Reemerging from 9/11: Teaching in a World of Tragedy and Terrorism

As teachers and students returned to their classrooms this fall, many thought about September 11, 2001. It is hard to believe that five years have passed since the tragedy forced US citizens to accept the reality of terror on their own turf. When I watched the footage of the magnificent towers crumbling to the ground or heard tapes of the 911 calls, I recalled the other political fears and tragedies that had occurred during my formative years.

In middle school, tears streamed down my social studies teacher’s face as he announced to our class that someone had attempted to assassinate President Reagan. I was shocked, and the memory of my strong, brilliant teacher succumbing to despair is emblazoned on my brain.

The fear during high school was nuclear holocaust. We read Walter M. Miller Jr.’s A Canticle for Leibowitz, John Hersey’s Hiroshima, and other war-related literature, and we discussed fallout shelters and mushroom clouds.

All of us have such memories as part of our histories. However, during the network broadcasts of planes crashing into buildings and firefighters bravely risking their lives to save others, most of us were focused on the moment in American history when, as country singer Alan Jackson put it, “the world stopped turning.”

As facilitators of learning, our challenge is to envision a curriculum that embraces tolerance and peace while acknowledging and addressing the tragedies of war. Students need us English teachers more than ever, for at the root of every conflict is a miscommunication.

The high school students who discussed the events of September 11 in ninth-grade classrooms this year were in fourth grade when the attacks occurred. The students who will fill ninth-grade seats in five more years were preschoolers during the attacks. Now that the fifth anniversary is also a memory, we language arts instructors must determine how we will continue to approach the subject of war and its terrors. As demographics shift, the global economy spirals, and Americans debate about remaining the asylum for the world’s poor, tired, and hungry, new challenges continuously emerge.

Our challenge is to envision a curriculum that embraces tolerance and peace while acknowledging and addressing the tragedies of war. Students need us more than ever, for at the root of every conflict is a miscommunication. If we are to make an enduring difference in students’ lives, we must provide students with the ability to talk, write, and think about the world’s conflicts while making sense of life’s tragedies.

This issue’s resources provide a variety of strategies for approaching the issues of war and peace with students. What Was It Like? Teaching History and Culture through Young Adult Literature, by Linda J. Rice, can help educators blend their love of young adult literature with lessons about issues such as immigration, the Holocaust, Vietnam, and more. Whose Wars? Teaching about the Iraq War and the War on Terrorism, a publication from Rethinking Schools, provides a collection of lessons and reflections that incorporate a variety of instructional strategies for teaching about the war in Iraq, terrorism and globalization, and values associated with war. Finally, Jessica Singer’s Stirring Up Justice: Writing and Reading to Change the World provides teachers with a wonderful tool for developing critical awareness and appreciation of social activism. With this collection, we will be better equipped to educate the young so that they will respect the
past and move more powerfully into the perils or peace that await them in the future.

Making History Come to Life through Young Adult Literature


“History is so boring!” I often hear students complain. This is discouraging because we teachers know how important it is to remember the mistakes of our past to prevent the same missteps in our future. Most teenagers fill their spare time with video games and other fast-paced electronic media, seeking instant gratification and immediacy. Providing active lessons is essential if we are to reach the incoming generations of kids, and there can be a natural marriage between language arts and social studies classrooms. For example, most of us have taught *To Kill a Mockingbird, Great Expectations, The Great Gatsby,* or *Of Mice and Men* and correlated our literary studies with an appropriate review of the setting. Moving beyond these titles can require additional materials and hours of extra work. *What Was It Like? Teaching History and Culture through Young Adult Literature* is packed with practical resources and titles of young adult novels that authentically approach historical settings.

In the first chapter, “Active Learning in Theory and Practice,” Rice emphasizes the importance of fostering student growth by “incorporating music, dramatic performance, simulation, role-play, experiences outside the classroom, and a variety of hands-on creative displays of critical thinking and meaning making” (6). Rice notes that providing more active learning activities causes instructors to become “less focused on their teaching and more focused on their students’ learning” (7). Ultimately, Rice believes that by “[u]sing active learning strategies in conjunction with historically based young adult novels . . . we can assist our students in seeing beyond stereotypes and examining the lessons of history with critical minds and compassionate hearts” (20). Most educators would agree that reaching such objectives today would truly indicate success.

Readers will be happy to see a well-organized, user-friendly format. Each chapter is organized according to the time period covered; teachers can choose to read the entire book or read a section that pertains to an era they will be covering. Each chapter provides an overview of the cultural/historical context, featured young adult novels, ideas for thoughtfulness and reflection, and varied activities for active learning.


The activities in this section are rich and varied, including the use of a skit to improve vocabulary instruction (32), role-play and simulation through a news broadcast or the creation of learning centers, and creative writing activities that could readily be adapted to any novel (42). After reading *Out of the Dust,* my students and I tried these activities, and the results were inspiring. They enjoyed and learned from the vocabulary skit, the news broadcast was engaging and helpful, and the creative writing provided a valid extension. I will probably use these adaptable activities with other novels.

Chapter 3, “Hunger of Body, Hunger of Heart: Mexican American Young Adult Authors Portray Migrant Farm Experiences (1940s–1960s),” is excellent and in tune with contemporary immigration issues. It makes the events in history relevant to today’s world. For example, Rice provides statistics from the US Department of Labor indicating that “approximately 13 million U.S. citizens migrate between states earning their living working in the agricultural industry harvesting crops and working in poultry plants and fish-
eries” (54). She goes on to mention that in California agribusiness remains the state’s largest industry, and it remains dependent on Mexicans (55). The historical overview continues with “The United Farm Workers Union,” “Working Conditions and Wages,” and “Education.” These brief overviews provide educators with strong starting points for knowledge and discussion, and they help to make literature study relevant to today’s learners.

The YA novels featured in this chapter include Pam Muñoz Ryan’s Esperanza Rising, Gary Soto’s Jessie de la Cruz: A Profile of a United Farm Worker, and Victor Martínez’s Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida. Outstanding learning activities are clearly explained, and examples make implementation easy. Rice provides an example of an anticipation guide about Mexican migrant families (58) and a sample semantic map about racism against Mexican Americans (59). She also includes instructions for teaching the novels through Socratic seminar, listing opening, core, and closing questions (61). Examples for problem-based learning revolve around an essential question, and Rice offers samples and suggestions for creative writing. The materials in this chapter could enrich any curriculum, and the YA titles provide extensions to instructors who are required to teach specific titles.


I plan to recommend What Was It Like? to my friends, as it is filled with practical pedagogy. The book’s student examples, which are missing from most publications, give teachers a head start on their planning. The wide variety of adaptable assignments will indeed bring history to life, make students understand the past and its connection to the world in which they now live, and enable young adults to appreciate the empathy they will need to carry forth if the world is ever to know a better, more peaceful future.

Conquering the Controversy of Teaching about the War in Iraq

Whose Wars? Teaching about the Iraq War and the War on Terrorism

Throughout my teaching career, no issue has been as divisive as the invasion of Iraq. Teachers around the world debated the political controversy, and the dialogues could be read everywhere from newspaper editorials to blogs. A troublesome issue was the polarization of beliefs. If people spoke against the war, they were deemed traitors or perceived as being unpatriotic. The country music band Dixie Chicks is a good example. After receiving heavy criticism and death threats for “Bush bashing” during their European tour in 2003, the women in the band chose to fly under the music world’s radar. Last spring they reemerged with a new album, Taking the Long Way, in which they sounded off about their rights to free expression. The group discovered that many country music radio stations still refused to play their music. Ironically, their album hit the stores at the same time as CDs by Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Pearl Jam, and Neil Young, all of whom were openly making derogatory remarks about the war and the president. These examples mirror the deep rift in society’s viewpoints about patriotism versus freedom of expression.

For English teachers, the Iraq war stirred up a variety of philosophical, pedagogical questions: Should teachers express their personal political beliefs to their students? Is it within the parameters of good teaching to criticize the president of the United States? Should teachers try to provide unbiased lessons and lead students to their own decisions? How should the Iraq war be handled in the high school English classroom?
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One day, while reading the Web pages of Teaching Tolerance, I stumbled on a link to Rethinking Schools (http://rethinkingschools.org). This independent publisher advocates reform of elementary and secondary public schools, with an emphasis on equity and social justice. I ordered Whose Wars?: Teaching about the Iraq War and the War on Terrorism expecting a politically slanted publication that would only be used by teachers wanting to protest the Iraq war. After reading it, however, I discovered that it was an excellent tool for teaching about the war of our times, no matter what one’s perspective might be.

The goal is for educators to take a social justice approach to issues, and the accompanying lessons provide the avenues for such a pursuit.

Whose Wars? is a collection of essays written by a variety of teachers mostly from the northwestern United States. Each of the fifteen chapters could be taught as individual lessons. In “Teaching in a Time of War,” the opening editorial, the editors of Rethinking Schools proclaim, “Education is about making explanations—asking why things happen—and exploring alternatives, not about finding and then balancing two sides to an issue” (1). The editors continue, “The kind of inquiry that we propose is not neutral, but neither is it biased. Teaching is biased when it ignores multiple perspectives and does not allow interrogation of its own assumptions and propositions” (2). The goal is for educators to take a social justice approach to issues, and the accompanying lessons provide the avenues for such a pursuit.

In Chapter 1, “Whose Terrorism?” teacher Bill Bigelow provides an activity that asks students to define terrorism and then apply their definitions to world events. Bigelow proposes that “[i]t’s not our role as teachers to climb on our soapbox to rail about U.S. foreign policy. . . . Let’s clarify with students what precisely we mean by terrorism. And then let’s encourage students to apply this definition to U.S. conduct in the world” (5). He begins by asking students to write definitions of terrorism and by writing questions such as the following on the board: “Does terrorism need to involve the killing of many people or can it affect just one person? Can it involve solely the destruction of property, with no injuries?” (3–4). Next, students talk in small groups and review individual definitions and answers.

To help students appreciate the meaning of terrorism, Bigelow designed a lesson featuring several terrorism scenarios. He changed the names of the countries involved, enabling students to approach the scenarios with unbiased perspectives. In one scene, soldiers are taunting and shooting children in refugee camps, with the assistance of another country’s military aid. These scenarios are included as handouts for teacher use, along with Bigelow’s commentary about the lesson’s results. In the end, Bigelow’s stand is clear: “Underlying this curricular demand for consistency is the basic democratic, indeed human, premise that the lives of the people from one nation are not worth more than the lives of people from another” (5). The material in this chapter could readily be adapted for any lesson about war, and the questions could easily emerge as foundations for a Socratic seminar. Student handouts provide easy access to the activities and are ready for reproduction. The ideas in this lesson would clearly enable students to discover the power of their interpretations of terrorism.

Other artifacts in the publication make it interesting and practical for classroom use. A student handout of excerpts from President Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address provides an excellent primary resource (39–40). The book also features lessons to coincide with Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11, which may be a turnoff to educators who take issue with Moore’s politics (45). However, there are terrific insights for teaching lessons about terrorism, and the book is an edgy, modern resource that teachers will find helpful in approaching the Iraq war and all of its complications.

Social Justice in Language Arts Classrooms

Stirring Up Justice: Writing and Reading to Change the World


When teaching Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience, I often show students clips of sit-ins and bus boycotts. We talk about how students staged a walk-out at their high school in Hudson, Ohio, one year to protest the administration’s firing of a favorite principal. In the end, though, I wonder how I can...
make students take the knowledge they have learned in the classroom and transform it into something greater: social activism. Jessica Singer’s *Stirring Up Justice: Writing and Reading to Change the World* provides insights and resources for teachers so that they can teach their students to be part of the solution for the issues that matter the most to them.

Commenting that “[o]ne of the main things I wanted this curriculum to reveal is that activist work is often something that comes from the inside of an individual through feeling, experience, and conviction,” Singer opens the book with a chapter that asks students to explore social activists through reading children’s books and writing toward change (10). She provides a list of titles that would work well in the classroom. A ready-made handout for students is included, and it guides learners through an examination of activists’ lives (9). Students are also given the opportunity to write narratives about personal injustices they have witnessed or experienced, and a handout of guidelines is ready for adaptation or copying for classroom use (16). Revision strategies, a peer-review guide, and rules for writing dialogue are also included in this chapter, making it easy for any instructor to design a unit.

In Chapter 2, Singer discusses the importance of book choice. While she respects the relevance of the “classics,” she also believes in furthering student reading via workshop: “We have a moral obligation as teachers to expose students to all kinds of people—disempowered, disabled, underprivileged, and privileged. . . . Book choice helps extend opportunities in my curriculum to expose students to stories about people working for social justice” (43). This chapter provides another excellent bibliography; Singer comments that given the choice, students often brought new titles to her attention (49). Ideas for activities abound, as students choose a book they want to read and then complete a variety of tasks, such as creating an activist timeline (57–58). Chapter 3 elaborates on how to develop writing assignments geared toward social justice, such as authoring a “Turning Point” essay (73) or an “Activism Article” (78). Together, these two chapters provide solid foundations for reading and writing for social justice.

My favorite part is Chapter 4, “Songs of Activists.” I have always loved music, and I try to include it in every unit I teach. Singer invites students to bring in a song of social change, to respond to a particular song of social activism, and she provides the handouts to facilitate such lessons. I particularly liked the “Songs of Activists: A List in Progress,” which contained fifty different song titles and their relevance to activism, ranging from the Vietnam War to feminism to immigration (109–10). In fact, I plan to visit a Web site for purchasing and downloading songs and create a CD with many of these titles. Chapter 5, “Culminating Project: Choosing Issues of Activism,” provides teachers with ideas for empowering students to go out into the world and make a difference. Student samples are included, and the chapter provides the avenue to extend lessons to the real world.

*Stirring Up Justice* creatively provides strategies for engaging students in activism. Singer’s open-ended approach and creative ideas will translate well into any classroom, and the handouts lay the groundwork for a transition to meaningful teaching without endless hours of preparation. She has penned a book not only about helping her students to appreciate social justice but also one that will give educators the strategies to empower their students to do the same.