Yu Ren Dong

Taking a Cultural-Response Approach to Teaching Multicultural Literature

High school teachers often feel challenged when working with texts from unfamiliar cultures. Highlighting the use of a cultural-response approach, Yu Ren Dong presents several activities that can give teachers confidence to explore the cultural differences in diverse texts and provide "ways to help their students discuss these differences and enhance cross-cultural understanding."

One of the concerns that I have about teaching multicultural literature is finding teaching activities that would really enrich a text for students. Very often I feel that we're falling back on issues of a literary nature rather than really trying to get a sense of the character's culture.
—Sue, a tenth-grade English teacher

What if a student of mine had just recently emigrated from China and corrected me on certain facts about Chinese culture? Being an outsider to the culture would discredit me as a teacher.
—Terry, an eleventh-grade English teacher

Many English teachers coming into my Teaching Multicultural Literature course in the past three years have had concerns like Sue's and Terry's. The majority of these English teachers were from middle-class, European American backgrounds and taught in diverse New York City public schools. Trained in the white, male, Eurocentric canon or "deadly traditions" (Applebee 21), many of them felt unprepared to teach multicultural literature. Students responded to my initial course survey with many questions: Should we teach multicultural literature the same way we teach canonical literature? How are we going to deal with our insecurity and ignorance about the other cultures we teach? How are we going to deal with touchy issues such as race, ethnicity, stereotypes, and so forth?

Researchers, including Enciso, Hines, and Rogers, argue that diverse students often actively participate in multicultural literature reading and discussion if the teacher moves beyond a New Critical approach and uses reader-response and cultural-response approaches in their literary discussions. A New Critical approach, which focuses on a textual analysis of the hidden meaning buried in the text, tends to silence the dialogue and turn students away from the discussion of critical issues related to multicultural texts. Rosenblatt's transactional approach encourages readers to make personal associations among their experiences, preoccupations, and the literature. However, as shown by Purves and Jordan, for those readers who are unfamiliar with the culture in the text, personal reader responses may not necessarily challenge the worldviews of the readers. Their desire for identification with the text hampers their ability to read texts from other cultures.

In comparison, a cultural-response approach challenges the students' preconceived notions about another culture by increasing their cross-cultural understanding.

An overemphasis on the personal connection may also run the risk of "narrowing our focus to the individual and masking the context," thus circumventing any sensitivity to ethnic identity and cultural differences (Pirie 10). In comparison, a cultural-response approach challenges the students' preconceived notions about another culture by increasing their cross-cultural understanding. It also engages them in exploring the cultural context of the text, which fosters cross-cultural understanding

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and explores racial and cultural differences (Beach, "Students" 70–71). Therefore, English teachers must include the cultural-response approach in multicultural literature instruction by illustrating the cultural patterns of a society and opening the dialogue on racial and cultural differences. Because the readers' cultural backgrounds and ideological stances affect their reading of multicultural literature, English teachers must help students reflect on their cultural backgrounds and switch ideological stances to learn other perspectives and expand their "cultural horizons" (Dasenbrook, qtd. in Soter 227).

Students who are unfamiliar with the racial and cultural differences of the characters may be resistant or silent in the beginning because they have difficulty relating to the differences.

In "Students' Resistance to Engagement with Multicultural Literature," Beach discussed several steps to enable students to make the ideological stance shift. First, the teacher must engage students in connecting their experiences to the racial and cultural differences portrayed in the work. They must critically examine these experiences, reflecting on their beliefs. For students who are from the culture that the work depicts, connections are easy to make. Still, they must go beyond making simple connections to exploring the historical, social, and cultural context of these works. Students who are unfamiliar with the racial and cultural differences of the characters may be resistant or silent in the beginning because they have difficulty relating to the differences. Students should be encouraged to listen to and actively observe these differences from another perspective, such as the perspective of a person from that culture. This shift of stance helps students reflect on their initial responses and attitudes and explore the contextual meaning of these differences (85–86).

Taking a cultural-response approach to the teaching of multicultural literature, I engaged the students in expanding their teaching repertoire through reading and discussing a series of multicultural works in small groups and in a whole-class setting. Together, students and I worked on viewing a multicultural text as a cultural artifact, learning to see each other and one's self as cultural beings, developing cultural-response questions, learning to examine and shift reader stance, reflecting on the readers' and writers' cultural assumptions and positions, and learning about the culture under study. Our course readings were Rogers and Soter's *Reading across Cultures: Teaching Literature in a Diverse Society* and Willis's *Teaching Multicultural Literature in Grades 9–12: Moving beyond the Canon.*

Establishing Empathy through Performance and Discussion

My initial survey indicated that many of the English teachers in the course were grappling with the issue of teaching a literary work from an unfamiliar culture. To provide them with a point of entry into a culture other than their own, I asked them to work in pairs to select one excerpt from the novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* that depicted a racial difference, write a dialogue on it, and then act out that dialogue. Acting out certain scenes led the students to experience the literature in new perspectives by using multiple senses. Acting also forced the students to step into the characters' shoes. The following is an example of the dialogue based on Cassie's trip to Mr. Simms's store and her revelation concerning racial discrimination.

Cassie: Why are you waiting on her before us? We were here first.

Mr. Simms: Didn't your parents teach you your way of life?

Cassie: There is no reason why we wait, can you finish our order, please.

Mr. Simms: Niggers get served last out here.

Cassie: What are you talking about?

Mr. Simms: Whose child is this?

Cassie: I don't understand.

The discussion that followed the acting served as a springboard for developing empathy toward the work from different perspectives. An African American teacher played Mr. Simms, the white racist, while an Irish American teacher played Cassie, the African American girl. When asked about her decision to play Cassie, the white teacher revealed that she did not want to say the N-word. She commented on how the acting filled her with strong feelings about the novel and evoked her internal drama with some touchy issues such as the use of the N-word, which she had not felt during the silent reading. Her revelation stimulated a spirited discussion. Many teachers, especially the European American teachers, voiced their concerns

about this issue. Two of the African American teachers responded by explaining the multiple layers of meaning behind the N-word and the contexts in which this word is used. Working as cultural insiders (people from the culture under study), the African American teachers also introduced the class to several scholarly books on social and historical aspects of African American language use. The integration of oral, visual, and kinesthetic means of expression into the reading expanded the students' powers of empathy, and the discussion made students realize the value of the cultural insiders' perspectives and the importance of expanding their cultural knowledge. Connecting the discussion with our reading of Spears-Bunton's essay, I made a point that while it was impossible for teachers to be experts in every culture, it was possible for them to learn the culture under study and do research beforehand on these issues. The African American students also reminded their peers that once they got over an initial fear of the unknown, they could see cultural insiders—students from the culture under study—as resources, listen to their perspectives on the issues, and learn along with their students.

Taking an Ethnographic Approach to Gaining Cross-Cultural Experience

Richard Beach, in *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories,* argued for the use of an ethnographic study to read and discuss multicultural literature for students to shift the focus of personal responses to cultural responses (148–50). Taking an ethnographic approach, students observe, listen to, and experience people's behaviors in contexts, thus enhancing their understanding of cultural values and beliefs. This is especially important for the teachers who, in their preparation for a multicultural literature unit of study, have to be aware of "historical and cultural discrepancies and inaccurate interpretations" as well as important social cultural issues (Fang, Fu, and Lamme 297). I assigned students to explore one culture through the use of an ethnographic approach, which included interviewing two cultural insiders by using two or three questions adapted from Brooks's questionnaire for cultural anthropologists (see fig. 1) and reading two or three works from that culture. Students selected these works from a reading list I provided or from the recommendations of their cultural insiders or their own research, with my approval. In reading literature, conducting interviews, and writing reflections, students took the role of a cultural anthropologist. They focused on one cultural practice or tradition depicted in the works and explored the cultural norms, values, and traditions behind it. Many students revealed that they gained a deeper cross-cultural understanding by confirming and contrasting what they read and what their interviewees said. Others claimed that the exercise provided them with the opportunity to learn about a culture in depth. Jennifer, a Chinese American teacher, deepened her understanding of her culture by reading Da Chen's *Colors of the Mountain,* Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children,* and Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves* and interviewing her grandmother and mother about Chinese family values and traditions. The following is an excerpt from her written reflection.

The integration of oral, visual, and kinesthetic means of expression into the reading expanded the students' powers of empathy, and the discussion made students realize the value of the cultural insiders' perspectives and the importance of expanding their cultural knowledge.

> I began . . . with a belief that having strong family values are inherent qualities associated with the Chinese culture. However, the root of this morale is deeply embedded in the teachings of Confucius. . . . His philosophies emphasized the importance of respect, loyalty, and honesty. Throughout my grandmother's life, she followed these ideas and passed it along my family. Therefore, strong family values are not innate but implemented and enforced throughout the Chinese Holidays and the common rituals exercised in a Chinese wedding.

By interviewing two Chinese women and reading the books that they recommended—Adeline Yen Mah's *Watching the Tree* and a selection from *A Treasury of Asian Literature* (Chi-Chen), Amy, an Italian American teacher, became aware of Chinese cultural values and more confident in teaching Chinese literature. She wrote the following:

> I enjoyed interviewing the two women because they always had a proverb or a tale to share with me to help me understand more about their culture. Their art of storytelling to teach a moral is amazing! Learning about the I Ching, Yin/Yang, Confucius, and the value of food in the Chinese culture, I feel much more comfortable teaching a Chinese work

Figure 1. Questions Cultural Anthropologists Ask

1. Who is busy and who is idle?
2. What do people talk about most?
3. What do people value most?
4. Who runs things in the home and in the community?
5. Who are the heroes?
6. What is taboo?
7. What is the character of the religion? Are the gods kind or cruel?
8. What folktales does everyone know?
9. What modes of artistic expression are allowed and encouraged?
10. What conduct wins the general approval and what merits scorn and ridicule?
11. What is considered fair and what unfair?
12. What is considered funny?
13. What procedures accompany the exchange of goods and services?
14. What are the important kinship ties?
15. What games are played and what pastimes enjoyed?
16. What is the role of music and dancing?
17. What are the important feasts and celebrations?
18. What rites and ceremonies are observed at birth, adolescence, betrothal, marriage, and death?
19. What are the rules concerning courtship?
20. What do people do to "get even" when they feel that they have been wronged?
21. What is done about the treatment of disease?
22. Who fights, how, and about what?
23. What are the tacit assumptions and unquestioned practices?

(Adapted from Brooks's *Language and Language Learning,* pp. 86–87)

of literature, such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,* because of this cross-cultural understanding experience. Multicultural literature inspires the reader to continue learning.

Exploring Cultural Values through a Critical Cultural Incident Activity

Another exercise in which students were asked to consider the importance of culture is the critical cultural incident study. Originally called cultural assimilators and developed by social psychologists to facilitate cross-cultural understanding (Fiedler, Mitchell, and Triandis), a critical cultural incident study included a narrative written by a group of students about a cultural conflict or an ambiguity in the text. After describing the incident, the group posed a question to the class. Along with the question, the group created a few possible responses to that question, taking into consideration the diverse points of views and preconceived notions that the reader may have had about the incident. Students were given time to work on their critical cultural incident in groups of three or five for two class sessions. Then each group gave its narrative and the class members were invited to give their responses and justifications for their responses. I then guided the class in examining the social and cultural contexts in which these meanings were derived. Students compared and contrasted their cultural values and beliefs with the cultural values and beliefs held by the people of other cultures.

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A group who had read *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid identified a critical cultural incident in Chapter 5. A white teacher is instructing her Caribbean students on Columbus's contributions to the history of Antigua. Annie's attention wanders as she becomes fascinated by a picture of Columbus in the bottom of a ship, his wrists and feet in chains. Annie learns that he had been arrested after a disagreement with a representative of Queen Isabella's and was being returned to Spain in disgrace. A part of the group's description of the incident and their questions follow:

> Annie likes the idea of Columbus being in chains. Annie decides to write underneath the picture, "The great man can no longer just get up and go." Why did Annie write this?
>
> a. Annie misunderstood the picture. It is the picture about how great Columbus was by tirelessly searching and then discovering North America and the Caribbean islands.
> b. Annie just tried to rebel against authority by making a mockery of the picture.
> c. Annie was keenly aware of where she came from and what really happened to her people and all that made her question Columbus' "discovery."

In discussing the possible responses to the incident, students shifted their stance from a teacher's to a student's, from a white European female's to a Caribbean female student's. Several European American students revealed that they would not have given much thought to this episode if we had not paused and focused on this incident. They would have treated this work as any other work by focusing on literary aspects. One Italian American teacher was especially struck by this incident and reflected on her stance on the celebration of Columbus Day. She questioned the textbook knowledge that she had learned, and that triggered a heated discussion about what was considered to be the truth. Afterwards students reflected on their stance toward the issue and the importance of using a cultural response approach to teaching multicultural literature as follows:

> This made me realize the importance of a cultural response approach. We learn and breed racism, prejudices, and stereotypes. As a teacher of multicultural literature, we must deal with issues like this. I would use a critical cultural incident exercise to encourage my students to construct their own views of race and culture as they come into contact with issues, such as Columbus' "discovery."—Christina, a tenth-grade teacher

> The critical cultural incident exercise really opened up the discussion on cultural and historical issues, issues that many American students had little knowledge about. It seems to me that a cultural insider's knowledge is important here. Or, the teacher and students have to do research on the history of migration and independence in the Caribbean islands to understand some of these issues. This further suggests that we have to move . . . towards a cultural criticism approach.—Terry, a seventh-grade teacher

As these students became more aware of the cultural and racial differences that were an integral part of multicultural works as well as the need for more connections in teaching multicultural literature, they developed ways to help their students discuss these differences and enhance cross-cultural understanding.

English teachers learn new texts and new ways of teaching these texts as they embark on the journey of teaching multicultural literature. Teachers must elucidate the cultural values and racial and cultural differences that underlie the behavior of characters in the work, challenge stereotypes, and engage students in examining their cultural background and ideological stance. By taking a cultural-response approach, teachers can seek ways to promote students' active participation in talking about cultural differences, fostering cross-cultural interactions, and thus developing critical readers and writers who learn not only the word but also the world (Friere and Macedo).

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