

HOW TO TEACH ABOUT INDIGENOUS LITERATURE IN A CLASSROOM THROUGH ROLEPLAY

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Abstract

The focus in this article is on how to use Indigenous literature well and how to teach about it by using roleplay as an activity. Roleplay is a good activity to use when teaching literature because it aims for meaningful reading and is an activity where interpretations is shown well. I have created a task as an example of how you can use roleplay with Indigenous literature in a classroom and show how literary analysis and classroom discussion can add to this experience. The students use the vocabulary of the culture, are creative, and analyse authentic English texts for things such as the main characters, plot and setting to create a play. These activities allow students to contribute with the knowledge of the cultures gained from the book in the classroom discussion about topic such as intercultural competence, assimilation and cultural identity.

Table of Content

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Background.....	4
Methodology.....	7
Results and the task.....	9
Discussion.....	12
Conclusion.....	14
Bibliography.....	16

Introduction

The treatment of Indigenous people in several countries around the world, are a shameful part of history which can be seen as difficult to teach about. It is a sensitive topic we teach with little pride because the education system was an important factor in the assimilation in several countries. The brutal history occurred in Norway from the mid-18th century onwards. Similar treatment of Indigenous people can be seen in Canada, where in 1876 “The Indian Act” made it illegal to have ceremonies, speak their language and wear clothing from the culture’s traditions (Burke et al, 2019, p.68). The way we look at Indigenous cultures today have changed drastically. In the new curriculum (LK20), it is stated in the core elements of the English subject that the pupils are supposed to work with English texts. These texts should contribute to the student’s knowledge and experience within the English-speaking culture and language (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). However, a culture is not defined by a language (Fenner, A. B. et.al, 2020, p.77) as a country with one language can have several cultures within it depending on how you define the broad term culture. Culture is for most people an important part of their identity, often defined by their history. Anyone can Google their own country’s history, but the search results might leave out the history of different minority cultures, as for example the Indigenous history of the Samí people in Norway. Since the Indigenous history have not been as prioritized in English curriculums before as they are today, I wanted to explore how Indigenous cultures could be taught in the classroom using literature for inspiration and roleplay as a method. My research question is **“how to teach about Indigenous literature in a classroom through roleplay?”**

I created a task based around two books by Indigenous authors. The first book is by the Canadian author Thomas King *One good story, that one* which is a collection of short stories. The other book is called *The Whale Rider* by the New Zealand author Witi Ihimaera. Pupils can use techniques from literary analysis to work with the books to understand the portrayals of indigenous cultures’ better, before engaging with them through roleplay.

I have chosen to focus on roleplay because it is an activity where the students get to be creative and interpret a given text, at the same time as they practice performing orally in front of the class. It is also convenient for the students to be able to discuss broader topics after the play. The roleplay task is designed to be in a 7th grade with about 16 students. In this grade, I imagine there are several strong English-speakers, most are on the average level of a 7th grader and some who feel weaker within the subject. The competence aim after 7th grade in the English curriculum states that students should “listen to and understand words and expressions in

adapted and authentic texts” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). In this task would get to read pieces of the novels with language not adapted to their grade to learn new vocabulary. Based on this competence aim, the lesson’s main aims are two. The first is to learn the vocabulary specific for the Indigenous people in the books. The second is to give the students new perspectives to discuss broader topics like assimilation, cultural identity, and intercultural competence.

Background

The history of the treatments of Indigenous people should be made aware of in class. In Norway “After a brutal history of experiencing state-driven discrimination, the Sami population achieved formal recognition and rights as indigenous group in Norway”(Eriksen, 2018, p.57). The brutal history occurred in Norway around the 18th century(Ellefsen, 2020). Around the same time, similar treatment of Indigenous people can be seen in Canada, where in 1876 “The Indian Act” had as a goal to eliminate all Indigenous government and treaties, taking away their right to have a separate “legal, social, cultural, and racial entities in Canada” (Burke et al, 2019, p.68). But not only did the government take part in this history, the school system was important too. The residential schools forced the Indigenous children to go to separate schools apart from their siblings and did not allow them to have any of their belongings, forced them to wear uniforms and prohibited them from speaking their Indigenous languages (Burke et al, 2019, p.68). There are many similarities between the treatment of Sámi children in Norway and the treatment of Indigenous children in other parts of the world. Teaching this history is essential for the students to understand that other cultures have similar past histories to their own. In Freeman’s article, it is claimed that the education system needs to be self-aware and honest about how it previously used its power to deny Indigenous children their languages, cultures and communities (Freeman et.al, 2018). Not teaching about the topic would be a way of denying Indigenous children their cultures and histories today. Even though it is shameful to look back on with a contemporary mind, this history is important to teach about.

When teaching about Indigenous literature, it can be difficult to know what topics are the most important to focus on. Topics such as cultural identity, intercultural competence and assimilation, are topics that educators need to address in the classroom “in order for progress to be made concerning reconciliation and inclusion of Indigenous peoples, classroom teachers need to find ways to help students understand these oftentimes uncomfortable issues” (Burke

et al., 2019, p.69). These topics need to be addressed for students to be able to reflect and critically discuss past attitudes towards Indigenous cultures. As stated in the LK20,

“By reflecting on, interpreting and critically assessing different types of texts in English, the pupils shall acquire language and knowledge of culture and society. Thus the pupils will develop intercultural competence enabling them to deal with different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns. They shall build the foundation for seeing their own identity and others’ identities in a multilingual and multicultural context”. (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020)

As claimed here, the English texts are of great importance when teaching about other cultures to build on student’s intercultural competence and to build on their own identity and relations to others. Hild Elisabeth Hoff describes in her chapter about intercultural competence, that to teach about this means to teach the language learner to compare and contrast different perspectives of cultures. It is necessary to gain an understanding of themselves and one’s own culture, as well as having an emphatic understanding of people from other cultures to develop this competence (Fenner, A. B. et.al, 2020, p.72). Both Hoff and LK20 agrees that it is about being aware of your own culture and being able to communicate with people from other cultures.

Working with English texts should contribute to student’s knowledge with the English-speaking culture and language. This also means insight into Indigenous people’s ways of living, mindset and traditions. By reflecting, interpreting, and critically analysing different types of texts, the students will be given several types of perspectives which can contribute to a more inclusive classroom environment. It also is important to know how to approach new cultures to be a person who can contribute in a society like democratic citizens (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020).

Books can be a good teaching tool when discussing difficult topics to give the reader a different perspective for the pupils to discuss. Burke’s research-project was on how post-colonial children’s literature could help children understand the historical struggles of Indigenous peoples of their country (Burke et Al., 2019, p.67). The study’s result was that pupils managed to see a connection between Indigenous children’s literature to previously learned knowledge and personal experience to the education system. They were able to use critical thinking in the way “the government enforced education of Indigenous people had a negative effect, stripping individuals of their own culture and language, as well as marginalizing

their traditional ways of life” (Burke et. al, 2019, p.75). The authors of the article claim that the use of children’s literature was essential to enable the students to critically analyse and discuss the issues in the classroom (Burke et al., 2019, p.77-78). In this study they used mostly Canadian Indigenous picture books and had critical discussions in the classrooms about the book’s themes. The topics under discussion focused on colonization and cultural identity. The students were

“engaged in an open dialogue, loosely guided by a series of critical prompts and posed questions. For example, students were asked to consider if Indigenous communities already had their own spirituality and belief system prior to being colonized by the British in NL [Newfoundland and Labrador]” (Burke et Al., 2019, p.70).

The students considered if sharing and encouraging Canadian values had a positive effect on Indigenous communities or not. Having read post-colonial literature, the pupils had a new perspective to discuss questions that might have been difficult to comprehend without that background knowledge. In this way, the literature was essential for the discussion in class.

Freeman’s article explains how previous methods of teaching about Indigenous people can be improved (Freeman et. Al, 2018). It gives specific tips to what the teacher should and should not do in a classroom when teaching about Indigenous cultures. One of the suggestions was to not dress, act out or have activities where you simplify a group into a stereotype or caricature. This would be very disrespectful and most likely inaccurate (Freeman et.al, 2018). A culture is not defined by stereotypes. Stereotypes are usually over-generalized attitudes people might have towards a certain group of people that are somehow different from yourself (McLeod, 2015). There should be a focus on that small communities of a culture will include individuals which can be very diverse with some differences to costumes and ways of living. In the article, the authors claim that the most important step you can do as a teacher, is teaching about Indigenous people of the country. Talking about them prevents pupils thinking Indigenous cultures are not worth mentioning.

According to Burke’s (Burke et al., 2019, p.71) article there are considerations educators should make when teaching about Indigenous people. A teacher should start with teaching “how the Indigenous people of our country are resilient, and that they still exist today despite the long history of colonial subjugation” (Burke et al., 2019, p.71). They are not just victims of assimilation; they are also survivors which still exists today. Students need to have knowledge of their own history and culture to be able to understand the effect of assimilation had on the

Indigenous people and their culture. What teachers choose to teach are also crucial when providing students with the relevant information (Burke et al., 2019, p.71-72).

To sum up this theory section, the difficult history need to be taught for pupils to evolve their intercultural competence and understanding of own's own identity and others. Allowing the students to reflect and critically discuss these topics are important for this evolvement. Teachers should also be aware of how they teach about Indigenous people, to make sure they are not enforcing stereotypes and simplifying too much, causing generalizations to the cultures. Working with authentic English texts will contribute to their language learning through vocabulary and being able to critically analyse and discuss texts they have read. Continuing this article, I will discuss one approach for how to teach about Indigenous people appropriately in the classroom.

Methodology

A book is a good starting point for classroom discussions about broader topics such as racism, multiculturalism, and integration. A didactical approach when teaching about Indigenous culture is to use the literature as a “stepping stone” into broader topics (Lillesvangstu et.al, 2017, p. 18). It is easier to get the students to talk and be active in class when you have something specific to relate back to, like a book. Having read post-colonial literature, the pupils have a new perspective(s) when discussing questions of cultural identity and assimilation, that might have been difficult to comprehend fully without the background knowledge from the books.

To understand the text, the students need to understand the vocabulary used in the texts. As a teacher, you could have a short introduction to the books explaining the vocabulary used in the text, or let the students try to figure out themselves by using the internet or a dictionary to look up uncommon words. Vocabulary learning is important for students learning English where terminology specific to the Indigenous cultures could unusual for outsiders but is common in the culture. It is not enough to learn how to pronounce words or spell it, there should be a focus on the meaning of the word by having activities where the students get to practice on creative writing. An example of this could be writing poems, stories or a roleplay which focuses on words meaning and makes it easier to remember terminology used in the text (Carlsen et. al., 2020, p.297). Roleplay is a way to help the children create a better understanding of the unknown language.

Reading a text together in class can, with some planning, stimulate “the four key language tasks of reading, speaking, writing and listening” (Birketveit et al, 2013, p.182). For example, by having a mixture of individual reading, group writing and classroom discussions, you could ensure that these four key tasks are in use in the literature activities. Introducing the book, you should create some expectations by either talking about the cover of the book (or show the movie trailer if available) and then discuss in class what they think the book is about (Birketveit et al, 2013, p.182). After that, you could let the students start reading the book and in their own pace where they have some expectations to what they are going to read about. As a teacher, you could design a reading plan for the lesson where the students follow a “map” with selected sections of the book to read, exploiting the book’s cliff-hangers and dramatic moments at its fullest to maintain the excitement of the story (Birketveit et al, 2013, p.183). In class, you could then arrange for a break in the reading where most students have read the first section and can discuss in groups some themes, the language and the topics of the book. In this discussion it is possible to give each group a short version of a literary analysis where they focus on the text itself. They can make a list of characters, give a short summary of the plot so far, describe the setting and comment on language use. Then, using a computer, they can go on to the broader topics outside of the texts like historical, cultural and political context of the book (Birketveit et al, 2013, p.213). The questions to answer could be

- Who is the author?
- What Indigenous culture is the author from?
- How is the political situation for that tribe/culture today?

The teacher could end this session by either having the students present their findings for the rest of the class, hand in a document or participate in a plural discussion where each group contribute with their findings. Or it is possible to use the obtained knowledge and deeper understanding of the book to create something, like a roleplay, from a section of the book.

Roleplay includes literature in an insightful way in the classroom. Having to select the most important parts of the text, students have to read and make meaning of the text as well as composing a text with meaning. Reading with meaning and composing a text are both interweaved by having to understand what you are reading and understanding what you are writing (Birketveit, 2013, p.236). Therefore, combining both activities is a way to make sure the students have understood what they are reading which is easy to see in their writing.

As a teacher, you could model the use of terminology from literary analysis when explaining the task with the class. You can for instance use terms like characters, plot, language use, setting and theme to discuss the text (Hawthorn, 2010, p. 107-145). Here there are many specific terms which pupils should practice using in either oral and written form, which they get to do when discussing the texts and writing a play.

Roleplay is an activity where you focus on understanding the text and the vocabulary used in it. The group would have to choose which parts are most important to involve in the play. Being an activity where the group might not need as much support from the teacher, it will allow the students to be creative, independent and focus on their own interpretation of the texts. A roleplay can be a good way to involve the students and let them be creative by making their own version of the story (Lillesvangstu et. Al, 2017, p.27). Children have a natural skill to dramatize and using this in a classroom is taking advantage of that skill (Henning, 2019, p.197). Having to make a play, finding good lines in the text and adapt them helps the students interpret, experience, and reflect over what they have read (Lillesvangstu et. Al, 2017, p.27). Moreover, it allows other students and the teacher to see their interpretations clearly. Consequently, it would open for a discussion of how the different groups in class have interpreted and make it easier to discuss the topics from the texts.

Results and the task

I have created a lesson plan design to be about two books by Indigenous authors. The task is divided in 3 main parts: Individual reading, literary analysis in groups and making a roleplay. My main focus points are learning vocabulary, contribute to the classroom discussion and creating a roleplay. For about 5 lessons (each about 45 minutes) the competence aim they will be working on is from LK20 after 7th grade “investigate ways of living and traditions in different societies in the English-speaking world and in Norway and reflect on identity and cultural belonging” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020).

I have decided to use roleplay as an activity to reflect upon the reading the class has done after the 1st lesson where they read sections of the book given (See Appendix 1). To include both books, I imagine the best way would be to let half the class read Book A *One Good Story, That One* and the other half read Book B *The Whale Rider* (See Appendix 2). They will then in groups do a literary analysis of the books, and finally, make a roleplay to present for the class. I would plan at least about 5 lessons (each about 45 minutes) on all these activities. The class I have planned for is about 16 students, which would be split into groups of 4. Two groups

are given book A to work with, and two book B. To continue, I will give an example of how I would use both books in a classroom. First, I will give a short summary of what both the book's plots, then explain the lesson plan in detail.

Book A *One Good Story, That One* includes many short stories which are about 10 pages long and I have chosen to focus on the story called *Totem*. It is 5 pages long. The story is about an art gallery where one day a totem suddenly appears from nowhere. The totem is growing out of the concrete floor of the gallery. To be removed, it has to be sawed down by the people who work there. Every time it is removed, it grows back and becomes more obnoxious and louder. The workers place it in the basement several times before they give up and ignore it. (King, 1993, p.13-18)

Book B *The Whale Rider* is about a girl called Kahu (or Paikea), an only child which is born into a great family of chiefs. Her great grandfather Koro Apirana who is the leader of the Maori people, does not accept his great granddaughter as a worthy heir because she is a girl and no leader of this tribe before her has ever been female. During the story there are several occasions where she tries to prove her worth to Koro, but with little success. I have chosen some of these occasions for the class to read. In this book I have chosen to focus on a section of the story where Koro's meets Kahu, his great granddaughter, for the first time. The baby dribbles on her grandfather and her grandma sees it as a sign of affection. Koro does not agree. The baby being a little older, she bites Koro's toe during a lesson he is holding about his many great tests to become chief, toe-biting an old man being one of them (Ihimaera, 1987, p. 24-28). This is one of her many signs to her being a worthy and destined chief.

Lesson plan (See Appendix 1)

In the first lesson, the pupils will be introduced to the book and start reading sections of it. The teacher would first show a trailer (Book A group) or discuss the cover of the book (Book B group). Then they will get the handout (Appendix 2) and start reading sections of the book individually. Halfway through the reading, the teacher will stop them and ask them to discuss in groups what they have read so far, what they think the book is about and how they think it will end and who do they think the narrator is.

In the second lesson they will in groups do a literary analysis of the book they have been given. They will be able to discuss the book and ask the teacher if something is unclear about the books.

In the third and fourth lesson they will work on making and practice performing the play. The third lesson I imagine will mostly be planning the script and writing it. In the fourth they will start practicing performing it, revise and adjust where it may be necessary. Each group will have a “practice run” in front of the teacher.

In the final fifth session, all the groups would perform the play in front of the class and have a classroom discussion. The discussion will be about the performance, the choices they took when writing the play and acting it out. Between each group, the teacher will ask questions such as

- Why did they choose to include certain parts of the text and focus less on other parts?
- Was there any vocabulary they had to find the meaning behind when reading?
- Was the text difficult to understand, and why/why not?

The teacher could also ask the students watching the performance what those who have not read the text yet, think the play is about. The students who have read it could confirm or correct the other student’s impression of the text from the play. At the end of the session, I would try to draw lines to broader topics like segregation and assimilation and ask the students if we could see any of the effects of these treatments of Indigenous people in the texts they read and performed.

Here the class could, after seeing both plays, discuss what this totem could symbolizes and if they can relate to the feeling of being consciously overlooked, and how it would make them feel and connect it to Indigenous people’s history. The story uses a lot of symbolism and sarcasm, being that there is a totem that showed up out of nowhere in an art gallery is making noise and growing back every time the workers at the gallery try to remove. Similar to the *Totem*, *The Whale Rider* uses symbolism, has a character which is being overlooked and an underlying serious theme(s). Kahu does not accept his great granddaughter because she is of the wrong sex and is distant and cold towards her until he finally realizes the mistake he has made (Ihimaera, 1987, p.118). The Totem could be a symbol for the indigenous people trying to be appreciated and valued as the other art in the gallery but is not accepted as a part of the exhibition and tried forcefully removed several times. Both Kahu and the totem are being overlooked for different reasons. Similar themes to this can be pointed out in the discussion.

Discussion

My research question was **“how to teach about Indigenous culture in a classroom through roleplay?”** To try to create a deeper understanding of the texts, I chose to include literary analysis and several point of discussion. When teaching about Indigenous cultures, it is easy to forget that there are individuals in every culture and that stereotypes are over-generalized and overlooking the individual differences every culture has. Hopefully, the discussions would help the students to reflect critically around this. Teaching this history is essential for the students to understand that other cultures have similar past histories to one’s own.

In the lesson, I imagine the class is about 16 students, which would be split into groups of 4. Half the class would read and perform Book A, the rest Book B. This is done so the groups would be given different texts to avoid too much repetition when they perform. It also allows the class to see two different ways of interpretation which itself could be interesting to discuss and might bring up some points from the literary analysis. It allows the students that have not read the other book to see an interpretation, which might make them more curious to the rest of the book and encourage more reading.

The first reason why I decided on 7th grade is because they are making a roleplay. However, it could be argued that this type of roleplay activity can be adjusted to fit younger grades too. Since Norwegian students learn about the Indigenous Samí people already after 4th grade (LK-06), but not so much about the history, the discussion around the broader topics might be more suitable for older grades (6th and 7th). They probably know a lot about their own culture but might not be able to see it in the light of someone from a different culture. I believe this is needed for these classroom discussions when discussing the texts as students need to have knowledge of their own history and culture to be able to understand the effect the assimilation had on the Indigenous people and their culture. In the play, I want the pupils to draw lines between the texts they have read and these broader themes about the treatment of Indigenous people. Maybe having just one of the activities could be enough in younger grades and where you could spend more time on teaching history and less time on student-dependent tasks.

The second reason for my chosen grade is the language in King’s book is difficult, being ungrammatically correct and very oral in its language. I believe a pupil will need to know the grammatical rules of English well to understand that this writer does not follow them. He writes in a “dialect” and this effects how you read it, as the title *One Good Story, That one* is an

example of. Ihimaera's book follows the common grammar rules but has many terms which might not be much in use outside of New Zealand. However, with some preparation work with the glossary and some classes beforehand about the cultural and historical background could make this lesson more digestible for younger students. Ihimaera's book is also made into a film, which is PG 11 (in Norway), which is a good addition to the book and could be shown in class.

The third reason I chose 7th grade is because the theme is an interdisciplinary topic. In the task they are supposed to do their own literary analysis in groups, then create a roleplay. The task has several interdisciplinary subjects within it, both English and Social Studies. There are several aspects from the English curriculum because they are writing and performing a play and discussing the content of an Indigenous text in English. At the same time, the text and topic are also about understanding different cultures and being able to meet and communicate well with people from other cultures, which is relevant for Social Studies.

The students have a "practice run" of the play before performing it. This is to avoid unappropriated language, dialect use, stereotypes and misunderstandings of the text. If there are any of these present in the plays, maybe the teacher could try to discuss and explain why this is inappropriate with the group in the aftermath? Maybe having the students pretend that people from the Maori culture where making a play about Norwegians and discuss what they should and should not do in this imagined play could be a way to emphasise the need for intercultural competence.

The books I have chosen are authentic English texts which are not adapted to the pupils learning English. It is important that students read books such as these to be exposed to the English vocabulary which is used in different cultures. By reflecting, interpreting and critically assessing different types of English texts, the students will gain new perspectives which they can discuss and reflect upon.

Teaching intercultural competence means to teach the language learner to compare different perspectives of cultures to gain an understanding of themselves and their own culture. As well, they need have an emphatic understanding of people from other cultures.

The task I have created allows the students to learn about a new culture and their vocabulary, but not so much on comparing it with their own culture. The teacher could also later on go back to the topic later and talk more about comparing the Indigenous cultures to Norwegian culture and Samí culture. Having read post-colonial literature, the pupils have a new perspective to

discuss questions that might have been difficult to comprehend without that background knowledge. In this way, the literature was essential for the discussion in class.

The themes under discussion are assimilation, cultural identity and intercultural competence. The focus in the discussion could be what effects assimilation might have on a culture. Cultural identity is not something only Indigenous people have and should be reflected upon. The teacher could ask the students to explain how they would characterize their own cultural identity. Talking about intercultural competence, a way to ask about it is to give certain scenarios like what should a tourist have knowledge about before visiting Norway to avoid being seen as rude or awkward by other Norwegians? And the other way around, what knowledge should we have of other cultures to understand that tourists might not know all of our “norms” and culture-dependent behaviours when visiting Norway. I believe students will most likely have experiences and opinions about these themes to share with the rest of the class. Tying these themes back to the books should be a goal for the teacher here as well, what knowledge should we have of “norms” and behaviours if we were to visit Canada or New Zealand?

The most important step you can do as a teacher is to teach about Indigenous cultures. More research needs to be done on how we should teach it well but addressing the fact that there are other cultures with individuals. Cultures are not necessarily tied to specific countries either. Talking about cultures should be fun, even though it is a serious topic. Making room as an educator for both the fun and the seriousness of the themes, I believe will make for a successful class about culture.

Conclusion

The focus of this article was on how to teach about Indigenous literature through roleplay. I claim that using roleplay as an activity, the pupils will gain a much deeper knowledge of what they are reading. Roleplay aims for meaningful reading, at the same time as it is an activity where interpretations of the texts are shown well for the audience. When writing and performing the roleplay, students have to use vocabulary, be creative, and analyse the text for things such as the main characters, plot and setting. Having these focus points makes the texts easier to discuss in class after the performances, even for the students who have not read both books.

The task is interdisciplinary because of the topics of the texts, being both relevant to Social Studies and English and is arguably supported by several competence aims within both

subjects. Teaching about other English cultures is also in the core elements of the English subject to highlight the importance of the theme.

Using literature is necessary to give the pupils a different perspective and learn about another cultures. Choosing activities which make sure that the students understand what they are reading and that all misconceptions and stereotypes can be discussed further. But teaching about Indigenous cultures are not easy and needs to be more researched to avoid being inappropriate or over-generalize a culture. It is important that the teacher does their research before they try to teach about a culture in class.

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