

Circles of Issues: Developing Critical Response Through Literary Engagement

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Abstract: Initiating a critical response among undergraduate students is a pivotal aspect of any literature program. However, what appears wanting in most literature classrooms is students critical participation. Based on a study conducted, it was found that one of the most decisive areas that the students face is in developing a personal response that highlights their critical and in-depth thoughts about a literary text. As an intervention strategy, a workshop was conducted to facilitate the development of critical response in selected students and the results appear positive. One of the strategies taken during the workshop was to introduce the concept of circles of issues towards facilitating students' personal responses from a close textual based standpoint to an issue based standpoint. This study discusses the concept of circles of issues as an approach towards initiating learner response in the literature classroom. The study will also use sample responses from 1st year students to illustrate how the concept of circles of issues can allow students to deepen their awareness of a given text and to intensify their participation in the act of critical response.

Key words: Circles of issues, critical response, literacy, reading tool, literature students

INTRODUCTION

Initiating a critical response among undergraduate literature students is a pivotal aspect of literary appreciation. At the School of Language Studies and Linguistics of the National University of Malaysia, literature courses offered including Critical Appreciation, Malaysia in Narration, Selected Literary Works and Gender Identities, aim to develop in the students the ability to engage with any literary work, fiction or non-fiction in a critical and creative manner. The students are later assessed for this critical response both in written and oral presentations. However, what appears wanting in most literature classrooms is students critical participation. To be able to read critically is perhaps the most important skill that literature students should acquire. As Griffith (2002) argues when researchers interpret, we need to pay close attention to the potential meaning of details. Training literature students to consider the details is the impetus of this investigation.

Based on an action research conducted recently, it was found that one of the most decisive areas that the students of the Bachelor of Arts Literature in English face is in developing a personal response that highlights their critical and in-depth thoughts about a literary text. As an intervention strategy, three workshops were conducted to facilitate and initiate critical response in selected students and the results appear positive. One of the strategies taken during the workshops was to introduce an original

concept of circles of issue towards facilitating students' personal responses from a close textual-based standpoint to an issue-based standpoint. This study discusses the concept of circles of issues as an approach towards facilitating learner response in literature classroom. The study will also use sample responses from 1st year students to illustrate how the concept of circles of issues can allow students to deepen their awareness of a given text and to intensify their participation in the act of critical response.

Literature review: Reading of literature, like most reading exercises can be situated within the domain of literacy. As critics have cautioned the teacher of reading is in the business of attempting to improve literacy (Urquhart and Weir, 1998).

Literacy as a sub-skill of learning has been placed as a part of the highest human impulse to think and rethink experience in place (Brandt, 1990). In fact, some researchers have also suggested that the notion of the literate denotes not mere word recognition (Grabe, 2008) but rather complexities of knowledge and skills possessed by an individual. As Barton (2007) suggests, people have different literacies which they make use of associate with different domains of life. These differences are increased across different cultures or historical periods. However, as Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) suggest, the notion of literacy is not apolitical: texts and their uses are inherently tied to power at some level.

For a reader who is new to the act of reading, in this case of literary texts, the engagement with the text needs to take into consideration the complexities of relations that James V. Wertsch (Gee, 2008) identifies as a set of complex role relationships, general cognitive techniques, ways of approaching problems, different genres of talk and interaction and an intricate set of values concerned with communication, interaction and society as a whole. However, from the perspective of the teacher, the pedagogical implication in the literary engagement entails acts that students will be expected to perform (Showalter, 2003). Showalter (2003) in her discussion of the topic identified twelve competencies and skills that most teachers would like their students to acquire in a literature classroom. From recognizing the complexities of language use to identifying cultural assumptions underlying writings from different time or society, to the use of literature towards broadening one's experience and practical knowledge. However, one important skill that we as teachers of literature would like to see in the students is the ability to develop a critical response to any text towards appreciating not just the text in question but more importantly to see how the said text connects to the larger world view. This study proposes a strategy called circles of issues which when used alongside other literacy techniques can assist learners engagement with a text.

Circles of issues-engaging the text: As a metaphor, circles of issues suggests the availability of issues within issues in any given text. The complexities with which we relate to texts signal not just the horizon of expectation as a member of a diverse community of reader but more significantly, the text's ability to engage a diverse populace of readership. The task of a teacher then is to tap into every learner's engagement of the text and facilitate critical responses from them. As a concept, circles of issues create the opportunity for learners to deepen their appreciation of literature based on their immediate response to a text. Many learners of literature who are not sufficiently exposed to the world of textual analysis are caught when questioned about themes and issues of a given text. At times, the learners will present the plot line of a short story or novel or even a film instead of explicating the central concern of the story. Circles of issues as a strategy forces learners to focus on the micro element of the story, i.e., the elements of literature such as characters and conflicts and for them to ask pertinent questions about the more macro aspect of life including how the story affects them.

To illustrate this more clearly as shown in Fig. 1, the learner will first be asked to identify a character that she appears to focus on as she reads the text and the reason behind her choice. She is also asked to identify the other

characters and her opinion of them. She is then asked her opinion about the way the characters are represented. Finally, the learner is asked her opinion about the story in its entirety. And if the learner appears receptive to the technique, the teacher may even ask her what she thinks of the writer who wrote such characters and such a story.

The methodology of circles of issues is in line with other student-centred approaches which sets out to create a paradigm shift in the way teaching and learning is to take place. As Victoria Thorpe Miller rightly states:

In literature classroom the emphasis is shifting gradually but inexorably away from the traditional exposure to great works with the teacher presenting background information and modelling a literary analysis that students will learn to emulate, toward an active, collaborative learning that takes place as the student confronts the text directly

The value of the active learning can be further expanded to include various strategies that set out to mobilise students self responsibility, self confidence, maturity and desire for excellence (Harmin and Toth, 2006). Another approach to active learning can be seen in Parker J. Palmer's teaching from the microcosm in which the students are brought into the circle of practise in a given area by exposing students to small but critical samples of the narrative which assist them to understand the central concern of the text. As Palmer (2007) expands:

In every great novel, there is a passage that when deeply understood, reveals how the researcher develops character, establishes tension, creates dramatic movement. With that understanding, the student can read the rest of the novel more insightfully

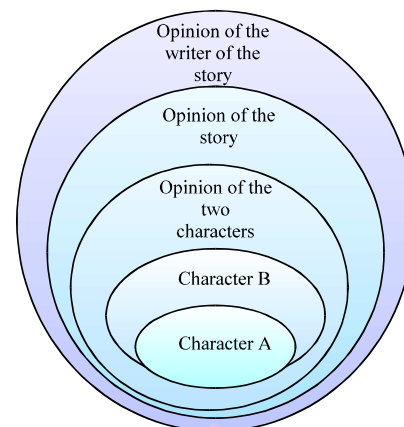


Fig. 1: Circles of issues: developing a critical opinion

Akin to Palmer's circle of practise, the concept of circles of issues approaches the reading of the text from a micro level-based on the specific characters identified, to a macro level in which the larger concerns of the text is brought into discussion (Fig. 2).

The strategy mooted in this study engages the active learner theory by drawing in and mobilising the learner's response to a text and assisting her to develop critical thoughts based on it. In addition by tapping into the students thoughts about a particular feature of the story such as characters and by focusing on specific characters, the teacher can then proceed to develop individual student's critical opinion about the bigger picture which includes how the story was narrated and even the researchers role in creating such a narration. This technique, albeit is not new, creates a much needed

emphasis on the specific aspects of the text and learner's focus on them towards developing her critical opinion. This strategy when used as a tool to guide engagement of texts should be able to facilitate learners responses about the central theme of a story and how it relates to their society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To facilitate the experimentation of the circles of issues, researchers conducted a workshop for 25, 1st year students of the Bachelors of Arts in Literature in English programme in which the strategy of the circles of issues was introduced and put into practice. The text chosen for the experiment is a short video from the previously running website womansworld.com which can now be accessed on various youtube channels including a womans world 2009 and a womans world episodes. (A video was used to facilitate the demonstration of the circles of issues. Once students mastered the strategy they were then required to practise the tool with other literary texts for the course).

The 1 min and 15 sec video tells a story of a woman who is trying to put on her jeans only to find out that she can no longer fit into them. Out of frustration, she asks her husband if he had put it in the dryer. Albeit he says no initially, upon seeing her persistent struggle to fit the jeans, he relents and says perhaps he could have done it. She then turns on him and hits him with a soft cushion before asking him to leave the room (Fig. 3). He leaves feeling sorry and muttering, I love you.

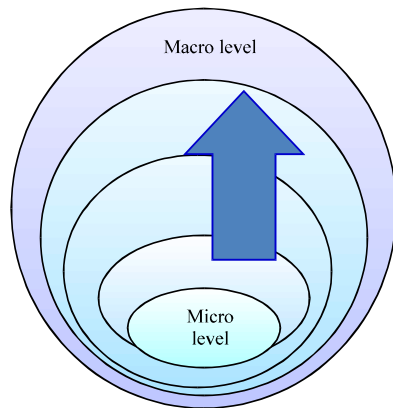


Fig. 2: From micro-level to macro-level engagement of text

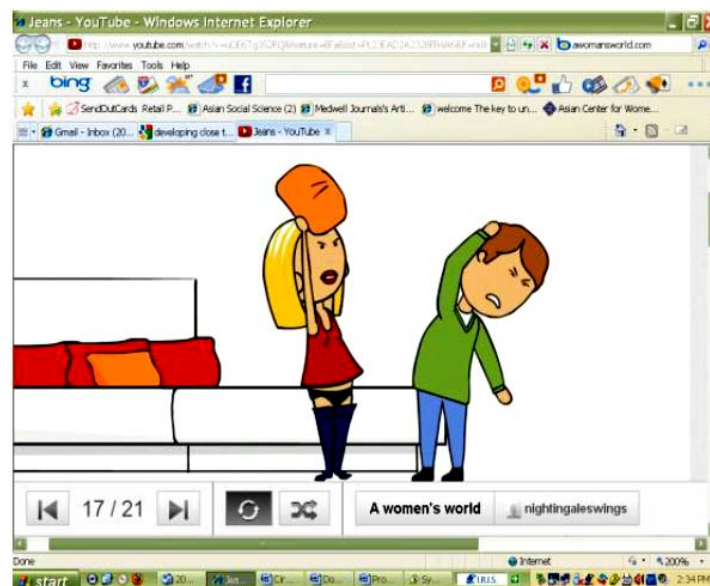


Fig. 3: From episode 11 Jeans; video from a Woman's World Series

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The video was shown three times during the workshop and on each occasion, students were asked to respond to specific concerns. As stated in preliminary findings, students generally held one dimensional opinion of the video focusing primarily either on the humorous depiction of the episode or the stereotypical portrayal of the man and woman (Raihanah *et al.*, 2011). Over half of the class (52%) agreed that the video is humorous for the way it portrays the woman's struggle as she falls backwards trying to fit into her jeans. However, almost a third of the participants (32%) took offense at the way the woman appears to lash out at the man for her weight gain. About two students (8%) felt sorry for the man.

In the second viewing of the video as students were practising to develop an informed opinion about the video, they were asked to pay attention to the character that they were immediately drawn to. Students were asked to identify who they focused on as they watched the video. Over two third (68%) focused on the woman and only a third (32%) focused on the man.

They were then asked whether they liked the portrayals of the man and woman, respectively. About 52% liked the way the man is portrayed as they feel he appears to hold positive characters including being patient, loving, caring, sensitive, supportive, considerate towards the woman and try to solve the problem in a better way. Those who said yes also, feel that the man is rational and matured and one added that he is willing to be blamed for something he did not do as a caring person who cares for his wife.

Conversely, almost the same individuals who liked the way the man was portrayed disliked the representation of the woman. About 60% did not like the way the woman was portrayed as they feel the woman appears silly childish, stubborn, immature, irrational, disrespectful and bad. As one participant stated: every woman is not the same and I don't think this video clip portrayed a good role model to the audience.

A fifth of the participants (20-24%) were not too sure how they felt about the representation of the man and the woman. Most were undecided about the lack of honesty shown by the man for not being forthright with his wife: because it's like 2/10 of man's population will react like that to their wives. It's rarely found and not real. Vis a vis the lack of self control shown by the woman, one participant states:

Somehow I agreed on how the woman is portrayed. This is because she is being realistic. Every woman would go through this at one point, it's undeniable. However, the selfishness portrayed by the woman is also unacceptable because not all women are like that

The students were then asked what they did not like about the video. About >90% of the participants aired their dissatisfaction about the unrealistic portrayal in the video and while the remaining 10% focused on the man's representation and the video on the whole. As one student comments:

In my opinion, the video was trying to portray the bad side of a woman. Where in reality, not all women are similar in the video. Besides that the video was trying to say that all men have to sacrifice instead of telling the truth and work together to solve the problem

Based on their comments about the characters and the video, the students were asked to develop their circles of issues that reflect how they engaged with the video. Beginning with the micro aspect of the video, i.e., the characters, they were asked to then move further away from the text to develop what they feel the video was representing which may assist in identifying the central theme of the video. Figure 4 for prompt questions towards developing the circles of issues based on the video used in the workshop.

Based on the circles of issues drawn by the students, a list of themes can be identified as a macro level engagement with the chosen video. Each student's circles of issues was accompanied by a short write up that

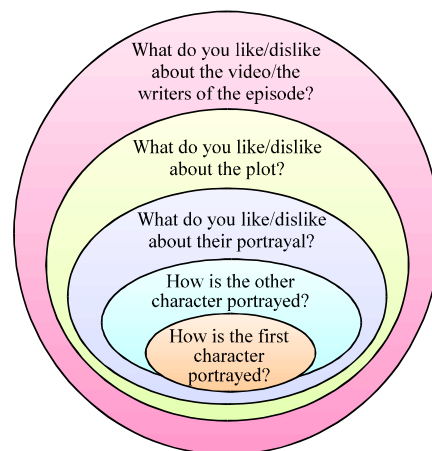


Fig. 4: What's the bigger picture?

explicates the theme identified as shown in the diagram drawn. Albeit the point of departure is the same, i.e., character analysis, each student's engagement with the video showcases a high degree of varied and diverse critical responses. The following is the discussion of six samples of the circles of issues drawn by the students.

In Sample 1 (Fig. 5), Student A engages the role of being an audience as an objective bystander who can be critical about the issue without being directly implicated in the emotions portrayed. As the student says in the write up following the diagram:

From this video clip, we can learn about how human beings behave generally when they face an obstacle regardless of male or female. We tend to point the fingers to the other and accuse external factors without realising we are the core of the problem itself. In a nutshell, we should learn from the mistakes portrayed in the video clip and not absorb fully what were shown in the video completely

In Sample 2 (Fig. 6) Student B appears to focus more on the role that family and society play in ensuring a committed marriage between the man and the woman. As the student explains:

Families and societies evasively benchmark in as to how they feel about a certain issue and impose their thoughts on the man and woman. It is how an issue is perceived in the minds of the man and woman be it a positive or negative output

In Sample 3 (Fig. 7), Student C appears to move away from the characters and focus, specifically on the conflict

that is portrayed in the story. The conflict of weight gain experienced by the woman signals the crisis of beauty that the woman is under:

If beauty becomes the issue, so both partners should tolerate and give moral support. The society also plays an important role in the video by not judging the beauty of women through their physical characteristics

In Sample 4 (Fig. 8), Student D appears to focus primarily on how society inadvertently influences the behaviour shown by men and women in relationship: Women are concerned of their appearance because they want to feel like they belong to a society or because they want to fit in with the society. In Sample 5 above, Student D focuses on the issue of accepting the changes that we experience in the life and the importance played by the spouse in ensuring emotional support for his partner. As the student elaborates (Fig. 9):

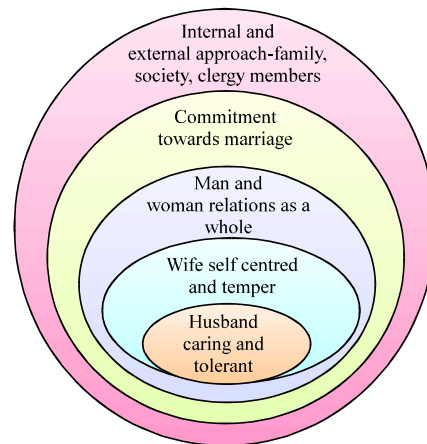


Fig. 6: Sample 2

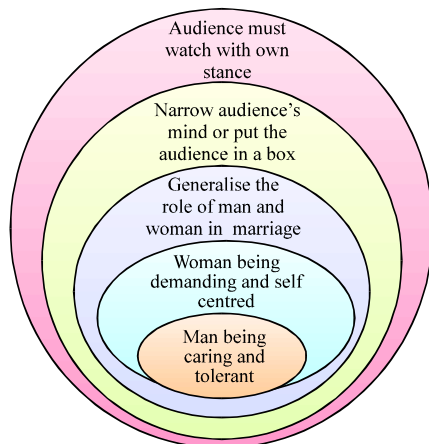


Fig. 5: Sample 1

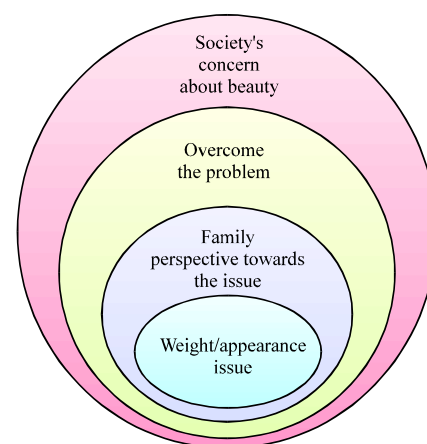


Fig. 7: Sample 3

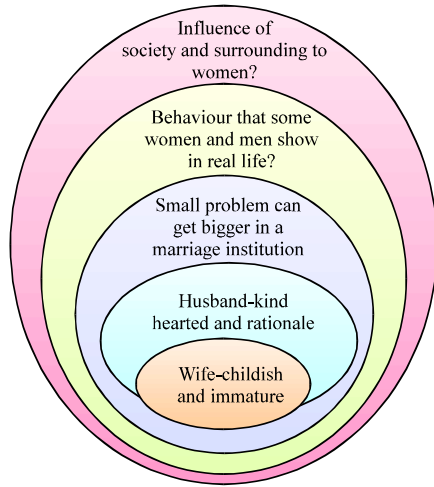


Fig. 8: Sample 4

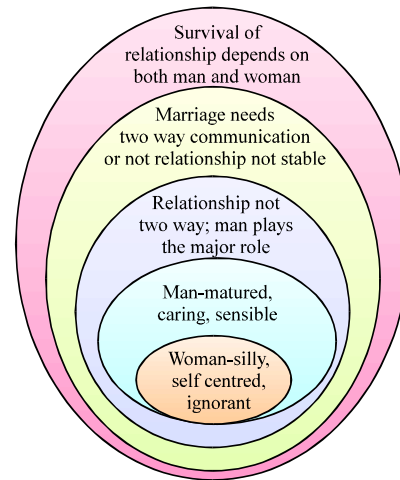


Fig. 10: Sample 6

It gives a bad indication of a marriage life because in a married life, both the man and the woman play a vital part

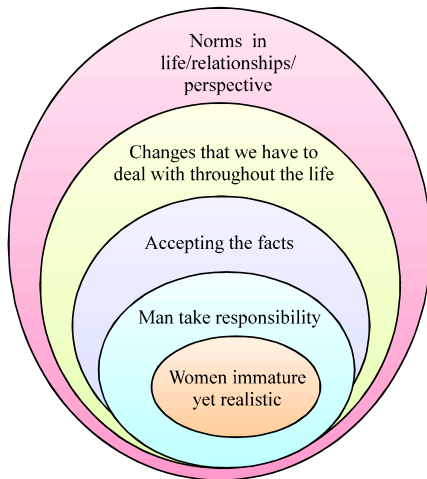


Fig. 9: Sample 5

Living in this era of globalization with a lot of stereotypes and perspectives from public, I think I agree on how the woman was portrayed. She is dealing with her depression about her physical changes. For me, she is not being selfish or somehow self centred because all she wanted is a respite or support from the person she trust

In the final sample (Fig. 10), Student F identifies the central feature of what it takes to ensure the survival of a relationship between the man and the woman:

I found that the way the woman and man reacted to the problem was not right. It shows to us that the relationship was not stable and it only shows that one person is trying to save the relationship.

Based on these six samples, it can be stated that the tool introduced to the students have to a large extent, assisted in increasing the students awareness to identify specific aspects of the video that they want to respond to. The technique of proceeding from a micro level reading of the storyline by focusing on a particular character to a macro level response allows the students the ability to state quite clearly what aspect about the video that they liked or disliked. In drawing the students thoughts on specific matters, this strategy engages the students ability to develop an informed opinion about a given text while stating their concerns about a macro level issue like marriage, societal influence or gender roles. The metaphor of circles of issues can work both as a response-building strategy as well as a guided writing task. The latter will be developed in another upcoming publication.

CONCLUSION

The strategy of circles of issues introduced to the students is only one approach into how one can develop a critical perspective of a text. Ultimately, the text is approached for the similar aspects of literature-characters, plots, conflicts, setting, point of view, use of language (figurative or literal). As a reader one may respond to the text from one's horizon of expectation that is different from the one the writer held in her portrayal in the text.

The interaction between the students perspective of the subject matter and the researchers perspective can create the critical reaction to the text. By tapping into the

immediate features of the text such as characters and conflicts, the proposed strategy termed circles of issues nurtures the ability in students to deepen their world view. By making them visualize the circles in their analysis, the students became sensitive to the ways in which the details contribute to other far reaching implications which were not immediately obvious previously. The central question that students are asked is What is the bigger picture that this story appear to paint? In answering this question, through the circles of issues strategy, students can begin to deepen their competencies in literary engagement and critical thinking.

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