

Inculcating Social Activism in the Literature Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Literature has always been one of the vehicles used to promote transformations. Malaysian writer Pak Sako wrote Putera Gunung Tahan to provoke change in the Malay mindset about colonial power. Jose Rizal's Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo made shattering impact on the Filipino society which now regards the writer as a national hero. Pramoedya Ananta Toer was jailed for what he wrote. These writers are amongst many writers who have made use of their writing dexterity to reveal social ills and effect change for the better. They wrote to describe social conditions, economic development, war and peace, and human development or lack of progress. In this paper, the link between literature and social activism will be discussed and reviewed. Social activism can be defined as attitudes and actions that challenge to persuade the social delivery of status, power, and resources. While the literature classroom should not turn students into agitators without a cause, the choice of texts and the way of teaching can sensitise students to value social activism and engage in pertinent issues that will help them develop not only their critical and analytical skills as students of literature but to imbibe change within themselves and the community.

Keywords: Literature; social activism; Malaysian classroom; domestic violence; progressive classroom

INTRODUCTION

I contend that what we teach in class – be it literature or languages – should coincide with issues that act in response to many burning problems in the world today. Coincidentally, as I was working on this paper, there was renewed interest in literature as reported by the *New Straits Times* (4 May 2011, p.4): “literature adds human touch to focus on science, Maths.” The report highlights “academicians and teachers hope [that] the government will place literature at the centre of the school academic life. They feel that literary appreciation will expose students to values such as patriotism, social and cultural awareness, level-headedness, soft-spokenness.” There are so many issues out there that should stir us from our comfort zone; hence, cultivating a consciousness on social activism is choice-less. Inculcating social activism in the classroom is an agenda of progressive education. As John Dewey (1959, p. 20) once proposed, the school and social progress should be intimately linked. He further states that “true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself.” In the literature classroom, there are many occasions where students can be encouraged to make links between what they do to the social surroundings, and to make the teaching experiential. Although what Dewey said may be dated in relation to today’s context, there has been anxiety amongst parents and educators that the Malaysian school system has been too focused on examinations and rote learning. There is a need to return to Dewey’s teaching and learning philosophy. In this paper, therefore, I show the ways in which teachers can embed progressive learning by inculcating social activism in the literature classroom.

We could turn to literature and show how many literary writers have used the avenue to effect change. A Malaysian writer Pak Sako wrote *Putera Gunung Tahan* to provoke change in the Malay mindset about colonial power. Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* made shattering impact on the Filipino society who now regards the writer as a national hero. His writings angered both the Spaniards and the hispanicized Filipinos due to their insulting symbolism. This did not dissuade him, however, from writing the preface of *El Filibusterismo* after he had translated *Noli me Tangere* into German. These works led to Rizal's prosecution as the inciter of revolution and eventually, to a military trial and execution. (http://philippine-revolution.110mb.com/rizal_detailed.htm; retrieved 23 April 2011). But so strong was his activism, and rightly so, that he is now regarded as a national hero.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer was jailed for what he wrote. His works, which spanned the colonial period to Indonesian independence, the occupation by Japan during WWII, as well as the post-colonial authoritarian regimes of Sukarno, described the ideology of colonisers as well as power struggles in Indonesia. He was seen as a remainder from the previous regime (even though he had struggled with the former regime as well) and was banished for years to Buru. It was there that he composed his most famous work, the Buru Quartet - *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*. Not permitted access to writing materials, he recited the story orally to other prisoners before it was written down and smuggled out. (http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Pramoedya_Ananta_Toer; retrieved 23 April 2011). Despite being marginalised in his own homeland, Toer was regarded highly elsewhere. Much of his works were seen from the postcolonial perspective, and he was seen as an activist who strongly opposed colonialism and corruption.

These writers are amongst many writers who have made use of their writing dexterity to reveal social ills and effect change for the better. They wrote to describe social conditions, economic development, war and peace, and human development or lack of progress. While some of these books are used in the literature classroom, the focus of teaching and learning is centred on the mechanics of the texts – plot, point of view, characterisation, and themes. Even if awareness for the political agenda in the texts is highlighted, there is no urgency or exigency for students to go further than writing an essay.

AIMS

I argue that it is time to examine the use of literature as a catalyst for social action. Literature and language teachers should embrace the use of literature in their classrooms and exploit it not only as a means to sharpen students' critical and analytical skills but to arouse an interest in social activism. In many instances, literary texts depict the relationships between people and their respective communities. As conflicts and other pertinent issues in the texts are looked at in detail from critical perspectives, it does not take any extra effort to make the link between the issues and engagement for social action. It will certainly expand the students' repertoire of response strategies in the literature classroom and to make the shift from the text to personal and social context. This article will examine support for activism from both the social studies and the literacy education communities, and will offer guidelines for literacy and social activism projects.

Social activism can be defined as attitudes and actions that challenge to persuade the social delivery of status, power, and resources. The report by the International Association for

Volunteer Effort, UN Volunteers and Civicus (2008, p. 11-12) provides several definitions of social activism:

I think social activism means citizens of a country being prepared to organise themselves around a particular issue or problem in order to effect change.

Activism is a kind of bond that brings people together in a society for a common goal.

Social activism is encouraging people to participate.

Perhaps activism is more a collective act than volunteerism, which may be collective, but is often done in smaller groups or as a one-on-one task.

You are trying to move others to change the situation.

A literature or language teacher may ask, “What does social activism have to do with me?” Having taught for many years, there are many things that teachers have to contend with in the classroom – getting the syllabus done, achieving the learning outcomes, preparing for examinations. Is there time for “social activism?”

What are the factors that have triggered us to begin talking about social activism? It is such a big word, and frightening, to a certain extent. There is always a tendency to go into overdrive – to turn an activity into a mob, to become unruly. Do I want the students in my class to hug trees? Or walk to the parliament to fight a cause? While I do not particularly wish for the students to turn into agitators without a cause, I am rather disturbed that many of the young adults I have met – face-to-face or in the virtual world, are rather oblivious to many pressing issues out there. In Facebook, for example, only the older friends made comments about certain current events locally or abroad, the tsunami in Japan, for instance, while most of the young ones are mostly more engrossed with themselves or which team is leading in the English league. While what one says on Facebook does not tantamount to social activism, but at least an acknowledgment of the magnitude of a certain event would show their sensitivity to what is happening around them.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have not been any scholarly articles published on the use of literature to create awareness for social action. School practices related to social activism show minimal engagement. Indeed, the English school syllabus covers issues such as sustainable environment and recycling but the teaching and learning of these issues do not go beyond classroom activities. Some schools for instance, do not even provide the customary three dustbins for the students to separate their rubbish. Aini and Laily (2007) found that while pre-school teachers were aware of various basic environmental problems, “the teachers’ understanding was rather shallow on the concept of environment and they had a vague notion of sustainable development. The understanding of these two fundamental concepts is vital as it lays the foundation for environment involvement and actions. There was a minimal level of involvement in environmental clubs or organizations, while the adoption of sustainable practices was modest” (p.280).

Thang and Kumarasamy’s (2006) study entitled “Malaysian students’ perceptions of the environment contents in their English Language classes” looked at the gender differences and different proficiency levels related to the environment. What was pertinent in their study was this quotation,

According to Malaysian Nature Society education programme officer, Evelyn Lim, though environmental education is infused into the school curriculum, it is unfortunate that its importance is not stressed and so students do not really see the need to practice an environment-friendly lifestyle (p.191).

I have provided two examples of research conducted in Malaysian language classroom related to the environment because it seemed that recycling is one of the topics being taught within the school syllabus that would allow social activism to be inculcated. But as the two research highlighted earlier, there is not much engagement with the practice of social activism which would allow the teaching and learning to be done in a more “hands-on” way. Despite the potential of making inroads into social activism through language, it is merely through teaching, not through doing the activities which would be more meaningful and lived experientially by the students.

It is pertinent to compare the Malaysian practice to other teaching and learning techniques elsewhere. In the American classroom, an increasing number of educators have begun to make the links between classroom literacy programs and activism. Vizyak’s (1995) 1st-graders at Cotton Creek Elementary School in Westminster, Colorado was prompted to social action through letter writing. In a class on whales, the children wrote letters to Vice President Gore and Senator Hank Brown to protest sonic testing proposed for the San Diego Bay. First graders at Jacob Shapiro Elementary School in Oshkosh, Wisconsin (“Reaching Out to Children in Haiti,” 1995) collected school supplies and sent them to a relief agency to children in Haiti, after reading about impoverished Haitian children. Students in Public School in Brooklyn, New York, made crib quilts for at-risk babies after reading materials on AIDS victims. While this awareness and social action have been triggered in literacy classrooms, it shows that students can be moved to take action. Similarly, the literature classroom can provide the same impetus because issues in literary texts can be compelling and trigger one’s emotions to react strongly.

Rous (2002) investigated the ways in which teachers broaden the scope of learning environment from the Science class to other related fields such as civics, social studies and language arts. He argues that it is possible to learn and nurture the awareness through various perspectives and one of it is through literature. Environmental language, Rous contends, possesses the usual English elements such as good literature and varying genres which make it suitable for research, projects and oral presentations. As an added element to the course, teachers complemented it with aspects of mountain hikes and plant transects. Students not only learn the language but they also broaden their perspectives through an exposure to environmental knowledge and awareness. The traditional assessments such as essays and presentations remain as the basic form of evaluation. Furthermore, students are able to work outside classroom, choose a local natural area and make weekly journal entries of observations and reflections, drawings and collections, as well as photographs. By combining literature and nature studies, the teachers have managed to infuse learning with social action. This practice helps to nurture their sense of awareness towards nature and environment.

In another research, Kostecky and Hoskinson (2005) combine the learning of literature with their life experiences. By linking the past to the present, students are motivated to learn based on their life experiences and find relevance of the subject matter with their current lives. Furthermore by relating assignments, reading and other components of the course to practical work and life skills, the teacher allows them to see the value or learning the skill and information for their future. One of the best examples is by making a direct connection between materials

in class with the “real world” experience. Bringing in literature material in the form of novels which deal with topics related to the course, students might be able to gain more than just analytical skills but they make connections between literature and real world context.

David Cooper (1997), in his article, *Literacy, Literature and Learning for Life* provides examples of classroom teaching where literature is used to raise awareness about the environment. He opines that a balance between real world exposure and basic literacy concept in a classroom offers a lot of advantages. Students learn more effectively because they could see how “real world” themes allow them to make learning experience functional and useful. It builds connection between new knowledge and old knowledge. Learners are able to integrate the connection when they get an exposure into many different types of resources. Furthermore, real world themes help students to interact with their environment because the issues they learn in the classroom can be related to the topics of their everyday realities.

Colby and Lyon (2004) in *Heightening Awareness about the Importance of Using Multichildren Literature* explore multicultural awareness in classroom using texts including literary texts which offer broader understandings about the world. It helps them to identify their own culture, other cultures and issues regarding diversity. By integrating multicultural literature and awareness, students and educators will learn the values and celebrate diversity of cultures and races. It is a revelation to stimulate understanding of multiculturalism in the classroom through literary works that focus on similar issues.

The brief literature review provided so far highlight the ways in which literature can bring about social change through reading and doing projects related to the issues presented. Outside the school domain, there have been a number of instances which showed awareness of social activism amongst Malaysian youths. As reported in the *New Straits Times*, Penang born Michael Teoh is the founder of Youth Entrepreneurs Malaysia (YEM) who has amassed a long list of achievements in his 23 years of life. The story below provides an insight into Teoh’s social activism:

Using the power of social networking site Facebook, he contacted 50 youth leaders to reach a total of 36,000 Malaysian youths to voice their opinions on various issues such as the environment, religion and education. This exercise resulted in the “Our Future Says...” report, presented at the conference as part of Teoh’s participation in a discussion panel on youth and social media. The presentation was a great success, garnering Teoh televised interviews with international television news channels such as CNN, BBC and Reuters. “Being chosen to represent the youth of Malaysia was a huge honour for me and I felt I had a responsibility to do something for them in return,” he said. Copies of the report have since found their way into the hands of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah and world leaders such as former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan. The responses had been positive, Teoh said. “Such reports are useful when coming up with policies affecting young people. There’s always a perception that our leaders are unwilling to listen to young people. But I think young people need to do their part to reach out and become part of the decision-making process,” he said.

(http://www.nst.com.my/articles/Men_Followhislead/Article/art_print; retrieved 23 April 2011).

We read and hear, almost on a daily basis, news about war, terror, natural calamities and personal tragedies. Sometimes we watch television while eating dinner, and somewhere in Africa, children are dying due to malnutrition. Or we live in a gated community with little fear

of being mugged or robbed, but in many parts of the world, women cannot even walk on the streets safely. Of course we cannot respond to each disaster to the extent in ways that we cannot function emotionally because we are too disturbed. Nevertheless, due to our own comfort of being safe, well-fed, being a politically-stable country, some of our young ones, including our own children have become insensitive to some of the basic problems in this world. There is a reluctance to take an interest. What is the effect of this lackadaisical or nonchalant attitude?

In a report by the International Association for Volunteer Effort, UN Volunteers and Civicus (2008), social activism is closely connected to volunteerism. When a person takes the initiative to do something good, for instance, visit the sick, it is an act of volunteering arising from social activism. The research shows that social activism and volunteering are symbiotically linked. These two acts contribute to the achievement of local and national development objectives, as well as global development commitments, such as the Millennium Development Goals.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

I would like to suggest that the literature classroom be a space where social activism for the common good can be developed and nurtured. While it is important for teachers to pay attention to the mechanics of the texts such as teaching students how to chart the plot, interpret themes and symbols, explore settings and character development, literature can become the vehicle to cultivate social activism.

How do we go about developing a sense of social activism in the Malaysian classroom? In my own practice where I have some liberty in choosing the texts and approaches of teaching, I incorporate awareness of social activism. In the case of an undergraduate course I teach, Malaysian Literature in English, the focus on nationhood which is discerned in novels of Lloyd Fernando, KS Maniam and Lee Kok Liang can be shifted to look at issues that would demonstrate the importance of social activism. For example, *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour* vividly show violence against women. Sally or Salmah in *Scorpion Orchid* is brutally raped while Siti Sara in *Green is the Colour* is abused physically and emotionally by her husband. But oftentimes, the teaching and learning of these texts do not foreground these abuses but see these women as metaphors of “Mother Earth”- resilient and strong despite being victimized. The overarching concern is to see how the nation crumbles because of racial conflict or religious fundamentalism. It is time to redirect our focus on issues such as domestic violence which is prevalent in many Malaysian works to reveal the circumstances around the abuse, what the abuse signify, and what are the profiles of victims and abusers. By highlighting these in the literature classroom, teachers can bring awareness of this social scourge, and perhaps instill consciousness of its danger.

The teaching of an issue like domestic violence can be combined with other activities such as poster presentations, meetings with victims, and focus group interviews for specific assignments. In a course called Gender Identities for second year undergraduate literature students, I have drawn up a programme that complements the teaching of literary interpretation with awareness in instilling social activism. Students were required to analyse local newspaper reports on violence against women and children. They compared these authentic reports with fictional works which contain portrayals of violence against women and children. By doing a comparison, they draw on the similarities and differences, and become more aware of the

constructs of reality and fiction. But most importantly, they have become more sensitive to an issue which has been suppressed from being discussed, or which has been avoided because of its sensitivity. The picture below shows an example of making aware domestic violence and the students' hand prints show their commitment and awareness:



PICTURE 1: Brochure and explanation of Domestic Violence

The students were also asked to design posters where they compared newspaper reports of domestic violence with representations of similar issues in literary texts. Below is an example of students' analysis:



PICTURE 2: Comparison of fact and fiction

Based on the students' activities, they are now sensitized to a national issue which has previously been ignored in the literature classroom. While this is not social activism as we understand it where they have reached out to the community to do social work, within their own parameters of existence, they have become more cognisant of the problem. They know what actions constitute domestic violence and where they can seek help if they are approached for help. As indicated on the poster, the students are aware of the statistics of domestic violence in Malaysia, the definition of domestic violence, occurrences of abuse as reported in the newspaper, and relate these issues to a text of their choice. By focusing on real and fictive representations of domestic violence, they have become sensitive to the issue. The lesson and activities have made them informed citizens about violence perpetrated within the privacy of a home.

CONCLUSION

Based on the examples above, the lesson plans can be adapted to suit the teaching and learning of social activism through literature. I would like to end with a quotation from this book:

The world is rapidly changing. The concept of development has shifted its focus from economic-oriented to a more social-oriented one. Social well-being has gradually caught attention of various sectors as the foundation of sustainable development. It

can be seen that not only business and industrial sectors have changed their course of developmental strategies; the higher education sector has also faced the need to change. In responding to shifting global concerns, universities [and schools] can no longer be detached from society. They have become active units within a society that vigorously applies the concept of social responsibility. (AUN-USR & S: University Social Responsibility and Sustainability, p. 9)

Therefore, it is imperative that the literature classroom is not just for teaching and learning of literary mechanics, but to provide an avenue to inculcate a degree of social responsibility which would allow them to become social activists in the future, even if it is only within the domain of the family or immediate community.

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