
Conference Review

Review of Liberlit 4 Conference

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The fourth annual Liberlit conference was held on Friday, February 15, 2013, at Meiji Gakuin University, Shirokane Campus, conveniently located near Shinagawa station in Tokyo. According to the Liberlit Manifesto (2013), “LIBERLIT is an ongoing, constantly developing forum in which we can establish how, where, and why literature should rightly figure in Japan’s English curriculum.” The 2013 conference theme, *Only Connect: Teacher, Student, Text*, inspired participants to consider ways to engage learners with various forms of literature. The conference program showcased presentations on novels, graphic novels, short stories, poetry, drama, and TV series. As a result, I was eager to attend this conference and discover reading selections and activities that I might be able to use in a literature themed course that I teach at my institution.

After arriving at the conference site, the registration process was simple. Participants could pre-register online or on-site and the fee for the one-day conference was reasonable: 3000 yen for teachers and 1000 yen for students. The registration staff members were friendly and helpful. The conference was small and the proximity of the rooms allowed for socializing with colleagues and meeting fellow conference-goers. The conference venue consisted of four presentation rooms, a refreshment room, and a central lobby area. At 10 a.m., the conference began with a welcome message from the conference organizers, Paul Hullah and Michael Pronko. Then attendees could choose from concurrent sessions, with three to four 50-minute sessions occurring at once.

The first concurrent session that I was able to attend was “Teaching Langston Hughes” by Hugh Nicoll. He used audio recordings and his own dramatic

readings to demonstrate the rhythm of Langston Hughes' poetry. He also led an interesting discussion about the poems which allowed the audience members a chance to discuss their own ideas, interpretations and experiences, greatly adding to the value of the presentation. He also proposed how to introduce the poems to Japanese students. Suggested poems included "One Way Ticket," "Peace Conference in an American Town," and "Theme for English B." Nicholl's passion for these poems came through in his presentation.

The plenary address, "Reading Classic Novels in Language Classrooms" was delivered by Yoshifumi Saito, Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Tokyo. His enlightening presentation reviewed the chronology of literature in the language curriculum in Japan from the Meiji era to the present. In the second half of his presentation, he demonstrated how excerpts from the print and film versions of *Jane Eyre* and *Wild Sargasso Sea* can be used in the classroom for both language and literature oriented activities.

After lunch, I attended a session entitled "Highlighting Culture in Literature through the Culture-Clash Paradigm" by Scott Bean. Bean described how he highlights cultures in conflict in the following novels: *The Giver*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Farewell to Manzanar*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *The Pearl*. He also uses the graded readers *Brave New World* (Penguin) and *The Scarlet Letter* (Oxford Bookworms). He read sample passages and discussion questions that he has used in class to draw students' attention to the topic of culture, thus deepening their understanding of the characters, plots and themes.

Next, I attended "A Full Year Course in Poetry for Learners at All Levels" by John Rippey, poet and teacher. He shared his elective poetry course that covers a variety of 20th and 21st century American poetry and includes works by authors such as Jean Valentine and Lucille Clifton. This course involves two cycles: the Reading-Response Cycle in which students read and discuss poetry and the Creative Writing Cycle in which they recite, write, and translate poetry. He also shared his school's literary journal, *SOAR!*, to which his students contribute their original poetry, and the results of his students' course evaluations. Both of these artifacts provided concrete evidence that a poetry-based curriculum can be well received by students, and this inspired me to incorporate more poetry in my

literature classes.

The next presentation I attended was “Using Drama to Connect Students to Literature” by Frances Shiobara. She explained how to use drama in connection with short stories to increase the depth of understanding. Shiobara uses short stories selected from *Lucky Luke and other Very Short Stories* by Paul Stewart, *Taste and Other Tales* by Roald Dahl, and *New Yorkers*, from the Oxford Bookworms series. In order to complete the drama tasks, the students need to reread the story and think about the characters more deeply. In addition, the drama activities are memorable and enjoyable for the students. She uses drama activities, such as miming, puppet shows, role-plays, and skits. Audience members participated in a variety of activities, such as using facial expressions and voice to show emotion and feeling, which allowed us to experience the drama tasks from the students’ point of view and perhaps understand students’ feelings of engagement or reluctance for the tasks.

The final concurrent session I attended was “Using a Novel to Facilitate Critical Thinking” by Patrick McCoy. He discussed how to use critical thinking and novels, such as *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *Animal Farm*. He uses activities that correspond to various levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, such as quizzes, discussion questions, and small group presentations on the novel’s themes to engage students. Because I teach *The Great Gatsby* in my class, I was pleased to find new ways to approach the book.

There were plenty of other presentation titles that looked interesting: “Smartened-Up Literature: Can the Graphic Novel Take Comic Books to Literary Heights?” by Sean Chidlow, “Teaching Global Literature in English” by Ian Lambert, “A Frakin’ Good Tale: Using Battlestar Galactica to Teach Academic Discussion in an EAP Program at a Japanese University” by Patrick Judge, and “Selecting Japanese Literature in English Translation to Use: Yukio Mishima’s Swaddling Clothes” by Cheena Fujioka. It can be seen from the presentation titles that a variety of texts are being used in Japan.

To conclude the conference, “Lightning Discussion, Any Other Business, Concluding Remarks” were given by Michael Pronko and Paul Hullah. They invited comments on the conference and encouraged conference participants to

take an active role. They introduced further initiatives that may be undertaken by the Liberlit movement, such as conference proceedings, a journal, and an online resource center. More information can be found on the Liberlit Web site (<http://www.liberlit.com>)

Overall, the Liberlit conference is worth attending. It is a small, specialized conference, so all presentations are directly related to the teaching of literature, mostly at the tertiary level, and the presenters' passion for the written word was evident. Although three to four concurrent sessions made it difficult to decide which presentation to attend, if you are interested in literature, then you will not want to miss this chance to meet like-minded colleagues and discover new ways of using literature in the language classroom.

References

Liberlit Manifesto. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.liberlit.com/liberlit-manifesto>.

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Received: October 10, 2014

Accepted: October 17, 2014