



Carol Osborne Curriculum Project Final Reflections

I surveyed the students at the end of the unit (see survey and a summary of the results below). Though many were skeptical at first, they seemed to enjoy the change of pace a unit on China brought to an English course. Several noted that they felt restricted in their ability to understand the stories, given their limited knowledge of the culture, but even in lodging this complaint, the students showed that they had learned a valuable lesson: the importance of cultural and historical context in literary interpretation and criticism. For me, the unit provided a welcome vacation from teaching the standard stories, ones that have generated tons of critical commentary and easily-accessed papers for students determined not to do the writing required in the introductory Composition and Literature course. Although some students were uncomfortable with the fact that we did not come to a clear consensus about the meaning of some of the more difficult stories, I also consider this result a positive one. The sooner our students learn that there is not one “right” interpretation of literature, one that the teacher knows and they do not, the better. Analyzing the stories in this unit has given my students the basic tools they will need to approach the longer works we will read next, and the experience they have had accessing the databases and other resources should serve them well in all of their college courses. I also hope that this study has made them more aware of and more curious about the history and culture of China.

Anonymous Survey of Student Reactions

1. Which stories would be worthwhile for me to teach again? Why?
2. Which stories should I drop from the course? Why?
3. What was your reaction to the content of this portion of the course (reading stories written by contemporary Chinese writers, learning about China through slides and lectures, and conducting your own research on a topic within the scope of Chinese history and culture)?
4. How can I improve in instructing you in research skills and in assisting you as you do your research? How helpful were the research guidelines, the rubrics, and the activities directed at specific skills of summary, synthesis, evaluation, and formatting?

Results:

The twenty-nine students surveyed were in overwhelming agreement that I should keep “Hometown,” “Sealed Off,” “Meijin, Baozi, and the White Kid,” and “Hot and Cold, Measure for Measure” as part of the unit. More were in favor keeping “Old Gun” than were opposed, and there was an even split about “The Longtang,” with some students complaining that it was long and boring, and others recognizing the value of analyzing literary devices and organizational strategies within descriptive writing. While the majority of students advised dropping “Black Bristle, White Bristles,” “The Fish,” and “The Floating City,” their reasons (that the stories were too difficult and confusing) could serve as the

basis for an argument in favor of keeping these works. Perhaps I could have done a better job in preparing the students for reading and in helping them to navigate through the texts.

The responses to question 3 were overwhelmingly positive. Only four students remained adamantly opposed to the focus on China in the selection of literature and research topics. I have included sample responses, both positive and negative, below. On the whole, the annotated bibliographies and the projects the students completed were impressive. The formats ranged from slide shows on education in China to “medical journals” presenting information about traditional Chinese medicine. One student even created a parody of a fashion magazine to showcase her discoveries about the practice of foot binding.

Selected Student Responses to #3

“It was interesting to learn about a culture that was very different from my own. At the same time, the lack of prior knowledge made it difficult to understand the cultural views of the authors.”

“I like seeing your pictures, gives a raw, more realistic point of view. The stories were not hard and told about culture without having to read in a boring textbook like way.”

“Since the stories were originally Chinese it made it interesting when you would try to find the meaning. In class when learning about the Chinese culture you were able to stay focused because it was always something different.”

“At first I was dubious to whether I would enjoy this course; it was not what I expected for an English class. Learning about and studying China wasn’t something I was interested in. However, even though I was questioning the topic, I have learned a lot about writing, as well as China. But as a consequence, I feel a little restricted when it comes to writing.”

“I have no interest in China and would have preferred American short stories.”

“I really do not care very much for China.”

“At the start of this class I did not want to learn about China at all. I thought it was a waste of time and effort. Now, I am glad that we talked about China and feel I did get a lot from it. The stories, for the most part, were interesting and talking about them in class enhanced my literary skills.”

“I really enjoyed reading these stories. They allowed a lot of insight to the different aspects of Chinese history and culture. Conducting my own research was great! It allowed me to learn so much more about my topic!”