

“Floating” WTL topic: Vicarious experience of diversity

We each have our own personal experiences of diversity / multiculturalism, from our family upbringing, our religious/ethical tradition, our interactions with and among others, etc. We also learn about diversity / multiculturalism through coursework, both when it’s the explicit topic of instruction (as in this class) or when it emerges in the context of something else (e.g., fieldwork).

While these experiences are invaluable, a rich source of insight into ourselves and others, they are necessarily limited: since I grew up in the Midwest, I don’t know what it’s like to grow up on the West Coast. Since I grew up middle class / Catholic / straight, I don’t have direct experience growing up as someone else. Yes, we’re taking SPED / TLT 404 together, but we don’t have the experience of a seminar on critical theory.

One way we can address this limitation of our experiences is through art and literature. At their best, art and literature communicate the human experience, bringing it from one place and time to another. When we view Picasso’s *Guernica*, we learn something about the experience of the Spanish Civil War (or at least Picasso’s view of it). When we read Elie Weisel’s *Night*, we learn something about the experience of the Holocaust; when we read a slave’s autobiography or oral history, we learn something about the experience of slavery in America. (Conversely, we can also watch Leni Reifenstahl’s *Olympia* or DeMille’s *Birth of a Nation* in order to learn something about the oppressor and his/her worldview.)

Therefore, I encourage you to develop the habit of actively seeking out art and literature that can give you a vicarious experience of an under-served group. Learning about diversity is a life-long process, and a great way to ensure that you are a lifelong learner is to develop this habit. To get it off to a start (or continue it, if you’re already doing it), I’d like you to select one film or novel that gives you insight into an under-served group. The film or novel does not have to explicitly address education. Examples of possible titles include:

- *Born Into Brothels* (2004): Documentary film about children living in the red light district of Calcutta, India. Available in the FML Media Center.
- *Zeitoun* (2009): Nonfiction book about the experiences of an Arab-American in New Orleans after Katrina.
- *One Teacher in 10*. (1st edition 1983, 2nd edition 2005). “Forty LGBT educators reveal what it’s like to be gay and teaching today” Available at FML
- *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011): Drama about an Algerian refugee applying for asylum in Canada who becomes a long-term sub for a class that has just lost their teacher to suicide.
- *Waiting for Superman* (2010): Documentary about five students in New York City as they apply to enter the charter school system through lotteries.

DO read / watch with a critical eye -- keep in mind that you’re getting one voice among many, and that there may be agendas at play that you are not aware of. *Waiting for Superman*, for

example, is thought-provoking, but it presents some pretty selective information.

After reading / watching your piece, do a (long-ish) WTL post about it. Concepts to include are

- What did you see/read? Why?
- Summarize the content -- what happened? Was anything especially interesting? Inspiring? Disheartening?
- Consider the context: Who made this? Why?
- Apply it to yourself and your context: What is your takeaway from this experience? How might you use this in your future teaching / learning?