

Living in the Global Village: *Strategies for Teaching Mental Flexibility*

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The globe has shrunk into an interconnected and interdependent village through global movement of goods, information, money, and people. But this village is new, its residents have just moved in, and they don't know one another very well. They come from different tribes, speak different languages, and have customs that may appear strange to those outside their group. They may be suspicious of one another.

For their sake and the sake of the whole village, they have to learn to live together peacefully and productively. As institutions charged with the responsibility for preparing future citizens, schools must educate students to become competent citizens of the global village.

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What is necessary to be a globally competent citizen? The answer lies in the examination of global trends which are currently characterized by *change* and *connections*: globalization of economics, increased connectivity through communication technologies, international dimension of issues and problems, and new immigration patterns.² Educators play a vital role in the development of globally competent citizens, and thus must critically examine how they are preparing young learners to successfully adapt to the future and serve as participatory advocates who will thrive in the global village.

Mental flexibility emerges as an essential skill for preparing young learners for global competency and denotes the ability to learn from and about different perspectives.³ Indeed, many of the problems, situations, and jobs that our students will encounter in the future do not yet even exist, thus underscoring the need to produce adaptable, flexible thinkers. Students who are regularly exposed to “alternative approaches to a wide range of scientific, social and everyday problems” appear to be more receptive to alternative solutions than “inflexible thinkers who are more likely to avoid consideration of competing answers and explanations.”⁴

Research on mental flexibility notes many benefits for children, specifically an increased resiliency.⁵ In addition, the ability to shift perspectives predicts confidence in communicating with strangers⁶ creates problem solvers,⁷ and reduces prejudice, thereby helping children to think critically and become more accepting of others' viewpoints.⁸ Consistent educational exposure to conflicting points of view develops mental flexibility, predicts tolerant attitudes, and shows lasting effects into adulthood.⁹ Likewise, expanding perspectives in the curriculum creates more accurate representations of the experiences of marginalized groups, emphasizes the

complex interaction of diverse groups in shaping a culture, develops empathy, teaches critical thinking, and promotes the valuing of diversity.¹⁰ It is this process of recognizing, experiencing, and thoughtfully considering different points of view that serves as the foundation for students to view themselves as participatory agents of the global village. Like all cognitive skills, the development of mental flexibility is best reached through ongoing opportunities which allow students to “try on” and practice multiple perspectives.

In this article, we share several strategies to guide teachers in developing mental flexibility in children. We use two children's books to create meaningful contexts for implementing multiple perspectives. As you read about these strategies, we hope that you will imagine ways to use them with any work of children's literature. Use the examples below as a starting point to create your own mental flexibility strategies!

Children's Literature and Shifting Perspectives

Children's literature is a natural tool to help students articulate their own point of view and consider points of view held by others. The structure of stories exposes children to varied characters, plots, and settings in which are imbedded many perspectives, all viewed through cultural lenses. As a conceptual framework, perspective offers limitless opportunities for exploring books.

Using children's literature enables a teacher to connect the story meaningfully to a child's life as well as to broader social issues. Examining varied perspectives, particularly as they connect to social issues, develops critical thinking, fosters empathy, and leads to social action.¹¹ Stories let us vicariously experience characters' lives and privy the reader to their ways of thinking and feeling, thus evoking the reader's emotions by drawing on the reader's values, attitudes,

and feelings. Once evoked, emotions can lead to empathy, and empathy supports equity.¹² We offer the books *Encounter* and *Esperanza Rising* as examples that provide many opportunities for students to develop mental flexibility through the examination of different perspectives.

Encounter: Revisiting an Old Story

Jane Yolen's book *Encounter* is a poignant example of the power of perspective. Departing from the typical Euro-centric recounting of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in San Salvador, *Encounter* is told from the viewpoint of a young Taino native. The book opens with the chilling warning from the boy, who recounts a dream that cautions against becoming too friendly with newcomers. The native people adhere to traditions of welcoming strangers, and forge relationships with the explorers. In time, the boy's fears prove to be completely founded, as the Taino people are brutally subjugated and their population diminishes from 300,000 to 500 in only fifty years. The story concludes with the sorrowful reflections of the narrator as a grown man who has witnessed the destruction and enslavement of his people. The rousing text, accompanied by John Schoenherr's beautiful illustrations, presents a thought-provoking interpretation of an event in American history that is typically celebrated, not questioned or mourned. The book is appropriate for grades 2-5, and we recommend it as one vehicle to increase elementary students' propensities in flexible thinking. The following four strategies to develop mental flexibility are detailed: through your eyes, say it again, take a stand, and shift it.

Through Your Eyes

Students examine a situation and try to imagine how people might view it differently. For example, in the context of the book *Encounter*, students consider the landing of Christopher Columbus in San Salvador, and think about it from the perspective of the Taino children, the Taino men and women, Columbus's crew members, Columbus himself, and his financial backers. Another possibility is for students to look at this historical time through multiple lenses that force varying perspectives and contemporary connections. For example, the educator may guide students with the following questions:

- What impact did trade have on exploration? What influences trade today? Issues of immigration patterns, and political and human rights may be explored.
- Can you describe the influence of the governing bodies of each party during the Colombian exploration? What would you consider to be a modern-day exploration? Educators may consider drawing relevance to a contemporary example such as space exploration.
- What impact did physical geography have on the



"Mexican girls, carrot workers, Edinburg, Texas, 1939."

Russell Lee/Library of Congress

Columbus exploration? How did the human geographical elements influence the events? What current events are defined by both physical and human geographic elements? Connections could be made to the conflict in Afghanistan which is defined by physical geographical challenges, or by the recent offshore oil spill which has tremendous implications for the citizens who depend on ocean and coastal natural resources as a way of life.

This exercise is effective in forcing students to step outside their own notions and consider multiple viewpoints and their potential intersections.

Say It Again

In this strategy, students adopt the identity of a person from history or character from a book and role-play a scenario. For example, students divide into groups such as the Taino natives and the Columbus crew, and role play the first encounter, vocalizing what members of each group may be feeling and thinking. Students could then be encouraged to switch roles to continue the role play from an alternate perspective.

Variations of role-playing include individuals (or small groups of students) learning about a historical person (or event) and then "freezing" in the form of a statue (or group vignette). "Talking statues" is an activity in which visiting students, maybe from a younger grade, interview the "statues" to learn about a time and event. Asking students to summarize a multifaceted event by creating the costume and dialog for one or more statues encourages students to make use of Bloom's higher order thinking skills. The activity also provides the teacher with an opportunity to see what the students understand to be the most essential elements of a historical event.

Take a Stand

The teacher reads a statement aloud to the class and allows the students to react according to their beliefs. For example, the teacher may read the statement, "Spanish colonization was justi-

fied.” Students choose a corner of the room labeled with a sign (agree, disagree, strongly agree, strongly disagree) and stand there to indicate their viewpoints. In order to foster evaluative thinking, ask students to support their opinions with logical reasoning and data. Having to support a given response reinforces persuasive communication, while listening to alternate interpretations offered by other classmates is an effective exercise in mental flexibility and identifying with the viewpoints of others. After an in-depth conversation, teachers should provide opportunities for students to change corners (based on their changed perspectives) as they consider the myriad of positions articulated by their peers. Teachers might consider using this strategy to explore other examples and motivations of cultural contact throughout history, such as Native Americans and Europeans ca. 1500, immigrants with native-born citizens ca. 1900, or U.S. soldiers in Iraq ca 2003.

Shift It

Situations can be examined from different perspectives. This can be done by changing the objects and characters in a story, choosing different time periods or cultures, and using different senses (such as hearing, sight, and smell). In groups, students use the following cards to shift perspectives:

Setting/person. Examine *Encounter* through the eyes of one of the characters and think about how changing the narrator might reveal a different story. In this book, a young Taino native tells the story in the first person. How would the story be different if told from the viewpoint of an adult Taino native? What if the Taino natives had been hostile to the explorers? What if the story was told from the viewpoint of a crewmember of the ship? What if Columbus had landed in a place where there were no native people?

Time. Change the time period. For example, what if Columbus and his crew passed through a “time warp” and arrived in your hometown in current times? How might the communication between “natives” and explorer look and sound similar or different? Knowing what you know now about the real Columbus, how would you react? Would you be afraid? Why or why not? How might this story of “discovery” change if it were written today? What accounts for these changes? What societal trends and issues would be mirrored if the story took place in contemporary times? How might we relate this story to a current situation? By examining contexts with which students are familiar, they are better able to recognize the complexities that shape historical events. Humans have dealt with similar issues across time. Recognizing these time perspectives provide an opportunity for students to critically examine their own beliefs and points of view as well as those of others.

Culture. Each culture is represented by its own worldview and belief system. How might actions and reactions of a character or person shift when viewed through the lens of another culture? Ask students to try and think of a decision they made that day that was not influenced by their culture. It is impossible! Have students consider the impact that culture had on the decisions made by characters in *Encounter*. How did culture influence the Columbian quest for riches, power, and colonization? How did his

culture reinforce (or not) his cruelty to the natives? Alternately, how were the reactions of the Taino natives influenced by their culture? What can we learn about Taino culture from the way they reacted to the Columbian expedition? Alternatively, in contemporary times, examine examples of cultural contact for groups that consider the interactions positive or negative. How does a cultural lens shape these perceptions?

Esperanza Rising: Transitions and Adaptations

As an additional example of how children’s literature is rich with opportunities to practice mental flexibility, we use *Esperanza Rising*, a story about cultural adaptations. Pam Munoz Ryan’s *Esperanza Rising* tells the story of a young Mexican girl’s experience of immigrating to the United States in 1930. Ryan beautifully chronicles Esperanza’s challenges and subsequent growth as she transitions from the life of a privileged daughter of a wealthy landowner in Mexico to that of a poor immigrant farm worker in California. Ryan also exposes her readers to the tension created in the 1930s by the increasing number of immigrants and Americans in California looking for work, the meager wages, and inadequate housing. Not only does Esperanza’s perspective shift throughout the novel, but each of the characters in the novel represents an important historical perspective.

Esperanza Rising is suited for upper elementary grades and middle grades language arts and social studies curriculums and is an ideal novel for implementing perspective shifting strategies. Below, we discuss four strategies to increase student perspectives: You were there, object speak, once upon a time, and role on.

You Were There

In this strategy students experience multiple perspectives of an event or time period by examining primary sources associated with that time or place. Using this strategy with a reading of *Esperanza Rising*, students examine photographs and personal accounts of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who were forced to leave the United States and move to Mexico as part of the 1929 Deportation Act and The Mexican Repatriation Act. In addition, students examine photographs and personal accounts of others affected by these acts such as the employers and those American-born Mexicans sent back to Mexico even though they had never lived there. By examining multiple perspectives through primary sources, students gain a fuller overall understanding of the 1930s in California, the effects of The Mexican Repatriation Act, and what it was like to be a Mexican living in America in 1930. Primary sources bring these perspectives to life in a way that textbooks fail to do. Teachers may wish to obtain photographs of the Mexican Reparation Act by searching the Library of Congress website at www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/. Another helpful resource is the National Archives website at www.archives.gov. The recent Arizona Immigration Law provides a contemporary example of similar issues that students may investigate using multiple perspectives.

Object Speak

Students write from the “perspective of an object,” as if the inanimate object could observe the world and talk about what it saw. *Esperanza Rising* includes many objects that work well with this strategy. For example, Esperanza is given a doll for her birthday by her father before he is killed. The doll accompanies Esperanza on her train journey from Mexico to California, witnesses Esperanza’s immature refusal to share the toy with a young peasant girl, stays in a trunk for safe keeping at the work camps, and finally becomes the beloved toy of Isabel, Esperanza’s younger friend at the work camp. What would this doll have to say about Esperanza and her surroundings in any one of these situations?

Another possibility includes writing from the perspective of rose plants that travel from Esperanza’s home in Mexico to her new home at the work camps in California. What changes would the roses observe in their surroundings? By looking at the characters, events, and setting of the story through the eyes of these objects, students build mental flexibility.

Once Upon a Time

Similar to *object speak*, this strategy asks students to adopt a new perspective, this time the perspective of a character who does not typically have a voice in the story. While *Esperanza Rising* is written in the third person, we see the story largely through Esperanza’s eyes. An interesting exercise would be to write part of the story from the perspective of Marta, a Mexican American who makes herself unpopular by leading a forceful movement to strike for better wages. At first Esperanza does not like Marta and is intimidated by her and her cause, but she later discovers that she and Marta share much in common. Marta also has a strong bond to her mother and is doing what she believes she needs to in order to survive. Writing part of the story from Marta’s perspective would allow students to explore Marta’s argument that if Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans do not strike, they will not get the pay they need and deserve. Teachers can relate this to similar contemporary issues such as equal pay for equal work and child labor. Again, this exercise allows students to practice mental flexibility and become more accepting of different viewpoints.

Role On

This strategy involves assigning students roles that reflect different perspectives. For *Esperanza Rising*, roles could reflect the perspectives of those at the work camps—the formerly wealthy Mexican immigrants such as Esperanza and her family, the former peasant Mexican immigrants such as Miguel, the American Mexicans such as Marta, the Okies (those from Oklahoma), and the company owners. Using these different viewpoints, students discuss an issue such as how to ensure that workers get paid fairly and adequately for the work they do. Undoubtedly, there will be disagreements between perspectives, but students will also discover some common ground between the different groups of people. Students will gain a deeper understanding of each group of people by adopting and role-playing their perspective. In addition, this strategy has practical

implications for real life: students gain practice in understanding multiple sides of an issue, thereby developing the necessary skills for effective problem solving in our changing world.

Conclusion

We live in one world. What we do affects others, and what others do affects us, as never before. To recognize that we are all members of a world community and that we all have responsibilities to each other is not romantic rhetoric, but modern economic and social reality.¹³

Competent citizenship in our global village depends on preparing today’s students to thrive in an interdependent and rapidly changing world. In order to deal with these challenges, students must be able to think creatively and flexibly. It is these skills of mental flexibility that promote acceptance and adaptability in a complex world and ultimately prepare students for participatory advocacy in the global village. 🌐

Notes

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