

Multicultural Detective Fiction: Exploring Cultural Diversity Through Leisure

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Multicultural education is “a transformative movement in education, which produces critically thinking socially active members of society. It is a movement that calls for new attitudes, new approaches, and a new dedication to laying the foundation for the transformation of society” (Gorski, 2000, p.1). To teach multicultural education in our classrooms we must engage students in self-reflection, self-exploration, self-examination, and personal growth to guide students through an examination of their reality in relation to the reality of people diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion, or other salient cultural characteristics (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, & Love, 1997). Although difficult, this process produces students who are able to think critically, challenge information presented to them, and become a more active and effective contributors to a diverse community (Ford, 1999; Gochenour, 1993).

Using multicultural education as a conceptual framework, we created a series of modules that use the humanities (art, fiction, history, music, etc.) as a window to teach about leisure and diversity. Our premise was that culture could be understood with greater richness and further complexity through this indirect means rather than by attempting to study it directly. Each lesson in this module includes background information that could be used as a handout, structured class activities, possible assignments, and a list of additional resources. At the end of each lesson students are asked to reflect on the following questions: What did I learn about another culture or ethnic group? What new insights did I gain about my own culture and myself? What did I learn about leisure as a way to reveal cultural values or to promote cultural understanding?

Background for this Unit

Reading is one of the most common leisure pastimes in the United States, though few leisure professionals see reading as an activity that needs their professional guidance. Reading is often viewed as an innocuous activity that simply helps to pass time. In this lesson we view reading as much more dynamic. First, reading has the capacity to impart *factual information and empathetic understandings*, bringing readers face-to-face with information and experiences that they might not otherwise encounter. Second, reading provides a window into the experiences of the author. We can learn a lot by examining the ways that authors present their material including the details they emphasize and those they brush over quickly, the values they give to characters in their stories, and the way their stories unfold. These factors are indirect clues that tell us about the author’s own values and beliefs.

Though books provide an opportunity to learn about other people and other cultures, books can also reaffirm stereotypes, marginalize subgroups of the population, and further entrench the status quo. For example, stories in which heroes are always male or stories that are obviously or implicitly about white middle class people unintentionally reinforce a belief that males, whites, and middle class lifestyles are centrally important in our society. When females, non-whites, and people of lower social status read these stories they are reminded that they are less important.

It may be difficult to see the impact of excluding people of diverse backgrounds from mainstream fiction but the effect becomes visible when, for example, a gay adolescent first discovers gay fiction or a woman discovers books with strong female protagonists. The joy in finding people like you in a story attests to the hidden damage that is done when books exclude and ignore the lives and experiences of diverse members of our society. In a very real way, books can validate readers and their lives.

As demonstrated in the activities for this lesson, even detective stories become significantly different when written by non-Caucasian authors. By stepping away from mainstream fiction and reading material written by authors of different backgrounds, people can gain new insights and perspectives about diverse populations. Fiction reading is not a meaningless or innocuous activity but potentially a way to grow in understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultures that make up society.

Using Multicultural Detective Fiction

This lesson begins with a discussion about stereotypes in traditional detective fiction. Students then read a detective story written by a non-Caucasian author that features other ethnic groups in its story. A handout to guide students' reading and points for class discussion are designed to help students see how the author's ethnic background influenced the way this detective story is told. The lesson ends with a more generalized reflection on how reading multicultural fiction as a leisure activity can lead to increased understandings of cultural diversity.

Materials necessary for this lesson include a detective mystery written by an author who is not a white male (we used the *The Sharpest Sight* by Louis Owens), a student handout based on the information presented below, and a film clip from a traditional detective video.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson students should be able to:

1. Recall "factual" information from the book that describes some historical or contemporary experiences of the cultural group;
2. Identify ways that this story differs from "traditional" detective stories;

3. Reflect on the belief systems or ideologies that influenced those differences in how this book was written;
4. Discuss the benefits of reading fiction written by non-mainstream authors.

Classroom Activities

Before students read the assigned book, the instructor should show a clip from a mainstream detective movie (we used the movie “Chinatown”). The selected clip should illustrate stereotypical aspects of a “traditional” detective story. This movie clip will provide a solid, shared background from which students can evaluate their assigned book. Stereotypes that often exist in “traditional” detective stories include:

- The detective is typically a white, Protestant, heterosexual male
- Risky behaviors (alcohol, smoking) often help define the main character
- The crime is often a violent assault on a person and is usually described in detail
- The detective primarily works alone or relies on himself in times of trouble
- Though often anti-social, the detective holds commendable ideals of justice
- Women are usually marginal to the story and often described sexually
- The detective may employ violent or unlawful techniques to solve the crime
- The story has a satisfying conclusion in which “justice is served”

What Students Should Know Before Reading

Information about the book and author. Students should be given background information about the assigned book and its author. For example, we suggest providing a brief summary of the novel and biographical information on the author.

Reading guide. A study guide should be handed out to help students focus on relevant aspects as they read the book. Possible discussion questions are listed below though the wording would need to be changed according to the selected book. Students should make notes on these points as they read, and come with written answers for each question when the book is discussed in class.

1. In what ways is it evident that the author was a man? In what ways is it evident that the author was not Caucasian?
2. What “factual” information did you learn about the ethnic group(s) represented in this story?

3. In what ways did this novel differ from conventional detective stories with which you are familiar? In answering this, think about the characters and their traits as well as aspects of the plot.
4. In what ways did the characters in this story encounter “white” culture? What was the outcome of those encounters?
5. Were there parts of the dialog or story that you found difficult to understand? If so, what made those things difficult for you?
6. After reading this story, do you feel you have a better understanding of the ethnic group(s) represented in this story? Explain.

Thinking more generally, discuss ways that leisure activities can help promote respect and understanding of cultural diversity.

Discussing the Book

Students should discuss the book in class or in small groups outside of class. Since students see different things in these novels, group discussion will alert students to ideas that they might not have thought about on their own. After going through the discussion questions listed above, students should reflect on the over-arching questions that guided this lesson: What did I learn about another culture or ethnic group? What new insights did I gain about my own culture and myself? What did I learn about leisure as a way to reveal cultural values or promote cultural understanding?

At the end of this unit the instructor should encourage students to pursue multicultural fiction on their own, using the insights and strategies they developed in this class assignment. The instructor might hand out a list of other multicultural detective fiction such as those books listed below, and should remind students that librarians can help find other books by authors of diverse backgrounds.

Possible Student Assignments

A variety of assignments are possible based on this lesson. Instructors should develop an assignment with consideration of the amount of time and degree of emphasis that this lesson receives in their class. Here are two suggestions:

1. Select another book from the list of multicultural detective fiction that has been provided. Read and analyze that book similar to the way you examined the assigned book, using the same or a similar list of “things to look for” while reading. Turn in a 5-8 page paper that summarizes the plot of this book and illustrates the ways this book differs from “traditional” detective fiction. Explain what you learned about this group/culture by reading this book
2. Based on what you’ve learned from reading the assigned book and in our associated class discussion, write a thoughtful essay that addresses the following:

What is the value of reading books written by non-traditional authors? Are there other leisure activities that provide similar opportunities to learn about different segments of our population? More generally, how can leisure be a forum for enhancing our knowledge and respect for diverse populations?

References

- Ford, T. (1999). *Becoming multicultural: Personal and social construction through critical teaching*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Gochenour, T. (1993). *Beyond experience: The experiential approach to cross-cultural education*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Gorski, P. (2001). Introduction. In P. Gorski, G. Shin, & M. Green (Eds.), *Professional Development Guide for Educators*. The Multicultural Resource Series, 1.

Instructor Resource List

An excellent resource is *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder from the "Other" Side* edited by Adrienne Johnson Gosselin (1999). This book includes chapters analyzing detective books written by authors from marginalized populations. The instructor may want to examine this book for useful insight. If the assigned story is analyzed in that book, students might be directed to that chapter for further reflection after the lesson is completed. Several of the references listed below are mentioned in that book.

Women's Detective Fiction

- Grafton, S. (1982). *"A" is for alibi*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Muller, M. (1977). *Edwin of the iron shoes*. New York: Mysterious.
- Papazoglou, O. (1985). *Wicked, loving murder*. New York: Penguin.
- White, G. (1995). *Charged with guilt*. New York: Dell.

Native American Detective Fiction

- Hillerman, Tony. (1980). *People of darkness*. New York: Harper Paperbacks.
- Hillerman, Tony. (1993). *Sacred clowns*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Hogan, L. (1990). *Mean spirit*. New York: Ivy Books-Ballantine.
- Owens, L. (1994). *Bone game*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P.

African American Detective Fiction

- Ellroy, James. (1987). *The black dahlia*. New York: Mysterious.

Himes, C. (1972). *The quality of hurt*. New York: Doubleday.

Mosley, W. (1991). *A red death*. New York: Simon and Shuster.

Mosley, W. (1994). *Black betty*. New York: Norton.

Gay & Lesbian Detective Fiction

Baker, N. (1993). *Long goodbyes*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad P.

Komo, D. (1988). *Clio Brown: Private investigator*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

McAllester, M. (1994). *The lessons*. Minneapolis, MN: Spinsters Ink.

Morell, M. (1991). *Final session*. San Francisco, CA: Spinsters Book Co