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Article Abstracts

ENGL 7711

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Yu Ren Dong, “Taking a Cultural-Response Approach to TeachingMulticultural Literature.” English Journal 94:3 (Jan. 2005): 55-60.

**Abstract:**

Although most teachers would argue the need to teach multi-cultural literature, many confess feeling inadequate to do so. Yu Ren Dong’s article, “Taking a Cultural-Response Approach to Teaching Multicultural Literature,” addresses this concern and offers strategies that successful teachers have used to enhance the process of reading and understanding the works of various cultures. Using personal examples from his/her own experiences and successful strategies from other teachers, Yu Ren Dong offers insights into what can be a challenging course to teach.

Dong argues one strategy that proves to be successful is the “cultural-response” approach rather than the tradition reader-response format that tends to limit or narrow the reader’s analysis of the text. The cultural-response requires the reader to explore the “cultural context of the text” through additional research. English teachers must allow for research to understand various cultural differences more fully. Along with exploring the histories of different cultures, teachers need to facilitate dialog to address differences and to make connections by listening to and observing differences.

One way suggested way to teach students the cultural-response approach is through “establishing empathy though performance and discussion” within small groups or pairs. Students are asked to act out scenes from various works, deliberately choosing a character with a different background than their own. This allows them to see the other side, another perspective, through fresh eyes. This also opens up a wealth of information and experiences that each student brings to the table as they share with each other from their personal perspective.

Another way to teach the cultural-response approach is through an “ethnographic approach.”

Having students experience the values of other cultures is beneficial, and Dong proposes using guided interview questions established by anthropologists to gain a better understanding of the cultural differences. The answers to these questions provide a better insight and a deeper understanding of different cultures which, hopefully, leads the reader to want to read and learn more.

Finally, Yo Ren Dong proposes that teachers offer opportunities for students to “explore cultural values though incident activity.” With this process, students create a narrative about a particular cultural difference or conflict. They then offer multiple responses from various biased points of view. The class then discusses cultural differences in values and beliefs, and the stereotypes that often follow.

As students practice more and more with these types of open discussion, they begin to see the differences in cultures and the importance of connecting with various cultures. With the additional practice, students and teachers begin to appreciate the differences as well as become better readers of multicultural literature.

**Questions:**

**1. Briefly discuss some of the possible applications of this article in your own classroom (or,**

**perhaps, discuss why the author’s conclusions might not work in your classroom).**

Yu Ren Dong offers several activities that my co-teachers and I could incorporate in our American Literature class. I like the idea of being cultural anthropologists and interviewing students/adults from other cultures using guided questions. Having the guided notes would be a good jumping off point for students who might be shy or might not feel confident in the interview process. We could have students interview in our first unit when we are reading Early American literature or later units (Realism or Modernism). I also liked Landt’s suggestion about having students read dialogue from a character whose culture is different from their own. This could stem good debate/dialogue within the classroom. Because we team Juniors, I think that they could handle this; however, this might not work when I team Ninth Lit.

**2. Consider whether the articles engage the concept of multiculturalism from some kind of critical**

**framework, and to what extent.**

Landt offers several different approaches that teachers could take: cultural anthropologist questions for interviews, reading dialogue aloud from characters whose culture is different from their own, and researching cultures different from their own. All of these activities not only align with standards, but could be assessed differently to appeal to various learning styles.

**3. Compose a thoughtful, multi-layered question that comes from reflecting on the major issues**

**found in your article.**

How does a teacher get students to really open up and share their prejudices in a respectful but non-superficial way?

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Susan M. Landt, “Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents: A Kaleidoscope of Opportunity.” Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy 49:8 (May 2006): 690-97.

**Abstract:**

In her article “Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents: A Kaleidoscope of Opportunity,”

Susan Landt shares her realization that most of what she had read as a child stemmed from a Eurocentric world of literature, and it was not until much later that she discovered literature from other cultures. Libraries today are filled with young adult novels about various cultures. Landt addresses the challenge that educators face in teaching quality multicultural, young adult literature in the classroom. Facilitating a broad-minded perspective is imperative in the today’s culturally diverse world, and teachers need strategies in selecting and teaching multicultural literature. Landt gives suggestions for incorporating good examples into the curriculum.

Landt argues the need to introduce new cultures through the “eyes of other adolescents” rather than through textbooks. Using young adult fiction will help students connect more with other cultures as they see similarities between the characters and themselves. Family friction and loyalty, puberty, peer pressure, and friendships are common thread across all cultures. Seeing these similar struggles allows students to understand, not only the commonality of cultures worldwide, but also the differences between cultures.

Landt suggests that teachers select material that, not only exposes students to a broader perspective of the world and reduces misunderstanding and prejudices, but also allows students to discover characters like themselves. She purports that when students do not read about characters in their own culture, they begin to “question their place within society.” Teachers have a vital role in both selecting culturally-authentic material that students of various backgrounds can relate to, and offering instruction time that teaches the class about these varying cultures. Guidelines need to include: accurate portrayal of the culture and relationships within, diversity without stereotyping, authentic dialogue, realistic social issues, and minorities shown as leaders within the community. If teachers commit to these, former barriers disappear and students will be able to relate to characters of diverse cultures, recognizing similarities and appreciating differences.

**Questions:**

**1. Briefly discuss some of the possible applications of this article in your own classroom (or,**

**perhaps, discuss why the author’s conclusions might not work in your classroom).**

I team two American Literature classes, and although we do read some multicultural literature, we need to include more. Unfortunately, the decision on what to cover is made within the English teacher, and with the new Common Core Standards, there is not much wiggle room for additional texts. One thing that is helpful is that we require summer reading, and the books that have been selected do offer cultural diversity: *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Stitches* by David Smalls, and  *Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger. These books deal with prejudicial issues such a race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation.

**2. Consider whether the articles engage the concept of multiculturalism from some kind of critical**

**framework, and to what extent.**

Landt does offer examples of and reasons why certain books would make good selections. And I do like her comment that if “multicultural literature were an integral part of education, preservice teachers would not be struggling to comprehend the necessity for infusing their teaching with a diversity of readings and images for their students.” Discovering cultural differences needs to be incorporated across curriculum, and not only in literature classes. It is imperative that schools offer more elective courses in English, such as multicultural literature, to better prepare our students for the “real” world. It is also helpful that she lists specific novels that teachers could select from. I also like the data she presents on how integrating multicultural literature serves the students.

**3. Compose a thoughtful, multi-layered question that comes from reflecting on the major issues**

**found in your article.**

How do teachers choose which books to read knowing that it is impossible to address all the various ethnic, cultural, racial, social, class, and religious differences?

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