



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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2023 Volume I: Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865

This is America: Images and Histories of Racism and Exploitation

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by Adriana Lopez

“Sugarcane, cotton hands

My blood and sweat came from this land!

My life would've been different if I didn't have cinnamon pigment

We built this!”-The Cast of *Black-ish*¹

Introduction

During the pandemic, students were confused, scared, and didn't understand why people were rioting after the George Floyd police killing. These topics were brought up a lot in my virtual classes and I made space for it because it was important to me that they understand what was happening in society.

The questions that kept coming up were, “Why are people rioting in the streets?” “What does Black Lives Matter mean and how is it different from All Lives Matter?” These conversations with my students inspired me to begin gathering materials that would refresh students on the history of slavery, oppression, and exploitation, and how it still affects us in the present. As we had conversations about this virtually, I realized students were not connecting the history of slavery in the U.S. with our present society; students didn't see the links.

This high school English unit is based on the Yale National Initiative seminar: “Histories of Art, Race, and Empire 1492-1865. This seminar examined images from the period that represented native people, enslaved people, and colonialists. The seminar allowed us to examine the fictions of empire, oriental fantasy, and unlearning colonization propaganda that is still perpetuated today.

I have been teaching high school English electives for many years. My elective classes are primarily offered to seniors with a few juniors in the mix. Many of the students in my electives don't need the class to graduate. Because my English elective may not be a graduation requirement for most of my students, I've tried to incorporate thought-provoking lessons that will keep the students engaged, learning, and completing their

assignments. It can be a real struggle getting high school seniors engaged and completing work when they know the English elective they're taking isn't a graduation requirement. I make sure to survey students and get their input on topics they'd be interested in learning. I created this unit based on conversations I had with students when we were virtual learning during the pandemic. I used the knowledge I learned in my Yale seminar to improve this unit and add images that would strengthen it.

Teaching Situation and Rationale

The subject of this unit will focus on art, images, and texts that focus on texts that depict slavery, racism, oppression, and exploitation from 1852 (towards the end of slavery), with a Frederick Douglass speech, to the present. The title, "This is America: Images and Histories of Racism and Exploitation" is a play on Childish Gambino's 2018 song, "This is America."² The song and video serve as inspiration to America's current state of affairs and is at the heart of answering the questions the students asked. However, before I could teach the song to the students, I had to augment my teaching with reference to historical texts and works that would help students understand how we went from slavery in the U.S. to Childish Gambino's, "This is America." This unit will be a mix of older historical works and texts with modern material to show students the history of oppression and the roots of why movements such as Black Lives Matter were formed.

I teach juniors and seniors at Back of the Yards College Preparatory High School, a Chicago Public School, on the Southwest side of Chicago. The school is named for the neighborhood it serves, the Back of the Yards neighborhood. The neighborhood is the former location of the Union Stock Yards; the meatpacking district that was active from 1865 until 1971.³ The stockyards inspired Upton Sinclair to write his sensational novel, *The Jungle*⁴, after he went undercover in the stockyards in 1904. The novel shocked public opinion with its graphic depiction of the meatpacking industry and the dangerous labor practices. Many of those dangers remain today. According to The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, "...in comparison to other industrial and manufacturing sectors, meatpacking and poultry processing are still among the most dangerous. Food manufacturing workers are twice as likely to experience injuries and illnesses than industrial and manufacturing workers as a whole."⁵ Many of the students in my high school have family members who work in this industry including themselves. Although the stockyards are gone, the unsafe conditions are not. Ironically, our high school is named after the neighborhood that inspired *The Jungle* where many of my current students and their families still work in meat packaging companies with little training and unsafe conditions.

The students at my school not only work in dangerous conditions but also live in a dangerous neighborhood. The current population of the high school is 94.6% Latino, 2.1% Black, 1.8% Asian, and 1.2% White. 93% of our students are low-income.⁶ The neighborhood has high crime, violence, and gangs.

I teach English III and Argumentative Literature, a senior elective. This unit was created for my elective class; however, it can also be used in any upperclassmen English class; I often use the materials in English III classes. However, the materials in this unit may be too mature for underclassmen. Having the foundation of a strong community in the classroom is key for these lessons to be successful.

My Argumentative Literature class is an elective that is permitted to have students of all levels; the Illinois State Board of Education allows students of all levels to be programmed in electives of any subject regardless

of their academic level. The class is a great opportunity for diverse learners to have classes with their peers. I always have a wide range of students programmed in these classes; students with IEPs, some with more severe disabilities who are in instructional (self-contained) classes, IB students, ELL students, bilingual students, and at-level students. The materials in this unit have been curated to allow all students to find an “in” for understanding and comprehension.

Content Objectives

The culminating objective of this unit will be for students to be able to see the connections between “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” “Strange Fruit,” “This is America,” and the images that correspond to each text, to see how these works reveal the reason why the Black Lives Matter⁷ movement was created. The texts and images were selected to reveal continuities across American history from slavery, to the Jim Crow segregation era, to modern times with racism and injustice. These texts and images will attempt to help students understand why the Black Lives Matter movement was created and how our history of enslaving people in this country still affects our current society. The projected time period for this unit is 5 weeks.

The unit will begin by analyzing “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July”⁸ and the images that portray what enslaved people and what slavery looked like. The images include:

“Peter (formerly identified as ‘Gordon’) 1863” Mathew Brady Studio⁹

“Renty, an elderly field hand who lived on B.F. Taylor's plantation, ‘Edgehill’¹⁰

“Types of Mankind 1854” Not and Glidden¹¹

“Portrait of Frederick Douglass 1879”¹²

“Portrait of Phillis Wheatley 1773”¹³

The next text and related images the students will analyze is, “Strange Fruit.”¹⁴ The images that help visualize this period for students are,

“Lawrence Beitler, Lynching photo, [Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith] Aug. 7, 1930”¹⁵

“Zip Coon 1820-1860”¹⁶

“Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956 [Buying ice cream]” Gordon Parks¹⁷

“Department store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956” Gordon Parks¹⁸

“At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956” Gordon Parks¹⁹

“Untitled, Alabama, 1956 [Boys playing with toy guns]” Gordon Parks²⁰

“The Van Der Zee Men, Lenox, Massachusetts, 1908” James Van Der Zee²¹

“Beautiful Bride,” c. 1930 James Van Der Zee²²

The last major work will be a deep analysis of Childish Gambino’s song, video, and accompanying images from “This is America.” The images include:

“Then & Now” 2016 Lorna Simpson²³

“Black America Again” 2016 Lorna Simpson²⁴

“Madame Beauvoir’s Painting” 2016 Fabiola Jean Lewis²⁵

“Rest in Peace” Fabiola Jean Lewis²⁶

“If perhaps I find myself encaged,” 2016 Sedrick Huckaby²⁷

“Another Fight For Remembrance,” 2015 Titus Kaphar²⁸

“Image of Donald Glover and Frederick Douglass”²⁹

All of these works and images correspond to the topics covered in the YNI seminar Histories of Art, Race, and Empire: 1492-1865. They portray imagery from the end of slavery, through segregation, and modern society. They are meant to give students a refresher course on the atrocities of slavery, the racial injustice and discrimination during segregation, and how that history still affects and connects to the racial injustice in the present. Some images can be difficult to look at and should be previewed before teaching them to students. Teachers should omit those images they feel will not be suitable for their students.

“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” by Frederick Douglass

It is important students understand the background of Frederick Douglass so that they get a full understanding of his powerful speech when they analyze it. Frederick Douglass was born in Maryland into slavery in 1817 or 1818; he did not know his birthday. His mother was a Black enslaved person and his father, a white man. During his time as an enslaved man, he suffered all the tortures of slavery; hunger, flogging, and hard labor. Douglass writes in his memoir of suffering such immense hunger that he would pick up crumbs off the floor. By the age of 20, he had escaped slavery and became an anti-slavery activist. He wanted to dispel the myth that slave owners would perpetuate at the time, “their slaves enjoy more of the physical comforts of life than the peasantry of any country in the world.”³⁰ Douglass also writes about how slave owners often divided enslaved people by having better treatment and food for select enslaved people who were loyal and had better appearance.³¹ This inspired him to speak about the truth and barbarisms of enslaving and owning human beings.

This text was selected because it highlights how when things don’t immediately affect oneself, one may not realize it’s a problem. Frederick Douglass was asked to give a speech at a Fourth of July freedom celebration in 1852, to celebrate freedom. Those who invited him failed to realize they had invited a Black, formerly enslaved man, to celebrate freedom when slavery was still in existence in the United States. Slavery didn’t end in the U.S. until 1865. Douglass used his speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” to call attention to how wrong and unjust it was to enslave and keep humans as property.³² He also called out those in

attendance for inviting him; he asks the audience if they invited him to make a mockery of him and mock enslavement. The speech was dangerous for its time but Douglass knew it was a message he needed to send.

This speech ties into the question my students asked me during the pandemic, “What is the difference between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter?” As in the speech, it should be obvious why a formerly enslaved person like Douglass shouldn’t have been invited to a freedom celebration. It should be obvious that all lives don’t matter until Black (and minority) lives matter. Until we can achieve that, all lives don’t matter.

The images to be analyzed to further enhance understanding and comprehension are the following:

“Peter (formerly identified as ‘Gordon’) 1863” Mathew Brady Studio

“Renty, an elderly field hand who lived on B.F. Taylor's plantation, ‘Edgehill’

“Types of Mankind 1854” Not and Glidden

“Portrait of Frederick Douglass 1879”

“Portrait of Phillis Wheatley 1773”

The first two images are difficult but important for students to see because they depict truthful images of enslaved people. Many textbooks have started writing a reimagining of how enslavers treated those who were enslaved. The images of Peter and Renty will help students understand why Frederick Douglass was angry and confrontational in his essay. Students should look at the two images and consider if the men in the photos would have been happy to give a speech at a 4th of July celebration celebrating freedom.

The third image listed, “Types of Mankind,” will help students understand how White people created pseudoscience to justify the atrocities they were committing against other humans. This chart gives a visualization of how White people created a classification system to feel justified in their inhumane treatment of captured and enslaved people.

The last two images of Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley will give students a visualization of the writer of the text they’re analyzing but also allow students to see the contrasts of how free Black looked when allowed more opportunities. Although Phillis was an enslaved person most of her life, she was educated and became a poet. Her image portrays her as a scholar in contrast to the photos of the enslaved men who have been wiped and beaten.

Additional resources:

“We Built This” performed by the cast of Black-ish video and lyrics³³

“I’m Just a Slave” by The Roots video and text³⁴

“Negroes for sale. Will be sold at public auction, at Spring Hill, in the County of Hempstead, on a credit of twelve months, on Friday the 28th day this present month” ... Spring Hill, [Ark.] Jan. 6th, 1842.³⁵

“Strange Fruit” by Abel Meeropol and recorded by Billie Holiday

Students should understand the importance of the poem and song, "Strange Fruit," because it was written in the mid-thirties, about 70 years after slavery was abolished in the U.S. and brutality and racism like lynchings were still occurring. Abel Meeropol was a high school English teacher who wrote the poem "Strange Fruit" after seeing a photo of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith lynched in Marion, Indiana.³⁶ The image left him horrified and inspired him to write the poem, "Strange Fruit." He later added music and had a few different artists sing it. It was Billie Holiday's rendition that popularized the anti-racial injustice song. It made Billie Holiday a "protest singer."³⁷ Something important for students to know about the inspiration for this text, the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, is that it was in Marion, Indiana. It is important for students to know that the lynching did not happen in a Southern state, it happened in the Midwest. The photo of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith will be the first image students will analyze to have a full understanding of this text. Students should know that lynchings weren't just happening in southern states, they were happening all over the U.S.

The images to be analyzed to further enhance understanding and comprehension are the following:

"Lawrence Beitler, Lynching photo, [Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith] Aug. 7, 1930"

"Zip Coon 1820-1860"

"Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956 [Buying ice cream]" Gordon Parks

"Department store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956" Gordon Parks

"At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956" Gordon Parks

"Untitled, Alabama, 1956 [Boys playing with toy guns]" Gordon Parks

"The Van Der Zee Men, Lenox, Massachusetts, 1908" James Van Der Zee

"Beautiful Bride", c. 1930 James Van Der Zee

The first image students will analyze, before analyzing the lyrics, is the photo of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith's lynching in Marion, Indiana. This image will allow students to visualize the lyrics and fully understand what "Strange Fruit" is and what message the author and performer wanted their audience to grasp; it will help students understand the brutality and injustice of the image.

The next image, "Zip Coon," an image of Blackface, will show the students how White people mocked and mimicked Black people. It will allow students to understand how White people at that time did not see Black people at the same level of "human" as themselves.

The next four images by Gordon Parks of Southern Alabama will allow students to visualize what segregation looked like and how people lived during that period. These images can also convey to students how racism can be taught. The photo, "Untitled, Alabama, 1956 [Boys playing with toy guns]," shows 3 boys, 2 Black and 1 White, smiling and playing with toy guns together. These images can give students a visualization of what segregation looked like and help them understand that segregation only ended about 60 years ago and we're still suffering the consequences of both slavery and segregation in the present.

The last two images by James Van Der Zee can help students visualize how people looked like during segregation in Harlem, NY during the Harlem Renaissance, to contrast the images from the same time period

in segregated Alabama. These images of successful Black people can show students that society didn't have to be brutal, deadly, and segregated during this time period; Black people were flourishing in certain communities during the great migration as they left the segregated South in search of better lives and freedom.

Additional Resources:

Aperture "Vision and Justice Guest Editor's Note" by Sarah Lewis³⁸

Season 1 Episode 1 of *Lovecraft Country* "Sundown"³⁹

Season 2 Episode 19 of *Cold Case* "Strange Fruit"⁴⁰

"This is America" by Childish Gambino (Donald Glover)

This last text will pull all the images and texts they've learned in this unit together. "This is America" was released in 2018 under Donald Glover's alter ego, Childish Gambino. Gambino released this song and video as a critical criticism of the current state of affairs in the U.S.; in particular, the current state of affairs for Black people in the U.S. Gambino highlights the U.S.'s obsession with guns, using Black people as entertainment, mass shootings (in particular, the massacre at a Charleston church), bondage and enslavement, violence against Black people, how the history of capturing Black people and enslaving them is still affecting us today, and the lack of enough progress.⁴¹ He is sending a message that the U.S. needs to fully acknowledge and address the issue of racism and racial injustice. Students will analyze the lyrics and video to find all of Gambino's hidden "Easter eggs."

The images to be analyzed to further enhance understanding and comprehension are the following:

"Then & Now" 2016 Lorna Simpson

"Black America Again" 2016 Lorna Simpson

"Madame Beauvoir's Painting" 2016 Fabiola Jean Lewis

"Rest in Peace" Fabiola Jean Lewis

"If perhaps I find myself encaged," 2016 Sedrick Huckaby

"Another Fight For Remembrance," 2015 Titus Kaphar

"Image of Donald Glover and Frederick Douglass"

The first two images from Lorna Simpson show a scene of police violence from the segregation era and the second image shows bullet holes. These images correlate with "This is America" because they are modern images that are asking its audience to think about how much progress the U.S. has made with racial issues and violence. These images will help students understand that it's not just Childish Gambino making this commentary, it's other artists as well. These images will help students think about what progress has been made and what more needs to be done.

The images from Fabiola Jean Lewis are from her collection, "Rewriting History." Her first print, "Madame

Beauvoir’s Painting,” is a reference to the image, “Peter (formerly identified as “Gordon) 1863.” We see how Lewis has re-envisioned the image of a brutal flogging for a re-interpretation in the present. Her print, “Rest in Peace” is of a lynching that students can make connections to “Strange Fruit” and the lynching image from Marion, Indiana. Students can use Lewis’s work to help them further connect and understand how the past is still present in our society. Students can think about why Lewis has rewritten history and the message she is sending with her work.

The images “If perhaps I find myself encaged,” 2016 Sedrick Huckaby and “Another Fight For Remembrance,” 2015 Titus Kaphar show students modern interpretations of protest, violence, and mass incarcerations. These images will help tie in the present-day racial injustice that spurred the creation of the The Black Lives Matter movement. These images connect to my students’ original question during the pandemic when they wanted to know why people were rioting after the George Floyd killing.

The last image was featured in an article “This Is America: Race, Revolution, and Resistance.” The image is a juxtaposed digital image of Frederick Douglass in the background and Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) in the foreground.⁴² This image will be the final connection between America’s past and how it still affects America’s present. Students will consider why this article chose to create this image with Douglass and Gambino, what their connection is, how it connects to the texts, and what message the image is sending.

Additional Resources:

Jill Scott’s version of The Pledge of Allegiance, “Home of the Slaves”⁴³

The Twilight Zone (2019) Season 1 Episode 3 “Reply”⁴⁴

Teaching Strategies and Activities

The teaching strategies and activities below are general because they are used throughout the entire year for all images and texts we use in the classroom. The activities become routine for students and they feel comfortable knowing they are familiar with exactly what assignments to expect for each image and text we read. My classes have a high population of special education students. My special education students thrive in knowing we have routines and they know what to expect.

There are a wide range of abilities in my classes. I use my English elective to strengthen student skills through a variety of thought-provoking texts and materials. Through trial and error, I have adapted the strategies that work best for my teaching style, my students, and my school. The Illinois State Board of Education legally allows students of all levels to be included in elective classes of any subject. Therefore, I teach students who are in instructional (self-contained) classes, at-level students, IB students, and AP students. I make modifications and accommodations for all students regardless of their having an Individualized Education Plan.

The most important teaching strategy I use is building relationships and SEL (social-emotional learning). I like to cover some heavy topics and a strong classroom relationship allows me to teach my content and have powerful conversations. I also make sure to use the same strategies for analyzing texts and images so that it becomes routine for students. Routines help me maintain good classroom management, reduce stress and

anxiety, and help diverse learners feel comfortable when they know exactly what to expect. Routines and consistency also allow behavior incidents to be reduced and, in some classes, to be non-existent.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Building Community

I think it's important to build community in the classroom through SEL work because it helps keep negative behaviors at bay and allows teachers the opportunity to teach their content without having to spend a lot of time managing behavior.⁴⁵ SEL didn't come easy to me, however, after years of training and practice, these are the strategies I've modified for my use. Teachers should always use the strategies they feel comfortable facilitating so that they come off authentic to the students.

One of the first things I do at the beginning of the school year is to create our classroom norms together and make sure to be consistent and uphold them. I always tell the students that we are all responsible for maintaining the norms. I remind them to respectfully call me out if they think I have gone against one of the classroom norms. I tell them that I lead by example and I try my best to keep it that way all year. I acknowledge when I am wrong and apologize when necessary.

We also start the year by doing our first Human Library story. The students write a short narrative about themselves, about 2 paragraphs to start. I randomly pair them up and they read each other their stories. The Human Library project is a program many libraries have where people tell stories about themselves as if they were a human book.⁴⁶ We will do about 1-2 Human Library stories per month until the end of the school year. At the end of the year, we'll combine them all into a book with a self-portrait to go on the cover. This helps keep the community strong for the entire year. I also share stories about my life with the students to model and allow them to get to know me as well. Each time they share a Human Library story, they must tell it to someone they haven't shared with in the class. This helps them meet new people, make new friendships, be more understanding, and keep the sense of community strong for the whole school year.

Another strategy I use is an SEL bell ringer to start the day. As the students enter the class, they know that as part of our routine, they have a bell ringer question⁴⁷ to answer while we wait for the bells to finish ringing. The questions I ask always pertain to emotions, student interests, or questions where I ask for their feedback and suggestions. I try to do these types of questions at least 3 times a week. We always share with a partner and then share with the whole class.

Other SEL and community-building strategies I like to do are one-on-one check-ins, a lot of partner work and I make time for fun games like Kahoots or circle games like Zip, Zap, Zoom.^[48] I always use fruity-smelling gel pens, vinyl stickers, or small treats as prizes and incentives.⁴⁹ When students are working independently I come around on my rolling chair and sit with each of them to make sure they understand their assignments, check to see if they have any questions, or check in with their emotional state if needed. I allow students to work with partners to lessen the workload and stress level,

An additional critical thing I do at the beginning of the school year is give students an interest survey on Google Forms. I ask students their preferred names, their pronouns, if it's safe to address them by their preferred name and pronouns with their guardians, who is a best guardian to call, what they're allergic to, their favorite music, favorite movies, TV shows, hobbies, sports, and ask them to share anything else I should know about them. I create a spreadsheet and make sure to incorporate all their interests as best I can in the class. I create a class playlist from their musical tastes and try to create engaging lessons around their interests. I also try to make it to their sporting or club events to show support. These connections help me

build my relationships and create a respectful and caring community.

All of these strategies help me build communities in my classroom that allow me to teach my content and respectfully cover heavy, controversial topics. I would not be able to teach my content successfully without this initial work.

Historical background

Before each of the texts, students will read historical background for each text. For “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” students will read about Frederick Douglass’s life and how he went from an enslaved person to a free one. They will also read about the slave trade and how enslaved people were treated.

For the text, “Strange Fruit,” students will read about segregation, Jim Crow laws, racial injustice, sundown towns, and lynchings. This will allow them to see the progression from enslavement to segregation.

For the text, “This is America,” students will read about present day racial injustice, the Black Lives Matter movement, redlining, mass shootings, incarcerations, and segregation in Chicago (relevant to students I teach since Chicago is a racially segregated city).

Observe, Reflect, Question

To analyze the images, we will do the Observe, Reflect, and Question strategy.⁵⁰ We will begin by projecting an image on the whiteboard. I will begin by modeling an observation of the image. I will write the observation with a dry erase marker or a Post-it note. I will then open the observations to the whole class and ask them, Describe what you see? What do you notice first? What is the physical setting? What other details can you see? Students will either use dry erase markers or Post-it notes to put their observations on the board. I will remind the class that we’re annotating the image. We will then look at all our observations, discuss them as a whole class and reflect.

For the reflection part of the analysis, students will work in small groups or partners. I have students answer the questions: Why do you think this image was made? When do you think it was made? Who do you think was the audience for this image? What’s missing from this image? If someone made this today, what would be different? What is the message of this image?

For the last section of the analysis portion, I have students come up with at least 2 questions about the image. To help the process I ask them, “What do you wonder about in this image?”⁵¹ We answer these questions aloud as a whole class and the students do further work and analysis in small groups. If needed, I begin by modeling some of the things I observed and questioned in the image.

Students are provided with digital copies in Google Class that allow them to zoom in on the images to see the fine details. All of our assignments are done digitally on Google class and texts are always available online and on paper.

Close Reading

I have a set routine when it comes to close reading texts. The first step in the process is to provide the difficult vocabulary for the students to define to enhance their comprehension as they read. They will close read all three texts using this strategy “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” “Strange Fruit,” and “This is America.”

The 2nd step is a timed, silent reading. During the silent reading, students are looking to identify a “golden line”⁵² (something that stood out to them), or to develop a question. After the 1st reading, they do a talk and turn and share their golden line or question with the partner next to them.

The next step in this process is to read the text a 2nd time and to do annotations. Students are given both paper and digital texts and they may annotate on paper or digitally. As they annotate, they also look for any patterns or discrepancies they notice in the text as they read and annotate. We have an anchor chart on the wall and posted in Google Class for them to remember what kinds of annotations they should be making; connections to the text or connections to other texts, asking questions, identifying golden lines, looking for patterns, imagery, and looking for deeper meaning clues in the text.

After annotating the text and looking for patterns,⁵³ the students do what we call the “Pattern, Question, Interpretation of the patterns they identified. They begin by listing the pattern they found, followed by asking a question such as, “Why did the author use the pattern of ___?”⁵⁴ They then answer their question for the interpretation. The answer to their question must be a deeper meaning (inference) to the text that is not obvious and must include a piece of textual evidence to support their answer. It may look like this, “The author used the pattern of ___ in the text because, ___. I know this because in the text it states...” “This textual evidence demonstrates how the author’s use of the pattern ___ further develops the idea...”

The last step in the close reading process is to answer text-dependent questions. For every text a student reads they always have to answer the question, What is the central idea of this story? and use at least 2 pieces of textual evidence to support their answer. Students have to use CER (Claim, Evidence, Reasoning) to answer this question. This question becomes routine as it is asked after every reading. It’s how we practice SAT strategies. It is always followed by 1-2 more open-ended questions that also require textual evidence to answer.

The close reading method is supposed to help students comprehend and understand deeper ideas and meanings the author is trying to convey as well as practice SAT strategies; a requirement in Chicago Public Schools.

Claim, Evidence, Reasoning (CER)

Another major strategy I use in my class is CER or claim, evidence, reasoning. In action, it looks more like claim, evidence, reasoning, evidence, reasoning, conclusion.⁵⁵ This is the basic formula for which students need to answer their text-dependent questions. It is also the method we use to write short answer responses and essays. Students must always prove their answers or arguments with evidence as it is an SAT strategy. This is a routine strategy that students come to expect every time they do a reading of a text. Students always have access to this formula by referencing the anchor chart on the wall or looking at their “class materials” section in Google Class.

For all three texts, students will answer the question, “What is the central idea of the text?” Students will answer the question using 2 pieces of evidence from the text to support their answer. They will also answer 1-2 more specific open-ended questions about each text that require textual evidence to answer. They will use CER to answer these questions.

Chunking Activities

To help all students, especially diverse learners, not feel overwhelmed, I “chunk” sections of work to make it

less stressful and reduce anxiety.⁵⁶ I chunk all the learning activities into different sections to help students feel accomplished after they finish each section. It has proven to be less overwhelming for students when I chunk their activities regardless of their cognitive ability level. I chunk their activities in the following way:

Observe, Reflect, Question analysis of images

Vocabulary of new text

Reading silently for the “golden line” or question

Talk and turn with a partner to share golden like or question

Read text a 2nd time, annotate, and look for patterns

Pattern Question Interpretation of patterns

Central idea and text-dependent questions

Because I ask students to do a lot of work for each text and related images, I chunk the activities for them to feel less stressed and overwhelmed about the process. The feedback I receive from students is always positive and this method allows me to be able to give students one-on-one attention as necessary. I try to do my assignments in this order every time we start new texts for students to get accustomed to the routine of our class.

One-on-one check-ins

Another important teaching strategy I use in the classroom is one-on-one check-ins.⁵⁷ This helps me build community, rapport, and maintain good classroom management; it’s also a part of the social-emotional environment. Because my activities become routine for students, it allows me to spend less time explaining what to do and more time sitting with each group or individual students to check in on them. Many students, especially diverse learners, have a fear of asking questions in front of their peers. Doing the one-on-one check-ins allows students to ask clarifying questions and advocate for themselves when they don’t understand something in the reading. Doing these check-ins also allows me to follow up with students about their interests, sports, hobbies, events, favorite TV shows, and movies.

Summative Assessment

The summative assessment for this unit will be a 5-paragraph argumentative essay where students will answer the question, “What connects the U.S.’s past to the Black Lives Matter movement?” They will use textual evidence using the CER method from all the texts and historical background they learned throughout the unit to write this essay. It can be modified to fewer paragraphs for diverse learners.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

These teaching strategies and activities are aligned with the Common Core learning standards for ELA grades 11-12 as required by Chicago Public Schools and The Illinois State Board of Education.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.⁵⁸

This standard ties into using CER (claim, evidence, reasoning); using textual evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.⁵⁹

Students have to actively discuss their thoughts and ideas with the whole class, small groups, and partners.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.⁶⁰

Students are required to be able to support their arguments with textual evidence; it's part of CER (claim, evidence, reasoning).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.1 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.⁶¹

This unit will be used in an English class where students are expected to use the conventions standard English and grammar.

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