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Introducing Controversy in a Secondary English Language Arts Classroom to Invoke Critical Thinking

Abstract

Teaching struggling secondary students concepts that lead to critical thinking and writing forced the author to find methods to increase engagement and motivation. Using controversial topics proved to be a successful vehicle for embedding concepts and skills while engaging all students in meaningful discussions and assignments. In this article, the author explains how the events of 9/11 and the controversial theories regarding the crash of Flight 93 were used to teach critical examination of multiple texts and persuasive writing using textual evidence to support a stance. The author discovered that introducing controversy increased student engagement and taught students to read critically and write persuasively.

Keywords: adolescents, critical thinking, engagement, controversial topics, writing

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Assigned with the task of teaching a group of struggling high school students to think more critically and write persuasively, I wondered how to engage students who were resistant and struggling readers. The sophomore English language arts class met five days a week for 50 minutes for two semesters. I could choose the curriculum material to teach the concepts and details of how to write a persuasive paper using textual evidence and incorporating multiple examples that could be taught using any material. I knew that to engage my students, I would have to find material that was relevant to their lives and somewhat interesting. I would be introducing a critical literacy unit in the spring that would require six weeks to complete. I wanted to start in the fall and scaffold students to think critically, question text, and examine possible bias in texts.

When students' primary experience with text has consisted of retrieving information, they often find it challenging to think critically about text (Alvermann, 2002). The students could retrieve information, but demonstrated that they experienced difficulty in making inferences, analyzing text, and thinking beyond the literal. Hall and Piazza (2010) suggested that "too few students are likely to have had experiences with critical literacy in school" (p. 91). The authors maintained that students must find topics relevant in order to invest the effort required to learn to

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look more deeply at text and ideas. Behrman (2006) suggested that turning critical literacy into classroom practice presents challenges "demanding innovative and local solutions" (p. 491). Luke (2003) encouraged teachers to adopt an "organic approach to critical literacy" (pp. 453-454). He discussed the importance of teachers and students creating critical literacy curriculum based on relevance, background knowledge, and choice. If I could present textual information that stimulated student interest and discussion, the progression to viewing with more critical eyes would occur more authentically.

In order to introduce the basic skills, I needed to start with a bang. If I captured their attention with this first lesson, it would provide the foundation for all the others to follow. One thing I considered when choosing the subject was selecting a topic that was timely. Since the month of September was just around the corner, I knew 9/11 was a subject that they would more than likely hear again and again. I had used nonfiction materials about 9/11 in the past and noticed a huge increase in students' engagement and motivation.

Background Knowledge—Filling in the Gaps

I started by asking a few questions to check for what the students knew about the events, the hijackers, and the number of planes involved on September 11, 2001. I was surprised at how little they knew and that most believed the only planes involved were in New York and that the planes had exploded as a result of bombs on board. My first step was to provide background information regarding the incidents that occurred on that September morning. This information was presented initially through a portion of videos available on the Internet. I selected a video that contained surveillance footage from the airports and contained videos of the terrorists as they proceeded through checkpoints. It also contained interviews with the ticket agent who dealt with them as well as recordings from the flight crew members from the first plane to hit the Twin Towers.

The students were able to put faces to those responsible for the events of that day as well as learn that New York was one of three sites of plane crashes. The use of primary sources, even conflicting ones (De La Paz & Felton, 2010), might assist students in learning to develop well-structured arguments with supporting evidence. The students needed to understand the use of multiple sources such as firsthand witness accounts of the plane crashes, studies by experts of the debris fields, and photographs of the crash site.

It was apparent by the end of the class that this topic roused the students' interest. One remarked "Miss! This is really interesting," and others asked, "Can we learn some more about that?" and "Are we going to talk more about 9/11 tomorrow?"

Introducing Controversy

I wanted to stimulate questioning, thinking, and critical discussion. I knew controversy would probably accomplish this and the students were interested and engaged in learning about 9/11 events. I decided to introduce the story of Flight 93. I wanted to begin by introducing the most basic facts and build on those with an introduction to the conspiracy theories and the public debates that followed. When we had completed the introduction of background history of 9/11 using printed articles, eyewitness accounts, and video news reports, we decided to examine one of the crashed airplanes more closely.

The students used a variety of graphic organizers for note-taking and jotting down thoughts while reading and viewing videos. Introducing Flight 93 and studying information regarding the flight plan, passengers, and possible intention of the hijackers took us into the close of class on a Friday. I ended the class very mysteriously with a cryptic request: "Ladies and gentlemen, we will be delving into information that has become the focus of top investigative agencies in and out of this country. I am requesting you get plenty of rest this weekend and come ready to work next week. The work in which you will be engaged could possibly solve one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of this century. Are you up for the assignment?" The students gazed at me in solemn wonder, but all nodded or responded with a softly spoken "yes" as I asked each student if he or she up to the challenge. As they quietly left class, I overheard one of my most challenging students whisper to another, "Oh my gosh, I am so loving this class right now."

Organizing Information with a Venn Diagram

The following week, I felt it was important to embed the concepts and skills into the information to not lose the momentum. I chunked information into small introductory pieces that the students could use that day during class while delving into the information they found so interesting. For example, I needed to teach them to take notes on differing sides of a story. I introduced the use of a Venn diagram to create an easy way to visualize facts that differed and some that overlapped in the information regarding Flight 93. I modeled the Venn using information from something they were all familiar with—two popular television programs. They quickly grasped the use of the diagram and how to use it to organize information. The use of the Venn diagram to organize evidence in relation to that present in a crime scene clarified the concept of textual evidence for the students.

It provided the extra step needed in understanding the term *evidence* in the literary context.

We discussed using quotations to present textual evidence and citing sources. By embedding these lessons in the information they found so engaging, the students were motivated to practice the skills with great success and understanding. I continued to explain with each lesson that these skills were all necessary tools to solve the mystery and offer proof.

Having students so highly engaged had a profound influence on the classroom atmosphere. The tension mounted and I noticed fewer than usual requests to leave my class. On one occasion, a student was summoned to the nurse, but he pleaded to stay and asked that the nurse pull him from another class instead. I was also pleased to receive feedback from my students regarding conversations they were having with other teachers and family members surrounding the events of 9/11. Many reported testing their parents' knowledge and expressed pride in being able to offer them information they had not previously known. For struggling students, this is a huge boost to their self-efficacy and metacognition.

By the end of the second week, the students had learned, reviewed, practiced, and mastered the use of the Venn diagram to compare and contrast. They checked sources of information, cited textual evidence in writing, and learned the proper use of quotation marks. These were significant milestones for these struggling students. My parting message to them that Friday was, "Next week you will be studying all the information available to the general public regarding the crash of Flight 93. You are the Investigators of Room 204 and will be charged with the task of solving a mystery and proving your theories using evidence. You are ready." The students agreed and the excited chatter revealed continued engagement.

Text Selection

The final week of the assignment was met with excitement and anticipation. After sharing text, newspaper articles, photos, and eyewitness videos, I introduced reports of various theories outlining details preceding the crash of Flight 93. Perhaps the greatest challenge for me at this point was presenting information in the most neutral fashion. Texts were selected from a variety of news sources such as newspapers, journals, and manuscripts. We reviewed the significance of multiple sources and the meaning of reliable or reputable sources. We had previously discussed unacceptable sources and students understood that gossip magazines and many Internet sites were not considered reliable. We discussed natural bias even in reputable sources and spent about 45 minutes one day discussing and questioning if all bias could ever be removed. These discussions justified the need for multiple sources in order to obtain the most unbiased information.

Text was read aloud in groups and by me, followed by small group discussion and finally full class discussion to ensure comprehension and understanding. I learned that in this context, students were far less reluctant to ask questions and more open to requesting clarification due to the nature of the assignment. The task seemed to lend itself naturally to asking questions and expressing confusion.

The remainder of the week found students huddled over new articles they searched for and found in attempts to learn more and take a stance. They wrote furiously and asked technical questions regarding inserting quotations or statements from a variety of sources. Remarks consisted of questions to each other such as, "Can you prove it? Do you have a source to cite? Should we directly quote that or paraphrase it?"

Studying the Evidence

As we gathered and examined photos of the debris fields, I began to ask questions like these: "What information does the examination of a debris field offer investigators? Why is it important to look at how debris is scattered? What does it reveal?" The class divided into self-selected small groups of three to four students and went to work. Their task included developing a theory of what actually happened to Flight 93, taking a stance, and supporting it using textual evidence. I moved from group to group answering questions that were technical in nature. I had already told my students that I didn't know any more than they did and would not share my personal theory with them. When the dismissal bell rang, a unanimous moan filled the room—sweet sounds to the ears of any teacher.

By the second day, the students came in already embroiled in deep discussions. I presented photos of debris fields, and the students re-examined Flight 93 photos. I repeated my questions from the day before. We discussed the news reports of passengers on that flight speaking to loved ones prior to the crash and what those conversations left loved ones concluding. As I allowed them time for more discussion, I witnessed students beginning to question what the debris field disclosed and what it actually meant. There were fewer questions for me, and I quietly walked around and listened. I approached a group that was quiet, but all members were leaning over photos and requested to review some of the eyewitness video accounts. As the videos played, every student in the room watched silently. Facial expressions demonstrated questions as brows were furrowed, one student frowned, and another rubbed her temple slowly. Without a word spoken, I knew I was observing critical and analytical thinking. Students were reading and viewing texts multiple times without prompting. This strategy had been previously taught but resisted until now.

Breakthrough

The following day as groups discussed their theories, a challenging student, one who often skipped or attempted to sleep through class softly spoke, "Oh man … that plane was hit by something before it crashed." Another student responded, "What? What do you mean?" He answered, "Look at how the debris is scattered and what was found." The second student asked, "What hit it?" A third student gasped as she put her hand over her mouth. "Oh my gosh!" An audible sigh rippled like a wave across the class as students began to comprehend the possible implications. Pained expressions turned to look at me as I maintained a neutral expression. It was important to allow the organic process to occur without interruption from me. One student addressed me simply in a pleading voice, "Miss …"

The remainder of the week found students huddled over new articles they searched for and found in attempts to learn more and take a stance. They wrote furiously and asked technical questions regarding inserting quotations or statements from a variety of sources. Remarks consisted of questions to each other such as, "Can you prove it? Do you have a source to cite? Should we directly quote that or paraphrase it?" Friday brought pleas for more time.

I added an additional week to allow students time to expand their research and work on rough drafts. I encouraged peer editing, and more drafts were written. I introduced the use of readability statistics in word processing and most were already using spell check and grammar check. Dictionaries and thesaurus were available in print and online. Students completed final papers amid constant debate among groups as they defended their final theories. Each opposing group energetically provided textual evidence to support its version of events. This class of struggling, resistant readers and writers were asking for more research time and perusing articles while discussing whether they felt the source was scholarly and reliable.

Peer Review of Textual Evidence Through Discussion

On the Monday due date for the papers, students approached me with a request. "Miss, can we have time to debate this?" They clearly were not ready to put this assignment away. I asked why they wanted to debate it. A female student answered, "We kind of want to hear what everyone thinks and how they think they can prove it. Like what evidence did they find?" The class nodded and voiced agreement. I agreed, but stipulated that we needed to develop guidelines for the debate to avoid possible arguments or unproductive communication. We spent one day developing guidelines and one day on the discussion, which really turned out to be more discussion than debate. The students began to understand the power that textual evidence lends to a persuasive discussion and contributed with comments like, "Huh, I didn't think of that," and "Wow, that's true," rather than argued. A student who wrote that he believed Flight 93 had been "shot down by the military" defended with a witness account. The witness reported seeing a smaller plane at the same time as seeing Flight 93 and that "it flew into the sun." The student concluded that the reason it flew into the sun "was so you couldn't read the letters on the side of the plane." Another student added, "We know that the military had deployed the F-16s." As students volunteered information, they each referred to textual evidence to defend their statements.

We discussed the difference between discussions versus writing a persuasive essay. As discussion participants, we often change our stance or bounce between sides, but I wanted to make certain the students understood that when writing, they needed to take one stance and support it. They agreed and compared how their conversation differed from their formal papers. This understanding represented a milestone in their persuasive writing since they previously had difficulty choosing one stance and supporting it.

Conclusion

By the end of the assignment, students were thinking about text on a much deeper level and demonstrating the ability to analyze, question, and critically discuss text while using text evidence to support their opinions. More importantly perhaps, they were extending those skills to other topics and discussions. By spring, because of this prior scaffolding, they were ready for a critical literacy unit where they would go even deeper by questioning positions of power, representation, and bias.

Prior to this lesson, most students thought that if information was published, it was reliable and correct. Through the study of 9/11 and the crash of Flight 93, students learned they could question text, examine for bias, question authors, and even disagree with text. They were learning to think more critically and analytically. These concepts can be taught with other topics, but the subject matter needs to be engaging and relevant. Secondary students welcome opportunities to examine controversial topics, which in turn provide an excellent forum for teaching critical literacy skills.

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