

Inquiry into identity: Teaching critical thinking through a study of race, class, and gender

Students learn important lessons about themselves through the critical exploration of race, class, and gender.

Martha Caldwell

A group of African American boys sits in a circle surrounded by their white classmates. Akhil, an A student and star soccer player, describes being followed through the mall by a security guard. The other boys in the circle nod in recognition. They echo similar stories of clerks watching them in department stores and white women clutching their purses when they pass them on the street. They begin to share the routine dismissals of their integrity and intelligence woven through the fabric of their daily lives. They know they can expect to encounter racism. They all have been schooled at home in how to handle it. Trish, however, sitting quietly on the outside of the circle with her white friends, listening intently, is stunned. She had no idea. She thought racism went out in the sixties with the Civil Rights Movement. Later, the African American boys move to the outside circle, and the white girls move into the center. Now it's Trish's turn to talk about her experience. She's about to find out that she's not alone.

In Inquiry into Identity: Race, Class, and Gender (RCG), an eighth grade social studies class, the students' stories serve as springboards for higher-order learning. Through sharing personal experiences and listening to one another respectfully, students form a learning community in which deep, critical thinking naturally emerges. They gain important insights about their own identities while learning about the lives of their classmates. They make important interpersonal connections that allow them to form alliances across divisions and think creatively, rather than stereotypically, about differences. When the students' experiences are the subject of shared reflection, learning becomes

relevant, and engagement in school increases (Friere, 2000; Shor, 1992; Wink, 2005; Magolda, 1999).

For my co-teacher, Oman Frame, and me, the course itself was a discovery. We originally set out to teach a course about climate change with a two-week introduction on race, class, and gender. However, our students were inspired by the unit and excited to have a forum for sharing their experiences. They asked us

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to expand the unit because they wanted to know more, and it became a semester-long and, eventually, a year-long study. Other teachers began to adopt aspects of the course for their classes because our students talked so much about RCG. We realized, after the fact, that young adolescents live and breathe the politics of social justice every day—in the hallways at school; in their cyber networks; through exposure to media; in their families; in churches, mosques, and synagogues; and sometimes in their classrooms. We had inadvertently tapped into a wellspring of intellectual energy.

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Value Young Adolescents, Meaningful Learning, Challenging Curriculum

RCG combines a variety of interpersonal learning activities (e.g., dialogues, Socratic seminars, fish bowls, social inventories, reflective writing and sharing) with inquiry-based learning (e.g., cycles of authentic questioning, research, group collaboration, project-based learning and presentations) (National School Reform Faculty, 2010; University of Illinois Inquiry Group, 2010). The interpersonal curriculum is complemented by academic inquiries into histories, politics, and cultures. Through a series of projects, supplemented by readings and films, students make connections between what they already know and the ways in which power and privilege operate in institutions like schools, religions, governments, and businesses. Throughout the course, they build important academic and communication skills.

The course is divided into three main units: race, gender, and class. Each unit serves as a generative theme and follows a similar template. We introduce the course with a brainstorming session to uncover the questions that will guide our inquiries, asking *What do you already know?* and *What do you want to know now?* Then we move into a series of experiential learning activities, through which our students explore and share their social identities and family histories. We follow these activities with reading assignments, many of which the students contribute themselves, and collaborative research projects that culminate in creative presentations to the class.

The interpersonal activities are, without question, the driving force of the curriculum, and our students routinely tell us they constitute some of the most important work they have done in school. “I would say I definitely learned the most from my classmates,” wrote Trish. “Hearing them talk and listening to their opinions meant a lot, and it made it possible for me to learn things I never would have learned before.”

The interpersonal activities also inspire students to apply themselves in the academic realm. Questions arising from their personal stories often lead them into further research, and through their natural curiosity, they learn valuable academic skills. Nina recognized her issues with low self-esteem in an article on adolescent female typecasting (Caldwell & Swift, 2003). When she heard other girls voice feelings and experiences similar to her own in the ensuing discussion, Nina’s passion to learn more was fueled. “I learned that so many girls feel just exactly as I do,” she wrote. “It came as a shock because none of these girls should be thinking about

themselves like that. Every single one of them deserves a confidence boost to match where her self-esteem should be.” Consequent to Nina’s interpersonal discovery, she collaborated with Trish on a short, creative film demonstrating the lengths to which girls go to “fit in,” causes of low self-esteem, and methods for improving self-worth. Their movie incorporated their own experiences and interviews with their peers with knowledge they had gained from their academic research.

What we do

Leaning into the discomfort

In conversations about subjects that lie close to the heart of a student’s identity, it is important to lay clear ground rules for respect. We ask our students to stay open, notice their feelings, and continue processing them through talking and writing. We introduce Gorski’s (2009) application of “cognitive dissonance” (p. 54) to give students a vocabulary for authentic conversations that may feel awkward at first. We encourage them to “lean into the discomfort” when challenging ideas and new feelings emerge.

For example, students of color may feel vulnerable sharing their experiences of racism, yet these stories provide an awakening for their white classmates in a way that nothing else can, as they did with Trish. White students may feel guilt by association after hearing these stories, even though they may feel they have done nothing personally to deserve such feelings. Some white students may want to dismiss or deny the stories they hear from students of color to avoid such uncomfortable feelings, which may make minority students feel even more vulnerable. Yet, when students begin to understand that internal tension often facilitates dynamic learning, they can learn to manage the conflict produced by challenging new ideas. Heffernan and Lewison (2009) reported that tension can be a resource for students who “consciously choose to engage with somewhat disturbing new ideas” (p. 27). We ask our students to consciously engage not only with the ideas but also with each other as they reveal their diverse experiences in the class. We ask them not to back away from what they honestly think and feel. We ask them to speak authentically and listen to each other respectfully. We ask them to be aware of their thoughts, feelings, and reactions and to work through their discomfort.

When students share their personal experiences, they are often surprised by the feedback they get from their peers. In a structured environment made safe for them to express their differences, students find they can be accepted and esteemed for their experiences rather than disparaged. When students hear their peers echo ideas and feelings they themselves have been afraid to express, they realize that underneath their apparent differences, there is far more that unites them than divides them. Cross and Strauss (1998) discussed how students benefit from direct discussions about their



The RCG class helps students gain deeper self-understanding while they learn about others. photo by Martha Caldwell

personal experiences with prejudice. They found that differences among students can be “transformed into something that is accessible, friendly, and engaging” (p. 275). Our students confirm their discovery. “I feel more confident with my background, my personality, my character, and more confident with expressing who I am without fear of being harshly judged,” Tonya wrote after taking the course. “And because of that, I feel more confident in supporting others when they express certain aspects of their identity that might be different from mine.”

Learning about race

We introduce the unit on race by showing *The Color of Fear* (Wah, 1994), a documentary in which a group of men—Latinos, Caucasians, African Americans, and Asian Americans—sit down together to talk about race. The dialogue gets intense, but the men give racism a personal face. The film holds our students’ attention and demonstrates how difficult conversations about race can be resolved in a safe setting.

A simple exercise called a “fish bowl” is perhaps the single most important exercise we do. In a fish bowl, the members of one group—in this case, a particular race—form an inner circle. Students who do not identify with that race move to an outside circle surrounding them. Only the students in the inner circle are allowed to talk during the exercise, and they talk only to one another. They talk about their experiences as members of the group, often responding to an essential question, such as “What is it like to be black (or white, Asian, or Latino)?” The students in the surrounding circle listen attentively, but do not speak or comment. At the end of an allotted time, students switch places and another racial group moves to the inner circle. After all the groups have had their time in the inner circle, we open the forum for general comments, impressions, questions, and discussion.

Many of these students have gone to school together for years, but because race is so infrequently discussed, they have no idea how much race impacts their lives and relationships. They are astounded to learn how much they do not know about one another. White students, for instance, are generally surprised to learn how prevalent race is in the minds of students of color, because whites seldom have to think about it. Trish remarked:

When my classmates of color described walking into a department store and being followed and watched closely by security guards, I really began to see how their everyday life differed from mine because of the color of their skin. When they described what that was like, I put myself in their shoes and tried to feel how they might feel when things like that happened.

Students of color may be surprised to learn how infrequently white families discuss race, because it is so often a topic of conversation in their homes. They are curious about how “white guilt” affects their classmates’ capacity for understanding racism and express a range of reactions from “It’s not your fault” to “If you feel guilt, do something about it.” Cross and Strauss (1998) found

that minority students who have encountered prejudice often benefit from sharing their collective experience. An emphasis on collective experience strengthens their social identity and buffers them from the psychological effects of discrimination.

The insights students gain from the fish bowl exercise provide the perfect segue into reading an article about “white privilege” (McIntosh, 2004) and discussing the concept. Our white students often begin to see that they are the recipients of a host of privileges as a result of their skin color. An authentic question routinely arises in our students’ minds when confronted with this information—*How did this happen?* We suggest that the answer to this question lies in history. Students then form small, collaborative groups to research particular racial histories. Groups may investigate aspects of African American history, Latin American history, Native American history, Asian American history, Irish American history, Italian American history, or any other people’s history they choose. A crucial part of each group’s assignment is the creation of a historical timeline that they include in their presentations to the class. The timelines help the students see larger historical and political trends involving dominance and oppression over time in a variety of contexts.

Because students often feel a familial connection to the peoples they choose to research, we often see significant academic growth during this project. For example, Joseph was a bright but impulsive boy who often made silly comments in class, distracted other students, and rarely turned in homework assignments. In an earlier collaborative project, the group leader complained that Joseph did not pull his weight and asked not to be assigned to another group with him. When he began to research the history of the Cherokees, however, he delved not only into academic sources but also into his family’s story. His mother grew up on a reservation, and her family knew the effects of Cherokee history from personal experience. Joseph’s deep personal engagement fueled his group’s research and made their presentation comprehensive and compelling. His group’s PowerPoint presentation included family stories and photographs that complemented their historical research. Joseph and another student made fry bread to serve to the class, which inspired other groups to make and serve ethnic dishes. The taste of academic success and positive peer feedback was a social and academic turning point for Joseph, and he began to take his

work in all areas more seriously. Joseph rarely missed assignment deadlines after this project and was fully engaged in subsequent group activities.

We bring the study of histories back to the present with a current events activity called “news bowl.” In groups of two or three, students search the Internet for articles related to race to share with the class. They summarize their articles and post a synopsis, along with a citation and a hyperlink, to a shared wiki page. Next, they write five questions reflective of the main ideas of the article. If the questions are well written, we use them verbatim in the news bowl event, giving a team with carefully composed questions an edge in the competition. In news bowl, students develop a variety of research and writing skills, build a large base of shared knowledge, connect current events to history, and contribute to the content of the curriculum.

Learning about gender

Like our unit on race, we begin the unit on gender with a documentary film—*Straightlaced: How Gender’s Got Us All Tied Up* (GroundSpark & Chasnoff, 2009), *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity* (Media Education Foundation & Jhally, 1999), or *Last Chance for Eden* (Wah, 2003)—to give background on gender issues and to generate discussion. We follow up with a series of experiential activities, news articles, and collaborative research projects. This year we assigned the executive summary of *The World’s Women 2010: Trends and Statistics* (United Nations, 2010) and asked the students to interview their mothers about their experiences with gender discrimination. This exercise especially impacted several boys in the class, who were surprised to hear that their mothers had faced discrimination in their jobs and sometimes in their own families.

In a group exercise, we ask the girls to describe what they like about being female and then what they find most difficult. The lists of things they like often include having greater access to their emotions, close friendships, and the capacity for pregnancy and childbirth. The lists of difficulties often include their feelings of being judged on looks alone; not “fitting in” with media stereotypes; and a sense that they can never be thin enough, pretty enough, or happy enough. The next day, we do the same exercise with the boys. The boys typically report that they always have to be tough; watch themselves, lest they appear too smart; and be careful not to do anything that could be construed as “gay” or “girlie.”

In this exercise and in the ensuing fish bowls, students are again riveted by what they learn. Girls sometimes talk about living with a fear of rape and violence that rarely affects boys. Boys may talk about how guilty and trapped they feel when they succumb to the pressure to objectify girls, who are often their friends. In same-sex groups, they experience another forum for talking and listening to one another. In these groups, girls may feel safe enough to talk about being sexually harassed and not knowing how to handle it, about feeling trapped by a double standard of conduct but feeling powerless to do anything about it, or about feeling controlled by media images of female sexuality. In the all-male group, boys may open up about the effects of homophobia or their confusion about pornography. Our students begin to see how gender stereotypes can limit their individuality, compromise their integrity, and affect their self-esteem.

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As students begin to hear their feelings reflected in one another's stories, they come to understand that many of their uncomfortable feelings do not necessarily arise because of personal problems but rather may be manifestations of a social system that defines their identity. Gilligan and Brown's (1998) longitudinal studies outlined the tension young adolescent girls feel as they strive to shape themselves to fit social norms in their quest to belong, often to their psychological detriment. Rather than expressing the truth of their inner experiences, many girls pretend to be what they believe will win them social acceptance. Girls caught in this dynamic have difficulty forming the authentic friendships they crave because they are hiding their true feelings under a cloud of pretense. The resulting mismatch between affect and behavior may create inner disconnection and compromise self-esteem. Through the activities and inquires in RCG, this dynamic gradually becomes visible to girls, and through sharing similar experiences, they form important social alliances.

LaFrance and Woodzicka (1998) found a correlation between a strong group identity and higher self-esteem among women. They theorized that a strong collective identity protects women from the negative psychological effects of gender discrimination. Girls become more empowered to share the sense of injustice they feel when boys' sports teams get the good practice gyms, or when boys make thoughtless comments about their bodies, or when they hear that their best friends are talking about them behind their backs. Monica, a talented swimmer, shared her perception that her coach pays more attention to the boys than the girls on her team. Other female athletes in the class nodded in agreement. Monica began to see that she was not alone and that her story represented a recurring pattern in a larger cultural matrix. She realized that there was nothing wrong with her personal ability. Perhaps more important, through telling her story and getting feedback from her classmates, Monica began to realize how her resentment interfered with her motivation and affected her swim performance. As a result, she gained the psychological distance necessary to recommit herself to her sport. Monica made an important discovery: she realized that the intrinsic reward of doing her best is separate and, ultimately, more meaningful than any external reward from her coach could ever be.

While the girls in the course become more vocal about their experiences with sexism and students of color become freer to talk about racism, the group, as a whole, becomes more cohesive and supportive and begins to experience the power of supportive alliances. Miles, a white male, and Anthony, a black male, were moved by the stories they heard from the girls about discrimination in sports and collaborated to create a film about sexism in sports. They researched Title IX legislation and interviewed female athletes, coaches, and the owner of a professional women's basketball team. David, a white male and a talented artist, recognized his own sexist behavior when Esther shared that it bothered her when boys made crude jokes about girls' bodies. David admitted he made such jokes to impress other boys because he felt insecure about his own masculinity. Reflecting on his motivation, David also realized that he hid his artistic talent for fear of being called gay.

In the gender unit, we feature a news bowl competition that gives students an opportunity to research current issues and become informed on a variety of issues related to gender identity. Students

contribute articles on the high cost of motherhood, biological differences between the sexes, the struggles of gay and transgender youth, bullying, the “glass ceiling,” and stories of successful women. By this time, our students have been introduced to a variety of issues from which to choose a research topic. Girls routinely ask how they can rise above gender discrimination. One group of girls that wanted to pursue this question interviewed successful adult women to learn how they overcame sexism, and they created a presentation to share what they found with the class. By this point in the course, boys begin to realize how constrained they are by gender norms and, like David, they are beginning to identify with a deeper, more aware, and caring aspect of themselves.

Learning about class

Our students often do not possess the vocabulary to identify their social class, so we begin the third unit by defining social class labels: upper class, middle class, lower class, owning class, working class, and underclass. We show the PBS documentary *People Like Us: Social Class in America* (Alvarez & Kolker, 2001) to give students a context for understanding how class identity affects people at all levels of society, and we give them questionnaires and ask them to identify their social class (O’Neill, 1997; Jackson, 2010).

In fish bowls, students reveal that they compare themselves to each other in terms of clothing, houses, and other possessions, and they worry that their peers will find them unacceptable either for what they have or for what they do not have. Students who identify as upper class may feel guilty for having too much, working class students may feel embarrassed for not having enough, and middle class students often feel embarrassed for having less than the affluent and guilty for having more than working class students. Their uneasiness resonates with Paul Fussell’s (1992) description of American attitudes toward social class, and the invisible structure of class begins to come into view. We introduce a set of social myths that underlie the dominant beliefs about class structure in America (Barone, 2009), and we discuss the ways in which schooling reproduces class structure. We follow the discussion with an assignment in which students map neighborhoods in Atlanta by income and compare the schools. We then have another news bowl competition and another round of group projects. Student research topics may include homelessness,

the working poor, media representations of class, the relationship between poverty and crime, the health care debate, and middle class guilt.

The recursive nature of the curriculum allows students to draw parallels and see intersections between different kinds of oppression. Joshua, a white male, was initially entrenched in defensiveness when we began talking about racial constructs. “Why are white males always the bad guys?” he asked. By the time we got to the unit about class, Joshua was identifying social structures that keep oppression in place and was also beginning to recognize the detrimental effects privilege may have on his own sense of humanity. Joshua emerged from the class as one of the students most committed to social change.



Students in the RCG class take time to reflect on what they have learned.
photo by Martha Caldwell

Moving into action

Our students tell us routinely that it is not enough for them to just learn about injustice; they want to *do* something about it. Once they have explored the categories of race, class, and gender, they may choose to investigate other aspects of identity (e.g., religious affiliation, ethnicity, ableism, ageism, learning styles) for their final action projects. These projects require direct action and culminate in I-search papers (Macrorie, 1988) and accompanying creative presentations to the class.

Taking action gives students a sense of empowerment in the face of the sometimes overwhelming social issues they confront in the class.

Students have designed games, collected collaborative poetry or art, written letters to editors, interviewed experts, attended protest rallies, recorded oral histories, created blogs, and made films. Recent groups of students have raised money to fund the construction of a well in Sierra Leone, lobbied for changes in Georgia’s juvenile justice laws, and interviewed online gamers about the effects of gender-based slurs.

Learning by design

Throughout the course, students participate in the design of the class. At key points along the way, we brainstorm lists of authentic questions with them. These sessions work as formative assessments for the group, as the questions they generate guide the study. Students frequently e-mail us with links to pertinent articles, invite expert speakers, recommend YouTube videos that invite media analysis, ask us to read books, and watch movies that inspire them. We use their recommendations in the curriculum as often as we can, because we want them to own their learning and teach each other. We incorporate their suggestions into our assessment rubrics and give them the opportunity to assess themselves and one another after every major project. At the end of each semester, we ask them to assess the course.

Why it works

Tapping into developmental drives

Themes of justice and fairness resonate with young adolescent students. “Embracing idealism—having a desire to make the world a better place—and wanting to be socially useful” are characteristics of young adolescents’ moral development (Center for Collaborative Education, n.d., p. 18). Our students want to affect the world in which they live, and their enthusiasm for doing so provides a useful energy for learning, problem solving, and self-discovery.

The interpersonal exercises in the RCG program facilitate the development of healthy peer relationships, which nurture our students’ need for belonging. Noam (1999) suggested that the need for group acceptance characterizes the period from 12 to 14 years of age.

Acquiring a sense of “belongingness” within a peer group may set the stage for later individuation and psychological autonomy. Hazen, Schlozman, and Beresin (2008) suggested that younger adolescents, driven by the need to belong, are more susceptible to peer pressure and may be prone to identify with the group imposing the pressure. As in the phenomenon of bullying, adolescents sometimes identify with the aggressor to avoid being cast in the victim role.

Erikson (1980) described the task of adolescence as identity formation. He characterizes it as a crucial stage of development during which a coherent sense of self must be formed if a person is to move into adulthood with a consistent, intact identity. A clear identity allows a person to negotiate adulthood with a sense of independence and agency.

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—parent of an RCG student

Kohlberg (1976) suggested that individuals complete the tasks of adolescence at differing times and to varying degrees. Most people remain at a conventional stage of moral development with limited agency, while only a minority progress to the principle-based, post-conventional level at which critical analysis operates. If middle level teachers understand young adolescents’ deep need for belonging as a crucial phase that sets the stage for identity formation, they can help facilitate their students’ healthy development. Through our RCG curriculum, we address identity in the context of building healthy peer relationships in a safe environment in which critical thinking and principle-based reasoning can naturally emerge. As Sarah wrote, “The relationships I formed were very strong through RCG, and they really affected my learning, because it was safe to say what you felt and what you thought, and people encouraged you and helped you along.” Sarah described her thinking

as “so much more open and bigger” as a result. Marcus wrote that the course “increased my ability to think about things from everyone’s perspective and not just mine.”

During a developmental stage in which adolescents are beginning to pull away from their parents and focus more on peers, parents sometimes complain that their children no longer talk to them. Parents of students in RCG frequently report that their children talk about what they are learning at home. Besides assignments that involve interviewing parents about their attitudes, experiences, and family histories, parents tell us they routinely have meaningful discussions about issues of justice and fairness with their children. Brenda’s mother said, “During the course, we talked about RCG-related topics virtually every day on our ride home and continue to do so when we witness manifestations of bias or unequal treatment in our daily lives.” Like many parents, she appreciated an inroad to important conversations with her young adolescent daughter.

The inquiry method

The inquiry method provides the framework for our students to reflect on the insights that arise from sharing their personal stories. The inquiry cycle (National School Reform Faculty, 2010; University of Illinois Inquiry Group, 2010), with its sequential approach to formulating, investigating, and analyzing questions, may be applied to a wide variety of topics. Our students use it to investigate personal themes and to research larger social issues in their collaborative projects. Each cycle of inquiry builds on knowledge gained from previous cycles and raises additional questions for further study. When their authentic questions guide the course of study, students gain a sense of ownership in the classroom. Their questions, investigations, and discoveries form the base of the knowledge acquired in the class, and they learn not only from the teachers but from their own research and from one another. As Clifford and Marinucci (2008) asserted, knowledge is not fixed and static but an ever-evolving construct built by a community of learners.

Genuine inquiries demand that understanding develops in a public space in which each person’s abilities, interests, perspectives, and talents help move everyone else’s thinking forward. It is a knowledge-building space in which ideas are at the center, and each individual has a commitment to producing the collective, evolving understanding. (p. 680)

The pedagogical tradition of inquiry recognizes that learning is sustained when cognition is integrated with its social, emotional, and creative counterparts. Its proponents believe that learning is a natural instinct, human motivation is intrinsic, and the thrill of discovery serves as its own reward. Research spanning several decades substantiates the effectiveness of inquiry and emphasizes the power of collaboration and learning-in-community on social, emotional, and academic development (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Conclusion

The demands of the 21st century require that students be self-directed learners, guided by their own authentic questions (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011). Students who are growing up in a society with vast amounts of information, rapid technological innovation, and increasing globalization must master a complex set of skills: media literacy, critical thinking, emergent technology, and multiple modes of communication. Daniel Pink (2006) asserted that the “high-concept/high-touch” society of the future will demand not only the mastery of logic and technology but also of empathy and “soft” communication skills. Successful global citizens must have a healthy appreciation for other cultures and understand that the dynamic potential of diversity lies in considering multiple perspectives and synthesizing collaborative solutions. The emerging age is an “era of connection” (Noam, 2001, p. 4) in which it is important to develop “a caring heart and critical eyes” (Wink, 2005, p. 167) in our students.

Learning is a social process. As Noam and Fiore (2004) stated: “Human beings learn and grow not in isolation but through interaction with each other” (p. 12). All information is filtered through the identities our students are developing. Thus, as we strengthen a sense of identity in our students, both as individuals and as members of collectives, we strengthen their capacity to learn. A sense of interrelatedness in the classroom transfers into greater engagement in school. Rapidly developing academic skills emerge—more thorough research, improved writing skills, closer collaboration with others, more engaging presentations, greater facility with technology, and a developing framework for self-assessment.

Our students have told us the close relationships they form with each other are the most rewarding aspects of the class. Joseph, once alienated from his peers, wrote,

“I feel like I have much stronger bonds with many people in the class and feel like I can trust them more.” Amanda wrote, “With friends from other areas of my life, such as neighbors or teammates, I could never talk about the sincere and risky topics we discuss in class.” She went on to say that learning about the effects of discrimination in the lives of friends she has come to know in the class “makes me want to take action even more.” These personal connections make social justice meaningful. “I hadn’t understood how much prejudice still exists in today’s society,” she wrote. “When I thought of racism or sexism, I thought of slavery and historical oppression. Now I see oppression every day in the media, in society, and, on occasion, in this school.”

While we plan our course carefully, we retain the flexibility to respond to our students by shifting gears and following their questions. Because the course is tied to current issues and evolving theoretical ideas, it continues to grow and change, but certain aspects of it stay the same year after year. In a rapidly changing world, there are some constants: the love of discovery, the power of authentic communication, and the generosity of respect for others. When authentic inquiry is bound to these essential human characteristics, differences can be transcended and community established. Authentic inquiry flourishes and skill building emerges, and both are natural by-products of real-life learning. By providing a forum to engage our students and a template to guide them, we bear witness to our students’ ever-emerging identities and phenomenal growth.

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Extensions

The author describes a course that helps students explore significant issues related to race, class, and gender. How can you use the strategies in this article to initiate such investigations with your students? How can these ideas be adapted to promote critical conversations about race, class, and gender among middle level school faculty and staff members?

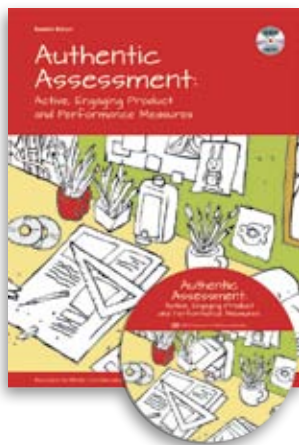
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