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ENGL 112B

Nov 28, 2022

Unit of Study: Critical Thinking

Rationale:

Whether it is through the rise of Trumpism, the anti-vaccine movement, or the long lasting effects of racism, it is evident that there is a lack of critical thinking in today's world. The English classroom is where critical thinking skills are most developed as the process of analysis and revision use higher order thinking in order to find a deeper understanding of a subject. Although it is ever present in the process of reading, understanding, and writing English, critical thinking is never explicitly taught and so the process of critical thinking is never brought to consciousness for the student, leaving them less equipped and vulnerable as they navigate the world outside of the classroom. This unit aims to provide students with the tools needed to independently think critically outside of the classroom using 1984 as its canonical text. 1984 is a book where individuality is suppressed by removing one's ability to critically think, which makes it perfect for this unit.

There are two definitions of critical thinking that are used throughout this Unit, the first of which comes from Dr. Jeremy Ball at the College of San Mateo who defines critical thinking as "The examination of whether to accept, reject, or suspend judgment on a claim."¹ The other comes from Robert Ennis who describes four aspects of critical thinking as "the ability to:

1. Identify conclusions, reasons, and assumptions

¹ Sorry for the lack of parenthetical citation on this quote. I got this definition from a class in Critical Thinking that I took in Community College and I wasn't sure how to cite a lecture.

2. Judge the quality of an argument [validity], and the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions, and evidence [soundness]
3. Develop and defend a position on an issue
4. Draw conclusions when warranted, with caution (Larsson).”

Launching the Unit

Before reading and discussing 1984, teachers can use any of the following activities to set the climate for critical thinking:

1. Have student independently freewrite, responding to the following questions:
 - a. What/how do you define critical thinking?
 - b. Do you think that critical thinking is important, why or why not?
 - c. What does a person need in order to think critically?
2. Have students read excerpts from The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum, specifically when the “emerald city goggles” are mentioned at the end of Chapter 10, and the middle of Chapter 15.
 - a. Hopefully students will still have prior knowledge on the story of the Wizard of Oz by the time that you teach this, so that the analogy makes sense to them.
 - i. Outline to students that as we grow up we all have these emerald goggles attached to our faces that force us to think and see things in a certain way, and that critical thinking is the tool that allows people to remove the goggles and see the Emerald City for what it really is.
3. Have students listen to “Mortal Man” by Kendrick Lamar with the lyrics printed in front of them. The song finds Lamar questioning the loyalty of his audience. He hopes that they will see him in totality, for everything that he has done, rather than focusing all

attention towards negative criticism if he ever made a mistake. He also challenges his audience to have this whole picture perspective even if the government makes it seem like he went crazy. The song is a beautiful way to open a unit on critical thinking because it poses the importance of challenging one's preconceived notions of things. The activity will be performed as follows:

- a. Play the song twice and have students annotate anything that they notice about the song.
- b. Prompt them to independently write about what they think the song is about and to write about what they think the song is about.
- c. As a class discuss the lines at the end of the first verse:

“If I'm tried in a court of law, if the industry cut me off
 If the government want me dead, plant cocaine in my car
 Would you judge me a drug-head or see me as K. Lamar?
 Or question my character and degrade me on every blog? (Lamar).”

Through the Unit

1. Throughout the reading of 1984, students will frequently analyze the role that Big Brother plays. Through in class discussions, and discussion questions assigned for homework, students will aim to find what Big Brother is trying to accomplish, and they will reflect on how they achieve their goals and their effectiveness.
2. Outline the process of finding reliable sources in class, and students will use the resources that we find in class to learn more about the historical context of Totalitarian leaders in order to compare and contrast with the world of 1984. As homework, students will be assigned to look up the corporations that own a majority of companies in

America. They will then write a page reflection on which companies they spend their time and money with. In class the following day, watch the Sinclair anti fake news broadcasts and discuss their assignment and the video.

Beyond the Unit

1. To deepen a student's ability to analyze arguments, students will be assigned five out of twenty commonly used logical fallacies and will be assigned to define them and find/create an example of each for homework. In class the following day, student's will meet in small groups to learn about the other fallacies that were not assigned to them. Additionally, ethos, pathos, and logos will be lectured.
2. One of the major projects that will conclude this unit will be an argumentative essay on a topic that is chosen by the student. Ideally the topic they choose would be something that the student is passionate about and would not center around 1984. Theses will be submitted very early in the unit, so it is important that students know that they will be working very closely with this topic for an extended period of time. However there will be a very thorough process of revision throughout the unit so that students can deepen their arguments over time. The goal is for students to learn how to apply their critical thinking skills towards their own writing.
3. The other major project to conclude the unit would be a presentation of a YA companion piece. Students will be given the choice of the following works:
 - a. *Parasite* (2019) [movie]: Like 1984, the world of *Parasite* is dystopic. *Parasite* is a movie about a poor family slowly integrating themselves into work positions needed by a very wealthy family. It comments on financial inequality in South Korea, and by viewing it through a critical lens, student's will be tasked to choose

whether the main family is immoral or not. This movie is rated R, so parental approval is required in order to allow students to watch this movie.

- b. *Zootopia* (2016) [movie]: Despite being a movie made for kids, *Zootopia* contains a lot of social commentary on race, using animals in place of race in order to tell its story. Student's would be prompted to analyze the medium of the story (animated movie), and to identify the argument of the movie.
- c. The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) [novel]: Students would return to the reading that began the unit to further look at the Emerald City. They would be prompted to analyze the Wizard, and to analyze how the Wizard uses language to keep his position of power.

Works Cited

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