Learning About Our Learners by Reading About Their Lives

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Kathy Lobo

Do Now:
• Read the quote (Quote A or Quote B)
• With a partner, discuss what you know from reading the quote.
• Jot down what you know.
• Jot down what you want to know—your questions

Our Plan for Today
• Pass out handout so you can follow along and make notes that are relevant to your context-teaching situation
  MY BELIEF:
• Learning about the languages, cultures, experiences, lives of others is a multi-step process, and multi-facetted.
• Learning is a life-long endeavor and a process that is never ending.
What we want to know:

Cultural Identity (history & politics)
L1 influences (and what happens over time)
Circumstances of “Home” (here and there)
Previous schooling-attitudes towards education
(teacher/Teacher)
“Parentifying” of the children
Family structure and values (gender & roles)
Religion/food/. . .

Don’t forget: No one student is like the others. . .

My belief is. . .

• Understanding the cultures and psyche of English Language Learners can help us (educators) to better reinforce and affirm the increasingly varied cultural identities found in classrooms (across the world).

And. . .

• In the absence of real-life experience, novels and non-fiction can offer a window into the lives of English Language Learners.
Who are our students?

- ELL from overseas (short-term and long-term
- US born ELLs
- 1.5 Generation
- Adoptees
- SIFE / SLIFE
- Refugees
- Undocumented
- And others

Multiple sources of information make what we learn deeper and multifaceted. Sources include:

- Online searches—the media—have limits
- Local heritage community sites (places of worship, grocery stores...)
- Books and short stories, memoirs, autobiographies, our students’ writing, conversations, oral histories...

Any view is limited. We need to consider: (Connecting this to the Do Now)

- Who is the author’s intended audience?
  - (Native speakers of English, adults, people interested in Japanese American experiences and WWII...)
- Who is the author—what might be their biases, and what is the source of their information?
  - (The author was born and raised in California, probably of Japanese descent given her name, Julie Otsuka, and she could even be one of the characters’ great-granddaughters. She has heard stories and read historical accounts from multiple sources)
- Reading alone or in a group?
  - (I read it because of a book group, but also because I have an interest in the varied experiences of Japanese people as they create lives in the US...)}
Before you read, a possible scenario:

• Consider what you have and what you need:
  • Culture and language
  • Historical context
  • Stories for adults vs. for children
  • Supplementary materials . .

During and after reading:

How “typical” is this story, character?
“Typical” of “what”?
What was and was not said/shown?
What needs to be added/taken away?
Implications on our classroom practice and interactions with others.

Watch out! Stereotypes!

• Cultural referents (not stereotypes)
A Step From Heaven

- Themes: Immigration
- Death of a grand parent
- "Parentification" of the child
- Seeking employment as an non-English speaker
- Learning to drive
- Religion in a new land
- Adolescence
- Challenges: Alcoholism & Domestic Abuse
- Surviving
- Leaving home to attend college

By An Na, 2001 New York, Penguin

At the start of the story we meet a four-year old girl named Ju Park in Korea. Soon she and her family leave Korea for America, she starts school and the family faces many challenges. The father is abusive to the mother, a younger brother is born, both the mother and father go to work, the mother gains her independence from the father and learns how to drive. Eventually father is arrested for drunk driving. The mother decides to leave the father when she learns of the father’s girlfriend... Book ends when Ju Park is going to college and she and her mother take a walk along the beach.

Breath, Eyes, Memory

- Themes: Reunification with parents who children hardly remember & the impact on later life
- Being of African descent but not African American, and learning the difference in cultures
- Issues of race as they are lived in the home country and then in the US
- Religion
- Family relationships, especially those of intergenerational women
By Edwidge Danticat, 1994
New York, Vintage

• A 12 year old Haitian girl, Sophie, is sent from her village in Haiti, where she was raised by her aunt & is reunited with her mother. She soon finds out from her mother that she was born of a rape. The story fast forwards to Sophie’s life at age 18. Her life with her mother is one of shame that was provoked by her mother’s desire to keep her not only chaste, but locked into Haitian cultural mores. She returns to Haiti after having a daughter herself, to try to make sense of her upbringing and reclaim her roots.

Digging to America

• Adoption and experience of second generation citizens and first generation grand parents. . .mixed marriages and growing up with a family that does not look like you. . .

Culture vs. Experiences vs. Feelings

• Visible Culture
  • (food, clothes, writing, accent, religion, architecture, dance, arts)

• Just under the surface culture
  • (Feelings and attitudes about things- roles, how to show various emotions, ideas about time, expectations, norms)

• Universal culture
  • (shared human experience like the ability to smile, love, feel sad, have dreams be happy . . . the way one feels about or how beliefs about these things may be evident by people’s behavior (Just under the surface culture), and how these things may be shown (visible culture) may vary greatly!)
Facilitating the potentially hard conversations

• Lessons on culture are key
• Learning about one’s own assumptions and own culture and one’s own cultural orientation /view of the world
• Taking care to present and represent the cultures of others, that one may not be familiar with is a delicate task- get help, and help others

• I want to learn more about “XYZ”
• Librarian- what is a good book?
• Look on line...Ask everyone
• Go to restaurants, shops, museums, and places connected to that culture
• Choose several books-to have a really good look at- intended for varied audiences-films
• Look for themes, look for authentic views and authentic voices
• Be creative in your quest...

Identify cultural brokers in your community:

Teachers with experiences and connections to other cultures
Parents and former students with experiences to share
Friends of friends, visitors, people you meet
Read/Think, Discuss/Pair, 
Improve your teaching practice/Share!

- Discuss, process, ask more questions, challenge oneself and others to deepen thinking and to deepen understanding
- Continue to identify questions and seek answers.
- Consider how this knowledge can help to make you a better teacher.

The danger of a single story - TED.com
(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)

Our turn to share:

- Questions...
- Concerns...
- Answers...

katherinelobo@hotmail.com