

Real-Time Teaching

A Social Justice Approach as a Base for Teaching Writing

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Images of Beauty: “Why do we women want to be beautiful, pretty, or cute? We may not like to admit it, but beauty is a factor in many decisions we make about our lives; from hiring an employee to choosing a romantic partner.” (Jamie)

Human Trafficking: “Children that are as young as 5 are being kidnapped from foreign and native countries. Many ignore the fact that this is happening because it seems unimportant if they do not live in the country.” (Terry)

Poverty: “Poverty is something one doesn’t normally take the time to think about in the United States, because we live in a country where all our necessities are provided for us. Even those who live in the neighborhoods that are not so good in America are a lot better off compared to other countries around the world that are affected by poverty.” (May)

Understanding Social Justice

These opening statements relate to a few interesting topics our ninth-grade students developed using a social justice approach as a basis for their writing. A social justice approach to writing fosters an awareness of societal challenges that affect students’ families, communities, and the larger society. It affirms students’ multiple identities, creates solidarity among peers, builds students’ abilities to respond to and embrace supportive criticism of their work, and targets authentic audiences for their finished products. Social justice education is considered a part of the continuum of multicultural education in which teachers and students should be coconstructors of learning in classrooms that are inclusive, supportive, and constructively critical of students’ racial, cultural, and social contexts (Nieto & Bode, 2007).

For many teachers, social justice remains an espoused ideal with little practical application (Hackman, 2005). Indeed, much of the literature on social justice education fails to define the concept or provide examples of practice. In this article, we employ Nieto and Bode’s (2007, p. 11) tenets of social justice education:

- Challenge, confront, and disrupt “misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences”
- Provide “all students with the resources necessary to learn to their full potential”
- Draw on the “talents and strengths that students bring to their education”
- Create a “learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change”

In the English language arts classroom, social justice is a way to increase students’ abilities to articulate their experiences, critique their world, and

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address those identified issues with subsequent action. Teachers who practice social justice education cultivate student voice through class activities, readings, assignments, and assessments that allow students to incorporate their personal stories within the contexts of the school curriculum. By teaching students to use genre, voice, research support, and various writing conventions for social justice, teachers help students learn to express themselves as individuals, community members, and global citizens.

Modeling Social Justice

Unfortunately, teachers have been afforded limited successful models on the enactment of social justice pedagogy in English language arts classrooms. We believe teachers need ample real-time examples of social justice education to cultivate new pedagogies and alter more traditional forms of instruction. As teachers of English language arts, we ask the question, How might we use social justice education to allow students to reflect critically on their own lives and experiences *and* develop their writing skills?

To model learning that connects social justice principles to academic writing, we combine the generative themes of students' lives with socially conscious writing topics and a new format for peer review. Teachers may use this process throughout the year, with various writing activities, to strengthen student voice and self-efficacy, writing skills, peer-response skills, and classroom community.

Building Student Awareness of Social Justice Issues

We use a multigenre approach that includes narrative, poetry, and exposition to engage students with different forms of writing and critical thinking. In

a three-week writing workshop for a college bridge program, our 30 students created multigenre pieces on issues of personal, social, and political importance.

The unit "Me, My Community, and the World" begins with brainstorming issues that connect students' lives and experiences with larger social concerns. We ask three questions: What concerns you? Which of these issues concerns your families and communities? Do these same issues distress the world on a global level? We rearticulate some of the topics so that students can see how something personal and immediate, such as living in a dangerous neighborhood, can be related to global issues of violence and war.

Responding to Peers Using Affirmation, Solidarity, and Critique

The following exercise is the crux of supporting students as they share their written reflections about social justice. Students engage with one another and issues of societal importance through a language of peer response that affirms students' epistemologies, builds solidarity among classmates, and offers critique for revisions. Students use concept maps to individually brainstorm the connections between their chosen topics and the three areas of focus (i.e., themselves, their community, the world) before returning to interact as a whole group.

Initially, we provide a definition of the words *affirmation*, *solidarity*, and *critique*. We ask the students, What does it mean to *affirm* someone's experience or assertion? How can you show *solidarity* with another person or community? What *critique* can you give that will extend or problematize these ideas? The students discuss definitions for the words and how they know when someone is doing or enacting each word. We create a reference handout with the three sets of definitions to build the capacity for continuing to use the process with other writing activities.

Integrating Social Justice Principles and Writing

To craft their texts, students take their initial brainstorming ideas and write about each focal area. In the "Me" section, narrative texts such as anecdotes and family stories can be presented as evidence to show the relationship between topic and self, as in the following example about poverty by May:

Poverty is a big deal not just to the world and the community, but also to me—even though I’m very lucky to live in a country where everything I need is provided for me, my sister is in Thailand where it’s very hard for her to provide for her family. She’s unable to do that unless my parents and siblings here in the U.S. help her by sending her some money. This saddens me because while I’m living in luxury and do very little for my daily needs, my sister has to work hard every day for her family’s needs.

In the section “My Community,” students shared poetry from books or the Internet, or they created their own poems. The following example is an excerpt from a poem by John:

Male Beauty is a rose
To men who wants perfection
But to beat this impossible goal,
Men work countless hours,
Young men skipping meals and
I am one of those young men.... [male beauty]

Students use expository writing with research support to express their views in “The World” section, such as in this example about living wage by Ina:

In the Dominican Republic, workers that sew pants for JC Penney only make sixty cents per hour, which isn’t even one-third of the living wage that Dominicans are supposed to make to support their families. In Indonesia, sweatshop workers who work for Nike only make ten cents per hour, and that puts them in poverty. In China, Chinese workers for Ralph Lauren work fifteen hours a day, six days a week, making only twenty-three cents an hour (Benjamin, 1998).

Once everyone has produced a first draft, the students read their peers’ work in small groups. Using the statements of affirmation, solidarity, and critique, the first peer reviewer must write a statement of affirmation, such as the following regarding the topic of pollution: “I think this is an important topic because there are so many cars and so much garbage and no place to put it.” The second peer reviewer reads the same student’s writing and writes a statement of solidarity, such as the following regarding the topic of cancer: “It would be great to find a cure for cancer because my aunt had breast cancer and it was really painful.” The third peer reviewer writes a statement of critique, such as the following regarding the topic

of child labor laws: “Do all countries have the same problem with children working?”

After three peers have reviewed each student’s work, students talk about their papers within their small group. Through the peer-response activity, students discuss important issues, receive feedback, and begin to understand how they can refine, expand, and clarify their ideas. As students become more comfortable with their peer responses, the responses become longer and more precise.

Sharing and Publishing: Finding Authentic Audiences

Social justice education helps students discover and wield their own power as critical and knowledgeable people. As students move toward a final draft, we identify and discuss authentic venues and audiences for their writing such as newspaper editorials, government officials, company CEOs, and Internet websites. This is another opportunity to discuss criteria for academic writing and audiences beyond the school. Using social justice approaches that are collaborative and personally engaging build a community of writers and the academic skills students need to be successful in future writing endeavors.

References

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