Multicultural Contemporary Literature as

NC Community College Course ENG 271

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Introduction

For my comprehensive assessment project for the M.A. in English, MTL, I have designed a multicultural literature course that will be taught within the approved course of English 271 in the NC Community College System. I chose to work within the parameters of English 271 with the advice of Dr. Lisa Eads, Associate Vice President of Programs with the North Carolina Community College System Office of Programs & Student Services. The existing parameters for approved courses have intentionally been left wide enough to encompass many different focuses within any given course. This course will fall under the “concentration elective” category and will be intended for those students that expect to major in English or humanities after transferring to a university.

I have chosen to focus on a contemporary literature course, as I will provide readings that are current and relevant to students’ lives. Readings included have been chosen intentionally to depict a diverse picture of American lives and have all been published within the last 15 years. The connecting theme among the studied works is identity; specifically, how difficult it is to find one’s identity in the U.S. today. The study of multicultural literature is essential for promoting cultural awareness, fostering critical thinking skills, and building multicultural competence. These skills will serve students not only in their academic endeavors, but in their professional and personal lives as well.

Literature Review

Research into the benefits of studying multicultural literature is not new. As quoted by Minshui Cai, Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, “extoll[s] the potentialities of literature for aiding us to understand ourselves and others, for widening our horizons to include temperaments and cultures different from our own, for helping us to clarify our conflicts in values, for illuminating our world” (212). James Banks’s transformational approach has similar goals of using multicultural materials in curriculum with the aspiration of widening student perspectives on cultural and social issues (Cai 212). While it is widely accepted that multicultural curriculum has the power to affect student attitudes on a variety of cultural issues, there is also evidence that simple exposure without guidance toward critical analysis can lead to “misunderstandings, stereotypical perceptions, biases, and prejudices” (Cai 212). The intention of my proposed course is to both transact and transform through facilitated critical thinking exercises, which I will discuss in detail later in this paper.

In Marcela Borge, et al.’s article, the authors expound on the importance of multicultural competence. They define multicultural competence as: “a lifelong learning process built upon self-appraisal and respectful, humble interactions with others that reflect a genuine desire to grow” (Borge, et al. 48). The article explains that current research on “the promotion of multicultural competency” has been “focused on graduate training or health service delivery” rather than on undergraduate courses (Borge, et al, 48). This research focuses specifically on psychology courses, and the need for multicultural competence within that context, however, I would argue that their findings show a need for multicultural coursework in other academic areas, as well. My proposed multicultural literature course would not only prepare students for further humanities studies, but for a multitude of professions, including psychology.

In Paul Corrigan’s “Conclusion to Literature,” he discusses the value literature can add to the lives of those who read it. Corrigan posits that, while much research into the value of literature exists, sources all “agree that although literature doesn’t automatically make us better people, reading literature may help us change or understand or give meaning or perspective to our lives” (30). Despite that general knowledge within academia, Corrigan laments that the message has not yet reached the public. He believes that introductory literature courses should be taught as though they will be the conclusion to literature study for many students. Instruction then, should focus less on literary elements, and more on the significance it can add to one’s life. This significance can be profound:

These students will be roommates and classmates who speak of literature to other students fondly or dismissively or derisively or not at all. They will be parents who encourage or discourage children from studying literature. They will be voters who care or do not care about the humanities. They will be legislators, donors, board members, and administrators who make funding decisions. They will be adults who read or do not read. In short, they will, collectively, exert as great or greater influence on the study of literature than we scholars, teachers, and writers will. And they will quite probably exert this influence in no small part based on what they experience in Introduction to Literature. (Corrigan, 32)

It is with this in mind, that I designed this multicultural literature course. The readings in this course, paired with guided discussion, will help students make connections between the literature, themselves, and their communities. Students taking this course may plan to continue their education into further study of the humanities, but many will not. My intention is to make a lasting impression that will affect students’ perspectives as they move through their lives.

Methodology

For this multicultural contemporary literature course, I have included multiple formats of literature written from diverse American perspectives. The purpose of this design is to expose my students to a variety of viewpoints, in multiple formats, that students will find relevant to their lives. As we work through the course, the overarching theme is identity, particularly the struggle many of the characters in the readings have in finding their own identity due to their race, ethnicity, and/or religion. The class will open with a viewing of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” where she discusses the importance of learning about different perspectives. This will set the tone for the class and begin students’ thinking about how and why it’s important to learn about viewpoints different from their own.

As we move through the readings of this course, students will be exposed to many different cultures and perspectives. Students will also read in a variety of formats including novels, poetry, a memoir, a graphic memoir, and a short story. Some additional themes and topics we will explore include family and relationships, religion and spirituality, immigration, abuse, addiction, violence, and discrimination. The characters we meet throughout this semester will struggle with their identity, oftentimes leading to trauma. Class discussion will be guided through provided discussion questions (see course outline) and will surround the listed topics, and address how and why the authors chose to write about them in the way they do. Through discussion and writing exercises, students will learn to think and talk about difficult topics in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner, thus benefitting their future academic, professional, and personal lives.

Students will also be asked to complete several assignments in addition to discussion posts. The first assignment will be an annotated bibliography. The purpose of this assignment is expose students to the campus library and teach them how to research and identify reliable resources. Students will learn format and citation guidelines through this assignment, led by campus librarians, and supported by myself. This assignment will be a low-stakes grade and should be considered a learning exercise to prepare students for their next writing tasks.

Students will also be assigned a literary analysis and a final research paper as evidence of meeting the course objectives. Students will be given ample class time for work on these writing assignments, particularly focusing on giving and receiving peer feedback. Students will also be given opportunity to submit their papers to me ahead of the due date for feedback and revisions suggestions prior to submitting for a final grade. As academic writing is often a source of anxiety for students, I would like to focus more on the process than the grade. Based on research by Shannon Baker, et al. giving students sufficient time to write, receive feedback from multiple sources, and revise will both lessen the pressure students feel, and lead to stronger writing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this proposed multicultural literature course will be a valuable addition to the NC Community College System’s English 271 course offering. The course’s focus on contemporary literature that explores multicultural issues of identity in America will provide students with relevant and diverse readings that promote critical thinking, cultural awareness, and multicultural competence. Research has shown that exposure to multicultural curriculum without guided critical analysis can lead to misunderstandings and biases. Therefore, this proposed course aims to facilitate critical thinking exercises and discussion to both transact and transform students’ perspectives. The course’s writing intensive approach, paired with research on feedback methods, will ensure that students receive comprehensive feedback to improve their writing skills. Finally, by emphasizing the significance of literature in one’s life, the proposed course aims to create a lasting impression on students’ perspectives as they move through their academic and personal lives. Overall, this course will prepare students for further humanities studies as well as any other profession and contribute to building a more culturally aware and competent community.

Works Cited

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