I’ve begun the last two school years in my sophomore Honors English classes by having students watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story.” Therein, Adichie, who grew up middle class in Nigeria, recounts her acceptance of “single stories” about her family’s domestic workers as well as the single stories she wrote as a child about characters that mirrored the British and American texts she grew up reading. Those stories were generally one-sided and did not allow for any hues of complexity: the domestic worker was poor and without any funds of knowledge, she thought. The characters she created had Eurocentric features and “talked a lot about the weather,” she jokes.

She continues with an explanation about the problems that accompany the acceptance of single stories, most profoundly that once a single story is created, it allows all who retell it to “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (Adichie). What sticks with my students is when Adichie explains, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

In our discussions, students return repeatedly to that last point: the incompleteness of the story. Through careful questioning, writing, and honest talk, we use Adichie as our guide into a postcolonial look at African literature, which has included Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus, and other contemporary African literature. Adichie gives us a language for unpacking the single stories of Africa and, I’ve realized, gives us a language for thinking about what other single stories we’ve accepted, often without much critical thought about that acceptance. Adichie later continues that it was only when her family visited their domestic worker did she realize that because he was economically poor, it did not necessarily mean he was not culturally rich. His family had a vibrant, complex culture. Her one-dimensional view of him did not capture his life at all.

Drawing on the language of single stories, my students and I think about the single stories we’ve accepted when interpreting literature (often of New Criticism); of texts (as being traditional books and poems); of ways of writing (five-paragraph essays, acronyms about how to write body paragraphs and analyze evidence); and, more broadly, the single stories that govern who sits in our classes (in this school, usually students in Honors classes are white and middle class). Because what we all realize (and I’m always learning along with them, or revising what I thought I knew, or finding out what I thought was the “truth” was wrong) is that single stories are comforting, and if we believe them, then we don’t necessarily have to contend with otherness, or different stories, or, as we apply academic definitions, counternarratives.

As the semester progresses, students frequently remind each other, and me, when we are veering into the territory of a single story: they apply the concept to characters in texts, they offer it up as a challenge to understanding historical contexts, they question what we are overlooking because we are repeating other single stories. The work of New Media Literacy (NML) scholars, for instance, helps think about texts as “any coherent set of symbols that transmit meaning to those who know how to read them” (Jenkins et al. xiii) and
encourages the inclusion of popular culture, turning students into critical creators as they demonstrate close reading and understanding of a text. NML also turns students into active participants rather than passive members of a classroom, placing on them the responsibility for authorship, of responding, and of re-creating texts.

There are quite a few frustrating moments throughout the term when my students and I struggle with writing: they with their frustrations because I won’t tell them exactly what to write about, me with my lack of patience because they don’t trust themselves to believe that they have something important to say. Their default settings are numbers, acronyms, reductive formulas. We write our way to understanding that while writing is hard work, it is work we can all do with some practice in various contexts: low stakes (thank you, Peter Elbow), medium stakes, high stakes; attention to audiences that range from peers to ones outside our school; focused peer review, reflection, sharing; writing so often that, eventually, when presented with a task that calls for writing, they respond that it’s no big deal and they write in powerful, thoughtful ways.

The larger, related single stories, too, concern who sits in the seats of these classes. In my school, honors classes are composed of predominantly white students, despite the fact that the school population is 60 percent non-white. Inevitably, we reach a moment in the class when this lack of representation arises—a moment that’s always introduced by a white student. The dialogue that emerges as we question the intertwined single stories—first the beliefs about achievement, then about tracking, then the ones about race, class, power, and access—reveals the perspectives of students who have not benefited from having enough opportunities to experience the counternarratives of diverse classes; therefore, they continue to manufacture single stories that maintain the status quo.

Thus, I keep Adichie as an integral part of the curriculum. She gives us a way to think broadly about literature, literacy, social justice, and telling different stories differently. She also reminds us why attempting to intentionally hand over to students ways to tell stories of all kinds offers the promise of expanding our understandings of ideas. Most importantly, Adichie encourages us to reject narrow notions of reading and writing—notations that, when left unexamined, can restrict access to power and literacy. She summarizes, “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.”

We must seek to expand the single stories that proliferate around us by addressing them and supplying counternarratives of all varieties as we, the teachers, tell our stories of competence and excellence in our classrooms; and as students, too, develop powerful literacy tools. Then, we can tell different stories. Then, we can tell the stories we need.

Works Cited

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