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Decentering American Students

Kristi Elliott

Twin towers, icons of American economy and technology, collapsed into rubble—a blow from Eastern opposition. The blow hoped to weaken American pragmatic idealism; however, much to the chagrin of U.S. foes, Americans did not crumble or cower in fear. Instead, families joined hands in forgiveness, citizens rededicated values for democracy, and representatives committed expenses for safety. Americans, true pragmatics, allowed reason to replace rash reactions. Through a careful study, analysts offered an application for retaliation. Consideration of culture and geography allowed analysts to anticipate future issues of conflict. Now, most Americans face their futures with hope and confidence, but at the rate of technological growth, new issues arise daily. Pragmatic values of study, application, and anticipation must remain the focus for the future.

With this frame of reference, assertions need to be made about those who play the biggest role in America's future, the youth. The youth, the students in the classrooms, need an awareness of the world's diversity and its complexities. Understanding the complexities of today's world forefronts future responsibilities. Therefore, the relevancy of these complexities should focus classroom studies. The authors of *Content Area Literacy* maintain that students who understand how learning relates to overall knowledge will comprehend more about what they are reading (Readence, Bean, and Baldwin 8). For example, classical literature is a tough sell in comparison to the stimuli given by media and technology. Although there will always be a few golden students, without a reason or motive most students will need relevant connections to interact with the learning

processes.

In the past, teachers of world literature have related, with moderate success, classical Greek and Roman literature to American concepts of government and art. Certainly, those connections remain important focuses; however, the time now demands a broader connection to the worldwide network.

New connections can be made when teachers launch units, present resources, and direct learning strategies that will not only expose students to academia but to cultural diversity. A pragmatic study of the content of world studies and current world events will equip students with the appropriate tools for communication. Outcomes will include relevant knowledge to gain deeper understandings, applicable tools to rationalize present world conflicts, and clairvoyance to anticipate resolutions of pending and future world issues. Without a new classroom focus, future freedoms sit precariously atop a mountain of isolation.

Far across an ocean, Western values are often in sharp contrast to Eastern thought. To the Israelis and Palestinians, freedom is still a fight. To those in possession of crude oil, America represents extortion and arrogance. To many who adhere to the philosophy of Confucianism, American relationships need reprioritizing. To the Hindus of India, American ideals desecrate nature. Values esteemed by the West are often incomprehensible to the East because they are not culturally parallel.

These facts do not mandate a conversion or even an accommodation. They do ask, however, for a responsibility—one that America has carried throughout its history; they ask for the pragmatic

advocating of peace. Efforts toward living peacefully in a diverse world must come from the Western comprehension of Eastern values.

Living peacefully with humankind requires communication skills. Communication is not limited to just translating the languages. It also includes interpreting the cultural aspects, not the least of which would be the religion of the culture. In *Essays on World Religion*, Huston Smith quotes Dr. Charles Strong, a supporter of studying world religion:

The use of studying other religions than our own is that our sympathy becomes thereby widened. We learn to think more charitably of those outside our religion . . . We thus learn to understand our own religion, see what it is in our own religion that has to be emphasized, . . . and, [through sympathy,] that we must try to communicate to mankind. (18)

Studying other religions, and other aspects of culture, will allow students to broaden their base of communicable knowledge. Students will gain a greater appreciation of their own faith, and respectful attitudes will grow concerning those that inhabit the same, small earth as we.

It is, therefore, imperative that teachers begin instruction that would enable communication across the cultural differences of this unique world. Any effort for a peaceful world must come from an appreciative, empathetic understanding of the lives of others. America is more than capitalism and materialism, yet how can those illusions be dissolved if there is not effort made to see ourselves from the perspective of those an ocean or more away.

Classroom teachers just need to take a quick glance at today's news to find potential topics for the lessons of today. For instance, America's war on terrorism traces to the Middle East. Homed near this hot bed, and southwest of China, is India. Just as President Bush responded to terrorists by striving to eliminate their strongholds, Indian

leaders are currently asking for the disablement of separatist camps because of terrorist conflict over Kashmir ("India" 1). Kashmir, claimed by both India and Pakistan, is a source of mounting tensions. Pakistan, "nuclear rivals of India," has allied with the not-to-be-forgotten China for over fifty years ("Musharraf" 1). Most Americans, even those not making foreign policies, could rationalize communication efforts with Indian leaders. And as Huston Smith suggests, a good place to start communication is studying the religion, in this case, the rituals of Hinduism.

One approach for teachers of world literature would be teaching a unit containing translations of classical and contemporary Indian texts. Particular attention can be made to relevancy by the unit's resources and learning strategies. In the following sample unit, students will study integrated aspects of Hindu culture by reading a play, apply their knowledge by analyzing a short-story, and anticipate conflict resolutions by debating various news and journal articles concerning India's welfare.

To engage learning to a classical text, teachers will need to access a variety of pre-reading strategies during the launching of this unit. One strategy to consider is preliminary research, which includes a visit to the computer lab where students can read current newspaper articles online and gather information about the plights of India, those in conflict with her beliefs, and its current relationship with America. After the given lab time, groups can meet to assess and then report on India's status and what areas are of primary concern.

A Lesson Plan

This two-day lesson plan will be student-centered, as opposed to teacher-centered. "Collaborative, small group discussion using pre-reading strategies . . . , are a good alternative to teacher-centered discussion Small, problem-solving groups can afford greater opportunities for student participation if they are focused on an important topic with clear task guidelines" (Readence, Bean, and Baldwin 39). Clear guidelines

are as simple as first presenting students with web addresses such as <<http://CNN.com/search>>, <<http://news.cnet.com/news>>, and <<http://washingtonpost.com>>. Second, students should type “India,” “American relations with India,” or “India and Kashmir” in the search box. Third, teachers will ask students to read ten related articles, and fourth, the guidelines will require students to take notes and write a reflective journal entry before meeting with discussion groups. Once gathered in groups, however, students will share their written work and discuss primary considerations.

After various pre-reading strategies are employed, students will be more comfortable (Redance, Bean, and Baldwin 149) reading Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* (232 - 316). Other areas of comfort rationalize the reading of this play, as well. The play’s classical language is comparable to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, a part of most world literature anthologies. Also, the storyline— boy meets girl, boy loves girl, boy loses girl, and boy finds girl— is a familiar plot to young adults of today. In addition, the use of imagery paints vivid pictures for even the youngest of readers, and for more than just a side note, the play makes a great tool for teachers to make after-reading connections with relevant Hindu concepts such as the caste system and the five debts owed by the upper castes of Hinduism.

In the grand, idealistic effort to exchange discourse effectively with all world cultures, students—America’s future—must decenter away from the egocentric behavior that breaks down communication.

Relevant connections made after reading are not meant to negate the usefulness of during-reading strategies like vocabulary breakdowns, predicting promotions, and character analysis, but emphasis must be made on one post-reading activity in particular, dramatic interpretation. Dramatic interpretation is an activity that breaks the play into assigned parts and requires groups to

act the parts out in cultural detail. Virginia O’Keefe, author of *Speaking to Think Thinking to Speak*, states, “Speaking in role promotes more abstract thinking abilities in [students, which] demands decentering, moving away from personal thought to ‘other-centered’ vision” (135 and 137). In the grand, idealistic effort to exchange discourse effectively with all world cultures, students—America’s future—must decenter away from the egocentric behavior that breaks down communication.

A Post-Reading Activity

This post-reading activity will require a week of class time. That week will allow groups time to practice their parts and to incorporate teacher-given topics into their performances. (Group members will be required during the performance to take turns explaining the significance of their teacher-given topics.) Although the week’s activities for the most part are student-centered, it does require the teacher to teach mini-lessons specific for each group: the Hindu trinity and their many representations, the dharma of India’s caste system, the festival days which honor the changing of the seasons, and the five debts paid by the upper caste. Teachers can compile information for each mini-lesson from *The World’s Religions* by Huston Smith, from *Great Religions of the World* by the National Geographic Society, and from *A Short Introduction to Hinduism* by Klaus K. Klostermaier. It does not require students to memorize the text; they are only to read from it.

The first group will act out *Shakuntala*’s prologue. After the benediction, the first narrator—assisted by visual aides—will describe the Hindu trinity. Next, the second narrator must define the “audience” mentioned twice by the director (Kalidasa 235 – 236). The audience definition, court society, given via teacher-relay, is depicted in Anderson’s description of Kalidasa (232). Finally, the last narrator will describe the festival days that celebrate the changing of the seasons, particularly, the summer festival mentioned at the conclusion of the prologue.

The second group will perform Act I until the modest disrobing by the king (Kalidasa 239). Actors will take turns describing the information received during their mini-lesson, which should have included an explanation of the king's warrior caste, the charioteer's laboring class, and the hermit's Brahmin caste, and the reason why the king automatically respected the wish and blessing of the hermit. In addition to acting and narrating, the teacher should require this group to support their explanations with specific lines or actions from the scene. For example, the urgency with which the king wants the chariot stopped and his reverent bows show his dedication to his dharma.

Group three will perform more of Act I, with emphasis on how the characters demonstrate one of the five debts owed by the upper caste (Klostermaier 29 – 30). In support, Kalidasa pays debt five when Shakuntala calls the tree "sister" (242). He pays debt four when hospitality is displayed by the girls washing the king's feet (244), and he pays debt two when the king describes his "duty to the scriptures" (244).

The final group will perform parts of Act IV, scene ii. They will incorporate the rituals of paying debt one, the ceremonial rites of the morning bath, and the Hindu reverence to the Ganges River. The teacher can best explain Shakuntala's ceremonial bath with the following quote from Klaus K. Klostermaier:

A Hindu householder is to rise at dawn (before sunrise) and to utter, before speaking to anyone, the name of his deity of choice. He should then look at the palms of his hands to make sure that the first thing he beholds is an 'auspicious' object. Similarly, he should then touch the earth so as to perform an 'auspicious' action before doing anything else. After bowing to the images of deities in his room and muttering mantras, he is to think about the day's agenda with a view to increasing dharma and artha. (29)

The character of Shakuntala must carefully perform this sacred ritual as the narrator explains and points out the materials of ceremony (Kalidasa 272).

If a fifth group is necessary, or if the teacher would like to model this activity, actors can perform the scene with the king, Shakuntala, and his son. An important part of this scene is the narrator explaining the thought processes behind the Hindu naming ceremony (Klostermaier 38). Because of Shakuntala's care in the naming ritual, the king was able to begin to recognize his son and thus become a family again.

Specific details are given for this post-reading activity because the ability to think-in-role is an essential key to unlocking the students' cognitive ability to break free from the narrowness of their previous self-centered focus.

Specific details are given for this post-reading activity because the ability to think-in-role is an essential key to unlocking the students' cognitive ability to break free from the narrowness of their previous self-centered focus. "The almost-real world of drama means that an individual can live safely under several hats, experiencing others' feelings and viewpoints" (O'Keefe 137). Living through the perspectives of classical characters allows students to acquire the sympathy needed to take America one step closer to living peacefully.

After reading and studying the classical play, students are ready to apply their understanding with the analysis of Santha Rama Rau's contemporary short story "By Any Other Name" (1387 – 1394). A careful reading by students and an analyzing activity will bring focus to the missing details learned from reading the first literary work.

The details missing include first, why the girls are mad about the teacher changing their names; it negates the special thoughts parents give to a naming ceremony. The second elusive detail

is the reason the mother regrets her inability to teach the stories of Lord Krishna; it is contrary to debt two. Third, the deciphering of the girls' castes and their treatment of their teachers goes against debt three, and fourth, the significance of the new lunch requested by the girls is contrary to debt five.

New information will become apparent to the students as the teacher points out the reasons Indians, during the setting of the story, were annoyed with Britain; colonization and forced rule did not sit well with Indian residents. Rau demonstrates this annoyance by her allusion to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the title and in the mother's statement about British narrow-mindedness. "You can bury a dog's tail for seven years and it still comes out curly, and you can take a Britisher away from his home for a lifetime and he still remains insular" (1390). This one quote supports Smith's earlier quote. Although Americans are not the "insular British," Americans have often been given the same label. Thus, if American youth can increase the foundation of their sympathies and look at themselves through the eyes of others, they might increase the chances of losing the stigma of American smugness.

Finally, to conclude the unit, students can debate current issues facing residents of India. Debating is essentially "group thinking," and O'Keefe considers it an imperative step to anticipate the means of conflict resolution. "People must talk, argue, compare, and suggest. New ideas disturb the peace. However, original thoughts emerge from this process" (89). Ideally, this last step will bring positive results because it promotes the same American ideals that established our nation.

Teachers can generate potential debate topics by looking back over the resources students found during the launching of the unit. Suggested topics are the fight over Kashmir, the efforts to stop the rising Indian population, and the food sources available to the starving lower castes. In addition, the entire class should read part of a *Divine Nature* by Cremo and Goswami. "Meat and

Environment" gives a Hindu's perspective of how the eating of slaughtered meat destroys the environment. It is an interesting perspective even for those not Hindu. The critical look taken by the students will absolutely force a debate about the starvation epidemic in India and the potential for America to sacrifice a bit for the greater good of humankind (13 – 20).

**Efforts for a peaceful world must
first start with those who desire
it the most.**

From sea to shining sea, Americans, young and old, but specifically those still in the classrooms of life, need to engage in a pragmatic, empathetic study of the diverse world. The study ideally will produce ongoing uses for their new sympathies and build their anticipatory abilities to create limitless possibilities for the future.

Efforts for a peaceful world must first start with those who desire it the most. If America truly desires to live peacefully, despite the world's diversity, teachers must turn the spotlight inward so that a true change can occur.

The world is not what it appears to be. Behind this surface life, where we experience the play of life and death, there is a deeper life which knows no death; behind our apparent consciousness, which gives us the knowledge of objects and things . . . there is . . . pure . . . consciousness . . . Truth . . . is experienced only by those who turn their gaze inward. (qtd. in Smith, *Essays* 29)

The world contains more, much more, than what Americans currently understand. To uncover the truth, teachers must first ask students to study and apply. Second, they must gaze introspectively to anticipate not only the needs of the "red, white, and blue" but to look deeper, look for truth in its entirety, and find the pureness of life.

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