

Voices from the Classroom

This issue features Ow Yeong Wai Kit, one of the winners of the 2019 Outstanding Young Educator Award. Read to find out how Wai Kit makes his classroom more engaging, and how he takes into consideration student readiness and interest when planning his Literature lessons, as well as ideas and approaches for creating a dialogic classroom.



Wai Kit has taught Literature and English for five years at Bukit Batok Secondary School. Outside of school, Wai Kit has also edited poetry anthologies such as *From Walden to Woodlands* (2015).

His favourite authors include Shakespeare, Thoreau, Miyazawa Kenji and Wena Poon.

Wai Kit teaches an Upper Secondary Full Literature class. Their text is *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. According to Wai Kit, his students are generally enthusiastic but a few tend to dominate discussions, while the rest are comfortable to sit passively and are content to be observers. Many also tend to wait for the teacher to provide the 'right answer' and lack confidence in formulating their own responses.

In the following interview, Wai Kit

shares ideas on how he developed his students' confidence, and how, through differentiated instruction, he managed to get his students to be more participative in discussions and formulate their own responses to texts.

How do you enact Differentiated Instruction (DI) in your classroom?

I used to think that DI was only about offering tiered assignments (i.e. homework with differing levels of difficulty) or splitting students into different-ability groups with separate worksheets. But I realised that this

arrangement involves differentiation only in terms of task. As Carol Tomlinson (2013) points out, teachers can differentiate not just based on students' readiness levels but also according to the students' interests and learning profiles. Activating student choice is crucial to tapping on students' varied strengths and building their confidence in their subject.

Building confidence by tapping on students' strengths

For instance, I have assigned Literature projects in which students can choose



their mode of presentation of a scene in their set text. They could choose to take a photo of a freeze-frame tableau, draw a comic strip or *manga*, or upload a video to YouTube. Students enjoyed such tasks so much that some groups even asked for additional opportunities to try out the other options available.

Structuring co-construction using flexible grouping based on learning profiles

My students used Google Sheets to create their own Literature knowledge organizers that summarise all the essential knowledge (plot summaries, lists of characters, etc.) they need to know about their set texts.

By working in pairs, my students found the task of drafting the content in the organizer a lot more manageable. Students with stronger language abilities could assist their weaker counterparts; they could discuss their ideas with each other before concretising them on a Google Sheet. The class had a

platform to co-construct meaning together, and students were far less confused about characters' names or plot details than they used to be. With reference to their knowledge organizers, I could also identify knowledge gaps and discuss with the class how best to address them.

What are some strategies or classroom norms you use to create a conducive environment for your students to talk?

Creating a conducive environment

In order to create a conducive environment for a dialogic classroom, the first routine I enforce is always for students to place their mobile phones in a class box at the beginning of every lesson. I put my phone into the box as well, to set a good example. Prior to enforcing this routine, students in previous batches would often be distracted by their phones. Now the phones are out of sight and out of mind.

Creating a safe environment

Another strategy I employ to foster

effective discussions is to reinforce the conception of the classroom as a safe space. I view the classroom as a play-room of sorts: I regularly bring to class a whole menagerie of soft toys related to an aspect of the students' texts, for example, a soft toy turtle for Kay Ryan's poem, 'Turtle'. One would think that Secondary Four students are too old for such toys. However, most of them squealed in excitement when Turtle burst out from my bag. To prevent certain students from monopolising whole class discussions, and to encourage more voices, the soft toy is used as a turn-taking tool, where one student at a time addresses the points made by another student during discussion.

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Fostering an environment for play

Gamification of texts can be another useful strategy to foster lively conversations about texts. I collaborated with another Literature teacher, Ms Nicole Kang, to create a card game inspired by the central motif of mahjong from Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*. The game allows students to assume the roles of characters and develop a deeper sense of empathy for them, so as to better understand the plot and the novel as a whole.

What are some questioning strategies you use to help your students probe, challenge and deepen their own learning?

I have found that the phrasing of

questions is crucial. We can make a difference by being mindful of the words we use when inviting questions. I have stopped asking: 'So do you have any questions?' This invites a yes-or-no response, and the 'no' is almost never true. Students often claim to understand things even when they don't. Instead, I ask: 'What are some questions you now have about [the character / theme / technique]?' The small shift in the phrasing signals to students that asking questions is normal and in fact integral to learning.

I have also found it helpful to pose questions that allow students to draw meaningful connections between set texts and the world around them. For example, students were delighted when I showed them stills from the mahjong scene in the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, and I asked them, 'Why do you think I'm showing you these pictures?' I knew many of them were film buffs, and by activating their prior knowledge about mahjong, students had the opportunity to engage in rich discussions about the significant role of mahjong in their text. By posing the right questions, we can encourage students to harness their curiosity and experience the joy of learning together.



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