

Bringing Literature to Life: Strategies for Supporting Arab and American Student Success in a First-Year Foundations Course**Gina Zanolini Morrison**Division of Global Cultures
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Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, USA**Abstract**

First-year courses for entering university students are vital to supporting their success and fostering lasting connections between them and their academic environments. To that end, four First-Year Foundations (FYF) instructors from one small private university in northeastern United States selected a common read to use with their diverse classes, including five classes with large numbers of students from Arab countries. The team worked together to bring literature to life for these first-year students by selecting an intergenerational novel about life in Palestine entitled *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, then bringing the award-winning author Susan Muaddi Darraj to campus to meet the students and discuss her novel in both formal and informal settings. The challenges involved in accomplishing this task are shared in this paper, as are the successful results. Sample study guides developed by the FYF academic team are also shared for those instructors who wish to use the same book for their own students, or who might find a model of this method of bringing literature to life useful in planning their own instructional activities.

Keywords: best practices with first-year students, first-year foundations, international university students, literature enrichment, Palestinian conflict

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Introduction

Regardless of rank or discipline, those of us who teach in a university setting are keenly aware of the need to engage our students in meaningful and challenging academic content while utilizing strategies that support their success. Entering students demand our particular consideration in that they are not only stepping out of the familiar learning routines of their high schools, but they are also transitioning to the demanding world of college life that is often far from home and existing social support systems. We know that these students must be engaged at the very beginning of their university experience and that choosing the right course readings is vital to sustaining this engagement throughout that short but crucial first semester together.

In an effort to forge a connection between our first-year students and their new university, four faculty colleagues worked together as a team to create a memorable and engaging experience for our students by selecting a common read for our classes and then bringing the author to the university during the semester. Our aim was to bring the literature to life for these new students during their first semester on campus by helping them recognize that behind every reading is an author with a personal history, a unique perspective, and a story to tell. We encouraged our students to reflect upon and share their own personal stories as they read each chapter of *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* by Susan Muadi Darraj (2015). Recognizing that it is “natural for us as human beings to tell our stories, to gesticulate, to dramatize our experiences in an effort to make meaning of our lives” (Downey, 2005, p. 33), we designed strategies to actively engage our students in the process of connecting their own lives to the reading. We also created study guides that served as the basis for semester-long classroom discussions and interactive activities. Our project summary, with sample study guides, is detailed herein for those university professionals who might also want to use Darraj’s book themselves, if not undertake a similar project, to bring literature to life for their own university students.

Literature Review

High impact practices with first-year students

Participation in high impact practices is particularly beneficial to students who “start farther behind in terms of their entering academic test scores” (Kuh & Schneider, 2008, p. 1). Statistically, this group includes not only minority group members, but also those students who are the first in their family to attend college—both populations that are targeted for recruitment by the mission and vision statements of our university. Historically, these groups enter the academic environment with a statistical disadvantage, making it especially important to provide support in order to ensure their success. International students are similarly at risk in that, at our university, the TOFEL score of most international students reflects the minimum English proficiency that must be achieved before entry. Nevertheless, our university has committed to the success of its international students by recognizing that mastery of academic English is a process that requires determination on the part of the student and strategic support on the part of the faculty member. High impact practices are data-driven strategies that benefit not only those groups of students who are statistically at risk of failure, but also *all* university students, in several ways.

High impact practices are likely to help students in areas such as persistence and higher level thinking, which are essential to academic success (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). They take students out of their comfort zones by requiring them confront problems and situations beyond the traditional academic requirements they have come to expect. In order to understand which techniques or interventions work best with first-year students, it is important first to realize first-year students comprise a unique subset of undergraduate students. Those who teach freshmen soon come to realize they are not so far removed from high school as we might have hoped. Their expectations of what constitutes college life is frequently very different from the reality of the experience. In fact, some studies have found that less than one-third of students have realistic expectations of the amount of work required of them to be successful in higher education (Jobe et al., 2016). The social isolation of being away from home for the first time also has an adverse effect on many students. Some decide to leave after suddenly finding themselves in an unfamiliar academic environment in which the onus is on them to learn the material, rather than being the responsibility of their high school teachers or parents. At the university, students are often presented with content and expected to find their own ways to master it, rather than being taught the content more directly as they have been in high school. Furthermore, each instructor sees them for just three hours a week. The content is more difficult, and there is much more of it to be learned in a much shorter time than in high school. According to Kuh and Schneider (2008), many incoming freshmen have neither the readiness nor the academic skills and study habits to facilitate their success in a post-secondary environment.

Gardener has stated that college is “academic Darwinism” (2001, p. 5): an environment in which only the strongest survive. Withdrawal from university study is an unfortunate waste of the student’s time, money, and opportunity to complete a degree that will open doors for a better future, as well as the institution’s resources, time, and seat given to a student with potential who, for any number of reasons, has been unsuccessful. Withdrawal is often avoidable, however. High impact practices have been shown to have positive effects on all students and to have a compensatory effect on “at risk” students (Cruce et al., 2006). Indeed, there is no “downside” for academic institutions to invest the time and energy to facilitate student success and retention.

High impact practices have six essential characteristics (Kuh & Schneider, 2008): They (1) require a significant amount of time and effort focused on a specific educational goal, (2) involve shared intellectual experiences with peers and faculty, (3) involve students stepping out of their comfort zones and being exposed to diversity, (4) involve students receiving prompt feedback, (5) provide opportunities for application of learning, and (6) encourage students to internalize new ideas and change the concepts that govern their awareness of the world they live in (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014, p. 19). According to a study by Hansen and Schmidt (2017, p. 76), high impact practices affect not only short term retention and persistence in freshmen students, but also have long term outcomes in a three-year persistence rate.

Retention

Retention is one of the primary reasons colleges and universities offer first-year foundations courses. Kuh and Schneider (2008) maintain that first-year foundations classes are “obvious

choices” (p.13) to encourage student achievement and to enhance the connections among students and between students and the university. Earlier research into the retention of first-year students revealed that first-year seminars affected not only a higher year-to-year retention rate, but were also associated with a higher retention rate in the second year, as well (Hoff, 1996). The results are consistently positive on the effect of such early initiatives. A study cited by Hansen and Schmidt (2017) notes that although first-year experience courses are often criticized for their “lack of academic rigor” (p. 58), they nonetheless have a positive impact on students and positively affect their lifelong learning orientations—if they are academically challenging and if they employ engaging teaching methods.

Faculty support

While social interaction helps students connect to college life, it is the engagement with the academics that keeps them in college. A study by Dewart and Rowan (2007) examined the reasons that students continued their courses in spite of obstacles. They found that, although students named their own determination as the primary factor in continuing their course, they also cited teacher support both as a reason they continued and as a reason they were successful. This study found that what facilitated retention was the positive expectations from teachers who encouraged interaction with students and recognized the “cultural capital they brought—a blend of work, life, cultural, and academic experience” (Dewart & Rowan, 2007). These instructors brought into the classroom a passion for the topic they were teaching, which in turn left a positive mark on their students. In a 2008 survey conducted by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (as cited in Thaiss et al., 2016, p. 2), the individuals who teach FYF, regardless of their position in the university, do so because they can try out new courses, teach in areas different from their usual courses, and enjoy the opportunity to interact with first-year students. Eighty-six percent of instructors who have taught FYF would do so again. This level of enthusiasm for those teaching first-year foundations facilitates retention and benefits both students and the university as a whole.

Faculty support in the form of mentorship is a highly effective and specialized brand of faculty support. The collaboration of first year-students with faculty on scholarly activities is a powerful experience for students resulting in not only additional research experience for students, but also increased productivity for the department. Students engaged in research with faculty have been shown to continue and sustain scholarly activity (Forbes & Davis, 2008). Undergraduate research can be an extension of what already is being done in a course, and it benefits students in their intellectual, academic and personal growth (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). The skills required in data collection, lab techniques, interpreting results, and independent thinking lend themselves not only to traditional science discipline specific FYF courses, but also to social science based and service learning courses as well. The opportunity for students to assist in the preparation of a paper for publication or to participate in a conference presentation provides benefits in professional self-confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to work through difficulties (Bauer & Bennett, 2003). Sadly, student participation in research is one of the least utilized high impact practices. It has been suggested that this is due to the nature of the research process itself and the lack of FYF courses in STEM disciplines (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014).

Inclusion, Diversity, Civic and Global Learning

Offering courses that help students explore other worldviews, cultures, and life experiences is becoming more commonly accepted as a high impact practice. College is often the first opportunity many students have to confront issues of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination; gender identity; basic freedoms and human rights; and power and privilege. Courses involving these sensitive topics can address differences that exist globally and nationally, and they require critical thinking and self-reflection in the processing of the information involved in the examination of the issues. These topics are frequently enhanced by service learning within local communities or study abroad (Kuh & Schneider, 2008) and can be integrated with associated academic content to promote critical thinking and openness to diversity that will help students become responsible and informed citizens of the world. Each of the FYF course sections involved in this project involve diversity, inclusion, civic and global learning as central components of the course.

Writing across the curriculum (WAC)

Writing across the curriculum is a strategy that emphasizes writing at all points of instruction and throughout the curriculum (Kuh & Schneider, 2008, p. 10). Writing intensive courses are beneficial to the development and refinement of critical thinking, building classroom communities, and establishing a campus community of learners (Thaiss et al., 2016). For example, the use of journal writing at the beginning of each class allows students to respond critically to a given prompt or issue and prepare own opinions and responses for sharing, thus giving them a voice in classroom discussions. Such sharing reflects a reciprocity that also encourages the recognition and acceptance of the diversity of the individual students in the class, and, in turn, encourages the development of a community of learners. The use of journal writing is also beneficial to faculty in that it is a forum for students who might not otherwise express themselves to write about a particular issue, problem or concern through the use of “free writes.” It is a formative assessment for faculty to monitor student attitudes and perceptions, and to deal with potential issues before they become major problems.

One real-world example of the use of online journal writing to subvert problems involves a student who wrote about racist posts made by a student in another class. Because of the journal, the posts were brought to the attention of the faculty member, who contacted the appropriate authorities to have the posts removed. It also prompted further campus-wide discussions on race relations. Easily implemented, with the option not to grade this formative assessment, journal writing is a best practice that, according to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (Kuh & Schneider, 2008), helps to develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies. At Wilkes University, where this project was undertaken, writing across the curriculum begins in FYF courses and is assessed at specific benchmarks throughout every student’s academic journey.

Service-learning

Service-learning is an approach to teaching whereby students participate in some form of civic engagement as part of a regular course. The difference between service-learning and community service is that service-learning has an academic component—including but not limited to group

discussions, directed writing, and presentations (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014, p. 20). Service learning also leads to better writing skills, improved racial understanding, increases in critical thinking, higher grade point average, improved communication skills, and higher levels of retention (Smith et al., 2011; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014, p. 21). In a study at Tulane University, Moely and Ilustre (2014) found that service-learning participants, when compared to non-service-learning students, are also more likely to continue study at the university and re-enroll the next year, thus boosting retention levels into the sophomore year.

To be effective, service-learning should provide opportunities for meaningful service linked to course content, with opportunities for reflection in order to be effective (Moely & Ilustre, p. 15). According to Smith (2011), there are six indicators of high quality service-learning. First, the service should be linked to academic goals and learning outcomes. Second, the service should respond to a need in the community and can extend beyond the time frame of the actual course it is linked to. Third, there should be a collaborative management and development of the project between teacher and student. Next, a sense of community responsibility and civic engagement should be fostered through a direct relationship between the participating institution and the community at large. The fifth indicator is the emphasis on contemplation, an examination of personal values and goals during all phases of the service—before, during and after. Finally, service-learning should involve an analysis and interpretation of the results of the project/service, including all stakeholders whenever possible (Smith et al., 2011). It is also suggested that a “celebration of effort and success” be held (Smith et al., p. 320) upon completion of the service.

Service-learning facilitates a common intellectual experience with faculty and peers, and it allows students to become aware of and reflect on their own views, beliefs, and value systems through the academic components. An additional benefit of service-learning is the students’ positive perception of the participating institution. Following service-learning activities, community members’ perceptions of students and young people in general are improved. In other words, the actions of students reflect positively on the campus community and the prestige of the institution. The participation of students in a service-learning course also encourages more participation in service activities throughout their academic career and later in life. Service-learning as conducted in FYF courses at Wilkes University and elsewhere have been designed to foster a broadened worldview and an acceptance and appreciation of others.

Common reading experience

A common reading experience used to facilitate a common intellectual experience is considered a high impact practice in first-year foundations courses (Young & Keup, 2016). A common read is more likely to have a positive effect if the reading is carefully selected for length and readability, if there are events outside of class and the purpose of the program is made clear, and if support is provided to instructors to assist with instruction, such as study guides and discussion questions (Ferguson et al., 2014). The common intellectual experience of a common read also creates a sense of community among those who read the book and contributes to the likelihood students will remain in school (persistence) and attain a higher GPA (Daugherty & Hayes, 2012; Huntly & Donovan, 2009). The common read can be used to anchor each course section and generate a

common intellectual experience, with the key being both to challenge and support students, thereby encouraging their critical thinking (Stebbleton & Jehangir, 2016).

Having the author visit campus and having a panel of local experts on the topic to engage students and faculty are two effective strategies to further enhance the effectiveness of a common read for a first-year foundations program. It should be noted that in some cases, the book is provided at no cost to all students, which may or may not be an incentive to their reading it. A common read program has its limitations in that, in one study on a Canadian university, the common read was used in only some faculty member's courses and was read by a minority of students; consequently, it did not create the sense of community and the common intellectual experience that had been hoped for (Ferguson et al., 2014). Nevertheless, this high-impact practice is one that we attempted to implement at our university for our incoming first-year students.

Methodology

Background of the project

This project took place at Wilkes University, a small private American university in northeastern Pennsylvania offering both professional and liberal arts programs with a total enrolment of nearly 6000 students. Of these, about 2500 are undergraduates. Each year brings about 600 undergraduate students to Wilkes as traditional freshmen; these incoming students are required to take First-Year Foundations (FYF), an introductory level mandatory general education course designed to acquaint them with the rigors of academics on the collegiate level.

The demographics of Wilkes reflects approximately 10% international students, with the overwhelming majority being from Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. In the 2017 class of entering undergraduate freshmen, 39 were international, with 38 of those having listed Kuwait or Saudi Arabia as their country of origin. Although our international students must achieve the required English proficiency score before acceptance to Wilkes, it is nevertheless a challenge to support the transition of the international students linguistically, academically, and culturally. As with all students, that first semester is critical to their retention and their success and, as with all students, they are required to take FYF in order to orient them to the social environment and academic demands of the university.

The FYF program design

The faculty of Wilkes University have designed a unique FYF program that delivers academically rigorous content according to pre-approved course objectives, while allowing a wide a variety of course topics designed to pique the variety of interests among the incoming students. During the fall of 2017, there were 679 first-year students enrolled in 33 sections of FYF, with an average class size of 20 students. These FYF classes were taught by full-time faculty and adjunct professors on 17 different topics ranging from robotics to service learning to international travel; however, each FYF course was required to embed a minimum of two general education student learning outcomes in the categories of *diversity awareness* and *critical thinking*, in addition to at least two other general education student learning outcomes and other course objectives appropriate to the course topic, to be addressed and assessed at the discretion of each instructor.

This diversity of FYF course offerings is a mechanism that allows students to choose sections with content that appeals to them; therefore, every effort is made to build a student's first semester course schedule around the FYF class section that each student has chosen. Typically, students whose first language is not English are encouraged to enroll in the FYF section entitled *American Culture and Values*, which provides an orientation to life in America through readings and assignments selected in such a way as to provide intensive English assistance. In the fall of 2017, however, scheduling conflicts required that at least 15 of our international students be placed in other FYF sections. Conversely, four American students selected *American Culture and Values* as their FYF section. This mixture presented a unique challenge for the instructors and students alike, which was met in several ways, including the use of a common read that was attractive to these multicultural classroom sections.

Selection of the common read

During the semester before our project began, award winning author Susan Muaddi Darraj delivered the keynote address entitled "Changing the Narrative: How Race and Politics Affect the Way We View Women" at the Women's and Gender Studies Conference organized in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, sponsored by Wilkes University and King's College. One of the members of our faculty team attended this author's speech and, as most who attended, found it extremely engaging and inspiring. Upon hearing the reaction of the audience and the comments about her book, our colleague decided to order her own copy of *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*. She immediately realized its clear potential to become a source of inspiration and debate for our students and decided to take the suggestion to the newly formed FYF Committee, a faculty standing committee on which she served as a member.

At same time, the FYF Committee was accepting proposals for the piloting of a common read. The timing was fortuitous, as one of the main goals of the FYF program is to increase diversity awareness on campus and a common read containing diversity issues was being sought. It was decided that readings must be chosen and discussions must be designed to encourage students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the diversity of the local and global communities, including cultural, social, and economic differences. Students are also encouraged to analyze, evaluate, and assess the impact of differences in race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, native language, sexual orientation, age, and religion while utilizing perspectives of diverse groups when conducting analyses, drawing conclusions, and making decisions. *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* (Darraj, 2015) seemed to address all of the relevant issues of diversity in a reading set within the context of political controversy. Thus, the ability of the book to advance our students' *diversity awareness* and *critical thinking* made it an excellent choice of a common read for our first-year students.

The book was ultimately selected by committee members because of its readability and universal appeal; the problems and life situations encountered by the characters are problems encountered by all people everywhere, regardless of culture. The central theme, the lasting power of love in its various forms, told through a series of love stories, captured the interest of these young adults. Other social issues in the book—homelessness, abortion, ongoing religious and

political strife, loss, duty and sacrifice for the greater good, as well as the emergence of strong female characters central to the individual stories—made this a natural choice. The message that we as people are more alike than different, and that we all face similar struggles, is one that we members of the committee compelling and relevant, particularly in our current political climate.

Brief book review

The book we chose for our common read, *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, takes the readers through a journey in the lives of Palestinians from a fictional West Bank village and includes references to their culture, love lives, and political events. The book is made up of short stories that in some way all connect to each other. Each short story takes place in a different time period, includes a different main character, and involves different types of conflicts related to the time period. Darraj disclosed that she wrote *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* for a western audience that might not fully understand the Palestinian culture. Through her stories, she told us, she hopes that people will find the common bonds we share as humans regardless of the differences between our cultures.

In an interview for a Wilkes University publication, Darraj confessed that she wrote *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* with the intentions of providing a glance into Palestinian life without “over-trying” to explain things. One example of that approach is her use of original Arabic words without italics as she felt readers would be able to use context to glean the meaning without translation or a glossary. In the same interview, she acknowledged that she tries to write about women’s experiences as much as she can. “If you look at any culture and the way that it treats women, respects women, hears women or allows women to speak, then that tells you a lot about that culture. But I think there’s no culture, no nation in the world in which women have equal voice in the society” (Darraj, 2017). She added that, although many only look at the Middle Eastern countries when it comes to the oppression of women, we have similar problems here in the United States.

Emphasizing the strength of women and the bonds of love in its many forms, Darraj’s stories offer a glimpse into the intergenerational issues faced by most societies, such as migration histories, compassion for others, the effects of conflict and occupation, and the thread of love that stitches together a family and a community. There is something real, recognizable, and deeply moving in each story, and these stories resonate with readers.

Results

The author’s visit to campus

Our author Susan Muaddi Darraj visited the Wilkes University campus on October 25 and 26, 2017. The itinerary of the visit included a dinner with the members of the committee in charge of the event (the authors of this paper), an International Studies newsletter interview, a lunch with students and staff, informal class visits with those four classes that had the largest enrolment of Arab students, and the main lecture entitled, “A Conversation with Susan Muaddi Darraj, Author of *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*.” The university’s advancement team handled the logistics regarding venue and food, while the marketing department created a visually attractive poster.

Students were selected to attend the author luncheon in some sections by their instructor, and in other sections by a vote of their peers, and all students and members of the university community were encouraged to attend the main lecture. In an effort to encourage our first-year students with their time management skills, an academic incentive (in the form of bonus points) was given by some instructors to encourage attendance. It should also be noted that the Middle Eastern students expressed much enthusiasm about hearing this author speak, and that this event continues to be cited as an example of the fact that our campus is welcoming to Arab students. In fact, in an FYF class held the following semester, students asked if it were possible for the author to return to campus to speak again.

Project outcomes

While reaction to the book varied by class, in general our students were very engaged in this reading, as we had hoped. We found them to be appreciative of our efforts to bring the book to life for them by enabling them to interact personally with the author and with the content of the book through guided discussions with their classmates. One unexpected positive result of working with *A Curious Land* was the ability—indeed, the necessity—of discussing the complex situation that has existed for generations in Palestine. American students were able to realize that they have not, in fact, been told the whole story. Similarly, Arab students seemed eager to find common ground with the Christian characters in the setting by sharing similar stories of their own families' migration histories, gender expectations, Arabic customs, and values. This gave our students the advantage of stepping outside their known world in order to participate in *critical thinking* about the short-sightedness of taking simplistic stands in complex political situations. We can only hope that they will continue to grow this ability as they continue their education.

The benefits of adopting this book for our common read were many; yet, we did discover primarily two challenges with the book. First, the author's choice to use Arabic names for her characters and Arabic words for certain nouns without translations proved to be confusing for the non-Arabic students. To assist our students with that, we developed study guides with guided questions and glossaries, which were a tremendous help to those students unfamiliar with the Arabic names and phrases used in many of the chapters. One unintended positive outcome of the author's use of Arabic words, though, was the dynamic that developed between the Arabic students and the American students. Whereas the Americans were, of course, faster at reading and better able to grasp the nuances of the writing without as much assistance, the Arab students became the cultural experts who were placed in a position of an authority on the language and cultural setting of the book. This alone was an unforeseen advantage of the process that directly impacted the *diversity awareness* of all students in the classroom.

The second challenge that we found was the negative depiction of the Israeli soldiers. This was an issue that could not be ignored, particularly with several Jewish American students in the classes. In our class discussions, we came to the conclusion that this view was the result of a long-standing situational issue that has been present in the Middle East, and we reviewed video broadcasts of both sides of the conflict. As instructional leaders, we agreed to make the statement in class that each story-teller has her own perspective and that the portrayal of the Israelis was a

common one among Palestinians. Nevertheless, we clearly stated that we did not condone negative stereotyping of any religious group, nationality, or culture. We also made mention of the many contributions that the Jews have made to world history and to the American culture.

As instructors, we did our best to utilize the strengths of our students by incorporating small group discussion and other interactive strategies when covering the reading. For example, one instructor created a *qahwah* (Arabic coffee shop) atmosphere in her classroom and developed work stations to help the students review the last chapters of the book and reflect upon how they were tied to the first. In this activity, students were required to visit three stations and fill out answer sheets at each station after discussing the questions with their peers. For one station, they chose either “The Village Qahwah,” if they were male, or “Imm Fared’s Kitchen,” if female, to discuss questions about Darraj’s story on “Village Gossip: The view from the *Qahwah*.” At the “George’s Coffee Shop” station, both men and women sat together at café tables to synthesize the major themes of “Christmas in Palestine,” over coffee and baklava. At the “Picnic with Susan” station, they were asked to develop questions that they would like to ask the author about the book, sitting on blankets with pillows to lean on as they sampled Middle Eastern snacks. The students were very eager to participate in this activity and were highly engaged.

Overall, we were very pleased by the richness of the discussions and the cultural exchanges that took place in our classes. In addition, we felt that the author was well-received on by the campus community and that her lecture was a well-attended, positive event for our campus.

Discussion

Introducing this book to our first-year students was valuable on multiple levels. It was enlightening for our students to read about another culture through a book that spanned a time frame of over 100 years of history. The cultural and political changes that have taken place over the century were striking, and our students were forced to confront realities of life in those times and in that place, as compared to their own lives. Yet, they were also quick to point out the commonalities between the characters in the book and their own family members, living or dead. They were drawn in by the love stories, moral crises, and family concerns that were quite familiar to them. They connected with this book.

The opportunity to meet the author provided an opportunity to engage in rich discussion about the creative process of writing, as well as the realities of living in America as a member of a minority group. In her lecture to the campus, Darraj said she was often asked growing up, “What *are* you?” because, although she was born in Philadelphia, she looked *different*. Many of our American students of color were able to relate to the personal stories that she shared about having a distinct cultural identity without a nationality. Indeed, all students at this age are invested in self-discovery of identities, and the stories in the book resonated with so many of the students who were actively involved in that difficult process of striking out on one’s own while holding onto the best parts of one’s cultural and personal history.

The study guides, which were developed through a collaborative effort of all four of us on the project team, worked very well to move the students through the layers of content to achieve insights about themselves as well as the situation in Palestine. The opportunity to discuss the meaning of each chapter—and the central theme of love—was a powerful teaching tool. The strong, determined, and powerful women who guided the story lines destroyed the stereotype of Arab women as being helpless and submissive. Rather, they provided examples of strong personalities and forces for good. They *were* the story.

Although we went into this project with knowledge of best practices and years of teaching experience behind us, we based our project mostly on a hunch that it would be successful. After all, we know our students and we know what they need. We did not realize, at first, how successful this project would prove to be and how meaningful an experience this project would provide for so many of our first-year students. Looking back, we wish that we had devised a pre-test/post-test for the students as an objective assessment of the project's success. Nevertheless, we did retrieve evidence of the value of the project, and the impact on our students, in their reflective writings and their final course evaluations. Some of their comments follow.

One student's course evaluation included, "Made me want to get out of the country and travel and see the world," and another student's reflection paper included these remarks: "This novel genuinely opened my eyes to how occupation and times of turmoil really affect the people, surrounding area, and sometimes the whole world... Often we don't truly understand what others are going through because we have never see the uncertainty others have gone through. Many people make simple comments about complex problems. This story gives you a realistic idea of how desperate these people were just to survive. ... Darraj did an excellent job of opening up my worldview with reliability and wholesome characters I could easily follow along with. Her novel solidified the idea in my mind that the world is completely grey."

Another comment was, "My favorite story in the book was the last chapter. It showed the reoccurring character Salma and her life as a child struggling to be a daughter in a time where parents would rather have a son. Reading this story really made me put my current life struggles into perspective.... She never got a break from working. Reading this emotional story showed me that I should not take what I have in life for granted, and I should appreciate all the things that I do have, such as a loving family and a great education." Similarly, another student offered a reflection on diversity: "An important part of education and growth is diversity. Diversity allows for one to be exposed to different cultures and different ideas, so that one is not ignorant to certain topics.... Learning about different beliefs also allows for someone to understand philosophies and ways of thinking that they may not have otherwise been introduced to." Similarly, one student remarked that the class "...taught about other cultures beautifully and always kept me fully engaged during class time. This was my favorite class of the semester."

Conclusion

Reviewing the student reactions and reflecting on the semester-long involvement with Susan Muaddi Darraj and her novel of short stories from Palestine, we arrived at the conclusion that our

project succeeded in providing an enriching and engaging experience for our first-year American and Arab students. We developed study guides that were useful in facilitating discussions and promoting rich intercultural exchanges. These study guides also helped support our efforts to bring creative interactive strategies into the classroom that enhanced the learning experience for all of our students. We used our knowledge of best practices to anchor our request to have this author visit our campus, and we received financial support from our administration to do so. We organized her visit, promoted the event, hosted her, and invited our students to meet her and ask questions of her. Although we met challenges and noted the shortcomings, such as the absence of a questionnaire to formally assess the success of this initiative, our student response surveys provided ample evidence of its success. At the end of the semester, we, as instructors, also felt enriched by the experience of meeting Susan Muaddi Darraj and introducing her to our students. Indeed, the process of bringing literature to life for our students proved to be rewarding for us, as well as for the larger campus community.

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Appendix A: Sample Study Guide for “THE JOURNEY HOME”

Darraj, S. M. (2015). *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*. Amherst, MA: Sheridan Books, p. 1-26.

Glossary:

jinn
thowb
abaya
maharam
Frangi
Inshallah
aroos

Guided Questions:

1. What was the lifestyle of Rabab’s people, and what were the hardships they faced during the war? What war was this?
2. When Rabab goes to the well, what does she find?
3. What do we know about the stranger? What was his name?
4. What happened to the people inside the house near the well? What was the first clue?
5. What was the problem with the stranger’s shoulder? How does Rabab get to know him?
6. What was Rabab’s mother’s warning about Awwad? Why is this important? How does Rabab confirm her mother’s suspicions?
7. What was significant about the bracelet?

Rabab
dabke
qamis
Arees
mabrouk
maskeen
tabla

8. How would you describe Rabab? How do you feel about Rabab, her family, Awwad, and the stranger? Were you surprised by the decisions that the people in this story made? Did you predict the ending? Can you predict where this story might lead?
9. Relate this story to your own life by considering: where would your own “journey home” take you, what is there that calls you home, and where your own family roots were in 1916.

When you review this story, please make special note of:

1. The stranger’s real name
2. The stranger’s problem shoulder
3. The village where Rabab settled
4. The name of the stranger’s village
5. The bracelet

Your notes, questions, and reflections:

Appendix B: Sample Study Guide for “ABU SUFAYAN”

Darraj, S. M. (2015). *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*. Amherst, MA: Sheridan Books, p. 27-39.

Glossary:

thowb
 hilwa
 sulha
 Inshallah
 Al-salaam alayki, ya Mariam
 abaya
 qamis
 mukhtar
 whayn / teta
 shebab

Guided Questions:

1. In the beginning of the story, there is a funeral in the church. Who has died? What happens at the very end of the funeral?
2. Coming out of the funeral, Abu Sufayan sees his green-eyed wife Halwa, remembering when she was his young and beautiful bride. How did they meet? How would he describe her as she is today?
3. What is Abu Sufayan's real name? Where have you heard this name before? Describe him.
4. How did Dimitri's son die? What are the people planning to do about it?
5. Some of the women in the village have been planning to go to a march. What do you think the women's demonstration was about?
6. What was happening globally in 1936, during the time of this chapter? What impact did it have on the village? Describe the situation in the village now.
7. What was the men's meeting about? What does Abu Sufayan want to do? What would *you* do?
8. In this story, we meet Salma, Abu Sufayan's granddaughter, and we will meet her again. What sort of relationship do they have? When they sit together, he tells her of his time in the service. Why do you think he does not tell her about the Bedouin girl? Who *is* the Bedouin girl?
9. Why did Abu Radwan's family flee? Why did they come to Abu Sufayan? Did he and Salma help?
10. The theme of being naïve appears in this chapter, as it did in the first story. Do you remember when it appeared in "The Journey Home"? Why does Abu Sufayan's wife call him naïve in this story?
11. Relate this story to your own life by considering what was going on in the world in 1936 and how that might affected your own family's story—including their decision to come to America.

When you review this story, please make special note of:

1. Abu Sufayan's sons, who moved to Guatemala
2. Imm Fareed, the tall woman who gave the signal after the funeral
3. Radwan, who killed Dimitri's son
4. The statue of the Virgin Mary in the village church, pockmarked by bullets

Your notes, questions, and reflections:**Appendix C: Sample Study Guide for "THE WELL"**

Darraj, S. M. (2015). *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*. Amherst, MA: Sheridan Books, p. 40-75.

Glossary:

Bi'sm al-ab w'al-ibn
 Inshallah
 hatta
 jinn
 qahwah
 mukhtar

ahlan wasahlan

Al-salaam alayki, ya Mariam

thowb

shebab

Guided Questions:

1. The opening scene takes place in a Christian Orthodox Church in the West Bank. What is the significance of that scene? What is the role of religion in Amira's life? What does she want to be?
2. Discuss Amira, the main character. What impression do you have of her? What words or events make you feel that way?
3. How does Amira see herself in comparison with her sister and other girls her age? Is this something specific to her culture, or is it universal? Explain.
4. What is Amira's relationship with her father and her own family? Do you recognize any one from a former story? Describe her relationship with Muneer, his children and his wife Lydia.
5. Lydia, Muneer's pregnant wife, wears something that you have read about before. What is it, and what does it tell you about Lydia's family of origin?
6. There is a crisis in Muneer's family. What is it? How does Amira decide to about it, and why? How does her family react to her decision, and why?
7. Many pages of this story are devoted to the inner struggle that Amira has in trying to decide the right thing to do. Who were the people that influenced her decision the most? Name three.
8. In this story, are there any clues to help us figure out how Amira's family connects to Abu Sufayan's (Jamal's) family? Can you predict any future connections?
9. At the very end of the story, Amira promises herself to say a prayer at the well in Muneer's home. What will she pray for? What does her prayer represent or foretell?
10. Why do you think the author inserts in the text words in her native language (Arabic)?
11. Relate this story to your own life by considering what was going on in the world in 1966 and how that compares to your own family's story.

When you read this story, please make special note of:

1. The description of Muneer's home
2. The importance of the *qahwah*, or coffee shop, as a gathering place for men
3. The recurring themes of strong women, love overcoming hardship, naïveté, and doing the right thing
4. The different types of love that can create lasting bonds between people
5. The relationship that Amira has with Muneer's eldest daughter, Adlah.

Your notes, questions, and reflections: