UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration

Episode 71: Michael Quinn: The Land Owns Us (21/08/2024)

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Esa Aldegheri

هـ آل ـوس هلّأل ـأهْ, benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society, and identity.

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Bella Hoogeveen

Hi, my name is Bella Hoogeveen and I'm the producer of this podcast. Today's episode was recorded at our annual UNESCO RILA Spring School: The Arts of Integrating 2024, which took place in May. We actually have an online version of that event coming up as well in October 2024 and you're all warmly invited to join. Tickets are free. I have put the link to the registration page in the show notes, so do have a look.

Today's presentation is called 'The Land Owns Us: Learning the global history of the natural world through Indigenous Creation Stories', and our speaker is Michael Quinn. Michael is currently undertaking a PhD project in the Philosophy of Education, focusing on the possibilities of teaching philosophical concepts through speculative fiction here at the University of Glasgow. He completed a Joint Honours in English Literature and Philosophy in 2013 before the MLitt in Fantasy Literature in 2018, both at this same university. Michael has taught English Literature in high schools for nearly a decade across Scotland, Spain, and Australia, where he also visited sacred Indigenous sites and began teaching Indigenous creation stories. He will touch on that in this presentation. Enjoy.

[APPLAUSE]

Hi there. Thank you very much for introducing me. Also, thank you for forcing me to record this talk as well. It's a pleasure to be here at the Spring School. The aim I'm kind of focusing on today is the intercultural communication through the arts. So, my whole talk today is basically looking at stories from minority groups and thinking about how you can use them in education to get to some particular aims.

So when I was in Australia, I was teaching there for a few years and I went to Uluru in Kata

Tjuta, otherwise known as Ayers Rock, but we don't call it that for various reasons. Yeah, there were some things that I thought were really good in the education system in Australia about the way they taught Indigenous culture, and there are some things I want to address today that I think can maybe be improved. I want to make it very clear that this is very much a work in progress.

In terms of the contents for today, I want to give the context in terms of where I'm coming from, in terms of philosophy and literature and how those two different subjects can overlap. Then looking at the philosophy of education, which is where my PhD is based. Then looking at science and stories and how they might overlap in interesting ways, focusing on Paul Feyerabend and Mark Turner. Then looking again at science and stories and the importance of that for some environmental philosophy. In terms of more contents, I want to focus then on Uluru itself, looking at the Dreamtime stories, Tjukurpa, which I'll explain, and the creation story of Uluru itself. Then finally, I want to suggest some teaching tasks that will maybe exemplify what it is that I'm trying to get at.

First of all, with philosophy and literature. There are calls for literature to be recognised as philosophy to challenge the cultural homogeneity of Western philosophy. There are some people, like myself, who argue that literature can do philosophy. It's not a separate thing, it's not exemplifying philosophy, it's not mirroring it, it's actually doing it. With that you get, I think, a much broader scope of what philosophy can do and obviously a lot of different voices that come into doing philosophy. Especially when you go away from the idea that philosophy is done by a certain group of people in a particular way. I think the further away you get from that, the better. That gives you this move towards a more inclusive understanding of philosophical ideas and of the world.

Then with children's literature in particular, so Lynn Glueck and Harry Brighouse, they talk about using children's literature to gently introduce quite complex philosophical ideas. They've got three benefits that they can identify with doing that. First of all is the moral reasoning that students can do when they're in a story. They can look at characters and the situations that they're in and what they would do. They're 'capitalising the prior knowledge of fictional narratives', so of course, students know stories, they were told stories from when we were very, very young. Then they're in that situation where they're quite comfortable, and from that they can then explore these more complex philosophical ideas. And the most terrifying word in education: enjoyment; students might actually have fun and learn about these stories in this particular way.

What it does is, and I'll talk about this more later, is that using literature to learn about philosophy also elicits empathy, especially for peoples and places and animals and all these kinds of things that we might not naturally elicit empathy for. Especially with the way that

morality is taught in schools these days, but I'm not going to go into that whole thing just now.

In terms of philosophy of education, yeah, encouraging students to critically reflect on their relationship with the natural world as a dynamic entity and to reflect on 'the products of human cultures…equally as products of nature.' Now, in Australia, and I think even in Scotland as well, a lot of the education that we see is very much knowledge-based and fact-based. It's like, how much can you learn and how much can you show that you've learned in an exam? There are really interesting and progressive thoughts about education these days in terms of not going down that route but thinking more about flourishing and all that kind of stuff. I think that's much more interesting. It's just moved away from these factually dominated pedagogies, so instead of how much can you learn, it's actually what can you learn about yourself and what can you learn about others.

And that takes us to stories and science and truth. So, what I want to argue today is that, and it's not anything particularly new, but I think in education it might not be very agreeable, is the idea that stories and sciences and truth are not in conflict. If you're telling a story, for instance, about Uluru and it's a creation story, that's not in conflict with science. It can definitely be something where they can support each other. The idea behind this then is that instead of just saying, "Here are the facts about or here is the science about a particular place," it's more about what are the stories and how do people actually pay attention to this place, what do they get from that place and what do they, importantly, give to that place as well?

We see the examples of this all the time in terms of fiction in the real world. Just this weekend past I had a friend over from Australia and I took her to Greyfriars Kirk. If you go there in Edinburgh, there's actually lots of names on the gravestones, it's all the characters from Harry Potter. So, J.K. Rowling went there, and she took these names and then you see them, and it's really interesting to see that in the real world. It is kind of weird because it is a graveyard, but when you're there you see all these tours going about and all these people dressed up as Harry Potter characters and all that kind of stuff. But what it does is, people wouldn't be there without those stories, and they wouldn't be showing that kind of appreciation to this place if it wasn't for those stories.

Last year I was in New Zealand and, massive Lord of the Rings fan, I went to see all those different places. Again, I was driving down these really unknown country roads just because I'd heard that there might be this particular place. Then all of a sudden there's this whole group there that's just showing this appreciation for this place that didn't really mean anything before the stories were told.

OK, so that takes us then to science and stories. Paul Feyerabend talks about theories and myths, and they say they 'have the very same goal: to collect and causally explain salient appearances. Even the method is the same: it consists in drawing conclusions from existing observations. The differences in the results are due to the limitations of the observation material available to the myth's original creators.' We're thinking about theories in terms of science, myths in terms of stories. I would kind of push back against this a little bit. I think the difference comes from the way that different cultures look at the world and what's most salient to them. So again, this kind of Western view is that we need to get the facts and we need to get the answer. Whereas I think looking across the world in a lot of Indigenous cultures, it's about finding meaning as opposed to finding what the actual answer is. And yeah, so I think with that different perspective, the observation material is kind of redundant, especially when it comes to creation stories.

However, Feyerabend also talks about the facts of the world. They 'are not just externally reflected by human ideology but are at least in part formed by it.' I think that's much more agreeable. So, what we perceive as facts is actually just a different interpretation of the world around us. And yeah, trying to balance therefore the importance of storytelling and science with our students in schools. And he also says, 'Languages tend to change, they degenerate or develop, and what at first cannot be uttered may become a fundamental principle, often just because the imperfection of the language's existing state is initially perceived in a manner that cannot be articulated linguistically.' So again, it's suggesting that the power of the language and by extension stories to change the way we view the world and how we interpret it, and it's offering students an interpretation they otherwise might not have had.

On Friday there's a talk I'm really looking forward to about the Gaelic language in Scotland. And I think it's really interesting. There's one, I was at a talk about the Irish Gaelic as well, and about the different ways that you can express emotions almost exclusively in different languages, and the importance of that for culture and also for place as well.

Last little bit on science and stories. So, Mark Turner: creation myths, such as Indigenous Australians' Dreamtime stories, helps students understand that allegorical, figurative and literal understandings of the world are not in conflict. Instead, as Turner describes, a 'conceptual blending is a fundamental instrument of the everyday mind, which is used in our basic construal of our realities from the social to the scientific.' Now, the question is, what is this kind of conceptual blending? I'm suggesting the conceptual blending between, broadly speaking, science and stories. And trying to explain conceptual blending – and I don't know if I still get it entirely, but I'm going to tell this story.

So: 'A Buddhist monk begins at dawn one day walking up a mountain, reaches the top at

sunset, meditates at the top for several days until one dawn when he begins to walk back to the foot of the mountain, which he reaches at sunset. Making no assumptions about his starting or stopping or about his pace during the trips, prove that there is a place on the path which he occupies at the same hour of the same day on the two separate journeys.'

Any suggestions about how that might work? Okay, for those that have just walked in, this is not going to make any sense to you and that's absolutely fine. It's not going to make sense to anyone in the room as well, so we're all going to be confused together. So, the solution to this problem is that you imagine a scenario where the monk goes up and down the mountain on the same day. Okay? And what the problem is, in this way we understand there is a place in time where he actually meets himself. And the scenario in which he goes up in one day is then like one input space, and when he goes down, that's a second input space, okay? And this is a kind of blended space with both kind of inputs occurring at once. And with this, with the kind of integration happens, that's the kind of conceptual blending.

So, there's some elements, like the path and the mountain, they stay the same under both outputs. Whereas the monks, they are projected separately, but they're getting put onto the same one. You look very confused and that's good. Okay. So, basically, in this space, it's possible to run this structure with the monk, therefore, meeting himself because you kind of put them on one. So, if that doesn't make sense, then that's good because it's not really supposed to. The whole idea is that it doesn't really make sense. So, you're putting two things together that don't make sense, but you're somehow trying to find a way that they work. I'm going to leave it at that for just now, but the idea is putting things together that don't really make sense just to see what happens.

So, in terms of environmental philosophy, it's got a much bigger importance in Indigenous philosophies in terms of the environment. And especially in storytelling as well. So, Val Plumwood talks about the richness – sorry, without the richness of 'narrative subjects that define and elaborate place, the connection between lived experience and the sense of this interweaving is lost, along with sensitivity to place.' So, stories, as I said, are really good at bringing us into the present and into a particular place as well.

Just a brief note on attention as well. I think telling stories in this way allows us to attend to places in a way we wouldn't normally have done so. Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil talk about 'unselfing' or 'decreation'. The idea is that you're not thinking, "What can the land do for me?" You're then looking at what can you do for the land and how can you be as part of the land without trying to control it or to own it as it were.

So, why Uluru? Uluru is a useful example for students to explore, given its religious, historical, and political significance in the world. It's one of Australia's most widely

recognised landmarks, it's got special significance, of course, for Indigenous Australians – in particular, the Anangu tribe, traditional owners of the area – it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and, of course, it's been a popular tourist destination since the 1930s. Massive controversy about people used to climb up the site despite being asked not to, that's now been stopped, thankfully, and you can still go and visit it today, which I did a couple of years ago.

In terms of the story itself, I just want to briefly give you the story of Uluru: 'Long, long ago in the Dreamtime the animals gave shape to some of the Rock. At that time a young Woma Python, called Kuniya was surprised by a group of Liru, which are venomous snakes. The Liru threw spears at the python and killed him. So hard did they throw their spears, that the points made holes in the Rock. The boy's aunt, also called Kuniya, was so angry that she killed one of the Liru with her stick. They made holes in the rock when the points of Kuniya's stick hit it. You can still see these holes today. Kuniya, the Woma python can still be seen as a dark wavy line on Uluru.'

Now, I want to show you this video from Barbara Tjikatu, who talks about a different part of the story. A couple of things I think are really interesting in the way that this story is told: first of all, the use of present tense. It's important obviously to hear the story in the traditional language, I should mention that first of all. But present tense, 'She *is* moving across', this is something that *is* continually happening. And the way that she points over, telling the story in its context, again, drawing attention to the land in that way. And the emotional tendency of these stories as well, the way that the characters are becoming enraged and things like that too.

These creation stories are part of Tjukurpa, stories that tell the creation of the land and the people. It's a religious philosophy, it's a moral compass. Importantly, it's not written down, which I will return to as well. Tjukurpa can be seen at Uluru through the physical evidence of the activities of the Ancestral Beings that still exist in the land. The idea is that these kind of stories function as a map as well for the Indigenous people, important lessons about how to survive, how to care for the country, how to find food and water, how to hunt. It's shared by person to person through oral storytelling, and when you walk around Uluru, you can actually see evidence of these stories.

For instance, in the creation period, Tjati, the small red lizard who lived on the mulgi flats came to Uluru. He threw his kali, a curved throwing stick, and it became embedded in the surface. He used his hands to scoop it out in his efforts to retrieve his kali, leaving a series of bowl-shaped hollows. You can see literally the way that that would look like a hand trying to scrape it out. So, this is the kind of evidence that these stories have taken place. There's also the place where Tjati died at Kantju. Unable to recover his kali, he finally died in this cave.

His implements and bodily remains would survive as a large boulder on the cave floor.

Before I go onto the actual tasks, I want to look at why Uluru is a useful one. If you've been to Uluru or if you ever go, you sit at sunset, some people do the sunrise one as well, and you can see the colours changing, it is a really spiritual and amazing experience. You just feel like it is very much alive. There are strong and clear connections with the importance of the land and its markings on the story. It's a very clear example for students about how the stories have impacted the way that people view these different parts of Uluru. Basically, what I think is that when I was in Australia, there was an improvement about the way that Indigenous culture has been taught, but a lot of the time it's a very negative and apologetic stance on the way that Indigenous culture is. It's all about what happened with colonisation and what are all the terrible things, and it's not so much focused on what does Indigenous culture have to offer students in schools today, which I think should be more focused on.

This kind of approach that I'm suggesting can be used for other landmarks. You've got Stonehenge, Mount Etna, Giant's Causeway, these all have their own kind of legends, so it's not just consigned to Uluru. And obviously a good focus on the oral tradition as well. So, this idea of having students, especially in this day and age, to slow down and to remember a story, and then to listen to a story, is something that I think should be encouraged as much as possible. Especially in this age of instant gratification and everything being recorded for all time.

So now what I think about, just briefly to wrap things up, is just think about how we could capitalise on this approach in the classroom. In terms of some formative tasks, you could have the story that I read out, you could split that up and put it in different sections, have students match it up in their own way, have them think about what makes more sense for the actual ordering of the story, think about their own interpretations of the creation story. Character interpretation, so why did Kuniya act in the way that she did? What can we learn from this? You could have students think about, has there been a time when someone acted in a certain way towards your family member? How did you feel? How did you react? So, it's taking this story about the land but making it about themselves. And bringing it back to students' personal experiences so that they can see there's a link between what they feel and what they experience and what is happening around them, as well as of course *where* it is happening to. This is kind of the whole teaching task that I would suggest then as a way to get these messages of what I've been trying to say across.

I would start off with doing an exemplar task. I would tell students about a time that I've created a story about the land. So, my sister and I, we talked about writing a song about our back garden because our family's lived there for quite a while. And we talked about if – we call it the field – it's like if the field could see or the field could talk, what would it have seen

and what the different people that have been there, like the first time that we went out to play, the last time we went out to play, a few years ago when we brought our niece and nephews there for the first time, and all those things, what would it say? She actually wrote a really good song about it, but I'm not allowed to share it because, you know, she's my sister and she wouldn't let me, but it is actually fantastic.

So I would have students do a similar kind of thing with something that's important to them. So have them select a natural place they are familiar with, and they can describe in detail, like a garden or river or a tree, and they can bring in a photo of that if they wanted. And I'd ask them to focus on one particular aspect of the land and think about how that came to be, so if there's a particular tree that was shaped in a really interesting way, how did it get that way, what story is there to explain that? Of course, some students would need some prompts and scaffolds to get them thinking. You could even just take them outside the school and walk around and have them look at it and come up with some ideas together. And then they create their own story of how it came to be, how did it become unique and what marks does it have and how did it get them? So then when they start walking around, they start thinking about these stories and obviously draws their attention to these places in quite interesting ways.

So to conclude, we have this kind of conceptual blending of fact, fiction, and belief. You're trying to bring these together in quite interesting ways. We're not putting one above the other, we're just saying that they can coexist peacefully. The potential of stories to bring places to life and the power of sharing stories, so diverting our attention to important aspects of nature in our daily lives. We're encouraging students to learn about other perspectives that they might not have encountered before, so understand the importance especially of minority groups. And then attention is shifted outwards towards the world and the various ways we can understand, interpret, and appreciate the land. We have this appreciation of place. But most importantly, what we have is this – it signals a shift away from what like the land or what the world can do for us, and instead what we can do for the land.

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[JINGLE]

Esa Aldegheri

شكراً, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for شكرا more information about our work, please visit bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA.

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