

STORIES MOVING READERS FROM FEAR AND BIAS TO TOLERANCE AND ACCEPTANCE: AN UNFINISHED CURRICULUM

M A R Y L . W A R N E R

The decade of the nineties was fraught with many signs that Americans, particularly students in America's middle and high schools, are growing more intolerant. Hate crimes and school violence dominate the news, sadly most often from the small towns of the United States which paradoxically should be the place of the strongest family-centered populations. English teachers, teachers who are the primary users of story, are those crucially poised to address these attitudes of bias, fear, and hatred, because we are the teachers most capable of reaching students with the literature that can inextricably link them to other human beings.

And that really is what a good literature program is. The authors we read and think about and worry about and doubt become part of us as we become part of them. If literature doesn't become part of our hearts and our guts and the guts and hearts of our students, then what is it good for? And that is our responsibility and our joy, to know so many different books and stories and poems and to present them so that young people will take some of them in and become wiser and nobler people because of the literature—and us (Donelson, 1989).

I suggest a curriculum built on canonical literature augmented by young adult literature exploring a range of differences. The aim of the curriculum is to share books, stories, and poems that can help our students as readers get into “the

hearts and the guts” of their peers, particularly peers who are different, and of others world-wide who we can know only through hearing their stories.

The ideas suggested for this teaching unit apply best to the ninth grade course of study, focusing on literary genre and elements, and tie as well to the eleventh grade curriculum of American Literature, since the foundation story, “Noon Wine,” is by Katherine Anne Porter, an American writer (1890-1980).

Porter’s “Noon Wine” is set in Texas, 1896-1905. A stranger comes to a farm in south Texas seeking employment; he is different from the lifelong residents there and is frequently called “the Swede.” The Swede’s experience—in this new place of employment—of suspicion, reluctant acceptance, and subtle harassment, parallels the experience many people of difference continue to face, over ninety years after the time of Porter’s story.

“Noon Wine” is rich with powerful lines that demonstrate our human reluctance to accept someone new and someone perceived to be unlike us. When Mr. Thompson, the small farm’s owner, first sees Mr. Helton, Thompson is described as judging “him” to be another of these Irishmen, by his long upper lip (“Noon Wine” 1964). One other dialogue early in the men’s acquaintance typifies the theme of skepticism and xenophobia:

“Now just where did you say you worked last? he [Thompson] asked, as if he expected Mr. Helton to contradict himself.

“North Dakota,” said Mr. Helton.

“Well, one place is good as another once you get used to it,” said Mr. Thompson, amply. “You’re a forriner, ain’t you?”

“I’m a Swede,” said Mr. Helton, beginning to swing the churn.

Mr. Thompson let forth a booming laugh, as if this was the best joke on somebody he’d ever heard.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said at the top of his voice.

“A Swede: well, now, I’m afraid you’ll get pretty lonesome around here. I’ve never seen any Swedes in this neck of the woods.”

“That’s all right,” said Mr. Helton (“Noon Wine” 1964).

Porter’s story builds to a stark and surprising ending. Her story has parallels to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” but “Noon Wine” more thoroughly and complexly develops the potent theme of bias and intolerance thrust on those who are new, different or strange to a local community and context. This story, as well as many of the other texts in the unit, powerfully illustrates the words of Elaine Scarry, cited in *Teaching for a Tolerant World*:

The human capacity to injure other people has always been greater than its ability to

Teaching MATTERS

Beauty is in the Eye of the Reader/Writer by Betsy Woods

One of my favorite activities for beginning poetry composition is to have students work in groups to develop lists of the ugly and beautiful words. I devised this lesson as a warm-up exercise for writing poetry and a good way to develop camaraderie among the members of writing groups. I’ve used this activity with my creative writing class which is a senior elective; however, the lesson fits nearly all grade levels.

Procedure:

1. Read the poem “Blackberry Eating” by Galway Kinnell. What are words in the poem the students consider beautiful and ugly? (You can find this poem on the following website: www.loc.gov/poetry/180)

2. Read the poem “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll. What are words in the poem students consider beautiful and ugly? (You can find this poem on the following website: <http://www76.pair.com/keithlim/jabberwocky/poem/jabberwocky.html>)

3. Have students work in groups to develop a list of the ten most beautiful words in the English language and the ten ugliest words in the English language. They have to do this relying on sound only, not on meaning. Provide dictionaries.

4. Write all of the words on the board (ugly on one side, pretty on the other), and have students work individually to compose short poems that are either ugly or beautiful. Again, they should rely primarily on the sound rather than the meaning. The teacher should write a beautiful and ugly poem with the students.

5. Share the poems. Discuss what exactly it is we like about certain words. Discuss characteristics such as cacophony and euphony.

6. As a possible extension, read the poems to other classes and ask them to judge their sound as ugly or beautiful.

I have always found this to be a fun activity to start poetry. You should see the students argue over which words are pretty and which ones are ugly!

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imagine other people. Or perhaps we should say, the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small (*For Love of Country*, 1996).

LAUNCHING THE UNIT

Before reading and discussing “Noon Wine” with your students, consider using one or more of the following as a pre-reading and anticipatory activity.

1. Play the song “People are Strange” by The Doors, from the album, *Strange Days*. Have students listen to the lyrics, writing down the words they find as significant, and use these lyrics as the basis for a writing prompt to initiate discussion. Some key lyrics are “People are strange when you’re a stranger/Faces look ugly when you’re alone ... No one remembers your name when you’re strange.”

2. Discussion questions or questions for students’ writing journals

a. Have you ever been new to a place? A school? A neighborhood? A city or community? A gathering? How did you feel? What were your feelings about the people or the setting into which you were moving or becoming a part of?

b. Write about a time someone new moved into your neighborhood, community, or school. How did you feel about this person? What questions did you have about the newcomer?

c. How long does it take you to get to know someone? What kinds of differences do you find hardest to accept: Physical? Racial or ethnic? Linguistic? Gender? Disabilities of some kind? Personality or emotional?

3. Read the following poems (possibly having the words on an overhead transparency) from Tabony (1986). The poems reflect the sentiments of Eastern European writers; writers from countries that experienced the Holocaust and have known the Cold War, the horrors of civil war and ethnic cleansing.

“The Final Reckoning”

Sandor Domokos

The blood everywhere is red.
Tears are always the same tears.
A scream for help at night
in every language sends the same message.
Many are the hues of the skin
and the colors of the eyes vary.
Words are too poor to cry out the pain
which cuts into the soul.
Woe to you man, woe to you,
if you do not fight evil.
Woe to you, if you do not see
how alike are the Gulag and Auschwitz.
Woe, if you live a double standard
and observe the present only through the past;
if how you view the chains of South Africa
depends on whether they are profitable to you,
and you judge according to your interests;
if Cambodia’s destiny is different for you
than that of Palestine or Israel;
if Belfast is close to your heart,
but Afghanistan does not interest you;
if you cry over injustices in Chile,
but the conditions in the Baltic States
are not your concern;
if you wish to gain freedom
by killing your enemies,
and after the victory
you only create more prisons, woe to you,
for then with your own hands
you will hasten the coming of
the End.

“Taking Stock”

Judith Selymes Ilosvay

It does not matter
where you were born
where you live now
what your mother tongue was
what language you speak now
what you wanted to become
what your old religion was
what you dared to do
in which God you believe
It does matter
whether you have remained
steadfastly a human being

These poems may help students see that hatred and intolerance have not been eradicated by the Civil Rights movement or any other attempts to foster acceptance of difference. Use these poems to help students start to comprehend the essential: we are all humans. Use the poems also to help students examine their stereotypes, preconceptions and their own lack of knowledge of others. Also have your students locate a poem in which they identify similar themes. Bring these poems to class and visually display these for other students to examine. Or as an alternate assignment, students can create a "found poem" with words taken from headlines or newspaper or magazine texts. These too, should be displayed as visuals to reinforce the theme of the unit.

During the in class reading or readers' theatre presentation of "Noon Wine," teachers might use a "List of Ten" activity. Students could list:

- a. Ten statements they would not like to have said to them or about them,
- b. Ten images or descriptions that contribute to feelings of hatred or violence,
- c. Ten reactions to characters about positive or negative actions of the characters,
- d. Ten responses to Mr. Thompson, Mrs. Thompson, Mr. Helton, Mr. Hatch, or other characters.

After they have read "Noon Wine," students can focus on the images and ideas they have gleaned from the reading. Have their perceptions



In Other Words: A Vocabulary Game Based on Taboo

by Elizabeth Chase

This game was devised to encourage my students to think about the meanings of words rather than just quote the dictionary definitions. It is an adaptation of the popular board game, Taboo, which is familiar to many of the students. Although I used the game with eighth graders, the game is appropriate for all middle and high schoolers.

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into groups of four.
2. Each group should be given a vocabulary list with definitions and an index card for each word.
3. The group should divide the words evenly among the players. For example, if there were twenty words, each of the four players would be responsible for making five cards.
4. A vocabulary word should be printed at the top of each card. Underneath should be five words that would most commonly be associated with the word. These words will be "taboo" during the game.

Cordial

Nice
Kind
Sincere
Friendly
Pleasant

Confidential

Private
Secret
Personal
Intimate
Nonpublic

Raucous

Loud
Boisterous
Rowdy
Noisy
Disturbing

5. When the cards are made, the students can begin playing the game. The directions are as follows:

- a. There should be two teams of two.
- b. The first player draws a card. The object is for that player to get his or her partner to guess the word at the top of the card.

- c. In describing the word, none of the words listed on the card may be used. One player of the opposing team should read the "taboo" words and monitor the clues for infractions. The other player of the opposing team should watch the clock.
- d. Each team has thirty seconds to guess as many words as possible.
- e. At the end of the thirty seconds the team adds up the number of vocabulary words guessed correctly and subtracts passes or words where 'taboo' words were given.
- f. The total is the team's score for that round.
- g. Teams alternate back and forth for the desired amount of playing time or until all cards have been used.
- h. Cards should be accumulated throughout the year so that students are constantly reviewing past vocabulary.



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of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson changed throughout the reading? How do they feel about Mr. Helton? Does he deserve the treatment he gets? How about the bounty hunter? “Noon Wine” is set in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Do students see parallels to the world of today? Are there any contemporary situations that are similar to those experienced by Mr. Helton? By the Thompsons?

In the discussions that follow the reading, return to the prewriting students have done with the song or the poetry or the Lists of Ten that have been reader responses. Compare what students previously felt to their responses in light of reading Porter’s story. There is a film version, as part of the American Short Story Collection, available from Fries Home Video. The 1987 production, #33267, is eighty-one minutes and stars Fred Ward, Lise Hilboldt, Stellan Skarsgard, and Pat Hingle. Use of the video following the reading allows students to see a visual and dramatic portrayal of the story; additionally, students can work with the layers of interpretation from film producers and directors with aspects like background music, cinematography, or selection of actors.

EXTENDING THE UNIT

For individual or small group reading, work with the following Young Adult texts. There are a variety of ways to guide selection of the novels. Students might be encouraged to read about an aspect of difference with which they are least familiar or knowledgeable. The aim, overall, of using these YA texts is to have other adolescents speak and make their stories known since we seldom fear what we know, and when we know others’ stories, we frequently build empathy for them. You might also begin with a Book Pass Activity; this involves providing copies of the novels and having students spend five minutes with a book before passing it on to the next reviewer. Students can get an initial introduction to each work and then can make a more informed selection of one they’d like to read.

Reading of the YA novels can be outside of class work; all these texts have reading and interest levels, which are easily accessible. At the same time, the books offer examples of powerful writing. Presentations on their individual reading can take a variety of forms, limited only by the creativity of your students. Each presentation should focus on how the reader has come to a new or deeper awareness of another person’s differences or of another person’s struggles and sufferings. Some possibilities for projects responding to the reading might include

1. Creative dramatics or a one-act play presenting the highlights of the book
2. Writing poetry to express the experiences of the book’s protagonists
3. Presenting a dramatic monologue capturing highlights of the protagonist’s experience
4. Selecting music or writing music that could be a sound track for the video.
5. Producing a video that demonstrates the themes of the book
6. Interviewing people who face some of the same experiences in their lives; the presentation of the interviews could be done in a Talk Show context
7. Artwork—painting or sculpture or other format to convey emotions felt by characters

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE SELECTIONS

The Giver by Lois Lowry: The key in this story is lack of difference. In the communal lifestyle Jonas and others experience, everything is the same. While all the regulation can present an aura of security for them, the young people in Jonas’s world face the deprivation created by sameness. The ultimate horror of the sameness is release of anyone different. Lowry’s novel might work best for readers who don’t see the richness in diversity.

Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes by Chris Crutcher: This novel is filled with characters—adolescents in particular—who face lack of acceptance because

of difference. Eric Calhoun is fat and his nickname is "Moby"; Sarah Byrnes has a physical disfigurement and hides the story of the horrible abuse she's experienced; Mark Brittain, a young man set on upholding the highest moral values, has a story hidden behind his self-righteous facade; Jody Mueller looks like the "all together" young woman, but holds a painful difference inside. A good read for students who are willing to question some of the status quo.

All Together Now by Sue Ellen Bridgers: Casey Flanagan, the novel's protagonist, learns about loving someone of difference: Dwayne Pickens, a 33 year old whose mind has never grown beyond that of a twelve year old boy. The novel is set during summertime; Casey and the whole community learn, in a context outside of school, a good deal about life.

The Trail on Which They Wept by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler: This novel presents the story

of the Cherokee people's tragic oppression in the voice of a young Cherokee woman experiencing the forced exile. It is only one of many possible texts displaying the injustices Native Americans experienced.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor: The book, as do all of Taylor's writings, presents the experience of Black Americans in Mississippi in the 1930s and the period preceding the Civil Rights Movement. Cassie, Taylor's protagonist, is female, Black, and part of a land-owning family in an area of white sharecroppers, who are themselves besieged by the Depression but further blinded by racist reactions. Taylor's novel is easily paired with *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Children of the River by Linda Crew: This text works with Asian immigrants, specifically Cambodian refugees, and their settlement in the U.S. Relayed in the voice of an adolescent protagonist, Sundara, the book addresses the

Teaching MATTERS

Revising Shakespeare: Hamlet, Yours or His? by Jack Horn

I created the following Hamlet revision project to make the play more relevant and enjoyable for my high school seniors. I came to the revelation that perhaps "Will" had not written the play the way some of us would like. Must Hamlet and Ophelia both die? Does the setting need to be Scandinavia? Why not let the students revise the play to their liking?

The students had to demonstrate their familiarity with the text by including characters and events from the original Hamlet. Students made the following revisions to the original ending in Shakespeare's Elsinore Castle:

- traveling back in time to 600 BC and the Druids
- warping into outer space with Star Wars
- submerging the play under the sea with "The Little Mermaid"
- tromping through the American West with a martial arts theme ala "The Magnificent Seven/Seven Samurai"

I used this revision project as an alternative to a final. This technique was so much more revealing and appealing than the usual multiple choice answers or long-winded essay questions. I was better able to evaluate if the students truly absorbed the essence of Shakespeare and the play. It was a fascinating project which I have since replicated for my freshmen who revised Romeo and Juliet.

What follows is the letter I gave my students explaining the assignment.

As the new owner of the Lion Theatre here in London, I have been told that a new playwright, William Shakespeare, wants to perform his latest work in our playhouse. As the new theatre manager, I want YOU to decide if HIS play is good enough to make a profit, hire the best actors, and, of course, keep Queen Elizabeth happy. We all know what happens if SHE is displeased.

I want you to read this Shakespeare's manuscript, called Hamlet, and find flaws in the plot, characters, location, etc. You are to rewrite the play (either partially or totally) by putting your ideas to pen (word processor) to make this drama more enjoyable and successful. You must submit YOUR version to me one day hence. You may collaborate with other students.

Specifically your task is to rewrite Hamlet, in summary fashion, the way YOU prefer to see it performed. You may add or delete characters and change plots or scenes. Regardless, I believe that the version written by Shakespeare will be a failure and soon forgotten; however, YOUR version may last 400 years and be performed and studied by students of higher education around the world. You need not write in his complex style of blank verse or create new quotes, but your version must include summaries of each scene that you rewrite. Of course, using metaphors and imagery enhances your work's chance of being acclaimed (and performed in our lifetime).

I want your version submitted on no less than two and no more than three type-written pages. Your grammar, spelling, and punctuation must be perfect. To ensure you do this correctly, use your seventeenth century version of Writers Inc. and that "other" version of Hamlet written by that upstart, Will Shake-a-spear, or whatever his name is.

I want you to refer to the Assessment Rubric on page 213 of Writers Inc., since I will evaluate YOUR summary by both your knowledge of Hamlet and accuracy of your grammar, spelling, and punctuation. As theatre manager, you must complete this assignment on company time (during school), and your final product is due in my office by 10:50 a.m., September 21, 1600 (2001).

By successfully completing this task, you will display to me your familiarity with Hamlet and your extensive knowledge of the proper use of the English language.

Signed, this 18th Day of September, 1600 (2001)

Sir John Horn, Owner, the Lion Theater

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cultural differences experienced by those who want to hold to their cultural heritage, but must assimilate in contemporary American culture.

Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick: Max, a boy who is large for his age and frequently ridiculed for his physical size and lack of intellectual ability, narrates this book. Max bears a striking resemblance to his father, a man imprisoned for killing Max's mother. Kevin Avery, alias "Freak" who has a giant mind and a deformed, dwarfish body, befriends Max. The combination is "Freak the Mighty." A 1998 video, "The Mighty" further supplements this text displaying a range of differences.

Belle Prater's Boy by Ruth White: This novel is captured best by White's epigram, taken from Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." These words could be the overall theme for this entire unit on exploration of difference, for tolerance and acceptance grow when readers enter the essentials of another person by hearing that person's story. Set in Appalachia, this novel offers an environment where people are often stereotyped. As the novel reveals, however, the aspect of difference actually deals with a universal: external appearance. In this book, Belle has been plagued by her "ugliness," which she believes causes her to lose the man she loves; Woodrow has severe cross-eyedness; Gypsy's father, who becomes disfigured while serving as a fire fighter, eventually kills himself when he cannot accept his disfigurement; and Blind Benny has been born without eyes. This novel is a good read for those willing to see in new ways.

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech: This novel also presents a powerful adage regarding acceptance of others.: "Don't judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins." Sal, whose full name is Salamanca Tree Hiddle, has ancestors who were Seneca Indians. Sal narrates the story of her friend Phoebe Winterbottom as she travels with her grandparents from Kentucky

to Idaho. The power of this novel is precisely in the power of story. Behind Phoebe's story, is Sal's story; both young women face the loss of mothers and face the experience of being different from others because of family situations. This difference may be one to which many students relate.

CONCLUDING ACTIVITIES

At the close of the unit, students should have new insights on some aspect of difference, possibly their own differences, which they want to communicate. Using the picture book, *If You're Not From the Prairie* by David Bouchard as a model, have students design a children's book about difference. In Bouchard's book, the narrator suggests that if you're not from the prairie, you can't really know the sun, the wind, the sky, cold, snow, or flat; in fact, "you don't know me ... you just can't know ME." The key lies in the small word "unless," for as the book ends the narrator asserts, "unless deep within you, there's somehow a part ... a part of these things that I've said I know." If there is such an understanding, there can be oneness and unity. Students can develop their own descriptions of "If you're not from ... you can't know"; hopefully they will feel free to write about the differences they believe are least understood.

Finally, in this unit of using story to move readers from fear and bias to tolerance and acceptance, it is vital to celebrate the positive aspects of diversity. One other picture book works well to assist students to identify important qualities, which make them who they are. Margaret Wise Brown's *The Important Book* can be read aloud. It is a pattern book, which moves through a series of objects—from a spoon to a daisy to the rain and ultimately to a child—presenting a variety of characteristics of each. The opening and closing lines of each description reinforce "but the important thing about ... is" Students can write their own "important thing about me" descriptions, and teachers can display these descriptions in a variety of ways. I have seen teachers create a giant patchwork quilt framing

each student's uniqueness. In any case, the crucial goal is to see that each student is a unique human being and the differences need to be celebrated, not feared.

Each text above offers literature that can become part of the heart and guts of our students. Each work gives voice to characters who experience difference and who possess the universal human desire to be accepted and loved. Literature allows readers to hear the voices, to feel with those hurt and abused, and to be challenged to move out of the limited world of individuals to the wider world of diversity. The title of the article suggests, though, this is an unfinished curriculum; the continuation belongs to the teachers who want to move their students beyond hatred and bias to acceptance and celebration.

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