



THE EDUCATIONAL
Forum

Bridging the Cultural Gap by Teaching Multicultural Literature

by Yu Ren Dong

Abstract

As multicultural literature has made its way into the English curriculum, it has challenged teachers' thinking about curriculum and instruction and urged them to expand their teaching repertoire to include a cultural-response approach to literature instruction. This article reports on a group of secondary English teachers' exploration and reflection on their learning and teaching of multicultural literature. The author argues that teachers must increase their own cultural knowledge and develop their sensitivity and teaching skills to promote cross-cultural understanding and use multicultural literature to validate expressions of cultural knowledge, perspectives, and differences.

*I liked *Down These Mean Streets* (Thomas 1997). I haven't read a book at the high school that I truly relate to. Shakespeare's plays, classic novels, and best selling books haven't hit my heart like this book did. Piri's family struggles are similar to my family struggles. It took me back to the time when four of us had to live in a tiny room in the basement of a roach-infested apartment. It makes me remember getting robbed and finally moving out because Corona was too rough. (Maria, a 12th grader)*

I think it is important to learn about multicultural stories or poems because most stories that teachers make us read are by white people (no offense). I think we should read more stories of the famous black people because all you ever hear about is white famous people. I think we should learn about blacks all year long, not just one month. (Sean, a 10th grader)

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I think that the story by Jamaica Kincaid (1997) was very interesting to read. It helped me understand the culture and lifestyle of most people of the Caribbean. My mother used to do many of the things that Jamaica wrote about. She read the story and thought it was very interesting because it related to her life. It isn't that related to my life because I don't have as many duties as described in the story. But it helped me learn more about my West Indian culture. I would love to read more books by Jamaica Kincaid. (Grisel, a ninth grader)

The students quoted are high school students in a New York City public school, boys and girls, 14–16 years of age, whose parents or grandparents came from countries around the world. Many speak English as a second language, and some were born outside the United States.

The students' enthusiasm for and connection to multicultural literature—literature written about or by ethnic minorities (Cai 1998)—as well as their critical voice of sporadic and isolated inclusion of multicultural literature point to the need for a new look at English literature curriculum and instruction. Though multicultural literature has made its way into the English curriculum, there is still a need to challenge thinking about the curriculum, and English teachers should be encouraged to expand their teaching repertoire to “create opportunities for shared

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understandings and greater inclusion of literature written by underrepresented groups” (Willis 1998, x).

The inclusion of multicultural literature in the English classroom is more than just an expansion of the reading list. It involves teachers transforming their attitudes and orientations, as well as their methods of exploring the issues of culture, race, and diverse voices in multicultural literature, and moving these issues and voices to the center of discussions and reflections (Banks 1993; Spears-Bunton 1998). Many English teachers, who come from middle-class European backgrounds and were trained in the white, male, and Eurocentric canon or “deadly traditions” (Applebee 1996, 28), often feel unprepared to teach multicultural literature (Fisher 2001). They fear that their unfamiliarity with the literature about or by people from other cultures may reinforce stereotypes. They wonder whether their students can handle racial and cultural issues with maturity and respect. They are afraid that the racial tension imbued in these works may divide rather than unite a class whose students are increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. Teacher educators need to inform preservice and in-service teachers of multicultural literature resources and broaden their ways of reading, thinking, and discussing this type of literature.

Research has shown that traditional methods of English instruction do not work when teaching multicultural literature (Cai 2002; Fang, Fu, and Lamme 2003). Studies on students' responses showed that in teaching multicultural literature, the use of the new criticism approach tends to silence the dialogue (Applebee 1996; Hines 1997). Though the reader-response approach encourages readers to make personal associations between their present and past experiences and preoccupations (Rosenblatt 1995), this approach may not challenge readers' worldviews, self-identities, and systems of thinking and acting. Emphasizing the importance of social and cultural perspectives in responding to multicultural literature, Hines (1997), Jordan and Purves (1993), and Pirie (1997) revealed the limitations of responding solely on a personal basis, particularly by those students who have limited knowledge and experience with the culture under study. Using this approach, one risks "narrowing our focus to the individual and masking the context" (Pirie 1997, 10) and circumventing any sensitivity to ethnic identity and cultural differences (Fang et. al. 2003). By adding the cultural-response approach (an approach challenging students' preconceived notions about another culture), increasing students' cross-cultural understanding, and engaging students in exploring the cultural context of the text, English teachers can foster thoughtful discussions that explore diverse issues of literature, culture, and identity. Athanases (1993) emphasized the teacher's role in engaging students in the exploration of diversity issues by making cross-cultural links and challenging stereotypes in discussions of multicultural literature.

It became clear that this was many students' first serious encounter with another culture, even though they claimed that they lived and taught in a multicultural and multilingual environment.

Willis (2000) argued that teaching multicultural literature begins with the teachers' reflection on their own race, culture, and ethnicity, and their respect for others whose race, culture, and ethnicity differ from theirs. Often this journey is a bumpy road because many European-American teachers haven't realized and acknowledged the impact of culture on themselves and society (Willis 2000). The deeply rooted, liberal-humanist ideology stressing that "we are all the same" has added barriers to acknowledging and exploring issues of diversity. Limited knowledge and experience about the culture under study prevent some European-American teachers from understanding racial and cross-cultural issues from perspectives other than their own and engaging students in discussions on these issues (Fang, Fu, and Lamme 1999; Fisher 2001; Margerison 1995; McNair 2003; Willis 2000). Consequently, there is an urgent need for English teachers to increase their sensitivity to cultural differences and develop teaching skills to conduct classroom discussions that promote cross-cultural understanding and culturally varied ways of living and knowing.

Engaging English Teachers in Multicultural Literature Reading

In the fall of 2002, I taught “Teaching Multicultural Literature” to a class of secondary English teachers. These students were working toward their New York state permanent teaching certification. The majority of the students (85 percent) had European backgrounds. Only 15 percent of the students came from Caribbean or Asian backgrounds. Though most students were New York City middle and high school teachers in schools where minority students often were the majority, a self-report indicated that the English literature curriculum in these schools was still Western canonical dominant with only occasional and sporadic attention paid to multicultural literature. As a Chinese-American teacher-educator at a four-year college in New York City, I believe that, to work with diverse learners, all teachers must have a cross-cultural understanding and provide a culturally sensitive curriculum.

There is an urgent need to increase English teachers' sensitivity to cultural differences and develop teaching skills to conduct classroom discussions that promote cross-cultural understanding and culturally varied ways of living and knowing.

I selected eight multicultural novels—Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Rudolph Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* (1997), Lauren Lee’s *Stella: On the Edge of Popularity* (1994), James McBride’s *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother* (1996), V. S. Naipaul’s *Miguel Street* (2002), Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)—from which students could select four to read and discuss in a book club. Two common course readings were Arlene Willis’ *Teaching and Using Multicultural Literature in Grades 9–12: Moving Beyond the Canon* (1998) and Teresa Rogers and

Anna Soter’s *Reading Across Cultures: Teaching Literature in a Diverse Society* (1997). Students worked in five- to six-person groups for 30–45 minutes in each class session to discuss their responses to the reading. In each book club discussion, one person served as a discussion leader, posing questions, recording group members’ responses, and writing a reflective paper after the discussion. After the book club discussions, each group reported on the dynamics and patterns of its members’ responses, as I attempted to elicit different views and interpretations and focus on the major points of the course’s common readings.

At the beginning of the semester, to raise students’ cultural awareness, I asked each student to free-write about how his or her own cultural perspective affected the reading and teaching of *The Color of Water* (McBride 1996) and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou 1969). The responses were varied and diverse. Many English teachers acknowledged the cultural differences and the impact of those differences on their reading and teaching.

I understand the shame associated with being a minority. Being a Korean, yet more Americanized in spirit, is a conflict I face within the Korean and Korean-American culture. If I am teaching this novel (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings), I would like to be more open-minded and encourage reflective writings from my students about biases they face in their own lives. (Korean-American teacher)

As a person of African descent, which the author James McBride related to, I am better able to understand and empathize with his situation, and I am thoroughly enjoying the book. Even though I do not have a white mother, my upbringing was similar to his. I teach in a school where the majority of my students are West Indians. Therefore, culturally most of my students live dual lives: American yet Caribbean. As a result, they understood my West Indian references to food, music, dance, lifestyle, etc. (Caribbean-American teacher)

My cultural perspective is always brought to my teaching because I can't separate who I am and I prefer to incorporate my culture into my teaching approach. I think it makes for a more lively and meaningful discussion. However, many times I am ashamed of the white race I am a part of that helped contribute to the oppression of African Americans. For example, when I taught I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (Angelou 1969), I told my students how ashamed I was of what my race did to the black people. I was open about it. As a result, my students became closer to me and able to voice their opinions. (Italian-American teacher)

At the same time, some English teachers perceived the issue differently.

I believe that the story, no matter whether it's black or Jewish, transcends race and culture lines. The Color of Water (McBride 1996) is about a strong woman, her past, her children, her husbands, her old religion, her love of family, and the transformation of the children and the mother. (Jewish American teacher)

My cultural perspective does not affect my reading. I just feel that I am reading about people. (German/British-American teacher)

My own cultural perspective doesn't really have any effect on my reading. I am third generation if not fourth. So while I feel some connection with my mixed European roots, I find my views to be American in the way that I feel I am open-minded to all cultures. (Russian/Polish-American teacher)

I believe students are slaves to their own cultures. What you believe is what you believe. I believe it is my job to open their minds to see beyond their cultures and to see how McBride captures the child's search for self. (American teacher)

Though I was encouraged that many teachers treat multicultural literature as a cultural artifact and are willing to talk about cultural differences and similarities, I was taken aback by some teachers' denial of the cultural impact, clinging to what Pirie (1997, 8 and 10) called "cult of the individual" and their approach of a "ro-

matic celebration of the individual” in reading and teaching multicultural literature. Their views indicated a need to move the issue of culture to the center of our discussions and reflections.

Book Club Discussions

Fang et al. (1999, 271) argued that teachers of multicultural literature need “experience as analytically critical readers of multicultural texts so that they can engage children in dynamic discussions about important issues and ideas.” Soon after my students settled into their book clubs, I noticed that some of their discussions were confined to an ethnocentric way of reading the text, ignoring the cultural context and refusing to use a perspective other than their own. This was evident when students read the description of America’s invasion of Macun in *When I Was Puerto Rican* (Santiago 1993), a critical episode in the main character’s cultural identity development.

Leader: *What were the fears of the Puerto Ricans?*

Group Member 1: *I just think that they were afraid of change, just like any culture fears change. That’s why they denied it, and they said that’s not going to happen here because these are Americans.*

Leader: *But what kind of change were they afraid of? I mean they have particular values and beliefs and they have the food that they eat, the way that they live their lives, and the Americans were going to upset that balance.*

Group Member 1: *I don’t think that it’s a matter of what the Americans are doing to them as much as change in general. I mean their lifestyles were going to change.*

Group Member 2: *Wouldn’t it be better to have plumbing in their house and things of that nature? I think that it didn’t necessarily have to be in a negative way, it’s just different.*

Leader: *I definitely agree with you in that sense. If it has to do with technology, there’s a positive change that has to do with amenities and housing and plumbing and running water and food and stuff like that, but then we look at pages 63–83. I mean if you look there, she says that all the things they bring her that are not indicative of their culture make her sick to her stomach . . . I mean she throws up.*

Though the discussion leader tried to focus on the fears associated with the American imposition on Puerto Rican culture, some group members were unable to distance themselves and read from the characters’ perspectives due to the ethnocentric stance they took. They missed the potential for historical, social, and cultural reading and discussion of this critical event in the main character’s life.

As students discussed the novels and responded to essays about multicultural literature teaching, it became clear that this was many students' first serious encounter with another culture, even though they claimed that they lived and taught in a multicultural and multilingual environment. Some read the novels with childlike fascination, admitting their complete ignorance about the culture on which the novel was based. Some dwelled upon their personal reactions and were unaware of the underlying cultural and social contexts that shaped the characters' voices and actions and of the sources of the cross-cultural conflicts that many characters experienced.

When we read *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan 1989) and *Stella: On the Edge of Popularity* (Lee 1994), many students were curious about the characters' actions and the relationships between mother and daughter and family and society in Chinese and Korean cultures. Based on their inquiries, emphasis was placed on the cultural differences in interpersonal relationships, comparing Chinese culture with American culture. I gave both an insider's view and a scholarly view on the ideology behind the characters' actions and relationships in these Asian cultures. The mini-lesson was an enlightening experience for teachers who were unfamiliar with Chinese and Korean cultures. Several students mentioned how much they would have missed if they had conducted a classroom discussion on these texts without this knowledge or if they had made only a surface personal connection with the text. The mini-lesson taught students to pay attention to cultural differences and look at text from the characters' perspectives.

The cultural-response approach that emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural understanding and empathy development has challenged many English teachers' previous beliefs and assumptions about how literature should be taught.

Beach (1997) offered cultural response guidelines when reading and responding to a text whose characters come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These guidelines included:

- empathize with experiences of discrimination;
- recognize one's cultural stance; and
- reflect on one's stance as a privileged white.

The cultural response perspective enabled students to step into the shoes of the characters and look at issues from the characters' perspectives.

Leader: *How is the sociopolitical issue conveyed?*

Group Member 1: *The breakfast regime. They gave her family a box of American food and she said, 'We will wait until we are really hungry.'*

Leader: *She put things way up in the cupboard. I thought that was interesting because Americans did not give rice or beans that would have lasted for months. They*

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gave novelties . . . delights that satisfy only in a few seconds. These are fruit cups. But it's kind of like the American experience, these changes that happen. It's a delight that happens for a while, but then there is that dark side.

Group Member 2: It's the same thing that's happening today with Afghanistan. They were dropping pop tarts like that was real food. They're sugary. Nothing nutritious.

Group Member 3: It's instant satisfaction, nothing nutritious with a lasting effect.

Group Member 2: A quick fix.

Leader: Also, it's from America, so it's idolized; even though it's not good for you, but just because it's coming from America. But they feel the repercussions later.

Group Member 2: I didn't know that until I read this. I had no idea that Puerto Rico was kind of upset about American imperialism and different things like that.

In the same discussion, the group leader—a Caribbean American—put the social and cultural issue up front. Group members assumed characters' perspectives while questioning American agendas and wondering about the ramifications of such a cultural intrusion.

The deeply rooted, liberal-humanist ideology stressing that "we are all the same" has added barriers to acknowledging and exploring issues of diversity.

Another strategy used to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding was cultural insights. Several students had non-Western backgrounds. Their respect for cultural insiders' knowledge was cultivated by encouraging them to share their views. If there wasn't a cultural insider in class, students searched the Internet and scholarly sources to build background knowledge about the culture, the

author, and critical issues. For example, while reading *Miguel Street* (Naipaul 2002), the discussion leader, a Caribbean-American teacher, offered her insights into language use and switch in the text.

Leader: According to Willis (1998), Caribbean writers often demonstrate an amazing range of language use in a single text which may make reading a tricky enterprise in terms of pursuing meaning. Did you find the author's use of language impeded the pace of your reading?

Group Member 1: I loved the language.

Group Member 2: Didn't the term 'Creole' come about in the Caribbean when the Europeans were there?

Group Member 1: Isn't the term 'Creole' a bunch of different languages?

Group Member 3: Yes, that's what the term 'Creole' means now . . . but the word and the language originated in the Caribbean when the French inhabited the areas. The language use is generally African grammatical structure.

Group Member 1: *What exactly is African grammatical structure?*

Leader: *It's the use of infinitive verbs with helping verbs. Like in Port of Spain for 'go to work,' the infinitive verb is used before a small helping verb. 'Go' is a common verb in the Caribbean.*

Group Member 1: *I think the use of real language makes the story more authentic and interesting.*

Leader: *It seems that language is very important in this novel because the author also seems to make a point to single out the people who speak standard English. That seems to be a focal point, maybe we'll understand why later on. According to Willis (1998, 201), 'The Caribbean islands have had various colonial ownerships and therefore carry the stamp of language diversity. The primary languages are English, Spanish, French, Dutch, a variety of Creole pidgins, and Papiamentu. These languages are the remaining sign of the variety of colonizing enterprises.'*

Teacher educators need to inform preservice and in-service teachers of multicultural literature resources and broaden their ways of reading, thinking, and discussing this type of literature.

Through their involvement in the book clubs, these teachers experienced a self-transformation. They moved from avoiding a discussion on cultural differences to openly accepting their own ignorance and recognizing a need to learn more about other cultures. For example, in their discussion of *Stella: On the Edge of Popularity* (Lee 1994), a novel about a Korean teen's struggle to find her cultural identity, some teachers found learning about racial discrimination against Korean Americans to be an eye-opening experience.

Leader: *One of the strongest points in the novel is the idea of discrimination. It's present in the story from the beginning, but now it's dominant in this scene.*

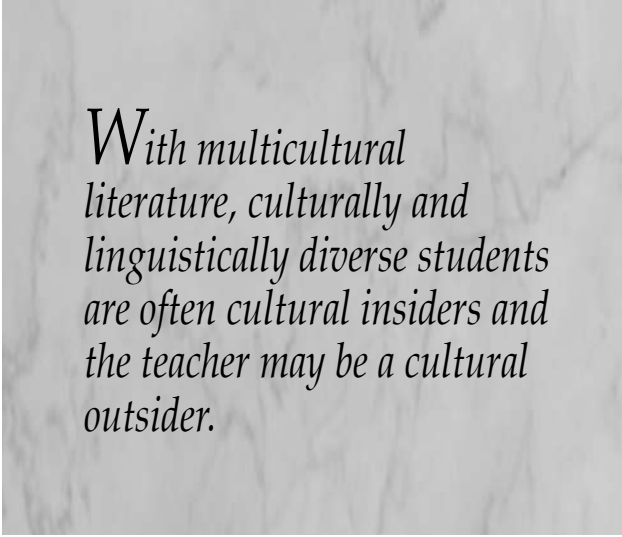
Group Member 1: *The characters seem horribly racist, the fried lice guy. And then Eileen talked about how idiotic the Koreans are. It's too archetypal. She's too mean.*

Leader: *The stereotypes are too drastic. I agree with it being stereotypical with Charlie Chan and the dry cleaners. Yet, it's far-fetched. But maybe it is a reality and her teacher didn't help.*

Group Member 2: *I don't know if that's true. We're talking about being teachers in New York City and having diverse students. I don't have any Asian kids yet. I may want to know something about Asian culture or maybe I'd do what Mrs. Murphy did. [Mrs. Murphy was Stella's teacher in the book, stereotyping her and showing no cultural sensitivity.]*

Many teachers were comfortable enough with members of their book clubs to discuss ways of engaging multicultural and multilingual students. Book club discussions included ways of resolving concerns and fears about using certain multicultural literature with their students.

Leader: *Do you think Latino students might be offended by the family that is portrayed in this book? Do you feel students would be offended that such a book is on the reading list as one of the only novels representative of Latino culture?*



With multicultural literature, culturally and linguistically diverse students are often cultural insiders and the teacher may be a cultural outsider.

Group Member 1: *I am not Puerto Rican, but I don't see why they should be offended. She basically illustrates what I think is life and the truth of what it is like in Puerto Rico, in a Caribbean country like that. I'm an immigrant and I wrote a memoir. It just came out of me one day, and I think when you write purely like that, it's just the truth. I am from a third world country and I am proud of who I am, even though there are many underdeveloped parts of my country. The truth is the truth. If I had the chance, I would move back to Jamaica because it is where I have my best memories. It was a simple*

life, just like hers. What is so embarrassing about that?

Leader: *It is funny that you say that because I asked one student of mine, who happens to be Puerto Rican and read the book last year in school, if he thought there was anything upsetting about the book. He said, no, that it is real life and a lot of Puerto Rican men do sleep around; a lot of men are like that.*

Group Member 2: *Even so, a very good friend of mine is Puerto Rican and she said the same thing that you [Member 1] said: good, bad, or whatever it is, this was her life. This is how it is to be in a Puerto Rican family, a very patriarchal family and society. And we can judge it and say that's bad or that's good, but reality is reality.*

Group Member 3: *Yes, and they had a very strong cultural foundation and strong family ties. No matter what happened, they did everything they could do to keep the family together. I appreciated that.*

Experimentation with Multicultural Literature

After reading and discussing several multicultural novels and experiencing the cultural-response teaching approach (Beach 1997; Hines 1997; Willis 1998) in small groups and in large class settings, each student was asked to use one multicultural literature text with his or her students. Individual conferences were held with each of them to discuss their selection of literature and help them plan their teaching strategies. They were asked to make an audiotape of their class and write a reflection afterward.

Terry, a Caribbean-American teacher at a private African-American school, believed that teaching multicultural literature was not only a literary study, but also an exploration of social change and justice. She and her students came face-to-face with the bicultural experiences and issues of racism and oppression when discussing the poem "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay (1922). A poem-writing afterward involved the students' parents by interrogating them about institutionalized racism and asking them to articulate ways of changing school and society.

Compared to Terry, many European-American teachers were not as determined or focused; instead, they had various concerns before launching their multicultural literature lesson. Carol, an Italian-American teacher, was frustrated with her outsider status in teaching multicultural literature to her class of linguistically and culturally diverse students, most of whom came from the Caribbean Islands and were reluctant readers. After reading and discussing Spears-Bunton's (1998) and Hines's (1997) essays, she found herself capitalizing on her students' insider knowledge to generate class participation and foster cultural critique. In her teaching experiment, Carol used Jamaica Kincaid's (1997) poem "Girl" to invite her Caribbean-American students to share their cultural and family values with the class. These students even offered to read the poem aloud using their Caribbean accents. Instead of feeling uncomfortable about her outsider status, Carol openly admitted to the class that she was an outsider and expressed her desire to learn from her students. Giving students the voice of authority was a turning point in their full engagement in the literature. Carol wrote in her report:

[Students]' enthusiasm at assuming the role of the teacher as I became the student was something I had never before witnessed in this class. This led to a deeper discussion on their lives and cultures. Students were able to go beyond the textual information to interrogate and critique things like gender role in the Caribbean, cross-cultural comparisons on parental relationships in Caribbean culture and American culture, and their own bicultural identities.

Carol excitedly reported that some of her students shared Kincaid's poem with their mothers. Carol was pleasantly surprised when these mothers came to the parent-teacher conference and discussed the poem with her.

Kate, a Greek-American teacher, taught Thomas's (1997) *Down These Mean Streets* to a class of seniors in a school whose students were Asian, Latino, African American, and Eastern European. She was a new teacher in a school whose students came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Kate was aware that cross-cultural understanding and respect were a constant issue. She worried about her students' responses to reading and discussing controversial issues and cultural differences. After reading books by Willis (1998; 2000) and Rogers and Soter (1997), Kate believed that multicultural literature might be an answer to these problems. Kate established a classroom environment where respect for differences and multiple interpretations were pivotal in a socially and culturally oriented discussion. This orientation enabled her students to feel comfortable enough to empathize with the characters in the novel and share insights of their own interracial and cross-cultural experiences. When some students could not understand why Piri,

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the main character, did not move back to Spanish Harlem after experiencing racial discrimination on Long Island, Monica—a student who identified herself as African American and American Indian, but not Colombian American—began a conversation about the dilemma of being a multicultural self. She talked about how the Colombian part of her culture was not acknowledged equally, but stereotyped in her family and community. As a result, she did not acknowledge her Colombian heritage as openly as her African and Native-American heritage. Monica's revelation led several students to share their bilingual and bicultural selves. Students explored the complex issue of how people in the majority felt about minority people and why it was so difficult to retain one's home cultural heritage and fit into the American school culture at the same time. Kate was impressed by her students' level of maturity and responses to the issue. She was delighted about the newfound respect developing among students in her class.

For Lauren, a Jewish American teacher, implementing multicultural literature initially was more of a "politically correct" thing to do rather than a step toward curriculum transformation and self-improvement. Our class challenged her assumptions. As she engaged her ninth-grade students in reading Nikki Giovanni's (1970) poem "Nikki-Rosa," her diverse students not only made personal and cultural connections, but also made connections with other readings they had in the semester. Inspired by her students' enthusiastic and critical responses to multicultural literature, Lauren moved beyond routine questioning of the plot and characters into talking about oppression, definition of the American dream, and cross-cultural understanding in class discussions. She learned a great deal about her students' cultural backgrounds, family life, and stories. Lauren was proud to report that she now knew her students and their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Sue, a German-American teacher, initially was reluctant to use the cultural-response approach in teaching multicultural literature to her sixth graders. She felt that these students were too young to deal with complex social and cultural issues and unable to handle cultural differences and racial conflicts. Further, given the pressures of standardized testing, she felt that teachers did not have time to explore any reading other than that which teaches literary elements and comprehension. Inspired by our class readings and discussions, Sue tried out a short story about a Native-American boy's struggle growing up in the Lakota Sioux Indian culture. Sue researched Lakota Sioux Indian culture before the lesson and used a KWL (what I know, want to learn, learned) table to determine students' knowledge about the culture before having them read the story. This preliminary activity engaged students in active reading, and soon Sue was able to launch a discussion using the cultural-response approach.

Teacher: How is becoming a man for the Sioux different than in the American culture or your own culture?

Student 3: Slow-to-Let-Go had to be a brave warrior to prove that he was a man. He was so young also.

Teacher: But how is this different from our culture? What do we consider a man in our culture?

Student 1: *Someone who has a family and a job.*

Student 5: *Someone who is responsible.*

Student 6: *A man in our culture has an education and fights for things he believes in.*

Teacher: *Didn't Slow-to-Let-Go fight for something he believed in?*

Student 2: *No, he just killed other people and buffalo.*

Student 7: *But he did it for survival to prove that he was a man. This is what they are used to doing. This is the way his people were taught.*

Teacher: *Does this make it right?*

Student 5: *For the Indians, it does. This was their way of life.*

Student 6: *Americans had no right to push them off of their land and try to make them live the way that they did. Just because they were different doesn't mean that they were wrong.*

Sue's students' responses to multicultural literature were a pleasant surprise. She explained, "My thoughts before the lesson were that they may not be able to understand or relate to others as well as the older students. They somewhat surprised me and reacted as the older students do. If you guide them and prompt them and get them to really think about issues, they do respond in a very positive manner." Sue became a crusader in teaching all literature using the multicultural approach. She articulated her newly gained perspective:

I find that students really enjoy reading about different cultures. It expands their minds and their understanding of different people. Students learn to be more accepting of others because they now put themselves in the places of these different people.

Our semester-long journey of reading, responding, and teaching multicultural literature made the students and me realize the great potential of using multicultural literature in the English classroom.

My journey into the realm of multicultural literature this semester can be assessed most accurately in terms of its newness. Never before have I had the experience of actually choosing something to read from among several possibilities, most of which were unfamiliar to me. It forced me to challenge many preconceived convictions and notions of the world. Some of the readings compelled me to think of American culture as a potentially distinct phenomenon rather than some intangible, universal given that is not distinct since it permeates everything. (Ninth-grade English teacher)

My journey of reading and discussing multicultural literature helped me to focus on the cultural aspects of the texts. Prior to this class, I would approach a text as 'one person's story' removing the cultural aspects and setting it aside as something to address later. This I did because that is how I read texts—I read for the story. Everything else is icing. However, this class gave me the tools to address the cultural aspects. Why does one particular culture exhibit a component in such a way? How does it make the culture work? Rationale and explanation, rather than judgment, should be the perspec-

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tive when reading texts like these so that we may benefit and learn. (Eighth-grade English teacher)

All of us are graduate students in the English program and many of us are teachers. We are more comfortable talking about narrator, characters, plot, and development. It is safe and noncontroversial. This may be because most of us were of Western European descent and, as members of the majority culture, we have to be reminded to look at things from the minority point of view. It may be because of our previous training as teachers. For many reasons, we largely lack sensitivity to the issues of multiculturalism. For most of us, it was the first time that we were ever in a class with this perspective. The class also is relatively large and comprised of many ethnic groups similar

Given the growing number of multicultural and multilingual students and the fact that many teachers may not share the same culture and language backgrounds as their students, teachers need to find ways to increase their cross-cultural understanding.

to the classes that I am currently teaching in the high school. The insights offered by class members helped me tremendously when interacting with diverse students in the classes I am currently teaching. I found myself asking more genuine questions about my students' backgrounds and they were very happy to fill me in on their perspective and correct my misinterpretations. (11th-grade English teacher)

My English language learners are in the majority in the high school I taught in and I am acutely aware of it. When we read literature about a certain ethnic group,

cultural insiders were asked to explain their views. The students enjoyed being cultural insiders. Then we would discuss differences in cultural norms, such as parental and children's relationships. All this raised awareness and developed respect for students from other cultures. They found strength in clarifying cultural misunderstanding, which in turned sensitized me to the diverse students that I am working with every day. (Ninth-grade English teacher)

I now look at multicultural literature in a new light. I read more into the books and look at the literature from different perspectives. Instead of looking at the literature as simply a piece of writing, I have learned to look at it as a piece of writing representing that particular culture. I bring in what I know about that culture, and learn new things about the culture that may have challenged my previous beliefs. (Seventh-grade English teacher)

Conclusion

The cultural-response approach that emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural understanding and empathy development has challenged many English teachers' pre-

vious beliefs and assumptions about how literature should be taught. This approach enables them to move beyond solely personalizing the text to examining the context of the culture from multiple perspectives. This change, according to Applebee (1996, 50), is not minor or accidental, but a transformation to bring “the course into better alignment with a larger, living tradition of discourse about American literature.” Teachers need to be willing to engage in transformation and to educate themselves about the societies that give rise to the literature.

With canonical literature, the teacher may be comfortable playing the role of an insider and be tempted to lecture. With multicultural literature, culturally and linguistically diverse students are often cultural insiders and the teacher may be a cultural outsider. These dynamics may require that the teacher play the role of the learner, thus offering an opportunity for students to take on the voice of authority and engage in the discussion at a deeper level. My students’ experiments with multicultural literature instruction have demonstrated that multicultural and multilingual students welcome this new addition to their English curriculum. These students are capable of discussing racial, cultural, and social issues concerning the text with respect and understanding when the teacher cultivates a cross-culturally sensitive learning environment and encourages diverse interpretations and multiple points of view. Given the growing number of multicultural and multilingual students and the fact that many teachers may not share the same culture and language backgrounds as their students, teachers need to find ways to increase their cross-cultural understanding. Multicultural literature can serve as an entry point to validate expression of cultural knowledge, perspectives, and differences that their diverse students live by every day.

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