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# Crossing Borders: Multicultural Literature in the Classroom

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By the year 2020, one of every two students in the United States will be a person of color (Banks, 1991). Education must reflect this change by creating classrooms that encourage students of all ethnic and cultural groups to develop their talents to the fullest. Multicultural education should not, however, merely address literacy and academic achievement (Banks, 1994). To promote equity, educators should help students explore their own cultures and contribute to intercultural understanding. Too often students are limited by their own cultural boundaries as they read and evaluate literature. Language arts teachers, therefore, play an important role in the creation of classrooms without borders.

In order to do this, educators need to deconstruct the myth that America is homogeneous by reexamining traditional literature and selecting literary works that reflect the perspectives, experiences, and values of all ethnic and cultural groups. Teachers must be willing to meet students on the students' cultural turf. In order to do so, teachers should become students, willing to reexamine the materials that animate American history and willing to engage in discussions that challenge their own cultural perspectives.

When multicultural literature becomes an integral part of the curriculum and teachers act as models and guides, classrooms can become arenas for open exchange. Literature and the ensuing discussion permit students to read, think, and become actively engaged with the texts. As a consequence, it should be easier for students to cross cultural borders.

Crossing cultural borders involves conflict, but educators need to teach about these conflicts and their value in understanding diversity. Graff (1990) suggests that traditional classrooms assume that instructors have to resolve or evade conflicts. Graff argues that students would benefit more from a chance to discover what connections and contrasts emerge when the controversies are brought out in the open and discussed. The point is not to delete the classics, but to teach them in relation to the texts that challenge them (Jay, 1991). The result is a continuing dialogue without necessarily forcing a classroom consensus. Change and conflict do not have to lead to divisiveness in the classroom. Instead, culturally diverse literature can enhance student involvement in the curriculum and in the multicultural controversies.

Students must be guided to seek a personal experience in literature. Language arts teachers should create classrooms that encourage students' connection to culturally diverse literature. According to Rosenblatt (1976), traditional classes tend to insulate the student from the impact of the literature. In these classrooms, the primary emphasis of the instruction has been the identification of literary elements such as plot, setting, and character description. When the concern is on the intellectual response, students are protected from experiencing the literature, and consequently there is no personal response. Traditional classroom instruction tends to downplay the rich cultural life experiences students bring to the educational arena. In order to extract meaning from the literature, students need to connect what is in the text to what they already understand.

Students are empowered through collaboration with each other. Power no longer needs to be viewed as a fixed quantity that is parceled out by the teacher. In contrast to the traditional classroom, the collaborative classroom generates power that is shared by the participants in the learning environment (Cummins, 1989). Multicultural literature is a primary vehicle for generating dialogues. The literary work becomes the shared body of experience, allowing students to respond from the perspectives of their individual cultural backgrounds. The teacher uses thought-provoking questions to enhance students' connections to the literature and to establish a relationship of cultural equality between students and teacher.

### **Multicultural Literature in the Classroom**

Teachers must first help students examine and identify with their own cultural backgrounds (Banks, 1994). Some students are knowledgeable about their ethnic cultural heritage, while others identify so strongly with mainstream culture that they fail to see that their own cultures are reflected in behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. Consciously or unconsciously, all of us simultaneously belong to many cultural groups. In addition to membership in ethnic cultures, our cultural backgrounds can also be linked to subcultures such as religion, socioeconomic class, nationality, geographic region, age, and gender (Banks, 1994). Multicultural literature offers opportunities for personal reflection and identification with many cultures. For example, a sixth grade language arts teacher might select Gary Soto's *Taking Sides* to promote a discussion of cultural identity. Soto's main character, Lincoln Mendoza, struggles with crossing ethnic, socioeconomic, and urban/suburban cultural borders in his move to a new school. His membership in an adolescent sports culture facilitates his transition from the old neighborhood to the new neighborhood and provides the setting for his identity struggle. Students can learn to cope with their own confusion with cultural identity by connecting with characters facing similar identity issues.

In introducing literature to students, teachers need to delicately balance giving the students background information prior to reading the text with allowing students to first connect with the literature. Too much background information inhibits the student from seeking a personal response to the text. Too little background information fails to entice the reader into the richness of the cultural world of the literary work. For learning of the desired kind to occur, students must be given the appropriate support, and it must be made available at the relevant time. Instead of disconnecting the background information, it should be provided judiciously throughout the sessions with the literature. Accurate background information prevents the students' prejudices and stereotypes from coloring the text and encourages them to attempt literary works that are slightly beyond the borders of their current capabilities.

When students enter an unfamiliar cultural milieu, the teacher can initially provide sensory materials to create a backdrop for the story. The sights, the sounds, and the flavors of a culture can be experienced by calling upon community resources. Slides, videotapes, photographs, and other visual media can introduce the setting. The sounds of the language, the music, and the drama of a culture introduce students to the

human aspects of the environment. Tasting experiences from other cultures can provide links back to a student's own culture, while simultaneously acknowledging subtle or not so subtle differences. Children's books such as *Everybody Cooks Rice* can help students to understand the role of food in a culture and to realize that all cultures see their own foods as normal. Teachers must help students bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar by carefully orchestrating the background information.

The ability of most students and adults to look at their own cultures objectively is a challenge because they tend to be insulated by family and communities. Appropriately selected literature can encourage students to see their own culture from another culture's point of view. An upper grade elementary teacher may select Jean Fritz's autobiographical children's book, *Homesick: My Own Story*, to initiate discussion of living in a bicultural environment. This book documents Fritz's transition from the Chinese culture of her early childhood to rural Pennsylvania. As a daughter of Christian missionaries, she spends her formative years in China insisting that she is American. At age twelve, she returns to the United States to realize that she is perceived by some of her new classmates as more Chinese than American. Like many bicultural students, Jean Fritz finds she must not only resolve cultural conflicts but learn to appreciate the benefits of living in two cultures. Through classroom discussion of Fritz's book, the teacher can help students identify the differences between their own cultures and those of literary characters.

After students examine their own cultural backgrounds, they are more likely to be able to view their own culture objectively from the lens of another culture. Two children's novels which illuminate mainstream American culture from the perspective of first generation immigrants are *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* by Bette Bao Lord and *Children of the River* by Linda Crew. In addition, a fourth grade teacher may also use Lord's book to illustrate the challenges faced by elementary students who are English language learners. Students can empathize with the character's struggle with English idioms and frequent misinterpretations. Middle and high school readers can similarly empathize with Crew's main character, a Cambodian immigrant, struggling to meet the expectations of her family and those of her mainstream American boyfriend.

Confronting prejudice indirectly by examining a piece of literature is often easier than having students reflect on their present day prejudices. Historical treatment of Southern ethnic injustice in the 1930s, illustrated for upper elementary students in Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* or for younger students in *Mississippi Bridge*, allows students to look at their own situations filtered through the lens of the past. With the teacher's assisted discussions and activities, the students are guided towards responses which illuminate their own beliefs and biases. Similarly, in discussions of issues such as homelessness, a children's literature selection such as *Fly Away Home* may challenge stereotypes of homeless families and allow children to see current events from the perspective of another child. Books such as *Lupita Manana* and *Journey of the Sparrows* permit children to put a human face on the issue of illegal immigration. Issues which may appear at first to be clear cut and in need of simple solutions become clouded as stereotypes are confronted with complex and sensitively developed characters. Readers are challenged to see multiple sides of complex human issues.

One of the values of seeing commonalities across cultures is the avenue it creates for students to establish lines of communication with people of diverse cultures. Knowing that one shares a common interest or value sets the stage for finding other areas of compatibility. Children across the nation and the world share similarities. The physical and psychological necessities of life become a springboard for exploration and discussion. All children need shelter and food. Most children are nurtured in some type of family setting and participate in play. Picture books for primary elementary students such as *A Country Far Away* and *Hopscotch Around the World* illustrate the universality of play. *How My Family Lives in America* gives

young readers opportunities to compare home situations and activities among recent immigrant families. Bread, Bread, Bread allows readers to see the role of bread as a crosscultural staple of life, thereby introducing young readers to the variety which is the richness of cultural diversity. Cultural differences can be valued within the framework of the shared cultural bond. Knowledgeable teachers can assist students in seeing that cultures do have representative attributes but that not all people from a particular culture embrace all its attributes. Even stereotypes with greater accuracy are still stereotypes.

Celebrating ethnic holidays as a strategy for learning about diverse cultures has been heavily criticized in recent years. Token celebrations are justifiably criticized when they are used to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes. Some teachers have had students participate in the celebrations without learning about the historical and cultural significance of the event. Cinco de Mayo is frequently celebrated in California schools as a method of covering Mexican culture. Although the event may have become more of a Mexican American holiday, many teachers erroneously equate it with the United States' Independence Day. For some teachers, it is also the only time that Mexican culture is introduced into the curriculum. For others, the celebration of ethnic holidays encompasses the totality of multicultural education. However, to deny the importance of holiday observances for cultures and for children in particular is also a disservice. Most children learn about their family customs and cultural heritage from celebrations, and certainly from the young child's perspective, holidays represent some of the most important days of the year. Children's literature selections such as Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead, Seven Candles for Kwanzaa, and Lion Dancer: Erbie Wan's Chinese New Year support teachers' efforts to introduce meaning to the artifacts and tangible elements of culture.

### **Communication and Community Among Teachers of Literature**

Competent teaching strategies for cultural diversity issues require skills that cultivate critical thinking and skills that mediate the emotions that are associated with controversial subject matter. Because teachers need to present the literature from multiple perspectives, they must think through their own responses to the sensitive subject matter prior to the class session. In this way, teachers can promote student involvement while simultaneously anticipating student pitfalls.

As the most powerful influence in the classroom, the teacher provides the links to multicultural literature. By participating in professional development programs where multicultural literature is read and discussed on an adult level, teachers reexperience their own reactions, confusions, and connections to diverse cultures. Teachers participating in programs such as the California Literature Project (CLP) become a community of learners who read and discuss literature, reflect upon their own learning, exchange curricular information, and collaborate with each other.

Teachers' personal bond with literature is often left behind when they read literature only for use in the classroom. Participants in programs such as the CLP are given the opportunity to renew themselves, to read adult texts, and to reflect on their individual responses. The pleasure and insight gained by immersing themselves in texts without looking for formal literary structures refocuses teachers' usual reading purpose. The literature establishes a collaborative context for program participants, allowing them to deepen their own understanding and appreciation of the works and at the same time, discuss theoretical issues relevant to teaching multicultural literature and culture. An additional component of programs like the CLP is the forum it provides for dialogue with colleagues from different educational arenas, kindergarten through university. Teachers at all levels need more opportunities to share ideas with instructors outside their immediate institutional context. Collaboratively, teacher-learners can overcome barriers to crossing cultural borders, and as a result, increase the likelihood of making bridges across cultures within their own

classrooms.

The multicultural curriculum for the 1994 Summer Institute at UCLA included *M. Butterfly*, *Palace Walk*, and *Tracks*. With just a small amount of introductory information, institute participants approached the selected readings, not as experts, but as colleagues recognizing the limitations of their own training and knowledge.

David Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1986) is a play about a French diplomat and a Chinese spy, their clandestine love affair, and mistaken sexual identity. This play confronts the teacher-learners with gender, East and West, and ethnic stereotypes. Through a series of flashbacks, the French diplomat Gallimard recalls his twenty-year relationship with Song, a man who plays the role of a woman so well that he/she deceives even his lover. Teacher-learners accustomed to confronting texts by displaying their analytic virtuosity were provoked by the gender issues in Hwang's play. The gender-confusion promoted personal reactions to the text. As the institute participants grappled with their preconceived notions about sexuality, they were given an opportunity through discussion to explore emotions and curiosities provoked by the play.

*M. Butterfly* also encourages examination of East and West stereotypes. Because Song, the Chinese spy, is aware of the Western stereotype of the submissive and pleasure-giving Oriental wife, he is able to use the myth to become Gallimard's ideal woman. In a discussion of Song's ability to dupe Gallimard, teacher-learners had to first confront their own misperceptions of the East before they could attempt to understand how Gallimard can have an affair for twenty years and not even know that the lover he believes to be a woman is in reality a man.

Another adult text used by the summer CLP institute at UCLA was *Palace Walk*. An historical family saga by Nobel Prize winning author, Naguib Mahfouz, this novel examines Islamic and Arabic cultures. The protagonist Al-Sayyid Ahmad and his wife Amina head an Egyptian family of five children. Although the reader eventually learns that the time setting is an era of British occupation during World War I, cultural myths continually need to be deconstructed as the reader realizes that the Abd al-Jawad household is conservative even under Islamic standards. Over her twenty-five years of marriage, Amina has only been allowed to leave the protection of her walled home for occasional family visits. Similarly, Al-Sayyid Ahmad prides himself in the knowledge that his two young adult daughters have never been seen by men outside of the family. It's easy for readers to judge these women's cloistered existence from their American 1995 vantage point. It's another thing for them to see it from the Egyptian cultural perspective. The readers' lack of multicultural knowledge perpetuates the stereotype of Egyptian culture. Through guided discussions, institute participants were able to look beyond their own cultural perspective.

The Egyptian culture portrayed by this particular family represents a blend of Islamic and Arabic cultures. Attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs attributed to the religious aspect of the culture by the reader may very well be more representative of Arabic culture or even this family's idiosyncratic ways of living. Without accurate background information, the reader's stereotypes could easily be strengthened. The dynamic discussions that can occur in a literary community of learners challenge readers to broaden their own knowledge of diverse cultures. They also provide opportunities to practice the difficult task of suspending judgment and seeing from the lens of another culture. And finally, the discussions confirm the readers' need for appropriate background information to guide them through the maze of cultural differences in multicultural works.

Cultural definitions of the American self have long been presumed to be White (Morrison, 1992). Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* provided UCLA Summer Institute participants with a chance to examine issues of cultural groups outside the circle of power. As participants struggled to follow the tangled lives of the fragmented

Native American community depicted in the novel, they discussed their own perplexities and at times conscious resistance of Erdrich's use of multiple narratives. The author's narrative technique of giving alternate chapters to her characters Nanapush and Pauline in order to provide readers with different points of view of the same situations made it difficult for the institute participants to reinforce White stereotypical attitudes about Indians. What began as a dialogue across Anglo mainstream culture and Chippewa culture extended to a dialogue across other texts in which nondominant groups are able to transform the experience of alienation through the process of story telling.

Developing a personal philosophy of multicultural education does not happen in isolation. The process is enhanced by the stimulation and interaction provided by a community of ethnically and culturally diverse teachers from various school districts and grade levels who are brought together by programs such as the CLP and other professional forums. Informally school and district staff development sessions abound with opportunities to reflect on and confront barriers for crossing cultural borders. The Internet could be used for on-line literary discussions with the stipulation that there would be no traditional lectures or teachers. The emphasis should be on cooperative and collaborative discussion that will enhance awareness of the literary works and create a true community of teacher-learners. Literature circles among faculty members could be established to begin or to continue discussions for creating learning communities which will prepare our students for living in multicultural America in the next century. Ultimately, what goes on in individual classrooms is guided by the teaching philosophies of individual teachers. To be successful, institutional change begins with the classroom instructor.

Teachers need to make classrooms lively forums of open multicultural exchange. They must select materials that encourage a cultural revision so students can both understand another culture's point of view and see their own culture from an outsider's perspective. Faculty must be willing to empower literary works outside the traditional texts in order to prepare students to live in their increasingly culturally diverse society. They must challenge students to become engaged with and to reflect on the material they read. In their borderless classrooms, students will become multiculturally sensitive. They will be able to participate vicariously in different ways of life, and they will be liberated from the narrow confines of their particular circumstance.

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