

The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love: Using Peace Corps Literature to Teach Global Awareness, Critical Thinking, and Service Learning

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I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire) from 1988-1990. One of the first new words we were taught during the training was *animation*. *Animation*, a French word meaning liveliness, was what we called the process of teaching. This term signified a new way of thinking about the teaching process; movement and life through education. This idea of someone gaining energy and forward movement was a heady concept to try to apply to my job as an agriculture extension agent in central Africa. Now, as a developmental reading teacher in central United States, I realize that the same concept applies. Developmental readers are in great need of stimulating materials which connect them to the greater world, while encouraging critical thinking and cultural awareness. The Peace Corps, which first taught me the concept of animation in teaching, has now provided me with such materials.

My developmental reading students test in with scores which place them in one of two reading classes: 4th and 6th grade level, or 7th and 11th grade level. They score this way for a variety of reasons. Some have learning disabilities, others have behavioral disorders. Many of my students struggle financially and most of them work 20-40 hours a week. Some of my students tried in high school and failed, others had intellectually “checked out.” Many of my students enter into college with hopes of a better job, but with resentment towards the school system. Most of my students hate reading. Many

suffer from a lack of basic background knowledge about the world in which they live, and some lack the curiosity to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

In this setting, it is of utmost importance to try to find a way to reconnect students with the world, to find a way that they are once again animated as I imagine they were as children. Many of the textbooks geared at teaching this group about reading are flawed in that they do not require the students to critically think about the world or to connect their actions to the greater community. The writing levels are quite simple so that the students can understand the text. The problem is that the concepts are also quite simple and do not necessarily address the fact that these students, though at a 6th grade reading level, are indeed adults.

Through teaching these courses, it became evident that simply asking students to read books and answer questions about what happened in the stories was not enough. Most of the students enrolled in these classes will not go on to complete a four year degree. Many will not complete a two year degree. The question then becomes, for the short window of time that they are enrolled in college, what is essential for them to know? What can we do to help spark their curiosity about the world, while giving them the reading skills necessary to succeed in their future endeavors? What can we do, how can we teach that will best fulfill our mission to our students? What are the essential concepts and skills that we can teach that will help them throughout their lives, whether they continue in an academic setting or not?

In my search to find reading materials that would challenge them intellectually, broaden their awareness of the world around them, and help them think critically, I

discovered The Peace Corps-Paul D. Coverdell's World Wide Schools' program. The goals of this program are:

- to broaden perspectives
- to promote cultural awareness
- to appreciate global connections
- to encourage service (*Voices from the Field*, 2003, p. 10)

Their materials have been invaluable in helping me increase students' background knowledge while teaching them about culture and service. There are four texts that I have utilized and all are well worth exploring. They can be obtained by going to www.peacecorps.gov/wws and downloading them. The lesson plans in the books are also available on-line, and they will send you a copy of the book if you contact their office.

Voices from the Field is the most helpful of the four books in the teaching of reading. It is set up in two parts. The first contains various stories written by returned Peace Corps Volunteers based around the three themes of "Heroes and Friends," "Perspectives," and "No Easy Answers." The second part is the curriculum unit with lessons based on these stories. The stories are engaging, funny, sad, and well within the range of a developmental reader. The lesson plans are easily adapted and designed to not only increase comprehension, but also to engage and connect the students with the experiences of others.

Insights from the Field: Understanding Geography, Culture, and Service is the book most connected to service learning. It is divided into three sections: "Geography: it's more than just a place," "Culture: It's more than meets the eye," and "Service: You can make a difference." This text is based primarily on the Dominican Republic and provides the user with modules with lesson plans, activities and worksheets.

Looking at Ourselves and Others tries to help students overcome their stereotypical thinking while increasing communications with other cultures. It is divided into three sections as well: “Defining Culture,” “Developing Global Perspectives,” and “Challenging Assumptions.” Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Classroom Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding helps students explore the concept of culture so that they will be better able to interact with people of different cultures, as well as people with whom they interact everyday. It is divided into two sections: “Culture in the U.S. and Culture beyond the U.S.” There are 13 lessons in this book so it fits nicely into a typical semester of 16 weeks.

The work of the late Brazilian teacher, Paulo Freire, is applicable to the approach of critically assessing culture. Freire (1988) states

One of the basic themes (and one which I consider central and indispensable) is the anthropological concept of culture. Whether men are peasants or urban workers, learning to read or in a post-literacy program, the starting point of their search to know more (in the instrumental meaning of the term) is the debate of the concept. As they discuss the world of culture, they express their level of awareness of reality, in which various themes are implicit. Their discussion touches upon other aspects of reality, which comes to be perceived in an increasingly critical manner...

With the experience now behind me, I can affirm that the concept of culture, discussed imaginatively in all or most of its dimensions, can provide various aspects of an educational program (p.117).

The Peace Corps material also encourages dialogue between the teacher and the students, the students themselves, and the students and their family and friends. Freire believed that the process of dialogue between teacher and student was imperative for education. He believed that all people, no matter their education or class, are capable of critically thinking about and responding to their world through dialogue. Education in this sense is transformative, and the engagement of learners in this process can

profoundly change their sense of self, the world, and their perception of the “limitations” they encounter.

“Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is not communication, and without communication there can be no true education.” (P. 81)

Engaging students in dialogue through the use of these books not only helps them explore their own lives, but also gives them a window into the lives of others. This is a prerequisite to the willingness to serve others in a community.

Another idea that he supports is that the teacher and the student are *both* learners *and* teachers. The “banking” method of education in which teachers know everything and the student knows nothing keeps students managed, but is not effective in empowering them. Freire (1988) states:

From the outset, his efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in men and their creative power. To achieve this, he must be a partner of the students in his relations with them (p. 62).

Asking the students to bring to the table their experiences, their ideas, their thoughts, their understandings, is one way to engage them in the books, the class, and the world around them. If we separate the class from their reality, they will be less likely to invest the time and effort to really digest the material. They may be able to answer a quiz question, but that is not really what drives a good course. What is more important and more difficult is creating a classroom that encourages students to *want* to read the books, to *want* to find out about the world, to *want* to try to help others. Freire (1988) states

“further requires an intense faith in man, faith in his power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in his vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all men)(p. 79).

The Peace Corps literature available through the World Wise Schools program is worthy of exploration. It provides some new ideas for developmental reading as well as service learning. As the students' background knowledge increases, their curiosity also seems to increase. The lessons focus on stepping out one's perspective, and seeing the world through others' eyes. This process of abstractly analyzing everyday "normal" occurrences helps engage students. It helps move students from passive recipients of a lecture, to more curious participants in their world. They begin to question and look at the disparities in the world as well as their own culture. The students in my classes who have read some of the stories and completed the lessons have responded favorably. One class wants to order the book from which some of the excerpts were taken. A class asking to order a book about a Congolese man so that they could find out what happened to him is music to a reading teacher's ears. These materials help my students to become more animated. They seem genuinely curious about the fate of the people in the returned volunteer's stories. These materials help an instructor animate and make real the plight of others, while encouraging dialogue about the power of culture.

About the Author:

Christina Chapman is a Developmental Reading Instructor at Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, Illinois. She also serves as the coordinator of the Developmental Communications classes. Ms. Chapman received her Bachelor's degree in Psychology from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois in 1988. Her early work centered on counseling and working one on one with people in crisis. After graduating, she served for over two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly called Zaire. It was there that her commitment to service learning and community were solidified. After she returned, Ms. Chapman earned her Master's degree in Education while working full time with homeless alcoholics in Seattle, Washington. Her current work as an instructor and coordinator of Developmental Communication gives her the opportunity to teach about global awareness and the importance of understanding the connectedness of humanity.

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