

Teaching Culturally Relevant Literature

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How can we help students succeed not only in the English major, but also in their General Education courses and in other majors? Reading and writing critically are essential skills for academic success at the university level. Moreover, these skills need to be developed at each stage of the educational process – elementary, middle school, high school, as well as college and university.

Several recent national studies of literacy, however, point to alarming trends for Hispanics. In the summer of 2004 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a survey of literary reading, *Reading at Risk*. While thirty-four percent of Hispanics reported to engage in literary reading in 1992, that number declined to less than twenty-seven percent in 2002.

According to Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, the *Reading at Risk* study reveals that “for the first time in modern history, less than half the population reads fiction, poetry, or drama.” The survey conducted in 2002 “investigated the percentage and number of adults, age 18 and over, who attended artistic performances, watched broadcasts of arts programs, or read literature.”

The N.E.A. report found that literary reading is declining among all educational levels, with the highest percentage of non-readers being those without a college degree. The implications of this study are alarming. According to Gioia, the decline in reading “parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life.” One commonly accepted explanation for this decline in reading is the increased presence and attraction to electronic media, including television, the Internet, video games, and portable devices.

A new report released by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) in December, 2005, found that literacy rates for Hispanic adults between the years 1992 and 2003 declined significantly, whereas literacy rates for whites, African-Americans, and Asian/Pacific Islander adults rose.

The N.A.A.L. uses three categories to define English-language literacy: prose, document, and quantitative. “Prose literacy includes the skills needed to understand continuous text, such as newspaper articles. Document literacy is the ability to understand the content and structure of documents such as prescription labels. Quantitative literacy involves using numbers, such as computing and comparing the cost per ounce of food items.” Hispanic adults showed a decrease in scores for both prose and document literacy and a higher percentage compared to 1992 in the Below Basic category, those with no more than the most *simple* and *concrete* literacy skills.

Both N.E.A. and N.A.A.L. studies point to the need to improve literacy and reading rates among Hispanics. Although larger numbers of Hispanics are attending

college than ever before, their completion rates are not nearly what they should be. One reason for this is that so many of these students are first generation college students. According to a report issued in August 2005 by the United States Department of Education, students whose parents were not educated past high school perform worse in the college classroom. These students were more likely to have taken remedial classes and were less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than other students were.

As Chairman of the Department of English at UTPA, I am very familiar with the challenges first-generation Hispanic college students face. Our department is currently ranked number one by *Hispanic Outlook* for Bachelor's degrees awarded in English to Hispanic students and for the past several years has been ranked in the top ten for Bachelor degrees awarded in English to Hispanics.

Unfortunately, many factors mitigate against the development of competencies in the areas of critical reading and writing skills for Hispanic students. Because many of the Mexican-American students here at the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) grow up in homes in this region of South Texas where Spanish is the primary language, they often struggle to acquire mastery of English. In addition, many of them grow up in homes where their parents never attended college and higher education is not emphasized as a priority. Mexican-American female students are influenced by family social values that define their place in the home.

How then do we overcome the many obstacles for our students to literary reading both within the home and in the popular culture? One strategy that I have adopted and several of my colleagues have adopted here at The University of Texas-Pan American is through teaching culturally relevant literature. The student surveys of my culturally relevant sophomore-literature class resulted in a wide variety of comments that encourage me to think that teaching culturally relevant texts may be the key to ensuring that our Hispanic students increase the amount of their reading and at the same time read more critically.

Joan Parker Webster, in her book *Teaching Through Culture*, defines culturally relevant literature as literature in which students "can see themselves ... represented accurately and respectfully." Louis Moll, a Professor of Language, Reading, and Culture at the University of Arizona, contends that "existing classroom practices underestimate and constrain what Latino and other children are able to display intellectually." He believes the secret to literacy instruction is for schools to investigate and tap into "hidden" home and community resources of their students.

In the case of the students here, ninety-five percent of whom are Mexican-American, this would mean connecting with the experience of students who are the children of recent immigrants to the United States. It would be interesting to discover in what ways texts in a sophomore core literature class mirrored their experiences or "tapped" into hidden home and community resources. Would a culturally relevant syllabus with readings exclusively on Mexican-American experience and the U.S. – Mexico border stimulate in the students a greater interest in reading and literary texts?

The texts I selected for the course included two collections of short stories, *Crazy Loco* by David Rice and *Brownsville* by Oscar Casares, the novel *Loving Pedro Infante* by Denise Chavez, *Coyotes*, a nonfiction account of illegal immigration, *Borders*, a collection of poems by Pat Mora and *With A Pistol in His Hand* by Americo Paredes. When I talked to the students about cultural identity, immigration, and language, the key issues raised by the texts on our reading list, I discovered that these core issues were of great interest to them.

In the past I had usually approached this course in one of two ways, either in a traditional historical context or in a contemporary multicultural one. Although the faculty has a great deal of freedom in how the course is designed, we do require the course to introduce students to at least three different literary genres. I had taught novels like *The Great Gatsby* and *My Antonia*, poetry by Robert Frost, and plays by Arthur Miller in a historical and canonical approach to American literature.

The multicultural approach led me to teach texts by Toni Morrison, Sherman Alexie, Maxine Hong Kingston, Rudolfo Anaya and other writers who reflected diverse ethnic groups in the United States. However, I wanted to try a third approach, a “culturally relevant” approach. Because of the close proximity of our University to the border and because I wanted to make the experience of the class as meaningful as possible for both the students and myself, I decided to teach texts only about the Mexican-American experience.

I asked my students to write about their parents’ educational and work backgrounds. I learned that many of the students’ parents were Spanish speakers who were born in Mexico and came to this country with their families to seek a better future. One student wrote: “My Dad was born in Mexico and never went a single day to school and at the age of 14 came to America and tried to learn English on his own to find whatever work he could find.” Another noted: “My parents struggled throughout their lives. Both of my parents were born in Mexico. The only jobs that my parents ever did was work in the fields. I have seven brothers and one sister. My family is a migrant family that would go up north and work in the fields.”

Both of these quotations speak to topics addressed in several of the books on the reading list, but most especially in *Coyotes*, one of the students’ favorites. Ted Conover, the author who accompanied several groups of illegal immigrants on their border crossings and on their journeys within the United States, depicts the struggles of the men and women who enter the United States to find employment, often in the orchards picking fruit. He explains that this struggle to survive economically is called by the immigrants’ “la lucha” (the fight). In our discussion of this term, many students referenced their own parents’ struggles to raise their families and survive economically.

Coyotes seemed to fascinate the students for several reasons. Although the majority of them were U.S. citizens, they were excited to learn “what illegal immigrants go through to reach the United States.” One student wrote: “It was a real good

documentation about the people who cross the border. It changed the way I look at Mexican immigrants and appreciate more their struggle to find work.” Others responded to the dramatic portrayal of racism, not only between Mexican-Americans and African-Americans in major U.S. cities, but also between Mexican-Americans and other Latino groups, especially Haitians and Cubans in Florida. Another student remarked: “I can’t believe how much is going on in our area. It really opened my eyes. Since my grandparents were immigrants, *Coyotes* really opened up my eyes to the hardships immigrants face.”

The most pleasant and striking discovery that I made, however, concerned the students’ comments about their enjoying not only the content of the texts but the process of reading itself. Many of the students confessed on the questionnaire that I gave them at the end of the class that they had not done very much reading prior to this class. One student revealed: “I hadn’t read a book in a little over two years, maybe three. It felt good.” Another noted: “I am not much of a reader, but now I read and I have started to like it.” Of course, these comments were a bit of a surprise for me, accustomed as I am to teaching English majors who simply *love* to read. It was wonderful to see these non-English majors discover the joys of reading. One of them noted: “I finally learned how to just sit and read for fun. I found the books interesting and fun, maybe because I could relate a little bit more.”

The biggest benefit then to taking the culturally-relevant approach accrued through increasing the students’ level of interest in reading. If reading is under attack, as so many recent studies indicate, then the students’ comments provide good evidence for connecting the readings in the classroom to students’ experiences. “Reading is very useful. It gave me some time alone.” “I am not much of a reader, but now I read and I have started to like it.” “I just learned that reading books isn’t that bad. I really don’t like reading unless it is about sports or something else that interests me, but I got the opportunity to read something different and enjoyed it.”

In one of the short story collections that we read, *Crazy Loco* by David Rice, a female character is deterred from fulfilling her dreams. Milagros, a bright young high school student who scored 1260 on the SAT and is recruited by many colleges and universities outside of Texas, is deterred by her parents from leaving the Rio Grande Valley in the story entitled “She Flies.” Her father tells her, “So if you’re going to leave the Valley, don’t be surprised to come home and find all your tias in a nursing home.” When one of her aunts discovers this, she tells Milagros not to worry. “Estoy vieja.” She laughed. “Mira, I can take care of myself. I always have. They don’t want you to go away because *they* never went anywhere.”

This exchange between father and daughter and between daughter and aunt is the kind of dialogue that taps into the hidden home and community experiences of our students. It manifests code-switching prevalent along the border and reflects the pressure our students face from family members who prefer that their students stay at home and not to progress. Milagros’ Aunt, who at the end of the story symbolically frees her

beloved parakeet named Pajaro, teaches her niece that “love does not cage. Love sets free.”

Like Milagros’ Aunt Mana, we must learn to set our students free and to inspire them to fly higher. In order to accomplish this, we need to find ways to engage them with reading and writing at a young age and to follow through at all levels of their education. Teaching culturally relevant texts then is a way to hook them on reading. As one student noted: “I learned how to look at literature from a different perspective ... how literature is not only Shakespeare’s Hamlet but also David Rice’s *Crazy Loco*.”

