Revising Resistance: A Step Toward Student-Centered Activism

ALEX **CORBITT**

The first time I sincerely critiqued my own pedagogy was in the spring of my first year as a teacher. My seventh graders and I were at a local police precinct sitting on metal folding chairs organized in a circle. An officer stood in the center. We listened silently as he lectured about why kids should obey the law. A few minutes earlier, a couple students had noticed a photo of a peer's cousin posted on the precinct's board of "suspects." Only now had I started to recognize the layers of injustice in the situation. My students, all black and Latinx adolescents, were made vulnerable to prejudice and potential trauma. And I was responsible . . .

Two months earlier I had launched a unit titled Mistakes and Challenges. My goal was to explore texts that would inspire students to navigate ethical dilemmas and the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. We considered ideas of friendship, bullying, and revenge in John Bell Clayton's "The White Circle." We analyzed themes of family, materialism, and betrayal in Cristina Henriquez's "The Box House and the Snow." Finally, we broadened our inquiry to investigate systemic injustice, asking, "Can society make mistakes?"

To consider society's ethical limits, my students and I examined two issues relevant to our 2013–14 academic year. First, we discussed New York City's stop-and-frisk policy. Second, we discussed youth incarceration. My partner at the time, a public interest law student, helped me curate relevant texts and resources. The students took a stance on issues, engaged in debate, and cited relevant textual and statistical evidence. The unit culminated in two projects: 1) position papers mailed to local, state, and federal policymakers, and 2) a critical conversation with our local police precinct.

I wanted to be proud of my Mistakes and Challenges unit. It seemed to have all the elements of good instruction: culturally relevant texts, deep essential questions, student-centered discourse, authentic audiences, and community engagement. But as I sat in the police precinct, watching the officer lecture, it became very clear that I had perpetuated injustice. Where had I gone wrong?

My process of reflection and growth happened slowly over the next two years. I continued to teach the Mistakes and Challenges unit, but I omitted the community activism component. In fact, my instruction from 2014 to 2016 was nearly void of any activism work. While I had made some personal progress interrogating my privilege as a straight white cisgender able-bodied man, my instruction was ideologically stunted. I doubted my ability to facilitate sustaining pedagogy that wasn't oppressive or colonizing. Instead of trying, I resorted to silence and status quo. That was equally problematic.

In the summer of 2016 I attended the New York City Writing Project summer institute. The United States was in the eve of Donald Trump's election, and the tone of the institute was sobering. Our institute facilitators, Jen Ochoa and Priscilla Thomas, reminded us of the danger of silence in the wake of injustice. For the next two weeks we discussed ways to create spaces for students to express their voices and identities in the classroom.

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A major value of the National Writing Project is writing in community. Throughout the institute, Jen and Priscilla emphasized the importance of active listening. When our colleagues shared their writing, we would lean in and focus on every word. After each person presented, the community would respond, "Thank you for sharing." Our constructive feedback always centered on areas specified by the authors themselves. Over the two weeks, I realized that listening is a cornerstone of pedagogical justice.

In light of the institute, I could finally discern what had gone wrong in my first year of teaching: I hadn't

listened. I created the unit theme, I asked the essential questions, I curated the syllabus with my partner, and I policed (literally and figuratively) my students' activism. At no point were the students in control of their advocacy; their work was an echo chamber of my voice. Moving forward, I knew student activism would need to be radically student-centered. It was time to listen. It was time to revise resistance.

For the first time in two years I began to consider a space for student activism in my classroom. As I prepared for September, I looked at my teaching load. I was scheduled to teach four sections of seventh grade literacy and an elective on documentary film. The elective seemed to be the perfect opportunity to experiment with a radically student-centered pedagogy. Instead of documentary film, I would ask my students if we could shift our focus to teen activism. Documentary film could be a medium through which we explored different issues.

It would be important to rethink my approach to unit planning if I were to afford students more agency over their learning and activism. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's Understanding by Design framework had historically guided my planning. I would outline my units prior to facilitation, maintaining a clear vision of what my students knew and where their thinking was headed. But I began to sense that such rigid planning might inhibit deep student-centered inquiry. I wanted to give students the opportunity to develop units, curate syllabi, and plan lessons.

Instead of beginning the teen activism course with a curriculum, I began the course with a series of procedures. I didn't know where the class was headed, so I needed to ensure that the students would be able to cofacilitate the course in a structured way. The procedures I created all followed the same three steps: 1) brainstorm, 2) curate, and 3) vote. We would brainstorm unit ideas and essential questions. We would curate texts of interest and collaboratively sequence our inquiries. Finally, we would vote as a community on the trajectory of the course. As I facilitated the process, my students and I would experience the unit unfolding together.

On our first day of class, my fifteen students and I organized ourselves around a large rug at the front of my classroom. Some of us were in chairs, others sat on the rug. We took turns sharing stories about our summers—connecting and building community. A few students mentioned that they had become increasingly bothered by the 2016 presidential election. Our conversation naturally segued into the goal of the course: teen activism. I explained to the students that they would have the chance to help create the course. Some students expressed immediate enthusiasm, while others conveyed hesitancy. I assured them that I would help facilitate the collaborative process.

The first class session culminated in a brainstorm of unit ideas. The students expressed interest in learning about incarceration, racism, LGBTQ+ identities, mental health, bullying, drug abuse, nutrition, and animal rights. Students voted on which topic they wanted to explore first. The majority of students voted for racism. Thus, we launched our first unit: Racism and Society.

We continued to outline the unit over the next few class sessions. We generated and sequenced a list of questions we had about racism and how it manifests in various aspects of society. Next, we curated a list of potential documentaries, articles, and books that could inform our discourse. A few students mentioned that discussing racism for 55 minutes each day would be emotionally exhausting. The group collaboratively agreed to establish a "safety protocol" in which we immediately pause a discussion and play a lighthearted team-building game. Anyone in the class could initiate the safety protocol if they felt overwhelmed with the content of the course.

As the unit progressed, our daily lessons took the form of checklists. We would collaboratively plot the questions, texts, and activities we intended to cover during the period. Then, the students voted on the order in which we would complete the items. Over time I played a larger role in preparing our texts and organizing activities. But I always offered multiple options to the group ahead of time and left curricular decisions up to a vote. The students owned their opinions and activism

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most when they were in control of the learning. Furthermore, the students had the power to conclude a unit once they felt that they had sufficiently addressed their inquiries.

Various student-generated activism projects synthesized and applied our values throughout the year. At the conclusion of our mental health unit, students created posters that featured a wealth of strategies to reduce stress and anxiety. They hung the posters up in high-traffic areas of the hallway. The goal was to provide support for students in the school who might be silently suffering from socioemotional challenges.

After our bullying unit, students created an underground zine with poetry and prose that celebrated body positivity, self-care, and inclusion. The zine had a 1970s punk aesthetic and was completely anonymous. Students decided to sign their contributions with monikers; their anonymity was intended to make the zine more edgy and provoke public discourse around its origin. They hoped that the zine would help disrupt local discourses of exclusion. After school, once the hallways were empty, the students and I stuffed copies of the zine into every sixth, seventh, and eighth grade locker. The following morning, the school was buzzing with discussion about the project.

At the end of the year, the students decided to create public service announcements that matched the aesthetic of PSAs produced by the hacktivist group Anonymous. The students formed small groups around topics of interest: sexism, immigration justice, and mass incarceration. They conducted research on their topics, created scripts, and filmed videos that advocated for their positions on their issue. Once a group was ready to film, the entire class would convene to help them record and produce their video.

Admittedly, I experienced a lot of anxiety throughout the teen activism course. Unit plans, lessons, and slides had been my security blanket. I felt vulnerable negotiating and navigating the course with my students. Nevertheless, the students demonstrated a level of insight, collaboration, empathy, and initiation that inspired me with confidence. Sometimes the sessions and projects got messy, and sometimes enthusiasm waned, but in the end they proudly took ownership of their opinions, interests, and advocacy.

I learned a lot from cofacilitating the teen activism course and actively listening to my students. First, I realized that there is a difference between teaching *about* social justice and teaching *for* social justice. My early attempts at facilitating student activism were problematic. I taught about social justice issues from a rigid, teacher-centered approach that failed to create spaces of authentic inquiry, open expression, and distributed leadership. If anything, my instruction reproduced injustice. Teaching *for* social justice, however, aims to create spaces of inquiry that embody the progress we desire in society.

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Second, I was reminded that my students are not exclusively concerned with issues of racism and mass incarceration. These issues are of paramount importance to my students, but they do not capitalize the entirety of their concern. As a white teacher working with students of color, I sometimes fall into the mental trap of conflating "activism" with "anti-racism." My students showed me that activism addresses so many other issues, too. In addition to conversations about racism and mass incarceration, my students wanted to discuss nutrition, mental health, and bullying. Listening to my students helped me better address their needs and passions.

Third, I noticed that students hold a spectrum of perspectives that don't conform to the partisan climate of our current political system. My students were able to attend to nuance and sit with contradiction in many ways that I cannot. My early attempts to facilitate student activism unconsciously tried to indoctrinate students into my narrow, limited understanding of progressivism. I subsequently realized that my students often have a much greater capacity to explore ideological complexities than I do.

Last, I learned that my students had a preferred audience: their peers. In 2014, I made my students engage with policymakers and law enforcement. These audiences were of primary significance to *me*. But my teen activism students decided to engage with the beliefs and values of their fellow adolescents. Their posters, their zine, and their public service announcements all addressed the student body. Granted, not all adolescents have the same preferred audience. My takeaway is to not assume that kids always want to dialogue with adults.

I think our teen activism course marked a significant advancement in my teaching. But pedagogical growth is boundless. There continue to be many aspects of the teen activism course that I would modify today. I am continually grateful for the patience that my students show me along my professional journey. Together we can continue to revise resistance.

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Promising Researcher Award Winner

The recipient of the 2019 NCTE Promising Researcher Award in Recognition of Bernard O'Donnell is **Tracey T. Flores**, PhD, University of Texas at Austin. She is an assistant professor of Language and Literacy at the University of Texas at Austin where she teaches Language Arts Methods and Community Literacies in the K–5 teacher education program. Dr. Flores is a former English Language Development (ELD) and English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, working for eight years alongside culturally and linguistically diverse students, families and communities in K–8 schools throughout Glendale and Phoenix, Arizona. Her research focuses on Latina mothers' and daughters' language and literacy practices, the teaching of young writers in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, and family and community literacies. Dr. Flores has published in *Research in the Teaching of English, Journal of Literacy Research, Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, Bilingual Research Journal, Voices from the Middle,* and *Language Arts*.

Flores discusses her work in this issue of *Voices from the Middle*, in Teaching with YA Lit with Jason Griffith (pp. 50–52).

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