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BALLOONS Lit. Journal:

An Emerging Force of Language Arts in Teaching Literature

By Dr Peter Lee

As an English language teacher in Hong Kong, one of the coolest and weirdest things I have ever done is to found an international literary magazine and gather different people around the world to support the endeavour by sheer reading and writing. And it turned out to be a brilliant way of building a literary network and one of my best resources for teaching literature and performing arts. Take a look at BALLOONS Lit. Journal (BLJ) <balloons-lit-journal.com> to find out more!

Read me! I'm BLJ!

BALLOONS Lit. Journal (BLJ) was first established by me in the winter of 2014 in the form of a website. It is a youngster-oriented independent biannual magazine of poetry, short stories and artwork freely accessible online and downloadable, as a print-ready magazine, to readers all around the world. Six issues have been released as of 2017. Selected pieces also have an audio version on the website, with some of them performed by the original poets/authors themselves. As a non-profit-making endeavour, BLJ strives to cultivate the spirit of creative English writing and quality reading among young readers, especially those in my local teaching context, who have yet developed an appreciation of the beauty of modern English poetry and literature.

BLJ displays a spectrum of works for school-aged readers (around upper primary levels and above) involving, but not limited to, rhyming poems, free verses, genre and literary

fictions, as well as artwork and photographic work. Whilst the chosen pieces may not commonly have young people as protagonists, certain qualities of the works are deemed to appeal to BLJ's target audience and/or have educational value, in addition to their literary and artistic merits. American poet Susan Gundlach (2015, Nov 5) comments that "The magazine's (BLJ) approach is both serious and whimsical, intellectual and accessible." And this well captures the essence of this magazine.

To Teach or Not to Teach

Children's literature writer Jacqueline Jules has recommended BLJ twice in her educational blog "Pencil Tips Writing Workshop Strategies from Children's Authors and Illustrators" for the modeling values of the publication for language learners. For instance, Jules (2015, Sept 7) says, for Issue 2, "The inclusion of work by young people makes this a wonderful model for young writers. Share the poem, 'Rain,' (Kullberg, 2015) by ten-year-old Sage as an excellent example of using descriptive details and then ask students to write their own weather poems." Also, for Issue 5, Jules (2017, Apr 24) states, "As an educator myself, I am immediately drawn to how this magazine could be a boost to classroom instruction. The first selection, 'The Best Poem You'll Ever Read' (Galef, 2017) is followed by a challenge to the reader to write his or her own poem... So many pieces in this issue would make excellent classroom writing prompts."

Jules observes the values of the selected pieces in terms of teaching and learning, especially on creative writing, and in fact, that was one of the major reasons they were chosen for publication in the first place. Yet, “to teach or not to teach” remains a big question whenever I give a copy to a student or when I give copies to a class. Reading should be enjoyed; if the pieces are always used as a sample to teach a certain kind of writing technique, then the literary journal will be turned into a textbook, losing its “magazine” status and value. Therefore, while I do use a few pieces to discuss with students and explain certain excellent writing styles, I mostly encourage readers to read the entire collection by “recommending” some of the works and showing great enthusiasm towards the body of work. I would like readers to genuinely like the work presented and appreciate the authenticity of the pieces as opposed to reading materials written specifically for learners, which is often the case for English language learners in my country.

Having said that, I cannot resist teaching by using certain pieces of the journal. For example, Dixon’s “The Dancing Banana” (2015) is one of my favourite pieces to be used for writing lessons. Students learn about the fantasy genre and imitate the style to create their own short stories or poems of magical realism. The products are shared among the class and they have so much fun.

However, since the project does not include a “Teaching Guide”, I do not expect other educators to use BLJ for classroom teaching, no matter how much I wish that to happen! My wish is always to hear teachers, local or overseas, telling me how much joy they have reading the magazine and recommending it to their students and friends. “Sharing and enjoying” is also what BLJ upholds.

From Page to Performing Arts

Apart from promoting modern poetry and literature for young readers, BLJ encourages performances with the materials from the journal. As mentioned, the journal has an audio version for some of the writings. Readers have the opportunity to listen to how some of the works are read by the original poets or writers. For some other pieces which we do not receive a recording from the original submitter, we invite competent performers to demonstrate the pieces in their own interpretation. A few of them are performed by award-winning students in verse-speaking and/or holders of Guildhall credentials in Speech and Drama. Also, experienced speech contest judges Tanya Kempston, Dr Gary Harfitt, and Mary Ann Tear together with renowned Hong Kong actress Flora Chan Wai-san are among the invited performers for different issues. All of them added another dimension of enjoyment for the readers.

BLJ also received requests to use its published work for speech events. A Hong Kong speech-promoting charity organization “Speech and Music Recital Development

Foundation” has used Jules’s (2015) “Thunder”, Smith’s (2016) “Sound of the Sea” and Ruderman’s (2016) “No Referees” for different categories of their speech competitions in recent years.

And I made use of some of the works for speech and drama purposes in my school context as well. For instance, for my school’s annual speech contest “Speech Gala” (see Lee, 2016), Foster’s (2015) “Recipe for Disaster”, Gundlach’s (2016) “In the Library” and Groves’s (2016) “Beneath the Surface” were among the set pieces for participants to learn and perform from memory. My favourite experience is to incorporate Vernon’s (2015) memoir on WWII, “The Day I First Wore a Yellow Star”, and Foster’s (2016) anti-war poem “All That They Want” into my Thematic Group Speaking act themed “In the Times of War” (see Lee, 2017). All of these pieces are fruitful materials for young people to perform on stage to feel the different imagined and authentic worlds the works portray. These varied voices also give the audience an excellent learning experience of how texts can be interpreted in distinctive ways to enhance meanings, not to mention that the works themselves also possess important moral and literary values.

Celebrated Irish actors Sam and Joan McCready have given comments on BLJ, in their educational and theatrical perspectives, which they sent me through social media at the time this article was being written. They are quoted below with permission:

“BALLOONS Lit. Journal is an invaluable resource for innovative teachers of English Literature, Speech and Drama. It is designed to enrich the creative imaginations of all students...leading to discussions on important personal and social issues, and also to the creation of exciting personal work...” – Sam McCready

“This literary journal is to be highly recommended as a valuable teaching and learning tool...it celebrates the arts by allowing children to delve into the work of creative artists from across the world, while also encouraging and displaying children’s own writing...” – Joan McCready

The Road Ahead...

A reporter of a local newspaper approached me sometime a year ago to show interest in learning more about the project of BLJ, which she regarded as a “business”. She was involved in a column introducing the start-up of new businesses in Hong Kong. However, I clarified to her that BLJ receives no payments from viewers, readers or contributors. No advertisements are accepted by the journal either. Therefore, the project makes no profit and is only sustained by labour of love and my team’s passion in literature promotion. It should not be the type of “business” the reporter was looking for. She understood it from our

brief phone conversation and politely said she would reconsider the feasibility of an interview, and then, she never called back.

I have to face the fact that, very often, only money-making projects are considered successful and are worthy of wide media coverage. BLJ in its current status may be somewhat disadvantaged in popularity building. I have been facing obstacles to promote the journal locally in spite of the funding it has won. Ironically, the majority of submissions come from western countries, particularly the United States. After all, literary journals in English are naturally developed from the west, though only very few of them become “successful” in terms of duration and/or reputation, not to mention the amount of profit they could generate.

Marching into its fourth year, my ambition for BLJ remains to widen the literary influence and coverage of the journal as far as possible. While it is as hard to encourage my local students to fall in love with English literature just with this humble magazine as to have foreign countries recognize the quality of a Hong Kong-based literary journal, every effort will continue to be made to perfect every page of the journal to present our contributors’ work in the finest way we can possibly do.

In this fast-paced era where electronic multi-media has infected all youngsters with instant messaging which gives little value to literature and poetry appreciation, BALLOONS Lit. Journal is still spirited to make its small contribution, however trivial, to the immensely important world of arts and literature, one issue at a time. <balloons-lit-journal.com>

Fun Facts about BLJ:

- The journal is titled “Balloons” for the peculiar balloonish faces the founding editor loves to draw, especially on his students’ work. The hand-drawn “balloons” shown in the magazine are all done by him.
- BLJ’s layout is also designed by the founding editor.
- In April 2016, BLJ was recognized by Hong Kong Teachers Dream Fund to be one of the 17 fund-receiving projects among 300+ applications.
- The current advisory board of BLJ involves two scholars from universities, a secondary school principal and a retired English language consultant.
- Prominent contributors of BLJ include Polish photographer Izabela Urbaniak, American writer Jacqueline Jules, British poets John Foster and Paul Cookson, Brazilian street artist Fredone Fone, as well as Irish painter and playwright Sam McCready.

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