasizing of the aesthetic experience of reading. In learning literature, students may learn to decode literal meanings, but not *'to look at, and to savour the structure of image, idea, feelings, attitudes during the process of evoking the literary experience from the text'* (Rosenblatt, 1968). Literary reading, as a result, has lost its sense of *'literariness'*. Therefore, there is a need to connect students with the aesthetic form of reading which, in contrast to informational reading, involves the evocation of feelings, attitudes, emotions and memories. Hence, strategies that allow for these elements of evocation to be expressed in literary response need to be developed.

In the light of the issues discussed earlier, there is a need to approach the teaching and learning of literature in a motivating and pleasurable way. The approach need to draw students into literary reading and help them see the relevance of literature in their lives and their learning (Wilhelm, 1997). It needs to help students to respond to literature in ways that engage them and enable them to experience its joy, pleasure and enchantment. Besides that, there is a need to devise an approach that provides the opportunities for the students to connect and respond to literature in affectively and personally challenging ways (Collie & Slater, 1987). This implies that there is a pressing need to develop strategies in the classroom that support the development of students' affective

engagement to literature, which at present, may at times be overlooked in the literature classroom.

In relation to learning, Gardner's (1999) theory of multiple intelligences strongly suggests that there are no inherently superior ways of learning or displaying understanding. However, some teachers may insist upon written or verbal forms as proof of understanding. In this way, students who do not provide sufficient response are marginalized in the literary process because they have not adequately developed the capacities for verbal or written display (Wilhelm, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary to maintain a less rigid stance on approved ways of knowing whereby it allows students to penetrate into the crucial entry points of enriched experiences related to literary texts. There is also a need for the present study to explore and demonstrate the value of creating avenues that increase access into literary texts and develop greater participation in the literary experience.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

In the light of the challenges discussed above, the present study intends to explore the use of performance as a tool to enhance students' understanding towards the content of literary texts. Performance is used to create greater opportunities for students to engage themselves in meaningful transactions with literature. Thus, the study also focuses on creating opportunities which help the student teachers to develop a wider repertoire of response moves through the integrated use of art and language. The study also aims to determine the ways in which performance can enable them to develop and display their understanding of literary texts. The study also intends to discover and describe the participants' response towards the use of performance in enhancing their understanding in visualising the content of literary texts. The study also seeks to enable students to explore a range of possible meanings and interpretations and to exercise freedom and spontaneity in their response. Through creative dramatics, students should enhance their vocal-physical expressive skill, imaginative abilities, and critical thinking.

1.2 The research questions

The research questions are formed to clarify student teachers' experience and perception on learning literature with the use of performance in the classroom. Questions are also formulated to discover the processes that occur during the production of the performance in the teaching and learning process. The research questions of this study are as the following:

- (1) Based on the student teachers experience in their practical teaching in schools, what is the teaching and learning situation in a literature classroom?
- (2) What are their perception of teaching literature in schools?
- (3) How was the students' response to their teaching in the literature classroom?
- (4) From the trainee teachers point of view, is there any aspect of creativity instilled in the teaching and learning process?

- (5) What are the students perception of teaching a literature class after being introduce to performance?
- (6) What are the processes involved during the production of a performance?
- (7) What are their experiences during the production?
- (8) What are the implications to the teaching and learning process when using performance in the literature component classroom?

It is hoped that this research can develop a climate conducive to critical and creative reflection, so that educators can produce quality teachers who have knowledge and values to overcome challenges in the real world with appropriate solutions.

2. Research Design

A qualitative research methodology was selected to help deepen the understanding of how literature collage facilitates and extends the students' comprehension of literary texts. This is to further enable the researcher to freely explore, discover, analyze and deeply probe into the participants' response and viewpoints in relation to the use of literature collage in enhancing their understanding of literary texts. In relation to the data collection of this study, the researcher conducted literature sessions which include the production of the literature collage and interview sessions with the key participants. These are to develop 'in-depth understanding' of the case study (Creswell, 2005).

2.1 Research Site

The study was conducted in the Faculty of Education in a university which is situated at the heart of Kuala Lumpur. The major courses offered at the Department of Language and Literacy here mainly trains experienced teachers as well as fresh school leavers in courses related to Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). The Foundation Course primarily aims to develop students' English Language proficiency, broaden and deepen their knowledge in relevant content areas and enhancing their creative and critical thinking skills. Besides the foundation courses, the TESL students are offered four options for their second method, which they have to choose one in their very first semester. The options are as follows;

- i. Literature Education
- ii. Moral Education
- iii. Arts Education
- iv. Physical and Health Education

Those who choose Literature Education learn courses on literature, such as Introduction in Literature Education during their first year and Performance in Literature Education in their final year. In between, the students also study courses based on Shakespeare writings like Poetry and Drama.

2.2 The Participants

The participants are the trainee teachers who come back from their practical teaching in school. The rationale of choosing them as participants is that they have a background knowledge of how a literature classroom in schools. They also have the awareness of the challenges that a literature teacher faces in the real situation. They are in their final semester and study Performance in Literature Education as one of their final year papers.

3. Why Teach Performance?

"The future of our nation depends on our ability to create-and to be creative. During the coming decades our most important national resources will be human resources. If our nation is to continue to meet the challenges of the future, today's schools need to develop creative leaders."
From *Performing together: The Arts and Education*, jointly published by The American Association of School Administrators, The Alliance for Education and The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1985.

3.1 The definitions

According to Nunan (1989:10), a task can be described as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. Such approving formulations of desirable language teaching activity seem to receive almost universal acceptance, and are very seldom subjected to scrutiny.

In simple words, performance includes the use of activities such as readers' theatre, coral reading, jazz chants, puppetry, dramatization, story telling role-play as well as spontaneous improvisations. This is a strategy for making literary texts accessible by appealing to the learner's imagination, as well as to develop insights related to the use of performance in literature education. The aim is to go beyond the choice of handy, traditional theatre scripts or monologues and to make any genre of literature more "dramatic" by looking at the basic ingredients usually associated with a theatrical performance:

- i. inherent dramatic appeal
- ii. degree of action
- iii. quality of visual images
- iv. catalogue of attitudes, actions or moods
- v. nature of the language
- vi. sequence of events and incidents; and
- vii. three-dimensional character portrait

3.2 The implications

Through creative dramatics, performances for peers and through observations and discussions of videotaped and live performances, the course enhances the student teachers vocal-physical expressive skill, imaginative abilities, and critical thinking. Further, lectures, discussions, performances, and readings in and outside of class helps students appreciate and understand literature in a special way.

Upon completion of Performance in Literature Education course, the student teachers are able to 1) define their personal aesthetic of performance in literature, 2) use creative dramatics exercises to regain the spirit of childhood and enhance imagination, 3) perform different genres of literature to reach, stimulate, and excite children and adults, 4) increase their knowledge of literature and performance in general as a result of understanding and appreciating the performance of children's literature.

4. The Participants' Feedback

Interviews and observations were carried out to answer the research questions formulated. Participants also keep journal entries right from the beginning of their semester when they first enrolled the course.

Most participants felt performance could challenge students' perceptions about their world and about themselves. Dramatic exploration could provide them with an outlet for emotions, thoughts, and dreams that they might not otherwise have means to express. They could explore a new role, try out and experiment with various personal choices and solutions to very real problems-problems from their own life, or problems faced by characters in literature.

As for drama in particular, it allowed them to communicate with and understand others in new ways. Perhaps more than any other art form, drama also provided training in the very practical aspects of communication so necessary in today's increasingly information-centered world. They were now more persuasive in their communications, both written and oral, would be better able to put themselves into others' shoes and relate to them, and had a more positive, confident self image. They also learnt to work together, to cooperate, to find the best way for each member of a group to contribute, and to listen to and accept the viewpoints and contributions of others. No art form is more truly collaborative. It also helped them develop tolerance and empathy.

As mentioned earlier, before the student teachers were introduced to Performance in Literature Education, they had experienced their practical teaching in schools. Most of them had a tough time in the literature classroom. It was a big challenge to go through all the genres prescribed by the syllabus with the secondary school students who were not very keen to learn literature. From their experience, most teachers and students in schools percepts literature subject as boring and outdated.

After being introduced to this course in their final year, the student teachers were motivated to go back to school and teach literature. They believed their experience in Performance in Literature Education course would give ways to tackle the students to love the literature class. The enjoyable learning strategies through performance could broaden the range of permitted interactional patterns within the classroom. Besides promoting critical and creative thinking skills,

performance could encourage the use of illustrative examples and reinstate rote learning.

5. Conclusion

Dewey (1958) argues that the restructuring of curricula and classrooms must provide an environment which is more likely to engage students in schooling than those provided by traditional teacher and content-centred instruction (Applebee, 1993). Therefore, the use of performance can be seen as an effort to create environments which produce engagement in learning.

Using the performance was part of an effort to provide alternative strategies that validate a form of knowing and exploring which help students to change their perception that there are 'correct' and 'incorrect' ways of responding to a text (Corcoran, 1987). Apparently, the students seem to understand that there were no inherently correct ways of responding. They assumed that there was room for them to explore and experiment, which was what they did. Performance also seemed to encourage risk taking. It was interesting that the students produced their pieces and shared their responses without much fear or doubt. They knew that it was unlikely that their response could be considered 'wrong' because the performance produced was their own work. Therefore, performance encouraged the students to freely explore, understand and express themselves (Wilhelm, 1995).

The findings from the study generated insights on the use of performance to enhance students' understanding of literary texts. One of the most significant notions that emerged repeatedly over the course of the study was the idea of 'opportunity'. It suggested that the students needed the opportunity to think and learn independently. The students seemed to already possess a tremendous amount of knowledge, experiences, capabilities, talents and interests and even literary awareness. They merely required an outlet for display. What the students crucially needed were opportunities that enabled them to display their latent potential (Sebesta, Monson & Senn, 1995). When the students were provided with the desired opportunities to express their responses to literature, the results surprised even the students themselves. Performance seemed to have effectively impacted students' learning in several ways.

As the students shared their experiences, thoughts and successful moments in producing each performance, the researcher sees the potentials offered in utilizing performance to teach students to read and appreciate literary texts. It had been an eye opener for the researcher and the key participants at how effective various performance could work as a catalyst of thinking and appreciating literary texts. It is suggested that teachers could adopt the idea of using performance in their literature classroom to allow students to express their thoughts, ideas and further appreciate the literary texts.

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