

## Crossing Cultures with Multi-Voiced Journals

“I’m only crossing . . . over Jordan, I’m only going . . . over home”

—(Adrian Fogelin, *Crossing Jordan*)

We teach in South Carolina, a state known for its picturesque sandy beaches, crepe myrtle, and palmetto trees. It is a place where folks sit down together on wooden benches to feast on mustard barbecue, collard greens, hush puppies, and banana pudding. Family and church values are held dear. It is also a state marred by a history of racial segregation. Remnants of this tattered past still linger. No less than four years ago, the removal of the Confederate flag atop the state house caused protestations from many. During these times of social opposition, we have often wondered how to better bring our students closer together. What methods might we utilize to bridge the apparent cultural gap between races?

As language arts teachers, we have the opportunity to transform students through literacy experiences. Reading allows us the means to transport ourselves into the lives of others like and unlike us. When reading, a girl can become Billie Joe, conquering death amidst the dust storms of Oklahoma (*Out of the Dust*) or Stanley Yelnats, digging holes at Camp Green Lake (*Holes*); just as likely, a boy can become Kenny Watson, driving to Bir-

mingham circa 1963 (*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*) or Winnie Foster, befriending the kind Tucks in the forest (*Tuck Everlasting*). The transcendent encounter with reading allows us the opportunity to enter the experiences and gain the perspectives of others. As a student once so aptly told Wilhelm (1997), “Reading is a way to get inside other people. . . . It’s a way to learn stuff that’s impossible to learn any other way because you learn from the inside” (p. 35). With the help of language, we can provide access to all possible ways of being in our classrooms.

For this reason, we expose students to a wide variety of literature. Inspired by teachers who have emphasized cultural exploration through the language arts (Dressel, 2003; Fairbrother, 2000; Gali & McArthur, 2003; Meier, 2000; Opitz, 1998; Spencer, 1990), we make conscious and deliberate choices, selecting works by diverse authors. We choose texts that introduce students to a variety of settings, characters, and situations. And most important, we utilize methods that encourage literacy travel among these cultured places.

This commitment has led us to offer students the experience of “cultural crossing” through multi-voiced journals. While much has been written about the “transformational” (Chambers, 1985) quality of literature, the process of writing also has the potential to foster social imagination and promote understanding in students. When writing, students might enter the world of cultured others just as they might through reading. Journaling from varied perspectives has the po-

tential to change our relationship with individuals, heightening sensitivity to issues of diversity such as race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

Multi-voiced journals, an adaptation of dual-voiced journals (Styslinger, 2004), encourage responses to reading in varied, cultured voices of characters. Based on the work of Rosenblatt (1938) that tells us that students construct meaning as they transact with texts, students write consistently as if they are characters representative of otherness in a text they are reading. If a student were reading Curtis's *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, she might respond to the story taking on one of several persona: a ten-year-old African-American child, a concerned wife and mother, a 13-year-old juvenile delinquent, an older matriarch who has lived her life in the South, or any number of the innocent lives caught in the crossfire of the civil rights movement. With such an approach, students project and predict how literature speaks to/as others.

Multi-voiced journals are similar to reading journals (Atwell, 1998) in that they prod students to connect to the lives of characters, but differ in that they direct personal response through cultural exploration. Whereas written conversation among students and teachers has certainly prompted responses to reading and engaged students in authentic and reflective dialogue with others about reading, we believe multi-voiced journals encourage more transcendent experiences for readers, as well as offer similar spaces and opportunities for response and discussion.

## What We Did

Our students live in a rural-turned-suburban area outside of Columbia. This means we have students who live on farms, students who live in half-million dollar homes, and students who live in houses with no plumbing. Approximately 40% of our students are African American. This journaling activity was conducted with two eighth-grade language arts classes.

When utilizing multi-voiced journals, what is most important is finding a text that includes a

variety of characters representative of difference. In our case, as we hoped to heighten the sensitivity of students in terms of race, we chose to read Adrian Fogelin's *Crossing Jordan*. We wanted a book with characters similar in age to middle school students and with situations with which they could identify. This is a story of friendship between two seventh-grade neighbors, Cass and Jemmie. They meet after Jemmie catches Cass spying through a peephole of a fence that Cass's father erected shortly after learning that a black family was moving in next door. The two girls soon learn that they share a love of running and become fast friends. Unfortunately, they also share the challenge of parents who do not approve of their friendship. Cass's father disapproves of mixing with other races, and Jemmie's mother does not want her daughter playing with someone reared in a racist family. Luckily, the two have the wise advice and lessons from Nana Grace, Jemmie's grandmother, and the determination of a friendship that crosses the boundaries of race and authority.

In order to determine the effectiveness of multi-voiced journals in heightening student sensitivity issues such as prejudice and perspective, we administered an initial survey (see Figure 1). Before beginning *Crossing Jordan*, students wrote about their definition of and experiences with discrimination. One student expressed her discomfort in writing about such topics, but was reassured that she could write freely and that no one would be offended by her response. Students also wrote about a time they put themselves in another person's shoes. As a class, students discussed the struggles of the post-Civil War South leading to the civil rights movement. We talked about the economic troubles of farmers learning to survive without slaves, the rise of unfair share-cropping practices, and racial tension and bitterness lead-

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ing to segregation of schools, stores, and even water fountains. Students spoke openly about their knowledge of the civil rights movement including activists Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and even Ruby Bridges.

We read the novel aloud as a class. Some students volunteered to read; other times they listened or read along in their books. As usual, we stopped periodically to predict what would happen next, recall key events, and infer the purpose behind the characters' actions and the author's creative choices.

At various points throughout the novel, students were asked to journal in the voice of a particular character. For the purpose of the multi-voiced journals, the places and characters whose voices in which they were to write were pre-selected. We purposefully chose points where characters were dealing with racial tension. For example, students journaled from Jemmie's mother's perspective after coming home to find a fence built between their house and Cass's house. At first, many students verbalized their frustration with the challenge of putting themselves in the shoes of certain characters. For example, several struggled with writing in the voice of Cass's dad at the beginning of the book. One boy exclaimed, "This is too hard. It's hard to write from his per-

spective because I'm not racist." Eventually, however, students became more comfortable and started anticipating writing in a specific voice as we would finish reading a section.

## What We Learned

### Increased Knowledge of Characters

Multi-voiced journals increase student knowledge of characters as they provide space and opportunity to explore conflicts from varied perspectives. Emotional and psychological turmoil experienced by characters becomes actualized as students write, transporting their selves into the lives and minds of others. Journal entries document the struggles of an array of characters including: Cass; Cass's father, Seth; Cass's mother; Cass's sister; Jemmie; Jemmie's mother, Leona; and Jemmie's grandmother.

Especially poignant is the writing that details the internal, racial conflicts of characters. As Cass and Jemmie grapple to understand their parents' perspectives in the novel, Carlos [all student names are pseudonyms] shared his frustration, writing from Cass's perspective: "I just met the girl next door, she is very nice, and says she can run. If I could, I would become friends with her. Momma probably wouldn't mind, but Daddy would get extremely upset." Student journals written from Jemmie's perspective also show the students' understanding of her internal conflicts. After Jemmie and Cass's first race in the novel, Meghan wrote in Jemmie's voice, "Hopefully Mama don't find out that we was out hangin-round today, or I'd get my butt cut so bad, I can't sit down for a week. Tomorrow I'm goin' to kick her butt so bad, I'll leave her in anotha time zone."

Student journals also indicate an understanding of the implications a school setting might have on Cass and Jemmie's friendship. Sarah's journal entry from Jemmie's point of view expressed Jemmie's fears of what will happen to her friendship with Cass when school starts: "I can't help but wonder what is gonna happen with me and Cass. Will we still be friends when school starts? She doesn't have any other black friends so ppl

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Please answer the following questions honestly. Think about your answers before you write.*

Have you ever tried to put yourself in "someone else's shoes" to understand his/her perspective? Explain the experience.

What is discrimination? Where does it come from? Have you ever seen or experienced discrimination? Explain.

What happens to people who are discriminated against? How do they feel and act?

Why do some people discriminate against others who are different from them?

**Figure 1.** Pre-journal sensitivity survey

[people] are gonna talk. I don't know, but I can't stand the thought of losing Cass as a friend. We are a team, Chocolate Milk! But will our team break up? Or will it stay together?"

The multi-voiced journals demonstrate student sensitivity to character transformations. After reading the beginning of the novel, Michael journaled from Seth's perspective when he learns that the new family moving next door is black. The journal entry demonstrates the complex emotions Seth is experiencing—fear of the unknown and resistance to change: "I don't care if they are nice, they are all the same to me. They already go to the same schools as us! If we give them an opportunity, they will take it and [who] knows what will be next." After reading more of the novel, Michael's journal indicates the character Seth's transformation: "I don't know what to think right now, because I want to be mad at Lou Anne or even Mrs. Lewis, but I am too worried about my little girl. I just feel really bad. I am really glad that Mrs. Lewis did what she did. I wouldn't have thought that she would do something like that."

In addition to student writing demonstrating Seth's transformation, the multi-voiced journals also show the students' sensitivity to the character Leona's growth. At the beginning of the novel, Leona is angry about the fence Seth builds. Paul wrote in Leona's voice, "We are complete equals and still they look down on us like they're better than us. You know what, if they don't want any part of us, then we don't want anything to do with them either. I haven't seen a white person yet that won't discriminate [against] a black person." After Leona saves the baby's life, student journals begin to demonstrate Leona's change. Paul wrote from Leona's point of view, expressing her complex emotions: "Missy [the baby] is looking better now. It's nice having a good friend as a neighbor. Laura sure is nice. Jemmie and me have something in common, we both have a white friend. Laura and I have a couple of things in [common] like we both have a daughter . . . and a baby, and we like to play with babies. Seth seems like a pretty ok guy, but that will never take down the fence. He shouldn't have put it up in the first place. I

don't want to even [get] into that right now. It's nice how he is doing all those things for the house, but he doesn't have to, he doesn't owe me a thing. I help babies, that's what I do."

### Gained Perspective of Others

The experience of traveling with and through characters allowed students to gain the perspectives of others, an experience they admit they have not had or appreciated. One-third of our students confessed on their initial surveys that they have never tried to put themselves in "someone else's shoes." Jose was candid with his negative response and explained, "No. Because I don't get involved with that stuff." Perhaps he is similar to Andre who acknowledged, "I'm actually rather vain. I don't like to think in other ways than my own." Sally was wary of the experience altogether, admitting she had tried this before: "Yes, I have put myself in someone else's shoes. It wasn't a very good experience to tell you the truth. It was awful. I put myself in my brother's shoes. I blindfolded myself where I couldn't see for a whole day."

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Those students who admitted to trying to gain the perspective of others on their surveys did so only with those close to them, such as family members or best friends, walking in their "mom's shoes," "cousin's shoes," and "friend's shoes." Only one student, Josh, thought about what it might be like to be someone other than family or friend: "Sometimes I think . . . what if I was born someone else . . . what if I was born in the slave days. How would I act—would I even have my same personality and I just keep wondering." The voices of our students heard loudly in these surveys help us to recognize even more the need for activities such as multi-voiced journals.

Students' written reflections on the journaling after the completion of the novel reveal that students definitely recognize the multi-voiced journaling experience as one that helped them to gain the perspective of others. "Doing this jour-

nal helped me to understand almost every character's perspective." Charline claimed, "It made me get out of the box of the white perspective and step into what a black person might think." "I learned how characters feel inside," Tasha said. "Writing from all those perspectives made me really think how some people think and can be . . . It gave me different opinions than I would have got if I just read the book."

While students unanimously recognized the value of multiple perspectives, some students really struggled and admitted to the difficulty of completing the journal. In order to create believable journal entries for literary characters, our students had to focus their attention on the details of the novel. Students reflected on their learning, claiming, "I really had to pay attention to the story so that I would be able to write as if I was the person." Tara agreed, "I learned from writing these that you really have to listen to the little details to figure out how they[characters] felt." While resistant at times, they still acknowledged the worth. In his final reflection, Michael requested, "I don't want to do this type of journal again because although it was fun, helpful, it was also very hard." Steve agreed, "I did not like writing these but thought it was a good way to 'see through others' eyes.' I learned that everyone has a different perspective." Sean admitted, "It might be hard but it helps me see that life isn't easy for anyone."

### Expanded Definitions of Theme

Along with increased understanding of others, multi-voiced journals helped students develop more complex definitions of theme. Prior to their engagement with these journals, students produced minimal and general definitions for "prejudice" on their initial surveys. Students wrote that prejudice involved treating people differently because of race or religion. Two students mentioned discrimination due to a person's gender, and one student included sexual orientation as a reason for discrimination. Students mentioned having seen prejudice, mostly on television.

After reading *Crossing Jordan* and completing multi-voiced journals, students were again asked

to define "prejudice." Rather than general, objective, or media-based responses, students wrote more sensitively about "a thing that causes people grief and anguish." They expressed the feelings of those discriminated against, describing them as "angry," "sad," or "upset." They projected the emotions of these others, claiming that those discriminated against may "feel a regret of who they are," or "get angry at themselves," or "do suicide attempts." "They feel hurt because people are mean to them for something they can't help." "I think they feel hurt because nobody likes to be treated unfairly because they're different." "I think they act self-conscious because they know people don't really care for them, and they feel like they aren't accepted."

Student definitions demonstrated an increased understanding of the beliefs, actions, and underlying values of others. Students insightfully pondered why others believe, act, and think the ways they do. "People discriminate others because of their own imperfections." Or because "they feel like they are better than the other person." Or "sometimes they know that the other person is better than them and they want to make themselves feel better by putting others down." "People discriminate because they're afraid of what's different." Some students pondered the reasons behind the actions of others: "Maybe because they were raised like that. Maybe because their parents taught them." Students expanded their definitions of prejudice, describing the feelings of those discriminated against and offering explanations as to why others might discriminate.

### Reflection

There is much we have learned as a result of our travels with students and characters through multi-voiced journals. We quickly realized that in order for these journals and consequent discussion to be successful, the classroom has to be a safe place for students to express their opinions. Initially, students seemed uncomfortable discussing the discrimination found in the book. "Wait time" was lengthy after questions, and it often had to be reiterated that everyone's opinions should be re-

spected. Slowly, after a few journals and discussions of why Cass's father acted certain ways and why Jemmie's mother acted certain ways, students started speaking more freely. An African-American boy who is very outspoken said, "Cass's father came from a family who taught him to think and act the way he does." Another remembered, "Jemmie's mom was treated badly as a child and she is afraid that will happen to Jemmie."

In addition to our own realizations, our students have taught us much through their reflections on the process, reminding us not to distract too often from the shared reading experience. Hannah urged, "I didn't like stopping. I really like just plain reading." Our zeal for a new method might have taken too much time away from the joys of sustained reading. Speaking with our students' voices, we encourage others not to require journaling every day and to, as always, allow some choices in terms of character selections.

Perhaps there will come a day when methods such as this will not be needed. Like Nana Grace, Jemmie's grandmother, said, we have come a long way with race relations, but there is always room for improvement. We were encouraged by one young African American boy who said more than one time during our discussions that Cass's father was acting the way people used to act, but that things have changed now. We were glad to hear of his lack of experience with discrimination in his young life. And we hope that his good fortune continues. We hope that this younger generation will learn to look at the inside of a person and not judge on stereotypes. We also hope they will continue to help the older generation shed their stereotypes and fears. We believe that this activity can help them to break these boundaries as one more river to cross.

**Mary E. Styslinger** teaches at The University of South Carolina in Columbia. She can be reached at [mstyslin@gwm.sc.edu](mailto:mstyslin@gwm.sc.edu). **Alison Whisenant** teaches at Blythewood Middle School in Blythewood, South Carolina. She can be reached at [whisech@mindspring.com](mailto:whisech@mindspring.com).

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