Using Critical Consciousness to Challenge Inequity
Resource Bundle

Teaching for Critical Consciousness

Resource   *(Back to Table of Contents)*

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How to use this guide:

1. Review the definition of critical consciousness.
2. Review the actions and strategies teachers can use to develop their students' critical consciousness.
3. Consider the extent to which you currently perform – or could perform – these actions.
4. Prioritize actions and strategies for implementation in your classroom.
5. Reflect on outcomes, and engage in the process again.

Definition:

Critical consciousness – the ability to identify, critique, and challenge the social forces that produce inequity and oppression (Gay, 2000; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000).

Outcome: Development of students' critical consciousness	
Associated Actions	Strategies
I help students develop a language of critique (Ladson-Billings, 2000)	• Encourage your students to ask the question **why**: Why are we learning this? Why does this matter? Why did this happen? • Teach your students how to engage in critical questioning: - Which perspective is reflected in this…? Which perspectives are absent? - Whose interests are served by…? Whose are not? - How are different people portrayed or constructed in…? - What could be problematic about…? • Teach your students terms and concepts that can function as "lenses" for analysis and critique. For example: racism, classism, sexism, privilege, oppression, hegemony, critical theories[1].
I make the familiar seem strange (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002)	• Position students to identify and critically analyze hidden assumptions, values, or power structures in things that are familiar[2]. For example: school policies, pop culture (film, music, and advertising), current events, etc. • Position students to identify taken-for-granted assumptions or beliefs, and analyze where they come from and how they serve to benefit or oppress people. For example: meritocracy, color-blindness, traditional gender roles, etc.

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[1] Obviously, the concepts that are introduced – and the *way* they are introduced – will be influenced by the age and developmental level of your students. For an excellent introduction to teaching critical lenses to school-age children, see Beth Wilson's article "Teach the How: Critical Lenses and Critical Literacy." Also see "Critical Race Theory: An Introduction" by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (both available for free online).

[2] Here are some examples:
- *Advertising:* An underlying assumption in women's advertising for clothing and beauty products is that the ultimate purpose of these products is to make women more pleasing to *men*. This assumption reinforces notions of male patriarchy and female subservience.
- *Advertising:* Similarly, advertisements featuring people of color frequently feature people with more classically "Caucasian" features (lighter skin, straighter hair, etc.).The underlying message reinforces "whiteness" as the standard of beauty to which people of color should aspire.
- *Policy:* "Zero tolerance" discipline policies disproportionately affect children of color, and can be connected to racist stereotypes and assumptions about the inherent criminality of black and brown students.

Outcome: Development of students' critical consciousness (continued)	
Associated Actions	Strategies
I teach students to examine issues from multiple viewpoints (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002)	• Expose students to multiple perspectives on a given topic. • Work with students to identify perspectives that have been excluded from the "official" curriculum. Read and analyze texts written from this viewpoint. • Explore the question: "How might this look from the perspective of…?" • Make difference visible. Explicitly discuss why different people might see, experience, interpret, or be affected by (a text, policy, situation) differently.
I teach counter-hegemonic content[3] (Cammarrota & Romero, 2006)	• Teach content that helps students investigate, challenge, and refute stereotypes. • Expose students to counter-stories that question or oppose dominant narratives[4] in school and society.
I connect the content of my class to sociopolitical issues (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000, 2011)	• Position students to use the knowledge and skills of your content area to examine unequal power relationships and the roots of injustice. • Create opportunities for students to research and discuss social problems. • Work to conceptualize "citizenship" as using one's knowledge to diminish the suffering of others – on both an individual and societal level.

I help students engage in praxis (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) .	• Engage students in a cycle of critical praxis:
	   - Work with students to identify a problem they want to address.
	   - Research the problem and gather information.
	   - Develop a plan to address the problem.
	   - Implement the problem.
	   - Reflect on outcomes, adjust, and begin the process again.
	
	• Use the cycle of praxis to teach, practice, and reinforce reading, writing, research, and numeracy skills.

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[3] "Counter-hegemonic" means content that opposes or challenges cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony describes a situation in which the norms, values, and narratives of the dominant group in a society become so pervasive that even people outside of that cultural group are forced to accept them as "natural" or "normal." In the United States, this is the culture of the white middle class.

[4] A "dominant narrative" is a story or collection of ideas so widespread that many people come to accept them as common knowledge or truth, even though they may be factually inaccurate and only represent the perspective of a narrow group. Here are some examples of some common dominant narratives: European settlers "civilized" North America, and the land was essentially open space before they arrived; the Civil Rights Movement ended institutional racism and discrimination; the United States is a meritocracy in which anyone can succeed if he or she works hard; schools are neutral spaces that do not reflect the interests of a particular cultural group.

Using Critical Consciousness to Challenge Inequity
Graphic Organizer

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What is critical consciousness?	
Definition	**Notes**

Why teach for critical consciousness?	
Reasons	**Reactions**

How to teach for critical consciousness	
Actions	**Ideas for my classroom**
• Help students develop a language of critique. • Make the familiar seem strange.	
• Teach students to examine issues from multiple viewpoints. • Teach counter-hegemonic content.	
• Connect to sociopolitical issues. • Help students engage in praxis.	

Planning Template + Exemplar

Supplement

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Prioritized action/strategy:	
Implementation • <u>When</u> will I start doing this? • <u>How</u> will I do this? • <u>What</u> will I observe for?	
Reflection • *When will I pause to reflect on progress toward outcomes?* • *What will show evidence of progress – both my own and my students'?*	

Exemplar

Prioritized action/strategy:	Help students develop a language of critique. *(5th grade – Language arts and social studies)*

Implementation
• *When* will I start doing this?
• *How* will I do this?
• *What* will I observe for?
	• I want to start teaching my students how to do critical questioning and analysis when we begin the next unit in our reading series next Wednesday. I am going to prioritize this for the three weeks that we are working on this unit.
	
	• Here are some concrete things I plan to do to help my students become critical questioners:
	  o Explicitly teach some key terms like "justice," "equity," and "oppression" and discuss them with students in the context of some of our reading selections. Ask for students to share personal experiences and interpretations of these ideas.
	  o Model critical questioning, where we examine texts with questions like:
	    - What do we notice? What is present and what is missing?
	    - How does this text treat different topics and different groups of people? Is there evidence of stereotyping, or "leaving out" certain perspectives?
	    - Is ____ fair/just/equitable? Is anyone being harmed or oppressed?
	  o Use these questions to engage in small-group and whole-class dialogue where the goal is sharing thinking – not arriving at a definite answer.
	
	• I want to observe students' level of engagement, their level of participation in text-based discussions, and their behaviors when interacting with a text (i.e. Do they begin to pose some of these questions on their own?)

Reflection
• *When will I pause to reflect on progress toward outcomes?*
• *What will show evidence of progress – both my own and my students'?*
	• I have three Socratic discussions scheduled during this unit, and I plan to use each as a formative measure of students' growth in critical consciousness. I also plan to survey students at the halfway mark of the unit and ask them questions like:
	  o How do you feel about the questions we're exploring and the discussions we're having?
	  o Do you feel like there is "more beneath the surface" of anything we read or see? How can we find it?
	
	• There are three main behaviors that I would view as progress toward developing a "language of critique." I'd like to see them do each of these things with increasingly *less* direct guidance from me:
	  o Posing their own critical questions.
	  o Considering multiple perspectives during a discussion, rather than making an immediate judgment.
	  o Performing analysis of a text (written or visual) that goes beyond the basics of simply "what it says."

Teaching for Critical Consciousness:
Examples & Illustrations
Supplement

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Actions: Helping students develop a language of critique; making the familiar seem strange

Grade/ Content Area	Example/Illustration
Lower elementary (K-3) reading	• In "Taking on Critical Literacy," Lewison et al. (2002) provide an example of how the routine reading of a picture book can provide an opportunity to "disrupt the commonplace," or make the familiar seem strange. • They describe a teacher reading *Voices in the Park* with her students, a book that tells the story of a day at the park from four different perspectives. • The students expressed surprise that characters in the story were treated differently because of their appearance (e.g. tattered clothing vs. fancy clothing, etc.). The teacher asked why they thought this would happen. Students shared some personal experiences, and engaged in a discussion that touched on issues of social status and class – particularly the question of whether it's fair for people to receive different treatment because of some aspect of how they look.
Lower and middle elementary (K-5) reading	• Some teachers express reservations about teaching for critical consciousness in schools with a fairly rigid curriculum (e.g. a scripted curricula for reading). • Others may be concerned about teaching in a way that is overtly "political," or the perception that they are trying to indoctrinate their students. • To navigate these concerns while also fostering critical consciousness, a teacher might consider these strategies: 　- Focus on the *questions* one asks: Who is included and who is left out? How might this look from the point of view of…? Who might be helped or hurt by…? 　- Use discussion to create space for students to articulate their own ideas and points of view. 　- Connect discussions and the exploration of content back to the idea of *equity*: Is/was/would it be fair that…? Why do you think so?
High school (9-12) language arts/social studies	• In his essay "Precious Knowledge: Teaching Solidarity with Tucson," Oakland high school teacher Devin Carberry (2014) describes a unit that he did with his students on contemporary social movements. • The students expressed a desire to study the Tucson Unified School District's Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program, and the state law that banned it (HB 2281). • Mr. Carberry's students, who were mostly first-generation Latinos, were interested in learning about student and community members' opposition to the ban. The class read several articles on the topic and screened the documentary Precious Knowledge. • To analyze these texts, they used a critical framework that was rooted in some key questions: 　- What is being said or done? 　- What is the implicit message behind the statement or action? 　- What connections can you make to yourself and your own surroundings? 　- What theoretical concepts apply? (students learned about different theoretical concepts like racism, white supremacy, white privilege, capitalism, and so on – and read texts with these lenses) 　- What can be done? • The students engaged in a Skype conversation with UNIDOS, a grassroots organization opposing HB2281, and then planned (and led) local workshops to educate others on the situation in Arizona.

Actions: Teach students to examine issues from multiple viewpoints; teach counter-hegemonic content.

Grade/ Content Area	Example/Illustration
Middle elementary (grades 3-5) language arts / social studies	- In Bill Bigelow's essay "Once upon a Genocide" (2014), he notes that "Children's biographies of Christopher Columbus function as primers on racism and colonialism. They teach youngsters to accept the right of white people to rule over people of color, or powerful nations to dominate weaker nations" (p. 65). - He notes the numerous biographies of Columbus geared toward young children that extol his bravery and seafaring prowess, but ignore the genocide, murder, and barbarism that he perpetrated on Native peoples. - Instead of relying on these books as sources of information about Columbus's legacy, young students could read books like Jane Yolen's *Encounter*, which tells the story of Columbus's arrival from the point of view of a Taino Indian boy. - They can also read articles and texts that provide a critical history of Columbus's voyage then analyze older Columbus biographies for bias. Specifically, Bigelow recommends posing questions like, "Who does this book 'root' for, and how is this accomplished? Who in our society benefits and who is hurt by these presentations?" (p. 75)
Secondary (middle & high school) - appropriate for various content areas	- Veteran social justice educator Linda Christensen describes a powerful activity for challenging stereotypes and cultural hegemony. - After a reading and discussion of Margaret Walker's poem "For My People," students are asked to identify their "people" – that is, all of the different communities that they belong to. - Students are then asked to pick a community to which they belong and list all of the things that they could praise or honor about it. Then, they are asked to think of common misconceptions (stereotypes) about that community, and how they might "talk back" to, or challenge, those judgments and generalizations. - Students finish by creating their own version of "For My People" that praises the strength and attributes about their communities while contesting stereotypes about them.

Actions: Connect the content of your class to sociopolitical issues; help students engage in praxis

Grade/ Content Area	Example/Illustration
Appropriate for various grades and subject areas	• TeachingTolerance.org offers an excellent page on its website called "Teaching about Ferguson: Race and Racism in the United States." • The page contains links to blogs, resources, and lesson plans focused directly on helping teachers engage with students on sociopolitical issues related to race. • Full lesson plans include titles such as "Talking about Race and Racism," "Racial Disparity in the Criminal Justice System," and "Dismantling Racial Caste."
High school science	• A high school science teacher uses his first unit of the year to teach students about the scientific method. • To learn about the scientific method, however, he has students use it to analyze the work done by members of the eugenics movement in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. • The students learn that the eugenics movement did *not* use the scientific method, and actually engaged in "pseudo-science" whose purpose was to justify the racial hierarchy in the United States. • Students analyze contemporary stereotypes and biases linked to the work of eugenicists, and begin the school year by connecting the study of science to matters of social justice.
High school math	• Social justice math educator Jonathan Osler, founder of radicalmath.org, offers a free online resource called "A Guide for Integrating Issues of Economic and Social Justice Into Mathematics Curriculum." • In it, he describes a praxis-oriented approach in which teachers begin with a mathematical concept or framework. They then work with students to identify a social justice issue (e.g. racial profiling, educational funding) that the mathematical concept can help to illuminate. • They create essential questions to explore in the unit and practice the mathematical concept while using it to learn more about an issue of relevance. Each unit involves the creation of a project in which students must propose mathematically-sound solutions to the problem under study.

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