

# Immigrants' Cultural Contributions

by Kathleen McCarthy

My job is to prepare immigrant students for employment; to help them make an economic contribution to our society. But I realized that I made a mistake by not also including in my lessons a focus on the importance of *cultural* contributions to society. In a recent ESOL job readiness class, I encouraged my students to develop a habit of creative expression so they might improve their quality of life *now*, while they work toward their longer term goals of finding a job and improving their English. Was this a justifiable topic in a job readiness class for low-level ESOL students? Focusing on the contributions of immigrant artists, writers, and architects in my classroom has proven to be a powerful tool for students in expressing the value they bring—personally—to the United States, and in increasing hope for their future here.

It started with an expressive writing activity as a follow up to short reading on the life of a U.S. immigrant living in Lawrence, Mass. The exercise went like this:

1. Name a sound you cannot hear in the U.S. that you could hear in your native country—perhaps a sound that you miss.
2. Close your eyes and imagine what you see in your native country. Describe.
3. Name an activity you typically do in your country.

The exercise was not meant to elicit poetry, but the students responses evoked such vivid imagery and emotion, that I decided to name each response after the author's native country and read these responses back to the class as poems. I think by reading their work this way, I acknowledged that despite their current "low-level" of English skills, they had, in fact, powerfully expressed their unique and complex thoughts and emotions (loss, grief, nostalgia, ambivalence), and that this creative expression had affected me.

It was the first time I saw my students excited in this class. They each seemed so proud of their own words in that moment. They also listened intently to each others' descriptions of what they missed most from their home countries.

I thought a lot about what happened in that class when I went home, and realized I needed to give my students a sense of being more than just a cog in the wheel. I want to remind them of their uniqueness; that they are not immigrant statistics but unique individuals.

Since then, I have made room in each class for students to read simple stories I've developed about immigrant artists

such as Edwidge Danticat, Andy Garcia, I.M. Pei, and Derek Walcott, or children of immigrants, such as Joan Baez or Carl Sandburg.

Like any good ESOL teacher, I want my students to set goals and plan for the future, to envision better lives, and perhaps become U.S. citizens. Most immigrants do want to work, many also want to be full members of our society where they can contribute culturally and socially. I have come to believe it is essential to cultivate in my students a belief that they are unique people, that their existence matters, and that expressing this in whatever form they choose is just as important as any job they'll do.

**Get Kathleen's lesson on immigrant artists at:**  
**<[www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras/index.htm](http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras/index.htm)>.**

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