

## Our Two Cents: Is It Worth It? By Ashley Moore

In recent weeks the classrooms, offices and yellow sofas of KUIS have been buzzing with talk of politics, race and gender. A presidential election that captured headlines and column inches around the world also preoccupied the minds of many of the staff and students at Kanda. A visit from Mick Huckabee that was both provocative and fascinating raised the issues at stake in modern American politics even further in our consciousnesses.

My students were excited at the prospect of having a well-known politician visit KUIS although I wondered how much they knew about the man beyond his name and the fact that he was one of the better-known players in the presidential play. So I asked them and was answered by a classroom of blank, eager faces. After telling the class about some of Huckabee's more interesting stances I then felt compelled to tell them that I disagreed with many of his policies. With the topic having been dealt with, the lesson seemed to continue and finish as normal. On reflection however, I began to question what had happened during the class. Why had I felt the need to give my opinion? Should I have given it? Does my role as a teacher and cultural informant of all things English-speaking mean that I should resist voicing my own value judgements in the classroom? Surely, some would argue, teachers are valid participants in the class and should not be expected to remove themselves of all traces of personality and opinion in the classroom.

I wonder how many other teachers (Americans and non-Americans) discussed their views on the presidential election with students. Should teachers be discussing their opinions with students at all? Aside from a few inappropriate questions, I've enjoyed the personable and easy-going nature of the relationships that exist

between the teaching staff and the students at Kanda. It feels perfectly natural to share my opinions with students, and indeed, it seems to be encouraged by many of the issue-based, discussion-driven courses that we teach. But certain inescapable facts render these assumptions problematic.

Firstly, a power-imbalance unfortunately persists between teachers and students. This imbalance is further compounded by the Japanese educational context in which we find ourselves. Although things are changing, the Confucian tradition of the teacher as the unassailable holder of knowledge within the classroom still persists, as anyone who has taught in a Japanese junior or senior high school can attest. Moreover, for all our learner-centred and peer-evaluated endeavours, it is still the teacher who ultimately decides the majority of a student's grade. How many of my students would have had the courage to write an essay entitled 'Why gay marriage should remain illegal' after I so vocally let them know that I disagreed this viewpoint? Of course I would have marked it as objectively as any other essay (I hope) but if I were a student I would probably rather not take that chance.

Given the emphasis we place on discussion and encouraging students to internalise the language and give their opinions in English, telling the class your own opinions may well have a negative influence on many of the courses taught at Kanda. Does the wall-flower student who rarely talks in group discussions lack linguistic ability or is she simply worried about expressing views that are contrary to the person who is assessing her? In addition, teachers who are native speakers or have spent a great deal of time living in English-speaking countries hold a symbolic power over students that comes from being considered cultural informants. Our opinions on our native countries (and perhaps even other English-speaking countries) are often given and received with added weight and

prestige in the classroom. They are artificially condensed through experience and wrapped up in language that makes them appear to be hard, solid facts. Indeed there is a linguistic imbalance in our classrooms that makes it more difficult for students to detect these faux-facts. Of course, this is a valuable skill and we should be encouraging our students to look at how language can be used (and abused) in order to persuade others. But distinguishing fact from opinion should ideally be done as part of a task rather than whilst listening to the teacher introduce the task (an interesting

activity might be to have students look back at what the teacher said during the lesson and see what kind of value judgements underpinned the language). Of course, some of the value judgments that we make in our classes, such as the importance of racial equality, are so widely held and commonsensical that it would be hard to argue that they could be harmfully influencing students in an enlightened, modern language classroom. However, if such value judgments are so widely accepted, why should the teacher make them at all? Given the facts, the vast majority of students will surely come to the same conclusion. At the same time, where does one draw the line between what is universally accepted and what is contentious? It is also worth remembering that racial equality was once considered an opinion and not a fact. In contemporary Japan it is acceptable to smoke in many enclosed public spaces. However, it is likely that future generations will view this idea with a similar incredulity to that with which most reasonable people now view the notion that a black person should have to give up his seat on a bus for a white person. How many of the opinions that we consider valid today will be seen as nonsensical and unenlightened by future generations? Should we run the risk of introducing them to our classrooms? Yes, but again, there is no need for them to be presented as the opinions of the teacher. Why not just give the students the facts

and opinions surrounding an issue and allow them to make up their own minds? The notion of simply giving students 'the facts and opinions surrounding an issue' is in itself problematic. We all have our own biases that will influence the ways in which we select and present this kind of information to our students. Is it not better to admit our own personal biases to our students in advance? If discussed thoroughly and consistently, this may promote a great deal of critical thinking and student-empowerment but unfortunately this brings back the question of what kind of shaping influence this may have on students when they come to give their own opinions. All too often, such an admission of bias on the part of the teacher, whilst well-intentioned, is not discussed again and lingers in the minds of students, twisted into some sort of vague warning concerning what's right and wrong in terms of what the teacher wants to hear.

At this point, it may seem as though we've reached a professional impasse. As a teacher I shouldn't give my opinion to students that I'm teaching on the grounds that my own personal biases are unfairly weighted within the classroom and might shape and control the experiences and opinions of students. At the same time my personal biases underpin almost everything I do in subtle and infinitesimal ways. Should teachers therefore pack it all in and be replaced with dispassionate teaching robots (complete with geographically neutral accents)? Perhaps our primary role should be to encourage students to think critically about their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. We can do this by questioning students and introducing other points of view (and not just when students say something that we personally disagree with). Taking a tip from journalists and qualitative researchers, the other point of view can be presented in the form of 'Some people think that ...' or something similarly distant from the persona of the teacher themselves. We can also trust in our

students to challenge each other (as equals). I recently felt an overwhelming urge to correct a student who was arguing that women should stay at home and not work. Biting my tongue, I was (personally) pleased to hear the student's peers gently counter her with their own opinions, all without me wading in as the 'sage' of the class. Lastly, the more we reflect critically on our own biases as individual people and how these infiltrate our teaching practices, the better placed we are to avoid such pitfalls.

To be honest, the issues of who I am, how I interact with students and what sort of value judgments I betray in the classroom continue to trouble me. I often reflect on what I thought was a successful lesson and realise that I actually introduced my own bias to the classroom, couched as commonsense. After Obama was elected, I couldn't help expressing how great I thought this was in front of my freshman students. I wonder how many other teachers did this too. I also wonder how teachers who supported McCain and the Republican Party feel about this. The next time I'm tempted to give my two cents in the classroom I'll try to remember that someone somewhere will be tempted to give theirs too.