

Nurturing Global Citizens Through Teaching Literature

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Good afternoon,

I am honored to have been invited to speak to you today about my experience in incorporating global citizenship education in my teaching at my alma mater Soka University, where I studied 40 years ago. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the founder of Soka University Dr. Daisaku Ikeda who is my mentor in life and Soka University for this opportunity.

As I was pondering on what to share today on global citizenship education, I thought about my school days and the teachers who taught me. I would like to pose two questions to you all: “Who was your favorite teacher when you were in school?” “What kind of teachers were they?”

When I moved back to Japan from the US at the age of 9, I had no understanding of the Japanese language and therefore had to learn the language from scratch. In grade 5, my class teacher patiently taught me the Japanese writing system during the summer holidays despite my frustrations of not being able to learn as quickly as I wanted to. He must have sensed my frustrations and gave me a signature board in which he wrote “ganbaru mono wa kanarazu katsu” which means “those who work hard will win in the end.” This made a lasting impression on me and gave me hope that I could succeed like my classmates.

Another teacher I remember is my Japanese language teacher in Junior High School. For one of our assignments, we had to write an essay about our summer vacation. During this holiday I happened to visit my mother with whom I was separated from. I felt embarrassed to share my personal life openly because I did not want to be asked why I was not living with my mother. But I wrote about spending the holiday with her. To my surprise, my teacher commented that my Japanese had improved and praised my essay. To this day I still remember what she wrote: “The more suffering you go through, you will become a person who

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understands other people's suffering. I hope you can be that kind of person." I felt encouraged that I could be somebody who could empathize with others in similar situations.

When I entered Soka University, I met a professor who was very strict. His strictness was that of kindness and helped guide me to always aim to be a better person. Even after I graduated, I continued receiving guidance and encouragement from him until he passed away a few years ago. These are some of the teachers who made a deep impression in my life, and who I hold dear to my heart. The reason I remember them so vividly and with such affection is because they believed in me and gave me encouragement and hope that even though I have my own weaknesses, I can shine in my own unique way and contribute to society.

Thinking about my teachers reminded me of Dr. Ikeda's words at Columbia University in 1996. I read this when I was struggling with writing my doctorate thesis in literature. He says:

The proud mission of those who have been able to receive education must be to serve, in seen and unseen ways, the lives of those who have not had this opportunity... I am convinced.... that education should be a vehicle to develop in one's character the noble spirit to embrace and augment the lives of others.

Dr. Ikeda's words inspired me and was the turning point in my profession as an educator. These words and memories of my teachers made me realize how important it is for educators to bring out the potential of each and every student and to nurture citizens who contribute and promote world peace. How can I as an educator do this? Ikeda stresses that it is essential to teach the three values of global citizenship—"the wisdom to understand the interconnectedness of all human beings and their environment; the courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them; and the compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one's immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places"—in order to promote humanity and world peace. These values are based on Ikeda's Buddhist belief that all human beings have the fundamental goodness such as compassion, empathy, wisdom, and courage innate in them.

In a book titled *Choose Life: A Dialogue*, Ikeda and the late British historian Arnold Toynbee discuss the challenges they anticipated the 21st century would face. They highlight that "the present threat to mankind's survival can be removed only by a revolutionary change of heart in individual human beings (50)." Half a century later, their message is more critical than ever. Our world has significantly advanced and our lives improved owing to the contributions made by science and technology. Nevertheless, thinking only about our own existence and the lack of respect for the lives of others including our environment are posing

threats leading to conflicts, wars, and various forms of injustices. The COVID pandemic that many initially thought was only affecting one area has affected the entire world, forcing us to realize how interconnected we are. The effect of COVID on the world spurred me on to teach my students the importance of fostering empathy and understanding our togetherness with others to create a world where everyone can live in harmony.

Unless each one of us looks inside our hearts and focuses on transforming our weaknesses such as greed, anger and selfishness to our positive traits of wisdom, courage and compassion, no strategy whatsoever may be effective to offer a permanent solution to our global crisis. Ikeda states: “Only when humanity itself is given the place of preeminence is it possible to make a meaningful breakthrough in our search for solutions to the problems of our age and the apathy plaguing human relations today.” Likewise, Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka states that “the foundation of justice is the ability to imagine yourself in another’s shoes.” How then can we develop our humanity where we are mindful of each other? What can we do to have “a revolutionary change of heart in individual human beings,” that is transforming our basic tendency and activating our goodness, as Ikeda and Toynbee push for?

Ikeda and Toynbee suggest that one important way of transforming our hearts is by reading literature and concur that literature is a crucial key to forging a century of humanity. Ikeda states that “Literature, ancient and modern, is a bridge that extends “from the heart to the mind” and how much of the bridge we cross determines the content of our own heart.” Thus, reading literature from different parts of the world can help us understand the world better; learn about different cultures and beliefs, but more importantly, learn that fundamentally, despite our differences, we share a common humanity. We understand that we cannot live in isolation; we must do good and condemn evil; we must help each other; and at the end of the day, what matters most is what we can do for humanity. Literature helps us to cultivate our hearts to be more understanding and see the world in a compassionate way. By reading stories, we understand the world around us and realize that no matter who we are, we are all human beings worthy of being treated equally with respect.

During the classes I taught, I asked the students three critical questions to aid my students to gain exposure, broaden their perspectives, and develop compassion and empathy through literary texts. They were: 1) What is the message of the writer to his/her readers? 2) How is the literary work relevant to you now and how has the text helped you understand yourself and the world around you? and 3) What questions did you confront as you read the text? These questions aimed to guide the students to connect the knowledge they had with the knowledge they gained; and learn not to be judgmental. The lessons were mostly held online and therefore they discussed the questions in small groups during the breakout room sessions.

Initially many students struggled to see how the texts were relevant to them. With time, they were able to understand that the stories they read were not about remote places that did not concern them but served as an important exercise for them to step into the characters' shoes and empathize with the characters.

One of the novels we studied was *My Good Son*, a novel by South Korean author Jeong Yu-jeong. This novel tells the story of a 25-year-old son, Yu-jin, who grows up not knowing that he has mental health issues. In the book, he kills his brother, father, mother, aunt, and stepbrother. I was not sure how students would react to this tragic story, but their discussion enlightened me. While some students felt unsympathetic to Yu-jin, others shared that they could relate to Yu-jin because they too have people close to them who suffer from mental health challenges. The story helped them realize how important it is for them to gather courage and talk about these challenges. They also expressed how society often shies away from discussing mental health issues, and those suffering from mental health challenges often feel isolated and are afraid to seek help for fear of being judged by others. By reading the novel and sharing their views, students recognized that the mental health challenges in Korea are no different from those facing them in Kenya. Through our discussions, many students expressed that they realized the importance of having compassion and taking action to educate our society of the necessity of discussing these issues openly.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was one text that initially brought uneasiness among students to discuss. This story is about a young man named Werther, who commits suicide after realizing that his love cannot be reciprocated. Not only is suicide an act considered taboo in Kenya but also, many communities believe that suicide brings a bad omen to the deceased's family and community. It was only after I asked them to put themselves in his shoes that they tried to understand why Werther would rather take his own life than face reality head on and move on with his life. Many did not agree with Werther's action and came up with other actions he could have taken. However, as we continued discussing, Werther's decision made them aware that life is not simple. When we discussed the relevance of the text to our lives, some opened up to the fact that they had people close to them commit suicide and how they were affected by the tragedy. This led to the discussion of rejection, life and death as well as the importance of having true friends who they can open up to. This discussion created awareness that suicide among the youth is a serious problem, and we can no longer keep quiet about it.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* created a lively discussion on the theme of rejection. This is a story about the protagonist Gregor who sacrificed his life working for his family. One day he turns into a bug and after being abused by his father and left by his mother

and sister, he dies a lonely death at the end. I was surprised to hear that most of the students could relate to Gregor. Many said that they have also been going through the experience of rejection even at home, and therefore were able to understand and empathize with Gregor. I was moved by the students' life stories. When one student shared her story, others were encouraged to share their experiences. This made me realize that having a space for the students to share deeply about their struggles with one another made them learn to appreciate each other. This led to a very lively discussion of what different actions they would have taken.

We also studied stories that dealt with colonization. Some students were able to re-imagine the horrendous worlds that the characters live in and compared it to Kenya's colonization. The students are aware of Africa's colonization and its effects on its people, but many of them were unaware of colonization of Asian countries. After reading texts on colonization outside Kenya, they learned about some of the injustices of colonization that occurred around the world, and that human beings exercising control over others is a universal phenomenon. Students were puzzled and asked, "What makes people hurt others to gain control and power over them?" Reading the texts also developed a new sense of appreciation among the students, for how much freedom and privilege they have and how they had been taking it for granted.

At the end of the course, I asked the students to share their feedback on what they thought about the course and what, if any, impact it had in their lives. I would like to share a few of their comments. Some students said that "reading literature helped [them] re-imagine a better version of [themselves] and have a new perspective and reasoning about life." The texts enabled some to "identify with characters and learn that [they are] not alone in their struggle" and "understand [themselves] and the world, [acknowledging] that individuals are different, and we can only respect each other's way of life." One student said that the question, "what does this text have to do with me?" helped her learn how to think broadly about the world around her. Others said that the questions made them realize that circumstances that have not directly affected them also serve as lessons for them. The questions enable them to be a part of the solution and that literature is a timeless and priceless tool for education. What was important was that they were able to reflect on themselves and ask if they have the courage to stand up for what is right, and if not, why not? These brief anecdotes suggest that literature helped the students learn how to think outside of themselves and to be more sensitive to the world around them. Not only did literature help them learn about themselves, but also offered them an opportunity to think of who they could be.

Another point I would like to mention is that most students appreciated having discussion sessions where they could share their views. Some even said that discussing in

small groups gave them courage to speak in front of others. Giving students the freedom and space to freely discuss their thoughts allowed them to share their diverse perspectives to understand and learn about others' views. Students were also able to practice active listening, which requires respect and compassion. Through dialogue, the students were also able to gain awareness of our interconnectedness and heighten their respect for each other to allow them to work together towards realizing a society free of prejudice, selfishness, and fear.

Societies are constantly changing. By changing how we think about things, how we process information and how we ask questions, we can encourage more dialogue among people. We can train people to learn to listen and respect others. Such a type of education that places the student at the center and focuses more on developing them as a person with individual thoughts would be more beneficial to the society in the long run rather than education that focuses on only attaining good grades. Such an education would hopefully move the world towards a more positive coexistence where though there are disagreements—as there would be in any healthy society—this would not alienate others or deny them the ability to live the life they deserve and desire.

Ikeda, in his *Harvard University on Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first Century Civilization* (1993) stated that:

The “invisible arrow” of evil is not to be found in the existence of races and classes external to ourselves, but embedded in our own heart. The conquest of our own prejudicial thinking, our own attachment to difference, is the necessary pre-condition for open dialogue. Such discussion is the essential condition for the establishment of peace and universal respect for human rights. (155)

The arrow, according to Ikeda, represents “a prejudicial mindset, an unreasoning emphasis on individual differences (155).” Understanding our shared values and commonalities requires recognizing the human beyond observation. It involves engaging in difficult and meaningful conversations. When applied, each person can create a more cohesive and compassionate society, which works on strengthening our bonds and leveraging our united strength to improve the lives of everyone. Dialoguing through books and with others opens a world of discoveries, enabling us to comprehend each other's fears, talents, and histories. We learn of our interconnectedness and continue to cultivate empathy and understanding.

The lack of mutual understanding and respect for both people and nature often causes or worsens many of the world's problems. To change the world and create a more peaceful society, the responsibility lies within each human being. Incorporating these values in education can be done through a variety of means, one of which being literature, an important and accessible medium. Through my experience teaching literature to students at the University of

Nairobi, I find that through studying literary works, students can embody the three essential characteristics of a global citizen as described by Ikeda—wisdom, compassion and courage. Literature exposes students to different life experiences and the different works depict our shared humanity. The students' perceptions of the importance of learning literature and their biggest takeaways after enrolling in literature classes highlighted that they not only learned about themselves, but also that they each have a unique mission. Furthermore, they learned about their shared experiences with people from other cultures and backgrounds and were challenged to understand and empathize with others' lives and situations. Their reflections affirmed that literature is an essential medium in promoting global citizenship.

Thank you.