I Don't Have the Answers, Sway! Teaching Secondary Literacy Methods Course Using an Inquiry Model of Instruction

Kisha Porcher
Rutgers University - New Brunswick/Piscataway

Recommended Citation

Porcher, Kisha (2020) "I Don't Have the Answers, Sway! Teaching Secondary Literacy Methods Course Using an Inquiry Model of Instruction," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 14.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/14

I Don't Have the Answers, Sway! Teaching a Secondary Literacy Methods Course Using an Inquiry Model of Instruction

KISHA PORCHER

Rutgers University – New Brunswick/Piscataway

A recent popular video shows an exchange between Kanye West and Sway, two entertainers. As the two are talking, West interrupts Sway and yells, "You don't have the answers, Sway!" Kanye's outburst has become a way for a speaker in the Black community to tell someone they do not have enough background knowledge. It's a phrase I often want to scream as a teacher educator but in the inverse, "I don't have the answers Sway, you do! In your mind!" Some of the questions from my students that have warranted a "Kanye response" from me include:

- *Dr. P., can you please just show us how to do it?*
- *Can you just show us what we need to do to get an A?*
- *I don't know what to do! Just tell me what to do!*
- *Do you have a sample, I can use to create my own?*

In my current role as a professor of professional practice in an English Education program, I teach students who lived through the rise of standardized tests following the adoption of No Child Left Behind in 2001. During their K–12 schooling, they were inundated with testing and their teachers' focus on test scores. It feels as if, as a result of that high stakes testing, they have become conditioned to look for the "right answer." In my experience, students are often more focused on their grade than thinking critically, problem-solving, or engaging in productive struggle to come to their own understanding of knowledge.

Not all schools succumbed to the pressure, and some are pushing back against the idea there's always one right answer. For example, on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers assessment developed under the Race to the Top grant program adopted in 2005, some questions have more than one right answer. This allows students to generate a range of rich insights supported by evidence from the text(s). Meanwhile, an increasing number of school districts have transitioned to inquiry-based learning because it shifts from information delivery to project- or problem-based teaching. Yet, higher education instructors and professors still predominately rely on lecture, further perpetuating the idea of students needing one right answer. I've wanted to say the Kayne comeback when talking with my higher education colleagues as well—we are lacking urgency around preparing preservice teachers for their future as leaders of inquiry-based classrooms.

The Case for Inquiry-Based Learning in Higher Education

Undergraduate students in any discipline should have the opportunity from the first year of university to learn about and experience inquiry, and research-intensive universities should lead the effort (Aulls and Shore 148). Spronken-Smith and Harland reported three studies offering evidence of positive undergraduate student-learning outcomes when professors taught using inquiry-based learning. The lack of implementation of inquiry-based learning in higher education often means teacher

preparation candidates, especially those whose own K–12 teachers focused on "right answers," have limited opportunity to experience it.

Many teacher educators are lecturing or using the gradual release of responsibility model, while the districts in which their preservice teacher candidates complete their clinical experience are utilizing an inquiry model for learning. As we have no idea where our students will end up, it's essential we expose students to inquiry-based instructional models. I made the decision to switch to an inquiry-based model to ensure my students were better prepared to step into and create inquiry-based classrooms.

The Implementation of Inquiry-Based Learning in English Education

Inquiry-based instruction can take many different forms. The common characteristics across most models are:

1. Students' interests contribute to what happens in the classroom.
2. At least some of the curriculum is co-constructed.
3. There is an exchange, diversification, sharing, or adoption of new roles of learners and teachers (Aulls & Shore 15).

The first course that preservice teacher candidates take in the English Education Department is my course, *Teaching Literacy in English Secondary Classroom*s. This course is designed to help students:

1. Interrogate and reflect on their views, perspectives, and beliefs on the teaching of literacy.
2. Develop and apply instructional strategies to sequence English Language Arts (ELA) content, skills, and standards to support student learning.
3. Work collaboratively to build and expand the knowledge base and clinical experience in teaching literacy in English Language Arts.

4. Explore literature and informational texts in order to understand contemporary local and global issues related to literacy, schooling, and education.
5. Plan and implement lesson plans for middle and/or high school.
6. Engage in understanding and implementation of critical literacies and culturally sustaining pedagogies in English Language Arts classrooms.

The content of the course did not change when I embraced an inquiry model. I wanted to model how to recognize learners' assets and help them see they have the ability to problem-solve and utilize their prior knowledge. Furthermore, I wanted to subvert the lessons they may have picked up as a result of high-stakes tests by shifting into a space of inquiry and modeling a growth mindset. My Kayne moments had shown me that structuring the course using a lecture model with facilitated mini-lessons would not provide students' sufficient opportunity to experience productive struggle while mastering the course goals (Munter et al. 5; Polly 454). I saw a successful inquiry model, known as Launch-Explore-Discuss (LED) in one of our partner districts and thought it would a good fit for my course and students and better prepare my students for the curriculum that they would encounter during their clinical experience.

Launch-Explore-Discuss (LED)

LED is an inquiry model that frames a lesson around one or more cognitively demanding tasks that explicitly enable problem-solving and opportunities for productive struggle (Lappan and Phillips 2). The teacher serves as a facilitator of students' understanding by presenting tasks, providing opportunities for collaboration, using materials, and by posing questions to support task completion. Some of the course-objective aligned tasks included

unpacking New Jersey state standards, analyzing state ELA assessments, writing learning objectives, designing formative assessments to align to standards and learning objectives, and developing close reading strategies using literary theory. Below, I explain how one task looks inside the model.

Launch-Explore-Discussion in Action in English Education Course

Launch

The *Launch* phase is about providing an opportunity for students to access their prior knowledge and prepare to engage with the task. Students are also oriented to any materials that they would use to engage with the task. There is no direct teaching at this stage. Below (see fig. 1), is an example of a launch session in one of the classes, where students had just finished reading Appleman's book, *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary to Adolescents*, focused on literary theory. Appleman's book did not have a chapter focused on critical race theory or any explicit strategies on how to teach students how to read using a critical race theory lens. This was the perfect opportunity for students to productively struggle through developing a strategy to assist their future secondary students in analyzing "texts" using a critical race theory lens.
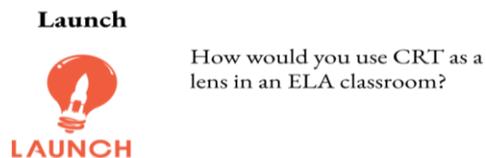

Fig. 1. Launch session example.

Explore

The *Explore* phase of the model (see fig. 2) is for students to explore the task, which enabled them to analyze and generalize content, a concept, or a skill. This phase provides the opportunity for students to work within assigned and/or self-selected groups on the task. While they worked, I prepared for the discussion phase by observing and listening to them. I posed questions when students encountered challenges and to push their thinking, and I used formative assessment to better inform the discussion stage.

Below (see fig. 2), is an example of a task, focused specifically on students creating a close reading strategy using the critical race theory lens. I assigned the chapter, "Critical Race Theory" from Lois Tyson's *Critical Theory Today*, as homework to ensure they had sufficient background knowledge on critical race theory.

Fig. 2. Task example.

Next, I provided an example of an anchor chart (see fig. 3). I also, reminded students of the tenants of critical race theory from the chapter they read.
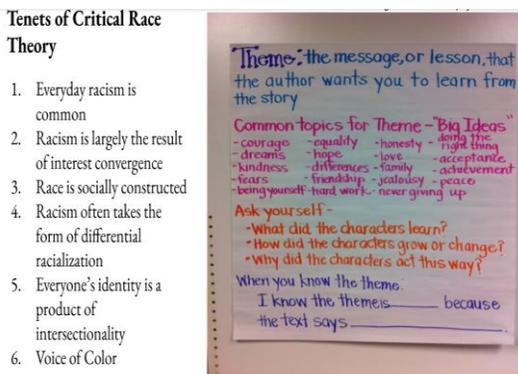
Fig. 3. Anchor Chart Example.

After the *explore* phase of the inquiry model, one group was able to produce the reading strategy below (see fig.4).
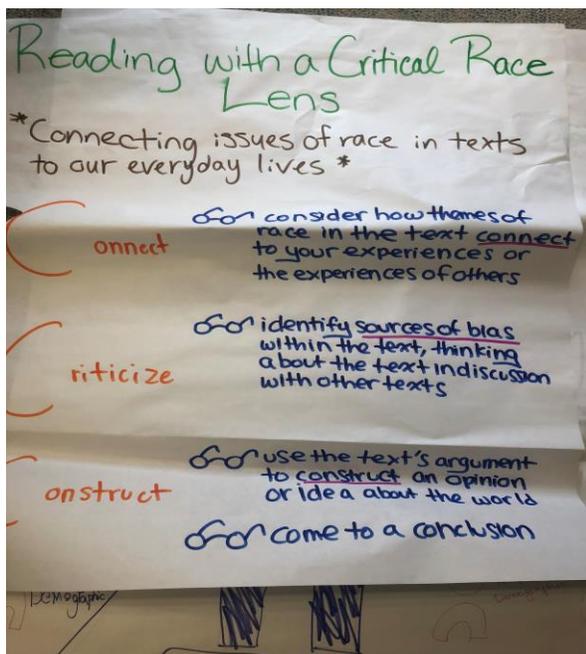

Fig. 4. Group-generated Reading Strategy.

Discussion

The *Discussion* phase of the model focuses on whole-group discourse about discoveries, analyses, and misconceptions about the content, skills, and/or concepts from the task. I provided direct instruction to address shared misconceptions I heard in the previous stage or to highlight important content.

Below (see fig. 5), are the discussion prompts focused on critical race theory.
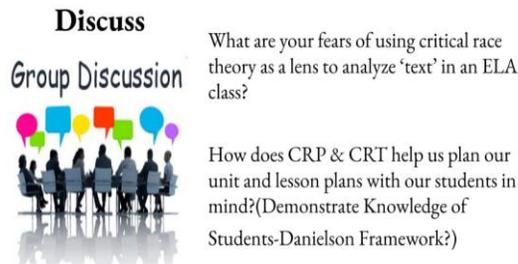

Fig. 5. Critical Race Theory Discussion Prompts.

After the discussion, I showed the students my model because I noticed they didn't use all of the tenets mentioned in the chapter that they read for homework. This allowed me to ensure they all had the necessary learning for the final phase.
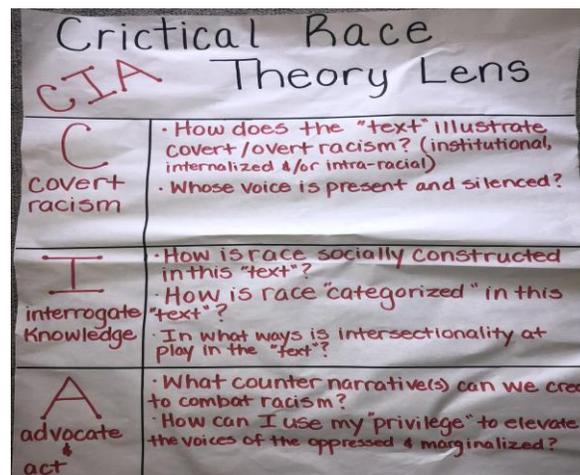

Fig. 6. Instructor Model.

The final assignment for the course was for students to teach a 30-minute lesson. I offered students the option to utilize the strategies from the course books but most designed their own reading strategies for their demo lessons based on what they had talked about and my direct instruction. Two groups created different reading strategies to teach students to analyze a text using the

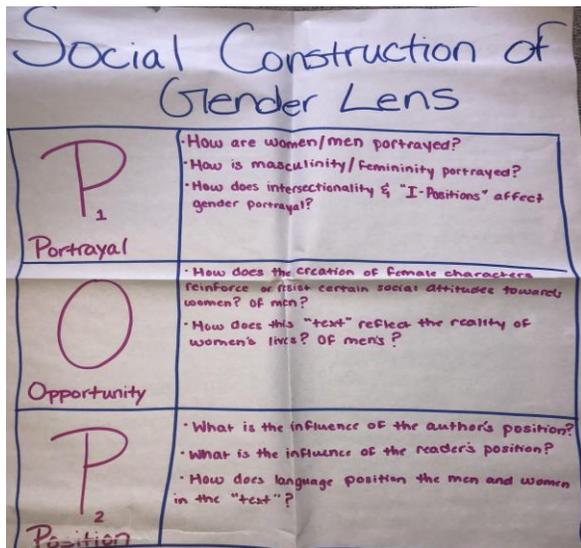social construction of the gender lens (see figs. 7 and 8).
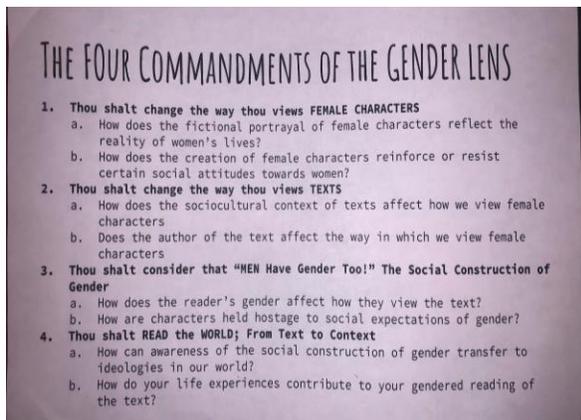

Fig. 7. Group-generated Reading Strategy.

Fig. 8. Group-generated Reading Strategy.

Students' Reflective Feedback

Throughout the course, my students and I engaged in cogenerative dialogues (Emdin 61) to reflect upon the strengths and challenges of each class and the course overall. On the final day of the course, I had the students reflect on Ladson-Billings' quote, "The reason I would not tell you what to do is that you would probably do it!...you would probably do exactly what I told you to without any deep thought or critical analysis. You would do what I said regardless of the students in the classroom,

their ages, their abilities, and their need for whatever it is I proposed," in relation to the inquiry structure of the course. Four of the 14 students explicitly mentioned the inquiry-based learning:

Student 1: You gave us the opportunity to think creatively, instead of just shoving it into your version of what good teaching is.

Student 2: Don't spoon-feed your students, let them figure things out. Let them have their own agency in learning.

Student 3: There is a sense of discovery...you need to give students the opportunity to discuss content and make those meaningful connections within their own genuine selves...instead of saying this is the answer.

Student 4: Productive struggle...I feel like this course models that.

Although Ladson-Billings was focused on culturally relevant pedagogy, I strongly believe that it is related to preparing preservice teachers to be curious risk-takers, especially in university-based courses. It is not the opportunity to just give them the answers or the strategies that they should use to teach their students. As a teacher educator, I don't want my preservice teachers to always look to me. I am there to facilitate their learning and to help them tap their background knowledge and experiences. I'm also there to address misconceptions when they struggle. I want them to watch me facilitate their inquiry so they can be prepared to do the same with their students, especially when faced with pressure to give their students one right answer. I want to ensure they can quiet their own Kayne response and know how to help their students find the answers.

Works Cited

Appleman, Deborah. *Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literacy*

Theory to Adolescents. Teachers College Press, 2014.

Aulls, Mark W., and Bruce M. Shore. *Inquiry in Education, Volume 1: The Conceptual Foundations for Research as a Curricular Imperative*. Taylor & Francis Group/Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008.

Emdin, Christopher. *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... And the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*. Beacon Press, 2016.

Munter, Charles, Mary Kay Stein, and Margaret S. Smith. "Is There a Common Pedagogical Core?: Examining Instructional Practices of Competing Models of Mathematics Teaching." *NCSM Journal of Mathematics Education Leadership,* vol. 16, no. 2 2015, pp. 3–13.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Yes, but How Do We Do It?": Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row,* edited by William Ayers, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Gregory Michie, 2008, The New Press, pp. 162–177.

Lappan, Glenda, and Elizabeth Phillips,. "A designer speaks: Glenda Lappan and Elizabeth Phillips." *Educational Designer, Journal of the International Society for Design and Development in Education*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2009, pp. 1–19.

NukaFromThe313. "Kanye West: YOU AIN'T GOT THE ANSWERS Makes a fool of himself on Sway in the Morning!" *YouTube,* 27 Nov 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaOQnikecf0

Polly, Drew. "Supporting Opportunities for Productive Struggle: Implications for Planning Mathematics Lessons." *Teaching Children Mathematics,* vol. 23, no. 8, 2017, pp. 454–457.

Spronken-Smith, Rachel, and Tony Harland. "Learning to Teach with Problem-based Learning." *Active Learning in Higher Education*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2009, pp. 138–153.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2014