

ANALYZING STEREOTYPES

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INTRODUCTION

We believe that it is not enough to just take in information when we listen, read, and watch. We must also critically analyze that information. One part of this critical analysis involves looking for stereotypes, the focus of this paper.

The paper has two main parts. In the first part, we briefly review some current thinking on the nature of the stereotypes. In the second part, we describe and demonstrate classroom techniques which may help students to critically analyze stereotypes.

PART I - THEORY

Definition of Stereotypes and How They Are Learned

One dictionary defines a stereotype as a "Fixed, formalized, or standardized (and therefore perhaps false) phrase, idea, [or] belief" (Hornby, 1974:847). Stereotypes can be seen as part of the taken-for-granted knowledge passed on as part of the socialization process. Language plays the central role in passing on this information which we use to construct cognitive maps of our worlds, including our own self-images (Dorfman, 1983).

In many cultures, written language, e.g., literature, is an especially potent tool of the socialization achieved through passing on stereotypes, because the written word is seen as having special power for representing objective reality (Bowers, 1987). People often lose sight of the fact that the written word is no more than a reflection of those people who produced it (Halliday, 1982).

People, ourselves included, are often completely unaware of the stereotypes and other taken-for-granted knowledge we have received in schools and elsewhere; it just seems natural to us. As a Malay proverb says:

Hidup dikandung adat;

Mati dikandung tanah.

(In life, by custom hedged around;

In death, we lie wrapped in the ground.

People are helpless creatures pent in their own environment). (Hamilton, 1982:10-11)

As a result of this socialization to stereotypes, we often make what we think are rational, reasoned decisions based on what we believe are our own views, without realizing that "[We] are under the authority of the language systems . . . of the culture that makes thought and communication possible" (Bowers, 1987:5). Fortunately, this socialization process is, however, not without cracks. Given the nature of human thinking, we cannot be completely molded. This human trait is expressed in another Malay proverb:

Kerbau sekawan dapat dikandang,
Manusia seorang tiada terkawal.
(A herd of water buffaloes can at least be penned;
A single human being oft is more than we can tend).
(Hamilton, 1982:52-53)

Promoting Awareness and Analysis of Stereotypes

We are not advocating that stereotypes be eliminated. Instead, what is being advocated here is that students be helped to bring to consciousness taken-for-granted knowledge, including stereotypes, so that it can be examined and, on the basis of awareness, accepted, rejected, or placed in a file marked "needs more thought" (Fetterley, 1978; Spolsky, 1989). As part of this process, special attention, we believe, should be paid to inaccurate stereotypes which have promoted injustice and discrimination.

Two mutually reinforcing and compatible approaches have been suggested for dealing with negative stereotypes in the materials students read. One approach is to replace materials which propagate such stereotypes with more positive materials.

However, as Brown (1989) points out, stereotypes do exist in our cultures. To present students with a picture of a bias-free society is, first of all, probably impossible, and, secondly, would leave them unprepared to face the world as it is actually constructed. Thus, a second approach to stereotypes is also needed. Such an approach prepares students to recognize stereotypes, to understand why they exist, and to think about their validity. If a stereotype is found to be invalid, then students can think about ways to rectify the situation.

But are students ready to do this complex thinking? Some educationists worry that many students lack the ability to do this kind of reflective thinking. Martin (1989), however, argues that with proper guidance children, even in elementary school, are capable of analytical thinking. Martin writes:

Conscious knowledge of language and the way it functions in social contexts then enables us to make choices, to exercise control. As long as we are ignorant of language, it and ideological systems it embraces control us. Learning about language means learning to choose. . . . Knowledge is power. Meaning is choice. Please choose" (pp. 62-63).

PART II - PRACTICE

Creating Charts

Part II of this paper looks at specific techniques that educationists can use in facilitating the examination of stereotypes. These techniques have their starting point with a specific type of graphic organizer, i.e., a chart which students use to array information about the literature they read (Christensen, 1991). McTighe (1992) recommends graphic organizers as devices which help thinking and provide opportunities for student-student collaboration.

Nursery stories and fairy tales can be used, even with secondary school and adult students, because these were the stories with which they were raised. Dialogue journals and examples from the teacher can encourage students to reflect on the impact such literature has had on their ideas.

Next, students are asked to chart stereotypes in literature they are reading or which they read or was read to them when they were younger. These charts can be constructed with five columns. Column One lists the characters or objects in the story. Column Two designates categories into which these characters might be placed, e.g., based on sex, social class, and race. Column Three describes the attributes of each character. Column Four is labelled Source. Here, students list their evidence for the attributes in Column Three. In Column Five, students note any stereotypes they find. The absence of characters of a particular category of interest can also be noted in the chart. Figure 1 illustrates this technique for the story Cinderella (Dolch, Dolch, & Jackson, 1950).

It should be stressed that there is no one correct chart for a story or one correct view of a particular stereotype. Text analysis is very complex. Thus, there will and should be disagreement about the charts and their interpretation. This disagreement, if handled constructively, can be advantageous, as students and teachers support their choices with evidence from the text, their own experiences, and their other reading.

Character	Category	Attributes	Source	Stereotype
Cinderella	Female From wealthy background	Attractive	p. 9 "beautiful daughter"; p. 13 "so beautiful that everyone turned to look at her"	
		Passive	p. 11 Could not think of a way to go to the ball by herself; pp. 15-16 Waited for the prince to find her, even though she knew she was the one he was looking for. p. 17 "I will be happy to go with you."	Attractive people are good. Women should be passive, kind, and dainty.
		Kind	p. 9 "good and kind"	
		Dainty	p. 12 "a pair of little glass slippers"	
Sisters	Female	Unattractive	p. 10-11 "They did not look very pretty even in their new dresses."	
		Unkind	p. 9 "took Ella's clothes"; "made her do all of the work"; "would not even let Ella sleep in her own room."	Unattractive people are bad. Big is unattractive for women. Stepsisters are unkind.
		Big	p. 16 "the first sister tried it on. Her toes were too big."	
Prince				

Figure 1 - Chart Analyzing Cinderella
Applying Information from the Chart

After completing the chart, students can convert it to prose form, for example, writing a review of the piece and giving it a grade. A group of Christensen's U.S. secondary school students gave the comic Popeye an F, commenting that, "[It] oozes with horrible messages from passive Olive Oyl to the hero 'man' Popeye. This cartoon portrays ethnic groups as stupid. It is political also--teaching children that Americans are the best and conquer all others" (1991:55). Christensen's students combined their reviews and grades of Popeye with those for other children's entertainment and passed these out as a pamphlet to meetings of parent-teacher associations. Of course, these reviews and grades can be positive as well as negative. This kind of process, in which students study for a purpose with a real-life, concrete goal in mind, helps avoid the overly abstract nature of too many school activities (Sobel, 1993).

The techniques described in this paper and others are listed below. You, your colleagues your students, and their parents, will, no doubt, think of more techniques and of variations.

1. Engaging in dialogue journals.
2. Writing reviews.
3. Giving grades.
4. Writing/role playing new versions with different attributes for existing characters, addition of characters from absent categories, or different perspectives, plot twists, and endings.
5. Comparing charts from related pieces of literature.
6. Considering stereotypes in light of students' own experiences, in terms of the accuracy of stereotypes, as well as experiences being stereotyped and doing stereotyping.
7. Asking others about stereotypes, e.g., parents, those negatively affected by stereotypes.
8. Discussing findings from the charts in cross-age reading pairs.
9. Participating in hypothetical interviews with characters and authors.
10. Doing charts of students' own writing.
11. Extending the same analytic techniques to non-literary texts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to be fully literate, students need to become analytical readers, listeners, and watchers. An important area for analysis is the identification and examination of stereotypes. A number of techniques have been briefly described for helping students analyze stereotypes. Charts, a graphic organizer, have been suggested as a starting point for these techniques.

Today, calls for preparing students to function as critical thinking adults are commonly heard. Certainly, there exists no shortage of modern-day tasks for which such analytical skills and attitudes are needed. In particular, unjust stereotypes cry out for attention. We need to prepare young people for these tasks. Or, as a Tamil proverb puts it:

Tottil palakam sudukaadu varaikum.

(What you learn as a young one, helps you till your days are done)

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Figure 2 - Chart Analyzing McDonalds Commercial

ANALYZING STEREOTYPES

Part I

- A. Definition of stereotypes
- B. Their role in society
- C. Approaches to teaching about stereotypes

Part II

- A. Using charts
- B. A sample chart of Cinderella
- C. Activities based on the charts
- D. Creating a chart of a tv advert
- E. Conclusion

A stereotype is a "Fixed, formalized, or standardized (and therefore perhaps false) phrase, idea, [or] belief"

Hidup dikandung adat;
Mati dikandung tanah.
(In life, by custom hedged around;
In death, we lie wrapped in the ground.
People are helpless creatures pent in their own environment).

Kerbau sekawan dapat dikandang,
Manusia seorang tiada terkawal.
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Goldilocks and the Three Bears

Interview with the author of Goldilocks and the three bears

Reporter : Good morning sir/madam I sure that this story, "Goldilocks and the Three bears" has been one of your greatest success in the world of children's stories. What do you have to say about this?

Author : Indeed this children's fairy tale has been very successful, being told in almost every corner of the earth. But sad to say, the version I painstakingly created is not parallel to the very famous but, twisted version you hear in nurseries everyday.

Reporter : Is that so? Well, in the version heard most commonly, Goldilocks was a sweet little girl roaming around and came across an empty cottage, tried the things out of curiosity and got frightened away by three bears. Isn't that the original version?

Author : In fact that is a totally different one from the one I originally wrote. Take for example, the main character, Goldilocks. She is not the cute, innocent girl as described in the story. She is actually a rebellious teenager, while running away from home, chanced by a small, delectable cottage and just made herself at home.

Reporter : Is that true? I had always thought Goldilocks was the heroine in the story and that the bears were the 'bad guys' frightening her away.

Author : No, that isn't true? After feasting on the porridge and vandalising the chairs, she just comfortably fell asleep on one of the bears' bed after 'testing' it. When the bears returned, they were shocked to see their house in a mess. They went upstairs and the baby bear gave a squeal of horror when he saw Goldilocks sleeping on his bed. Goldilocks woke up with a start and got frightened by the sight of the bears and not because the bears frightened her. The bears then tried to make friends with her but she had already run out of the house.

Reporter : Why did you create such an unusual story with an unexpected plot and ending? Did you think the readers would like it?

Author : I wanted this fairy tale to be special, different from the rest. I wanted to show the readers that humans can be the bad ones too and that animals are not always fierce, they can be kind too. I thought that readers would like it as it would be different from other stories. Having a different plot and ending, but as the years went by, the people gradually began to change the story to how they would like it to end and how it actual ended. It's quite sad.

Reporter : Yes, indeed. Thank you for sharing with me the truth and may the original version be revealed!

Coal Black and the Seven Giants
(From: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs)

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away, There was a queen whose husband died immediately after the birth of their son. Their son had skin as dark as coal and therefore he was named Coal Black.

After the death of her husband, the queen remarried and the new king was evil and vain man. He disliked Coal Black and ill-treated him.

The king also wanted to be the most handsome man in the world. Everyday he would go to the magic mirror and ask, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most handsome of them all?" The mirror would usually answer, "The most handsome man of all, is none other than you, dear king." The king was always pleased to hear this.

After a few years, Coal Black grew up to be a very handsome and fine young man. One day, the king went to the mirror and asked again, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most handsome of them all?" This time the mirror gave a different answer, "You are no doubt handsome, dear king, but Coal Black is more handsome than you are." The king was furious when he heard this. Jealousy gradually grew in him and he ordered for a huntsman to bring Coal Black deep into the forest to kill him. The huntsman had no choice but to do as he was told. When they reached the forest, the huntsman, upon seeing how pitiful Coal Black looked, said, "Run.... run as fast as you can and never return!" At once, Coal Black turned to run towards the deep forest. He did not know where he was going, but he just ran. He continued running until he saw a huge house at the end of the path. He entered the house and found that it was vacant. In the house everything was extremely huge and was in sets of seven. Coal Black felt sleepy and went into one of the beds and fell asleep.

Later in the evening, seven giants, who were the owners of the house, came back after a day of hard work at the gold mine. They were surprised to see such a tiny person on their bed. They started chattering excitedly and woke Coal Black up. Coal Black was frightened and shocked to see such huge creatures. He got on his feet and started running, but the giants stopped him and assured him that they would not harm him. Coal Black felt relieved and told them all about his evil stepfather. The giants felt sorry for him and allowed him to stay at their house. Coal Black readily agreed.

Meanwhile, back at the castle, the king was convinced that Coal Black was dead and went to the mirror to ask again, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the most handsome of them

all?" To his surprise, the mirror answered, "Coal Black is still alive and is living in a huge house at the end of the forest, and therefore he is still the most handsome of them all." The king was enraged when he heard this and thought of a vicious plan to kill Coal Black.

Meanwhile, Coal Black was enjoying himself in the giants' house. The giants' treated him well and he was happy living there. Before leaving for work early in the morning, the giants will always remind Coal Black never to open the door to strangers, for fear that they might be sent by the king in another attempt to kill him.

In the castle, the king disguised himself as a pitiful and poor old man, selling combs. He had soaked a comb in poison and when Coal Black combed his hair, the poison would seep into his head and he would die.

When the king, in disguise, arrived at the giants' house and was greeted by Coal Black, Coal Black was reluctant to open the door, but when the old man said, "What harm can an old man like me cause?", he opened the door. Taking pity on the old man, Coal Black decided to buy one of his combs. Not knowing that the comb contained poison, he started to comb his hair and after a while, he fainted. Upon seeing that Coal Black has fainted, the king made his way back to the castle.

In the evening, when the giants returned and found Coal Black lying on the ground, they knew that the evil king must be the one behind it. They saw the comb and removed it from his hair. Slowly, Coal Black began to regain consciousness.

Thinking that Coal Black was dead, the king went back and asked his mirror, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most handsome of them all?" The mirror replied, "Coal Black is not dead yet, and is the handsome of all." The king was furious and thought of another plan to kill Coal Black.

Back in the giants' house, it was clear to Coal Black and the giants that it was the king who had tried to kill him. The giants cautioned Coal Black again not to allow any strangers in.

This time the king disguised himself as the peddler selling ties and went to the giants' house after they had gone to work. Coal Black was again reluctant to open the door for him after what had happened, but after some persuasion, he opened the door and bought a tie from the old peddler. The old peddler helped him to put the tie on and while doing so, he strangled Coal Black with the tie and left him lying on the floor.

The giants returned to find Coal Black lying on the floor with the tight tie and immediately loosened it. After a while, Coal Black regained conscious and was cautioned once again by the giants not to open the door to any strangers.

Meanwhile, in the palace, convinced that Coal Black was

dead, the king went to the mirror and asked once again, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most handsome of all?" Once again the mirror replied, "Coal Black is still not dead, and is the most handsome of all." The king was filled with anger and jealousy. He was absolutely determined to succeed in killing Coal Black this time. He prepared a pear in which one half was filled with poison. He again went to the giants' house, knowing that they were at work, and disguised himself as a farmer's wife selling pears. Coal Black was very, very careful this time and refused to allow the farmer's wife to enter, but the king managed to convince him by eating the other half of the pear without poison and offered the other half to Coal Black. Coal Black was convinced it was safe and he ate the other half, which contained poison. After a while, he was lying on the floor. Upon seeing that Coal Black was dead, the king turned to return victoriously to the castle.

When the giants returned, they found Coal Black dead and could not do anything to revive him. They were very upset and started weeping, but he never regained conscious. The giants built a coffin for him and brought it to the top of the hill. Everyday a giant would stay beside it.

After a few weeks had gone, a princess happened to pass by in her house carriage, saw how handsome Coal Black was and gave him a kiss. Almost at once, the pear in the prince's mouth was pushed up and out of the Coal Black's mouth, he was alive again! The giants were filled with wonder and joy to see this and celebrated. The princess asked Coal Black to marry her and he agreed.

The king upon hearing about the marriage of Coal Black and the princess was angry and jealous, but there was nothing he could do as Coal Black and the princess lived happily ever after in the princess's palace.

An example of how stereotypes may change

"Girls are expected to be squeamish over insects and worms. I remember once in school, some boys planted a grasshopper on my shoulder, expecting me to scream my head off. Contrary to what they expected, I coolly picked it from my shoulder, put it on my palm and handed it to them. I think they were impressed because they said that I was not too bad, for a girl."

Why does Hollywood put these stereotypes in movies? Is it because the filmmakers believe them, because that's what sells, or because that what seems normal?

"Today's movies are loaded with role models for working women, that is, if you're a big-hearted hooker, a burned out waitress or a power-mad boss. You would think that decades of feminism and the ever increasing presence of women in the workforce would have made a dent on Hollywood filmmakers. Wrong. Sure most women in movies today have some kind of job, but usually it is merely decorative like a glitzy evening gown. If a woman does at all have a job that figures prominently in a movie's plot, chances are she's one of these three things: a hooker, waitress or secretary.

'Pretty Woman' is probably the most famous example of a tired hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold fantasy, tempering Julia Roberts' trade with a candy coloured romance. Waitresses are Hollywood's other big staple. There are so few variation of the type - under that grease stained apron lies a sweet, bruised waif - it's boring to name examples. Secretaries prove a little more complicated since they could, in theory, work their way up the ladder, if only higher-ups (usually men) would allow them to. These images send a distinct message to movie-goers, male and female alike, that women's work is insubstantial and forever secondary to looking sexy and chasing a guy."

A few instances can cause stereotypes if that's all that people encounter and these stereotypes are reinforced because every time an instance is encountered, the person is looking to have their stereotype reinforced, not disconfirmed.

"Another aspect of looking at stereotype of an RGS student is that we are very wild. This, like other cases of stereotype is due to only a few girls who enjoy to hang out at Orchard Road acting indecently."

Are there stereotypes in our own thinking and writing? Can there be good stereotyping?

"This pieces of writing may also be full of stereotypes since it is written in a woman's point of view. Without realising it, we are all guilty of stereotyping, let it be good or bad."

Different people can hold very different stereotypes of the same group.

"There are people who believe that RGS girls are 'social retard' girls who have difficulty in interacting with others, particularly members of the opposite sex. ... People believe that RGS girls are 'party animals' or 'havoc girls', girls who hang out at Far East Plaza and flirt with guys."

Are stereotypes useful? Should we try to get rid of them? Can we?

"I can only hope stereotypes can be wiped out from society."

Sometimes stereotypes aren't only what is shown but also what isn't shown.

"The play (Snow White...) opens with a scene of the queen at a window sill where she pricks her finger. She wishes aloud that her soon-to-be-born daughter would be blessed with unlimited beauty - a fair complexion, rosy cheeks and black hair. This leads the audience to wonder if only the fair-skinned, dark haired with bright cheeks are blessed. Has God forsaken the rest of the human race?"

Humour

"Give your views about stereotypes in society.

'Is it the same as stereosystems like walkmans, discmans?' given by a 14 year old passerby."

Are stereotypes based on facts?

"Stereotyping is not based on true facts. From the interview, it is clearly shown tht almost all of them hear it from friends, and that stereotyping is based on first impressions or minority of the students. Thus, we should not believe in sterotyping."

Stereotypes of students from different secondary schools

(based on interviews)

"New Town Secondary

gangsters, noisy, rude, hang out everyday, drop-outs from school, unintelligent, no future, poor results, Chinese-speaking family, crime-prone, poor family, take things easy.

Raffles Girls School

nerdy, obedient, spoilt, kiasu, studious, intellectual, proud, dignified, smart, dignified, smart, future leaders, future top earners, uncaring, desperate, ugly at heart, fake, tomboyish, rich, competitive