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Empowering Young Writers as Authors and Illustrators through a Study of India

Michelle Hassay Doyle

Cross-cultural studies, such as ours on India that Margaret described in “[Crossing Cultural Borders: Our Study of Indian Culture](#)” provide opportunities for students to learn about cultures very different than their own. By immersing ourselves in Indian culture over time through stories and books, the students moved beyond knowing the external surface characteristics of culture, such as food, folklore, festivals, famous people, and fashion, to beginning to understand beliefs, values, perspectives, and the diversity that exists within Indian culture (Short, 2007). They began to understand that, “their cultural perspectives were only one of many ways to view and live in the world” (Short & Thomas, 2011, p. 156).

For an overview of our literacy community and school community, please see the first vignette in this issue, “[Learning about Ourselves and Others through Global Literature](#).” In this vignette, I share some of the happenings in my classroom related to the study of India, with a primary focus on the process of the students writing and illustrating their own books on India. While Margaret, Laura, Jenna, and I tweaked this in particular ways in our own classrooms, we all followed the same general process.

Learning about India

For four weeks my students and I lived and breathed India through reading and discussing numerous fiction and nonfiction books and writing about our learning. For each of the four text sets (a different one each week), our usual routine involved me reading books aloud and/or the students reading and discussing books with their reading buddies. I spread the books out on the carpet and each set of buddies selected a book to read together while I circulated the room to answer questions. When the buddies finished their book, they would add a few notes to the section of their graffiti paper designated for that text set. After a time (or the following day), pairs would trade to get a different book. During a sharing time, students would tell about interesting things they’d learned in their books or raise questions for discussion. At the end of each week, to reflect on their reading and learning, I asked them to draw and write about something significant they’d discovered in their sketchbooks.

It was an exciting few weeks! One of my goals for this study was that my students develop an understanding of and appreciation for the rich diversity in Indian culture and as the weeks progressed, I saw that happen. I knew the students had that appreciation for the diversity in our classroom. From plotting our heritages on the world map, they knew, for example, that Joseph was from Trinidad, Adam and Evan from China, Sharon from Zambia, and Anthony from Germany and Italy. We’d said good-bye to Hassan in February when he went back to his homeland of Egypt for a month and then returned and shared his experiences there. Azka joined our class partway through the year. She came from Pakistan and talked and shared about India too. Just as our classroom was diverse, we continually talked about the diversity in India and how, depending on what part of the

country you visited, you'd meet different people and have different experiences.

Reflecting on Our Learning

The text sets provided the students with lots of information that filled their curious minds about India. Since our study had spanned four weeks, before the students started writing I wanted to review the four text sets so the students didn't focus only on the last week of study. For this review, I hung four large papers across the board and titled them after the text sets: Cities and Villages; People and Families; Land, Resources, and Animals; and, Culture and Traditions. Students first talked with their partners about what they remembered and then took turns sharing with the class what they learned. As students shared, we talked about which chart to put the information on, which itself added to the discussion. For example, when Emely suggested "women wear saris," there was discussion about whether that information belonged with "People and Families," since this was common attire for people in India, or "Culture and Traditions," since this is part of the culture of India. Finally, the children decided that we should write it on both charts since it could fit either place. The chart discussions helped the students think about the range of information they'd learned across the different texts and critically consider how/why to categorize it in a particular way. As examples, the Culture and Traditions and People and Families charts are shown below.

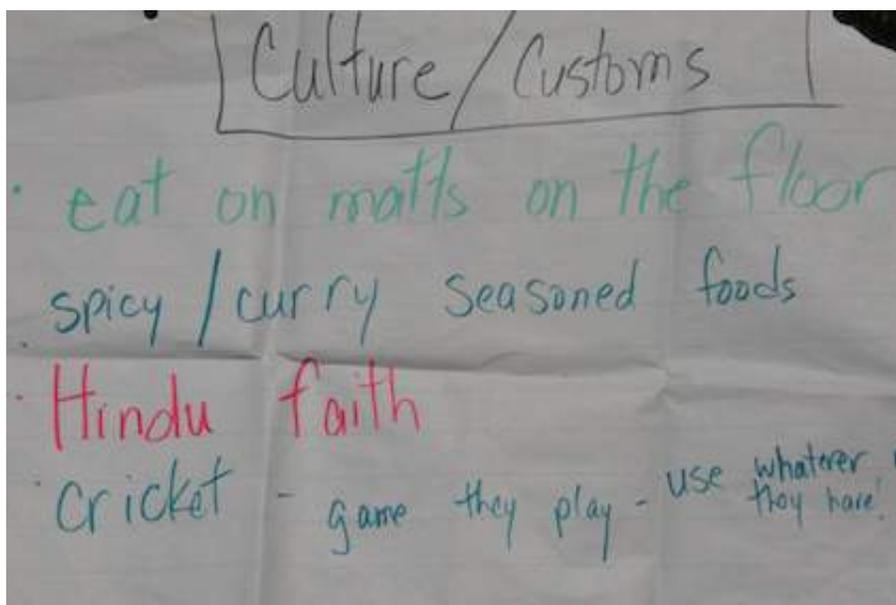


Figure 1. Culture and Traditions Chart

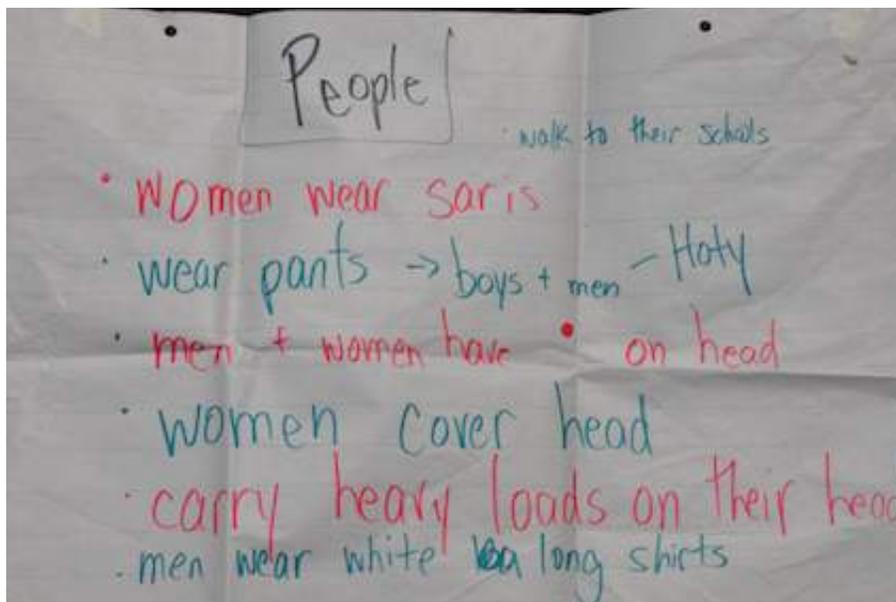


Figure 2. People and Families Chart

After this sharing of what they remembered, I had the students pull out their graffiti notes, which were divided into the same topics as the charts, to see if they found any information we'd missed and could add to our class charts. We filled the charts to the brim with overflowing information. We were ready to start writing.

Writing Our Books

To help the students think about the organization of their books, I decided to reread two books to them visualize possibilities. The first one I read was [Same, Same but Different](#) (Kostecki-Shaw, 2011). This book shares the story of two pen pals, one who lives in America and the other in India, who send letters and pictures to each other about where they live, what they do, their families, etc. While the book is full of good information, the American boy lives in the city and the Indian boy in the country which can set up stereotypes of both countries. We talked about this and how both India and America have many different regions and what people see, do, and experience depends on where they go. Writing their own "Same but Different" book while remembering the diversity in the countries was one possibility the students had. To help display the information side-by-side in a book like this, I showed them how the book could open, with India on one side and America on the other and the pages for each country turning out, similar to the book [Mirror](#) (Baker, 2010).

The other book I reread was [Geeta's Day](#) (Das, 2010), which takes readers through the day of six-year-old Geeta from the time she wakes up to the time she goes to bed. I suggested that the students might want to write a book about the different things they would see if they went to India. One possible title was "If I go to India I will see..." When I made that suggestion, though, Ethan rejected it, pointing out that "will" means you *will* see something and maybe you won't. He said, for

example, “Even if you go to India you might not see an elephant.” His classmates agreed and revised possible titles to: “If I go to India I hope to see...”, “In India I might see...”, and “In India...” Of course, these were just suggestions to help the students get started with writing pages for their books. In the end they needed to decide what would work for their own individual books.

With those two possible organizational formats, the students needed to decide which interested them the most for sharing what they’d learned. I gave each student a large folded piece of construction paper to hold their draft pages and they began to write. When they finished a page, they came to me and we had a conference. I was careful to just help students with their capitalization and punctuation and suggest where they might add details to their writing. I wanted the books to be their own words, thoughts and learning. I acted as the editor, proofreading each draft page. The students rewrote their final book pages. These pages had an area on the top half for art and lines on the bottom half for writing. For students who wrote a lot, the lines continued on the back of the page.

When the students finished writing their pages and the books were bound, work on the illustrations began. Before they started, we reviewed different art concepts like color, use of lines and how to show motion, so they could make more informed decisions while they were creating their illustrations.

My class invited our fourth grade buddy class to visit so my students could read their books to their buddies. The fourth graders helped my students think of good titles for their books. Luke decided to use the title “Exquisite India” that his buddy Henry suggested after reading Luke’s book. The fourth graders enjoyed reading the books and the first grade authors/ illustrators were very proud to show off their work.

The books were amazing! The students were excited and motivated to create their books and share what they had learned. The last days of school were a bustle of activity, with everyone working hard right up to the last day. In these two video clips Hannah and Emely read their books. Hannah’s book provides fact about what she hopes to see in India, while Emely’s book compares similarities between India and America.

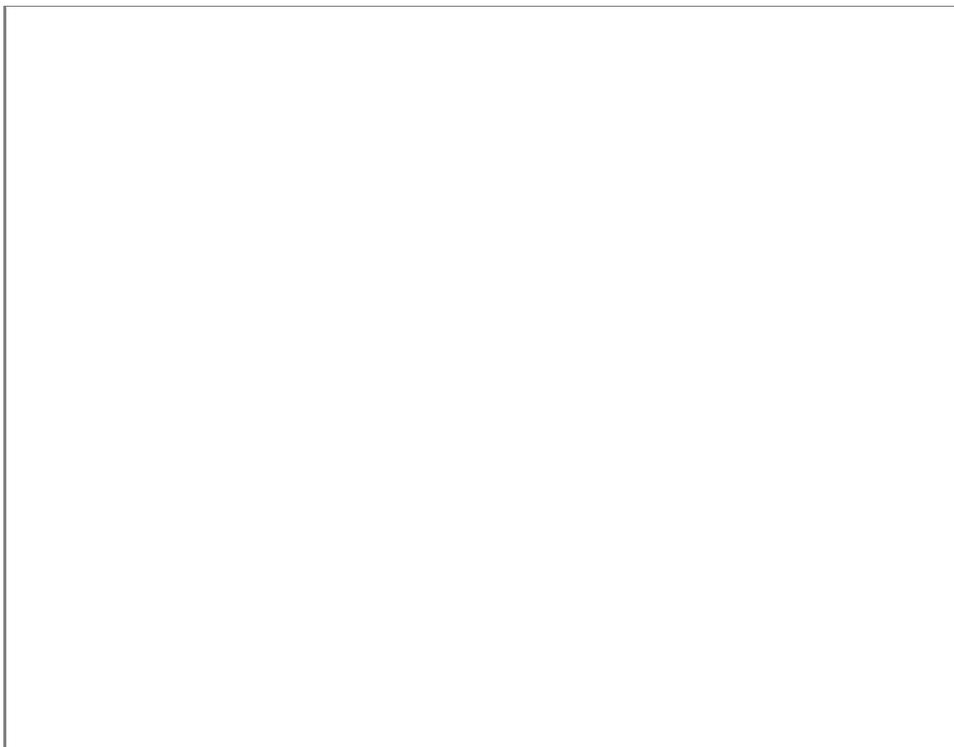


Figure 3. Emely reading her book

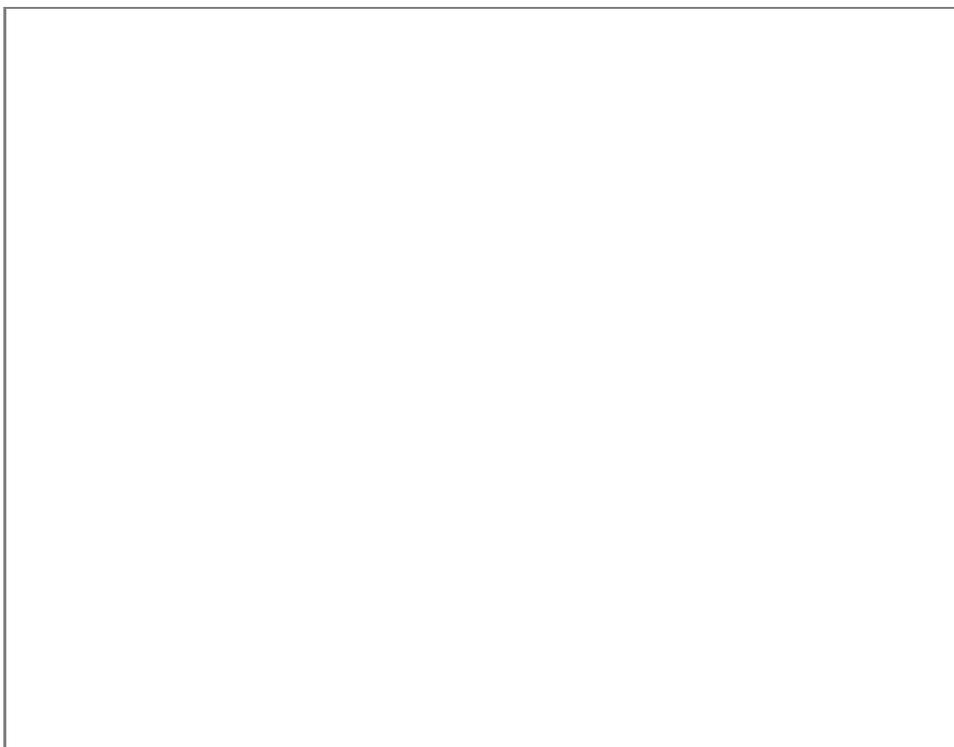


Figure 4. Hannah reading her book

Because of differences in the students in my classroom, I'm always conscious of differentiating to meet the needs of particular students. This book project, I found, was naturally differentiated by the length and the amount of pages. I told all of my students, including those with an IEP or who were ESOL students, that they needed to write a minimum of three pages and as many pages as

they desired beyond that. Students worked to their own abilities with impressive results. For example, Anthony, who was shy and didn't share his work or write much on his own throughout the school year, was empowered. He had an extensive IEP with math, reading, and writing goals but was an extremely intuitive and bright young man. Not only did Anthony write a wonderful book, four pages in length, but he was so proud of his accomplishments that he shared it with the entire class on the document camera, something he hadn't done with his work before this. Although Anthony's work was differentiated he was motivated to exceed expectations, as this video clip of him reading his book shows.



Figure 5. Anthony reading his book

Leah, who has an IEP for speech and reading, is another student who accomplished much. Throughout the year it was often difficult to understand some of Leah's speech but at the end of the year she read her book (six beautifully illustrated pages) clearly. Please listen for yourself.

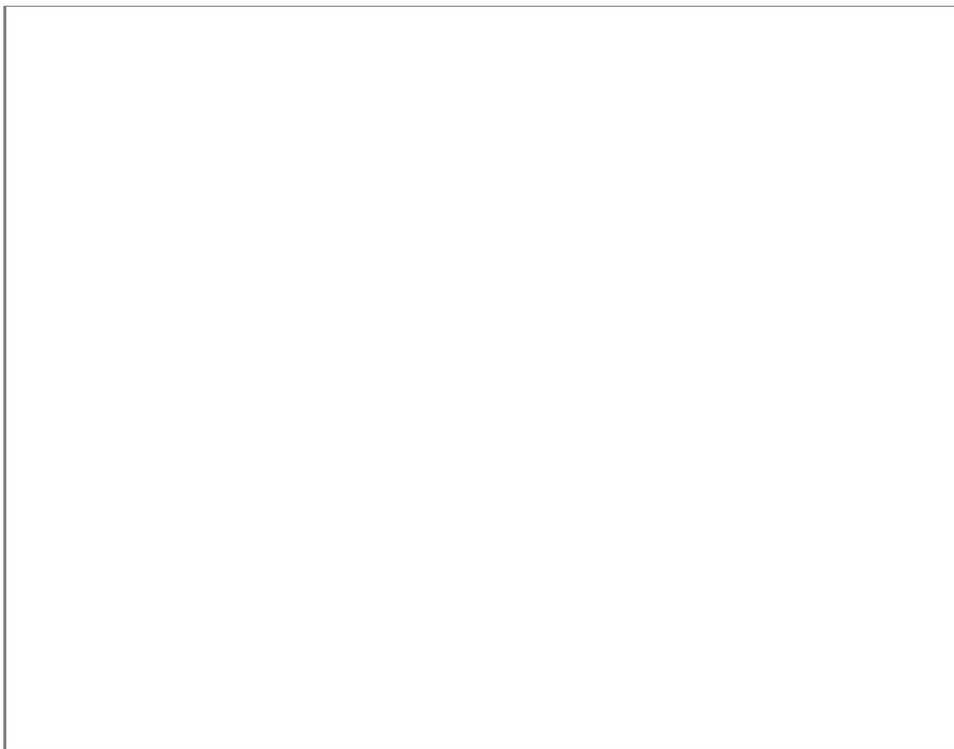


Figure 6. Leah reading her book

Developing Intercultural Understandings

As a team, one thing we were all interested in learning was whether and how studying another culture, such as India, helps students understand themselves and others as cultural beings more deeply. To get at this, once the students completed the content of their books, they created two character x-rays (adapted from the cultural x-rays in Short, 2009); one of themselves which served as their author's page, and another of a character from one of our India-themed books. Character x-rays examine and detail both external and internal features of someone. On and around the outside of the character x-ray is what is clearly visible about a person (for example, hair, eye and skin color). The heart on the inside shows what the person values, what is important to him/her, and what kind of person they are. We talk about what we know about the character based on their actions and make inferences about the kind of person they are. For example, if the character does a kind act we might say they are helpful or compassionate. Since creating a character x-ray of a "general" Indian child would be difficult, the other teachers and I decided to have the students focus on the young girl who is the main character in the book *Monsoon* (Krishnaswami, 2003) or Geeta in *Geeta's Day*, (Das, 2010). The character x-ray of themselves and the Indian child were included in the students' books. As Laura described in her vignette, a couple months earlier all of our students had completed a large character x-ray to reflect their unique identity and culture. We decided to have the students complete another one after studying India to be their author page and to learn if they gained any insights about culture, others, and themselves.

Prisca and Ray interviewed students about their books to discover what they learned about India as well as their understandings of themselves and children in India. It was clear that through our study of India that students began to see that while there are external differences in such areas as clothes, customs, food, and language, many internal feelings and values are similar. For example:

- Emely: “Geeta and I are both loving and beautiful...and we have the same hair, the same smile, and the same skin ...[but] she has different clothes and shoes than me.”
- Ethan: “We’re both happy...and care for other people...[but] [people in India] have brown skin and we have white skin.”
- Sharon: “We both like to play ...[but] [in India extended] families might live together and ours don’t live together.”
- Jamie: “Sometimes we can both feel sad ...[but] I don’t wear a sari and [girls in India] do.”

Our cross-cultural study of India was rich and meaningful for all of us, students and teachers. As we studied similarities and differences that make Indian and American cultures unique, we learned “what it is to be human” and that others may have perspectives that are very different than ours (Collins, Czarra, & Smith, 1998, p. 314). “Children’s ability to understand, value, and celebrate diversity evolves from recognizing their places and their particular experiences as part of the universal whole of humanity” (Lehman, Freeman, & Scharer, 2010, p. 19). Students gained an appreciation and understanding of India and made connections between their lives to families in India.

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Learning to Read and Compose Meaning in Art Using Picturebooks

Stacy Aghalarov

Illustrations are pictorial representations of meaning (Kiefer, 1995). The illustrations in picturebooks are more than pictures that accompany the written text; they are rich examples of meaningful texts that artists create using the elements of art and principles of design. Artists use these elements and principles to create pictorial meaning just as authors of written texts use words and grammar to create meaning.

In my art instruction, I regularly use picturebooks for a number of reasons. Picturebooks show that the art techniques, art elements, and principles of design are used in other places than the art room. Students begin to understand that what they are learning during art instruction is important and can be used in other contexts. For instance, if the reading teacher asks them to illustrate a story they have written, the students can (and do!) think beyond drawing about what they wrote. Often they add more details in their drawing than what they included in their written text. As students learn to read the illustrations in picturebooks, they see little details not mentioned in the written text which enriches their understandings of the story. I have also noticed that students who study illustrations in picturebooks create richer meanings in their artwork.

For an overview of our literacy community and school community, please see the first vignette in this issue, "[Learning about Ourselves and Others through Global Literature](#)." In this vignette I share how I help children learn to represent meanings in art. I begin with how I use Molly Bang's work to explore basic art concepts and then discuss how I help children think about how to represent emotions and feelings in their art. I also share how my work with the children supported the India study in the first grade classrooms.

Molly Bang's *Picture This: How Pictures Work*

I like to begin by using Molly Bang's (2000) *Picture This: How Pictures Work* with students. In