

Diversity, Identity, and the American Dream

Deborah Dabbs
Lamar High School

“...The sidewalks of America are where the cultures of the world cross.”
(Mitsui, Roseboro, Sasse 1)

INTRODUCTION

Some consider the American Dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, promised by the Declaration of Independence, more fact than fiction. This debate is a key issue that I want my students to consider as they read and analyze the literature written by Americans who represent the ethnic and cultural groups that make up our great nation. To get started, I will speak to them of an America that is a collage of cultures melded together at the edges and in the hearts of its peoples to form a rare and beautiful nation comprised of many diverse people. I will speak to them of an America that is not a melting pot but a nation of blended cultures, a country of many languages, beliefs, practices, skin colors, and histories all begging to be given a voice. I will speak to them of an America emblazoned in our literature, which is a living, breathing entity telling of who we are, when we are, where we are, what we are, and why we are. I will speak to them of an America where who we are provides the pathways we must take to begin to understand that there is an avenue open to each and every one of us, leading to the realization of our own particular American Dream. And, I will speak to them of how the highlights of the history of their peoples and their cultures can aid them in finding their way to a success that embodies life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – the American Dream.

OBJECTIVES

The Houston I.S.D. CLEAR Objectives used in this unit are from the Language Arts/ Reading Strands 2-3 of the Vertical Alignment Matrix. The students will increase knowledge of their cultures, the cultures of others, and the common elements across cultures (ELA.9.9A-ELA.12.10C); the students will express and support their responses to various types of texts (ELA.9.10A-ELA.12.11D); and the students will analyze elements for their contributions to meaning in literary texts (ELA.9.11A-ELA.12.12D).

RATIONALE

I work in an inner-city school where roughly seven percent of the students are Asian or Native American and the rest are almost evenly divided between Anglo, Black, and Hispanic. Lamar High is located in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Houston, TX and though our students run the gamut from privileged and future ivy-leaguers to those in the lowest economic strata who may be the first generation in their family to graduate from high school, a good many of them are considered at-risk. They are the ones who seem to signify the precariousness of youth and its wild ride on the brink of failure and oblivion. They are the ones who can fall through the cracks if we, as teachers, don't take care to note the pitfalls, caulk them, and provide a safer passage for those placed in our care. They are the ones who need hope and encouragement just as much as they need data, facts, statistics, and the knowledge of the subject matter inherent in our disciplines to make their way in this world. They are the ones who need to see themselves, through others very

like them, in the literature they are required to study so that they can begin to know that they, too, can overcome, survive, prevail, and achieve the American Dream.

If these connections can be made, these so-called at-risk students will have a very high chance of being successful, both in the classroom and in the workplace. With these connections, they will have a link to “real life” in their studies that not only offers hope but also affords “proof” that the American Dream is not always heavily weighted on one side, that in America others are not always more equal than they, and that by using those tools that have been refined and honed in their cultures they, too, can be happy, free, and have options that open paths to the realization of their aspirations. They will simply have to look for the guide posts planted by previous travelers, which will point them towards a means to fulfilling their hearts’ desire, their keys to the American Dream.

These keys to the “proof” are to be found in the literature that the students will read, study, analyze, emulate, and evaluate. These keys will be used and the proof expressed in their writings on this literature as well as in the writings they will create mimicking the authors’ styles and the themes covered (like duality and the insider/outsider) that these authors have chosen to address in their works. Following these assignments, the students’ original writings will serve to proclaim their individual “voices” to the world. All genres, and all cultures and ethnicities representative of the students in the classes, will be the subject matter used to ensure the students meet the Language Arts Objectives of Houston I.S.D. and those Texas Essential Skills and Knowledge set forth by the Texas Education Agency in both Reading and Writing.

UNIT BACKGROUND

“In the last five hundred years millions of people have made the U.S. their home. ... For at least 10,000 years before this, the U.S. was inhabited by thousands of tribes of native people [whose] descendants ... live in the U.S. today” (Knight 3). Therefore, the U.S. population is comprised of many peoples and many cultures. All of these peoples have contributed to the making of America and all of these cultures are represented in some way that is perceived as “the American culture.” Yet, for the most part, the literatures of many of these people play a very small part in the educational process to which the majority of American students are exposed. This leads to a sense of unworthiness, a perception of being less than, among the children whose cultures are either not represented or only represented in miniscule measure.

This sense of separateness and inequality – this “outsiderness” – can be a hindrance. For this reason, I would like to use the literatures of many segments of our society to give a true picture of America and to allow these students to “see themselves” in the literature and to afford those children who are a part of mainstream America a glimpse of the “others” who have helped to make this nation one of the greatest in the world. To do this, we must address the issue of identity, specifically the American identity of the different ethnic factions of American society.

Identity

“Identity is an umbrella term used ... to describe an individual’s comprehension of him or herself as a discrete, separate entity ... social identity is defined as the way that individuals *label* themselves as members of [a] nation, social class, subculture, ethnicity, gender, etc. ... It is in this sense that sociologists and historians speak of the national identity of a particular country” (“Identity”).

The American Identity

Marc Pachter in “The American Identity” says that there is an “enduring social contract that underlies the United States of America and that defines the national community and culture.” According to Pachter, “It is ... the very condition of striving, of becoming, the experience of

unfettered living, that excites the national imagination [and that] particularly revealing are certain words such as freedom, individualism, mobility, and pragmatism that ‘speak’ to the American spirit.”

More logically, however, according to Matt Spooner, “The American Identity is a question of values.” Spooner says that “we ... define ourselves ... by our belief in a common value system, the basic tenets of which were spelled out in the Declaration of Independence and which are reiterated in countless movies and television mini-series.” Spooner goes on to say that “attempts to define Americanism by a specific set of cultural values undermine the far more valuable lessons [found in an] America ... a nation ... grown great through its encouragement of disparate viewpoints [with] ... values ... comprised of all of our values mixed together.” This being said, then, we must define who “all” is and what “our disparate viewpoints” are.

The Hyphenated American Identity

That America is a nation of immigrants cannot be disputed. “It has proven flexible enough to allow a large number of incredibly diverse people and cultures to integrate themselves into the American pageant” (Spooner). “Except for the stubborn and heretical barriers of race ... Americans assume ... that their origins may enrich their lives but do not shape their destinies ... [placing] on the individual the burden of responsibility for his or her own fate” (Pachter). Yet, it is that barrier of race which makes achieving the American Dream seem so difficult to those Americans outside the white mainstream. It is that barrier that adds dimensions and debate as we define the American Identity and attempt to make the eclectic nature of American society a value in itself. To do that, we must take a look at representative factions of American society and how they define themselves in terms of an American identity.

Black American Identity

“I wanted a rib sandwich / so I ... drove ... / to a little black restaurant- / ... walked in / and ... walked out / of America” (Haynes 5). The poem from which this excerpt is taken, “Rib Sandwich” by William J. Harris, aptly expresses many African-Americans’ sense of identity – outsiders looking in who, though reluctantly allowed to come inside to work, pay, and provide distraction, must go back out when the time comes to relax and “be at home, comfortable in their own skins and environs” (Haynes 5).

One of the ways the Black American has learned to deal with this “outsider” identity is through the use of Trickster tales based on the animal tales from the West Indies and Africa. These tales depict a weaker animal triumphing over a stronger one through guile and, often, deception. However, though these tales seem to portray the Trickster negatively, it is obvious within them that to survive the “Trickster” must use any means necessary. To explain this reasoning, the students and I will look at some Trickster Tales which are American in origin. The first of these will be “Buh Rabby and Bruh Gator,” which epitomizes the “outsider” persona.

In this tale, Buh Rabby wants to join in the gator children’s ‘dance-in’ and comes in ready to “hop-to-dance.” He is told by Bruh Gator that he is not welcome because he is not a gator. To stress his point, Bruh Gator uses his fierce tail to knock Buh Rabby out of the house, hurting him both physically and within his spirit. Buh Rabby grins to mask his feelings, flatters Bruh Gator, and offers to fiddle while he rests. By the time he is through, he has gotten even. He has left a knot between Bruh Gator’s eyes and caused him to have a forever-singed tail. And the results of these interactions are? Since that time gators have tried to catch bunnies and make snacks of them whenever possible (Hamilton 15-23).

This appears to be a simple children’s tale but the implications are significant – “outsiders” tire of being left out of the good things in life and sometimes, when they have been hurt once too often, they devise a way to get back at those who have humiliated and harmed them. Often, they

are successful; the tit-for-tat, however, does not change the status quo, and enmity between the two has a way of growing and never going away.

Asian American Identity

Asian Americans, on the other hand, face the issue of duality. “While [they] have a very rich culture, often they suffer from problems of identity crises ... Should one maintain a sense of family history? Or is it better to try to blend in and assimilate with the rest of America? ... Asian-Americans seem to have a particular presence in this problem” (MacMichael).

In Dwight Okita’s poem, “Notes for a Poem on Being Asian-American,” this concept is mirrored. “As a child, I ... would separate the yolk from the egg white / as I now try to sort out what is Asian / in me from what is American” (Haynes 86). The problem posed by this duality – the uncertainty, the fragility – is clearly presented and brought to bear at the end of the stanza, which reads. “... eggs resemble countries only in that when you crack one open and look inside, you know even less than when you started” (Haynes 86).

This sense of duality threads throughout Graff’s *Where the River Runs*. In this non-fiction story, Sohka Prek, her sons, and her mother are featured. Escaping a civil war in Cambodia, they come to America and adjust to life in this new land – speaking a different language, observing new customs and traditions. Yet, they eat foods from and practice the religion of their homeland. In their homes, they speak the Khmer language.

This same duality is found in the lives of the family featured in Brown’s *Lee Ann: The Story of a Vietnamese-American Girl*. In this also non-fiction story, the two parts of the life of the main character – the American girl and the Vietnamese girl – are highlighted

Both of these books will be used to demonstrate how Asian Americans retain their culture, even as they become more “American” and learn to function as productive residents of the U.S.A. These real-life stories will be used to provide a glimpse into the lives of Asian Americans that, hopefully, will lead to understanding. They will also be used as fodder for the creation of “fun tales” or children’s stories, which highlight the best parts of both cultures – the American and the Asian. Comic strips and other visual representations will be created and existing examples of the same used to both show connections and demonstrate that the experiences of the families studied are not unusual but, rather, representative of a large part of the Asian experience here in America.

However, our students should be made aware that all is not fun and light in the Asian American world. A deeper look into the Asian American identity is given in Yen Espiritu’s *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. This book speaks to the fact that “Asian Americans are a complex and changing population,” which consists of a multicultural and multilingual people with different outlooks on life and “who hold divergent modes of interpretation” and tells of the building of pan-Asian ethnicity, which incorporates “the heterogeneities among [their] ranks” (xi). When “the breakdown of economic and residential barriers ... gave Asian Americans their first chance to, in unprecedented numbers, come into intimate, sustained contact with the larger society – and with one another” (Espiritu 25), they became more “American,” enjoyed more of the freedoms of America, interacted more with one another, and developed a stronger bond of ethnic cohesiveness. This resulted in duality becoming even more pronounced as the term Asian American came more and more to refer to many peoples, many cultures and heritages, and many literatures. This literary umbrella now covers a vast many, as Gamber *et al.* note in their *Studies in the Literary Imagination* in “Introduction: Cross Wire: Asian American Literary Criticism”:

Asian American imagination, unlike that in African American writing, has no single, unifying grand narrative to organize the vast materials on which Asian American writers call. It possesses no single linguistic Other, as in Latina/o writing, on which to hinge a

counter-tradition of stylistics. Instead, what Asian American works of imagination manifest in full is a plethora of seemingly separate threads — threads leading back to distinctively different national origins, first languages indecipherable to other Asian Americans, and cultural signs and codes of signification unintelligible to those identified as the same in census reports and academic discourses.

This literary trend seems to contradict what has happened in the Asian reality where, “as national differences receded in subjective importance, generational differences widened”, and many American-born Asians have begun to feel that they have more in common with other American-born Asians than with those born in their home countries (Espiritu 27); now, they often choose friends and spouses who are not necessarily of the same ethnicity as themselves (Espiritu 27).

This has changed, somewhat, the nature of the duality issue. Though it still exists, it is no longer always between single Asian nationalities and their American identity but is often between combined Asian ethnicities and *their* American identity. This point must be considered by our students. They need to ask the questions, “If those Americans with a common ancestry, who are from different places in Latin-America, Africa, the Middle-East, etc. – combine their efforts to carve out a growing niche for themselves and their ‘group,’ what impact would be had on America? How could this change the current perception of what it means to be an American?”

I want my students to take these questions to heart and to write essays delving deeply into the issue. I want them to create articles which seek to answer these questions with facts and statistics. I want them to use this issue as the basis of a research paper so that they can develop a more mature appreciation of the experience of ethnic minorities here in America, minorities which have not necessarily been given the exposure now commonplace to Black and Latino Americans.

Latin American Identity

In the June issue of the *Perspectives on Politics* – a journal of the APSA, Gary Segura observes that in the cities, “the fight ...over who is an American, and what constitutes “American-ness,” is and has been an ongoing one for virtually the entire history of the United States” (cited in “Scholars Examine Latino Immigration”). Further, Concha Melendez suggested that the great Latin American novel which would encapsulate the American experience would be conceived in urban areas, “the space where the typical Latin American would achieve an ideal state of consciousness and intellectual capabilities” (cited in Henriquez). Ironically, though, it was found that as the people moved within the urban areas, their identities changed, making it hard “to ascribe permanent identity descriptors[, ... though] writers ... have unearthed descriptors such as history, economy, land, and movement that advance a collective definition of self in these societies. Additionally, female characters have been granted a new identity” (Henriquez). And the ghettos across the country have spawned the newest Americans.

Let’s begin with the Latina, or female Latin American. A part of a culture known for its machismo and male-dominated society, these women have had a double row to hoe. They have had to establish a Latin American identity and a Latina American identity, as well. Taking the stories of Maria, Sonia, and Carmen, Alma Garcia has, in her book entitled *Narratives of Mexican American Women: Emergent Identities of the Second Generation*, documented a chapter of this experience. It shows a distinct difference between previous patterns of assimilation and that of the Mexican American experience. Some, but not all of this, can be attributed to travel back and forth between Mexico and the U.S.

George Sanchez “challenged the assimilationist perspective,” saying “Ethnicity [is] not a fixed set of customs surviving from life in Mexico, but rather a collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the United States. As such, ethnicity arose not only from interaction with

fellow Mexicans and Mexican Americans but also through dialogue and debate with the larger cultural world” (cited in Garcia 19) and, according to Vicki Ruiz, “... the second generation (re)define themselves and (re)construct boundaries around themselves, between themselves, and between others ... [revealing a] blending of the old and the new, fashioning new expectations, making choices, and learning to live with those choices” (cited in Garcia 19-20).

I would like my students to consider these statements, basing their conclusions on the same by applying the answers to the questions (provided below) that are asked by Garcia on page 27 in *Narratives*. Answers to these questions will facilitate student understanding of the female authors to whom they will be exposed in the course of this unit of study and the world(s) in which they live:

- How is ethnic identity of second-generation Mexican American women shaped by the experiences of their Mexican immigrant parents?
- How does the second generation navigate through the worlds of its immigrant parents, the university setting, and the larger American society?
- What socially constructed group boundaries and meanings emerge among second-generation Mexican American women?
- What meanings do the second generation attach to their ethnicity and what kinds of ethnic group boundaries do they (re)negotiate?
- How does ethnic identity emerge over time for a second-generation individual?
- How do gender and social class shape the emergent identities of second-generation Mexican American women?

Jewish American Identity

Steve Bayme, in his "Changing the Language of Jewish Identity," comments frankly, “I came to realize that the overarching image of Jewishness in contemporary communal discourse today focuses on Jews as victims.” He goes on to say that:

To be a Jew means the regular consecration of Jewish time to the study of Jewish texts ... sharing fellowship with other Jews ... subscribing to an unflagging optimism ... to challenge the status quo ... Judaism articulates a particular balance between particular and universalist imperatives ... the beauty of American Judaism ... is that we live in two civilizations ... Our challenge is to preserve both rather than permit one to absorb the other.

In *A Leak in the Heart*, Faye Moskowitz tells how she, as a child, achieved this balance, “I get the blues at Christmas like a lot of other people, but I don’t need analysis to find the roots of my depression... Christmas was a miserable time for a Jewish child” (17). After being despondent because she does not understand the preparations for the Christmas holidays, Moskowitz is made to feel worse as she is accused of “killing [the] Lord” (18). She breaks down and confides in her parents and, in response to her questions of what to do since she has been selected to sing Christmas songs with the school’s carolers, her father tells her to “sing ... but don’t say Jesus’ name ” (Haynes 20). She does as advised and writes, “I stood outside the classrooms, my voice blending with that of my friends ..., careful always to omit any forbidden words” (Haynes 20).

These truths make up both a more positive and a more “separatist” definition of a people’s identity which, perhaps, can be attributed to the fact that the Jewish are more like the white majority in appearance than many of the other ethnic groups or to the fact that the Jewish minority is more “moneyed” as a rule than the other minorities to be studied. Then again, perhaps it is the fact that theology is an integral part of the Jewish ethnic identity or a combination of all of these things and others. Whatever the reason(s), the inclusion of this particular ethnic group in

this curriculum unit is made more urgent by the cultural differences presented. Further, the female in Jewish society warrants a look in itself. In her “Twice an Outsider: On Being Jewish and a Woman,” Vivian Gornick says that:

When one is attacked as a woman, one must defend oneself *as a woman* ... The thing about outsidership is that one feels it in the flesh every day; one feels oneself invisible in the ordinary social way ... That particular knowledge of being one among the many is mine twice over (Divakaruni 299).

Like the Latina, this hyphenated American woman is further separated by her gender. This begs attention from our young ones, especially those who find themselves in similar circumstances and seek understanding or validation. We need to see how they relate to and what lessons they can take from the fact and fiction which highlight this theme of “outsidership” due to gender.

Arab American Identity

“Outsidership” can be felt within an ethnicity, also. Arab Americans “constitute an ethnicity made up of several waves of immigrants from twenty-two Arab countries ... descend[ed] from a heritage that represents common linguistic, cultural, and political traditions ... [a] strong sense of family values [is] characteristic,” as is being social conservatives and valuing entrepreneurship and free enterprise (“Arab American”). They come in a variety of skin tones, though the U.S. Census has classed them as white; a designation many protest, seeking a separate classification (Fisher). Like other ethnic groups, they have had their share of being victimized and discriminated against, especially in recent times, and it is important that our students see them out from under the shroud of “9/11,” as a people who have come to America in search of its promise (some several decades ago). They have made numerous contributions to the culture and have, like the other groups of peoples who have made the U.S.A. their home, valiantly sought success and achievement of the American Dream. However, they may have all of these things and still not be considered Arab American by other Arab Americans, making a “common” American dream even harder to identify.

Realizing the American Dream

According to the law of the land, achieving the American Dream is summed up in those words found in the Declaration of Independence – “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But, what does this truly mean? How can one recognize if this “dream” has been attained and made real? What, essentially, is the American Dream.

The American Dream

God Bless The U.S.A.

If tomorrow all the things were gone I'd worked for all my life ...
I'd thank my lucky stars ...
Cause the flag still stands for freedom and they can't take that away.

---Lee Greenwood

These lyrics, part of a song penned by Lee Greenwood, sum up the epitome of the American Dream and echo its realization. The documents in which the tenets of American life are rooted say “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Greenwood adds all of this together and comes up with the one reality that makes these things and this dream possible – freedom.

The Black American Dream

More than any other group that has come to these shores, the Black American has striven to “be free,” unfettered and to have the right to pursue the promises of America. The first of these

promises is the right to choose, individually, how he/she will be labeled. To avoid confusion, I choose “Black American” to distinguish American-born blacks who are virtually clueless of their origins due to slavery from those blacks who can trace their roots back to the Dark Continent in a most facile manner because they or their parents were born there. This being said, let’s look at other ways Black Americans can realize the American Dream.

Ntozake Shange, in her “senses of heritage,” says “I got talked to about ... achievement/ ... & propriety/ nobody talked to me about the moon/ ... trees were status symbols/ I’ve taken to ...” (*African American Literature* 711). Her poem speaks of the pinnacle of the Black American Dream – choice – saying in essence, “When we have this, we know we have arrived!” I want my students to discuss why they feel this attitude is most peculiar to Black Americans, why choice is of primary importance. To do this, I want them to consider the ramifications of slavery, of legalized oppression, and of having no voice in a system in which one is forced to live, to being told you are part and parcel of a process and must not only participate but also contribute – with no prior preparation.

The Asian American Dream

“The woman ... a floral apron around her neck .../a sharp cleaver in her hand/ said ... we cook tonight .../There was no resistance .../she, an elder of the tribe ... /deigned to teach ... about the Asian plight./... we would never forget... / how to honor” In this Marilyn Chin poem, “The Floral Apron,” on page 120 of *Asian American Literature*, we see tribal hierarchy and the respect for elders that permeate every aspect of Asian American society. We see the apron, a token of hard work to most other Americans and considered menial, regarded as a badge of honor, a token of highest esteem. We see a culture privileged to appreciate age and the wisdom it brings, even as we look on in unquestioning obedience rewarded and humbled because this paragon is willing to share her life-earned knowledge with callow youth.

This aspect of Asian culture bears mentioning. It recalls a vague racial memory in other ethnic groups of a time when this was true of them also, highlighting a universal commonality; however, it also shows how close to hearth and home the Asian American populace has remained and how it has not traded in its “best practices” for a more-westernized approach to life by idolizing youth. It is this characteristic, more than anything else, which sets Asian Americans apart from the rest of the hyphenated American citizenry. Though all aspects of the American populace have a degree of esteem for their elderly, no other segment seems to venerate its “old” as much as Asian Americans, who treat theirs no less well than they do their revered Ancestors, cultural deities in their own right.

The Latin American Dream

Ties of family bind the Latin American. The success of the family member becomes the success of the family. Here we have group or communal accomplishment, even when it is the result of one individual’s efforts. This individual carries within him/herself the knowledge that those who travel with him/her, even if only in the heart, have provided the strength and wherewithal for the goals realized and the aspirations attained. This is made patently clear in Teresa Paloma Acosta’s poem found in *Latino Literature*, entitled “Family Story for Your Twenty-first Birthday,” where the life lessons begin in the birthing room:

I sit on our bed/ and hold you .../ You are ours now / With us wherever we wander ... /
You, me, tu papa’, la familia .../ Holding you against my warmth, / Someday .../ You
will let me lean against your strength. (104-105)

Made clear, here, are the responsibilities the parents have undertaken. Also clarified are the expectations of this newest member of the Latino American family. There is to be no turning back or away by either party. The path has been chosen; the first steps onto it have been taken.

Life's course is set. And, as is stated in the introduction to *Latino Literature*, works such as this “celebrate the bonds created by the love of parents and grandparents and the comforts and protection provided by these relationships” (v) and open up an avenue to the Latino American experience in these United States. This is what I hope to share with my students. This is what I hope that, together, we will investigate in hopes of uncovering the impact these practices have had on Latino Americans as they make their way in a new, larger culture where the bonds of family and community have loosened, if not altogether come undone.

Rolando Hinojosa-Smith is a good place to begin this journey. A segment of his novel *Fair Gentlemen of Belken County*, entitled “Rafe Buenrostro Returns from Korea,” can be found in Harcourt-Brace’s *Mexican American Literature*. It shows how the main character’s close family and community ties help him to bear the painful memories of his experiences in the war, which have long haunted him. Only these ties enable him take up his life in the valley and go on still whole if not unscathed, and still a part of his community, his people, and their experiences.

The Jewish American Dream

An ethnic group’s experience oftentimes has a great deal to do with whom the individuals of that group become and are. When you study the Jewish American, you cannot do it apart from the pogroms, which mark their history. Nor can you exclude the Holocaust. These events mark the people. As Elie Wiesel says in *Night*, “Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never” (32). This is not an uncommon attitude among Jewish American people, and they are adamant. Sometimes seeming self-righteously so.

The superior victim is usually the accusation hurled at Jewish Americans amid mutterings of “Lest we forget; as if!” Perhaps this criticism can be attributed to the “common Jewish view that a Jew must never talk about negative Jewish traits to non-Jews” (Falk); thus triumphant, “a people building” stories are the ones that make the rounds of the general public. This does, at times, result in ruffled tail-feathers and a sense that ‘these people believe they are entitled!’ However, I want my students to see beyond the indignation caused by these situations, beyond the envy of a people’s success despite oppression, beyond the tragedy of a people repeatedly enslaved and against whom untold atrocities have been committed, including the Holocaust. I want my students to see into the dry wit, the laughter, the wisdom that led to the survival of this people. I want them to read authors like Philip Roth, who dares to portray the nagging Jewish mothers, choosing to depict his fellow Jews as mere humans with the vices of the species, including sinning and being foolish, banal, and conniving, thus incurring the scorn of his contemporaries:

Those writers who have dealt with such diversity in a didactic way -- notably Chaim Potok -- have achieved a great deal in terms of educating those readers who are embedded in a milieu of self-confidence and unilateral understanding of the self as a version of being American. Conversely, a writer such as Philip Roth appears to have taken on the central American stereotypes and myths, in order to deepen his incursions into this heartland of residual Jewishness in the cities and suburbs. (Wade)

Along with these works which show the good done, as well as the bad that the Jewish people are not supposed to share with others, I want my students to learn from and be entertained as they read Jewish mysteries like Faye Kellerman’s “Holy Water” because, in spite of their history, Jewish Americans have never lost the self-deprecatory flavor that allows them to laugh in the face of adversity as they shrug and say, “I am what I am because ...” even though, according to Janet Burstein in her article, “Israeli Critics Comment – Problematically – on American Jewish Fiction”, “American writers are seen “to be caught in a no-win bind. Forget the past and the Jewish component of ‘identity’ falls away. Remember the past and you write European rather than American fiction” (Burstein).

In spite of beliefs such as this, I want my students to realize that if you are Jewish, you can't simply peel off the Holocaust because you are not European. The attempts at genocide were not dedicated to annihilating Europeans; they were directed against Jews. Jewish Americans are part and parcel of that band so the experience is, by virtue of this, theirs also. "I am what I am because ..." still pertains.

The Arab American Dream

This sub-group of hyphenated Americans is by far the most difficult group for which specific identifying characteristics can be found. The members are deemed Arab American for a number of reasons – ancestry, language, and identification with issues or concerns relevant to the Arab world. These identifiers can bind but they also set apart; hence, criteria for identifying Arab Americans can exclude even those whose ancestry is unquestioned.

First, I want my students to know that Arab Americans come from a large number of countries, have differing religions, and claim various political and social identities based on the countries from which they hail. Tolerance for the diversity within the group becomes a much-needed tool, especially since "three decades ago ... there was really no self-identified Arab American community" (Zogby). Therefore, we will use being an American of Arab descent, coupled with a voluntary association with the Arab community, as the identifiers of the Arab American. Second, I want them to consider what Aleya Rouchdy in her article, "Language Conflict and Identity: Arabic in the American Diaspora," says: "Classical/Standard Arabic builds ethnic identity among Arab-Americans from different countries (saying) it is a source of rapport, solidarity, and bondage creating a sense of ethnic identity" (Almubayei 94). Third, my students should be aware of James Zogby's conclusions on the building of an Arab American ethnic identity:

In recent years, ... institutions and organizations ... developed here in the United States ... have fostered the growth of a self-identified Arab-American community, ... creating visibility for the ethnicity, providing services for the community, fostering pride in a common heritage, giving a coherent and respected voice to community concerns; ... making it possible for Arab Americans to come together and feel comfortable in building a community.

This, then, is our key to recognizing the realization of the Arab American Dream and characterization is, perhaps, the best literary element to use in a study of Arab American literature for examples. A prime one can be found in Gregory Orfalea's "The Chandelier," where the main character is clearly seen. The brief passage does much to describe Mukhlis, and it also gives the reader a picture of Wardi/Rose and Arabs, in general. I would like my students to note this and to be aware of, in later readings, how often this is done and how important the practice is in "schooling" the reader. I also want them to see that Mukhlis meets the criteria for attaining the American Dream and it has nothing to do with the wealth he has accumulated. It is, instead, all about claiming his heritage and affiliating himself with his Arab American culture, being satisfied with who and what he is, and keeping all of it alive by sharing with others who can make the same claims.

IMPLEMENTATION / LESSON PLANS

Several texts will be used in this study to insure that a full cross-cultural mix is provided. They will include but not be limited to excerpts from *African American Literature: Voices in a Tradition* and *Mexican American Literature*, edited by Charles Tatum, which speaks to the journeys of members of the titled cultures. The course of study will also introduce students to *Latino Literature* in which "deep family ties, cultural confusion, the challenges of language and cultural barriers, and growing up" are stressed (v) and to *African American Literature* where the

emphasis will be on how “the experiences of racism, challenge, and triumph [have resulted in] created literature that reveals the human spirit” (iv). Excerpts from *Asian American Literature* will also be studied and the fact that its focus is two-fold is paramount: they are not “a single group of people with the same heritage and the same reactions to American life” (iv) and that, as such, draw from diverse histories when relating their experiences and the joy of discovering one’s heritage and paying tribute to one’s parents or grandparents, a belief that is a universal among Asian American writers.

Lesson Plan I

Objectives: ELA.9.9A-ELA.12.10C; ELA.9.10A-ELA.12.11D; ELA.9.11A-ELA.12.12D

Materials Used

Pictures of successful Americans, a CD and player, selected multi-ethnic readings, individual student notebooks, index cards, poster-sized blank paper and markers, pens, a timer, and Research Paper Bingo completion handout (Appendix 1).

Introduction

When the students walk into the room, they will see several American flags on the walls around the room, each surrounded by pictures of various Americans of different hues whose lives are considered success stories and whom different segments of America believe have realized the Great American Dream. An effort will be made by the teacher to ensure that all of the people depicted are not wealthy and whose achievements students from various cultures will recognize. Playing as they enter the room will be a recording of Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the U.S.A.” and, on the board, will be written the question, “What do these people have in common?”

After being given time to take in the atmosphere of the room, students will be directed to spend ten minutes discussing with their group members the answer to the question. Each group will have at least four members and will be comprised of members of the diverse ethnic groups represented in the class. At the end of the allotted time, a class discussion will ensue and the people depicted will be identified. If no group lists “American” as one of their choices, the teacher will supply this answer as the primary characteristic shared.

Overview

The teacher will discuss with the students the concept of America as a collage of cultures. A discussion of America as a nation of blended cultures with many languages, beliefs, practices, skin colors, and histories will be held, with the students being invited to tell what impact this fact has had on their lives. Afterwards, the students will be told how this is relevant to literature, which reflects history, and why the American literature taught in the classes should speak to the lives of all Americans – not merely mainstream, white America. This part of the unit will end with the students being told that America’s success is the culmination of the works of all of its citizens and that each and every segment of American citizenry has contributed to the “makings” of America.

Concept Development

Following this discussion, students will be asked to gather information for a research paper which will highlight the contributions made to the growth of America by members of their particular cultures. They will be taken, as a class, to the library to obtain this data. They will be given specific areas of interest from which they will choose three. These will include but not be limited to science, technology, politics, religion, art, literature, sports, law-making, dance, theater, and education. Information gathered and its sources will be written on the index cards. Students will be given a Research Bingo Card on which they will be directed to check off areas of writing a research paper as they meet the required criteria.

Student Group Practice

There will be round robin discussions of data gathered. Students of the same or similar ethnicity will “speed discuss” the information they have gathered in ten minute sessions. The focus will be, primarily, on categories they share. They can exchange information and/or speak to whether or not they feel the data gathered will enhance the research paper they will write and whether or not the material is properly documented using MLA Style. They will review the areas included on their Research Paper Bingo card to determine if each requisite part of the draft has been considered in the preparation

Student Individual Practice & Assessment

Each student will write a draft of his/her research paper, which must be at least five (5) pages in length, typed and double-spaced, and contain a Works Cited page as well as a Research Bingo Card, which will be appropriately shaded and initialed by the teacher. Along with the three chosen sections, the paper must have an introduction with a thesis statement and a conclusion. This draft will be submitted to the teacher to be edited in regards to content and documentation. The teacher will also make a holistic evaluation of conventions and mechanics and attach a written summary assessment of the same.

Assessment

Student will submit the final copy of the research paper which will be graded on content, documentation, conventions, mechanics, and adherence to directions provided. Copies of attached Individual Research Paper Bingo Sheets from peers and teacher’s first assessment will be reviewed. Points will be added or deducted for accuracy and application as determined by their “Bingo” card. The research paper will also be assessed for accuracy of information (and sources), and bonus points will be given for an accompanying original visual pertinent to the subject matter which reveals yet another facet of the hyphenated American.

Lesson Plan II

Objectives: ELA.9.9A-ELA.12.10C; ELA.9.10A-ELA.12.11D; ELA.9.11A-ELA.12.12D

Materials Used

Students will work in groups and will need individual notebooks, copies of selected stories/poems, poster-sized blank paper, pens, and markers.

Introduction

Have the following words/phrases prominently displayed around the room when the students walk in: love/hate, war/peace, star-crossed lovers, good/evil, ambition, beauty, loyalty/betrayal, courage/treachery, freedom, love/loneliness, truth/deception, prejudice, perseverance, duty, jealousy, and truth. After the students are settled and have had a chance to look at the words, ask them to participate in an exercise in which they line up in front of those terms that suit stories you name that they have read. Inform them that some terms may go with more than one story, yet they are to choose the one that best fits the story named. Credit beyond a participation grade of 75% will be given each time the student lines up before the appropriate display.

Concept Development

After completing this exercise and insuring that all students are participating, ask the students to write a brief paragraph telling what they feel the words have in common. Then ask them to share their conclusions with the members of the group in which you’ve placed them and to select the response they feel, as a group, best suits. A member of each group will then share their choice with the class. Credit beyond a participation grade of 75% will be given if the group correctly names the terms as literary themes.

Student Group Practice

After this has been done, inform the students that all of the words represent literary themes; then ask them how, using the fruits of the preceding discussions, to provide a working definition of the term, write it on the paper provided, and post it on the front board for discussion.

Overview

The teacher will provide both a working and the literary definition of the term, respectively; i.e. (1) wherever humans are found, these ideas or meanings called themes will be found and, in literature, are concepts the author feels are important and wants to share with his/her audience, and (2) a theme is the central or dominating idea in a story, which allows the author to show how he/she feels about a particular aspect of life.

Group Assessment

The students will be asked to talk among themselves to answer the following questions, leading to a class discussion of the same after they have turned in the answers upon which they have decided.

1. What is a theme?
2. How does it compare with a moral?
3. How does it compare with the subject of the story?
4. Is it a hidden meaning that needs to be pulled from the story?
5. What does the theme allow the author to do?

Individual Student Practice

Students will be asked to read an excerpt from Rolando Hinojosa-Smith's novel, *Fair Gentlemen of Belken County*, entitled "Rafe Buenrosto Returns from Korea." They will be asked to identify the major characters, provide the elements of plot – exposition, conflict, climax, and denouement – to analyze the author's style and tone; and to evaluate the values of the characters which the author seems to perceive desirable. They will use these responses to identify the major theme(s) of this excerpt.

Individual Assessment

Students may create a poster of visual media, which shows the significant characters and/or events in the excerpt and which supports their choice of theme, i.e. if they say the major theme is family support, then that poster will show the main character in the middle of the poster bowed down by the pressing painful memories of the war and the deaths that resulted above him while at the same time being bolstered by the actions of his family members pictured below him. The poster must be uncluttered and any captions must be legible and free of errors. The visual and caption should be creative, pertinent, and aesthetically pleasing.

In lieu of a poster, the students may submit a research paper which discusses the themes, characters, and/or events in the story. The topic must be well supported with both cultural research and literary conjecture about the subject(s). The paper should contain specific detail and evaluation; analysis and interpretation of the subject matter should thread throughout it in a clear, consistent manner.

The third option for assessment is an oral presentation which is unique and creative. It should be interesting, relevant, and well rehearsed, flowing smoothly without benefit of a script. The ideas of the piece, dealing with the theme of the excerpt, should be communicated to the audience in a most expressive manner.

Closure

Reiterate to the students that though theme does not offer practical advice or have philosophical value, it provides the author a measure of control. Remind them that though it is not the subject of the story and is not a secret, hidden meaning, theme conveys the author's perception of an aspect of life. Reflect with them upon the fact that theme is an aspect of human experience present wherever humans exist, which the author wishes to express. Reinforce the fact that theme blazes forth when all of the text is taken into consideration, analyzed, and evaluated.

Resources

1. Literary Analysis Guide: Theme – MHS Composition Guide:
<<http://www.ci.maryville.tn.us/mhs/studyskills/CompGuide/LitAnaTheme.htm>>.
2. Text: *Mexican American Literature*; Charles Tatum, General Editor

Lesson Plan III

Objectives: ELA.9.9A-ELA.12.10C; ELA.9.10A-ELA.12.11D; ELA.9.11A-ELA.12.12D

Materials Used

Students will work individually and in pairs. They will need a notebook, a blue and a red pen, copies of selected stories/poems/excerpts, a sketch pad, and map pencils.

Introduction

Characterization is the method used by a writer to develop a character, which includes “(1) showing the character's appearance, (2) displaying the character's actions, (3) revealing the character's thoughts, (4) letting the character speak, and (5) getting the reactions of others” (Nellen). This can be a very useful tool when an author wants to highlight a people or their traits, so that the reader can better understand them. Characterization is also a very useful literary element for the students to understand to facilitate better analysis and evaluation of the characters an author creates and uses to get across that information he/she wants the readers to have.

Using the definition provided for characterization, the class will be asked to tell what they know about both the main character and the Arab American after reading the following excerpt from Gregory Orfalea's “The Chandelier”:

Mukhlis has made a small fortune in real estate... and many of his tenants are black or brown. He himself is ... almond, and his eyes, like those of many Lebanese and Syrians are blue ... words rarely ... His eyes and body speak – a body made to withstand – a slight bulge to his belly, brought on ... by ... Wardi's desserts ... Muklis has learned it is useless to compliment her because Wardi (Rose, in English), like most Arabs, does not react to compliments; she prefers to go to great lengths to pay a compliment, instead (*Literature from the United States: Multi-cultural Voices* 191)

Discussions will result in the first part of the definition – showing the character's appearance – yielding a description of a middle-aged brown man who has blue eyes and is stocky without being fat, though he has a small “potbelly.” The second part of the definition will reveal that he is well-to-do, and the third will indicate that he likes sweets. The fourth part of the definition will show the character as the silent type, rarely speaking, whereas the fifth will yield up the fact that he knows “his people” and enjoys the fruit of their labors, even as he acknowledges that they are circumspect, choosing to flatter rather than to receive fulsome compliments.

Student Group Practice

After this has been done, students will discuss together, in groups, public people from their own culture(s) of whom Muklis reminds them. They will provide the information to complete the categories in the outline about these people and to offer up details of how they differ. They will then compare the people they've each chosen and tell what they have in common and how they differ.

Individual Practice

After this has been done, the students will be given other aspects which help to flesh out characters in literature. These include, but are not limited to those aspects included in the following outline, which will be provided to the students:

- A. Name
 - 1. Proper
 - 2. Title (Dr., Mrs., Mr., Ms., etc.)
 - 3. Diminutive (nickname)
- B. Description/physical appearance
 - 1. Age
 - 2. Gender
 - 3. Ethnicity
 - 4. Distinguishing characteristics
- C. Personal history
 - 1. Intellectual capacity & education
 - 2. Economic status & occupation.
 - 3. Mental disposition/frame of mind

Choosing from a list of excerpts from readings which deal with characters from Arab American backgrounds, the students will use the outline above to gather pertinent information about the main characters and his/her people, which is relevant to this course of study. This information will be used to develop a sketch of the main character in an essay, a draft of which will be edited and critiqued by peer group members for content and use of descriptive language designed to make the character come alive. The essay will then be revised and submitted to the teacher to be graded for content, figurative language, conventions, and mechanics.

Individual Assessment

Students will either draw/paint/provide a photograph of the character about whom they've written, create a collage of elements which shows the significant traits/interests of the character, write an original monologue in which the character reveals him/herself to the world while speaking of a matter important to him/her, or create a sock-puppet which depicts those traits of the character that are most telling.

Closure

Reiterate to the students that characterization does more than provide a surface tale of whom or what the story is about: it paints a panoramic view of this person or thing leaving very little, if anything, to the reader's imagination. In literature, not only does the reader need to understand the character and his/her motivation to appreciate the tale, but he/she also needs to "know" the character in order to gain the proper perspective of the character and the events, so that the author's perception of them is understood and the reader knows why the author feels this story is worth telling. Further, because of the subject matter of this unit of study, the reader needs to understand how the character and these events relate to the Arab American experience and how such leads to the realization of the American Dream.

Lesson Plan IV

Objectives: ELA.9.9A-ELA.12.10C; ELA.9.10A-ELA.12.11DELA.9.11A-ELA.12.12D

Materials Used

Students will work in groups and will need individual notebooks, copies of their research papers, pencils, and pens.

Student Group Practice

Using their research papers for information, students will write a script for a documentary of an ethnic group's success in America. They will take the real-life examples they have incorporated into their papers and the facts about their lives and show where members of this group began their lives in America and how far they have come on their journey to achieve the American Dream. Each member of the group must have a part to play in the telling of the story, from being the narrator to being one of the voices speaking in the documentary. Each script must be accompanied by visuals which represent the setting and props needed in the documentary, i.e. a story board.

Group Assessment

The students will either produce a video of their documentary, with every member playing a part, or perform the script before their classmates. Peer assessments will be done which take into consideration the facts gathered, how apt the students are in bringing to life the people they are portraying, the appropriateness of the setting and props, and how well the documentary shows the chosen ethnic group's achievement of their concept of the American Dream, based on the information provided during the teaching of this curriculum unit on how each group perceives the same.

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APPENDIX 1 (C. MERCHANT/D. DABBS)

Topic is narrowed and manageable.	Format provided has been followed.	grammatical errors.	Cover page correct.	Works Cited page included and correct.
Quotes in proper MLA Style.	“Bare Bones” outline submitted	No or few spelling errors.	Primary and secondary sources used and cited properly.	Paper submitted to turnitin.com in timely fashion.
All quotes cited.	12 pt serif font – Times New Roman	No grades of zero/not more than one deadline missed. FREE!	Outline with support detail submitted.	Logical and coherent; paper “makes sense.”
Transition used.	Paraphrases cited.	Word choice is appropriate.	<u>Format</u>	<u>Works Cited</u>
REDUCE ONE LETTER GRADE.	<u>Conventions</u>	<u>Mechanics</u>	SHADED IN THIS AREA OF	YOUR RESEARCH BINGO CARD!
Introductory paragraph completed.	YOU DO NOT WANT	ANY OF THE SQUARES	Body paragraph(s) for third support detail complete.	Concise thesis state has been provided and approved.
<u>RESEARCH</u>	Body paragraph(s) for first support detail complete. <u>PAPER</u>	Body paragraph(s) for second support detail complete. <u>BINGO</u>	4” x 6” note cards and 3” x 5” source cards submitted.	
	There are no or few	Typed, double-spaced.		