Making the best of an inappropriate textbook

Using an 'international edition' to teach critical thinking and intercultural understanding

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ABSTRACT

In this report, I outline and provide examples of an approach to using an international edition of an introductory sociology textbook to facilitate cross-cultural learning and critical thinking skills in an EFL (English as a foreign language) environment at a small engineering university in the United Arab Emirates.

KEYWORDS

critical thinking, culture, EFL classroom, introductory sociology

I read Kolowich's (2014) article about the pedagogical value of confusion with some interest because I have been implementing strategies based on this idea since arriving at Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. in the Fall of 2013. I was the first (and remain the only) sociologist to teach an introductory sociology course at this small but dynamic engineering university. The language of instruction is English, although nearly all students speak English as a foreign language. Most students are Muslim, and are predominantly U.A.E. nationals. The few expatriate students come mostly from families – originally from elsewhere in the region – who are long-term residents of this country, sometimes for several generations. Almost none of them have had exposure to social scientific thought prior to arriving at Khalifa University, due in part to the emphasis in high school on maths and sciences that are required for university admission. My challenge was to make this new elective course relevant and accessible.

The course as it had been outlined in the syllabus of record, established by the university well before I had been hired, included an 'international

edition' of an American textbook that was, at that point, already a few years old. For a number of reasons, including the fact that changes to required course materials require the approval of a committee composed of faculty representatives from across the university, I elected to retain (for at least the first semester) the text that the committee had already approved. Once I had begun to develop the course, it became clear that this text was not ideal and so, while I reviewed alternatives, I needed to figure out a way to make the best of the textbook that I had. I decided to frame the textbook as something that could be contested and challenged and used as a tool to promote critical thinking, to encourage students to state their opinions and to highlight the ways in which intercultural understanding could be fostered in a classroom setting. Two strategies were implemented towards these ends. First, students were required to submit weekly reading journals, for which they needed to read the pages in the text that I had assigned and then write about the connections that they saw between what they had read and their experiences outside of our class. The best of the journals ended up being informative and insightful commentaries on how students' cultures, languages and religions were characterised in the textbook as well as what they found strange about the (North) American society depicted there. Through the journals, I learned what was not resonating with the students and what they were confused about. Often problems arose because of the examples or assumptions about the student-readers that were embedded in the textbook. I assured the students about the confidentiality of their journals, so students were free to say whatever they liked. This frequently resulted in wonderful connections being made between ideas from the course and students' lives outside of their formal university schooling.

The second strategy involved extensive in-class discussions of information from the text. The class size was over twenty students but we talked as though we were in a smaller seminar. Students drew upon their own and one another's backgrounds to verify or refute what the author of the text was claiming. When we discussed measures of global social inequality and education, for example, students from Egypt talked at length about the changes in wider Egyptian society that had affected the way that education in their country is done. Students were very aware that models of teaching and learning, such as rote memorisation, that relied upon standardised testing for assessment are incompatible with the thirst for knowledge and information that accompanied social changes such as those related to the Arab Spring. When their classmates offered up or wondered about examples

from Yemen or Pakistan or Jordan, students whose families came from those countries spoke insightfully and passionately about their own and their family's experiences. Certainly we were all very fortunate to hear about such experiences, and it is true that these conversations could not be replicated without the same composition of students in the class. The conversations were also very valuable in sociological terms because what these students learned by drawing on their own knowledge to refute the text was how to apply sociological ideas to practical, real-life examples that mattered to them and, more significantly, to assess critically the information before them.

These kinds of conversations achieved two things: first, students were working to provide examples that would make sense for them and for their classmates, which meant that they were teaching one another; I was merely facilitating. Due to the range of English language abilities in the classroom, students had the opportunity to translate ideas and concepts for one another, sometimes in terms of examples that drew on experiences of travelling or studying abroad, and sometimes quite literally in terms of descriptions in Arabic or Urdu or another common tongue.

Second, and most confusingly for them, students were having to engage with something unfamiliar and to try and articulate how their experiences differed. Throughout the course, they were confronted by me telling them that the examples in the text were accurate in an American context (and sometimes with Canadian corrections based on my own background), but asking them to provide examples from their own experience or knowledge, that would be more accurate in *our shared* context at the university. To do this, students needed to understand a concept such as group dynamics (explained in the text through the example of American football, which is not well known here) a little bit before coming up with the example. The process of providing good examples also helped to clarify their understanding. Unlike a course taught to a group of students who all shared the same cultural references that were included in the textbook, the required reading materials in this case forced students both to learn about a different culture and to find applicable examples from their own local experiences. Of course, such an antagonistic approach to the required text probably should not be taken at every turn, since finding similarities and patterns can also help students to learn.

To improve and formalise this process of using a less-than-ideal text to work towards several different learning goals, I have a few suggestions. First, from an instructor's point of view, repositioning the text in the way that I

have described above, as a tool to promote critical thinking and intercultural understanding, is imperative because it works to reframe what might otherwise be an exceptionally demoralising experience. To have to slog through a ‘bad’ textbook for any reason is frustrating and keeping in mind that there are some potential benefits is essential. Second, students should know what they are in for, even if this is not explicitly stated. The experience of teaching one another and – importantly – teaching the teacher challenges models of instruction where students are passive recipients of information. Students might need to be told at the beginning of the course (and perhaps reminded periodically throughout) that challenging the text helps to achieve the learning goals for the course. The sense of empowerment and confidence that come with creating correct examples or new information should not be underestimated, but students might need some encouragement, especially at the beginning of the course. Depending on where the course is to be delivered, this approach might run counter to students’ key cultural values and to norms related to respect and authority, and this should not be ignored. Finally, instead of learning about students’ opinions and objections to the text and how they saw the text material in relation to their own lives only from reading journals, I recommend building into the course an assignment that challenges students to write a paragraph that corrects, expands or makes more appropriate a particular idea or passage in the text.

I believe that it is essential for university students to engage critically with information and points of view that are outside their experience because it helps them to understand what life is like in the rest of the world. In this respect, the ‘inappropriate’ textbook probably was not so bad after all. My former students are very likely to interact with people who come from many different backgrounds in the course of their professional lives after graduation. They are already fortunate to be living in a country alongside people of so many other nationalities. To understand more about them and where they come from, how they have learned and been raised, can only help students here – or students anywhere for that matter – to be good global citizens capable of confronting difficult problems with empathy and understanding.

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