



Children's Books - Transparencies for Diverse Cultures in an Undergraduate Course

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Abstract: This paper describes an undergraduate course, A Global View Through Children's Literature, at Eastern Washington University in the United States that support the students in gaining a wider global perspective through reading a variety of children's and young adult literature set in a variety of countries and cultures. Class experiences include read alouds of children's literature and inquiries about themes through reading sets of books. These themes are explored: families in diverse cultures, crossing borders/geography, and the impact of war and peace on the world's people. In addition, all students read and respond to nine young adult books.

Key Words: Children's Literature, Global, Undergraduate, Course.

Introduction

This paper describes a course, A Global View Through Children's Literature, for undergraduate students at Eastern Washington University in the United States that support the students in gaining a wider perspective of world cultures and issues through reading a variety of children's and young adult literature. The University draws students mainly from rural areas of the states of Washington and Idaho. People from diverse cultures are invisible to these students because they have had few first hand experiences with other cultures. My colleagues, Dr. Jane Liu and Dr. Chris Valeo, and I designed a course that addresses this problem. Dr. Valeo from the English Department and I from the Education Department teach the course. We combine our knowledge, perspectives and expertise in children's literature and other cultures. In sharing children's and young adult literature with international settings we widen the cultural views of our students.

Description of the Course

Children's and young adult literature offers a unique opportunity to explore a variety of perspectives regarding global issues. Class experiences include read alouds of picture books and inquiries about themes through reading sets of children's books gathered around the themes. In whole class and small groups the class explores the following themes: families in diverse cultures, crossing borders/geography, and the impact of war and peace on the world's people. In



small groups the students read set of books that match the themes. All the students read and respond to the following young adult books:

- Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone*.
- Compestine, Ying Chang. *Revolution is Not a Dinner Party*.
- Hobbs, Will. *Crossing the Wire*.
- Jolin, Paula. *In the Name of God*.
- Kamkwamba, William & Mealer, Bryan. *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*.
- Lat. *Kampung Boy*.
- McCormick, Patricia. *Sold*.
- Mortenson, Greg & Relin, David. *Three Cups of Tea: "One Man's Journey to Change the World... One Child at a Time."* Adapted by Sarah Thomson.

To respond to these novels the students participate in large and small group discussions where they share their written reflections about the books. The class also features presentations by students and guest speakers as well as explorations through experiences such as museum displays, traveling journals, art projects and more.

Outcomes and Evidence

The following lists the learning outcomes and how the evidence from the students that is gathered:

- 1) Students will come to understand that culture is a construct that transmits stories and is transmitted through stories (evidence: museum display, textsets exploration, response papers).
- 2) Students will gain familiarity with other cultures on the way to a better understanding of the global community through the reading of children's and young adult literature (evidence: response papers).
- 3) Students will learn to consider non-U.S. perspectives through their responses to children's literature (evidence: response papers, classroom discussion).
- 4) Students will develop a thoughtful and critical reading stance that allows for consideration of their source, the author's point of view, and the impact of their own perspective on their reading of children's literature (evidence: final project).



5) Students will develop critical insights into sociopolitical issues and trends around the world (evidence: graffiti wall, response papers, final project).

Course Impact on Students

The course has makes a significant contribution to the students' understanding about world cultures and issues that affect the global society. It has become a popular course with students that represent many majors across the University. The course has two major impacts on the students. First, they read, respond and discuss books about other cultures. Second, they become acquainted with the rich resources available through children's and young adult literature. Here are some quotes from students' about the course:

- "Most of these books I would have never chosen on my own. They are amazing books, but I have never pushed myself to read these hard topics until now!"

- "I used a few radicals to form my opinion about the Muslim Cultures and about the Middle East in general. I have never seen or even thought of life on their side!"

- "I love that I have been changed in some ways and unchanged in others; ultimately, this is the value of what I have read and where it has taken me. It is, in fact, how I have grown."

- "... I've learned that it's not necessarily about changing the world, but about changing the lives of the people that you encounter."

- "What I have realized by reading the variety of books this quarter is that not only did I learn a lot about cultures but I have more feeling and relate more to the characters in the books".

- "I have learned there is a great big world outside of me that deserves my attention, my prayers, my concerns and my dedication to becoming more knowledgeable".

- "It is important to realize that it only takes one person, one idea to change the world".

Conclusion

At the end of the quarter, students tell us that reading the books in the class has changed their views of other cultures. When the course is finished we ask students to list actions that they will take as a result of the reading the books for the course. They proposed to: share the ideas they discovered with friends and family; start fundraising for global humanitarian or



environmental causes; volunteer for the Peace Corp; continue to read widely about other cultures. It is a rewarding course for both professors and students.

Bibliography

- BEAH, Ishmael (2007), *A Long Way Gone*, New York: FSG.
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Please note my web site: <http://www.ewu.edu/x14875.m> There you will find a nineteen page booklist with all the books listed that we use in the course

