

December, 1999 - David Surrey, Sociology and Urban Studies

For a Navajo as traditional as Chee, digging for a corpse in a death hogan (house) wasn't a task to be taken lightly. It would require at least a sweat bath and, more properly, a curing ceremony, to restore the violator of such taboos to hozoho (balance), from First Eagle, Tony Hillerman.

For example, the Navajo Indians traditionally believe that they were Holy People supernatural and sacred, who lived below ground in 12 lower worlds. ...A deity named Changing Woman give birth to the Hero Twins, called "Monster Slayer" and "Child of the Waters," from Cultural Anthropology, Raymond Scupan.

A. Which would you rather read? B. Which would engage your students more?
C. Which is more accurate? Answers below.

College teachers in general are not trained to teach. Authors of most college textbooks in general are not trained to write. Dealing with the latter will help us with the former. As part of a New Jersey Department of Higher Education (now defunct) grant awarded several years ago, I started experimenting with incorporating fiction into a number of traditional social science courses in Sociology and Urban Studies. The initial results were so positive that I now try to do this as a major component of all my classes. I have even taught one Anthropology course entirely based on mystery novels set in a variety of cultures.

I constantly find that mystery books, poems and short stories actively engage my students in ways that are too often lacking in the traditional approaches. These pieces, when chosen carefully, accurately portray specific cultures with a richness that is often missing in the standard texts. Once the students are engaged, I find that I am far more successful at pulling out the social scientific elements which they would have missed in a drier textbook.

There are many directions one can go with this approach. One that I have found to be very successful is a *what if* question. For example, *what if* Easy Rawlings in the Walter Mosley Black Detective series was a White Female. How would the cultural elements in the book be portrayed differently? How would his neighborhood, home life or childhood be pictured? Or in a more advanced course, *what if* Tony Hillerman's Navajo detective Jim Chee was a Hopi? How would his inseparable approaches to crime solving and life differ?

One of the difficulties in the social sciences is that it is too easy to view the world through the lenses of one's own culture. While this in itself is not as inherently evil as, say, making up the data, without an awareness of the process, it can lead to distorted interpretations. An assignment to help students understand this view is to have them imagine how a certain piece could turn out if the writer was from a different ethnic group or gender. *What if* Patricia Cornwell's Coroner novels

were written by an Asian male? How would the book be different? Student discussions here are varied, lively and perceptive.

Another direction one can use is to *place your culture* in the story. For example, *place your culture* in the main roles in a Toni Morrison novel. Given the rich diversity of our students, many different possibilities emerge, even from the same ethnic groups. An assignment that follows from this approach is to have students, and here I prefer that this be done in groups, rewrite a scene from a novel with characters from another culture responding to the same events. This approach not only leads to deeper insights but, should students grow up to be college text authors, will lead to livelier texts as well.

In the past students have been given a *cultural scavenger hunt*. Here they find either their cultural group or one assigned to them in a piece of fiction. They are then asked to present their findings to the class with a critical analysis. I have also used current movies or television shows.

Often before I have the class start on a piece of fiction, I ask the students to create a before-list of what they know about the particular culture. After the book has been completed, the students create an after-list, which is (satisfactorily) dissimilar from the before-list.

The positive outcomes from these approaches are enormous. I strongly believe that our students learn most when actively engaged in a directed manner. Uses of fiction as depicted above have led to a richer appreciation of *others'* and *one's own cultures*. Further, hearing classmates interpret the same pieces differently leads to an even richer perception of the differences, and at times similarities, we have at the College. Most of all, I find that these approaches provide the best possible context to maximize what we can offer in the social sciences.

Answers to Questions Above.

A. Both B. Both C: Both