Connecting through and to Stories
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Discussing stories helps us connect with others and create community. When we do so, we may be surprised by what we share.¹

Written by a student in my intermediate-level English language acquisition reading class, the above quotation reveals a fundamental desire underlying my teaching: I want to guide my students across divisions toward connections with one another and with literature. Age, time, language, culture, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, socio-economic situation, and fear of the unknown – these categories can divide us, separating us into groups and places that feel familiar and safe. But divisions into the safe and familiar may also limit our chances to experience understanding and connection.

As a teacher, my emphasis on helping students to discover connections stems from various observations. First, language learning and reading both require the strengthening of conceptual connections on many levels. Reading ability (whether in a native or non-native language) is improved by relating schemata from previously acquired knowledge structures to a new context or task. Extensive background knowledge facilitates textual understanding; in other words, by drawing upon social, cultural, literary, and philosophical schemata to construct meaning, the sophisticated language learner compensates for gaps in specific linguistic knowledge (i.e., structure and vocabulary). Unfamiliar grammatical forms and vocabulary are then more easily decoded.

Second, readers who perceive links between their own experiences and ideas and those expressed in stories are motivated to engage more deeply with the texts and each other. And in doing so, they progress both in their reading and in verbal communication of ideas. But I have a third reason, admittedly political, for encouraging students to seek relatedness. As they learn to see how their own thoughts, emotions, and experiences connect with those of others, they become not only more accomplished language learners and readers, but also more empathic citizens of our interdependent world.

My approach to fostering these cognitive and cultural connections has been influenced by Edward Said, for whom the value of integration is central as it prompts the reader “to read philologically in a worldly and integrative, as distinct from separating or partitioning mode and, at the same time, to offer resistance to the great reductive and vulgarizing us-versus-them thought patterns of our time” (Said 50). While not asking my students to ignore difference, I try to increase their awareness of the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which individuals, cultures, and histories connect. Understanding the concept of integration, they can challenge the belief that cultures, languages, and identities are static, monolithic, and disparate with the more nuanced view that these structures are dynamic, complex, and intertwined. In sum, one of my primary teaching goals is to increase opportunities for students to consider how they connect – within a text or in their own lives – experiences and ideas that may at first appear unrelated. A rich resource for the practice of this skill is the short story.

A typical semester in my class includes several short stories, for example William Maxwell’s “What He Was Like,” John Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums,” and “The Bridegroom” by Ha Jin. In Maxwell’s story, a daughter deals with the shock she experiences upon reading the journals of her recently deceased father. This semester, we approached the narrative by forming general questions about reasons for keeping journals, as well as about the ethics of reading the journals of the deceased. Students reflected upon the consequences of sharing all of our feelings, fantasies, attractions, and experiences with an intimate partner, which lead to further questions about...
differences between public persona and inner life. They wanted to know if “bad” fantasies make us “bad,” whether journals reflect permanent emotions, momentary truths or both, and what they would do in a similar situation.

Directed by their preliminary questions, the students reflected more directly upon the specifics of the story, imagining the details possibly revealed by the father in his journals, judging the morality of the daughter who read them, and predicting the consequences of having done so. In the course of the discussion, students shared a deep interest in the questions and discovered many similarities in experience and idea with classmates from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Several, for example, shared the experience of privacy violated by parents who read their journals.

Students were required to keep a journal as a way to practice English and further the overall objective of the course of integrated thinking. On the second day of class, those willing to reveal some of their journal entries discovered that what they had written often reflected similar themes – friendship, romantic love, competing loyalties to family and self, loneliness, anger at parents, and concern about the future. Another commonality among the students was that many had actually kept a journal at some point in their lives.

A specific example of the course’s emphasis on engaging across difference was a journal assignment to write from the perspective of someone in their eighties. In this particular class, most students were between eighteen and twenty-five; the oldest was in her mid-thirties. By projecting their current lives into an imaginary future, they could reflect upon the concerns and experiences of people who are aged. Later, when we discussed our entries, we saw that the themes we held in common were, once again, family, love, achievement, and regret.

And like the father in Maxwell’s story, students too wrote about their fears of death. Prompted by their journal reflections, students established deeper connections not only to their imagined future selves, but also to older people, other students, and literature.

Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums,” like Maxwell’s story, is characterized by language accessible to the comprehension levels of the non-native English students in my class. Equally important, its theme of conflicting desires for security and freedom resonates for students living far from home, as reflected in the following journal entries:

Elisa Allen’s [the protagonist] life is very protected. She doesn’t have to worry about basic things such as enough food or a comfortable place to live...but her life is boring for her. For a while, she has the fantasy of being like the traveling repairman who lives in his wagon and has many adventures...This situation gave me a lot to think about. My life is filled with stress. I dream of having a safe life. But I also like adventure. That’s why I came to the U.S. to study...It’s a beautiful idea to write about this conflict. I will return to this story many times...It is a story that’s close to my heart.

Elisa Allen wants to be free, but at the same time she’s afraid. What is better, to have a life under the stars, but sometimes without dinner or a boring life with many comforts? This is something I am struggling with here in New York. Sometimes I really like being here, but other times I want to go back to Korea where things are more familiar to me. I miss the comforts of home.

She [Elisa Allen] demonstrates the desire to know a typically masculine way of life, but her wish is not fulfilled...In all this I see the historical conflict between men and women where, unfortunately, women of great sensitivity and fine intelligence do not have the economic independence to express their talents...As a man, I try to understand what this situation has been like for so many women.

In the first two entries, the writers identify with Steinbeck’s protagonist Elisa Allen; they, too, struggle to balance adventure and security.
The writer of the third entry, a young man, sympathetically defines Elisa Allen’s unfulfilled desire as a “masculine way of life,” and tries to imagine what it would feel like to be a woman whose potential has been suppressed. During their discussion of “The Chrysanthemums,” these young men and women from different parts of the world acknowledged that conflicts previously considered private were familiar to everyone.

But not all of the stories we read promised sympathetic connections. An example of narrative as potential obstacle is Ha Jin’s “The Bridegroom” through which runs the theme of homosexuality. Set in China, the story is about a homely young woman, Beina, ostensibly heterosexual, and Baowen, the handsome young homosexual man whom she marries. Anticipating some students’ feelings of disconnect from the narrative, I wondered how to suggest connections between the characters in the story and students’ own experiences. How could students for whom the theme of homosexuality might be foreign, perhaps even anathema, avoid the “us-versus-them thought pattern” warned against by Said, and arrive instead at empathetic connection?

With the goal of these connections in mind, I scaffolded questions prompting students to examine first their own beliefs and values, and then to consider how these might relate to or differ from the experiences and emotions of “The Bridegroom.” In lively conversation, they identified the qualities most desirable in an intimate partner, commenting along the way upon specifics of love, money, status, beauty, education, sexual compatibility, gender, shared values, and similarity of interest. Students clearly enjoyed describing the factors of family, education, religion, television, tradition, personal eccentricities, and friends that contributed to shaping their values and perspectives.

When appropriate, I highlighted the similarities underlying the students’ apparently disparate responses. For instance, one student wanted a partner who shared her religion, while for another student shared political views mattered most. During discussion and questions, these two students eventually agreed that both desired to be with someone who shared certain important values. When asked which factors may have contributed to shaping their preferences, both responded that the values they had absorbed while growing up contributed in large measure to their current beliefs.

Question and reflection: together these techniques created the links between students’ interests, values, experiences and Ha Jin’s story. Questioning the ways our lived experiences often differ from or even contradict the narratives we shape about ourselves, we could then reflect more closely upon the ways the cultural factors implied in the story may have shaped the narrator’s antipathy toward his son-in-law Baowen. The following journal entry is an example of the revelatory power of questioning:

Old Cheng [the narrator of the story] says things that seem so traditional. He wants his adopted daughter Beina to get married and have children. But why didn’t he ever have any of his own children? Why did he promise Beina’s father, his close friend, that he’d take care of Beina after he [the friend] died? Do you think that Old Cheng and his friend were closer than Old Cheng admitted? Do you think Old Cheng didn’t have any of his own children because he never had sex with his wife?

Although “The Bridegroom” does not provide enough evidence to answer these questions, they are worth asking for the light they shed on a possible connection between the narrator and Baowen, a link possibly implied by the author but left unrecognized by the central characters.

For homework, students explored Baowen’s conflict between his desires and the mores of his society, and then identified situations in which their own desires might be at odds with those society deems acceptable. The four responses below succeed in finding connections to the story:
Almost everyone in the story, including Baowen himself, displays a shocking, near superstitious ignorance of homosexuality. The author wants to show a conflict between society’s values and individual preference. I experienced this sort of situation when I decided to study archeology in my native country, but my parents and high school teachers thought I should study something that would be more practical (I think they meant it would pay more money). I felt very alone in my choice. But then I decided it was what I really wanted to do, so I did.

Whenever I visit Thailand [the student’s native country], I feel so different there. And then when I’m in the U.S. I feel like I don’t fit in here either... I’m like Baowen. In many ways, I feel like an outsider in society.

When I was reading this story I was very shocked because the matter of homosexuality is very strange for me... But on the other hand, reading this story gave me the opportunity to think about the matter of homosexuality and social values. I think members of society make social values, and citizens live in the boundary of values and rules that they make. Baowen was raised in his society, so he accepted its values and thought of himself as a sick man because of his homosexuality. Do we have to accept the values of our society just because we live there? I was a psychiatric nurse in Korea, so I had the chance to notice that a lot of people that society called “crazy” just didn’t fit into society’s ideas of “normal.”

In the town I’m from in Mexico, it was common (almost expected) that the youngest son in the family would be gay. Personally, I don’t mind sharing a bed with a woman or a man. Still, I try to understand what Baowen’s life is like, since he comes from a society that doesn’t have that value.

Even those who had apparently thought little about homosexuality before reading “The Bridegroom” learned that they could relate to Baowen’s experience of having desires antithetical to those sanctioned by society. Regardless of sexual preference, all of the students in my class responded to the theme of romantic love. By focusing on these more deeply structured similarities in emotion and experience, many students began to blur or even erase the lines between “us” and “them.” And in doing so, they strengthened their rapport with one another, and came to understand more deeply a character to whom at first glance they may have felt little or no connection.

Note
1. The student quotations included in this article have been revised collaboratively by the student writers and the instructor to make them conform to the rules of Standard English.

Works Cited