

Answering “Why”: Life’s Biggest Question

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Birth of an Idea

Around the time that I was encouraged to apply to be a fellow in the Charlotte Teachers Institute I was co-teaching a Biology lesson on the carbon footprint. My co-teacher and I had divided the class into heterogeneous groups; in one group my co-teacher was lecturing on human impact and, in the other, I was leading students through a web quest activity in which they took online quizzes to determine their carbon footprint, the impact they make on the planet. While students were taking these quizzes we asked them to take note of how many planet Earths we would need if everyone lived as they did. At first, they were confused by this idea but we explained to them that the quiz would analyze the amount of carbon they use in their everyday lives and it would calculate how many extra planets we would need to provide enough resources for to sustain that lifestyle.

Our students were able to understand that they were making an impact on the planet but weren’t able to see the global impact they were having, even after the site told them the number of planets needed. Our class ranged from needing 4.3 to as many as 7.8 Earths. We asked them what their impact was and how they could make changes in their lives that could help protect the resources we have. Instead of readily being able to provide possible changes, they justified their lifestyles by saying things like “He got less planets than me so that evens it out.”

It was then that I realized the students were struggling to take the concrete information they had learned and understand it in an abstract, or global, way. When we then asked them why the way they were living was dangerous or how it negatively impacted the people and animals they share the planet with, they, once again, were unable to see the “big picture.” They were only able to say “because it is.” The question of “Why?” seemed to greatly frustrate students.

Introduction

Young children are innately inquisitive. “But why?” can be heard almost constantly from the back seat of every mini-van toting children younger than 6. Where does this questioning nature go? Now, as a teacher, I think I would probably find it slightly difficult to complete a lesson if a student asked “Why?” after every statement rather than nodding in agreement and waiting for me to move on. This fact does, however, raise the serious question: when does the need for answers to the question “Why?” become the

inability to provide more than “because” as an answer? As we age, we use our ability to be inquisitive less. It is not entirely stifled in all people, but for the masses, I would say it is probably safe to bet that most would just as soon be told the answer rather than put for the effort to discover it on their own. This is because we become conditioned to blindly accept what we are told is fact. Our questioning nature is stifled by those who don’t want or are not able to answer our questions.

Niels Bohr, Danish physicist, once said “Every great and deep difficulty bears in itself its own solution. It forces us to change our thinking in order to find it.” Bohr, I suspect, was referring to a scientific problem with a concrete answer that could be found via thought, but his words hold true for problems that have subjective, opinion-based solutions as well. To be a productive, functioning member of today’s global society, I believe, one must be able to find one’s own “solution” to life’s big difficulties and questions. I am not suggesting the blind adoption of someone else’s belief but rather the process of considering all aspects of an issue and establishing an informed opinion.

From a young age we are taught *what* to think, both in school and at home, but rarely are we given a lesson in *how* to think. Of anything I teach my students, this is probably the lesson I am most proud of: no matter the content area, I encourage questions, discussion and debate in my classroom. My students are typically pretty surprised when I look up an answer we aren’t sure of; they are intrigued when I present an opposing viewpoint solely for the sake of argument. My proudest moment in a recent lesson was the ability of three of my students to stand up and make an argument for a situation in which they felt taking the life of another was “right.” Despite their true opinion on the subject matter, or mine, they were willing to stand up, against jeers from their classmates, for something they believed in.

Teachers today often struggle to find the time to teach the more abstract and “worldly” topics because they are attempting to fit a year-long curriculum into a semester-long class and prepare students for a state standardized exam. I don’t doubt that the content we teach is genuinely important and relevant to student’s lives, but if we don’t find a way to present that information in a way that gives students a chance to practice higher-level thinking and problem solving skills it will never matter that they can tell us the structure of an oxygen atom.

Today’s students struggle with answering higher-level questions for a variety of reasons. As a classroom teacher I have experienced the collective groan that inevitably occurs when students are asked to explain their answer to a question. They struggle to do this because they have never been taught or are rarely required to explain answers; so long as they can choose A, B, C, or D the explanation is typically not as important. If we are perfectly honest, we have all had courses that were structured this way. I know for a fact that I can tell you the names of important leaders, cities, and battles in Ancient Greece and Rome, but I couldn’t necessarily explain their significance or relevance to my life

today. However, I have also had teachers who taught classes from a problem-based prospective in which I was required to explore and explain and apply knowledge to come to conclusions/solutions.

Background

Teacher

I received my Bachelor's degree in Elementary and Special Education from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am licensed to teach K-6 regular education, K-12 special education and 9-12 Biology. This is my third year teaching and second in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS). I teach in the Exceptional Children's department at East Mecklenburg High School, which is located in an urban neighborhood just outside inner-city Charlotte.

School

East Mecklenburg has a fairly diverse student population of nearly 2,000 students. Our population consists of many different sub-groups (as defined by NCLB) including: 25% Caucasian, 49% African American, 5% Asian, 16% Hispanic, <1% American Indian, and 4% Multiracial. 56% economically disadvantaged (receiving free and reduced lunch), 16% students with Limited English Proficiency, and 10% students with disabilities.

East Mecklenburg offers a wide variety of programs and classes including Advanced Placement and honors classes, an International Baccalaureate diploma track, English as a Second Language/Limited English Proficiency classes and consultative services, and the full continuum of classes and services for students with disabilities.

There are many clubs, sports, and extracurricular activities for students to get involved in at East Mecklenburg. Members of these groups and teams come from every subgroup. This diversity promotes an inclusive and collaborative environment and a well-rounded education for all of our students. Having so many different programs for students to be involved in is beneficial for our students; they are able to learn from each other in every facet of their involvement at school. Students are able to learn from each other, both in the classroom and out. I went to a high school that was very uniform. We all came from the same socio-economic background, neighborhoods, and family structures. We were naïve to the world outside those doors. I think that this experience left me at a loss when it came time to go out into the real world. I had to learn how to deal with people who weren't just like me.

The students at East Mecklenburg learn how to work with others because of the cultural melting pot that is their environment. I think, as a teacher, this mixed population is quite possibly my favorite to work with, because every student brings a distinct personal

history to the table and has something unique to offer in every situation; this makes school an enjoyable and enriching experience for both the teachers and the students.

The Exceptional Children's (EC) department at East Mecklenburg offers a wide range of classes and service delivery models ranging from consultative services to a self-contained program for students with severe and profound disabilities. Most students that are in general education classes are typically served in the consultative or inclusion models. Consultative services entail the child's case manager meeting with them once or twice a month to check in and see how things are going. Inclusion is where students are "mainstreamed" into the general education classroom where there are two teachers, a regular education teacher who serves as the expert in content and the special education teacher who is the expert in content delivery. In addition to teaching a resource level Greenhouse Biology class, which is the precursor to an inclusion Biology class, I teach students who are enrolled in the Occupational Course of Study (OCS) program. The OCS program is in the middle of this spectrum of services. This program offers students with disabilities an alternative to the typical North Carolina diploma track.

The OCS program provides a modified math, science, social studies and English curriculum, aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, but with a focus on employability, post-secondary planning and functional life skills. Along with taking core classes, students must take Career-Technical Education (CTE) classes and earn 900 vocational hours to receive their diploma. They receive these hours in a variety of paid and unpaid on and off campus jobs. Students enrolled in the OCS program typically have below average intellectual and academic abilities, most functioning between 2 and 3 grades below grade level. These students are usually certified under the IDEA categories of Intellectual Disability-Mild (ID-Mild) or Specific Learning Disability (LD). These categories are determined based on full-scale IQ scores and academic ability levels. They are all served in the special education classroom between 75-100% of the school day. They participate, independently, the rest of the school day including homeroom/assemblies, and CTE classes. The OCS class sizes range from 8 to 15 depending on the subject; this provides teachers with a better chance to focus on individual skill needs, as laid out by the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that has been designed for every student.

Students

This is my first year teaching in the OCS program and it has been a challenging and rewarding experience. It requires me to push myself harder than I have ever before as a teacher. My students are hard workers but it became apparent to me very early on in this school year that they have rarely been challenged. I expect the same performance, work ethic and participation from *all* my students whether they are on the standard or the OCS diploma track. This, I think, was a struggle for my OCS students in the beginning. There is not an OCS program at the middle school level and it was obvious that they had not

always been fully included by teachers in the past, which also means that they had not been held to particularly high expectations, either. These are students that are passed along by teachers without having fully grasped the basic concepts that are intended to be developed at any given grade level. I am constantly trying to find ways to make things relevant and understandable for them while still having high expectations and supporting them to have high expectations for themselves. I encourage them to believe they can and will meet or exceed our expectations.

The class I am writing this unit for is my OCS English II class. It is comprised of 11 students ranging in ability level from 5th / 6th grade to 8th / 9th grade. The North Carolina Standard Course of Study for OCS is aligned with the equivalent class in the general education curriculum but has slight modifications to make it accessible for the OCS students. These standards include functional reading and writing skills as well as functional public speaking and presentation skills. Also included is analysis of texts in multiple mediums. Some of the teaching tools that have been provided to and purchased for us include modified textbooks, containing shortened and “user-friendly” passages that are accessible to all and modified versions of novels.

One of the biggest challenges I face in teaching this class is that these particular students are typically fairly socially adept. They have fairly age-appropriate peer relationships and are informed and knowledgeable about the world around them. Unfortunately, they cannot always decipher the more abstract ideas that they are exposed to, whether it be in my lesson plan or in the news. I have to find ways to make things relevant socially but understandable cognitively. This task is often difficult because the typical teaching materials are written about grade level topics, for example a reading for a 6th or 7th grade lesson may be written about something like having a fight with a best friend about a pen. Not to say that my students don't have fights about pens, but articles or readings about more complex relationships are more relevant to their social lives. Sometimes it means creating these things on my own so as not to make the students feel like they're being patronized. OCS, however, is not entirely without benefits. One of the biggest benefits to teaching this type of class is that I am only focused on promoting and encouraging those functional English skills. The only standardized test the students in this particular class will take is the 10th grade writing test. The 10th grade writing test is the only EOC that inherently lends itself to a critical thinking curriculum.

Rationale

Content

“Critical thinking” is a term that is used frequently but is rarely understood. At the 8th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Education Reform in 1987, Michael Scriven and Richard Paul defined critical thinking as “is the intellectually disciplined process of ...conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or

evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication...”ⁱ Critical thinking is important to everyday life. It is required of citizens to be able to think critically about all sorts of issues. The problem with critical thinking skills is that most students don't use them because they aren't able to. It is something they are able to do when they are younger, but as the “education machine” gets a grasp on them and content specific teaching and questioning become the focus, students stop using their critical thinking skills to use their rote memory skills.

Critical thinking is a lifelong process and is not something that could be mastered; however, skills can be taught and integrated into a student's processing routine. Studies have shown that if critical thinking skills are taught explicitly rather than being taught ingrained in the curriculum students fared better on classroom based tests as well as practical applications of the skills.ⁱⁱ Studies have also shown that critical thinking skills are typically not included at the secondary level.

This unit introduces and defines the process of critical thinking. To assist students in understanding the rationale and purpose behind activities, defining critical thinking should be a group activity. The teacher guides the discussion of the definition to include the following specific things:

1. The ability to form and defend one's own opinion on an issue;
2. The ability to consider all of the possible solutions or opinions about an issue;
3. The ability to analyze another's argument for its soundness and logic and without prejudice.

Throughout this unit students will be assessed based on their efforts in these skills and not the opinions they form while working on them. I am a firm believer that, even subjectively, students cannot be assessed or given a grade for their opinions. There is no correct or incorrect way to answer opinion questions because, in trying to teach children to analyze without judgment, it is only fair that we do the same. Studies have shown that when students were given a grade on an assignment they were often less apt to do more than the minimal required amount of work. It also shows that students who are used to being assigned a numerical grade on every assignment tend to do less learning of actual concepts and their application to real world situations.ⁱⁱⁱ The only requirement throughout this unit is that students are participating. They don't necessarily need to be answering every question every time one is asked, but they are required to form opinions, defend those opinions and raise questions for their peers to answer when called upon.

These critical thinking skills are included in the 21st century skills all teachers are required to teach.^{iv} Some of these skills include:

- Using 21st century skills to understand and address global issues
- Creating new and worthwhile ideas
- Elaborating, refining, analyzing and evaluating their own ideas
- Being open and responsive to new and diverse perspectives
- Analyzing and evaluating major alternative points of view

Teachers are now evaluated on how they can incorporate these 21st century skills into their lesson plans. Some of these skills are included into any “good” lesson plan, but there are some, such as those listed above, that are a struggle to include with content and test preparation, especially when there is research showing that teaching them explicitly rather than implicitly yields better results. Including explicit instruction of these skills can be difficult when you are on a state mandated pacing guide. My goal in writing this unit is to write/develop/modify strategies and activities that can be tailored and adapted to be included into any curriculum.

Texts

Monster by Walter Dean Myers is the starting point of this unit.^v This story is of a 16 year old African American boy who is facing the death penalty or life without parole for first-degree murder. The story is written as a movie script from the boy’s point of view. The script covers the trial and conversations had in jail as he remembers them. It also includes journal entries that he keeps in jail to describe how he is feeling and what he is thinking as the trial progresses.

This text was chosen for a few very important reasons. First, it is socially relevant for all the students; they are all 15 or 16 years old so they can empathize with Steve’s thoughts during the trial. Second, it is a topic that is not completely foreign to the students that attend my school. Some, if not most, have had some sort of run-in with law enforcement in their lives, whether it was themselves or one of their friends. Third, it allows many “hot button” uses to come to life in discussions that offer jumping-off points for further discussion. There is the issue of whether or not it is right to charge a child of this age as a juvenile or an adult, at what age one becomes responsible for their actions, who is responsible for their actions before that age and, of course, the morality of the death penalty as a punishment. This text lends itself to use in a class like mine because it is written very accessibly because the language of most of the characters is informal. The story is also interesting without being incomprehensible.

A second text that will be used is *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare and modified by Globe Fearon.^{vi} This text will again be used to spark discussion and thinking. This classic tells the tale of two lovers from different families who are told they cannot be together. The story follows the two of them through their blossoming love, their struggle to be together and ultimately their deaths. *Romeo and Juliet* raises, again, the conversation of the age at which one should be held personally responsible, as well as

the discussion of choosing a partner in questions such as, “Who has the right to determine whom you can and cannot love and who determines the criteria on which love is based?” This text also presents a socially relevant topic of the idea of “true” love—students in high school are always madly in love with the individual who inevitably ends up being only a “flavor of the month.” This text will raise the issue of defining and analyzing “true” love.

This text, specifically, is a good choice because our OCS department has a modified version of it. It has been written in a shortened version while keeping the Elizabethan feel and beauty of the original text. This story is also one that is very widely known which makes it a good choice because the language will be less of a hindrance when reading a story that students have seen portrayed in many TV shows and movies throughout their life. This text fits comfortably into the NCSCoS for this class. It is a text that lends itself well to being analyzed in different mediums: there are musicals, movies, and episodes of many television shows that all revolve around the topics

A third text that will be used is *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom. This text is a good discussion starter for concepts dealing with the meaning of life, the meaning and process of death, love, family, and friendship. The story follows Mitch and his Sociology professor Morrie Schwartz through conversations about various topics in life. Morrie is on his deathbed, suffering from ALS and is trying to leave his legacy with Mitch, his favorite student from Brandeis University. This text raises issues of the emotion and fear surrounding death and life.

This text is a good choice for my students because, for most of them, death is not something they’re strangers to. Some have been shot at, have had friends die or be killed by various causes, or have lost loved ones to disease. This book offers a “lighter” look at death, while still being emotionally deep and sensitive. This book, as with *Romeo and Juliet*, has a movie adaptation that will allow students to see a depiction of the story after reading it. The other interesting connection that can be made to this text is that Nightline did a series of interviews with the real Morrie Schwartz during this same time in his life. My students find it fascinating to look at the real Morrie and compare him to the way he is portrayed in the story and the movie; it gives a face to an otherwise anonymous character.

Unit Strategies

Each of the strategies below is used as a part of this unit. They are graded on a participation basis unless it’s otherwise noted. As long as the student is productively participating (speaking and listening) in the discussion they are given full credit. I usually award bonus points to those who go above and beyond. This unit is designed to be included as a supplement to the curriculum that is already set up for a semester long English class.

Line game^{vii}

This strategy offers an interesting way to get students to make decisions about topics. It is a modified version of the Line game depicted in the movie *Freedom Writers*. Class rules are established regarding discussion. Depending on the teacher's goal students may not be allowed to defend their position at all, or there may be rules established for each student to have a chance to make their point in a respectful way. Once rules are established, an imaginary line is drawn across the room. Students stand in two lines, facing each other, on either side of the line and are asked questions in which they are asked to agree or disagree with a situation or problem. If students agree they step toward the line and if they disagree they stay in their spot.

This strategy can be used as a pre-reading or activation strategy, a way to discuss "hot-button" issues before or after a writing assignment, and a way to bring the class to a close after a particularly heated discussion. As students became more comfortable with the idea of how the game works the teacher can modify the game so that the students take a more active, facilitation role. Teacher can choose a random student of the day, and that student is in charge of facilitating the discussion by asking questions and calling on classmates to offer their reasons and discussion points. Below is a list of examples that may be used for the line game activity.

Stand on the line if:

- You have had a friend that got you in trouble for something that wasn't your fault.
- You have had a friend move away
- You have had a friend or family member with an incurable disease
- You have ever done something you knew was wrong
- You believe that your parents are responsible for your actions
- You believe that prison is capable of rehabilitating criminals
- You believe that ex-convicts should be given a second chance
- You think you are discriminated against because you are in OCS
- You have ever been treated differently for something that wasn't your fault

Fixed Debate

This is a "devil's advocate" twist put on a classic classroom debate. In this activity the teacher arranges to talk to a student before class and asks them to disagree with the majority of their classmates on the given debate topic. Students are told that they should work to come up with arguments against whatever their classmates say, despite how rational they feel the argument is. Then the teacher gives the class a debate topic. If they agree with the topic or problem presented they go to one side of the room and if they disagree they go to the other side of the room. If students are unsure about their opinion

they are free to stand in the middle of the room until they have heard more information. Students on either side are then given the opportunity to try and change the minds of those on the opposite side by presenting compelling arguments for their side. Students are free to move throughout the activity depending on the information presented. Here is a list of topics that may be used to inspire the debate activity:

- Everyone should have equal rights to get married
- High school students should be required to wear uniforms
- High school students should go to school year round
- High school should start later and go later in the afternoon
- All of the troops should come home from overseas and focus on protecting the US
- Should high school students be required to wear uniforms?
- Should couples be banned from adopting children overseas?
- Should there be a ban on television advertisements aimed at children?
- Should human beings be allowed to use other animals as objects of sport and entertainment?
- Can the assassination of a dictator be justified?
- Should celebrities have greater protection from the media?
- Should celebrities get a break in the justice/legal system?

Journaling

Students are asked to write opinion-based responses and reflections to various questions and situations. These questions/situations can stem from unfinished conversations in line game and debate activities or can be extensions of the topics discussed while reading the text. Here are topics that may be used for the journal activity:

- What is something you dislike about yourself?
- What is your favorite thing about yourself?
- What is your favorite/best/worst memory?
- What is your favorite holiday?
- What is your favorite movie?
- Which vegetable do you most resemble and why?
- What is your best attribute?
- In 20 years I'll be...
- If you were stuck in a TV show for a month, which would it be and why?
- In what ways are you discriminated against and why? How does it make you feel?
- Think of a time when someone disappointed you or when you disappointed someone else. Describe the event and the feelings.

- Would you rather your child be more intelligent or more attractive than you?
- What is a teacher?

Devil's Advocate Journaling

Students created an anonymous journal in which students are given a topic to write their opinion about. I then write an individual response in which I argue the opposing opinion by raising questions and making points for the opposition. Students are then given an opportunity to respond and defend their opinion by raising more points and answering the questions I've asked.

This can also be used as a small group activity. It takes away the anonymity but allows for students to discuss their responses with a small group before answering a teacher posed question. Students write their answers on a poster board. Groups then rotate and ask the devil's advocate questions of their classmates' responses. Once students have played the devil's advocate role they return to their original poster and respond to the questions posed by their partner group.

Here are some examples of topics that may be assigned:

- Is cheating immoral? Why/Why not?
- If a family member needed a kidney would you donate one? What about a neighbor? A Stranger?
- Should everyone who tries out make the team? Why/Why not?
- Is honesty always the best policy? Why/why not?
- What if there were no rules?

Socratic Seminar ^{viii}

In a Socratic seminar, students are given the opportunity to reflect on their own thoughts regarding a particular idea, portions of a text or a clip from a film. After doing their own reflecting students are seated in a circle around the room so that they may speak to their classmates directly and fully engage in active listening. The teacher then offers up a starting question, which is open-ended and thought-provoking in nature. Students are then given the opportunity to speak to their classmates about their opinions. This strategy encourages students to question each other in a respectful and open-minded manner.

Read Aloud

Students in this program often struggle with reading fluency and basic reading skills. To combat this and allow them to have access to more age-appropriate texts, read aloud is often used. This strategy changes depending on the text. In the texts that are written like plays, students are given assigned parts and allowed to preview their parts before the reading selection each day. Teacher can assign parts based on student's reading ability and difficulty of a particular. In the prose-written text students are given a copy of the text to follow along as the teacher reads it to them.

Thought Experiments

Thought experiments are used to provide moral or ethical problems for students to think about. These problems usually present a difficult choice that needs to be made. With high school students it is often interesting to offer up these questions and see the range of opinions and justifications that you hear. Teachers can modify questions to make them more relevant or easier to understand, depending on their students' abilities. Teachers may then choose to use the problems as a jumping off point for a line game or debate. There is a wide range of thought experiments that can be found by doing a simple internet search. Below is a list of websites that can be used for to find thought experiments.

- <http://www.friesian.com/valley/dilemmas.htm>
- <http://www.philosophyexperiments.com/>
- <http://www.philosophersnet.com/games/>

Activities

What Would You Do?

This activity stems from an ABC News special called *What Would You Do?* hosted by John Quinones. The premise of the show is to find out what unsuspecting people would do if they witnessed an ethical wrongdoing. The show has hidden cameras set up around a casted and scripted ethical problem. The viewers then get to watch the reactions of onlookers and passersby as the situation unfolds. The show delves into all sorts of issues including racism, ageism, obesity, alternative lifestyles, and parenting styles. My class and school composition really lend themselves to looking at the issue of racism and racial equality. In this activity, the teacher can start out by watching three different clips from the show found on YouTube.

The first two clips are from the same episode. The episode is set in a suburban park in New Jersey, depicting a car being vandalized near the jogging path. The first clip goes through the occurrences when there is a group of 3 white teens spray painting the car and hitting it with a baseball bat. The narrator tells the audience that in the entire time of

shooting the white teen's segment there were 3 phone calls made to 911. One of those calls was regarding the 3 white teens. The other two calls were regarding the 3 black teens and the guardian that had driven them to the shoot; these individuals were asleep in their car waiting their call time when the 911 calls were made. The second clip is the same setting except it is the 3 black teens spray painting the car and hitting it with the baseball bat; there are 10 phone calls made to 911 during this shoot.

The third clip we watched was pulled straight from the headlines, depicting a Latino man being beaten by 3 hooded assailants. During this segment, 99 individuals walked by, 7 called 911, and an astonishing 61 did absolutely nothing. While the clips were playing I wrote statistics about onlookers and 911 calls on the board. When the clips finish playing I ask students for their initial reactions. We had a discussion about the inherent racism shown in both the calls and the comments from onlookers.

After students share their initial reactions with each other, a Socratic seminar can be used, in which students discuss their moral responsibility to step forward and say something in a situation. Students are prompted to keep the conversation on track and about their responsibility to say something when they see something that is ethically wrong. After the seminar, students are given a journal topic in which they must write a reflection to the situation as a whole; they're prompted to include information from the statistics provided, their reaction to the clips, the reactions of their classmates and the class discussion on moral responsibility.

This I Believe

"This I Believe" is based on a radio program started by Edward R Murrow in the 1950s. It is a collection of essays written by different people about their core beliefs about various topics in life. On the "This I Believe" website are podcasts and full texts of different essays. Using these essays as models and examples, students will write their own "This I Believe" essays on various topics. This activity will give students a chance to express and share their individual beliefs with their classmates.

For this activity, one of the "This I Believe" essays students should listen to is "Free Minds and Hearts at Work" by Jackie Robinson. In his essay, Jackie discusses his fight against prejudice and discrimination as he broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. Students can listen to the podcast while reading along with the print copy. After listening to the essay the teacher can lead a discussion of the historical significance of Jackie Robinson's life and how the world has changed since he lived. After listening to the essay and discussing it, students are given instruction to write about their beliefs about racial equality, discrimination and prejudice. When students have completed their essays, students who wish to do so are given the opportunity to read their essays for the class.

Devil's Advocate Journal

Among the possible topics that can be used for the devil's advocate journal is "Should everyone who tries out make the team?" The teacher writes the question on the board with no further instruction or explanation. Students are given ample time to answer the question and defend their opinion there is a place that they can place their journals so that the teacher will not associate a cover design with any particular student. Teacher writes an individual response to each student, arguing for the opposition. In this case the teacher could either respond that when you cut people it ruins self-esteem or that the team will lose more games if there are talent-challenged people on it. Students then get their journals back and are given a chance to read and respond to the opinions and questions posed by the teachers. This cycle can continue for any amount of time until the teacher feels the argument has been exhausted.

Student Resources

Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie: an old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson*. New York: Doubleday, 1997. Print.

This book follows the main character, Mitch, through his conversations with dying Sociology professor Morrie Schwartz. They discuss topic of life, love, family and death.

Myers, Walter Dean, and Christopher Myers. *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999. Print.

This book is the story of 16 year old Steve Harmon and his experience of life on trial for murder. Told from Steve's perspective we see how he feels his age and race are working for and against him during his trial and prison.

Romeo & Juliet. United States: Globe Fearon, 1996. Print.

Following the well-known Shakespeare tragedy, this book has a modified text that makes the story line more accessible without the confusion offered by the poetic and Elizabethan hurdles of typical Shakespeare.

Teacher Resources

"Framework for 21st Century Learning - The Partnership for 21st Century Skills." The Partnership for 21st Century Skills.
http://www.p21.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid
(accessed November 1, 2011).

This site explains all of the 21st century skills that students are expected to have before they leave high school.

"Journey to Excellence: Socratic Seminars." Journey to Excellence.
<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/>
(accessed November 1, 2011).

This site gives a good description of a Socratic seminar that teachers can use in their classroom. It describes the roles for both the teacher and the students.

Daniel, Marie-France, and Emmanuel Auriac. "Philosophy, Critical Thinking, and Philosophy for Children." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 5 (2009): 415-435.

This article discusses the importance of teaching critical thinking through philosophical discussion with children.

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

This chapter from Freire fits with my rationale for this unit and my teaching philosophy. It describes the concept that teacher's should be offering students ways to experience their education rather than just "depositing" information into them.

Halpern, Diane, and Lisa Marin. "Pedagogy for developing critical thinking in adolescents: Explicit instruction produces greatest gains." *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 6, no. 1 (2011): 1-13.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1871187110000313> (accessed October 27, 2011).

This article was the basis for most of my rationale for this unit. It gave information from studies that show that teaching the skill of critical thinking explicitly rather than implicitly hiding them in lessons is often more beneficial for students.

Hollenbeck, Amy. "Instruction Makeover: Supporting the Reading Comprehension of Students with Learning Disabilities in a Discussion-Based Format." *Intervention in School and Clinic* 46, no. 4 (2010): 211-220. <http://isc.sagepub.com/content/46/4/211> (accessed September 15, 2011).

This article discusses increasing the reading comprehension of students with learning disabilities by leading students in discussion. It also discusses the importance and steps to developing good active reading skills.

Kohn, Alfie. "From Degrading to De-Grading." *Alfie Kohn author teacher lecturer* www.alfiekohn.org. Web. 1 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/fdtd-g.htm>>.

This article fits with my philosophy for teaching despite how out of the norm it is. This article discusses the pros and cons of grading students. It discusses the declines in performance and learning when grades are assigned.

Neal, Mary-Anne. "Engaging Students Through Effective Questions." *Education Canada* 51, no. 1 (2010): 49-52.

This article discusses the instructional technique of questioning and its use in engaging students and encouraging classroom discussion.

Nocella, Anthony. "Emergence of Disability Pedagogy." *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies* 6, no. 2 (2008): 77-94.

This article explores the instruction of students with disabilities. It discusses the importance of an inclusive educational setting and the dangers of segregation in education.

Snyder, Lisa, and Mark Snyder. "Teaching Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills." *The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal* L, no. 2 (2008): 90-99.

This article discusses the instructional design strategies involved in teaching critical thinking skills.

Implementing District Standards

OEII.C.1 Create increasingly complex oral and written responses for a variety of audiences, purposes, and contexts.

OEII.L.1 Use a variety of strategies to comprehend texts.

OEII.T.1 Analyze texts in visual, auditory, and digital formats.

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http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/define_critical_thinking.cfm (accessed September 15, 2011).
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<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1871187110000313> (accessed October 27, 2011).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kohn, Alfie. "From Degrading to De-Grading." *Alfie Kohn author teacher lecturer www.alfiekohn.org*. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.
<<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/fdtd-g.htm>>.
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http://www.p21.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid (accessed November 1, 2011).
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- ^{vii} Freedom Writers Foundation. "Teacher tips and lesson plans-Freedom Writers Foundation." FWF Home-Freedom Writers Foundation.
http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/site/c.kqIXL2PFJtH/b.2260037/k.93F0/Teacher_Tips.htm (accessed November 1, 2011).
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<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/> (accessed November 1, 2011).

