Life Imitates Lit: A Road Trip to Cultural Understanding

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Life Imitates Lit: A Road Trip to Cultural Understanding
Overview

World Lit. II (Eng. 202) is a course designed to familiarize students with literature from other cultures, sharpening their critical thinking skills by exposing them to a range of worldviews while inviting them to explore what it means to be human. Across the discipline, such courses are conventionally taught so as to cultivate students' skills in interpretation and analysis and to reinforce their ability to construct clear and logically supported written arguments. Analysis and argumentation are characteristically Western approaches to literature. My project, based on "The Narrow Road of the Interior" by 17th-century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho (renowned as a master of the poetic form haiku), introduced students to an Eastern text and invited them to demonstrate mastery of the material by a classically Eastern means: imitation.

Description of the Project

Step 1: Cultural Background. In our first unit (Weeks 1-5), I included two Japanese short stories: "The American School" (1954) by Nobuo Kojima and "Child's Play" (1895) by Ichiyo Higuchi. We studied three concepts that are key to understanding Japanese culture: in-groups versus out-groups and how such affiliations are reflected in the Japanese language; saving face; and shame versus guilt cultures.

Step 2: The Text. In week 7, we began a 4-week unit entitled "Road Trips."

Day One: In the first of three class periods spent on Basho's "The Narrow Road of the Interior," a student group gave a presentation on the history and tenets of Buddhism. We returned to the Higuchi text briefly to look at elements of Buddhism in the story. Following this I gave a PowerPoint presentation on Shinto, the indigenous folk religion in Japan. For homework, students were assigned a discussion question on Basho's text for the next class.
**Day Two:** Basho's text is a narrative, interspersed with haiku, about a pilgrimage he took through the northern area of Honshu. Via PowerPoint I showed students photos that illustrated sites on Basho's pilgrimage. I also included pictures of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines to reinforce differences between the two religions. Small groups then met together and reported their answers to the following questions:

1. How do religious sites inform Basho's journey? What can you deduce about religious practices from the narrative? Where do you see evidences of Buddhist and Shinto beliefs?

2. What role does nature play in the narrative? How does the narrator respond to the landscape? What emotional states do natural phenomena evoke?

3. What role do historical sites play in the journey? How would you characterize the narrator's view of and relation to history and the passage of time?

4. What do you observe about social interactions in the narrative? What values seem to inform the way the narrator sizes up or assesses people he meets on the journey?

5. What is the function of literary allusion in the narrative? What type of scene or event provokes a literary allusion from the narrator? What does he assume about his audience?

For homework, each group was given a section of haiku from the second day's reading to study.

**Day Three:** We discussed the "Road Trip" assignment described below. Then we went over a handout that covered the history and conventions of haiku (a 3-line, 17-syllable poetic form that contains a Buddhist reflection on nature). We concluded by examining Basho's use of haiku, with each group reporting their observations about their assigned passages.

**Step 3: The Road Trip Assignment.** For the assignment, students were asked to:

--Write an imitation of Basho's "The Narrow Road of the Interior" by taking their own
"road trips" and then writing about them, drawing on their own culture, beliefs, and values while modeling their narrative on Basho's.

--Give attention to **nature, history, and religious values and beliefs** in their narrative and incorporate **literary allusions** (or song lyrics).

--Incorporate their own **original haiku** into the text for an A (4 haiku) or a B (3 haiku).

--Include **reflection** on the places, things, and people they encountered.

(Bolded elements above correspond to points of analysis or discussion of "Narrow Road")

I provided a list of local and regional sites of interest (e.g., parks, museums, burial grounds, battle sites, historic neighborhoods, and so on). The assignment was given out one week before fall break, and students were given 2 ½ weeks to complete it.

**Step 4: Further Development of the Road Trip Theme.** After fall break we spent four class periods discussing works that extended the "road trip" theme in widely differing directions: Lu Xun's "Upstairs in a Wineshop" (Chinese, 1924), Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" (English, 1798), and Tennyson's "Ulysses" (English, 1842).

**Step 5: Assessment.**

**Formal:** I created a checklist to help me track whether students met the criteria for the assignment, then graded the papers using the standard scoring guide I provide for in-class essays.

**Informal:** For class participation points, I asked students to complete 4 reflective questions about their writing process, making clear that their answers would not affect their grade:

1. In what ways did writing your own road trip narrative enable you to better understand Basho’s “The Narrow Road of the Interior”?

2. Was your narrative influenced in any ways by the other road trip literature we’ve read in this unit? Was it shaped by any other influences?
3. What did you enjoy most about your road trip experience? What do you like best about your essay?

4. What was the most important thing you learned from this assignment?

**Step 6: The Surprise Haiku Contest.** When I realized that students had done unexpectedly well with their haiku, I decided to reward them by devising a behind-the-scenes "contest." I selected the top 15-20 haiku for each class. Then Senior English major Josh Garcia and the Ink creative writing group served as judges, selecting first-, second-, and third-place winners for each class. A handout with the winners' haiku on one side and the finalists' haiku on the other was given out at the final exam. Winners were given bonus participation points.

**Innovations**

1. Imitation has fallen out of the modern repertoire of pedagogical strategies for the study of literature. If imitation exercises are ever used in writing classes, their focus is purely on style, not content. The western approach to literature privileges objective analysis. However, the classical Eastern approach to literature involves learning by imitating the masters. This Eastern tradition of imitation privileges *learning by doing*. My students gained a deeper understanding of the "road trip" theme by composing their own travel narratives.

2. Non-English majors at the sophomore level are not typically treated as if they are capable of sophisticated creative writing projects. But students proved far more adept at the creative elements of the assignment than I imagined. In order to include appropriate haiku in their narratives, they had to engage in reflection and make meaning of their experiences, distilling significant moments into 17-syllable "capsules." I was worried that having to write haiku would turn off some of the male students, but in fact one of the contest winners was a male non-major.

3. The assignment did not *replace* analysis with narrative; rather, it embedded analysis within
To fully carry out the directions for the assignment, students had to understand Basho's text at both a logical and emotional level. Moreover, students had to engage in synthesis in order to integrate all the required components into their papers.

4. By yoking Eastern literature ("Narrow Road" and "Upstairs in a Wineshop" with Western literature ("Tintern Abbey and "Ulysses") under the "road trip" theme and drawing on disparate genres, the unit forced students to think against the grain about the way literary constructs reflect human experience. (I have never heard of anyone treating "Tintern Abbey" as a travel narrative, and "Ulysses" is usually taught as an example of a dramatic monologue.)

5. In a pedagogical reverse-engineering strategy, students were invited to reflect on their own religious beliefs, cultural history, literary traditions, and response to nature--but only after having first been steeped in Japanese culture to give them “new eyes” by which to view their own.

**Assessment**

The assignment was successful by every measure. Engagement and energy levels were high. Students were excited about using their fall break experiences as the basis of their papers. And their overall performance was high: All grades fell into the A, B, or C range (in sharp contrast to the grade range for their two in-class analytical essays). One writer who got a D on her first essay earned an A on her road trip paper. Moreover, the "informal" evaluation questions revealed that many had drawn on concepts or stylistic elements from the other works we read.

**Improvements**

1. I would create a scoring guide specific to the assignment to remove any ambiguity about expectations for each grade category. 2. I would make the checklist I used for grading available. 3. I would encourage peer response groups to meet to encourage revision and editing. 4. I would not keep the haiku contest a secret; I might even consider having students submit entries.