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Multicultural Education Comes to Lake Wobegon

When Garrison Keillor created his fictional town of Lake Wobegon, he touched a nerve of nostalgia in millions of Americans. His pleasant, unobtrusive, blue-eyed, blond-haired inhabitants reminded listeners of the places in their memories where people exist as strong, handsome, and above average.

But I’ve never thought of Keillor’s town as either fictional or as a stop on memory lane. I grew up in a Lake Wobegon, and I return for periodic visits. When I return, I find the town has changed little. It is still mostly Lutheran, and white, and the townspeople project an image of life as trouble-free.

I left Wobegon to go to college and I ended up living in Osseo, a suburb of Minneapolis, where I teach English to the children of other Wobegonians who graduated from college and pursued careers not available in their home town. Like the town, my suburban school is basically white, Lutheran, and Scandinavian. And I think everyone has tried to take the values of the town with them to the suburbs. I would say that most of my students and their parents see themselves as smugly “above average.”

Teaching the children of ex-Wobegonians isn’t much trouble. They behave well, achieve well, and still give their best at understanding the classic writers we have them read: Shakespeare, Chaucer, Hawthorne, Fitzgerald, and so on. My students seem to be living out Keillor’s legend, and, with any luck, will become another generation of strong women and handsome men.

However, within the last years, a new concept has come to shake up Lake Wobegon: multicultural education. Our English department meetings are resounding with the names of writers never spoken before: Michael Dorris, Jamaica Kincaid, Chinua Achebe, and Zora Neale Hurston. We have begun talking about multicultural stories and poems that “work” with our students. Most of us, I think, feel a great deal of relief that the sameness and whiteness of the Wobegonian world is being cracked by literature that allows students to see a world of different cultures and colors. The students seem to respond well to this change in literature. Just as they read Fitzgerald and grappled with the meaning of the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, they now read Hurston and wrestle with the hidden meaning of the pear tree in bloom.

But somehow in all of this there is something nagging at me. Articles and workshops seem to suggest that multicultural education is simply finding the right literature to use in the classroom. Open up the canon to Native-American, African-American, Asian-American, or Hispanic writers and students will automatically become culturally sensitive.

I think the problem is much more complex than that. I’m afraid my Wobegonian students and their parents just don’t have the background to fully understand the stories of other cultures. Why? Because I don’t think they know their own stories. I don’t think they have any cultural identity themselves.

How can this be? First of all, most Wobegonians are ethnically ignorant. Sure they joke about being Norwegian or Swedish, but a careful examination of typical inhabitants will show that that’s about all they know. Grandparents and great-grandparents were very careful when they settled Wobegon to renounce the old country and their heritage. For new immigrants to speak with accents or to act in any way different was a sure way to bring ridicule upon their heads. I remember my grandfather scoffing at his father for not being able to forget the old country. His attitude seemed to say, “We are Americans now. Forget the old ways and get on with your life here.” His son, my father, followed his example. Correspondence with relatives in Sweden was stopped, and he truly became a first generation American. This pressure to fit in, which still
continues, has severed a whole generation of Americans from their ethnic pasts. Stories of immigration, hardship, and parting with loved ones have been lost forever.

Secondly, grandchildren of these immigrants further removed themselves from their roots when they left their villages and farms and went to college. Most of these children were the first in their families to do so. I remember that college meant books and ideas I had never met before. There were symphonies, plays, and art galleries. They all made my Wobegon seem a little unimportant in the scheme of things. I didn’t care about what was going on in my home town, so I removed myself from its world. I viewed my upbringing there as quaint and picturesque but certainly not a part of who I had become. And who I had become was a person without a story.

When I look out over my classes, I see myself multiplied many times over. I see hard-working, intelligent people who have no identity, living in suburban communities that have no identity. That is why several years ago I decided that I needed to help my students find their stories and the stories of their communities. Otherwise, I wasn’t sure that any other stories I used in my classroom would have any impact upon them.

**Oral History Projects**

I started my search with inspiration from Elliot Wigginton and his Foxfire series. If he could have students in Rabun’s Gap, Georgia, discover the history of the community they live in, then I certainly could have my suburban students do the same. I sent them out with tape recorders and they came back with wonderful stories of one-room school teachers, semi-pro baseball players, Great Lakes ore shippers, early-day potato farmers and a host of other interesting people. They discovered that the housing developments they live in sit on potato fields that once belonged to proud farmers who had to give up a way of life for a growing population (and discovered how they sometimes got wealthy in the process). They found that major malls like Brookdale have changed the functions of small, downtown areas like Osseo. Pizza parlors and travel agencies replaced small department and grocery stores. Through the people of the community, my students have discovered a sense of place. They don’t just live in a development, but they live in a community with a history to tell and they are a continuing part of that story.

Later, I expanded the sort of topics my students dealt with because I realized that a community’s stories are more than historical. I began to read the weekly articles in the Minneapolis Star Tribune that Peg Meier and Dave Wood wrote about the colorful people in the small towns of Minnesota. These stories were later collected into the book *The Pie Lady of Winthrop and Other Minnesota Tales*. The articles show the variety of people who exist around us. I challenged my students to find the colorful people in our community and to get them to tell their stories. Once again they went out with tape recorders and returned with stories of a former mortician who now owns one of the biggest gift shops in the Twin Cities, of refugees from Vietnam who now are successful restaurant owners, and of the owner of a combined feed store and bus station who still manages to adapt and make a living in the middle of suburban sprawl. Through these stories my students discovered they live in a place of individual, one-of-a-kind characters who make their suburb different from any other.

But both of these projects are pretty upbeat. They show the positive side of the community, and I know that any community also has identity through the stories of its defeats and disasters. This realization really came to me when one of my students said he wanted to do a different kind of a project. He said he wanted to interview his mother, not because she was colorful or could shed light on the history of the town, but because she was a single parent and he thought she had an important story to tell. Others followed his lead and returned with stories of parents who had overcome chemical dependency and survived divorce, or friends who had gone through abortions and the breakup of families. As models they used interviews done by Studs Terkel in his book *American Dreams Lost and Found* and Peg Meier’s collection of stories called *The Last of the Tea-room Ladies*. These stories helped my students understand that they live in a community filled with the drama of daily life, that suburban living isn’t necessarily the escape from the reality of the world that many say it is.

**Reader-Response Journals**

At the same time I was searching for ways for my students to mine the stories of their communities, I was also looking for ways to get them to reveal their own stories and, through them, their own identities. I found the use of reader-response journals to be very successful in this attempt. Whenever I have students read a selection they quickly get used to responding to the piece, often with memories of situations that are similar in their own lives. For example in Paulette Childress White’s story, “Getting the Facts of Life,” a twelve-year-old black girl learns from her mother the facts about the changes going on in her young body, but she also learns the facts of racism as she accompanies her mother to the welfare office and sees her intimidated by a social worker. One of my students responded with her own story:
When I was 12 years old everything changed. I was going into the seventh grade and I was still a very young child in many aspects, but I was living in a very grown-up world. I was the oldest in my house because my sister had moved out leaving me with the two youngest kids to look after. I had a lot of responsibilities to handle and at times I felt I really couldn’t handle them. I felt like I never wanted to get any older. I could feel the kid inside of me being pushed out and a newer, older, more responsible person being shoved in its place. At times I felt like a two-year-old learning new things about life, only this time they were adult things. --Nicky Trent

This response, I think, demonstrates the main value of reader-response journals. They allow students to meet authors on their own terms. Instead of mystifying writers, placing them on pedestals, creating auras of greatness about them, the response journal says to the student, “That writer is a storyteller just like you. Now you tell your story. It’s an important one.” The response also allows students to see their stories in relation to the stories told by writers from all different cultures from all over the world. It allows them to see how similar all people are, but it also lets them see the major differences that exist.

A Senior-year Project: Memoir

These journals also become wonderful sources of stories that students can turn into larger works. Over the years I have had students write autobiographical sketches and memoir. Recently I began having my students write memoir based on a project conducted by one of my colleagues, Jule Adelshiem, who teaches English at Osseo Senior High. Every year she has her students write a memoir as a final project of their senior year. It is a good time for them to assess who they are as they embark on major changes in their lives. But what is most unique about this project is that students interview people who are close to them to find stories about themselves. I think that is an important concept. We all know that we carry our own stories, but this activity helps students understand that other people carry stories about them as well, and these stories may differ from those the students hold in their minds.

The project starts with having students complete a personality shield (see Figure 1). The shield causes students to take inventory of their lives. It asks them to name something that they are good at but also something that they wish they could improve. The questions attempt to let students see themselves in a sort of balance, both the good and bad aspects of their personalities. The last section of the shield is most important, for it is here that the students sum up the shield and make three statements about themselves. For example, one student looked at the shield and decided he was extremely creative, money hungry, and lazy. My suggestion was that he use these three topics as the basis for his memoir.

![Figure 1](image.png)

Next I ask the students to tape interviews with three important people in their lives. They could be parents, teachers, friends, or bosses. The purpose of the interview is, first of all, to check out the conclusions on the shield. The first question might be, “Do you agree that I am creative?” Or many students asked, “What do you like best about me? What is my strongest point?” Some students discover that their original summation on the shield is accurate, but some find from their discussions that they need to change one or two of their conclusions. The second purpose of the interview is to ask these people for stories that will illustrate the points in the memoir. For example, a student might ask, “When did you first realize that I was going to be a creative child?”

I don’t grade the tapes, but I do listen enough to know whether or not the assignment has been done. And I find myself listening much more than I intend. They are a real revelation. There is a lot of laughter on the tapes as everyone recalls stories that have long been buried, and there is a lot of love shown as well. I find that sometimes I have to rethink my relationships with some of my students based on what I hear. One of my roughest and toughest students was called “honey” by his mother, and he acted like a honey on the tape. That was a side of him I had never seen before and I decided maybe there was potential there for him.
After the tapes come in, it is my job to help the students turn the raw material into memoir. I see my job as helping students to become better storytellers, and that usually involves two things. Students don’t like to be very detailed; they’d rather tell than show. And they don’t like to reflect or comment on the facts they present; they’d rather just list the facts of a story. Both of these elements are most important in establishing the voice of a storyteller. Lucy McCormick Calkins in her book Living Between the Lines makes the point that personal narrative only reports the details of an event. The purpose of memoir is to explore the significance of the event (166). An example might serve to show how important the reflective nature of memoir is in this project.

In the following, a student gives great detail about an incident but both prefaces and ends the incident with insight she has gained from relating it:

One thing in my life that is really hard for me to keep balanced is my outgoing personality. Like sometimes I am way too outgoing. I can remember the time when I was in first grade and my best friend Mandy and I were outside on the playground. A boy came up to us and said, ‘I bet you’re too scared to go down that slide.’

I jumped up and said, ‘Oh yeah! I’m not scared. I can even do a cartwheel down that slide.’ So up, up I went. The ladder seemed to go on forever, but when I got to the top and looked down I saw all these people looking at me. I knew there was no way I could turn back.

The next thing I remember is me lying on the ground with blood going everywhere and my tooth with a big chip out of it. I really wished then that I was the shy little girl in the corner instead of the loud girl lying on the ground with a chipped tooth.

--Lisa Stardig

The project ends with students binding their memoirs into books loaded with pictures and artifacts from their lives. I hope these will become treasured souvenirs of their high school years.

My search for ways to help students find their stories has helped me realize two important concepts. First, my search has helped me realize that along with adding the works of minority writers to the canon, I need to add my students’ stories to the canon as well. In her book Student Worlds, Student Words, Elizabeth Radin Simons maintains that “...when students’ lives become the core of the curriculum, the teacher conveys something powerful to them. By making them part of the curriculum, the teacher is saying that they are as important as any other subject” (6).

Second, I have come to realize that students’ stories are a good starting base for helping them see the diversity in the world. Again, Simons speaks to this point. “Sharing family folklore, students see both similarity and diversity across family and ethnic groups...Through the study of their folklore, students in multicultural classes can come to appreciate the richness of living in a country of many cultures. On the other hand, a culturally homogeneous class will be more a celebration of one ethnic group ... Also, a class that looks homogeneous from the front of the room can be deceptive ... a surprising degree of diversity surfaces within an apparently single cultural group” (3-4).

I have great hope for all Wobegonians. I hope we will begin to know ourselves through our stories, our communities through their stories, and the people of all cultures through their stories.

References


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