

Resources and Strategies for Doing Window and Mirror Curriculum Work

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It has been my joy since being introduced to the art work of Carmen Lomas Garza (see *The New Press* paperback *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de mi Corazón*, 1990, and excerpt following this article) to make use of her work to generate comprehension of the concept of curriculum as window and mirror. In workshops, I invite participants to select a Garza picture which appeals to them and then to pair with another person for the purpose of a balanced conversation using the “lenses” of window and mirror. I structure the paired sharing so each person is singularly in the role of speaker or listener. For example, each person might have two minutes—without interruption—to describe how a particular Garza picture exists in relation to the “textbook” of his or her own life: How is it a “mirror” of something familiar? How is it a “window” into something new? Only after each person has been listened to—without interruption—do we move into people talking freely in pairs and/or in a larger group configuration.

In a noisy, cacophonous world, classrooms must, in my view, create listening clearings attentive, first of all, to the actual people in the room before venturing into other material which can further frame, collectively, a balanced curriculum of windows and mirrors for each and every student.

In the years since my 1988 essay “[Curriculum as Window & Mirror](#)” was published, it has been rewarding to learn of its usefulness in helping other teachers bring into being a more balanced curriculum, even as I myself have continued to invent ways of teaching in light of the metaphor. For example, in 1925, five years after women won the right to vote in the United States, F. Scott Fitzgerald published his novel *The Great Gatsby*. Its central female character, Daisy Buchanan, is better known by many Americans than prominent (non-fictional) suffrage workers such as Lucretia Mott and Alice Paul, for instance, or the 75 black women whose photos are rendered by Brian Lanker in his 1989 book, *I Dream a World*. In interdisciplinary teaching, one way I have worked to rectify the above imbalance is to have students imagine Lucretia Mott, Alice Paul (or any other historical woman) talking back to the fictional Daisy Buchanan.

Early in the novel, the Daisy character offers the following gender definition (found in the “mirror” of her own life at the time her daughter is born) when she says: “I hope she’ll be a fool, that’s the best thing a girl can be, a beautiful little fool.” Amazing conversations emerged in my classroom when real women were given (“window”) space in the curriculum alongside the solitary fictional figure of Daisy. How might Rosa Parks, for example, respond to Daisy’s definition about how best to be female?

The limitations of Daisy’s life, as portrayed in the 1925 novel, should not be allowed to obscure (dominate) the vast, various, and real lives of women different in race and class from her. Not to teach about the courageous, peaceful, and tenacious rigor of the more than seventy years of women’s work which resulted in the passage of the nineteenth

amendment is, by omission, to permit characters such as Daisy Buchanan to represent womankind inaccurately. Furthermore, it could be argued that Daisy's own "life" would have been drastically different, had she been schooled accurately about the range of lives led by women in her own time and across history.

Given the power of narrative, however, a peculiar and unrepresentative figure such as Daisy can take up residence in the minds of educated Americans. I specifically urge social studies teachers to seek out poignant historical narratives such as Yelena Khanga's *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian Jewish Woman's Search for Her Roots* (W.W. Norton, 1992) as resources for teaching about the actual complexity of human life in history. In the excerpt which follows, Yelena Khanga speaks for herself:

I am a black Russian, born and raised in the Soviet Union (at least, that's what we used to call it) and shaped by an extraordinary mixture of races and cultures.

I am descended from American idealists, black and white, who came to the new Soviet state in the 1930s with high hopes of building a more just society through communism. Although time proved them tragically wrong about the revolutionary experiment, there was nothing wrong about their heartfelt dream of racial and economic justice....

One of my great-grandfathers was born an American slave, while another was a Polish Jew who left Warsaw for the United States just before World War I. Hilliard Golden became one of the largest black landowners in Yazoo County, Mississippi, after the Civil War, while Isaac Bialek taught Hebrew school and worked in a New York garment factory. My great-grandfathers had one important thing in common, though they probably wouldn't have recognized any common ground at the time: they were both religious men. Hilliard was a Methodist preacher, and Isaac was a rabbi in Warsaw before immigration transformed his settled existence.

I believe it's fair to say that "only in America" would the children of two such different families and backgrounds have been drawn together in the 1920's. Those children—my black grandfather and white grandmother—joined the newly established American Communist Party and met in a New York jail after a union demonstration in 1928. Oliver Golden and Bertha Bialek soon fell deeply in love, defying both my grandmother's family (most of whose members never spoke to her again) and the larger American taboo against interracial marriage.

In 1931, Oliver and Bertha left the United States to pursue their common dream of building a new, more equitable society in the Soviet Union.... My grandparents intended to return ... but changed their minds after my mother [Lily] was born in 1934... It has always seemed to me that Tiger-Lily might have been more appropriate for this forceful child of an interracial love match spanning three continents.... (pps. 18-19)

In addition to Khanga's book, I want to mention a few others resources which can further aid the process of individual and group reflection about matters of balance and inclusion in the curriculum. But before doing that, I want to emphasize my own deepened awareness of the fundamental need that all students have for a sense of their own location in the scheme of things. I am using the term location as Adrienne Rich does in her essay, "Notes Toward

a Politics of Location” (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, 1986). In a society awash in information emerging from a plethora of locations and lenses, the need is profound for individuals and groups to find and name their own grounded “place(s)” in relation to others. Going through such a process focuses a primary lens for people, i.e., locates, first of all for themselves, where they’re coming from. It is my contention that a particular and developed awareness of location(s) is necessary in order for the self to have the capacity to undertake the act of looking reflectively into mirrors and/or through windows. Schooling must provide enough of a shelter and balanced structure so that the complex cognitive and psychological work of “window and mirror” curriculum can proceed.

Schools must create safe havens where each student can be listened to, regardless of the cacophony of conflicting identity messages aswirl in the world at large. I remain appreciative to scholar Peter Elbow for his analysis of the damaging imbalance of educationally perpetuating the dominance of what he calls the Doubting Game—and the concurrent lack of teaching attention given to its vital counterpart, the Believing Game (“The Doubting Game and the Believing Game—An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise” in *Writing Without Teachers*, Oxford University Press, 1973). Elbow’s analysis is, in part, about the need for balance in how people are taught to approach new ideas—be it, closed, with (understandable) skepticism, or open, with a willingness to understand a very different reality from their own. Three questions I have used to invite more practice of the Believing Game, more validating “mirroring” of another person when in conversation about difficult issues and different points of view are:

- How long have you felt this way?
- What caused you to feel this way?
- Can you imagine what might cause anyone to feel differently than you do about this subject?

Pragmatically, I have also found it useful to ask young people or adults who are engaging in conversation about difficult topics to put on, for a time, a conversational yoke, so to speak, which strictly separates the roles of speaker and listener. Such a structure provides for each person a separate time to speak (and be listened to). Using a rigorous conversational yoke, even for a brief time, can surface a more accurate array of windows and mirrors than often occurs when a *free* discussion inadvertently invites domination by a few speakers leaving most to observe silently. In his book *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, (Harvard University Press, 1994), Harvard professor Robert Kegan makes a similar point, with more depth, about the psychological and cognitive need for a sense of modernism to precede an individual’s comprehension of post-modernism. In other words, one needs to have a sense of one’s own location(s) in the scheme of things before being able to “identify” with someone else’s and/or acknowledge multiple realities.

A comprehensive, historical resource that has become available since my essay was first published is Professor Ronald Takaki’s *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1993). In the introduction to that volume, Takaki tells about an incident in which a cab driver, surprised by Takaki’s good English, asks him how long he has been in the United States. Takaki, who is third-generation Japanese-American, is regularly on the receiving end of such questions—even as the majority of

white Americans remain oblivious (when asking the question) about what they reveal about which faces they assume to be a mirror of “America.” As parents, partners, and practicing clinical psychologists, Darlene Hopson and Derek Hopson offer seasoned and sensible (window and mirror) tips about such situations in their book *Different and Wonderful: Raising Black Children in a Race-Conscious Society* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), a resource I recommend for teachers and parents of all colors.

Another resource I want to recommend highly is *The Color of Fear*. In this ninety-minute video released in 1994 and available from Stir Fry Productions (510-419-3930), Chinese-American filmmaker Lee Mun Wah facilitates a candid conversation among eight men who explore the persistent and debilitating existence of systemic racism. I strongly suggest that viewers share initial responses to this compelling documentary while in a “conversational yoke” so that everyone has a chance to speak about his or her response—in a paired sharing or a small cluster of three or four—without interruption and before any large group discussion takes place. Part of the power of Mun Wah’s video stems, in my view, from how effectively it attends to the particularities of each man’s location(s) even as it illuminates patterns of interaction which reveal commonality of experience and multiple lenses. In framing the showing of *The Color of Fear*, it is important not to inadvertently minimize the complexity it portrays and provokes. It is critical, for maximum benefit, to use a pedagogical method which will enable viewers to engage with *both* “the textbooks” of their own lives *and* the text of the film, with a balanced sensibility, promoting the rigor of *both/and* thinking. *Both/and* thinking moves beyond dualism to more complex cognition which can hold the validity of multiple points of view without seeing them as automatically in opposition.

I link the portrayal of the corrosive effect of systemic racism which *The Color of Fear* documents with words African-American writer Alice Walker uses in her introduction to *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (Scribner, 1996) where she states:

I belong to a people, heart and mind, who do not trust mirrors. Not those, in any case, in which we ourselves appear. The empty mirror, the one that reflects noses and hair unlike our own, and a propensity and harmony we may never have known, gives us peace. Our shame is deep. For shame is the result of soul injury. Mirrors, however, are sacred, not only because they permit us to witness the body we are fortunate this time around to be in, but because they permit us to ascertain the condition of the eternal soul that rests behind the body, the soul. As an ancient Japanese proverb states: When the mirror is dim, the soul is not pure. Art is the mirror, perhaps the only one, in which we can see our true collective face. We must honor its sacred function. We must let art help us.

I began this piece by referring to the art work of Carmen Lomas Garza because I have seen her pictures give rise to illuminating window and mirror conversations between people located very differently. Artistically orchestrated school curriculum (at any level and in any subject) can be a vehicle to enable collective and individual wrestling with the peculiarities of reality, multiple locations, and complicated lenses. I agree with Alice Walker that art can play a vital part in drawing forth from each other information about our particularities and our varied experiences of systemic cultural patterns.

In educating citizens for insightful participation in a democracy, we as educators need to collectively create pedagogy and content which is more conducive to acknowledging the multiple perspectives already embodied in the life-texts of Americans. As James Banks has been pointing out for years, the motto of “e pluribus unum” cannot be authentic without balanced attention both to particularities and to common ground. We have, within us, the resources to be truer to our multiple selves and to fashion an array of curricular windows and mirrors to educate each other (and our children) in more balanced fashion.

Poet Naomi Shihab Ne offers a comforting and a challenging vision of *both/and* understanding in the following poem, which presents itself as an interesting companion piece to Lew Gardner’s “My Great-Uncle’s Horse,” which was part of my 1988 essay. In Gardner’s poem, a classroom window offers unbalanced knowledge to the fourth graders looking out. Nye, on the other hand, posits a graceful ambiguity, knowingly open to interpretation, about the significance of any individual’s flicker of life.

Lights From Other Windows

Driving west tonight, the city dissolves behind us.
 I keep feeling we’re going farther than we’re going,
 a journey that started in the deep inkwell
 out of which all our days are written.
 Nothing is said yet to indicate a monument,
 yet I perch on the edge of some new light.
 The hills could crack open and a pointed beam,
 like the beams on miners’ hats, could pick us off this road.
 Signals blinking, we arrive in a bright room
 of greetings and hands. But when the stories spill,
 I feel myself floating off alone into that night we just left,
 that cool black bag of darkness, where black deer
 nibbled invisible grasses and black fences divided one thing
 from the next. A voice in my earliest ears not this, not this
 and the lit windows of childhood rise up,
 the windows of houses where strangers lived,
 light slanting across black roads,
 that light which said what a small flicker is given
 to each of us to know. For seconds I dreamed their rooms
 and tables, was comforted by promise of a billion other lives.
 Like stars. Like knowing the Milky Way
 is made of more stars than any naked eye can count.
 Like having someplace to go when your glowing restlessness
 lifts you out of rooms, becomes a wing,
 takes you farther than you will have traveled
 when your own life ends.

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In light of this Naomi Shihab Nye poem, my question for educators is: how might we translate this vision into classroom lessons and curriculum which both comfort and challenge our students with an interdisciplinary balance of windows and mirrors?