

2005

"I Have a New Understanding": Critical Narrative Inquiry as Transformation in the English-History Classroom

Gina DeBlase
Wayne State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeBlase, Gina (2005) "'I Have a New Understanding": Critical Narrative Inquiry as Transformation in the English-History Classroom," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 11 , Article 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl1119ih>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol11/iss1/4>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

"I Have a New Understanding": Critical Narrative Inquiry as Transformation in the English-History Classroom

Cover Page Footnote

Gina DeBlase is Assistant Professor of English Education at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. She may be reached at GinaDeBlase@wayne.edu.

“I Have a New Understanding”: Critical Narrative Inquiry as Transformation in the English-History Classroom

Gina DeBlase

Recent analysis of literacy and literature instruction contends that pluralistic approaches to education require changes in curricular content to include voices of cultural groups who have been excluded from literary study in schools (Applebee, Burroughs, Stevens 396; Smith and Strickland 137). However, the addition of cultural information and multicultural literary texts in the curriculum, by themselves, appears to be insufficient for meeting many goals of multicultural education, where voices interact and students reflect, think critically, increase cultural awareness, decrease ethnocentrism, and create a global perspective. Students limited by narrow cultural perspectives need to engage in discussion, writing, and other dialectical activities which prompt examination of knowledge constructed from multiple perspectives. Developing students' ability to *use* cultural knowledge and perspectives to think about literature, history, society, *and themselves* is emerging as a necessary part of a pluralistic approach to education.

Case Study Background

This case study of Kris, an eleventh grade student, is embedded in an ethnographic study of an interdisciplinary literature-history class where students had opportunities to reflect about multicultural texts in their historical contexts through open-forum discussion, writing, and other dialectical activities which emphasized thinking critically about perspectives (Miller). The site for this study was a largely white suburban high school in upstate New York located in a community at the state median on measures of wealth. Sharon, an English teacher, and Ron, a social studies teacher, felt these students, in particular, needed a course focusing on multicultural perspectives because the students came from a more or less homogenous community. The teachers believed a goal of their school should be “stating outcomes, developing curricula, and providing experiences that address this imbalance.” Students taking their course—American Dreams, Lost and Found: Interdisciplinary U.S. History and English 11—produced a portfolio of written work, which included a response journal (5-7 pages per week); 2 multiple-source research papers; 22 pieces of writing of mixed creative and expository genres; an extensive multiple source and media anthology representing a selected historical theme, time period, or event(s); and a culminating American Dream paper, synthesizing students' learning and thinking over the school year (10-15 pages). For an overview of the integrated curricula, please see Appendix A.

Gina DeBlase is Assistant Professor of English Education at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. She may be reached at GinaDeBlase@wayne.edu.

This interdisciplinary class was team taught. Reading texts from different cultural perspectives, engaging in open-forum discussion and writing, and participating in other dialectical activities were meant to foster student awareness of the multiple, sometimes conflicting, languages for understanding texts and social issues. Teachers provided assistance at points of need, sometimes in the form of posing problems, juxtaposing texts/perspectives (e.g., stories, reports, personal experiences), and initiating multivocal activities, often in the form of conversational strategies for moving from unreflective speech to conscious reflection about one's own and others' assumptions and values.

Kris claimed that participating in the integrated class changed her life. The analysis presented here emerged as I engaged in content analysis of Kris's journals, writing folders, interpretive field notes, and interviews with Kris and her teachers. My goal was to understand what happened to Kris and her ways of knowing over the course of the year. I had a couple of questions in mind: What changes do I detect and what themes occur and recur in her writing, her class participation, and her thinking over time? Finally, what happens to Kris when she is allowed to voice opinions that are not mainstream?

As I read, I began to see clear themes. For example, over time, she showed an increased awareness of and concurrent anger over issues of social injustice and social apathy. In the dialectic between Kris's work and the relevant theory and research, I saw patterns that suggested a movement through women's intellectual development as described by Mary Belenky and colleagues in their groundbreaking book, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, which provided an explanatory framework for this case analysis.

Narrative Thinking

Conceptions of knowledge and truth historically have been defined by a majority culture which often excludes the notion that knowledge can be constructed as a function of personal experience or stories. As a result, educational institutions have generally not attended to methods of learning and understanding which address the potential of dialogue and narrative thinking as an alternative or complement to logical, analytical thinking. Entering into dialogue to understand others' stories produces an alternative to intellectualizing (Bruner). Such aesthetic response and reflection can act against our tendency to "intellectualize" understandings of, for example, oppression and injustice, by distancing self, making detached reports, or instructing others what to do. Such perspective-taking through a feeling/thinking dialogue with the text and others formed the center of narrative thinking in this class. Kris was among those students who, in dialogue with the play of voices in these texts, were transformed by new knowing.

Women's Ways of Knowing

In their book, researcher Mary Belenky and her colleagues describe the ways of knowing that women most value and that contribute to the development of women's voice. After analyzing 135 interviews, they group these ways into five major epistemological perspectives. Movement through these perspectives, or ways of knowing, is directly connected to personal experience and relationship to the

world and the self-perception that is an effect of this experience. Further, these perspectives change as the search for an understanding of self leads to an enhanced development of a critical, reflective voice. A summary of these phases follows:

The silent knower "believe[s] that the source of self-knowledge is lodged in others—not in the self" (31). These women exhibit unquestioned submission to the immediate commands of authorities, not to the directives of their own inner voices.

The received knower equates receiving, retaining, and returning the words of authorities with learning. In a complex and pluralistic world such as ours, this reliance on authority for a single view of the truth is inefficient. As she experiences increasing frustration at her inability to find the source of growth and change, the received knower is compelled to move forward and begin to listen to herself.

The subjective knower conceives of truth as personal and subjectively known or intuited. These women still hold the conviction that there are right answers, but truth now resides within the person, and she can negate answers the outside world provides. These women do not see themselves as constructors of truth but as conduits through which truth emerges.

The procedural knower acknowledges that intuitions may deceive, that truth can be shared, and that expertise can be respected. Procedural knowers "believe that each of us construes the world differently. They are interested not just in *what* people think but in *how* people go about forming their opinions and feelings and ideas" (97, my emphasis).

The constructed knower desires to connect reason with intuition—to construct *one's own way of knowing*. At the crux of this constructivist way of knowing is the insight that "[a]ll knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known" (137, my emphasis). Constructed knowers "feel responsible for examining, questioning, and developing the systems that they will use for constructing knowledge. Question posing, problem posing, and dialogue become prominent methods of inquiry" (139). The constructed knower claims her own voice and makes the effort to combine her intuitive knowledge with knowledge learned from others.

It is important to note that individuals do not necessarily move through the positions they describe in a linear, ordered manner. I found that to be the case with the recursive course of change over time in Kris's ways of knowing.

Kris: Tracing One Young Woman's Development

This paper traces Kris's developing awareness of the relation between self and culture using these five phases, or ways of knowing, as an explanatory lens.

Kris's work in this course demonstrates the educational power of narrative writing and personal experience to create empathy between one's self and the experiences of those who lived not only in a different time, but also in cultures representing different customs, beliefs, and social classes. Joining her empathic feeling with her ability to think critically and reflectively transcends mere knowledge of history and experience, in that it contributes to an understanding of that which makes us human and, perhaps, merges the boundaries of what *is* with those of what *can be* in our world.

Reclaiming a Silenced Voice

To appreciate more fully her journey, it is important to have a sense of where Kris had been. Like the silent women in Belenky's study, a journal entry from the beginning of the school year reflects Kris's concern that her own voice is silenced as she listens to others speak:

Sometimes I feel like I don't have anything to say about anything, and that bothers me a whole lot because people say it for you. So you can't make arguments for yourself. Like I always say, okay, I believe this, and like wait a minute, no I don't. And if somebody is already telling me the other side of it, I have nothing to talk about.

However, in her later journals, class discussions, and interviews, Kris acknowledges that the classroom, as well as the course content, assists her in recognizing her ability to create change in her own life and to evolve toward more complex ways of thinking and knowing. This is a shift from her earlier perspective at the beginning of the course. Kris confirms this change when she writes:

The most helpful thing during this class was the atmosphere in which it is safe to express your views without the fear of rejection. . . . I'm not one bit afraid of expressing my views, and my individuality to anyone.

Further into the year, she realized that fellow students listen to her. She said of this realization: "It became something where I wouldn't just have them listen to me, I'd try to teach them something . . . I don't want to look smart. I want you to know that you're smart." This concern for knowledge as something that is shared is characteristic of the constructed knower. Kris is eager to engage in dialogue with others where the intent is to create understanding and meaning rather than just to talk, which does not necessarily imply mutual engagement between conversants. That is, she sees the intent of discussion and the sharing of experiences as involving questioning and argument rather than just holding the floor and talking.

Reaching Toward Connectedness: Kris's Emerging Voice

As I read and reread Kris's work and related materials, I began to recognize three major phases in her intellectual and social development over the school

year. These phases seem to dovetail with her construction of knowledge as outlined by Belenky et al., and I will make these links as I discuss each of the phases. These recursive phases were 1) her emerging insight into the *mutuality of lived experience* and the accompanying empathy and anger she feels toward the social injustice and apathy she perceives as part of the human condition, 2) her search for *explanations and consequences* of social injustice, and 3) her recognition of herself as an *agent of change* in a diverse world.

In fact, her anger, which initially spurs her thinking, is apparent throughout her writing. Kris's strong feelings give voice to her own experiences and stories that in the past she had not been able to articulate or define. Her anger derives, in part, from her personal connection to the heretofore silenced voices she came to know in the literature she reads for class. She questions the world and the word around her as the result of her strong emotional responses to the injustice she discovers. The braiding of literature with history, the dialogic between content and context, gives rise to the empathy which leads to intellectual and social growth. In her final interview, Kris is asked to talk about the way in which she has changed over the year. She responds,

I was always opposed to the oppression of women, the oppression of African Americans, Native Americans, and so on. But until you learn these things, it sets a fire inside you. You just want to scream. . . . And it just, it got to a point where I was taking in so many things and I was getting so passionate about everything, that I would leave the classroom and I would have so much on my mind. I just think I gotta save the world. I have to do something.

In her response, Kris distinguishes between her previous awareness of oppression as a concept and her current understanding of oppression by feeling its real consequences on lived lives. She stresses that it is this felt understanding of oppression that "sets a fire inside you." Kris feels this strong emotional connection because, in her aesthetic transaction with the texts, the boundaries between the characters she reads about and her own lived experience are blurred (Rosenblatt). She becomes more than a passive observer; rather, she has entered into their lives and so is consciously aware of the potentialities of her own life.

For example, in the same interview she relates her reaction to Lutie Johnson, a poor African-American character in *The Street*, and the way in which people in the story blame her because she is a single mother. "But we didn't hear once the blame go on the father, who left the woman and her child. . . . And that made me angry because . . . I feel like sexism is so invisible in society . . . people just blurt out awful things about women, without even thinking about it, because it has been chiseled into their heads." Kris clearly identifies sexism here, not as individual failing, but as socially constructed yet "invisible in society," where what is "chiseled into their heads" shapes what people unconsciously "blurt out." Kris is aware of the play of social voices in the text, too, hearing the blaming voices opposing Lutie's own voiced experience.

It is a literary text, the narrative story of one woman, then, that angers Kris and causes her to reflect on the nature of sexism in society. In her formal essay about this novel, she writes:

Isn't that what society is out to do. [sic] Rape our women; rape them of their pride, humanity, and human rights. . . . When men are aggressive it is considered an asset but when women have similar qualities they are bitchy. What if gender roles were switched around and men were looked upon as inferior? . . . These things stem from something greater than race, or sex. Possibly despair, a hope for something better with a readiness to push anyone out of your way to get ahead. . . . Despair very possibly may be the reason why hate has been such a common feeling since the beginning of time. People are so wrapped up in . . . themselves . . . they don't take the time to understand the thing that makes this world so rich; diversity. When we fail to recognize what is different we can't begin to understand, but we can harbor a fear of it.

Kris's choice of "rape" as a metaphor to explain society's violence toward women suggests her anger and sense of injustice. She makes a general observation about the opposing ways in which society views aggression in men and women. But then something important happens. Her anger moves her forward and causes her to think about the social forces which might motivate sexism and racism. She speculates that uncertainty and despair are root causes of hate and fear and that a possible effect of people becoming so involved with themselves is that they don't recognize or understand diversity and, as a result, begin to "harbor a fear of it."

This reflection represents a critical juncture in Kris's intellectual development for a few reasons. First, she does not dwell on her anger as someone at the subjective phase of knowing might do. Instead, the anger she feels spurs her process of reflecting, questioning, and seeking answers. However, her anger is not the direct cause of this process. This is a significant point because it is important to understand that her anger alone doesn't motivate her growth. It motivates her rethinking. Dewey discusses this notion of reflective thinking as "(1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity" (12). Kris seeks a more comprehensive explanation for human behaviors than sexism or racism and finds some tentative coherence in her account of human uncertainty and greed, breeding self-involvement and fear. It is a solid piece of abstract thinking, prompted by the concrete puzzlement the story posed and her own further inquiry into the nature of felt experience.

A second critical point in Kris's writing about *The Street* is this: it is through her rethinking that Kris moves closer to constructed knowledge, the final phase in Belenky's system, as she begins to understand that her frame of reference matters. This knowledge enables her to examine and question, to construct (that is, to take on) modes of inquiry that simultaneously prompt and signal her developing voice. Kris poses a question of herself ("Isn't that what society is out to do") and presents an elaborated metaphorical answer, with repetition ("Rape our women; rape them of their pride, humanity, and human rights"). Her question formulates society (not a man or even men) as a culprit and constructs a rhetorically powerful answer. Instead of working out the persuasive details of that posi-

tion, though, she makes a dialectical move to examine the differential language for describing men and women, uncovering this tool which "invisibly" (she said earlier) constructs us beyond our consciousness. She seems to intuit that "[t]hese things stem from something greater than race, or sex," then seeks further answers tentatively ("Possibly despair"), an unusual path of explanation. Finally, recognizing the potential source of hate in the need for certainty and sameness suggests seeds of insight. Kris is in a reflective dialogue with herself here and begins to see that others are alienated from dialogue which could help them "begin to understand."

Jerome Bruner argues that this aesthetic or narrative mode of understanding that Kris experiences functions to "open us to dilemmas, to the hypothetical, to the range of possible worlds that a text can refer to. . . . Literature, in this spirit, is an instrument of freedom" (159). In the integrated class, though, literature as "an instrument of freedom" gained power because the class situated texts within their sociohistorical contexts. As literature provided understanding of the human consequences of public events, history provided the sociocultural public context for personal experience and action.

This dialogue of history, story, and events was evident in a mock trial the class held in which Christopher Columbus was the defendant; this was the class project which Kris said caused her to think most deeply. Kris acted as a prosecuting attorney in the simulation, which included research, reading, trial preparation, and actual dramatized trial. While the students were preparing for the trial, they read fiction and historical biography by and about Native Americans. As Kris read and responded in her journal, it was evident that she looked through diverse others' eyes and was moved by the plight of the Native American as told through such texts as *Lakota Woman*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*. Kris initially responded by expressing feelings of anger, hate, and sadness. In the following quote from her final interview, we can see her empathic understanding of these narratives in their sociohistorical contexts as the impetus for her critical reflection:

I just started getting really angry. . . . And I thought [about] the fact that Columbus invaded these people's land and it wasn't just that he had done that, but the people behind it. . . . I got really sad about the fact that I missed out on so much because . . . all these things were destroyed. The culture. . . . These people were killed because they were who they were. And I could just picture me getting killed for who I was. And I thought about it a lot. . . . everybody in the world one day is going to be in the Nazi's place, and they're gonna be in the Jew's place, they're gonna be in the African-American's place and my place now . . . they're gonna want somebody to say this is wrong. And I think it takes you to be put in that place for you to say, "look at this. I have to do something." And I think that helped me to understand I have a place and have to do something.

Significantly, Kris's language is laden in a sense of personal connectedness to a culture and a way of life that has been virtually eradicated. This connectedness leads her to think about the authenticity of history and to recognize her own

commonality with voices ostensibly different. Kris is angry that Columbus's invasion involved more than land. More importantly, it involved "the people behind it." Her critical voice finds expression because the personal narrative, the story of the people, matters to her. She recognizes the human consequences of what happened more than 500 years ago when she writes, "I missed out on so much . . . because all these things were destroyed." She empathizes with those who were destroyed when she pictures herself being killed for who she is. These images cause her to "think about it a lot." Further, Kris contemplates that at some point, each of us will be either in the position of the oppressor or the oppressed, and, if we are one of the oppressed, we will want someone to "say this is wrong." She transcends the past as narrated by those who lived centuries ago and looks at the multiple perspectives of both the oppressors and the oppressed of more modern times when she writes about the Nazi's place, the Jew's place, the African American's place, and even "my place now."

Like the procedural knowers in Belenky et al.'s study, Kris recognizes that the world is constructed differently for different people, and she analyzes, or thinks through, what she has learned from these different perceptions. She begins to question not only *what* people think and do but also *why*. Perhaps this is what enables Kris to define herself in relation to other groups and cultures. She learns to define knowledge through her perceived connections with others, and this enables her to situate their experiences, as well as her own, within a social-historical context. In other words, her critical reflection about their experiences challenges her to a new self-representation, one in which she begins to renegotiate the boundaries between herself and others in society.

Kris's empathy with diverse cultural and ethnic groups indicates not only a concern for the situation of others but also the assumption of responsibility for taking her place as an agent of change, as someone who has "to do something." The connections she discovers between herself and others bring her to a new understanding of her own historical narrative. Perhaps Kris is willing to share her story because she understands, through the personal narratives the class has read, the ability of the narrative voice to recognize previously silenced perspectives and to hold up what has been previously assumed to be true against lived experiences. This is a necessary component to her emerging recognition of herself as subject, not object, which, in turn, is a precondition to her perception of herself as an agent of change.

Kris at an Intellectual Crossroad: Her Search for Explanations and Consequences

Eventually, Kris begins to turn her somewhat rhetorical "why" questions into a sincere and interested search for the causes and effects of the injustice which angers her. As is common to those who construct knowledge by listening to their own voice and also reflecting critically on the voices of others, Kris begins to formulate answers that make sense to her by posing critical questions for discussion. She begins the process of learning that knowledge can be reconstructed to accommodate both what the outside world provides and what she knows, or intuitions, to be true.

For example, during a discussion about whether or not mainstream history textbooks are biased in their interpretation of events, the class is divided

between whether textbooks should present only the "straight facts" or include stories of the people. One student, Andy, states that he believes texts should "be straight facts." Kris responds, "This is for Andy . . . if you were in a concentration camp and someone was writing about that in a history book, wouldn't you want the story of the people in there [the camp] to be in the book?" What is significant in this exchange is not only what Kris has said but also that she frames her remarks in the form of a question, which suggests the dialogic intent of the conversation she has initiated. She has begun to value the voices of others, and she uses question posing as a method of inquiry in an effort to combine intuitive knowledge with knowledge learned from others.

Kris demonstrates remarkable insight in her efforts to think critically about the causes of injustice and its effects. For example, although she comments that she "hated" Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and that it was a "low point" for her, her discussion of the novel in her "American Dream" essay leads her to acknowledge the state of American education:

One stand that Hester took was that she wanted something better for her child. . . . Maybe if people wanted more for other people's children as well as their own something would be done to better society. Which leads me into the trial we did on education. It infuriates me that we as a society are so money hungry that we allow children to attend school in horrible conditions. . . . And as long as they are living the good life, who the hell cares if some African American child gets the raw end of the stick? This country thinks it is so much better than all of the others because we don't trap our people in caste systems. But if we don't have unbreakable class systems why is it so hard for a child from the ghetto to break out?

Kris's comments regarding caste systems identify effects of racism and classism on education. She has moved beyond reacting solely with anger (although anger is still very much evident in the tone of her voice) and is genuinely concerned about the reasons for injustice. Her method for pursuing reasons is a dialogic one: she imaginatively puts languages in dialogue, to question one language or perspective through the eyes of another as a means of thinking critically about the world. She is engaged in critical-narrative thinking (Miller), and out of this dialectic she is constructing sense provisionally in an honest coherence composed of tensions and multiple possibilities. As Kris learns to move among these conflicting meanings for the same event, she and other students become conscious of silenced voices, multiple perspectives, and the limits of monologic ways of knowing.

Agent of Change

Perhaps the most exciting transformation in Kris's thinking is her recognition of herself as an agent of both self and societal change. The knowledge and new understanding she gained from the class's critical and narrative reflections led her to evaluate her ability and authority to enact transformations in her own life as well as in the larger society.

In the following example, Kris engages in dialogue with the author of a piece entitled “Gee, You Don’t Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation,” and in her response she resists the authoritative voice of the writer. This act alone constitutes a perception of herself as someone who can contribute to the development of ideas and knowledge. It demonstrates movement away from procedural knowledge, when external truths are still dominant, toward constructed knowledge. In her response, she speaks with a sense of authority as she disagrees with the writer.

I felt as if the author was slaughtering all whites. . . . I feel the need to speak out against racism, but slandering other races is not the answer. . . . Feeling sorry for ourselves isn’t going to end the hating, it is going to strengthen it. There will always be hating and white people didn’t invent it. So in order to end it, we have to turn over a new leaf and begin by educating a new generation of people. And I will be more than happy to lead the way.

In this example, Kris has begun to construct her own way of knowing, which is a hallmark of the fifth and final category defined by Belenky et al., constructed knowledge. At this stage, the knower understands that all knowledge is relative and is constructed through individual frames of reference. Kris claims her own voice when she examines, questions, and speculates upon the text. She engages in problem posing, and, through a blending of her own voice and outside knowledge, her own way of knowing emerges.

Kris’s sense of empowerment comes from her realization that her frame of reference matters in the construction of knowledge. Earlier in this section I mentioned that, in addition to seeing herself as an enabler of social transformation, Kris had undergone a personal transformation, one which she recognized. This personal transformation, along with her cognizance of it, contributes to Kris’s journey toward a power of thought that is “not a mirror of reality, not a mere reflection, but is *reflexive and reflective* of reality” (Shor and Freire 13). The following is her comment on her perception of how she works with groups and individuals in her class. It is also indicative of the contribution the work of the class has made to her.

I really like to listen to other people and what their opinions are, and I like to change them. And I can see a big change . . . before I just wanted so much for people to listen to me, and I wanted them to believe what I believed. But now I kind of just want them to believe what they believe, and think about it.

Kris is writing about the change she has undergone from someone who only wanted others to hear her and then believe as she believed to someone who likes to listen to others and engage them in constructive argument. Significantly, this dialogue with others is successful, according to Kris, not necessarily if people believe what she believes but rather if they think about what they believe. This new insight represents an astounding level of intellectual development from the Kris who referred to herself in the beginning of the course as someone who could

never have effective arguments with people about things she believed. In fact, we can clearly see her progress through several phases of knowing.

Like the silent and received knowers, prior to this class Kris seemed to have little confidence in her own ability to speak, and, although she recognized that words were central to the process of knowing, she believed that truth came from others. Later, she expressed a need to have people listen to her exclusively. She was not interested in the voices and ideas of others. This corresponds to the subjective phase of knowing although Kris did not exhibit all of the characteristics of this phase. Like the subjective knower, Kris believed that truth resides within herself and that she could negate answers that the outside world provides. However, she was unlike the subjective knower in that she was willing to reveal her thoughts to others. Often, the subjective knower will elect to keep her ideas to herself rather than reveal her critical stance toward others' points of view.

Kris's desire to have others "believe what they believe, and think about it" is a step toward procedural knowledge. She recognizes that truth can be shared and that expertise can be respected. She clearly is interested "not just in what people think but in how people go about forming their opinions and feelings and ideas" (Belenky et al. 97). Kris's question posing, which is central to constructivist thinking, indicates her consideration for the context of particular situations and individuals rather than relying on mere generalization in her decision making. By the end of the year, Kris claims her own voice and combines her own intuitive knowledge with knowledge learned from others to construct her own meanings from the web of conflicting meanings and languages available for understanding the world.

One year after graduating from the integrated class, Kris volunteered to take part in a discussion among 17 students who had been students in the integrated class. In the lively conversation about multicultural education and the integrated class, Kris was an active participant. In her final retrospective comment about the influence of the class, she said:

This class has changed my life. Sounds so corny, but it's true. I always thought that I was stupid, and that nobody thought I had a worthwhile opinion, or anything like that, and it really made me feel better, and I think it made me a more educated person. I know when I go out into the world now, for example, I went to a rape crisis seminar and the county legislator is still calling me up on the phone and talking about me. It's changed my life. I grew as a writer. The things I'm writing now, I never would have thought I could have written. I also feel like, my life has changed because of all the different things that I have been exposed to here. The literature, the different opinions. I've always been a really, a big hot head, where I can't stand to argue with people, I had to push my idea on them. But now, I feel I can tolerate your opinion.

Kris sees herself as an active agent in the community and a constructor of meaning in her own life. She understands, in retrospect, how the reading, writing, and dialogue in the class prompted her growth but sees, too, how difficult to believe or "corny" it sounds to attribute so much to her work in the integrated

class. She describes clearly, though, the journey she has taken: from the silence of feeling stupid and not worthwhile, to being a “hot head” who couldn’t listen to others, and, finally, to accepting differences to act as “a more educated person” in the world.

Discussion

Kris’s work demonstrates that lived-through aesthetic response to personal narrative is intimately connected to her developing critical and narrative thinking. She becomes conscious that understanding is more than just an *intellectual* process or task. The stories in the literature Kris encounters about the effects of oppression on individuals ignite deep passion in her. Responding to multicultural literature in journals and discussions prompts Kris’s sense-making by stimulating her attention to new dilemmas, alternative human possibilities, and the many-sidedness of the human situation in the landscape of action and mind (Greene). Because she connects her experiences to others, she seems to understand that words such as racism, sexism, and oppression are much more than abstract concepts but have real consequences for those who suffer these injustices and have real social-historical roots which people need to understand. Kris is developing a critical subjectivity that shows genders, classes, and races in dialogue rather than in opposition.

The focus of the integrated class on validating the marginalized and silenced voices of oppressed and minority groups provides Kris with a space where her own voice can be heard and acknowledged. This validation, in turn, allows her to discover that she can be a source of knowledge as well as make determinations about knowledge derived from outside sources. Through personal narrative, she discovers “connections between self and others, [she] penetrates barriers to understanding and come[s] to know more deeply the meaning of . . . her own historical and cultural narrative” (Witherell 94). The recognition of this power within herself allows her to become an active participant in self-directed change and growth in her own life and to redefine herself as an agent of change in society.

Kris’s experience carries important implications for the ways in which academic discourse and pedagogy either assist or hinder a student’s ability to shape a sense of self in society. We need to continue to question the ways in which traditional classroom discourse and curriculum may operate to sacrifice certain student voices to a more culturally mainstream social order. These findings suggest that, as teachers and researchers concerned about education as a transformative practice, we need to provide students with opportunities for self-reflexive critiques regarding issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity *which begin with lived experience*. As we work toward a more multicultural curriculum, reflexive practice can assist students in interpreting their construction of knowledge to encompass the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and social issues that comprise the American quilt. What is central to Kris’s work and the work of this paper is the recognition of the emergence of her *conscious* understanding of the way she encounters the world and her developing ability to transcend and reveal cultural ideologies that suppress herself and others in a democratic society.

Kris’s change results from a pedagogy that values the lived experiences of others and creates space for dialogue and connectedness. Narrative and dialogue

can be a powerful paradigm for teaching and learning. It allowed Kris the space to discover the power of her own voice, to locate herself within a social and cultural context, and, over time, to engage in dialogue with society. When she learned to use her voice in these ways, she became subject rather than object. The pedagogy of this classroom and its curriculum construct knowledge as multilayered and evolving rather than objective and static. We must rethink not only how knowledge is created, but also what knowledge is and who creates it. In the process of rethinking, we can begin to create a learning environment that opens up spaces for the unexpressed voices and perspectives that remain silent in our classrooms. ☐

Works Cited

- Applebee, Arthur, Robert Burroughs, and Anita Stevens. "Creating Continuity and Coherence in High School Literature Curricula." *Research in the Teaching of English* 34 (2000): 396-429.
- Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic, 1986.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986.
- Dewey, John. *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*. Boston: Heath, 1933.
- Greene, Maxine. "The Passions of Pluralism: Multiculturalism and the Expanding Community." *Educational Researcher* 22 (1993): 13-18.
- Miller, Suzanne M. *Making the Paths: Constructing Multicultural Texts and Critical-Narrative Discourse in Literature-History Classes*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1997.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1978.
- Shor, Ira, and Paulo Freire. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1987.
- Smith, Michael W., and Dorothy Strickland. "Complements or Conflicts: Conceptions of Discussion and Multicultural Literature in a Teachers-as-Readers Discussion Group." *Journal of Literacy Research* 33 (2001): 137-67.
- Witherell, Carol. "The Self in Narrative: A Journey into Paradox." *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*. Ed. Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings. New York: Teachers College P, 1991. 83-95.

Appendix A

Overview of Integrated Curricula: Key Activities and Texts within Themes

Theme 1: The Native American and Immigrant Experiences

- Student reports on family history, written and presented orally
- Important events in history as seen through perspectives of different cultural groups
- Whole class reads and discusses Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*
- Why do we believe what we believe? Journals, small groups, large group discussions
- Watch and discuss the film *Avalon* (immigrant experience)
- Christopher Columbus trial
- Independent reading of Native American novels, autobiographies, biographies, histories
- Individual presentations on Native American books (e.g., *Lakota Woman*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, *Black Elk Speaks*, *The Life of Tecumseh*, *Education of Little Tree*)
- Watch and discuss films *Thunderheart* and *Where the Spirit Lives* (Native American experience)
- Videotape report on Geronimo
- Student-written poems from Native American perspective

Theme 2: Justice and Oppression

- Multiple source papers researched, written, presented, discussed (e.g., on people—Rosa Parks, Hurricane Carter, Jackie Robinson, Langston Hughes, Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey; topics related to specific groups—Laws and Practices of Discrimination against African Americans, Black Panthers, Negro Baseball Leagues, Mexican Americans; and on periods and events—The Harlem Renaissance, Sandcreek Massacre, Racial Riots, Wounded Knee)
- Watch and discuss videotape on Maya Angelou
- Whole class reads Ann Petrie's novel *The Street* and writes responses
- Read and respond to Martin Luther King, Jr. packet of materials; discuss as a class
- Watch and discuss the civil rights documentary *Eye on the Prize*.

Theme 3: Labor/Working

- Whole class reads and discusses Sinclair's *The Jungle*
- Write short story, rewriting an incident from *The Jungle* in the voice of one of the characters
- Read excerpt from *Labor's Untold Story* (Boyer and Morais) and respond in discussion and writing
- Watch and discuss film *Matewan*
- Read Denise Giardina's novel *Storming Heaven*
- Read choice of Steinbeck's novels *The Grapes of Wrath* or *In Dubious Battle*
- Research a strike in U.S. history; write a script for an in-depth newscast; film the drama; present it
- Make links between *Storming Heaven* and other novels, between *The Street* and *The Jungle*
- Watch and discuss the film *Out of Darkness*
- Multiple-source papers on labor researched, written, presented orally (e.g., on people—Samuel Gompers, Elizabeth G. Flynn, Sacco and Vanzetti, Helen Keller, Emma Goldman; and on events—The Railroad Strike of 1877, NFL Strike)
- Watch and discuss the film *Roger and Me*