

# “Cinderella with a Twist”: Building Academic Literacy and Social Consciousness

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Celeste, “I never thought I would like Cinderella. I did not like Cinderella before. But now I like the story very much. It is my favorite story now.” These are the words of an English learner (EL) who loves reading but prefers to read young adult novels about adventure and dystopia in Spanish. Fairy tales, creation tales and myths are a component of the program of study in Virginia’s secondary English curriculum, but the literature in these genres are generally unknown to most ELs. As Celeste, and her EL classmates, progress to academic English course work and graduation they will need to become familiar with, and think critically about, such literature. It was with this progression in mind that the “Cinderella with a Twist” project was planned and implemented.

Many ELs that arrive in the U.S. struggle to meet proficiency in English. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in the 2014-2015 school year approximately 24.6% of ELs met proficiency in English assessments (EDFacts, 2017). English learners possess varied skills in literacy in their first language and in English, but are expected to demonstrate the same mastery of English as their monolingual English peers. The stakes are high, and the challenges are many. Teachers of ELs must help them find entry points into academic content that are personalized and accessible. Krashen (1983) describes comprehensible input and affective filter as critical variables in the language acquisition of ELs.

Researchers exploring best practices for supporting ELs have described a variety of strategies to accomplish this outcome. Many have proposed using poetry and multimodal instructional strategies with positive results. This research provided direction for the “Cinderella with a Twist” project.

## Literature Review

Vogel and Tilley (1994) described a layered approach to literacy skill development through poetry instruction. The strategies included reading a variety of forms of poetry and making connections to music and TV characters known to the students. The students’ teacher added depth through sharing her own writing, then students were asked to do the same. The next layers were built through communal

storytelling, discussion and sustained sharing of student work to establish a constructive environment for writing to support reading comprehension. Rubenstein-Avila (2004) described work with a young adolescent male who struggled with acquiring literacy skills. As in Vogel and Tilley (1994), it was found that writing and sharing work with others helped the student learn new vocabulary and develop greater comprehension of what he read.

Myers (1997) promoted the perspective that in order to make learning relevant to adolescents, teachers should connect content to poetry. Myers posited that students should participate fully in reading, writing, listening, and speaking poetry, with extensions to music and art, to help them develop important academic literacy skills. Myers reiterated the need to teach poetic literary terms and their application in different forms of poetry as a part of this instruction.

Pellegrino, Zenkov, and Calamito (2013) examined the use of multimodal texts and media to enable adolescent students to understand and critically analyze the abstract concept of citizenship. Students expressed their understanding through illustrated “slam” poetry. The researchers posited that students achieve more in-depth understanding of content when multimodal and image-based materials are used for instruction. Johnson and Kendrick (2016) also explored the impact of the use of multimodal modes of communication to help ELs engage in academic activities. They acknowledged that because so many ELs have experienced interrupted education in their first language they have underdeveloped literacy skills, which makes it difficult to help them build literacy skills in English. They demonstrated that the use of visual material and music enabled the students to share their perspectives and experiences.

Wissman (2007) and Wiseman (2011), explored the importance of encouraging critical thinking and analysis of social issues through literature. Wissman (2007) engaged a group of 14-16 year old young women in constructing and sharing poetry that reflected their experiences and thoughts about social justice and self-definition. She noted that it is critical that teachers acknowledge the thinking capacities of young women and provide opportunities for them to express themselves through writing and the arts. Similarly, Wiseman (2011) described how teaching students to write poetry could support their development of critical social thought as well as reading and writing skills. Poetry provided efficient opportunities to engage with literature so that students could use a minimal number of words to express big ideas. Wiseman (2011) described how poetry helped students make connections between academic content and their personal experiences and creative expressions.

### **The Project**

The “Cinderella with a Twist” project reflects the research findings that poetry instruction using multimodal resources to encourage reading, writing and critical discussion is an effective strategy for engaging ELs in academic content and social

consciousness. The use of fairy tale literature, with simple but profound themes of kindness, justice, gender roles and hope that can be found in most cultures, provided an accessible point of entry for the ELs.

The student group included adolescent ELs from Central America, Brazil, Mexico, Iran, and Pakistan. All students had ACCESS scores (ACCESS for ELLS 2.0, 2017) of 1.5 to 2.0. Students were enrolled in English literacy class in a suburb of Northern Virginia. Students were surveyed to determine their familiarity with fairy tales. They had little to no knowledge of traditional fairy tales in general, and none of Cinderella, or other culturally based Cinderella tales from their home countries. This indicated a need as the cultures these students represented have rich folklore. Of the 23 students participating in the project, one admitted that she liked haiku poetry, although her understanding of it as a poetic form was only that it was short, and about nature. Three others had limited experience with Shel Silverstein's poetry from study in the previous year. All students involved in the project needed to develop their writing skills as documented by their ACCESS scores, and they all vocally expressed a dislike of writing because it was difficult for them. A blank sheet of paper was a daunting challenge to them. It was difficult for them to acknowledge that they had good ideas that could be reflected in writing.

### **Project Goals**

There were several goals in the project. Each goal guided instruction to scaffold skill development in reading, writing, listening and speaking around academic skills and social consciousness. The opportunities to apply technology to their work extended their comprehension skills through multimodal avenues. The project took six weeks to complete, as the accomplishment of each skill and knowledge goal provided a base for the next.

### ***Social Consciousness***

The class had just completed study of Black History and Women's Rights Month. Students' social consciousness had been raised regarding equality, fairness, kindness and overcoming racial and gender barriers. For example, connections were made between the study of the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman's experience as a slave, conductor and fearless woman. Students also read about women other time periods who broke racial and gender barriers and contributed to the lives of people, in general. Important figures included Elizabeth Blackwell, Helen Keller, Marie Curie, Wilma Rudolph, and Mare (2012), a Mexican woman rapper and Queen Noor of Jordan (2011). These portraits of strong women provided a basis for the later work on the retelling of Cinderella with a "twist."

Student discussion about breaking barriers focused on what it means to be courageous in the face of external limitations, and the importance of equality in relationships. For example, student reaction to viewing Mare, as she rapped in Spanish about women's responsibility to themselves, was particularly impactful at

this point in the project. The Spanish-speaking students translated the rap for the non-Spanish speaking students in English. It was a clear demonstration of their understanding of the meaning of the words Mare (2012) rapped.

### ***Analysis of Literature***

Students enrolled in the literacy class are expected to read and analyze material they read. As emerging ELs, lengthy literary material is exhausting to read, comprehend and analyze. Even children's literature, such as short Cinderella stories, contains difficult vocabulary. However, the story line is not complex. It can give ELs a sense of confidence that they can read and understand literature written in English and a basis for discussion about kindness, justice, gender roles and hope. A second goal was to build student reading comprehension skills. Students participating in the project listened to a reading of the traditional version of *Cinderella* (Craft, 2000), using a document camera so they could see the words and the illustrations. Students explored the words used to create imagery in the story, and recorded these words (sadness, gray, brilliant) for future use. At this point, it was explained that students would be retelling the Cinderella story, but with a twist. It was explained that "The Twist" would change how the story ended. Students also learned, at this time, that the retelling would be shared with the Head Start children in the school. Not only would their words be read aloud, but there would be a ballet performance to accompany their writing. This intrigued the Els as it gave value and importance to their work.

Students were then introduced to the different versions of the Cinderella story from other cultures. Their options included *Yeh Shen* (Louie, 1982), *The Egyptian Cinderella* (Climo, 1989), *The Korean Cinderella* (Climo, 1993), *Cendrillon* (San Souci, 1998), *The Rough Faced Girl* (Martin, 1992), *Little Gold Star* (San Souci, 2000), and *Adelita* (dePaola, 2002). They rank ordered which version they wanted to read and students were then paired to carefully read their preferred story. They read the story and identified and defined words unknown to them, so their comprehension would be enhanced. They used a graphic organizer to note events in the beginning, the middle and the end of the story.

### ***Poetry Terms***

A third goal was to begin to prepare students for the poetry vocabulary they would need to know and use in future academic English classes. The participating students were introduced to important poetry terms, such as alliteration, rhyming, onomatopoeia, assonance, personification, imagery, metaphor and simile. A pretest indicated that these were terms with which the students were unfamiliar. As a class, they listened to poems by Robert Frost, Alfred Noyes, color poetry found in *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* (O'Neill, 1961), Shel Silverstein (1981), and the lyrics to the title song from the musical "Hair" (Cowsills, 1969). Students worked to analyze the poetry and lyrics using these poetry devices. Students were given a packet of templates of different forms of poetry to include "I AM," Bio, acrostic,

haiku, lantern and cinquain. They were asked to apply various poetic devices to write in these different forms of poetry. This application allowed students to experience writing poetry in different forms while using the poetic devices and learning the literary terms for these devices in English.

The writing of poetry in the poetry packets was a parallel activity to the retelling of the multicultural Cinderella in poetic form. Once they had completed the first type of poem, an acrostic poem, on a topic of their choice, the paired students began to write an acrostic poem retelling their multicultural Cinderella story, using key words from their graphic organizer and their imagery word lists to guide them.

Once students completed their multicultural Cinderella acrostic poems they illustrated the poem to further demonstrate their understanding of the story. The students' multicultural Cinderella acrostic poems were published in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual ELL Poetry Anthology. Students' were very excited to share their work with their peers. They also were excited to take home a copy of the Anthology to share with their families. The public recognition was an important boost to their self-confidence as writers of English. I share an excerpt in Figure 1 below.

*Figure 1*

*Excerpt from: Cedrillon* by Bryan and Katia

*Indescribably in the most beautiful green island,  
Sanctuary of a wonderful young lady,  
Largely covered by trees and rivers,  
Automatically the flowers rise with the shiny sun,  
Normally a lot of commotion at the fresh river,  
Diversity of birds stop to sing with gorgeous Cedrillon.*

***Multimodal Learning***

The use of Green Screen technology was a means to further demonstrate comprehension of the Cinderella story in an authentic, multimodal way. Students worked with school librarians to learn how to create a WeVideo. This activity involved identifying and saving visuals that represented their particular Cinderella story version in a folder in the Cloud. They then were videotaped with their partner while reading their multicultural Cinderella acrostic poem, which also was then put into the Cloud so they could combine visuals, music (using Audacity) and their videotape to make their personal movie. This multimodal approach added another skill layer, connecting reading, speaking, listening, writing and technology skills

(Pellegrino, Zenkov & Calamito, 2013). Later, as a part of an “end of the year” reflection, students had the opportunity to view each group’s video.

Another goal was to guide students in exploring how to re-envision traditional, dependent roles of women into roles of strength and independence. Once students’ individual movies were completed, they listened again to the traditional version of Cinderella. The students in the class reflected on how their multicultural version compared to the traditional version through class discussion. Next the class listened to a reading of the *Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980). The class discussion continued in order to make comparisons between the traditional Cinderella character and her dependence on the Prince, and the Paper Bag Princess and her independence from Ronald the Prince. For example, Prince Ronald did not want to associate with the Paper Bag Princess because she no longer “looked like a princess.”

As a whole group, the students began to write an acrostic poem about Cinderella with a Twist. Students were reminded that “The Twist” meant that the story would end somewhat differently for Cinderella. This part of the project involved revisiting information about the women that had been studied during Women’s History Month, and how they broke stereotypes and barriers. The story of Queen Noor (2011) and her role as Queen and humanitarian gave students a direct connection to the task of making Cinderella an independent working queen that helped her kingdom beside the Prince. This was an authentic example of “The Twist.”

The students followed the same process of outlining the events of the beginning and middle of the traditional story. Students referred to their poetic devices and imagery notes to make suggestions as they dictated the retelling on the Promethean Board. The students also had their multicultural Cinderella acrostic poems to refer to for ideas. Each class for three class periods, students drafted the retelling, and revised their work the next day. This collaborative writing encouraged students to brainstorm ideas and participate in discussions as to word choice and events that should be highlighted. Word choice, putting ideas into words, and descriptive and figurative language are examples of critical writing skills that can be very challenging for ELs; but in this case, students had the support of each other to share and discuss how these skills are applied. The “Cinderella with a Twist” poem from students in the ELL Literacy 2 is shared in Figure 2 below.

### **A Powerful Culmination**

Students also created original drawings to accompany their class traditional “Cinderella with a Twist” acrostic poem. Students volunteered to illustrate different settings, artifacts or events in the story. Then, through a partnership with a program “The Adventures of a Rogue Swan” and media specialist/ballet dancer and director, Ms. Matina Banks, (2017) the students’ illustrations and poem were digitized. Students were then treated to a performance by Ms. Banks with their

illustrations and narrated poem with a twist presented on stage in the background. None of the students had ever seen ballet danced before, and the thrill of seeing their work presented as a performing art supported the multimodal connection to literature and social consciousness. After the performance, students were asked to reflect on the project. All the students were very proud. Their comments reflect the value of the project:

*“This project helped me to be more creative, to open my brain.”*

*“I feel very proud of what I have done in school this year.”*

*“I love the rhythm of the poems. I feel happy and peaceful when I read the poems.”*

*“Spending time doing this project made us more of a unit as a group and friends. We have more trust between each other. It was good to let your weakness go and to trust yourself.”*

*“The woman dancing was beautiful. I like this dance.”*

It was exciting to see the pride reflected in the students’ faces as they watch the performance and realized the value of what they had created. It was especially moving to see how the Head Start children responded to them as authors. It can only be hoped that this experience will remain as a positive memory and will encourage their continued confidence in their lives.

*Figure 2*

Excerpts from: *Cinderella with a Twist* by ELL Literacy 2 Class

*Stopping to rest after her stepsisters sleep*

*Tears of deep sadness and loneliness*

*Everyday imagining changes in her life*

*Putting her mean and ugly stepsisters before herself*

*Sharing a small space with mice, spiders, the cat and cinders*

*Impossible to feel loved, be happy and free*

*Sometimes she dreams of gardens of violets, roses, sunflowers and tasting of honey*

*Trying to survive her harsh life*

*Everything is dirty, grey and dark*

*Reaching for her dreams*

*Someday she hopes to find her dreams.*

*Life of the kingdom depends on her*

*Energy and emotions are low without her*

*After the wedding, the prince promised to love her forever and give her freedom*

*Divergent ideas about leading the kingdom*

*Expressing dedication to her future*

*Respecting each other to live happily ever after.*

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