

Promising Practices

Narrative History in the College Classroom: Re-Contextualizing Multicultural Issues through Close Re-Reading of Juvenile Literature

By Ana Maria Klein

This article brings to the foreground what I find to be the most difficult of all teaching tasks—raising awareness. I teach cultural and linguistic diversity and hope to instill a measure of tolerance in my students. I use the Narrative Inquiry¹ format to help uncover the many layers that surround discriminatory practices, and I urge my students to explore *self* and *other* in great depth throughout the college semester.

During the course of fourteen weeks, we explore personal accounts: our own written and oral narratives, and those of our community. Our aim is to learn more about ourselves as we listen to others. In this process, we uncover layers upon layers of discriminatory knowledge that had not surfaced before—during our “less enlightened” years, when we did not have a name for certain things.

Hopefully, this unobtrusive, non-judgmental, sharing explored in the college classroom offers my pre-service teachers an example of best practices in equitable instruction. My dream is that my own caring, equitable stance will be imported into their future classrooms. I don't know whether I can teach them tolerance; however, I can offer insights about developing a tolerant stance in life.

I work with teacher-education candidates in their third year. They participate in a required field-based course that is lodged in the multicultural arena. The course, designed to raise cultural and linguistic awareness, is delivered in a non-

diversified, middle class, rural environment. Many of the students have not traveled to larger cities, or seen much cultural and linguistic diversity.

I have heard comments in class that attest to the fact that students have never seen a person of color and perhaps never will. However, I have fourteen weeks to complete the job of: (1) raising cultural and linguistic awareness; (2) breaking their protected bubble; and (3) introducing painful topics that uncover barbaric acts of hate and violence.

During the lecture portion of the course, students explore: (1) their own biases; (2) their own experiences with diversity; (3) their sense of cultural and linguistic awareness; and (4) their threshold of tolerance. During the practical portion of the course, students go into the field, and experience realities of classroom life in a very culturally diverse, low-income, semi-rural area.

They continue to attend college lectures while spending eight weeks in a school classroom assisting teachers and students. Prior to sending the students out into the field, college staff and school administrators ensure that students: (1) know current legislation; (2) can deliver equitable instruction; (3) communicate clearly; (4) reflect on their insights; and (5) deliver well-thought-out lessons.

I screen my students closely before placing them, seeking a suitable match for each individual situation. Students then sign a contract whereby they uphold district requirements and college statutes. However, before sending them out on this mission, I lay the foundations to prepare them for dealing with diversity. The following is my narrative of how I do this.

To begin, students are given a simple questionnaire that asks them to reflect on

who they are, how they feel about certain issues, and what their personal experiences tell them about cultural and linguistic diversity. When addressing the question about their threshold of tolerance, a generalized answer looks like this:

“Oh, I accept everybody.”

“I'm tolerant of people's differences.”

“I'm not a racist.”

“I don't intimidate others.”

These answers uncover the very first layer of consciousness. It's that first “I didn't do it” defense mechanism-layer, where we are saved by our verbal convictions. However, we share views with each other, discuss common situations openly, and allow everybody in the class to participate openly. The second, I'd say “national origin/religion” layer, begins to appear with such revelations as:

“Well, my Catholic relatives aren't too pleased with...”

“My Irish grand-parents would have balked at...”

“My African American friends don't visit me at home...”

After these first two layers peel off, we focus on uncovering more layers, micro-managing the ones that are more comfortable to deal with in class—a public arena. We discuss what it is that makes us react to simple things, very much like children do.

So, we begin with early childhood reactions to diversity. Vivan Paley, in her book *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, clearly shows us how children in pre-school begin to discriminate. Small things like a little girl discriminated against for not wearing whatever the rest of the group are wearing, or the

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little boy who can't throw the ball like others can.

Memories of childhood surface as these tiny little issues become gigantic in our minds. We agree that discrimination is learned behavior and explore a bit deeper. We read *Common Bonds* by Deborah A. Bynres and Gary Kiger, *Valuing Diversity: The Primary Years* by Janet Brown McCracken, and other books by Vivian Paley.

The course begins to teach itself as personal narratives from childhood begin to surface and our own stories corroborate those from the readings. The following research-informed statements presented to the college students in lectures are no longer surprises:

Between the ages of two and five, children become keenly aware of differences in ethnicity, abilities, and gender. (McCracken, 1993, p. 1)

The harsh truths that children are exposed to at a very young age come alive. We discuss the fact that children develop race and ethnicity attitudes early on (Katz, 1976). Skin color has a powerful impact on a child; more than gender differences (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). Not dealing with these situations early on makes children vulnerable to discrimination (Pine & Hillard, 1990).

Unexpected reactions spring up. They are mild, in the sense that they express simple likes and dislikes. For example, students express their views on personal preferences. They describe their disdain for preferences in dress; for example, piercings and tattoos, garments that reflect team affiliations, and, believe it or not, choice of essences in personal grooming.

Just like the pre-school children we've just discussed, college students realize that they too unknowingly discriminate. They reveal discriminatory behavior by just saying, "Well, it doesn't affect me directly; but I don't like to sit next to someone wearing grubby clothes." Personal hygiene soon becomes an issue, as yet another layer in our discrimination package. Views about people's personal habits (smoking, drinking, drugs) surface and are quickly silenced in the classroom arena. Either the students feel uncomfortable discussing these issues in front of me, or I find that we veer away from our conversations on ethnicity and cultural diversity. Some of these discussions are resolved outside.

When we explore people's belief systems, eyebrow-raising is not as much of an issue, and tensions subside. I think people are comfortable discussing these issues

because they are almost conversation pieces among many communities. Our own, in fact, includes both Amish and Menonite communities as stakeholders in nearby neighborhoods. As we are dealing with a more familiar layer, this easier arena allows students to become more vocal about their views. As they begin to talk to one another about their inherited and acquired religions, they then speak about national origin, family traditions, and tensions between family members are revealed.

The open discussions veer to the third person, the blame is put on family, community, or whichever convenient stakeholder should carry this burden of discrimination. Hence, students mention ways in which their family members express reactions to issues or how they deal with difference. There is little or no personal investment in the discussions that ensue, unless a group of students wishes to express their religious beliefs, which they seldom do. I know about their convictions more from their journal entries than their classroom revelations.

I then ask the class, "Are we tolerant of the Italian relative, of the newly immigrated Irish relative, of the not-Jewish sister in law? Or do we just accept their presence and participation in family affairs?"

"I'm not prejudiced!"

"I treat them nicely and always make a point of being polite!"

"Sometimes I hear racial slurs within the family, one cousin nudging another saying... 'Did you see the way in which she...'"

Because these issues are housed in family and tradition, the feelings that ensue don't really muster the kind of tolerant thinking that I seek in my college classroom. They remain as *personal narratives in the third person*. My task becomes harder as I have to start personalizing the situations and forcing the personal issues. It's when we breach intimacy that the heated arguments appear.

Our thresholds of tolerance continue to linger in the protected bubble of family, tradition, heritage, and third-person narratives until we are up close and personal with harsher issues. These are: (1) proximity with differences; (2) frequency of exchange with culturally different communities; and (3) close encounters with people of different ethnic origins. The core layer, the one in the middle, appears after discussing these and ensuing issues.

This, the saddest layer, reveals yet

another layer embedded in it, social circumstance. Students speak out, vociferating personal views on poverty. We talk about job lay-offs, our own pockets of poverty, and poverty-related problems that our state is going through. Some students express their concerns over their own family circumstances and their coping mechanisms.

The bottom line is usually one of resourcefulness and strength. Most students agree that you can move out of poverty if you really want to. I hear comments like, "Go get a job! Move away! Get better training!" They usually believe that social circumstance and poverty can always be solved by some form of financial remedy. However, we have barely touched the surface of personal circumstance, namely, low self-esteem, hopelessness, and many truths that we are about to encounter as we breach the non-fictions in literature.

We continue discussing world-views, global awareness, and immigration issues. My students have a hard time understanding what it is that brings immigrants to our shores. I sometimes hear comments like, "Well why do people from other parts of the world come here?" "Why don't they learn the language and get the skills they need to secure a job?" I am not a social studies professor and can not make up for the information gaps our media offers. So I choose to avoid this issue.

I do notice, however, that issues related to socio-economic level engulf all others. Sadly, our society has created the type of consumer that we are and has fostered the discriminatory consumer. Discussions we have reveal that the type of consumer we are determines our socio-economic level. Sad as it may sound, what we buy, own, and choose determines our rate of success. Personal belongings and personal choices mark our discriminatory practices. Whether we can afford the more expensive brand or not determines our sense of worth.

Sadly, this is a very important layer in our discrimination package. It accounts for many of the above layers that we discussed (personal preferences, habits, etc.). We can blame the media for this sad truth (Neil Postman, 2001, personal narrative). This layer, of course, is not easy to dispense with and is the topic for another article.

We are now four weeks into the semester and feel that we have uncovered many layers already. I would say that the terrain is now ready for revamping juvenile narratives, for interpreting cultural awareness, and for developing a multicultural perspective with more tools at hand.

For this segment of the course, I like to

begin with shared knowledge and familiar events. The area where I teach is close to Lucille Ball's birthplace. The Lucy & Desi Museum attests to the fact that this comedian is highly revered and that her show 'lives on.'

I allow myself to begin the second phase of classroom lectures by introducing the question: "Do you find any multicultural issues in the show 'I Love Lucy'?" There's a prolonged silence until somebody usually catches on to the fact that Desi, "Ricky Ricardo," is Cuban and speaks with a Spanish accent. We all smile and remember scenes of Desi playing the "conga drums" with his musical band.

We haven't uncovered new layers of awareness while discussing this show until somebody in the back of the room says: "Desi yells a lot." "Yes, he speaks in a loud tone, I respond." "No, I mean he yells so that everybody else listens." "Yes, aha!" I answer. "Now you're talking. What else do you notice?" "Well, when he speaks to his wife, he yells at her and doesn't let her speak." So, we begin uncovering layers of linguistic and cultural awareness. I am a Latina. I was born and raised speaking in Spanish. Vociferating, gesticulating, and taking turns to speak are part of my upbringing. Being "silenced" is another of the many experiences that I share with college students.

Women in many societies are silenced for many reasons. One of the most popular and more generalized ones is that of power and control. Depending upon how the society in question is set up, women are usually silenced by either: (1) elders; (2) male figures; (3) higher-ranking people; (4) people with more social clout; (5) people who hold power positions; or (6) people who can speak out. Again, it's almost like the children in the early childhood playground described by Vivian Paley. It's all about power and control.

My own tri-cultural heritage (Jewish, Hungarian, Latina) gives me 'an edge' in these matters and a few more experiential tools to share with my students as we discuss the issues that arise in this power arena. Power relationships make up most of what we attribute to be discriminatory practices. That hierarchy of who controls what we say and do exists among all of us, industrialized nations, non-industrialized nations, families, tribes, clans, and groups. Humankind is hierarchical and discriminatory when it comes to power and control.

With this reality in mind, I continue bringing shared contexts to enrich classroom discussions and to level the terrain for bringing out best practices in literacy pro-

motion. Paulo Freire (1999) talks about the liberating power of an informed consciousness. He also mentions the fact that the literate person is he who has knowledge and knows what to talk about; in other words, he who has a motive and knows how to express it. Perhaps this is that silencing element that I spoke about before. Turn-taking takes on a different color when the person who has the floor has a vested interest in something and can say it loud and clearly.

I want my students to experience this and find that the shared discourse comes from shared contexts. I continue bringing up themes that appeal to them, like popular culture. I mention the fact that I, too, am a consumer and a viewer. They can't believe that I enjoy watching episodes of popular sitcoms (The Simpsons, Seinfeld, Friends, Fraser, ER, etc.) and that I actually bring these up in class. One thing leads to another and I begin to hear students' comments like the following:

"The casts of Seinfeld, Friends and Fraser do not represent cultural diversity. None of the main cast of characters are people of color."

Nodding heads, raised eyebrows and shared connections occur as other students speak out. "There are people of color in The Simpsons." And they begin to list them by name. "Women are presented in varying roles." "The treatment of religion is interesting." And many shared contexts arise in the classroom, again creating a comfortable, shared arena for discussing pressing issues, under the comfortable shade of humor. It is the kind of statements that are made that help build that level of awareness and informed consciousness that I look for. Once it's there, I send the students onto the literacy journey of re-reading childhood texts.

We revisit Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Shared insights reveal thoughts and ideas about this book that had never been discussed in a classroom. For example, the treatment of persons with learning disabilities. Boo Radley, the learning disabled youth in the story, appears as the prime suspect in a crime. His neighbors fear him because they think he will hurt them or their children.

College students are stunned to find out that in those days learning challenged people like Boo were not schooled and that there was no legislation to support them. They are saddened to see how his family and neighbors treat him as an outcast, hiding him from everybody. Boo manages to befriend the child-protagonists in the story,

protecting them when they walk alone in the woods at night and carving soap figures for them to play with.

Atticus, a prominent lawyer in the southern town in the book, is portrayed as a tolerant individual who defends the black man accused of murder and employs a black house-keeper. He treats everybody around him with respect, encouraging both his children to be critical thinkers and tolerant individuals. These issues surface in class discussions and become topics for further research. Juan Gonzalez' (1996, p. 32) definition of scapegoating comes in handy:

Scapegoating occurs when someone places blame for their problems on some convenient, but powerless and innocent person or group.

We revisit this concept in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* where Curly, who is mentally-challenged, is marginalized by his co-workers and also accused of something he did not do.

S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* provides us with an arena for discussing the marginalization of individuals further and also for exploring gang warfare. We look into the language and ways of the distinct gangs and relate to them in a contemporary format. Students' awareness of social-class interactions is heightened as they learn that the gangs in *The Outsiders* are economically defined. They discuss the insider's perspective, the language of belonging, and the adolescent's need for affiliation. These issues also open new topics of research.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* has another, very special effect on students. It's excellent writing style rubs off on student writing, producing excellent narratives. This novel allows college students to uncover many layers and truths that they had not noticed when reading it during their adolescence. For example, they bring up ecological issues. The old man respected the sea and its treasures, always giving back what he took. The other fishermen in this Cuban village also held the sea at bay, fearing it in great reverence.

The young boy's devotion for the old man, and his respect for the knowledgeable elder, surfaces as well. This is an important topic in any discussion on multiculturalism, because we often dismiss the impact elders have on us and on our culture. Misconceptions from an un-informed outsider portray the tourist as an invasive, non-accepting presence who visits the foreign land to consume of it rather than to bask in it. This is revealed when a group of tourists walk over to the village canteen in pursuit of entertain-

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ment, turning a blind eye to the villager's plight and to their empty fishnets.

It is this specific kind of energy that makes teaching so exciting. As we deal with these book-informed-issues in the college classroom, we hope they will be imported into the future elementary, middle, and high school classroom. As re-visiting these classics allows college students to bring closure to issues that might not have been resolved during their own first reading, then hopefully they will inspire the adolescents at their charge.

Note

¹ Narrative Inquiry is a type of qualitative research design in which stories are used to describe human action...to understand the fullness of human experience...(to) maintain the level of specific episodes. (Boutte, 1992, p. 2)

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