

Studying American Literary History through Song

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Abstract

This short article discusses 米文学史 (American Literary History), a course taught by an English-speaking instructor at Kagoshima Prefectural College in spring 2006. The course's thirty-seven students, for the most part second-year English majors, conducted their own research, made in-class presentations, and developed a course Web log, or blog (www.beitunes.blogspot.com) to share their research and comment on other students' work. In discussing the course, the author explores the questions of how to teach literature to Japanese undergraduates and how specifically to teach in English without overwhelming the students. Based on the instructor's own assessments and the students' written evaluations, the course is deemed to be a significant improvement over the conventional model of lecturing.

I Introduction

The following article discusses 米文学史 (American Literary History), a course taught by an English-speaking instructor at Kagoshima Prefectural College in spring 2006. The course's thirty-seven students, for the most part second-year English majors, conducted their own research, made in-class presentations, and developed a course Web log, or blog, to share their research and comment on other students' work. In discussing the course, the author explores the questions of how to teach literature to Japanese undergraduates and how specifically to teach in English without overwhelming the students. Based on the instructor's own assessments and the students' written evaluations, the course is deemed to be a significant improvement over the conventional model of lecturing.

II Article Title

米チューンズ is a neologism that names the course blog. It alludes to the most distinctive feature of the course, which is the study of problems within American social and political history through the consideration of songs and song lyrics. The blog, referred to in English as "Beitunes," is no longer under development; however, it is still available for consultation as of the printing of this article.¹

¹ www.beitunes.blogspot.com

III Preamble : Course Development

When I first taught 米文学史 in fall 2005, I took a conventional approach to teaching literature. On reflection, this led to two types of problems ; one relating to course content and the other to my pedagogical interaction with individual students. Concerning course content, the short stories discussed were written by the well-known African-American writer Alice Walker and Native-American writer Sherman Alexie, and the course theme that these and other writings allowed us to explore was that of “the quest for identity in ‘minority’ American writing.” A main idea I tried to convey to the students was that the questioning of personal identity through writing or artistic creation, while particularly important to the so-called hyphenated ethnicities that inhabit the United States and characterize the writers we were studying, is in no way exclusive to either ‘minority writers’ or to Americans. It is, in fact, equally significant to Japanese, who have no reason to take their individual ethnic or cultural identities for granted. From this perspective, the value of studying American literature is that it highlights with particular vivacity issues of identity that are significant to all cultures. More specifically, my lectures focused on the subtle ways in which Alice Walker, in her story “Everyday Use,” derides the superficial grasp of African culture that, in her view, characterized many of the pan-Africanists of the late 60s and early 70s; or, similarly, the ways in which Sherman Alexie ridiculed the attempts on the part of certain Native Americans to foster an authentic cultural identity by celebrating “fry bread” (whose origin is, in fact, not Native American) or by assuming stoic attitudes in public in accordance with a stereotype of Native peoples. In keeping with this theme, I asked the students to write a term paper in which they discussed, on the model of Alice Walker’s story, objects of everyday use which relate to their identification with Japanese culture and history.

In taking this approach to teaching 米文学史, I realized that, despite the pertinence of the texts and theme, an insufficient understanding of the cultural background prevented my students from fully appreciating both the authors’ literary strategies and the stakes of the issues their writings address. For instance, figures as central to the civil rights movement as Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr. were recognized in name by only a few students. For such a course to be effective, the students required a general grasp of the history not only of the identity politics against which Walker and Alexie react in their writings, but also, as far as race relations are concerned, of the entire civil rights era from which these political movements were born.

In light of this realization, I decided that, without neglecting the literary dimension of the course, I needed to direct my efforts away from teaching specific literary strategies as understood within larger social and political problems and toward those very problems. This is where the inspiration to use songs and songs lyrics came from; since, generally speaking, such texts are not as complex as short stories or novels. Although many song lyrics are complex in ways that require

analysis, since they generally require less analysis in and of themselves, they can more readily be used as a springboard to researching the historical and political issues to which they relate. By using songs and song lyrics, I was able to direct the course away from literary devices—for instance, questions of narrative voice and irony—and toward significant social issues and problems that continue to mark American society. These issues include economic disparities, race relations, the uses of space exploration and war, gender inequalities, and health care (or its lack). By employing texts whose formal aspects are not as daunting as those of short stories but that nonetheless make a unique artistic or literary stamp on a given issue, the course offered a general introduction to contemporary American society that, I hope, was memorable for the students.

A second problem stemming from my first experience of teaching 米文学史 concerned two separate practical issues: my lecturing in English and the requirement of writing a term paper. It became apparent to me that, no matter how deliberate, controlled, or repetitive a manner in which I lectured, listening to spoken English for more than an hour at a stretch is, for most students, a difficult if not discouraging task. This is especially true for a class consisting of thirty-seven students in which, necessarily, attention to individual needs and questions is limited. To overcome this problem without losing the benefits of my instructing the students in a substantive way, I decided that student presentations and group discussions could occupy a large part of class time, while my instruction on substantive issues could take place in consultations of no more than three students at a time, when class was not in session. Thus, I conceived of creating research groups comprised of two to three students that would be required to make appointments with me before, during, and after their individual research projects. Moreover, the in-class presentations could be presented both in English and Japanese. This bilingual approach in fact became a common practice in the course. It allowed students the opportunity to practice speaking and listening to English while at the same time assuring that, through the use of Japanese, the main points of each presentation would be conveyed, and the burden of listening comprehension lightened.

The second issue involved the term paper requirement. Whereas there are obvious advantages to writing a term paper, such as practice in English composition or the in-depth pursuit of personally rewarding topics, it seemed a shortcoming to me that the term papers were handed in at the end of the semester, since this meant that my corrections and comments would not reach the students, if at all, until weeks after the course had ended, thus delaying and weakening their pedagogical value. Furthermore, although all the students met the end-of-the-semester paper requirement, completing it obliged them to divert their attention from the graduation theses that many were in the thick of writing. This is why I decided that a different system for course involvement was called for, namely, one that allowed me to respond to the students' contributions earlier in the semester and not all at the same time. The use of a course blog seemed ideal for this purpose, since not only can it be

updated from week to week and contributed to by everyone, it also allows me to edit student writing in conference with the students. With a blog, the students see not only the corrections that I recommend to them before they publish their individual articles; they also see their peers' work and respond to it in writing. The blog thus provides a more interactive and mutually beneficial learning environment than conventional term papers do. Moreover, as a contrast to term papers, which may or may not be retrieved and preserved by individual students, the blog remains a lasting, public archive of the research group projects and of the class experience as a whole.

IV Course Objectives

The course objectives were of two kinds: one relating explicitly to the course title, and several objectives that were, in one sense, secondary, but, in another, no less important, as they addressed basic academic skills. The primary objective was to provide a general introduction, through the study of topical music of a literary quality, to issues and problems within American society. The secondary objectives were to teach basic academic writing skills, including how to cite reference material properly, how to incorporate others' information and insights while distinguishing this input from one's own views, and how to document the citations one makes; how to read and research English-language Web sites using various online tools; how to develop a blog for research purposes; how to make effective public presentations in English; and how to make constructive comments on others' presentations and articles. The specific design of the student-centered, blog-enhanced course as I conceived it for spring 2006 allowed me to encompass some of the secondary objectives for the first time, and others more effectively than I had been able to in my first experience of teaching 米文学史.

V Course Design

1 Syllabus and Explanatory Materials

Below is an excerpt (slightly modified here) of the course syllabus:

We will examine defining moments and themes in American history by listening to, analyzing, and discussing well-known and not-so-well-known songs of historical import written by or about Americans. We will also underscore the literary borrowings of these songwriters and their influence on American and world literature. A variety of songs, from national hymns to protest ballads; and genres, including folk, blues, soul, and rap, will be featured.

Artists whose works we will explore include Billie Holiday, Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs,

ADAMEK : Studying American Literary History through Song

Bob Dylan, Roland Hayes, Otis Redding/Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, Marvin Gaye, Gil Scott-Heron, Billy Bragg and Wilco. The historical events and cultural themes we will discuss will include the Civil War, the Postbellum era in the South, segregation, space exploration, the Vietnam War and the 1960s peace movements, corporate media culture, and immigration.

Students will participate in group discussions. In addition, each student will work together with another student to present a single song to the class and analyze its lyrics with respect to specific historical trends and events in the United States. The exams will review the general literary and historical significance of the songs discussed in class.

The course description handed to students on the first class meeting included the following comments,

授業の方法

アメリカの歴史と文学に関連した歌を、二人組のリサーチ・グループを組んでリサーチしてもらいます。初回授業でペアをくじ引きにより決定し、各組にまず1曲ずつ割り当て、学期中に1組計2回プレゼンテーションをすることになります。リサーチ・グループに加え、1組4人又は6人のディスカッション・グループを7組、くじ引きで作ります。同じリサーチ・グループの人が同じディスカッション・グループに入ることはありません。

Furthermore, the following indications concerning the presentations (modified slightly here) were included in the first-day handout,

プレゼンテーションの準備について

プレゼンテーションは英語で行います。しかしプレゼンテーションのまとめは日本語で行っても構いません。作曲者の生涯、曲の歴史的・文学的背景、ジャンル、そしてその曲が主にどの様な人達に向けたものか、を必ず含む内容にして下さい。どの様な意味合いを持った曲かを分析しましょう。プレゼンテーションや資料を効果的なものにするために、自分達なりの考えを持って、プレゼンテーションを構成していくことが大切です。例えば皆に問いかける形式であったり（間接的）、はっきりとした主題であったり（直接的）、と色々なかたちでその考えを表現することができるでしょう。

又プレゼンテーションの際、おそらく他の学生が知らないであろう単語を説明する必要があります。原稿を読むような発表はとても退屈なので、極力避けて下さい。楽器やDVD等を使うのも効果的だと思います。各リサーチ・グループは、プレゼンテーションの2週間前にリサーチ方針について必ず私と話し合ってください。それ以前に話し合いに来ても構いません。

2 Description of a Typical Class Meeting

On the first day of class, my handout included the following explanation of our daily routine:

授業の流れ (90分)

Part I : リサーチ・グループによるプレゼンテーション1組目 (20分) → ディスカッション・グループによる話し合い/グループ・ディスカッション (10分) → プレゼンテーションへの質疑応答 (5分)

Part II : リサーチ・グループによるプレゼンテーション2組目 (20分) → ディスカッション・グループによる話し合い/グループ・ディスカッション (10分) → プレゼンテーションへの質疑応答 (5分)

グループ・ディスカッションとプレゼンテーションへの質疑応答

グループ・ディスカッションでは、歌詞について話し合い、扱われた曲やリサーチ内容について、発表者に尋ねる質問を英語で考えてください。話し合いの後、各ディスカッション・グループは発表者に一つ質問をします。

It took several weeks for the students to acclimate themselves to this student-centered style of course. After several class meetings in which by means of two random drawings I determined the members of research groups and discussion groups, respectively, and subsequently discussed how to access and use the course blog, I demonstrated how to make effective presentations of song lyrics and publish follow-up articles by presenting the first two songs of the course, "Spaceman" by Phil Ochs and "Whitey on the Moon" by Gil Scott-Heron. This established a model which, in the successive weeks, became a matter of course for the students. Save for days on which the students reviewed for or took an exam, each class meeting was dedicated to the study of two distinct songs in accordance with the time distribution indicated above.

3 Blog Design and Use.

In the introductory handout, the students read the following,

Blog について

Blog の記事は英語で書き込みます。コメント記入は英語又は日本語です。引用や他のウェブサイトへのリンクをしても構いませんが、blog 記事は学生の皆さん自身の考えに沿って書き、他人の書いた文章をそのまま載せてはいけません。Blog 記事は箇条書きや Power Point 形式ではなく、文章とします。各リサーチ・グループはまず「draft」として

記事を保存し、プレゼンテーションがある週の授業前に私に見せて下さい。

悪い例：“Masters of War.”

1. Song by Dylan.
2. Dylan: singer. First Name: Bob.
3. Genre: folk.
 - guitar, voice, no electric instruments
 - popular especially in the 1960s
4. Dylan didn't like the war in Vietnam.
 - > In Vietnam War, about 1 million Vietnamese killed.
 - > 55,000 Americans killed.
 - > The United States lost the war.

良い例：“Masters of War.”

Dylan, who began his career as a young folk singer in New York City, wrote a few anti-war ballads that gained him the appreciation of the liberal communities in New York. This song is the most famous of those ballads. However, Dylan did not consider himself a protest singer. In the mid-1960s, he distanced himself from politics and began playing an electric guitar with a back-up band. (This information comes from [Put Link to Web Site Here.](#))

I was required to return to these examples and the points concerning blog article composition repeatedly in both my consultations with individual research groups and in class. Students needed continual encouragement to employ their own voices in their writing and to be accountable for their personal compositions. It seems a common temptation among students to cut and paste English-language articles into a loose assemblage resembling an essay and to consider the results to be a suitable essay, or to write a series of grammatical fragments, in the manner of a shopping list, and to deem this an effective means of conveying a thesis or personal insight.

米チェーンズ is not merely a repository for information gathered from other Web sites and reference materials, but also a tool that assists students in shaping their own research. On the upper left portion of the blog one finds links to some of the most important musical figures that we discuss. More importantly, there are links to tools for research. For instance, in addition to a translation page,² which can be used to give students an immediate sense of the contents of an

² www.excite.co.jp/world/english/

English-language page by offering a rough rendition in Japanese, there is a link to Pop Jisyo, a Web page that provides a hovering dictionary in Japanese that is activated by placing the cursor over words whose definitions one seeks in Japanese.³ Pop Jisyo can also be used to assist reading 米チェーンズ articles written by either the instructor or other students. For this reason, even non-English majors who take the course have at their disposal all that they need to be able to comprehend the course material, including articles and encyclopedia entries that are linked within blog articles.

The comments link that appears at the bottom of each article can be read by anyone but added to only by registered members of the blog. Each class member has an individual password and a separate blog that they may develop if they wish. Therefore, there is no potential for abuse by spammers or so-called trolls, which is to say, individuals who leave comments at others' blogs illegitimately or with malicious intentions. Moreover, it is indicated at the outset of each comment who has authored the comment and, by clicking on this hyperlinked name, one is led to the student's individual blog. It was a requirement of the course that students leave comments on every article and presentation, and the comments gave me a clear sense of each student's grasp of the particular issues covered therein.

VI Song Titles and Artists

Songs were selected on the basis of two main criteria: the fact of their conveying an issue within American society and the quality of their lyrical composition. I also gave consideration to aspects such as the intelligibility of the spoken or sung performance. Two songs in particular, "Spaceman" by Phil Ochs and "Ingrid Bergman" by Woody Guthrie, were selected, in addition to the above reasons, because they resonate particularly with the culture and geography of Kagoshima Prefecture.

One consequence of my using these criteria is that, with a few notable exceptions, the songs I selected come from the 1960s and early 1970s, which is to say, from a period when topical songwriting was common. Since the issues they address in every case remain relevant, I did not think this predominant representation of one era of songwriting to be a disadvantage. It became clear, moreover, that Woody Guthrie, long recognized as one of America's greatest folk songwriters, played a central role in the organization of song titles. Not only were four of his own compositions featured, but three songs written under his direct influence were, as well. This fact helped to give some thematic continuity to an otherwise disparate grouping of songs and song ideas.

3 www.popjisyo.com/WebHint/Portal_e.aspx

Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," in particular, poses, within the otherwise conventional mode of a patriotic, nature-worshipping anthem, the essential questions of ownership, belongingness, immigration, and human rights that many of the other songs raise in their own ways. The list of songs we researched and discussed is as follows:

1. "Spaceman" (Phil Ochs).
2. "Whitey on the Moon" (Gil Scott-Heron).
3. "America the Beautiful" (Ray Charles).
4. "This Land Is Your Land" (Woody Guthrie).
5. "Hard Times in New York Town" (Bob Dylan).
6. "Strange Fruit" (Billie Holiday).
7. "Here's to the State of Mississippi" (Phil Ochs).
8. "The Death of Emmitt Till" (Bob Dylan).
9. "One More Time" (The Clash)
10. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (Scott-Heron).
11. "Four Dead in Ohio" (Neil Young).
12. "What's Going On" (Marvin Gaye).
13. "Who Killed Davey Moore?" (Bob Dylan).
14. "Why (The King of Love Is Dead)" (Nina Simone).
15. "Respect" (Aretha Franklin).
16. "Bracero" (Phil Ochs).
17. "Sister Mary Had-a But One Child" (Roland Hayes).
18. "Eisler on the Go," "California Stars," "Ingrid Bergman" (Woody Guthrie).

VII Exemplary Research

In this section, I will discuss one exemplary article and its corresponding in-class presentation. In the first week of July, three students presented to the class the Negro spiritual, "Sister Mary Had-a But One Child," by the renowned tenor Roland Hayes. Hayes first transcribed for piano and voice this and other songs he had learned from his parents, themselves former slaves, and other African-Americans. The students' article and the comments made by their peers were published at the blog,⁴ as was usual, in the days following the presentation. Class was held that day in the large hall of the second floor of the student center (学生館) so that the song could first be performed live. One student

4 <http://beitunes.blogspot.com/2006/07/sister-mary-had-but-one-child-roland.html>

played the piano score while I did my best to render Hayes's vocal performance with the aid of a microphone and amplifier. During the semester, three of the songs were performed to piano or guitar accompaniment. I thought that performing the music would introduce the music in a more vivid and memorable way than if we had simply listened to a CD recording; so, when possible, I collaborated with students in performing certain pieces. Once the students had listened to our performance of Hayes's arrangement, the presenters drew a chart on the chalkboard to show the analogies between the spiritual's Christian theme of emancipation and the slaves' own desire for freedom from bondage. They also discussed the particular language of the lyrics, which mixes King James English with African-American slang as spoken by the slaves, and read their own Japanese translation of the lyrics. (In many cases, the Japanese translations composed by the students were a first for the song lyrics in question.) When the presenters had taken turns explaining various points in English, they briefly summarized their presentation in Japanese.

By studying this slave-composed spiritual, the students explored the idea of the Underground Railroad, which is to say, the clandestine series of stop-offs in the North where blacks fleeing to slave-free Canada found respite and comfort at the hands of white sympathizers. They also became aware of the common literary tricks of allusion and analogy used by slaves to provide cover for the expression of their true feelings and intentions in the face of censorship or repression. As discussed in the previous section, when the students completed their presentation, the other students assembled into their discussion groups, named in accordance with days of the week, and within approximately ten minutes managed to pose a single open-ended question per group. One member of each discussion group then wrote their group's question on the chalkboard. As the questions appeared on the chalkboard, I discussed them with the presenters. In some cases, where the questions proved especially difficult, the presenters could not give satisfactory answers. It was common for them to offer to pursue such questions at a later time and to address them in writing at the blog. Once the routine of song-listening, oral presentation, group consultation, and a question-and-answer session had run its course, the second research group of the day walked to the front of the class and readied themselves as we listened to the day's second song. In this way, the same order was run through twice per class meeting.

VIII Problems Encountered and Recommendations

There were four particular problems that I encountered in conducting this course. The first three were expressed clearly in comments that I solicited from the students in the final week of class. Concerning the first, since students were required to use computers both to publish their own research and comment every week on others' work, it seems that it would be preferable to conduct

the course in a computer lab. Students want to make their comments immediately after witnessing others' presentations and some feel indisposed if they are required to use campus computer labs regularly. Concerning the second, students have fewer skills in using the Internet for research purposes than I had imagined. This is especially true when it is a matter of using a blog. Although I was able to instruct the students in either pairs or groups of three, it seems that, in addition to handing out ample instructions on the first and second class meetings, I should spend more time at the beginning of the course reassuring everyone, in a step-by-step manner, of how to leave comments at the blog and how to create and design original articles that faithfully reflect one's research. The third problem, which was raised by two or three students in their written comments, concerns the definition of "literature." "Literature," I think, implies a degree of inventiveness and unconventionality in language or writerly intentions that is used to make a social or artistic statement. Although expansive, this understanding of literature suffices to exclude the vast majority of popular pieces, especially when the overriding or exclusive intention of the songs is commercial in nature. Since I am aware that my own definition is open to wide interpretation, I need to convey the reasons for my definition of literature from the outset of the course. Although few students express an enthusiastic interest in literature, understood in the most conventional of terms, some adhere strongly to a conventional definition and exclude all song lyrics from it. In addition to discussing the limits of conventional notions of literature, I should add songs to the research list that fit such a conventional definition; for instance, songs whose lyrics are penned by famous literary authors, of which there are many. Their comparison with presumably "non-literary songs" would show that the two categories are not as radically different as some students assume. The final problem is that in most of the research, the students fail to record their own impressions of either the music or the lyrics, or of the two in combination. In place of their own impressions, including thoughts on what they do not understand or on what surprises, disturbs, or intrigues them, they record factual details relating to the authors' or performers' lives. Indeed, the assumption was made by many students that the research was to be found, in quantifiable form, online or in books or magazines. Accordingly, they imagined that some songs offered more, and some less, material for discussion, and that their own views of the material mattered little. To counter this false assumption, I encouraged the students to indicate clearly in one section of their written article and presentation that they are expressing their own views. I think that I could manage this aspect of their research better in future if I first ask them to provide a kind of "reader response" consisting of a few paragraphs in which they note all their impressions of the song and its lyrics, before they have undertaken research online or elsewhere.

IX Advantages

Teaching 米文学史 as a student-centered course that requires Internet-based research, short academic compositions, in-class presentations, and both spoken and written question-and-answer follow-ups requires a high degree of organization and obliges the instructor to spend considerable time in consultation with students outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, my experience from the spring 2006 course suggests that teaching in this manner was a significant improvement over the conventional lecture-style approach I took in the previous year. There were several advantages, including:

- i) increased “quality time” with the students in the form of weekly consultations with groups of two to three students at a time;
- ii) more active and meaningful roles played by students in determining course content and direction;
- iii) the opportunity for all English majors to compose in English, in a largely academic mode of writing, and to have their writing edited, which practice serves them well as they compose graduation theses;
- iv) a public display of writing and research techniques that can be discussed openly and learned from by members of the course;
- v) the practice of using the Internet to explore English-language Web sites and to develop strategies for conducting research and presenting original ideas through the use of a blog, which skills are more likely to be useful to many students of Kagoshima Prefectural College than are those associated with long essay writing ;
- vi) the creation of a stable and easily accessible data base of course research and student input, which contrasts with the “term paper” phenomenon in which ideas pass from student to professor and are rarely shared with other students, who thus lose the opportunity to learn from them;
- vii) increased autonomy of the students, who, after a few weeks of the course, became comfortable taking charge of not only the course proceedings but also of their education—thus putting to shame the stereotype of passive learners in Japanese colleges.

In closing, it occurs to me that 米文学史 could be taught along the same lines as described above by using selections of poetry rather than songs and song lyrics. One particular challenge that using songs presents is the common presumption among students that songs and song lyrics are to be consumed “spontaneously” and that, therefore, unlike poetry and literature, they do not require careful consideration for one to be able to appreciate them, nor even a second listening. This

ADAMEK : Studying American Literary History through Song

presumption is particularly off-the-mark when it comes to the songs selected for the course, since, precisely, their resisting superficial assimilation is, if anything, what makes them “literary.” If, therefore, I were to use songs once again in teaching the course, I would insist even more strongly that the songs and song lyrics are to be analyzed carefully in their own right, just as one would analyze a poem, short story, or novel.

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