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English 112B

December 6th, 2016

Empathy and Common Ground from the Lives of Strangers

**Rationale:**

When I was younger, my parents were different people than how they are now. My mother, specifically, would be someone who would often put her foot in her mouth when talking about people of other races and certainly religions. Sometimes, when I would be talking with friends who were from different cultures, she would say something that would make them embarrassed, or sometimes even a little angry. Even when I was younger, however, I had gotten the feeling that she never meant any harm by her misconceptions and her opinions, but despite that, she would still from time to time offend. From my experience, this is not just limited to her, as many adults in my family would also have similar ‘micro-aggressions’ against groups of people who they would be conversing with without meaning to.

However, as my mother got older, and with her age grew a new love for reading, as well as our house having more ready access to an internet connection of merit, she had educated herself about different aspects of the world that had always interested her, even when she was a little kid; some of the more impoverished areas in Africa, or the history of the Holocaust and how that was able to happen in a time like this. Even now, I still talk with her about history, and to the best of my knowledge, try to contextualize the events that transpired, such as how Adolf Hitler was able to convince as many people as he had to slaughter millions of people. Soon she became more sensitive and worldly, and while she still speaks her mind a little too much, at least I know she has more context than she had initially.

I had always wanted to consider myself to be a person of ‘the world’, and tried to contextualize every culture I came across, and tried to shift my viewpoint from my own, to theirs at any opportunity presented. Many of my peers, as well, would avoid prejudice and preconceptions as much as they could, but I never quite got the feeling that any of them were actively trying to relate to other people. I feel like Young Adulthood is a fantastic time to realize that, in a lot of respects, the struggles of groups of people, especially ones of radically different cultures, circumstances, or time periods.

However, the biggest challenge of accomplishing such a goal is that, when you read about the terrible happenings that can happen in several different countries in the world, such as on the news or via YouTube videos of actions happening, young adults are given very little context for them to relate to what is happening. Sure, they can look at a video of a protest, and listen to what they are protesting about, and are sympathetic to the cause, but that does not mean that they can fully empathize with other people, who to these young people might as well be worlds apart. Given that, the goal of this curriculum is to be able to help students be able to understand and empathize more with these people, be they objectively real people or an author’s personal fictional expression of who they are.

Preparing to start:

* I would ask students to keep a journal of some kind. A personal one; **students would not be turning the journals into me at all**, rather, they would be using them to write about their daily lives, at least a short autobiographical blurb twice a week. This is to get the students used to the idea of getting their lives on record, and to help contextualize the canonical work.
* Before getting started with reading the canonical work, one thing I would have my students do is an essay, and the goal of the essay would be to create a ‘blueprint’ of themselves. I would instruct the students to keep them vague and non-identifying, as specifics are not quite as important as the general idea of things.
  + The essay should include three key things about the students:
    - Their family dynamic; their relationships with their parents, siblings, and extended families are important.
    - What their hopes are for the future: what they hope to accomplish with their lives, and what goals they have set, short-term and long-term.
    - What their biggest fears are: what they fear the most, be it what they feel is rational or irrational.
* I would then ask the students what they feel would be the most common topics from the essays, and would take a tally of the amount of people who had those elements, or similar elements, in their essays. Again, trying to avoid specifics. I would then, naturally, ask the students to keep their answers in mind, when we move into the book we would be studying.

**Part 1:** The Canonical Work - *The Diary of a Young Girl*:

The book that we will be basing all of the other assignments and ideas behind is *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank. Specifically, we would be reading an edition without the edits made after her death, that edited out some of the more explicit entries, as well as mentions of her family, as the point of the book is less about the point of view of Frank herself during the Holocaust, but rather being able to identify with her and her struggles as she enters adolescence. Being able to keep those scenes in is of much more value for my unit than if we were studying strictly history. This is a perfect time to teach this book, as most students who are working through World History spend a lot of time talking about the Holocaust, so they can get benefits from already learning about her situation, and can spend most of their focus on Frank and her personal struggles. This book is a wonderful book to explore for young adults, even if Anne Frank herself is a little younger throughout most of the readings than most of the students who would be taking this unit, as she talks about the terrible events of the Holocaust that she endured, as well as incorporating the more pressing matters of her growing into adolescence.

Given the nature of the text, we would likely read entries that I would pre-screen ahead of time, and we would read the book in chronological order through the entries I have picked. To keep the student interaction going, I would ask if anyone has read the book previously, and had any specific entry they wanted to talk about specifically.

**Part 2:** Books to Pair With The Novel:

In addition to reading the novel, I would also ask each student to pick from one of a few books, and have them read the book to go along with the unit. I would have to make some small cheats around this point, as finding biographical works that young adults can really relate to is a difficult endeavor. Therefore, I decided to go for a different approach: finding modern young adult works that are semi-biographical, works of fiction that are meant to emulate the experiences of the writer. The list would include, but likely would not be limited to, with proper screening:

* *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie
* *A Long Way Gone,* by Ishmael Beah
* *Every Falling Star*, by Sungju Lee
* *This Star Won’t Go Out*, by Esther Earl
  + This particular entry also paired with watching the videos on her YouTube page: https://www.youtube.com/user/cookie4monster4/

All of these books are either biographical, or have a lot of element of biography to them, and all of them contain issues that are current. A couple of them are more domestic than others, but all of them contain situations and points of view that you would not find on an average person, allowing the students into a world that they had likely not known about.

These are merely a few examples of books we could use, but also a good basis to form different points of view from; one would have a difficult time understanding the world that these people lived through, or in one case, succumbed to, without these books to help contextualize them.

**Part 3:** A Modern Pairing For The Class: *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Got Shot by the Taliban,* by Malala Yousafzai

The third book, and the final one to read, is *I Am Malala*. This is the autobiography of Yousafzai, whose life story very recently made national headlines, and her being hailed as a hero by many people around the world. Her autobiography talks about her life in Pakistan, her relationship with her family, and her activism in allowing women to get a proper education. The book was published when she was sixteen, so in terms of a first-person view of a world vastly different from the one most of my students would be living in, you cannot get much better.

**Final Assignment:**

At this point, each student should have read the three books assigned to them: *The Diary of a Young Girl*, *I Am Malala*, and a third book of their choosing. Now is when we revisit everything we have done so far throughout the unit: We take a look at our ‘personal blueprint’ of ourselves, and the journals that the students have been keeping up with on a regular basis.

The idea now is to write an essay comparing and contrasting the main ‘protagonists’ of the three books we’ve read, and talk about their personal struggles, and how the book the students had chosen compared with *The Diary of a Young Girl* and *I Am Malala*.

In addition, each student should compare themselves to the characters they had read about, and compare their ambitions and goals to them, as well as their fears and other comparisons. Throughout the course, I would have the students respond to what they have read about out loud in-class, to reinforce those experiences, but I want to keep the comparing relatively light, in order to really have a large discussion at the end of the unit.

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