

2020

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Recommended Citation

Wargo, Katalin (2020) "Into the Fray: Social Justice Teaching Gone Awry," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/19>

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Into the Fray: Social Justice Teaching Gone Awry

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As English educators, we find ourselves deeply entrenched in the polarizing politics of our time. Now, perhaps more than ever, we are called to action to fight rampant social injustices through our teaching. We serve on the front lines, trying to battle racism, sexism, classism... wielding our whiteboard markers in one hand and our ideals in the other. However, many well-intentioned teachers remain unarmed with the tactical knowledge to succeed in this fight. Aja LaDuke asserts that even the most *woke* teachers have difficulty translating their racial understanding into anti-racist action in the classroom. I count myself as recently having been amongst those ranks.

Right after the fatal shooting of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown and the ensuing riots that unfolded in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, I asked students in my Advanced Placement English and Composition courses to examine the extent to which the media perpetuates the racial status quo in our country. After students completed some research on their own, I was shocked to hear many of them say they could not find evidence of bias in the media. As a result, I created a lesson where we explored headlines from well-known news sources, teasing out the biased language used to depict White suspects as opposed to Black victims. The headlines for White murder suspects often read with a tone of disbelief, as opposed to the headlines for Black victims, which verged on character assassination. We then read an iconic piece, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, by Peggy McIntosh. This was used as a springboard to discuss how privilege may play a role in the primarily

White mainstream media. I chose this reading not to blame mainstream media but rather to provide some context and reasoning for why there might be inherent biases. I had anticipated there may be some discomfort with the idea of privilege, as many of my students were White, high achievers who might find it difficult to grapple with the notion that they have what they do because of any other reason than hard work and determination. As a person who grew up on food stamps and only made it to college because of an academic scholarship, I also had difficulty understanding the notion of privilege when I was first introduced to it. Because of this, I approached the topic with what I thought was sensitivity and shared with students that to recognize privilege of any kind is not to diminish any of our own achievements but rather sheds light on the inequities in our society.

As we read the piece on white privilege, a student angrily stormed out of the classroom, disturbed by the notion of privilege. I had taught this text before in other schools in different parts of the country and never had this happen. I was befuddled to say the least. Not too long after, the assistant principal called me into her office as a result of multiple parent complaints. One parent chastised, "Adults can't even handle these kinds of conversations," to which I replied, "Isn't that more reason to teach our children how to have difficult conversations?" But for the students and parents who took issue with the lesson, to question their role in possibly contributing to the inequities of our society as White citizens with privilege made them

incredibly uncomfortable. Having taken the time to reflect on this experience, I can understand this response a bit more now. Most likely their reaction stemmed from living in an area that has historically been under silent siege by racial tension, which has unfortunately been reignited in recent years—the race riots in Charlottesville, Virginia being the most blatant show of overt racial conflict we’ve had here in Virginia in some time.

As a result of parental pressures, I was forced to stop the unit and I emerged from that experience saddened, deflated, and frankly disillusioned. For the first time in my teaching career, I felt the same binding constraints of institutional factors that Christina Berchini highlights as an obstacle many teachers struggle against when teaching about race. She discusses how the teacher’s traditional role within the classroom is “structured to minimize and dismiss broader discussions of institutionalized and systemic oppression and violence” (1030). In my case, rather than opening up a discussion about why the idea of privilege may make us uncomfortable or how unintentional bias can occur and what we can do about it, the conversation was shut down. Honestly, I think the unit did more damage than good, reaffirming the status quo even through my efforts to reveal it.

Like many in our field, I entered the teaching profession with the hope that I could have a positive impact on the world by addressing inequity head on, instilling empathy and a drive for social justice in my students so that they could go forth to create positive change in our world, but in this instance I failed. Initially, this experience had a profoundly negative effect on my self-efficacy and identity as a teacher. This clash between my own identity as an anti-racist educator and my newly developed fear of rebuke, or worse, losing my job, was a

shock to the system. I became incredibly hesitant to teach anything outside of the prescribed curriculum, and this made me feel shame more than anything.

After taking much time to reflect upon this defining moment in my career, I can see that my failure stemmed from a basic lack of understanding of what James Gee terms “big D” Discourse. Discourse isn’t just about the words spoken; it’s about what words mean within certain contexts. Frankly, when I successfully taught about the racial status quo in prior contexts I was, pardon the cliché, preaching to the choir. When I taught in Seattle, Washington, I was thousands of miles separate from the small Southern community within which I now found myself immersed—not only geographically, but also socially, politically, and culturally. Embracing these differences as a starting point rather than essentially attacking them head on would have helped me to plan for a more effective start to the discussion about the status quo because I could have met my students where they were ideologically.

This is not to say that teachers should affirm racist, sexist, or classist notions: racism is racism; sexism is sexism; and classism is classism. However, I’ve learned through this experience that teaching about social justice to students who may have very different ideologies requires not only understanding the genesis of my thinking and identity as a White, female, upper middle class teacher in this context, but also helping students to examine and grapple with their identities and why they hold certain beliefs. In order to be able to have the kinds of critical conversations necessary to promoting social justice, we teachers must begin by understanding and helping students to reflect upon the intertwined constellations of their identities, which Elizabeth Johnson describes as intersectional and situated. Only then, will teachers and students be able to successfully “critically

interrogate the historical and present-day intersections of race, culture, gender, and foster a self-reflexive engagement with difference...[opening] up more meaningful, situated ways of knowing self and other..." (Asher 66). What I didn't realize before is that social justice is as much about examining ourselves as it is about examining the world.

As a result of this experience, the following year I focused more on student identity through writing activities like "I Am poems" and "More than a Stereotype" essays, where I had students reflect upon and write about how others perceive them and how they perceive themselves. We posted these anonymously on the wall outside our classroom and gallery walked to read through and reflect. I shared my own story of growing up "White trash"; one young championship runner shared his experience with people shouting slurs like "homo" at him on his runs through town simply because he wore short running shorts; too many young woman shared being denigrated daily by insults like "whore" and "slut"; and a lot of students wrote about the social toll that poverty takes in a town divided by the haves and have-nots. This led to discussion about what shocked or resonated with us. Through activities like this I could feel a shift, where students began to look both inward and outward, seeing themselves in relation to others in the class, drawing parallels to and finding perspective through others' experiences, as well as finding community through the process of sharing our stories in this forum.

Using what I learned about students through these activities, I created a unit exploring the American Dream through texts and films such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Inequality for all*, and *A Place at the Table* where students drew upon their own experiences and synthesized these sources

and others that they found in their own research to discuss inequality and the American Dream. I received passionately written essays on racial inequality, gender inequality, socioeconomic inequality, marriage inequality, and many more. Next time, I would turn this into a Project-Based Learning unit where students could tackle real social justice problems and take some kind of action to try to combat these inequities in our own community. For now though, I count this as one small move towards social justice in a community greatly divided.

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