

Teaching American Culture and Literature to an Increasingly Diverse Student Body

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ABSTRACT

Teaching American culture and literature to an increasingly diverse student body at the college level accentuates the importance of adjusting course materials and methodology. The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in three ideas that are critical to the author's teaching philosophy: activating engagement through experience and discovery, allowing voices to flourish through rich analysis, and challenging paradigms through interdisciplinary methods. This article describes a college course that enabled students to engage with American literature from a multi-perspective approach and to interrogate the relationship between power and storytelling. Discussion demonstrates how students describe their heritage and tell their "American stories" through self-reflection, while also making comparisons to course readings. The findings from this field-based research encourage participatory and experimental research on the college level in literature courses.

When I started teaching the "American Culture and Literature during the 18th and 19th Centuries" course at my college, I was given a syllabus that stated: "American Culture and Literature during the 18th and 19th centuries is a study of New England literature during the years when American literature developed from an amateur pastime to its peak of distinction leading to the so-called New England Renaissance." This brief description can appear intimidating to any student, particularly the non-traditional student who is returning to college and taking a required literature course. In order to integrate the history and tales of American fiction, meet the objectives of the course, and also heighten the students' learning experiences, I made a conscious effort to develop assignments that connected the students' identities with coursework. Students were encouraged to question those who tell the story and how the story is told. Through self-

reflections, students were given the opportunity to explore their ethnic backgrounds and heritages. Essentially, this course encouraged students to tell their "American stories" while making comparisons to course readings through multimodal projects.

Taking this pedagogical stance required a shift in the course materials and requirements, and offered the opportunity to challenge traditional discourses within American history. This alteration in course materials and pedagogical approach is essential for assisting diverse students to become better acquainted with the discipline-specific language of literary study. Challenging the traditional literary canon is an important act toward promoting social justice and cultural sensitivity in the classroom, especially when learning about American literature in its connections with American history. The effects of my instructional approach allowed the students to claim the confidence to share their personal narrative accounts as these related to their unique American

experiences. This change in instructional strategy can be applied to other college-level courses that focus on reading and writing, as well.

In this article, I will first discuss how I came to understand the need to modify course materials to better engage an increasingly diverse population of students. Next, I will present theoretical frameworks that further informed my pedagogy during the semester. The article concludes by demonstrating how a creative multimodal academic project enabled students to make connections between their identities and the course material.

Changing Classroom Contexts for American Literature

In my early stages of teaching on the college level, I initially taught “American Culture and Literature during the 18th and 19th Centuries” to literature majors. At that time, the students typically held full-time jobs and were returning to college in the evening to receive an undergraduate degree. I was in the midst of working on my second master’s degree and had studied literature for six years on the collegiate level. The English courses that I took as a student were traditionally structured in this way: an assigned reading for homework, a lecture based upon the reading, and a classroom discussion to follow. Scholarly criticism and secondary sources written by professors were also included, and the assignments typically required in these courses were lengthy essays with heavy text analysis. These requirements were challenging for literature majors because of the dense course material.

As I continued to teach other literature courses in the college, however, it became apparent that there was a shift in those students who were majoring in literature and those who were taking these courses to fulfill a liberal arts requirement. During the semester that I decided to change my pedagogy, only one student in the class majored in literature while several others were nursing and business majors. Several of the students had not been exposed to literature on the college level and

some were in their first semester after returning to the college environment. During the beginning of the semester, students stated they were only taking the class as a requirement and probably would not have taken the class if it was not a requirement because it did not have anything to do with their major.

The particular class described in this article included fifteen female students, fourteen of whom were non-literature majors. Two-thirds of the class were self-identified immigrant students and were taking the class as a requirement; for some, this class was their first time taking a college-level reading course. Most students commented on the large amount of time it took to read the first few reading assignments and how little they understood about what they were reading. They reported being interested in the history of the literature and the philosophy of the time period, but were not feeling competent in how they were completing the work. Revising the reading schedule was necessary because assigning a weekly novel would not be a practical goal for these students.

After the second class meeting and learning of my students’ concerns, I referred to the initial course description that was given to me by a colleague in the department three years prior and continued to reflect upon my dissertation research that I was conducting with four Southern Italian immigrant women. The description read:

This course, American Culture & Literature (18th and 19th centuries), is a study of New England literature during the years when it developed from an amateur pastime to its peak of distinction, the so-called New England Renaissance. The course will begin by exploring the historical events that impacted writing during the American Revolution, and assessing the burgeoning of American fiction. This course will analyze the foundations, the unfolding, and the literary results of the country’s great change during the 19th century, giving special attention to major transcendental writers—Emerson and Thoreau and those

who depicted the Civil War era like Whitman, Stowe, and Dickinson—particularly surveying them in relation to a host of other figures and to the conventions, values, and institutions that shaped their work in common. In the process, the student will be able to contribute by understanding authors and genres discussed, the ideology of provincialism, in general, and the New England strain; and in particular, the phenomenon of literary emergence, and the ongoing attempt to chart a course of American literary history.

This was a loaded description. Previous texts included in this course were Alcott's *Little Women*, Hawthorne's *Blythdale Romance*, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Thoreau's "Walden" and "Civil Disobedience." Other shorter full-length works included writings by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Margaret Fuller. The course materials and assignments needed to be adjusted for this class. Guided questioning with heavy academic jargon might be unfamiliar to those who may not have been raised within a K-12 American school system, which focused on American history and patriotism as part of the prescribed curriculum. Furthermore, because of the students' diverse and, in some cases, immigrant backgrounds, their prior knowledge and perspectives might also be viewed as "non-traditional" with regard to the accepted interpretations of the course's canonical Western texts.

Upon reflection, it also became clear that my doctoral research was importantly influencing my thinking about how I could reshape my pedagogical practices in this course. My research was a three and a half year longitudinal study focused on the social and cultural identities of four Italian immigrant women, who came to the United States after World War II. In tracing these women's individual narratives, I began to think about their immigrant experiences as they became citizens in the United States. In my dissertation, I argued that during times of crises, these women's silenced voices are of importance.

Similar to the four immigrant women in my study, the adult students enrolled in the "American Culture and Literature during the 18th and 19th Centuries" course already held significant experiential knowledge, as well. The outcome from my dissertation valued the literacy practices of the four women who did not have the opportunity to pursue formal education and celebrated their oral stories. By considering the research model and connecting the findings in the study to this course, it became apparent that building on the literacy practices that the students already had and bridging their experiences and backgrounds with the literary periods we were examining would encourage the sharing of their stories as significant narratives in American history.

Conceptual Frameworks and Background

The development of this new course outline in "American Culture and Literature during the 18th and 19th Centuries" was also influenced by my teaching philosophy, which emerges from my commitment to supporting students and enabling their voices to develop through critical thinking and research so that their perspectives can be fostered and valued. My philosophy is heavily impacted by my years of teaching, my own education, and my scholarship. Three ideas that are critical to my teaching philosophy are: (1) activating student engagement through experience and discovery, (2) allowing student voices to flourish through rich analysis, and (3) challenging paradigms through interdisciplinary methods.

Activating Engagement through Experience and Discovery

Paolo Freire's (1970/1997) work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, advanced "problem-posing education" and suggested that this "humanist and liberating praxis" should serve as the basis for the relationship between students and teachers (p. 79). From this vantage point, Freire argued that "reading the word" cannot be separated from a student's outside experiences, or his/her ways of "reading the world" (p. 35). Throughout the semester, students often related the literature they were reading to their own

lives. They felt that the language and events in the literature spoke to them personally. Words have meaning when applied to people's experiences.

Like Freire (1970/1997), Maxine Greene (1995) and Louise Rosenblatt (1978) also theorized the importance of increasing student engagement while reading, which helped me reconsider my pedagogy in relation to how my students were comprehending and responding to texts. Putting Greene's and Rosenblatt's theories on aesthetic reading into practice, I noticed the strong presence of Western philosophy in the literature assigned for this class. The decision to study narratives that are not traditionally considered part of the American literary canon both valued the diverse background knowledge these students were bringing to their reading and also encouraged them to take a more active stance as college-level readers. In this way, the study of American literature can become more of a cross-cultural exchange.

Allowing Voices to Flourish through Rich Textual Analysis and Writing

Helen Cixous' (1994) work supports the pedagogical tenets of Freire (1970/1997), Greene (1995), and Rosenblatt (1978), and offers a new way to think about transformative pedagogy in relation to identity formation. While Cixous' theories may not be typically included in a traditional American literature course, her focus on the absence of women's stories throughout Western history and her claim that "writing is the fastest and most efficient vehicle for thought" (p. 3) helped me understand that writing is a means for establishing a person's identity and his/her place in the world (see also McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Williams, 2003). I considered the stories shared by my students at the end of the semester as part of an "American history," even though their words are neither published nor widely read.

Challenging Paradigms through Interdisciplinary Methods

Interdisciplinary frameworks that cross over and between the humanities, social sciences,

sciences, and multimedia create environments that are culturally sensitive and invite critical questioning of longstanding paradigms. When participants in a community view their histories and cultures as important, the setting welcomes a personal exchange in discourse. This was evident with my doctoral research on the four immigrant women's lives and how their narratives took shape to forge a unique literary form. As stories are recorded and histories are learned in a pedagogical arena, the students in this course struggled to recognize their personal history as a viable part of the American experience and culture. Most of the students were immigrants or first generation citizens. Their stories and families' stories about immigrant experiences and culture existed in cracks and in generalities.

Linda Christensen (2011) stated, "History is taken away from some and given to others." In this way, stories are lost, and a question is: "Are these stories considered a part of American history?" The history of ordinary people is often not included in curriculum. More specifically, in schools, the histories of women's immigrant stories are noticeably absent, severing the ties between the old and young. Their local knowledge is exiled, negating any possibility for future generations to learn from their relationships of the natural world and from their life-sustaining experiences in difficult circumstances (see Taylor, 2012). During the semester, it was evident that by offering students the opportunity to trace their narratives and identities and learn from their individual and collective stories, they were able to consider a new way to think about American history. Through storytelling, writing the narrative becomes a vehicle for change.

The Importance of Shifting Course Materials

In reshaping my pedagogical stance to better serve my students, I realized that the reading selections had to coincide with the theme for the class and also be an attainable goal for the students. While we did honor those writers who were conventionally a part of the American literary tradition, like Washington Irving, James

Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Louise May Alcott, we also questioned why these writers were included when other writers were not. In choosing additional course readings, I was mindful of including texts written by those who did not represent the dominant culture, like women and other minority groups, but also did not exclude the more traditional accounts. Through poetry, short stories, and excerpts from the aforementioned novels, students were exposed to an array of perspectives and genres. Alternate lenses and viewpoints were advantageous for the students to study and to understand the importance in reclaiming stories previously not told.

In addition to the assigned literary readings, the class was also asked to evaluate the way in which American history is traditionally taught and to consider the power structures that existed at the time of these texts' production. In this way, the course began to chart a new course of studies in American literature. New literary pieces consisted of "An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Male" by William Apess (1798-1839), Jane Johnston Schoolcraft's (1800-1842) poem "Moowis, the Indian Coquette," and Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney's (1791-1865) poems "Indian Names" and "Our Aborigines." Students unpacked the poetry, analyzed its historical significance, evaluated the writers' purposes, and brought their own immigration experiences to the texts as well. The course inevitably was entrenched in discussions of the history and culture of the time, but included more writers who were considered outliers from the more typical or canonical American literature course.

The students were beginning to think about what storytelling is and whose story is told—along with who holds the power in telling the story. We further looked at and applied the concepts of cultural memory and collective identity which offered further elaboration on the concept of American identity as individualistic. The course also made explicit connections between the "memory of culture" (Assmann, 2011) and the oral tradition, and linked patterns

and traditions as a conversational part of the narrative. In thinking about American culture and the concept of nationalism, the topic of a collective identity was a central theme emerging from the class discussions.

American history is integral to teaching the literature of the period. Topics that emerged from the newly applied readings illustrated acts of war and acquisition of land. These themes spurred questions and conversations around past and current territorial interests and citizenship status. We analyzed the Native American influence on this country by starting with geography and its link to language. We also looked at the labels of states and their origins so that students could become more aware of the origins of this country through a Native American lens. The major time frames in this course also showed the impact of the French and Indian War and how the developing states received their names. These historical markers reinforced the students' understandings of land ownership and enforced the ideas of acquisition, imperialization, and immigration. These topics were relevant to the students. The students found these actions unjust. We spoke about the essence of "patriotism" and what this term means to the many immigrants who come to this country.

Other materials that were introduced during the course were texts that may be more typical in a women's history course than in a traditional American literature course. For example, to better understand the unification of the U.S. and its complexity during the American Revolution, students read Abigail Adams' letters, which portray a private and public display of affinity. For the class, it was valuable to view the intimate conversations Adams had with her husband. While Abigail Adams did not have a public voice, the letters demonstrated that she was influential to her husband's decisions at this critical time in American history. I also introduced the text, *Battle Scars*, by Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, and examined a chapter called "Embattled Manhood and New England Writers" (1860-1870) with the class. This chapter discussed temperaments of Emerson and his

reinforcement of gender roles, and also served as a secondary source that celebrated the contributions of Margaret Fuller and Harriet Beecher Stowe to the New England area during the Civil War. These additional, multi-dimensional secondary sources complement the history and the presumed position of women in society, and also allowed for an interdisciplinary approach in the course.

Class interaction allowed for risks to be taken. Readings and journal writings were a part of the weekly rituals. Discussions were more dynamic. Secondary sources informed students' understandings of the course content and were also relative to 21st century issues. For example, while discussing the history of the time period and significance of the Civil War, we read articles that offered comparisons between the economic crisis in 2009 and referred back to Abraham Lincoln and his economic influence as a Republican president. The analysis of these contemporary issues placed greater emphasis on the historical context.

Creative Project: Developing Personal Narratives and Becoming a Part of a Local History

In revising this course, it was important to create realistic assignments for students who may not have a significant background in 18th and 19th century American literature. The "Creative Academic Project" assignment for this class was distinct and aimed at helping students develop personal narratives and reflective writing skills (See Appendix A). For Part I of the assignment, students were invited to develop a narrative using the following topics to guide their writing: a description of their ethnic heritage and a discussion of the country from which they or their families had emigrated and their immigration process to the United States. When choosing the theme for their stories, students were encouraged to relate their self-reflections with a character or story read during the semester. Part II of the assignment required the students to choose a poem written by Emily Dickinson and to bridge a literary element from the poem to an idea in Part I. Students were also

asked to include in their oral presentation a visual that coincided with their reflections. The visual could utilize any modality the student chose (e.g., poster, PowerPoint, iMovie, internet, performance).

This assignment gave students liberty in choosing literary texts that resonated with their identities. Each part asked students to choose a piece of literature, develop a reader response to the chosen text, and then critically connect their own narrative story with a piece of literature from the course. In this way, the students were making text-to-text analyses, as well as contributing to and questioning the dominant narrative form.

Students responded to this assignment in a variety of ways. [Author's note: Student quotations are presented verbatim.]. For example, one student shared vividly her connections to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She wrote and explained in her presentation that, "This book brought back memories of the history lessons I learn in Jamaica. Our histories are similar. But most of all I could see the early emergence of the women's right movement and the anti-slavery movements." This student compared her own schooling with the history that she was learning. She made direct acknowledgements about progress for minority groups.

A poster display was created by another student who also identified specifically with the theme of morality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In her display, the student used red oak tag and labeled the top of the poster with the word "morality." Cut-outs of square and rectangular portraits of men were arranged in a circular shape below the title. The men were members of her family. The pictures included men of service and pictures that were personally chosen to enhance the meaning of her project. The only image that included other colors besides black and white was the book cover of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Orally, she described her home environment. The student's oral presentation demonstrated that she had a clear understanding of the literary theme, and she explained how the essence of "morality" was a trait valued in her family. She focused on the idea of the individual and the community in which she lived.

Another biographical portrayal was created by a student who could trace her family back thirteen generations, as far back as the 1700s. For this project, she even visited her family in Oneonta, NY. She showed pictures of the men who fought in the Civil War. Her roots reflected two sides. As part of the project-based assignment, she connected to Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* because she felt she “doesn’t know much about her background. This is like Pearl because she is unaware of her father.” In her writing and oral presentation, she related her interpretation. She connected her father’s side to two pieces of literature we read during the semester, *Sleepy Hollow* and *Last of the Mohicans*. Her heritage, she explained, was like the characters in *Sleepy Hollow* because they were Dutch settlers, farmers, and blacksmiths. *Last of the Mohicans* presented a binary with interracial couples. Since she is of mixed ancestry she stated, “*The Last of the Mohicans* tells us how Indian culture was destroyed; so my ancestors were practicing and destroying the culture.”

Other students shared comparative descriptions between their native physical environments and the characters’ interactions with their new environments in the course literature. For example, a student from Haiti wrote, “Lately for over 25 years now it has been, upheavals, agitation and destabilization. All kind of crimes, corruption, fraud. We have known ‘Zengledou,’ when robbers knock on your door and ask you to open for them, or most recently ‘kidnapping’ when they take you away in exchange of money.” She came to the U.S. in 2005. She continued, “But one thing happened that I did not plan, I got use to the stability and the security of a system where I can plan the day after without any ‘if,’ I got use to driving on the street and not being hunting by who is behind me or next to me or going home and not worried of who is close to the gate that I don’t know. For the first time I was appreciating another side of your culture and it was a relief. And got use to it.” She introduced the course material in this way: “But somehow in the process I felt like Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*. Because whether I like it or not it was a whole new world. With a different culture, customs, a new language,

another way of living, for a moment you feel isolated, alone. You start over again, everything you knew who you are, where you are from, you adjust or review almost every line in your life.”

“I am Jamaican.” This was how another student began her presentation. She spoke of her roots. Her mother’s grandmother was Irish, and her mother’s father was of African ancestry. The student’s grandfather was born in India and came to Jamaica “to take up a business opportunity.” “Deeply entrenched in the cast system my dad was expected to marry an Indian woman,” she wrote, “my parents had a romantic connection and married. Her father was promptly disinherited.”

A nursing student, whose mother grew up in Colombia, South America, explained that her mother was engaged to be married, but as the wedding date approached, the prospective husband left the country. She read that he was betrothed to be married to someone else. Her mother saved money and immigrated to Australia. However, she was denied entrance because she only spoke Spanish. Her mother requested a visa to U.S. This student revealed that the hardest part of this assignment was reciting the poem aloud to the class. Her visual presentation was drawn to reflect Emily Dickinson’s poem “It bloomed and dropt.” On three separate pieces of white oak tag she used calligraphy to write out the poem. On each poster, along with the words of the poem, was hand-drawn imagery from the poem (e.g., birds, flowers, and branches). As her instructor, I was unaware of her artistic talent and was delighted that she shared this part of her identity with the class.

This project-based creative assignment was, in and of itself, a rich contribution to the class’s engagement with American history. Each student included how she saw a part of herself in the course material, and this was integral to the students’ retellings. Student responses, collected from their reflections written at the end of the semester, included the following comments:

“To make you aware that we are all immigrants. If you look back far enough we all have something in common with each other.”

“This is our America, this how this great country started. We are all immigrants.”

“I believe the creative project was great because it gave you the opportunity to think about your heritage and learn your history from 18th and 19th centuries.”

“A way of going back to our own background, be able to make retrospective about what we have done and maybe what we have left to do. And adapt it to what we have learned.”

“In looking at our own background, as well as those our classmates, we see how very much alike we all are- how our experiences as immigrants are repeated in each new influx of people coming to the US.”

“I really enjoyed the creative project I think it makes you look about yourself and helps you use your imagination. It helped me read a poem out loud.”

“I think the whole purpose of the creative project was for us to analyze ourselves.”

“The purpose of the project was to discover our past because like in my case we are learning about history through literature.”

In its previous iterations, this “American Culture and Literature during the 18th and 19th Centuries” course focused primarily on violence and white male citizenship. Social injustices and the experiences of other ethnicities or minority groups were not explicitly explored or analyzed. These students, however, learned about other threads running through the time period, including Native American writings, female literary agents, and analyses from 21st century female immigrants.

Conclusion

Scholars in interdisciplinary studies have called into question the literary canon of the Western world as to why, in general, immigrant and women’s stories and the voices of ordinary people have been absent from the rich tradition of rhetoric or mainstream culture (Irigaray, 1992). By including gender, class, and ethnicity as critical lenses in this course, students were able to challenge the Western literary canon productively. The approach was not based on a dominant hierarchal model, but rather on a transformative and interdisciplinary approach that from a collective inquiry stance might more productively engage with immigrant student populations.

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1998) have argued that modifying frameworks in pedagogy was essential to reveal the fuller capabilities of students. The students’ work in this class reflected how they thought about and understood themselves, and how they empathized with the characters and writers of the time period under study. Such understandings thus became new knowledge that was generated and disseminated across the classroom. The use of multiple disciplinary approaches assisted in deconstructing the assigned texts during the semester, and fostered the students’ sense of autonomy and ownership of the material and their work. Campano (2009) asserted that “cross-cultural research on literacy in different communities argues for investigating the literacy development of adult learners by exploring the particular practices that adults themselves see as meaningful under different circumstances, and that reflect their own purposes and aspirations” (p. 382).

Combining analyses of static texts with dynamic representations and self-reflections, the students in this class created a place for themselves and a space for their history to be expressed. JCLL

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APPENDIX A

Assignment: “Creative Academic Project”

Below is the description for the final creative project. Please include the following in your creative project and presentation.

I. Self-Reflection: Describe your ethnic background and heritage. From which country did you and/or your family emigrate? Tell your story. What has been your immigration experience in the United States? (The reflection should be written in a narrative format.)

a.) Relate this experience to a character or story that was read this semester. Explain.

II. Text analysis and reflection: Emily Dickinson wrote a series of poems. Relate one of her poems to a piece of work this semester.

a.) Choose an Emily Dickinson poem from the anthology. (Please select a poem that has not been assigned.)

b.) Relate the poem to a reading this semester; it can be a short story, another poem or a novel.

i. Read and analyze the poem-- express the meaning.

ii. Explain why you choose the poem?

iii. Which other reading are you relating to the poem? What connections are you making?

Consider analyzing any of the following works from the semester: excerpts from the novels-- *Scarlett Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper, *Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Little Women* by Louise May Alcott, “Black Cat” & “The Masque of the Red Death” by Edgar Allen Poe; or works by Thoreau, Emerson, Fuller, Whitman, Schoolcraft, Sigourney, Apess

*This part should continue to build off the first reflection.

III. During the presentation, the student will present parts I and II.

a.) Be sure the presentation has a visual (powerpoint, hand-out, poster, iMovie, performance). Be sure to explain the significance of the visual.

*Parts I & II should adhere to MLA format.