



## “Kabob Norsk” and “Talking Black”:

### Deconstructing Immigration and Minority Status through Text and Talk

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**Abstract:** This year-long qualitative study highlights research conducted on the use of international children’s/ young adult literature in Norwegian *ungdomsskoler*. It focuses on issues of diversity and immigration as a salient feature of US culture while simultaneously providing a mirror to Norwegian students to explore their own world. The use of accessible texts, protecting space for dialogue, and encouraging multiple sign systems to communicate ideas encouraged students to think deeply about the world around them. I also highlight the importance of pedagogy that invites students to explore the complex connections they make while reading, to better comprehend the text, the world, and their own lives.

**Keywords:** pedagogy, multicultural literature, critical literacy, dialogue.

Norway’s recent influx of immigration created a unique background for my year-long study completed during the 2008-2009 academic year as a Fulbright Scholar. A country known for peace and human rights, Norway has had an increase in immigration in the last seven years that has challenged many Norwegians’ fundamental beliefs. Currently many of their cultural values, such as women’s rights and separation of church and state, are being redefined by immigrant and minority communities. This redefinition has caused tension throughout the country as citizens see a rise in poverty and crime within their communities--some are calling for tighter national policies on immigration and others are valiantly fighting the institutional racism that exists for many Pakistani immigrants and Somalian refugees.

#### **Theoretical Foundation**

As I worked with the Norwegian teens to disrupt the stereotypes of the United States and to begin to see the complex connections between the socio-historical and political natures of the two countries, I relied on critical literacy pedagogy combined with the opportunity to engage in dialogue.

Children’s and young adult literature open worlds to readers. However, the books themselves are not enough. Teachers must help students to use the books as a springboard to make differences visible, present multiple perspectives, and disrupt the status quo (Harste, Breaux, Leland, Lewison, Ociepa, & Vasquez, 2000). The pedagogy I employed during this research



was grounded in critical literacy and attempted to support students to use dialogue to see their world differently and act upon their new understandings (Comber & Simpson, 2003; Edelsky, 1999; Harste, 1999; Janks, 2005; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997). The literature chosen was important, but so too was the time for students to discuss the literature and begin to read their world.

To do this, I employed two different types of literature discussions: literature circles and text set discussion. Both of these pedagogical choices encouraged students to spend time reading and discussing texts. Barnes (1975/1992) argues that it is through dialogue that students work together to create meaning from texts. As students read a variety of American literature, they began to construct a view of the US that often countered their stereotypes. During those discussion students also began to reflect on their own country. This dialogue is essential in facilitating critical thinking. Friere's (1998: 73) writes that "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education".

### **Methodology**

My qualitative study involved visiting 45 *ungdomsskoler*, lower secondary schools, throughout Norway and the Canary Islands and sharing with over 5,000 students and teachers multicultural literature about US immigrant and minority populations through the Roving Scholars Fulbright Program. The program, unique to Norway, invites 2-3 scholars for the United States to travel around the country providing lectures on American culture to students in *ungdomsskoler*, grades 8-10, and *vidergoande skoler*, grades 11-13. Over the past ten years, the program has brought scholars from all parts of the United States to work with over 100,000 students and teachers.

My Fulbright experience occurred during the 2008-2009 academic year. I worked primarily with *ungdomsskole* students who ranged from 14-16 years of age. The majority of the schools I visited were located in small fishing or mountain towns and had little diversity, only one or two immigrants and often from European countries. However, several schools I visited within and around the larger cities of Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, and Stavanger had much higher



levels of students who were either first or second generation Norwegians and who were Norwegian Language Learners.

My visits generally consisted of meeting with small groups of 15-25 students for 60 to 90 minutes. During these visits I shared information about my own background and the many places within the United States I have lived and asked the students to share a little bit about their own backgrounds. I then proceeded with one of six lectures<sup>1</sup> designed to explore US culture with the students. I designed each lecture to engage students in the issues of diversity within the United States, to interrogate the stereotypes of the United States, and to make connections to the increasing diversity within their own country.

The research questions explored were as follows:

-How can literature about US minority adolescents help Norwegian students better understand their own cultural tensions regarding immigrant and minority cultures?

-What factors and pedagogies enable Norwegian students and teachers to critically analyze the word and the world?

The data I collected included field notes and student/teacher artifacts. I analyzed the data using constant comparative methods and triangulation (Merriam, 1998) to help determine patterns and themes within the data. The following presentation provides description of the pedagogy used and the initial analysis of the data.

### **Pedagogy**

There were six lectures offered to the teachers. I designed each lecture to actively engage students in English communication and exploration of US culture. For this presentation, I will focus on two lectures in which I used children's and young adult literature that highlighted multiple perspectives regarding US culture: Short Story Literature Circles and Small Group Text Sets. I will briefly describe each. For an in-depth description, please see my published work in the Norwegian journal *Språk og Språkundervisning* (Wilson, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The term *lectures* is a misnomer for what I did with the students. Lectures tend to be didactic and teacher-centered. I prefer to use the terms *lesson* or *presentation* as they better match the constructivist nature of my interactions with the students; however, since the Norwegian teachers use the term lecture, I use it throughout my presentation in order to maintain consistency.



### **Short Stories Literature Circles**

The short story literature circles lecture required the students to read a short story; therefore, many of the teachers who chose this option felt that their students were strong in English. I worked most frequently with 10<sup>th</sup> grade students for this lecture; however, one 8<sup>th</sup> grade class and several 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes also requested it. The goal of this lecture was to provide the students a chance to explore diversity among US teenagers through literature. I chose 5-6 short stories about teenagers from a variety of cultures including such stories as “If you Kiss a Boy” by Alex Sanchez (2003), “Jeremy Goldblatt is so not Moses” by James Howe (2003), and “So I Ain’t No Good Girl” by Sharon Flake (2004).

The presentation began with a modified form of the tea party strategy (Beers, 2003) to organize students into groups and preview the story. After the students read the story in a pair-share format, I used a jigsawing to place students in new groups. In their new groups students shared a summary of the short story they read and looked for patterns across all the stories. The final engagement was to have the students return to their original small group and create a thesis statement that represented their learning about American teenage life and a symbol that represented this statement. I relied on multiple ways of knowing (i.e., combining both the written and the symbolic representation of their ideas), to scaffold students into critical thinking patterns. (See example in Appendix A.)

### **Picture Book Text Sets**

The picture book text set lecture mainly included fictional picture books, grouped under such themes as *immigration*, *Native Americans*, *social class*, *family stories*, etc. Each theme had approximately 7-10 pieces of literature and was designed to provide a unique window into the culture of the United States.

To place students into groups, I taped a different word drawn from the reading on each students’ back. The students walked around and asked each other yes/no questions (e.g., “Am I a person?”) in English to discover the word on their back. After all the students figured out their word, they grouped themselves based on similar words. This game allowed students to move



around, practice their English in a low-risk environment, interact with one another, and experience vocabulary they would be seeing in their reading. Once the students were in their groups, I passed out the text sets. Each student was asked to read one to two of the picture books from his/her set and browse the rest. While the students were reading and browsing they were supposed to discuss what they are learning with their group members. After a set amount of time, I gave the students large pieces of paper and markers. The students created graffiti boards (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000) as their response to the reading. Grounded in Rosenblatt's (1994) theory of reading response, the students created images, phrases, words, and symbols that they found important to their reading. The students then shared their work with the class. (For an example of graffiti boards see Appendix A.)

I found many teachers reluctant at first to use picture books in their classrooms, thinking that picture books are too simplistic for *ungdomsskole* students. However, after viewing the pictures many began to agree with scholars and researchers who argue the benefits of using sophisticated picture books with older students for aesthetic enjoyment, build background knowledge on topics, appeal to visual learners, increase motivation, and contain “provocative issues and moral dilemmas to stimulate critical thinking and discussion” (Carr, et al., 2001: 147). The picture books I used had large amounts of content, touched on sophisticated issues, and were accessible to all students regardless of English proficiency. A selected list of the picture books I used can be found in Appendix B.

## **Findings**

As I visited each school, I encouraged students and teachers to read and discuss various texts written from the perspective of US minority cultures including African American, Asian American, Latino, Middle Eastern, Jewish, Muslim, and homosexual adolescents. During these discussions, students and teachers explored the issues that arise for US minorities and compared their experiences with being a minority or interacting with immigrant populations in Norway. My initial findings from this research suggest that: 1) providing accessible texts enable students to think deeply about issues, 2) using literature from other countries and encouraging complex connections through pedagogical choices enables students to reflect critically upon their own



social worlds, and 3) providing time for students to dialogue and move through multiple sign systems scaffolded their critical engagement with the texts.

### **Conclusion**

Literature can open hearts and minds. It can help a community redefine who it is and what it wants to become. My year in working in Norwegian *ungdomsskoler* illustrates the possibilities that exist when teachers combine text and talk to begin the process of deconstructing racial and ethnic stereotypes against the backdrop of rising immigration and an economic recession.

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## Appendix A Examples of Student Work

### Literature Circle Discussion Symbols



(Reads: "There are tonz of different people in the US")



(Reads: "America is a mixed country with many different religions and cultures!")

### Text Set Graffiti Example







## Appendix B

### Selected Bibliography of Picture Books Used

#### Social Class:

- BROWNE, A. (1998), *Voices in the park*, New York: DK Publishing.
- BUNTING, E. (1991), *Fly away home*, New York: Clarion.
- HAZEN, B.S. (1979), *Tight times*, New York: Puffin.
- JIMÉNEZ, F. (1998), *La Mariposa*, New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- WYETH, S. D. (1998), *Something beautiful*, New York: Dragonfly.

#### Family Stories:

- GREENFIELD, E. (1988), *Grandpa's face*, New York: Putnam & Grosset.
- POLACCO, P. (1990), *Babushka's doll*, New York: Aladdin.
- (1992), *Chicken Sunday*, New York: Putnam & Grosset.
- (1994), *My rotten redheaded older brother*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- RYLANT, C. (1985), *When the relatives came*, New York: Aladdin

#### Immigration:

- ALTMAN, L.J. & E.O. SANCHEZ (1993), *Amelia's road*, New York: Lee & Low.
- BUNTING, E. (1994), *A day's work*, New York: Clarion.
- ELYA, S. M. (2002), *Home at last*, New York: Lee & Low.
- HEST, A. (1997), *When Jessie came across the sea*, Cambridge-MA: Candlewick.
- LEVINE, E. (1989), *I hate English*, New York: Scholastic.

#### Native American:

- BRUCHAC, J. (1996), *Between earth and sky: Legends of Native American sacred places*, San Diego-CA: Voyager.
- BRUCHAC, J. & T. LOCKER (1995), *The earth under Sky Bear's feet: Native American poems of the land*, New York: Penguin Putnam for Young Readers.
- DEPOALA, T. (1988), *The legend of the Indian paintbrush*, New York: Putnam & Grosset.
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