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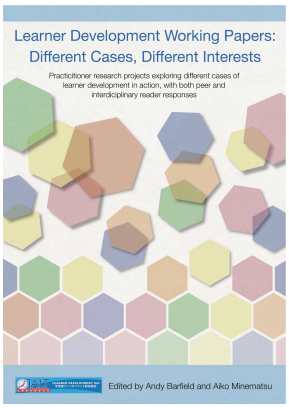

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Co-constructing Academic Literacy in an American Studies Seminar

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Chapter Nine

Co-constructing Academic Literacy in an American Studies Seminar

Hugh Nicoll, Miyazaki Municipal University, Joseph Tomei, Kumamoto Gakuen University, and Debra Occhi, Miyazaki International College

Abstract

This chapter is an account of my reflections on working with students enrolled in my American studies seminar course (*senmon enshu*). Helping students develop the literacy skills for reading authentic texts in English and completing the required 20+ page graduation thesis while they are pursuing post-graduation employment has always been a struggle, but has become more of a challenge in recent years. I began the project as an account of using ideas from Allwright and Hanks's *Exploratory Practice* (2009) as a way of overcoming those challenges. Through formal and informal discussions with students, however, I began to wonder if other approaches to the challenges of seminar teaching would help me develop a more critical and reflective practice. Seeking alternative perspectives through the study of critical pedagogies for social justice, I shifted focus and began to explore ways of explicitly integrating the perspectives of John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Henry Giroux and John Smyth into my thinking. The chapter concludes with an account of my efforts to confront, in dialogue with my students, the neoliberal marketization of contemporary teaching and learning environments.

要旨

この章では、私のアメリカ研究ゼミ(専門演習)履修学生の指導に関して考察する。本ゼミに登録をした学生は、卒業するために、約20ページの卒業論文を書き上げなければならない。学生たちが卒業後の就職活動を行うのと同時に、論文執筆のために英文資料を読み解く能力の向上と論文の完成を助けるという作業は常に多大な苦労を伴うが、近年ではその試練はさらに厳しいものとなっている。このプロジェクトは、当初、このような困難を乗り越える方法として、 Allwright とHanksの「Exploratory Practice」(2009)の発想の利用を説明するためのものとして始めた。しかし、学生達と授業内外で対話を通じて、ゼミ指導の困難に対して、批判的かつ深い思考の訓練を編み出すもっと別のアプローチがあるのではないかと考えるようになる。そこで、社会正義に関しての批判的教授法の研究を通して別の考え方を模索しながら、視点を変えてJohn Dewey、Paolo、Freire、Henry Giroux、John Smythの視点を自分の考え方に明瞭な方法で取り入れる方向を探りはじめた。章の結びとして、学生との対話を通して、現代教育と学習環境の新自由主義的市場化に立ち向かう努力について述べる。

Key words

academic literacy, critical pedagogy, critical and reflective practice, neoliberalism
アカデミクリテラシー、批判的教育研究、批判的・省察的教育実践、新自由主義

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Volunteered slavery has got me on the run
Volunteered slavery has got me on the run
Oh volunteered slavery, oh volunteered slavery
Oh volunteered slavery, slavery

Volunteered slavery is something we all know
Volunteered slavery is something we all know
Oh volunteered slavery, oh volunteered slavery
Oh volunteered slavery, slavery

– Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1969)

"How do people learn things, and what can anyone do to help?"
– Eleanor Duckworth (2012)

Part One

Introduction

In writing this chapter I have found my core beliefs on the value of teaching and studying the humanities tested by two parallel neoliberal discourses: the attitude expressed by students that they must adapt to the roles assigned them in the contemporary economy, and, more insidiously, the vocational orientation of our university administration's curricular policies. The dilemmas teachers now face seem increasingly acute. On the one hand, students deserve support in pursuing their personal aspirations. My students, for example, are doing their best to find employment, and establish themselves in society. I feel duty-bound to support them in their choices as persons, and yet, simultaneously find that the current political economy affords few of us significant autonomy as learners or as citizens. As a consequence, the potential for students to develop deep and meaningful engagement with the humanities seems to be eroding, and I often feel simultaneously powerless to help my seminar students develop their capacities for working with difficult literary texts, and to make connections from the academic work they're doing to the real world challenges they are sure to face after they graduate.

For the past 17 years I have been teaching an American studies seminar at Miyazaki Municipal University, a small public undergraduate university in southern Kyushu. The senior seminar (*senmon*

enshu) is, at least on paper, fundamental to our institutional identity and at the heart of our mission to provide a liberal arts education to our graduates. Faculty members also function as student advisors for their seminar members, providing moral and pedagogical support in several ways. Most importantly, we guide students in the selection of topics and oversee the writing of their graduation theses. In addition, we often function as informal life counselors, working in tandem with the university's career guidance counselors in helping our students to negotiate the challenges of job hunting. These two aspects of our students' lives—thesis writing and the job hunt—constitute competing demands on the students' time. Job-hunting pressures now make it increasingly difficult for students to maintain their focus on academic work over the two- to three-year span of their participation in the seminar. The job hunting realities also test the capacity of instructors in their thesis advising role (*sotsuron shidou),* especially when students are away from the university for months at a time, dedicating their energies primarily on the job hunt (*shushoku katsudo*).

When I began working on this essay several years ago, my original goal was to write a straightforward narrative chapter. I wanted to write, or *thought* I needed to write, an account of how I was using the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP) (Allwright, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009) to help my seminar students develop their academic literacy skills and come to enjoy a deeper, and more fulfilling learning experience in completing their graduation theses in American studies. My plan was to describe their project work during their third year of university study, and to follow up with accounts of their thesis writing experiences: how we negotiated their research topics, struggled together with their chosen texts, and finally, how through the exploratory process of developing their writing abilities the students were becoming more autonomous learners.

Having worked with undergraduate seminar students (at MMU) for over 15 years, I did not expect the process to be easy, nor did I assume that all of the members of the seminar would achieve the same levels of competency in completing their theses. I also knew that many of my students would struggle to balance the demands of their lives outside the seminar room, including the pressures, both socio-economic and psychological, of the long and frustrating "job hunting" experience—a rite of passage made even more difficult in our post Lehman-shock world, especially for students enrolled in a small university in rural Japan. The catalyst for these efforts was a comment offered up by a female student who had graduated in 2012. "MU" had said in essence that the members of the seminar really appreciated my passion for literature and history, and for the support that I was attempting to provide them in guiding them through the completion of their papers, but that in the end, what they really cared about was getting a job. MU's comment produced mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was disappointed that the students could not apparently see our seminar work as being of at least of equal value to the promise of employment, and, on the other hand, I was grateful to MU for her honesty. I also believed that my students' immediate concerns would likely change, and that the lessons learned in completing their graduation theses would also deepen over time.

My meditations over this three-year span of exploring my seminar practices reflect my extended struggle to both theorize, and thereby better understand, our shared situation, and to develop ways of engaging with my students that will help them learn more effectively. These meditations have also become an attempt to identify the parts that I play in perpetuating the systems of "volunteered slavery" under which I labor as a teacher in the neoliberal economy. The chapter is, therefore, *becoming-,* in the Deleuzian sense [1], a nomadic journey, necessarily starting in the middle (and muddle) of things, an account of false starts and of my struggle to find a voice with which to explore several inter-related challenges in teaching American literature and advising my students. It is, then, an attempt at giving an account of a journey through the socio-cultural landscape of higher education in the Japanese context, which I tentatively introduce here in question form:

1. How can I teach students how to do American studies and simultaneously support them in their job hunting?
2. How can I foreground my interpersonal relationships with seminar members, i.e., emphasize the co-construction of mutual trust as a basis for their development as life-long learners, in balance with the practical challenge of helping students to meet the graduation requirements and get their theses completed on time? And, finally:
3. How can I develop interdisciplinary approaches adequate to the challenges I face as a teacher of American studies in ways that will help me address my responsibilities as language teacher, as well as what Castoriadis describes as "psychical and social-historical conditions (not 'causes'!)" which require recognition of " . . . both the effective and the reflective point of view" (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 30)?

While this last question is problematic in its generality, I will try to show in the following section that it goes to the heart of the challenges we face in developing criticality and critical pedagogies appropriate to our responsibilities in contemporary higher education. There are of course, most immediately, the day-to-day challenges of teaching: lesson planning, assessment, and student advising. And, while we might see these responsibilities as falling under the "effective" point of view, both in addressing curriculum policy, and in developing a capacity for understanding the social conditions we share with our learners, the reflective point of view cannot be ignored or forgotten; rather, it is essential to the development of criticality in and for our classroom practices.

This, perhaps, is a good time to reflect on open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness: the three qualities Dewey describes as necessary for being a reflective teacher in *How We Think* (1910). The critical distinction, usefully summarized and discussed by Zeichner and Liston in *Reflective Teaching: An Introduction* (1996), is that between routine action and reflective action. Perhaps a brief attempt to consider open-mindedness as a multiplicity or complexity, rather than as a single principle, will illustrate how these three qualities function in generative, resonant, and overlapping ways. I see open-mindedness as necessary to the fulfillment of my role and responsibility as a teacher in meeting institutional deadlines. In brief, these include helping my students navigate the university's rules and making sure that they accumulate the credits required for graduation. A full embrace of open-mindedness, however, also requires criticality in understanding the ways these routine actions may produce negative consequences for the students' development in the long run. For example, Zeichner and Liston (1996) argue, that if we are engaged in becoming inclusive researchers with our students, attentive to, and working to articulate questions of social justice with our students/learners, we must move "beyond questions of immediate utility" (pp. 10-11). Here is the quote in full:

> *Responsible teachers ask themselves why they are doing what they are doing in a way that goes beyond questions of immediate utility (i.e., does it work) to consider the ways in which it is working, why it is working, and for whom it is working.*
>
> *This attitude of responsibility involves thinking about at least three kinds of consequences of one's teaching: (a) personal consequences—the effects of one's teaching on pupil self-concepts; (b) academic consequences—the effects of one's teaching on pupils' intellectual development; and (c) social and political consequences—the projected effects of one's teaching on the life chances of various pupils.* (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, pp. 10-11)

Encouraging my students to press on with their job searches, and fulfilling my own responsibilities in submitting job-hunting related paperwork is another example of routine action. I would, however, feel that I am failing to act responsibly and whole-heartedly if I do not engage with my students in

the critical exploration of the choices they are making, both about their practices as students in my seminar and in their career choices.

Context, content, and practices

In an effort to flesh out the problems and conundrums introduced above, in this section of the chapter I will share narratives of my experiences with four cohorts of students before returning to a discussion of my own reflective practice in the final section of the essay. These cohorts include the 2013 and 2014 graduates and the students I am working with now, those planning to graduate in March of 2015 and 2016. All of these students began their studies with me when the senior seminar started in the second semester of their second year, and therefore committed to work with me for a minimum of two and a half years.

When students enter my seminar they have generally had very little experience working with literary texts, even in Japanese. Nor, I might add, have they taken composition classes in their L1. Helping seminar members develop academic literacies, therefore, is our first challenge as we start reading and responding to poetry, fiction, and essays addressing issues in American cultural history. Most students who join my seminar have taken my Introduction to American studies lecture course, and become at least somewhat interested in the legacies of slavery, the Civil War, the U.S. as a country of immigrants, and questions of how the contemporary United States developed into the home of Disneyland, Hollywood, and shopping malls.

To help my seminar students begin their study of American literature I have created a short set of core texts with which I introduce the goals and practices of the seminar. Over the past several years, these have included a selection of poems by Langston Hughes and short stories by Kate Chopin[2]. To meet the challenges of reading these non-simplified texts, we have used several primary strategies:

1. Students meet in small groups before class to discuss the readings, and again at the beginning of the seminar to discuss the assigned texts with each other in Japanese. Then we discuss themes and literary concepts such as character, setting, plot, figurative language, etc. I initiate these discussions in English, but with a flexible language policy, encouraging the students to conduct group discussions amongst themselves in Japanese as necessary to cope with the lexical challenges of the text as we talk.
2. I prepare supplementary glossaries, and discuss reading and vocabulary learning strategies with the students as well as prepare online versions of the core texts using Tom Cobb's vocabulary and hypertext tools on the Compleat Lexical Tutor (Cobb, 2014) website.
3. Students also work in small groups to research author backgrounds and the themes of the stories, then share their reports with each other during informal presentation sessions.

At the conclusion of their first semester of seminar study, the second semester of their second year, we have discussed the goals, selection of texts for study in the third-year seminar, and talked about the goals for completing their "First Big Research Project" in the third year and the graduation thesis in their fourth year. I ask that they complete their "First Big Research Project" (FBRP) during the third year as a pre-requisite to researching and writing their graduation theses in their senior year. The timetable we use is as follows:

1. Choose topics and texts in June;
2. Read their books over the summer break;
3. Prepare to give a work-in-progress presentation in November; and
4. Complete a 10-page essay on their topic by the end of the academic year.

The approach I have used with my students is just one among many for those of us responsible for seminar teaching and thesis advising in Japanese universities. In recent years, I have shared my concerns and questions regarding seminar teaching and academic literacy with colleagues and participated in panel discussions with John Herbert, Ken Ikeda, Kevin Mark, and Joe Tomei at PanSIG2013 in Nagoya and at the Learner Development 20th anniversary conference in Tokyo in December 2013. I therefore invited Joe Tomei of Kumamoto Gakuen University to be one of my correspondents in the writing of this chapter. His peer reader response follows.

Peer Reader Response: Joe Tomei, Faculty of British and American Studies, Kumamoto Gakuen University

The question that my peer response begins with is 'How can two approaches that are grounded in the same concerns end up being manifested in such different ways?' because both Hugh and I have, over the past several years, discussed many of the points that he raises here, so much so that I think there is a sense of kindred spirits. However, given that near total agreement in opinions on the problems, how is it that the manifestations of our seminars could be so different?

The first point is that the MMU curriculum aims at creating that liberal arts experience, and students begin their journey with Hugh in the second term of their 2nd year. At my institution, the time is much shorter, with students taking a required 3rd year seminar where they write a paper that is approximately 1000-1200 words, excluding references and an elective 4th year graduation thesis course that requires a 3,200-4,000 word paper. There is little, if any, articulation between classes and as the older tradition of the central importance of the seminar class has slowly vanished to the point now where it is honored more in the breech, it is only natural to believe that the reason for the differences is because of these circumstances. However, there are some other reasons for the differences in the way our two seminars have developed that can be traced to choices made by us, and it may be enlightening to discuss these differences here.

One point that became clear as I was reading Hugh's discussion of his seminar was that because of the topic area that Hugh has chosen, he has also made a commitment to provide the necessary background information. If one stops and thinks about it, for the subject area that Hugh has chosen, the amount of background information is actually overwhelming. From the Middle Passage to hip-hop, from Madison's three-fifths compromise (where African American slaves, for purposes of representation, were counted as three-fifths a free person) to Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, with chunks for the American Civil War, anti-miscegenation laws, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Act, and this only begins to scratch the surface. Hugh and I, as foreign teachers working in Japan, have often been told that part of the reason for our presence here is to help students learn about the culture of our home country. This is a rather common request that can raise a number of questions that I will set aside (though they are worth considering in regards to Debra's later points about curricular expectations by Japanese education authorities). What I find interesting is that the African-American experience Hugh is bringing to his students is not only very alien to them, it is also alien to large swathes of the US population. This gives me a keen appreciation of the challenge that Hugh has set for himself.

When I started teaching seminar and sotsuron, I tried to make a similar commitment to teaching students the background of my topic, which was linguistics. However, I quickly found myself not only frustrated at trying to convey the main points in the field of linguistics, but rather skeptical that giving students a basic grounding in linguistic theory and ideas is fundamental to their identities and their future growth.

So stepping back from that commitment, I have since tried to set up opportunities for students to choose topics that they feel passionate about. For me, this has forced me to research alongside the students. The metaphorical ideal is to imagine a path where I am ahead, but just out of sight, so students aren't simply mirroring my reaction, but ideally are finding things for themselves. On the other hand, Hugh is laying out an entire map of a continent and providing the students the possibility of taking any one of a huge number of paths

These are two very different ways of approaching a seminar, and if the process of knowledge creation is all that we take into account, it may be difficult to reconcile these two approaches. In one, we have a careful curation of materials presented in a way to build on preceding lessons and information with special attention paid to establishing interconnections and links to give a broader knowledge of the subject. In the other, we have students expressing an interest in a particular subject and then encouraged to carve out their own path. However, if we look at the ultimate goal of both of these approaches, we can see that we want to give the students something that they can treasure and take to heart. In the 'unsuccessful' cases, it is simply to have students produce enough work, the challenge of writing connected prose at a length longer than they have in either English or Japanese. For the 'successes', the students come away with a sense of ownership of their subject, a notion that they have the requisite knowledge of their topic and a familiarity with it to be able to apply it to their everyday lives.

One thing I feel Hugh may be overlooking (and to be fair, I think this is a failing that almost any teacher has to a certain degree) is though we want students to have the life changing realization sometime within the timeframe of our guidance; we can't demand it of them. It is certainly understandable, in that we are given a certain amount of time to work with students, but we can't really expect epiphanies to occur according to a schedule. Students who we feel may have 'failed' in doing what we want them to do still have the rest of their lives to live and, if given an opportunity to engage with these ideas, that epiphany may occur years after they have finished. Our increasing sense of urgency at students completing our requirements shouldn't be evaluated on how much their lives are changed at the moment they turn in their thesis; rather, we should aim to be sensitive to the effects farther into the future.

Part Two

Stumbling towards a turning point

During the fourth year, our primary goal in the seminar is to complete the graduation thesis. For students enrolled in English language seminars the graduation thesis must be at least 20 pages long and include properly formatted citations and a list of Works Cited. The completed thesis must also be presented orally, in a *sotsuron happyoukai*. While almost all of my seminar students over the years have managed to complete their thesis writing work on time, and to successfully share their work in the presentation forums (*happyoukai*), getting to the goal line is almost always a panic-filled struggle, and it has sometimes been hard for me not to feel that the students' efforts fall too often into the 'unsuccessful' category that Joe described in his peer response above. Indeed, the difficulties I have shared with students in completing the *sotsuron* were the primary catalyst for my decision to take on the writing of this chapter. For far too long I blamed myself for my apparent failure to teach the students better time management and literacy skills, and naively hoped that somehow I would find technical solutions to the challenges students face in becoming academic

writers. I also hoped, as Joe so keenly observed, that I could share life-changing realizations with the students at some point in the thesis advising process—if not during regular meetings, then at least during the preparations and rehearsals for their thesis presentations. Most of all, I hoped that the members of the seminar would start making connections between the study of American literature, their own lives, and to put it a little too simply, the issues of our time. I aspired, in other words, to help my students continue their journeys in life, thinking a little more deeply about what it means to be a citizen in these times of "corporatized contemporary culture" (Cunningham, 2011, p. 142). I further hope that, as representative of the university, I will have served them well in that pursuit. Finding a voice (or voices) for articulating and sharing my sense of those responsibilities with the seminar members led me to start on the path towards what I now can define as a more philosophically informed basis for my work in mentoring them. Below are two excerpts from my teaching diary of December 2012 that I hope will illuminate the final sections of this essay.

> *I. During the first part of the year, the class of 2014 continued readings in shorter texts by Langston Hughes, Kate Chopin, and William Carlos Williams. Seminar members worked together in groups of four to complete two collaborative research projects in preparation for their first big individual research project, … During the spring and early summer, the seminar teams considered the life and works of Kate Chopin and William Carlos Williams, completing collectively written papers and giving presentations on the selected writers as a way of getting a handle on the planning, research, writing, and presentation tasks that they will then be individually responsible for in completing their FBRP.*
>
> *II. When I met with my seminar members at the beginning of October, it became clear to me that a revised and somewhat flexible approach to the completion of the projects would be required. Only two of the eight members of the seminar had completed their summer reading, and most seminar members had not done much in the way of note taking or in writing their FBRP drafts. I met with seminar members during our regularly scheduled weekly meetings, as well as in individual counseling sessions. All members, including one student just returned from a year abroad in Australia, for a total of nine, managed to do their presentations at the university festival, and we have in subsequent weeks, held several meetings in which we negotiated schedules and goal-setting with the hope of helping all seminar members to complete their FBRP essays on schedule. Graduation thesis outlines are due the third week in April 2013, with the final paper due in January 2014. The students will inevitably find themselves battling time constraints as they are filling in company entry sheets, participating in the Informational meetings (setsumeikai), and/or working to complete their education courses, teaching practicums, and study for the prefectural teaching certification exams in the late summer. They will, as usual, only really get down to work on their graduation theses in the autumn months of 2013. Some students will also be working crazy hours at their part-time jobs.*

After re-reading these teaching diary notes, I am struck by two things: first, my anxiousness regarding students' achievement, and second, what seems in retrospect a lack of specificity in observation and data gathering. I also have a strong sense of having been as fully aware at the time as I am now retrospectively, that I was in fact making a choice to honor the students' choices, even when I simultaneously wished that they could and/or would be more focused on their approach to language learning practice strategies.

Still partly in the thrall of skills and outcomes-oriented assumptions about my responsibilities as seminar advisor, I turned to Ann Burns's *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching* (2010) to consider several questions to help me re-focus the project:

- *What gaps are there between my current teaching situation and what I would like to see happening?*
- *What needs of my students are not being met?*

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- *Why are some of the seminar members not achieving in the same way as others?*
- *What do I want my students to know, understand, and do better than they currently do?*
- *What language skills would I like my seminar students to improve?*

(Adapted from Burns, 2010, p. 23)

Feeling quite lost and frustrated, I also returned to Allwright and Hanks's work on Exploratory Practice (2009) and began to consider the links between their focus on "Quality of Life" issues as central to the work of learning *with* our students; of working toward understanding, rather than the problem-solution model of research.

Discussions with Alison Stewart and Andy Barfield during workshops on critical pedagogy, first at an Learner Development SIG Tokyo Get-together in Tokyo, then at PanSIG2013 in Nagoya and the 2013 International JALT conference in Kobe led me to revisit criticality and critical pedagogy as research and discourse domains that might help me break free of routine ways of thinking about student needs, and perhaps help me to develop new ways of working, new ways of being/becoming a more reflective teacher. I started to feel that the work to support the seminar students' research projects, building resources on the Moodle site and discussions of learning strategies, for example, was bearing too little fruit. I also began to wonder if I was too caught up in an outcomes-oriented practice, if I had fallen "into," to cite Glazek and Sarason (2007, p. 4) a "predictable and understandable trap" of required subject matter and practices that were becoming obstacles to rather than pathways toward liberatory pedagogies of understanding. As Allwright and Hanks (2009, p. 90) have noted,

> "Overall . . . the wide tradition of looking at learner variables has not contributed as positively as we might have expected and would have hoped. For that it needed to be less interested in classifying classroom learners and more interested in understanding them, in all their richness and complexity."

My struggles in working with the seminar members in the class of 2014 led me to pose my working questions in new ways as I discussed seminar goals with the class of 2016, drawing on Allwright and Hanks and from readings in the work of John Smyth (e.g., 2011), Henry Giroux (e.g., 2011, 2014), Ira Schor (e.g., 1992), and other advocates of critical pedagogy. These discussions took place in November 2013, when the 2016 seminar members and I sat down to a brainstorming session, and agreed upon the following principles for working together in the seminar:

Co-constructing our philosophy of language learning—our goal is to identify questions and discuss language learning practices:
Principle 1: Asking questions is where/how learning begins
Principle 2: No one can learn for you; learning is something we have to do for ourselves
Principle 3: When teachers and students work together, teachers can help students identify and practice using strategies and new tools.

With the propositions from our brainstorming session as guiding principles (P1 – P3, above), we finished the second semester by negotiating a plan for the first semester of the 2014-15 academic year. The seminar members wanted to focus on African American literature and culture, and after a discussion of possible core texts, we set a reading list that would begin with Langston Hughes's "The Blues I'm Playing" (1934), Hughes's 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" as well as two excerpts from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W. E. B. Du Bois. These texts bring the legacies of slavery in the United States, the experience of racial discrimination, and questions of social justice

into clear focus, almost begging the question of how students might connect their own concerns as young people to the themes and narratives in these works.

As a way of making this act of linking social justice themes in their lives as learners in the university setting explicit, I decided to introduce several questions from Smyth and McInerney (2012, p. 4) for their consideration, including:

- *What kind of society are we creating?*
- *Who are schools working for?*
- *What are the consequences of inequality?*
- *What kind of future are we creating?*
- *Is this sustainable?*

Then, in late June of 2014 Joe Tomei told me that Molefe Kete Asante[2] would be visiting Kumamoto in early July. He asked if I might be interested in attending Professor Asante's lecture with my seminar students. I hoped that this chance to explore Afrocentricity would help my students make connections between the reading we had been doing in our seminar sessions and current debates on social justice issues as explored in the work of a contemporary scholar African American studies. When we returned to Miyazaki I asked the students to identify new ideas and questions–'puzzles' in the Exploratory Practice sense introduced by Allwright & Hanks (2009)–which his talk had raised for them. I suggested that we consider ways in which Dr. Asante's ideas might be useful for us as individuals, and in our shared research and reading work in the seminar. I offered them a set of key words as prompts for their discussion: *identity*, *life experiences*, *power*, and *understanding world history*.

The students identified two key slides in Dr. Asante's talk as being of particular interest to them, noting that Dr. Asante's working definitions of Afrocentricity were especially useful:
– Afrocentricity is a critique of domination, and it is,
– a new departure in analysis;
– at the intersection of race, gender, sex, class and culture in contemporary American society;
– it insists that human values must not be neutral but vigorously anti-racist and anti-sexist; and,
– it insists on the centrality of women in society.

Following up on our discussions of Dr. Asante's talk, we decided to continue to use these points as touchstones for discussion and interpretation as we continued to study *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois, 1903), and the seminar members worked on their individual research projects. The third-year seminar members' chosen texts in 2014 included the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). In response to my working puzzle: "How will these perspectives help us understand/define the practices of criticality and learner autonomy in the co-construction of our seminar, of ourselves as learners?" we agreed upon a basic activity cycle in these sequential steps:

1. Students brainstorm questions and talking points;
2. Share their questions with each other; and finally
3. Share their questions and concerns with me.

An example of a post-discussion written response from MK, one of the seminar members, may serve to illustrate how these practices are working. First, I quote her original English version, followed by my framed or "translated" version, which I returned to her as a way of helping her to learn the moves of academic writing. I then checked to make sure that I had not put words in her mouth, i.e., that my

translation was an accurate representation of what she was trying to say, and we shared our discussion with the rest of the seminar members.

1. MK original: *Afrocentricity may be helpful for our African American study. What I think important for not Africa but also others, like Asia, is not decide the "universal" and try to look one's own country's history and experience with regarding oneself as agency.*

2. HN framed: *Asante's theories of Afrocentricity may be helpful for our study of African American literature—his theories are important not just for Africa/Africans but also for others, like Asians, in helping us not to accept Eurocentric ideas as "universal" but to try to look at our own countries' histories and experience, regarding ourselves/one's self as having agency*.

I found MK's effort to address the complexities of identity and agency in her own voice moving and affirming of the work we had been trying to do in the seminar. I was reminded once again of the importance of seeing and engaging with our learners as persons and not as repositories or "processing devices" for linguistic knowledge (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145), no matter how open and process-oriented the framing of those language competencies and academic skills might be. I realised that even though MK might not be able to fully articulate her conceptions of independence and agency in psychological or political terms, she was engaged in a heartfelt effort to grapple with Dr. Asante's arguments, and that they would over time help her in her study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

As a work-in-progress, a partial account of the journey through Exploratory Practice toward Critical Pedagogy I have undertaken with my seminar students, I conclude this section of the chapter with a set of on-going puzzles and challenges as a way of inviting an interdisciplinary reader response from Debra Occhi, who teaches at Miyazaki International College (MIC). Debra, who trained as an anthropologist, brings a special set of experiences and intellectual accomplishments to these puzzles and challenges. Like Miyazaki Municipal University (MMU), MIC is exploring liberal arts approaches to meeting the needs of contemporary Japanese university students. Debra's teaching experiences within the MIC framework, therefore, while similar to but also different from that of MMU, may provide a useful contrasting perspective. More importantly, Debra's explorations of contemporary issues in Japanese society and culture, including linguistic anthropology and the anthropology of gender have always proved informative and inspiring to me as I/we have wrestled with the complexities of teaching and learning in our respective areas of work.

- *How can we help learners develop multiple literacies, criticalities for understanding, and greater capacities for autonomous learning?*
- *How can we address institutional constraints: curriculum, staffing, resource, and support issues? (leadership, stereotypes, obstacles, etc.)*
- *How can we develop exploratory practices to address these issues? What language policy issues are/could be in play here?*
- *How can we leverage blended learning approaches to address these issues?*
- *How can we help to co-construct meta-discourses, critical pedagogies with which to challenge neo-liberal "reforms" with our learners AND our colleagues?*

Interdisciplinary Reader Response: Debra Occhi, Faculty of International Liberal Arts, Miyazaki International College

Hugh and Joe make observations that deserve broad consideration, all the more so in the context of MEXT's increasing curricular expectations for accountability that concomitantly increases labor on the part of teachers. One of these we are instituting in my college involves changes in syllabi to provide explicit information as to what is to be learned in each class period, along with what materials are assigned. However, as Hugh describes, the number of excused absences required for successful job hunting in the upper division courses makes it difficult to believe students may achieve learning objectives, however specified they may be.

In the case of the institution where I teach, there is no seminar. Students are free to choose thesis topics in a process involving negotiation with several instructors who are potential thesis advisers. Thanks to recent curricular innovations, this discussion also involves the EFL specialist instructor of a senior thesis guidance course focusing on writing skills development in the third year. Thus we advisers are often closer to the 'one step ahead' model Joe discusses in which students may choose a topic outside his specialty per se, even though potential advisers are chosen in part based on our academic specializations. This may be a particular concern of mine as an anthropologist who studies popular culture; I have wondered whether there would be any use in bringing my thesis students together for mutual discussion given their variety of topics in any given year. As Hugh and Joe discuss, it often becomes difficult to monitor student progress as we enter job-hunting season simultaneously, and it is a challenge to ensure that students are taking time to develop critical awareness of their topic along the way. In the best-case scenario, a student I have taught will take up a course-related topic, and in doing so further develop ideas taken from the liberal arts pedagogy that is inherent to upper division coursework.

On top of this entrenched conundrum of coursework versus job hunting come the imperatives of a liberal arts curriculum, which is itself said to be increasing in value in the eyes of Japanese employers. I am impressed with the care Hugh takes in setting up the plan for study in negotiation with his seminar students. The struggle between the need for time to meet these mutually agreed educational expectations and the time requirements imposed by neoliberal capitalism in its productive (job search) and consumptive (need for part-time job) arenas itself certainly provides an example of the sort of social justice themes taken up by the seminar Hugh describes. I wonder if that embodied instance of struggle may be possibly taken up as a theme endemic to the system in which they operate. If so, making it explicit may provide a useful comparison to the systemic injustices African Americans have undergone as described in the literature Hugh assigns. It may at least serve as a basis for raising awareness that the situation is common among students (i.e., not just a personal time-management problem), and that it perpetuates the meta lesson that serving the system overrides all other concerns. I say this having adopted a similar method in my anthropology courses: to find some kind of shared context with students before taking them into exploration of foreign cultures. This is the opposite of my training; however, working in an EFL classroom makes it quite difficult to face students with strange content at the start. It is much easier, for example, to start freshmen on an inquiry into their new environs through a survey, and compare it to life in a large public university in the USA. Then we can lead them further into inquiries about life in far-flung places. Perhaps Hugh's students have faced issues of inequality or witnessed them while on study abroad or even noticed them on the news. Can sharing those experiences help connect "their own concerns as young people to the themes and narratives in the texts"?

The tension of increased educational expectations, in this case needing students to focus on a graduation thesis while being pulled further into society with entrance into adulthood does lead me to

question whether they are getting what we thought they came to liberal arts education to learn. Joe reminds us to keep the long view. With every year I work here, I learn of alumni achievements that encourage me towards that perspective. These encounters remind me that we do make a difference in the human development of our students in the long term. We are working to instill habits of mind that will continue past whatever frustrations existed in the moment, long after imperfect documents are filed.

Part Three

Hope and Critical Pedagogies for Dark Times

Debra's peer response raises a number of fascinating problems and possibilities. She began by noting the disjunct between MEXT's current directives on syllabi design and the real-world time pressures of job hunting. MEXT's directives also make me wonder how we can help students meet learning objectives when the pressures to adapt to the constraints of the job market reduce the time available for study and thought in both real-world and imaginative social spaces. One intriguing idea Debra raises is that of bringing students together to share their thesis topics within her college setting. Although logistical challenges do exist, I wonder if we might extend this implicit suggestion, and organize seminar-to-seminar exchanges between our respective institutions, thereby creating a broader authentic audience within our local setting. Such initiatives might help students and teachers fulfill the ideals of higher education in both philosophical and practical domains. Debra also asked if my students "have faced issues of inequality or witnessed them while on study abroad or even noticed them on the news", and if sharing those issues would help students connect to the social justice issues in the American literature texts we study in the seminar. Encouraging our students to explore their lived experiences critically strikes me as a natural and elegant solution to the challenges of learner engagement, especially in seminar or thesis advising settings. In fact, I look forward to exploring this further in all of my classes. In her conclusion Debra reminds us that our overall goal is "working to instill habits of mind that will continue past" the "frustrations" of the moment. This is precisely the note I needed to hear in moving forward, and reminded me of the central importance of the "pedagogy of hope," for as Freire claimed, hope, as an "ontological need" (1994, p. 2) or perhaps more precisely—"educated hope" as Giroux (2011, p. 122) has framed it—and the struggle to put it into practice is necessary in making education an engine of social justice, learning for citizenship, rather than a mere exercise in wishful thinking[4].

As I look back over this chapter, I realize that the question that has haunted and confused me in recent years boils down to "What are my primary responsibilities to my students?" Is it to help them achieve higher scores on TOEIC tests and to satisfy other assessments of the outcomes of their schooling, or is it something qualitatively different? In a more perfect world, by which I mean an institutional setting with goals and policies that might more coherently serve the needs of the community, the faculty and staff of our colleges and universities could work towards achieving a balance between helping students acquire the licenses and competency certificates required by the job market and the cultivation of mind that my students aspire to in their search for what it means to be more fully human. Craig Cunningham argues that the "primary purpose" of schools should be to "make democratic life possible" (2011, p. 141). In making this claim, he is following the principles of a

philosophy of education explored by John Dewey a century ago (see Boydston, 2008) when modern education systems were first being institutionalised in the industrialised world. With the widely acknowledged triumph of neoliberalism since the 1970s, the discourses of education reform—especially as they are implemented in schools, colleges, and universities—are dominated by what Henry Giroux (2013) has critiqued as a too narrow "vocationalization" of schooling. It is precisely this "vocationalization" that my readings in the literature of critical pedagogy over the past several years have inspired me to reflect on and reject as I struggle to work with my seminar students. I am embracing and arguing for this move from Exploratory Practice towards Critical Pedagogy as essential in my efforts to create a Quality of Life in the seminar that may serve my students' needs broadly defined. This is not to argue against the necessity of researching and reflecting on teaching strategies that may help my students improve their language learning practices, but to argue for a philosophy of a democratic classroom as foundational to those efforts. Finally, it is to work against the temptations of despair and to work my way towards the education of hope called for by Freire (1994) even in these dark times.

There are, I'm afraid, several potential weaknesses in my argument so far that must be addressed:

1. How can I develop appropriate ways of training my students in learning new concepts and practices, including the vocabularies and analytical frameworks required for expressing and exploring those concepts, in a way that allows me to pursue a pedagogy of understanding; in other words, allows me to listen first, then suggest the techniques and moves that will help them become more critical readers of the texts we are studying and of the society in which we live?
2. In addition, how do we avoid the philosophical and political inadequacies of a naive version of the democratic classroom as a value neutral space, fundamentally complicit in maintaining the status quo through the dominant language of the marketplace? How might such discourses be most effectively and critically addressed? To cite just one example of a recent effort to get at this problem, how do we, or can we, rescue democracy as a useful philosophical and pedagogical term from what Jodi Dean (2005) identifies as its complicity with neoliberalism where its "Ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation" (p. 55) are expressed in what she calls "'communicative capitalism'" (op. cit.).
3. How might teachers and students organize themselves to challenge the dominant models of schooling, from standardized testing and punitive grading systems to the ways in which curriculum and faculty development initiatives are shaped, theorized, and implemented by bureaucracies rather than educators?

With these questions in mind, I begin this year's cycle of advising the seminar members as they start their final research projects and negotiate the job-hunting process. I remain as passionate as ever about reading and discussing literature with them in the seminar, to keep putting, as Allen Ginsberg (1956) exhorted in "America", "my queer shoulder to the wheel" (p. 148). I know too well, of course, that my passion and hopes alone will not, by themselves, be sufficient for me or my students to free ourselves completely from the volunteered slavery of participation in the neoliberal economy. I will, however, keep working with them to co-construct new critical pedagogies for learning that may in the long run help my students, over time, to deepen and share their understandings of educated hope (Giroux, 2011) as they face the inevitable challenges of our unpredictable futures. As both Joe and Debra have pointed out in their reader responses, the learner development we seek to encourage in our students takes time to mature. In that spirit I recommit myself to patience and to re-doubling my efforts at studying and writing towards a greater quality of learning life in my classrooms.

Notes

1. The Deleuzian concept "becoming," also represented in the form "becoming-," is central to Deleuze and Deleuze & Guattari's explorations of contemporary life and thought. In *Deleuze, Education and Becoming* (2006), Inna Semetsky traces the relations of their expressions "becoming-other," "becoming-sign," "becoming-language" and "becoming-nomad" to the work of the American pragmatists John Dewey and Charles Sanders Pierce in her arguments for a philosophy of "education as a developing and generative practice" (Semetsky, 2006, p. xxii). There is clearly not enough space in this chapter for me to adequately explore the potential resonances between and among Semetsky's linking of Dewey and Deleuze, critical pedagogy, and reflective practice. That said, the importance of Dewey to thinkers across multiple literatures, all of which argue for a reintegration of philosophy and education, suggests that reading and researching in interdisciplinary ways are essential to the theory and practice of learner and teacher development.

2. Kate Chopin (1850-1904) was the author of many well-regarded short stories exploring race, class, marriage, women's lives, and the emerging consumer society at the end of the 19th century. Her stories are both transparent and complex, written primarily for magazine publication. Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was a leading member of the Harlem Renaissance, and wrote poetry, fiction, plays, essays, journalism, an autobiography, and a host of non-fiction books. These authors serve to introduce a number of themes important to developing an understanding of contemporary American culture through their depictions of the transformations in the lives of 19th and 20th century characters, North and South, black and white.

3. Dr. Molefe Kete Asante is Professor and Chair of the Department of African American Studies at Temple University, and has published widely on the history of Africa, the theory of Afrocentricity, and intercultural communications.

4. Two further quotes from Freire (1994) will give readers a fuller sense of his arguments. "Hope is an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and become a distortion of that ontological need" (p. 2), and "... hope as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain. ... without the struggle, hope as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness" (pp. 2-3).

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