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How to Teach Critical Thinking to Japanese University Students through Literature

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Summary

The Great Books Programs are an alternative way to teach language and literature to Japanese students. For the facilitator or discussion leader they are intellectually challenging and refreshing programs. To come away from a classroom session stimulated by students' ideas and their discussions is personally rewarding for any caring teacher. These programs are also exciting for the students. They enjoy the preparation and discussions, which seem to nurture in them a love of English, a desire to communicate, and self-confidence in their own reactions, analyses and well-reasoned answers.

Perhaps the most important objective of the Great Books Programs is that they develop in students the habits of inquiry and informed intellectual exchange essential to independent, critical thinking, and a lifetime of learning. These skills are the building blocks for effective citizenship in a free, democratic society.

Key Words: Great Books Programs

I. Introduction to the Great Books Programs

During the past eight years this author has been teaching literature, in English, to Japanese adults and university students in Sapporo.

These classes have taken place at the Hokkaido University of Education, Hokkaido University, Fuji Women's College, Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College, the NHK Culture Center and Hokkai Gakuen University. Thus, the students have come from a variety of educational institutions, such as national and private universities, and their ages have been between eighteen and eighty. Critical thinking and independent self-expression have been the focus of these literature courses, which have been designed around the Great Books Programs.

The Great Books Programs are an American approach to teaching reading, critical thinking, listening, speaking, and writing. They can be used with pre-readers in kindergarten as well as sophisticated scholars in adult reading groups. There are four programs: the Read-Aloud Program for pre-readers, Junior Great Books, and Introduction to Great Books for grades K-12, and the Great Books Program for university students and adults. These Great Books Programs were developed at the University of Chicago in the 1930s by the then chancellor of the university, Chancellor Robert Maynard Hutchins and Educator/Philosopher, Dr. Mortimer Adler. Since those days scholars have been refining these programs and are continually researching world literature for appropriate selections. The Great Books Foundation in Chicago, Illinois, established in 1947 as an independent, nonprofit, educational corporation, trains teachers, librarians, and interested volunteers to become Great Books Program discussion leaders. These facilitators must be prepared in a two-day intensive seminar, called the Basic Leader Training Course, in order to become certified discussion leaders, and thus to have access to the curriculum and teaching materials. In the United States, each year some 20,000 leaders are trained in the Basic Leader Training Course by the Great Books Foundation. In Japan, training seminars are being held in November

1996 in Hokkaido and increasingly will be offered throughout Japan.

Reading serious literature is a collaboration, a meeting of the minds, between the author and the reader. The author provides the reader with a literary text but does not tell the reader what to think about it: the reader must try to understand, to interpret, what the author is saying.[1] The Shared Inquiry Method, the pedagogical approach of the Great Books Programs, is a group process in which participants explore together the meaning of a literary work. During Shared Inquiry Discussions students help each other explore an author's intent or the meaning of a text. Trained leaders pose interpretive questions and readers share their interpretations and opinions with a group or a class. The leaders or facilitators guide readers in carrying their thinking to logical conclusions based upon the literary text. Leaders do not steer students towards a predetermined answer or even a group consensus; rather they help each participant to develop an individual point of view supported by reasons from the text. Each student brings his/her personal perspectives, values, and experiences to the literary work. Like a mirror, the text reflects to the reader his/her own feelings and thinking; however, all responses to interpretive questions must have reasons supported by the text. Individual opinions and independent critical thinking often stimulate other members of the group to rethink their own positions, sometimes deepening their understanding of the text, sometimes altering their original opinions.[2]

II. The Great Books Programs Curriculum Objectives

The Great Books Programs curriculum objectives are based on the idea that all students put forth their best intellectual efforts when they are presented with genuine problems of meaning. The following are

five curriculum objectives:

A. Reading — Reading skills are improved at every stage of the Great Books Programs. Participants practice oral reading, expand their vocabularies, and develop reading comprehension through Shared Inquiry Discussions and preparation activities. These preparatory activities are, among others, reading the text at least twice, taking notes about anything that surprises the readers, that they disagree with, that they do not understand, or that they think is especially important, and then creating their own interpretive questions — questions they genuinely find puzzling and interesting. Specifically, students learn to: 1) derive word meanings from the context of the passage 2) recall details, determining which are important and which are not so important 3) organize details for cause and effect or time sequence 4) draw inferences 5) recognize tone and point of view in both fiction and nonfiction 6) understand characters and what motivates them 7) find the main idea of a passage and learn to summarize several paragraphs 8) draw conclusions and find the main idea of the whole text.

B. Critical Thinking — Reflective, critical thinking is at the core of the Shared Inquiry Discussions as students learn to explain their opinions and the evidence supporting them, comment on others' statements, use supporting evidence mentioned by others, and sometimes modify their own positions because of others' thinking. Specifically students learn to: 1) solve problems, since each interpretive question presents unresolved issues 2) make rational arguments by clarifying their opinions, explain the reasons behind them, and offer logical support from the literary texts 3) think critically for themselves, analyze classmates' arguments, assess their logic and the supporting evidence, reach individual conclusions by reconci-

ling or choosing among conflicting lines of thought 4) synthesize individual ideas with those of their classmates in reaching an independent resolution.

C. Listening — In discussion, participants listen and respond to the leader's questions, as well as to the statements of fellow participants. The leader models listening skills by paying close attention to participants' comments, taking brief notes on a seating chart, and posing questions that directly relate to participants' statements. The leader also encourages active listening and a cooperative attitude by asking questions that encourage students to respond to each other's statements and to assist one another in recalling details, explaining opinions, agreeing or disagreeing with a participant's position.

D. Speaking — Shared Inquiry Discussions require students to articulate their opinions, to explain their reasons for an inference or a conclusion, to recite facts, to recount others' opinions, to use persuasion, and of course, to read aloud. The leader helps students achieve more coherent, precise, and complex oral expression by assisting them with the choice of vocabulary, paraphrasing their statements, asking thoughtful follow-up questions, and encouraging participants to speak directly to each other. By showing respect for students' opinions, by not insisting on a "right" or "wrong" response, by demonstrating genuine interest in participants' rationale, the leader helps bring out differing opinions in an atmosphere of harmony.

E. Writing — After participating in a Shared Inquiry Discussion, students are in an excellent position to assess and express, through writing, their ideas. At this point they have something meaningful to write about. When a genuine problem of meaning has been

resolved by a student, he/she is more likely to be able to write a coherent, well-reasoned composition, be it a few paragraphs, or a full essay. The interpretive and evaluative discussions serve as a springboard to teach the mechanics of writing.

III. How To Use The Great Books Programs

After a leader has been trained and certified to use the Shared Inquiry Method, the challenges are twofold: to select appropriate literature and then to prepare students for classroom discussions on three levels: factual, interpretive, and evaluative.

A. Selecting Appropriate Literature

In selecting a literary text, the first and most important criterion is that the work must be able to support extended interpretive discussion. Because students participate in a collaborative search for meaning of a text, selections must invite and support a number of interpretations. Only selections that are sufficiently rich in ideas, and in which an author's meaning is not explicit, raise the interpretive questions necessary for a Shared Inquiry Discussion. Only well-crafted selections, works that are thematically complex and cohesive, are appropriate for a variety of interpretations with evidence from the text, rather than selections that merely encourage personal opinions. The fact that a work is a "classic" is no guarantee that it can support a Shared Inquiry Discussion. It may be beautifully written and uplifting, but if its meaning and intention are transparent to the individual reader, it cannot offer the sustained intellectual work of Shared Inquiry. Every piece of literature requires some interpretation, but not all works lend themselves to extended interpretive analysis.

Secondly, a selection must raise genuine questions of interest for leaders as well as students. Ideally, in preparing for a Shared Inquiry Discussion, trained leaders do not rely on a teacher's manual, or look to an answer key. Instead they experience the same kind of intensive engagement with the literary work as their students: they read the text at least twice, note whatever they find puzzling and thought-provoking, and write interpretive questions that express their own search for meaning. Because these questions reflect a leader's own genuine interest and curiosity about what a selection means, students experience their teacher in a new role —— as an active and involved partner searching for solutions, not a teacher who knows all the correct answers. And, the intellectual respect leaders show for their students' ideas engenders in students the expectation that they can find answers within themselves, thereby taking responsibility for their own learning as independent, critical thinkers.

Thirdly, selections must be limited in length so that students can read each selection at least twice and work with it closely. Through concentrated work on a single text over a period of several classroom sessions, students learn how to examine details, draw connections, reflect upon a character's motivations —— always with the purpose of working out answers in an independent, critical way to substantial questions of interpretation. The Junior Great Books series, published by The Great Books Foundation, consist of great literature from around the world, which meet these criteria. The Introduction to Great Books series and Great Books series also include short selections from great works of philosophy, history, economics, and psychology; thus, both fiction and nonfiction.

Fourthly, selections must be age-appropriate. A primary crite-

rion for selecting a text is the appropriateness of its theme, its philosophical or problematic ideas to the students' intellectual and emotional growth and interests. In all the Great Books Programs the texts are original; that is, students read the author's own words, or the translator's words. No texts have been modified to meet a controlled vocabulary. Nothing has been simplified. The artistry of the author remains for the student to discover and enjoy. Therefore, age-appropriate themes are critical to engaging students' interests. However, leaders also can guide their students in broadening their tastes and ideas. "It is the Great Books Foundation's conviction that if students are to develop the habits of inquiry and intellectual exchange essential to a lifetime of learning, then they must be given the opportunity to grapple with challenging literature — works rich in ideas that allow students to ask and to seek answers to the question, "What does this mean ?"[3]

B. Preparing for Classroom Discussions

The Great Books Programs Curricula are designed with Text Openers and prereading questions. These brief introductory activities help orient students to the selection they are about to read. In some cases they prepare readers to meet a potential obstacle in the selection, such as an abstract theme or metaphysical language. In all cases, Text Openers and prereading questions alert students to important interpretive issues in the text and help them connect their own experiences with the story or essay they are going to study.

Students should then read the selection at least twice and take notes before they are ready to discuss it. Sometimes the first reading is done together in the class with students taking turns reading one paragraph at a time, or with students taking the roles of particular characters and a moderator reading the rest of the

text. Oral reading brings a text alive. It also enables students to concentrate on the literary work rather than the mechanics of reading, and gives them confidence in their abilities to understand the language and facts of the story when they read it on their own. Active reading and note taking are important techniques used in preparing every selection for discussion. Directed Notes Activities help students internalize different note-taking strategies, and develop the most effective ones for their personal style.

Shared Questions Activities are encouraged throughout the discussion preparation. Questions can be classified into three categories, or placed on three levels that readers experience when reading literature. The first and most fundamental is that of fact, all of the "givens" of a work. In fiction, any information the author provides about the world of the story —— every detail of setting, character, or plot is a "fact," whether or not it corresponds to the reader's perception of reality. In nonfiction, the author's statements —— propositions, lines of argument, conclusions are "facts." A question of fact has only one correct answer. It asks participants to recall something the author says, and can usually be answered by pointing to a passage in the selection. However, sometimes a question of fact cannot be answered by referring to any single place in the text; rather its answer must be inferred from other facts in the selection. Factual discussions are times for students to clear up misreadings, to understand vocabulary, and to set the selection more firmly in their minds. More importantly, forming questions based on a student's initial responses gives him/her a starting point for interpretive and critical thinking, and lays the foundation for the next level of reading: the interpretive level.

To interpret a story or essay is to construct explanations of

what the author wants the reader to think about and experience, through the student's own words. Why does a character act in a certain way? Why does the author include a particular detail? Why do things turn out the way they do? Developing answers to these questions gives students a better sense of how the parts of the work fit together and what the work means. Unlike factual questions, interpretive questions have more than one reasonable answer that can be supported with evidence from the text. Because good interpretive questions raise substantial problems of meaning —— that can be interpreted in more than one way based on evidence in the story —— they are capable of sustaining a rewarding discussion. The core of the Great Books Programs is exploring answers to interpretive questions: developing independent, critical thinking abilities.

Particularly in the Japanese classroom, where students are hesitant to express themselves, the interpretive question discussion preparation, in writing, is important. Students are given an interpretive question as homework and asked to write out their responses to the question and to cite the pages in the text where the evidence to support their interpretation can be found. This step facilitates discussion. After discussions they also write their opinions and explain why they did or did not change their thinking because of the classroom dialogue.

The third level is evaluative. Questions of evaluation ask students to think about a work in light of their own knowledge and values or experiences in life, and to decide to what extent they agree with the author's ideas or point of view. Just as a firm grasp of the facts is essential to thoughtful interpretation, a solid understanding of the author's meaning is the basis for intellectual evaluation. If the evaluative step is introduced to the discussion prematurely,

before the meaning of a work has been fully explored, students tend to talk about personal opinions and ramble about their own experiences that do not relate to the literary work being discussed. Evaluative questions have no "right" or "wrong" answers; instead they depend upon the student's own interpretation of a work and his/her personal values, experience, and knowledge. At this level critical thinking is a basic skill.

The activities and steps described above help prepare readers for stimulating Shared Inquiry Discussions, first on the factual level, then on the interpretive level (where most of the discussion time is spent), and finally on the evaluative level.[4]

IV. Conclusions

The Great Books Programs are an alternative way to teach language and literature to Japanese students. For the facilitator or discussion leader these are intellectually challenging and refreshing programs. To come away from a classroom session stimulated by students' ideas and their discussions is personally rewarding for any caring teacher. These programs are also exciting for the students. They enjoy the preparation and discussions, which seem to nurture in them a love of English, a desire to communicate, and self-confidence in their own reactions, analyses and well-reasoned answers.

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Footnotes

1. *An Introduction to Shared Inquiry*. Second Edition. The Great Books Foundation: Chicago, Illinois. 1991, p.vii.
2. For a more detailed explanation of the Shared Inquiry Method see Browning, Carol. "The Great Books Programs: An Alternative Approach To Teaching Western Literature, In English, To Japanese University Students." *JACET NEWS*. No.93, March 1994, pp.10-13. See Browning, Carol and Jerald Halvorsen. "The Shared Inquiry Method For English Language And Literature Classes in Japan." *The Language Teacher*. Vol. 19, No.9, September 1995, pp.22-24. See also Browning, Carol and Jerald Halvorsen. "Shared Inquiry: A Refreshing Approach To Critical Thinking For EFL." *The Language Teacher*. Vol.20, No.9, September 1996, pp. 40,41 and 48. Also see Browning, Carol, Jerald Halvorsen, and Denise Ahlquist. "Adapting The Shared Inquiry Method To The Japanese Classroom." *On JALT 95: Curriculum and Evaluation. Proceedings of the 22nd Annual JALT International Conference on Language Teaching/ Learning: Nagoya, Japan*. JALT: Tokyo September 1996, pp.219-223.
3. *An Introduction To Shared Inquiry*. Op.cit. p.63.
4. For a detailed explanation of how to prepare for and lead a Shared Inquiry Discussion see *An Introduction to Shared Inquiry*. Second Edition. The Great Books Foundation: Chicago, Illinois. 1991, and *An Introduction To Shared Inquiry*. Third Edition. The Great Books Foundation: Chicago, Illinois. 1992.