

★ 2017 CLA MASTER CLASS

Diverse Nonfiction Children's Literature in the University Classroom

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The 2017 Master Class in Children's Literature featured roundtables led by experts who shared their research and recommendations regarding the inclusion of diverse nonfiction children's literature in university settings. This article describes some of the primary themes and insights that emerged during that session.

SINCE 1994, the annual Children's Literature Assembly Master Class in Children's Literature has provided opportunities for those who teach in college and university settings to discuss contemporary trends and issues in the field of children's literature and share experiences related to the teaching of children's literature at the university level. As McClure (2011) explains, the Master Class provides "a forum for professors of children's literature to share effective strategies for promoting a love of literature in ever-changing political climates and diverse academic contexts" (p. xi). On Saturday, November 18, 2017, the 24th annual Master Class convened during the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention in St. Louis, Missouri. This year's Master Class centered on selecting, evaluating, and teaching "diverse" nonfiction children's literature in university-level courses. The goal of this session was to foster professional conversations among teacher educators about general issues of representation in children's literature and, more specifically, about the importance of diverse representations in children's nonfiction. This session built upon the focus of last year's Master Class about the present-day landscape of children's literature in university teaching, which also emphasized diverse literature (Liang, Parsons, & Crisp, 2016); the conversation will be continued during the 2018

Master Class on voice, culture, and identity in children's poetry, a session to be chaired by Roberta Price Gardner and Suzanne M. Knezek and co-chaired by Louise Shaw. Throughout this piece, we use words such as "diversity" to signify a range of cultural identity categories, including (but not necessarily limited to) age, dis/ability and developmental differences, gender, parallel populations (Hamilton, 1993), region, religion, sexual identity, and socioeconomic status and class.

Due, to a large degree, to programs like Reading First, as well as the Common Core State Standards (2010) and other educational initiatives, there has been a tremendous increase in the use of nonfiction (particularly informational texts) in K-12 classrooms. Although the demand for more expanded use and appreciation of nonfiction books is not new (Meltzer, 1976; Pappas, 1993), such arguments have achieved remarkable prominence in pedagogical debates and discussions following the turn of the 21st century (Duke, 2000; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Zarnowski, Kerper, & Jensen, 2001). In less than a decade, educators and policymakers have taken action to respond to the lack of informational text in classrooms. And yet, the inclusion of culturally diverse literature in classrooms has changed little across the last half century (Crisp et al., 2016)—in spite of more than 75

years of research, scholarship, and criticism documenting and questioning the ongoing lack of diversity in children's literature publishing (Heaton, 1947/1963; Horning, 2013; Larrick, 1965; Low, 2016; Rollins, 1941/1967). With annual U.S. children's publishing statistics showing the number of books with significant content, topics, characters, and/or themes about African or African American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific American, or Latino or Latino American people hovering around 10%, it is discouraging that the number of multicultural books published annually has remained stagnant for more than 20 years (see, e.g., Horning, 2013). The work of many other researchers also supports the existence of such disparities—in both fiction and nonfiction literature—across these and other cultural identity categories, including race, socioeconomic status and class, gender, religion, sexual identity, and disabilities, developmental differences, and chronic illness (see, e.g., Blaska, 2004; Chaudhri and Teale, 2013; Crisp, 2015).

While the current political and cultural climate, with its frequent public discussions of the acceptability of xenophobic language, border walls, gender bias, and racism, feels bleak to us, it may actually offer opportunities for immense growth and change in the inclusion of diverse nonfiction literature across all educational contexts—from early childhood through adult education. Such possibility is evidenced in the rise in public discussion and debate (particularly on social media) centering on the need for diverse children's books that “have fueled demands for a greater understanding, awareness, and appreciation of the need for diverse children's literature” (Liang, Parsons, and Crisp, 2017, p. e-5). While change needs to occur at all levels, university professors—particularly teacher educators—are uniquely positioned to have tremendous influence on the use and inclusion of diverse nonfiction youth literature in all pedagogical spaces.

Attendees at this year's Master Class had the opportunity to engage in small group conversations with a number of prominent scholars, critics, librarians, and teachers whose expertise includes issues of representation and diversity in youth literature. The following topics, while not exhaustive, were the primary focus of conversation among participants and roundtable leaders at this year's Master Class:

- Nonfiction Depicting Multiracial People (led by Amina Chaudhri, Northeastern Illinois University)
- Religion in Nonfiction (led by Denise Dávila, University of Nevada Las Vegas)
- Nonfiction Depicting Jewish People (led by Rachel Kamin, Joseph & Mae Gray Cultural & Learning Center; Michele Widdes, Sunset Ridge Elementary School)
- Nonfiction Depicting Latinx People (led by Jamie Campbell

Naidoo, University of Alabama; Ruth Quiroa, National Louis University)

- Nonfiction Depicting African/African American People (led by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, University of Pennsylvania)
- Nonfiction Depicting LGBTQ People (led by Jon Wargo, Boston College)
- Critical Multicultural Analysis of Nonfiction (led by Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, Pennsylvania State University)

In this article, we summarize some of the recommendations for university professors offered during the 2017 Master Class in Children's Literature, including selecting diverse nonfiction children's books, positioning/situating our courses, and interrupting intolerance. While the sections below address some of the primary takeaways from the Master Class, we are not suggesting there was uniformity of perspective across all roundtable leaders and session chairs. Obviously, any group of diverse individuals will represent a range of equally diverse perspectives on any topic. In addition, it would be impossible to summarize in these few pages the entirety of what was discussed during the session. Instead, we have attempted to identify specific recommendations and insights related to university teaching of children's literature. This article concludes with a list of ten recommended readings we think will be useful to instructors seeking to further their own understandings and/or identify materials about diverse and nonfiction literature that they can share with students enrolled in university-level children's literature courses.

The Classroom Canon: Some Considerations While Selecting Diverse Nonfiction Children's Literature

Debates about literary canons and the “great” and “classic” books have been ongoing in the humanities and education since at least the 1960s (Hicks, 2004). Rethinking, expanding, and complicating the dominant and exclusionary children's literature canon is vitally important and, at the same time, profoundly difficult. For example, even when university educators attempt to disrupt the canon by choosing nonfiction course texts that depict underrepresented and traditionally marginalized populations and histories, we must also acknowledge our own complicity in the act of literary canon-making. By selecting certain books for inclusion in our classes over others, our syllabi create another form of literary canon for our students. As Guillory (1993) explains, “the distinction between the canonical and the noncanonical can be seen...as an effect of the syllabus as an institutional instrument, the fact that works not included on a given syllabus appear to have no status at all” (p. 30). In other words, the literature we select for use in our courses

become privileged texts and tacitly teach our students which books are the most important to read.

Several strategies for disrupting canonization in designing our university courses and syllabi were shared during the 2017 Master Class. One suggestion was to provide students with options and choice when it comes to selecting books to read. For instance, if a portion of the course is devoted to the history and value of *Pride* within queer communities, we might choose to provide students with a list of children's books related to the topic and ask them to decide which book(s) to read in preparation for class. These lists could include a variety of nonfiction books (e.g., *Pride: Celebrating Diversity & Community* [Stevenson, 2016]; *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* [Sanders, 2018]; *The Harvey Milk Story* [Krakow, 2002]), as well as fictional pairings (e.g., *This Day in June* [Pittman, 2013]; *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* [Newman, 1991]).

For those of us who value having a shared text or engaging students in classroom experiences like literature discussions around a single book, one suggestion involved requiring students to read one instructor-chosen text along with another book that adds complexity and additional voices to the conversation. When teaching about the Holocaust/Shoah in Nazi Germany, for example, university educators might consider incorporating nonfiction books that give voice and representation to individuals and experiences that are often excluded in nonfiction children's literature, including texts like *The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Rescued Jews During the Holocaust* (Ruelle, 2009), *We Will Not Be Silent: The White Rose Student Resistance Movement that Defied Adolf Hitler* (Freedman, 2016), *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow* (Bartoletti, 2005), and *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Settington, 2013). As a related option, university educators may wish to require students to utilize what they've learned from reading a shared text by locating and reading a book that they believe will contribute to and/or extend class discussion.

Master Class roundtable leaders also addressed the pedagogical strategy of pairing a quality nonfiction book with a counterexample (a problematic text). Although this can be a powerful mechanism for teaching students to read critically, the general recommendation was to elevate and focus upon exemplary literature, rather than highlight texts of lesser quality. Should one ultimately decide to utilize a counterexample with students, however, we follow Debbie Reese's recommendation that instructors purchase a set of used copies from an online or secondhand bookstore in order to avoid contributing to sales numbers for such texts (if a book continues to sell, publishers are more likely to keep it in print).

Finally, we want to reiterate what Adichie (2009)

referred to as "the dangers of a single story" (n.p.). As university professors, it is essential that we provide our students with access to multiple stories, multiple voices, and multiple perspectives. We need to question the what, who, and how of stories about historical and contemporary events, places, and the lives of individuals and groups. Regardless of how we go about selecting and using nonfiction books for our courses, we can also bring another dozen or so books with us to class, present book talks for selected titles, and then provide students with time to read and dip into those quality texts we have vetted.

Understanding and Utilizing Policies and Position Statements

As several Master Class roundtable leaders and attendees discussed, it can be challenging to foreground the importance of diversity in children's literature when standards in the English Language Arts often center on literary elements or pedagogical approaches. For educators who value representations of diversity and critical inquiry in children's literature courses, an important early step is to increase our own familiarity with the strategic plans and mission, vision, and values statements of our universities, schools/colleges, departments, and programs. Institutions of higher learning are not politically neutral, and students in our courses have chosen to enroll in programs with specific stances toward education, cultural, and social issues. Therefore, these stances also position every participant (faculty, staff, and students) in particular ways. Strategic plans and mission, values, and vision statements not only inform the ideologies of the programs in which we teach, they also reflect the professional commitments and dispositions to be expected of individuals who graduate from those programs.

By reviewing documents that involve policies and procedures, university professors are likely to find support for creating courses and curricula that take an active stance toward diversity, equity, and justice. Aligning our courses with those stated institutional goals is not just useful in justifying our theoretical and scholarly stances (or even the necessity of our children's literature courses in general) to colleagues and administrators; it can also be beneficial in helping our students understand why the courses in which they are enrolled have explicitly stated, unapologetic points-of-view.

As we were preparing this article, we briefly reviewed the mission, vision, and value statements of the institutions ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as being among the top 10 programs for elementary teacher education in 2017. Through our somewhat cursory look at these top-ranked programs, we found that guiding documents and statements for 8 (80%) of the 10 colleges/schools of education included direct and explicit positions related to issues of equity and

social justice. In fact, 6 (60%) of the programs included menus/pages on their primary webpages devoted exclusively to issues of diversity. Examples of frequently used words and phrases we can look for in our own university's documents include terms like the following: equity, justice (or social justice), diversity, and inclusion.

If an institution does not provide language that explicitly places importance on diversity, equity, and justice, we can also look for related words like “global,” “reflective,” or “responsive” that signal or support stances, practices, and pedagogies that are culturally responsive (Gay, 2018), relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014), and sustaining (Paris, 2012). Ultimately, even the most general statements may still provide support for the purposeful inclusion of diverse materials, content, and pedagogies through the use of phrases like “every learner” or “all learners.” As Dyson (2003) reminds us, the inclusion of words like “all” in these contexts “is almost always syntactically linked or semantically associated with that other category, the ‘different’ children--not middle class and not white” (p. 100). While Dyson's statement highlights the problematic reliance on such loaded language and terminology, it also cues us to actively look for this and similar language within the documents that guide our universities.

In addition to institutional documents, professional organizations also provide statements of principles and/or position statements that underscore the importance of diversity, equity, and justice. Within the field of children's literature, organizations like the Children's Literature Association (<http://www.childlitassn.org>) and the International Research Society for Children's Literature (<http://www.irsl.org>) offer statements that explicitly address the value of diverse and nonfiction children's literature. Among the many resources available to university educators through the Children's Literature Assembly (<http://www.childrensliteratureassembly.org>) and National Council of Teachers of English (<http://www.ncte.org>) are position statements related to the roles and critical importance of children's literature, its benefits to teacher education programs, as well as a resolution on the value and need for diverse youth literature in classrooms, libraries, and bookstores. CLA's (2012) statement on *The Value of Children's Literature Courses within Teacher Education*, for example, includes six points related directly to the ways in which literature can support the development of multicultural perspectives, including its ability to help readers develop understandings of “difficult social and cultural issues” and immerse them in the lives of individuals “from a wide range of cultural experiences, both multicultural and global” (p. 2).

Obviously, each of the above described documents will not be free of their own issues and limitations. Further,

what our institutions claim to believe in writing may not always align with what is valued in actual practice. Although drawing upon such statements is a powerful way to justify our selection of diverse nonfiction children's literature, it is essential that we also remain cognizant of the level of commitment exhibited in the day-to-day decisions and actions of our programs and institutions (e.g., what protections are in place and who is accountable for enforcing those protections).

Interrupting and Speaking Back to Intolerance

Some of the most frequently voiced concerns shared during the Master Class involved the anxieties that surround our abilities to foster classroom atmospheres in which critical and challenging conversations can occur and in which we feel prepared to interrupt intolerance. Based on the concerns raised during the Master Class, we offer a few suggestions for establishing shared norms and confronting prejudices in our children's literature classrooms.

Establishing norms that are based on explicit agreements among both instructors and students can help prevent (and, when necessary, provide a means of addressing) a number of barriers that often shut down critical conversation in university classes, such as the willingness to be vulnerable or address sensitive and controversial topics. There are many ways to introduce norms in university classrooms. For instance, an instructor may choose to arrive to the first day of class with a previously generated list of suggested classroom norms and invite feedback, additions/deletions, and amendment from students. Wentworth (2014) suggests a more generative approach to forming ground rules in a way that “builds trust, clarifies group expectations of one another, and establishes points of ‘reflection’ to see how the group is doing regarding process” (n.p.). The initial phase of Wentworth's process takes approximately 30 minutes to complete and requires all participants to identify and share one specific thing that they need in order to work productively in a group. By seeking clarification from one another, the class collaboratively creates a list of approximately 10 ground rules to which they agree to abide throughout the semester. Regardless of how one establishes a set of classroom norms, these should function to guide conduct and conversation throughout the course. At various points during the semester, it is helpful to revisit these norms to check in on how well the class is adhering to the ground rules, revising them as warranted.

During their time as graduate students and members of the Children's Literature Team (led by Laura Apol) at Michigan State University, Suzanne and Thomas participated in an anti-racist professional development retreat titled, “Doing Our Own Work” (Gardi, 2006). By the end of the retreat, the Children's Literature Team had refined

a list of norms they then utilized in the university-level children's literature courses they taught. Those norms were subsequently revised across several semesters; we offer one version of them in Figure 1 with the hope that they may serve as a helpful starting place for others.

Even when we succeed in creating a learning environment in which it is safe to take risks and where individuals are allowed to change, difficult and sometimes uncomfortable conversations are virtually inevitable when we are confronting issues related to privilege, power, voice, and representation. Teaching Tolerance and the Southern Poverty Law Center provide a free, detailed publication called, *Speak Up! Responding to Everyday Bigotry* (Willoughby, 2005) that is intended to offer guidance and support to individuals looking to learn approaches to addressing bigotry among family, friends and neighbors, and/or while at school, work, or in public. The six steps are to (1) speak up and refuse to remain silent, (2) identify the behavior you find troubling, (3) appeal to the individual's higher principles, (4) set limits for the future, (5) find an ally/be an ally, and (6) remaining vigilant (Willoughby, 2005, p. 77-79).

Of these six steps, the second (identifying the behavior you find troubling) seemed to be the most enlightening for Master Class participants with whom we engaged around this topic. By identifying the troubling behavior, we are forced to separate the person from the problematic statement or action. This is a fundamental shift in the ways in which many of us are inclined to respond to instances of intolerance and prejudice in our classrooms. Instead of falling into the trap of labeling someone a racist, cultural commentator John Randolph (Smooth, 2008) emphasizes the importance of centering our attention on what someone did or said (e.g., "That thing you said sounds sexist") as opposed to who they are (e.g., "You're sexist"). By focusing "strictly on the person's words and actions and explaining why what they did and what they said is unacceptable," we have the ability to hold them accountable and avoid being derailed by individuals who might simply declare that they are not racist/sexist/etc. (e.g., "If you knew me, you'd know that I'm not a racist") (Smooth, 2008, n.p.). Put another way, it is easier for us to acknowledge we did something that comes across as—and may actually be—racist than it is to admit our own racism; depersonalization that focuses on the act and not the person can help foster more productive discussions.

Final Reflections

Across the many conversations that occurred during the 2017 Master Class, the primary insights for university professors who were not able to attend the session in person seemed to be that (a) we need to work to collect and share diverse nonfiction books in our children's literature classrooms, (b) in order to help our university students

FIGURE 1

Community Norms That Will Allow Us to Bring Our Full Selves to Discussions

- Speak from your own experience
- Listen carefully/Consider the experiences of others
- Deepen difficult conversations (rather than divert them)
- Actively include everyone in discussion
- Everyone has a responsibility to participate
- Respect differences—they are assets in this class
- Honor confidentiality
- Allow people to change
- Challenge ideas in a way that builds
- Attend to denial/defensiveness
- Take risks/Ask and explore difficult questions
- Ask for more time
- Expect unanswered questions—every conversation will be difficult

understand why diversity matters in nonfiction, we need to be able to make an argument for diversity in our classes more generally, and (c) in order for us to create environments where discussions of representations of diversity are encouraged about all literature, we need to be prepared to act when disruption occurs or is necessary.

Although it may be difficult, it is essential for university educators to confront intolerance and bigotry immediately and on an ongoing basis, both in and outside of our classrooms. Silence, we all know, it not an option. In spite of our fear that we will make mistakes or even fail, university instructors have a responsibility to speak up. In fact, because each of us will always have more of our own personal work to do, we should accept that mistakes and failures are inevitable. But by speaking up and continuing our own learning and professional development, we will also be better prepared to continue to help bring about much-needed change for our students (and for their future students). We offer, in closing, a final quotation from Dyson (2016) that underscores why this work matters:

In a troubled world of poverty and violence, of racism and sometimes breathtaking indifference, we cannot pave children's way. But, as teachers, we can help.... If our classrooms are not places for a diversity of social action and a wealth of cultural materials, we risk sending messages of alienation, messages that say that educated people are not rooted in their own histories, in strong relationships with people that matter. (p. 65)

This is equally true for all of us who are university educators.

Recommended Further Reading

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