

From Theory To Practice: Challenging World Views and Power Narratives in the English Language Arts Classroom

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“For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

If there is one thing I hope to foster within my students, it is the idea that before they can truly own an idea—a belief—they must first question it. Where did they get that idea? Is that what is best for them? Society? And if all roads lead back to this belief, then I can't say much for they have at least examined the influences before blindly accepting. As a teacher, I see my role as being the facilitator in this process of inquiry. I ask the difficult questions and encourage my students to wrestle with them and then ask their own.

Background

I teach at Providence High School in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School (CMS) system. We have around 2100 students at our school, and I teach about 150 of them. I teach one section of Yearbook, one section of Standard English III, and four sections of Honors English III. The English III curriculum focuses on a survey of American Literature and we are also responsible for completing the research paper requirement for the CMS Graduation Project. My students come to me from a tenth grade curriculum that focuses on World Literature, but is also dictated by the state writing test. All year long, students are inundated with prompt-driven writing activities in order to ensure success on the writing test. The test is very important for measuring growth and progress toward the school goals, and as the “pay for performance” talk increases, I am sure we will see a more intense approach taken toward guaranteeing that students do well. The test covers the definition essay and cause and effect, and while these are types of writing that do exist in the real world, the way in which success for the test is taught—or the purpose behind teaching this type of writing— is highly inauthentic. We are teaching formulaic writing that is riddled with conventions that must be followed in order to make the grade. With the ever-increasing demands of teaching, everything that must be covered and tested, making time for developing writing beyond the test seems daunting or unnecessary for some teachers. Teaching writing is difficult as is, not to mention the time and energy it takes to give timely, sustaining feedback.

I also find that my junior honors students thirst for the “right” answer, but would rather be told what it is as opposed to discovering it on their own. They cannot afford to be wrong because they have too much at stake: getting into a good school and pressure from themselves and parents. While there are a few “right” answers in my class, my pedagogy is predicated on inquiry and investigation. This freedom to think scares many of my students, almost to the point of paralysis. I find that it is rarely the students who take initiative and advocate for themselves but rather the parents, thus further enabling a lack of autonomy and problem-solving skills. When I ask students to free-write after reading a small excerpt, or give them a question to write freely about, I inevitably elicit the question, “what am I supposed to write about?” I blame this on many things, and education is no exception. Freire’s “banking concept” of education basically says that we as educators are “projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression” and that in turn “negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.”¹ Oppression, ignorance, negating education and knowledge—none of these are words I want associated with my classroom or teaching strategies. The new North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process wants to ensure that teachers are preparing students for the 21st Century in our global economy. The handbook states that we should “encourage students to ask questions, think creatively, develop and test innovative ideas” because that is what will set them apart in society—a society that demands “creativity and innovation; critical thinking and problem solving; communication and collaboration.”² I want to encourage innovation, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and engagement using theory as a vehicle. I want my students to know who they are, think independently, learn through inquiry, and then masterfully articulate what they have learned and think.

Introduction

What is Knowledge?

What is knowledge? How do we gain this so-called knowledge? How do our students make meaning of their worlds? Do we ever ask them to? As educators, I think it is important that we consider these questions because isn’t that our job after all—to impart knowledge? (I say as Freire rolls in his grave.)

As part of a district-wide initiative, my school is in the midst of developing a professional learning community and part of that plan involves common planning where we are to address the following questions:

1. What do we want the students to learn and how will they learn it (objective, learning activities)?
2. How will we know if they learned it (assessment)?
3. What will we do if they do not learn it (response to instruction)?

Notice there is quite a bit of discussion of learning and knowing. Learning implies the acquisition of knowledge on the student's part, and according to this model, the teacher is then responsible for knowing whether or not the learning has taken place. Pretty simple, right? Well, if it were only that easy. With my team, we usually get stuck on question one—what do we want the students to learn? There are two schools of thought when it comes to this question: 1) what *information* do I want them to learn? versus 2) what *skills* do I want them to master? The traditional methods of teaching—the novel studies, mainly—only dabble in the first realm of thought, and our planning meetings quickly evolve into a discussion of what novels and poems we're going to read, and then what assignments our students will complete to show us they have read the text. In my first years of teaching, this process seemed like the practical approach in the English Language Arts classroom—read, do, assess, repeat. I needed something practical that wasn't rooted in theory because theory was just that—theory. Theory doesn't translate easily into the classroom because it is abstract. It's not a handout or a clear objective to write on your board. It can't be measured easily by a multiple-choice test, rubric, or latest teacher-evaluation system. Where is the spot for “theoretical justification” on the lesson plan template? I needed to keep my students busy and on task with rigorous work. I laughed at the pedagogical primers my graduate professors had me reading during my first year of teaching. If I had only known how important they would turn out to be, maybe I would have absorbed a little more and scoffed a little less.

How do you know?

How do you know? This is a loaded question. What does it mean to know something, and then how do we go about doing that? There are no easy answers to either of those questions, but one thing I am sure of, knowing extends beyond the memorization of facts and recalling details in a text. It goes beyond the identification of certain stylistic devices and elements of a major work. My students can identify similes and metaphors all day long, but ask them how it functions as part of a whole and why the author might have included it in their text and you get...that's right, crickets. And when I ask myself why—something I've done quite a bit over the last few years, I come to the conclusion that they are not accustomed to answering questions that have multiple answers. They want me to fill in the blank with the right answer instead of exploring the multiple possibilities because: 1) right answers=good grades and 2) education for them has been about figuring out what is generally accepted as appropriate and “right,” not posing relevant questions about their world and seeking the answers through purposeful study. This leads me back to the question from my common planning—what do we want the student to learn and how will they learn it? The rationale of this unit seeks to answer the “what” and “why” of that question, while the strategies and activities attempt to address the “how.”

In the organization of this unit, I have struggled with the age-old question, “what comes first, the chicken or the egg?”—my chicken being knowledge, and the egg, inquiry. I have come to terms with the idea that knowledge is gained through the inquiry process,

but I also assent to the idea that we need to question the knowledge presented to us. And to throw in another wrench, where does power factor into this process? If these three elements are just a few of those that make up the process of constructing meaning, then we have to accept that learning is not necessarily a linear process.

Rationale

The Importance of Being Curious

First, I want to look at why it is necessary to build a classroom around relevant questions. I think it is safe to say that every teacher utilizes some form of questioning in their classroom, but it is critical to examine the types of questions being asked. In the book *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*, the authors state, “student thinking is devalued in most classrooms. When asking students questions, most teachers seek not to enable students to think through intricate issues, but to discover whether or not students know the ‘right’ answers.”³ The text goes on to describe a typical American classroom as one that is “dominated by teacher talk” where “the construction of new knowledge is not as highly valued as the ability to demonstrate mastery of conventionally accepted understandings.”⁴ If this is true, and I would say that in many cases it is, then the acquisition of knowledge is synonymous with the memorization of “truth” the teacher provides. The problem with this model is that students believe “certainty is possible” and passively wait for feedback confirming whether or not they got it right, thus making them teacher-dependent; they are not required to take any ownership in the learning process; therefore, the pursuit of knowledge becomes a game to play rather than a set of skills that will serve a purpose in their future endeavors.⁵ Essentially, this form of education has nothing to do with the student and what’s going on in their world, ultimately discouraging student-engagement and independent thinking. Opposing this model, the constructivist classroom seeks to be an

[E]nvironment in which...so much of their day is organized so that student-to-student interaction is encouraged, cooperation is valued, assignments and materials are interdisciplinary, and students’ freedom to chase their own ideas is abundant, students are more likely to take risks and approach assignments with a willingness to accept challenges to their current understandings.⁶

Teachers of constructivist classrooms tend to share a set of values with those devoted to critical pedagogy. A premise of critical pedagogy is that “the school curriculum should in part be shaped by problems that face teachers and students in their effort to live just and ethical lives.”⁷ When making decisions about lessons, teachers should not ignore the pressing questions of the lives of their students and of their own. Just as with any other skill, modeling the act of posing relevant questions and seeking answers through critical thinking becomes an important part of the process. Consider what Brooks and Brooks say about leading by example:

When students work with adults who continue to view themselves as learners, who ask questions with which they themselves still grapple, who are willing and able to alter both content and practice in the pursuit of meaning, and who treat students and their endeavors as works in progress, not finished products, students are more likely to demonstrate these characteristics themselves.⁸

A teacher's willingness to learn with his or her students does not strip authority, but rather validates the process they are asking their students to undertake. In his book *Critical Pedagogy*, Kincheloe recounts a discussion of teacher authority with Paulo Freire: "teachers must admit they are in a position of authority and then demonstrate that authority in their actions in support of students...as teachers relinquish the authority of truth providers, they assume the mature role of facilitators of student inquiry and problem posing."⁹ By fostering autonomy and encouraging initiative, teachers allow students to own their education and discover the value of acknowledging and solving problems they face every day—problems that matter to them. In this type of classroom, questions posed by the teacher and students become the primary mode for constructing meaning: "complex, thoughtful questions challenge students to look beyond the apparent, to delve into issues deeply and broadly, and to form their own understandings of events and phenomena."¹⁰ Questions illuminate contradictions causing the student to revisit and evaluate prior knowledge—to reformulate what they "know" in consideration of a different perspective.¹¹ Questions suggest that in our quest for knowledge, certainty is not a guarantee. The learning focus shifts from the delivery of knowledge to ways of knowing.

Power Play

Whether we are questioning the knowledge we have passively acquired or actively pursuing knowledge through questions, it is necessary to examine the cultural ideologies shaping our students' world view as well as our own. In a discussion of the paradox of education, James Baldwin maintains that as we become educated, we are more aware of the world around us and begin to think for ourselves; however, society does not always welcome members who see through the system and may choose not to comply. Baldwin goes on to say, "the obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change."¹² If we are asking students to take ownership of their education by asking questions and seeking answers, it is necessary for them to investigate the world around them. Kincheloe relays Freire's "lesson that no subject matter or knowledge in general was beyond examination. We need to ask questions of all knowledge...because all data are shaped by the context and the individuals that produced them."¹³ As students explore different perspectives, they heighten their awareness of the forces that are shaping their actions and interpretations. In her article "Approaches to Reading with Multiple Lenses of Interpretation," Melissa

Troise comments on the importance of acknowledging cultural influences:

All of us, including high school students, have internalized ideologies that cause us to react intensely to ideas that challenge what we ‘know.’ But learning happens when we are uncomfortable, so it is important to push students to question their current understandings and assumptions.¹⁴

Challenging what you have always assumed to be true can be quite an undertaking, especially for students, because it requires that you abandon the safety of conventionally accepted ideas and, in most cases, also identify and question the power structures that are in place. Freire maintains “that all teachers need to engage in a constant dialogue with students that questions existing knowledge and problematizes the traditional power relations that have served to marginalize specific groups and individuals.”¹⁵ There are many systems that perpetuate opposition, inequality, and injustice. At the risk of sounding cliché, I support the claim that knowledge is power. By questioning the powers, good or bad, that inform and limit our understanding of the world, we empower ourselves to rewrite those narratives: “thus, empowered by our knowledge, we begin to understand and disengage ourselves from the power narratives that have laid the basis for the dominant way of seeing.”¹⁶ If education never examines and challenges the prevailing mindset guiding society, improvement and progress will be obsolete.

A Matter of Perspective

If I am to establish an English classroom that values student inquiry as a means to arrive at relevant and meaningful knowledge, one that allows students to question the underlying powers that establish norms, I must examine my role as the facilitator and the purpose of activities such as reading and writing. My students have a difficult time understanding that the acts of reading and writing are not mutually exclusive—that one informs the other. In my attempt to bridge the gap between reading and writing, I often use the phrases coined by Frank Smith telling my students that they should be “reading like a writer and writing like a reader”; however, until students actually put this into practice, it is merely something I repeat, falling on deaf ears.

Assigned reading is, for most students, tedious, boring, and seemingly purposeless. I have found that if I want my students to actually read the text, even my top-notch students, I have to convince them of the purpose—a purpose that is intrinsically motivated. Horton contends, “reading is not an easy endeavor...for to be a good reader is to view reading as a form of research. Thus, reading becomes a mode of finding something.”¹⁷ In conjunction with the discussion of knowledge, inquiry, and power, the purpose of reading is not to simply “know” the text, but rather a means to practice skills used to make sense of the world around you. “Radical teaching calls into question the ways in which cultural practices are traditionally represented—it makes them problematical—in order to substitute an account of the real relations between culture and

politics, which are rooted in class.”¹⁸ The world we live in is shaped by ideologies, and by charging students with the task of exposing the ideologies within a text, “we are helping them to discern the system of values and beliefs that help create expectations for individual behavior and social norms.”¹⁹ These ideologies are not transparent; therefore, it is important we equip students with methods of analysis that are open to multiple perspectives and interpretations, methods that allow uncertainty in the construction of meaning.

Why Literary Theory?

In the English classroom, literary theory is a vehicle for transformative thinking. Myers posits “literary theory is a demand for proof and further defense. Its advantage as a course of study, then, is that it introduces students into the rough-and-tumble of critical argument, the open-endedness of genuine inquiry, where the only sure way to go wrong is to decline the challenge.”²⁰ Students are usually provided one approach to studying literature, and most often it comes in a limited form of New Criticism. Troise discusses the concerns of students only experiencing one way of reading:

There is a great risk that the possibilities of interpretation will get lost amid the search for symbolism and a neatly reduced statement of theme. Such an approach can also, over time, suggest to students that the purpose of reading is merely to find what is already in the text and what the teacher and SparkNotes already know. It would be logical for students to then begin thinking that meaning is closed, singular, static, and *findable*.²¹

Year after year, I sit through group presentations and trudge through essays that merely identify the symbolic representations and declare bumper sticker themes. Our students are the product of a monolithic, lifeless study of literature. In contrast to this approach, theory empowers “students by showing them how to disclose ideological conditions behind any cultural performance, and then leading them to re-politicize their newfound knowledge.”²² Literary theory adds the element of purpose when reading because it forces the student to question their worldview and confront varied interpretations. “If we are serious in believing that the role of theory is to oppose cultural authority, if we are sincere in our objective of putting self-evident certainties under interrogation, what better way than by leading our students to struggle against the authorities the we ourselves have placed in their hands?”²³ Again, we move away from the delivery of knowledge to ways of knowing.

In the Classroom

Just Do It—Theory, that is

While I will be discussing traditional examples of literary criticism over the course of the unit, I am not going to approach theory as something that can be taught; theory, as I have come to understand it, is a way of knowing, not a means of delivering instruction. If I want my students to exercise independent critical thinking, I should not ask them to first learn the theories others have come up with, but rather allow them to theorize on their own. Consider what Charles G. Sellers, as quoted in Lendol Calder's article "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," says as he explains why he chose to move away from the "facts first" approach:

The notion that students must first be given facts and then at some distant time in the future will "think" about them is both a cover-up and a perversion of pedagogy...One does not collect facts he does not need, hang on to them, and then stumble across the propitious moment to use them. One is first perplexed by a problem and then makes use of facts to achieve a solution.²⁴

I think it is important to make students aware of popular literary theories, but I will use them as models and examples after students have been primed to ask relevant questions about the texts they're reading and draw their own conclusions. Lee S. Shulman, past president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, promotes a method of teaching that brings to light for students what professionals are doing the course's field of study—knowing means doing. He calls this method a signature pedagogy and says this style tends to "disclose important information about the personality of a disciplinary field—its values, knowledge, and manner of thinking—almost, perhaps, its total world view."²⁵ Theory is something that people who study literature do. I want my students "to do, think, and value what practitioners in the field are doing, thinking, and valuing." I want my students "doing theory."

In J. Hillis Miller's 1986 presidential address to the Modern Language Association, he described literary theory as shifting "from a focus on the meaning of texts to a focus on the way meaning is conveyed."²⁶ Using theory as a way to examine literature from this perspective eliminates the search for fixed meaning situated within a text or assumed by the teacher because it becomes necessary for the student to reflect on the ideologies that shape their own construction of meaning as well as those implied through the text itself. To reiterate a few points made about theory earlier in the rationale, I would like to briefly outline what D. G. Myers claims literary theory actually is:

1. "Empowering students by showing them how to uncover the ideological conditions behind the text, and then lead them to re-politicize their newfound knowledge.
2. A reflective struggle to work out the vexing tangle in literary experience—in other words, it is to scramble for counterarguments, to test the theory for logical soundness by submitting it to refutation.
3. It demands proof and further defense.

4. It introduces students to the rough and tumble of critical argument, the open-endedness of genuine inquiry, where the only sure way to go wrong is to decline to meet the challenge.
5. It opposes cultural authority by questioning self-evident certainties.²⁷

Bottom line: theory involves inquiry, disclosure, deliberation, and reform. Returning to the concept of a signature pedagogy, we see that these two practices are very closely aligned because signature pedagogies consist of three main elements: they “unfold from big questions that students are likely to find meaningful, questions that are useful for uncovering how expert practitioners in a discipline think and act”; “the intellectual project envisioned by their big questions is advanced through a standard pattern of instructional routines”; and they “requir[e] regular, public student performances.”²⁸

Using this model of theory to guide my practice, I will share a few examples of how I attempt to establish a signature pedagogy.

Reeling Them In

My first goal for the school year is to engage my students. To put it bluntly, I just don't want to lose my audience. Teaching a survey of American literature to 21st century students is a bit of challenge, especially if I approach it chronologically. The canonical texts, many of which I love, are often perceived by my students as outdated, irrelevant, and difficult to read. I chose to start this year off a little differently by using Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*. It is a contemporary American nonfiction text that is accessible to all students. National standards are calling for an increase of nonfiction texts in the English Language Arts classroom, so not only does this book fit the bill in that regard, it also captures students' attention and challenges their preconceived notions of success. And so begins our scrutiny of “self-evident certainties.”

In the introduction, Gladwell clearly states his purpose for writing *Outliers*:

Wolf and Bruhn had to convince the medical establishment to think about health and heart attacks in an entirely new way: they had to get them to realize that you couldn't understand why someone was healthy if all you did was think about their individual choices or actions in isolation. You had to look *beyond* the individual... In *Outliers*, I want to do for our understanding of success what Stewart Wolf did for our understanding of health.²⁹

Essentially, this text sets the tone for the year by asking my students to think in an “entirely new way.” *Outliers* affords many topics for exploration, but I am going to focus on only two for the purposes of this unit: motivation and opportunity via wealth.

Motivation and Meaningful Work

Motivation is always an interesting topic to discuss with students. I think every teacher desires students that are intrinsically motivated—those that want to learn for the sake of learning. I have already mentioned that I am entrenched in a culture of grade-seeking students. With GPA's and prestige as the driving forces, students sacrifice the authenticity and creativity of the learning process. In our discussion of motivation, I am able to help students uncover the ideology behind why they place such an importance on resumes, GPA's, and academic prestige. *Outliers* discusses and defines meaningful work multiple times, even going as far as to italicize the phrase each time it is mentioned. As part of one of my quizzes, I ask students to discuss the significance of meaningful work in the context of the book. Many students have not read closely enough, annotating their text to acknowledge the repetition of both the definition and italicized phrase, and as a result do not do well on this portion of the quiz. Taking advantage of this teachable moment, I am able to stress the importance of annotations informed by a close reading, set the bar for accountability, model the recognition of one author's development of an important concept throughout a text, and challenge the pervasive ideologies motivating their academic performance.

Before I guide students through Gladwell's discussion of meaningful work, I begin class with an activity that asks students to examine their view of motivation. I use what's called a daybook in my classroom as a means of exploratory thinking and writing. Daybooks are a type of writer's notebook used widely by The National Writing Project and discussed by authors such as Ralph Fletcher in many books about teaching writing in the classroom at all grade levels.³⁰ This is usually a composition notebook used by students and teachers to brainstorm ideas for writing, organize thoughts, respond to texts, and respond to peers. I ask students to answer the following questions in their daybooks:

1. What motivates you to do well in _____? (I leave it open-ended because not everyone cares about doing well in school)
2. If you ran a business/classroom, how would you motivate your employees/students?
3. How do you define 'reward'?

After students answer these questions, I facilitate a whole-class discussion of the students' responses. What happens in every almost every class is that the majority of students are motivated by intrinsic factors, yet the majority says they would motivate their employees and students with extrinsic rewards. We talk about the discrepancy and why they chose their answers for question two. From here, I conduct a little experiment using a version of Karl Duncker's "The Candle Problem." The problem asks the group to attach a candle to the wall so that the wax won't drip onto the table using only the supplies provided. I pass out four versions of the problem on cards, although students are not aware that they have something slightly different from the other groups. I do not actually provide my students with supplies for the sake of time and logistics. I have four

groups total, with two groups competing against each other to see who can solve the problem the fastest. One set of groups has the original version of the candle problem—the one that requires greater cognitive skill, and the other set of groups has what Dan Pink affectionately dubs “The Candle Problem for Dummies.”³¹ On one card in each set of groups I have written that the group who solves the problem the fastest will be given a reward. I give the same set of instructions to all groups at the same time:

1. They can't turn over the card until I start timing.
2. They are only allowed to use what is pictured on the card in their solution.

I remind them that they are competing, so they should not be loud when discussing their solutions and what is on the card. Students are given the go-ahead, and this year, three out of the four classes produced results that were consistent with the studies that have been conducted since the 1950's—the group with the easy task and reward and the group with the difficult task and no reward solved the problem the fastest. After we celebrate the winners, I reveal the differences in the cards and ask them to watch part of Dan Pink's TED Talk called “The Surprising Science of Motivation.”³² In this short video clip, Dan Pink talks about the candle problem and other similar studies conducted to show that the way businesses and schools choose to motivate students and employees is not backed by scientific studies. The overwhelming results of these studies show that extrinsic rewards only result in high performance if the task is not cognitively difficult; therefore, if you want your employees to accomplish a difficult task that requires innovation and creativity, offering bonuses and other rewards actually stifles creativity and hinders performance. He goes on to outline meaningful work as consisting of three elements: autonomy, mastery, and purpose.³³ After we finish watching the TED Talk, I ask students to make a connection between the candle problem, Dan Pink's talk, and *Outliers* in their daybooks under the warm-up questions. When students have had enough time to make connections, I ask them to turn and talk to their neighbors, sharing what they observed. As we bring it back to a whole-class discussion, I begin to parcel out Gladwell's discussion of meaningful work in *Outliers*, using what students have shared as my starting point. Gladwell defines meaningful work as having the elements of autonomy, complexity, and a clear relationship between reward and effort.³⁴ After we compare the two definitions, noting the obvious similarities, we talk about how this applies to school and our daily lives, evaluating the effectiveness of commonly accepted practices. The discussions are critical, thorough, and eye opening. Over the next few class periods, I continue to challenge students' view of grades and motivation by having them read and discuss Alfie Kohn's article “From Degrading to De-Grading” which outlines issues with the traditional grading system and proposes alternatives.³⁵

Opportunities via Wealth

Outliers also gives many examples about how growing up in a household with a high socio-economic status can contribute to a person's success. Not only does having the

means to afford special schooling and access to a wide range of extra-curricular activities give a child an upper-hand, but children from these households often times acquire a certain skill-set that makes them more successful socially. As a class we discuss Gladwell's arguments, evaluating their validity, and then extend this further. I pose questions about class and society. I also try to bring in current events when possible. This year I chose to listen to an NPR podcast about the Occupy Wall Street protests and then contrast that with Herman Cain's reaction to the protestors. I used the podcast titled "Wall Street Protests Stretch On, Reasons Vary" from October 3, 2011,³⁶ and the CBS News report on Herman Cain's reaction to the protestors titled "Cain: Wall St. protestors playing victim card" posted online October 9, 2011.³⁷ Students discuss power, money, class systems, and politics. After examining these two articles, I have students engage in a thought experiment where they debate whether or not they would share their GPA points with fellow students. The same issues are brought up, but in a context that hits a little closer to home because grades and GPA's determine their "rank" within the academic setting. Another text that might be helpful in furthering this discussion is Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, specifically the last chapter titled, "Evaluation."³⁸

And the Survey Begins ...

Now that I have laid the foundation by asking students to question and reevaluate their views on relevant topics, stressing the idea that reading is a form of research where we are trying to make sense of the world we live in, we are ready to begin our study of canonical American literature. Of course I begin with early American literature, the primary focus being texts influenced by Puritanism. To introduce characteristics of the various literary time periods, I give students what I call primary source packets. Their objective is to study the representative texts of that literary time period and characterize the literature through inferences backed by evidence from the texts. This reinforces the concept of viewing reading as a form of research and gives students a reason to study these texts—the packets are artifacts revealing what that literary time period was like. In the Puritan primary source packet, I include two Anne Bradstreet Poems, "Huswifery" by Edward Taylor, an excerpt from "The Trial of Martha Carrier," an excerpt of the *New England Primer*, and the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by Jonathan Edwards. The research questions I ask students to consider, after they have already answered a few comprehension questions for each text, are adapted from a SpringBoard lesson in the Level 6 book. The questions ask students to draw conclusions about the society's view of God, philosophies of education, work ethic, view of success, definition of the American Dream, values, view of authority, definition of truth, view of society, and whether or not they believe man is inherently good or evil. Students gain a holistic perspective of what writers were concerned with during this time period, and I tie up any loose ends by sharing my conclusions in the form of brief notes—this is where they compare their "research" to mine. The goal of this activity is to uncover the ideologies informing the literature of the time period. Students need the context and perspective in

order to accurately analyze the literature and topics. From here, we proceed to study Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Witch Hunts, Communism, Mass Hysteria (and all that other fun stuff)

During our study of *The Crucible*, I pose three questions that fuel our discussions and give students a focus for their annotations:

1. What is the nature of authority?
2. What is hysteria? How is it created? What fuels it? What impact does it have on society?
3. What types of people does society tend to criticize and alienate? Why? Do we see this only in America or globally?

I also give my students another primary source packet that includes an excerpt from the book *You Can Trust the Communists (to be Communists)*,³⁹ six political cartoons published in 1950's US newspapers, an excerpt of the Communist Control Act of 1954, and Arthur Miller's article "Are You Now or Were You Ever?"⁴⁰ This packet allows students to understand the world Arthur Miller was living in while he wrote and published *The Crucible*.⁴¹ As we read and discuss all of these texts, students draw conclusions about the various time periods, examine how authors were trying to convey meaning, and question the ideologies that support student and authorial interpretations as we try to answer the three questions. This happens in the form of seminar-style class discussions, small-group activities, and print and non-print comparisons. At this point, I also begin discussing what theory is and introduce Marxist literary theory. I facilitate a discussion of how we have been theorizing as a class when we ask big questions about our world and those of our authors, examine the texts and our world for answers, and draw conclusions. We make some connections between our previous discussions of power, class, money, politics and Marxist theories. I also use question three to plant a seed for future discussions of gender issues and feminist literary criticism. Students always notice that women are targeted in *The Crucible*, but have trouble answering 'why'? They can identify and describe what types of people were targeted during "The Red Scare" and in their daily lives at school, but it takes a little longer to deliberate the reasons why. At this point, many students are becoming more comfortable with the concept that there are rarely "right" answers or one truth present in the text, or the world for that matter. They understand that we must grapple with the uncertainties and show concern when we believe that there are no other possible answers. I give reading quizzes and conclude with a test. The test asks students to write two essays based on their choice of two of the four questions listed. The questions deal with the nature of authority, hysteria, sacrifices necessary to restore social order, and the author's treatment of women—all questions that relate directly to our focus of study.

We Wear the Mark

By the time we begin reading *The Scarlet Letter*, students are ready to begin posing their own questions about the text.⁴² I encourage my students to continue thinking about the nature of authority and why we have a tendency to alienate or dismiss certain types of people, but I place the responsibility of initiating and facilitating the inquiry process into the hands of the students. This happens by way of a structured discussion on an online forum. Each year I create courses on a free online program called Schoology and require my students to enroll in my courses. Schoology looks and operates very much like Facebook, so it is appealing and user-friendly. I know as teachers we are always asked to try a ridiculous amount of “new tools,” but honestly, this is one of the most user-friendly programs I have ever encountered. This program is safe and I keep it private between classes. Parents can get the class access code and see the work that is being done online. Through this program, there is an easy way for me to set up a discussion where students can post analyses and respond to other students’ postings. I got the idea for my online discussion from an English course I took in college. The idea and design of the online assignments are taken almost word-for-word from an assignment given to me at Furman University by Dr. William E. Rogers in his course on British and American Literature to 1798, in the fall of 2004, and I want to make sure he receives this credit. Students are assigned one section of *The Scarlet Letter* to analyze and are required to respond to three analyses posted by other students. Analyses are 250 words and must accomplish these three things (this is part of the handout I give to my students):

1. The analysis should clearly identify a non-trivial interpretive problem in the text you are assigned. That is, it should explain why you find some particular aspect of the text difficult to understand. This interpretive problem should not be a problem that is susceptible to an easy solution—for example, a problem you can solve just by looking up a word that you did not know. Instead, it should be a problem that you expect to create disagreement among thoughtful readers of the text.
2. The analysis should clearly identify possible alternative solutions to the interpretive problem—two or more different ways of reading the text.
3. The analysis should *either* explain which solution you accept, and why; *or* explain clearly why you find it impossible to choose among the alternatives.

This format has worked well for my students because it gives them enough structure to produce a substantive analysis while at the same time leaving it open to anything they find to be significant in the text. Other students respond to the analyses, thus a thoughtful student-generated discussion ensues. Responses must be around 100 words and agree or disagree with the interpretations presented in the analysis, or offer a new interpretation

altogether; however, each response must also include at least one new piece of textual evidence to back up the student's claim. Responses do not count toward their total if they are deemed unsatisfactory, and students are required to post a new analysis for a reduced grade if it does not meet the standard. Students are responsible for reading all posts each night so they are prepared for our class discussions. I give students examples of my old analyses and responses so they have a model for structure, length, and content. I use their postings to drive my instruction because I acquire a good grasp of what students know and what they need by reading their posts.

Through these posts, students naturally address many literary elements, the hypocrisy, the narrator's attitude toward the subject, color, symbolism, the nature of authority, alienation; the fact that Hester, a woman, is viciously criticized by the society but portrayed differently by the narrator; and most obviously that Hester is marked. This text is a great way for us to continue our discussion of gender that we began with *The Crucible*. I begin introducing supplemental texts and activities to get students thinking about gender, and very quickly they are drawing conclusions about gender and its role in society. We read Deborah Tannen's essay "There is No Unmarked Woman."⁴³ Although it was published in 1993, students mostly agree that it is still relevant today, if not more so than it was back then. Tannen's use of the word "marked" immediately invites students to make connections between the 'A' worn by Hester Prynne. I don't discourage these connections, but I also make sure that students don't oversimplify what each text, especially that of Tannen's, is trying to convey. After examining Tannen's argument, I have students get into small groups and brainstorm the "unwritten rules and expectations" for each gender. I ask my students to take this seriously and be honest—I don't want the stereotypes unless that is actually what they witness in their day-to-day lives. We find that as a society, we have not come all that far, in some cases, from the 1600's. This is the point where I ask students to begin examining why we play into these gender roles ultimately living the narratives that have been written for us by society, and then to consider what consequences transpire.

Identity Crisis: "A Boy Named Sue"

The word 'feminist' scares many people, male students especially. I think it is best to have students explore gender issues before I even utter the phrase feminist literary criticism for two reasons: 1) it follows my philosophy of prioritizing the discovery of new material, and 2) I don't want to disengage my students by presenting a term that, for them, carries negative or irrelevant connotations. I also do not want to limit the discussion of gender to that of the female gender. Throughout the year, I will open the

door for students to examine issues surrounding male and female gender roles as well as force them to consider the challenges of not fitting into either category. Most of our texts for the first half of the school year call into question the female gender, so sometimes an entertaining way to bring up the ideologies shaping the male gender role is to listen to Johnny Cash's version of "A Boy Named Sue." This song advances the notion that texts may equally reinforce or explore the expectations of men. After we have surveyed our own ideas about gender and the treatment of gender in our texts, I introduce feminist literary criticism.

The rest of the school year will follow the same routines I have established here in this unit, with gender and power issues being a major focus in our course of study. Students will continue to study primary sources—representative texts—from each literary time period to build context. Students will initiate inquiry and investigate possible answers as they analyze a variety of texts through the online postings, seminars, regular class discussions, and collaborative activities. I will continue to pose over-arching "big questions" that anticipate important concepts students will encounter during their readings. Some examples of the works I will use include:

Major Works

1. *The Awakening*—Kate Chopin
2. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—Zora Neale Hurston
3. *The Great Gatsby*—F. Scott Fitzgerald
4. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*—Ken Kesey

Minor Works

1. "The Great Lawsuit"—Margaret Fuller
2. "The Yellow Wallpaper"—Charlotte Perkins Gilman
3. Excerpt from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass—Frederick Douglass
4. "Hills Like White Elephants"—Ernest Hemingway
5. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"—T.S. Eliot
6. "Go Carolina"—David Sedaris

Teacher Resources

Appleman, Deborah. "What We Teach and Why: Contemporary Literary Theory and Adolescents." *Minnesota English Journal* 43, no. 1 (2007): 1-13.

Appleman, a former high school English teacher, discusses the significance of teaching literary theory in the secondary classroom. She outlines her rationale, citing many well-known educators in the profession, while also including examples of activities she used her classroom. The article includes student samples.

Brooks, Jacqueline Grennon, and Martin G. Brooks. *In search of understanding: the case for constructivist classrooms*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999.

This book argues the need for constructivist classrooms, discussing the guiding principles of constructivism and how a teacher might go about establishing a constructivist classroom. Constructivism focuses on cultivating a student-centered classroom that prioritizes student's needs, student-inquiry, collaboration, authentic assessment, and relevancy.

Calder, Lendol. "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy of the History Survey." *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006): 1358-1370.

Lendol Calder talks about how and why he works toward establishing a signature pedagogy in his History survey course. A signature pedagogy bucks the "fact-first" approach to teaching and chooses to operate under three assumptions of best practice: students have meaningful, important questions that should be addressed; students need routines for successful practice; and students need to collaborate on a regular basis, both whole-class and in small groups.

Kincheloe, Joe L.. *Critical pedagogy primer*. New York: P. Lang, 2004.

Kincheloe discusses the basis for critical pedagogy, what it looks like in the classroom, and how it supports a certain view of cognitive processes. This book echoes many issues brought up the Brooks book on constructivism listed above, but its primary focus is on how teachers and students need to seek social and educational justice by examining and questioning the power structures that have shaped our curriculum and society as well as marginalized certain groups.

Myers, D. G.. "On the Teaching of Literary Theory." *Philosophy and Literature* 18 (1994): 326-336.

Myers walks through many of the common approaches to teaching literary theory, pointing out the major flaws and misinterpretations while also highlighting some insight that might be gleaned from each approach. Midway through the article, the focus shifts from a description of what teaching literary theory is not to what it is. Ultimately, the article suggests that theory cannot be taught, but rather it is a practice—a way of knowing—and describes what that looks like in the academic setting.

Troise, Melissa. "Approaches to Reading with Multiple Lenses of Interpretation." *English Journal* 96, no. 5 (2007): 85-90.

Melissa Troise, a high school English teacher, warns teachers about the risks of only asking students to examine literature from one perspective, that of New Criticism, year after year in the English classroom. Her article discusses the value of introducing literary criticism, offering students different “lenses” for analyzing a text. This article is very practical in that it offers detailed examples of how she uses literary theory in her classroom, giving the reader specific ideas for a variety of texts and student writing samples.

Student Resources

Most of the student texts are described throughout the unit, and the list of major and minor works at the end of the unit are generally recognized to be part of the canon by those who study American literature. Here I have elaborated on just a few of the other texts mentioned in the narrative.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Evaluation." In *Nickel and dimed: on (not) getting by in America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001. 193-221.

This book catalogs a journalist’s journey into the depths of America’s working class environment. Barbara Ehrenreich goes undercover to reveal what it is really like to make a living off of minimum wage. The book is eye opening for most students because very many of them have never experienced anything like what she recounts. It is a very honest depiction of class struggle in contemporary America.

Kohn, Alfie. "From Degrading to De-Grading." Alfie Kohn author teacher lecturer www.alfiekohn.org. <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/fdtd-g.htm> (accessed September 26, 2011).

This article shocks many students because its discussion of grading—practices, flaws, alternatives—is typically not something they have questioned or examined from this perspective. It asks them to challenge the system they have blindly adopted out of ritual compliance.

Classroom Materials

Daybooks—composition notebooks for responding to questions in class, organizing ideas, and any general writing or note taking I would like students to complete.

Schoology—the free online program used for the online discussion. This can also be used to post announcements to class, post assignments, post important class documents, administer online quizzes or tests, or give feedback on electronic copies of papers. You can set up your account by accessing www.schoology.com.

Technology for podcasts and streaming TED Talk videos—you will need technology of some sort that is connected to a screen, computer with Internet, and speakers. TED Talks, like the one mentioned in the unit, as well as NPR podcasts and YouTube videos are a very powerful way of capturing your audience and helping your students make connections between texts.

Candle Problem Cards—if you choose to conduct your own “Candle Problem” experiment, I recommend making your own cards after assessing what resources you have available to you and researching what is available online in terms of common-use images. I find that the picture is sufficient for my students to begin solving the problem, but you may want to get candles, boxes, and tacks and just leave out the part where they actually attach it to the wall.

Appendix—Implementing District Standards

As a district, we are transitioning to the Common Core National Standards.⁴⁴ The Common Core standards as follows are not the only ones addressed by the unit but serve as the primary focus for activities presented here. Most of these standards are practiced daily in some form whether it takes place in or out of class. The parenthetical at the end of each standard denotes which section and number of standards I am addressing for those teachers that are familiar with the Common Core.

1. Students will cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of text. (RL 1)

2. Students will determine two or more themes or central ideas and discuss how they are developed throughout the text. (RL/RI 2)
3. Students will analyze multiple interpretations. (RL 7)
4. Students will examine and compare texts from various literary time periods and analyze their treatment of similar topics and themes. (RL 9)
5. Students will determine the author's point of view and analyze the rhetoric for its effectiveness, paying close attention to how the style and content contribute to the text's power and beauty. (RI 6)
6. Students will integrate and evaluate multiple sources to help them address questions and solve problems. (RI 7)
7. Students will write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics and texts, using valid reasoning and sufficient and relevant evidence. (W 1)
8. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas. (W 2)
9. Initiate and participate effectively in a broad range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and clearly and persuasively expressing their own. (SL 1)⁴⁵

Notes

¹Paulo Freire, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, and Donaldo P. Macedo. "The Banking Concept of Education." In *The Paulo Freire reader*. New York: Continuum, 1998. 67-72.

²North Carolina Public Schools. "Teacher." North Carolina Public Schools. <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/profdev/training/teacher/> (accessed October 5, 2011).

³Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin G. Brooks. *In search of understanding: the case for constructivist classrooms*. (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999), 6.

⁴Ibid., 6-7.

⁵Joe L. Kincheloe. *Critical pedagogy primer*. (New York: P. Lang, 2004), 28.

⁶Brooks and Brooks. *In search of understanding: the case for constructivist classrooms*, 10.

⁷Joe L. Kincheloe. *Critical pedagogy primer*, 16.

⁸Brooks and Brooks. *In search of understanding: the case for constructivist classrooms*, 9-10.

⁹Joe L. Kincheloe. *Critical pedagogy primer*, 17.

¹⁰Brooks and Brooks. *In search of understanding: the case for constructivist classrooms*, 110.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 12.

¹²Deborah Appleman. "What We Teach and Why: Contemporary Literary Theory and Adolescents." *Minnesota English Journal* 43, no. 1 (2007): 1.

¹³Joe L. Kincheloe. *Critical pedagogy primer*, 16.

¹⁴Melissa Troise. "Approaches to Reading with Multiple Lenses of Interpretation." *English Journal* 96, no. 5 (2007): 89.

¹⁵Joe L. Kincheloe. *Critical pedagogy primer*, 19.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸D. G. Myers. "On the Teaching of Literary Theory." *Philosophy and Literature* 18 (1994): 326-336.

¹⁹Deborah Appleman. "What We Teach and Why: Contemporary Literary Theory and Adolescents," 3.

²⁰D. G. Myers. "On the Teaching of Literary Theory."

²¹Melissa Troise. "Approaches to Reading with Multiple Lenses of Interpretation," 85.

²²D. G. Myers. "On the Teaching of Literary Theory."

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Lendol Calder. "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy of the History Survey." *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006): 1362.

²⁵Ibid., 1361.

²⁶David R. Ellison. "Introduction." In *Of words and the world: referential anxiety in contemporary French fiction*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993. 5.

²⁷D. G. Myers. "On the Teaching of Literary Theory."

²⁸Lendol Calder. "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy of the History Survey," 1368-9.

²⁹Malcolm Gladwell. *Outliers: the story of success*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2008.

³⁰Ralph J. Fletcher. *Breathing in, breathing out: keeping a writer's notebook*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996.

³¹Dan Pink. "Dan Pink on the surprising science of motivation | Video on TED.com." TED: Ideas worth spreading. http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html (accessed September 12, 2011).

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Malcolm Gladwell. *Outliers: the story of success*. 2008.

³⁵Alfie Kohn. "From Degrading to De-Grading." Alfie Kohn author teacher lecturer www.alfiekohn.org. <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/fdtd-g.htm> (accessed September 26, 2011).

³⁶Joel Rose. "Wall Street Protests Stretch On, Reasons Vary : NPR." NPR : National Public Radio : News & Analysis, World, US, Music & Arts : NPR. <http://www.npr.org/2011/10/03/141016911/-occupation-protests-spread-from-wall-street> (accessed October 4, 2011).

³⁷Lucy Madison. "Cain: Wall St. protesters playing victim card - CBS News." Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News - CBS News. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/09/ftn/main20117819.shtml?tag=mncol;lst;4> (accessed October 10, 2011).

³⁸Barbara Ehrenreich. "Evaluation." In *Nickel and dimed: on (not) getting by in America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001. 193-221.

³⁹"You Can Trust the Communists (to be Communists)." CPCW: The Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing. <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/schwarz-cover.html> (accessed October 10, 2011).

⁴⁰Arthur Miller. "Are You Now or Were You Ever." *The Guardian/The Observer*, June 17, 2000. <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/miller-mccarthyism.html> (accessed October 15, 2011).

⁴¹Arthur Miller. *The crucible*. New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1996.

⁴²Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Scarlet letter*. New York: Barnes & Noble Children's Classics, 2001.

⁴³Deborah Tannen. "There is No Unmarked Woman." In *50 essays a portable anthology*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 409-415.

⁴⁴"Common Core." North Carolina Public Schools. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/acre/standards/common-core/> (accessed November 28, 2011).

⁴⁵*Ibid.*