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Unit of Study: Introducing New Perspectives Through International Literature

Rationale

After the United States' victories in both World Wars, America claimed her spot at the center of the modern world. Since then, America's education system has revolved heavily around Amero-Euro centric literature and values; the perspective of most literature coming from white male authors and their respective caucasian cultures. This focus, however, does not account for the diverse and refreshing voices of many strong ethnic writers detailing their culture and experiences through beautiful prose, poetry, and art. The perspectives of these writers are too often drowned out by the pale literary canon reinforced by school curriculums and AP lit classes across the United States.

The centerpiece of this Unit will be Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* a memoir edited for a Young Adult Audience. I chose this gut-wrenching text because it is a story that needs to be introduced to our students, especially during our modern-day racial climate. Grande's memoir is her unabashed journey towards the American Dream. Having this text be the center-piece and base for the unit allows students to ease their way into international literature with a country and people they are more familiar with before I introduce them to other different regions and writers.

In designing this Unit of Study I recalled my own English classes and the missed opportunities to introduce my culturally diverse peers to fresh ethnic perspectives. For years, my peers and I read old dead white man after another and not once was I taught to consider the world through the eyes of a student in Malawi or the recollection of memories from a Mexican immigrant. Looking back on my education there was an enormous hole in my knowledge of the world; I often believed I knew too much about the country my parents left their home for and too little about my parents' actual home. The sad reality of ethnicity in America is that students are taught to believe one way, America's way. I may have read Tim O'Brien's *The Things We Carried* about America's perspective on the horrible war that took place in Vietnam, but never once occurred to me to read and understand writings from the people Tim O'Brien once called his enemy. Viet Thanh Nguyen; author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer*; on his panel at San Jose State University, said that not seeing any Vietnamese people speak during Coppola's Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* left an angry empty feeling in his stomach. The importance of representation plays a key role in the development of every students' education. The pale palette of America's literary focus presented to me that certain stories and themes are more important than others. Looking out I found that the school curriculum matched a parallel society we live in today. The voices, faces, and stories of other international ethnic people are drowned by the plethora of successful and popular caucasian trend of the status quo.

The societal change won't happen overnight, so I desire to start by breaking the status quo locally in a classroom. Yet, problems still arise when trying to offer a break in the pattern of a conditioned pale literary palette. Teaching international ethnic literature can surface ignorance such as racial stereotypes or may indulge students in ethnocentrism. It is my duty to walk these

young minds towards a path of understanding and tolerance towards the difference in other cultures and perspectives. Another problem arises when teaching and discussing international ethnic literature. This Unit of Study is not a furthering of tokenism but a solid stance against it. The amazing works that will be discussed are not simply a “minority of the week, month, etc” but an in-depth look and process of understanding the intricate and delicate differences from the American point of view to other ethnic recollections.

Preparation for the Unit

Before diving into *The Distance Between Us* I would have my students define a list of terms in their own words.

1. Immigrant
2. Alien
3. Refugee

These words have been thrown around the news cycle when discussing our crisis on the Southern Border with politically charged rhetoric backing them. Next, I would begin a lecture on the difference between the words and why people are labeled differently depending on who is labeling them. After my lecture, I would open up a discussion with a couple of questions:

1. Why would somebody leave their home for another country?
 - a. Why would parents leave their children or vice versa for another country?
 - b. Is it justified to leave your family behind?
2. Why do we label people with derogatory terms like Alien or Illegal?
3. Have you ever traveled/lived in another country? If not where would you live?
 - a. What are the differences between that other country and the U.S.

b. Why is the U.S. such a sought after destination?

On completion of the discussion, I would then hand out printed copies of Emma Lazarus' sonnet "The New Colossus" and specifically focus on the last six lines. These are the words Emma Lazarus believed the Statue of Liberty would say about America's immigrants.

My assignment for the students is: write a new poem for the Statue of Liberty envisioning what she would say in our modern-day world. I encourage creativity, she could be a fiercely kind woman like what Lazarus envisioned or she could embody xenophobic sentiment that coincides with our own president. Be creative and hone in on a feeling that can be expressed, not simply told.

The New Colossus

BY EMMA LAZARUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Reading the Text

While reading through Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* the students will complete various assignments to engage their critical analysis skills and creative writing.

1. At the end of every week, after students have read the three chapters for that week, will be a response assignment on Reyna Grande's life so far into the book.
 - a. Students will choose an instance/emotion in Grande's life where they too have felt as if they are in her shoes. This assignment will close the gap between reader and writer and introduce them to a new perspective with feelings and events they can relate to.
 - b. In class after the weekend, the students will share their responses with their groupmates to also build a relatable connection to others in their classroom.
2. "I Am From" poem project
 - a. There is a point in the book where Reyna Grande's older sister and herself return to their hometown of Iguala, Guerrero. At this moment Grande details her older sister Mago's refusal to acknowledge that she is from the overwhelming poverty that plagues Iguala. Mago has become so Americanized that she even rejects visiting old friends or family members that helped them while their parents were in El Otro Lado. It is a sad moment for Grande and the reader to witness Mago abandon where she is from. This event will serve as a reminder to the students not to forget who they are and where they come from. The project will be for each student to personally research through their family, heritage, and culture various expressions, objects, customs, etc. that embody where they are from and what makes them who they are.

b.

Where I'm From
 By George Ella Lyon
 I am from clothespins,
 from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
 I am from the dirt under the back porch.
 (Black, glistening
 it tasted like beets.)
 I am from the forsythia bush,
 the Dutch elm
 whose long gone limbs I remember
 as if they were my own.
 I am from fudge and eyeglasses,
 from Imogene and Alafair.
 I'm from the know-it
 -alls
 and the pass
 -it-ons,
 from perk up and pipe down.
 I'm from He restoreth my soul
 with cottonball lamb
 and ten verses I can say myself.
 I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
 fried corn and strong coffee.
 From the finger my grandfather lost
 to the auger
 the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
 Under my bed was a dress box
 spilling old pictures.
 a sift of lost faces
 to drift beneath my dreams.
 I am from those moments --
 snapped before I budded --
 leaf-fall from the family tree.

- c. The Final Project is taken straight from my teacher observation with the blessing of Ms. Dancheva I will model the memoir-writing project after the similar assignment she has her students doing at Latino College Prep Academy. In my assignment for the students, I will have them create an immigrant from their

cultural background and write in their perspective the experiences they may have immigrating to the United States. This project will be a long process of drafting and editing their memoirs in order to prepare them for the rigorous drafting and editing process that comes with upper high school and college-level writing. Students who “feel” as if they are exempt from writing in the perspective of an immigrant will be reminded of how the United States was formed. No person, besides Native Americans, in the United States are originally from here; the United States was created by immigrants, for immigrants and that sentiment must be reminded especially while educating the youth.

Extending the Unit

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi is a graphic memoir set in place during the Iranian Revolution. The novel is a great visual representation of Satrapi’s experiences of hardships and coming of age during a violent time in her history. The details and themes she employs coincide with the lost adolescence and youth during an oppressive regime. Her journey and drive to find identity within herself is a harrowing act of breaking the repressive laws forced onto her family and body.

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind book and film by William Kamkwamba is another bildungsroman of William growing up in his poor home of Malawi, Africa. His memoir details his struggle with the western values of the modern world and traditional African beliefs is another beautiful story of finding one’s identity through the experiences and values he shares. His continuous drive to strive for education coupled with his ambition to lift his village out of poverty is an amazing pay off for young readers no matter their background.

Concluding the Unit

The importance of teaching International Literature to Young Adults is in their exposure to other cultures. The purpose of this Unit of Study is to further and expand the way students see the world through literature not solely focused on the usual suspects read in classrooms across the country. This Unit is a diverse and refreshing voice of representing as much of the world possible through literature. In teaching memoirs of bildungsroman, I hope to close the distance between the different and various unique traits of other cultures. American students are naturally diverse in the classroom from their backgrounds, heritage, and various cultures. By teaching stories of other ethnic writers I can hone in on the human experience of struggle and reassure students that no matter where they are or where they come from they can share and relate to the experiences of others from millions of miles away.

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