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# Multiculturalism and the American Identity: A Student Oriented Approach

Robert A. Slayton

Chapman University, [slayton@chapman.edu](mailto:slayton@chapman.edu)

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## **Comments**

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# Multiculturalism and the American Identity: A Student-Oriented Approach

In the October 1994 issue of *Perspectives*, Ronald Takaki, George Fredrickson, Robert Fullinwider, and Earl Lewis all tackled the issue of how to teach multicultural American history. Each of these scholars and teachers stressed the importance of opening up the past to provide a fuller and truer view, one that captures the complexity of our heritage.

Responding, however, to complaints that such an approach can also fragment our society, several of the authors noted how their approach can lead to conclusions about our common story as well. Ronald Takaki asks, "Do our various stories, when studied together, connect the diverse memories and communities to a larger national narrative?" and then answers in the positive. In words echoed by some of the other authors, Takaki argues that the common link has been a quest to achieve a society where we are all treated as if, indeed, all individuals are created equal, and

where every American has the rights of life and liberty.

While I agree with this conclusion, let me submit that there is a better way to teach this concept of diversity and national identity, one that involves letting students reach their own conclusions.

Every semester I teach the second half of the U.S. history survey. About a third of the way through the course, we read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. While the book has a number of shortcomings, it remains a compelling tale of industrialization and immigration, of the problems facing American society at the turn of the century.

After a lengthy discussion, I ask the class to think about the wedding scene at the beginning of the book. This is an incredibly detailed story, and we learn everything that there is to know about a Lithuanian wedding in Chicago: what kinds of food the people ate, what instruments they played, what dances they enjoyed—even what clothes they wore.

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This last example is the excuse to read from the novel:

Of these older people many wear clothing reminiscent of home—an embroidered waistcoat or stomacher, or a gaily-coloured handkerchief, or a coat with large cuffs and fancy buttons. All these things are carefully avoided by the young, most of whom have learned to speak English and to affect the latest style of clothing [the old folks look like a polka band, I tell my class, while the youngsters wear Reeboks and Armani suits]. The girls wear ready-made dresses or shirt-waists, and some of them look quite pretty. Some of the young men you would take to be Americans, of the type of clerks, but for the fact that they wear their hats in the room.

And then it begins. Quietly, I ask them if Sinclair was right: were these people Americans? This catches the class off-guard. Someone usually argues that they were Americans by the end—but not at the start—of the book, and asks which aspect of the work we are discussing. Taking Sinclair at his word, I submit that they must analyze Jurgis, Ona, and the other characters at the time of the quote, right at the start.

The discussion is always lively, and sometimes quite contentious. When I first started doing this in 1988, the majority of students in the class usually reached the conclusion that the Lithuanian immigrants were not, in fact, Americans at that point in the novel. For the last four years, however, the more typical response is to have a roughly 50-50 split, half saying that they were, half saying that they were not Americans.

I then instruct everyone to grab a pencil and pad and to stand. All those who felt that the characters were Americans are sent to one side of the room with an assignment: create a list of reasons why they are indeed Americans. What factors, what attributes demonstrate, indicate, or prove this? The other group is then sent to the opposite corner, with a similar task: create a list of what knowledge, what characteristics these immi-

grants would have to acquire in order to become Americans. After a reasonable time we get together again, and both lists are presented in public for discussion. I also write the lists on the board, and all of us, including me, have to record them in our notes.

The lists present an amazing gamut of viewpoints. Those who think that these immigrants were Americans explain that they believed in the opportunities of America, and in America's freedoms. The characters in the book, it is pointed out by these students, were, in fact, beginning to define America for themselves. In a line that has now been appearing with some regularity, many of these students argue that Jurgis's family were Americans simply because diversity itself is inherently American; as one class put it, they were Americans *because* they were immigrants.

Students who feel that these characters were not Americans usually argue that a key factor is language; people have to speak English to become part of this country. These students also state that Americans need to know something about our history and government, and should vote (on one occasion the group softened this, noting that most of them knew relatively little about these subjects, and rarely voted). In the spring of 1992, some students made the argument that immigrants needed the benefit of time, that they had to spend a certain period in this country. The nature of their activities was almost irrelevant; duration was a key factor. That same semester this group suggested that immigrants had to switch from a rural to an industrial outlook to join our ranks. One student claimed that clothing, having a sense of American style, was essential, and went so far as to argue that anyone who wears, for example, a sari, cannot be an American. Food was also a relevant criteria.

As a general note, I never interfere in the discussion, other than as moderator or facilitator; the lists must be theirs, based on their own values and beliefs. Sometimes this is hard for me, but I have almost always maintained my calm.

After finishing with the lists we put them away, and go on to other matters as the term continues. Much later in the semester we read another work of literature, Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. The book is beautifully written, compelling reading, and gives a powerful depiction first of life in the South and then of the turmoil of the civil rights movement.

Before much time has elapsed in the class, however, I make an announcement. Due to the press of other business—meetings, or some other typical faculty rationale—I have to end the class early. Thus, I have only one more question. Simply put, is Anne Moody an American?

The response includes anger, disbelief, frustration. One student usually points out that she is a citizen, and I reply that is a legal definition, whereas we are functioning here as social and cultural historians. In that realm, is she an American?

After considerable discussion, involving heat and insight and a lot of thrashing around, I intervene. It is time, I explain, to teach them something about methodology. Asking permission, I then pick up a student's backpack, cradle it in my arms, and start to stroke it, announcing that I have brought my cat to school. They look at me as if I am daft.

Finally, I ask if the item in my arm is, in fact, a cat (a student once replied, "If you think so!"). Obviously it is not, but how do they know? Of course, they cry out, it does not have any of the features of a cat—no whiskers, no feet, eyes, or hair. It does not even purr.

I then explain what is happening. To analyze a problem like the one we face in the Anne Moody discussion, we need to find or create an ideal set of characteristics, and then compare our subject to check on the fit. To decide if Anne Moody is an American, we need a list of what it means to be an American. Sheepishly, they tell me they have one at hand. I compliment them on their brilliance, and the lists go back up on the board.

The class then proceeds to discuss each item, how and whether it applies to Anne Moody, and its larger significance. Once again, the students decide what it means to be an American, rather than having a viewpoint, no matter how learned, handed to them in a lecture. Superficial issues fall away, like the peels of an onion, and students have to confront what is at the core of America, as well as the complexities of a diverse population. I conclude the class by stating that while they can hold any opinion they want, they really must face up to this debate—these are the original and still potent questions of our society; as a result, this remains the most important controversy we can raise in a class on American history.

Robert Slayton  
Chapman University

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