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Creative pedagogical approaches using fiction to prepare educators to work in international and intercultural contexts

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Introduction

Those of us who teach adult educators and teacher educators need to be attentive to the intercultural context of this work as educators generally work in pluralistic environments. Our students may be involved in delivering programs in other countries and establishing research networks with partners in various locations across the globe. Even educators who do not travel or work internationally often find their local classes are increasingly shape by migration and globalization, requiring them to work effectively with students coming from diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. In addition, knowledge is increasingly derived from research that comes from different parts of the globe. Today it is commonplace for educators to read about and exchange ideas about teaching practices from different countries and cultures.

Given that our understanding of effective teaching practices must be shaped with sensitivity to the complexity of lives of our colleagues and learners, we need to develop pedagogical strategies to foster creativity and deeper forms of learning. It is important to encourage the development of open-minded, critical, and insightful educators who have a strong sense of their own identity and the capacity to appreciate what learners and educators from other cultures have to offer.

This paper draws upon research from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) study on lifelong learning, citizenship and fiction writing to consider how fiction can be used to prepare adult educators to work in international and intercultural contexts. Our SSHRC study involves interviews with authors and 'key informants' such as educators working in writing programs in academic and community-based contexts. In our discussion we take up some of the themes that have emerged from our research, using quotations from some of the participants as they reflect upon how fiction can shape the way that individuals can come to view themselves and others when living and working within a global context.

The paper begins by looking at the value of learning connected with fiction writing and reading, discusses how issues of identity are linked with globalization, takes up the concept of cosmopolitanism as defined by Beck (2000), and concludes with a discussion of some practical pedagogical strategies that might be incorporated by adult educators in various contexts to help prepare learners to work in intercultural and international contexts.

Fiction Reading and Writing

In reading fiction, we enter into the world of another person, exploring their environment, their speech, and taken-for-granted assumptions. In writing fiction we investigate our understanding of where people are located and how they make sense of the world. Canadian writers, for example, represent an array of diverse backgrounds, which comes through in their writings that explore the harmonies and tensions of what it is to live in a highly pluralistic society.

Fiction has the advantage of allowing people to explore different possible visions for what globalization will mean through symbolic representations of change. Using literature not only broadens perspectives, but allows students to observe patterns of change in society, as documented through literary texts. Educators may feel uncomfortable addressing certain issues in the classroom, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the subject matter. Fiction can be used as both an outlet for learners who find it challenging to vocalize thoughts and concerns, and as a forum for raising and discussing sensitive topics. Analyzing such themes through the experiences and tales of fictional characters can create a safe environment for sharing thoughts and opinions that otherwise would be kept private.

Fiction may also create identification with characters whose lives and circumstances are markedly different from ours. The emotional investment this creates opens us to seeing and understanding the perspectives of those we regard as outsiders (Jarvis & Burr, SCUTREA 2010, p.229).

Some authors feel a responsibility for authors to create dialogue around important issues that are addressed by different societies in various ways. Author Garry Ryan talks about the importance of fiction writers taking up difficult issues:

But who else is going to talk about these issues? And where else are you going to discuss those issues, and explore those issues, and make people think about those issues? If you look back at the race issue in North America, there were stories like 'To Kill a Mockingbird'... 'The Crying Game' explored those issues of not only race but also sexuality... All of those issues get explored and discussed and people start to think about them, and they argue about them, and they maybe get a different point of view from all of those things.

Narrative offers portraits of societies affected in both localized and larger systemic ways; characters, and the complicated nuances of their lives, engage readers to

discuss complex power relations between individuals and the larger world. Fiction enables exploration of difficult topics such as social justice, racism, and equity issues.

In a world which becomes increasingly influenced by technology, arts-based media in general provides a rich source of educational material, and fiction is part of this teaching tool. In a paper discussing how media can be used within conventional pedagogical situations, Jarvis and Burr (SCUTREA 2010) discuss the educative function of global media. 'This includes examining their potential as tools that teachers use to raise awareness of social and political issues and enable students to imagine a range of experiences and possibilities' (p.227). Using fiction in the classroom is one aspect of incorporating arts-based media into education. According to Jarvis and Burr (2010), 'fiction has the potential to initiate transformative learning because it induces intense vicarious experience' (p.228).

Tisdell, Sprow, and Williams (SCUTREA 2009) have also researched critical media literacy and its usage in educational contexts. Some of the benefits they found in teaching using media were 'people finding alternative narratives about themselves and others; their expanded thinking about marginalized 'others' and hegemonic processes through discussion and analysis of media and semiotics; and new insights through facilitated discussion and analysis' (p.413).

Identity and Globalization

Creating a strong sense of identity as a learner leads to more meaningful learning and understanding of others. Identity can be thought of as 'having a sense of one's self as a force that matters in the world' (Bracher, 2006, p.6). Reading and discussing diverse works of fiction which touch on a broad range of topics can help to develop and strengthen one's identity. Reading fiction based on the learner's geographical location can bring to light the social and cultural mores closest to them, while works from intercultural contexts can expand the learner's global perspective. Fiction can be a window into society whether that is the most familiar or the most distant from the reader. As one Canadian author, Christine Walde states: 'In many ways, books are like mirrors into who we are, who we want to be, who we don't want to be. They're just incredibly complex and fascinating little things we can hold in our hands, we can open and shut'. By developing this multicultural perspective and appreciation through reading works of literature, learners may become better equipped to explore global issues such as violence, inequity, social justice, and sustainability.

At the same time, one cannot assume that using fiction writing and reading will automatically foster critical thinking or the capacity for deeper reflection. Luke (2000) argues we should move 'toward an explicit pedagogy of critical vocabularies for talking about what reading and writing and texts and discourses can do in everyday life' (p. 453). For adult educators working in international contexts, these kinds of pedagogical approaches to teaching about globalization and its impact, allows for

students to have divergent opinions that may well disagree at times, but the underlying premise of such an approach is that all discourses are subject to critique for their vested interests.

The strategies used to encourage educators to think deeply about the issues raised within fiction are important, as not all individuals are inclined to be empathetic or particularly insightful when considering alternative viewpoints. Educators must be taught to cultivate a “sociological imagination”; to make linkages between individual troubles with broader social, political, and cultural concerns. This may involve developing what Beck (2000) terms as a cosmopolitan approach to dealing with globalization.

Cosmopolitanism

As Johnston (1999) notes, Beck’s (1992) concept of the ‘risk society’ is ‘typified by uncertainty and risk’. Today, problems are increasingly interconnected, and no one individual or nation-state can resolve these. Issues such as climate change, terrorism, and economic uncertainty must be addressed on a global level. ‘To keep multicultural education relevant in the shifting context of the 21st century, multicultural scholars must address globalization as an area of curricular inquiry and a site of socio-political and educational contestation’ (Gibson, 2010, p.135).

Beck (2009) argues globalization is frequently depicted in a negative way, whereby learners yearning for social justice or a better world often feel incapacitated. To counter this inertia, we need thinkers who can move beyond local and even national borders, to consider how interconnections can be forged in positive ways to resolve difficult issues. Students need to think both abstractly and critically, and locally and concretely to be able to make changes. Beck believes that cosmopolitanism involves having people come from different locales but be able to work across their differences to resolve matters. ‘The notion of cosmopolitanism is widely discussed in educational theory as, among other things, it concerns the fostering of citizens capable of participating in and taking responsibility for a world increasingly characterized by global interdependencies and risk’ (p.183). To achieve this, educators must shift from a neoliberal, marketplace focus of education to a more global, critical focus. According to Tett (SCUTREA 2010), ‘Rather than a narrow conception of learning for the world of work the priority would be learning for citizenship leading to a revitalized sense of democratic and social purpose’ (p.324).

In his discussion around international migration and learning, Williams (2006) argues that ‘cosmopolitanism facilitates intercultural exchanges’ whereas stereotyping constrains possibilities for learning. He argues that a ‘willingness to engage’ is a prerequisite for various kinds of learning to occur with individuals working with others from different cultural contexts (p. 598). Using fiction within educational settings may be a way to encourage this willingness to engage with alternative viewpoints and perspectives.

Educators must model the type of thinking they wish to develop in their students. In a discussion on the role of adult educators, Boud and Rooney (SCUTREA 2010) identify the tools in an educator's toolbox: a critical perspective or 'multi-faceted ways of engaging with and challenging diverse practices'; a broad perspective to 'broker understandings of learning between those focused on different sites'; and 'a new reflexivity that enables us to be aware of both the possibilities and limitations of our own practices as educators' (p.35). By teaching and presenting material through this critical, global perspective, educators may strive to create multicultural awareness in their students.

Practical Pedagogical Approaches

There are a number of practical pedagogical approaches that may be used when working with educators to foster an understanding of how to work in intercultural and international contexts. Given the space constraints of this paper, we will provide just two different examples.

The 'fishbowl' is a student-centered activity that promotes diverse discussion when reading fiction. Its namesake is due to the fact that after students read a piece of fiction and have had a chance to think through some ideas on their own (ie. through a free write), then three to five students go in to the centre of two concentric circles – hence, they are in the fishbowl, observable from every angle by their peers. The peers form the outer circle, sitting in chairs. For five minutes only those in the centre circle are allowed to speak. Their job is to analyze the fiction. The educator may ask them to focus on a specific passage, or s/he might provide a question that is meant to prompt the discussion. Those in the outer circle are told in advance that their task is to listen and to take notes.

After approximately five minutes, the educator then invites the people in the outer circle to start responding to what has thus far been discussed. They are reminded to connect their points to the conversation already in progress (to build listening skills). Beyond this process of facilitation, the educator does not talk until the conversation has been fully developed by the students. Instead, the educator is busy taking notes on what everyone says. Only at that end point, does s/he join in to provide insight on any aspects of the discussion that perhaps have not been delved into or to pose a controversial question. An advantage of this exercise is that the students volunteering for the centre circle are temporarily given the spotlight, while those in the outer circle have an opportunity to speak as well, but shy or English as Second Language students do not feel pressured to participate immediately (Milner & Milner, 2007). Generally, peers will almost always correct one another's misinterpretations of the text. In the follow up discussion, however, the instructor can build on the conversation to think about how social values explored in the fiction extend larger understandings of what is citizenship in a globalized context.

The point of this fishbowl strategy is not necessarily deep literary analysis. Rather, it is to inspire conversations about the complex range of interpersonal and intercultural

relations that fiction often opens up. It involves recognizing fiction as a cultural marker situated in specific political, historical, and social contexts. If a piece of fiction is interpreted as a social artifact that speaks to issues in current society, a new set of questions gets developed. How does the text comment upon local or global issues that are difficult to resolve? How does this piece of fiction function as a representation of larger social contexts? How and why do power struggles in this narrative give insight into hegemonic relations between individuals and larger institutions?

Similarly, fiction writing can be used to encourage students to think critically about issues around identity and relationships within international and intercultural contexts. An example of this would be to ask students to write a piece of fiction in which they discuss the “First Day” of a teaching situation for either a student or a teacher entering into an educational setting that is from a different cultural or national perspective than this individual is used to being in. Before students begin to write, the instructor could explain the importance of attending to sensory perception in writing fiction – what sounds does one hear? What is the temperature? What does the locale look like? In addition, good writing involves showing not telling – if it is cold, how would you reveal this? Through dialogue? Through observation? Through the character’s thoughts or movements? In telling the story, the writer has to choose who will be the narrator and think about how this will affect the way that the story will be told.

Students are then asked to write their piece, taking about twenty minutes to half an hour to write the scene. If they struggle, they are to put their pen to the page and write, regardless of what comes out. Then after this, learners can share their writing, either in the larger class or within pairs or small groups. From this, they will be asked to explain what prompted them to choose to tell this particular story. They can discuss what information they drew upon to develop their characters – was it from listening to a story from someone they knew, was it related to a personal experience from their past, or did their idea come from a book that they had read or a film or television show that they had watched? In addition, learners may want to discuss the emotions of the characters in the scene(s) they wrote, why they think a person might feel or behave in a particular way, and why would they choose to show these behaviours or include particular details within the story. Since it is also a piece of fiction, they could be asked what they had to invent, what parts of the story required the use of their imagination, and what led them to develop the scene the way that they did.

In the ensuing discussion, the instructor can encourage students to ask themselves and others if they were perpetuating stereotypes, or trying to make a more empathetic ‘leap’ into what might be the perspective of another person coming from a different kind of background. They can query their own taken-for granted perceptions of the world and how people should behave or interact with one another.

A critical lens can be used to make connections between how fictional characters and settings are created, and what real life intercultural experiences might entail.

Controversial topics and experiences can be discussed through reading and writing fiction with the understanding that social justice and issues of inclusion can only be addressed when differences of opinion can be explored in depth and with an eye to critical analysis. Instead of students simply feeling empathy or dislike for certain characters, they can be asked to think about their own positions as readers, writers, and ultimately, as educators. What constitutes their own identities in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, and culture that affects how they read, write and think about fictive narration? Or, as Freebody, Luke, and Gilbert (1991) in their discussion surrounding critical literacy put it, it is important to critique the ideological underpinnings of any text, and they press for 'a critical scrutiny that affords multiple reading positions' (p. 450). By 'positions' they mean that any one individual's identity is fluid and part of larger systemic structures. In an age of globalization, it is key that people think critically about how their own personal identities shift in relation to the larger waves of societal forces. Through fiction reading and writing, educators can explore some of the challenges around understanding complex issues pertaining to identity within an increasingly globalized and intercultural world, for both themselves and their students.

Conclusion

Creative pedagogical approaches using fiction reading and writing may be useful strategies to adopt in fostering the development of adult learners in terms of international and intercultural understanding. Guo (2009) argues that one of the challenges facing educators committed to social justice orientation is the need to 'recognize challenges facing lifelong learning in the context of transnational migration' (p. 150). He points out the injustice of treating differences in cultural outlooks and experiences from a deficit framework, whereby the knowledge and experience that immigrants bring to a country are often devalued. Williams (2006) points out that managers who are able to understand and work within international contexts are increasingly valued in a workplace that requires flexibility and an appreciation of diversity. Those of us who are preparing adult educators need to consider how we will prepare our learners to work effectively in a world increasingly shaped by globalization. Helping learners to think critically about identity issues and to foster a cosmopolitan approach to education through innovative teaching practices, such as using fiction reading and writing, may be one such strategy.

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