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Delving into Multicultural Literature with Inquiry

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Delving into Multicultural Literature using Inquiry

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Lee Honors College Thesis

Abstract

This paper argues for the use of multicultural literature in the classroom, and puts forth a unit

plan that uses critical literacy in an English 11 classroom, though it can be readapted to fit other

grade levels. Bishop (1990) describes multicultural literature as a set of windows, that people use

to view the experiences of others, and mirrors, that reflect and validate peoples' experience, a

core principal in this paper. Critical literacy is comprised of four dimensions (Lewison, Flint, &

Van Sluys, 2002) that allows for analyzing literature in a different and meaningful way. The final

part of this paper details a five phase unit plan that has students inquiring into different cultures

using Jigsaw groups (Aronson, n.d.).

Keywords: Multicultural Literature, Critical Literacy, Social Justice, Inquiry

Delving into Multicultural Literature using Inquiry

Introduction

Multicultural literature is something that I encountered much later in life. I did not truly read something that was written by someone like me–a Mexican-American–for someone like me, until I got to college. *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya (1987/1999) was my first encounter with Chicano, or Mexican-American, Literature and though it did not have a profound impact on me at first, when I was rereading it for a different class (one that I planned to teach), I realized that the main character Antonio, was like me, in fact could have been me–a boy stuck between two worlds, one that my family dominated with Spanish, and the other full of English, where I had to strive to succeed. It struck me then how despite being an extensive reader, I had never read about a Mexican-American, and had never truly identified with a character in the way I identified with Antonio. My history with books had been full of Katniss Everdeens, Harry Potters, and Percy Jacksons, for the most part white, and male, but rarely ever so specifically diverse, and never a book written by a Mexican author in such an authentic way.

It was then that I decided that I would do my best as a teacher to never have a student not reflected in something they read because it is so important and can easily change someone's perception of reading, if not their entire worldview. This is where I started with this undertaking: designing a curriculum that would include multicultural literature that would allow students to see themselves, as well as see others through the lens of literature. I want to go beyond the white, cis, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian reader, and show that there is a multitude of identities and cultures that can be found in literature. This paper will detail why multicultural

literature is important, critical literacy (a specific form of reading that I will integrate into this unit, and my teaching in general), and an in-depth description of the unit.

Multicultural Literature

Multicultural literature is a term that has a lot of meanings, and is constantly talked about in education. The definition I am using comes from DeNicolo & Franquiz (2006) "'[Multicultural literature is] literature by and about people who are members of groups considered to be outside the socio-political mainstream' (Bishop, 1992, cited in Dudley-Marling p. 305)" (p. 158) as well as including "… differing perspectives generally including gender, culture, age, and class" (Iwai, 2013, p. 187; Singleton, 1996). Specifically, multicultural literature is about those that are not part of the mainstream, including, but not limited to, culture, age, gender identity, socio-economic class, and sexual orientation. Typically, multicultural literature is focused to younger grades (Souto-Manning, 2013; DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006; Bishop, 1990), but there is now more research that advocates for secondary access and beyond (Connor, Bickens, & Bittman, 2009; Cook & Amatucci, 2006; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Lafferty, 2014; Louie, 2005; Suh & Hinton, 2015). While I completely agree that it is very important that children in elementary and middle school read multicultural texts, it is as important that secondary students also read multicultural texts.

Secondary students are exploring who they are, and who they want to be in high school. Multicultural literature, as discussed by Bishop (1990), allows for diverse students to see themselves reflected in literature, something that may not have occurred as experienced by Adichie (2009), and myself. Seeing this new reflection, often for a first time, validates students'

existences and may fuel a desire to read, where there had not been one before. Bishop (1990) talks about how this lack of representation can lead children to "learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (p. x), and possibly cause them to believe that reading is not for them, or at least the stories within books are not for people like them something that Adichie (2009) discusses in her video regarding her childhood of reading stories about British and American children that was completely from her experiences.

Another important aspect of incorporating multicultural literature in the classroom at all levels is that it allows students to experience things that are foreign to them, and make them a little more empathetic, and a little more open-minded. Bishop (2009) stresses the importance of this "window" (p. x) because it could otherwise lead to a false perception of how important they are in the world, since they only see themselves in the books they read. Louie (2005) also talks about the importance of "…prepar[ing] students to understand people living in other parts of the world … [using] a broad variety of texts from the diverse cultures of humanity" (p. 566), which speaks to the globalization that the world is facing with the Internet as important as it has become. As teachers, we have to do more to prepare our students to face this diverse world that we live in, a good first step is incorporating multicultural literature as often as we can, so that students not only see themselves, but others as well.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is the central idea behind the actual interpretation, or reading, of these multicultural texts within my unit plan. It, according to Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002), is comprised of "…four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple

viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social

justice" (p. 382). Critical literacy gives students an answer as to why they are reading a specific

text because it has those dimensions that explicitly give meaning and purpose to the text and the

student.

A significant part of critical literacy is an analysis of the production of a book (Ehst &

Hermann-Wilmarth, 2014), such as who wrote it, for what reason, what is being valued, what is

being ignored, and who is being left out. This leads to looking at books with a closer eye, and

being more critical of the information it gives you, rather than accepting it at face value. Critical

literacy with this style also helps support state standards, including the Common Core because a

method into analysis is looking at literary devices to see how it impacts the text, an example

being choosing to write in a certain dialect, or how the authors push the readers into feeling a

particular way through imagery. The images and words used, important skills that the Common

Core makes a part of the curriculum, can help students be more critical readers.

Unit Plan

This unit plan, using the Understanding by Design template (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005),

is my effort to integrate multicultural literature into the curriculum while allowing for student

choice, and most importantly, allowing them to inquire into it. Multicultural literature, especially

with the definition I have in mind, is a sociopolitical issue, especially with bringing it into the

spotlight as I intend, which is the third dimension of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Van

Sluys, 2002). While written for an English 11 class, it can be easily readapted for any grade level

with the appropriate scaffolding and texts, which I will discuss later. Before delving into the unit

plan though, there is some front-loading to be done in a unit before beginning this one. Given

that we will be talking about sensitive matters, both within (if students fall into particular

cultures studied) and outside the classroom, it is important that students know how to

appropriately discuss and dialogue culture and sensitive matters particularly if they are not of

that culture and/or have disagreements with others in the classroom. It is important to do this

ahead of time, and practice it repeatedly before getting into these cultures. It is important for

students to know that cultures are different and are not inferior or superior to others (especially if

this "understanding" stems from assumptions), and how to appropriately articulate their thoughts

and opinions without demeaning the culture or people within the culture.

The unit begins with students choosing (through a Google Form) which cultures (at least

3) interest them, and from those results, I will develop groups that have a common culture that

the 4 students will have in common. To narrow down the many cultures that can be studied, there

will be a class discussion about what the class as a whole wants to investigate. This should be

done at least a few weeks in advance for me to gather the materials, as well as getting the class

involved in the investigation even in the early stages. Ideally (depending on the sort of class

being taught), there could be a class "theme" like "What it means to be American", where

different groups can investigate how different cultures within the United States define being

American. Following the choosing, students will take a number of pre-assessments through

Project Implicit (2011) that will get their brains thinking of what they are walking into this unit

with and what they are working from in terms of worldview. This will be strictly for self-

assessment (though they will write a reflection about what they learned about themselves), partly

to start students' thinking, as well as allowing them to be honest without feeling like they need to

answer a certain way to impress me. This unit is not solely for investigating a culture, but also

evaluating our own perceptions of Culture in general, as well as individual cultures through

learning specific information – which is the first dimension of critical literacy, disrupting the

commonplace (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

    Students in these groups will then split even further, in a sort of Double Jigsaw (Aronson,

n.d.) with each group studying a particular culture, but each individual reading different texts

(not only books, but articles, videos, movies, poetry, short stories, etc…) that are representative

of that culture. This covers the second dimension of critical literacy – interrogating multiple

viewpoints (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Each group will be handed a text set on their

culture, though they need not be limited by the text set; they can and should find additional

resources (which will cause each text set to grow over the years). Each type of text will have a

different point value based on the difficulty of the type (novels will be worth more than short

stories for example), and each student is required to reach a minimum number of points in

whatever combination works best for them, which allows students to play to their strengths and

differentiates for different learning styles and literacy rates.

    Students are expected to read and research their cultures individually, though there are

Daily Briefings in the group where they find commonalities and differences within the culture

and begin compiling their work. Students are also expected to keep a Reading Log of materials

read, as well as Multiple-Entry Journals (Allen 2008) where they will keep track of their research

and update according to new information, whether through their research or from others in the

group. I, as the teacher, will be able to have mini-lessons, or workshops on this specific style of

writing if needed, and will be able to model (through a think-aloud on a common book that we

have read) what I expect their entries to look like. I will also be circulating the room, helping as

needed, and conferencing with individual students and groups to formatively assess their

understandings and adjust instruction (through mini-lessons) as needed. Mini-lessons will be

short lessons that highlight a particular skill, such as annotating a book with a cultural lens,

writing a journal entry, and/or collaborating with a group, that students may have trouble with

and that I can teach as needed, whether as a whole class, or a specific group of students,

throughout the unit.

      The third phase of this project, after individual research is compiling the information they

have gathered as a group and beginning to set-up for the presentation. Students will have realized

through their research and Briefings that culture is hard to nail down, and harder still to define,

but they will see some threads that are shared throughout their chosen texts, that they will be able

to flesh out through further research as a team. While finishing up research and compiling

information, they will receive a lesson-plan template that they will begin filling out because they

will be teaching their culture to the rest of the class. Co-teaching (Emdin, 2016) is a concept that

involves getting students to teach the lesson, using the teacher's lesson plan, to the class while

the teacher sits in their seat to observe. Emdin highlights the teacher is usually the expert in the

content (though in this case, I might not know very much about the specific culture), while the

students are the experts in the delivery of the information to their peers, which is what I am

encouraging within this unit. My goal is for the students to get excited about their culture and

share that excitement in the ways they know how because it would be more authentic and

relatable to the other students than if I were to teach the culture. It also allows for more cultures

to be explored, and for different students to explore more in depth what interests them about the world.

      For the teaching aspect of the presentation, each group will have to create a pre-and-post assessment to be able to assess how much their peers have learned, as well as at least 2 activities to teach the material, one of which has to be interactive between the "teachers" and the class. I will be conferencing with each group ahead of time, to run through the lesson-plans and answer any questions they may have about teaching (including suggestions for activities), but they are expected to be the experts in the content, especially since I might not be familiar with the culture outside of conferences with them. Their entire lesson will be expected to go through most of a class period (45-50 minutes), while leaving time for a Question and Answer session from the rest of the class, as well as time to hand out a Recommended Reading List on their culture to the class. The rest of the class will be taking notes on the culture, as well as evaluating how well they delivered the material. The grade for this project will be made up of the Reading Logs, Multiple Entry Journals, individual and group conferences, the lesson plan (how they planned the lesson), and to a lesser extent, how well they delivered the material, and their peers' evaluation of their learning.

      The final part of this unit is a debriefing/reflective week where the students will think about where they started and what they have learned over the course of the unit. This focuses on the fourth dimension of critical literacy – taking action and promoting social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002), through changing people's thinking (Ehst & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2014). There will be a Final Reflection essay, which will be a minimum of 4 pages double spaced, where they will write out their findings as well as respond to a variety of prompts that

will help them get started and put their thoughts in order. Ideally, they will have grown and

learned that culture is not as tangible as they once thought, and that there is a wealth of

information that they can explore to learn about different cultures, beliefs, and people. This will

also hopefully open their mind to the idea that no one culture is superior or inferior to another,

but that they each have their idiosyncrasies that are neither good nor bad.

Conclusion

This unit plan is a first step, a stepping stone onto a career of incorporating multicultural

voices and social justice into the classroom. Researching multicultural literature showed me that

despite its slow progress, it is being included more often in the classroom, from elementary

through post-secondary studies, and that I have to do my part in exposing students to different

voices, for their own sakes as a mirror as well as a window into others' experiences (Bishop,

1990). This unit will also ideally prepare students to work with people different from themselves

with an open mind; diversity makes for better thinkers since different cultures can offer different

perspectives on issues we all face.

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English 11
Dr. Hermann-Wilmarth

Multicultural Literature
Unit

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Stage 1—Desired Results

Transfer

Students will be able to independently use their learning to …

better understand the diverse cultures that are around them, and better empathize with people different from themselves. They will also be better equipped for recognizing themselves in literature.

What kinds of long-term independent accomplishments are desired?

Meaning

UNDERSTANDINGS

Students will understand that …
Culture is subjective, fluid, and very difficult to pin down.
Individuals and culture are different, but they go hand in hand.
Stereotype can cause misconceptions, and false assumptions.

What specifically do you want students to understand? What inferences should they make?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Students will keep considering …

What purposes does stereotyping fulfill?
What defines a culture? What identifies someone as part of a particular culture?
What role does an individual's self-identification in a particular culture play? Can someone be part of a culture without wanting to be?
Why is multicultural education important? Why should people be familiar with other cultures? Why should people read about their own cultures?
Does culture make up the individuals, or do individuals make up the culture?

What thought-provoking questions will foster inquiry, meaning- making, and transfer?

Acquisition

Students will know …
Multicultural education is important to understanding and interacting with others (especially in a multitude of diverse cultures and an increasingly global world)
Reading can offer a peek into others worlds and experiences that you may not be familiar with.
Reading about others' cultures and experiences is just as important as reading about your own.

What facts and basic concepts should students know and be able to recall?

Students will be skilled at …
Researching, and inquiring into a particular subject (i.e., Culture), including being able to use quotes from the texts (citations) to support their thinking
Collaborating with other students to inquire into a particular subject, and compile their research
Presenting information in an informative and engaging way.
Summing up their learning in a logical, and linear way
Organize their thinking using graphic organizers.
Using multiple ways of note-taking (annotating) for different reasons, and knowing which to use when.
Working in groups, and giving each other feedback on their collaboration skills

What discrete skills and processes should students be able to use?

Figure B.1

The UbD Template, Version 2.0 *(continued)*

Stage 2—Evidence		
Code	**Evaluative Criteria**	
Are all desired results being appropriately assessed? HAVE TO CREATE AND TEACH (Mini-Lessons)	What criteria will be used in each assessment to evaluate attainment of the desired results? Rubrics Individual Conferencing Group Conferencing Presentations / Teaching Final Reflection	PERFORMANCE TASK(S): *Students will show that they really understand by evidence of …* Group Teaching/Presentation Final Reflections / Debriefing How will students demonstrate their understanding (meaning-making and transfer) through complex performance? The biggest performance will be in the students using what they have learned about the culture and teaching it to the class. To be able to teach it, the students must have a good grasp on the literature/research (the information they have read/watched/interpreted), and have compiled it in such a way that would make it engaging and give their peers something to learn from. Also, in the final week of the unit, there will be a final debrief where they will put what they learned about culture and the world into words, showing that they communicate what they had learned and thought about it in a linear way.
	Regardless of the format of the ~~assessment~~. What qualities are most important? Developing Empathy Recognizing Diversity Developing self-awareness/intentionality	OTHER EVIDENCE: *Students will show they have achieved Stage 1 goals by …* Reading Logs Multi-Entry Journals Conferencing Graphic Organizers Student-Led Unit Exit Slips What other evidence will you collect to determine whether Stage 1 goals were achieved?

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Figure B.1

The UbD Template, Version 2.0 *(continued)*

Stage 3—Learning Plan

Code	What pre-assessments will you use to check student's prior knowledge, skill levels, and potential misconceptions? – Student Choices (and Reasons Why) for Cultures studied – Project Insight IAT (Implicit Association Tests) – Group Table Discussions (GTD) – Students in their groups talk about the IATs

What's the goal for (or type of) each learning event?	**Learning Events / Lesson Plan Overview** *Student success at transfer, meaning, and acquisition depends upon …* **Week 1:** Students (through a written/online questionnaire) will write out what cultures they are interested in and some reasons why they are interested. Students will then be placed in groups based on responses. Before any group assignments, students will complete a Privilege Survey (to understand where they are coming from) and an Assumption/Stereotype Assessment (to understand what they are bringing to the table, background knowledge on a culture). After this INDIVIDUAL task, students will talk in their groups about their expectations about what they will learn, and talk about assumptions in particular, and write down meeting notes After some group administrative tasks (role delegation, expectations, deadlines), each group will be presented with a text set based on their culture. Each student is responsible for a certain amount of points (each "text" represents a different number, books=3, videos=2, magazine articles=1, for example) and for the most part will be investigating on their own with daily check-ins with the group. **Week 2:** Students will be researching their cultures, looking for similarities and differences within their own culture and the one studied. In the Daily Briefing, students in groups will have the opportunity to discuss things they have noticed, and see if it fits for multiple texts, and could be classified as part of the culture. Students will be expected to keep track of their reading with a Reading Log (complete with information about finding it again) and their notes with Multi–Entry Journals (refer to Janet Allen book). As students research and discuss in their groups, I will help as needed, AND (more importantly) try to conference with as many students/groups as I can to get a grasp on what they have learned. **Week 3:** Students will finish up their research and begin to compile information within their groups. They will discuss commonalities between their research/reading and differences to get a handle of what their definition actually looks like in real life. This would also be the point where students (if needed) will do more general research to see what makes up culture, and theirs' in particular (religion, stories, language). While compiling, students will decide on methods of presentation/teaching (poster board, Powerpoint, video, etc…), and complete the (simplified) Lesson Plan Template and assessment to submit to me, so it can be approved. I will spend more time conferencing with groups to get a handle on what they have learned and how they plan on presenting it. **Week 4:** Students will present their findings. Each group/culture has one complete class period to share what they learned about the culture; in essence they will be the experts on the subject, and they will be responsible for teaching the class for that period. I will have approved of their proposal, and be familiar with what they will be presenting, but I will also be in the role of student. Students will be observed and evaluated on their presentation by me, and their peers will also have input into the group's grade. An important aspect of the presentation is compiling a list of recommended resources for their fellow students who developed an interest in the culture, and want to learn more. **Week 5:** Students will debrief, and write a Final Reflection putting together what they learned about culture, working in groups, teaching the class, and what (if anything) they are walking away from this unit with. Are all three types of goals (acquisition, meaning, and transfer) addressed in the learning plan? Does the learning plan reflect principles of learning and best practices? Is there tight alignment with Stages 1 and 2? Is the plan likely to be engaging and effective for all students?	*Progress Monitoring* How will you monitor students' progress toward acquisition, meaning, and transfer, during lesson events? There will be constant conferencing with students, as well as near daily exit slips to assess where students are, as well as what they are learning. Some will be a quick update, others are more scripted with specific questions. What are potential rough spots and student misunderstandings? Potential rough spots are marked in blue, and if necessary, I will do a mini-lesson explaining how to use the specific note-taking techniques, including reading a short book, and doing a Think-Aloud to model how it is done. How will students get the feedback they need? Through conferencing (from me), and group work (from peers), as well as through their exit slips (from self). During the Teaching portion, they will get feedback from the rest of the class as to how they did teaching the material, and what their peers learned.

China Text Set

Title	Author	Text Type	Points	ISBN
American-Born Chinese	Gene Luen Yang	Graphic Novel	2	1596431520
Paper Menagerie	Ken Liu	Anthology	1 (per story)	1481442546
Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts	Maxine Hong Kingston	Novel	3	679721886
Silver Phoenix	Cindy Pon	Novel	3	61730211

LGBT Text Set

Title	Author	Text Type	Points	ISBN
We are the Youth	Laurel Golio, Diana Scholl	Essays	1 (per essay)	9781631732
More Than This	Patrick Ness	Novel	3	1406350486
Luna	Julie Anne Peters	Novel	3	316011274
Two Boys Kissing	David Levithan	Novel	3	307931900

Mexico Text Set

Title	Author	Text Type	Points	ISBN
Bless Me, Ultima	Rudolfo Anaya	Novel	3	446675369
Summer of the Mariposas	Guadalupe Garcia McCall	Novel	3	1600609007
Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories	Gilbert Hernández	Graphic Novel Anthology	1 (per story)	1560975393
Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe	Benjamin Alire Sáenz	Novel	3	1442408928