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AVOIDING BINARY THINKING: USING MULTIPERSPECTIVISM AS A CLASSROOM TOOL

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One of the greatest challenges teachers face in literature classes is encouraging students to go beyond the easy answers. That is especially true when students are studying literature in a second language. In their lower-division classes, they have become accustomed to providing the “right” answer applying the language they are learning. Therefore, when they enter a more advanced language class with a literature focus, they feel cheated when the instructor fails to tell them what the right answer is... even if the issues involved are extremely complex.

Students must learn that most literary works pose questions that have no easy answers, both within their own culture and in others. They should also learn that symbolism and many other aspects of a literary text in another cultural context take on a completely new set of meanings. Although it is difficult to persuade students to consider complicated issues and to reconsider them in light of a different value system, it is important to move students beyond memorizing isolated facts “for the test.”

This is the challenge I faced when teaching *The House of Bernarda Alba*, a well-known play by the Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca. Ironically, the stage directions for this play call for a set in which the walls are completely white and all the characters are dressed in black. It is a set that suggests a “black-and-white” environment, where values and behaviors are clearly stipulated and there is no room for “shades of gray.” This is the situation of the nine women in this drama, and this is precisely the type of world-view that Lorca deconstructs in his play. However, the students had difficulties with the interpretation of such a symbolic/poetic view of reality.

During each class period, we worked through each act of the play to make sure that students understood what each line of dialogue meant. Students worked in groups to analyze and to present to the rest of the class their observations on the various aspects of the play including the symbolism of names and the importance of color (in a black-and-white stage, any color carries special importance), including the different symbolic meaning of different colors in Spanish culture. We also discussed several aspects of the play that critics have emphasized.

With some help and suggestions, students were able to discover the answers to specific questions regarding the work. However, when asked about

the larger universal meaning of the work, the students were silent. They could not relate to a world in which a tyrannical mother controls and manipulates the lives of her daughters. If they had found themselves in such a situation, they would have left home and found something else to do. To them, the play was senseless.

In order to help the students understand the plan and the society in which it was based, I created an activity that would force the students to consider the various points of view presented in the play and also require them to present their arguments orally to the entire class. In other classes I had used activities in which the class was divided into two groups to debate a topic. But, in this instance, I wanted students to see the complexity of the issues involved and how social interaction and responsibility affected the actions of the characters. Most of all, I wanted the students to appreciate the fact that, often, there are no right or wrong answers and that this is true regardless of cultural context.

I began by asking the students who was responsible for the central tragedy of the drama (the youngest sister commits suicide after being told falsely that her lover—who was going to marry the oldest sister for her money—is dead). The students had no difficulty identifying the repressive mother as one of the people responsible; they also took little time in singling out the sister who lied. With a little prodding, the students recognized that the oldest sister might have been responsible—as well as the lover. With a little more encouragement, the students came to realize that the villagers obsessed with finding and condemning any deviations from their moral values, were also responsible.

After we identified all those responsible, which included almost all the characters who appeared in the play and some who did not, I divided the students in the class into small groups and assigned each group one of the “guilty parties.” I told the students that we would conduct a “multisided” trial. Each group would serve as the defense team for their “client.” Instead of seeing the blame for the tragedy as distributed among all the characters, the teams would be responsible for defending one specific character.

Each group had ten minutes to prepare its defense strategy. The first group to present was the one defending the mother (theirs was a difficult task and they deserved to go first). As soon as the first group accused someone else, that character’s team was invited to offer a rebuttal. When the new group accused yet a third character, that team was invited to enter the debate. Soon, the students were involved in a lively conversation that lasted quite a while.

When groups of students were asked to defend a specific character in the play, they showed a greater comprehension of the work and paid greater attention to nuances of meaning than they had before. Through this process, the students came to understand that the world of *The House of Bernarda Alba* is not black and white. Even the most despised character in the play has motives that the students can understand.

As the students participated in this activity, they became aware that the values depicted in this Spanish play were not so far removed from their own.

They became aware of the commonalities between a seemingly archaic system and their own system of values. They were able to relate to the conflict between passion and a rigid social system and to see how this kind of conflict exists in their own world.

This kind of activity can be useful in classes that involve neither a modern language nor literature. It can be applied to classes in history, political science, sociology and education. In any area in which there are conflicting views and conflicting values, a multisided debate can be useful. It involves several of the Lead Forward Land Grant Goals, especially being communication-able, globally competitive and socially responsible.

Additional benefits of this kind of activity are the following:

- a) involves all students, both in small groups and as a whole class
- b) requires collaboration
- c) forces students to collect all the information learned and focus on details since every bit of information can work for or against their "client"
- d) increases student involvement through competitiveness and yet shields the students because their own values are not involved
- e) encourages students to advocate instead of judge and thus reduces the distance between the student and the situation depicted in the play
- f) utilizes a format familiar to students: the trial

EPILOGUE

My experience with this activity in a Spanish literature class was extremely positive. I know that it did not totally transform my students' lives. But, it did enhance their ability to think critically, to consider issues of tradition and social responsibility and to communicate their concerns to others.

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BIOGRAPHY

María T. Ramos-García is a native of Galicia (Spain). She graduated with a Licenciatura from the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela in 1991, and obtained her M.A. (1993) and Ph.D. (1997) in Spanish at Washington University in St. Louis. She became part of the Department of Modern Languages at SDSU in 1998. Currently she is associate professor of Spanish and became department head on August 2004.