

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 550

CS 213 755

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 TITLE Acquiring a Multicultural Perspective through the Use of Collaborative Pairs.
 PUB DATE Apr 93
 NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (24th, Charlotte, NC, April 1-3, 1993).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS College Sophomores; *Cooperative Learning; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Pluralism; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Multicultural Education; *United States Literature; Writing Instruction
 IDENTIFIERS Cultural Sensitivity; Literary Canon; *Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

Writing shapes identity, since it explores the core of values and experience that defines the self. The literary canon, once considered sacrosanct, is now being disassembled in response to the many voices that are now recognized to comprise the American experience. Sensitivity to such a multicultural perspective resulted in the design of a sophomore level college survey of American literature that combined group identity with group work. Students from different population groups were paired to examine a common literary text. Ownership was fostered by allowing student choice: choice of partner, group affiliation and text. The project followed a four-part outline: individual response to the text, collaborative critical study, a synthesis done collaboratively, and concluding individual responses to the whole assignment. Initial responses did not always conform to expectations regarding the concerns of each discourse community. Pairs worked together to research the literary work, agreeing on controlling thesis and structure of their survey of the critical opinion. The collaborative synthesis was achieved in a variety of ways by the groups, often highlighting disagreement and thus acknowledging the viability of differing viewpoints. Student reaction ranged from positive to negative feelings toward the collaborative project, demonstrating that the process was not always comfortable for participants. Overall, such projects should aim at fostering an "openness to unassimilated otherness." (HB)

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Acquiring a Multicultural Perspective
Through the Use of Collaborative Pairs

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Writing shapes identity. When we write, we explore the core
of values and experience that defines the self. This is true regard-
ing not only individual self-definition but also group identifica-
tion. Acknowledgement of this fact has been the impetus for much of
the recent scholarly discussion concerning a redefinition of the
American literary canon. More and more we have come to recognize the
many voices that define the American experience and to question what
we thought to be the established tradition.

Consider this. Hanging in my university office is an antique
Staffordshire plate with a concentric design labelled "American
Poets." The seven figures painted on the porcelain surface
include William Cullen Bryant, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell
Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan
Poe, and, in the center, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. This
assemblage of white, Anglo-Saxon, triple-named males made up the
American literary pantheon during the first half of this century.
Collectively, they represented what some have called the "white
patriarchy" that defined the literary tradition in this country.

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Only within the last two decades have we begun to challenge
this established view. Critics like Gregory Jay now argue for
reconsidering the sophomore survey of American literature under
a new label "Comparative American Literature." He feels that such

a renaming would reflect the fact that there is really no core experience that is universally American, that this country has been essentially a multicultural experiment (268). Gerald Graff proposes that the only valid way to examine American literature is to "teach the conflicts," to select texts that openly challenge each other's assumptions as well as any pretense of national generalities (51-58).

It is sensitivity to this issue of multiculturalism that informed my decision to create in my sophomore survey of American literature a class project that combined group identity with group work.

I thought that it would be interesting to pair students from different special population groups to examine a common literary text. This collaborative examination would satisfy one of the major criticisms of multiculturalism, that its assertion of ethnic or racial or gender identity leads to a "balkanization" of perspectives, a tendency to fragmentation rather than unification. The collaborative element, I think, avoids that perceived problem since it ensures dialogue and an implicit acknowledgement of the other person's point of view.

From the very beginning of the assignment, I sought to foster ownership by providing choices: choice of partner, choice of group affiliation, and choice of text.

Students were asked to choose a partner from a special population group different from their own. In this regard, the logical denominators would appear to be race and gender. That was true in most cases; most of the collaborative pairs were composed of African-

American/European-American partners or female/male partners. Yet, there were interesting combinations that did not fit my initial expectations. Two female students chose to examine Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" from the perspective of a Southerner and a Northerner. Two male students chose to analyze Phyllis Wheatley's "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield" from the points of view of a Methodist and a Roman Catholic.

All texts were to be chosen from works included in the compact edition of The Harper American Literature and not to be covered in class discussion during the project time frame.

The project itself followed a four-part outline: initial individual responses to the text, a collaborative critical study, a collaborative synthesis between the personal responses and critical data, and concluding individual responses to the assignment as a whole.

Thus, the project had two sections that showcased individual effort and that would be evaluated for individual performance and two sections of collaborative work for which group responsibility would be gauged.

In the first section, each student wrote a personal response to the chosen literary text from the perspective of her or his special population group. For example, in examining John Updike's "Separating," the tale of how an estranged couple face up to the task of telling their children of their decision to live apart, a male student focused on the character of the husband and the "fact that men do have emotions." His female partner, on the other hand,

perceived the husband to be weak and his distress over the impending divorce unjustified, particularly in light of the fact that he was the one who initiated the separation process.

Initial responses did not always conform to my expectations regarding the concerns of each discourse community. In examining Anne Sexton's poem "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," for example, a collaborative pair provided unexpected initial reactions. The female partner was critical of the mistress who is the speaker of the poem; the male partner, on the other hand, sympathized with "the other woman" in the traditional love triangle and criticized the husband as someone who is "doing both his wife and lover a disservice by not seeing them as human beings."

After establishing their initial reactions to the text, each pair then researched the literary work with their special focus in mind. This is the first truly collaborative section; each pair was free to determine how they would combine their energies to accomplish this task. Some identified the essential secondary material together and then divided what they had accumulated into two relatively equal parts, each partner being responsible for a separate list. No matter how the critical inquiry was divided, the pair had, at some point, to come together to integrate what each had discovered in regard to critical opinion; they had to sit down and agree upon a controlling thesis and structure for their critical survey. One student wrote: "We met several times a week to discuss the work that needed to be done; we worked on certain portions together and then separated the portions that could be handled by one

or the other. It was nice to have someone to sit and talk with about an assignment and it actually be legal."

The next section, which calls for a collaborative synthesis of both the critical material and personal responses, the student pairs approached in a number of ways. A few structured this section in dialogue form; each partner, in her or his own voice, used critical material to reinforce or re-evaluate her or his initial point of view. Citing critical support for their respective positions, one male/female pair argued over the meaning of responsibility in Kate Chopin's story "Desiree's Baby." A portion of their lively exchange follows:

Carlene: "My impressions of women in "Desiree's Baby" is that they gain identity from their social context and they are consequently victimized by prevailing ideologies."

Patrick: "This is true, but I find it is a sentiment too sympathetic to the female element of the story; it ignores the plight of the male."

Carlene: "There is no plight of the male in this story! Desiree has been made to feel as though she is worthless without the acceptance of a man. As Mary Papke writes, a woman can be destroyed by 'social sanction.'"

Patrick: "You don't understand. Nobody has any compassion for Armand, who just like Desiree, has to obey the pretexts of an environment he was born into. If you did your reading, you would also find that Papke says Armand is 'born into a dark world of sadness and barely restrained brutality,' so he is subject to an inescapable dilemma as well."

This format proved particularly effective because it provided a means for integrating critical opinion with one's own and engaging in

an exchange of perspective to reach, if not agreement, at least an acknowledgement of differing viewpoints.

The final part of the project was composed of another personal response; in this instance, both students were asked to react to the project as a whole, to cite what they learned from the format and from working with each other. Student reactions ranged from "I felt a greater sense of responsibility since I had a partner who was depending on me" to "my personal response to this experience is that I have no interest in doing such a thing again."

In their keystone research on collaborative writing, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have asserted that "group writing demonstrates the way in which we share or collaborate...in creating our own realities and selves" (435). Indeed, sharing the writing experience provides a crucible for one's own ideas, a means for testing their relative weight.

The process is not always comfortable for those involved. One young woman admitted this past fall: "I never realized how personally I took my writing until this project. I truly came to appreciate what 'my' words meant to me and how they are an extension of me." A male student wrote: "Writing to me is like a lover that one does not want to share." That same student went on to say that he did not object to the sharing of ideas but that shared writing was difficult. "One never hears of Picasso saying, 'Hey, come here and finish this up,' or Keats saying, 'Fill in this line.' Art is too personal for consultation."

Yet, this hurdle was jumped. After one student commented

that he and his partner left their first meeting "in a state of stunned muteness," that same person finally acknowledged that attempting a dialogue was not in itself a bad thing, that to exchange ideas is not necessarily a prelude to surrender of self. John Trimbur writes that "the consensus that we ask students to reach in the collaborative classroom will be based not so much on collective agreements as on collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences" (610).

The goal, therefore, is not necessarily conformity. Just as the concept of the American melting pot has been largely discredited as a paradigm of the making of America so too should be the class objective of reaching agreement by assenting to prevailing opinion. A multicultural collaborative project, such as the one described in this paper, should have as its purpose the fostering of what Iris Marion Young so eloquently labels "an openness to unassimilated otherness" (22). Each student would come to recognize and respect the many voices that make up the American experience as well as the individual voice of her or his own project partner. The process of collaborative dialogue is a sufficient achievement in itself.

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