

Teaching Asian-Australian identities through literature



Abstract

One of the most critical issues for English teachers in Australia concerns teaching Asian-Australian identities. This paper will take a literary approach to this topic, and use *Only the Heart* by Brian Caswell and David Phu An Chiem (1997), and *Dreaming Australia* by Steve Tolbert (2004) as pedagogic tools. These texts are starting points for discussing the many intersections between Asian and Australian identities. The emphasis of this paper is on perceptions of Asian-Australian identities amongst young people, and how these can be used by English teachers to create worthwhile and exciting learning environments. The theoretical approach that will be elaborated is based upon a poststructural reading of textual practice, so that students relate book-study to identity-construction. In this instance, this means that the students will understand the ethical and cultural distinctions that are present in the texts, yet these will not be placed into hierarchical or fixed structures. Rather, students following these themes will be encouraged to engage with the other, and to look at Asian-Australian identities from a variety of perspectives. At each critical point or issue in the texts, the dynamic and moving basis for teaching Asian-Australian identities will be emphasised.

Introduction

This paper uses two books to study Asian-Australian identities. The focus of these classes is a transformative approach to subject English, and the consequent novel study that the students engage in. This is in line with recent critical literacy and poststructural work in Australian educational circles that has prioritised the analysis of positioning and power concerns that run through literature (Morgan, 2004). These

lessons ask the questions: Who are the Asian-Australian characters portrayed in the novels, and how are they represented? How does the author position the characters in Australian society? Yet working with the students in such a direct manner could become overly dry and dependent on the rational apprehension of power relationships that might be endemic to the communities undertaking the study (Luke & Luke, 2000). As a consequence, the educator involved with this work must take out the most impacting themes from the texts that engage with rational and emotional (Cole, 2007) aspects of Asian-Australian identities; to ensure that the students become fully involved with this project.

The two texts have therefore been divided into three major themes, and lessons built around these themes. The themes should stimulate and interest the students, whilst examining the power relationships that have developed in Australian society due to Asian-Australian identities. Each theme should be run for as long as necessary so that the students understand the issues involved, and simultaneously read and enjoy the books (Dong, 2005). These themes encourage the pleasure in reading whilst demonstrating the ways in which subject English may tackle important social issues.

1. Asian-Australian identities

The use of the hyphenated term 'Asian-Australian' is a blanket expression for a complex mixture of identities. Teaching this subject should at all times avoid any possibility for generalisation or stereotypical representation of the idea of an Asian and Australian 'blend' (Lo, 2000). In the context of teaching *Only the Heart* and *Dreaming Australia*, students will be analysing particular identities that have been constructed from Vietnamese and Afghani perspectives. Yet the influence and lens of Anglo-Celtic culture is prevalent in this construction. The characters in the books come to Australia, they are judged by Australians; indeed these texts are being studied as part of the English syllabus in Australia and both books have been authored in Australia. It is therefore vital that the teachers involved in the teaching of these lessons do not go from particular stories about characters that bridge the gaps between Asian and Australian cultures to discussions about the make-up of contemporary Australian society - without considering the political nature of this movement.

At one end of the political spectrum, the issue involved with teaching Asian-Australian identities is immigration. At the other end, it is about personal freedom, life and understanding identity. The immigration perspective will necessarily push any discussion about the themes and topics of the books into domestic and defensive matters; in so doing any Asian-Australian identities that are analysed through this study of literature will be constructed as 'other' to the mainstream (Lettau, 2005). This fundamental approach to teaching these texts misunderstands Asian-Australian identities; as it positions gaining access to Australian society as a primary concern for Asian immigrants. The contrasting approach, which takes the politics of immigration out of the equation, and constructs Asian-Australian identities from the inside experience of the immigrants; will open up the possibility for a balanced discussion about Asian-Australian identities (Wenger, 2000). Teachers should therefore contemplate the politics of this topic before embarking on these book studies with their cohorts; making sure that the Asian-Australian identities that the class constructs do not become influenced by the ways in which the Australian public has been manipulated to vote.

2. The theory of teaching Asian-Australian identities

Teaching about identity through literature rests on the personal engagement that the text arouses in the student body. It sits within a multiple literacies approach to language and literacy learning (Masny, 2005/6). This states that learning that will happen in the classroom is a social affair, primarily driven by affects (Fiumara, 2001). Teaching Asian-Australian identities must engage with these affects and the sense that it is an issue of personal importance to the students. This sense is perhaps most clearly defined in areas where a variety of ethnic groups have settled in Australia. These are also areas that have experienced recent social problems in terms of racially motivated attacks (Sydney Morning Herald, 2005). Teaching Asian-Australian identities through literature is a strategy to address this problem by demystifying the other, in this case Asian communities living in Australia, and by giving students experience and skills to understand the narratives of Asian-Australian migrants.

As an intellectual construct, Asian-Australian identities have the negative possibility of becoming a remote and abstract idea. The teaching of this concept through literature must therefore relate it in every instance to concrete identity formation in the lives of the students. For example, they will have families, yearn for freedom, and may experience discrimination in some form or another. Finding out that Asian migrants to Australia have had similar formative experiences; works on the level of social identification and empathetic understandings of the students (Verducci, 2000). It also deals with residual power issues in the community as a linkage is being built between peoples living in the same country.

3. *Dreaming Australia*

This novel is about a young Afghani refugee, Soraya, who travels to Australia after her mother dies. The author has researched the piece well, as it is full of great detail about the places and the people that Soraya meets. It is also written in an accessible and clear style, which should appeal to most teenagers. The novel deals with tough aspects of this story; such as the reality of people smuggling, the incarceration of illegal immigrants, and common Australian perceptions and prejudices against such migrants. However, *Dreaming Australia* is it never sensationalist or sentimental. Rather, the author presents a third person narrative that focuses on Soraya’s journey in order to draw our attention to the ways in which Asian-Australian identities have been constructed around people who may have undergone similar experiences.

Note: These thematic extracts from teaching the novels are not prescriptive lesson plans. They are meant to be interpreted by English teachers as starting points to building ideas to enable the teaching of Asian-Australian identities through these texts.

3.1 *Dreaming Australia* theme 1 – Travel

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| Target group | Grade 9/10 |
| Theme objectives | To plot the stages where Soraya travels |

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| | <p>on a map</p> <p>To understand a particular immigrant's journey</p> <p>To relate these experiences of travel to the immigrant's feelings of confusion and alienation</p> |
| <p>Theme procedures/materials</p> | <p>This class requires maps of Asia and Australia. The teacher will start by discussing the journey that Soraya makes in <i>Dreaming Australia</i>. Which countries does she go through? How does she get from place to place? The students will find the place names on the maps and plot Soraya's journey from Masar e-Sharif to Woomera. The first task is to calculate how far she travels and how long the trip takes.</p> <p>For the second part of the class, students will work in pairs. They will write a dialogue between Soraya and a travel journalist. The journalist will ask questions about each leg of the trip, for example, how comfortable was it? What was the food like? Would you recommend it to a friend?</p> <p>The pairs will perform their dialogues. This may take several sessions, depending on how quickly they can write their scripts and rehearse. Points to note with respect to the dialogues: How accurate are they? How does Soraya feel during her journey?</p> <p>This lesson should finish with a</p> |

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| | discussion about the immigrant's experience of travel. |
| Curriculum links | This lesson is connected to geography and SOSE. The novel is being used to unpack issues of Asian immigration from a particular migrant's perspective. |
| Assessment of theme | This session is in two stages, and should be assessed accordingly. The skill of plotting Soraya's journey on a map requires accuracy and precision. The dialogues require sensitivity and good use of language to express Soraya's emotions. |

This theme should present a fun and interesting introduction to studying *Dreaming Australia*. However, it also serves the serious purpose of highlighting the reality of travel that many Asian-Australian migrants have faced. Students may have seen television images of boat people, or migrants shipped in trucks. These powerful sequences have been used for political purposes, and given different interpretations depending upon the messages that have been attached to them. This theme from *Dreaming Australia* should allow the students involved to examine below the surface of the global trade in migrating people; as they will look at the physical facts of such journeying, and write informed dialogues from the point of view of somebody on such a trip.

3.2 *Dreaming Australia* theme 2 – **Discrimination**

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| Target group | Grade 9/10 |
| Theme objectives | To look at several situations of discrimination in <i>Dreaming Australia</i> To understand the way language is used in discriminatory situations To understand discriminatory |

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| | relationships from an immigrant's perspective |
| Theme procedure/materials | <p>The issue of discrimination should be handled delicately by the teacher as it may touch upon experiences of individual students in the class. This lesson will focus on 2 characters in the novel that demonstrate different sides of discrimination. Students will have to read pp. 64-86 and pp. 143-149 to get their information. The class may be split into groups to work on the 2 characterisations of discrimination that the novel presents:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The people smuggler Pervez Lateef. His discrimination is primarily economic in that he treats Soraya as an item of trade. He doesn't ever tell her what is really going to happen. 2. Annie. She befriends Soraya after she has escaped from Woomera. When Annie returns Soraya to the detention centre, she demonstrates her hatred for illegal immigrants. <p>The groups will use the text to design a 'straw-man' of each character. This sketch will include as many character traits about them as possible. They should also find examples of language by the characters to back up their claims (for example Lateef's letter to Soraya about Amir).</p> <p>When the groups have finished their</p> |

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| | <p>straw-men, they will write a first person monologue from the perspective of Soraya explaining how she feels about these characters.</p> <p>This session will end by reading several of the monologues and discussing how Soraya’s Asian-Australian identity has been affected by meeting these characters.</p> |
| Curriculum links | <p>This English literature lesson requires that the students engage in understanding character and language. It presents curriculum links to psychology and sociology.</p> |
| Assessment of theme | <p>This lesson may be assessed by how well the groups perform the task of designing their straw-men. How much information did they find? Have they found appropriate examples of discriminatory language? The monologues may be assessed by applying English criteria about language use and sensitivity to topic focus.</p> |

The second theme from *Dreaming Australia* should be sensitively handled by the teacher (Bennett, & Bennett, 2004). Any racist or inappropriate use of language that this session brings to the surface should be examined and challenged. Students will probably label the people smuggler as an evil character in their construction of his ‘straw-man’. The straw-man is a visual representation of the character that is not meant to be real (it is made of straw). Their labelling of Annie might well be more ambiguous, as she displays a frequently held belief that illegal immigration is plain wrong. She is also Australian. The monologue exercise will help to liberate the task from such conditioned responses to these characters; as the students will perceive the

characters from Soraya’s perspective. Furthermore, the teacher should feel at ease to examine subtle aspects of discrimination as they occur during this theme - such as the motives behind Lateef’s and Annie’s behaviours. They might also want to play devil’s advocate to open up the debate, by pointing out that Lateef is just a businessman, whereas Annie acts sneakily by hiding her beliefs about illegal immigration to trap Soraya.

3.3 *Dreaming Australia* theme 3 – **Freedom**

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| Target group | Grade 9/10 |
| Theme objectives | <p>To analyse Soraya’s friendship and support networks</p> <p>To compare Soraya’s situation with student realities</p> <p>To examine the ideas of freedom in the Australian and Afghani contexts</p> |
| Theme procedures/materials | <p>The teacher will open up this lesson by drawing a spider-diagram on the board around the idea of freedom. Students will suggest words and phrases that link to it.</p> <p>The students will work in small groups of 2 or 3 and draw the support networks that surround Soraya in the novel. For example, mother and father and extended family, Muhammed, Mustafa and Amir, Elham and Salar. The students should indicate the quality of the relationships and how these individuals have helped Soraya and in what context. If students struggle with this exercise, the teacher may point to the parts in the book where information about Soraya’s support networks may be found.</p> |

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| | <p>The groups will draw their own support networks, including family members, friends and teachers. They should include information on their diagram about the nature and context of each relationship. This will lead them to be able to compare their own support networks with Soraya's.</p> <p>This comparison should be related back to the initial ideas of freedom that constituted the spider-diagram. Students will start to write a comparative essay: <i>A comparison between Soraya's freedom and my own.</i></p> <p>This task should be completed at home and handed in.</p> |
| Curriculum links | <p>This links to information that students will receive on wellbeing and relationships. The issue of freedom is well suited to literature study, but should also relate to the student's own situation.</p> |
| Assessment of theme | <p>This theme may be formally assessed through agreed criteria applied to the essay; including the depth of analysis that students demonstrate when assessing Soraya's freedom and their own. It could also be informally assessed via student participation in the construction of the networks.</p> |

This third theme that has been presented rests on students being able to make the connection between freedom and support networks. The teacher might aid this conceptual link by referring to examples or instances where having a great support

network can set you free, such as brilliant teachers helping you to do well at school, and therefore achieving your goals! Support networks can also trap you, such as happens to Soraya in Woomera, or as some teenagers might feel about their family. Open discussion about freedom and society is therefore necessary to make this session work. The theme of freedom could potentially degenerate into a vague focus for the class, unless the teacher harnesses its power as a universal desire and constructive element in building multicultural identities (Tompkins, 2001).

4. *Only the Heart*

This novel is a powerful and emotional read that examines Vietnamese migration to Australia. It is written in an evocative and dream-like manner, which mixes-up memories with poetry and action centred on a family's experiences of leaving Vietnam and settling in a foreign land. Students studying this book will learn about Vietnamese culture as well as the construction of Vietnamese-Australian identities, including the conflicts and resolutions that coming to Australia means for this family. The educator involved with this unit of work should use the style of the language and the particular episodes that are described to examine the subjective perspectives and psychical connections that are presented in the novel. In particular, *Only the Heart* can be used as a way of linking Vietnamese generational concerns to the movement of its people.

4.1 *Only the Heart* theme 1 – Ghosts

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| Target group | Grade 11/12 |
| Theme objectives | <p>To understand how ghosts function in <i>Only the Heart</i></p> <p>To analyse particular sections of the text that refer to ghosts</p> <p>To make connections between Vietnamese culture and the notion of ghosts</p> |

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| Theme procedures/materials | <p>This lesson will start with the teacher involved engaging the students' idea of ghosts. They could ask: Who has heard of a ghost story? What happens? The teacher may want to refer to ghosts in English literature such as <i>Hamlet</i>. The students should work in groups on these questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the ghost stories in <i>Only the Heart</i>? 2. How do these episodes work in terms of plot and atmosphere? <p>The groups will report back on their findings. The teacher may help this activity by highlighting the relevant sections of the text to explore. After reporting back and receiving feedback on their comments, the class will examine broader Vietnamese culture and answer the question: <i>What is the position of ghosts in Vietnamese society?</i></p> <p>Students will be asked to do research on this question, and will present their findings using a power-point presentation and accompanying hand-out.</p> |
| Curriculum links | <p>The lesson connects with SOSE and the study of culture. Students will learn about important spiritual matters connected to Vietnamese identity.</p> |
| Assessment of theme | <p>Teachers may assess the progress of the students through their ability to find the relevant textual references and the focussed nature of the power-point</p> |

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To start the novel *Only the Heart*, the grade 11/12 students will be given the novel to read in advance of the lessons. The first thematic study is on the topic of ghosts. There is a sense of otherness that runs through the novel, which is emphasised by the fleeting glimpses of displaced lives and the poetic and haunting nature of the language. Students should therefore engage with this theme as a pivotal aspect of the story; that shows how Vietnamese culture deals with death as well as the position of ancestors and memories. The contrast to contemporary representations of ghosts in horror films or cartoons will also be discussed at some point by the students. This theme should lead the students to question the position of death, ancestors and memories in contemporary Australian society.

4.2 *Only the Heart* theme 2 – **Family**

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| Target group | Grade 11/12 |
| Theme objectives | <p>To analyse the structure of the Vo family in <i>Only the Heart</i></p> <p>To make connections between this family and their own</p> <p>To understand the effects on the family due to migration</p> |
| Theme procedures/materials | <p>The second theme in this novel study will engage the class in an analysis of family values. The teacher should begin with a general discussion about family, and its role in the novel and in Australian society. The class will then work in groups on large pieces of butcher's paper, plotting the names and relationships of the Vo family in <i>Only the Heart</i>. Any confusion should be ironed out in the feedback session, where the groups will</p> |

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| | <p>discuss how accurately they have understood the family structure in the novel.</p> <p>Afterwards, students will work individually on their own family relationships, including as many as possible. They will answer the comparative essay question: <i>What are values of the Vo family and, how do they compare to my own?</i></p> <p>Students should find textual references to back up their claims in the essay. The teacher will guide them to read or re-read sections of the text where the family values are apparent in Vietnam and Australia.</p> |
| Curriculum links | This lesson engages student to study aspects of personal and social wellbeing that relate to family. |
| Assessment of theme | The essay may be assessed using agreed subject English criteria. The ability to work in groups and access relevant parts of the novel may also be assessed. |

The evolution and transformations in the Vo family as they migrate from Vietnam to Australia; is an important story to share with the students. The teacher must handle this theme carefully, as it has the potential to lead to discrimination (Beach, et al., 2003); the Vietnamese family experiences being regarded as alien by the students. Therefore, the comparative elements of this lesson are vital to make sure that the Asian-Australian identities that are being constructed by the class are complex and reflexive. Furthermore, the analysis of the Vo family structures as they undergo the pressures and tensions of contemporary Australian suburban life; carries with it the potential for discussion about the mixture of immigrant communities that are found in

such environments (Li, 2004). The teacher must orchestrate this debate so that it is not affected by post-modern tribalism; or the drawing of boundaries and territories around resources and zones in the suburban belts.

4.3 *Only the Heart* theme 3 – War

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| Target group | Grade 11/12 |
| Theme objectives | <p>To understand the role of the Vietnam War in <i>Only the Heart</i></p> <p>To relate the effects of the war to a particular character in the novel</p> <p>To look at the broader implications of the Vietnam War for Australian society</p> |
| Theme procedures/materials | <p>The last theme gives students the opportunity to examine the Vietnam War. The teacher should contextualise this lesson by explaining the effects of war in terms of displacement and suffering, and that much of the emotion in <i>Only the Heart</i> results from this conflict. Students should work in groups on the question: <i>How does the war affect the characters in the novel?</i> They will find textual references and make notes on episodes that relate to the war. The teacher will orchestrate feedback on this question and provide extra information on this question if necessary.</p> <p>The students will work individually on monologues from a particular character's perspective. They will express their feelings about the war. These monologues will be read in front of the</p> |

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| | class, and particular emotional perspectives discussed. Students may do research and analysis on the effects of the Vietnam War on Australia in follow-up sessions. They may want to examine the political and economic fall-out from this conflict. |
| Curriculum links | This English literature lesson has a strong relationship with SOSE. Furthermore, the monologues will be sensitive and empathetic, demanding skill in use of language and analysis of character. |
| Assessment of theme | The monologues may be assessed by noticing how well the students have understood the characters, and the ways in which the war may have affected them. |

The Vietnam War was an important conflict for Australia; due to its proximity, the geopolitical consequences and its involvement in terms of troop deployment. It represented the end of colonial endeavour in Asia, and the beginning of the emergence of China as the major global power that we see today. *Only the Heart* gives students the chance to study this important historical event in terms of human relationships and fear. Mainland Australia has been lucky in that it has been spared the horrors of contemporary war within its own borders. Yet students should relate to the experiences of the characters in the novel on an empathetic and polemic level (Khoo, 2004). To help strengthen this point, the teachers could ask for examples of local families that have been devastated by war. Or the class could discuss the ways in which colonial British rule drove aboriginal families from their homes, causing fear and collective misery.

5. The pedagogy of Asian-Australian identities

Appropriate pedagogical approaches to Asian-Australian identities will create interactive and motivational environments for these lessons. They will use the themes that have been extracted to best present the books and the consequent study of identities. At all times, a multiplicity of voices and debate should be encouraged on these topics through which students will be given every opportunity to participate and relate the ideas to their own experiences (Arnold, 2005). These lessons will engage the students in accessible and effective ways whilst maintaining the importance of the subject matter. Teachers may use themes as have been described above as templates for their own creative thinking about teaching Asian-Australian identities; and by designing further English teaching pedagogies that engage with the texts.

The pedagogical work that the teachers and students involved with these lessons will do; has significance beyond the particular classroom settings in which they work. As the demographic landscape of Australia continues to shift and change according to the needs of the population; the ways in which pedagogy will impinge upon the social make-up of the country will also change (Lo Bianco, 2003). English teaching pedagogy is in the privileged position of being a link between language learning (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and cultural formation. English teachers should therefore take the time to sensitise themselves to the topics involved in a broad sense. The ways in which they handle these sessions on Asian-Australian identities may have profound economic and global effects, as the students head into a future of global relationships and potentially cosmopolitan citizenship.

6. Reflections on teaching Asian-Australian identities through literature

Dreaming Australia has been recently introduced as a grade nine text in a primarily Anglo-Celtic demographic context (Tasmania), whilst *Only the Heart* has been a staple grade eleven literature option in a multicultural teaching environment for a number of years (suburban Brisbane). Whilst the research data is at a preliminary stage, the tabulated results of student questionnaires about these sessions read thus (n=65):

| | Negative | Neutral | Positive |
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| I now better understand Asian-Australian identities | 12% | 5% | 83% |
| I feel more sympathetic to Asian-Australians | 3% | 32% | 65% |
| I want to know more about Asian-Australians | 21% | 21% | 58% |
| More should be done to build links between communities | 34% | 12% | 54% |
| There are many serious issues connected to Asian-Australian identities | 43% | 29% | 28% |
| Studying this literature has given me insight into Asian-Australians | 5% | 2% | 93% |
| I now communicate positively about | 36% | 12% | 52% |

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The results are generally positive. It is perhaps a little surprising that only 28% of the students think that there are serious issues connected to Asian-Australian identities after studying one of these texts. Students' comments include, "I have come to respect the journeys that Asians have taken to come to Australia," and, "it is incredible just how much we have learnt about different cultures and their people through studying this book." A teacher has also commented that by using the themes to teach Asian-Australian identities through these books, it has opened up, "inter-cultural discussion to a level that I hadn't thought possible from previous novel study."

Conclusion

This paper may be used by teachers as a guide to teaching Asian-Australian identities by applying the ideas that are presented here in their contexts. They should choose their particular texts for study carefully; so that they simultaneously fascinate their students and lead them through the construction of Asian-Australian identities through:

- The examination of themes that underpin the connective relationships between Australia and Asia
- Open discussion and debate about the issues involved with these identities
- Empathetic reading, writing, speaking and listening exercises that prioritise the experiences of the migrants and the ways in which their lives are lived
- The celebration of all the cultural elements that are to be found in contemporary Australian society
- Knowledge and skills that relate the study of literature to communal cooperation
- An understanding that those in power may make a difference through education by enabling harmonious and

integrative public discourses.

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