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NEW TEACHERS FOCUS ON MICHIGAN: BRINGING MICHAEL MOORE INTO THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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In his latest documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore has more than guns on his mind. The film critiques American culture at large, taking aim at our fascination with weapons, our fear-saturated media, and as Moore observed in his Academy Award acceptance speech, our global policy that relies on violence and intimidation. "We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president," he claimed. "We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons." Throughout the film, two particular states embody the culture of violence that Moore satirizes: Colorado, home to Columbine High School and, not coincidentally Moore would have us believe, the Lockheed Martin Corporation; and Moore's own state of Michigan. Much of the documentary's heaviest ammunition is reserved for our state, the onetime residence of Columbine killer Eric Harris, the birthplace of NRA president Charlton Heston, and the current asylum of the Michigan Militia and James Nichols, brother of convicted Oklahoma City bomber Terry Nichols.

As Michigan educators, we may be disturbed by what *Bowling for Columbine* says about our state—one of the movie's most gripping scenes retells how a six-year-old Flint boy shot and killed his classmate. But the movie also gives us a unique opportunity to address larger social issues from a critical perspective, particularly in our writing classrooms. Michael Moore certainly intended the film to be used in such educational settings; the *Bowling for Columbine* Web site (<http://www.bowlingforcolumbine.com>) includes a library guide for teachers, which is full of provocative pre-

watching and post-watching writing assignments, ranging from analytical to creative writing. One such assignment, for example, calls for a persuasive essay in which the writer supports or opposes Moore's connection between the Columbine shootings and Lockheed Martin Corporation.

This article may serve as an additional resource for language arts instructors who want to use *Bowling for Columbine* in their own classrooms. Unlike the assignments on the Web site, however, the following writing tasks have been specifically crafted for writing teachers in Michigan. They were developed by students in my composition methods course at Western Michigan University. Mostly juniors and seniors in the secondary English education program, my students were eager to design assignments that they could use during their upcoming internships and in their future classrooms. After seeing the film, they worked in small groups to formulate writing tasks that would both take advantage of our location in Michigan and reflect a critical pedagogy approach to composition instruction. While they are not fully-developed as presented here, the following project ideas may serve as heuristics that serve as starting points for other teachers who want to venture into teaching about or with the work of Michael Moore and his role in Michigan, Midwest, and National discussions of values, society, and controversy.

"I Want the Account Where I Can Get a Free Gun"

Steve Davison, Elizabeth Fisher, Amanda Gruber, Jessica Gyurscik, Alexander Krutsch, and Abby Zondlak

Michael Moore opens *Bowling for Columbine* by going to a Michigan bank and receiving a free gun for opening an account, as advertised in the local paper.^o Throughout the film the director returns to Michigan again and again to illustrate different views on guns. One scene shows Moore buying ammunition for the gun he received at the bank from the local barbershop.^o In other parts of the movie, Moore conducts interviews with the district attorney of Flint, members of the Michigan

militia, a Flint teacher who witnessed a school shooting, and a young man from Oscoda who stole nine-millimeter handguns to sell them in Detroit.^o Michael Moore's use of Michigan as the hub for his movie inspired us to create a writing task that focuses students on the different regional attitudes that exist in our state concerning guns.^o Throughout this writing assignment, students will discover the various regional perspectives toward guns and gun control in Michigan.^o Regions will be divided into rural, urban, and suburban communities.^o Students will observe the effect of media on a regions particular perspective as well as that region's unique qualities contributing to a particular view.^o

Before viewing *Bowling for Columbine*, each student will be asked to draw a picture of a gun.^o The goal is to get a quick insight into each student's perspective on guns. Based on their regional background, some may depict a hunting rifle while others sketch a handgun.^o The students will then be asked to turn their paper over and watch this movie, taking a few notes on what they find interesting or what they have questions about.^{o o} After the movie, we will carry out a discussion among the students pertaining to why they chose to draw the gun they did.^o Ideas on whether gun control should be more or less harsh are also invited.^o The teacher may divide the class into groups, having each group focus on a certain geographic area of Michigan.^o The students will each be presented with a clip from the media; be it from the news, newspaper, or radio, depicting that area's outlook on the purpose of guns.^o

In the end, the students will write a multi-genre paper that presents the group's regional community's perspective on gun control/gun ownership.^o Each will polish at least one genre from their submitted paper that can be published or dispersed throughout the community.^o

"A Campaign of Fear and Consumption"

Dianne Conn, Michelle Jackson-Long, Kristine Lentz-Johnston, Heather Richeson, and Chrissy Wodecki

Bowling for Columbine presents the media

as an extremely powerful tool that influences and molds our minds, actions, and beliefs. But just how influential is the local media? Do they conspire with national media in what Marilyn Manson called, in a *Bowling for Columbine* interview, the "campaign of fear and consumption"? This is a valuable question for Michigan students to raise and write about.

Prior to showing the movie, the teacher might begin to collect headlines from the local newspaper and begin taping the local evening news. These headlines and broadcast snippets could contain negative stories that demonstrate how local media directly effects students and creates public fear. Afterwards, the class could be directed toward the issue of the media. Statistical facts that contradict what the media portrays as truths could be presented in this discussion, such as the fact that crime in the United States has gone down though the media seems to continue reporting it more often. To make this discussion more concrete, students could be given headlines from local newspapers to discuss in small groups.

After discussing the influences seen in the media, students may begin to realize that the media can be responsible for instilling fears in them as well as in their communities. As this may generate negative feelings, it would be refreshing to tie in a positive writing assignment focusing on what students can do as individuals in their community to work toward changing the messages that the media presents.

An important part of this is getting students involved with the local media. If feasible, a local media person could come in and speak with the class to answer questions students had prepared in advance. In addition, students could compose letters to the editors of local newspapers, discuss their opinions on the media and even request that the anchor team try to focus on the more positive stories that are happening in their neighborhoods. The goal of this writing task is to provide students with the challenge of looking at themselves and their community with a new perspective and to challenge students to become active thinkers and members of society.

Are We a State of Gun Nuts, our Just Plain Nuts?

Zoe Bliss, Sarah Huff, Emily Milanowski, Charleen Werman, Thomas Wood, and Jared Zehm

Michigan, it's safe to say, is not portrayed in a flattering light in *Bowling for Columbine*. If the film is any indication, Michigan residents spend their free time making pipe bombs and brewing up vats of homemade napalm. After viewing the documentary, many people might even begin to wonder if Michigan really does produce crazy, violent people. Students will be asked to explore and think about this idea, research and write about it, and present their findings to their peers and community.

To accomplish this aim, teachers might first show the film in class, and then have the students write a journal entry on their reaction. The students should then be divided into groups of four or five. Each group will research crime and violence within Michigan, chiefly through a comparison with a second state. Choosing states with similar demographics yet from a diverse range of locations would be ideal. Research can be done in the media center and communicated via collaborative discussion sessions. Group reports of findings for Michigan will be given to show deviance in different sources of research. This will be followed by presentations of research results for each of the other states in comparison to Michigan. After the presentations, each student could compose another journal entry to explore if/how their views have changed. These ideas can be shared and incorporated into a final, collaborative article to be published, ideally, in the local newspaper. A school newspaper will suffice if the local paper is unwilling to publish the article.

This project will get students to look critically at Michigan-related violence compared to other regions around the United States, based on the supposed implication in Michael Moore's film that Michigan produces violent people. A parallel aim is to get students to recognize media bias and influence on an audience through the way an issue is portrayed. Once the students grasp these concepts, a third objective is for them to learn to develop

informed opinions on an important issue, taking into account multiple representations of both facts and ideas. Finally, the goal behind publishing the students' collaborative end project is to instill in them a sense of the process, responsibility, and pride involved in relaying information and ideas to their community.

This unit plan is loosely structured to allow room for each teacher to incorporate specifics and add or subtract portions, tailoring the lessons to his/her own style and adapting them to meet the needs of his/her classroom.

The Guy Who Asks the Questions

Tara Bowling, Michaeline Carlson, Amanda Long, and Meg Thompson

Michael Moore uses a host of editing styles throughout *Bowling for Columbine* to achieve dramatic, comedic, shocking, and ironic effects. This writing task prompts students to think critically about Moore's persuasive technique and apply these techniques in two different mediums: a written essay and an oral presentation. Topics for both might include issues raised by the film, such as suburban segregation, gun laws, violent music, and dress code, but students would also be encouraged to create topics they feel passionate about. After critically evaluating how Moore achieves his effects, students must apply these techniques to their own persuasive essays and presentations, demonstrating the crucial awareness that different mediums require different approaches.

Students may choose to work individually or in groups, though all will participate in group brainstorming activities to help formulate ideas. They will then compose a written persuasive essay from one of the previous topics by conducting research and interviews. They must also derive a creative presentation demonstrating their knowledge of the issues.

Editors Note: Julie King's "Resources for Teachers" (ppg. 50-53) Column contains information on Michael Moore.