

# EMOTIONS WHILE READING LITERATURE IN MULTICULTURAL GROUPS

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## Abstract

The article presents a qualitative hermeneutic study on literary interpretive interaction in multicultural teachers' groups. Participants were Jewish and Arab teachers in Israel who read a story by Kafka. The objectives of the study were to learn in what ways readers express emotions towards the Other in the text as well as the Others in their learning groups. The activity aimed at generating a literary interpretive discourse and promoting interactive learning involving willingness to face the Other with keen attention and dignity. Learners' oral and written interactions with the Other—in the text and with peers—were examined. The findings indicate a variety of ways of relating to the textual Other by filling textual gaps, interpreting symbols and explicitly expressing emotions. The interaction among the learners was characterized by (1) acquaintance and seating arrangements; (2) cooperation; (3) sharing; (4) facing the Other. However, not all participants expressed receptive emotions, especially towards their groupmates. The study has implications for the teaching of literature in multicultural classrooms.

Key words: multicultural classroom, literature instruction, emotions, the Other, empathy, sharing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents a qualitative hermeneutic study on the sociocultural and ethical aspects of literary-interpretive interaction in multicultural groups of teachers studying for a post-graduate degree. The starting point was the complex problem we, the authors, face on a regular basis: teaching literature in Hebrew, the majority language in Israel, to groups of diverse languages, religions, cultures and nationalities in a society caught in an intractable conflict (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2019; Soen, 2002; Zarmi-Poyas, 2012). We wished to examine the characteristics of the interpretive discourse the readers carried out while discussing a story in a multicultural context, as well as its potential to generate emotional response towards the Other.

The complexity of our educational context mirrors that of the Israeli population, which is composed of two main groups: 74.1% Jews from diverse countries and languages, and 21 % Palestinian-Arabs (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS), 2019), who, following conventional usage, are referred to below as “Arabs”. In their daily lives, Arab and Jewish students hardly ever interact. The education system is segregated, and most students live in mono-cultural neighborhoods and cities. Arab students study Hebrew in school and use it at work or higher education, but many do not use it in their daily lives. Jewish students may choose to study Arabic as third language, but only few do so.

Upon reaching higher education, Arab students have reasonable proficiency in Hebrew, but still face some difficulty with literacy that often stretches to graduate studies. In 2016, 9.1% of Arab students did not complete their first BA year, compared to 7.1% of non-Arab students; and only 50.8% graduated within the standard time, as compared to 61% in the rest of the population (ICBS, 2019).

The learners in our groups are experienced teachers with a sound pedagogic-didactic basis, as well as entrenched educational approaches often aligned with those of the institutes where they teach. They arrive at Hebrew-language education colleges for graduate studies as part of their professional development.

Finally, the relationships in our multicultural learning groups are also affected by power relations at the college, majority-minority relations in Israel, and the constant tension related to violent events and political statements as part of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We lecturers belong to the Jewish hegemony, adding weight to the imbalance of power in the classroom. However, following our studies (Elkad-Lehman & Poyas, 2019; Poyas & Elkad-Lehman, 2016; Zarmi-Poyas, 2012), we are highly aware of the cultural-linguistic sensitivities in class and do our utmost to respect views, difficulties and preferences arising during the learning process.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *2.1 Emotions in literature instruction*

Literary works vary in terms of the potential for discourse for different groups (Long, 2003). In our case, the discourse occurs in groups of teachers—mostly women—who thus share professional experiences, but also come from highly diverse environments. We wanted to generate Literature instruction that enables readers to express thoughts and emotions. A key concept in our approach to Literature instruction is narrative empathy, “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition” (Keen, 2013, 1). Closely related, identification is a state in which one is transformed by the model of the Other or experience transference, with art perceived as a source of insight (Berman, 2003).

Often, however, emotions are blocked in the academic context, due to social reasons. The way emotions are discussed (or not) depends on “emotional rules” and therefore varies with context (Zembylas, 2005). Expressing emotions contributes to interpreting the text, understanding oneself and understanding the Other. Hence, it is important to avoid silencing emotions that contradict those ‘desired’ by the instructor (Thein & Sloan, 2012), or by the social hegemony. According to Zembylas (2006, 2007), narratives or discourse in interactions can be a significant tool in studying emotions in instruction, as well as social processes of coping with hatred and trauma in a society in conflict.

Although literature reading is an individual act, many have a strong urge to talk to others about their experience (Long, 2003), and this dialogue offers new insights.

In multicultural contexts, teaching Literature can make readers reconsider complex situations (Farren, 1999; Macaluso, 2015; Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007; Thein & Sloan, 2012), and may engage them with fictional Others in a way that stimulates discussions with actual Others in the learning group. It offers an opportunity to address questions of identity and belonging (Beach & Myers, 2001; Sumara, 2002; van de Ven & Doecke, 2011) and thus raise awareness of social, ideological, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the classroom and community. Interactions among readers are important in multicultural literature teaching contexts but pose significant challenges to teachers since they may increase emotional tension in the learning group (Miller, 1998; Poyas & Elkad-Lehman, 2016; Thein & Sloan, 2012). Controversial topics may be muted since teachers prefer to avoid them (Glazier, 2003; Glazier & Seo, 2005), or channeled to socially and emotionally safe and normative zones.

### *2.2 The Other*

Our previous attempts to cope with the aforementioned difficulties (Poyas & Elkad-Lehman, 2016; Zarmi-Poyas, 2012) have led us to inquire regarding the concept of the Other. The Other is a broad concept ranging between Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary-

linguistic approach and Emmanuel Levinas' ethical approach. While we recognize the importance of the concept of Otherness derived from postcolonial theory, it fails to address the diversity of Others in Israeli society, leading to a unidimensional perspective of tensions between Arabs and Jews. In our groups, the diversity is much more complex, and we therefore find the concept of "radical otherness" (Levinas, 1972) more suitable.

For Bakhtin, we are all Others to those who are not us. This opens up the possibility of dialogue constructed out of the speaker's attentiveness to the Other, allowing persons to be what they truly are. The discourse among the various voices creates polyphony and openness within the same literary and sociocultural space (Bakhtin, 1981).

Conversely, for Levinas the Other is the starting point for moral responsibility. The Other demands responsibility from the self—the responsibility of placing oneself in the Other's place. Responsibility derives from the Other's visage, which embodies the divine in man and serves as a moral reminder not to be violent towards the Other and acknowledge his vulnerability. Responsibility, in the sense of responsiveness to the Other, is evidence of the divine in man (Levinas, 1972; Levy, 1997). By extension, we, the authors, are responsible for the Other - we cannot remain indifferent to our students' difficulties as immigrants, as Arabs in a Hebrew-speaking college or as people facing us in general.

According to Levinas, to promote ethical conduct the self needs to be guided in breaking its interiority and going beyond the confines of its nature by encountering the Other (Guoping, 2016; Levinas, 1972; Levy, 1997). This encounter also occurs in the interpretive act (Ben-Pazi, 2012) - the interpreter faces the textual Other and his or her interpretation seeks to be attuned to the Other. We have borrowed Levinas' principle in order to emphasize the educational, hermeneutic and ethical responsibility involved in the interpretive acts of reading. Being attuned to the other and empathizing with him/her is a desired educational goal, but difficult to achieve in an academic context and/or following a short-term intervention. Therefore, researchers recommend discussing perspective taking (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007; Thein & Sloan, 2012), that is, being able to respond emotionally and receptively, and acknowledge the Other's presence.

Given the challenges of generating an emotionally accepting discourse in the multicultural classroom while interpreting a story, the aim of the present study was to learn about our learners' interactions with the Other, both in the text and in their reading group. More specific research questions were:

- 1) In what ways did readers express their emotions towards the Other in the text?
- 2) In what ways did readers respond to their group mates' stories and ideas?

### 3. METHOD

Our study is a qualitative hermeneutic research: "Interactive/hermeneutic approaches involve seeking meaning and developing interpretative explanations through processes of feedback" (Grbich, 2012, p. 17). In qualitative hermeneutic research interpretation of data, a text or artifact, should be from a multi-perspective approach. Data interpretation involves the researcher's interpretations combined with the context that the data comes from. Both the researcher interpretation and the context of the data influence each other (Levy, 1986; Ricoeur, 2007).

#### 3.1 Participants

The study took place in two groups of MEd students during two consecutive years (2014- n=32; 2015- n=34). All students were teachers, most with more than ten years' experience, who took a course on travel literature. The groups' characteristics were very similar. Each year about half taught in grades 1-6 and the others in grades 7-12. The participants' mother tongues were Hebrew (64%), Arabic (26%), English, Russian, Dutch, Turkish, Romanian, Italian, and Georgian; 73% preferred reading in Hebrew, 16% preferred reading in Arabic and 4% in both languages. They reported reading mainly for academic and professional development purposes (73%), with only 8% reading for pleasure.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

College in central Israel—66 students (53 Jews; 13 Arabs)							
Age				Teaching Subjects			
M	F	Range	M	Hebrew L-1, L-2	Literature (Hebrew & World)	English L-2	Arabic L-1, L-2
7	59	23-58	39.4	20	19	21	6

The first author of the paper was also the lecturer of the literature courses under study.

#### 3.2 Intervention: reading activity

##### 3.2.1 Objectives

We planned an activity to foster interaction and dialogue about the fictional Other with actual Others, thereby providing our students with an opportunity to face the Other (Levinas, 1972). Our activity had the following objectives:

- 1) Generate a literary interpretive discourse in multicultural learning groups (Thein & Sloan, 2012; Willis, 2000) of Language and Literature teachers.

- 2) Promote learning in which an interaction among learners is a learning tool (Appleman & Hynds, 1992).
- 3) Promote discourse that involves willingness to face the Others and recognize their otherness, as well as hearing and expressing opinions in different areas out of attention and dignity (Levinas, 1972; Thein & Sloan, 2012)

### 3.2.2 *The text*

We selected *Homecoming* by Franz Kafka. This very short story was unfamiliar to the participants with one exception, and some of them had not read Kafka before. The story describes a real-life situation but retains ambiguity given the lack of spatial and temporal references, and includes symbolic aspects that call for diverse interpretations (Berman, 2003). The story's content invites readers to explore their views concerning the experience of returning home after years of detachment and disengagement, and to express narrative empathy. We assumed its themes were cross-cultural, with a potential for emotional response and discourse regarding the personal, cultural and political in the relatively safe dialogic environment of the course. We hoped it would allow participants to encounter each other and to deal with diverse views concerning the term 'Home' and its cultural meanings.

"Home-coming" by Franz Kafka<sup>1</sup>

I have returned, I have passed under the arch and am looking around. It's my father's old yard. The puddle in the middle. Old, useless tools, jumbled together, block the way to the attic stairs. The cat lurks on the banister. A torn piece of cloth, once wound around a stick in a game, flutters in the breeze. I have arrived. Who is going to receive me? Who is waiting behind the kitchen door? Smoke is rising from the chimney, coffee is being made for supper. Do you feel you belong, do you feel at home? I don't know, I feel most uncertain. My father's house it is, but each object stands cold beside the next, as though preoccupied with its own affairs, which I have partly forgotten, partly never known. What use can I be to them, what do I mean to them, even though I am the son of my father, the old farmer? And I don't dare knock at the kitchen door, I only listen from a distance, I only listen from a distance, standing up, in such a way that I cannot be taken by surprise as an eavesdropper. And since I am listening from a distance, I hear nothing but a faint striking of the clock passing over from childhood days, but perhaps I only think I hear it. Whatever else is going on in the kitchen is the secret of those sitting there, a secret they are keeping from me. The longer one hesitates before the door, the more estranged one becomes. What would happen if someone were to open the door now and ask me a question? Would not I myself then behave like one who wants to keep his secret?

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<sup>1</sup>See [http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/de/Kafka%2C\\_Franz-1883/Heimkehr/en](http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/de/Kafka%2C_Franz-1883/Heimkehr/en) for German and English versions. The story was presented in a Hebrew version (Kafka, 1971).

### 3.3 Procedure

The activity took place as an integral part of the participants' graduate studies in a Language Education program, conducted in the first part of the course, after several introductory lessons.

The learners were divided into multicultural subgroups of 3-5 each, aiming at providing confidence to the shy and hesitant in the group, making them feel heard and respected, and enabling all to speak up. Almost all the subgroups included at least one Hebrew and one Arabic speaker, and one speaker of another language. Participants were instructed to focus their discussion on the following questions: (1) What expectations does the title raise for you? (2) How are these expectations expressed in the short story? (3) Which five words best capture the story's meaning? Discuss the words and reach a consensus. Each student had to speak up at least twice. The duration of the entire activity was 90 minutes.

Finally, the students were asked to upload to a dedicated website (1) a recording of the discussion; (2) a jointly written document describing it; and (3) a personal text describing the most important things they had found in the text.

#### 3.3.1 Data gathering

We gathered data using the following tools:

- 1) Recordings of the sub-groups' discourses, which were transcribed by a research assistant. We obtained ten fully transcribed recordings. Other recordings were of bad quality. We decided to audio record the discussions to learn about the process of entering the textual world (Langer, 1995), given the multicultural context of the activity.
- 2) Nineteen group texts summarizing the group discussions and expressing what was found to be important by group members. We asked for a group summary to learn what participants could agree upon, in comparison with the content of the oral discussions.
- 3) Fifty-eight personal writings which were uploaded to the course site a few days after the activity. The personal comments expressed participants' ideas regarding the story and their impressions of the activity. We decided to gather these in order to learn about participants' interpretations after sharing their thoughts with their colleagues, arguing, questioning and crystallizing their own ideas, as well as reflecting on the whole experience.
- 4) Field notes taken by the lecturer: participants' behavior, seating arrangements, facial expressions, laughs or arguments, etc.
- 5) Six interview transcripts. We conducted semi-structured interviews with six more proficient learners - two Jewish women, two Jewish men and two Arab women, selected based on expressions we wanted to understand (Anderberg et al., 2008), their ability to provide thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), and their willingness to be interviewed. The interviews took place six

months later, after the course grades had been published, to avoid ethical issues regarding participation in a lecturer's research.

The use of these tools gave us the opportunity to learn about participants' relationships and thoughts during and following the activity, and gather data in several steps (Grbich, 2013). Using two different types of text: spoken (group discourses) and written (group session summaries and personal writings) enabled us to take advantage of different kinds of expressions (Ricœur, 2007). We could listen to what was said among group members while engaging with the story, and later read what they had considered important and worth summarizing in one group voice. The personal writings gave us another perspective regarding the activity, that of individuals who were less dominant during the activity, and the ability to hear reflecting voices of individuals who had undergone a process of reflection, shaping their ideas and interpretations. This personal writing is no longer a publicly spoken discourse, and has the ability to present the unspoken (Ricœur, 2007). The interviews helped us understand individuals who expressed in the group discourse or in writing interesting ideas which needed more elaboration (Anderberg, Svensson, Alvegård, & Johansson, 2008).

The students gave written consent to participation in the study.

### 3.3.2 *Data analysis*

The data were read and the content analyzed by each researcher separately. We separated the analyses of data from the different sources (oral discourse, group writing and personal writing), searching for statements expressing (1) explicit and implicit expressions of sensitivity, sympathy, empathy or the opposite towards the narrator's character (e.g. "something must be threatening to him at home"; "he sounds remote") (2) explicit and implicit expressions of sensitivity, sympathy, empathy or the opposite among group members (e.g. using plural language, "we worked together"; "your story touches me"); and (3) personal stories and memories attesting to emotions elicited by the story and the discussion. Each data source exposed a new angle regarding the picture and layered it. A statement was defined as a complete idea written in one sentence or a sequence of sentences.

Next, the authors collaborated, discussing the phenomena each of them had elicited in the previous step, arriving at a consensus regarding themes and interrelations of data. This consensus led to a more refined analysis of the data. We consequently compared the types of responses from the three data sources to learn what characterized the responses at each stage of the activity.

We also explored participants' patterns of interacting with the story and with their colleagues in the group throughout the three stages of the activity. We looked for steps of acknowledgement and response to the Other during the groups' performance and the personal writings, in order to identify a common pattern of cognitive and emotional response to the Other.



#### 4. RESULTS

The findings were very rich, and the present article focuses on personal and inter-personal responses to the Other. Although 'everything is political' - we minimized discussions of political responses (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), since they are reported elsewhere (Poyas & Elkad-Lehman, in press). In the following section, data related to group discourse is encoded as GD; group writing—GW; and personal writing—PW. The number is the group number, while the letter represents the first (a) or second (b) research year.

##### 4.1 Interaction with the textual Other

Statements concerning a learner's attitude towards the Other in the text were scattered among other types of statements throughout the oral discussions (e.g., vocal reading, procedural remarks, getting to know each other). Abrupt turn-taking and interrupting one another's words were common. Complete and elaborated ideas were found mostly in the personal writings. Analysis of the personal writings yielded four categories of statements: (1) trying to fill literary gaps related to the narrator's situation; (2) discussing the meaning of symbols and motifs; (3) expressing explicit sensitivity, sympathy and empathy for the narrator; (4) thoughts regarding the activity and its contribution to the teaching of Literature (See Table 2). The fourth category is less relevant to this study.

Table 2. Personal writings—statement frequencies

Type of statement	No. of statements	Percentage	Example
Trying to fill literary gaps	54	25%	Was there an actual return or is it all his imagination?
Discussing the meaning of symbols and motifs	18	8%	Home symbolizes warmth, connection, familiarity.
Expressing explicit expressions of sensitivity, sympathy, and empathy	95	45%	I felt the character's alienation and estrangement and pitied him.
Thoughts on the activity and its contribution for teaching literature	46	22%	It was fun to work with people I have never spoken to before. It gave me a good idea for my next lesson at school.
Total sum of statements	212	100%	

Cases of trying to fill literary gaps were identified, discussed and closed by the participants in light of their cultural world (Langer, 1992, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). The gap that concerned the students primarily, significant to any travel literature (Campbell, 1973), had to do with the reasons for the narrator's departure and return, and his relationships at home. Some participants surmised that the narrator had left

of his free will, whereas others said he had been forced out due to sexual, social, or religious misconduct that shamed his family:

Maybe [...] he did something really bad at home and then had to leave it. Yes, they will not tolerate what he did... he feels ashamed all the time. [...] what he did would not be acceptable [...]. He feels ashamed to return because of what happened between them (Rana, Arab, GD, 8/a).

Several students, Jews as well as Arabs, referred to home leaving as exile and homecoming as repatriation. The reasons for the narrator's homecoming troubled the participants, as did his feelings concerning this act and what he expected to find. Some spoke about hopes, others about the impossibility of homecoming after absence. After reading the description of the narrator's feelings facing the kitchen door, Muhamad asked "So why he is coming back home?" (GD, 7/b). These examples demonstrate how engaging with ideas in order to fill the textual gaps elicited implicit emotions towards the character, as well as insights concerning his situation and emotional state. These were influenced by the participants' cultural background.

Most responses were a mixture of literary and personal-emotional response. When voicing her emotions and thoughts about the text, the reader reflects them to herself and others: "What home is he returning to? Is it the same one he left, or did things change? Did the old farmer go bankrupt? Did the same people he had left remain in the house, or are new people living within its walls?" (three students, GW, 7/a). Another example deals with the relationship in the family: "In this story, the protagonist only mentions the father and not the mother, I wonder why..." (Orit, Jew, GD, 4/b). And Jacob offers a piece of advice: "We have a very-very dominant father figure here [...] he needs... to 'break free' of the father's hold to achieve self-realization" (Jew, GW, 7/b). In her personal writing Efrat wrote: "The many gaps in the story stood out for me. All the things not said in the story demonstrate the intensity of the distance and alienation at home, even more than the descriptions in the story" (Efrat, Jew, PW). From the last example we see that in the third step of the activity, the personal writing, the ideas of participants were more consolidated and less fragmented.

Discussions of the meaning of symbols and motifs revealed readers' emotions towards the narrator's state. Group 2/b discussed the meaning of 'door' as a symbolic option for hope or failure, and reported in writing:

A door symbolizes the entrance to something familiar, safety, entering home, and can also stand for the opposite—shutting the door, a closed door, a barrier. The door symbolizes his journey; it can be both the end of something and a beginning—the return from the journey. The door is also related to his fear—would the door lead him to safe and familiar spaces or [...] strange and frightening ones? A door also symbolizes a new opportunity for a different life or a change of fate.

In Group 7/a's response, the students referred to the fact that in both Hebrew and Arabic, a single (and very similar) word referred to both the structure (house) and the sense of domesticity (home), and wondered whether there were such differences in Kafka's original language. When relating to 'home' as a symbol, participants

explicitly associated it with their parental home in the past, and their home in the present.

Participants also referred to the physical barriers before the entrance as metonymic of the emotional barrier experienced by the narrator, and derived interpretive conclusions: "The arch and the door. [...] the puddle in the middle. [...] Water is a source of life, but this is a puddle and it's stagnant water [...] and it's right there with the tools [...]" (11/b, GD). These excerpts from the oral discussions and group writings show that in the process of interpreting symbols participants voiced their thoughts and emotions concerning the narrator's hesitations.

*Explicit expressions of sensitivity, sympathy and empathy* appeared in group discussions, written assignments and interviews. "Did anybody miss him?" asked Avner, a Literature teacher (Jew,2/b, GW), or: "For me homecoming is a positive experience [...] after reading I felt the strangeness and alienation and felt sorry for him" (Jew, Bar, PW). They expressed sensitivity or pity but saw the narrator as an Other, with different experiences. Eddie (Jew,8/b, GD) said: "He went through so much in life", and quoted, "What use can I be to them, what do I mean to them?". Others emphasized the fact that the narrator dared not knock: "Something must be threatening to him at home" (11/b, GD). Hella, an English teacher who had immigrated to Israel as a child, felt particularly empathetic. She wrote:

I find myself setting out on a personal and nostalgic journey to my childhood home [...]: the weather, [...] the staircase, the hinted duskiness, secrets whispered in the kitchen for the little girl—me—not to understand [...]—all evoke forgotten memories (Hella, Jew, PW).

Unlike Hella's nostalgia which refers mainly to the landscape, Anola, another Jewish English teacher, focused on the narrator's emotional world. She used the first person in a way that indicated her empathy: "Who awaits me and how do I cope with it?" (GW, 1/b). In her personal writing, she explained that her interest in the narrator derived from her professional encounters with children removed from their homes.

Hamsa, an Arab participant from the same group, wrote a personal comment suggesting her strong emotional response. Without providing details, she hinted at a story experience "in the family". Note the reference to the narrator as a child and the transition to the first person:

It tears my heart out to see how children pay for problems their parents can't solve [...]. I understand that child who cannot find himself in that abandoned house, because that's what he feels: I've been abandoned, although everyone is seemingly around me.

Jacob, a Jewish English teacher and former dancer, did not empathize with Kafka's character in the classroom discourse, but felt more comfortable doing so in the interview. He provides an example of profound, almost physical empathy, perhaps too intense to be expressed in class:

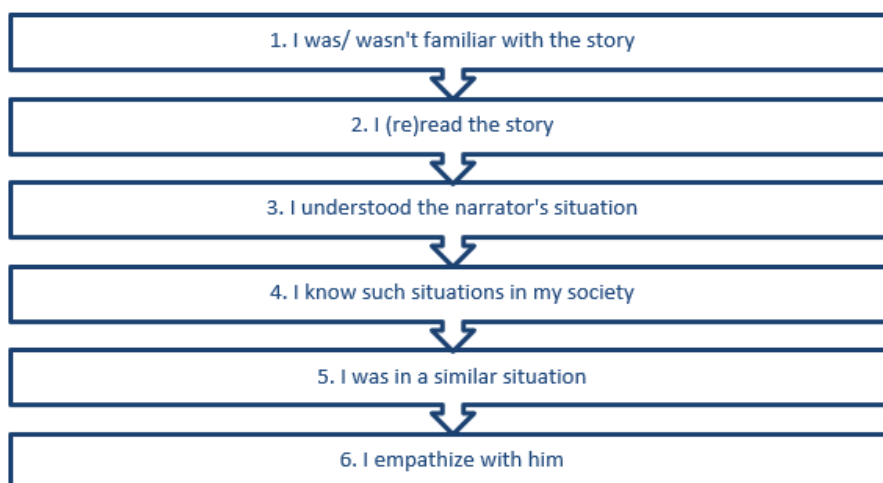
I "danced" Kafka—the same story [...] there was a choreographic discourse that spoke about the homecoming of a cruel person who comes home and has to live with the past [...]. And throughout my reviewing of this story, I thought of myself as a dancer, and could see the father and his relations with his son, and myself as returning home after

six years in the US [...] to find rejection by my mother who was ill and told me, "Why did you come? This will only cost us money". [...] The way back home is impossible.

To conclude, the participants referred to the Other in the text, the homecoming narrator who dares not knock on the door. Several participants tried to see the Other as different from them (Bakhtin, 1981), while others (at least 22 responses) saw the Other as similar, or more precisely, saw themselves through the literary character using projection (Berman, 2007). Still others felt sorry for the narrator - seven responses that saw the Other as needful of their responsible, ethical gaze (Levinas, 1972).

Figure 1 depicts a linear process of responding to the Other while reading and discussing the story, as emerging from and theorized based on the analysis of participants' patterns of response throughout the activity steps. Note that not every reader completed the process. Stage 2 depends on the reader's will. Stage 3 depends on his understanding of the text. Stages 4-5 depend on the reader's lived experience. Finally, Stage 6 depends on the readers' psychological structure and willingness to engage with the text emotionally.

Figure 1. Learners' interactions with the textual Other



We found that attitudes towards the Other varied, ranging from reading the story without emotional response to empathy with the narrator. Only seven students (e.g. Eddie) completed the process and attained empathy, whereas most were projective, i.e., they reflected a sense of similarity between their personal situation and that of the narrator (stages 4, 5), without looking at the Other's own situation with empathy (stage 6) (Keen, 2013).

#### 4.2 Participants' interactions among themselves

In this section we present participants' behaviors towards each other while discussing the story, as elicited from the group recordings, lecturer's field notes, personal writings and some of the recorded interviews. We assumed that participants' behaviors and interactions reflect, to a certain extent, their feelings.

*Acquaintance and seating arrangements.* Prior to the activity, acquaintance among the learners was shallow at best. There were almost no contacts between Jewish and Arab students, and they would sit in separate areas in the classroom. The first activity, Expectations Raised by the Title, was an opportunity for rapid acquaintance through a round of comments. As early as that point in time, there was surprising openness and people shared personal stories. Interestingly, after this lesson observations showed changes in seating arrangements.

*Cooperation* between the students was good. Despite differences in language proficiency, participants cooperated flexibly, managing to help and be helped, resulting in an overall sense of synergy. The following is a description of the work process in group 7/a (GW). The members—three women teachers, two of them Jews, one of them an English and another an Arabic native speaker—reported on “differences in reading processes”: “One of us wants to [...] mark the important words while reading [...]. Two others want to read the entire text first. [...] The English speaker wants to read the text again aloud [...] she asks for clarification about a sentence she didn't understand”.

Following our directions, talking turns were observed and all members were heard. The participation of all learners was particularly important due to the heterogeneity of the learning groups. In the observations and recordings, we found no evidence of intolerant or aggressive behavior. The participants were willing to listen and share, and treated the assignments with complete seriousness. Participants showed great interest in getting to know the others in their group, and appreciated the opportunity to do so. The short story enabled a candid, ethical, and respectful discourse across cultural barriers. Twenty participants (out of 58), in 36 statements (out of 212, 17%), mentioned in their private writing how meaningful it was to work together in a multicultural group:

It was fun working with people that we had never spoken to, to see the viewpoints of people coming from another world really, from a different culture [...]. To understand what one story means to three completely different people (joint response by Jewish and Arab students, PW).

We cooperated as a team so that each came from another cultural background and had different things to say from her perspective (Nadine, Arab, PW).

The final assignment, when we were each asked to find five words and agree on them, led to a fascinating discussion in which we all gained new insights. The words selected by the other group members opened up new ways of thinking for me. [...] The unique composition of our group led to a fascinating discussion. [...] after completing the task, we proceeded to a personal discussion [...] about the place and home of each one of us (Ayala, Jew, PW).

The assignment inspired thinking in both the personal and social contexts and led to constructive conversation that opened up new possibilities for understanding.

I think that this journey led me to look at the story from several directions [...]. For me, the very fact that we worked together opened a new window on the story [...] (Anat, Jew, PW).

The multi-staged interpretive process required listening, openness and respect, and the results surprised the students: "I was really surprised by the depth of our discussion" (Esther, Jew, PW).

*Sharing.* In all groups, we found personal emotional responses by all students. The opening question was met by moving responses. During the observation, one could already sense the great interest, the personal tone and the emotional openness in the work groups: "We are slipping into personal memories", one student confessed. Many found the story emotionally resonant and wanted to share their feelings with others.

Emotional excitement and empathy were evident in 7/a via bodily gestures, since all three students cried as they spoke. Samiya, an Arab teacher, was cut off from her childhood home after her parents' death, since as a woman in rural Muslim society she had no right to the inheritance: "My brother sold the house without our consent. And all the memories [...] are now only in your head. You can't go there. [...]. I don't even... dare... stand in front of this house now".

Talking about Kafka's story was a projective tool for Samiya to tell her own story. For other members of the group, it enabled coming closer to her and her culture, and empathizing with the Other's story. This was particularly meaningful in a group of three women from very different cultural background, as until that moment Samiya was for the others a woman dressed in traditional Muslim garb. In her interview, Anna, a Jewish member of Samiya's group, said:

It was amazing. Because we had Sara, who's younger, single, and a Jew. I'm religious and [...] Samiya, who's Arab [...] by the end of the meeting we were all in tears [...], and until today we are in touch, I mean, not outside the college, but we see each other and talk and hug. [...] This is the peak experience of the course [...]. It was also an exercise in listening.

The personal conversations continued after the lesson in the discussion groups. Responses were emotional, and 18 (out of 58) included personal narratives.

Kafka's short story reminded me, if only for a fleeting moment, where I came from and where I was going... My childhood years, immigrating to Israel, missing my parents when they were working long hours to support me, as well as the less positive things that happened at home in those years. To come back home is to return to my safety zone. [...] This is what the story [...] gave me... to remember and be moved (Yulia, Jew, 8/b, PW).

Sharon, a Hebrew teacher who had lost her father at a young age, reacted similarly to the story, but her memories were explicitly critical of her mother:

The sentence that got me in the first reading, which I immediately highlighted, "The longer one hesitates before the door, the more estranged one becomes". I really

connected to it, in the emotional sense, because it happened more than once that I returned to my mother's house, stood outside the door, hesitating for several moments—what am I about to enter? Who would I meet there? The painful internal sensation of the enormity of the estrangement from this woman, as opposed to the deep longing to dwellers who unfortunately are no longer alive with me and next to me (grandma and grandpa). [...] I never expected such a short text to touch me emotionally and evoke memories, longings and retrospective insights [...]. Thank you. (Sharon, Jew, PW).

Sharon's "thank you" makes clear how meaningful this reading situation was for her. Jacob (7/b) also found himself introspecting on his life journey: "Such a text—it is as if somebody wrote it *for you*. I thought this had happened only to me [...]. Thanks to literature, people experience things together". Havi (Jew, PW) used theories she had learned when writing in the discussion group about her learning process:

Following the reader response theory [...] I see the responses in real time on my mobile as well. [...] I saw how these theories were being fleshed out right in front of my eyes. Then it struck me. In this assignment each one of us has brought his personal baggage and linguistic-cultural-normative world [...]. I see the comments I have read as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Despite what appeared to be an accepting and respectful space, however, the interviews revealed that not everybody felt completely at ease, and carefully weighed their words. Jacob said in the interview that he did not talk about himself as having returned home after six years abroad.

Jacob: I missed home and when I returned, I found that there was no way back home [...].

Interviewer: And the group discourse?

Jacob: You had to carve out a place for yourself... it wasn't easy. To give up, let go. [...] What you said you said [you can't take words back]. Let others feel they are where they want to be. Literature allows for ventilation.

*Facing the Other*. Eddie is an Arabic-speaking Jew who chose to live in a mixed Arab-Jewish community and be a political activist. Even before this lesson, he had befriended the Arab male students in the group and worked with them on several course assignments. In the interview, he said: "I always look at things from at least two perspectives. And it's very difficult for me... really... in today's Israeli reality".

Eddie decided not to share his difficult home leaving story, or his observations about home as a symbol for a national home, exile and the Palestinian refugees' right of return. He said that he felt he was entering a sensitive political space, so he gave up on stating his views in the group. Eddie's view of the Other in class was affected only a little by the stories told. For him, the violent reality of the conflict was stronger than any story. Facing the Other was manifested, in his view, by political activism, and acting in one course was not enough.

Unlike Eddie, Samiya welcomed every act of being seen and accepted as the Other:

I'm lucky with the other side... [Jewish] people, and not with... mine. They have this warmth, they have this... understanding... of the other side. Of the Other. [...] There's someone who can listen to you [...]. Not only listen, but also help you.

Samiya feels that her visage has been seen—the person in her, her pain—beyond the traditional dress.

To conclude, the activity instructions stimulated a literary discourse between student teachers from the majority and minority cultures, with willingness to share and listen at varying levels of openness. The interaction between the learners was characterized by openness that surprised some of them as they shared personal memories and narratives, as well as by a rich discourse on the story, informed by personal and cultural differences.

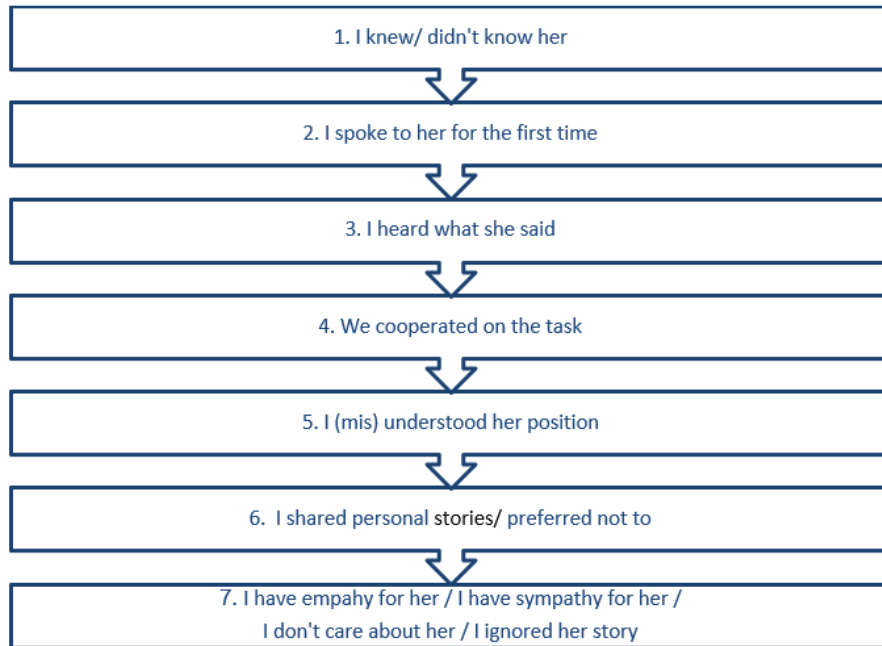
Our findings reflect a process that can be schematically represented in stages (see Figure 2). Acquaintance and seating arrangements represent the first two stages, forced on the participants by grouping arrangements. These were followed by listening. The fourth stage was cooperative interaction. All derived from reading the story and the activity itself. The interaction between the learners played a decisive role in formulating the interpretive insights, characterized by considerable openness to share and receive, open up to alternative views, evaluate surprising opinions, reformulate understandings, and appreciate the literary work. The interaction enabled discourse among Others based on partnership and mutual respect. Here, too, the process was multivocal, representing students from multiple cultures and including frequent emotional expressions.

While the first four stages were shared by all participants, from the fifth stage onwards the nature of their response altered. It referred to the understanding (or misunderstanding) of an expressed position, while the following, sixth stage, referred to the willingness or unwillingness to share personal stories and memories. As seen in the findings above, while many shared their stories, a few participants avoided sharing personal thoughts, memories and narratives due to caution, shyness, or other reasons, despite the fact that discussion took place in small groups.

The seventh stage included the responses ranging from sympathy to empathy (e.g. Anna), as well as responses of disregard and discomfort (e.g. Jacob). Even when expressing powerful emotions, the responses raised questions and doubts that both authors felt during and after the activity. Was what happened only candor combined with curiosity? Or was this an intensive emotional response to a challenging story that led to a projective process of self-exposure, contributing to acquaintance with and willingness to change attitudes towards the Other?



Figure 2. Learners' classroom interactions with the Other



Even what seemed as an expression of empathy by Samiya's friends, as experienced and shared by Samiya in her interview, raises doubts. When we examined what Samiya's friends said in the interviews, it turned out that they did feel excitement and closeness, but only to a limited extent. As you may recall, Anna said, "We are in touch, I mean, *not outside the college*" [our italics]. This is not the Levinasian seeing of the Other and responsibility, but a relationship limited in time and space.

Thus, whereas we focused here on empathy and sympathy, we also observed lack of understanding, indifference and disregard, particularly when the personal discourse or narrative involved a political issue, an aspect on which we elaborate elsewhere (Poyas & Elkad-Lehman, in press).

It appears that in the strictly literary space, it was easier for the participants to relate to the textual Other and face his weakness and misery than in their own interactions. We are nevertheless aware that Levinas' approach represents a moral ideal and that in daily classroom interactions it is reasonable for attitudes towards the Other to be limited to a respectful discourse. Under the circumstances of an intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the other aspects of diversity in Israeli society, it is, in fact, a real achievement.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The literature reading activity reported above offered Israeli teachers in multicultural groups the possibility of facing the Other—the one you read with and the one you read about. The activity's objectives were to generate a literary interpretive group discourse and promote interactive learning involving a willingness to face Others, recognize their otherness and respect it.

We posed two research questions. Our *first research question* was: How did readers express their emotions towards the Other in the text? We answered that question in reference to three areas: identifying and filling literary gaps in the story related to the narrator's situation; discussing the meaning of symbols and motifs; and using explicit expressions of sensitivity, sympathy and empathy for the narrator.

As we had assumed, Kafka's story was indeed a space that is apparently impersonal, but from which participants quickly moved to a highly personal discourse.

Literature and art call upon the reader to respond and share (Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978). When the work of art is seen as an empowering resource, offering the reader insight about her life, the process can be described as transference in the psychoanalytical sense (Berman, 2003). Insights of this kind are shared by similar Others (Long, 2003), but due to "emotional rules" they are sometimes avoided in school discourse (Zembylas, 2005). Nevertheless, personal narratives were shared in discussion groups and groups discourses. They described various cross-cultural experiences of home leaving and coming, memories of deceased parents or grandparents and family crises. Several speakers shared narratives highly critical of close family members, testifying to group trust and respect; the class discourse enabling different voices to be heard, resulting in multivocality.

The *second question* was, how did readers respond to their group mates' stories and ideas? We observed four types of behaviors: (1) acquaintance and seating arrangements; (2) cooperation; (3) sharing; (4) facing the Other.

This paper demonstrates that although the activity challenged the participants, they could assume some responsibility for the Other in a multicultural context, be committed to equality, and show sociocultural sensitivity in teaching up to a certain level. It proves the social value of learning literature by way of discourse among Others, which can serve as a bridge of words between people (Bakhtin, 1981).

The activity was also a challenge for us lecturers. Phenomenological hermeneutics requires the researcher to understand the texts under study out of existential relation to her life, and out of her own context (Ricoeur, 2007; Levy, 1986). The starting point of this study was our need to better understand the discursive undercurrents in the classes that we teach, which are inseparably linked to the complex political context, which produces a kind of abnormal normality: life goes on seemingly without any difficulty above deep subterranean flows of two hostile nations, cultures and languages. Our academic work context supposedly normalizes reality, but we must ask ourselves what really goes on in the worlds, in the minds and emotions of our students? And where does it position us?

We also reflected on how we saw the Others, our students, and how—despite our power positions as lecturers and members of the majority, and despite the political situation—we could make the students feel we faced them and were responsible in the Levinasian sense. This goes beyond our strictly academic responsibility; it is a personal, human responsibility. We have created space for the students' voices and listening as well as for ours. This study has given us awareness and understanding that continue shaping our daily planning of teaching and evaluation: in our teaching, we take the responsibility for initiating joint learning situations, joint discourse, that can support the possibility of taking a moment to look into each Other's eyes.

A lesson or a series of lessons will not overcome the multiple barriers between human beings. The atmosphere outside our classroom is charged with daily tension, mutual suspicion, segregation and aggression. Our minor activity is important, however, since it focuses on teachers who educate the next generation, shaping their attitudes towards the Other living next to them. This makes a small but important contribution to the ongoing struggle against racism.

The study highlights the contribution of open discourse around a text in small multicultural groups of readers. It also emphasizes the importance of open tasks which invite the readers' reality into the classroom and the sharing of stories and memories as a way of making sense of the text. The study demonstrates the contribution of multiple verbal tasks, group discussions, written group summaries of the discourse and personal writing in order to enable growth of interpretation evolving from listening to others' stories as well as rethinking one's own ideas.

#### *Limitations and future directions*

This study was based on one short story studied in two multicultural groups. It is important to conduct similar studies with other participants on other stories and topics. Moreover, the study was based on data collected via verbal expressions, and therefore did not include those muted by students who decided to avoid expressing their minds. Finally, the study was conducted from the point of view of participant researchers who are part of a hegemonic Jewish majority in multicultural classrooms, but in a Hebrew-speaking college. We are aware of our perspective on the learning situation and of its influence on the learning groups and our interpretations of the above findings. To enable additional perspectives, future studies will do well to include at least one other researcher from a different culture.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was conducted with the support of the Intercollegiate Research Committee at The MOFET Institute and Levinsky College of Education.

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