

**Learning about Difference  
in a White Rural Population  
ENG 343:**

***New Novels: Many Voices, Many Cultures***

<http://users.uma.maine.edu/faculty/akurth/eng343/index.html>

Maine has the dubious distinction of being the second-whitest state in the Union, at 97%. The largest minority is French-Canadian (14%). African-Americans and Native Americans are each less than 1% of the population. Students often have minimal opportunities to encounter and negotiate diversity.

The University of Maine at Augusta is small (5000 head count). The majority of the students are female (78%), non-traditional in age (60%), work at least part-time (75%), and are first-generation college students (75%).

**ENG 343: *New Novels: Many Voices, Many Cultures*** is an online literature course featuring six novels in English set in, and written by authors from, foreign or U.S. minority cultures. A course website has extensive information about the culture or sub-culture of each book: maps, historical and geographical information, art, music, brief author bios, web links, and lists of further resources.

Texts include (for Spring 2006) Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*; Ha Jin's *Waiting*; Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*; Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*; Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*; and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*.

The course centers on ample discussion of both the literary aspects of the texts and the cultural issues they raise, including such topics as assimilation, polygamy, attempted genocide, U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the Caribbean, colonialism and its effects, feminism, and several traditional cultural beliefs and practices, e.g. foot binding, vodun, and the Indian caste system.

Can such a course change (or create) our students' thinking about those cultures? Is it possible for students to develop an understanding of the character of Lin, the passive Maoist doctor who patiently waits eighteen years for permission to divorce his arranged-marriage wife and marry his girlfriend? Can they appreciate the cultural dynamics that led Esi, a successful Ghanaian professional woman, to both embrace Western career values and become the subordinate wife in a polygamous marriage?

### **The study**

The initial goal of this research was to determine whether and how student openness to the practices of other cultures changed as a result of learning a little about them. This is difficult to determine. Since the course is an elective, students enrolling are likely to be interested in and open to new ideas. Indeed, each class group has included one or two students who had

lived abroad at least briefly or were part of a mixed-ethnic family by birth, adoption, or marriage. A few students from other states enroll. Local students thus have the advantage of meeting at least a few classmates with somewhat “different” backgrounds.

Pre- and post-testing of knowledge of and attitudes about the cultures under study would be the best way to determine what changes, if any, students undergo in their thinking. That will be the next step.

Meanwhile, this preliminary research undertook an initial look at possible changing attitudes through several means, using data from the Spring 2006 class:

- analysis of the discussion boards
- responses to assigned research papers on the cultures under study
- a short survey

### Discussion boards

The analysis of the discussion boards took two forms:

- A look at how often students volunteered examples of new perspectives or changed minds. Unsolicited comments about changed thinking or attitudes, such as “I never thought of that,” “I used to think. . . but now,” “I had a new idea,” “I’m learning that \_\_\_\_” were counted.
- A count of how often students reported additional information and/or resources they sought out on their own. Doing so was neither suggested nor rewarded by the instructor, so was taken as a strong measure of interest in the culture under discussion.

Figures shown below are for the current class, Spring 2006:

N = 19	Total discussion postings (over two weeks)	Unsolicited mentions of changed thinking or attitudes	Unsolicited seeking out and sharing of outside resources
<i>The Toughest Indian in the World</i> (Northwest Indian)	184	9	0
<i>Waiting</i> (Cultural Revolution)	185	13	6
<i>The Farming of Bones</i> (Dominican massacre of Haitians)	205	8	1
<i>The God of Small Things</i> (India)	221	1	7
<i>Changes: A Love Story</i> (Ghana)	100	7	4

At the halfway point:			
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While the numbers in both cases are small, we can still see that even if there is some duplication in reporting, several students each week are re-thinking some cultural practice, value, or idea.

### **Research paper responses**

Students posted research papers on some aspect of the cultures under study that interested them. Topics this semester included, among other topics, the regime of Rafael Trujillo, foot binding in China, Haitian vodun, Chinese creation myths, Haitian folk art, the ancient capital Persepolis, interracial marriages in the U.S., and the lives of Chinese coal miners.

Students were invited to respond to one another's papers. No credit was available for doing so. Postings might have been made in hopes of "brownie points," but since the instructor never entered the discussion, there would have been no encouragement for that idea. Therefore we might assume that papers were read and discussion engaged about them purely out of interest.

Total responses: 89 messages posted by 14 out of 19 students.

### **Reactions/attitudes survey**

A short survey was conducted in the current (Spring 2006) class (N = 17). Students were asked about the frequency of their interactions with people of races/colors different from their own, and several questions about issues raised in the books.

1. 40% reported cross-racial interactions "rarely" or "never." Surprisingly, 35% reported "often" or "every day" interactions. A more detailed questionnaire would help determine how students defined "interaction" and the nature of these relationships.

2. Students were also asked which characters they did and did not identify with:

- Identified *least* with:
  - 9 - one of the two Chinese Cultural Revolution-era characters, who seemed "indecisive," and "a talker, not a doer."
  - 6 - Sherman Alexie's Indian characters, because of their troubled souls; as one student said, "they are so darned angry." One student noted, "I find this odd since they are from my own part of the world, I should be able to relate better."
- Identified *most* with:
  - Nearly half the students named 3 female characters who exhibited qualities considered admirable by the mainstream popular culture: bravery, loyalty, compassion, caring, family orientation.

- Three students named the pioneering African feminist who put career above family.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students appeared to gain little in *identification* with characters from cultures different from their own. But failure to *identify* with a character does not necessarily mean a failure of understanding. Better questions would perhaps tease out how much students' attitudes toward these "others" really do change.

3. The final survey question was "Add any comments about any aspect of your thinking and/or attitudes that have changed as a result of your work so far in this course."

All but two of 14 students responding said they became more aware of other cultures: "The novels chosen have opened up my little world." Most of the comments focused more on learning than on attitudes. Several were very specific, such as:

- "I have always understood why Native Americans were angry with our government but I did not realize or really ever stop to think about the inner conflicts they might experience on a daily basis."
- "I learned about marriage traditions, celebrations and other things from various cultures. It really helped me see different perspective"

### **Conclusion**

Can introductory exposure to selected world cultures through literature, discussion, and supplementary materials open students in a homogenous culture to the wider world? Students seem to think so. In addition to the survey results above, course evaluations from other semesters gave similar results. If learning is the first step toward appreciation and tolerance, the course seems to be successful. Just how much change really occurs in student thinking remains to be researched more carefully.

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