

# Literature as a Means to Foster Tolerance and Respect

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Literature need not be limited to studying the narratives of authors of other countries. Just like any other subject, literature lessons can serve to foster tolerance and respect among cultures by creating awareness in our students about the different traditions, the different history, and the different mentalities existing in other countries. In a world that is ever more globalized but ever more fragmented, in which a great technological leap has not been accompanied by a leap in tolerance and dialogue, the role of the literature teacher can be of great importance in either fostering tolerance or fostering bigotry.

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## Introduction

This paper aims to exemplify how the subject of literature can be used as a means to understand people of other countries and other cultures, and not be limited to the study of narrative. In a world that is becoming ever more conflictive, it is imperative that teachers assume the responsibility of fostering tolerance and respect. This paper provides an example how the study of Mexican literature of the revolution was used to create awareness about social justice in German university students.

## The Aims of Teaching and Learning

Every teacher should ask herself what her pedagogic aims are before she starts instructing youth: Are her aims purely acquisitive, i. e., does she have the sole intention of delivering “knowledge packages” to her students? Are they required only to memorize and repeat what they learn in class? Or are her goals of an inquisitive nature, i. e., does she intend to foster critical thinking in her students so they can grow and mature as human beings and develop a judgement of their own? If, as Jiddu Krishnamurti points out, “The purpose of education is not to produce mere scholars, technicians and job hunters, but integrated men and women who are free of fear; for only between such human beings can there be enduring peace” (Krishnamurti, 1985, p. 15), then it is clear that the aims of the study of literature, like that of any other subject, should not be limited to accumulating knowledge.

It is fundamental that teachers are aware of the main difference between pedagogy and didactics: While the first concept determines *what* the aims of education are, the second concept refers to *how* the goals are to be attained, that is, the most effective methods to fulfil those teaching aims.

Unfortunately, in the era of corporate capitalism, education has become hardly anything more than a commodity that can be purchased. As a consequence, pedagogical aims in the best of cases have become a

secondary concern in school, and in the worst they have been completely neglected: The cleavage between knowledge acquisition and the development of humanity in an ethical sense has become ever clearer as we witness how the survival of our own species as well as that of the biosphere has become increasingly jeopardized. At the same time, artificial intelligence has reached a development that just a couple of decades ago was a topic of science fiction novels.

Environmental degradation, violence against women, children and the handicapped, the most monstrous animal cruelty, and the threat of nuclear war have become so ubiquitous that we rarely question them any more. Is this “normal”?

In his book *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm points out that we tend to see our deeply sick societies as “normal” (Fromm, 1990, pp. 67-77). It is an undeniable reality that schools in general do very little to combat violence, bullying, and addressing problems that jeopardize our mere survival as a species. It seems that questioning our extremely unhealthy social order has become tantamount to a taboo, even in societies that call themselves democratic. Moreover, it is evident that many societies around the world are going through serious crises of authority as corruption scandals among political leaders abound and even more serious scandals of sexual child abuse and grotesque cruelty have become commonplace among religious leaders.

What can we then expect of our youth other than violence if our role models legitimize violence? How can we possibly reprimand a student for being violent when abusing people of other races, of another gender, or treating animals in an infamous way are seen as acceptable practices?

Furthermore, in our Western societies the decay of the family has had as a consequence the erosion of the fundamental roots individual identity. In many societies, children from broken homes have become the rule rather than the exception in our schools. If we add poverty and social exclusion to this unfortunate development, we can be sure that our pupils will have a very tough start in their adult lives.

### **The Need for Redesigning School Curricula**

In my book *Pedagogy and Conscience: The Teacher as an Agent of Awareness*, I point out the urgent need of redesigning school curricula with the aim of not being limited to giving marketable skills to our students, but to foster awareness, critical thinking, empathy, and compassion. If, as we have seen time and again, the pedagogic aims of developing the individual as a human being with a conscience are neglected, we end up with having highly skilled automats in the best of cases, and with cultured sociopaths in the worst. What is then the aim of giving brilliant literature lessons if our pupils will become highly productive, unhappy members of our society, or maybe spend their adult life in jail?

It is true that for most teachers it is quite important to receive high evaluations at the end of a course, i. e. that the course goals have been attained and that our pupils have acquired new skills and knowledge. Nevertheless, for some of us, the best feedback we can get is when we know that we have made a difference in the life of our students. Ethics has thus become an imperative for those of us who see education as more than just a means of obtaining marketable skills. Here, it is fundamental to differentiate between ethics and moralism, since far from being synonymous, these terms are opposites: For Erik Erikson, the most malignant forms of righteousness and prejudice appear as *moralism*. And in the name of the highest moral principles, the most brutal forms of torture, murder and derision can be employed (Erikson, 2000). History abounds with examples of the destructiveness of

moralism. Ethics, on the other hand, is based on the universal paradigm of *do no harm*.

Then, if we aim to create a more ethical society, a more ethical world, then ethics should not be just a topic in philosophy class but the basis of all subjects. If we are to accomplish this aim then it is fundamental for us teachers to always have in mind that we are role models, and that our actions speak much louder about us than our words do.

Unfortunately, the deontological preparedness of teachers, that is, the development of teachers' professional competence, value orientations, and knowledge of the norms of pedagogical ethics, is rarely considered in the current educational industry (Osieja, 2014).

I am sure that most of us can recall examples of teachers who lacked deontological preparedness. The most recent example I can think about is an elementary school art teacher who attends bull fights because she "sees art" in that tradition of monstrous animal torture. Probably this teacher does have knowledge about art. Nevertheless, the message she is giving to her young pupils is that it is all right to abuse, torture, and kill an animal for fun. It would not be surprising for her pupils to become criminals, since according to most psychiatric studies most murderers begin their criminal career by abusing animals. Is this teacher forming or *deforming* children's characters?

### **Literature and Art as Means of Value Creation (or Value Destruction)**

Literature and art can contribute to value creation or value destruction. They can foster the aggrandizement of the individual or his or her degradation as a human being. To illustrate this point, we can compare the content of pornographic literature with literary masterpieces; we can compare the effect an "action film" in which thousands of shots are fired with the experience of attending a ballet performance at the Bolshoi theatre.

Literature need not be limited to entertainment and storytelling: While the characters of a novel are fictitious, the historical moment, the psychological complexity, and the social problems presented in a novel portrait a reality. It is through understanding a different reality from ours that prejudice and bigotry can be combatted. It is by reading the works of authors of different cultures and nationalities that we get to know other societies with a different history, different traditions, a different culture, and different values from our own. While history and sociology aim to create an abstraction of events in which personal accounts are irrelevant, literature provides us with a perspective of how people in those societies perceived those events and how they were affected by them as human beings. Literature then gives a face and an identity to the members of a society in a given historical moment.

Thus, by reading works of foreign writers and analysing them in class, by discussing the characters in their historical setting, we can foster understanding of other cultures. Or, as Fox News exemplifies, we can create stereotypes, foster prejudice and bigotry by presenting distorted images of foreigners and by transmitting the idea that *we* are right, and *they* are wrong. We decide if we want to give to our students an image of Russia as the land of Lenin, Stalin and the gulags, or the land of Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

### **An Enriching Experience: Teaching Literature of the Mexican Revolution to German University Students**

I was invited many years ago by the Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany to teach Spanish and Latin American Studies. I was required to teach one literature course per semester and one of the courses I taught was

literature of the Mexican Revolution.

As a Mexican, this topic was of great importance to me, because it was part of my history—not just the history of my home country, but the history of my family. My grandmother had been greatly affected by the Mexican Revolution in her childhood, and as a child had presenced horrific brutality on the streets of Mexico City. My grandmother would fascinate her grandchildren with accounts of the Mexican Revolution, which was still an obsession of the Mexican people half a century later.

It was a great pleasure to teach that subject because the students were very proficient in Spanish, highly motivated, and had a great curiosity about a country which was usually depicted in tortilla advertisements with images of men with big *sombreros* on horseback holding a tequila bottle.

The students had knowledge of the Mexican Revolution as a historical event which transformed the country. Nevertheless, they lacked the cultural background to understand the social contradictions, the mentality of the people and of course the vocabulary typical of Mexican Spanish.

One of the novels we read was the classic of the Revolution *Los de Abajo*, by Mariano Azuela. This novel is not only of great literary value, but of historical value as well, since the author actively participated in the Mexican Revolution. It portrays the endemic social injustice of the Díaz dictatorship and provides the reader with the perspective of the Mexican peasant. Therefore, Demetrio Macías, the protagonist of the novel, is not only a literary figure but a representative of the typical Mexican peasant who lived through the Revolution. By analysing Demetrio's situation and feelings, the students were able to empathize with this character, and with hundreds of thousands of Mexican peasants living in abject poverty. Discussions about social justice followed, and not with the aim of justifying the excesses of Mexican revolutionaries but with the aim of understanding their causes.

At the end of the semester, the students were very satisfied with the course. The literature of the Mexican Revolution had given an identity, a face, and a personality to the millions of people who were affected by this event. We tried to understand the characters of the stories in their historical and social setting, and to empathize with them. The course gave them an insight of what it was like to experience a revolution in a country which had been colonized for 300 years and had kept its colonial structures, it provided them with new vocabulary and a deeper understanding of a country which is very far from Germany, both in distance and in culture.

## Conclusion

Teaching literature of the Mexican Revolution to German university students was a success in many respects: First, as stated above, the students gained knowledge of a literature genre which was unknown to them; second, it greatly increased their vocabulary in Spanish, especially the Mexican form, and third, the students gained an insight of what it was like to live in pre-revolutionary Mexico as a peasant. For the instructor the third achievement was the most significant.

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