

# judging a book by its cover

## DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH BOOK COVERS

**By Dorie Conlon Perugini**

*Food, in the end, in our own tradition, is something holy. It's not about nutrients and calories. It's about sharing. It's about honesty. It's about identity. ~Louise Fresco*

Let's face it, as elementary language teachers, at some point or another we all teach about food. Maybe it's because food is an easy, tangible topic, or because it's easy to connect to our students' lives. Or maybe we're all just hungry. But I tend to agree with Louise Fresco—food is about identity.

We have strong memories of favorite family recipes and foods traditionally eaten at the holidays. So how do I evoke these strong emotions associated with food in my third grade students during a standard fruit unit? Is it possible to get across the importance of food in cultural identity with novice level learners? To answer these questions, I would have to go beyond asking students to memorize the list of fruits found in my curriculum.

After spending a few class sessions learning the names of fruits and how to describe them with basic adjectives (small, round, juicy, sweet...), I gathered my class to the reading rug to share one of my favorite third grade stories—*La sorpresa de Nandi* by Eileen Browne. In this story, a young girl in Africa decides to surprise

her friend by bring her a basket full of local fruits. As she walks to her friend's house, animals keep stealing the fruits from her basket one by one until it is empty. The story ends with a great surprise to both Nandi and her friend Tindi when, unbeknownst to Nandi, a goat rams into a tree filling Nandi's basket with mandarin oranges!

Prior to reading the story, we had a class discussion, in novice level Spanish, about the cover of the book where I asked my students to describe what they saw:

- What do you see on the book cover?
- What colors did the illustrator use?
- Where do you think the girl lives? Why?
- What fruits do you see?

It was when the students started naming the fruits that the conversation got interesting. They correctly identified the pineapple and orange, but couldn't figure out the four other fruits. A green pear? A red apple? A plum, lemon, grape, tomato? Even after they had exhausted their Spanish and began to excitedly shout out guesses in English, they still didn't know what Nandi was carrying.

The suspense created by discussing the book cover gave my students great motivation to listen to the story. They

loved discovering the new tropical fruits (passion fruit, guava, mango and avocado for the curious ones out there) and found humor in the story (not an easy task for novice speakers). And with such energy and enthusiasm generated from the cover of this book alone, I knew we couldn't just say goodbye to Nandi when we closed the book.

I wanted to capture the student's energy and use it as a context to help my students gain skills of Intercultural Competence. I decided to base my future lesson plans on this essential question:

*How would Nandi's story change if it were set in a different country?*

Despite the cognitive complexity of this question, I knew my novice-level speakers would be able to ponder this question using the target language as long as I framed the questions used in class in a linguistically simple manner. On day two of discussing Nandi, my questions began to probe into my students' understanding of the world around them:

*Where does Nandi live? Yes, Nandi lives in Africa. Now, use your imagination. Nandi lives in Connecticut! Does this cover look right? Describe for me how "Nandi's Surprise in Connecticut" would look.*



Students were now using their language skills to go beyond the tasks typically given to novice learners. They were reimagining the story and setting it in a completely different cultural context. They used simple sentences, such as Nandi is \_\_\_\_\_, or Nandi has \_\_\_\_\_, to reimagine the story in a completely different cultural context.

#### **PARTNERING WITH THE CLASSROOM TEACHER**

With day two coming to an end, I still wasn't ready to say goodbye to Nandi just yet, but I recognized my students were reaching the limits of their linguistic abilities and wouldn't be able to delve deeper into the essential question without switching to English. This is when I made the decision to partner with the classroom teacher to create an interdisciplinary lesson.

I am extremely fortunate in that my school has built in time (two hours on Wednesday afternoons) for

teachers to collaborate and teach interdisciplinary lessons. I scheduled time for the classroom teacher and I to co-teach a lesson on discovering a book's setting and once again asked students to ponder the question "How would Nandi's story change if it were set in a different country?" Working in English, they came up with some great questions:

- What would Nandi look like?
- What would her name be?
- What would her environment look like?
- How would she carry the fruit to her friend's house?
- How would she get to her friend's house?
- What language would the book be written in?

When class finished, they continued to work with their classroom teacher to research these questions. They even worked with the library media specialist to learn about new tools, such as [Culturegrams](http://online.culturegrams.com/kids/index.php), (<http://online.culturegrams.com/kids/index.php>) to con-

tinue their research. These students were so determined not only to redesign the book cover, but to make it authentic!

When they had finished gathering their information, the students then worked collaboratively to bring their research to life. They used materials from the art room (watercolor paint, colored pencils, crayons, glue, patterned paper, and more) to create poster-sized covers for their new stories. I am still amazed at their creativity and attention to detail in creating their new book covers (see photos).

Overall, this was a wonderful project and I received positive feedback from everyone involved (including the

students, principal, and even some parents!) Not only were students able to explore their own culture and cultures around the world, but they were highly motivated to create a beautiful piece of art that is now framed and on display in our school. This is, without a doubt, a project that I will continue to expand upon in future years.

#### **Dorie Conlon Perugini**

is an elementary Spanish teacher in Glastonbury, Conn., currently teaching grades one through five. She is passionate about using a variety of technologies in her classroom to engage her students and bring real-life applications to foreign language lessons. Dorie, along with her team of fifth-grade students, produces a monthly podcast to broadcast school-wide news to parents and the surrounding community. She has presented several sessions at foreign language conferences and workshops around the nation on topics ranging from digital storytelling to intercultural competence.

