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Connecting Cultures

Marianne Peel Forman

We will travel as far as we can, but we cannot in one lifetime see all that we would see or learn all that we hunger to know....
— Loren Eiseley, Anthropologist

"Why do we have to study about those people who live so far away and have nothing to do with our lives?" students inevitably ask in my 7th grade Language Arts/Social Studies class. As teachers, we try to make connections for students—through history, through geography, through the study of traditions and rituals. Our focus is on helping students to see that, as citizens of this world, we are often more alike than different. When I attended the Spring NCTE Conference in Albuquerque this year, I was introduced to an "art book" called *The Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, by Peter Menzel. This book is filled with photographs of average families from around the world pictured outside their homes, surrounded by their possessions. As an adult, issues of economic status, gender equity, and first world vs. third world concerns began to arise in my mind immediately. As a teacher, I saw this book as a marvelous tool to introduce and engage students in the study of cultures around the world. This activity allows students to "travel" and to really get to know real people in cultures that traditionally seem inaccessible and so very far away.

The Lesson Unfolds

To provide a sense of urgency and immediacy, I ask students to imagine that a fire has erupted in their home. Knowing that their family members and pets are all safely outside, I tell them that they have five minutes to gather their most prized possessions. I give them a grocery sack in which to store these items. Their job is to collect the possessions and bring them to school the next day.

The next morning, we share the contents of our bags. Everyone's contents are uniquely personal,

special in their own way. Stories about the importance of each object emerge naturally, and questions like "Why did you save this?" and "How could I have forgotten that?" fill the room.

(A variation of the above starting point would be to have students draw ten items they would save if their house suddenly burst into flames.)

After students have had the opportunity to discuss their possessions and tell the story of at least one of the items to their sharing group, students divide into pairs. I then pass out two laminated photos from *Material World* to each pair, making certain that the photos represent very different cultures and economic levels. Students are then invited to discuss what they "notice" about each picture. I remind them to consult the people and possessions "keys" which the photographers have included with each photograph.

We then reconvene as a whole class and discuss our observations. Students often notice that, in many of the photos, the items present are very functional, no-frill kinds of possessions. They also notice that many of the people are pictured with animals, which differ depending on the part of the world they are viewing. Furthermore, they also notice different abodes, as each family is pictured in front of their home. They begin to look at the photos with a very keen eye, an eye that is often full of questions and concerns.

Next, students are each asked to select just one of the photos viewed in their pair. I have each student create a list of his/her possessions from the "bag" activity. Next to that column, I have them list important possessions they noticed from the photograph they viewed. A full class discussion, then, focuses on comparing what we considered signifi-

can't enough to save with what the family from another culture displayed in front of their home.

By this time, students are steeped in noticing similarities and differences. Many feel that they “know” the family in the photograph quite well because they have been privy to what matters to them. We know each other better in class, too, because we have shared what truly matters to each of us. A sense of trust has been established, and we are ready to write.

Let the Writing Begin...

I like to give students a place to begin to write, and I usually accomplish this by offering many options. What follows is a list of suggestions, always accompanied by giving students the freedom to write in their own directions if they have already thought of places to begin.

- Think about all the “stuff” that you have that is important to you. Select one of the items and write a piece describing the item and its significance in your life.
- Think about the “stuff” that you put in your “fire bag.” Imagine your life **without** one of those items. Write a piece in which you discuss the item and how your life would have been different without this possession.
- Think about all the “stuff” you have that clutters up your life. What are the items you have that you could do without or clear out of your life? Write a piece in which you discuss the “extra stuff.” Consider why you keep this stuff around, why you don’t let it go, what having this stuff around does for your life.
- Think about the photos we looked at from around the world. What startled you? Amazed you? Shocked you? Write.
- Think about the people in the photographs from around the world. Pretend you are one of the family members in one of the photos you examined. Take on the voice of that person, discussing your most prized possessions.
- Look at the two photographs again. As you can see, they are from very different parts of the world and represent very different life styles, cultures, and economic levels. Select two people—one from each of the photos. Develop a dialogue between these two people in which they discuss what matters to them, based on the possessions they have chosen to bring out into their front yards.

- Look at your drawing again. Write a poem in which you devote a stanza to each item you selected. You might consider writing an “ode” to each object in each stanza, praising your fondness of and devotion to each item.

- Look at the photographs again. Look carefully at feet, at shoes. Write the story of one pair of feet or one pair of shoes that you observe. Where have these feet/shoes been? What have they seen, felt, experienced?

- Look at the photographs again. Select a face that fascinates you or moves you. Write a monologue in which you discuss what is on your mind, what matters to you, what you are thinking, what consumes you.

- Many of the photographs show families with animals in their front yards. Select an animal and a child in the photograph. Write a piece in which you talk about your feelings about this animal, whether it is a pet or a work animal or both, the animal’s name, memory stories about the animal, etc.

- Notice that there are musical instruments in many of the photographs. Select a person from the photograph, perhaps the person holding the instrument, and write about the relationship between the instrument and the person. Take on the voice of the person discussing the instrument. When did you first discover this instrument? Who taught you to play? What kinds of music do you like to create? How does the instrument fit into your daily life, into your family life, etc.

Teacher as Writer

One of the most valuable strategies I use in my classroom is to write along with my students. On our very first day together, I let them know that I will be writing with them on each assignment. Sometimes, I will share a piece I wrote in the past, sometimes I will write at the same time they write, but I will always share with them. These writings are presented as just one way to approach the writing, and the students always appreciate a “model” from which to work.

Below are two pieces that I share with students in conjunction with this activity. The first piece describes my initial reactions as I viewed the photographs for the very first time in Albuquerque. The second piece is an example of myself attempting to follow one of the suggestions from the writing prompts above.

Stuff

*My daughters tell me
that we need to buy
a bigger house,
that we no longer have room
for all the stuff.
And yet our home
modest in square footage
for this Midwest place
is mansion in dimension
to over ninety percent of the homes
around the world.*

*Instead
of finding a real estate agent,
I take them to a shelter
early Saturday morning
to prepare and serve
food for the homeless,
for the people down on their luck,
for those who have all their stuff
in their pockets
or on their backs.*

*They are surprised
by the size of the kitchen
and the dozens of pans of chicken
they must baste, turn, and baste again.
Over a hundred will come,
just before noon,
a veteran cook tells them.*

*The mashed potatoes
are real and lumpy
and my daughters stir in
extra butter
because they like the flavor
it leaves on their tongues at home.*

*Children come,
mostly,
and mothers
who balance them
on tired shoulders and hips.*

*Their part in the line
was to serve
the dessert,
the cake they had cut
in perfect squares
making certain that the frosting*

*was evenly distributed
among the single plates.
One man asked,
"Which flavor would you recommend,
young ladies?"
and both daughters
pointed to the chocolate cake
rich with layers
and creamy with topping,
not dry like the yellow cake.
They offered this moistness to the man
and I watched the food pass from their small hands
to his.*

*The ride home
was unusually quiet
and still.
All of us
without telling each other
burrowed through our rooms,
our drawers,
our overflowing boxes
that afternoon.
Separating temporary pleasures
from lasting treasures.*

*I found boxes
outside of each room
that night,
boxes of possessions
to give away.
And, like fresh moist chocolate cake,
I tasted the knowing
that my daughters
now possessed.*

Ethiopian Boy

*If I look at your hands
I know you are not idle
That pounding grain with mortar and pestle
Is a memorized motion
Of your palms and fingers.
I can see the sinews in your forearms
Bulging above your skin
Familiar with the twists and turns
Such work makes on the body.*

*If I look at your feet
I know that you visit the chicken coop
Often gathering up the daily eggs
From your one feathery friend.*

*I know that you mucked out
The horse stalls,
Rubbing the noses of the horses between rakings,
Delighting in their nudges,
Their warm smells,
Their desire to eat the oats
You have to offer.*

*If I look at your eyes
I see the center of who you are
Looking to your papa with such admiration
Your eyes make your whole face smile.
Your papa, standing there
With his arms outstretched
Feet grounded on straw floor
Proclaiming with his hands
"All of this belongs to me."*

Sharing our Writings

After students have had the opportunity to share their writings, make revisions, and create a "final" piece that they are truly proud of, there are numerous options for further "publication." One option would be to create a display of the photographs paired with the students' writings. Another would be to create a display board, with a background of flames perhaps, and display the writings.

Also, students could be photographed with the contents of their bags—in front of their own home, even—and a display board with accompanying writings could be created. A repeat of this activity, giving new photographs to each student, could be done, too, or a display with several writings about particular photos could be created.

Extensions and Adaptations

Consider involving parents and/or grandparents in the bag activity. Have students ask relatives what they would put in their "significant possessions" sacks. Students could then write pieces about what new insights they now have about the relatives based on the objects they selected. They could also do compare/contrast types of paper, comparing their own objects with those of their relatives.

Consider linking this activity to a unit on how economics often determines our decisions, our values. Have students read about child labor around the world. Invite students to complete a "What's in Your Closet?" analysis. To accomplish this, students investigate their closets and make lists of articles of clothing and the country in which the clothing was made. Pair this activity with readings about working conditions for children in India, the

Philippines, Indonesia, etc. A study of Iqbal Mashish, the young boy in Pakistan who was murdered due to his fight for children's rights around the world, would work well with this unit.

Pair this activity with a close look at the UNICEF book entitled *Children Just Like Me*. Each page of this wonderful book celebrates the life of a child from cultures all over the world. Have students design their own pages, focusing on such things as dress, hometown, customs in the family, business, school, and favorite foods.

Consider this activity a part of a unit on cultural awareness and multiculturalism. This activity could also be a part of a unit on world economics, social justice, or distribution of world wealth.

Conclusion

Students love looking at the photographs from *Material World*. As I stated earlier, after spending time discussing and writing about the families in the photographs, they feel like they really "know" several people from another culture. Students also revel in similarities they find. One of my students, upon examining the photo from Great Britain, discovered that one of the people pictured clearly had several similar and unusual hobbies in common with him. At the request of the student, I began to help him "track down" this person he believes to be a kindred spirit. An internet search proved very helpful. We sent our letters of inquiry to matching names and are currently waiting for replies.

Most of all, I feel this activity accomplishes one of my major goals as a teacher of Social Studies and a teacher of literature: creating empathy in students. By viewing these articles and really beginning to walk around inside the people photographed through writing, students were able to "feel with" people from other cultures. We traveled so far, without ever leaving our classroom.

Works Cited

- Kindersley, Barnabas and Anabel. *Children Just Like Me*. New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, 1995.
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About the Author

Marianne Peel Forman, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant and a middle school teacher in East Lansing, is an accomplished poet and was the inaugural winner of the Pete Edmunds Poetry Prize. She was nominated for the Irving Thornberg Bell-Ringer Award in Teaching and was honored as one of Michigan's Top Teachers in 1997 by *Metropolitan Woman* magazine.