

# ***TEACHING THROUGH CULTURE***

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*Strategies for reading and responding to young adult literature*

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## Preface

Learning to read is perhaps one of the most highly publicized, researched, and debated topics in the field of education today. The topic of reading has become prominent in the political arena as well, securing its place as a national priority steeped in rhetoric and promoted through legislation. To be sure, the ability to read is one of the most important processes that must be developed by students if they are to be successful in school and beyond. That is the primary reason why I decided to write this book. But, this book is not about the often highly politicized debate over which approach or what program is the best to accomplish this goal. Rather, this book is about helping students negotiate the process of reading and comprehending texts, which has at its center the ultimate goal of constructing meanings from texts. The word *meanings* is used with careful intention, because texts can contain and generate many different *meanings*. Readers, therefore, can be influenced by what a text says—its actual content—as well as what a text says to them—the coming together of textual content and the reader’s background knowledge. What makes the interplay of these two elements—what the text says and what texts say to a particular reader—important to constructing meaning? Simply put, if a reader cannot find a way to connect the ideas presented in a text with her or his own knowledge base and life experiences, the possibility for the reader to construct meanings may be seriously constrained. Both of these elements are integral parts in the process of comprehension.

## **The Relationship between Reader and Text**

The idea of a dynamic relationship between text and reader is not new. Reader response theorists have described the different roles that the reader and the text play in a reading process that is fluid and constantly unfolding (Bleich, 1975; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978; Fish, 1980). Despite there being variations in degrees of the contributions by the reader and text (and authorial intention) toward constructing meanings, the reader is foregrounded in the process of making meaning.

This view of reading and responding to literary texts has driven and continues to drive instruction and assessment in many of our classrooms, and I agree with an approach that allows for agency on the part of the reader and the recognition of different perspectives in the creation of meanings. However, I think it is important to consider some additional factors that come into play when implementing this approach to reading literature, particularly in the context of today's diverse classrooms, which reflect a multiplicity of cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

When we ask students to read a piece of literature, we need to recognize the integral part that understanding what the text actually says plays in the process of comprehension. If the reader has no understanding of what is happening in a story at this very basic level, she or he may have no point of departure from which to engage the text, and there may be a disconnect in the relationship between the text and the reader. This can result in a break in the process of comprehending that depends on a reader's engagement with the text at this primary level. Thinking in terms of how this piece fits with what a reader brings to the text, it seems necessary that in order for a connection to be made, the reader must be able to find a hook on which to hang his or her prior knowledge and life experiences. For many students whose cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds are different from the dominant culture reflected in most school curricula, a text that lacks any connection to anything in their lives can and often does subvert the process of comprehension at the very outset.

This can be devastating in a testing climate that privileges a view of comprehension based on the ability to restate what the text or reading passage says as interpreted by those constructing the tests. We cannot therefore underestimate or ignore the need for the reader to understand what the text actually says. Understanding the text then is the mediating part of the process of comprehending that provides readers with the means to interpret what the text says to them.

This leads to another key factor in fostering the process of comprehending—choosing the texts. The act of choosing a text with its socially and culturally constructed content can be considered a way of reproducing culture, because literature is part of the larger sociocultural context, historically positioned in time and place. In other words, literature is a cultural product or resource (Leitch, 1992; Fiske, 1989). Looking at literary texts as cultural documents then, it could be said that when reading and responding to literary texts, readers, who are also cultural beings, positioned in time and place, are actually involved in the study of culture (Rogers, 1997). This seems highly important when we talk about readers making connections to texts, because choosing and using materials that foster these connections rests at the center of a culturally responsive pedagogy. No doubt, most educators would agree with the axiom that learning requires building on prior knowledge and background experience of the learner. If this is true for learning in general, how much more appropriate is this concept when we think about choosing texts and developing strategies for reading and responding to literature? But, equally important, given that the study of literature implies the study of culture, is the recognition that we need texts that present other than the dominant culture in our schools' curricula. This brings me to why I chose the particular texts that are the focal points for discussion and the basis for implementing various reading and writing strategies in a literature-based classroom.

### **Choosing the Texts for This Book**

The Latino population in the United States has been on a

steady increase over the last decade. According to the 2000 Census data, in states like Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, which share historical roots in Mexico, it is not surprising that the Latino population between the ages of five and seventeen constitutes a major portion of the overall population, ranging between 34 and 42 percent. However, in other states, such as Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island, the growth of school-age Latino population is also rapidly on the rise.

Overall, according to summary data from the 2000 Census, approximately 16.2 percent of today's youth between the ages of five and seventeen are Latino, and three out of four of approximately ten million students with linguistically diverse backgrounds are Latino students (NAEP, 2000; NCES, 1997). This trend, marking a shift in the dominance of cultural groups reflective of Anglo/European backgrounds, suggests the need for a shift in the choice and use of literature and curricular materials if we are to keep up with these significant demographic changes in the student populations of our schools.

The need for the inclusion of literature reflecting the pluralistic society in which we live has been a clarion call made over the past several decades by educators who advocate multicultural education and cultural responsiveness in curriculum and instruction. The recognition of the need for making multicultural literature an integral part of the school curriculum and instruction is important for two reasons. The first, as stated previously, is the need for texts that reflect the culture of the reader in order to facilitate the construction of meaning by acting as a mediator between students' experiences and literacies that exist outside of school and those that are part of the culture of schooling. However, equal, if not more important, is the need to create a school environment that is based on social justice, which values and empowers all students. For, if students continually see only one culture, which is predominantly mainstream, white, and middle-class, reflected in the literature they read, then this becomes the norm against which all "other" people are viewed. Such a myopic view of culture can have

a damaging effect on all students. For those students within the dominant culture, a lack of exposure to other perspectives can seriously limit their ability to question the status quo and hinder their development of a critical stance toward the social, political, and economic systems that influence our daily lives. Students outside the dominant culture, who see no images of themselves, or inaccurate portrayals of their culture in the literature that they read in school, can experience a devaluing of their cultural identities. This can result in a loss of self-esteem and empowerment that can seriously limit agency, which is a key ingredient to learning. It is with these two primary reasons in mind that I have chosen the literature included in this book. But, in addition, the selection of these young adult novels reflects choices of quality literature that can stand on their own as good examples of the art and craft of storytelling about the human experience, and, as such, should be part of any literature-based classroom.

## **Overview of the Chapters**

I will now introduce the chapters and text selections that form the basis for the reading and writing strategies presented in each chapter. The unifying feature of all the selections is that they can be categorized in the genre of fiction. Two of the novels, Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Storyteller's Memories* and Rivera's *And the earth did not devour him* both provide examples of the heritage of an oral tradition in which the storyteller collects and preserves the memories of a people and their culture. Two novels, *Jumping Off to Freedom* (Bernardo) and *Trino's Choice* (Bertrand), are contemporary stories about male protagonists involved in life-changing, real-life dramas that mirror events that are happening in our world today. Lachtman's *Call Me Consuelo* combines mystery with a subplot centered in identity issues and a young girl's coping with a new environment. And, *Spirits of the High Mesa* (Martínez) blends a family's and community's history with the historical events of the period just after World War II to illustrate the dichotomous nature of progress. When I first read the novels, their strong underlying