# Using Visible Thinking Routines to Teach about the Impact of Colonialism on Race Within the Language Arts Classroom

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Language Arts is a subject with a very traditional canon of literature. It is very easy to construct a curriculum that focuses on a range of texts dominated by white male authors. When I began teaching Language Arts in my current school, it was the first year that the subject was being taught separately from Social Studies. This gave me almost complete autonomy on how I teach, but tied me to the main topics covered by Social Studies, one of which is colonialism. It is impossible to teach around colonialism without discussing race, and how racist attitudes have shaped the world. This can be a difficult topic, and I wanted to develop a unit that engaged with the difficulties of race within colonialism. To do this I chose to represent the perspective of the nations who were the objects of colonialism, rather than the white perspective of this history. To teach about race, and to fully engage students, I have used visible thinking routines for my method as we read stories from different nations around the world.

In order to disclose my biases (both conscious and unconscious) it is best to state that I am a white middle-aged woman teaching in a private middle school in southeast Michigan. As such I fit into the description given by Gay in her paper on *Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity*, "In the United States teachers are predominantly middle class, female, monolingual, and of European ancestry" (2015, p. 64). The school at which I teach is, for the area, disproportionately white. This is true of both the faculty and the student body. We have some race diversity, but the majority of adults and students are white, with Asian being the second largest group. A staggering 95% of staff and faculty identify as white. The student body is more diverse: in an area where 58% (MISchoolData, 2016) of the students in public school are white, we have a similar figure of 54%. However, the number of African American students is only 2% in our school, whereas the public schools report a figure of 14%. We do have a much larger number of multi-racial or unsure/

undisclosed students than the public schools, but still it is true that we do not accurately reflect the diversity within our own city. These two factors mean that I am aware of my own unintended bias, and that of my students, when addressing race.

The faculty are very aware of the over representation of white people in the school, and much time and money has been invested to become more inclusive. As an independent school we have full autonomy over our curriculum, and many faculty members teach about diversity, equity and justice. In spite of these efforts, it can still be said that over half of our curriculum falls within the description of Jett and Cross that "our standards, assessments, textbooks and curricula materials have been designed, both historically and currently, by many white scholars" (2016, p. 131). When addressing colonialism, I want to move away from this bias and to use texts written from a non-white, non-American perspective.

## Challenges to teaching Colonialism within the Language Arts Classroom

I have already outlined my current teaching situation, and it is clear that there are some challenges presented within it. My own person, the school I teach in, and the curriculum I follow, are all dominated by white culture. Not only does this mean that I have to overcome some obvious inequality, but it can also pose other problems.

Firstly, it is far too easy to "other" cultures, even with the best of intentions. When studying literature from around the globe, simply talking about an author or a character from outside of the United States requires the use of the pronoun "they". "They" then becomes a tool of distancing, making the subject of the sentence an "other" who is not one of "us" within the classroom.

Discussing the history of colonialism, with its inherent racism, can be upsetting and difficult. Expecting middle school students to approach this subject with maturity and

sensitivity is a high demand. How difficult students find these discussions can vary greatly. Some of the unease that students feel can be based upon their own Privileged Identity, as defined by Watt and quoted by Gayles, "privileged identities refer to aspects of one's identity that are dominant and linked to social, political, and economic advantages that are unearned" (qtd Gayles, 2015, p. 302). Students can also find this topic challenging because "attempting to analyze and discuss issues of *global* diversity can create additional layers of resistance and limitations" (Barst, 2013, p. 149). The challenge here is to make students see beyond their own cultural background in order to keep them engaged with the work.

Finally, there is an issue of pedagogy. The voices of white people have been the dominant ones within American society. If I truly intend to teach meaningfully about race, then my own, white, voice, lacks authenticity. As the only teacher in the room I should, of course, be in charge of the learning, but as a white person I should be allowing other voices to be heard. I therefore need to create a class dynamic where students can speak freely and with authority.

## Theoretical Framework to Teaching Diversity

As I put together my curriculum, I researched a number of approaches about how to teach on difficult topics such as race. Fortunately I have a number of resources available to me as my school often shares materials from conferences. In addition, I have access to the library of a large teaching college, and could research papers on this topic. This research provided me with a theoretical framework for how and why teaching about colonialism from a non-white perspective should take place.

A starting point for how to address difficult topics is the concept of building a community within the classroom. Community can build a sense of shared endeavor that is important when taking on a difficult task. In addition, it helps to create a more cooperative and caring classroom environment. bell hooks promotes the idea of the classroom as a communal place (1994, p. 8) and writes that a good teacher "respects and cares for the souls of our students" (1994, p. 13). To do this, hooks argues, we must be truly inclusive of all students. The community that we build within our classrooms, then, must be one that values and respects all of the voices within it. Drawing on this, Style and Powell outline their ideas for how to teach Diversity Literacy, and note "we need to develop a public discourse capacity which encourages sensible thought rather than driving talk into polarized corners" (1995). Far more recently, Jett and Cross suggest the use of "respect - and community-building exercises" as a necessary part of "a mu-

tual foundation of respect" (2016, p. 135). I have therefore adopted the policy of deliberately fostering a sense of community within my classroom as a year-long teaching strategy.

Once the classroom has become a caring community, then it is possible to open up the difficult discussions. To make the conversations less difficult, it is important to avoid othering the different cultures that we discuss in class. Loren Marulis recommends anti-bias teaching as a way of addressing cultural diversity. She introduces different cultural customs without comparison and attempts to "create a space for children where there are no biases and stereotypes" (2000, p. 18). Rather than teaching from the perspective of an American viewing another culture, she encourages "multiple perspectives" and believes that "the process is more important than the outcome" (p. 19). When teaching about colonialism, the use of texts written from the perspective of colonized nations provides the opportunity to present the cultures without comparison, as Marulis recommends.

As helpful as it is to use an anti-biased approach, and to talk about the social construction of race, we need to heed the warning from Lorde not to enter into the "pathetic pretense" (1984, p. 110) that race diversity does not exist. At the same time as attempting to discard our cultural bias, we need to also be aware of it and challenge it. Jett and Cross are clear that in order to teach about race "you need to confront your own biases" (p. 142) and Jessica Charbeneau adds to this that "white people's behavior is still affected by their privileged racial standing" (2015, p. 656). Charbeneau writes about the tension of benefitting from white privilege at the same time as opposing the ideology of whiteness within education. She reflects that this can be a "potentially liberating experience" (2015 p. 657) for faculty and students alike. Therefore we need to discuss our own biases and be aware of them, at the same time as attempting to overcome them.

To really address issues around race, the teaching cannot be a shallow, brief experience. There needs to be a meaningful approach towards the work. Barst argues that one approach is to present "solid historical and cultural context" (2013, p. 152) when investigating a text. She therefore includes materials such as biographical information about the author, and related visual discourses (art, film, photos) as part of her teaching of a text that addresses race diversity (p. 153). Barst outlines a number of activities that she uses, and employs " textual analysis" (p. 155) along with "writing and discussion assignments" (p.154). By using a variety of teaching activities to challenge students teaching about race can be a meaningful experience for students.

In order to both challenge students, and to keep them included and valued, then a pedagogical shift must take place. Particularly in the situation of a white teacher in the classroom, it is important for students to have authority in how they speak. When reviewing how teacher educators dealt with difficult dialogues, Gayles et. al note four major themes. One of these is "to stimulate and sustain dialogue by democratic processes that considered students, along with professors, as sources of knowledge" (2015, p. 305). Annette Wannamaker also describes a process where she fosters the authority of students in her classroom, thereby giving them the opportunity to speak with the same level of inclusiveness as she herself has (p. 344). For me to effectively teach diversity within the classroom I have to give students the same authority as I hold in order for them to be able to discuss issues of race.

This is the final piece to establishing my own theory of how to teach about race: in order to both care for the souls of my students, and also to teach them meaningfully, as hooks suggests, I need to give greater authority to my middle school students than is traditional within a middle school.

## Practical Framework

Reading the work of previous educators gave me a strong idea of how to approach teaching race, but I also needed some practical methods which could be used within the middle school classroom. Much of the research I did looked at papers where university faculty members were teaching race diversity to preservice teachers. Although the theories could be transferred into a middle school setting, many of the practices had a heavy reliance upon discussion. Discussion is clearly a useful tool within any classroom, but in a crowded environment it may not enable all students to speak with authority and confidence, and it can be difficult for teachers to reflect on the learning of the students.

At the same time as I was putting together my curriculum, I was also attending a number of professional development days about visible thinking routines. The course I took drew heavily on the work of Ron Ritchhart, author of the book *Creating Cultures of Thinking* (2015) and co-author of *Making Thinking Visible* (2011). One of the key aspects I wanted for teaching about race was to reward students for thinking about their work, rather than any material product from it. Therefore the idea of using some visible thinking routines fitted well within my intentions for a unit of studying texts from around the globe.

I was also aware that I wanted my unit to fit within the overall curriculum for the year not just with the content, but also with the use of thinking skills. Throughout the year I use

visible thinking routines with the texts we studied, and we address how race is represented (or ignored) within the works we read.

As we study both Vergil's *The Aeneid* and Shakespeare's *Richard III*, it is a regular part of classroom practice to address the people who are being excluded from the text. In *The Aeneid* there is a brief reference made to slaves who set the feast for Aeneas and Dido in Book One (Ed. Copley,1975, l. 701 - 706). We break from the text at this point to reflect on the experience of the slaves within this story. I use the techniques suggested by Barst and we spend time with textual analysis, discussion, and writing (2013, p. 153 - 155). However, instead of simply talking about how slaves must have felt, we use a routine known as "Zoom In" from *Making Thinking Visible* (2011, p. 64) to engage students more meaningfully. I use some visual images from mosaics found in Ancient Rome. Without exception they have the main character centered within the image. Around the edges of each picture there are slaves performing tasks. The Romans are being served in some way as they relax. Instead of looking at the picture as a whole, we begin with looking first at the slaves, and identify what work they are doing. As more of the picture is revealed, it becomes apparent that the slaves, and their work, are literally side-lined, and the role of the Roman (who often is simply sitting) is at the center of the image. After working through the zoom in routine, we then discuss how the slaves would want to describe Dido and Aeneas, and then students write a slave diary entry to complete this work.

Later in the year we study *Richard III*, and again want students to engage with the text more personally. We use "Generate, Sort, Connect, Elaborate" (Ritchhart et al, 2011, p.125) in two different ways. The first time we use it to put together a mind map which could be used to write a paper. We then use the same routine to create a poem about the eponymous main character. The thinking routine requires students to generate as many ideas about the work as possible, then to sort them into groups of similar ideas, to draw connections between the different groups, and to elaborate or explain those ideas verbally. Students respond well to this and consistently provide more than sufficient material to use for writing a paper or a poem.

Other routines which are used regularly include "Think-Puzzle-Explore" (p. 71) and "I Used to Think . . . , Now I Think . . .' (p. 154). Each of these encourages students to be aware of their own level of knowledge, and how to expand that knowledge.

These routines are all part of the work from the first two trimesters of the year. As we approach the third trimester,

students are therefore comfortable with having their thinking skills reflected on, and even graded, and they are confident about expressing their ideas. This then creates the atmosphere that I intended to create from my research, namely that students are challenged to think outside of their comfortable ways of thinking, and that they see themselves as sources of knowledge.

The final trimester has almost half of the time spent on reading short stories from colonized people. I have spent considerable time finding suitable excerpts and short stories. I wanted the writing (and also the writer, where possible) to be based in a region that has been subjected to colonization from a European nation. Each year I continue to expand the range of works from which I draw, but currently I use excerpts from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1994), Berhendt's *Home* (2004), and stories from an anthology called *One World* (2009). Throughout this unit I use a number of visible thinking routines, and my key objective is to push students to think beyond their comfortable perspectives and to "interrogate identity categories" (Wannamaker, 2004, p. 347). Students work in groups, and each group reads a different story or excerpt. This then makes that group the expert in the room about their text. My role as a teacher is not to give them information, but to present activities that make them think about how the text presents race. Some activities, such as reading the text, are obligatory, but at other times students can choose how to respond to the work.

As an introduction to the unit, I use Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie's TED talk *The Dangers of the Single Story* and give a very clear message that we will be using literature to explore how colonialism affected different areas of the world. I also talk to them about Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the impact of Achebe and his work on the study of literature. The short stories which I use in class engage with colonialism in some way, and this is the main focus for student research around their given text.

At the very beginning of the work, we use "Think-Puz-

**The Kiss by Marlene Dumas, 2003**

zle-Explore" (Ritchhart, 2011, p.71). This gives students a baseline that they can use later to reflect on what they have learned. Students start by writing down some words or phrases that reflect what they think they know about colonialism, and also the country that their story comes from. They are then encouraged to puzzle about what they don't know, and create a list of suggested areas for further study. At this stage I introduce the stories to them. This begins the start of the exploration to find out more about the individual country that their story covers. Having read the story, students are asked to find out as much as they can about the author, the setting and the culture of the story. Throughout this exploration stage, students are frequently directed back to the short story they read, to compare the fictional work with the historical background information that they are researching. This research from students means that they are gaining authority as they gain knowledge, and that they are providing "the solid historical and cultural context" (2013, p. 152) which Barst recommends.

Once students have spent two or three class times with research and reading, we then work through the "Color, Symbol, Image" (or CSI) routine (Ritchhart, 2011, p. 119). This routine makes students reflect on what is the key message or purpose of their short story. Students are guided to select and draw or paint a color, a symbol and an image that represent their story. For this exercise there is almost no wrong answer, as long as a student is able to explain their decisions. The routine concludes with students sharing their thinking, and this final step is important. We then use the ideas generated from the CSI routine to create a mind map using "Generate-Sort-Connect-Elaborate" (p.125) which we have used earlier in the year. These two routines cover the same material as a more traditional approach of class discussion, making notes, deciding a thesis, and then outlining a paper based on a school text. The main difference here is that students are using both visual and written responses to demonstrate their thoughts.

The final work for this unit is a creative piece of work. This has a very open and broad instruction to students. They

are able to choose whether to work individually or as a group, and they can design their own creative piece. Students can write, act, film, paint, sing or respond however they feel is most appropriate to reflect what they have learned from their work. Before students begin their final piece, I make it clear that work will be graded by how much they have reflected on the issues of colonialism, and what they have learned around this topic.

When using thinking routines, often the work that is produced is difficult to grade from a traditional rubric. Sometimes, such as when students write a diary, there is a completed piece of written work that can be given a grade for its accuracy. However, more frequently, there has been a discussion of ideas rather than a completed piece of work. I have therefore put together a rubric that looks at how successfully a student has engaged with the ideas discussed, rather than any written expression. When talking through the work with students, I regularly share the grading rubric with them before the work is completed, and it is written in the format of a series of questions. These questions are formed to encourage students to reflect on their own experience, such as "why did you include …". In addition, I also use an exit interview for the final unit on colonialism. During this, students are encouraged to give answers that show how well they have engaged with seeing the story from a non-American perspective.

## Reflections

To decide whether teaching about colonialism and race has been "successful" or not I rely upon self-study that "operates under the premise of critical reflection" (Han, 2016, p. 412). I keep examples of student work, and discuss the classes with colleagues. My main criteria for success returns again to a student's ability to "move out of comfortable ways of thinking into spaces that require them to interrogate identity categories" and also "to stimulate and sustain dialogue by democratic processes that considered students, along with professors, as sources of knowledge" (Wannamaker, 2004, p. 347).

A key component of the success is how effectively a student has managed to respond to their story in a way that doesn't reflect an American perspective. For example, when writing a story set in Ghana, students do not need to explain how every character has brown eyes or dark skin, as this would be an assumption for characters in that setting. Only when a character has lighter skin would this be worthy of description, as the otherness of their lighter skin would be a detail worth noting. As I look at the creative work of students, I am looking for examples such as this in order to ascribe a grade.

During the exit interview, I ask students to talk through how they see colonialism reflected within the story. This can include details such as noticing that Christmas is a celebration within a story set in Africa, or more obvious examples such as characters who see lighter skin as being superior to dark skin. This then leads us to discuss what has happened to make these events part of the story. As students discuss these questions in a small group, I use my rubric to check off when I hear comments that respond to the questions which were prepared.

Looking back at this unit, I can identify four key requirements to make it possible to discuss literature about colonialism in such a way that students can then reflect on how racism affected this period of history.

**Positive relationships within the classroom.** Without an atmosphere of trust, students will not be willing to share ideas and engage with difficult discussions. In addition to building the practices of positive relationships between peers, as a teacher I cannot use a dictatorial or dogmatic pedagogy. Trust has to be established so that students have the confidence to speak out about ideas, even if they haven't fully developed their thoughts, or are aware that their thoughts may seem controversial or challenging.

**Confident students.** Although there is little that I can do as a teacher to affect the confidence of students within every aspect of their life, I can influence how willing they are to engage with new ideas and speak out during discussion. As well as the positive peer relationships that I work to create, I have deliberately chosen a range of visible thinking routines which can encourage less confident students. Being able to transfer their ideas to paper without using words, or to work collaboratively, really helps students to contribute to the learning within the classroom.

**Continuous practice.** Although I have one significant unit of work which focuses on colonialism, I prepare for this throughout the year. Both visible thinking routines, and issues of diversity and justice, are part of regular classroom practice. Neither aspect is a sudden change from the usual classroom experience, and this makes student participation an easy part of the work. This also applies to grading work, so that students are experienced with having their thinking process being the focus of assessment, rather than the finished written product.

**Focus on process not product.** When the focus for a grade is taken away from writing mechanics or content, students gain confidence about their ideas. They see the value of thinking and learning for their own sakes, rather than as

a way to gain a certain grade. Although students are given certain products to generate (such as a story, a picture etc) they are clearly told that it will be their ideas, rather than the product itself, which will be graded. None of the students saw this as an opportunity to avoid work, although some focused so intently on their ideas that their products were never fully formed. In spite of this, every student successfully contributed to the final interview, and was able to provide evidence of how they had engaged with the issues of race created by colonialism. They were confident in exploring and expressing their ideas, without worrying about whether those ideas were right or likely to gain them points.

## Conclusion

Studying colonialism has taken careful planning and reflection. Simply introducing a greater diversity of texts would have brought different material to the classroom, but not promoted the depth of thinking around the issue that I wanted to see. Using routines that provide visible thinking, and building a classroom atmosphere where students are engaged and confident is just as important as the reading materials covered. By introducing visible thinking routines early in the year, always making time for addressing the 'others' from a traditional text, and allowing a significant period for investigating and reflecting on stories from colonized nations, students willingly engage in a series of activities which make them discuss the impact of colonialism on race.

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