

Using Regional American Short Stories to Promote Student Collaboration

The authors suggest a variety of creative group activities to engage students in literature that explores several geographic areas of the United States. Advice for managing the group activities and lists of short stories are provided.

Collaboration and the appreciation for multiple perspectives have become increasingly important. The current political and economic condition in the United States and globally has exemplified the urgency for people of many different backgrounds and ideologies to work together to find solutions to world problems such as climate change and economic recession. The English language arts classroom lends itself to teaching collaborative skills through fostering meaningful discussion and encouraging group authorship, group inquiry, and cooperative problem solving. Today's students need not only to be able to understand and interpret what they read, but they also need to be able to create and negotiate meaning and realize that different backgrounds, cultures, orientations, and experiences shape their interpretations. Literature can be used as a springboard to help students develop all these collaborative and interpretive skills.

In *Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy*, Miles Myers recognized new literacy demands now placed on our students; he referred to this literacy as "translation/critical literacy," and its requirements include the "interpretation of many texts" and the ability to "develop multiple perspectives, translations of culture, negotiation of differences, [and] flexibility among speech agents" (57).

We have developed a unit to help teachers explore various short stories based on American regions. We believe that if we expose students to literature from various regions, we offer the oppor-

tunity to investigate literary elements such as dialect and sense of place in addition to more traditionally studied elements, such as symbolism and tone. These texts also offer opportunities to examine dialect, which supports Myers's assertion that students need to understand the "flexibility among speech agents" that is necessary for students to function in a global society in which there is not one right way to speak or to think. Additionally, studying literature from the entire American landscape broadens students' perceptions and perspectives about various American cultures, and the focus on sense of place reinforces the notion that culture shapes who we are. This unit is centered on collaboration: for students to fully appreciate the concept of multiple perspectives, they must work with their fellow students, hear other opinions and interpretations, and share their own.

The following plan outlines our unit on American Regionalism, and we offer specific suggestions for providing both individual and group accountability. Requiring individual and group accountability offers students the opportunity to showcase their personal abilities, but it also creates a cooperative learning environment where the students must work together to make decisions about their common goals. While we offer many detailed activities for accomplishing the goals of the unit, teachers can modify, change, or substitute any of the suggested projects based on student need, ability, grade, etc. Finally, we offer a list of suggested readings.

A Unit on American Regionalism

Guidelines

1. Divide the students into groups. The groups can be preselected by the teacher or self-selected by the class (see fig. 1).
2. Each group will select an American region they would like to study.
3. The number of students in the group will dictate the number of stories each group will read. For example, if the group consists of five students, the group will read five stories from the selected region.
4. Each student in the group will read all the stories in his or her group.
5. Each group will have group accountability assessment activities.
6. Each member of the group is responsible for becoming “an expert” on one story in the group.
7. Each member will have individual accountability assessment activities.

Selecting the American Regions

Instructors can choose the regions in advance, based on other activities occurring in the classroom, or teachers can give students/groups the opportunity to select their own region, making sure that groups do not duplicate the same region. For this unit, we focus on the following American regions: the South, the Southwest, the Northeast, the West, and Appalachia.

We firmly believe that when grouping students, it is vital that students are evaluated as a group and as individuals.

Dividing the Groups

Teachers can divide the groups based on the number of students in the class. Figure 1 exhibits a simple approach to divide the class.

Accountability

We firmly believe that when grouping students, it is vital that students are evaluated as a group *and* as individuals. Working in groups and holding the groups accountable will promote peer decision-making and cooperation as well as allow the opportunity for using collaborative literacy strategies. Additionally, including individual ac-

FIGURE 1. Dividing the Groups

A	B	C	D	E
Southern	South-western	North-eastern	Western	Appalachian
1A	1B	1C	1D	1E
2A	2B	2C	2D	2E
3A	3B	3C	3D	3E
4A	4B	4C	4D	4E
5A	5B	5C	5D	5E

countability assures students that their own work will be valued and gives students the opportunity to make creative decisions. Offering both types of accountability is necessary to avoid the “one student doing all the work” scenario. By requiring both types of accountability, we have built in both a personal and collaborative purpose to the unit.

Group Accountability

The entire group will read all the short stories selected for that region. It is important to give both class time and homework time for the students to complete the reading. Since the groups will be reading approximately five stories from the region, we believe students should be given ample time to meet and discuss the short stories. These short-story discussion groups are a critical opportunity for teachers to model and foster collaborative literacy strategies, which allow for students to create and negotiate meaning; students should be responsible for actively engaging in the reading and sharing their reader responses with their peers. Teachers can model how to read and respond to literature using such techniques as sticky notes, double-entry journals, reading logs, and annotating texts. In addition, teachers can use small-group discussion techniques like those used in literature circles (Daniels) to guide students through sharing their own interpretations and listening to others. In their short-story discussion groups, students can learn the value of understanding multiple perspectives through both the stories they are reading and from listening to their peers’ responses and interpretations.

Group Projects

In the group project, students will investigate the region depicted in their short stories. Each group will be responsible for the following:

- Students will research the culture of their region, including music/dance, food, customs, themes, folklore, and dialect.
- Student will create a presentation that teaches the class about the different cultural aspects of that region. This presentation should incorporate technology such as a PowerPoint presentation, creating a website, or creating a WebQuest.
- Students will create a pamphlet providing information about their region. Creating a pamphlet can help students learn how to publish their work cooperatively.
- Students will give a demonstration of at least one aspect of the culture such as playing a recording, showing a video clip, or sharing food from a recipe.
- Students will share a description of the literature from the region showcasing aspects of the short stories they read collaboratively. If the technology is available, we suggest having students create a wiki about the literature of the region (examining dialect, sense of place, as well as literary elements); wikis emphasize the importance of group authorship as well as afford teachable moments about the benefits and pitfalls of such media.
- Students will be evaluated on their group presentation, oral presentation skills, the quality of the pamphlet, and their regional literature showcase.

To emphasize the importance of collaboration and collective authorship, students should be encouraged to meet these objectives together, rather than dividing up the work among them.

We suggest giving students plenty of time to work with their groups as they prepare their presentations. The amount of time allotted will depend on the level of the class. After groups have time to work together, they should have ample time to present their material to the rest of the class. For example, each group could present their material on separate class days. The entire class day does not need to be devoted to the group presentation, but when more

than one presentation is done on one day, presenters tend to feel rushed and the class can feel overwhelmed. A suggestion is to allot 20 minutes for the group presentation, then allow students to work on the individual short-story portfolios (see below) for the remainder of the class. We also suggest incorporating whole-class accountability for the presentations. We have found that too often when groups present their work to the class, the other groups do not always pay as close attention to the presentations as we would like. We have required students to keep a response sheet for each presentation based around the categories of the project, where students can record information from the presentations as well as their responses to them.

Individual Accountability: Short Story Portfolio

Although each student will read all the short stories assigned to the group and participate in the group presentation of the American region, each student is also responsible for becoming an expert on one short story. The assignment of student to story should occur during the initial group discussion of the region. After selecting a short story in their groups, the students analyze the story and demonstrate their understanding in a short-story portfolio. Students are responsible for creating their portfolios. Instructors can choose literary elements they deem vital. We selected character, plot, dialect, tone/mood, and sense of place—we tried to include both universal literary elements and those that emphasize multiple perspectives. Figure 2 outlines activities associated with each literary element. Students will select *one* portfolio element from *each* category to include in the Short Story Portfolio.

The portfolio must be professional in design. Students should make sure the final product is neat, all written material is typed, the various sections are bound together, and it is easy to handle and read. The following are descriptions and directions for some possible items to be included in the short-story portfolios.

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FIGURE 2. Short Story Portfolio Selections

Character	Plot	Dialect	Tone/Mood	Sense of Place
Yearbook	Timeline	Dialect Dictionary	Artwork	Quote Board
Character Bag	Storyboard	Quote Translation	Music Compilation	Making Connections
Compare and Contrast	Plot Diagram	A Personal Conversation	Narrative Passage Analysis	Regional Map

CHARACTER

Yearbook. Select at least five characters from the story. Develop a yearbook page identifying the character's name, nickname, clubs and organizations the character might have been involved in, sports, college plans, and any other notable accomplishments. Include a picture for each character.

Character Bag. Choose three characters from the story and determine various everyday items that are representative of his or her personality and traits. Items bag should include a favorite personal item, a picture of how the character might dress, and an item that represents the character's personality. The teacher can predetermine how many items are required.

Compare and Contrast. Choose at least two characters from the story to compare and contrast. Include a minimum of three comparative elements and three contrasting elements between the characters. Explain in detail why these elements are important to the meaning of the story. The paper should be 2–3 pages double-spaced.

PLOT

Timeline. Develop a chronological timeline of the important events throughout the story. The timeline should include a brief note explaining why the event is significant.

Storyboard. Design a visual display of significant events in the story. Each event should have its own storyboard panel (think of the way a comic strip is created). The storyboard must include at least five panels. Each panel should include a brief note explaining why the event is significant.

Plot Diagram. Create a diagram describing the five essential elements of the story's plot development: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Include a definition of each element and an explanation of an event in the story that is an example of the element.

DIALECT

Dialect Dictionary. Develop a dictionary using words found in the story that depict the use of regional dialect. Include the following elements for each word: part of speech, origin of the word, definition, the Standard English word equivalent, and the quote from the story using the word. The dictionary must include at least 20 words.

Quote Translation. Select ten quotes from the story that are written in the regional dialect. Translate the quote into Standard English. Include the name of the character you are quoting. Please note that this assignment is not intended for the students to "correct" the regional dialect. Instead, it should be used as a comprehension tool where the teacher can determine that the student understands the intent of the author through the use of regional language.

A Personal Conversation. Engage in a personal conversation with a friend using the regional vernacular used in the short story. Create a recording of the conversation and have your peers listen to it. Have the listeners determine the region in which the conversation would take place. Ask the listeners what clues were presented in the recording that helped them determine the region.

TONE/MOOD

Artwork. Draw or paint a picture depicting the overall tone/mood of the story. Include a written description explaining how artwork is representative of the story.

Music Compilation. Compile several pieces of music, edited together to capture the tone/mood of the story. Or, write an original piece of music that captures the emotion of the story. Include a written justification for how the music represents the essence of the story.

Narrative Passage Analysis. Quote 8–10 passages from the story. Offer an explanation de-

scribing how each quote is representative of the story's tone/mood.

SENSE OF PLACE

Quote Board. Select 10–12 quotes from the story that demonstrate the importance of the setting and how it shapes the plot and characters.

Making Connections. Generate an annotated bibliography of five other short stories that share similar regional themes with your story.

Regional Map. Create a map depicting the American region described in the story. Make sure to include significant locations mentioned in the story.

ORIGINAL PORTFOLIO WORK

In addition to including work that focuses on the short story, students can also be encouraged to include an original piece of writing that demonstrates how their cultural background and sense of place have influenced them. This could be in the form of an autobiographical piece, a personal narrative, or a poem (one popular with our students is writing a piece modeled on the well-known “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon).

Teaching the Short Story

After the students have created their short-story portfolios, they will share their stories and portfolios in new jigsaw groups (see fig. 3). Pulling one student from each regional group creates the new groups. Each group will be composed of multiple regions.

The purpose of the activity is twofold: (1) it allows every student to act as an expert on a story, and (2) all students have the opportunity to listen to other students present their stories and portfolios from other regions of America.

Dividing the class into new groups works well for this section of the unit. Earlier in the unit, each regional group gets a portion of a class period to

present a region to the entire class; the presentations will take at least a week of class time. By regrouping the students and allowing each student ten minutes to present to the rest of the group, all the groups will be presenting simultaneously. This second set of presentations should not take more than two class days to complete.

SUGGESTED STORIES BY REGION

The following is a list of short stories, organized by region, as a starting point for the activities suggested in our article. We strongly encourage teachers to explore all American regions and corresponding literature with their classes. Moreover, we hope teachers broaden the conversation to include regions that speak English outside the United States.

Appalachian Literature

“32 Votes before Breakfast” by Jesse Stuart
 “Appalachian Humor” by Loyal Jones
 “A Pair of Shoes” by Billy C. Clark
 “The Quilt” by Bo Ball
 “Woman in Coal” by B. L. Dotson-Lewis

Northeast Literature

“Big Joe’s Funeral” by Walter Dean Myers
 “Blues for Bob E. Brown” by T. Ernesto Bethancourt
 “Day in the Barrio” by Judith Ortiz Cofer
 “Freezer Burn” by Michael Rosovsky
 “The Stoop-Sitters” by Elise Justa

Southern Literature

“The Ease of Living” by Amina Gautier
 “The Man Who Was Almost a Man”
 by Richard Wright
 “Theory of Reality” by Holly Goddard Jones
 (a bit long at 34 pages, but worth it)
 “A Worn Path” by Eudora Welty
 “Wretch Like Me” by R. T. Smith

Southwest Literature

“At the Powwow Hotel” by Toni Jensen
 “The Fifth Daughter” by Charles Kemnitz
 “Imagining Bisbee” by Alicita Rodriguez
 “Old Border Road” by S. G. Miller
 “What I Never Said” by Elmo Lum

Western Literature

“A Hunter’s Story” by Jerry Mathes II
 “Imaginary Tucson” by Geoffery Becker
 “Purgatory, Nevada” by Tracy Daugherty
 “Retrievers: Good and Bad” by Norman Maclean
 “Sacagawea’s Nickname” by Larry McMurtry

FIGURE 3. Portfolio Discussion Groups

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
1A	2A	3A	4A	5A
1B	2B	3B	4B	5B
1C	2C	3C	4C	5C
1D	2D	3D	4D	5D
1E	2E	3E	4E	5E

Extension Activities

Time permitting, we would encourage your students to create more-elaborate literary maps of their


Time permitting, we would encourage your students to create more-elaborate literary maps of their regions or a whole-class literary map of the United States emphasizing the authors and stories of each region

regions or a whole-class literary map of the United States emphasizing the authors and stories of each region, as well as the descriptions of the literature for each region. In classes with access to technology, the literary map could be online with links to websites as well as work created by the students, such as their wikis.

More information about liter-

ary maps can be found on NCTE's website (<http://www.ncte.org/affiliates/literarymaps>).

Our goal is to expose students to a varied set of American literature from across the entire coun-

try while still maintaining a reasonable set of student expectations. We believe that units such as this one, which focus on a set theme such as regionalism using short stories, offer students and teachers the opportunity to discover multiple literary pieces that explore the varied American experience. In addition, this unit allows students to work cooperatively to foster various literacy skills such as collaborative reading and writing, oral presentation skills, technological literacies, the creation and negotiation of meaning, and fostering an appreciation for multiple perspectives, all of which are vital for participating in today's society. 

Works Cited

- Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. 2nd ed. Portland: Steinhouse, 2002. Print.
- Myers, Miles. *Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy*. Urbana: NCTE, 1996. Print.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink and Christy Simon, RWT

In "Varying Views of America" students collaboratively examine how perspective influences individuals' tone and how perspectives differ on social issues. Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," Langston Hughes's "I, Too, Sing America," and Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of the Morning" are highlighted. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=194

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