

Recognizing the Value of Teaching Proverbs: Multicultural Origins of Oral and Written Literacy

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of multicultural proverbs in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural instruction through the language arts, history and social sciences. Educators can use proverbs to engage students in learning, enhance their understanding of other cultures and languages, and promote a globally-sensitive community.

Students come into the classroom with a rich heritage of personal, experiential and acquired knowledge from their parents and community. Teachers need to draw from these uniquely personal understandings and allow the student to share their familial and historical perceptions within the classroom and in their readings. The reader combines personal knowledge and experience, knowledge of history and cultures, experience with values and ideas, and knowledge of other pieces of literature (Christenbury, 2000). When teachers allow students to reflect on and share their perceptions in the classroom, the teacher is affirming the students' knowledge and participation, opening up discourse, and encouraging students to "make a community of meaning" (Christenbury, 2000, p. 132). One of the avenues to help develop this community of meaning is by examining proverbs, which are learned through oral literacy, through parental and generational teachings, and through cross-cultural studies, which can be implemented in the teaching of language arts, social studies and/or history. Proverbs were and are primary tools for teaching children in all cultures and communities throughout the world. The purpose of this paper is to encourage educators to understand the origin of oral literacy, which preceded the written word, and how multicultural proverbs can effectively be used to engage students in participating in literary and cultural understanding.

Historical Perspective

In *Non-Western Educational Traditions* (2000), Reagan writes about the communal approach and oral tradition of learning in non-Western societies, which bring about the understanding of common principles that different groups use to accomplish their educational practices. All cultures share different types of proverbs and parables, which serve as foundational tools of guidance and instruction. Proverbs are conduits of oral literacy, which enhance communal learning. Lee (1993) reveals how oral traditions of teaching, which are primary tools in all native and ethnic communities, develop into a written literature that has universal commonalities. Proverbs represent a legitimate literary source from which students can incorporate their understanding as it applies to their knowledge and experiential base. Lee (1993) states, "Voice is the metaphor of empowerment" (p. 19). Educators can grasp the opportunity to integrate proverbs, both researched and those shared by the students, as a teaching tool, which will engage students and enhance their understanding of the world around them. Communal proverbs can be valued for their pragmatic use as a vehicle for instruction in teaching the cross-cultural origins and applications of shared wisdom through oral and written literacy.

Historically, African Americans have used proverbs and other forms of storytelling (tongue twisters, riddles, parables, etc.) to sustain their diverse cultures as uprooted and unwilling participants in forced servitude in the Americas (Reagan, 2002). As slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write, they used these forms of oral literacy for instructional and entertainment purposes; these were sometimes imbedded with meaning only understood among the African slaves—much like a verbal form of masking.

Sharing proverbs is a positive avenue and door opener for engaging students of diverse cultural backgrounds and interacting with their peers from a prior knowledge-based heritage rich with generational discourse. Proverbs serve for edification, teaching, warnings, admonishments, as well as maintenance for the survival of the family, community and culture. Professor Kofi Asare Opoku, who has invested considerable research in the proverbs of African countries, states, “The Yoruba of Nigeria emphasize the value of proverbs by saying, ‘A proverb is the horse that can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas’” as cited in Diener and Lieber (2001, p. 1). Proverbs promote intercultural and interdisciplinary connectedness in language arts, history and the social sciences. Cook (1993) compiled proverbs into categories such as: peace of mind, happiness, acceptance, forgiveness, helping other people, a higher power or God, faith and belief, self-acceptance, self-knowledge, self-reliance, simplicity, the past, the present, hope and an array of other categories, which are common concerns and challenges for all humankind.

Practical Application

According to the Florida Sunshine State Standards (1996) and the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards for the English Language Arts (1996), multicultural instruction should be included on a regular basis. Specifically, some of the NCTE/IRA standards address multicultural inclusion and encourage the development of the student’s understanding regarding language and cultural diversity as applied to geographic regions and social roles, consequently promoting a respect for different language patterns and societal norms. As students contribute and apply their own literary and historical understanding of proverbs, they become reflective participatory actors in a global community. The application of proverbs in the classroom can facilitate cultural and literary understanding as well as fostering creativity. Students can be asked to consider proverbs from other regions of the world, come up with similar proverbs in their own part of the world, and create new proverbs according to the social problems that face them today. Further application would be to incorporate them in music, dance, drama and art.

Some ways in which proverbs are taught are in such forms as easily digestible couplets, haikus, aphorisms, truisms, or within parables. Sometimes their forms are not readily recognizable, but are “certainly proverbial” (Dance, 2002, p. 456). Proverbs are characterized by brevity, but can have multiple applications and layers of encoded meaning (Moon, 1997). Students can be asked to decode the meaning of such proverbs, which originally may have been applicable only to an intended circle, such as the Navajo proverb, “I have been to the end of the earth” (Aboriginal Archive). Where or what is the end of the earth [to the Navajo]? Or does this mean the end of one’s life—life is now finished? Students can use critical thinking to analyze these proverbs and understand basic cultural values as well as cross-cultural applications. Educators might challenge students to decode messages and understand why a particular proverb is culture-bound by understanding the people and their cultural norms. Another application might be to have the students create their own culture-bound proverbs. Students can formulate proverbs that address the social issues that they face as they pertain to their particular schools or

communities. Simeone (1995) uses the game *Chalkboard Pictionary* to teach African proverbs while encouraging students to use multiple intelligences by visualizing and translating their understanding into metaphorical symbols and pictures and strengthening their inferential skills. She states that proverbs ask us to use words to "see images with the mind's eye," something which is very difficult for concrete thinkers to do. She states that the "process of translating these metaphors and symbols to pictures enables these students to make the language connection and, it is hoped, to strengthen their inferential skills" (Simeone, 1995, para. 13). Simeone uses African proverbs, such as "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," to encourage students to translate symbols and metaphors into pictures. Thus, as the students visualize, conceptualize, infer meaning, and translate into pictures, they are processing multiple intelligences.

Proverbs, whether referred to as a maxim, wise saying, rule of conduct, aphorism, an adage, native or conventional wisdom, fundamental principle or truth, analect or precept, all have cross-cultural connections, which can open dialogue. Many of the analects of Confucius are culture-bound, but many more have cross-cultural commonalities, such as "To study and not think is a waste. To think and not study is dangerous" (Analect 2:15). Students can share their own understandings of multicultural proverbs (See Table I) through classroom discourse and written application such as (a) rephrasing, (b) comparative pieces, analyzing different culturally derived proverbs, (c) using proverbs in the heading of each journal entry, and (d) expressing them through individual creativity in poetry, prose, music and art. Proverbs contain imagery, and "are employed frequently to give point and add color to conversation, and their skillful use is a mark of erudition and elegance of speech in African societies" (Messenger, 2002, para. 4). As part of an oral exercise, students can develop their presentation skills by interpreting proverbs in front of the classroom. Through proverbs, students will learn about brevity in writing and speech, poetic meaning, sometimes rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and other literary techniques that enhance oral and written literacy. Cruz and Duff (1996) look at the student as an opportunity to draw a wealth of information from the personal resources, through familial understanding, that the student brings into the classroom. As they stated, "*Cada cabeza es un mundo*," or "Each head is a world in itself."

Educators need to look at their students as resources, having a wealth of information to contribute to the classroom discussion. The usefulness of proverbs has crossed cultures and endured through centuries of oral and written literacy; their usefulness continues to affect the way students learn at home and how they integrate that learning within the school environment. Cruz and Duff ask three important questions: (a) How are we in the classroom not just tapping but enriching those funds of knowledge? (b) What are we doing to get students to know that they know? (c) What are we doing to help learners see each other as resources toward a community knowledge? It is up to the educator to tap the very resources that they have before them, the students, and promote bridge-building opportunities of understanding among the students. Students can use their multiple intelligences in interpretation through art, such as posters, cards, and murals depicting the people and practices of other cultures; through music, using instruments to emphasize meaning; and through dance and drama. Many students complain that their ethnic or racial group is not sufficiently and positively reflected in posters and images throughout the school and classroom. Administrators and teachers could permit students of multicultural backgrounds to draw and paint murals on specified walls and areas in the school (hallways, cafeteria, classrooms, chorus rooms, gym rooms, etc.) and include global proverbial sayings that would give the students a sense of personal pride, which is reflected from their geographic origin

(or their parents), as well as recognizing the commonalities that they share with their fellow students.

Table 1. Multicultural Proverbs¹

Multicultural Proverbs	
Country, people, or Language	Proverb
Yoruba	The man who has bread to eat does not appreciate the severity of a famine.
Nigeria	A wealthy man will always have followers.
Somalia	Wisdom does not come overnight.
Swahili	Who digs the well should not be refused water.
Sierra Leone	To try and fail is not laziness.
South African	The drums of war are the drums of hunger.
Ivorian	The death of an elderly man is like a burning library.
Moussi	Little by little the bird builds its nest.
Ivorian	Until the snake is dead, do not drop the stick.
Aristotle	Dignity does not consist in possessing honors, but in deserving them.
Aristotle	I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is over self.
Maya Angelou	There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.
Abigail Adams	We have too many sounding words and too few actions that correspond with them.
Mahatma Gandhi	No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive.
William Shakespeare	There is a history in all men's lives.
Malcolm X	Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.
Anne Frank	Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy.
Standing Bear, Sioux	The old Lakota was wise. He knew that a man's heart away from nature becomes hard.
Eleanor Roosevelt	No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.
Confucius, Analect 2:15	To study and not think is a waste. To think and not study is dangerous.
Sukuma	The wind does not break the tree that bends.
Ruth Graham	Just pray for a tough hide and a tender heart.
Moussi	Little by little the bird builds its nest.
Swahili	If you do not seal the holes, you will have to rebuild the walls.
Rudyard Kipling	Borrow trouble for yourself, if that's your nature, but don't lend it to your neighbors.
Voltaire	It is far better to be silent than merely to increase the quantity of bad books.

Conclusion

Educators have multiple opportunities to incorporate proverbs into their teaching strategies. Dance (2002) states, "the individual who can contribute traditional wisdom to the argument in the form of a proverb or who can make his case in eloquent and memorable language wins a number of points" (p. 454). As shown in Cruz and Duff's study of proverbial instruction, students were allowed to share their personal knowledge, engage in literary discourse, and use multiple intelligences to interpret ancient proverbs and create their own understandings through language, art and music. "Like other forms of folklore, proverbs are constantly evolving. Many of them seem to continue from time immemorial. Other pass out of currency or are recast in modified form, appearing in completely new contexts" (Dance, 2002, p. 455). Proverbs invite

¹ Taken from the following: African Proverbs (2002); African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories (2002); The Book of Positive Quotations (1996); The Aboriginal Elders Archive (2002); Art Glenn's Homepage (1997)

students to explore their own understandings and prior knowledge, interconnect their understandings with those of the students and the teacher, and promote interdisciplinary understanding.

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