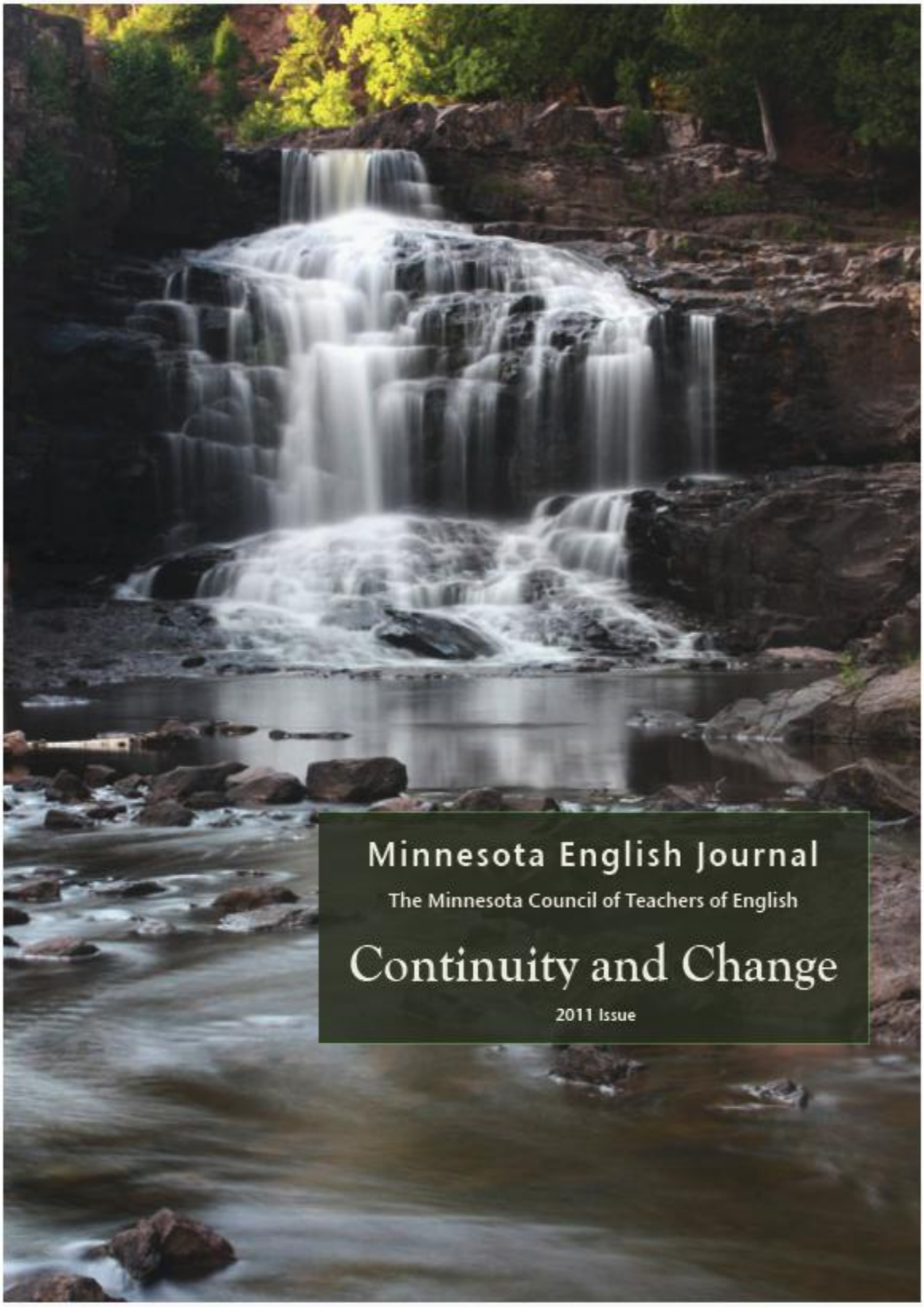

Minnesota English Journal
The Minnesota Council of Teachers of English
Continuity and Change
2011 Issue

The Minnesota English Journal is published one each year
by the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English. Annual membership
in MCTE is $30 for one year. Remittances should be made payable
to MCTE.

MEJ Editor Brian C. Lewis
Editorial Board Jacqueline Arnold
Jessica Dockter Tierney
William Dyer
Jeremy Hoffman
Rachel Malchow Lloyd
Charon Tierney

Communications regarding membership, billing, or bookkeeping
should be addressed to:
Elizabeth Boeser, Executive Secretary
MCTE
Minnesota Humanities Center
987 East Ivy Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55106
bizlazer@gmail.com

Communications regarding advertising or submissions:
Brian C. Lewis, MEJ Editor
English Department
Century College
3300 Century Avenue North
White Bear Lake, MN 55110
or brian.lewis@century.edu

It is the policy of MCTE in its journals and other publications to provide
a forum for the open discussion of ideas concerning the content
and the teaching of English, Composition, and Language Arts. Publicity
accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by
the Executive Board, the Advisory Board, or the membership at large,
except in announcements of policy, where such endorsement
is clearly specified.

MEJ is a peer-reviewed journal with an acceptance rate of approximately 50-60
percent of all submissions.

Copyright © 2011
By the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English
MCTE is an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English
and a participant in the Information Exchange Agreement.

Cover photo: Ryan Acker, "Gooseberry Falls." Acker is a local artist from
Shoreview, MN. To see other photos by Acker, go online to
http://www.etsy.com/shop/ryanacker or **http://www.ackerphotography.com.**

Cover design: Rodney Nowosielski. Nowosielski is a graphic artist from
Winona, MN.
Formatting assistance: Jeffrey Stephenson

Minnesota English Journal
Volume 46
2011 issue
Continuity and Change

A publication of the
Minnesota Council of Teachers of English
celebrating 50 years of professional conversation and continuing education.

Edited by
Brian C. Lewis
Century College

Editor's Introduction: Relating to "Continuity and Change"

I am writing this just a couple days after the beginning of our new year, 2011. It seems to me that the beginning of a new year is an excellent time to reflect on this journal's theme, "Continuity and Change," which we celebrated last year at the MCTE Conference. As we teachers begin 2011, we need to ask ourselves, "What remains 'continuous' in our classrooms? And how can we establish 'continuity'? Is 'continuity' always good to have?" Furthermore, we can ask ourselves questions about "change." These questions include, "What has 'changed' in our profession? Is this 'change' desirable? And are there times when we should avoid 'changing' our classrooms?"

The articles (and poem) in this journal all relate to "continuity and change," on some level or another. The most common relationship between "continuity and change" that I'm noticing from the submissions in this journal is that the submissions show how "continuity" in the classroom may inspire others—including readers of this journal—to "change" their classroom practices. The authors here, by and large, demonstrate how tried-and-true practices in the classroom may remind us about what we may need to do differently.

Another important manifestation of "continuity and change" may be seen not just in the content of the articles themselves, but in the "behind the scenes" aspects of this issue of *MEJ*. Some things about *MEJ* have remained "continuous": we still have one yearly issue, we have a beautiful cover, and we still have print articles in the same set-up as last year, for the most part, with identified topic categories within the journal and articles within them. However, many aspects about *MEJ* have also "changed" this time around. The most obvious change is with me, I suppose, in my new role of editor of this journal. As editor, I wanted to have an editorial board—this is also new to *MEJ*. Six individuals from the MCTE board—Jacqueline Arnold (our current president), Jessie Dockter Tierney, Bill Dyer (the former *MEJ* editor), Jeremy Hoffman, Rachel Malchow Lloyd, and Charon Tierney—agreed to assist me in the article review and selection process for this journal. They were instrumental in helping me choose the twelve pieces that are included here. So unlike with previous *MEJ* issues, the *MEJ* articles selected for this issue were chosen anonymously by the board and subjected to a peer review process. (As editor, I was the only reviewer who knew the names of the authors.) Through all of our work, I really gained a truer sense of what Andrea Lunsford meant when she proclaimed that every act of writing is an act "of collaboration." The result of the work you see in this journal is indeed a collaborative effort.

All five categories for our journal submissions explore both "continuity" and "change." The first is called "Part One: Defining Our Profession." With a category like this, we're obviously paying attention to traditional teaching concepts, as Richard Beach exposes in his article about Minnesota teaching over the last 50 years, and definitions that stem from ancient rhetorics, as Carol Mohrbacher shows us in her article on "style." However, it's important to note that Beach titles his article "Changes in Minnesota English Teaching"; he shows us how methods in the classroom have differed from decade to decade. And Mohrbacher's article shows us how applications of the traditional concept of "style" have changed to become relevant for our modern students.

Our next category in *MEJ*, "Part Two: Multicultural Literature in the Curricula," stems from a need to change what's continuous. All three articles acknowledge the

"continuity" of typical classroom practice that involves teaching traditional, Western, male authors in K-college classrooms. However, all three also manifest the possibilities that can come with classroom "change": Candice Deal, Corrine Ehrfurth, and Paula Schevers show how Indian novels can teach complexity of identity to secondary students; Darryl Parks reveals the importance of not clumping Native American literature together with all multicultural literature and instead viewing it within its own separate tradition of literary work; and Jacqueline Arnold and Anne O'Meara provide us with many ideas for new books we can read to bring an appreciation for cultural diversity into our English classrooms.

The next category of articles here, "Part Three: Working with New Media," may seem to serve only as a set of arguments for classroom change. After all, Linda Lein asks teachers do their best to "survive the tsunami" of online educational techniques; Molly McCarthy Vasich and Jessica Dockter Tierney show the dynamic consequences of having their students work on documentary films; and Elizabeth Barniskis shows how her students were able to open up to discuss race issues in *Huckleberry Finn* by using an online NING. Still, one commonality between all three of these articles is the desire to maintain "continuity" in writing processes to achieve course objectives. All of these instructors understand that new media tools enhance student learning but do not necessarily replace traditional, "continuous" ones.

Our final major article category, "Part Four: Why Teach This Text?," shows how new texts can be used in K-college classrooms to learn tried-and-true educational concepts. My article on the 2009 film *Precious* (directed by Lee Daniels) shows how instructors can use this film as a resource to improve their teaching of developmental writing. Dallas Crow explains that he teaches the poem "Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall" to help students grasp key poetic concepts. And Heather Megarry Traeger discusses the advantages of teaching specific novels and/or plays in her Somali charter school. Therefore, we can see that each article here shows how what's "continuous" in the classroom—those objectives that we attempt to fulfill in the classroom year after year--may be "changed" through the introduction of new film or print texts that help students engage and learn.

Our issue concludes with a “Coda,” a poem from Bill Meissner--"Veteran English Teacher: The Chalk Magician." It asks us to think of an ephemeral, supposedly outdated technology--chalk--in new ways. His poem thereby reveals chalk's continuous imprint on our lives:

> As the students file out, <the teacher> nods at each of them.
> He wishes they understood that chalk will outlast us all,
> leaving traces of itself long after we are gone.

The poem suggests that chalk--and the lessons taught with it--will remain with us much longer than we are aware. In this sense, "continuity" is shown in this poem as something that survives into infinity.

Does this mean "continuity," ultimately, matters more than "change" in our English classrooms? Hardly. I believe we chose the theme "continuity and change" because a symbiotic relationship exists between the two concepts. Where "continuity" is

present, "change" is as well, and vice versa. I want to thank these authors--and my editorial committee--for enhancing our awareness of this.

I hope you enjoy the new *MEJ*! For comments or questions on this issue, please e-mail me, Brian C. Lewis, at **brian.lewis@century.edu**. Or, instead of an e-mail, please consider writing a "Letter to the Editor" for us to publish in our 2012 issue. We'd like to know what you think!

Brian C. Lewis
MEJ Editor
January 5, 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2011 MINNESOTA ENGLISH JOURNAL:

"Continuity and Change" Issue

Part One:

Defining Our Profession

Changes in Minnesota English Teaching: 1960-2010

Richard Beach, University of Minnesota

I started teaching English in 1967 in a suburban, middle-class high school outside of Hartford, Connecticut. Then, some 37 years ago when the Minnesota winters were "real winters," I began teaching English education at the University of Minnesota in Fall, 1973 and began attending MCTE conferences.

Since my first efforts to teach high school English, I've witnessed considerable changes in English teaching during my career.

During the past 50 years with the founding of MCTE, *who we are* as English teachers reflects changes in the prevailing practices and values of our times. We are no longer the didactic purveyors of values based on moral lessons extracted from literature, a role derived from the 19th century. And, we are no longer the arbiters of correctness, doting on errors, constituting the role of the English teacher of the first half of the 20th century.

Who we teach has also changed. The class-based, tracking labels of "high-ability" versus "low-ability" or "remedial" has given way to greater diversity in our classrooms related to ability, race, class, and gender.

This societal diversity has led to changes in *what* we teach. Since the 1950s, the relatively narrow high school literature canon of white male authors (*Julius Caesar, The Scarlet Letter, Red Badge of Courage,* etc.) has broadened out to include young adult literature and writers from a range of race, class, gender, and global perspectives. Writing instruction has evolved from the formalist essay written primarily to the teacher to writing multimodal, interactive discussion or blog posts or wiki entries for multiple audiences.

How we teach has also changed, changes reflecting a shift to from more teacher/text-centered instruction to more student-centered, constructivist, inquiry-based learning. The straight rows of desks facing the front of the rooms, raising their hands to answer teachers in the traditional initial-response-evaluate IRE ritual, have been replaced by students in small group or online discussions, or actively engaged in drama activities or media productions.

And, *why* we teach English has certainly changed since the 1960s with economic and cultural shifts towards life in the global, knowledge economy. While in the 1960s, we prepared middle-class students in the literary canon and the "college essay" for success in college and working-class students for "workplace literacies" for a job in the local factory, we must now prepare both groups of students for the knowledge economy that demands relatively high levels of literacy. And, we've always hoped that our students would learn to appreciate literature and writing as a way of valuing the reflective, aesthetic, and ethical experiences afforded by creative uses of language.

To track some of these changes since the 1960s, at the risk of overgeneralization, I've identified one prevailing focus or theme that best characterized English teaching for each of the decades since the 1960s, recognizing that lots of other changes occurred within each of these decades.

1960 – 1969: The Autonomous Text

When I started teaching in 1967, I taught literature the same way I had been taught in college. I adopted a New Critical stance that the text was an autonomous entity divorced from the influence of readers' purposes or agendas. I was the master explicator, modeling analysis of the intricacies of figurative language. My students were far more engaged when we connected

their responses to novels like *Catch-22* to the protests occurring in their school over the Vietnam War or when we examined initiation experiences in their own lives as portrayed in literature and film.

Similarly, writing instruction consisted of drawing on formalist rhetorical models of form, so my students wrote outlines, single rough drafts based on the ideal five-paragraph essay template, and then made minor editing. They therefore perceived writing as largely an exercise in filling in the template boxes, so they didn't have a strong reason to write to voice their ideas. Because they were writing largely about literature, and because most of my students were not comfortable writing literary analysis, they weren't engaged in their writing. As later composition research indicated, because they were making few major revisions requiring self-assessing, their writing showed little improvement over time (Beach and Friedrich).

There was also little focus on media or popular culture texts—the equipment was quite antiquated. I recall showing a 16 millimeter film and making the mistake of sitting in the front of the class. Towards the end of the film, I looked to the back of the room to witness a huge pile of film on the floor, much to the snickering amusement of my students.

Our classes were organized by "ability levels." I actually enjoyed teaching my "low ability" students because they were continually sharing their everyday experiences with the class, sharing that often led to some engaging discussions and writing.

In teaching "high-ability" 12th grade literature, I was also caught up in the popularity of the "Spiral Curriculum" of the 1960s—the idea of building the curriculum around teaching conceptual frameworks. I therefore taught my students Northrop Frye's archetypal narrative patterns--tragedy, comedy, romance, and irony—in a very top-down manner, failing to recognize that without extensive knowledge of a lot of literature, that my students did not really understand these narrative patterns.

1970 – 1979: The Response and Composing Process

In the late 1960s, educators began to challenge New Criticism's focus on the autonomous text, as well as its need to approach literary criticism in a top-down manner. Participants in the 1968 Dartmouth Conference, drawing on earlier transactional theory of literary response (Rosenblatt) and theories of learning through drama and language use, as well as research on literary response, argued for the need to focus more responding to literature through valuing and sharing students' individual responses, particularly their engagement, autobiographical, and intertextual responses. This adoption of a reader-response approach wasn't necessarily widespread, given the continued use of those ten-pound literature textbooks with largely canonical texts accompanied by recall questions about character, setting, storyline, and theme. At the same time, there was a growing awareness of the emergence of the young-adult novel as an engaging alternative to these canonical texts, particularly for early-adolescent students.

The 1970s also witnessed the development of the composing process approach to teaching writing through prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing, along with the later realization that these processes are not necessarily linear, but can be recursive. This focus on the composing process drew on research such as Janet Emig's study, *The Composing Processes of 12th Grade Students*, which found that students, as well as writers, didn't employ the traditional outline, draft, edit formalist model.

During the 1970s, there was also a growing recognition that many students were having reading difficulties. The first assessment of students' reading abilities conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1971 found that many 13- and 17-year-olds had difficulty

interpreting texts. That same NAEP assessment conducted in 2008 found that 17-year-olds showed no significant improvement over their 1971 peers (Rampey, Dion, and Donahue), suggesting that students continue to have difficulty interpreting texts. On the one hand, this concern with students' reading difficulties led to an increased focus on the need to teach reading comprehension strategies, as well as attention to students' positive interest in reading emerging young adult literature. On the other hand, given the prevailing skill-based methods of reading at that time, this led to a "back-to-the-basics" movement focusing on teaching of isolated, decontextualized reading comprehension skills. Unfortunately, this skill-based approach that focused on summary and informational recall neglected student learning of what Russell Hunt defines as a "point-driven" reading stance—the ability to infer thematic and symbolic meanings, as opposed to simply summarizing the storyline or recalling information.

1980 – 1989: The Social

With all of the attention on response and composing processes in the 1970s, educators began to recognize the need for students to do more than just employ these processes. Educators realized that they also needed to create social contexts with an engaging purpose or audience that motivated students to respond or write. This led to devising writing assignments such as the I-search assignment, family-history writing, or persuasive writing activities which involved a clearer sense of social purpose and audience constituting a social context. During the 1980s, I did research on use of role-play activities to foster persuasive writing to other roles about issues—for example, whether students at Rosemount High School should be able to go off campus for lunch. Students were relatively engaged with this writing because they were using writing to convince audiences to support their positions on this issue. And, as teachers encouraged students to write for peer audiences, writing instructors increasingly employed peer feedback groups as a means to help students reflect on how their writing engaged their peer audiences.

This focus on the social also led to an increased interest in how to effectively facilitate literature discussions through use of higher-order questions and small-group discussions. Teachers were also adopting more reading-writing workshops (Atwell) and individualized reading activities related to the growing popularity of young adult literature. Additionally, middle-school language arts teachers built cross-disciplinary curricula that focused on early-adolescents' social needs.

During the 1980s, fueled partially by the electives movement and improvements in the technology for showing and accessing media, there was an increased focus on teaching film, media, and popular culture, as evident in the rise of English elective courses such as "The Mystery Novel and Film."

1990 – 1999: The Cultural

The attention to the social context and students' prior knowledge and experience in the 1980s, as well as the increasing diversity of student populations in Minnesota schools, led to increased attention to cultural differences through the infusion of multicultural literature in the curriculum, as represented by the publication of *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing (Minnesota Humanities Society).* Teachers also focused on portrayals of race, class, or gender differences in literature as reflected in Deborah Appleman's book on the application of critical lenses, as well as addressing issues of institutional racism portrayed in literature (Beach, Heartling-Thein, and Parks).

Writing teachers, often working in conjunction with the Minnesota Writing Project or the College in the Schools program, continued to expand the genres and topics of writing assignments. Students began writing ethnographies about local cultures or engaging in multi-genre writing. Teachers such as Jan Mandell at Central High School in St. Paul were using drama to engage students in critical inquiry about issues of race, class, or gender differences in their everyday lives.

At the same time, during the 1990's, politicians and business leaders called for schools and teachers to be held "accountable" to standards and test scores. This led to the development of high-stakes reading and writing tests for all Minnesota students, as well as the Minnesota Profile of Learning and later attempts to impose content-driven standards by former Commissioner Yecke, a shift that would continue to challenge English teachers' professional status and autonomy to the present. Our 2000-2001 research with Minnesota English and social studies teachers found that teachers had difficulty adopting performance assessment techniques associated with the Profile of Learning, particularly if they had not received adequate preparation for using performance assessment (Avery, Beach, and Coler).

2000 – 2010: The Digital

This past decade has witnessed a shift from an English curriculum focus on primarily print literacies to uses of digital tools such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, and online discussions in the classroom. This focus reflects students' increased use of digital communication tools outside of school. A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation report found that adolescents are now spending about more than seven and a half hours a day using some sort of digital or media device. In one survey (National Council of Teachers of English), 52% of English teachers indicated that their students spend at least an hour a week outside of school writing in such environments.

This increased focus on digital literacies is evident in teachers' use of blogs, online discussions, or wikis to foster students' literary responses, as well as students' use of digital video production for communicating their ideas (Beach, Anson, Kastman-Breuch, and Swiss). Students used these digital tools to communicate and interact with wider audiences beyond the school walls. Students shared their responses to literature using a variety of online discussion techniques, including wikis and blogs. They created digital poetry, storytelling, and comic books as multimodal forms of communication. They created digital videos that engaged multiple audiences. And, they used e-portfolios to reflect on their learning over-time. Recognizing the lack of focus on media/digital literacies in the Common Core Standards, Minnesota teachers added their own additional standards to that focus on analysis and production of media and digital texts (Minnesota Department of Education).

Building on the cultural, Minnesota teachers continued to diversify the literature curriculum by treating authors of color not as token add-ons, but at authors within the canon. They also incorporated spoken-word poetry and rap as evident in the *Teens Rock the Mic* project at Minneapolis North High School. And, they continued to redesign the curriculum around inquiry-based projects for engaging students in place-based writing or service-learning experiences in their communities (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, and Borgmann).

However, the effects of testing continued, with a return to the focus on formalist "five-paragraph essay" writing instruction of the 1960s designed to prepare students for standardized writing tests. And, these test results revealed that in 2009, while 84% of white students passed this writing test, only about half of students from non-dominant cultural groups passed the test, a disparity that can be attributed to a 60 percent disparity in opportunities to learn between high

support/performing versus low support/performing schools (Schott Foundation for Public Education). So, while English teaching continued to change since 2000, a larger economic inequality in American society persisted that fostered disparities in students' performance.

Summary

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of MCTE, we need to recognize that many of these changes over the past 50 years occurred because Minnesota English teachers were willing to take risks and experiment with new approaches. In many cases, they acquired these new approaches from attending MCTE Fall and Spring conferences or reading the *Minnesota English Journal*. As a precipitator of these innovations, MCTE deserves thanks and congratulations for its 50 years of service to our profession.

What changes will occur in the next decade? Whatever they are, we can all depend on MCTE to foster future innovations for Minnesota English teachers.

Works Cited

Appleman, Deborah. *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000/2009. Print.

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987/1998. Print.

Avery, Patricia G., Richard Beach, and Jodiann Coler. "The Impact of Minnesota's 'Profile of Learning' on Teaching and Learning in English and Social Studies classrooms." *Education Policy Analysis Archives.* 11.7 (2003): 1-37. Web. 15 Mar. 2010.

Beach, Richard, and Chris Anson. "The Pragmatics of Memo-Writing: Developmental Differences in a Writing Role-play." *Written Communication* 5 (1988): 157-183. Print.

Beach, Richard, Chris Anson, Lee-Ann Kastman-Breuch, and Thomas Swiss. *Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and Other Digital Tools*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 2009. Print.

Beach, Richard, Gerald Campano, Brian Edmiston, and Melissa Borgmann. *Literacy Tools in the Classroom: Teaching Through Critical Inquiry, Grades 5-12*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2010. Print.

Beach, Richard, and Thomas Friedrich. "Response to Writing." *Handbook of Writing Research.* Eds. Charles A. MacArthur, Steve Graham, and Jill Fitzgerald. New York: Guilford Press, 2006. 222-234. Print.

Beach, Richard, Amanda Haertling-Thein, and Daryl Parks. *High School Students' Competing Social Worlds: Negotiating Identities and Allegiances in Response to Multicultural Literature.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008. Print.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of 12th Grade Students*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971. Print.

Hunt, Russell. "Reading Reader, Reading Readers." *Reader* 43. (2000): 47-51. Print.

Kaiser Family Foundation. *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation. 9 Mar. 2005. Web. 15 Dec. 2010.

Minnesota Department of Education. *2010 Minnesota Academic Standards: English Language Arts K-12*. Roseville, MN: Minnesota Department of Education. 9 Nov. 2010. Web. 11 Dec. 2010.

Minnesota Humanities Society. *Braided Lives, An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing.* St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Humanities Society, 1991. Print.

National Council of Teachers of English. *Writing Between the Lines—and Everywhere Else.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2008. Mar. 2009. Web. 14 Mar. 2010.

Rampey, Bobby D., Gloria S. Dion, and Patricia L. Donahue. *NAEP 2008 Trends in Academic Progress* (NCES 2009–479). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2009. Web. 15. Dec. 2010.

Rosenblatt, Louise. *Literature as Exploration, 5th ed*. New York: The Modern Language Association, 1938/1996. Print.

Schott Foundation for Public Education. *Lost Opportunity: A 50 State Report on the Opportunity to Learn in America*. Cambridge, MA: Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2009. Web. 15 Mar. 2010.

Style: Definition, Separation, and the Teachable

Carol Mohrbacher

> *We should confirm for our students that style has something to do with better communication, adding as it does a certain technicolor to otherwise black-and-white language. But going beyond this "better communication" approach, we should also say that style is the proof of a human being's individuality; that style is a writer's revelation of himself; that through style, attitudes and values are communicated; that indeed our manner is a part of our message. We can remind students of Aristotle's observation, "character is the making of choices," and point out that since style, by its very nature, is the art of selection, how we choose says something about who we are.* (Weathers 144)

In the excerpt above, Winston Weathers points out the personal nature of style and the idea of choice, as well as the educator's responsibility to illustrate to the student the importance of developing something more colorful than a plainly stated form of writing. Emails, electronic postings, memos, proposals business letters, software instructions, and web pages too seldom benefit from a well-crafted tri-colon, an elegant metaphor, or the rhythm of alliteration. Students, in a sense, are a reflection of America's business technology. Although many may not voice their concerns, they want concrete definitions to what and verifiable answers to why. They want to know—What are the deliverables? Why is a semi-colon better than a period here? Why is this not a good word choice? Why should this sentence/phrase/paragraph/section be moved? Why can't you understand what I mean? Why are you "messin' with my style"?

Before effectively teaching style, we must first be able to define it, and defining it involves limiting its scope. Moreover, to teach style fairly and to help students maintain their writing identities, we must distinguish it from personal voice—that writing personality which is an intimate and individual part of each writer. Finally, in the composition classroom, matters of style must be clearly explainable, which means defining "good" style is important for our students.

Classical and Contemporary Definitions

Aristotle devotes eleven chapters (2-4 and 5-12) of Book 3 *On Rhetoric* to a discussion of style or *lexis*. He includes diction, word choice, and sentence composition in this discussion. Near the beginning of Book 3, he defines style as the "virtue" of clarity, as an element of rhetoric which is "neither flat nor above the dignity of the subject" (221). It is a strategy of choices that strongly considers the rhetorical situation. Thus, for Aristotle, good style in rhetoric models the qualities of conciseness and appropriate choice. His use of the word "flat" also suggests attention to the life and liveliness of writing.

Cicero describes good style as a virtue, one that distinguishes good writers from bad with harmony, grace, artistry, and polish. His primary focus rests on elegance in oratory; however, he emphasizes the importance of knowledge over stylistic choices, warning students of rhetoric that "if the subject matter be not comprehended and mastered by the speaker," this elegance is valueless (207). Although he doesn't directly address clarity, as does Aristotle in the aforementioned passage, he does suggest that a polished style is ineffectual if the rhetor does not clearly convey the essence of the subject.

Correctness, lucidity, and elegance constitute Quintilian's perspective on style. Although he does not give a direct definition of style, Book 1 of *Institutio Oratoria* devotes much discussion to diction, maxims, aphorisms, amplification, and correctness (which, he says, belongs to the grammarians). In Chapter 5 of this book, he hints at a definition, saying that "all grammar has three kinds of excellence, to be correct, perspicuous, and elegant" (35), echoing Cicero's ideas about style.

These classical rhetoricians all agree that style must include clarity, propriety, and elegance. All three define clear style in terms of appropriateness according to subject matter, occasion, and audience. Elegance, for the classical rhetoricians, results from an appropriate level of language and a wise use of ornament as rhetorical strategy. Additionally, correctness is considered a province of style, but arrangement is a separate matter, as is content and form. One could argue that arrangement or organization is a stylistic concern because it can imbue writing with elegance through focus and cohesion. Arrangement can also reflect personal choice.

Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian defined style in terms of its functions. They generated taxonomies of stylistic devices and classifications of language levels that support a perspective of style as a number of rhetorical enhancements and a level of gracefulness.

Of the contemporary definitions of style, Richard Ohmann's is one of the broadest—"A style is a way of writing" (135). Style, for Ohmann simply means that another writer would have written it in a different way. For him, the boundaries are not so discernible; rather, style is born out of "intuition." He includes matters of correctness and arrangement in the realm of style, but says "though syntax seems to be the central determinant of style, it is admittedly not the whole" (160). This is a departure from Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian who placed arrangement into its own canon.

Louis T. Milic directly contradicts Ohmann, arguing that "style must be defined in a way that its boundary with content can be clearly distinguished" (166). Although he agrees with Ohmann's concept of individual choice as central to stylistics, he finds Ohmann's metaphysical approach worthless for what he believes is the necessary quantification of stylistic criticism. He advises reading Aristotle's *Poetics* to see a clear separation of content and stylistics (174-175).

In a Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, Erica Lindemann acknowledges broad definitions of style such as that of Richard Ohmann, but for the purposes of those who teach writing, she more narrowly defines style in the classroom as a choice of words which reflects clarity, emphasis, specificity, and variety and which also considers audience, subject, and purpose (124). In planning a pedagogical approach, theory must convert readily into practice or it is useless, except as an analytic or descriptive aid.

Nevin Laib applies theory to the development and improvement of personal writing style in his textbook, *Rhetoric and Style: Strategies for Advanced Writers.* He defines style as the "external expression of your values and beliefs, your personal or social rhetoric" (21). He maintains that those values and beliefs are expressed in elements of grammar, clarity, self-expression and content and also that writers must manipulate those elements to convey a style that establishes him or her as an "admirable" person (21). His textbook offers advice and exercises for creating this persona in the student's writing, while admitting that no one approach will reach every member of an audience.

Most contemporary rhetoricians define style in terms of its boundaries. The disagreement seems to be where those boundaries lie. As Laib suggests above, choice and individual style also become part of the definition. Moreover, most contemporary rhetoricians

concern themselves with style as it applies to pedagogy, which explains the contemporary impulse to limit, verify, and evaluate (and I include myself here). Style for contemporaries can be more concerned with concision than with ornament, which was Cicero's primary stylistic focus. Teaching style today has become less about the manipulation of tropes and schemes than it is about editing for clarity and concision. The anthology, *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries,* describes historical perspectives on style from Aristotle to George Campbell and distills the current changes in stylistic focus in this way:

> Today, Enlightenment doctrines of plain style have so influenced our essayist prose that teaching style is often reduced to teaching editing skills. Yet the concerns of the postmodern age have also rekindled interest in metaphor as a way to generate multiple perspectives on the subject matter at hand. (Covino and Jolliffe 88)

A synthesis of both the classical and contemporary definitions as described above might result in the following description: Style is using language clearly and elegantly to convey meaning in a manner appropriate to audience, situation, and subject matter. However, this definition also needs to convey individual choice, both in respect to the myriad of stylistic options and personal voice. I have included the word *elegance* in the definition, even though it is an abstract idea, because elegance was an important component for classical rhetoricians, such as Cicero and Quintilian. Also, because of its subjective nature, the concept of elegance allows for flexibility in definitional boundaries.

The difficulty in an absolute definition is embedded in the individual's freedom of choice. Style manifests who the individual is—the attitude and values a writer has concerning a certain topic and an individual's expressions conveying hierarchies of emphasis. Nevin Laib, in his textbook, *Rhetoric and Style: Strategies for Advanced Writers,* claims that an individual's attitude and values can be maintained, while personal expression of those attitudes and values can be improved in a way that demonstrates the writer's admirable persona to the target audience (1-3). Pedagogical approaches must avoid over-prescription to avoid limiting the personal style and to avoid producing assembly-line writers who write correctly, but whose writing is devoid of values and attitudes. So, the question is how do we separate the teachable from the personal style for the purpose of helping students improve their reception by the audience, while maintaining the integrity of personal style?

Separating the Teachable from the Un-teachable Personal Style

Personal voice is an abstract and difficult notion to define, just as the whole notion of style is. Nevertheless, at its core personal voice is the style that emerges in a writer's work—intended or not—appearing through the selection of topic and the attitude toward that topic and its constituent parts. It is a certain choice of vocabulary and sentence structure. It is the selection, the emphasis, and the arrangement of certain information. All—except writer's attitude and values concerning a topic—in theory, cross into the domain of the teachable. Cleanly separating un-teachable personal voice from teachable style is impossible. Areas that define personal style, but that also have a potential for development, persist. Another problem with the teachable is that developmental criticism must be clearly justified to the student to effect real change. "Because it is convention" works sometimes, but explaining why a change is sound

rhetorical strategy or what meaning is conveyed more clearly justifies stylistic suggestions and criticism.

A student writes, "Today's music is more creative than music of 30 years ago." Stylistic criticism might address the faulty parallelism with a suggestion like the following: "Music of today is more creative than music of 30 years ago." However, the following parallelism suggestion—"Today's music is more creative that yesterday's music"—might be interfering with personal attitude. Although more concise, the second suggestion might interfere with the student's perspective concerning time. Maybe yesterday is ten years ago to the 18 to 20 year-old student. Maybe he or she especially despises the music from thirty years ago—music the student may not appreciate because it represents parental music in particular. The danger here is that while giving stylistic advice, an instructor may actually cross that fuzzy boundary from the teachable to the personal.

Perhaps we might suggest spelling the number 30 in the sentence above, rather than using figures, but can we definitively answer why—beyond a rule in a particular composition handbook? Students want a sound reason. They are beyond the "Because I said so" phase. A reasonable explanation would have to include why it is a sound rhetorical strategy—its effect on audience. The student may have chosen the number because it has fewer keystrokes, it looks better, or that's the way another teacher or handbook taught them. This stylistic advice is clearly not supportable as are many rules of convention.

While most errors in punctuation, syntax, and grammar are explicit and criticism is easily justifiable, other style choices are not. For effectively critiquing choices which are not specifically incorrect and justifiable, we should ask students what meaning they are trying to convey implicitly and explicitly and what reaction they expect from their audience. Only then can we understand their rhetorical goals and fairly give suggestions for improvement without tampering with their personal choice.

The original sentence—"Today's music is more creative than music of 30 years ago"—uses the word "creative" as its argumentative pivot point. Here we might suggest "different" or "unique" and explain to the student that arguing whether one era's music is more creative than another's may be a difficult point to support, but this comment may be perceived as a reflection of the instructor's bias and again, the student may resent the intrusion into the personal. In this case, the student should be urged to develop his or her own definition of creativity. Perhaps, what the student means is that today's popular artists are more willing to experiment with discordancy, dissonance, electronic sounds, and non-standard phrasing. If the word "creative" is a simplistic description of something more complex, encouraging the student to develop a more textured description of "today's music" versus "music of 30 years ago" might lead to a critical analysis, a student activity that most educators hope for.

So just how do we fairly address areas whose meanings could be enhanced, are unclear, or are in real danger of being misinterpreted? While many errors in punctuation, syntax, and grammar are explicit and criticism is easily justifiable, other style choices are not. For effectively critiquing choices, which are not specifically incorrect and justifiable, we must show students *exactly* how our suggestions clarify or improve their original intended meaning. That involves asking them what precisely they meant.

Students in high school advanced composition and college composition classes require a variety of stylistic choices, not stylistic prescriptions. We can turn to the classical rhetoricians for material. Consider the taxonomies of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian for help in illustrating this variety. Exercises in identifying stylistic strategies in professional and student writing using

the lists as references would be a manageable task. Quintilian advised that students read successful and accomplished writers and observe not only "any expression that is peculiarly appropriate, elegant, or sublime," but also those expressions which are "inappropriate, obscure, tumid, low, mean, affected, or effeminate [sic]"[1] ("Institute of Oratory" 307). Using a short classical piece, one that self-consciously uses stylistic maneuvers, like Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, would be an interesting and instructive connection to the early rhetoricians and would show how purposely style selections can and have been made, even millennia ago. This piece is short enough, but challenging enough to be appropriate to high school advanced composition and college first-year composition students. Although today's students would be bored with Erasmus prescribed exercises of *imitatio* and the endless lists of style suggestions found in *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style*—his illustration on the many ways to write, "Your letter pleased me greatly," would add humor while illustrating variety in syntax, word choice, and subtle shifts in meaning (514-523).

The point is that the instructor's task is to provide students with a wide selection of sentence structures, metaphors, examples, adjectives, creative punctuation, word choices, and arrangements. Classical works provide a rich menu. If students are shown a broad assortment of both classical and contemporary examples, ways of seeing their writing will become fresher and more individual, not suppressed by cliché, formulaic thinking, or rigid writing patterns.

Is There Such a Thing as "Good" Style?

If style in student papers can be improved, then there should be a model of perfection or, at the very least, acceptability on which to base an evaluation. Is there a "good" style and a "bad" style? What criteria can be used to judge so slippery a concept that both classical and contemporary rhetoricians cannot agree about its boundaries?

Let's use the previous synthesis of classical and contemporary definitions of style: "Good" style is using language clearly and elegantly to convey meaning in a manner appropriate to audience, situation, and subject matter. Now let's add choice and intention: "Good" style is *choosing* that language which clearly and elegantly conveys *intended* meaning in a manner appropriate to audience, situation, and subject matter. This definition allows for individual intention, as well as choice, and that choice of language supports the voice of the student writer; therefore, the writer retains ownership of the work. Choice also allows for developmental criticism. Now that we have the definition for "good" style and the rationale for stylistic evaluation to present to students, we must consider a pedagogical approach.

Consideration of intention and choices makes verification and evaluation a complex task. An approach must include questioning about meaning, and feedback about what meaning we perceive in the individual student paper. Correctness errors and errors in explicit meaning are, in most cases, obvious; however, every sentence also carries with it implied meaning, as we can see from the previous example (i.e., "Today's music is more creative than music of 30 years ago.").

Consider this sentence: "My sister accomplished a "D" in Calculus." The explicit meaning is that the sister received a "D" in Calculus. An instructor may argue that "accomplished" is not the most appropriate verb choice. However, if asked what the student was implying by that choice, the response may very well be, "A 'D' is an accomplishment for her." If the student chooses to keep this verb, then the next question should involve how the student could give this sentence more contextual support. This type of exchange helps students see the effect on audience (the instructor), as well as allowing them to make their own stylistic choices.

Experience allows a composition teacher to make educated assumptions about much intended meaning based on familiarity with individual student style, context, and past encounters with similar instances. Other questionable meaning can be explored by simply asking students what was meant or why they chose that particular form of expression. In his essay, "Style and Good Style," Monroe Beardsley argues that implicit meaning can be made explicit:

> In order to show what style is, and what good style is, you have to work out the implicit meanings and state them baldly for examination. Then they are no longer implicit, of course, and the explication of them may seem forced and artificial. But implicit meanings *can* [italics mine] be understood and can be stated explicitly; and that is the only way to exhibit their connections or divergences. This is what I call style-analysis. (207)

If the plainly stated, implicit meaning indicates the intended meaning is unclear or worse, then the instructor must ask the student how the meaning can be made clear. The advantage to this approach is that the stylistic improvement may come in the student's answer to the instructor's question, "What do you mean by that?" This process is a dialectic process in that it involves definition, redefinition, clarification, and reclarification until the student's intended meaning is clear to the audience.

Final Thoughts

Defining, limiting, and separating the teachable from the personal style is not precise science, but we can get close. Students need to know that style is important, that there are many choices, that we can give concrete reasons for change, and that we trust their version of what their writing intends. After this, we need to teach them to recognize stylistic opportunities in terms of effect on audience. Classical works can help. The ancient rhetoricians began the discussion and named the strategies. Moreover, a classical overview will give credibility to stylistics by the weight of its historical importance. Students at college level have outgrown the simple arrangement of the five paragraph essay, as well as other formulas that do not foster and develop their natural voice. If we can show them that professional writers—both classical and contemporary—rarely follow a pedagogical encyclical, but rather, they vary wildly in their use of style, perhaps then they will try new methods of expression. Bringing samples of professional writing to class from a variety of fields would help make this point.

Finally we must be models for style ourselves. Bringing our own work into the class for analysis further enhances our credibility. It says to the student, "I really believe that style is important; I, too, have room for improvement and I make stylistic choices every time I write. I am not asking you to do anything that I would not do."

> *[S]hould not the student's most significant model, so far as style is concerned, be the teacher himself? Isocrates, that ancient member of the profession, did not "merely discuss the technique of language and composition—the final inspiration was derived from the art of the master himself." And surely this is so: what the teacher writes on the blackboard in front of the student, or even what the teacher writes outside of class and brings to read to his students, is the teacher's commitment to the style he is urging his students to learn. (Weathers 191)*

Note

1. While I would, in fact, be hard pressed to define "effeminate" as a distinct style, this is Quintilian's word choice or, more likely, the translator's word choice. I assume what might be meant is a euphuistic or ornate style.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Trans. George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.

Beardsley, Monroe C. "Style and Good Style." *New Rhetorics.* Ed. Martin Steinmann, Jr. New York: Scribner, 1967. 191-213. Print.

Cage, John T. "Why Write?" *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries*. Eds. William Covina and David A. Jolliffe. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995. 715-733. Print.

Cicero. *On Oratory and Orators*. Trans. J.S. Watson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986. Print.

Covino, William A. and David A. Jolliffe. *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995. Print.

Erasmus, Desiderius. "From *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style*." Trans. Betty I Knott. *The Rhetorical Tradition.* 2nd ed. Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford, 2001. 597-627. Print.

Laib, Nevin K. *Rhetoric & Style: Strategies for Advanced Writers.* Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1993. Print.

Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.

Milic, Louis T. "Metaphysical Criticism of Style." *New Rhetorics.* Ed. Martin Steinmann, Jr. New York: Scribner, 1967. 161-175. Print.

Ohmann, Richard. "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style." *New Rhetorics.* Ed. Martin Steinmann, Jr. New York: Scribner, 1967. 135-160. Print.

Quintilian. "Institutes of Oratory." *The Rhetorical Tradition*. 2nd ed. Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford, 2001. 365-428. Print.

-----. *On the Teaching and Speaking of Oratory.* Ed. James J. Murphy. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. Print.

Weathers, Winston. "Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy." *College Composition and*

Communication 21 (May 1970): 144-49. Print.

Part Two:

Multicultural Literature in the Curricula

Indian Novels Teach Complex Identities to Secondary Students

Candice Deal, Corinne Ehrfurth, and Paula Schevers

Multicultural literature offers students diverse perspectives. Due to the ever-increasing and expanding global environment, we believe in emphasizing multicultural literature in the classroom. Presentation and analysis of three contemporary Indian novels offer rigor and relevance to students as they develop an understanding of diverse cultures, which creates a Bahktinian[1] appreciation for the self. With careful guidance, students connect their own situations to those that characters encounter within Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things,* and Jumpha Lahiri's *The Namesake*. These novels all examine issues of identity: Roy explores a fractured identity, Suri exemplifies religious identity, and Lahiri depicts conflict between ethnic and personal identity. This article highlights tangible reasons for introducing Indian culture and discusses the pedagogical applications of literature circles, intertextual analysis and close-reading practices while exploring these texts.

A few days before writing this article, one of us spoke with a colleague about teaching Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* to high school students. After this colleague shared his knee-jerk reaction against introducing such complex material to kids, he respectfully explained that a deeply controversial novel would never be approved to teach in a high school setting. We heard similar concerns at the 2010 MCTE conference, where the three of us presented methods of incorporating contemporary Indian novels into multicultural curricula. Not surprisingly, our audience's reservations were directed particularly toward the teaching of Roy's *The God of Small Things*. However, our convictions remain: challenging texts need inclusion within secondary classrooms and academic risks are worth taking if we are committed to preparing our students for diversity. If students can persevere through Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and obtain information about Puritans' culture and codes, then these same students will apply higher-order thinking skills and connections to discuss the important global topics within contemporary Indian novels. Roy's, Suri's and Lahiri's intricate writing styles and content produce relevant literacy challenges for students.

We need to continue conversations with our colleagues about the most effective means for teaching difficult material. Rather than eliminating culturally and politically relevant texts, we want to encourage accepting David Mura's suggestion in *Braided Lives*: students "must learn the specific histories behind what [they] read" (222). As educators and members of a global society we must make an effort—no matter how laborious—to cross into "unaccustomed" areas of education by searching out methods for incorporating contemporary Indian literature into secondary classrooms.

Literature Circles to Mend Fractured Identities

In a speech given in September 2002, Arundhati Roy explains that "there can never be a single story . . . there are only ways of seeing" ("Come September"). Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (2007), attempts to provide a new way of seeing contemporary and traditional India. Although the novel has been highly criticized due to controversial issues—such as caste violence, molestation, incest, and explicit sexuality—it is first and foremost a story about fragmentation and transformation. Roy shows how identities are constructed, fragmented, and redeveloped. By extending to students the invitation to discuss the political and social transgressions in the novel, they can continue to enhance their critical

thinking and analysis skills. By learning about the historical and social themes within the novel, students become more literate in multicultural issues (colonialism, postcolonialism, caste, religion, gender, etc.), which, according to Behbood Mohammadzadeh in "Incorporating Multicultural Literature in English Language Teaching Curriculum," allows them to "connect conflicts and cultural issues which took place between the discourses within a text to the similar conflicts in other pertinent fiction, newspapers, historical texts, and other nonfictional literary texts" (24). Moreover, students are asked to place themselves in the twin protagonists' situations, learning how identity formation is sometimes challenged and fractured by society. They can practice reader-response theory by asking and answering questions: How do I identify with some of the issues? How is a certain character's identity unfolding? How are men and women portrayed throughout the novel? By assessing the ways in which students analyze and connect with *The God of Small Things*, teachers can determine the best methods for teaching literature (examples of which include Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy)* required by the 2010 Minnesota Education Standards for English Language Arts.

While Roy's work is highly engaging and relevant to the political and social framework of identity, a secondary instructor takes a risk when approaching its adult themes. Characters encounter identity-changing events: Velutha, the untouchable Paravan, is brutally murdered; Estha, one of the twins, is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man; and Ammu, the twins' mother, and Velutha engage in explicit sexual activity. Although these scenes represent the severe fracturing of characters in the novel, which can lead to an engaging discussion about fractured identities, they are certainly difficult to address in the secondary classroom.

The literature circle structure provides options for students who may feel uncomfortable approaching controversial topics within Roy's novel. Generally, with a unit that employs literature circles, teachers introduce a couple different novels to students, who decide which book is the most suitable to their interests and comfort level. Students meet in small groups to analyze their chosen literature in depth. Typically, conversation is based off student responses to what they have read, but teachers can provide discussion questions and reading suggestions. Offering novel options to students affords the instructor both an opportunity to address identity and communicate cultural mores. We suggest offering students the choice of *The God of Small Things* by Roy, *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa, *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya and *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai to engage students to explore their own literary interests, develop critical reading skills and create new ways of seeing the world.

Introducing literature circles into multicultural curricula yields many benefits. According to Harvey Daniels, in his book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, literature circles have been deemed by national literacy standards as one of the "best classroom practices" because they encourage students to "explore a wide range of books representing different cultures, periods, and regions" (7). Literature circles allow for student assessment and correlate with the learning outcomes for AP Composition and Literature. As outlined in the 2010 Minnesota Academic Standards for English Language Arts K-12, in order for 11th and 12th grade students to be college and career ready they must "grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries." In view of those standards, using a literature circle structure to teach multicultural literature also allows students to:

-Understand how personal responses to literature are developed

-Identify and analyze structure of novels and language used
-Analyze ways in which national and personal identity are formed
-Articulate the role of political identity specific to a culture
-Practice strategies for completing sections of the AP exam

While we propose the above objectives, application of literature circles into a classroom varies since each teacher must implement a structure that best fits his or her own teaching style. We suggest that student success can be assessed by adopting the following literature circle structure, which is an adaptation of three different literature circle options as outlined in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups:*

1. *Teacher will start multicultural unit by introducing the historical aspects put forth in the novels*. For example, with the Roy novel, historical aspects should include at least a timeline of Indian history, synopsis of caste, religion, gender and identity issues.
2. *Teacher will introduce novels*. Continue a discussion of historical relevancy.
3. *Literature circle groups will form according to reading preference.* Students can exchange contact information and divide the novel into sections (according to the number of discussion days available in the unit). Teacher will assign discussion leaders for each section.
4. *Teacher will provide guidelines for each group.* Teacher will hand out unit assignment sheet and discussion evaluation form, which students will use to keep track of their peers' discussion. Teacher will also discuss format for the required journal entries and provide direction for group discussion.
5. *Literature will be read and discussed in groups.* Students will have a set amount of discussion periods where the teacher will provide discussion prompts and questions to consider. Some questions on the Roy novel could include:
    A. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains that "Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us…they were physically separate, but with joint identities" (4-5). Where do we see their identities joined and disjoined throughout the novel? What do you make of the end of the novel?
    B. Estha and Rahel clearly go through very traumatic experiences. What are some the traumatic experiences? How does each character respond to each experience? How are their identities "smashed" and "reconstituted?"
    C. Throughout the novel, Rahel has horrific thoughts and terrifying visions (8, 30, 70, 76, 89, and 214). What can you make of her ideas? Does it fracture or help her understanding of the world?
6. *Assessment of learning*. Students will have recorded and evaluated group discussions. Students will create a portfolio including all journal entries, a 4-6 page formal and thematic analysis of their chosen novel, and a short essay reflecting on the individual growth acquired during the unit. (159-74)

The literature circle option allows students to become empowered readers, thinkers, and communicators. This process of reading, analyzing, and discussing is an invaluable tool for students to learn; Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs encourage

challenging students' achievement. Rigorous college-prep programs—including public schools in Minnesota[2]—have adopted *The God of Small Things* into their curriculum alongside Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude*, and other multicultural and American texts. Additionally, more than 500 American schools have adopted an International Baccalaureate program that requires high school students to read, analyze, and discuss multicultural novels throughout their junior and senior years ("UA International"). For both AP and IB classrooms, the literature circle option encourages students and teachers to create a student-centered level of discourse. Through literature circles, teaching becomes focused on a student learning paradigm, encouraging students to invest in their own learning interests. In doing so, students become responsible and equal participants of their education. Because students can use their own discretion when choosing a novel, the level of emotional investment will, hopefully, increase along with the intellectual development of analyzing issues. Moreover, the literature circle promotes communication between students, providing opportunities to learn through multiple and diverse perspectives. In using Roy's work, as well as other demanding novels, students not only learn about ways in which identity is often fractured by specific social and political incidents, but they negotiate literary connections through various personal and shared experiences.

Although Roy's novel introduces topics of controversy into the classroom, teachers have the opportunity to teach beyond the literature. This, according to Chrissy Cooper in *What to Expect When You're Expected to Teach*, is a "teachable moment": a platform for a safe and intellectual exchange of ideas. By incorporating Roy's work into an AP Literature and Composition curriculum and IB programs, students have the chance to explore topics of diversity on their own terms (with modeling, structure and feedback from the teacher). Literature circles allow students and teachers to engage with the transformation of knowledge and ideas in a non-threatening environment. It is in this type of environment that literature will flourish and fractured identities will begin to mend.

Pairing Texts to Illuminate Religious Identity

Another worthwhile academic risk in the secondary classroom occurs when teachers provide students an environment where they can build connections between contemporary fiction and religious texts. Teaching at the intersection of such works focuses on three main objectives: understanding religious tenets via intertextuality, illuminating the core of faith structures within novels, and adopting a balanced appreciation of the world's major religions. In Rochester, Minnesota's third largest city, an upperclassman honors elective titled "Humanities Search" offers students the opportunity to discover identities within ancient to modern faith structures. While students read about a dozen religions during a semester, this section of our article maintains its focus on one of the oldest, still vibrant faiths: Hinduism (or more properly denoted as Santana Dharma).

In each unit of study, the "Humanities Search" teacher presents religions to students through diverse methods. In addition to the typical honors classroom mix of lecturing, reading, discussing, collaborative learning, and writing, every student signs up to act as the "resident expert" on one religion. Each student accepts the responsibility of conducting extensive research on major tenets (including hero stories; passages from central texts; make up of believers; role of god(s), music, architecture; treatment of women; and purpose behind holidays and rites[3]), delivering a period-long presentation to the class and composing a synthesis essay on how practitioners search for meaning. About halfway through the Hinduism unit, students take a field

trip to Rochester's Samaj Temple, where they witness rites performed by a Hindu priest and spend about an hour interacting with an elder of the community. The teacher pairs a religious text, the Bhagavad Gita, with a fictional novel, Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu*. After watching a children's cartoon interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, students are divided into seven sections, where they read and analyze one specific part of the dialogue in-depth.

The Bhagavad Gita occurs within a foundational epic of India and divulges vital philosophies of the Hindu tradition. Featuring one of Hinduism's main gods, Krishna, as imparting counsel to a human protagonist, Arjuna, the entire text emphasizes the importance of seeking a spiritual guide when facing a moral dilemma. Arjuna struggles with his duty and cannot overcome his doubt alone. To explain the timeless significance of this predicament, Sanskrit scholar Phulgenda Sinha expounds an analogy:

> Sometimes a man is faced with a situation in which it is very difficult to decide what to do. If he acts one way, it will be bad; if he acts another way, it will be worse. What should he do in that condition? This condition of indecisiveness might be very tortuous, painful, and disturbing. The remedy for sorrow resulting from such a situation was not provided by Kapila or Patanjali [ancient Hindu philosophers]. Thus, Vyasa felt that unless an answer to this type of sorrow were provided, man would still not be free from sorrow and would not enjoy a healthy and happy life. (77)

Arjuna's circumstance in the Gita extends to students facing moral decisions and those who are trying to determine their identity.

Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu* transplants the context and wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita into a modern setting, an apartment complex in Bombay, India. Suri continually reminds readers that the present nature of the contemporary world necessitates a revisiting of ancient texts for guidance. Foreboding passages, such as when one character, Mr. Pathak, realizes that "even when he thought he had found it [peace], like this morning, there was always something that caused it to be short-lived" (Suri 33), ground the recurrence of doubt that characters and readers carry. Although Arjuna found inner peace after understanding his *dharma* (duty) and acting in accordance with it, and although Suri leads his characters through that struggle as well, peace is not achieved on any level at the conclusion of Suri's novel. This open-ended conclusion engages students to dissect their own interpretations of characters and applications of religious tenets.

When scaffolding discussions, a teacher models, invites and challenges students to examine text-based interpretations of characters and to practice applying religious tenets to the characters' lives. For instance, a few chapters into the novel, students spend one class period "in the mind of" a particular family or character. The prompt to start this activity assigns the character(s) and offers direction to each group of students:

> *For the rest of the hour, the women in your group need to think like Mrs. Jalal and the guys in your group must get into the mind of Mr. Jalal. Work through the below questions first, then start talking through the motivations behind* ***your*** *actions.*
>
> 1. *Determine how your character literally/symbolically fits as a representation of one (or more) of the "purposes of life" (ex: Artha).*
> 2. *What path to liberation would work best for your character? Why?*

3. *Trace interaction with specific gods (ex: Lakshmi) or pujas (rituals) that your character has or fails to have.*
4. *Select at least one quote to best describe your character thus far in the novel.*

The next time class meets, students are jigsawed into groups where each character from the novel is represented. This follow-up discussion keeps the students thinking like their character would. They discuss predictions of what they may do next and share self-evaluations of how closely they have been upholding their religion. Students often end up speaking for their particular character throughout subsequent discussions; such an action is an unintended benefit of this activity.

Throughout the Hinduism unit when students cite certain flashbacks contained within the novel, they provide deeper understandings for why the characters act the way they do. Four families reside in a typical, inner-city building: the Hindu Asranis and Pathaks share a kitchen between their flats on the first floor, the Muslim Jalals inhabit the second floor, and the widower Vinod Tanega lives as a hermit on the third floor. A deathly ill Vishnu—a mischievous drunk during the flashbacks—earned the right to squat on the stairway landing between the first level and the street. Although neither of the Hindu wives are happy about this arrangement, "[s]ince nobody actually owned the landing, it was clear that all inhabitation rights to it now belonged to Vishnu; it would have been ridiculous to usurp this order" (Suri 17). During discussions, past students have proposed that Vishnu ought to maintain the order of the entire complex if he functions a symbol of the god Vishnu. Trained to ground their arguments with evidence from the religious and contemporary texts, students use both to debate Vishnu's ability to uphold worldly defined and expected duties.

Considering students have been pre-taught the Bhagavad Gita's emphasis on the equality between beings and the highest end existing as a faith-filled experience of the Atman (the spirit that all living beings share) within others, every semester numerous students are not surprised that the thieving, prostitute-loving, seemingly lazy Vishnu serves as the conduit for spiritual growth. Krishna repeatedly addresses the importance of knowing god and seeing him in all things of this world, which is the great mystery that transpires behind knowledge. Therefore Krishna states, "I am impartial to all creatures, / and no one is hateful or dear to me; / but men devoted to me are in me, / and I am within them" (trans. Stoler 9.29). Depending on the issues that students raise, the paradox of the caste system may be divulged here: if people follow Krishna, all beings ought to be treated fairly, so one then cannot justify the treatment of Untouchables. Past students have grabbled with this problem. Some have arrived at the thought that Suri tries to represent impartiality by describing Mr. Jalal's reverence for Vishnu, whom Jalal feels has entered a sacred state.

Students also uncover the contradiction between actions and motivation by studying the characters created by Suri, for neither Jalal nor his Hindu neighbors reveal complete respect for the doctrines of the Gita. To aggravate the situation, Jalal also has not gained the trust of his Hindu neighbors before assuming his self-determined *dharma* as prophet; his character remains consistently earnest and self-assured during the climatic mob scene: "I am convinced, absolutely convinced, that there is only one course of action that can save us all—to follow the directive that Vishnu has asked me to convey to you" (Suri 244). Hindu scholar Phulgenda Sinha asserts what Jalal has neglected to realize: "the growth of a civilization is rooted in what it has learned from its past. The past becomes educational and inspirational only when it commands the trust and respect of the generations that follow. Without trust, even the most treasured ideas and

teachings get rejected" (147). Although he means well, Jalal shares the Gita's revered vision in a counter-intuitive manner, which incites the distrust of others.

Scenes such as these are popular instances where students take the opportunity to self-analyze and incorporate lessons from the novel and from religion to expand on their own identities as members of a faith or community. Individual response papers[4] serve as one outlet for personal connections. A previous student related to Jalal's struggle: "In my life I want to be the person that doesn't fit the mold. I don't want to be someone that is predictable and expected. I want to have unique quirks and qualities, and I want to be able to fit in any group/situation." Her conjunction choice of "and" instead of "but" hints that this student internalized discussions of paradoxes in faith and views searching outside of one's condoned faith as admirable.

Reading Indian novels helps expand students' understanding of the actual tenets behind Hinduism and initiates increasing open-mindedness toward other religions that have caught negative attention in the media or in politics. In many parts of the world, religious identity links inextricably with personal identity. Therefore, educating students on various religious tenets not only encourages them to think of their own experiences with spirituality, but it enhances their cultural/global awareness and sensitivity.

Transitioning Readers into Cultural and Personal Identity

Offering engaging texts that also challenge students' academic abilities needs to occur at the middle school level. Current research about middle school students shows a need and interest for readers to not only comprehend what they are reading but to be able to connect to it on global and personal levels as well. However, teachers face a persistent difficulty in selecting texts that expand our students' learning horizons and offer broader cultural perspectives. The limited inclusion of Indian novels and other multicultural texts reflects teachers' hesitancy in the ritual of text adoption. Selection of literature has been and continues to be an ongoing topic of many studies and scholarly articles relating to reading practices and middle school students. Teachers' perceptions of middle school students in the English and Language Arts classroom continue to be impacted by a view of their students as readers "in transition" (Ivey & Broaddus 68). This idea of transition is represented in not only the physical move from elementary to middle schools but additionally in students' shifting literary interests. Students in middle school are often viewed as "in transition," which themes of personal and cultural identity found throughout novels and stories within the genre of multicultural literature reflect. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake,* particularly speaks to readers in transition.

Approaches to teaching multicultural literature in order to create a global classroom are not pedagogically ground-breaking; however, many teachers continue to overlook these texts for our "transitional" middle school students. Through the context and teaching of identity, we have the potential to help our students find a place where they fit into complex novels. Donna Alvermann summarizes the importance of identity in relation to literature as being "ways of seeing, acting, believing, thinking and speaking that make it possible for us to recognize (and be recognized by) others like ourselves" (679). For middle school students, eighth grade in particular is a time of transition, not only academically but also in students' personal lives and experiences. Selecting novels carefully empowers the teacher's ability of engaging students. Multicultural literature enables students to take ownership of their reading and allows them to "deal with texts in complex ways" (Ivey & Broaddus 71), which fosters heightened textual engagement. The themes of cultural and personal identity in multicultural literature mirror students' own situations that connect them to a greater worldview and "open doors" through

"ideas and insights of other adolescent [characters]" (Landt 691).

Spaces of transitional identity and recognition of self are frequently portrayed and illustrated by Gogol, who struggles to situate himself between two worlds and two identities: the American culture and society, which he understands and accepts as Nikhil, and his Indian heritage, which knows him as his good name Gogol. Gogol's exchange with a teacher illustrates the double names (both Gogol and Nikhil) that Gogol identifies with:

> . . . when they are alone, Mrs. Lapidus asks,
> "Are you happy to be entering elementary school, Gogol?"
> "My parents want me to have another name in school."
> "And what about you Gogol? Do you want to be called by another name?"
> Gogol picks up a pencil, grips it tightly, and forms the letters of the only word he has learned, thus far to write from memory. (Lahiri 59)

This passage also presents an opportunity for students to relate Gogol's formation of his identity to their own lives and provides students an introduction to self-exploration of the formation of personal identity. Having students conduct research into the meanings and origins behind their own names creates a foundation for activities about naming, identity, and personal reflections. Additionally, Lahiri's novel provides a variety of activities through which students can explore and connect with multicultural literature through the contextual lens of personal identity. A few suggested activities include free-association about an elementary school experience when students felt uncomfortable with their own name, heritage or other aspect of identity or family; students could conduct an interview with a family member about the story of their name and the specific reason they were given it; and students could be assigned to small groups to discuss, compare and contrast issues of identity presented other passages or stories, such as Adeline Yen Mah's *Chinese Cinderella: The Story of an Unwanted Daughter* and Suzanne Staple's *Under the Persimmon Tree*, where the main characters also confront uncomfortable experiences involving their names.

These themes of transition and personal and cultural identity are simply presented and exemplified by Lahiri. Lahiri's depictions of cultural situations and familial expectations are represented in the Ganguli family's experience from India as they immigrate to America. The Ganguli family is frequently depicted as one constantly transitioning and transforming themselves, navigating between both Bengali and American traditions; however, the role of personal identity is ultimately left to the character of Gogol. He represents how personal relationships, family, and friendships often initially define children and young adults. Gogol's striving to define himself through his own personal experiences reaches out to the typical middle school student, who is testing out his or her individuality. Throughout the novel, Gogol assumes various identities based on the recognition he receives from those around him. Students can most readily identify with Gogol's experiences:

> At seven-thirty the bell rings, and the front door is left open as people and cold air stream into the house. Guests are speaking in Bengali, hollering arguing, talking on top of one another . . . in so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another...And yet these events formed Gogol, shaped him, determined how he is. (Lahiri 285-287)

In his attempts at understanding his culture and heritage, these same connections mirror his own formation of personal identity. Gogol literally opens doors that serve to bridge his Indian heritage with his American identity. Students can relate to his experiences as a young boy and his transition into adulthood by analyzing how his identity is formed by those around him and his cultural traditions, in conjunction with how he views himself and, in turn, is viewed by others. *The Namesake* challenges students' perspectives of identity and literature by engaging them to draw parallels in their own process of forming a new sense of self, one that is separate from their parents, friends and social perceptions.

The world that Lahiri offers to students also creates a larger global perspective that extends beyond the four walls of the classroom and students' immediate community. Susan Landt further echoes this global viewpoint in her article, "Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents," where she posits that students who read about diverse cultures "discover similarities in their own" and "look beyond the differences and take a step toward appreciating cultural connectedness" (682). In an increasingly diverse world, students at a younger age need to be able to make connections between literature and their daily lives. The earlier students practice identifying with individuals in literature and develop a better understanding of cultural awareness and strengthen their ability to identify with those of different backgrounds. The teaching of personal identity within multicultural literature—specifically illustrated within Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*—helps transition middle school students into not only more diverse readers but more cognizant global participants.

Bringing Indian Literature to the Teaching Front

In Jhumpa Lahiri's most recent collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth,* she begins with an epigraph from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom House":

> Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike roots into unaccustomed earth. (qtd. in Lahiri)

In addition to providing a thematic level of understanding in Hawthorne and Lahiri's works, her epigraph underscores the importance of evaluating the instructional texts we use. As authors of this article, we believe that incorporating Indian literature into multicultural curricula allows students and teachers to collaboratively "strike roots into unaccustomed earth." The increasing emergence and popularity of Indian literature inspires students and teachers to seek refuge in other cultures and customs, to move across oceans and into human hearts.

While a wealth of Indian novels would enrich any secondary curriculum, the three we elected to highlight speak directly—yet diversely—to the concepts of identity. The mature situations encountered in Roy's *The God of Small Things* challenge readers to reason through global issues that socially impact cultures and individuals. Students are encouraged to think about the traumatic events in the novel as metaphors for larger global and cultural issues. By understanding the ways in which characters become fractured, students can apply their knowledge to other literatures and to their own lives. Suri's *The Death of Vishnu* engages a sensitive reading of religious identity. Focusing specifically on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims within the novel, teachers can lead students toward investigating the historical and religious identities of other cultures in order to forge a bond between religions. Lahiri's work,

more than Suri and Roy, encourages readers to personally identify with fundamental human experiences. Although *The Namesake* details an immigrant experience, it introduces the understanding of one's own identity. Students can absorb the author's pathos through her use of simplistic, honest, and pure writing. We deeply care about the future of our students, and teaching literature from diverse birthplaces adds richness to the soil that we tend in our classrooms.

Notes

1. The theory behind our beliefs stems partly from readings found in Bahktin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act,* which outlines three states of "being" that characterize the "uniqueness" of an individual through both passive and active thoughts and actions.

2. For an example of a course "offered to high school seniors in the top 30% of their class" that uses Roy's novel, please view Peifer's syllabus: http://central2.spps.org/uploads/CIS_syllabus.pdf.

3. More detailed information on the presentation and other aspects of the course may be perused via Mayo High School's website: http://www.rochester.k12.mn.us/se3bin/clientgenie.cgi?G5button=5093.

4. The assignment directions for individual response papers: Compose a reflection for each major novel read (*The Death of Vishnu, Siddhartha, Tao of Pooh, The Journey of Ibn Fattoum,* and Jewish/Christian choice novel). Each paper is **due** a week after assigned date for conclusion of novel (ex: *Siddhartha* paper due Thurs. Nov. 4th) Select 3-5 quotes that "speak" to you on some level. Compose a concise (less than 2 page) response that incorporates those quotes into a culminating statement on how this novel shapes your understanding of a specific belief system, religion in general (defined as broadly as is suitable for communication your current understanding), or your personal journey. Let your thoughts take you where they wish; do not self-censor any insights or questions!

Works Cited

Alvermann, Donna E. "Reading Adolescents' Reading Identities: Looking Back to See Ahead." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 44.8 (May 2001): 676-690. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holoquist. Trans. Vadim Liapunov. Austin: U of Texas P, 1993. Print.

The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War. Trans. Barbara Stoler Miller. New York: Bantam, 1986. Print.

Cooper, Chrissy. "Teachable Moments." *What to Expect When You're Expected to*

Teach. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2002. Print.

Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups.* Ontario: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002. Print.

Ivey, Gary & Karen Broaddus. "Tailoring the Fit: Reading Instruction and Middle School Readers." *International Reading Association* 54. 1 (Sep. 2000): 68-87. Print.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Print.

---. *Unaccustomed Earth*. Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Print.

Landt, Susan M. "Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents: A Kaleidoscope of Opportunity." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49.8 (May 2006): 690-697. Print.

Mohammedzedah, Behbood. "Incorporating Multicultural Literature in English Language Teaching Curriculum." *Procedia* (2009): 23-27. Print.

Mura, David. "Living in the Global Village." *Braided Lives.* St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Commission, 1991. Print.

Peifer, Lindsay M. "Introduction to Literature- English Lit 1001." *University of Minnesota*. n.d. Web. 27 Dec. 2010.

Roy, Arundhati. "Come September." Lensic Performing Arts Center, Santa Fe, NM. 18 September 2002. Keynote Speech.

---. *The God of Small Things*. United Kingdom: Harper Perennial, 1998. Print.

Sinha, Phulgenda. *The Gita as It Was*. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986. Print.

Suri, Manil. *The Death of Vishnu*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. Print.

"2010 Minnesota Academic Standards-English Language Arts K-12." *Minnesota Department of Education.* MDE. 9 Nov. 2010. Web. 01 Dec. 2010.

"UA International Baccalaureate Programme." *UA Schools.* Upper Arlington City School District. n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

Towards Segregation of Native American Literature Instruction in Secondary English Classrooms

Daryl Parks

> *The Indians survived our open intention of wiping them out, and since the tide turned they have even weathered our good intentions toward them, which can be much more deadly.*
>
> --John Steinbeck (326)

Act 1: A non-descript, high school English classroom, eight days before the first day of school.

Karl Peterson is an eager, new English teacher at Inner-Ring Suburban High School in Minnesota. Of his many plans, one thing that his teaching program encouraged him to do is use "multicultural literature" in his classroom. He might use Toni Morrison or Cisneros… or, hmm… maybe some Indian…errr….Native American literature from the new Minnesota Common Core Standards. Hmm… he'd really liked the book Black Elk Speaks back in his freshman year of college; the Indians had really been so far ahead of things on so many things like spirituality and the environment. Hmm… and in his Young Adult Literature course, he'd skimmed Lipsyte's The Chief, a book that showed how native bravery had overcome hardships. He could use that with his struggling readers in a unit about overcoming the odds. His students could learn about the environment and courage even as they learned about Native American culture.

Karl is exploring the desk in his new room and mumbling aloud about the use of multicultural texts. He wonders if the school has any classroom sets.

Enter, Cynthia Jones, the English teacher from the room next door, where she has taught for the past thirty-two long years.

Cynthia: Hi Karl. Hadn't seen you since the interview, so I thought I'd stop by to see if you needed any materials… or any nearly-retired veteran teacher tips! (*Smiling, with her hand extended)* You might recall; I'm Cynthia.

Karl: *(Shakes her hand*) Sure, thanks Cynthia. No big needs, really. But you did catch me thinking about this: Do we by chance have any multicultural novels? I'm teaching a regular American Lit and one for struggling readers. I've got about 34 students in my second hour. I'd like to add something diverse to augment the textbook.

Cynthia: (*Pausing*)… umm… sure, probably… there are quite a few boxes in the bookroom with novels that teachers have used over the years. I can check for you. *(Cynthia gives him a playful stare)* So… thinking you'll shake things up a bit, eh?

Karl: Umm…not really… *(Grinning)* I'm just hoping teach some diverse novels, not start

a political party.

Cynthia: *(Laughing)* No, of course; it's just the way you said "multicultural," like you've got an agenda or something. I personally think it's a great idea, but I always caution new teachers not too open too many cans of worms in the classroom too fast. That's tip one!

Karl: (*Laughing*) No need to worry about that. But I would appreciate it if you could help me find some books. Hmm, maybe I could get a "good" Native American title or two. Do you think we might have something like *Black Elk Speaks* for the regular class or Lipsyte's *The Chief* that I could use with struggling readers?

Cynthia: Well I'll get back there and take a look before classes start up. *(Pause)…* Can I ask a question, though? I'm just curious about the way you said that: So, how do you define a "good" Indian author or novel? I mean, there are lots out there…

Karl: *(Looks away, thinking)* Yeah… umm…

Cynthia: … and when you find it, what are your thoughts on how to teach it? What kind of approach will you use? I mean, not that's there a right or wrong here… I'm just saying…

Karl: Well… (*Still processing her questions*) yeah… first, I think it's good for students to learn about Native American culture. Second, and maybe most importantly, it's good literature: quality writing, universal themes… and I like to use a lot of reader-response activities to connect it to students' lives. Those approaches can really help students engage and make relevant meanings from the text. Surely you agree that letting students read about other cultures is the most…

BING! BING!
(Suddenly, the voices of Native American authors Craig Womack and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn blare over the school's public address system and interrupt the discussion, which is really odd since their primary audience is tribal First Nation members and higher academia, but anyway…)

Womack/Cook-Lynn: "We regret this interruption… (throat clearing cough)… ATTENTION. KARL. WE ARE SORRY TO ANNOUNCE THAT YOU ARE ANOTHER WELL-MEANING TEACHER WITH NO IDEA WHAT THE HELL HE IS DOING…"

(Karl stares into the distant eyes of Cynthia. He's bewildered, but listens even more intently to their blaring, somewhat synchronized voices. He looks around the room expecting to see Ashton Kutcher or, given Cynthia's age, Allan Funt.)

… AS YOU DON'T EVEN CONSIDER TRIBAL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT WHAT MIGHT CONSTITUTE A NATIVE AUTHOR, A NATIVE TEXT, OR A NATIVE INTERPRETATION…

At that moment, Cynthia reached up, and with years of practiced experience flips the switch to "OFF." The room falls silent.

Karl: Hey, what are you doing? Those voices, those people… are … are… talking directly to me!

Cynthia: (*Smiling and shaking her head*) It always seems that way at first! After a few years, you learn to tune out that loudspeaker. If it's important, it'll show up in our mailboxes in the morning. That's tip number two!

Karl: (*Frantically*) Could you just please turn it back on? I think it could really be meaningful!

(*Cynthia lets out a "hrmph," walks over to the wall, returns the switch to the 'ON' position. She moves back near the door, and looks down the hall trying to get the attention of the custodian who is putting the final coat of wax on the floor at the end of the hallway.)*

"…AND ON TUESDAY, SPIRIT WEEK WILL CONTINUE WITH COWBOY DAY; DON'T FORGET TO WEAR YOUR HATS. FINALLY, KARL, BE SURE TO READ THIS

(*The rest of the Parks MEJ article begins spewing page by page from the fresh air vent in the wall above Karl's desk. Karl runs and scoops pages up off the floor as the voices continue*)

… OR YOU'RE DOOMED TO PERPETUATE THE VERY SYSTEM THAT YOU THINK YOU'RE INVOLVED IN CHANGING. (*Karl looks bewildered as he reaches under his desk for the last page.*) ALSO…(*The sound of paper shuffling*) THE LIBRARIAN WISHES TO REMIND ALL FACULTY THAT SHE PREFERS TO BE CALLED THE "MEDIA SPECIALIST" THIS YEAR. HAVE A GREAT OPENING WEEK, EVERYONE. (*Silence*)

(Cynthia catches the custodian's attention, waves with one hand, and holds her nose with the other while shaking her head back and forth. As Cynthia turns around and returns her attention to Karl, he is now slumped in his desk chair with his head bobbing in disbelief).

Karl: Did… did… did you see that? Did you? That paper, it just came blowing out all over the floor. I… I... picked it all up.

Cynthia: (*Looking shocked*) That is a surprise! Usually Lenny and the crew have everything spotless by now. Anyway, like I was sayin', just don't try to take on too much too soon. That's tip number three. (*Turning to leave)* I'll head on back and let you get your work done. I'll follow up on those multicultural novels when I can.

Karl: (*Still confused*). Um, yeah… thanks Cynthia. It seems that I've got some fresh reading to do before I follow up on those (*He looks down at this MEJ article*). Will you be in your room working on your syllabi this week?

Cynthia: (*Soberly*) No, I'll be immersing myself in the new Common Core Standards. (*Pause)* Ha! (*She laughs)* Gotcha! (*Smiling broadly*) Actually, I've got a little copying to do, but my goal before school starts is to start working on my retirement numbers. Bye!

(*Karl turns his eyes to the pages that have arrived from the fresh-air vent overhead. He reads…)*

Introduction

The inclusion of Native American literature within the classroom may be understood as more than the mere changing of book titles on a course syllabus; instead, it is a move steeped in history and the politics of many groups. The pages that follow provide a brief overview of some of the common conversations related to texts, interpretation, and pedagogy before considering the writings of Craig Womack and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, two Native American authors whose provocative views regarding the relationship between Native American texts, authors, and the political concerns of First Nation tribes may serve as a sobering wake-up call for well-meaning English teachers such as Karl.

The context of Karl's push for multicultural literature

The political nature of curriculum is well-documented by Jurgen Habermas and many others. Perhaps no classroom within the school is more culturally significant than the English classroom in which the texts selected for study are understood as having great influence in shaping students' worldviews; text selection has been part of the "culture wars" stretching from the 1980's to today. Theorists such as E. D. Hirsch and Alan Bloom argued for a fixed cultural literacy in which the European literary canon would be the primary foundation upon which literature instruction rests. In contrast, scholars such as James Banks argued for an inclusive canon that does not perpetuate a singular cultural heritage but incorporates authors, experiences, and perspectives of multiple cultures into the classroom (5-7); authors and publishers such as Rick Simonson and Scott Walker argued that "multicultural literacy" is essential for accurately representing the breadth of contributions to culture within the United States.

Those supporting the use of multicultural literature cite a variety of reasons. Banks argued for multicultural education due to its transformational power in a democratic society; multicultural literature can serve the goal of a more just nation. Simonson and Walker argued that the exclusion of females and authors of color within the canon fails to reflect the lack of change that has taken place within the US, and that this is a result of "Eurocentric bias" (xii). In today's teacher education programs, the emphasis on our changing society, the needs of diverse learners, and the desire to engage "all" students finds English teachers both well-meaning and well-intentioned when adding multicultural literature to their classrooms, a laudable goal for Karl and others.

In common use, however, the phrase "multicultural literature" is essentially pejorative. Typically, it still holds up a standard of the white, male, heterosexual literary tradition as normative, and lumps those outside of its experiences into a single category of "otherness" that frequently overlooks those literatures' abilities to stand independently and within the fullness of their own cultural traditions; African-American literature is not Asian literature, is not Native literature, and is not Latina literature. Yet, the multicultural moniker would lead the hearer to believe that somehow these texts are similar as they function merely as a colorful variance from the canonical norm. The teacher who incorporates such a cognitive frame into literature instruction functions as little more than an interloping tour guide who points out to students the ways in which these multicultural "others" bear similarity and difference to the mainstream; the majority population remains the primary focus of inquiry.

The undercurrent of multicultural education yearns for an inclusive, just America. It represents a move towards bringing all of the marginalized, disenfranchised voices into discussion of a unified America. But what of those whose goals are not necessarily within "the American Dream," but apart from it? What of those who don't want in, but want out? Clearly, this is a point of demarcation when combining contemporary Native American concerns with African-American or Latino; while lawsuits and protests in the latter communities tend toward equality and inclusion, the consistent political voice and legal negotiating of Native America is for separatism, as Cook-Lynn attests:

> In practice, multicultural education has not and will not cast much light on the centuries' long struggle for sovereignty faced by the people of the First Nation of America. Its very nature, ironically, is in conflict with the concept of American Indian sovereignty… (91)

Regarding current practices in relationship to Native literature, Cook-Lynn's voice resonates with a call against this random merging of cultural groups into a new category. She writes:

> Because of flaws in pedagogy and criticism, much modern fiction written in English by American Indians is being used as the basis for the cynical absorption into the "melting pot," pragmatic inclusion in the canon, and involuntary unification of an American national literary voice. (96)

As the First Nation tribes seek sovereignty, they, not well-intentioned teachers, should certainly be afforded a voice when considering the questions posed by Cynthia: What constitutes a Native American author or novel? How is such a text to be interpreted and taught? How might it reflect (or not) the specific culture or the politics of the tribe to which it is connected? Though the potential answers to such questions are broad and complex, value exists in considering seminal voices in the conversation.

Craig Womack, in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism,* and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegnar and Other Essays,* are two such voices. Though their audience is primarily Creek and Sioux tribal readers and extended First Nation communities, and while their emphasis is first to argue for the foundation of tribal literary traditions and a more active, autonomous voice within academia, their ideas are likely to resonate with contemporary literature teachers both in and out of those contexts.

The first point of concern with Karl's perspective on Native America occurs long before he arrives at questions of authors and texts. When he notes that Natives, "had really been so far ahead on so many things…" he considers Native America in the past tense, a view that Womack describes as widespread and misinformed (28). Part of this misguided notion arises from the premise that the "pure" native culture was only the one that existed prior to European contact (65), which leads Womack to wonder why "Indian cultures are the only cultures where it is assumed that if they change they are no longer a culture?" (31). European America and its numerous, notable western writers perpetuate romantic eulogies of the native cultures that have passed (Cook-Lynn 31). When Womack writes, "The tendency to put native people in this reductive tainted/untainted framework occurs, at least partially, because Indians are thought of not in their true legal status, which is as members of nations, but as cultural artifacts" (65), he identifies and refutes America's (and Karl's) faulty zeitgeist.

Having established that Native American Tribes are alive, well, and seeking the full implementation of sovereignty, it is understandable that Womack and Cook-Lynn call for the establishment and recognition of a native literary tradition that is independent of the US canon, as most nations would. While teachers like Karl hope for Native literature to be acknowledged as canon-worthy, Womack applauds a form of segregation, writing:

> The primary purpose of this study is not to argue for canonical inclusion or opening up native literature to a broader audience. I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas. We *are* the canon. (6)

Such a position forces a new way to think about native texts: they are not a subgroup of multicultural literature, but contemporary expressions of rooted, tribal literary histories expressed in both oral and written forms. The consideration of a Native text should not be first in its relationship to European or American literary history, but in relationship to Native literary histories. This is especially significant given the current political and legal battles in which specific tribes engage, as Womack writes of the Creek tribe:

> When Creek people assume they have the inherent right to interpret their own literature and history, even when their interpretations differ from those of dominant culture, they are setting themselves apart as a nation of people with distinct worldviews that deserve to be taken seriously. This is an important exercise in sovereignty. (29)

A Native canon is not about enacting a new push toward multiculturalism in classrooms; a Native canon is about strengthening tribal independence.

Karl should also reconsider his laissez-faire use of contemporary trends in interpretation and textual criticism. Womack and Cook-Lynn propose a new direction towards restoring the primacy of the authors in relationship to meaning being constructed within a work, a call usually in contradiction with a postmodern age. Womack argues that the establishment of an authentic "national literary identity" is essential in order to "reaffirm the real truth about our place in history" (5). In order to establish such a place, Womack alludes, those involved with the texts must ignore the deconstructionist's cry of "the author is dead" and restore attention to the author of the text and the tribal context of such. She explains: "So, at least until we get our stories told, especially in terms of establishing a body of Native criticism in relation to 19th century writing, postmodernism may have some limitations in regard to its applicability to native scholarship" (4). For Karl, a reconsideration of the everyday use of reader-response or new critical approaches, for example, is likely in order. If heeding Womack and Cook-Lynn's call, he will move towards understanding the centrality of the author and his or her tribal context in the work before contemplating the use of other popular interpretive strategies.

The ancestry of the author is primary concern for Womack and Cook-Lynn as they seek to strengthen and construct tribal canons. Both authors argue that America's understanding of Native American stories have come too frequently from non-native voices, individuals that claim native status or expertise, then make a career of speaking on behalf of specific tribes or nations. Womack explains, "I feel that native perspectives have to do with allowing Indian people to

speak for themselves; with prioritizing native voices" (4). Given this maxim, authors who lack tribal affiliations should not be regarded as creating Native American literature or authoring Native American criticism. Because a text or analysis infuses native characters, perspectives, histories, or themes does not make it Native literature; a book *about* Native Americans is different than a book *by* Native Americans. Karl might consider such distinctions.

Womack acknowledges, however, that tribal authors may certainly possess a variety of native perspectives--"rez, urban, full blood, mixed blood, language speakers, non-speakers, gay, straight, and many other possibilities" (2). Yet, cultural credentials alone do not mean that the texts they author are in synch with the emerging traditions for which Womack and Cook-Lynn argue. For example, in assessing the writing of Alice Callahan's *Wynema*, Womack affirms her Creek identity, yet he problematizes her novel "because of its failure to engage Creek culture, history, and politics" (107). Womack and Cook-Lynn both struggle to find tribal function in Native-authored texts that are not firmly rooted in tribal landscapes and concerns. This perspective is not intended to dismiss Callahan or her work, but to clarify the parameters for which they argue in the construction of tribal canons, parameters in which the credentials of the author alone do not make a text representative of a tribe or tied to contemporary tribal political interests.

Cook-Lynn critiques Native authors whose texts may be described as culturally rooted but do not address greater tribal considerations within those works. She struggles to embrace literature that engages some aspects of tribal landscapes and culture, such as "loss, exile, identity, and degeneration" (89), but glosses over those elements that are less palatable to the mainstream, such as "the sovereign rights and obligations of citizens of the first nation of America" (89). She finds herself ultimately concerned with this: "How does the tribe benefit from this text?" Womack echoes that America "loves Indian culture; America is much less enthusiastic about Indian land title" (11). Cook-Lynn encourages increased scrutiny of Native-authored texts to assess the motivation of the author as related to the needs of tribal concerns. For Cook-Lynn, the text should be more attentive to tribal concerns than those of a literary agent or a broad book-buying public. Teachers such as Karl would do well to acknowledge such complex conversations around both authorship and tribally-representative texts (or not) in which Native literatures live.

A tradition of functional Native literary criticism can more fully emerge with the establishment of a tribal and pan-tribal native canon. Cook-Lynn argues that "…individual works are comprehensible only within the context of the economic, behavioral, and political forces of the culture from which they emerge..." (77). Womack concurs, while also proposing a more intentional reclamation and translation of tribes' oral tales that would allow structures and symbols to be teased out, framed in political contexts (64), and used to interpret future native works (61). Womack writes:

> We scholars haven't yet done enough to articulate how the oral tradition provides the principles for interpreting our national literatures—the genres; the unique approaches to character development, plot, theme, setting, and so on; the effect on the structuring of stories; the philosophies that come out of this tradition; the contexts it provides for understanding politics, religion, and society. (61)

These authors strongly encourage the interpretation of tribal literatures to take place within the growing tribal canon, the culture, the political, spiritual, and social histories, and within the body

of symbols, genres, and interests of the tribes from which they are birthed. Only within this framework and context can (should?) native meaning be made. Karl, take note.

Conclusion

Common practices for Native American literature selection and use in today's secondary English classrooms should be reconsidered when placed alongside the arguments of Womack and Cook-Lynn. Teachers like Karl would do well to explore the complexities and conversations of the tribal nations in which such texts are rooted, nations whose authors, interpretations, strategies for instruction, and ultimate aims usually differ from those of non-Native teachers. As secondary teachers of literature become purposeful regarding the genuine, effective incorporation of Native American literatures, there will hopefully be less focus on the abstract broadening of a classroom canon and instead increased focus on tribal voices that call for the creation of a Native one.

(Karl stretches. He looks up soberly from the pages at the PA speaker and air vent above his desk. He shakes his head in a slow, contemplative manner, releases a long sigh, and rises to stretch. As he wanders around his classroom adjusting the desks, he seems to arrive at a fresh sense of resolve.)

Act II: Karl Peterson's High School English classroom

(One week has passed. Karl is teetering atop a desk taking down an old Tiger Woods poster. In walks a grinning Cynthia…)

Cynthia: Karl, how are you? I just wanted to stop by to see if you have everything ready for school tomorrow… and to announce a little surprise!

Karl: Hi Cynthia! Yep, I've got everything pretty much ready (*Karl steps down gingerly*): syllabi are copied, seating charts are ready, and I'm just putting the final touches on the room. And did you say surprise?

Cynthia: Yes, I did; check these out! (*Cynthia pulls from her denim bookbag a handful of paperback novels. She spreads them out on the desk like a card dealer*.) I'm like a multicultural novel Old Country Buffet! Isn't it great? I looked through some bookcases and found a variety of novels: some of them are Native American! Just let me know which one you'd like, and I think I can rustle up a classroom set for you within a week, pardner.

Karl: (*Grinning*) I appreciate it, I really do. But I think I'd better take a slight raincheck before I place the order. The truth is that I've been doing a little research since we spoke last, and I'm putting a new plan into place before I incorporate them in the classroom. I'm really excited!

Cynthia: (*Taking a chair near his desk)* Oh, do tell what you've learned in one week on the job! (*As Karl begins to talk, Cynthia reaches into her purse and takes out notepaper and a pencil*)

(*Behind the muted microphone in the principal's office, Craig Womack and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn watch Karl's classroom on the security screen*)

Womack: Pass me the popcorn and grab me a tissue. It's time for the DENOUEMENT! I think Cynthia is going to learn something from this kid!

Cook-Lynn: Are you kidding? She's a foil! A flat character! A grizzled veteran! Parks won't let her change. You'll see.

Karl: Awesome! Okay, so check this out. (*Karl's eyes widen and his voice quicken*) In the past week I did some research spawned by the *Minnesota English Journal*. It encouraged me to teach Native American literature, but to do so with increased integrity. In addition to authors Womack and Cook-Lynn, I learned more about these complex issues from Minnesotans like… errr… Leech Lake Ojibewe, David Treuer. I found that while many tribal members and scholars differ on key questions, but they would agree that my … our… multicultural-literature-lumping is problematic. I realize now that my teacher education program could only do so much, and I have much more to do much on my own if I'm going to teach diverse literatures effectively. Would you like me to quickly sketch out my plan?

(Cindy nods blankly and begins jotting down words on the notebook page. Karl jumps up, runs over to the white board, and scribbles furiously with a dry-erase marker)

SHORT TERM PLAN: I will…

-resist my previous thinking of Native tribes in the past tense
-get input from tribal educators/scholars regarding resources. A call or email to a tribal office can get me started
-teach texts in a more tribally specific manner --over 500 tribes! (Reese 247)

(Cynthia has reached down, extracted a calculator, and enters numbers as Karl continues)

-increase attention to the role of the author as situated in both historical and contemporary contexts of the tribe
-use multiple texts of a tribe to reflect diverse perspectives in that community; poems can work well. One text does not reflect the group!
-be willing to address misrepresentations that students <u>will</u> bring to the texts

Karl: (*Loudly*) This is tough because I didn't even realize the faulty approaches I was bringing to the novels! The hard part of this work is that I'm trying to learn things that I don't know I'm missing! Which leads to my long-term plan! (*Karl scribbles furiously)*

(*Cook-Lynn leans in closer to the security camera screen to see what Cynthia is writing*)

LONG TERM PLAN: I will…

-be intentional about growing in Native American awareness.

Karl: (*Rapidly*) I'm enrolling in the Native Studies Summer Workshop for Educators held in June on the White Earth Reservation! I found information at <u>www.stcloudstate.edu/aic</u>:

–**be ready to deconstruct faulty stereotypes about Native groups.**

--better determine my purposes between "reading books *as* culture and seeing books as capable of *suggesting* culture" (Treuer 5)
--understand Native literatures' "immensity and diversity" (Porter and Roemer 4)
--understand the ways Native narrative structures differ from ours (Susag 43)

(*Karl stops writing. He lets out a long sigh and turns back to look at Cynthia.*)

Karl: Whew (*Dropping his arms*), my shoulder is getting sore, but as you can see… (*Karl puts the marker in the rail beneath the white board and turns back to Cynthia.)…* I could go on a long time.

Cynthia: (*Mumbling*) Not really. (*Looking up at Karl*) Not that long.

Karl: No, I agree. Not that long. I mean, not compared to 32 years. But I do have to get started.

Cynthia: I agree. If you get started this first year, you'll be amazed at the growth over time.

Karl: I thought you might understand! Do you think funds will be available from the school to help me with some of these things?

Cynthia: I'm sure of it. The work teachers do is really important. That is why the school district offers generous support.

Karl: For these sorts of staff development opportunities?

Cynthia: (*Looks confused)* Staff development? No, silly, for retirement, of course; they'll match your IRAP up to 4%! Look at column one. (*She thrusts her notebook under his nose*) The way I've figured it, I'm out before Spring Break.

(*Cooke-Lynn to Womack: Told you so; told you so. Womack chuckles, mumbles "I shoulda known… I shoulda known," and gathers up his things. He and Cook-Lynn exit the building.)*

And you? Look at how things start to compound after just 10 years of contributions!

Karl: (*Realizing he'd been giving a soliloquy*) Ummm… yeah. Thanks. I see exactly what you mean. (*Pause*) So, I'll follow up on that book request then after I connect with some tribal resources and get my ducks in a row.

Cynthia: (*Picking up her bag and heading toward the exit as Karl is speaking*) And I'll put these numbers into an Excel sheet and get back to you soon! (*She pauses at the door and turns back*) And, my last tip is this: you can never start planning for your future success too soon, Karl!

Karl: (*Nodding, and looking up at the PA speaker, then down at the paper on his desk*) You're right about that, Cynthia, you're right about that.

Works Cited

Banks, James. "Transforming the Mainstream Curriculum." *Educational Leadership* 51.8 (1994): 4-8. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987. Print.

Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegnar and Other Essays*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. Print.

Habermas, J. *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans. J. Shapiro). London: Heinemann, 1972. Print.

Hirsch, E.D. Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. Print.

Porter, Joy and Kenneth Roemer eds.. *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.

Reese, Debbie. "Proceed With Caution: Using Native American Folktales in the Classroom." *Language Arts* 84.3 (2007): 245-256. Print.

Simonson, Rick & Scott Walker eds. *Multicultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind.* St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1988. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction.* New York: Viking Press, 2002. Print.

Susag, Dorothea M. *Roots and Branches: A Resource of Native American Literature—Themes, Lessons, and Bibliographies*. Urbana: NCTE, 1998. Print.

Treuer, David. *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2006. Print.

Womack, Craig. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.

Multicultural Literature Revisited: New Books and Teaching Ideas

Jacqueline Arnold and Anne O'Meara

How do we teach multicultural literature effectively? What multicultural texts will our students enjoy and learn from? We have each taught literature in secondary schools and college for twenty years or more and find ourselves always looking for new books to introduce to our students. In recent years, the increased publication of multicultural tales, novels, memoirs, and other non-fiction for all readers--from elementary students to adults—has provided us and our students with lots of new areas to pursue. The theme of the 2010 Spring MCTE convention, *Continuity and Change*, led us to reflect on our practices of teaching of multicultural texts. In the sections of the article that follows, we will address ways of reading multicultural literature and ideas for structuring courses to improve student interactions with the literature; we will also offer a list of works and resources we have used in our classes or would consider using.

Introductions

Although we both currently teach at Minnesota State University, Mankato, we began teaching in secondary school. We came to multicultural literature in an effort to find books that would appeal to our students; in Madelia, Mn., a third of Jacqueline's students were Hispanic and at least some of them spoke English as their second language. She still remembers the excitement and interest these students exhibited when they encountered poetry that mixed Spanish with English words (*Cool Salsa*), recognized characters in novels who experienced injustice like they had (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) or even saw portrayals of characters in roles they admired (the 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* film with warring gangs). The way one year's group of eighth grade Hispanic young men would suddenly become very animated and involved in class discussion so clearly expressed the importance, necessity, and motivating power of seeing oneself or one's conditions portrayed in literature.

Lately, we have been teaching multicultural literature at the university at the general education level as well as in upper-division level classes for English majors, pre-service elementary through secondary teachers, and graduate students. We especially want future teachers to become familiar with the literature of diverse cultures so that they will be comfortable teaching it to their students. Many students in southern Minnesota, even in this global news age, are surprised to learn that Japanese American citizens were removed to internment camps during World War II or that tribal reservations were divided into parcels of land and allotted to individual Native Americans in an effort to make them assimilate by owning and farming land; many of these parcels were later bought by lumber companies, railroads, and white settlers when taxes were not paid or poverty forced sales by their Native American owners. Increasingly, too, students of color, particularly Hmong and Hispanic students, find forgotten traditions, beliefs, and tales featured in novels and non-fiction we read in these classes. As our Minnesota population becomes more diverse, we feel it is imperative that all our students have opportunities to see themselves in literature as well as opportunities to understand cultural experiences different from their own.

Teaching multicultural literature is a dynamic endeavor. We are always changing our choices of books, restructuring our courses and assignments, and trying to think of new strategies to challenge our students to move further into books about cultures which may be unfamiliar to them.

Ways of Reading

Authorial Reading vs. Personal Experience

Our student audience (of pre-service teachers) in online multicultural literature courses we teach reflects the racial and class demographics of the teaching profession – generally white and middle class. Several problems predominate in their interactions with the multicultural literature.

One problematic response is that students equate their own experiences with those of characters in the text. Although empathy offers a useful way into texts, it is also important that students differentiate or at least are aware of differences between their own experiences and those of characters in the text so that they participate in the literary experience – one that might be quite different from their own - that the author offers them. For example, in *The Skin I'm In,* author Sharon Flake tells a story of Maleeka, a middle school girl, who is bullied by classmates. Reading the novel evokes moving personal accounts from students about their experiences of having been bullied. But, because of their emotional connection to the story, many white readers fail to look at its particular circumstances: the protagonist is singled out by peers because of her very black skin tone. Flake's story offers readers like the protagonist support in standing up for their own beauty and worth, and at the same time it informs cultural outsiders about the effects of internalized racism.

One way to help students move beyond the personal response – that indicates their engagement in the author's narrative – is after a first reading to invite students to step back from the story and engage in a critical or authorial response – one that seeks to discover the author's purposes for writing the story and the conditions that have given rise to it. In the case of *The Skin I'm In,* for example, the teacher might have students read the New York Public Library chat where Flake states her purpose for writing the novel: "I have a beautiful dark-skinned daughter, and . . . as a black woman I know that if you're dark in our communities, people don't always say nice things about you, so I wanted to deal with that issue . . ." ("Author Chat"). The teacher could also have students view excerpts from the CNN series *Black in America* (2008) about skin tone bias or read research articles that provide statistics indicating how skin tone bias negatively affects individuals' life choices and economic success, statistics that can be found in ADL Curriculum extension activities, such as "Skin Tone Bias Focus on the Research"("Words That Heal") Or instead of moving out of the story, the teacher might invite the students to take a critical stance and move back into the story to examine particular passages that give clues to author themes. For example, in *The Skin I'm In,* the teacher could ask students to consider key passages such as the following one that occurs near the end of the novel when the protagonist, after discovering her own talent for writing, reading Langston Hughes's poetry celebrating blackness, and receiving support from a concerned teacher, finally speaks up for herself: "'Call me by my name! I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I'm black, real black, and if you don't like me, too bad 'cause black is the skin I'm in!'" (Flake 167).

Generalization vs. Differing Perspectives

Another issue is that students might generalize the experiences they read about in one novel as being typical of everyone from a particular group. It is important that teachers offer students opportunities to read the stories of people from diverse groups told from multiple perspectives. For example, students should read about Bobby, the middle class protagonist of

Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* whose parents are able to offer him financial and emotional support, as well as the story of Jacqueline Woodson's young protagonists in *Miracle's Boys* who must be totally self-reliant in their struggle just to make ends meet. Additionally, just as students learn about life on one reservation through the eyes of Junior in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian,* they should also read the perspective offered by Cynthia Leitich Smith in *Rain is Not My Indian Name* of growing up in rural small town America where dating, town gossip, and coping with loss are more important than one's Indian heritage. In a recent class after students read *Rain is Not My Indian Name, s*ome complained that they had not learned enough from the book about growing up Indian, only to have others make the point that there is no one experience of growing up Indian in the US.

Individual Prejudice vs. Institutional Discrimination

A final point is that some students might attribute racism to individual prejudice rather than seeing that racism is institutionalized. Some good books that help students see racism as being part of a larger structure are *Monster* and *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* by Walter Dean Myers for middle school readers and memoirs like Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running* and Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand*. All of these works highlight how societal institutions are set up to make it extremely difficult for young men of color to escape imprisonment and experience success in our society. (A useful description of this stance is found in Richard Beach's chapter "Students' Resistance to Engagement with Multicultural Literature" in *Reading Across Cultures.)*

Ways of Structuring the Study of Multicultural Literature

Moving beyond "Tourism" and Celebration

One issue arises when readings are chosen for the course. We usually teach courses that consider literature by authors from several cultural groups all in one course; others choose to devote an entire course to one cultural group, as in a course in African American literature. Teaching multicultural literature according to the first approach is sometimes criticized as taking a "tourist" approach. It certainly can be. But travel ("there is no frigate like a book") has often been a way of learning about other cultures. The walking tour was a rite of passage for English gentlemen during the Renaissance; they would walk through Italy or France as a way of finishing their educations by observing the art and culture of other places. Walkers such as Thomas Wyatt and Philip Sydney brought back to England the Italian sonnet form and translated various Italian and French sonnets for 16th century English readers. So, although "tourism" has lots of bad connotations, people from all cultures can learn from studying other cultures if they make an effort to stop and look deeply. Tourism can be a rich source of knowledge and appreciation of other traditions, histories, and arts.

The criticism which charges of "tourism" are meant to convey, though, is one of superficial acquaintance, a celebration of differences that are only vaguely understood. And it seems to us that many teachers have recognized in the past decade that one challenge of teaching multicultural literature well is to try to go more deeply into the beliefs, traditions, and histories that form the cultural contexts from which these books spring. Gradually as we have become familiar with the literature, we have begun looking for more depth, seeing what we need to know to make a more complex context for the literature we are discussing with our students. We take the idea of multicultural literature as a celebration of difference for granted now. We are trying

to get students to go more deeply into the literature, to articulate more fully the conflicts they see enacted, and to see how historical incidents they may or may not know about actually play out in individuals' lives. In multicultural literature classrooms, we are trying to get people of all cultures to form a different picture of "others" when they read these stories and histories.

We're aware that several aspects of our college teaching situation help us as we attempt to enrich the cultural contexts we present to student readers. Teaching in college is much easier than teaching literature in junior high because students have elected the course and, even if it is somewhat required (chosen to fulfill a general education requirement, for instance), they are motivated and often at a time in their lives when difference is new and interesting. And younger college readers today seem to be involved in a "reality craze" (note all the reality shows on television), so non-fiction books, including memoirs, histories, and biographies, as well as historical fiction, are often the hook that will get students to read and consider. Oddly, it also seems easier to teach multicultural literature online rather than face-to-face. Online, students have time to compose their postings, rather than feeling the pressure of speaking "off the cuff" in class; they have time to assemble the incidents and quotations from the book that serve as support. The seeming anonymity of the online course is freeing to some. Early discussion of online teaching techniques warned against flaming and other abuses during discussion, but it has not been our experience at all that online students are disrespectful to each other; they are often startlingly honest and strongly supportive of the efforts of their peers.

Structural solutions: pairing, building the syllabus toward harder material

One way to help students see the diversity of experiences within a racial or ethnic group is to read pairs of books against each other. For example, students might read Smith's *Rain is Not My Indian Name* against Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* or Bruchac's *Heart of a Chief*. The latter stories describe protagonists' experiences on reservations growing up in poverty, struggling with the effects of alcoholism, and the difficulties of moving between the reservation and white society, but these stories also describe the strong communities that support the protagonists. The former novel tells the story of growing up middle class as a member of a minority in a small town. By reading a pair of these novels, readers get some sense of the diversity of experiences lived by Indians in our country.

Another productive structure might be to arrange course texts so that students read books featuring protagonists whose experiences most closely resemble their own and build to those that might be more different so students gradually move from familiar to unfamiliar territory. For example, a teacher might begin with a book such as Johnson's *The First Part Last* where protagonist Bobby reacts similarly to any young person in his situation (unplanned fatherhood), or Smith's *Rain is Not My Indian Name* in which much of protagonist Rain's experience is about small town life and how she learns to recover from the loss of her mother and her best friend. But a book such as Flake's *The Skin I'm In*, where protagonist Maleeka suffers because of her skin color, poverty, and feelings of powerlessness, might be placed later in the course, so that by the time it is introduced to students, they have had practice going beyond their own reality to seeing experience through the lens of a book's character.

Surface vs. in-depth (Norton's 5-level set up)

In researching materials for our 2010 MCTE presentation on multicultural literature, we came across Donna Norton's article in the *Reading Teacher*, "Teaching Multicultural Literature in the Reading Curriculum." The article outlines an interesting structural approach to addressing the

tourism problem, taking a five-phase approach to building a cultural context that will help readers understand and appreciate a current book more deeply. Her article contains not only a discussion of the five levels of texts her students encounter during a given unit (31) but also lots of resources and examples of possible texts to use in units on Native American (32-25), African American (36), and Latino/a texts (37). For example, for a unit on Native American literature, she outlines the progression which we summarize below (leaving out many specific suggestions, which are very much worth consulting in the article itself):

Traditional Literature (Generalizations and broad views)

> Consider folktales, fables, myths, legends from a variety of tribes. Note common stories (throughout the culture) and common types of stories, as well as oral language style as much as possible.
>
> Learning activities: analyze oral traditions, show map of US with tribal locations, identify types of tales and look at some common types (creation, tribal/family, trickster, crossing the threshold between worlds—animal to human, for example, or vice versa). Have students create a story that opens, develops, and closes as do the oral tales they have read.

Traditional tales from one area/tribe (Narrower view)

> Consider tales from one tribe, for example Ojibwe or a specific tribe of Plains Indians.
>
> Learning activities: analyze and compare these tales with the more general characteristics noted above. Note values, beliefs, themes in regional tales.

Autobiographies, biographies, historical non-fiction

> Consider works from an earlier time.
>
> Learning activities: analyze these non-fiction texts for values, beliefs, and themes identified in the traditional literature. Compare nonfiction and historical texts with autobiographies and biographies. (See, for instance, Ignatia Broker's *Night Flying Woman*). Norton notes that these kinds of comparisons can point up biases. For example, she notes that juvenile autobiographies tend to soft pedal the cultural repercussions from white-Native American confrontations (34).

Historical fiction

> Learning activities: evaluate fiction for authenticity of setting, conflicts, characterization, theme, language, traditional beliefs, and values based on information noted in earlier phases. Discuss the role of traditional literature in comparison; also compare historical fiction with the autobiographies, biographies or historical non-fiction read earlier.

Contemporary literature

Consider works written for readers by current authors.

Learning activities: analyze the inclusion of any beliefs and values identified in the traditional literature, autobiographies, biographies, and historical fiction and non-fiction read above. Analyze character and conflicts. Analyze themes and look for connections across the literature types.

Norton also suggests that teachers use similar specific questions throughout, especially through the last three areas, to help students analyze: for example, what is the problem, what reward is wanted, what kinds of action do the people admire, what kinds of action do people despise, what are the characteristics of great people (34). In this way, students build up an understanding of the values of a culture and develop ways of noting and analyzing changes as a culture moves through time and as they are represented in different kinds of texts.

Works Cited

"Author Chat with Sharon G. Flake." *Blogs, Videos, Publications*. New York Public Library. 18 July 2002. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

Beach, Richard. "Students' Resistance to Engagement with Multicultural Literature." *Reading Across Cultures: Teaching Literature in a Diverse Society.* Ed. Theresa Rogers and Anna O. Soter. New York: Teachers College, 1997. 69-94. Print.

Norton, Donna E. "Teaching Multicultural Literature in the Reading Curriculum". *Reading Teacher* 44.1 (Sept 1990): 28-40. *JSTOR.* Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

"Words That Heal: Using Children's Literature to Address Bullying: *The Skin I'm In*." *Anti Bias Lesson Plans and Resources for K-12 Educators.* ADL Curriculum Connections. 2005. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

Appendix A: A Selection of Books and Teaching Resources

The following selection is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead it represents a collection of works that we and our students have found useful and interesting.

Middle School and up

Abdel-Fattah, Randa. ***Does My Head Look Big In This.***

Although set in Australia, US readers will find the setting familiar. The novel opens as Amal, an Australian-Palestinian eleventh grader, makes the decision to wear the *hijab* (Muslim head scarf) full-time. Readers see how following her religious tenets impacts Amal's interactions with the people in her life. The novel also takes an often humorous look at typical teenage angst surrounding dating, friendship, and appearance, as well as examines the choices immigrants make to fit into a new culture and the stresses faced by immigrant parents and their children when expectations about gender and family roles from the parents' culture of origin are at odds with their children's experience in the new culture. (NY: Orchard Books/Scholastic, 2005. 360 pgs.)

Alexie, Sherman. ***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.***

Written in an appealing format - diary with comic illustrations - this work tells the story of a year in the life of fourteen-year-old Junior who leaves the reservation school to attend school in a nearby all-white town for a good education and "hope." Junior is deemed a traitor by his people who feel rejected by him but is supported by loving family members who want him to follow his dreams despite their poverty and struggles with addiction and loss. During the year, along with educational and social success, Junior also experiences numerous tragedies, including the accidental deaths of his sister and grandmother. Alexie uses humor to soften (or confront) the harsh realities of reservation life as well as to deal with the uncertainties of adolescence. Language and references to masturbation make the book appropriate to a slightly older audience than its readability would indicate. Art by Ellen Forney. (NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2007. 230 pgs.)

Bausum, Anne. ***Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement.***

Bausum focuses her non-fiction account of the Freedom Rides of 1961-1962 on two volunteers, John Lewis, a black man born in Alabama who was later an elected Congressman, and Jim Zwerg, a white man born in Appleton, WI who transferred to Fisk University as part of a college exchange program. They met in Nashville in 1961 and joined the group who rode buses throughout the Deep South in an attempt to end desegregation in buses and bus depots, as ordered by the Supreme Court in two separate cases spanning 14 years. Students get a sense of each man by reading their very different life histories and then seeing them in non-violent action. The violent confrontations between the Riders and the local peoples is described in words, quotations, and pictures. The book also contains a chronology, a partial roster of Riders with brief stories about them, and a Resource guide. (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2005. 79 pgs.)

Bruchac, Joseph. ***The Heart of a Chief.***

Sixth grader Chris leaves the reservation to attend school in the nearby town. All students can relate to his nervousness about a new school, making friends, and being in the youngest grade in a middle school. Chris shares observations about reservation life, his alcoholic father, his close-knit family of grandfather, great-aunt and sister, and the painful experience of being Indian at a school where the team mascot is an Indian and the team name is the Chiefs. Chris faces his fears with courage and maturity changing aspects of his life for the better. Bruchac has written numerous picture books, YA novels, collections of traditional stories, and an autobiography, *Bowman's Store.* (NY: Puffin Books, 2001. 153 pgs.)

Budhos, Marina. ***Ask Me No Questions***

This book was born after 9/11 as a result of the stories of Muslim immigrants, legal and illegal, who instantly became suspect and entangled in a legal morass as a result of the aftermath. Nadira's family, Bangladeshis, have overstayed their visitor visa. Because all Muslim men need to register as a result of the Homeland Security Patriot Act, Nadira's father and the family--Nadira's mother, sister Aisha, and Nadira--travel to Canada for asylum. Unfortunately, due to the massive influx of immigrants, asylum is denied them. Nadira's father is jailed; her mother stays to support him and help with the hearing, and Nadira and Aisha need to return to New York to continue their studies, studies in which Aisha, the perfect daughter, is very successful. It is in this climate of fear and uncertainty Nadira comes into her own, realizing her strengths as a person and a daughter and beginning to envision a future for herself. The novel puts a human face on illegal immigrants, describes the way 9/11 impacted their lives, and offers some insights into the difficulties they face if they want to live and work in the United States. (NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006. 160 pgs.)

Broker, Ignatia. ***Night Flying Woman.***

Ignatia Broker tells the story of her great-great-grandmother, Night Flying Woman, from her girlhood, centered in traditional Ojibwe culture, through the coming of the white people and the ways in which her tribe interacted and their traditional life cycles were changed. Broker's introduction explains and frames her narrative; her story paints a rich portrait of a complex society, demonstrating native values toward natural cycles, animals, elders, storytelling, and the importance of dreams and openness to the spiritual world. It appeals to all age groups, including adults; a clear Minnesota connection adds interest. Supporting websites on Broker and Ojibway culture are available at the Internet Public Library's Special Collections: http://ipl2.org/div/natam/. Search by tribe or author. (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1983. 135 pgs.)

Carlson, Lori Marie ed. ***Moccasin Thunder: American Indian Stories for Today.***

A wonderful collection of stories by acclaimed Native writers (Bruchac, Smith, Van Camp, Erdrich, Alexie, Harjo, Hogan, Sarris, Power, and Francis.) Gr. 8-up. (NY: Harper Collins, 2005.)

Cofer, Judith Ortiz. ***Call Me Maria.***

This short, lyrical, coming-of-age novel uses a mixture of genres -- poetry, prose pieces, letters, and journal entries -- to tell the story of fifteen-year-old Maria, a recent newcomer to the New York *barrio* from Puerto Rico. Readers share her loneliness, dreams, and struggles to learn English and to adapt to a new culture/environment. Other themes include divorce, the

importance of education, and the power of language. Teachers using the novel might want to read the first sections aloud to model the importance of noticing titles and to help students realize how easy the poetry is to read. *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* is another Cofer novel readers might enjoy. (NY: Scholastic, 2004. 127 pgs.)

Curtis, Christopher Paul. ***Elijah of Buxton****.*
This work of historical fiction, though often humorous, also addresses the serious issue of US slavery. Its protagonist, Elijah, is the first child born in Buxton, a free settlement for ex-slaves in 1860s Canada. Much of the story revolves around everyday life, pranks, and school, but the shadow of slavery is ever-present. Although Elijah and most of the other settlement children have never experienced slavery first-hand, its effects are far-reaching in the silences and sadness of adults, memories of loved ones left behind, and the pitiful state of newly-arrived runaways. The story takes a particularly dark turn when Elijah, after crossing the border into the US, encounters the violence of slave catchers and meets a chained group of runaway slaves. Elijah has to decide how or even whether or not he can help them. Although Elijah himself never suffers the experience of slavery, his encounter with it, and newly-found understanding of its horrors are what readers take away from the novel. This book would be a good read aloud as younger readers may have difficulty with the dialect of the novel. (NY: Scholastic P, 2007. 352 pgs.)

Draper, Sharon. ***Copper Sun.***
In this work of historical fiction, Draper traces the life of protagonist Amari from the village in Africa where she is captured and enslaved, after witnessing the murder of family and friends, to Carolina, where she is bought as a present for a plantation owner's son. The plantation owner also buys a white indentured servant named Polly. The two girls eventually become friends and, at a time of violence and confusion on the plantation, manage to escape together to Fort Mose. Although the novel may be a little sentimentalized, it is also gripping and well-researched, describing many aspects of the slave trade, slavery in America and the interrelationships of those living on plantations. *Forged by Fire*, *The Battle of Jericho* and other books by Draper are also popular with young readers. (NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006. 302 pgs.)

Flake, Sharon. ***The Skin I'm In.***
This realistic novel is written in the voice of first-person narrator, Maleeka Madison, an inner-city African-American seventh grader who is teased by peers because her skin is so dark. The story focuses on Maleeka's struggle with issues of self-esteem and identity. Along with support from caring adults, Maleeka is empowered when she begins to see herself as a writer. The novel is quick-paced and provokes discussion about race/colorism, societal images of beauty, self-esteem, peer pressure, and bullying. Flake's other two novels, *Easy Money* and *Bang,* are also provocative and written in a similar style. (NY: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 1998. 131 pgs.)

Grimes, Nikki. ***Bronx Masquerade***.
Grimes uses a mix of poetry and first-person prose to invite readers into the lives of 18 high school students representative of people we all recognize – the jock, the tough talking rapper, the artist, the beauty queen, the teenage mom, etc. Through the student-performed poetry on open-mike Fridays in which the characters reveal their fears, talents and aspirations, readers are invited to look beyond stereotypes and appearance to see who people really are. This inviting and easy read shows the transformative power of art and language. It would work well with a poetry unit and (for an older audience) could be paired with the movie *Slam*. (NY: Speak, 2003. 176 pgs.)

Johnson, Angela. ***The First Part Last.***
The story, which focuses on unplanned teenage fatherhood, moves back and forth in time -- from the happy times when Bobby first begins dating Nia to his discovery that he is about to be a father and the uncomfortable weeks as the two of them grapple with the idea of parenthood and face the decision of whether to keep the baby or offer it up for adoption. Bobby, unlike many real-life young fathers, steps up to his responsibility for his child and the book deals realistically with how this decision impacts his life. This very simple but powerful book leads to good discussion. (NY: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003. 131 pgs.)

Martinez, Victor. ***Parrot in the Oven.***
Martinez's episodic novel about a young Chicano is written in lush, metaphoric language and stands alongside Chicana coming-of-age stories such as *The House on Mango Street*. Manny and his family struggle against poverty and racism, let down by the institutions that are supposed to help them. At one point, Manny joins a gang but realizes that he is not a person who preys off others. At the end of the novel he returns home, seeing his family rather than his peers as a source of support. Like with *Mango Street*, a teacher might want to help students put the episodes together to get a vision of the story as a whole. Although easy to read, the situations the family faces are desperate, so the book is appropriate for a slightly older audience. See the *The ALAN Review* (Fall 2004) for a good review of the book by Betsey Nies. (NY: HarperCollins, 1996. 224 pgs.)

Myers, Walter Dean. ***Autobiography of My Dead Brother.***
Fifteen-year-old Jesse no longer feels like he knows his blood brother, Rise. Rise has decided to get on the fast track to realizing his dreams – through selling drugs and working for a gang – and Rise wants Jesse, an aspiring artist, to use his drawing to tell Rise's story. Myers explores the ease with which young men get sucked into the violence of a neighborhood plagued by drive-by shootings, vicious gangs, drugs, and turf wars. This novel is an intense but easy read. Art by Christopher Myers, particularly his comics, lightens the dark mood. (NY: Harper Tempest, 2005. 212 pgs.)

Okorafor-Mbachu. Nnedi. ***Zarah the Windseeker.***
In this coming-of-age fantasy, thirteen-year-old heroine, Zahrah, is set apart from and teased by her peers because of her dada locks and special powers. Zahrah learns to accept herself and to use her powers when she has to depend on them and her courage to enter and travel through the Forbidden Greeny Jungle to find an antidote that will save the life of her best friend. Over the course of the adventure, Zahrah faces tests of endurance, meets strange creatures, and gains self-knowledge. Okorafor-Mbachu's second novel *The Shadow Speaker* takes place in the same fantasy world. (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2005. 308 pgs.)

Rempel, Leah. ***Hey Hmong Girl Whassup?***
This journal-style novel written in the voice of a fictitious Minnesota Hmong girl, fifteen-year-old Choua Vang, was a product of ESL teacher Rempel's master's thesis. With the purpose of opening avenues for "cultural understanding and interaction," Rempel worked with Hmong students and other members of the Hmong community to make sure the portrayal of characters and situations in this YA novel were authentic. The novel deals with the difficulties experienced by Choua and her family – the conflicts between children growing up in the US, immersed in US customs and values, and parents holding traditional expectations about gender roles, marriage, and parental respect. Choua's oldest sisters married young and married men chosen by their father, but her next oldest brother and sister have rebelled, joined gangs and spent time in jail/detention. Choua is at a crossroads, deciding what kind of person she wants to be. (St. Paul, MN: Hamline University P, 2004. 138 pgs.) A good resource for teachers and older students is *I Begin My Life All Over* by Lillian Faderman, a collection of oral histories by Hmong in America.

Smith, Cynthia Leitich. ***Rain Is Not My Indian Name.***
This novel combines journal entries with first-person narrative, moving back and forth between the present and recent past, keeping readers engaged until the end to find out what really happened on a fateful New Year's Eve night when Cassidy Rain Berghoff's best friend died. This second death –her mother's death having occurred several years prior to the story's opening– has left the fourteen-year-old protagonist overcome by grief, and the novel follows Cassidy's "return" to a normal life through her love of photography, her connections with family and community, and her examination and acceptance of events prior to friend's death. (NY: Harper Collins, 2001. 135 pgs.) Cynthia Leitich Smith's "A Different Drum: Native American Writing" in the July/August 2002 issue of *The Horn Book Magazine* is a good resource.

Sterling, Shirley. ***My Name is Seepeetza***.
Told in a series of journal entries based on the author's own experiences, twelve-year-old Seepeetza recounts the story of life in the Indian residential schools (boarding schools) in 1950s British Columbia which Indian students are forced to attend and where they are not allowed to speak their language. The book recounts the sadness of leaving home, the regimented life of the schools, the punishments, the endless hours of cleaning, and the sadness of waiting for the few vacations when students are released from the schools to rejoin their families. The dismal, militaristic life at the school is juxtaposed with the joy students experience with their families, being back on the family ranch and engaging in the activities that help support the family. (Toronto: Groundwood Books, 1992. 126 pgs.)

Tamaki, Mariko and Jillian Tamaki. ***Skim.***
A graphic novel about coming-of-age which explores suicide, depression, love, sexuality, crushes, cliques and other issues encountered by adolescents. Main character Kimberly Keiko Cameron (a.k.a. Skim) attends an all-girls school and the novel follows her search for friends and love and portrays the pain and the difficulties of growing up. In the end Skim and her best friend Lisa both find happiness and acceptance. (Berkley, CA: Groundwood Books, 2008. 141 pgs.)

Yang, Gene Luen. ***American Born Chinese***
A graphic novel with three intertwined stories: a traditional Chinese tale of the Monkey King who does everything to be human rather than a monkey; the story of Jin Wang, the only Asian American boy in his school, who desires to fit in and to date an all-American girl; and Chin-Kee, a television-sitcom-like character compiled of numerous Chinese stereotypes, on his yearly visit to his American cousin Danny, to whom he is a constant embarrassment. The stories eventually tie together, leaving readers to

think about identity, the power and pain of stereotyping, racism and prejudice, and the importance of self-acceptance. (NY: First Second Books, 2006. 233 pgs.) Margaret Chang's "We Like Our Version Better" in the November/December 2002 issue of *The Horn Book Magazine* discusses Asian American Literature.

High School and General Education College

Alexie, Sherman. *Flight.*
This novel, like ***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*** (2009, Grades 7-10), has a young male protagonist with an edgy, *Catcher in the Rye*-type of voice. In *Flight*, Zits, an orphaned half-Irish, half-Indian boy who has been through better than twenty foster homes finds himself about to commit a crime but is powered back through time travel and sees historical events personally from different sides of the question while in the body of an FBI agent on an Indian reservation in the 1970s; an Indian child during the Battle of Little Big Horn; a US Army Indian tracker during the 19th century; a flight instructor with a potential terrorist student; and finally in the body of his alcoholic father. Zits experiences and re-considers revenge, violence, shame, change, and empathy during these "lives." Language is "adult." High School and College. The book contains a very specific reading guide at the end with detailed questions. (NY: Black Cat, 2007. 181 pgs.) Sites on the web provide sample units and more general info on teaching approaches: http://sites.google.com/site/vjohnson119/flightunit and http://ncte2008.ning.com/forum/topics/teaching-sherman-alexie **.**

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents.*
This novel tells the story of the Garcia family, who fled the Dominican Republic in the 1960s; the story is autobiographical, reminiscent of Alvarez's own experience as a child immigrant and her family's escape after her father's work in the anti-Trujillo underground. The novel moves backwards in time, beginning with the stories of the four sisters as adults and then moving back through their courtships and marriages, college careers, adolescence, and elementary school right after they first moved to the US. The last section takes place in the Dominican Republic and gives a strong sense of political intrigue and the cultural base from which the girls are working. Challenging reading because readers must trace the sisters' developing understanding of American and Dominican cultures backwards and different chapters focus on different sisters. (NY: Algonquin, 2010. [1991] 336 pgs**).** Google "Alvarez Garcia Penguin" (without the quotes) for a book discussion page.

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *A Place to Stand.*
Baca's memoir is very intense, much of it involving his prison experience; it includes the stories of the men he meets there and the steps he takes to survive. Baca also recounts his literacy journey: the writing and reading that help him survive the insanity of prison. The story is inspiring because Baca turns his life around, but it is also a condemnation of our society which fills prisons with young men of color rather than providing them with the resources and support to succeed in society. (NY: Grove Atlantic, 2002. 272 pgs.)

Butler, Octavia. *Kindred.*
In this science-fictional slave narrative, Dana, a 26-year-old black woman, in the midst of moving into a new home in L.A. in 1976 with her husband, is mysteriously transported to an antebellum plantation in Maryland, where she saves a child from drowning. For the remainder of the novel, she time-travels between these two locations in order to save her ancestor, that drowning child, until he grows up and fathers the child who will become her own ancestor. While in Maryland, Dana witnesses and experiences personally the evils of slavery, particularly for women—the drudgery, the psychological abuse, the mother's loss of children, the rapes and beatings, and brutality. Butler uses the conventions of traditional slave narratives and contrasts the reactions of a present-day feminist who, though outraged, is powerless to intervene. Dana also comes to recognize the scarring effects of slavery that remain to this day. **(**Boston: Beacon, 1979. 264 pgs.). Excellent resources, discussion questions, and a well-thought out creative writing story guide related to *Kindred* at http://www.webenglishteacher.com/butler.html

Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower.*
This journal-style novel opens with fifteen-year-old Lauren describing her gated community, a neighborhood that has banded together in a chaotic 2024 California where people battle for scarce resources of water, food, and land. Lauren suffers from hyper-empathy, so she is debilitated by and suffers along with the pain of others. She is also unusual in that she has ceased to believe in the religion of her minister-father but is creating her own religion called Earthseed. After a fire and mob kill, or scatter, the inhabitants of her small community, Lauren takes to the road, moving toward safety in Canada. Along the way, she creates a group of people who coalesce around her and her new teachings. This novel is very powerful particularly as it resonates with current US circumstances. It also invites students to explore their own beliefs and the role of religion in creating community. (NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1993, 329 pgs.)

Culleton, Beatrice. ***April Raintree.***
This novel, set in Canada and loosely based on its author's life, tells the story of two Metis sisters who are removed from their family and grow up in foster care. The sisters, April and Cheryl, suffer injustice under the social service system and face a struggle to survive and find their identities. The book is an easy read that is powerful and moving. (Winnepeg: Peguis Publishers, 1995, 196 pgs.)

Dorris, Michael. ***A Yellow Raft in Blue Water.***
This novel is excellent for teaching point of view. Its three parts are all first-person narratives, the first told by Rayona, 15, an American Indian who runs away from her reservation in Montana; the second by her mother, Christine; and the third by Aunt Ida, who is Christine's mother and Rayona's grandmother. Sometimes the same incidents are narrated in more than one section with interesting differences in interpretation of the event. All three women encounter difficulties in love and daily life, living always on the brink of poverty. Rayona eventually comes to understand and reconnect with her dying mother and stoic grandmother and to have a strong sense of self. (NY: Picador, 1987. 384 pgs.)

Fairbanks, Evelyn. ***Days of Rondo***.
In this memoir, Evelyn Fairbanks tells the story of growing up in the Rondo, St Paul's largest African-American neighborhood during the 1930s and 1940s. Fairbanks describes the people who came to be her parents and family, trips back home to Georgia, school, dating, and working. In a chapter called "Being Black in Minnesota," she talks about discrimination in everyday terms, speaking for instance of not being served at Bridgeman's. of the mini-sit-ins she and her friends tried, of negotiating with the principal for exceptions to the rule that no non-students could come to the prom so that she and her friends could have dates, and of using her "white person's voice" to get an admission interview for business school. It is a reminiscence of a time and era, especially interesting since I-94 was built through the Rondo neighborhood in the 1960s. It includes pictures of her family and St. Paul places. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical P, 1990. 182 pgs.)

Otsuka, Julie. ***When the Emperor Was Divine.***
This is another excellent novel for teaching point of view. It is a novel in five parts, telling the story of one Japanese family's removal from Berkeley, California to an internment camp in Utah during World War II. Each section, which carries the story forward, is told from a family member's point of view—the mother tells of the notice and the preparations to leave; the ten-year-old daughter tells of the train journey; the seven-year-old son tells of their stay at the camp; both children narrate the return to Berkeley; and the father "confesses" to his "war crimes" in the final section. The story is told simply and straightforwardly without authorial comment; it is easy to read but the last section poses challenging questions. A good book for discussion of us-them social categories and interactions, social and political reactions to security threats, historical research projects, and literary point of view and symbols. (NY: Anchor, 2002. 144 pgs.). Both a Reader's Guide and a Teacher's Guide are available online at Random House.

Rodriguez, Luis. ***Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.***
Luis Rodriguez wrote this memoir of his growing up in East L.A. in the 1960s and 1970s as an extended argument to his son, who was following a similar and dangerous path with drugs, gangs, and violence. Rodriguez shows what becomes of living *la vida loca*, although he is singularly lucky in the adults who take an interest in him and help him realize his talents in mural painting, writing, traditional dancing, and social activism. This is a fast and very engaging read; students love it. Rodriguez describes not only the violence and dangers he encountered, but also his own feelings of sorrow, powerlessness, and loss as a gang member. His social activism continues; see his well developed website: http://www.luisjrodriguez.com/ Also available in Spanish. (NY: Touchstone, 1993. 262 pgs.)

Shange, Ntozake. ***Betsey Brown.***
This coming-of-age novel is set in St Louis during 1959, the year that St Louis schools began desegregation. Betsey, a seventh grader, confronts the usual problems of friendship, love, sexuality, and realizing the effect of her actions against the backdrop of changing ideas about civil rights and black identity. She lives in a solidly middle-class family; her father is a doctor and her mother a social worker. But her parents have very different ideas about integration and black power; her father is proud of their black cultural heritage while her mother is more conventional and accommodating. And Betsey, their oldest child, is in the thick of their—and society's—conflict. This is a good historical novel, one that develops Betsey's personal conflicts, including finding her place within a new school, as well as making readers more aware of the problems facing American society at the start of the civil rights era. (NY: Picador, 1985. 208 pgs.)

Speigelman, Art. ***Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*** and ***Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began.***
Speigelman's well-known, breakthrough historical graphic novels about the Holocaust are centered on the author getting the story from his surviving father, Vladek. The two books take Vladek through the build-up of Nazi power, his flight, and finally his stay at Auschwitz. This historical story is interspersed with attention to the lasting personal effect on the survivors as well as on

those close to them, including the author. (*Maus I*: NY: Pantheon, 1986. 160 pgs. and *Maus II*: NY: Pantheon, 1992. 144 pgs.). Excellent sites support teaching the work: a teacher's guide with detailed questions for *Maus I* at Random House http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780394747231&view=tg ; another @Web English Teacher http://www.webenglishteacher.com/spiegelman.html , and a course site with links to many other informative sites at http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/33d/33dTexts/maus/MausResources.htm.

Viramontes, Helena. ***Under the Feet of Jesus.***
Estrella, a thirteen-year-old, and her family toil in the harsh conditions of California's migrant workers, though nature and family rituals are both beautifully described in this coming-of-age novel. They move often and at each new place, the statue of Jesus and their citizenship papers (which are kept under the feet of the statue) are enshrined. Their existence is precarious and it seems that Perfecto, the man who has replaced Estrella's father after he abandoned the family, is also considering leaving them. Estrella questions the value of religious faith and the ability of adults to offer protection. Her first love, Alejo, is poisoned by a crop duster as he picks peaches in a tree and the family confronts the medical system, trying to get him assistance. By the end of the novel, Estrella finds that the only things she can rely on are her own strength and determination but she is determined to move forward. (NY: Plume, 1995. 192 pgs.)

Appendix B: Additional Teaching Ideas or Resources

Bader, Barbara. "How the Little House Gave Ground: The Beginnings of Multiculturalism in a New, Black Children's Literature." *The Horn Book Magazine* 78.6 (November/December 2002): 657-73. Print.

-----. "Multiculturalism Takes Root." *The Horn Book Magazine* 79.2 (March/April 2003): 143-62. Print.

-----. "Multiculturalism in the Mainstream." *The Horn Book Magazine* 79.3 (May/June 2003): 265-91. Print.
This series of articles offers a history of children's multicultural literature.

"Books to Avoid: How to Tell the Difference." *Oyate.org.* Oyate. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.
Helpful in suggesting things to look for or avoid in representations of Native peoples.

Clegg, Luther B., Etta Miller, Bill Vanderhoof , Gonzalo Ramirez and Peggy K. Ford. "How To Choose The Best Multicultural Books." *Scholastic.com.* Scholastic. n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.
This site suggests 50 multicultural books and contains comments by writers and educators about how to choose good multicultural books; ten books each about, and for, Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish peoples. K-8.

English Journal: *Special Issue on Multicultural Literature of the Americas*. 94.3 (Jan 2005): 1-106. Print.
Articles by teachers, writer, and researchers.

Fox, Dana and Kathy Short, eds. *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature.* Urbana, lL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003. Print.
A collection of chapters by various experts discussing the controversy surrounding authentic representation, teaching issues, and definitions of multicultural literature.

Sass, Edmund J., ed. "Multicultural Lesson Plans and Resources." *Cloudnet.com.* College of St. Benedict's/St. John's University. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.
Scroll past the ads and see a large compendium of sites dealing with general issues (such as immigration) or cultural groups or specific authors. At the bottom is a link back to the central index from which you can find other ideas, sites, and lesson plans for adolescent literature and for teaching literature; K-12. Updated regularly; very few dead links.

Norton, Donna E. "Teaching Multicultural Literature in the Reading Curriculum". *Reading Teacher* 44.1 (Sept 1990): 28-40. Print.
Outlines a multi-step approach to teaching multicultural literature, beginning with traditional myths, legends and folktales of the cultural group; narrowing to specific traditional myths and stories related to a specific group or tribe; adding relevant non-fiction such as biographies or historical accounts; historical fiction; and finally contemporary fiction, biography, or poetry. This method seeks to create a context for the contemporary fiction and help student readers understand better the relations between culture and literature. Well worked-out examples for Native American and African American works.

Rabinowitz, Peter J. and Michael W. Smith. *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature*. New York: Teachers College, 1998. Print.
The authors alternate chapters discussing ways of reading literature. Several chapters focus on teaching and reading multicultural literature.

Reese, Debbie. "Native Voices". *School Library Journal* (Nov 2008): 53-60. Print.
Offers an annotated bibliography of literature by and about American Indians suitable for elementary through high school.

-----. "Proceed with Caution: Using Native American Folktales in the Classroom". *Language Arts* 41.3 (Jan 2007): 245-256. Print.
Identifies problems of using some folktales as examples of authentic Native American literature.

Zitzer-Comfort, Carol. "Teaching Native American Literature: Inviting Students to See the World through Indigenous Lenses." *Pedagogy* 8:1 (Winter 2008): 160-170. Print.
Discusses difficulties of overcoming stereotypes of Native Americans while teaching Native American literature.

Part Three:

Working with New Media

Online Distance Education: Surviving the Tsunami

Linda Lein

"Online classes are hitting us like a tsunami."

So said my colleague during a conversation we had about course offerings in our English Department at MSU-Moorhead.

He's right. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of K-12 students enrolled in technology-based distance education courses grew by 65% between 2002-2005 (xi). Picciano and Seaman, authors of *K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators,* found nearly three million K–12 students took online courses during 2005-06 (17).

We need to remind ourselves that students today are no longer digital immigrants, but digital natives, and as such they not only expect, but are in need of teaching methods that differ from those used to educate previous generations. Last year, at a Consortium for School Networking webinar, Don Tapscott, author of *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World,* said, "The nation is at a turning point, and many institutions that have served us well for decades or even centuries--including education--have come to the end of their life cycle and must be 'rebooted' or reinvented for a new age" (Devaney). In his research, Tapscott noticed that students used the Web primarily for discussion or communication. "This is the true meaning of the Internet, " he said, "…it's not about presenting content or managing knowledge, it's a new platform for communication and collaboration, for building communities" (Devaney). Former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and the MnSCU Board of Trustees Chair David Olson, concur. In a press release issued November 20, 2008, they announced the following goal: by the year 2015, 25 percent of MnSCU system credits will be earned via online courses.

The question should be asked, however, whether or not there is research that supports the pedagogy of teaching online. More specifically, does teaching students online and/or providing other technology-based instruction really improve students' reading and writing skills? Beach, Anson, Breuch, and Swiss concluded in their book, *Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and Other Digital Tools,* that instructors who help students understand the purposes of digital writing tools find that students "move from teacher-initiated writing to self-initiated writing because they want to write to communicate to their audiences" (viii). They also found that students who use e-portfolios "perceive relationships between their texts and growth over time in their uses of tools" (ix). In addition to improving their writing skills, "the depth of the students' thinking and development of ideas" grew as well (x).

Other studies exist that corroborate the conclusions of Beach, Anson, Breuch and Swiss. In *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies,* the U.S. Department of Education found in the meta-analysis of 51 studies the following:

- *Students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction.*
- *Instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage relative to purely face-to-face instruction than did purely online instruction.*

- *Studies in which learners in the online condition spent more time on task than students in the face-to-face condition found a greater benefit for online learning.* (xiv-xv)

Because there is strong evidence to support teaching students online and because educators find themselves on the leading edge of this distance education tsunami, we need to ask how we can ride the wave rather than be drowned under it. In other words, how should our traditional land-based English instructors redefine their teaching methods in this Age of Technology?

The first step to survival is to stay informed about online tools and software. For example, Minnesota public schools, colleges, and universities primarily use two Learning Management Systems (LMS):

- Desire2Learn (D2L) <http://www.desire2learn.com/>
- Moodle <http://www.moodle.org>

Types of Online Courses

Online Course: Class is conducted entirely online.

Hybrid Course: Part of the class is conducted land-based and part of it is online.

Blended Course: Class is conducted land-based, but it is supplemented with online interaction outside of the class periods.

Other popular LMSs include Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, and eCollege. Each of these LMSs provides the basic tools an instructor needs to conduct a class, such as a content area, a discussion board, a chat room, quizzes, dropboxes, and a gradebook. An LMS can be integrated with online, hybrid, or blended courses. To learn how to use an LMS, instructors might receive in-house training through the IT Department of their school or university. If that isn't available, they could take an online class or attend a reputable land-based workshop.

A good IT Department will also keep instructors current with software programs that enhance the school's LMS. For example:

- Horizon Wimba <http://www.wimba.com> is a synchronous conferencing tool that permits instructors to convene an entire class or a small group for a PowerPoint lecture and/or online discussion. For example, an English instructor can present a PowerPoint lecture about writing similes and metaphors. Then the instructor can immediately check students' comprehension of what was taught by asking them to write their own similes and metaphors in the chat room tool available in Horizon Wimba. Students can also ask questions. I've used Horizon Wimba primarily in two ways: to introduce a writing assignment and to teach mini-lessons on skills that students demonstrate they need help with in their writing (i.e.: punctuation, point of view consistency, in-text documentation, works cited entries, etc.). My students preferred using the chat room versus asking their questions aloud. Using the chat room avoided the problem of more than one student talking at a time or me missing them raise their electronic hand, another feature that's in Horizon Wimba.

- Camtasia Studio <http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp> is a multi-media presentation software that enables instructors to create audio PowerPoint lectures

(podcasts) that incorporate videos, photos, text, clipart, etc. Camtasia Studio is for online English instructors who meet at asynchronous times with their students. Camtasia allows the instructor to have a "film-like" feature of content, so that students do not have to learn everything by reading text. I found this software addresses the different learning styles of students in the class. The auditory learner appreciated the Camtasia file the most. Students said they downloaded the lectures to their iTouch or iPhone and listened while they exercised or did other things.

- Softchalk <http://www.softchalk.com> helps instructors create interactive web pages that include learning aids such as pop-up text annotations, self-assessment quizzes, and other interactive games. For example, an English instructor can build a unit in Softchalk in such a way that each time a new literary or writing term is introduced, an annotation that defines that term will automatically pop up when a student places the computer cursor directly on the term. URL links can be linked to additional readings or videos on the Web. Periodic quiz questions can also be spread throughout the unit to help students check their comprehension of the material. Interactive flashcard games at the end of the unit can help students review for a unit test. A website/unit built in SoftChalk will work in any LMS. So let's suppose the MnSCU decided to not use D2L anymore or that a Minnesota public school no longer wanted to use Moodle. If a class is built in Softchalk, it's easily uploaded to a new LMS. An instructor does not have to start over building a new website when a school or campus switches to a new LMS.

- Respondus <http://www.respondus.com> is a program that closes down Web browsers during online tests. This reduces the possibility of cheating. For instance, students are unable to do Google or Yahoo searches for answers.
  In addition to being knowledgeable about LMSs and the software programs that work with them, today's writing instructors need to learn how to use digital tools such as blogs, wikis, eFolio, and Facebook.

- For those who want to publicly share their thoughts with the world, Google offers Blogger <http://www.blogger.com>, a tool that makes creating a personal blog page easy and accessible. A class blog invites discussion from an audience of readers beyond the four-walls of a classroom. Instead of keeping a writing journal or a reading log that only the English instructor reads, students have the opportunity to write for each other and a worldwide audience. Students can also receive feedback on their posts. At the end of the semester, students often tell me, "Even though class is ending, I'm going to continue to post on my blog."

- Wikis are workspaces where cooperative groups can do collaborative writing. A popular free wiki site is PBWorks <http://www.pbworks.com>. Research-based projects work well for collaborative writing groups. For example, an English instructor can divide a class into cooperative teams, assigning each team the task of creating a multi-page website that defines a particular poet's writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, and publishing. Students who have done collaborative

writing in wikis enjoy the creativity and ownership of building a website. Their writing is detailed, well-organized, and audience-focused.

- eFolio <http://www.efoliominnesota.com/>, provided by MnSCU, is an electronic, digital portfolio. I use eFolio in Technical Report Writing. My students create an electronic web portfolio that presents their education and employment credentials to prospective employers. They can update this site throughout their career. This eFolio website is an assignment that becomes a life-long, practical tool.

- Facebook <http://www.facebook.com>, which probably doesn't need an introduction, is the most popular social networking website in use. Instructors can create a Facebook Community Group (previously called a Fan Club) where discussions about literary or writing topics can take place both within and beyond the four walls of a classroom. MSU-Moorhead's English Department uses its Facebook page to announce department events on campus and literary events in the community. The next time I teach English Composition and Literature online, I'll be using Facebook for an open discussion of stories and poems. Not only will students participate in the discussion, so will anyone else who joins the group.

For those who are insecure about new, technology-driven teaching methods, this list of information or article may itself feel like a small tsunami. Just remember, if the first step to surviving the wave is to be informed about online tools and software, the second step is to start slow. Choose *one* tool for *one* lesson for *one* class. For example, learning to post grades and course handouts in an LMS is a great place to start. When instructors find success in one class, they grow to the next level by using the same online method in the other classes they teach. Then this success spurs instructors to try other online tools for other units, such as how to build and add Camtasia files. Starting small and moving systematically and progressively into the use of online tools and software is more successful than trying to do too much all at once.

The final piece of advice for surviving the online tsunami is to find a colleague who is experienced using online tools. A mentor can show how it is done and be the "go-to person" who can answer questions or help solve problems if they arise. The mentor knows the best practices from research and experience. This mentor might be a colleague whose classroom or office is just down the hall. At MSU-Moorhead, I serve as the "go-to person" in the English Dept. We also have IT Dept. technology experts and instructional design educators on campus who are skilled at providing in-depth training.

Although the growing surge of online classes and digital writing tools is inexorable, it doesn't have to feel like a tsunami. Instructors can successfully ride the crest if they are informed, make changes systematically and progressively, and find a mentor who will partner with them in the process. Remember, it's about the students and what they need to become self-initiated writers in today's class and tomorrow's world.

Works Cited

Beach, Richard, Chris Anson, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, and Thom Swiss. *Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and Other Digital Tools.* Norwood: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc. 2009. Print.

Devaney, Laura. "Tapscott: Digital Natives Need Tech-rich Education." *eSchool News*. eSchool Media. 26 Jan. 2010. Web. 28 Nov. 2010.

Pawlenty, Gov. Tim and MnSCU Chair David Olson. Press release. 20 Nov. 2008. Print.

Picciano, A. G., and J. Seaman. *K–12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators*. Boston: Sloan Consortium, 2007. Print.

U.S. Dept. of Education. *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies.* Washington, D.C., 2009. Print.

Claiming Their Learning: Urban Teens and the Documentary Filmmaking Process

Molly McCarthy Vasich and Jessica Dockter Tierney

> *At first when I heard about the last project I was ready to start skipping the last few months so I wouldn't have to deal with all the computer using…but after all this I'm really excited to get to use computers and see what new things I can learn . . . maybe someday I can teach some of my skills.* – Shawn

> *It was more than writing [a] paper or analyzing data. Mostly it involved critical thinking. And the best ways [to] present different points of view fairly . . . without bias.* – Mohamed

The students quoted above are reflecting on the process of planning, filming, editing, and producing a documentary film. The student-produced documentary film projects were the culmination of four months of focused effort and a year of collaborative inquiry within two classes: *U.S. History* and *Literature and Film*. The goal of this combined social studies and English course was for juniors and seniors to explore the connections between history and film through questions about truth, representation, and art. Projects throughout the year were designed to scaffold students' technical, artistic, and critical analysis skills while they utilized digital technology tools to synthesize, manipulate, and produce information.

Located in the heart of south Minneapolis, Roosevelt High School draws its student population from neighborhoods throughout the city. The documentary film class included Somali, Mexican, Hmong, Guianese, African American, and White students. Like their range of cultural backgrounds, the students' life and educational experiences varied widely. For Molly McCarthy Vasich, English teacher and first author of this article, this kind of diversity in a classroom was simultaneously thrilling and intimidating. How, Molly wondered, would she encourage students to draw from their personal experiences in their documentaries? Paradoxically, how would she guide students to be open-minded to different or contradicting perspectives as they developed into filmmakers? And, most significantly, how would she convince a classroom of teenagers that creating a documentary is a worthwhile pursuit?

A first-year English teacher, Molly inherited the film class from an educator who believed that student motivation occurred through critical inquiry and authentic projects. Based on the stories this educator told her, Molly gathered that the class was a success; unwilling students were transformed in the filmmaking process. Further, their completed films inspired fellow students and community members at the public film festival. Audience members raved over the high school students' professionalism and creativity. These were big shoes to fill as a new teacher, but Molly had the support of an experienced U.S. History co-teacher, Collin Quinn, and a team of researchers from the University of Minnesota including PhD candidate, Jessica Dockter Tierney, co-author of this article. The contents of this article were borne out of Molly's reflections and conversations with Jessica at end of the school year.

In alignment with NCTE's position statement and definition of 21st century literacy skills, this course demands that students demonstrate competency and ability across literacies as they synthesize complex layers of narrative, sound, and image in the filmmaking process. In addition, students must manage streams of information from both local and global sources in order to

create meaning. Students in the filmmaking class must not only become proficient with technology tools, such as iMovie and GarageBand, but also work in relationship with others to ask questions and search for answers to problems in their communities. This merging of literacies and community involvement gives the urban youth in Molly's classroom access to what Henry Jenkins calls "participatory culture." According to Jenkins:

> A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (3)

Intended to provide students increased access to technology, the documentary film class encouraged them to build the experiences, skills, and knowledge necessary to participate fully as citizens in an increasingly digital world.

Scaffolding the Film Project

Molly's expectations for students remained fluid throughout the year. One month in, she feared the worst; few students saw value in their work or school in general. They seemed to like the concept of making a movie, but they were not interested in exerting intellectual or creative effort. The first creative project, an autobiographical collage, was a complete flop; the projects were thrown together and turned in late. If the collages represented anything, they demonstrated the students' disregard for their own learning and creativity. Molly realized that she would need to convince students of the social, historical, and personal power of art and the value of the quest for knowledge in order to increase student motivation and shift the resistant attitude of the classroom. Given the context of Molly's students and her own inexperience, how was she going to manage that?

As the year progressed, each subsequent unit concluded with a summative assessment that highlighted an aspect of filmmaking. In December, Molly began a unit primarily focused on audio documentaries and podcasts from National Public Radio like "Ghetto Life 101" and "This I Believe." Unsurprisingly, the students' connection to the authentic, young narrators from "Ghetto Life 101" was a turning point for many students. The students eagerly read along with the transcript and analyzed the podcast's narrative structure. Through this exercise, the students began to realize that their daily experiences had value. Additionally, everyone seemed really excited to create podcasts using Garage Band.

In an attempt to stay true to the vision of "Ghetto Life 101," Molly decided to keep the podcast topic open. Working individually or with a partner, the students needed to podcast about a passion or something that affected them on a personal level. A handful of students appreciated this flexibility and quickly rose to the challenge. For instance, two female students produced a podcast on teenage motherhood. They included the story of one of the students, a mother herself, as well as an interview with the mother of the other student. Another set of students created a podcast that dismissed negative stereotypes about Roosevelt High School as untrue and included interviews with Roosevelt students, parents, and staff.

Overall, the podcasting project was valuable from the standpoints of both students and teacher. While students began to learn the importance of organization and teamwork in order to

meet deadlines, Molly learned that creative freedom could be highly motivating for students, even if not always successful. For example, there were some students who claimed that they were not passionate about anything and had nothing about which to podcast. As much as Molly tried to help these students brainstorm and choose a topic (any topic!), there were a few students who barely started, much less completed, the project. It was these students who worried Molly. How would they ever make a documentary film? At this point, the thought of scrapping the film festival all together definitely crossed her mind.

Still, the pressure of the film festival looming ahead and the success of previous film festivals kept the class moving forward. Although Roosevelt's principal reassured her that the festival was not part of her contract, Molly was determined to prove herself. Furthermore, she had emphasized the connections between the current content and the upcoming filmmaking process all year long. After six months of implementing lessons intended to prepare them for the final project, the thought of giving up on the students mid-year didn't feel right.

The Film Unit

Before filming their own documentaries, students viewed, critiqued, and analyzed documentary films such as *Grizzly Man*, *Hoop Dreams*, and *Food, Inc.* for both their artistic and technical elements. They were able to identify and describe filmmaking techniques such as b-roll, montage, and transition and to describe the relationship of each of these techniques with the meaning depicted in film.

When March rolled around, students seemed ready to pitch their own film topics and begin the process of producing their documentary films. They were certainly itching to get their hands on the camcorders, but the process required students to brainstorm ideas, pitch topics, and choose production groups before they could gather any footage. Annoyed that they couldn't produce their dream film without these initial steps, many resisted immediately committing to the process. Slowly, however, as the students began to conduct interviews, log and upload footage, and add transitions, music, and subtitles, their ideas manifested into moving images, and they began to claim their inner creative selves.

Molly and Jessica identified three keys to the students' transformations in the film unit: *student ownership, emphasizing collaboration and social interaction,* and *learning through disequilibrium*. Each is explored in turn below.

Student Ownership

Allowing the students ownership over this project came in many forms and not all of them settled easily with the students or with their teachers. The first step in letting students lead came on pitch day. Collin, the U.S. History teacher, and Molly had been talking about pitch day from the very beginning of the year, connecting each unit of the course to this day when students would state in front of their teachers and their peers, "I want to make my film about…" In preparation for presenting their pitch, students needed to look outside our classroom for stories that they could bring back to analyze, evaluate, and incorporate into their documentaries. Students were encouraged to choose topics that they were authentically curious about or on which they had a fresh perspective that could be fleshed out through research and interviews. Only five films would be made overall, so students had to convince others to join them on their projects.

The topics shared that day were a balance of the plausible and implausible, novel and cliché, impassioned and ill-passioned. Some students had clearly struggled to come up with any

idea at all, while others took pitch day very seriously, eager to share a detailed description of their dream documentary and a tentative list of people to interview. As Collin and Molly let students lead the filmmaking process from the very beginning, a number of challenges and exciting moments revealed themselves. One challenge, for example, was allowing students to move forward despite the nagging feeling between the teachers that some film topics were doomed to failure from the start.

In particular, Arianna,[1] a straight-A student, pitched the topic, "Women and The Media," a film which would explore how the media negatively affects women. The topic appealed to Arianna as well as to a few other female students because they felt the topic was close to their lives. To her teachers, this topic was predictable and lacked focus. The film had been made already, not only by a film group the previous year, but also in feminist media circles. When Arianna pitched her idea, Molly acknowledged its currency, but she also warned her that if she decided to focus on it, her group would need to narrow it down and approach it from a fresh angle.

Heedless of the teachers' reservations, Arianna, Stephanie, Lashay, and Nikki refused to relinquish their topic. Certainly, there was a plethora of research out there, but the problem emerged when the group tried to say something new about the issue. What could possibly be said that hadn't been said already? Accordingly, the group had known their position before they started the film: media affects women negatively. They didn't have an authentic research question to guide their filmmaking process. Consequently, their initial research and interview contacts seemed more appropriate for a PowerPoint than a documentary film.

Weeks later, the group expressed their realization of their topic's shortcomings with disgruntlement and uncertainty. "Why," Arianna asked her teachers pointedly, "Did you let us go along with our topic when you knew it wasn't going to work? Did you want us to fail?" Her group mates nodded with frustration. Collin and Molly reminded the students of their initial warning, but they also emphasized that an important part of the course was allowing students to take the lead. While the teachers would constantly support and provide a timeline for the filmmaking process, they also had to allow the vision of each film to come from the students themselves.

Ultimately, the group was too far along to switch topics, so Molly tried to make the best of the situation. In pursuit of authentic inquiry, Molly asked, "What do you truly want to learn about the topic that you don't already know?" After reviewing the list of perspective interviewees, the group decided to focus on what local organizations were doing to counter the media's negative effects on women.

Another example of the challenge and excitement of allowing significant student ownership took place with Shawn, Montay, and Abdi, whose film sought to explore and compare success stories of Hispanic, Haitian, and Somali immigrants in Minnesota. A couple of weeks into filming interviews, however, this group had collected only one interview with Abdi's brother. Shawn, a Hispanic student, planned to interview a mentor from his church, but he repeatedly failed to get the interview on tape. Feeling that they were at a crossroads, Collin suggested that the group focus their film around Abdi's brother and interview him again to learn more about his story of coming to the United States and starting his own business. While Montay and Abdi embraced this idea, Shawn fought it. In order to frame the film as a sort of comparison between immigrant sub-cultures, Shawn insisted that the film include the Hispanic perspective.

His group decided to give him one last chance. Shawn managed to pull through; he captured an interview with his mentor, as well as an additional interview with his mentor's

undocumented wife. Encouraged, Shawn set out later that week to film an immigrants' rights protest march in Minneapolis. The parade footage ultimately served as bookends for their documentary, setting the context for the series of immigrant success stories. In hindsight, it was perhaps the notion that his idea might fail that motivated Shawn to prove his teachers and group wrong. As his teacher, Molly was relieved that she didn't enforce her own viewpoint in an attempt to make learning "easier." Instead, Collin and Molly put a little more faith in Shawn, and he surprised everyone.

Initially, not all students were as eager and confident as Arianna and Shawn during the filmmaking process. Mohamed, a quiet and scholarly Somali student, seemed to need constant feedback – from developing his film pitch to endless reminders about editing techniques. Admittedly, Mohamed's topic, which explored the Minneapolis schools' new transportation and attendance plan, was highly complicated and controversial. Further, it didn't help that one group member was struggling with family issues and thus habitually absent, and the other group member had social and behavioral issues. Feeling stranded, Mohamed regularly turned to his teachers for advice and ideas. Well aware of the fine balance between offering service and co-opting the project, Collin and Molly hoped that extra support at the beginning of the project would later result in increased self-assurance.

As the documentary project drew closer to the film festival, Collin and Molly became spread more thinly. Soon, other groups needed guidance more than Mohamed did. After a hiatus, Molly checked in with Mohamed's progress. For the most part, she was impressed with his progress in terms of editing. However, Molly was convinced that he should rework the order of the interviews in order to capitalize on controversy (thus, making the film more interesting to viewers!). Mohamed was on board with Molly's desire to make contradictory statements explicit, until Molly ruthlessly suggested placing a set of severely opposing opinions back to back. At that point, Mohamed looked at her with wide eyes and refuted, "No, Ms. McCarthy. We cannot do that. That would make the people look badly." Mohamed's respect for his informants prevented him from turning his documentary into an overt political commentary. Additionally, this refute signified a personal transformation: once dependent on Molly for ideas and techniques, Mohamed was able to confidently call the shots on his own.

In order to truly give ownership over to our students, Collin and Molly had to let go of their preconceptions and visions for the projects. The students needed creative freedom so that they could be empowered through authentic investment in a project. As the teachers provided space and opportunity for possible failure or hard-won successes, their students began to realize they were accountable for their documentaries, their education, and ultimately, their futures.

Emphasizing Collaboration & Social Interaction

Given that students would spend the last three months of the year working closely with others in their film groups, collaboration was central to the learning that took place in the course. Students were accountable not only to each other throughout this time, but also to the final documentaries they hoped to present to community members on film festival night. As is typical in small group work, the film groups became a site of both struggle and success as each student resisted or embraced the tasks and roles before them.

Notably, students did not choose their film groups through their social or racial affiliations, despite the fact that some students maintained close ties with others in the class throughout the year. Instead, students chose their film groups based upon the topics laid out during pitch day. This, too, came with compromise on the part of some students who settled on

their second or third choices, but after brainstorming and idea mapping for a week, students seemed pleased with their group members.

Dynamics within the groups varied throughout the three months of work. Arianna, for example, was the self-appointed and member-approved leader of "Women and the Media." She delegated tasks, conducted most of the interviews, and edited the film. One group member, Stephanie, shared at the end of the project, "I just did what Arianna told me to do." In other film groups, however, the sharing of tasks was more evident. Montay, Abdi, and Shawn, for example, each took turns editing the film footage. When one group member felt that he was doing more than his share, he would get up from the keyboard and force another member into the driver's seat. Over time, this group began to work quite closely together, consulting each other about the smallest details of the film, and as we describe later, becoming close friends in the process. For yet others, collaboration meant becoming a leader in unexpected ways. Mohamed, the quiet and scholarly Somali student we described earlier, often had to call or text his partner, Emily, in order to remind her to return equipment or conduct an interview. In fact, Emily's instabilities often got in the way of the project, and in certain moments, only Mohamed could convince her to complete tasks that even Collin and Molly could not persuade her to do.

One of the greatest challenges for students throughout the process of making the film was initiating and navigating contact with individuals outside the school who might lend expertise to their films. As indicated in the podcast project earlier in the year, students in this course were aware of their school's marginalized status within the district. To them, being a Roosevelt student meant that no one believed in their value as community members. While students were articulate and impassioned about defending their identities as capable students and valued citizens within the walls of the building, it meant something quite different for them to perform this identity outside the school. For this reason, cold-calling, emailing, or going up to people on the street was a daunting prospect. Although they hadn't planned on it, Collin and Molly spent a great deal of class time helping students script their phone conversations and edit emails. At these times, the lack of cultural capital among the students was apparent, but so was the students' appreciation for their teachers' explicitness in regards to strategies for professional communication, a practice Collin and Molly had wrongly assumed the students would already have mastered. Stephanie, for example, expressed that her favorite part of the process was "setting up the interviews and sending emails" – something which she had never been asked to do before.

Social interaction with community members also created valuable opportunities for students to gain deep understandings about social issues around them. Abdi, Montay, and Shawn took their cameras to a diverse area of the city to capture immigrants' stories for their film. Again and again, the men and women they approached responded kindly but refused to be interviewed. On some occasions, individuals who agreed to answer questions later changed their minds upon seeing the cameras. Although these three young men were frustrated by the setback this created, each expressed a nuanced and mature understanding of the reasons behind these rejections. Shawn stated, "I know where they're coming from...they have a lot of ideas about what can happen." Abdi, too, expressed a deep respect for the immigrant experience. When asked about some revealing statements made by undocumented immigrants in his film, Abdi conveyed respect for these individuals in responding, "they know better than we do," which suggested that he trusted his participants to make their own decisions about the risks involved in telling their stories. In alignment with in NCTE's Definition of 21st Century Literacies, Shawn and Abdi attended to the ethical responsibilities required by the complex literacies involved in

this process and demonstrated empathy and reverence for individuals based upon their social interactions with them.

At times, the social interaction required of this project also provided the opportunity for students to exhibit agency in ways that surprised their teachers. Mohamed, whose group depicted the recent busing shift in the Minneapolis district, set up an interview with a then-member of the school board. When reviewing his interview questions, Collin and Molly were struck by the boldness of his approach. Despite his quiet demeanor and being silenced by comments from students about his strong Somalian accent, Mohamed planned to ask some hard-hitting questions, such as "Minneapolis public schools typically have poor performances on test scores, so will changing school options help to improve test scores? Why? How?" and "You say this isn't about the budget. Then what is it really about?" Not only did Mohamed score the most high-profile interview of the year, but he also asked questions of a school board member that would have been too uncomfortable for some adults to ask! Through the course of this project, Mohamed became fearless – or perhaps he was all along, and we were seeing it for the first time.

Each of the above examples demonstrates how collaboration with group members and social interaction with community members were integral to the learning and growth that took place during this project. Across their final reflection essays, students described working with others inside and outside of class as both the most challenging and ultimately rewarding aspect of the project. As their teachers, Collin and Molly hope these experiences helped prepare students for life after high school as confident, informed and literate adults.

Learning Through Disequilibrium

Putting a stake in a project is not easy. To do so requires an emotional investment that many students are not accustomed to making in a school setting. During the first weeks of school, Molly got the impression that her students assumed the documentary class would be an easy A, and making a film simply required toting expensive camera gear around the city. However, as the class worked through a series of creative projects that required critical inquiry and digital technology skills, it became apparent that deep insight often manifested during mental and emotional disequilibrium. Learning to deal with frustration and uncertainty, students began to appreciate the internal rewards of the learning and creative processes.

Highly successful in school, Arianna didn't settle for anything less than an A. In most classrooms, Arianna was the teacher's dream student. However, as the class began working on the documentary project, Arianna's identity as an "A" student conflicted with the openness of the project. Initially, her dedication to the project was not an emotional investment; rather, it was motivated by the final grade. In this frame of mind, Arianna experienced constant frustration and disillusionment with her film, her group members, and her teachers.

When Collin and Molly suggested revision on the group's film topic, Arianna nearly exploded and then gave up. She wanted them to tell her exactly what to do so that she could get an A in the class. When they refused, she claimed Collin and Molly were terrible teachers who wanted her to fail. Reflecting on this moment in the process, she wrote, "It started out great; we knew what we were going to do and what needed to be done, but then next thing you know, we hit rock bottom. We had no idea what to do and where to take the project." When Arianna eventually began to feel secure about the topic again, her group members began to resent her desire to be in control. Arianna's long time friend, Stephanie, continued to follow her directions, but Lashay and Nikki allied and refused to communicate with Arianna. Instead of encouraging the girls to participate, Arianna, grade-motivated, saw it as an opportunity to explicitly compare

her "A" work to their lack of work all together. It was also at this time that she began referring to the film as "my film."

Although Arianna did not completely reverse her character as the filmmaking progressed, Molly does believe that Arianna did experience a glimmering of enlightenment in regard to her attitude towards her education. Arianna realized that her frustration with the filmmaking process was a result of her perfectionism. The filmmaking process, like many creative pursuits, is uncertain. The end result isn't a sure thing because footage, interviews, technology, and working with others are not predictable. In a final reflection following the project, Arianna said, "I am so used to step-by-step instructions because that's what I'm used to and that's how I learn…I will not settle for less than an A and no one is going to get in my way of that…In the end, I wouldn't say that I wish I had a different group or even wished I did this on my own. In the long run, this helped me to try my hardest to get others involved."

Students also experienced disequilibrium as their cultural worldviews were challenged. Despite Shawn's determination to include the Hispanic experience in his group's documentary, he reflected that the ultimate lesson he learned in the process was one of cross-cultural understanding and acceptance. Having tea during an interview in Abdi's brother's shop was Shawn's first inside perspective of the Somali community. Describing this experience to his classmates, Shawn bravely admitted to viewing non-Hispanics differently before he started the film project. He said, "At first, when I look at somebody that wasn't my race I would think they are annoying and weird. After talking to people and interviewing them, I can't just be judging people because they may be thinking the same things about me and my race." As the group wove together tales of immigrant journeys and successes, the three students discovered the value of listening to other perspectives. Further, they realized that the immigrant populations might have more in common than they previously imagined.

As Shawn spoke, Abdi and Montay nodded in understanding. To be sure, the relationship that developed between these three students might have been partially responsible for Shawn's transformation. With different cultural and racial identities, Shawn, Abdi, and Montay discovered common ground as they exchanged perspectives and opinions within the framework of the documentary film. In fact, the group became so comfortable with their differences that they shifted from politeness to joking about race, culture, and identity. Race and ethnicity were no longer topics that needed to be silenced in order to protect self-worth; instead, the group was willing to challenge the racial inequality and stereotypes through candid conversation, open-mindedness, and reflection.

Due to their commitment to the documentaries, the students learned to accept disequilibrium and embrace uncertainty. Their role as filmmakers and their expectations for the project were challenged and modified as they researched, filmed, and edited footage. When new stories, insights, and problems revealed themselves, the students learned to take them in stride and incorporate them into the films. In this way, though visible only to the filmmakers themselves, and perhaps to their teachers, the finished documentaries contained traces of the young filmmakers' internal and social transformations.

Conclusion

Located within a system set on increased standardization, rank, and test scores, our documentary film class is likely considered an oddity. The culminating project is not a close analysis paper or a multiple-choice test. To be sure, there is no right answer. Yet, at some point during the construction of ten-minute documentary films, our students formed deep investments

in their learning. Accordingly, they dismissed traditional notions of "student" and "education." By proving that they had something to say about their world, students began to view their education as an opportunity to overcome the stereotypes assigned to them by misinformed teachers and community members. Their identities as "learners" became entangled and quickly pushed aside as they assumed the intertwining roles of filmmakers, historians, and storytellers. As students claimed learning as their own, the filmmaking process empowered and inspired the students themselves, their interviewees, and the film festival viewers. At last willing to defend the value of critical inquiry and creativity, our students realized that their education reached far beyond the confines of the classroom.

Note

1. All student names are pseudonyms.

Works Cited

Jenkins, Henry. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." *Digital Media and Learning*. The MacArthur Foundation, 2006. Web. 25 Aug. 2010.

"The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies." *NCTE Position Statement*. National Council of Teachers of English. 15 Feb. 2008: 1-68. Web. 25 Aug. 2010.

Huck or Chuck: Using Online Role-Play and Ning to Negotiate Race in the High School English Classroom

Elizabeth Barniskis

Introduction

I cringed when reading the newest discussion topic on the class online role-play forum:

I read it again, this time with my administrator mouse hovering over the "Delete Discussion" option. Did this question have anything to do with our dialogue about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? I knew Sheila, the student who posted this question, did so earnestly, and it would assuredly elicit interesting responses from her peers. I was beginning to see that Twain's 1885 work certainly "provokes more questions than it provides answers" (Methelis), but was this question provoked by the text, and if not, did that really matter?

I was not sure how our online dialogue surrounding Twain's often banned book fostered this question, but I knew after a few minutes of internal debate that I would not hit that "Delete Discussion" button.

I teach eleventh grade American Literature Foundations classes for students whose transcripts and work in previous courses suggest they struggle in English class. These classes are not representative of the mostly white, middle class students who attend this first-ring suburban school. A third of the students in these classes are African, Asian, Hispanic, and Mideast immigrants, first-generation Americans, African Americans, or open-enrolled students from other school districts.

Conversations about race never occurred in any classes I taught until last April. Class discussion, what professors and other teachers told me was the pillar of the English classroom, didn't happen much either. Last year I abandoned my annual attempt at the Socratic Seminar by the end of October, after a few wrenching days of near silence, and I fell back to call and response: I called on students and they responded— sometimes.

The idea of having a truly participatory dialogue about racial issues seemed to me unrealistic. I was afraid to talk about issues of race before I even began my career. I still remember feeling paralyzed by anxiety, shame, and nausea as I sat in the principal's office at the Minneapolis high school where I student taught. To my student-teaching horror, three girls had complained that I was being racist.

I was not flinging racial slurs or promoting racist sentiments, but I was trying to be colorblind. My white, Midwest, middle class attitude reflected the belief that skin color should not matter in the classroom. My own skin color, I believed at the time, had little to do with my education. I know now that "a teacher who professes to be 'colorblind' is not going to understand how unconscious biases can influence expectations, actions, and even the way a teacher addresses students of color…The fear of appearing racist also throws up roadblocks" (Scruggs). I had no vocabulary to talk about issues involving race, and for these young women, race not only mattered, it was central to their identities and to their learning.

Not Talking About Race in the Classroom

At the start of my first year teaching over ten years ago, a more senior member of the staff instructed me that the one thing "you just don't do in class is talk about race." I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but at the time I had little awareness of the role race would eventually play in my classroom. Her comment, coupled with my episode student teaching, left an indelible scar on me. I kept this scar in the back of my mind and took it forward into my practice, avoiding conversations about race.

In my current district, dialogue about race and equity *is* happening among the staff. In August of 2008, all teachers attended a kick-off event centered on the discussion of race with our colleagues. One of the strongest messages to come out of the presentation echoes Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton's claim that "the most devastating factor contributing to the lowered achievement of students of color is institutionalized racism" (33). The speaker asserted this racism still exists in education today because schools unintentionally uphold racial bias and foster white advantage.

The speaker asked the primarily white teachers in the auditorium about the discussions of race within our schools. One person raised her hand and said that "We teach books by writers of color, but we don't talk about race." The audience response to this comment was hushed but harsh. I heard grumblings from people who disagreed with this statement and asserted that they did talk about race. Folding my shoulders inward, I shrunk back a bit and dug deeper into my chair. *My* experience talking about race fell into the description given by Linton and Singleton: I see myself "become silent, defiant, angry, or judgmental when the topic comes up" (18). I earnestly wanted to teach literature written by diverse authors to students, but I avoided talking about race.

Not Teaching *Huckleberry Finn*

One way I justified the absence of any class dialogue about race was by teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an antislavery book. I piled onto my students social criticism of the work, examples of satire from the text, and my own opinions that were based on the aforementioned illustrations. I used it to teach the power of friendship and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. I was an enthusiastic guide, navigating students through the symbolism of the river and the irony of the duke and king. We read excerpts from *The Damned Human Race* where Twain labels man as "avaricious and miserly." We studied its history as a censored book and the controversy it still stirs today. I also felt that I did at least address race: I showed the provocative PBS *Culture Shock* documentary *Born to Trouble*, which follows the unsuccessful

effort of a group of Tempe, Arizona parents to have the book removed from a required reading list at a high school.

When I started teaching foundations classes, the book—in my judgment—was never an option. My reasons for keeping it out of my classroom were numerous and practical, even if they did contradict all my reasons for including it in the first place. It was now too long and the dialect too difficult for the students in these classes. The novel was convoluted and messy. Each year students in my foundations classes saw the rest of the juniors in the school reading the novel at some point. I was inevitably asked by many of them if they were going to read it, too. I always had a prepackaged and polite "no" answer, providing them with a reasonable excuse that never implied I thought it was too difficult for them to read.

I found the novel quite rewarding to teach when my classes were made up of mostly white kids. They took no issue—or at least not one they publicized—with the book's use of the word "n[redacted]r" or its portrayal of Jim. When finished with the novel, I was confident these students understood that "Twain uses the term to show the contrast between society's dehumanization of slaves and Jim's nobility of character…and humanity" (Johnson 37). Ironically, I always felt a pang of hypocrisy when I used the book in a "regular" class and not in my foundations class. As I taught more foundations courses, I began to question if my job was to teach it as an antislavery book that modeled satire. I also began to question my exclusion of it from my foundations curriculum. Was it really too long? Too messy? Did I place low expectations on these kids that I did not place on kids in the other classes? Or were my personal scars dictating what I offered to my students? Were the issues about race and language in the book something I did not know how to adequately present to a class where the faces weren't mostly white?

It was the last question and my inability to clearly articulate an answer to it that made me realize that, after years of a basically self-imposed ban, I needed to use it in my foundations course. If I learned that I didn't know how to adequately present it to kids of color, there were deeper issues about teaching the book in my class and about the lack of culturally relevant instruction in my practice that I needed to examine. Ladson-Billings states that teachers who practice such instruction "demonstrate a connectedness with all their students and encourage that same connectedness between students" (25). I believed my classroom was a safe place for my students; I worried that bringing in this text would disrupt the relationships I had worked for months to establish. I was not certain how relationships between students would be impacted, but I felt that open and even potentially quarrelsome communication was better than no communication at all about the issues in the book. If the relationships I had with students were as strong as I believed, I would be able to mediate the potential conflicts.

The N-Word

By the spring of last year, I believed the students in these classes were prepared to look at this book critically and even question its appropriateness as a required text. I was also eager to try the Ning as a forum for debate, and the controversy surrounding the book seemed an ideal topic. I shared my enthusiasm with my students, and I studiously prepped them with background about Twain and the book's controversial legacy.

We had just finished reading August Wilson's *Fences*, and the kids took no offense to the use of word "n[redacted]r" in that work. My African American students volunteered to read the parts of Cory and Troy, and did so with zeal; most of these students decided to use the word as it was

written. They understood Wilson's choice to use dialect. My students who weren't black generally chose not to say it aloud and substituted, on my counsel, "man" instead of "n[redacted]r."

Before reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, students wrote about a word they believed held particular power in American society today. "N[redacted]r" was included in some of their lists. This preceded the reading of Gloria Naylor's article "The Meanings of a Word" where she shares her first childhood realization that the term could be used to denigrate African Americans after a boy in her third-grade class used the word to insult her. She explains how she had heard the word many times previous to this incident but that members of her family used it quite differently than whites. She states that "The people in my grandmother's living room took a word whites used to signify worthlessness and degradation and rendered it impotent" (246). Even before beginning the novel, we talked about how Twain's use of the word was a deliberate and provocative act, and I referenced professor David L. Smith's comment that emphasized "even when Twain was writing his book, 'n[redacted]r' was universally recognized as an insulting, demeaning word" (107). This fact would offer later fodder for a lecture about author intent.

I became uneasy, however, while we were watching *Born to Trouble*. The documentary attempts to provide both sides of the modern controversy surrounding the book. Many of my students became noticeably upset, however, during a montage in the video where several media clips feature offensive and excessive use of the term. One African American student asked me (and audibly the rest of the class), "Why are we watching this?" His tone was one of anger more than curiosity. Several others—black, white, and brown— echoed his question or nodded.

I found myself again folding my shoulders inward and shrinking back a bit more deeply into my chair. In the years of showing the video, I had never been asked this question. I explained the video's context before viewing it, and I thought my pre-viewing commentary would allay any emotion evoked from watching it. I was wrong. These students were offended by the use of the word in the video. Staying silent behind my desk was not the responsible option. I paused the video and told them that debate about the use of the word in the book, as well as in our own society, would be at the center of our Ning.

Using Ning to Examine Language

Using the Ning, I expected all my students to participate in the dialogue. While the novel and its events would drive initial conversations, I expected students to transfer ideas Twain presents in the novel to those at the center of our debate today: race, power, and language.

An online role-play would be an engaging and novel activity that provided a forum for my students to examine multiple perspectives without the same anxieties present in a classroom discussion. I followed the online role-play protocol described by Beach and Doerr-Stevens where "students adopt roles and positions related to a certain issue and then conduct a debate on a blog or online discussion tool over an extended time period. These debates involve students voicing their roles' positions and responding to other roles' positions" (463). Although I would know their online identities, they would not know each other's new guises. This added to the activity's novelty while disconnecting students from each other just enough to focus on the issues rather than on what they already knew and believed to be true about each other.

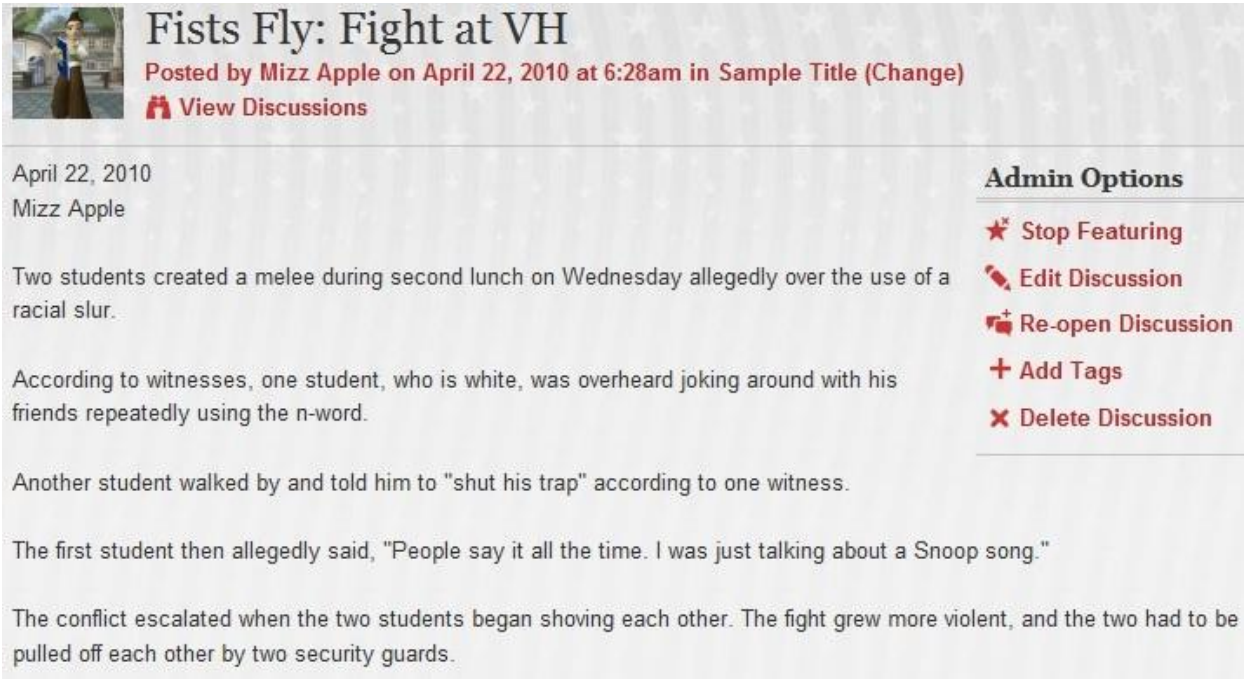
Our online platform was the Ning, a social networking site similar to Facebook, and our debate was framed by the following question: Should *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* be a required text in high school English course? The school we created, Valley High, was facing a controversy similar to the one detailed in the documentary in Arizona. We read an additional

article, as well, involving local schools in St. Louis Park and Lakeville that were challenged in 2007 by parents who questioned the necessity of the book in the curriculum.

Planning with the end on mind, I did not want to use a Ning only for novelty. My objectives included having several dialogues in class about the controversy surrounding the book where students shed their Ning identities. Additionally, students would craft persuasive essays arguing for or against the use of the book as required reading in a high school. This latter activity would also involve dropping their Ning identities but using arguments and ideas generated from the Ning in their own pieces.

In this role-play I became a media representative, Mizz Apple, a reporter from the Valley High Press who was covering the controversy. I also posted most of the original forum topics, and the first topic was about the use of the word "n[redacted]r" in schools. As a teacher, I do hear the word regularly in school, and I wanted students to dialogue about it.

In the initial discussion forum, I posted an article written by Mizz Apple that detailed a recent fight between two students at the school:



The previous year, a fight did occur at our school under allegedly similar circumstances according to one student involved. I did not revisit the event with students, but I felt it was a relevant situation to their own experience. Under the discussion forum, I posted questions about the situation and the use of the word in schools: Should the word be banned in schools? Are there certain people who should be "allowed" to say it? Should teachers step in when they hear anyone of any race use it?

In retrospect, I realize my first discussion was flawed. Although the students at Valley High were reading Twain's book, I created a situation unrelated to the text. Exploring the *Born to Trouble* documentary, considering students' strong reaction to it, would have been a better opening forum. Despite my belated awareness, student reactions to our first forum were compelling, telling, and immediate. Students reluctant to say anything in class suddenly became engaged in conversations with other students. Debates developed, and disagreements were

explored. For the first time all year, students questioned each other and challenged their peers' arguments.

Argument and Analysis, Online

Mr. Bob, a Valley City policeman, and Hitoshi Kiyo, a Valley High student working to remove *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the required reading list, shared the following dialogue:

I noticed several things immediately reading over these initial dialogues. Many students strayed from their role-play identities or were ambivalent to them in their responses. I pushed them to stay "in character" for the first few days, but I realized it was as instructive for them to respond as they wanted rather than as the boxed persona they assumed. My objective was to have students think and talk about issues of race related to the text as well as to our modern society in ways they may have not done before; whether or not they stayed in the voice of their character seemed irrelevant to achieving that goal.

Also ineffectual was my overwhelming English teacher urge to police conventions in their writing on the Ning. I was not as concerned about the punctuation in their writing as I was about the reactions other people—colleagues I invited to view this Ning—may have when reading their comments. Would students' lack of conventional precision reflect poorly on me? Evelyn and Andrew Rothstein, citing Joos, state that "Teenagers speak in a different register to fellow teenagers in contrast to how they are likely to speak to their parents, known often as 'intimate' or peer group register" (13). Although they were initially to write as their assumed identifies, it was unrealistic to expect them to acquire the jargon of their personas. While such an expectation could be useful, it was not one of my objectives.

As their discourse developed, the Ning was clearly a platform for students to prewrite and think about the topics more deeply. Dialogues in the classroom don't necessarily encourage participation from those individuals who need more time to process others' comments before they contribute. Students now had that time.

My misjudgment of one student's aptitude was evident when I read his initial Ning response. Will, a soft-spoken if not silent student, showed little engagement with any text we had read, and I assumed this lack of interest would carry into this unit, as well. He struggled with Twain's novel but became engrossed with the Ning, and his writing was more critical and analytical than at any other time in the year. In his first entry, using lyrics from the song "Letter to the King" by The Game, Will sought to clarify the difference between the word "n[redacted]r" and the word "n[redacted]a," including this portion of the song in his response:

Reply by **Peter Chao** on April 22, 2010 at 10:10am

Send Message

there is a difference between the way african americans use the word among themselves. these lyrics exemplify the difference.

"The word n*****
Is nothin like ni**a
Dont sound s*** alike
Like game, like Jigga
One came before the other
Like aim and pull the trigga
One slang for my brotha
One hang and take a picture

I did my customary cringe when I read the lyrics; songs like these are not standard texts in our class. There was certainly a time in my teaching career when I believed such lyrics had absolutely no place in my class. How could I censor this example, however, when it was central to the issues we were addressing? He explained his use of this song in the same entry:

this controversy shows how words and their meaning change over time, and people disregard the seriousness of words and their actions. these days there are right and wrong ways to use the n-word. the game shows the difference in his song. it can be used as a weapon to make someone feel inferior, but black people countered this by using the word among another but with a different meaning behind it. in the past the n-word was normal (not saying it was ever a proper way to refer to someone) but as slavery ended and the world became more open to the idea of equality the word was "socially banned" no one would use the n-word in an everyday sentence unless they had very strong emotions towards african americans. It is strange that it is normal for a black person to say nigga to those around him, but when a white person says it, its racist. i feel that this is a "black only" thing. they use it because it is their own definition of the word. a word they can use that isnt offensive at all. but that is also because there are different ways of using the word. also, a black person may take offense to a white person using the n-word because they have experienced white people throwing around the word as a joke. these are my feelings at least. what do you think?

Will's analysis brought Rothstein's assertions about registers into our classroom and provided a platform for a discussion among the students about dialect, slang, and register switching.

I was not sure how many ideas we would address on the Ning, but as reading of the novel continued the variety of dialogue topics was endless. I set up forums about the portrayal of Southerners in the novel, quotes of controversy, and the prejudice of Pap. I also began

encouraging students to develop forum topics and a few did. In addition to the forum about the use of the word "n[redacted]r," Matt created a forum that asked students who they thought should select books that are read in schools. Should parents have more of a say since their tax money goes to fund schools? Are teachers the experts in book selection? Should there be a committee of students, parents, and teachers that decide? Dan's forum questioned why there is a need to spend time focusing on issues around race when there are numerous other social problems the book exposes. Students tackled these complex questions with enthusiasm I had not seen before in class. One student wanted to focus more on the abuse of Huck in the book:

Send Message

i agree. people can be offended by racism but honestly how many people went through the time of the civil war and that degree of racism? none. no one from that time is still alive. people go through abuse from parents every day and that is even worse in my eyes. i would rather be racially discriminated against than physically and emotionally abused by my own parents. i think that we should spend more time educating kids on physical and emotional abuse than racism. that topic at least applies to our time and is not talked about enough.

In reading responses like these it was hard for me not to become overly critical or frustrated with what I perceived as a lack of racial awareness, and I looked for opportunities to encourage students to question their own assertions. My response to the above statement posed multiple questions that I hoped would cause this student to think a bit more reflectively and personally:

What a thoughtful response! Have you ever been racially discriminated against? Do you think this book allows us to talk about physical and emotional abuse? For example, we have Huck who is abused clearly by Pap, but what about Miss Watson? She takes him into a closet and makes him pray!! Is that abusive? Also, slavery itself, because of the nature of it, was certainly emotionally and physically abusive. What a great topic you have started!

In addition to student-generated questions, forum topics reflected current events. I admit I was oddly excited last May after I read about a controversy involving a white student at a local Christian college who donned blackface for a costume party where he masqueraded as rapper Lil' Wayne. Reaction to this episode was emotional—many of the college's students took offense to the act—and the story was covered in several local newspapers and Internet sites. The incident was a local, timely, and relevant illustration of how issues of race still exist despite claims made by some students that racism is no longer pertinent. After reading several articles and blogs, students connected this modern- day debate to minstrelsy and the ambiguous portrayal of Jim in the novel. By this time most students had shed their role-play identities; the dialogue on the Ning was revealing of student attitudes about race and reaction to the Lil' Wayne controversy was clearly divided as seen in the following excerpt:

Reply by **Commander Gure** on May 12, 2010 at 10:09am

Send Message

I think people should be angry over this incident because the student was trying to be funny by painting his face black. Blackface is a way to degrade an african american and what he did was a shame. There is a line where you cant cross and he crossed that line. Somethings are funny and other things are'nt

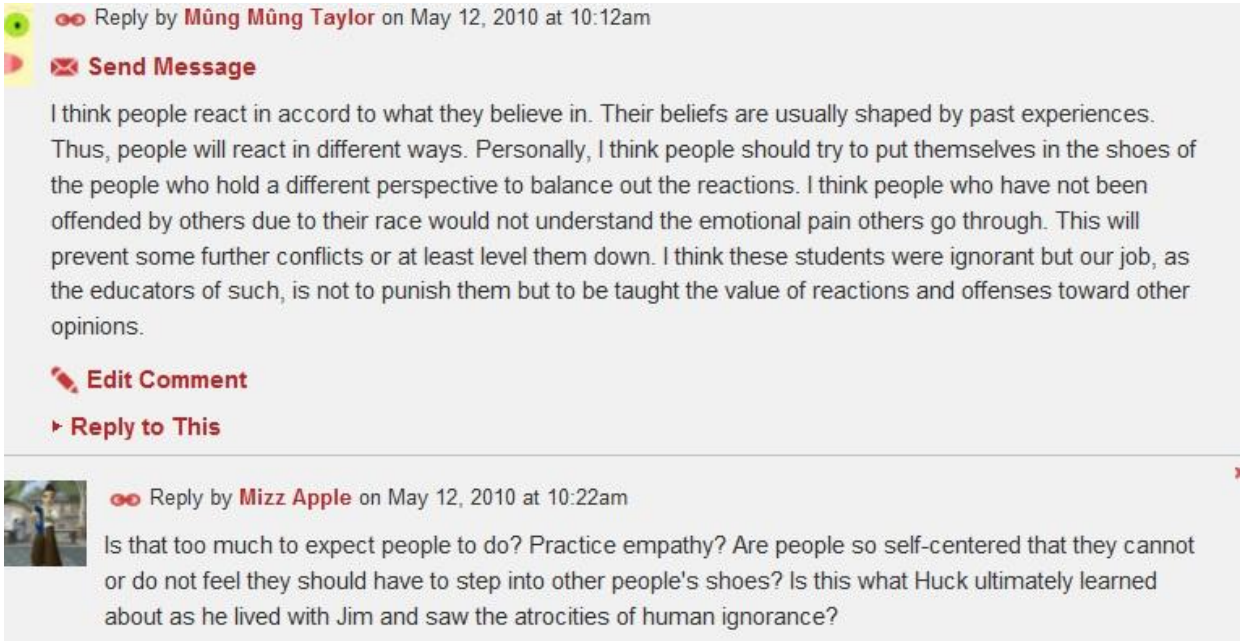
Reply to This

Reply by **Cinderella Princess** on May 12, 2010 at 10:09am

Send Message

I understand that it wasnt the best idea for the student to do, but i dont think he was trying to offend anyone. I think people are overreacting because it was just a skit and they were just trying to have fun. I would tell someone who was offended that the students were not trying to hurt anyones feelings they were just trying to act as Lil Wayne. For the most part, i would guess that the crowd enjoyed the skit.

I, too, saw a change in my response to what students wrote as I had more time to think about my own reaction. On the Ning, kids discussed topics related to the book and issues in it, and I consciously connected students' comments with events and ideas in the text. Although students' observations about these issues were independently valuable, I hoped that my comments would stress Kelly Gallagher's emphasis of providing "an opportunity to think deeply about issues that will affect their lives" (89). In the following exchange, I underscored arguments made by one student who did not relate her assertions to the novel but that were clearly connected to the text:



Reply by **Mûng Mûng Taylor** on May 12, 2010 at 10:12am

Send Message

I think people react in accord to what they believe in. Their beliefs are usually shaped by past experiences. Thus, people will react in different ways. Personally, I think people should try to put themselves in the shoes of the people who hold a different perspective to balance out the reactions. I think people who have not been offended by others due to their race would not understand the emotional pain others go through. This will prevent some further conflicts or at least level them down. I think these students were ignorant but our job, as the educators of such, is not to punish them but to be taught the value of reactions and offenses toward other opinions.

Edit Comment

Reply to This

Reply by **Mizz Apple** on May 12, 2010 at 10:22am

Is that too much to expect people to do? Practice empathy? Are people so self-centered that they cannot or do not feel they should have to step into other people's shoes? Is this what Huck ultimately learned about as he lived with Jim and saw the atrocities of human ignorance?

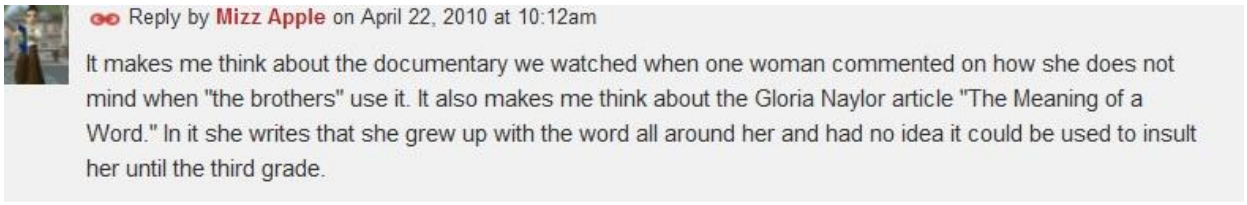
The questions I posed to individual students often went unanswered on the Ning. However, those questions came into the dialogue we had in the classroom away from the computers. Face-to-face conversations did not go away with the Ning. Instead, our class discussions became more deliberate and specific. There were no more long moments (or

minutes) of silence. I came prepared with comments from the Ning that needed examination, and the kids were also expected to bring selected posts they wanted to revisit with their peers in small groups.

Conclusion: Dealing with Difficult Issues

I have never felt that I needed to be the exclusive authority of my classroom content. I am comfortable being a student as well as a teacher, and there have been many times when students have pointed things out to me that I never before considered. I acknowledge their insights and honor their perceptions. On the other hand, being a white female, I believed I had no place bringing such deeply personal and sensitive issues into my class because I felt inadequate in leading discussions about them.

The Ning allowed me to lead the class without necessarily directing it, and I found that my place on the Ning was natural and metacognitive. While I made considerable effort questioning students' claims, I found that there were times when I just wanted to participate, as I did in Sheila's forum about African Americans using the word:



With every forum and student response I, too, was realizing the necessity of talking about difficult issues with students.

The final persuasive essays came in, and there was a difference in students' depth of thought. Students were thinking both more critically and more broadly after interacting with their peers on the Ning. Students returned to the Ning when writing their essays to collect arguments and review their own perspectives. Of course, things were not perfect with the Ning. I never found a "best way" to grade student participation. While I read through responses, I realized I did not have time to reply to every comment made. I decided to grade the Ning entries as I would short, formative writings that I have kids do in class and submit before leaving for the day. For each entry completed, they received five points. If students were not meeting my minimum expectation—expectations I established at the year's start— I spoke with them individually. My most effective tool was modeling the type of responses I expected and presenting strong student examples I read in our forums.

I returned to school this fall, and the focus of the district kick-off was less provocative than the previous year's event. Nonetheless, my colleagues still recalled being asked last year to determine the influence of race in our lives and the reaction to the speaker's claim that race impacts our lives 100% of the time. While I have students who openly claim racism no longer exists or isn't an issue worth spending time on anymore, I saw how significant it is to many of my students and how race and issues around it are part of their lives every day. Our district has created equity teams at each school and its members—teachers, administrators, and other staff—are meeting to continue this conversation, a conversation I had been told early on to avoid at all costs.

Works Cited

Beach, Richard, and Candance Doerr-Stevens. "Learning Argument Practices through Online Role-Play: Toward a Rhetoric of Significance and Transformation." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* (Mar. 2009): 460-468. Print.

Gallagher, Kelly. *Deeper Reading*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2004. Print.

Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents.* Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1996. Print.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *The Dreamkeepers*: *Successful Teachers of African American Teachers*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2009. Print.

Methelis, Nancy. "Trying to Tame Huck Finn: A Conversation with Nancy Methelis." *Humanities* (Jan./Feb. 2000). Print.

Naylor, Gloria. "The Meanings of a Word." *The Prentice Hall Reader*. 6th Ed. New York: Pearson, 2000: 243-247. Print.

Rothstein, Evelyn, and Andrew Rothstein. *English Grammar Instruction that Works.* Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2009. Print.

Scruggs, Afi-Odelia. "Colorblindness: The New Racism?" *Teaching Tolerance* 36 (2009): n. pag. Web. 15 Dec. 2010.

Singleton, Glenn E. Curtis Linton. *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2006. Print.

Smith, David L. "Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse." *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn.* Ed. James Leonard et al Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992. Print.

Twain, Mark. *Mark Twain on the Damned Human Race*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1962. Print.

Part Four:
Why Teach This Text?

"Forgit the WHY ME shit and git on to what's next": What We Can Learn from *Precious (*and *Push)* about Developmental Writing Instruction

Brian C. Lewis

Sapphire's protagonist from the novel *Push*, Claireece Precious Jones, also known as "Precious," is a morbidly obese, black, pregnant teenager growing up in the late 1980s. She has been sexually molested by both parents, as well as physically and verbally abused by her mother. In *Precious,* the film version of Sapphire's *Push*, Precious's mother tells her, "You're a dummy, bitch. Don't nobody want you, don't nobody need you." Late in this film, Precious discovers she is HIV+ due to her father's molestation; she already has one child by him, a daughter with Down's Syndrome. Still, Precious does manage to believe in herself a bit. In Mr. Wicher's math class, she serves as "the polices," interrupting the kids who get out of control: "'Shut up motherfuckers I'm tryin' to learn something,'" she yells at them (Sapphire 6).[1] However, the Harlem public school system has failed her; she cannot read and write, yet she admits, "I got A in English and never say nuffin', do nuffin'. I sit in seat" (Sapphire 49). In *Precious*, we hear her voice declare, "Someday, I'm gonna break on through, or somebody gonna break on through to me." She maintains this glimmer of hope. A pivotal moment for Precious involves joining the "Each One Teach One" class for Pre-GED students at the Hotel Theresa, taught by Ms. Blue Rain. Once Precious enters the class, her life begins to turn around. She even tells us that she wins a literacy award of $75 dollars from the mayor's office, and that her class has a party in her honor (Sapphire 82).

But why . . . or what . . . turns Precious around? This young woman has absolutely nothing going for her. Her persona reminds me of what Albert yells to Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman, Goddam . . . you nothing at all" (Walker 206). Furthermore, Precious is fat, HIV+, too scared to talk to people, and a child abuse survivor. However, in spite of Precious's outcast status in both the novel and the film on which it's based, Precious--and her peers at Each One Teach One--emerge as inspirations for both students and teachers. In particular, both the novel and film have a lot to teach teachers--at any level--about developmental writing instruction. (For the most part, I will focus on the film, but I will also occasionally allude to points that the novel makes that the film does not.) Quite often, students in developmental courses see themselves as people who don't read or write, just as Precious sees herself. But if we study the classroom dynamics between Ms. Rain and her students closely, we can clearly learn teaching tips for helping this supposedly "difficult" group of students.

Small class size (less than ten).

When we see Precious first enter the Each One Teach One classroom in the film *Precious*, the door opens very slowly, and we notice that the class has only about five or six students in it. Before speaking a word, Precious walks to the front of the class and sits in an empty seat. She likely would not have had the courage to perform such an action if the class had had 20, 25, 30, or more students, such as Mr. Wicher's math class at her former school.

Then, in the scene that follows, we get to learn a bit about the students as individuals through the "icebreaker" that Ms. Rain uses in the class to enable the students to get to know each other better. We quickly learn that Rhonda is a Jamaican spitfire, Jermaine a tough lesbian, Rita an ex-drug addict who loves to dress in black, JoAnn a singer with a bouncy personality,

and Consuelo a Hispanic beauty determined to define the activity as "bullshit." After Consuelo expresses her resistance to participate, Precious asks if she can pass, too. Ms. Rain allows her to do so without shaming her into speaking and then proceeds to another activity. However, Precious changes her mind and asks if she can have a turn to introduce herself to the class. At the end of her introduction, Precious quietly proclaims that she has never spoken in class before. Ms. Rain quietly asks, "How does that make you feel?" She shyly replies, "Here. It makes me feel--here."

Through her quiet actions, Ms. Rain serves as a model to other teachers of developmental writing instruction. First of all, she attempts to build a sense of community in her classroom right away through her "icebreaker" activity, even though we know from the novel that this was not the first day for all of the students in that class (Sapphire 39-48). This activity enabled Precious to feel more included in the class, to feel "here." Secondly, when Precious asks to pass on her introduction, Ms. Rain allows her the freedom to do so without cajoling her, teasing her, or shaming her into following the rules. This action gives Precious the confidence to raise her hand to contribute anyway. Thirdly, Ms. Rain shows that she cares about Precious's feelings by asking how she feels. By asking her this question, Ms. Rain validates Precious as a human being instead of rejecting her as an object to be dismissed. We begin to sense that this is an environment in which Precious will feel nurtured rather than abused. Precious's response--that she feels "here"--indicates that she already feels that she belongs. Even Precious's classmates respect the poignancy of her response by remaining silent for a few seconds after she speaks.

Due to the small size of the group, Precious is able to develop friendships with these women; she learns to trust them in ways that she could never trust anyone before. Many scenes in the film show five or so students talking, learning, laughing, and interacting with each other. In the novel, we see the stories of each individual young woman come together in a collection of "Life Stories," in which we get to learn the history of each member of the class (Sapphire 141-177). This collaborative activity (not shown in the film) further validates the existence of the class members and enables their lives and their writing to inspire others in ways that they would have never imagined previously.

Assuming that developmental writers can already write.

In Precious's first day in the class, Ms. Rain asks her students to write, even though some of the students, including Precious herself, seriously question this directive. "How we gonna write if we can't read? How we gonna write if we can't spell?," she asks. Ms. Rain insists that spelling and grammar don't matter--all they need to do is write. In the novel, she tells Precious "'Don't say it, write it.'" After Precious replies, "'I can't,'" Ms. Rain responds, "'Don't say that . . . DO what I say, write what you was thinking'" (Sapphire 61).

Consequently, Precious attempts to write what she can: "li Mg o mi m" (61) While some writing teachers might dismiss this as jibberish or "bad grammar," Ms. Rain instead asks Precious to read what she has written out loud--"Little Mongo <Precious's daughter> on my mind." Ms. Rain then ends up writing out responses to Precious's words (such as "Who is Little Mongo?"), encouraging her to write more responses to Ms. Rain in her dialogue journal. Precious concludes from this exercise, "I am happy to be writing. I am happy to be in school. 'Thas great" (Sapphire 62).

Ms. Rain's lesson here reminds teachers of a very important task when teaching developmental writers: *get them to write what they know*. Developmental writers are often developmental because they have been labeled--institutionally, or within their families, or among

their peers--as "deficient" in their writing abilities. They are smart enough to figure out that "developmental," from an institutional perspective, is often a code word for "dumb." Even though these students may be old enough for college-level work, just as Precious is, it is probably best to think of students like Precious as working on the pre-college level. They have not, as David Bartholomae would say, learned to "invent the university," or master the discourse of academia (403-17). Bartholomae explains further: "<The student> has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (403). For these reasons, a great place to start in teaching developmental writers at any level is to have them write about they know--that's why Ms. Rain asks Precious to write what's on her mind. If Precious is writing what's on her mind, she's writing about something that matters to her, giving her some sense of agency in the writing task.

One-on-one work with students.

The film *Precious* also teaches us the importance of doing one-on-one work with students. Soon after the classroom scene in the film, we see Ms. Rain asking Precious questions about her life at home. Precious reveals to her that her mother "don't do nothin.'" Even through this brief conversation, the film reiterates the importance of talking to students, even on an informal basis, about what their lives our like. Such conversations can help deepen our understanding of why our students have the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that they do. On film, as Ms. Rain attempts to get Precious to read a picture book, we witness a montage of all the negativity in Precious's life; we overhear verbal abuse from her mother and view brief images of sexual abuse from her father. Fortunately, Precious is able to move beyond such negative messages and ultimately admits to Ms. Rain, "All the pages look alike to me." Ms. Rain pauses for a moment, and we see a tear in her eye. Still, Ms. Rain painstakingly has Precious read the phrase "A DAY AT THE SHORE," letter by letter, word by word, until Precious CAN read the phrase. Later in the film, Ms. Rain and Precious continue to use the dialogue journal discussed previously to talk to each other on paper, even while Precious is in the hospital, soon after giving birth to her second child, Abdul. "So many questions you ask," Precious remarks to Ms. Rain at one point. She does not yet understand that Ms. Rain's attempt to get to know Precious better is not an attempt to Ms. Rain's part to be nosy; it is her attempt to make her new student think critically about her life, and especially her newly-developing literacy skills.

The relationship between Ms. Rain and Precious here stresses the importance of getting to know our students as individuals, not just ID numbers. If we can see them as real people with real problems in their lives, we may gain more empathy for their situations, and perhaps even challenge them more. Note that Ms. Rain did not necessarily make work easier for Precious once she found out that "all the pages look alike" for her. On the contrary, she pressed to her to *read anyway*--she continued to see Precious as a capable, functional individual in a situation when most people might be hard-pressed to do so. And even when Precious is absent--away at the hospital--she continues to make her "do her homework" by carrying on the dialogue journals with her. These individual relationships between student and teacher, as we see here, transcend the boundaries of the traditional classroom.

Hone appreciation of a student's own cultural history.

At one point in the film, we see Precious sitting at her desk studying a series of images that appear on the wall in her classroom. They include images of famous black politicians and

singers. These images are not just pictures, but video clips; one quickly follows after another, and they end up all blending to together in a collage of image and sound. Simultaneously, we see the image of a clock with its hands rapidly turning around. This moment in the film represents for us not only how much Precious is learning, but how quickly; it's all coming together for her in a relatively short time period. The hours pass by and Precious learns more and more. Most meaningfully, she is learning about her African American past, giving her a cultural identity with which she can connect. Similarly, in the novel *Push*, Ms. Rain has Precious pour through African American literature, for both Precious and her child. Precious is even compelled to create lists of all the books she and Abdul are obtaining because she's so excited to learn (Sapphire 80-81). We begin, therefore, to learn another lesson that the film teaches: give students readings and materials that connect to their heritage. When we ask our students to read, after all, they are probably most likely to want to read materials with which they can personally connect--and this is particularly true for students at the developmental level of literacy instruction. Giving students readings and materials from their own cultural background legitimizes their identities in classroom environments. It shows that their lives and experiences are worthy of classroom conversation.

Forming a sense of community.

A final key aspect of *Precious* as a film is the way it shows the importance of developing community beyond the classroom. In the film, this development takes place in two ways. To begin with, Precious develops an appreciation of lives and perspectives different from her own. For example, when she comes to understand that Catherine is Ms. Rain's lover, she initially comments to herself, "Oh my God, they are straight up lesbians!" But as she sits and talks to the women, she knows that their erudite nature can have nothing but a positive influence on her and her child. And, after all, she concludes that "It not homos who let me sit in class for years, learn nothin'. Ms. Rain made me Queen of the ABC's." Furthermore, Jermaine, the butch lesbian character in the film, comes to visit Precious in the hospital, and, in the classroom, Jermaine defends Precious's right not to work for "slave labor" wages as a home attendant. In the novel, the friendship between Precious and Jermaine is even more developed, as Precious calls Jermaine to help her read the file that she stole from Ms. Weiss's office (Sapphire 117-20).

Another way in which Ms. Rain's class forms a sense of community is through the actions of Ms. Rain herself. She takes the young women on a museum field trip early on in the film. And immediately after Precious's mother forces Precious out of her home once Abdul is born, Ms. Rain is shown on the phone, frantically trying to place Precious in a suitable living situation. Ms. Rain's efforts puzzle Precious: "Ms. Rain ain't no social worker; she just an ABC teacher," she comments. However, Ms. Rain's efforts here remind us what we ALL can afford to be with developmental writers--diligent, patient, understanding, and, above all else, willing to make an extra effort. Many of our students are not unlike Precious Jones; some have been abused or kicked out of their homes for one reason or another. While it may not necessarily be incumbent upon us as teachers to provide homes for these students, it should be our responsibility as professional people to care enough to direct such students to the right resources.

Conclusions.

Near the end of the novel *Push*, Precious makes the following remark: "I'm not happy to be HIV positive. I don't understand why some kids git a good school and mother and father and some don't. But Rita say forgit the WHY ME shit and git on to what's next" (Sapphire 139). So

in spite of everything that Precious endures, she eventually learns (from one of her classmates, Rita) to look forward into her future and not be mired down in the bog of her past. Our developmental writing classrooms can serve as positive opportunities for our students if we only let them be so. They are opportunities not just for learning to write, but for personal growth, community-building, and individual empowerment. Each class can be a gift to each individual student if we only let it happen.

Note

1. All quotes from the novel are as written just as they are in the text; also, all quotes from the film are written just as they are spoken in the film . The novel is written just as the story in the film is told-- in Precious's vernacular, not in Standard English. Similarly, the quote from *The Color Purple* is in Albert's vernacular.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." Rpt. from *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writers' Block and Other Composing Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford, 1985. 403-17. *Wikispaces.com*. Web. 1 December 2010.

Precious. Dir. Lee Daniels. Perf. Gabourey Sidibe, Mo'Nique, and Mariah Carey. Lionsgate, 2009. Film.

Sapphire. *Push*. New York: Vintage, 1996. Print.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. 1982. First Harvest edition. Orlando, FA: Harcourt, 2003. Print.

Why I Teach Campbell McGrath's "Maizel at Shorty's In Kendall"

Dallas Crow

Over nearly a dozen years in a high school classroom, I have learned that teenagers have a number of strongly held beliefs about poetry. I am not sure where they come from exactly—I don't see my colleagues passing along these messages—but year after year I hear versions of the three following adages at the beginning of the poetry unit:

> 1.) Poetry is about one's innermost feelings and can only be written when one is inspired.
> 2.) There are no rules for poetry. Anything goes. You can do whatever you want.
> 3.) Poems are keepers of secret hidden messages, which the instructor somehow knows, and which students are supposed to find.

Not only do I disagree with these assumptions, but they seem to be defense mechanisms students use to keep themselves from engaging with poetry. The first two points disqualify any discussion or constructive criticism of student writing and help discount anything new the student may encounter as far as structure or syntax, and the third leads to student frustration. In response, I have designed my poetry curriculum to undercut these beliefs—in what we read, how we discuss it, and in the kind of writing exercises I assign. For many reasons, Campbell McGrath's poem, "Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall," provides an important early step in breaking down student defenses.

Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall

All shift them sugar donuts
been singing to me,
calling to me something crazy in a voice
Dolly Parton'd be proud of—*Maizel, honey,*
eat us up! Like that.
Friendly. Nice and sweet, all
glazed up together in that box, as if they was
happy about being what they
is, surely more than this
jelly-junkie waitress hooked on
Krispy Kremes can say. Halve the moon,
leave a frosted crescent for some other girl.
Maizel, you ain't kidding
no one, honey.
Of a certainty you're going to eat that yourself,
probably soon's you get these BB-
Q
ribs to them boys at table
sixteen. Nice-looking boys, too.

These days we're getting the,
uh, Cuban mostly,
virtually all what you call Hispanic-speaking.
White folks gone moved up to Broward County, like my
ex. *Maizel, you shut*
your mouth about that man! Sweet Gee-
zus, honey, ain't this ring of sugar gold enough?

I teach this poem along with other persona poems to show kids that poems don't have to be about your own experiences. The female waitress who is the speaker of this poem is a far cry from the author himself (a male college professor), so we talk about who the speaker is, and the students can identify her as working class with a limited education. They see this in her diction—"them," in the first line and the contractions in lines 4 and 16—and syntax—"as if they was / happy about being what they / is" (lines 7-9). Through her hesitation and incorrect word choice, students also identify her attempt—and failure—to be politically correct ("These days we're getting the, / uh, Cuban mostly, / virtually all what you call Hispanic-speaking")(20-22). They are able to see and hear the humor in the doughnuts and their siren song to her, and they recognize what that says about her self-image. They see a young woman torn between desire and disappointment. Her critical self-image is evident in her definition of herself as "this / jelly-junkie waitress hooked on / Krispy Kremes" who is tempted to take only half a doughnut (9-11), but she can also admit to herself the bitter reality: "*Of a certainty you're going to eat that yourself*" (15). They also see her loneliness in the way she notices the "Nice-looking boys" at table sixteen (a shrinking commodity these days in her mind) a few lines before mentioning her ex (19). In the end, she settles for the temporary satisfaction of a "ring of sugar" rather than the more lasting and meaningful engagement or wedding ring she appears to desire (26). With both Maizel and the Krispy Kremes taking turns speaking, this is really a double persona poem, even if the doughnut voices are in her head. (I later give students an assignment where they write from the point of view of an animal or inanimate object, and while I give them specific models for that, this is another opportunity to point out such a strategy.) Identifying how these techniques develop her character helps the students see both the poet's craft and the distance between the poet and the persona he has created.

After we have talked about the content for a while, I take the opportunity to turn their attention to form. In some classes a student will comment on or ask about the one-letter line, "Q," which is also a good time to make the transition (17). I have them look down the left-hand margin. Almost without exception, none of them have noticed that this is an abecedarian poem. It makes for a moment of awe. They are impressed by what the poet has pulled off and note other things about the poem they had questions about, like the spelling "Gee-zus" (25-26). Identifying the formal structure leads students to see that poems may be a result of authorial intent as much as inspiration or happy accident, that in this case the author chose particular words because they fit the abecederian format. This is an important discovery for students to make because it undercuts the first two presuppositions many of them bring to the study of poetry, while simultaneously offering evidence that close, careful reading of a text may help them more fully appreciate and understand a poem.

I use "Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall" as the beginning of teaching them about poetic forms. I will show them other abecedarian poems, as well as more complex forms, like sonnets, pantoums, villanelles, ghazals, and sestinas, but for now it's a chance to point out how poets use

structures to inspire them and drive their poems forward. That "uh" (21), that moment's hesitation as she tries to find the socially acceptable term to cover for her racism seems to me something McGrath may have discovered due to the constraints of the form, and it prepares us perfectly for the stumble ("what you call Hispanic-speaking") which the students recognize as her revealing the biases she's trying to hide (22). It's a great example of the poet showing us her character rather than telling us or editorializing. In fact, the students often have a great deal of sympathy for Maizel and her situation, even as they criticize her racial attitudes.

While poetry may not have strict rules like math and science do, it does have forms and techniques that writers use to shape their poems. I encourage students to look at a poem's architecture as a way of reading closely—that the artist doesn't hide meanings, but that looking at the structure of a poem may reveal such things. "Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall" is a poem that is accessible to beginning poetry readers and also rewards closer reading. It's a poem I use to defuse preconceptions about poetry while also introducing formal aspects of the composition process to students. Best of all, perhaps, it's a poem that students like initially and like even more with additional explication and exploration. After reading and discussing it, those defense mechanisms I mentioned in the first paragraph start to fade, and I find students more open to looking at how other poems engage and affect us.

Work Cited

McGrath, Campbell. "Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall." *Florida Poems*. New York: Ecco Press/HarperCollins, 2002. 59. Print.

From *The Odyssey* to *The Kite Runner*: Creating and Implementing a Literature Curriculum in a Somali Charter School

Heather Megarry Traeger

I was about a week into studying *The Odyssey* with a class of ninth graders in an all-Muslim (mainly Somali and Oromo) charter school in Minneapolis when I finally got the question. Poseidon was thwarting Odysseus' travel plans when Abdishakur[1] looked up from the book and asked, "Hey, should we be reading this? They believe in all these gods, but there is no God but God."

The particular community that started our school was a little more traditional and conservative than most of the Somali communities in the Twin Cities. For example, all of the girls wore traditional Muslim head scarves (or *hijabs*), and boys and girls had separate physical education classes, sat at separate tables in the lunchroom and separate sections of the gym in all-school assemblies. So a student casually quoting the *Shahada* ("There is no God but God"), the first tenet of Islam, was not a surprise. Because the school had just opened and my students and I were just getting to know each other, Abdishakur's concern about the book selection was not a complete surprise, either.

Not willing to take an authoritarian position on what was, essentially, a cultural and religious question, I dodged. "What do you think?" I asked the class.

Another boy in class, Mohamed, was regarded amongst the students as a junior religious scholar. He often had his pocket-sized Qu'ran secretly open under his desk because, in the tradition of *hafiz*, he was working toward complete memorization of the Muslim holy book. When Abdishakur and the students turned to him to "rule" on the appropriateness of reading *The Odyssey*, he calmly said, "Nah, it's o.k. The Greeks came before Mohamed, Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him."

"Any other thoughts?" I asked the class. Everyone seemed satisfied, so I moved on to the rest of the lesson.

Reading literature with students is one of the best aspects of my job, and choosing which books to study can be a complicated, albeit enjoyable, decision. In *The English Teacher's Companion*, Jim Burke writes, "We read these stories [in class] for the conversations they let us have" (57). The brief exchange I had six years ago about Greek polytheism with two young Muslim men stayed with me. In it, I learned a little more about how my class would respond to questions of faith in the classroom, and it added to my understanding of the community in which I was teaching. I also imagine that, in the conversation, my students learned I wouldn't be offended if they questioned my decisions or the value of a piece of literature, and that I would take their ideas seriously. As literature so often does in classrooms, the story opened up space for us to talk to each other.

I have been a high school English teacher in Minnesota for eighteen years, four of which I spent at a charter school opened by an East African community in the Twin Cities. I look back on those years fondly, in part because of the conversations about literature I was able to have with my colleagues and students whose lives were often very different from my own. In condensing countless hours of conversation into a few specific examples here, I hope to speak for the value of using literature to increase cross-cultural understanding.

However, I hesitate to write about my charter school experience because the stakes seem so high: I don't want to misrepresent my students or the East African community that welcomed me and treated me with esteem. Even with good intentions, writing about someone else's culture is filled with potential for simplification, stereotype or offense. Furthermore, I was a guest of the community; I cannot provide a true "insider" perspective. I can only write about my perceptions of my East African colleagues and students and my shared experiences.

On the other hand, I am driven to write about my experience for much the same reason why I try to include literature with Muslim characters in my curriculum: as counterbalance to the sensationalistic and negative images of Muslim people in the media. I believe that perceptions change when we have more images of people living their ordinary lives – learning, going to school, teaching – and reading books and articles can help provide those images.

Literature Selection Parameters from the Community

Our school's charter charged us to prepare students for college and meaningful careers in the community. My challenge in selecting texts for the English classes was to balance several goals. The texts had to maintain high school-level rigor, meet community leader-and parent-approval in this traditional and conservative community, and be accessible to Levels 3-5 ELL students. I also wanted the curriculum to include a variety and diversity of texts that challenged students to think deeply about themes that resonated in their own lives. I tried to select texts very purposefully rather than merely replicating the curriculum that I was familiar with from my twelve previous years of teaching.

The process of "learning" what texts were acceptable to the community was continual – as I believe it always should be. The second day of teacher workshop before the school opened, I was told to "start ordering books," but I was cautious enough to start by asking questions first. Integral to this process was the openness and thoughtfulness of the Somali and Oromo men on the faculty who patiently answered my questions and illustrated their answers with stories of their own educational experiences in Somalia, Ethiopia, Italy, England, Norway, Kenya and the United States. These men were also very articulate about the perceptions of American schools that were commonly held in their communities.

Americans – myself included -- like lists and clear guidelines. I kept asking, "What should I teach? What should I avoid?" hoping, I suppose, that I could create a checklist or rubric that would help me make future decisions more consistently and efficiently. What I repeatedly learned and grew to appreciate was that this is not always the African approach to communication, which tends to be peppered with anecdote, metaphor and nuance. So in anticipation of my readers' desires for a list, here's a greatly simplified version of what came to me as guidance and opinion from many, many conversations over the years:

<u>Of High Value (in this specific Somali/Oromo community):</u>
Family
Respect for Elders and tradition
Education for both boys and girls
College preparation as the path to success
Giving back to the community

Topics to Avoid:
Teen dating
Anti-Islamic rhetoric
Teaching Islam specifically

I discovered I was allowed – encouraged even – to teach a lot of the American high school canon. People might be surprised that most parents who enroll their teenagers in a Somali charter school still want their kids to get not just an equal education but also the same *kind* of education that "regular" American teenagers get. Ironically, for many it was that desire that actually sent them to the (culturally-specific) charter school in the first place. A common belief in the community was that their children were not treated like regular American kids when they were enrolled-- in some cases for years -- in ELL classes in regular public schools. As is probably common in many immigrant communities, there is great cachet in being perceived as being able to compete on an even playing field with native-born students. Titles like *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Odyssey* and *The Great Gatsby* are staples in high schools across the country and including them gave our curriculum "legitimacy," particularly to those students with older brothers and sisters who had attended regular public schools in the U. S. (As a start-up charter school, perceived legitimacy was important to earning community "buy-in" that would keep the school alive).

Because our students and families have lived in many countries before coming to the United States, books and authors with international reputations were also very well received. A student who had recently arrived in the U. S. with an excellent education from Kenya had been free with his disdain for American education (which included our school): students here were undisciplined, teachers were too casual, and there was not enough homework. The school must be a poor one if no white students attended it, he argued. Luckily, a few weeks into his experience at our school, I began teaching Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to his 10th grade class. The next day he came in, formally and respectfully as always, and told me that I had selected an excellent book: "My uncle tells me that this book is read in all the schools in Africa and that it is a genius book. I think you have chosen well."

I also think teaching two of the most sexually explicit texts in the curriculum, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* by Naguib Mahfouz and *Sula* by Toni Morrison, met with less controversy in the community because both authors are Nobel Prize winners in Literature, a prize that is only granted to authors with well-established international reputations (a fact that I was sure to point out explicitly to students before we began reading).

Sexuality in literature was a delicate issue. Many parents in traditional cultures are very fearful of the highly sexualized teen culture in America. The traditional cultures place a high value on girls' purity and virtue to establish their worthiness for a desirable marriage. The parents, many of whom grew up in places where the entire culture perpetuated this value, worry a great deal about the mixed messages their teenage girls and boys are getting in America. Most parents of teenagers in America feel some of the same anxiety, but it is amplified in conservative first-generation immigrant communities.

Why such intense concern about female virtue? There is likely both an economic and a moral concern at play. For a woman, getting married assures economic stability for herself and her children. Having a reputation for getting too close to boys challenges a girl's marriage prospects in the culture. As the daughters become women, the community's impulse to monitor their contact with young men often increases.

This vigilance can feel oppressive to those of us (students as well as teachers) who were raised in the United States in the last half of the 20th century. I remember the first day I taught a class of "newcomers," students who had recently arrived in the U. S., and the boys sat themselves at the tables in the first two rows and the girls sat at the ones in the back two rows. When there weren't enough chairs for the girls at the back tables, some of them stood, even though there were extra chairs in the front rows. I encouraged them to sit in front and they refused. I was startled and, I admit, dismissive of their desire for physical separation. Why wouldn't they just sit in the front where they would have more room and where they had every right to sit?

The stand-off was resolved when one of the boys got up and brought the chairs over to the girls, who then sat down, crowded around the back tables.

At the time I thought the issue was about equality and I was irked that the boys got (and were granted) the "prime seats" while the girls, who outnumbered the boys, were over-crowded in the back. However, when I look at the situation knowing the cultural pressure to maintain physical separation between men and women, I understand that some of the girls – a few of whom were women in their twenties and married already – would be so uncomfortable breaking the cultural standard they had been taught (if they were to sit next to an unfamiliar boy in class) that they would have had trouble completing their school work. They perceived that their reputations were at stake.

So sexuality in literature was, indeed, a delicate issue, but the rules were not always what I expected. As you can see, the book list is hardly Puritanical (although I did have some fascinating discussions about Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"). It was the idea of *dating*, which seems innocent in American culture, but was generally forbidden in our school's Somali community, that was most worrisome to the community leaders. There was greater latitude for books that contained references to sexual relations, particularly in the context of a marriage, than there was for casual references to dating.

This startled me when I presented *A Raisin in the Sun* to a group of elders for approval. I had anticipated that Ruth's desire to abort her baby would raise flags, so I launched into an explanation of the context of her decision (and the fact that she does not have the abortion in the end). The elders nodded and didn't express concern. Then I went on to explain how Asagai, one of Beneatha's boyfriends, is from Africa and is studying in the United States in order to return to Africa to help his village. I thought this would really please the elders because many of them hoped our students would also return to Africa to help their people as nurses, doctors, or other medical professionals. I was surprised when their faces turned grim at this point in my presentation. Finally, one of them stopped me, "How is this man related in the play? He is a girl's boyfriend? That is not acceptable. I think you can find a better book to read."

Romeo and Juliet was rejected on similar grounds. Young lovers defying their parents' traditions and meeting each other secretly – even when these behaviors lead to tragedy – were not the images our parents wanted presented to their children in school. The community did not want students glorifying the Western practice of dating, and they worked very hard to counteract the notion in America that dating was a normal aspect of teenage life.

A few words regarding "book banning"

I was fine with taking *Romeo and Juliet* off the list, but I understand why other teachers might be more upset by the elders' rejection. They might argue the "cultural trump card," thinking, "These books are classics. This is what we teach in the United States, so people who

come here from other countries should get on board." Or they might be more upset on the basis of perceived authority, thinking, "Who do the elders think they are to tell me, an experienced, licensed English teacher what books to choose?" Or, seeing no continuum between "no restrictions" and censorship, might ask, "Are they banning books now?" I have colleagues who think I'm a coward for allowing parents and their representatives to dictate what I teach, but I believe local control is an important part of American education. Especially as a new teacher in a new setting, I wanted to know what books would be accepted by the community in which I was teaching. I believe parents have a right to participate in decisions about what is taught in schools. I believe that what texts work with some students in some parts of the country or eras in history aren't as meaningful to students in other parts of the country or at other times. Effective teaching is greatly enhanced by skillful text selection, matching text to students' needs.

Am I a coward for not fighting the conservative ban on *Romeo and Juliet*? No. I wanted to get along and build trust with the community and, frankly, I didn't feel passionately about *Romeo and Juliet*. I did, however, want the kids to read Shakespeare and to puzzle through the difficult language and to feel wonder at how something written hundreds of years ago in iambic pentameter can still be relevant to our lives today. Shakespeare wrote a lot of plays; I didn't have to squander cachet over the Montagues and the Capulets. I decided to teach *The Merchant of Venice* instead.

But *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play about a proud African-American family that values education and following dreams and which includes an articulate, respectable African immigrant, was worth fighting for, especially if it pushed my East African students to re-think their own prejudices about African-American people. So I backed off initially when it was rejected by the elders, but knew I'd return and ask about that text again once I'd gained people's trust.

The Reading List

Of course, creating the reading list is only one part of creating a high school English curriculum and what follows is only the list of major texts (novels, memoirs, plays, a complete short story collection, and an epic poem), organized by full-year course. Although every English class focused on reading, writing, speaking, critical viewing and critical thinking, I tried to develop a unique identity for each course through literature selection and organization.

Major texts in the curriculum

English I (9th grade equivalent), organized by genre and theme
The Odyssey by Homer
The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

English II (10th grade equivalent), mostly international authors, examined thematically
The Journey of Ibn Fattouma by Naguib Mahfouz
Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe
The Director and Other Stories by Leila Abouzaid

American Literature (11th grade equivalent), organized chronologically
A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry
The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway

College in the Schools: Basic Writing (now Writing Studio) (1 semester 12th grade)
A Choice of Weapons by Gordon Parks
Lucky Child: A daughter of Cambodia reunites with the sister she left behind by Loung Ung

College in the Schools: Introduction to Literature (1 semester 12th grade), Modern and Contemporary Literature, introduction of multiple literary critical theories
The Awakening by Kate Chopin
The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien
The Kite Runner by Khalid Hosseini
Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi
Sula by Toni Morrison
A Place Where the Sea Remembers by Sandra Benitez

We also offered 12th grade World Literature, which I did not teach, and a one semester English elective called "Writing for Publication" that did not have a literature component.

Student Reactions to Specific Texts

Some of the texts I brought to my students were already familiar to me from having taught them in other settings, and some of them were new. In either case, the conversations they let us have helped us to share our cultures and viewpoints with one another.

***The Odyssey* by Homer:** The adventure always works, no matter where I teach. Who doesn't cringe with horror and surprise when the Cyclops' eye sizzles and melts at the end of Odysseus' hot spike? What child raised by a single mom doesn't feel his throat tighten a bit when long-lost Odysseus reveals himself to his son, Telemachus, and wraps it in an apology, saying, "I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he"? I have grown to love teaching *The Odyssey* during the first term of ninth grade and likening Odysseus's travels to the long adventurous journey of high school.

At the charter school, *The Odyssey* was my first text. We talked about gods and religion, about loyalty and things that frighten us, about the difference between confidence and hubris, about hospitality and gods-in-disguise. I also learned that showing a movie clip, particularly one that depicted "pagan gods," to devout Muslim students during the first week of Ramadan isn't very sensitive. I learned that female students in the charter school, much like their regular public school counterparts, are exasperated at Odysseus' unrepentant affairs with various nymphs while he expects Penelope to virtuously wait twenty years for his possible return.

I followed the study of the text with a writing project where the students had to interview an elder about his/her own "life odyssey" and write a biographical essay about it. This also encouraged many interesting conversations in class, as well as between students and elders. Most memorably, one team of boys interviewed one of the boys' moms. All three speak Somali, English and Arabic, and when I listened to the interview they recorded, I discovered that they switched back and forth in all three languages. Luckily for me, the following exchange was in English. The boys asked, "If you could tell people back home in Somalia one thing that you have learned since coming to America, what would you tell them?" The mother replied, "I would tell them that in America people of all different kinds can live side by side in peace and not bother each other. This is what is great about America."

***The Merchant of Venice*:** Perhaps as a reaction to the prohibition of *Romeo and Juliet*, I chose to teach Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which is often prohibited in schools because of its derogatory and stereotypical depiction of Shylock, the Jew. I guessed – and was right – that the depiction of religious persecution of a minority would resonate with Muslim American students in a Post-9/11 world. I used PBS's excellent website about the play to front-load historical context before we began reading (Rogers). Students learned about the persecution of the Jews in Elizabethan England (and continental Europe) and compared and contrasted it with religious persecution of Muslims and Jews in contemporary times, a topic in which many of them already had knowledge and interest.

As we read, my students talked a lot about Shylock and were extremely sympathetic to his plight. They were outraged at the "happy" ending of the play when the young couples force Shylock to convert to Christianity. One could argue that teaching this play fanned some anti-Christian sentiment in a Muslim community, but it didn't feel that way to me. I was happy to see Muslim students, some of whom had previously listened to Holocaust denial rhetoric on the Internet, rooting for Shylock and learning about the historic oppression of the Jews in Europe. I liked listening to a teenage girl wearing a full *hijab* presenting a convincing, memorized rendition of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew hands?" speech.

To extend the literature, I had students compete in teams, debating topics such as "Shylock is a villain in *The Merchant of Venice*" and "Justice is served at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*." Debates and academic competition are very common in African schools and were quite popular with both students and elders. As it is in any school, having to take a reasoned stance that is counter to one's own opinion is both a frustrating and enlightening experience for students.

***The Old Man and the Sea*:** I first brought *The Old Man and the Sea* into the American Literature course when I had a class that was 75% male and where most of the class had reading levels below sixth grade. Admittedly, the girls didn't like it much, but the boys really engaged with it. The themes of manhood and tenacity, of pride in completing a difficult task and setting your own standards while others mock you, all seemed to resonate with them. The boys in the class were in their late teens. Some lived in neighborhoods where they got involved in gang activity, and few of the boys lived with their fathers. Some were in the country on their own, living with distant relatives. One young man had even fought his way to a refugee camp on his own, avoiding lions along the way. In coming to America, or in continuing to attend school when "thug life" was knocking at their door, these boys knew what it meant to be laughed at by other men. They respected the Old Man's quiet resolution and steady progress toward a challenging goal. They liked his gentleness, wisdom, and the respect with which he treated his young friend, Manolo. It's a book that honors positive male characteristics that are rarely present in American media directed at teenage boys and believe my male students craved.

The level of empathy and engagement was clear to me when some of the boys were visibly upset when the sharks came and destroyed the Old Man's long-sought fish (one boy shut his book and turned to the wall while I read this part out loud) but by the end of the book, some said they liked that the ending wasn't perfect because it was more realistic.

***The Kite Runner* and *Persepolis*:** Both *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (a autobiographical graphic novel about an Iranian girl in the

1980's) have Muslim characters and are being taught in more and more high schools, which is wonderful. There aren't enough books in the literary canon with Muslim characters. However, my most conservative Muslim students had complicated reactions to images of Muslim characters in these texts.

I bristled when my students wrote that Baba (in *Kite Runner*) and Marji's family (in *Persepolis*) are "not real Muslims" because they question religious scholars and drink alcohol and do things that are prohibited by the religion. Perhaps because of my own inclination towards religious relativism, this comment struck me as exceedingly judgmental. I wanted to say, "Who are you to determine who is and who is not a 'real Muslim'? In passing this judgment, how are you different from the leaders of the oppressive governments that are persecuting the Afghanis and Iranians in the books?" But instead of voicing my judgment, I asked questions and listened, a strategy I found myself relying on in many tricky situations and which served me well.

Another time when I felt caught between my own religious beliefs and one of my student's beliefs happened one day when I stumbled into a conversation a group of students was having in the hallway about the stoning scene in *The Kite Runner*. One of the brightest girls in the class, who was also very serious about learning Islam, was explaining why the stoning of the adulterous woman was proper. I remember the shock I felt while listening to her. I was tempted to jump into the conversation and say, "There is no context in which stoning another human being is morally justified! Do you even believe what you're saying?" Instead, I reminded myself to listen and to try to understand her point of view without letting my own re-discovered prejudices get in the way. I still don't agree with the girl's stance, and I don't understand enough about the *hadith* she cited to summarize her argument authentically here, but I'm glad that I held my tongue at that moment because it also gave me the opportunity to hear other Muslim students question her position and interpretation, too. This was one of the most difficult religious conversations I witnessed amongst my students and I am glad that it happened after I had known the student for three years and we already had a good relationship. I'm afraid if it had happened earlier, I would have let it negatively influence my entire perception of her.

A perspective that the same student had about the books I could accept more easily was that traditional "real Muslims" (as the kids say) in *The Kite Runner* and *Persepolis* are portrayed as evil while the main characters of the books are less-conservative, more "Western" Muslims and are therefore easier for Western readers to identify with. This made me think about my own reactions to her conservativism.

There's an incredible need for Western people to feel kinship and shared experience with Muslim people, which is why books like *The Kite Runner* and *Persepolis* have sold well in Western countries. But I could see my students' desire to push Western people further, to understand more about the devout Muslim, not just the assimilated, "cool" Western Muslim. I understood how my devout, *hijab*-wearing, Qu'ran-reciting students wanted to see characters more like themselves as heroes rather than villains in the books. So I struggled between wanting to push them toward a more accepting, less judgmental stance on Marji and Baba, and recognizing their perspective that the books perpetuate the stereotype that devout Muslims are dangerous.

One of the concerns my students had was about the *hijab*. In *Persepolis*, Marji and her mom are angry when they forced to cover their heads in Iran. My female students recognized that Marji's experience was common for Muslim women in some countries, but the book perpetuates the stereotype that all veiled Muslim women are oppressed. They explained their own reasons for wearing the *hijab* and vociferously denounced the idea that Islam forces women

to cover. "Her government forced her to wear the veil, not the religion," they explained. In the years since I've left the charter school, I have continued to teach *Persepolis*, but I always also show a short video created by a group of Muslim girls from the St. Paul schools called "What's With the Hijab?" wherein the girls each explain why they do or do not wear a hijab (TVByGirls). I agree with my Muslim students that it's important for non-Muslim people to see that there is diversity in the practices of Muslim women around the world.

Other examples of anti-conservative bias come from *The Kite Runner*. In it, Amir and his father are Muslim, but they aren't very religious. Baba denounces religious leaders early in the book when he teaches Amir his own moral code, saying: "'Now, no matter what the mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft'" (17). Amir isn't very devout as a result. He only starts praying when his father is dying of cancer (my students chuckled knowingly at this and one student explained to me that this often happens in Islam. I assured her that it is common in Christianity, too). Maybe because they are fallible and non-observant, the Western reader is drawn to Amir and Baba and sees them as complex, empathetic and frustrating characters. On the other hand, the evil character of the book is Assef, who becomes a member of the Taliban and perpetuates atrocities (the stoning of adulterers and the sexual exploitation of children) under the guise of Islam.

My students' concern about the book is that the character who is associated most closely with Islam by the reader is an evil fanatic, and the more Westernized, secular characters (Amir, Baba, Soraya) are the more sympathetic protagonists. Some students pointed out that Hassan and Ali, the faithful and tragic servants, were the most morally upright characters and they were devout Muslims, but I agreed with them that an American reader who is predisposed to associate Muslim men with terrorists is more likely to remember Assef's evil actions and associate them with Muslim stereotypes than Ali and Hassan's quiet devotion to Allah, peace, and goodness.

When teaching *The Kite Runner*, I think it's important to open up a thoughtful conversation with students about the diversity of Muslim characters in the novel. I have asked students to place the characters on a continuum of spiritual devotion in order to spark this discussion. Inevitably, some students go back to the text to prove that Assef's evil is not truly based in his religion, but in a predatory desire for power.

Lucky Child: A book that was a surprise to me was *Lucky Child* by Loung Ung that I taught as part of the University of Minnesota's College in the Schools Basic Writing course. It is a memoir written by a child survivor of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. (Ung's first book was the more widely-read *First They Killed My Father*). In *Lucky Child*, Ung has left Cambodia for America with her older brother and sister-in-law, but she has to leave behind her beloved older sister, Chou. Ung describes her own experiences in American schools, her struggle to find balance between being Cambodian and being American, and the pain of growing up without her extended family. She alternates chapters about her life with chapters about her sister's life in rural Cambodia. The sister frequently fears gunfire, works long days, and watches family members suffer with no medical care, but she is connected to members of her extended family and ancestral culture. In the end, we talk about which of the sisters is really the "Lucky Child," and there is good evidence to support either choice.

There were strong positive reactions to this book in my classes. The students who had grown up in Africa or the Middle East seemed to understand and relate to Chou's (the Cambodian sister's) life of family and work and fear as well as Loung's descriptions of trying to understand and fit in to American culture. The students who had lived in the U. S. all their lives

were very curious about Chou's life and the book sparked interesting conversations between students of different life experiences in my own class. One of my Somali students who grew up in the U. S. quietly confided in me one day that she liked our discussion of the book and hearing about the other kids' African experiences, because she had always too shy to ask her mom or her older sisters about their old lives in Somalia. In this case, reading a book about southeast Asia helped a young African girl learn about her own cultural history.

Maybe more importantly, the book describes the after-effects of trauma. Some of my students grew up in Somalia in the 1990's and were infants when the Civil War broke out. Those who stayed in Somalia the longest had watched people die; they remember hunger; some of them have lasting physical injuries. All of the students know family members who continue to suffer from experienced traumas. However, members of the East African community are often resistant to seeking mental health counseling. It is more common to turn to religion, family support, or denial to cope with after effects of trauma.

I never pushed students to tell me specifically about their own traumatic experiences, but the book opened up a discussion amongst the students about what is otherwise an uncomfortable topic in their community. We could talk about Loung and Chou and their families without (what one of my teaching colleagues calls) "picking off the scabs" of the students' own traumas. The classroom and the literature became a safe place to explore a difficult and important topic.

I have found this book equally effective with native-born American students. I read the book more recently in a mostly white suburban high school and, when we analyzed the sisters' responses to trauma, several of the students related stories of relatives who have returned from active duty in the military and they recognized some of the same types of traumatic after-effects. The conversations this memoir let us have reached into the students' real world.

Caveats and Disclaimers

One of my concerns about writing an article about teaching literature in the specialized environment of a Somali charter school is that I don't want readers to walk away thinking that I've created an "approved reading list for Muslim kids." I can tell you what parameters I was given, what choices I made, and what happened. Please keep in mind that the parameters I was given were from casual discussions with individual people who held sway in the particular community in which I worked. For example, although I was asked not to teach *Romeo and Juliet*, I am sure there are many Muslim families who haven't minded in the least when their kids read it in school. Similarly, I'm sure that some Muslim scholars would have other responses to Abdishakur's question than the one 15-year-old Mohamed gave him. The Muslim world is incredibly large and diverse; furthermore, East African culture permeated our school's culture, and I am not sure (nor were my students) what aspects of their culture were Muslim and which were Somali. Even within the Twin Cities' Somali culture, there is a wide variety of customs and viewpoints.

I also want to acknowledge that I am only dealing here with the major texts I used over a four-year period. The entire English curriculum included expository writing, researching, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, standardized test-taking strategies, creative and personal writing. The entire reading list also included poetry, short stories, and non-fiction, none of which are included in this article.

Final Thoughts

First, in all settings (no matter how mundane you may think yours is), teachers need to listen to their communities and their students and try to make a wide variety of literature relevant to them. This article is a practical example of how I tried to do that in one specific setting. Administrators can help achieve this goal by drawing teachers and community members together on committees and volunteer projects that will foster conversations, both formal and casual. When it's possible, helping a teacher to fund a new classroom set of paperbacks mid-year can also support that teacher's ability to experiment with new texts that might address a perceived need. My students and I were the happy recipients of this kind of fiscal flexibility from my charter school administrators. Teachers from other buildings and districts can also help each other out by lending class sets of books that aren't currently being used to each other. I was able to experiment with some books because I had friends in other schools who were willing to lend me their copies for a few weeks.

Second, many teachers across Minnesota have Muslim and East African students in their classes but don't have the flexibility that I did to investigate these students' cultural reactions to the literature. In my charter school classroom, I was the "odd one out" and the students had each others' (and their school's) support in trying to explain their culture to me, and as a result, I was able to comfortably ask genuine questions about culture. I also had well-educated, multi-lingual adult colleagues who lived in the East African community and were enthusiastic cultural brokers for non-Muslim faculty members and who frequently helped me to interpret my students' experiences from a different perspective.

It is a quite different paradigm for students and teachers when students are more culturally isolated in a more diverse school. In my experience teaching in mostly white, suburban high schools, I have found that minority students are often less comfortable openly approaching literature through the lens of their home culture than the students in the charter school were. Sometimes this hesitancy comes from having fewer peer supporters, and sometimes it stems from their own lack of connection with the traditional customs or religious beliefs of their home culture. I hope that this article helps teachers become more familiar with some African and Muslim values and traditions so that they feel more comfortable asking questions and continuing to learn about these often misunderstood and sometimes feared communities when they don't have the cultural support system that I had.

Recognizing that culturally-specific classrooms like mine are somewhat rare, is there a sure-fire way for teachers in a more diverse situation to choose literature that is culturally relevant to all of the students of all of the different cultures in their classrooms? Of course not. However, the first step is continuing to learn about different cultures. This is critical for all teachers. Here are my suggestions for how to increase your background knowledge so that you can help your students unpack texts in ways that are culturally relevant to them:

- We know that literature transports us just as it does our students; therefore, diversify your pleasure reading.
- Seek professional development courses that are taught by people you don't know. The Minnesota Humanities Center, for example, sponsors quality professional development around the state that explores topics from the history and culture of the Iron Range to Somali literature. Some courses are even online.
- Explore art from a culture you don't know well. Admission to the Minneapolis Institute of Art's permanent collection is always free, and they have extensive Asian, African and Native American galleries, for example.

- Do what you do best: talk to your students. Keep them writing about the world and about literature and about their families. And – this one can be difficult – make sure you talk with your students about your own culture. The exchange is best when it's mutual.
- When it's feasible, travel. Consider applying for one of the many quality teacher-travel opportunities, including the Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar Abroad, the Toyota International Teacher Program, or one of the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars and Institutes. These programs are designed for teachers and provide free or subsidized travel expenses.

When classrooms are diverse, our professional development must also be diverse and wide-ranging so that our curriculum will evolve to meet the needs of our students.

Note

1. All students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Works Cited

Burke, Jim. *The English Teacher's Companion, 3rd ed.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. Print.

Minnesota Humanities Center. N.p., 2008. Web. 15 Dec. 2010.

Rogers, Jami. "Shylock and History." *Masterpiece Theatre*. PBS Online, WGBH Educational Foundation. 2005. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

TVByGirls. *What's with the Hijab? YouTube*. N.p. 10 Apr. 2008. Web. 14 Dec. 2010.

Coda: Poem

Veteran English Teacher: The Chalk Magician

Bill Meissner

His fingers are turning to sticks of chalk. Yes, all ten of them
become chalk from deep in the sea. He's deep in
thought, writing on the blackboard with cursive that
could make the students dizzy. His fingers script
book titles and authors, semi-colons and commas, they draw diagrams:
rising and falling lines that parallel the ocean waves, circles that describe the rotation of the solar system.

The puffs of dust fly into the air and when the students inhale it,
they understand each word and symbol.

No flimsy whiteboard for him. No chintzy colored markers,
their ether scent so strong they could make you faint.
Just chalk for him: just
chalk, plain, simple, amazing chalk,
and a solid blackboard that's dark and deep as the night sky.

He writes a word or two, and the whole dictionary appears on the board.
He writes the words *skin of a grape* and the students taste it on their tongues.
He draws the sun, and the students feel the heat on their faces. He draws a cloud, and cool rain falls on students' heads.
He writes the word *simile* and suddenly they see the connection
between a spider web and a galaxy.
He writes the word *poem* and the students take a deep breath filled
with insight and awe.

After his classes, he can't scrub off his thumb and forefinger,
his skin permanently stained with pale dust. He could exit through any classroom door, any window and someone would always know
where he's been just by the mark he leaves behind.
Years later, his students might still feel
his spiral fingerprint on their brains.

Just before class is over, he reminds them of those tiny microorganisms
that shed their shells and give their lives
so we all can learn. *Chalk is everywhere*, he tells them:
in the curve of our skulls, beneath our fingernails, hiding inside the white ladders of our spines.
Accept chalk, he tells them. Bow down to chalk.
Believe in the beauty of chalk.
Let chalk teach you about life and death—about sinking to the bottom
of the ocean yet still being of use, still rising to kiss a blackboard,
a roomful of people gasping at your memory.

As the students file out, he nods at each of them.
He wishes they understood that chalk will outlast us all,
leaving traces of itself long after we are gone.
He wishes they understood that some day when the oceans dry up,
the whole earth will turn to chalk
and leave its huge white fingerprint there,
in the middle of the universe.

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Jacqueline Arnold

Jacqueline Arnold has a PhD in Literacy Education and currently teaches English Education at Minnesota State University in Mankato. Jacqueline has a license to teach 7-12 English and Spanish and taught at Madelia High School for fifteen years. Before teaching high school in the United States, Jacqueline served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco where she taught TEFL. Jacqueline's research interests include online teaching, teaching multicultural literature, and literacy education. She is the President of Minnesota Council of Teachers of English.

Elizabeth Barniskis

Elizabeth Barniskis teaches English at Edina High School. She received National Board Certification in English Language Arts/Adolescence and Young Adulthood in 2009 and is completing a certificate program in writing and critical literacy at the University of Minnesota. She is a member of her district's equity team and participated in the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education teacher training program. She is currently working with colleagues to create a culturally responsive curriculum.

Richard Beach

Richard Beach is Professor of English Education, University of Minnesota. He is the author/co-author of *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*, 2nd ed. (http://teachingliterature.pbworks.com); *Literacy Tools In The Classroom: Teaching Critical Inquiry, Grades 5-12* (http://literacytooluses.pbworks.com); *Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, And Other Digital Tools* (http://digitalwriting.pbworks.com); and *Teachingmedialiteracy.com: A Web-based Guide to Links and Activities* (http://www.teachingmedialiteracy.com; http://teachingmedialiteracy.pbworks.com). He is Vice-President Elect of the Literacy Research Association and will be retiring from the University of Minnesota in Spring, 2011 after teaching at the University for 38 years.

Dallas Crow

Dallas lives in St. Paul and teaches upper school English at Breck School in Golden Valley. His writing on poetry has previously appeared in *English Journal*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Notes on Contemporary Literature*. His own poems have appeared in a number of periodicals (including the last print issue of *Minnesota English Journal*), two anthologies, and—through a public arts program—in the sidewalks of St. Paul.

Candice Deal

Candice Deal is a second-year graduate student at Minnesota State University. She is working towards a Masters of Art in English Literature, specifically focusing on contemporary South Asian fiction. Her thesis work investigates gender performativity and body politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Last year, Candice had the opportunity to present at several conferences including the MCTE. After graduation, she plans to pursue a teaching career.

Jessica Dockter Tierney

Jessica Dockter Tierney is a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota. She is currently writing her dissertation about a year-long study examining students' conversations about race and identity in a high-school documentary filmmaking class. She has presented papers about digital literacies, critical engagement, and white racial identities at national and local conferences, including the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Reading Conference/Literacy Research Association. Her co-authored publications include "Redefining Rigor: Critical Engagement, Digital Media, and the New English/Language Arts" in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and "Reading Literature in Secondary School: Disciplinary Discourses in Global Times" in the *Handbook on Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature.*

Corrine Ehrfurth

Corinne Ehrfurth currently returned from a sabbatical teaching college-level composition and completing her M. A. in English at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is back working at Rochester Mayo High School, where for the last nine years she has taught a variety of composition and literature-based courses. One elective, Humanities Search, inspired the topic of her thesis: analyzing tenets of Hinduism espoused in contemporary Indian novels. In addition to her passion for researching cultures and viewpoints expressed in literature, her professional values lead her into efforts that try to increase articulation between all levels of a student's education. Past community responsibilities include coaching high school volleyball, facilitating Link Crew's freshman transition intervention, serving as the chair of Mayo's English Department, and working in a Small Learning Communities Grant position that provided time to collaborate with Rochester Community and Technical College instructors. Presently, she serves as the MCTE secondary co-chair with Scott Hall.

Linda Lein

Linda Frances Lein currently teaches at Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSU-Moorhead). At MSU-Moorhead, Linda teaches a variety of online writing courses: English Composition I, English Composition II, English Composition III, Introduction to Creative Writing, and Technical Report Writing. She has nine years of experience as an English distance education college instructor and ten years of experience as an English middle school teacher. She is also a member of the Lake Region Writers Network Board, which is a nonprofit organization formed to serve writers in nine counties in west central Minnesota. She has published four books: *Mother to Mother: Letters about Being a Mom* (1999), *Country Reflections* (2000), *Hannah Kempfer: An Immigrant Girl* (2002), and *The Making of a Small Town: Carlisle, Minnesota* (2008). And from 1999-2003 she wrote a bimonthly column called "A Day in the Life of a Farm Wife" for *AGRI-GUIDE*. Linda lives on a farm with her husband and two sons near Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

Brian C. Lewis

Brian earned his Ph.D. in Critical Studies in the Teaching of English from Michigan State University in 2004. He is now a full-time instructor of both English and Women and Gender Studies at Century College in White Bear Lake, MN. At Century, he teaches composition, American Literature courses, and Introduction to GLBT Studies. His primary teaching and research interests include gender and sexuality issues, American Literature before the Civil War, composing in digital environments, and writing center pedagogy. In addition to serving as *MEJ* editor, he earned Honorable Mention for the Diana Hacker Award from TYCA in 2009 (for his work with Century's Online Writing Center) and was named one of MnSCU's Outstanding Educators in 2010. During the 2010-11 academic year, he is on sabbatical from Century to learn more about how to integrate digital technologies into community college composition classrooms.

Molly McCarthy Vasich

Molly McCarthy Vasich is currently completing her second year of teaching at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Molly teaches media and documentary film in addition to more traditional English classes. In November, Molly received the 2010 NCTE Affiliate Leadership Development Award, recognizing her as an early career teacher who demonstrates a capacity for professional leadership.

Heather Megarry Traeger

Heather Megarry Traeger currently teaches at Rosemount High School and Eagan High School. For four years, she taught at a charter high school in Minneapolis that was created by members of East African (Somali and Oromo) communities in the Twin Cities. She has served as the MCTE Secondary Chair and continues to coordinate Minnesota's entries to the NCTE Achievement Award in Writing Contest for high school juniors. Traeger is writing a non-fiction manuscript about her charter school experiences.

Bill Meissner

Bill Meissner is author of seven books. His first fiction book, a collection of baseball stories entitled *Hitting into the Wind* (Random House, SMU Press Paperback, 1997), received enthusiastic reviews nationally in over 70 publications. His second book of stories is *The Road To Cosmos* (University of Notre Dame Press). His writing has received praise by such authors as Tim O'Brien, Richard Ford, Susan Power, Jonis Agee, and W. P. Kinsella, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who called Meissner "A storyteller with remarkable gifts." Meissner's latest novel, *Spirits in the Grass*, was published in September, 2008 by the University of Notre Dame Press. The novel won the 2008 Midwest Book Award, received a starred review in the Sept. *Booklist* and was featured in a syndicated AP wire story. It will be released as an eBook in June 2011.

Carol Mohrbacher

Carol Mohrbacher is currently an Associate Professor of English and writing center director at St. Cloud State University. Her research interests include composition, developmental writing pedagogy, and digital copyright as it affects academic authorship. She has presented at various local, regional, national and international conferences including MCTE, CCCC, International Writing Center Association, Midwest Writing Centers Association, and the International Cultural Studies Conference. She has published in a variety of traditional and online publications, including the *California Quarterly*, *Sidewalks*, *The Anthology of Minnesota Writers 1996*, *The Power and Persistence of Stereotyping* (University of Aveiro, Portugal), and *CCCC's Top Intellectual Property Developments* (2009). She has also guest-edited a feature article for *Kairos* and served as reviewer for the American Library Association's periodical, *Choice Magazine.* Currently, she is working with her staff on a set of writing podcasts.

Anne O'Meara

Anne O'Meara has taught composition and American literature at Minnesota State University, Mankato for the last twenty years; she began teaching in Edina, MN where she taught 7th and 8th grade math and English. At MSU, she co-directs the Valley Writing Project, a faculty development program to support the teaching of writing across the curriculum and is a mentor in the College in the Schools program. Her research interests include teaching multicultural literature, online teaching, and the transition of high school writers to college.

Daryl Parks

Daryl Parks, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of English Education at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, MN. He serves as the Co-Chair of English Education for the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English. His primary academic interests include the relationships between identities, literacy practices, and student outcomes. He consults with a variety of school districts to improve instruction and reduce the achievement gaps.

Paula Schevers

Paula Schevers is currently pursuing her M.A. degree in English Literature and a graduate certificate in Gender and Women's Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU). Her current thesis and research interests include Gothic and Victorian literature, fiction by Angela Carter, and feminist/psychoanalytic literary theory and criticism.

ANNOUNCEMENTS OF 2011 MN CONFERENCES

2011 Call for Proposals (CFP)
MnCUEW in Collaboration with the University of Minnesota

Connecting Diverse Discourses:
Language, Literacy, and Literature

Theme**:** *"*Connecting Communities: Language, Literacy, and Literature*"*
Site*: North Hennepin Community College (NHCC) in Brooklyn Park, MN*
Keynote Speakers: *Author Kao Kalia Yang, and NHCC President and former English Professor John O'Brien*

The conference theme, "Diverse Discourses: Literacies, Writing, and Literature," provides a forum for college and university English instructors to discuss the multiplicity of literacies reflected in literature, composition, and creative writing. The MnCUEW conference provides a platform for sharing diverse pedagogies and styles in teaching literature, composition, ESL, and creative and professional writing. We will also learn more about the ways colleagues are researching, collaborating, and making connections with each other and among disciplines, fields, institutions, and communities. **Send electronic submissions only to writeplace@stcloudstate.edu.**

Conference organizers seek individual and panel proposals from any faculty member (full-time or adjunct) or graduate student involved in teaching, tutoring, or research addressing any aspect of teaching literature, composition, ESL, and creative and/or professional writing. Topics may include but are not limited to

Literature
Writing about literature
Culture and context in literature and writing
The teaching of writing or literature to nonnative speakers
The teaching of writing or literature to nontraditional students
Research on writing and literature

Technology/New Media
New media/new literacies
Computers and writing/literature (computer-assisted and online instruction)

Composition/Writing Pedagogies
Topics in composition or basic writing
Teaching research in first year composition
Technical and professional writing and communication
Writing competencies and assessment
Cultural, social, or religious themes/issues in literature, writing, or teaching

Literacy/Literacies
Minnesota urban, suburban, small town, and rural communities and constituencies in literacy practices
Writing centers as crossroads of literacy practices

Writing Centers
Writing centers: connecting with high schools, middle schools, and/or the community at large
Writing center collaboration with other fields and other entities
Working with diverse populations in writing centers: research and practice

Creative Writing
Creative writing (both craft and creative work)
Approaches to teaching creative writing

Research/Diversity/Inter-disciplinary, Inter-Institutional Connections
Research and/or approaches to teaching writing to diverse populations
Undergraduate research in literature and writing
Cross-institutional discussions/influences among colleges or between high schools and colleges/universities
Diversity in the literature classrooms
Writing across the curriculum/writing-intensive courses or programs

Submission Deadline: March 1. Send electronic submissions only to writeplace@stcloudstate.edu.

This program is made possible through a Center for Teaching and Learning grant with generous funding from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System Office of the Chancellor.

MnCUEW Committee:

Dawn M Armfield, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, armfi002@umn.edu
Brian Baumgart, North Hennepin Community College, brian.baumgart@nhcc.edu
David Beard, University of Minnesota-Duluth, dbeard@d.umn.edu
Stephen Brasher, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities <bras0100@umn.edu
Kristin Buck, Rochester Community and Technical College, Kristin.Buck@roch.edu
Anthony Collins, Inver Hills Community College, acollin@inverhills.edu
Ruth Crego-Ulvin, North Hennepin Community College, rcrego-ulvin@nhcc.edu
Julie Daniels, Century Community and Technical College, julie.daniels@century.edu
Pat Darling, Inver Hills Community College, pat_darling@hotmail.com
Kate Green, North Hennepin Community College, kate.green@nhcc.edu
Danielle Hinrichs, Metropolitan State University, danielle.hinrichs@metrostate.edu
Richard Jewell, Inver Hills Community College, richard@jewell.net
Darryl Johnson, Anoka Technical College, dajohnson@anokatech.edu
Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, University of Minnesota, lkbreuch@umn.edu
Ben Kiely, North Hennepin Community College, benjamin.kiely@nhcc.edu
Amy Kubista, Walden University, amy.kubista@waldenu.edu
Jenna Kulasiewicz, UW-Eau Claire, kulasijj@uwec.edu
Anna Martignacco, Hennepin Technical College, anna.martignacco@hennepintech.edu
Anthony Miller, North Hennepin Community College, anthony.miller@nhcc.edu
Carol Mohrbacher, St. Cloud State University, camohrbacher@stcloudstate.edu
Brian Nerney, Metropolitan State University, brian.nerney@metrostate.edu
Dave Page, Inver Hills Community College, dpage1@inverhills.edu
David Pates, Normandale Community College, david.pates@normandale.edu
Tom Reynolds, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, reyno004@umn.edu
Ken Risdon, University of Minnesota-Duluth, krisdon@d.umn.edu
Donald Ross, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, rossj001@umn.edu
Nancy Shih-Knodel, North Hennepin Community College, nshih-knodel@nhcc.edu
Larry Sklaney, Century Community and Technical College, larry.sklaney@century.edu
Tom Wortman, MnSCU Center for Teaching and Learning, thomas.wortman@so.mnscu.edu

2011 MCTE Spring Conference

Literacy at the Lake

Friday, April 15 & Saturday, April 16
Cragun's Resort & Hotel on Gull Lake, Brainerd

Friday

Welcome and Keynote:
Frank Sentwali, spoken word artist and performance poet

Break-out sessions from elementary through college teachers across the state.

Lunch Speaker and Evening Entertainment**:**
Lorna Landvik, author, actor, comedienne

Saturday

Teacher and author **Jim Burke,** for an extended workshop, 9:00 - 2:00
Letters About Literature presentations during lunch

Conference Registration ~ Deadline: April 1

Conference registration:
Full registration: $190
Single day registration: $100
Full-time student/Student teacher: $50 per day

Hotel Reservation ~ Deadline: March 14

For conference and hotel reservation forms, please go online to www.mcte.org.

CALL FOR PAPERS: 2012 MINNESOTA ENGLISH JOURNAL

Please consider submitting an academic article, a brief teaching tip, a letter to the editor, a hypertext, a multimedia presentation, or a creative work (such as a poem, short fiction, or play) for the next issue of *Minnesota English Journal*. We have no required number of pages or words for our submissions, but if you cite academic sources in your work, please do so according to *MLA Handbook for Writers for Research Papers*, 7th edition. Please also keep in mind that we are a peer-reviewed journal with an editorial board. Our acceptance rate is approximately 50-60%; therefore, we cannot accept all submissions. Most importantly, before you submit to *MEJ*, keep in mind that *MEJ*'s audience primarily consists of teachers from the elementary to the college level who want to learn more about effective teaching techniques.

The theme of the upcoming MCTE 2011 Spring Conference in Brainerd, MN is "Literacy at the Lake." This theme may also tie to our upcoming *MEJ* issue. For example, you may wish to consider submissions that explore the following themes, topics, or ideas involving "literacy" at the K-college level:

- What is literacy? How has its definition changed over time?
- The relationship between literacy and power.
- Race/class/gender/sexual orientation issues and literacy.
- Standardized testing as a means of gauging literacy ability.
- Digital/online/hybrid literacies and composition classrooms.
- Social networking/texting as literate practices in everyday student lives.
- Global/cross-cultural literacies.
- The relationship between "literature" and "literacy."
- Literacy and community activism.
- Graphic novels as visual literacies.
- The writing center/lab as a place for literacy development.

The idea of practicing "literacy" at a "lake" may even suggest the following topics:

- Nature as a visual text.
- The relationship between literacy and peace/tranquility.
- The idea of the "lake" as a retreat for writers.
- Literary moments on/at "the lake."

DUE DATE FOR SUBMISSIONS FOR 2012 ISSUE: SEPTEMBER 1, 2011. (The 2012 issue should come out by mid-February 2012.) Authors should be informed of the status of their submissions by October 15, 2011. If you have questions, comments, or concerns about the next issue of *MEJ*, please contact the current *MEJ* Editor, Brian Lewis, at **brian.lewis@century.edu**.