

Critical Literacy and Our Students' Lives

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I received the US West Outstanding Teacher of the Western United States award in 1990. I treasured the award, not because I *was* the best teacher, but because after fifteen years in the classroom with two children at home, I was tired. The award came with a sabbatical. But it also came with humiliation and outrage.

First, the award itself was boastful. I was a good teacher, but the *best*? No way. I wasn't even the best in my school much less the entire western United States. But I was the one who had applied, pulled together a résumé with the help of my colleagues, and apparently answered their questions in the right way. No one who gave me the award even watched me teach. So I felt pompous and overreaching with the title. But the worst part came later when my photo appeared in the local paper stating that I taught "disadvantaged" students. I prayed that none of my students or colleagues would see the article. This wasn't how I framed my students or my work. Yes, many of my students qualified for free and reduced lunch. And yes, many of my students were African American, but none of my students was "disadvantaged."

I started out teaching in a remedial reading program. At that time, the reading department taught high school students syllabic patterns because, according to test scores, they didn't know how to decode. Their test scores guided our work. They read SRA cards and answered questions. They completed grammar lessons from the Warriner's English Grammar and Composition books. The closest we came to real reading was giving them books, then reading out loud to them. They rebelled. They hated the class. They didn't come or they acted up when they attended. They didn't do the work. I said things like, "These kids just don't want to learn" and "These kids don't care about their education."

And yet "these kids" could out argue me about everything under the sun: the inherent problems with school policies, the merits of long lunches, why we should hold class outside, and about local issues that reverberated through the building like desegregation and school closures. When they wrote, they had spelling errors and grammar issues, despite—or because of—the Warriner drills or my lack of knowledge about African American Vernacular English, but their logic and evidence spun circles around me.

My error—and the error of the department that hired me—was to see these students as "disadvantaged" instead of seeing their brilliance. In her poetic tribute to her mother's accent, a "sanchocho of English and Spanish," the poet Denice Frohman says,

there is no telling my mama to be "quiet,"
she don't know "quiet."
her voice is one size better fit all
and you best not tell her to hush,
she waited too many years for her voice to arrive
to be told it needed house keeping. (lines 10–15)

My students' voices and lives didn't need "housekeeping"; they didn't need to be told to "hush." They needed a teacher who could unleash their beauty on the page and their capacity to discuss and argue in the classroom. When I stopped attending to test scores and started listening to the music of my students' voices and seeing them as "more than a score," I increased my capacity to engage them. I knew what *didn't* work, but I still didn't know what *did* work.

Breakthroughs

In his advice to writers on creative breakthroughs, Ta-Nehisi Coates describes his struggle to become the kind of writer he wants to be. He says, "I was not becoming that writer. I was looking for a breakthrough, and I was not finding a breakthrough at all. I was banging my head against the wall . . . I think breakthroughs come from that kind of stress." (2003)

I understand Coates's frustration and his insight. Becoming the kind of teacher I wanted to become meant banging my head against the wall of the wrong choices I continued to make about teaching literature and writing. While I no longer gave students grammar worksheets or insulted them with SRA cards, I still hadn't created classrooms that matched the classroom in my imagination, where students read, argued, and wrote passionately. I moved in the right direction when I stopped believing that I was the one who knew and they were the ones who needed to know. I became curious about what I didn't know: African American literature,

history, language, culture, and especially the lives of the students and families in my neighborhood.

Then I overcorrected. Instead of an all-white lineup, I taught almost all African American literature, which was an improvement, but still problematic. When one student in class tallied up all of the races in class and suggested I teach by the percentages present, I realized I had once again erred. As an Asian American, she wanted to be included. And then there was the graduate who returned and chided me for not preparing her with any “traditional” literature.

Over the years students taught me that teaching language arts doesn’t mean diving into data to locate the discrete reading or writing skills a student needs to learn, and it doesn’t mean looking at the sea of students and neatly matching novels to their race or heritage, nor does it mean creating a mathematical formula to represent the diversity in the room. Dirk Tyler taught me this. After reading an excerpt from Carlos Bulosan’s memoir *America Is in the Heart* about the struggles of Filipinos, Dirk, a student in a class I cotaught with history teacher Bill Bigelow, said, “I didn’t realize that other people went through the same things we [African Americans] did.” His comment helped fuel another breakthrough. Bill and I didn’t have any Filipinos in the classroom, but we had students whose families had struggled to find meaningful work, who experienced economic exploitation, who fought with others for better lives.

Dirk and his classmates didn’t care just about themselves, their neighborhood, and their city, they cared about other people’s lives too. And when they saw how their lives and stories intersected with the struggles of other people, they became more adept at making

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connections across cultures, races, and time periods. The “disadvantaged” label that the newspaper had placed on my students didn’t recognize their eagerness to learn, their drive to be intellectuals, to know more about the world.

When I started paying attention to the larger themes that brought the world into our classroom, my students (mostly) stopped rebelling. Dirk—and

others—taught me that teaching language arts means plumbing my students’ lives to bring their stories and voices into the classroom as we examine racial injustice, class exploitation, gender expectations, sexual identity, gentrification, solidarity, and more.

Creating the Classroom of My Imagination

These days I attempt to teach a critical literacy that equips students to “read” power relationships at the same time it imparts academic skills. I try to make my literacy work a sustained argument against inequality and injustice. I want my students to be able to “talk back” when they encounter anything that glorifies one race, one culture, one social class, one gender, one language over another: texts, museums, commercials, classes, rules that hide or disguise domination. A critical literacy means that students probe who benefits and who suffers, how did it come to be this way, what are the alternatives, and how can we make things more just?

This kind of work takes time. We can’t race through a half-dozen novels. I’m forced to make difficult choices about what I include and what I leave out. Often one novel will provide the center, or core, and I’ll surround it with other texts, role-plays, videos, improves, museum visits, speakers. My units are responsive to what is

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In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus explains to Scout that “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (36). Make this advice more literal by inviting students to imagine spending a day in someone else’s shoes in this writing activity. Students examine a variety of shoes and envision what the owner would look like, such as their appearance, actions, etc. They then write a narrative, telling the story of a day in the shoe owner’s life. While this lesson plan uses the quotation from *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a springboard and ties nicely to discussions of the novel, it can be completed even if students are not currently reading the book.

<http://bit.ly/1HirMjz>

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happening in the world and the way it affects my students' lives—sometimes in obvious ways like the impact of gentrification on our community, sometimes in subtle ways like the pervasive, but invisible hierarchy of Standard English.

The word *sancocho*, which is a thick stew, that Denice Frohman used to describe her mother's voice, might serve as a description for my curricular process. Over the years my curriculum has become a *sancocho* composed of key pieces: a question that provokes the examination of historical, literary, social "texts"; the study and involvement of students' lives through poetry and narrative; an essay that allows students to create a passionate response to their learning; and a final project that opens the possibility for students to act on their knowledge—create historical fiction or write and teach lessons about the topic to others. It's big and it's messy. It combines the reading and writing of poetry, fiction, essay, historical documents and statistics, lots of discussions, read-arounds, days of writing, responding, and revising of student work.

My gentrification unit demonstrates how I play with the *sancocho*. I frame this unit by sharing a quote from the Pew Research Center (Kochhar & Fry, 2014): "The median wealth of White households is 13 times that of Black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households." And then I ask, "How did this 'gap' happen?" I tell students that we are going to look at the housing history in Portland to help us understand those statistics.

For me, this unit is critical because it talks back to the "disadvantaged" label that has been hanging around my school for the last forty years. In order to teach students effectively, I have to raise the curtain on the myths that control the narrative of our community: for example, that our predominantly African American Albina neighborhood was "bad" or "run down" before Whites moved in, or ignore the Black-owned businesses that lined the streets before urban renewal bulldozed them, or that imply that it takes White wealth and money to make a neighborhood "good."

I bring in students' lives in two ways. First, the unit itself is about their lives and the unfolding narrative of how racial inequality, displacement, economic disparity, as well as resistance and resilience are currently playing out in their neighborhood. And second, I ask them to write a narrative about a time their homes were lost, stolen, or restored. I say something like, "In this narrative, you might tell a story about a delightful time at home—a night when your 'family' celebrated the birth of a new child or the homecoming of a relative who was in the military or college or just an incident that

demonstrates your 'family' doing something together. Your home may not be at home; it might be hiking in Forest Park or dunking basketballs at Peninsula Park. You might tell the story of a time when your home was disrupted." Uriah wrote about her "home" in the dance studio, and Desi wrote about how a blank canvas represents both home and possibility to her. But most students wrote about their homes being disrupted—by divorce, evictions, mental illness, alcohol, or drug addiction. Dylan wrote about the night his home was stolen by FBI agents arresting his grandparents for dealing drugs. Bridgette wrote about the night her parents' marriage fell apart and she and her sister huddled together in a closet while anger ran loose in her house. And Desiree wrote about the day her family was evicted:

I knew it was the eviction notice that came no matter how hard [my mother] worked, how good we were, how friendly of a neighbor we were. I was young, but I wasn't stupid. I knew we were going to have to move again, but so soon this time? Would we end up in a shelter again? Would we have to switch schools? Again? Tears swelled my eyes and poured down my dirty, 8-year-old cheeks. My tiny fists clenched so tight my knuckles turned white, my whole body shook with angry sobs. Barely brushing four feet tall, I was going to destroy the whole world for what they were doing to me: for taking away my security, my happiness, my home.

After students write, we arrange the desks in a circle for a read-around. The read-around is the living room of our classroom. During this time, every student reads their piece. As students read, we laugh, cry, and create community, but we also teach and learn from each other. If I had to choose one strategy as the centerpiece of my teaching, it would be the read-around. It provides both the writing text for my classroom and the social text where our lives intersect and we deepen our connections and understandings across lines of race, class, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation.

As students read, I ask them to take notes on each person's narrative and to think how their classmates felt about their homes. At the end of the read-around, I tell students to write the "collective text" from the class. "If you add up all of our ages, we have hundreds of years of experience dealing with homes. Think back to your classmates' stories and summarize how people felt about finding, losing, or keeping their homes. You might want to name specific people and their stories as evidence. Let's read the collective text of our classroom." In our

post-writing discussion, students name both anger and sadness that accompanied the loss of homes.

After personalizing the unit, we dive into historical background that includes redlining, real estate covenants that didn't allow people of color to live in certain sections of the city, like the following one dated June 8, 1948:

11. Race: No property shall be sold, leased, or subleased to Japanese, Chinese, Negroes, or Orientals, whether born in the United States of America or elsewhere, provided, however, that this shall not prevent their occupancy as domestic servants while employed by an owner or tenant.

We travel through the history of eminent domain, urban renewal, and the contemporary gentrification that has pushed Black people out of our school's community. These historical stories help students answer the opening question about Black wealth. While we are reading historical documents, we take a neighborhood tour with one of my former students, who shares her history as well as the history of Albina. We meet an elder along the route, who tells stories about growing up in segregated Portland, of surviving the Vanport Flood, who describes the Black-owned nightclubs and restaurants that used to line the streets. When we return to school, students write persona poems from the perspective of people or buildings that have been lost or stolen over the years.

We also read *This Side of Home* by Renée Watson, a young adult novel, which explores the complex issue of gentrification through the eyes of Maya and her twin sister, Nikki, African American teenagers at a majority Black high school in Portland, Oregon. Watson's novel reflects the race—and class—tensions that occur on the streets and in the classroom during population shifts. She unravels the myth that gentrification improves neighborhoods that didn't have much to offer: "There is something good here. And not just because more white families have moved to this side of town. There's always been something good here. People just have to open their minds to see it" (p. 98).

To provide closure to this part of the unit, students write an essay. Students sometimes use their narratives about home as introductions to their essays that

might include Watson's novel as well as the history we uncovered.

I finish this chapter of class by asking students to write a piece of historical fiction. They might write from the perspective of one of the historical "characters" we met during our study, their sons or daughters, or even from someone in their family. Students have written imaginative stories set in nightclubs where jazz greats came to play and their grandparents met and fell in love, cafés that once held the laughter of Black voices, or the basements of an elder's home where neighbors organized to protest urban renewal.

As language arts teachers, we continue to live in a time when students are forced to jump through alienating academic hoops because of low test scores, especially in schools serving poor communities. But as teachers, we have more academic space than we inhabit. We can choose to push back against the disadvantaged narratives and mandates that continue to lurk in our schools and society and instead build a curriculum that puts students' lives at the center and encourages them to resist a story line that distorts or maligns their right to blossom into the intellectuals and change-makers they are so ready to become.

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