

Teaching Empathy and Promoting Global Citizenship through Literature

An educator shares readings and assignments that develop empathy skills among students for global citizenship.

In the dual roles of educator and reader, a Venn diagram of overlapping desires and experiences emerges. In teaching literature, we want students to read and understand the perspectives of those who they might perceive as being different from them. We want students to learn about and consider the experiences of writers from faraway places and even time periods.

As readers, we want students to experience what it is like to be drawn into a story and to be compelled to act or to think differently about the world around them as a result of reading. To present my students with literature that provokes them into conversation, I think of them not simply as English students but as developing global citizens. In this article, I discuss how teachers can develop empathy in students through reading and writing about literature, which contributes to their development as citizens in a global community.

DEVELOPING GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

As the NCTE Standing Committee Against Racism and Bias states, “There is no apolitical classroom. English language arts teachers must examine the ways that racism has personally shaped their beliefs and must examine existing biases that feed systems of oppression.” By choosing texts that trigger empathic reactions, English teachers can help students better understand others’ experiences with oppression and even promote good global citizenship skills such as

participating in community efforts and promoting social justice initiatives.

On the other hand, as Miguel Conde writes in a *LitHub* essay, freighting literature—specifically what he calls “serious fiction”—with the task of promoting empathy ignores the multiplicity of ways in which readers can be transformed via fiction and poetry. He suggests that writing and reading literature does not need “a practical purpose,” and even worse, that the reader’s empathic response could possibly result in the eradication of others’ experiences. However, by pairing literature with contextual materials, teachers can avoid the erasure of difference that Conde warns against.

As a teacher and a reader who feels compelled to proselytize the “good word” of literacy, my goal is for students to consider their relationships with others in the world through utilizing texts that ask them to do the emotional and intellectual work of putting themselves in someone else’s shoes, so that they may begin the lifelong journey of becoming good global citizens. While teaching university and high school courses at the University of Kentucky and Interlochen Arts Academy in the past fifteen years, one of my primary goals in my English classrooms has been to think about my students as global citizens and to consider my role in preparing them to be citizens of the world.

What is English language arts learning? Is it merely proficiency with reading, writing, and conversational skills? Or is it something else? The Ideas

for Global Citizenship website states: “Global Citizenship is a way of living that recognizes our world is an increasingly complex web of connections and interdependencies. One in which our choices and actions may have repercussions for people and communities locally, nationally or internationally” (“Global Citizenship”).

LEARNING ABOUT COMMUNITY

To develop students for citizenship in our teaching involves learning about community in all its varied forms. Additionally, the position of “citizen” ought to be engaged with and challenged by these questions:

- What rights and privileges do citizens receive?
- How do you exercise them?
- Who is excluded?
- Why?
- What happens to noncitizens?

By viewing students as future global citizens, my goal has been to get students engaged in reading and writing about literature that serves multiple

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purposes. The course includes texts that explore, challenge, and raise questions. I invite students to think about characters’ experiences in relation to their own. I employ a variety of historical contexts (through lectures, listening to music and looking at visual art from the time period, discussing legal policies from the era, and so forth) so that stu-

dents can consider the context that may have influenced the text.

More importantly, students can see the texts as providing an important and valuable perspective,

even (or especially) as the text might work as a counternarrative to more familiar and mainstream narratives. If we imagine our students as future global citizens, there are key skills they will need. In “Global Citizenship: What Are We Talking About and Why Does It Matter?,” Kris Olds and Madeleine F. Green note that global citizenship skills should include “linking local and global issues, practicing empathy, making informed, ethical decisions, and participating in the social and political life of one’s community.” While this list can appear overwhelming to already busy English teachers, literature is one tool that can be used to hone and develop these skills.

Empathy is key when thinking about developing global citizenship skills in the English classroom. Texts that call on students to empathize with characters have the strongest effect of creating engaged readers, sparking conversation, and perhaps even getting students to consider their actions beyond the literature and beyond the walls of the classroom. Many have cited the role of empathy in reading from Aristotle’s argument that a catharsis is “the purging of passions,” dependent upon a process of identification between reader/audience and tragic hero, to Barack Obama, who famously spoke about his enjoyment of novels as foundational to his education as a citizen (xxv). He states,

When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there’s still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you. (“President Obama and Marilynne Robinson”)

The connection between citizenship, reading, and empathy that Obama discusses is significant when we consider our students as global citizens. Just as education is a lifelong process, so is the process of citizenship, as Obama suggests, with the notion that one must continue to strive for the possibility “to connect.”

Martha C. Nussbaum’s research has traced the connection between citizenship, reading, and empathy. In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, we learn about the connection among citizenship, reading, and empathy. She notes,

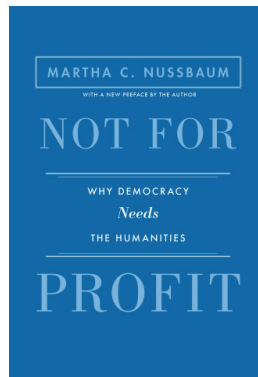
Citizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, is what we can call the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. (95–96)

As English teachers, this means that we should consider the texts that we choose as assigned readings—not only should we consider developing student competencies and introducing cultural and historical contexts, but also selecting texts that provide opportunities for readers to develop the empathic understanding that Nussbaum identifies.

DISCUSSING OUTSIDERS, MISFITS, AND WEIRDOS

Since 2008, I have taught several different iterations of a course called Outsiders, Misfits, and Weirdos at the high school and university levels. In reading a broad range of texts, students realize that the authors determine their status as “outsiders” or “misfits,” and many (if not all) individuals may fit into one of these categories—in life and in fiction—through social ostracism or norms.

From 2010 to 2014, one version of my class served as an introductory literature course at the University of Kentucky and another as an elective literature course for high school juniors and seniors at Interlochen Arts Academy, from 2016 to 2018. Both were quite similar in terms of texts and assignments. The course is designed to introduce students to genres such as fiction, poetry, drama, and creative nonfiction. However, the primary goal is to teach twentieth-century American texts that focused on



“outsider” roles in a variety of situations and contexts, including race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. I wanted students to grapple with a few key lines of inquiry, such as the following: (1) how individuals or groups are marginalized while others are reified within a culture, (2) how literature works as a tool to analyze and critique society, and (3) how authors offer solutions to some of these problems, as seem-

ingly fantastical they may be.

Students read novels and plays such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *Persepolis*, and *Angels in America*, and watch films such as *Rebel without a Cause* and *Bladerunner*. In introducing these texts, the key course questions, and the course theme, my intent was that students might better understand not only the way that literature has produced counternarratives detailing the American experience, but that they think about their own attitudes and behaviors through the different experiences portrayed in the texts. Rather than consider one text as an emblematic example of “American” literature, students can see how configurations of marginalized groups had or had not changed over time, especially when they consider the historical context in which the texts were produced.

Overall, the course is an attempt to model what theorists Bill Ashcroft et al. posit, that “decolonization is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms . . . dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved” (56). Though the project of decolonizing the classroom is ambitious and continual, the careful and deliberate selection of course texts is one way for teachers to contribute to the process.

By using texts that document a range of experiences, students come to see that there is no one single or quintessential narrative of the “American” literary experience. In fact, the notion of a dominant or standard narrative does not even begin to capture the multiplicity of voices and experiences. By introducing students to perspectives that lie outside their

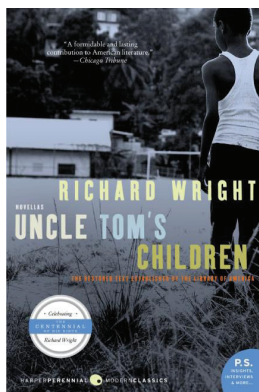
own, the desired goal is that they become more attentive to others.

Students examined *Uncle Tom's Children* by Richard Wright as the 1940s era component of the course. Published in 1938, the book is composed of several different short stories featuring the lives of African Americans in the US South during the Jim Crow era. Although the book predates the works *Native Son* and *Black Boy* by Wright, it illustrates many similar themes from his later novels.

In preparation for reading the short story “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” we discuss the legal and cultural implications of life during this time period, as well as the inherent Jim Crow–based violence of the era that takes the form of lynching, rape, and abuse, which are all elements that Wright addresses in the volume. In the following passage, Wright introduces readers to his childhood and to issues such as segregation, Jim Crow, and racial violence that pervade the novel and his life.

My first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small. We were living in Arkansas. Our house stood behind the railroad tracks. Its skimpy yard was paved with black cinders. Nothing green ever grew in that yard. The only touch of green we could see was far away, beyond the tracks, over where the white folks lived. But cinders were good enough for me, and I never missed the green growing things. And anyhow, cinders were fine weapons. You could always have a nice hot war with huge black cinders. All you had to do was crouch behind the brick pillars of a house with your hands full of gritty ammunition. And the first woolly black head you saw pop out from behind another row of pillars was your target. You tried your very best to knock it off. It was great fun. . . . When night fell, my mother came from the white folks' kitchen. I raced down the street to meet her. I could just feel in my bones that she would understand. I knew she would tell me exactly what to do next time. I grabbed her hand and babbled out the whole story. She examined my wound, then slapped me. (1–2)

This passage highlights key aspects from the story such as Wright's usage of first-person narration, the economic disparities between Whites and African



Americans, and the theme of internalized racism. These elements continue throughout the story and in the other stories that make up *Uncle Tom's Children*.

In the discussion about this short story, students tend to gravitate toward the usage of first-person point of view, locating the repeated use of “I” and “my.” They are typically versed in close reading or learning the process, so they know to look for different literary devices in the text such as Wright's usage of color in the first few paragraphs, the contrast in imagery for White and African American areas of his town, and they are especially drawn to the dialogue between the narrator and his mother. We discuss what the title might mean and consider lines such as “gems of Jim Crow wisdom” (2). The remainder of this short story follows the narrator as he grows and learns more about the ethics filled with brutal violence from Whites toward African Americans, sexual violence, and internalized racism of African American characters.

Overwhelmingly, students (high school and college) are drawn to the text because they are able to bear witness to the narrator's experiences of life as an African American person in the American South during the Jim Crow era. Students tend to respond to



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the text in a way that draws on their sense of empathy. They tend to think critically upon their own actions (or inaction) as they realize that many of the issues that Wright discusses are not limited to the Jim Crow era but are also present in our contemporary moment.

PROMOTING CONVERSATIONS ON GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

In several recent conversations with educators and students, we considered what we think about when we choose texts. We also discussed students' experiences reading the literature. A selection of responses from teachers is noted below:

- How does the literature show/connect to the context?
- What statement is the author making in the literary work?
- How will students connect to the work?
- As an educator, I ask how the text connects to the sociopolitical concerns of its time and to what extent it speaks to today's sociopolitical concerns. I also consider how the form, themes, and metaphors connect to other texts we've encountered in class or that my students and I may have encountered elsewhere. Essentially, how can we understand it intertextually as part of an ongoing cultural dialogue?
- When I teach a text, I always think about how gender is represented and also race, sexuality, and class. I am always curious about how the text may tell us/relate to the sociopolitical context or ideology. Lately, there are always questions about emotions/feelings and ethics.
- What does this text tell me about its time and place? What message does the author want to send? How does form reflect content?
- The questions I ask regard what ways of reading the text will teach the students something about reading texts more

generally, whether that relates to form or genre, medium, historical, social, intellectual or political context. For example, if I were to assign a television show, poem, or modernist manifesto, I would ask myself what kinds of questions could be extended to multimedia storytelling, poetic form, or modernism more generally. What kind of questions could help students frame further engagements with culture beyond the classroom?

- What am I assigning that makes me feel something or teaches me something about the human condition? Usually, I also ask myself if the students will like it.

When students respond to classroom texts, their feedback looks a bit different. They wrote:

- Has the work been able to express, in words, something that I have felt but haven't been able to express that way?
- What portion of my life/my worldview/this particular experience is part of the universal human experience? What portion is specific to my culture and context? And which portion is specific to me as an individual? And following that: how certain can I be of those judgments, and how do I know?
- Why do I care? How do I relate?
- Have I ever felt or experienced anything similar to the character(s)?
- Did I react the same way as the character(s)?

The concerns from teachers and students look different from one another. Teachers thought about form and content, while students focused on personal connections to the text and issues of feeling or affect that the text provoked. With this in mind, how then can we, as teachers, better connect to student readers and their concerns? Empathy can work as a bridge to teaching content, form, and context. By reading texts that focus on others' experiences,

students not only learn how historical and cultural events happened but also what it was like for those events to happen.

In the research study “How Does Literature Affect Empathy in Students?,” Christine R. Junker and Stephen J. Jacquemin found that fiction tends to generate more empathy than nonfiction, as do first-person point-of-view narratives. Additionally, their findings suggest that “writing reflectively about literary texts could encourage empathy, providing the writing prompted readers to link the texts to themselves and to interrogate the relationship between themselves and the characters and situation in the texts they’re reading” (80). Role-taking while reading is important for experiencing empathy. In fact, writing assignments in which students are asked to take on the perspective of a character can correspond with an increase in empathy (80). These kinds of writing can be assigned in the form of reflective writing responses that can become longer essays or launch classroom discussion on literature.

Furthermore, Junker and Jacquemin noted that students were most empathic toward texts that are more accessible. For instance, they explained that the more difficult a student perceives a text to be, the harder it becomes to foster empathy. If students are spending all their time trying to understand what’s happening, it can be difficult to build empathy. This finding is of serious consideration as we select and read literary works with our students.

While the literature classroom may be a space in which we can increase student understanding of diversity and foster student development of empathy, we also want our students to become better readers who can read increasingly complicated and sophisticated texts. If the educational focus is to increase empathy, teachers will need to consider student ability and facility with language and reading skills. If we want analysis and literacy skills to improve, it is important that students be presented with texts that grow more complex over time, which, as Junker and Jacquemin state, may decrease their empathic connection with the texts.

Despite my rationale for teaching empathy through literature, there is some concern with the

process. Conde writes, “Imagining the other could end up being the most efficient way of ignoring his or her singularity. Empathy, after all, implies that we put *ourselves* into the place of the other, and it may well be possible that in so doing we end up projecting sameness and drawing up false inferences” (*italics in original*). While Conde’s concern may have some merit, that our desire to teach empathy somehow eradicates the experience of the other and replaces it with a narcissistic sameness, I find that teaching texts in conjunction with the cultural and historical context works to avoid this issue. In addition to teaching form, content, and historical/cultural context, it is worthwhile to ask students to consider their relationships with others in the world through using texts that ask them to do the emotional work of “putting themselves in someone else’s shoes.”

Furthermore, teachers can connect social issues such as oppression and prejudice and themes from literature to contemporary social problems such as police violence and immigration and ask students to think critically about the effects that their choices and actions have on others. As teachers, we can find the texts and create assignments that provoke and promote conversations among our readers who are our current and future global citizens. Global citizenship requires that individuals see the diversity and complexity of different subject positions in the world, and their development of empathy helps to foster consideration of the impact they have on the larger global community. [EJ](#)

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EIR-ANNE EDGAR is an associate professor of literature in English at Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Norway. She was previously a faculty member at Interlochen Center for the Arts Academy in Interlochen, Michigan, where she taught English courses for students in grades 9–12. She can be contacted at eir-anne.edgar@ntnu.no.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

This lesson plan builds students' understanding of empathy by defining key terms and comparing responses to characters when they are introduced by someone else, and then when they narrate the story themselves. <http://bit.ly/2ofAE6Y>

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