

A Pinch of Tobacco and a Drop of Urine:

Using Young Adult Literature to Examine Local Culture, Using Local Culture to Enrich Schools: An ALAN Grant Research Project

For students who don't excel in school it often comes as welcome information that there are areas in their lives where they are proficient learners [. . .] . Outside of school they are successful learners. In a class in folklore their success in other settings can become part of the curriculum. They can take pride in it. This change in self-image can rub off favorably in their schoolwork.

—Elizabeth Radin Simons

A successful search for identity—aided by folklore—takes us far beyond mere survival and results in a state of health.

—Fred Metting

Folklore is fascinating to study because people are fascinating creatures.

—Jan Harold Brunvand

The richness of place

Several years ago, I was invited to visit a seventh-grade classroom to talk with the students about writing for publication. The tiny school was tucked away in the farming country of northwest Missouri, and the students were mostly the children of local farmers.

At first I tried to talk with them about things they could write about, but they assured me there was absolutely nothing unique about their lives, nothing at all that anyone might care to read about or know.

“Really?” I asked. “How many of you have ever driven a tractor?”

All of the boys and at least two-thirds of the girls raised their hands.

“Imagine all of the kids your age in America. How many of them do you think have ever driven a tractor?”

One young man offered a tentative answer,

“About three-fourths, I suppose.”

“I don't think it would be quite that many,” I said. “In fact, I'll bet that it would be well under five percent.”

As a group, they looked stunned and a little angry, and most of their heads turned to the teacher who was kind enough to rescue me.

“Yes, I think he's right,” she said. “Not very many people live on farms anymore.”

I pushed on. “I think your lives are interesting because not very many people these days have the opportunity to experience the kinds of things you have. How many of you have ever helped a cow deliver a calf?”

Almost everyone there had.

“What other things have you done that most people haven't?”

“Castrated hogs.”

“Good. What else?”

“Went coon hunting.”

And so it went for several minutes until I tried to bring the discussion back around to the reason for my visit.

I ended my visit by telling them they need to write about their experiences because those experiences are unique. “The rest of the world needs to learn about you,” I said, “and if the rest of the world isn’t interested, they should be.” In truth, of course, I had already learned a great deal from them. In particular, I learned that the seventh graders I visited have a wealth of experiences that reflect more honest work and responsibility than many adults accumulate in a lifetime, and many of those things that were part of their experience would be unfamiliar to the vast majority of adolescents their age—experiences like butchering hogs and building fences and herding cattle and attending special church services called for the purpose of praying for rain while crops withered in the July heat.

Interestingly, however, they were almost completely unaware of how unique their experiences are in comparison to contemporary adolescents. If anything, they tended to view the uniqueness of their culture as a liability. At the very least, the idea of taking school time to write about those things we talked about seemed to take them by surprise. Perhaps it even seemed a bit fraudulent to them.

Taking the show on the road

Shortly after this experience, with the help of a grant from the ALAN Research Foundation, I was able to explore some of these ideas in a classroom context. I envisioned the study as an opportunity to examine how students’ local culture could be tapped in order to promote meaningful responses with quality young adult literature. With the help of a cooperative classroom teacher, I spent two weeks in a middle school in rural eastern North Carolina where I taught a novel to a group of sixth-graders, making a set of deliberate attempts to engage students’ folk knowledge in service of the study of literature.

The novel I selected was *When the Nightengale Sings*, by Joyce Carol Thomas. I believed this novel was particularly appropriate for several reasons. First, it is a re-telling of the Cinderella story and, as such, it

is easily connected to oral lore. Second, the novel is set in an African-American church (in this case, the Cinderella being sought is a new lead singer for the choir), and I thought it would likely be of interest to the class I was working with, as many of the students in that rural school were African-American. And finally, *When the Nightengale Sings* is an excellent novel for middle grades students.

The process we used was fairly simple. We began our study of the novel by asking students to share bits of their folk culture with us. We asked for ghost stories and folk remedies and weather predictions and so on. And we introduced the concept of folklore to the students. We talked about nursery rhymes, and we shared popular urban legends. We talked about how folklore is passed from person to person and generation to generation.

Through this process, I learned many things from the students. I learned how to use a pinch of tobacco to relieve a bee sting. I learned that a drop of urine was an established treatment for pink eye, and I learned about a mysterious gray apparition that appeared along the North Carolina coast in advance of hurricanes. I learned how to predict the weather and how to predict the sex of an unborn child, and I learned techniques for inducing labor.

From here we turned to fairy tales, and we asked the students to select a familiar tale (any tale except Cinderella) and re-write it as a contemporary story. Then we turned to *When the Nightengale Sings*, reading it as a class and pausing to discuss and savor each plot twist. About halfway through the book, we took a break to read the Grimm brothers’ version of the tale and talk a bit about how the basic story had been transformed by various storytellers (e.g., Disney, Joyce Carol Thomas).

Anne Haas Dyson describes “a chain of communication in which privileged adult authors have rewritten characters, plots, and/or dominant motifs” (282). In other words, each generation retells a story like Cinderella, but each telling reveals the values and concerns the “authors from the more privileged class” wish to pass along to children (280). According to Dyson, “it is possible for a classroom chain of communication to develop in which individual children, as members of a collective, use the school sanctioned agency of writing to question given stories and, thus, their given social and political worlds” (284).

With this in mind, we concluded the brief unit on *When the Nightengale Sings* by having students re-tell the Cinderella story in any way of their choosing. I am not at all sure our students reached the lofty social goals Dyson describes, but I do think the unit was successful. The students were clearly engaged throughout the unit. They took considerable pride in describing their folk traditions, they exhibited a high degree of involvement with the novel, and they created some very interesting versions of Cinderella. Their writing incorporated elements of folklore and traditional storytelling, and I think it is safe to say these activities helped the students connect and respond more deeply to the novel.

Attempts at understanding

I began this project with an intent to explore and document ways folk knowledge and local culture could be tapped in order to build connections to young adult literature. I saw this as a teacher-research project that would explore an extension of traditional reader-response activities, beginning with a recognition of the need to meet readers where they are and building progressively more sophisticated aesthetic responses to literature. Folklore was simply another part of the reader's prior knowledge to be tapped to foster response. I did not question the assumption that the purpose for all of this was the study of the novel (and whatever increased reading skill students might gain through the reading of the novel). Literature was primary; folklore was a tool to be used in its service.

By the time I finished the project, I was beginning to understand that the folklore was at least as important as the literature, not simply a tool to be used in service of the teaching of literature. That is to say, we can use students' folk knowledge in support of literature instruction, but we can also use literature as a connection to students' folk knowledge and culture, and helping students understand and validate their unique cultural heritage is arguably as important as the study of literature.

Tension at the cultural boundaries

In an illustrative example of the re-telling of fairy tales in cultural context, one of our students recast "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" as Clide and Jimbo, Jeffro, and Elestin. This version opens with Jimbo, Jeffro, and Elestin sitting at the table eating deer meat

that was too hot, too cold, and so on. After they have left the house, Clide enters and helps himself to the trio's most valued possessions: the afore-mentioned deer meet, chewing tobacco and a rifle.

This student text is a rich illustration of the local culture—a social environment in which most farmers raise tobacco, gun ownership is common, and hunting (and eating) deer is an accepted seasonal ritual. This student text also clearly expresses values that fly in the face of the accepted norms of school culture. The text tests the rhetorical boundaries of the school's culture (it would not be at all uncommon for the text to be censored or otherwise suppressed in a school setting) because the aspects of local culture expressed stand in stark contrast to the values we typically find in school culture.

School culture (e.g., Deal and Peterson) is a recognized force. Generally speaking, the values of school culture are those of upper-middle class America. Schools value respect, hard work, timeliness, and a faith in knowledge validated by experts. Typically, the dominant culture of the school approaches the culture of the local folk as deficient, particularly when the folk of the community and the faculty of the school are from different races or social classes. At the school, we don't rely on ghostly figures to predict hurricanes. We consult the weather service. We don't use urine or tobacco to heal physical problems. We go to a doctor who sends us to a pharmacist. The school is an authoritative "distanced zone" (Bakhtin) within which we validate and celebrate stories and knowledge that we assume to be fundamentally superior to the folk knowledge of the surrounding community and the omnipresent popular culture.

But our students come to school thoroughly immersed in the values of their folk and popular cultures. From the folk culture, adolescents receive a world view and an identification with a unique cultural system. If the students are suburban, upper-middle class children of college graduates, there is probably much agreement between the values of the folk community and the values of the school community. If, however, the students are from working-class or impoverished backgrounds, it is likely the values of their folk cultures will conflict in important ways with the values of the school.

Many young adult novels are situated within unique folk cultures, and those novels are uniquely

positioned to help teachers and students discuss and reconcile competing cultural forces. We can use novels with strong expressions of folk culture to engage in a two-way dialogue with our students. The benefits to the students include a deepening appreciation of their own cultural heritage, the improved sense of belonging in the school environment that results when they feel the school has validated their cultural backgrounds, and increasing interest in and engagement with the literature based on the connections made between the literature and the local culture.

The knowledge gathered about the local culture benefits the school, as well.

We gather all sorts of information about our students. The ever-swelling folder the school keeps on each student is filled with all manner of testing data, as we measure and probe all the accessible portions of that student's mind. What we don't gather systematically is information about our students' cultures, and that information is potentially very useful to us as we select content and build curricula, as we plan instruction and interventions, as we attempt to gain the support of the community for our efforts, and as we evaluate all aspects of our programs. When we focus entirely on the cognitive aspects of the observable performances of students and groups of students, we ignore some of the most powerful available "data" that could help us improve student performance on the very measures about which we have become so obsessed. Most school districts have available the services of one or more educational psychologists to help collect and interpret data on student achievement. I do not mean to suggest this is not important and potentially valuable, but I would like to suggest the school could benefit just as much from the help of a cultural ethnographer. I would also like to suggest that the better the school understands and accounts for the local cultures within which the students exist, the better the school will be able to create and adapt learning experiences that will result in increased student performance (including the kinds of performance that are measured on all manner of tests).

So what would this look like in the real world?

Just how would we go about doing this? As an example, let's consider how we might use a young adult novel to explore youth culture. M.T. Anderson's

Feed is a science fiction novel in the tradition of the dystopian future society such as *1984* or *Brave New World*. In *Feed*, we follow a group of teenage characters at a time when transmitters are implanted in the brains of most citizens. Primarily a parody of the faddish consumerism and corporate greed spawned by our ever-present media interest, *Feed* is an interesting accomplishment in that it manages to paint a vivid portrait of a youth culture, including a set of language idioms and constructions, without dating that culture at a point in the historical past. Most novels that relied on a realistic representation of the youth culture of a particular time (e.g., the 1960s, the 1980s) become hopelessly dated in rather short order. By placing the novel in a future society, Anderson manages to capture the mechanisms and functions of youth culture in a book that should be not lose its impact for a good long while.

Of particular interest for our purposes here is Anderson's creation of a teen vocabulary. Consider, for example, how a unique youth culture is created through the following examples from chapter one of *Feed*. To express his sense of feeling a little spacey, the protagonist tells his friend, ". . . I'm so null . . . I'm null too, unit . . ." Here the term "null" refers to state of mind and "unit" expresses a friendship relationship. In describing contemporary fashion, the protagonist reports that on the walls of a club ". . . there were lots of pictures of dancing and people with romper-gills and metal wings . . ." In noting that he appreciates the company of his friends, the protagonist says, "And it would be good to have someone to download with." Upon feeling embarrassment, the protagonist notes, ". . . I felt like a complete bonesprocket . . ." and the expression "I'm flat-lining. Meg." reflects the character's lack of engagement. Note that "meg" is a modifier, not a name.

In a high school setting, we might approach study of *Feed* by having students create a lexicon of the teen terminology present in the novel. Aside from being a nice activity for language study, it could lead naturally to the creation of a lexicon of the teen vocabulary the students themselves use, and then we could have the students do some oral history work in the community to discover the unique vocabularies of previous generations. Here we started with the high-interest teen vocabulary present in the novel and moved to

first validate the students' existing culture and then to connect the students to the larger culture outside the walls of the school.

But the school gets something at least as valuable from the series of activities. The data collected from the contemporary lexicons and the interview data from the oral histories should be shared among the faculty and fed into school improvement efforts in the same way we make use of standardized test data. For example, if we have data suggesting students struggle with reading comprehension, we might schedule in-service workshops on comprehension strategies, and we might make the incorporation of those activities across the curriculum a priority. What should we do if the students' youth vocabulary reflects a glorification of drug use or promiscuity? How should we respond to disturbing trends we find in this kind of data we collect from students? Obviously responding to this kind of data is not as straightforward as responding to standardized test scores reflecting a particular deficiency, but the point is that discussion of the data by faculty members help teachers better understand their students and their communities, and this deepened understanding can enrich our instructional efforts.

My argument, then, is we need to validate, and respect the local culture. We need to discover as much as possible about the local culture, and we need to use our growing knowledge of the local culture to help select content (e.g., novels) to be taught. We need to connect the local culture to works studied, helping to develop interest in the content, but at the same time we need to connect the works studied to the local culture. When we use the content we are teaching to help students and teachers discover as much as possible about the local culture, we deepen our understanding of the local culture, and that under-

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standing can, in turn, help us do a better job of meeting our students' needs.

The readability and high interest of young adult literature make it well suited to use as a connection into local culture. How might we use a novel like *Dogwolf*, or *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*, or *Permanent Connections* to engage students in similar rural working-class communities with their own cultures? How could we use the novels like *Monster*, or *Forged by Fire* or *Miracle's Boys* to engage urban adolescents with their folk cultures? How could a novel like *Tangerine* be used to explore suburban culture? What young adult novels are uniquely appropriate for the students in your school? What could your students gain from a deeper appreciate of their folk heritage? How could you use that knowledge to better meet your students' needs?

In today's climate of standards from on high and pre-packaged instructional materials, it is easy to lose sight of the less perfect worlds in which our students live.

Whether the standards and accountability frenzy is a good idea or not is a topic for another place. My point here is that, given our pressing need to produce demonstrable student improvement on standardized measures, it is more important than ever for us to better understand and account for our students' rich cultural background. Instructional interventions based purely on cognitive data can have only so much effect. To push achievement higher, we need to account for and incorporate a much more sophisticated socio-culture awareness.

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