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Teaching Three ‘Writing for University and Beyond’ Course Concepts Simultaneously Utilizing One Three-minute Scene from a Bollywood Film

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Teaching three ‘Writing for University and Beyond’ course concepts simultaneously utilizing one three-minute scene from a Bollywood film

Kanika Verma

Overview

Teaching writing concepts in an undergraduate university writing course can be challenging. Several threshold concepts in writing studies are new for undergraduates majoring in any discipline. The comprehension of many concepts is dependent on other sub-concepts or meta-concepts. For instance, students need various examples to understand what ‘meta’ is in order to understand, use, and integrate ‘metadiscourse’ (Cayley; Samuels and Garbati) in their academic writing. Films are one of the creative media commonly used in classrooms to underscore important course concepts. *3 Idiots*, a 2009 Bollywood Hindi film, is a comical satire on the Indian higher education system. I use a three-minute university classroom scene (What is a Machine? – Funny Scene | 3 Idiots) from *3 Idiots* to highlight three core concepts in an undergraduate ‘Writing for University and Beyond’ course: meta, code-meshing (Pattanayak; Young), and whether to teach language, communication, and writing prescriptively or descriptively (Young).

Time Commitment

20-25 minutes

Materials

You will need a couple of readings for students to complete prior to class discussion. I use Young’s “Should Writers Use they Own English” and Pattanayak’s “There is One Correct Way of Writing and Speaking” to highlight such concepts as standard/King’s English,

code-meshing, and teaching language, communication, and writing prescriptively vs. descriptively. I also assign Cayley's "Metadiscourse" and Samuel and Garbati's "Using Voice to Make Your Mark" to underscore the concept of metadiscourse. To watch the three-minute film scene ("What is a Machine?") on *YouTube* together as a group in class, you will need a computer/laptop, internet access, a projector, a screen/white wall for projection, speakers or sound system, and any necessary audio cables, HDMI cables, or adapters.

Activity Process

- Students will complete the readings before coming to class. You can first assign Young's and Pattanayak's readings as homework for one week, and then Cayley's and Samuel's and Garbati's readings as homework for next week. Or you can ask students to complete all four readings as one week's homework. It depends on your syllabus timeline and course design.
- Once students have activated this background knowledge, they can easily extract concepts such as standard English, World Englishes, code-meshing, prescriptive vs. descriptive instruction of communication and writing, and meta from their experience of viewing the film scene.
- Next, the whole class watches the three-minute scene (What is a Machine?) from the film *3 Idiots* together in class as the instructor projects it on a big screen. The dialogues in the scene are in both Hindi and English with English subtitles. Most students find it easy to understand and connect with the university classroom narrative presented in the scene. Sometimes a three-minute video can give just enough context to spark a great discussion and help everyone understand the topic better. That is the whole purpose of this activity.
- In the scene, the professor in an undergraduate engineering

college asks the class, “What is a machine?” A student stands up and delivers a precise, memorized bookish definition filled with technical jargon in standard English. The professor approves of his definition, praising him for his memorized response. Another student interrupts with a simple, practical definition in both Hindi and English using everyday language and gives relatable examples like a fan, a bicycle, or a zip, to illustrate his point. The professor, dissatisfied with his straightforward explanation, asks for a more detailed and technical definition. The professor gets frustrated with his simplified approach and asks him to leave the classroom. Before leaving, this student subtly and cleverly criticizes the rote learning approach, implying that understanding the concept is more important than memorizing complex definitions.

- Then, ask students to take a few minutes and note down instances of course concepts exemplified in the scene. Divide students into small groups of two or three to discuss and draw examples of course concepts from the film scene.
- Next, elicit responses from the students. Every term I do this activity in class, I am amazed at how effectively students connect with the scene’s classroom narrative and come up with brilliant ideas to explain and discuss course concepts. You might have to remind students a few times to keep connecting their answers with course concepts or main points from the readings, so their thoughts are streamlined to arrive at the learning objectives
- For example, my students are surprised to see how smoothly students (in the scene) in an Indian classroom switch from Hindi to English and vice-versa (an example of code-switching) and how effectively they use both languages simultaneously (code-meshing). Students learn that this is a common socio-cultural and linguistic practice in India, as

most people are at least bilingual. My students also notice the use of a different dialect of English, Indian English, in the scene. Thus, utilizing a film scene in Hindi and English (with English subtitles) in an English-medium Canadian classroom serves as an example of code-meshing. However, some students also comment on the preference of the professor for the crammed-up bookish definition in standard English, a sign of the colonial legacy in India. This point also sparks the discussion about the decolonization of language.

- Also, based on their learnings from Young's course reading, my students see the difference between teaching prescriptively and descriptively in this classroom scene. The scene humorously critiques the rote learning approach. My students also applaud the second student's answer and practical explanations in the scene emphasizing the importance of understanding and applying concepts in real-world contexts. They underscore such points as how education should foster true understanding and critical thinking, rather than just the ability to memorize and recite information. I, then, bring them to understand how communication and writing work in this context, such as by understanding, listening, and writing in multiple dialects simultaneously and by observing how languages function within and from various cultural perspectives.
- To explain the abstract concept of "meta" to come to a discussion of metadiscourse (Cayley; Samuels and Garbati), I use this university classroom scene to discuss how the conversation between the professor and the students is a meaningful narrative about how classroom communication works. So, I explicitly show students why I use a classroom scene to illustrate a classroom concept. Thus, a classroom story about a classroom story (story about story) becomes a good example of the 'meta' concept for the students. They

begin to use this simple explanation of ‘meta’ (metaX = X about X) to apply it to any context in which ‘meta’ is used. Then, it becomes effective to make them understand what metadiscourse is and why it is important in academic writing.

- Finally, students actively sharpen their critical and analytical thinking skills by discussing such examples from the scene and connecting these examples with course learnings and concepts in the field of writing studies.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Apprehend the notion of standard/King’s English and World Englishes and understand the concept of code-meshing with an example
- Comprehend what "meta", an abstract concept, means with a classroom scene as an example (meta-story: classroom story about a classroom story)
- Gain an understanding of the difference between teaching prescriptively and descriptively
- Deepen their critical and analytical thinking skills

Learning Accommodations

- You can replace Young’s and Pattanayak’s readings with similar academic articles focusing on such concepts in writing studies as standard English, code-meshing, and prescriptive vs. descriptive instruction of language, communication and writing.
- You can replace Cayley’s and Samuels and Garbati’s readings with similar academic articles discussing metadiscourse.

- The instructor should aim for the synchronous group viewing of the scene during class time. For asynchronous classes, however, the instructor can provide the *YouTube* link for the students to watch according to their schedules and contribute to the group discussion using online collaborative discussion forums, such as Google Docs, Blendspace, or online course management systems.

Works Cited

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