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Responding to Diversity with More Than Simple Lip-Service

Author of Honoring Identities: Creating Culturally Responsive Learning Communities (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), Donna L. Miller, Ph.D., is an adjunct instructor, educational consultant, co-director of Writing Projects Under the Big Sky, and manager of www.thinkingzone.org. She has taught in the secondary and post-secondary school systems for 38 years.

Teachers who value and nurture social justice often invite their students to engage with ideas that honor diversity with more than simple lip-service. Sometimes they teach to transgress in an effort to ensure that their students don't turn a deaf ear to cries for justice. Sometimes they even use controversial pieces like "White Hollywood" by Joe Limer, a slam poem that discusses anti-Asian racism (Kiley, 2021). Although transgressive educators have an obligation to know their contexts and to proceed with the necessary steps to inform stakeholders—giving them an opportunity to choose an alternate text in the event that a particular text encroaches upon their own comfort zone—using contentious topics like those in Limer's poem can act as catalysts for sparking conversations on complex social issues. Such topics not only raise social consciousness but also support collaborative conversation.

In his poem, Limer calls Hollywood to task for its casting practices that have contributed to misrepresenting racial groups and basically making Asians invisible (2020). He addresses racism, sexism, and other important social issues. These ideas are considered by some to be controversial—even taboo. Others consider them essential areas for exploration and question, and those who adopt texts and hold discussion around such issues should not have to worry about

jeopardizing their careers or compromising their convictions. Miller's book *Honoring Identities: Creating Culturally Responsive Learning Communities* (2021) shares several protocols for tackling tough topics, as well as a rationale for inviting critical thinking about controversial social subjects into the classroom. The book also includes a list of bold texts.

Miller shares her GREEN APPLE acronym and outlines strategies for using it as one way to guide students in confronting significant but occasionally complicated topics. Using the identity markers indicated by each letter in the acronym and framing questions or interrogating behaviors from that angle puts important issues in the spotlight. These identity markers are:

- Gender Expression/ Sexual Orientation;
- Religion/Spiritual Beliefs;
- Economic Class/Socioeconomic Status;
- Ethnicity and Race;
- Name/Family;
- Age;
- Place (geography, national territory);
- Perception of Belonging;
- Language/Discourse/Community/Dialect; and
- Exceptionality—from gifted to challenged.

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Like critical lenses, each letter in the acronym provides a kind of analytical tool that helps readers to “see” differently, illuminating an identity element for closer scrutiny. When we read a text with this kind of “lighting” and follow with questions (See Figure 1), we suddenly see what before was invisible. Although these questions are subject to change—taking on greater specificity—as the acronym is applied to a specific text, reading with these aspects in mind focuses one’s thinking and might stimulate questions that enable us to see more clearly and completely because they multiply our perspectives.

Applying GREEN APPLE scrutiny to Limer’s poem might bring into focus details like those identified in Figure 2. Once gathered, the questioning process can unfold as students determine what these elements mean and why they matter. This meaning-making process will likely lead to deeper discoveries, about the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, for example, and its connection to the history of racism in the United States. Uncovering the purpose of other allusions and decoding the diction adds further enlightenment as we ask questions like: How might the label “model minority” function in society when we peel back the layers of meaning and the implications of such a term?

Because the topics of culture and identity can be both layered and confusing, GREEN APPLE shares ONE way of approaching this complexity. Educators are in a unique position to bring this topic to learners at a time when society gravely needs interventions that promote social justice. Although the GREEN APPLE approach may at first seem oversimplified, the author’s intention is to make a convoluted topic more approachable so that we talk about cultural differences more frequently and recognize that the influence of these traits is not fixed or permanent. As students grapple with identity, to deny or exclude any of the GREEN APPLE factors, in effect, erases the unique experiences which shape who we are. When we see culture as a fluid, negotiable, and dynamic

quality and when we nurture and honor identity, we facilitate social justice.

Although Miller’s research doesn’t explicitly embrace critical race theory (CRT), the questions generated by GREEN APPLE sharpen our cultural lenses so that we are better able to perceive how others might experience the world. In the broadest sense, CRT provides language and concepts with which to analyze and discuss precisely the issues raised by Limer’s poem. Such a poem will likely lead to discussions about white supremacy and to scrutiny of Hollywood’s treatment and portrayal of Asian American characters. Yes, Limer’s language is brutally candid—sometimes even sexually graphic—as Limer’s anger surfaces. But it is precisely the kind of text that helps us to examine one form of racism in the United States. It invites conversation about the ways in which the movie industry has contributed to our “understanding” of certain topics and how Hollywood shapes perception.

According to Farag (2021), “CRT seeks to help people learn about and validate experiences of those who’ve been marginalized and whose perspectives have been ignored by policy makers, judges, educators, and others who hold positions of power in our society” (n.p.). Its intention is not to label any racial or ethnic group as evil nor to assign blame to any one group. Instead, CRT enables students of all races and ethnicities to have informed, productive conversations about the forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, the society in which they live.

Using contentious topics like Limer’s poem as catalysts for sparking conversations on complex social issues, we raise social consciousness and support collaborative conversation. Miller’s “Chapter Four: Nurturing Social Justice” not only encourages the use of contentious topics as a method for teaching civil discourse and making a difference in the world but offers strategies for hosting those conversations. She claims that “students who experience opportunities to openly discuss what’s awry about the society in which they

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live, to read a text as social protest literature, or to develop a body of knowledge about contemporary social conditions and to critically examine the culture that created those conditions develop civic awareness, critical thinking skills, and argument literacy” (p. 58).

In this skill development work, GREEN APPLE questions provide a training grounds for civil discourse because they enable students to hear diversity of thought and to recognize that their reality, their understanding, their experience is not the only one. They learn to interrogate their biases, to consider alternatives, and to make room for new learning as they struggle against long held assumptions, often planted by misinformed media messages or by parochialism.

With this shared awareness, we are more inclined to empathize than to judge or to hate. We are more inclined to wonder, what would I do if this were happening to me? Questioning opens the door to communication and potentially brings on new forms of knowledge. It is the heart of learning.

Using the GREEN APPLE acronym engages readers in spirited inquiry. A GREEN APPLE discussion not only challenges dominant modes of knowing but facilitates social justice. Reading print and nonprint texts with a GREEN APPLE guide has potential for building the bridges needed for

cultural border crossing while encouraging readers to imagine another way to see.

With these analysis, argument, and public conversation skills, we give students access to forms of intellectual capital that have power in both the corporate and the academic worlds. These skills also provide access for those wishing to enter political and social conversations as they vie for resources or rally to promote positive change. A thinking, democratic populace should possess the skills necessary for interrogating social and political practices and policies.

One of the primary purposes of an education is to nurture curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking. In doing that, educators may start by asking questions about difficult topics. Leading conversations with a GREEN APPLE guide might ensure that the lip-service we perform comes closer to answering questions like that which earned one teacher administrative leave: “How do others experience the world differently than I do?” (Kiley, n.p.). By wrestling with contentious topics, hopefully we won’t be guilty of the impediment for which Limer criticizes Hollywood: “You can’t hear us unless it’s in stereo . . . type” (2019).

Figure 1. GREEN APPLE Questions

Gender Expression/
Sexual Orientation:

What gender boundaries, if any, limit, define, or dictate behavior or create conflict in this text? What, if any, gender role expectations does the reader of this text encounter? If gender is a social construct, what other gender definitions exist in the text? Thinking of gender as falling on a spectrum, what feminine, masculine, or gender fluid behaviors define the characters involved in this situation or text?

Religion:

Reflect on what you know, have heard, or experienced about church and religion. Explain how your experiences and understandings might compare, contrast, or align with the beliefs exhibited by characters in this text. Beyond organized religions, look for any rituals, ceremonies, and/or beliefs which have potential to affect or influence mind, body, and spirit.

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Ethnicity and Race:	Consider how ethnicity shapes one’s worldview. What ethnic markers occur in the text—like a reference to ancestry (German, Sioux, etc.)? What purpose do they serve? How do the characters live out the social practices and customs of their ethnic groups? What descriptive details does the author use to indicate the racial identities of the characters? Consider what these details mean and how they do/don’t matter. What privileges or challenges, if any, do the characters experience because of their race?
Economic Class/ Socioeconomic Status	What details in the text or in the context of this situation: give clues about their socioeconomic class to which each character belongs? What conditions account for the class differences in the lives lived by the characters? How might these features privilege or disadvantage the characters? To what degree, if any, do characters exhibit a sense of entitlement? How do these identities compare or contrast with your own socioeconomic status?
Name/Family:	Often imparting status or clout, names can send signals about who we are and where we come from. Do any of the characters have names that allow people to make quick judgments and assumptions about them? Consider whether character or family names carry expectations, reputations, or unearned privileges. What are the characters’ reactions to any nicknames?
Age:	How does age help to define and shape the behavior that manifests in any of the text’s characters? What limitations, if any, are imposed by age?
Place:	How do place and location contribute to and shape character behavior? What limitations, conflicts, restrictions, and/or conveniences result because of place? How has place shaped their identities? How do the characters react to society’s expectations for integration?
Perception of Belonging:	<p>How do characters perceive of themselves? How do they want others to perceive of them? How are they presenting themselves? What efforts, if any, do characters make to fit in, to find their niche? What difference makes the characters feel the most different? Consider the degree to which the characters find personal acceptance or feel accepted by others.</p> <p>Some people define themselves as athletes, social justice warriors, theater kids, or Victorian novel readers; how do the characters define themselves in the text you are reading? How do you define yourself? On what do you hang your identity? What identity, if any, do others thrust on you that you resist?</p>
Language:	Because we each belong to a unique discourse community with its own vernacular, what do you notice in the languages that are spoken by the characters? Look for any culturally relevant idioms. Consider the discourse community to which you belong; what vernacular/language is common to you?
Exceptionality:	Ability falls on a spectrum—from gifted to challenged. What exceptionalities do you observe in the characters? In what ways do these traits impose limitations or enable access? How do labels like <i>normal</i> function in society?

Figure 2. Applying GREEN APPLE to Limer's Poem

Identity Markers	Example Words and Phrases from Joe Limer's "White Hollywood"
Gender Expression/ Sexual Orientation	asexual, male, girl, love interest sex slaves, colonized erection
Religion	Shaolin monastery, savior, samurai, Manifest Destiny
Ethnicity and Race	Asian American, White Hollywood, white people, ninjas, anime
Economic Class / Socioeconomic Status	knapsack of rice, suburbs, nursing degree, Hollywood
Name/Family	Donald Trump, Scarlett Johansson, Matt Damon, Bruce Lee
Age	young
Place	Shaolin monastery, Hollywood, war zone called the suburbs
Perception of Belonging	pushing me out of harm's way, burden, invisible, kicked aside, society's sidekick, model minority, unheard, unseen, putting me in my place, heathen, rebooted, supporting role, stereotyped
Language	subtitles, English/Engrish, "It's funny, how pushing me out of harm's way feels like putting me in my place"
Exceptionality	model minority, solved all your math homework, dance crew, burden, dangerous mind, problem-solving skills

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