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[ [ARTICLES](#): | [Makinde](#) | [Landis](#) | [White-Clark & Lappin](#) ]  
[ [INSTRUCTIONAL IDEAS](#): | [Hecsh](#) ]  
[ [REVIEWS](#): [Art Reviews](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Multimedia Reviews](#) ]

# CHANGING THE CULTURE, ONE STUDENT TEACHER AT A TIME: Multicultural Book Clubs in Secondary Social Studies Curriculum

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on a set of literacy activities and strategies adapted from English and literacy instruction for secondary school students. The Multicultural Book Club Project assigned in Methods and Materials in Social Science Teaching, a fifth-year course in a teaching credential program, engages teacher candidates in selecting, reading, and designing learning activities linking literature and content. The article provides strategies, references, and ideas for those involved in secondary teacher education. It also argues for engaging learners with multicultural literature as a key element in social studies education and challenges the highly scripted and codified approach endorsed by the high-stakes testing environment so prevalent in contemporary schools.

Introduction  
Multicultural Book Clubs  
Each One Teach Many  
Endnotes  
References

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## Introduction

Here are some of the voices raised during the opening session of my social studies methods course for single-subject candidates: "Book clubs, what's that got to do with teaching history?" "*Bless Me, Ultima*<sup>1</sup>? That's a novel. It doesn't fit into my curriculum." More voices chime in: "No way my students can understand *Ceremony*<sup>2</sup>. I barely understood it myself when I read it in college." "*Paco's Story*<sup>3</sup>? I never read that. I don't really like to read." A soft voice explains to me, "There's not enough time to read a whole novel in class. Besides, we are supposed to be history teachers, not English teachers." Building on the same subject,

another says, "Don't they read *Farewell to Manzanar*<sup>A</sup> in English class?" Voices questioning, "Book clubs, literature circles, how can I do this when I have all that content to teach? How can I teach this when I have to cover the standards?" [paragraph 1]

As is the case with many of us who rarely ventured out of our own high schools during the years of teaching, I naively, as it turns out, imagined that the literature-rich and culturally relevant curriculum my students experienced in Social Studies classes in their high school was the norm. I thought all school librarians chose young adult literature corresponding with the socio-linguistic cultures of the students attending the school. I thought all English teachers wrote grants to create "multicultural book boxes" for reading clubs in English and Social Studies classes. I thought all Social Studies classes had "core" novels or "book clubs" that ran parallel with their curriculum. I should have gotten out more, I suppose. Eventually, I did. [paragraph 2]

This article describes how my experiences of teaching and working collaboratively with literature teachers during my high school teaching years led me to develop the strategies I used in Methods and Materials in Teaching Social Studies, a graduate-level course required of all single-subject candidates, and to model and demonstrate ways to incorporate culturally responsive and relevant multicultural literature in social studies instruction. Teaching in a culturally responsive way while meeting the content standards is, in fact, consistent with the expectation of social studies teacher preparation in California. Here I also share assignments my high school students completed and discuss how I translate these into the Methods and Materials course, including several of the more successful strategies I incorporated into the course. Finally, I argue that this work is one way to transform teaching practice in the region from an overemphasis on content to meet high-stakes testing requirements to a focus on historical thinking and historiography. [paragraph 3]

During my 15 years as a social studies teacher in two large, comprehensive high schools serving a low-income community of linguistically and culturally diverse students and their families in California's Central Valley, my curriculum was structured around an interdisciplinary and multicultural focus in which my students "saw themselves" in the literature, film, and primary sources we used in our class. My high school teaching practice was influenced by an English teaching colleague, in particular, with whom I co-taught sophomores, juniors, and seniors for more than a decade. With her as my teaching partner, I learned to infuse literature circles, literary fishbowls, and multicultural book clubs into my social studies curriculum. These and other literacy "best practices" were strong features of the summer institutes I attended over several years, such as University of California-Davis (UC-Davis) Writing Project, UC-Davis Transition to College, and UC-Davis History and Cultures Project. Students in our classes and across the rest of high school were expected to read literature in their English and History classes and were provided with a set of activities designed to facilitate their understanding of the literature. This was particularly important since the school served students with a wide range of reading proficiency. [paragraph 4]

When I began to teach the Methods and Materials for Social Studies course for single-subject candidates in a teacher preparation program, I was surprised to find that the "culture of reading" and the expectation of reading "culturally relevant" literature in a social studies class were not only unusual, but also considered outside the realm of teaching history. Comments like those at the beginning of this article, along with anecdotal reports and informal surveys, indicated that the social studies curriculum at the secondary level did not, or the most part, include multicultural literature or literacy practices. This "reality check" reinforced my belief in the necessity of developing a project within my own course that student teachers would "enact" and hopefully reenact within their own classrooms when they become teachers. Therefore, I designed and implemented an activity, called Multicultural Book Clubs, that combined a number of strategies typically associated with literature instruction. This activity is required as one of the major assignments in the course. [paragraph 5]

## Multicultural Book Clubs

Though my formal instruction related to literature or literacy strategies was minimal, I encountered a wide array of resources and information related to teaching strategies and teacher resources for book clubs and multicultural literature (a few examples include Daniels, 2001; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Rochman, 1993), which include strategies like literary fishbowl, hot seat, and others discussed below. Many of the reading and meaning-making strategies I used in this assignment come from the reading workshop model (Calkins, 2000). The strategies have been revised and refined and are available at the click of a mouse with a search engine like Google (e.g., <http://www.literacymatters.org/adlit/response/discussion.htm>, Education Development Center, n. d.). The use of multiple genres to interpret literature comes from Romano's work (2000) including teenage writers. More recently, the book club model has been appropriated by Oprah Winfrey<sup>5</sup>; so kids are fairly familiar with the idea and may even have family members who belong to book clubs or read with Oprah. [paragraph 6]

By participating in the Multicultural Book Club, social science candidates gain hands-on practice in identifying, using, and assessing a range of literacy strategies to help student readers connect with text, their own lives, and the historical content of a given course. Along with this Social Studies Methods course, candidates are usually enrolled in a "content reading" course focusing on literacy and reading instruction, so they are able to make connections across coursework. The book club assignment is first identified in the course syllabus and briefly describes the task for the candidates:

### Multicultural Historical Novel/Biography Book Club (20% of Grade):

Candidates (in pairs or groups of 3) will choose a book from the list posted on WEB CT1<sup>6</sup> to read, and complete a set of activities related to teaching literature in the social studies classroom (CA Standard 8B-c), including a reading guide for students, a visual representation of the book in the form of a book cover, CD or DVD cover, mandala, movie poster, web page illustrating themes, issues or conflicts raised in the book, and make a short presentation to the class. [paragraph 7]

This is the assignment that causes the most uproar among candidates, in part because it requires them actually to take on the role of students in a social studies class; read a book; and, most importantly, design and complete the learning outcomes assessments and enabling activities they would use in "book clubs" of their own. [paragraph 8]

We spend a small part of two class meetings discussing the assignment, showing exemplars from previous classes, and examining student work in book clubs or other multicultural literature activities from 7-12th grade Social Studies classes. During this time, I use a strategy called "book talk" to introduce books from the list. I also open the floor for book talk from candidates who may be interested in a book not on the list. The book talk is a strategy to preview books for the class and helps in the selection process. I learned this strategy from the library media teacher at my high school, but there is a wide array of information on the Internet with hints and ideas (Keane, 2005). [paragraph 9]

Candidates are required to complete several activities with their text and share with the whole class prior to presenting the entire project. In the second session following the selection of the book (they are presumed to have read it as part of class reading assignment), candidates bring the book to class and we engage in "interrupted book reports." For this activity, students sit in a circle and, in turn, have 30 seconds to share about their book. After 30 seconds, "time" is called and the next person shares. After all have shared, the process repeats with a deeper focus on personal connection with the literature or a character in the book, and finally, in the last cycle, with reflections on the content area in the History-Social Science curriculum with

which this novel would connect. [paragraph 10]

During another class session, students engage in a set of meaning-making activities including "Quaker Reading" (Burke, 1998), a form of reading aloud passages from a common text that resonate with the reader, and "Found Poem" (Clagget, Reid, & Vinz, 1996), a strategy for making meaning of prose through distilling the most important (to the reader) language from the text. I introduce students to other literacy strategies including "literary fishbowl," a discussion process, and "hot-seat," a way of unpacking the motivations and deeper sentiments of a given character. Many of these strategies may be found on the Internet sites such as <http://www.englishcompanion.com/assignments/reading/103readingactivities.htm> (Burke, n. d.) and [http://www.ncteamericancollection.org/amer\\_fishbowl\\_lessonplan.htm](http://www.ncteamericancollection.org/amer_fishbowl_lessonplan.htm) (Lindenberg, n. d.). [paragraph 11]

We also discuss the use of companion pieces to a novel: e.g., Maya Angelou's poem, "Harlem Hopscotch," in conjunction with her autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, 1970). Additionally, we discuss the usefulness of film as a companion piece and view excerpts or whole pieces: e.g., the film version (Roeg, 1971) of the book *Walkabout* (Marshall, 1970) or the film version (Redford, 1988) of the book *The Milagro Beanfield War* (Nichols, 1979). [paragraph 12]

The most popular activity in this project is making a mini book. I demonstrate how to make a booklet using a single sheet of paper. This is then the basis for students to make a mini book of their novel. This strategy is particularly effective in having the reader synthesize the book and present it to others. The best part is when they are required to draw a picture of themselves reading the book. I always provide prototypes, usually one I have done for the book I am currently reading. This semester, my book was *In the Name of Salome: A Novel* by Julia Alvarez (2001) and I drew (badly) myself reading in the tub, my favorite reading place.

Modeling always helps. [paragraph 13]

By this time in the semester, candidates have begun to develop a reading schedule for the book in their groups, using the readability index and their reading fluency tests to determine a reasonable reading rate. They plan the reading schedule and activities "with the end in mind" (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) as they develop learning outcomes, assessments, and enabling activities. Following the in-class book talk, students produce and share a PowerPoint slide show of their book and ultimately share their entire project before submitting it for evaluation. Each group also produces an abstract of their work which is shared on the WEB-CT so that each candidate will have the materials for 10 to 12 books for use in her future class. [paragraph 14]

### Each One Teach Many

In addition to learning about instructional strategies and techniques, I hope students deepen their way of thinking about teaching as a result of this project. Teacher candidates are asked to interview experienced teachers about reading; survey the literature available in their libraries; look at what their students in schools are reading; and become informed about young adult literature, particularly multicultural literature that connects with the social studies curriculum. Most importantly, they are required to read. Social studies teachers need to be readers. This assignment brings them face to face with that expectation. [paragraph 15]

Additionally, future teachers need to "unpack" and operationalize interdisciplinary instruction. The book club becomes as much an exercise for reconceptualizing curriculum and planning in larger chunks around broader concepts and ideas. It is anti-hegemonic in the sense that it demonstrates a way to teach within the standards-conscious but not standards-driven perspective. High school students are able to engage in learning through story and gain many more skills through the activities that accompany a unit including multicultural literature. Additionally, big questions, important questions, and questions about race, class, and democracy nest within a well-chosen novel, companion pieces, primary source documents, and well-

planned instruction. Percoco (2001) argues that the heart of the social studies curriculum is teaching and learning about conflict using a variety of strategies. He urges teachers to take advantage of the mission of social studies education to develop critical thinking, civil discourse, and civic understanding among young people. Using multicultural literature in the social studies classroom and a book club approach shatters the inch-by-inch and year-by-year strategy so embedded in social studies education and permits wide-ranging discussion of deeper issues that underlie the minutiae, which will make long-term differences in our social milieu and in the lives of young people. [paragraph 16]

It has been more than six years since I first incorporated the Book Club project into my course assignments. Many of my former students have shared their ongoing work with me, and I see evidence of literacy practices in their instruction. Some former students are using the Book Club, or some aspects of it, in their courses. Others utilize strategies they learned as part of the Book Club project with a variety of print material. A few organize their instruction in which their students choose from a set of books selected to appeal to them (socio-culturally) at their reading level (linguistically within the "zone of proximal development") in a collaborative way (clubs or partner reading). [paragraph 17]

I am still modifying this project to make it more compelling for my students in the teacher education program. I think the challenge is a larger one, permeating all levels of my own instruction. I struggle to find ways to help future teachers, predominantly middle-class White young adults who are less than eager readers, inquire deeply into the world and focus on the "funds of knowledge" that their students bring to class, by which each and every decision about instruction should be informed. Our school kids need to see themselves in the "story" as its members and makers. In this era of increasing standardization and its intensification, Book Clubs and other literacy initiatives are much needed in our classrooms. However selfish it may seem, I want more high schools to be like the one in which I spent so many good years. Through this project, student teachers are given a few tools and hopefully develop an ethos of collaboration that is much needed in high schools today. [paragraph 18]

## Endnotes

1. The novel is written by Rudolfo Anaya (1972).
2. *Ceremony* is written by a Native American novelist, Lesley Silko, in 1986.
3. *Paco's Story* is based on the author's (Heinemann, 1987) combat experience in Vietnam War.
4. *Farewell to Manzanara* (Houston, 1973) is a novel often used in high school English classes.
5. This African American female TV personality hosts a talk show branded by her name and publishes books.
6. WEB-CT is the on-line component of the course and is an environment that permits posting of assignments, communication among students (candidates), and instructor, and links to resources useful to Social Studies teachers.

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