

KNOWLEDGE, MOTIVATION
AND EMPOWERMENT:
Addressing learner diversity in
Literature in English

5/1/2011
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SCHOOL CONTEXT (1)

- Catholic girls' school
- 83 years of history
- EMI for all classes
- Long history of offering Literature in English from S1 upwards
- NSS: S4 & S5 around 30 students each
- Students better at speaking than writing
- Many enjoy drama activities

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SCHOOL CONTEXT (2)

- Challenge of Learner Diversity
- Flexibility offered to students – free choice of subjects & combination regardless of academic/ English ability
- Students inclined to take BAFS, Econ
- Lit. attracts very diverse students
- E.g. S5 class (1st NSS)
Form Ranking: ranged from 2nd to last 10th

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COMMON PROBLEMS FACED BY US LITERATURE TEACHERS (1)

- Tight schedule of teaching
 - Short stories – more challenging than expected
 - Unfamiliar contexts
 - Difficult language
 - Diverse themes and characters
- => understanding of the western culture

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COMMON PROBLEMS FACED BY US LITERATURE TEACHERS (2)

- Learner diversity
 - Background (personal experience, maturity level)
 - Ability (language / thinking)
 - Interest / Motivation
- Majority: average students
- Common practice: teachers cater for the majority to “even out” the differences

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MOTIVATION & LEARNER DIVERSITY

- "Certain motivational states interfere with learning. Two adverse conditions are especially dangerous: anxiety and boredom. Anxiety occurs primarily when teachers expect too much from students; boredom occurs when teachers expect too little. When curricular expectations are out of sync with students' abilities, not only does motivation decrease, but also achievement."
-- *Talented Teenagers* by Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, Whalen

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FOCUS

- To enhance learners' motivation through tiered activities to help weaker students overcome anxiety and eliminate boredom for the stronger ones in order to cater for learner diversity

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TIERED ACTIVITY

Varied levels of complexity to meet students' diverse needs:

- foundational to transformational
- concrete to abstract
- simple to complex
- smaller to greater leaps
- more structured to more open
- clearly defined to fuzzy
- less independent to more independent
- slower to quicker

<http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/siegle/epsy373/Tomlinson.htm>

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STORY 1: "THE LOTTERY"

Difficulties anticipated by the teacher:

- 1st short story – students new to the genre
- Manipulation of language – difficult to appreciate
- Irony involved: gap between the detached, objective descriptions that are seemingly joyful progressing to the revelation of a chilling, horrible human sacrifice

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DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED (1)

- Pre-teaching task
Students asked to read the story & give a photo report on The Lottery

Difficulties expressed by the students:

- Weaker ones unable to understand what happened to Mrs Hutchinson and why she died (they told me)
- The majority could not feel the horror of human sacrifice (from the drawings they had done)
- Strong ones were able to grasp the tone though they could not articulate how the atmosphere was built

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STRATEGY

Strategy: Role Play

Objectives:

- Enhance students' motivation through experiencing (particularly for weaker students)
- Help students understand the tension involved through identification with the characters
- Help students understand how the atmosphere was built through the use of setting, contrast and dialogue (particularly for stronger students)

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ROLE PLAY

- Everyone participates
- List out all the characters with the students
- Narration done by students and teacher together
- 5 students in a group
- Each group represents a household
- Students may decide who they are in the family through negotiation
- Act out the story
- Draw lots – first round by household heads to decide which family was picked
- 2nd round – by each member of the Hutchinson family

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ROLE PLAY AS A TIERED ACTIVITY

Procedures:

- Teachers set the scene by asking students to imagine and create a peaceful village through the use of very simple props
- All students became one of the villagers in *The Lottery* so all were witnesses to what happened in the story; they were thus not only able to understand the events that took place but also feel the feelings of the villagers, which would be shared by all, after the role play
- Students were also able to experience the transition from a peaceful day to a bloody sacrifice. For the able students, follow up questions were asked to prompt them to think about HOW such effect was created

Rationale: from concrete (actions/events) to abstract (the tension/moral implications of the story)

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FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS

- "It was a really horrifying experience. I nearly cried." by the student who acted as Mrs Hutchinson
- "I especially enjoy the time we pretend to be the characters in the Lottery. I can feel the tension inside the situation after we acted it out."
- "I enjoy the acting of the short stories most. It helps clear my concepts about the stories and it's different from learning by words in other lessons. It's fun!"

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STORY 2: SEVENTEEN SYLLABLES

Difficulties anticipated by the teacher:

- Unfamiliarity with the cultural context -- Japanese American: issues on cultural adaptation & racial problems
- Age difference: mom's urge to write poetry

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STRATEGY 1

Strategy: Exploring different perspectives

Objectives:

- Participate in activities that relate to students' daily life to help them understand the text
- Better understanding of the characters through adoption of perspectives similar to the characters'

Activities:

- 1) Snapshot of yourself when you are 40 years old
- 2) Interview your mom about her dreams

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PROBLEMS

- Intended outcome:
 - through the interviews and reflections, it was hoped that students would be able to relate the story to their daily life, look at the story from another perspective, understand it better and thus feel more interested in it
- Actual outcome:
 - Most students thought the story was BORING & grumbled when they heard we're going to discuss it
- Additional problem:
 - Did not address the learner differences issue as the teacher didn't actually know how much the students understood the text

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STRATEGY 2

Strategy: Question setting

Objectives:

- To assess students' understanding of the text
- To enable students to reflect upon the text
- To empower students as they become teachers setting questions on the text

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STRATEGY 2 (CONTINUED)

Procedures:

- Students pretended they were the teacher and designed a worksheet on Seventeen Syllables
- They were encouraged to give thought to the activity, as good and interesting questions would be selected for the class to answer
- Students would choose one question to answer
- The assignment would be marked by the student teacher
- Students shared and read their peers' work before the teacher gave her feedback

Rationale:

- From more structured to more open / less independent to more independent – Empowerment

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STRATEGY 2 (CONTINUED)

- Selection criteria: quality and types of questions, NOT ability of students
- A range of creative, analytical and role play questions were asked.
- There were also questions related to plot and character but there weren't any factual questions

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SELECTED QUESTIONS

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

- ✓ Find some information on the web about the history of Japanese immigrants in America and find out how it affects Japanese American women's father. What can you see about Tome's marriage? (Christine)

CHARACTERISATION

- ✓ If you were Rosie's mother, would you try to pursue your dream? Why? (Tiffany)

DISCUSSIONS RELATE TO LIFE

- ✓ List three cases that you think you feel deeply possessive about something/someone. What is your view towards loving relationship and marriage? Explain. (Winnie)

CREATIVE

- ✓ Create your own haiku about "tomatoes". (Yami)

ROLE PLAY

- ✓ Imagine you were Rosie. Tomorrow is Valentine's day and you decide to write a note to Jesus. What would you say? (Michaela)

ANALYTICAL

- ✓ Why was the story entitled "seventeen syllables"? (Michaela)

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

To KNOW:

- Need a solid understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of students
- Try to find out, if possible, their difficulties BEFORE teaching the text
- Provide students with the necessary support for understanding the cultural background of the story and the story itself
- Revisit specific parts of the text, where necessary, so students could fully appreciate it

To MOTIVATE:

- Develop or revise teaching plans (and strategies) making use of students' personal interests/ strengths to help bridge the gap
- Do tiered activities before exploration of the text

To enhance learning through EXPERIENCE & EMPOWERMENT:

- Design activities that engage students in the text and encourage a range of responses
- Provide feedback for improvement

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