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Research Highlights of Current Faculty Projects

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Transforming Multiethnic Literature Instruction

In a recent study using alternative approaches to teaching multiethnic literature, University of Illinois researcher Arlette Ingram Willis and her colleague Julia L. Johnson posited that a) students need to understand that people read the world differently depending on class, gender, race, and politics and b) reading literature about those outside their own culture can cause a paradigm shift in students' views about those of other cultures. Using Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, Willis and Johnson conducted an instructional intervention in an untracked, ethnically and economically diverse high-school English class of 25 students. In the novel, set in rural Louisiana in the late 1940s, a poorly educated young African American, Jefferson, is sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit.

Willis and Johnson wanted to augment what students could learn from the text by providing additional sociohistorical information, as well as offering sustained opportunities for response. During the semester-long qualitative study, they highlighted the variety of ways in which racial inequities arise when the death penalty is invoked. They invited four guest speakers: a judge involved in reviewing the death penalty; a distinguished scholar of African-American history and education in the South; a scholar and advocate for social justice; and a law professor and opponent of the death penalty. The researchers also shared *Dead Man Walking*, the movie portrayal of a nun who supports a death-row inmate prior to his execution, and a documentary, *The Greatest Trials of All Time: The Scottsboro Boys*, which portrays a trial of nine African-American males falsely accused of raping two white women.

The researchers wanted to learn whether students would change their views or otherwise respond to the insider information provided. They audiotaped pre- and post-intervention interviews, gathered student written work and artifacts, videotaped discussions and guest speakers, and reviewed their own lesson plans, field notes, and reflective journals.

What this research tells us:

Analysis of students' written and artistic pre-intervention responses showed a consistent perspective. One student's response illustrates a common point of view: "No matter what a slave does, society will get the best of him, and there is no escape." The researchers analyzed the post-intervention data by focusing on the responses of three representative students with contrasting death-penalty views (against, uncertain about, and for) and found them richly consistent across data sources. Students did not radically change their views as a result of the intervention but in post-intervention interviews and questionnaires showed appreciation for the guest speakers and videos. One student wrote, "It made you think about things a little differently." Students were particularly impressed with the guest speakers who spoke from lived experiences. One student wrote, "It got real at that point....Hearing history firsthand is just kind of cool."

Recommendations for teaching multiethnic literature:

- ⇒ In teaching multiethnic literature, students and teachers who happen to be members of the group being studied should not be expected to provide all of the needed background information.
- ⇒ A variety of contributors should be introduced, as all people hold their own biases.
- ⇒ Instructors, student contributors, guest speakers, and supplementary materials can give further insights into the text.
- ⇒ Some students are not strong writers and respond more fully through art and drama.
- ⇒ Don't expect high-school students' viewpoints on social justice to change significantly in one semester: change will be gradual.

For more information about this research:

Willis, A. I., & Johnson, J. L. (2001). "A horizon of possibilities": A critical framework for transforming multiethnic literature instruction. *Reading Online*, 4(3). Retrieved February 28, 2002, from <http://www.readingonline.org/articles/willis/index.html>

We invite your response...

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