Heather E. Bruce

Hoop Dancing: Literature Circles and Native American Storytelling

Misrepresentations of Indian culture can be addressed through the study of Native American oral traditions and literatures. Simply teaching works by Native Americans, however, is not enough, according to Heather E. Bruce. Here she details the use of literature circles and storytelling in the classroom to combat negative stereotypes and racism.

Negative stereotypes, serious misconceptions, and distorted images of Native Americans[1] abound in the collective psyche of non-Indian America. Many non-Indians fail to recognize that flesh-and-blood Indians still struggle to survive in contemporary America. Non-Indians generally are infatuated with the people whom they believe wore loincloths, lived in tepees, and roamed the plains and forests long ago (Deloria, qtd. in Shanley 39). Such outdated fantasies hamper efforts to teach Indian-friendly curricula. At least one Indian educator is so perplexed by the dilemma that, from the audience, he pled with participants at the annual meeting of the Montana/Wyoming Indian Education Association in October 2002, "Please, please, please . . . tell your students that Indians today eat Cheerios, drive their cars to the grocery store, live in houses, own DVDs, and watch television just like they do." Anti-Indian racism is also a stumbling block. Lois Welch reported that, as she and her husband James, award-winning *Fools Crow* author (Blackfeet), were eating lunch recently in a Missoula, Montana, restaurant, they overheard at the next table someone ranting on about how dirty "they" are, how "they" don't care about education, "they" only care about basketball; even "their" sacred powwows are so filthy you can't walk on the ground. "They" in this case turned out to be the Crow, according to Lois Welch.

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English teachers can address such anti-Indian racism and the neglect and misrepresentation of American Indian cultures in most K–12 curricula through study of Native American oral traditions and literatures. Literatures and personal testimonies by Native Americans help illustrate important contributions made by Indian peoples and contradict negative stereotypes. Study of Native American literatures also helps all students understand the complexities of Native and European American interactions, experiences, and relationships. However, we need to do more than simply include works by Indian authors. We need culturally responsive pedagogy, which helps us to examine the work's cultural roots and to construct anti-racist interpretations. I have found that literature circles can be an especially useful pedagogical tool for such study in high school and college English classrooms.

A Circle Begins

in the surround of snow-touched mountains
a circle begins
in a meadow by a snow melt creek
where hands weave a house of thin green saplings
    it is a way of song
    a way of breathing
a pure womb to center oneself through sweat
a way of blessing and being blessed
a circle of humility, prayer and asking
and there are no clocks to measure time
but the beating of our singing hearts

—Harold Littlebird (Laguna Pueblo; qtd. in Susag 17)

Weaving Interpretive Threads

Circles create a recurring metaphor in Indian rhetorical traditions and written literatures, which capture the experience of individuals circumscribed within community, within landscape, within ceremony, and within time. Dorothea Susag explains that "the organizational pattern of Indian oral and written literatures differs from the Western European tradition of unity in linear time, place, and action. Instead of a plot characterized by rising action, climax, and falling action, Indian stories are frequently cyclical and episodic" (43). Awhirl in circles of relatives, circles in landscapes, circles in gifts, in life, and in history, image and language in Indian stories may suggest multiple directions and interpretations. Indian stories tend to lead readers and listeners into holistic experiences that coalesce characters' related experiences to create new meaning or understanding (43–44). Literature circles honor the cyclical and episodic nature of Indian stories. Literature circles help communities of readers weave together varying threads of interpretation through interaction and collaboration.

Because American Indian literatures and rhetorical traditions are embedded in the cyclical and rely extensively on collaboration rather than individual showcasing, literature circles can be especially compatible with Indian ways of knowing, learning, and being. Literature circles reflect a constructivist, student-centered model of literacy. As Tierney and Pearson point out, readers do not take meaning from texts; they compose or construct meaning. Meaning is created as readers use their background of experience to come to grips both with what the writer is getting them to do or think and what readers decide and create for themselves. Students' understanding of texts is broadened when they share their experiences and interpretations through discussion, synthesis, and application of ideas presented in a text. Literature circles provide a social and community context for reading, which involves continuous, recurring, and recursive transactions among readers and the writer, their respective inner selves, and their perceptions of each other's goals and desires (271). As readers in literature circles discuss together their varying stances and collaborations with a writer, they bring diverse responses to a text and enable wider stances to be taken. This enriches readers' comprehension and enhances critical understanding and application of information. When undertaken in a politically informed context, literature circles can promote social change and social justice.

Literature circles reallocate power in the classroom by giving teachers and students more control and authority over ways of teaching and learning. Choice and responsibility are promoted when students choose their own books, decide on the number of pages to read, select a group facilitator, and determine their questions, responses, and extension projects. As a result, literature circles can promote literacy, reasoning, civility, and broadmindedness.

Examining Misconceptions

To engage students in antiracist interpretations of Native American oral traditions and literatures, teachers ought to challenge students' prior misconceptions and stereotypes of Indians before undertaking a course of study. Ethnocentrism and racism are the root causes for many stereotypes and biases that pertain to American Indians. Being aware of common stereotypes about Indian peoples helps to discourage prejudice and misinformed interpretation of Native American literatures. Three overarching and interlocking contexts ought to be examined. These include (1) deconstructing ongoing discriminatory treatment of Indian peoples, (2) challenging stereotypes and biases, and (3) establishing historical facts on the nature of European American and Native American interactions. Along with Dorothea Susag's *Roots and Branches: A Resource of Native American Literature—Themes, Lessons, and Bibliographies,* Jon Reyhner's edited collection, *Teaching American Indian Students,* contains useful historical information.

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During the study of Native American oral traditions and literatures in my Introduction to Critical Interpretation classes at the university (which operate, by the way, very much like my high school English classes did), students engage in four phases, which are shaped by the organizational structure provided by literature circles: (1) prereading research and deconstruction of stereotypes and bias, (2) reading and discussion, (3) presentation, and (4) storytelling.

The prereading phase enables readers to examine prior misconceptions that color interpretations of Native American literature in the negative. Two excellent resources for an overview of negative Indian stereotypes are Susag's *Roots and Branches* and Devon A. Mihesuah's (Choctaw) *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities.* Before we read, I require students to conduct collaborative research investigations on selected Native American orators and writers and their tribal nations. We identify the tribal membership of the Native American orators and writers included in a course of study and build students' background knowledge of various tribal customs and traditions. Culture committees in most Indian nations have produced teaching documents that are available to teachers and students through tribal Web sites. A number of Indian-friendly resources are also available from Oyate (http://www.oyate.org), a Native organization working to see that Indian lives and histories are portrayed honestly. Oyate's work includes evaluation of texts, resource materials and fiction by and about Native peoples, and distribution of books and materials for children, young adults, and teachers. These materials emphasize writing and illustration by Native people. It is important to note that a great deal of diversity exists among various Indian nations that calls for contrastive generalizations to overcome bias (Garcia and Ahler 28). During the prereading phase, we also examine bias toward Native Americans by investigating the ubiquitous use of Indian nicknames and mascots for sports teams. Terms such as *redskins, reds, braves, warriors,* and so on are offensive. Chief Wahoo of the Atlanta Braves and his tomahawk chop cheer are an insult to all Native Americans. Discussion of historical facts, stereotypes, and misconceptions raises students' awareness to ways in which distorted images and inaccurate historical understandings shape commonplace misperceptions of Native Americans.

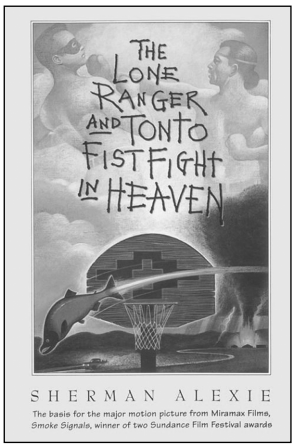
The point is that we are the stories we tell about our lives; stories connect us to each other and sustain us.

Reading and Writing about the Text

Following the prereading activities, students select texts from a range of possible choices. I provide an annotated bibliography of books from which students may choose, and I conduct a brief book talk about each book on the selection list. Students turn in a ranked list of their top three titles, and I organize literature circle groups. I have discovered that literature circles work best with three to four students in a group; I try to give students their first or second reading choice. The number of texts I provide depends on enrollment. The greatest number of titles we have read at any one time is eight.

Students choose among several historical and contemporary works of fiction and nonfiction by American Indian writers. In selecting texts, I include works by writers who belong to a wide variety of Indian nations and/or who write from eclectic perspectives. I select works of noteworthy critical merit. I include works by writers of various sexual orientations and both genders who develop plots that include a broad array of characters. I select works that represent an expanse of time periods and take place in a variety of geographical locations. Again, *Roots and Branches* provides a useful guide for selecting authentic Native American texts as Susag has carefully annotated hundreds of titles and recommended grade-level appropriateness. Titles chosen in my classes appear in the sidebar.

After students select a book, we agree upon a due date for completing the reading. Students read during reading workshops (see Atwell; Daniels) and outside of class. They keep a daily journal of their reading, written toward the end of class or on their own time. Journals do not have to be complete, but students are asked to tell the story of their reactions (pleasure, boredom, irritation) and the elements that puzzle them about the book. They may write the tale of the personal stories that occur to them while reading. I ask them to keep track of any questions they have about the reading. I also ask them to tell the story of the connections that they are making between the secondary sources they read during the prereading phase of the project and the recurring literary themes and motifs we have discussed. I urge students to track in their journals any shifting perceptions about American Indians with the sentence starter, "I used



to think . . . , but now I realize. . . ." Due at the beginning of each class is a response story, a memo, or a summary of the students' musings in the journal. Students either respond to a particular question I have asked them to consider or respond to an issue or story of their own choosing. For example, Patrick discovered a response to Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony,* written by a student at another university, which reminded him of a recent experience. He responded with a story:

> I copied this . . . off the web . . . because it reminded me of a question [another student] asked me in class the other day, "Do you, being a white Euro-descended male, feel guilty for the crimes of your ancestor fathers against people of color and women?" My answer was that, of course, I don't feel responsible for these crimes. . . . I did not do these crimes nor would I *ever* do them. I did tell him I think that we have to acknowledge these crimes against humanity and realize that they can continue today. (What I didn't tell him is that I wonder if supporting a system that exploits other humans implicates me for their crimes.)

Patrick relies on prereading research and draws conclusions about European American–Indian relations and about racism and questions the nature of his collusion with a racist system. He uses the journal to analyze, interpret, and extend what he understands Silko to be saying in *Ceremony;* he engages with an array of texts and contexts and tells a story about what he believes the novel means.

The questions I ask students to address in their journals are general enough to apply across texts. They include: (1) What idea or ideas does this book make you think about? How does the author get you to think about this? (2) What are the writer's main points? How might you summarize and review this book for future members of this class? (3) What additional preparation might the teacher have done to help you think about the ideas presented by the writer of this book? (4) What strong reactions have you had as you read this book? What ideas were you responding to that made you react strongly? (5) Think about issues of Indian identity presented in this book. In what ways do you connect with or disconnect from these identities, which the author constructs? What do you learn about yourself and about others based on the author's representations of the characters and events in this book? (6) What questions would you ask if the author were here? Which would be the most important question? Why? How might the author answer it?

Students need to be ready to read their response stories aloud to their literature circle group

WORKS SELECTED FOR LITERATURE CIRCLES

Alexie, Sherman (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene). *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.* New York: Harper, 1993.

———. *Reservation Blues.* New York: Warner, 1995.

Black Elk (Oglala Sioux), and John G. Neihardt. *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1932.

Deloria, Ella Cara (Yankton Dakota). *Waterlily.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.

Dorris, Michael (Modoc). *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water.* New York: Warner, 1986.

Earling, Debra Magpie (Salish). *Perma Red.* New York: Blue Hen, 2002.

Erdrich, Louise (Ojibwe). *Love Medicine.* New York: Holt, 1984.

Hopkins, Sarah Winnemucca (Northern Paiute). *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims.* Reno: U of Nevada P, 1994.

Howe, LeAnne (Choctaw). *Shell Shaker.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2001.

King, Thomas (Cherokee). *Medicine River.* Toronto: Penguin, 1989.

Momaday, N. Scott (Kiowa). *House Made of Dawn.* New York: Harper, 1968.

Mourning Dove [Hum-Ishu-Ma] (Okanogan). *Cogewea, the Half-Blood.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1981.

Silko, Leslie Marmon (Laguna Pueblo). *Ceremony.* New York: Viking, 1977.

Vanderwerth, W. C., comp. *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains.* Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1979.

Welch, James (Blackfeet). *Fools Crow.* New York: Viking, 1986.

———. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk.* New York: Random, 2000.

Womack, Craig S. (Muskogee Creek). *Drowning in Fire.* Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2001.

and to discuss their responses. I collect their papers at the end of class, respond, and return them at the beginning of the next class. I respond to the content, ideas, questions, and concerns raised in their writing rather than to form, usage, and mechanics. Students eventually write these papers with relative ease because they have the opportunity to tell stories about their various interpretations and responses to the literature without fear of being wrong.

Setting Discussion Agendas

I provide students with an agenda for the scheduled literature circle discussion groups to help each group ensure that discussion proceeds effectively. The agenda asks students (1) to assemble with others who are reading the same book and determine roles and responsibilities for each member of the group, which include appointing a discussion facilitator, a timekeeper, a scribe, and an observer to reflect on group process; (2) to discuss responses to and questions about the book—the idea is to get a grasp of the main points of the book and think about larger issues of concern to the Indian characters that the book addresses; (3) to think about and discuss links to tribal histories, oral traditions, and cultural mores in order to apply the ideas learned from reading this book; (4) to debrief discussion—How did group members help each other? What did the observer notice about group process? What might participants try differently next time to have a more satisfactory discussion?

As students talk about their lives and their families, they call our attention to the diverse ways humans formulate such connections and help us to reflect upon the various narrative genres and cultural backgrounds of each storyteller.

During discussions, I circle around the class eavesdropping on discussions and answering questions when asked. I take note of issues raised in small-group discussion that I think might benefit from another perspective. Later, I attempt to bring to the whole-class discussion questions and issues raised in small-group deliberations. In these ways, readers converse within and beyond the borders of their small-group book talks, narrating overarching stories of their readings.

Once we arrive at the due date for finishing the reading, students in each literature circle develop a performance. The purposes for these presentations are to tell the story of selected literary works to class members who did not read them and to synthesize information about the literary elements and cultural contexts in the rhetorical traditions and Native American literatures we have read in order that we might enrich our understanding of Native American literatures in relation to other literatures studied in the class.

Students create an Indian-friendly format for their presentations, drawing upon ideas they have learned from their reading and research. For example, a group that had read Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* created a story circle in which each member of the group assumed the identity of one of the characters. Storytellers wove a piece of yarn among themselves and other members of the class as each narrator told a story. As one storyteller passed the yarn to another, the recipient acknowledged by adding a syncopated detail to the narrative, which constructed a point-counterpoint effect. Through this process, readers demonstrated the cycle of connections among characters, time periods, and ceremonies depicted in the book. Each member of the class was a participant in the telling of the tale, adding an individual narrative to the story, making it both theirs and the community's.

Circling to Story

The final activity in our study of Native American oral traditions and literatures is a storytelling circle. Modeled after an assignment developed by my colleague Debra Magpie Earling for her Introduction to Native American Literature course, students take turns narrating a story that illustrates something about the storyteller and his or her life experiences. Students may choose from several options. They may tell a story of a life-changing event or they may select an old family story and reinvent it around their own life. They also have the option to tell a traditional story, such as a coyote or trickster story, or to tell a traditional story from an updated perspective and explain its relevance to their lives. Students might select a family story that has been told and retold at family gatherings, for example, as a way of depicting what it means to belong to an intimate relational group or how the message conveyed in the story has influenced and continued to teach the storyteller. The point is

that we are the stories we tell about our lives; stories connect us to each other and sustain us.

These oral narratives tell us about the storyteller's past and present, about the storyteller's ideas of community and individual experience. As students talk about their lives and their families, they call our attention to the diverse ways humans formulate such connections and help us to reflect upon the various narrative genres and cultural backgrounds of each storyteller. In these ways, we all benefit from the similar and different insights each storyteller gives us. These shared stories help us as storytellers realize our responsibility for carrying on our family stories. Storytelling helps us face the past and take responsibility for the actions of others who have gone before us. Storytelling frees us to move beyond and to imagine peace in the world.

White readers have a long legacy of looking at Indians through what Mary Louise Pratt calls "imperial eyes"—eyes that "passively look out and possess" (qtd. in Clark 300). Indian-friendly study of Native American oral traditions and literatures requires non-Indians to alter their preconceived views of Indian worlds. It requires them to "pay [their] half of the bill" at the "tribal cafe" (Alexie 5). William Old Chief (Blackfeet) comments that discrimination will not end until Indians say, "enough." He declares that there are "many good non-Indians who have walked alongside our cause, who have seen the other side and have chosen to support the rights of Indian people" (A9). My hope for this ongoing work is that it enlarges the numbers of "good non-Indians" who are willing to work for the end of discrimination against Indians in America.

Note

1. A word about the use of the terms *Native American* and *Indian:* I use the terms interchangeably. Although many writers today prefer the term *Native American* in an attempt to correct historical wrongs done to Indian peoples and to demonstrate respect, most Native Americans refer to themselves in English as *Indian.* My colleague in the Department of English at the University of Montana, writer Debra Magpie Earling (Salish/German), exhorts: "Native people, having survived five hundred years of genocide, alienation, and discrimination, have given dignity to the term 'Indian'" (qtd. in Susag 9).

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