Stirring Up Justice

Writing and Reading
to Change the World

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HEINEMANN • Portsmouth, NH
For Rose Horowitz

This is for your coffee table
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Introduction

My connection to other Oregon educators committed to teaching social justice influenced my interest in social activism. As an active member of Portland Area Rethinking Schools, a local and national progressive activist group for educators, I was surrounded by an incredible group of teachers creating innovative curricula and working to influence progressive change in local schools. Though I have never considered myself a traditional activist or political organizer, I have strong convictions—particularly about the need for creating more equity in education and more creative opportunities for all students to learn. I participated in the Portland Area Rethinking Schools Steering Committee, a group of new and experienced teachers, parents, and community members. Our conversations and work together gave me courage to start thinking about the kind of change I wanted to take place at my school.

Cleveland is a large public school located on the corner of a busy intersection in the heart of the city. The student population is just under 1,400, and 20 percent of the student body qualifies for either free or reduced-price lunches. My students were from a working-class population, with about 25 percent speaking a language other than English as their first language. The school’s student body, much like the state of Oregon, is predominately Caucasian (77 percent). Students arrived in my classes with varying reading and writing skills ranging from barely literate to highly proficient. One of the first things I noticed was the way students were divided into two groups: “honors” and “regulars.” Honors was the name assigned to all classes where students earned honors credit by taking the class; regular classes were those considered less challenging and that moved at a slower pace. The content in these classes was not parallel. I had previously taught for a year in a public, untracked, international high school in Oregon. I had never taught in a tracked system, and I
was naïve about the divisions, assumptions, and learning cultures created and perpetuated through tracking.

My own activism project began when I decided to work with my English department to untrack our ninth grade course offerings. Instead of having freshmen begin their high school language arts studies sorted and segregated in courses, previously labeled “honors” and “regulars,” I worked along with my department members to implement a system of learning where students were no longer divided by earlier success or failure. Rather than beginning some students at a more accelerated level than others, we were committed to offering everyone a chance to receive an “honors” education and begin high school English with a clean slate. I experienced firsthand what it is like to believe in a cause so strongly that I felt driven. I spent the majority of my free evenings working to research and educate myself about untracking, meeting with my department, and planning ways of making this change take place successfully. After two years working toward this goal, our department decided unanimously to untrack our ninth grade classes and to work toward eventually untracking all of our course offerings, at every grade level.

For the first time in my school’s history, English teachers were preparing to teach courses where students with different academic, ethnic, and social class backgrounds would be learning together. One of the main challenges teaching any group of students, and one that I knew would be accentuated teaching untracked courses, is that students have a wide array of learning needs. With this in mind, I wanted to find a way to capture my students’ interest by making learning both exhilarating and rewarding. I also wanted to teach a curriculum that would reach all of my students, whether or not they considered themselves strong readers and writers. Through my own activism work, I became interested in finding ways for my students to experience the kind of drive and passion that comes when studying topics they care about deeply. I wanted students to experience the powerful relevance of reading and writing by exploring their own convictions.

I began to wonder about their interests and passions. What did they care deeply about? What issues and ideas mattered so much to them that they could be inspired to act? Teaching a truly diverse community is both challenging and rewarding. There was
Danika, who at fifteen was five feet seven inches tall and a varsity soccer player. Her writing was often poetic and full of voice. She rarely misplaced a comma or a quotation mark. She wrote notes at the end of papers asking for book recommendations—“preferably classics.” Then there was Nate. He signed his name “N8.” He was fourteen years old and obsessed with skateboarding. He read and wrote well below grade level. He rarely formed complete sentences and often seemed distracted and worried. There was Jeff. He was six feet two inches tall and wore jeans that sagged below the hip. He loved Air Jordans, hip-hop music, and looking cool. He often refused to carry his books in the halls and left them in a cupboard in the classroom. His writing seemed natural and confident, though sometimes scattered. He was usually the first to have his hand up and the last to put it down. Jeff said, “I hate to revise. Revising is for people with too much time. I’m always in a hurry.” There was shy Paul who read poetry and listened to music on his Walkman. He often arrived late because he cared for his younger brother in the mornings. There was Erik, who has Asbergers syndrome. He methodically drew ships and hallways on blank paper before class. He listened to pop music and befriended Emma. Emma loved to paint canvases full of bright flowers and write letters to her pen pal in Argentina. Students in these classes came from a cross section of southeast Portland that includes neighborhoods of extreme wealth and extreme poverty. These ninth graders did not easily fit into neat categories or definitions. They did not all clearly fit into a particular “level” or benchmark. Arriving at my class in different places in their literacy development and their lives, what these students needed in their learning was complicated and without easy explanation. I created the Stirring Up Justice curriculum to provide multiple perspectives for students to understand and define activism.

Thinking about the activism unit, I began with high hopes. At first, I had visions of my ninth graders out in the community creating social change, perhaps even working on one project together. My ideas about activism initially followed the more narrow and traditional view of activism. When thinking about activists and their work, I often imagined individuals marching with signs in protests, drafting petitions, taking up environmental causes, organizing rallies, and partaking in other stereotypical antiestablishment behavior. Through developing and teaching
this unit, I came to understand that there is a wide range of socially active behavior that falls well beyond the more common perception of activism.

I went on a walk with a friend early in October when I had just begun planning the Stirring Up Justice unit. I shared my plans to teach a unit at the end of the school year on activism. My friend suggested that the entire class work toward an issue “like the recent janitor cuts in Oregon or the school funding crisis.” Something in this conversation did not sit right with me. True leaders and activists have skills carefully honed over time, and do not instantly become sincere and effective activists as the result of one classroom assignment. They have passions that stem from their own particular life experience. I wanted this curriculum to create opportunities for students’ individual interests and multiple perspectives to enter the classroom discourse, rather than forcing my own agenda. Paulo Freire explains this distinction eloquently: “A humane educator’s fundamental objective is to fight alongside the people for the recovery of the people’s humanity, not to ‘win people over’ to their side” (1970, 84). I continually asked myself, “How can I set the agenda for what my students should care about? I want my role to be as a guide and to give my students a backdrop to begin to explore issues that matter to them.”

This book shares a long journey I took with my students to choose an issue they each cared about and then to guide them through working toward creating positive social change surrounding their individual interests. By sharing their individual projects as they prepared them in and out of class, students also learned that activism is not a solo process and that influencing change grows with support and camaraderie. Using a range of literacy tools—including reading biographies of activists, creating gallery displays, writing essays, revising written work, interviewing activists, and teaching other class members—the students learned the power of using their literacy to make positive changes in the world.

Nuts and Bolts

In the beginning of the school year, months before I introduced the unit on activism, I taught literature and short stories from
South Africa along with the history of political efforts to abolish apartheid. Students read Mark Mathabane’s autobiography, *Kaffir Boy* (1986), along with short stories from other South African writers such as Peter Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer, and Doris Lessing. Next I taught Latin American literature, where students explored issues of family, identity, and immigration. Along with international literature, students read multiple texts about traditionally marginalized groups in the United States. Throughout the year, students explored literature and history from a variety of cultures while simultaneously participating in writing and reading workshops that provided skills for understanding difficult texts and writing in multiple genres.

Each project, text, and area of study during the initial months of the school year built up to the final three-month unit on social activism described in this book. Before students participated in the activism unit, they were exposed to a variety of stories about people committed to effecting positive social change. This is in no way a requirement for teaching this curriculum; however, it did add to students’ preparedness for the final unit. Creating curriculum throughout the year that highlighted political or inspirational activists was not difficult. Much of the required literature or literature “in-stock” in high schools includes rich stories of people devoted to making a difference in others’ lives. I included texts such as Sandra Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street* (1991), Gail Tsukiyama’s *The Samurai’s Garden* (1995), and Melba Beals’ *Warriors Don’t Cry* (1994). My reading curriculum fluctuated back and forth between required texts that the whole class read together and books students chose revolving around specific themes such as immigration, apartheid in South Africa, and social activism. The two ninth-grade classes read a total of five required books during the year in addition to at least four books of choice. As students read, they also worked directly with me and with each other to improve as writers. The continual integration and scaffolding of direct reading and writing instruction provided a foundation for students to succeed in the last three months of spring term with the culminating social activism unit.

In the beginning of April, I began this final Stirring Up Justice unit. I established a schedule where, for the most part, reading workshops and reading skill development took place on Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays; writing workshops and writing
skill development took place on Tuesday and Thursday. My high school operates on a partial block schedule, meaning that twice a week (Tuesday and Thursday) classes are ninety minutes long, while on the other days they are forty-eight minutes long. A typical reading or writing workshop day began with me teaching or modeling a reading or writing strategy such as rereading difficult passages for improved understanding or weaving quotes effectively into writing. A whole class reading or writing activity followed so students could practice the specific strategy taught that day. Students then often shared their work in groups or as a class. Setting up a routine schedule each week helped students arrive at class aware of the day’s focus. A series of short writing workshops in the beginning of the unit connected to students’ assigned reading provided scaffolding for students to later write articles about the activists they had studied. I informed students from the beginning of the unit and reminded them throughout the course of the curriculum that the work they were doing in April and May would help them succeed in creating their own activism projects in June. At the end of the year, students shared their final activism projects in a gallery format during the last week of the school year (see Appendix 1: Unit Timeline).

Portfolios
Finding a way to read, assess, and manage the hundreds of pages of writing that came my way in a week became an essential piece of my teaching and planning. I set up a portfolio system with my students that helped all of us stay organized and gave me a way to handle their work successfully. At the beginning of each unit, I handed students a piece of paper labeled “Table of Contents,” with numbers listed down the side. (See a sample in Appendix 2.) I also required that each student bring a portfolio folder to class (the kind with the brackets that allows the paper to stay fastened within the folder) at the beginning of the unit. I always bought extra folders for students who did not have access to these school supplies. As students completed work of any kind, they added assignments to their table of contents and then included them in order in their portfolios. Often portfolios are used in teaching to show a finished product that exemplifies a writer’s or artist’s best
work. In contrast, I wanted my students’ portfolios to represent their rough as well as their polished work. I am interested in their progress and development as readers and writers over the course of a unit. I also taped a large piece of poster paper on the wall and used it as a “Master Table of Contents.” Students could walk into class each day and update their portfolios. This system helped all of us stay organized and assisted students who missed class for any reason in catching up with the course work. I collected portfolios every two weeks to read, respond to, and grade.

My hope is that this book provides a window into my classroom along with offering concrete and practical resources for secondary language arts teachers and teacher educators. I have included the kinds of handouts, book lists, student examples, and stories that I would have liked at my fingertips when I began teaching this curriculum. My wish is that teachers open up this book to utilize, revise, and improve upon any idea that feels useful to their own work. My intention is to share resources, processes, and student outcomes in order to paint a clear picture of a classroom in action.

References


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