

Inspiring Empathy: Story Exchange and the Postcolonial Novel

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As both Director of Experiential Learning and Associate Professor of English, I continually seek ways to integrate experiential pedagogy into my literature classes. The special topics course in the English program at my small liberal arts college invites innovative teaching practices and seemed an appropriate place to design an experiential component. Exploring postcolonial novels, my course paired mostly English majors with international students in an introductory ESL class to discuss moments of cultural assimilation and conflict. Reflective writing and class discussion helped English majors explore literary characters as they navigate a postcolonial context, while the conversations with ESL students helped them make real-world connections with their peers who were studying away from their home cultures.

Works such as George Kuh's important *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, And Why They Matter* (2009) show that experiential learning, where assignments call on students to make connections between the real-world and course content, creates a deep and lasting effect on learning. Long before Kuh, John Dewey, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), first articulated the critical role reflection plays in learning—connecting understanding with doing—in defining experiential pedagogy. While experiential practices are many and varied, they all share an emphasis on the art of doing, reflecting,

abstracting, and applying to future experiences (Kolb). As I sat down to design the course the summer before I was scheduled to teach, I brainstormed ways that I might get my students to be active readers and learners of this culturally diverse material, arriving at a plan to engage the international student body on our campus.

I had also recently learned of the Narrative4 project designed by renowned novelist Colum McCann that was being implemented in communities across the country to build rapport and empathy among diverse groups of students. I was intrigued by its emphasis on storytelling as a tool to achieve empathy and hoped that I could use the act of storytelling to promote active learning in my postcolonial novels class. Designed as a response to help traumatized community members deal with the horrific Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown Connecticut in 2012, the N4 project asks its participants to exchange meaningful stories with one another followed by a group story-share where each individual retells his or her partner's story. This story exchange places individuals in another's shoes as he or she must retell the story as though it were his or her own. On its webpage, the N4 states its mission: *"In an effort to break down barriers and shatter stereotypes, N4 encourages people to walk in each other's shoes and prove that not only does every story matter, every life matters"* (<https://narrative4.com/>). For a transcript of this video, see the [Appendix](#).

[Insert video "What Is Empathy"? <https://narrative4.com/2016/10/what-is-empathy/>]

Video: Narrative4 Video on Empathy

Because the N4 project is relatively new, not much scholarly work has been published on its implementation but some ground has been broken in the value of story exchange in the humanities more generally. In 2014, Yoon Young Kim participated in a storytelling program for the Korea Institute for National Unification whose aim was to promote “social integration by significantly contributing to mutual understanding among diverse peoples;” the educational program for high school and university students prepared young Koreans for “possible unification” of North and South Korea (5). Another project utilized storytelling to help immigrant and refugee secondary students build resilience and adjust to their new environments in Canada; program designer Koreen Geres, Ph.D, writes “stories are a powerful force for learning, healing, and promoting social change across cultures” (63). More broadly, research shows that storytelling encourages self-reflection as well as engagement with others (Andernoro et al.) and thus can be a powerful tool for building identification among diverse populations. The novels I selected for the class explore characters who encounter conflicting value systems under colonial rule in their native countries. My students, then, were reading stories of cultural struggle while exchanging their own stories with international students studying here on our campus. Through discussion and reflective writing, I hoped my students would make connections between theory and practice.

Enrolled students¹ read the literary works of writers who have been part of communities colonized by the former British Empire. These postcolonial writers explore their feelings of displacement, cultural alienation, and conflicted identity having grown up with outside cultural

values imposed on their own native communities. As a hermeneutic, we relied on French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of the "nervous condition" as he first stated in the introduction to postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon's famous work, *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The status of 'native' is a neurosis," suggesting many people with a colonial past can be diagnosed with a nervous condition, characterized by a constant state of turmoil, struggling not to lose the values of their native culture while also learning to conform to the dominant values of the colonizing culture (liv). The postcolonial subject often finds herself in a "double bind"—a dilemma where one receives and must reconcile conflicting messages.

While this is the experience of many postcolonial subjects, it is not unique to them. Many of our own students, having been raised in an Appalachian culture², have felt the dilemma of having to conform to both their "native" culture as well as the more mainstream one imposed from the outside. In their story exchange, domestic and international students explored moments of cultural sameness and difference from their pasts; the stories were not necessarily grand or elaborate but meaningful to each of the participants. My goal was for them to recognize that although they may be from different cultures, their experiences of navigating conflicting cultural demands were often very similar.

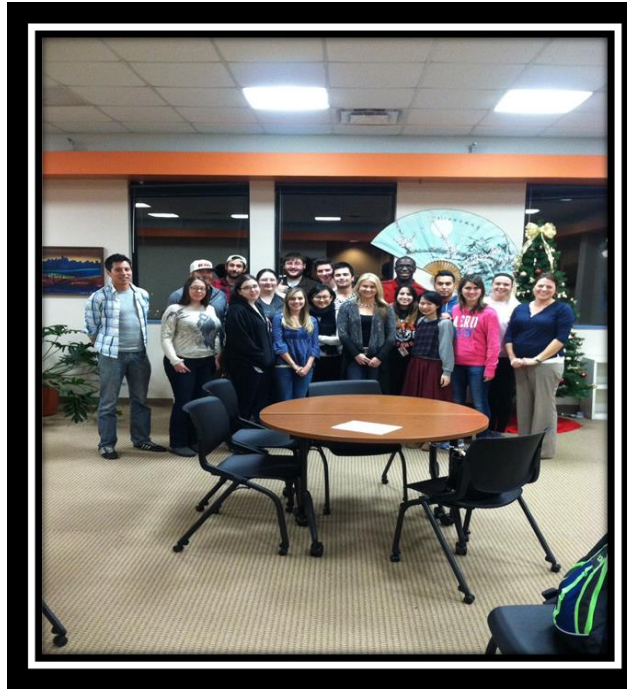


Figure 1: Special topics class

The first part of the semester was devoted to general readings in postcolonial theory including excerpts from Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind*, Ania Loomba's *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*, and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Strikes Back*. With a solid introduction to postcolonial theory under our belts, we began our exploration of canonical texts told from the perspective of the colonizer alongside postcolonial texts. I arranged the study of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" and novel *Things Fall Apart*, and finally Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. For this essay, I will work primarily with Dangarembga's novel as most students chose to work with it in their journals and portfolios.

I had coordinated with the instructor and assistant director of the international student program prior to the beginning of the semester to coordinate our goals for the project. The primary form of assessment for the experiential learning portion of the class was journaling. Likewise, the ESL instructor asked his students to journal based on their conversations with the students in my class. I established conversation circles made up of one or two students from each course. In between each full group meeting, the smaller groups were asked to meet on their own several times to get to know each other. By the last month of the semester, the groups were asked to meet to specifically share stories of cultural assimilation and conflict. After sharing these experiences with each other orally, they were asked to reflect on their own experiences as they compare to other members of their group and write on those experiences in their journals. My group was asked to go an additional step by connecting some of these experiences to examples in the novels where characters had struggled with moments of double consciousness.

The journal responses from my students demonstrated a range of engagement with the material and their UPIKE peers. I received the typical, obvious kinds of examples of cultural difference like “People in France kiss on each side of the cheek when greeting each other. We never do that;” “We both drive on the same side of the road;” “American students eat all kinds of junk in the cafeteria; I’ve never seen so many greasy foods served up!” While important, and perhaps good icebreakers for students who are asked to somewhat artificially sit down and chat with someone they don’t know, these are obviously not the kind of responses I ultimately wanted my students to arrive at or at least end with. By the conclusion of the semester, when we all

gathered for our final meeting, though, to eat pizza (another greasy American entrée!) the group laughed and engaged comfortably, sharing each other's stories as the N4 project is designed.



Figure 2: End of semester celebration

To help generate meaningful dialogue between students in their meetings, I provided them with a list of possible questions or target areas of conversation. Some of these included such points of discussion as 1) what kind of town or region are you from; 2) how are your home regions similar or different in terms of size, population, geography, economics, industry; 3) what aspects of your national and local culture characterize you; and then finally, 4) what incidents in your past show moments of conflict in navigating between two cultures. In other words, I asked them to identify times in their pasts when they felt pulled between two different groups who seemed to hold different value sets. Were they expected to act one way around family and

friends, but another, seemingly opposite way, around another group? In addition to writing about their own experience, I asked them to also reflect and write on their partners' experiences.

As we know, food best translates our cultural differences. So many of my students wrote about contrasts between the food of their home cultures and the cafeteria food at UPIKE. This was an excellent place to encourage communication and comfort in my conversation circles. A young woman from Taiwan journaled about the trouble she had acclimating to American food, not unlike the experience Tambu, the protagonist in Dangarembga's novel, has when she first gets to her Uncle's house at the mission school. The food was plentiful but strange and tasteless with foreign textures and smells, "refus[ing] to go down [Tambu's] throat" (82). Finally, her Aunt Maiguru brings her the more traditional sadza which she is accustomed to. My Taiwanese student remarks that American food is "always salty [with a] heavy flavor" that she can't eat "without water." For both Tambu and my Taiwanese student, food in the culture to which they try to acclimate is abundant and may sustain them—Tambu states, "food was not meant to be interesting but filling" (82)—but does not nourish the soul as the tastes of their home place do.

Another student wrote an extraordinary reflection upon her own marginalized status as an Appalachian in relation to more mainstream culture. She first remarked on the responses she gets when she tells people outside of her area where she is from and their unfortunate stereotyped response: "When I tell people I'm from KY, I often hear, 'Oh yea, KFC!'" She goes on, "Well, yes, KFC is named after my state, but it's hardly the heart of the place. ... I won't say that all of these associations and stereotypes are completely inaccurate or even negative. However, if that's all you can think of, then you have an inaccurate, skewed, incomplete and outdated view of this

place.” Clearly, the student recognizes the importance of looking beyond the stereotype and searching for the nuances.

When asked to describe her home, she writes, “I grew up in Mosley Town. It was named after the surname of my maternal family because they clustered there. A lot of us still live in the area, including myself. My mother was born at her parents’ house, and I live beside the spot of land that they called home at that time. There’s an Old Regular Baptist church on the hill in front of my home. My grandfather helped to build it and the name of the church came from a dream my grandmother had.” This student’s reflection shows a deep knowledge and appreciation for place and identity. She has not simply listed her street address when asked to share characteristics of her home region. Rather, her writing reveals her attention to history, tradition, and local ways of knowing.

As a class we discussed a similar analysis in *Nervous Conditions*. Tambu tries to make sense of the landscape of her childhood in her reflections of home, writing,

My grandmother, who had been an inexorable cultivator of land, sower of seeds and reaper of rich harvests until, literally until, her very last moment ... gave me history lessons as well. History that could not be found in the textbooks. ... Slowly, methodically, throughout the day the field would be cultivated, the episodes of my grandmother’s own portion of history strung together from beginning to end (17).

In this passage, the grandmother relates to Tambu a detailed history of her ancestors and the land they farmed until the colonizers, or wizards, as the grandmother calls them, move in. Her description of the wizards and their heartless treatment of Tambu’s ancestors decenters the

European experience, the perspective readers traditionally get. Our sympathies lie with her grandmother's story, an experience we come to understand through a history written out on the land, providing a counter narrative to the colonizer's story of conquest. Tambu's experience of her home place finds commonality in my Appalachian student's perception of place, a small former coal mining town whose secrets are known only to its community but whose value is found in the resources extracted and profited from by outsiders.

Another student commented at length on linguistic variations unique to the Appalachian region, citing such colloquialisms as "More skittish than a hen house spider" and "that dog's done shuck off the fleas." She goes on to cite dialect as one way in which she often feels caught between two opposing value systems, her home culture which critiques her for "actin' above her raisin'" and her academic culture which critiques her and judges her intelligence for talking like she is "from the holler." Similarly, this student identifies her love of the geographical region and her desire to see it protected from the coal mining culture from which she descended. The tensions that lie between the historically exploited coal mining community and the outside industries that profit from them was an ongoing theme in my students' journals. They routinely find themselves caught in the cultural crosshairs of the industry that has been the area's livelihood and downfall.

Like my students, Nyasha, the tormented cousin in Dangarembga's novel, best captures the trauma one experiences from a system that demands adherence to opposing values. A successful student in her father's British mission school, she is taught the colonizer's history and values, but expected to adhere to the conservative, gendered rules of a Umtali village woman. As

Ato Quayson observes, “Nyasha is keen to move away from that modernity and into a more strategic and fraught appropriation of both rural *and* modern spaces” (43). She cannot reconcile these unrelenting demands, and the factions play out on her body through self-harm and anorexia— “Nyasha grew weaker by the day. She weaved when she walked and every night was the same” (200). In the novel’s climactic scene, she identifies with her father’s torturous position:

Then she sat on her bed and looked at me out of her sunken eyes, her bony knees pressed together so that her nightdress fell through the space where her thighs had been, agitated and nervous and picking her skin. ‘I don’t want to do it, Tambu, really I don’t, but it’s coming, I feel it coming.’ Her eyes dilated. ‘They’ve done it to me,’ she accused, whispering still. ‘Really, they have.’ And then she became stern. ‘It’s not their fault. They did it to them too. You know they did,’ she whispered. ‘To both of them, but especially to him. They put him through it all. But it’s not his fault, he’s good.’ Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. ‘He’s a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir,’ she informed in sneering sarcastic tones. Then she was whispering again. ‘Why do they do it, Tambu,’ she hissed bitterly, her face contorting with rage, ‘to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they’ve done? They’ve taken us away. Lucia. Takesure. All of us. They’ve deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. We’re grovelling. Lucia for a job, Jeremiah for money. Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him.’ She began to rock, her body quivering tensely. ‘I won’t grovel. Oh no, I won’t. I’m not a good

girl. I'm evil. I'm not a good girl.' I touched her to comfort her and that was the trigger.

'I won't grovel, I won't die,' she raged and crouched like a cat ready to spring. (200-201)

Her outburst reaches a level of mental and physical hysteria as she beings to rock, cry, tear and bite at her own body, highlighting the impossibility of her conflicted state. Finally, she murmurs, "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you," encapsulating the colonized position.

My students as members of Appalachian communities experience the pull between their home culture, greatly devalued and misrepresented, and mainstream American culture. Even as recently as 2014, Annie Lowrey wrote a controversial piece entitled "What's the Matter With Eastern KY?" for *The New York Times Magazine*, a headline followed by an image of a KY license plate that says "HELP ME."



Figure 3: Image from NYT Magazine, 2014

Images such as this are inherently stereotypical, totalizing the communities of eastern KY as impoverished, uneducated, even criminal. While the article accurately reports data about household income (which does fall largely below the poverty line), educational attainment (which is often arrested at the high school level), and unemployment, it fails to capture the spirit of the place—the communities that are rich in tradition, comradery, and hard work. When

Lowrey writes, “But the number and proportion of people living in poverty in places like eastern Kentucky persists, despite all the trillions of dollars spent to improve the state of the poor in the United States and promote development,” the implication is that there is something inherently wrong with these communities—that they just can’t get it right. A similar myth surrounds formally colonized territories whose people and government seem to remain in a state of instability and corruption despite billions of dollars given in foreign aid. These reductive and easy narratives fail to consider the infinitely complicated circumstances of these communities and the generational and systemic interference and exploitation of them by foreign powers.

The Narrative 4 project targets the young people of these communities in the United States from the urban to the rural. The story exchange central to the project asks that students put themselves in someone else’s shoes; the act of reading aloud someone else’s experience calls on students to embody and articulate the struggles of their fellow person, hopefully producing what the project calls a “radical empathy.” Using this same framework, I challenged my students to first recognize the tensions, fissures, and impossibilities of navigating two conflicting cultures in postcolonial novels. The course content came alive for them through their interactions with our international students in conversation circles. In their conversations and journal writing, students reflected on their own struggles existing in a marginalized culture and made connections to the pressures of our international students as they traverse the “American” experience. These seemingly disparate groups of students found commonality in their experiences, discovering ties to texts that at first seemed distant to them. Narrative 4 states as its mission that it hopes to build “a community of empathic global citizens who improve the world through the exchange of

personal narratives.” Surely postcolonial writers such as Dangarembga had the same goal in mind when she takes her readers on her painful, beautiful, and haunting journey.

Appendix

“Empathy is...”

“*My definition of empathy...*”

“My definition...wow, um...that is a hard one.”

“Oh, man (*laughs*) I hope other people have struggled with this too.”

“Oof...(clears throat) the definition of empathy...”

“Oh boy...”

“*Empathy...*”

“Empathy, for me, is a sense of giving.”

“Giving yourself fully to someone else’s experiences.”

“Giving up something of *yourself* in order to take in...”

“...someone else’s...depth and beauty.”

“It’s for the benefit of others, but it’s for ourselves too.”

“Empathy is *belonging*.”

“It’s the exchanging of...a person’s mind, body and spirit.”

“I don’t even know how to say it in words...it’s more of a *feeling*.”

“I *see* it...and when I see it I have this very specific feeling.”

“You’re in that air-conditioned apartment, and you can feel the heat of somebody who’s out sweating in the sun.”

“If someone’s down in a hole, you’re not at the top of the hole saying ‘oh, it looks dark down there’ while eating a sandwich.”

“It’s only through taking on another’s perspective and taking on another’s emotions that you can actually affect action and change in the world.”

“Empathy is...being *human*.”

“Well, the Story Exchange is best put like this: I’m gonna become *you*, you’re gonna become *me*.”

“A Story Exchange is this really magical thing...”

“When you have a partner, and you share a story with each other...”

“...and it can be funny, it can be tragic...”

“It’s usually a story that has some vulnerability...”

“To tell somebody else’s story...to me, it was one of the most incredible experiences.”

“It can be comical...”

“It’s a little bit scary at first...”

“It felt like a lot of responsibility.”

“A story can be a fragile thing.”

“It’s like you’ve given a part of, like, your life to someone else, but like you still *own* it...but sort of like...”

“It’s *sacred*, you know?”

“The beauty of the Story Exchange is that, for a brief moment, you are not yourself.”

“I felt like I was telling his story through his skin.”

“It’s a new part of your identity that you now understand.”

“Learning about someone else’s story...deepened the meaning of *mine*.”

“You learn so much more when you’re telling that story.”

“It felt like a true gift.”

“There’s so much to be gained from...*listening*.”

“I love listening to other people’s stories.”

“This way you get to *bond*.”

“Hearing someone else tell your story is very weird.”

“I was nervous hearing someone else talk about me.”

“It was kind of hard giving out that story, because it was the first time I kind of *told* a group of people...”

“I told one about being bullied, and when they started telling my story, I kept looking at them like ‘why would they even care what other people think?’”

“I told a story about a fight that I had had with my father.”

“It was somewhat surreal to hear my story, my personal experience, in the voice of someone else.”

“She told it nicely.”

“When I got the story back it was very different.”

“And it took me a second to be like, wait, that’s *my* story.”

“It made me realize how wrong I had been.”

“You know, it’s sort of like unburdening yourself a little bit by having somebody else tell your story.”

“You get to see yourself through a different lens.”

“I feel like I have a lot of confidence to tell my story though other people now.”

“I was really proud to tell her story.”

“We connected.”

“A spiritual connection.”

“My listening has gotten so much better since I did the first Story Exchange.”

“Change is enacted not from, like, large to down, but from, like, small to up.”

“It brings it from *me*, and what I think about *myself*, to *you*.”

“Through the exchange of stories, they would realize that they have more in common with each other than they might think at first.”

“The idea of empathy and the move toward a more empathetic civilization is probably my overarching issue.”

“I did a Story Exchange in my school, but I would love to continue that and bring it to all of the English classes in school so that every student has the opportunity to participate in a Story Exchange.”

“I want to *tap* those stories; I *hunger* for those stories.”

“I really see it as a tool for *prevention*.”

“A story can *define* you. And sometimes you don’t get to *decide* what your story is.”

“I think it’s essential for me to learn how to connect with anyone on the street because anyone on the street could be my patient one day.”

“I want to bring the Story Exchange and radical empathy back to my community...”

“...then, the people in my community can spread it as well to the people that *they* know...”

“...and encouraging everyone to do what they want to do because they *can* do it.”

“I think all of us who are associated with Narrative 4 bear witness.”

“*Humane*...it’s...add an ‘e’ to ‘human’, and that’s what we all strive to be. And part of that is you *have* to have *empathy*.”

“And storytelling is a way to better understand *ourselves*, and more importantly, better understand *each other*.”

“We all have a shared humanity.”

“I believe that stories are the one thing that really unite us.”

“We get people to move towards kinship. Period.”

Notes

¹ The international students who paired up with my English majors for story exchange were not proficient enough in English to read the novels alongside my students. While they were not able to participate in analyses of the novels, I do think they benefited from the reflective writing and conversation with domestic students. Although I did not see the international students as frequently over the course of the semester as those enrolled in the postcolonial course, I did develop a relationship with each of them and have been visited by them throughout their time at our university.

² University of Pikeville is situated in the far eastern corner of Kentucky and most of our student population comes from a 100-mile radius of the campus. Buried in the Appalachian Mountains, these communities have historically been somewhat geographically isolated.

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