

Reflections on a Class at SEEPALS Summer School in Maribor

Fatma Shijaku, University of Tirana, Albania



Fig. Holding that a picture is worth a thousand words, these images try to give a glimpse of the class I had (before, during and at the end of it), which once intertwined with the content of this essay will better picture my experience and reflections on it.
(Photo credit: Matic Ačko & Amy Kennedy)

My perception, principle and approach to school, teaching and learning lie deep in the verses: “Long live the academy/ Long live the professors/ Long live each student/ Long live all students/ May they always be in their prime/”.

Although old, dating back to the early 18th century, based on a Latin manuscript from 1287 and used as a formal graduation hymn, and nowadays considered as a jocular, light-hearted composition poking fun at university life as it is known elsewhere, the “Semper sint in flore” has profoundly affected my teaching experience and my life. This seems to be the driving force whenever I encourage, myself to teach or critique my own teaching with the aim of evolving in several respects-- no matter what, why, when, how, where and who I teach or learn, or with whom I interact. Still, I am not simply a naïve optimist, unaware of my strengths and limitations—of the hard and heart work this whole process of “flourishing” invites, even considering the challenge and responsibility that the word “semper/always” bears. Yet, every single experience, thought, feeling or moment of discovery I have is a link in the chain of a better teaching and learning process. So was my experience in Maribor a threshold for unlocking the potential for teaching beyond geographical borders, the confines of a particular discipline and of personal borders.

I come from a culture of needs, rather than desires, where teaching classes to international students happens to be a rare occurrence confined to experienced professors or most probably something we have read about in books, watched on TV or provided on the internet. Thus, being given the opportunity to have a class with such an audience to share one's theory and practice of teaching and learning, at my age (not that I am ageist, but rather cognizant of the strengths and limitations of an eight-year teaching experience and surprised by the suddenness of this event) is to be appropriately evaluated as "a dynamic, borderless world" and thus, "a challenge" or "another window" to teaching and learning, demanding not only enhancement of adaptive behavior and cognitive modifiability, but also cross-cultural and intellectual awareness and enrichment. Bearing all this in mind, I took the journey beyond the borders of my home country and its teaching and learning environment to an international audience at the University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts in Slovenia.

Furthermore, it is necessary to point out that I am a lecturer in English Lexicology, Varieties of English and Spoken English, and in my choice to teach a piece of literature--"David Swan" by Nathaniel Hawthorne--I was heeding the call for the application and testing of "Modernizing Literature and Cultural Studies," which arose from the meeting in Banja Luka and immersing myself in the topic of Interdisciplinary Englishes "A creative mixing of literature, language and culture," while remaining faithful to the order (1. Literature, 2. Language and 3. Culture). In my attempts towards the enhancement of student learning, I endeavored to make sense of the short story not only by elaborating on its literary terms (plot, characters, symbols, narrator, point of view, style, etc), but by striving towards a much larger and more creative framework involving the general literary background, the influences of the author and features of his style and certain semantic aspects. The aim was to show versatile perceptions and attitudes towards the main idea of the story (perceptions and attitudes even of different cultures), its modernity by referring to the philosophical issue of determinism vs/and free will, and to incorporate developments and research as broadcast by multimedia. Most of this was planned as a lecture class and the whole of it to take place within the confines of ninety minutes. One might regard my undertaking as too ambitious, but I had become absorbed in and integrated into interdisciplinary Englishes and I wanted my students to experience the same thing.

Another important step I took was the one of pushing my personal borders. By embracing the international audience and its teaching and learning environment, the site of "interdisciplinary Englishes" and all the challenges it offers, I was becoming engaged in further interpersonal, emotional, professional and academic development and self-realization (involving even other sorts of development), and overcoming the barriers of fear and timidity that "the unknown new" evokes.

Given this context, I taught a class where, to my reflections and insight, students liked the choice of the conflict I was teaching through "a youngster almost trapped in a mixture of destinies" and emerged with an understanding of this conflict. They seemed to believe in the theory of destiny, especially when it is good (this is understandable given the students' optimism, which reminds me of the statement of Mark Twain: "[H]ope [makes] a show of reviving – not with any reason to back it, but only because it is its nature to revive when the spring has not been taken out of it by age and familiarity with failure." Student attitudes were pulled in the directions of both determinism and free will, a situation which happens quite often, but they were curious and wise enough to ask me to mediate and contribute my personal opinion towards their reflections. They definitely enjoyed the short BBC broadcast excerpt which, in fact, required high levels of mental processing. The students' feedback, evident in their answers, questions and non-verbal communication, informed me that the class was intrinsically challenging.

A very important aspect of this experience even arose from the sharing of my colleagues' ideas and attitudes towards my teaching. One of my colleagues said that she appreciated my time-management (considering the disciplines and the richness of the content of the lecture); another said that she liked the way multimedia was involved in the lesson, but in the end we ended up talking about our destinies and free will/determinism. It was a good feeling to see that all were favourably impressed by the content of the lecture. Their criticism would have been most welcome and have done me good had this been communicated to me, for I do think that this is part of a class as it should be, or is this just me thinking critically?

Talking about critical thinking, I cannot deny existence of aspects to be improved, such as involving creative and critical tasks or engaging students more in different interpretations of the story. I won't even begin to describe the stubbornness of my emotions, which urged me on in my teaching performance even as I tried not to give vent to them and perhaps might have failed me in some way at certain moments, something I do not care to disclose here.

To sum it up, I hold that a ninety minute-class of teaching and learning in a "Summer School" in addition to being a step further in developing teaching and learning skills, also carries the significance of an opportunity to uncover and make accessible the teaching potential of many teachers like me and highlights the importance of unlocking this potential beyond different borders. These ninety minutes of exploration and cooperation have nurtured and enriched me with all the thoughts and feelings of dancing the dance of the ecstasy and pain of the first time.