



# Reaching Diverse Learners Through Social Justice Themes

## SUMMARY

A curricular framework that provides techniques for teachers to combine content about labor and social justice with technology for digital storytelling is giving culturally and linguistically diverse learners new opportunities to participate in personally meaningful activities that incorporate multiple literacies, and become successful critical readers and writers.

*It is* well-established that low socioeconomic status has major implications for student success. Poor and working-class students are more likely to be in schools in which restricted school literacy (Miller & Borowicz, 2007) is the preferred mode of instruction, with their limited conceptions of literacy learning, print bias, a dominant practice of chalk and talk, under rigorous testing mandates. In many classrooms, students' cultural and family "funds of knowledge" are not recognized or valued (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2004). A report by Rosen and Ortego

(1969) indicated that inexperienced teachers with unawareness of cultural biases and language acquisition are frequently responsible for attitudes that denigrate immigrant and migrant workers' rich and varied life experiences. As teacher-educators, literacy professionals and educational leaders, we are most concerned with reaching all students with relevant and socially useful skills and information. Lack of knowledge or injustice cannot be perpetuated as it impedes students from modes of learning that will empower them as they grow up.

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*Organizing the Curriculum* (OtC), (Linné, Benin & Sosin, 2009, 2006) counters the absence of labor-related classroom resources with suggestions and techniques about America's history of labor activism, particularly directed toward meeting the needs of working-class students (Finn, 1999). OtC provides an overall curricular framework that guides teachers in the selection of content resources and literacy materials about labor and social justice. One aspect of OtC concentrates on professional development opportunities to support and extend the learning of content and repertoire of literacy strategies that help students connect and succeed in reading and writing. Our current textbook-based educational system does not provide teachers and students access to themed materials that highlight workers' lives and labor's stories (Loewen,

1995; Zinn, 1999). OtC supports efforts by unionists, teachers, administrators and families to connect labor consciousness and social justice in the minds of students (Freire, 1970).

The concepts promulgated in OtC have blossomed into a grassroots organization, the Education and Labor Collaborative ([www.organizingthecurriculum.org/aboutus.aspx](http://www.organizingthecurriculum.org/aboutus.aspx)), made up of like-minded educators and unionists. Developing collaborations between educators and labor unionists offers new avenues for educational transformation in the interests of working-class families and their children, particularly those who are culturally and linguistically diverse, to participate in literacy communities so that they achieve success as readers and writers.

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## Content and Literacy

We strongly rely on the comprehension model outlined by Keene & Zimmermann's *Mosaic of Thought* (1997). Research-based best practices for literacy instruction originate and are adapted from Daniels & Bizar's *Methods that Work: Six Structures for Best Practice Classrooms* (1998) and Harvey & Goudvis' *Strategies that Work* (2000). OtC incorporates content about labor and working people's concerns with strategic literacy instructional techniques, including guided reading, shared reading, teacher read aloud, independent reading, literature circles, individualized reading, and reader's and writer's workshops.

Biographies of Cesar Chavez, picture books, children's and young adult literature and media about farm workers and immigration from Mexico are touchstone texts for a unit that integrates social justice content for literacy instruction. Biographies about Chavez, an archetypal labor leader, were selected because Chavez's life story resonates with immigrant and working-class students, who may have found themselves in similar situations and because many biographies of Chavez have been written at various levels of readability difficulty, ranging from early elementary grades through high school. Such materials have potential for engaging students across

grade levels in learning about the lives and struggles of immigrant workers both in the past and present, how they met their challenges and found solutions through organized action. See this article's appendix for a list of the recommended books.

A new social culture of electronic communication uses innovative technology tools that enable culturally and linguistically diverse learners to organize and make meaning from experiences, interpret cultural and personal impressions, and represent and share what they know in ways they find meaningful. Acknowledging students' multiple literacies (Harste, 2003; Luke & Elkins, 2000; New London Group, 1996) offers a way of moving toward a more socially just pedagogy, as it empowers students to express their ideas in alternative media.

*Digital Storytelling incorporates the use of technology and media to express personal narratives.* Digital stories usually rely upon images, audio (voice and/or music) or video that may be embellished with text. As with conventional storytelling, digital stories often reflect the creator's individual point of view. Digital stories can provide the medium for meaningful expressions of people's lives (Lambert, 2003; 2002). Readers and writers who create digital stories become aware of

alternative and multiple literacies, apply critical and higher-order thinking skills, use media for expression, organize materials, produce a coherent product and learn to take advantage of technologies they previously did not use (Figg, Ward & Guillory, 2006). In addition, digital storytelling offers an engaging way for the story maker to acquire technology competencies. Digital Storytelling can be an effective technique for engaging students in a motivating self-expressive process, and has potential for inviting reluctant readers to make personal connections (Behmer, Schmidt & Schmidt, 2006; Kajder, 2006). For models incorporating technology into literacy, explanation of the concept of multiple literacies, and particularly the instructional value of digital storytelling that provides alternative ways to express personal thoughts and ideas creatively with computers, animation, digital cameras, video recorders and software, we refer to the Center for Digital Storytelling (2007), along with BRIDGES to Understanding, (2005) Leu & Kinzer's work on literacy and technology, (2000) and our own work with Digital Storytelling (Sosin, Pepper-Sanello, Eichenholtz, Buttarro, & Edwards, 2007).

### Action Research

In an action research study (Merriam, 1998; Mills, 2003) that took place during a professional development project at a South Bronx elementary school, the university professor introduced the principal to OtC's concepts and literature selections. The principal adopted the touchstone texts, and eight teachers developed units of study for their culturally and linguistically diverse students.

During lunch and preparation periods, as well as after school, the group shared their expertise in reading and writing instructional best practices and implemented digital storytelling as means for their mostly immigrant, English language learning students to express ideas and thoughts. Using the touchstone texts, the teachers communicated about social justice concepts and collaboratively created meaningful classroom learning experiences that gave students the opportunity to use technology to express their ideas. The following statements are selected from teachers' reflections of their learning experiences as they implemented their literacy instructional classroom programs.

We have thematically arranged the teachers' remarks into categories based on implementation of grounded theory and constant comparative analysis to extract themes from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

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## METHODOLOGY

### Themes of Teacher Awareness

#### Voice/Empathy

“After I read these books, I became aware of something very powerful. I saw my students in a different light. I thought I had an idea. I realized I did not know enough.”

“As I started asking my students about their experiences, I noticed that they were not far removed from what Chavez went through. My students in the Bronx have amazing stories, sad ones, horrifying ones, but amazing nevertheless.”

#### Cultural connections

“The books have brought a level of awareness. When the family moves and they pack their boxes with their belongings, it’s something everyone can relate to. We all moved from ‘here to there’ - *de aqui hacia alla*.”

“With digital poetry, the kids got to use all their languages — Spanish, English and a few African tongues as well. These kids ‘owned’ the project.”

“The kids got to see English and Spanish. *Voices from the Fields* has poems in both languages. Now kids feel comfortable with code switching; they don’t see it as doing something wrong.”

#### Multiple literacies

“I feel more comfortable now that I can use technology in the classroom. Everybody gets involved and there is no room for boredom.”

## Conclusions

*Organizing the Curriculum* provides curricular direction to integrate literacy and language arts with content-area instruction using children’s and young adult literature and new technologies. Culturally and linguistically diverse learners have opportunities to relate to key characters in biographies and stories set in historical and present-day contexts. The content opens consideration of labor while a standards-based instructional program in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing is implemented. In this way, a focus on labor, work, social class, and immigrant experiences is connected with foundational literacy strategy instruction in a process of making learning personally meaningful.

In the action research study, the teachers’ comments and reflections quoted herein make it apparent that appropriate resources and materials, combined with literacy and technology instruction, develop and support critical awareness and social justice learning. The introduction of motivating content, new literacies, and new technologies, empower teachers to reflect upon effective literacy teaching practices for immigrant students who may not otherwise be exposed to positive school learning experiences.



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Biographies of Cesar Chavez, picture books, children's and young adult literature and media about farm workers and immigration from Mexico are touchstone texts for a unit that integrates social justice content for literacy instruction.

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## APPENDIX

### **Biographies of Cesar Chavez:**

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- Cesar Chavez: The Struggle for Justice*. Richard Griswold del Castillo. 2002. Houston: Arte Publico Press.
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- The Words of Cesar Chavez*. Richard J. Jensen & John C. Hammerback. 2002. College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press.

**Suggestions for teaching upper elementary through secondary students about migrant farm work and Mexican immigration:**

*A Day's Work.* Eve Bunting. 1994. NY. Clarion Books, Houghton Mifflin.

*Esperanza Rising.* Pam Muñoz Ryan. 2000. New York: Scholastic Press.

*First Day in Grapes.* L. King Pérez. 2002. NY: Lee & Low Press.

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*My diary from here to there.* Amanda Irma Perez. 2002. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

*The Circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child.* Francisco Jimenez. 1997. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

*Voices from the Fields: Children of Migrant Farmworkers Tell their Stories.* Interviews & photographs by S. Beth Atkin. 1993. NY. Little, Brown & Co.