

CURRICULAR ADAPTATION: HURRICANE KATRINA AND THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Promoting students' critical thinking and agency for social change in a multicultural classroom requires curriculum that engages students to interact with the social structures and current events that are shaping their life experiences. In Chapter 1, we established one of the primary goals of multicultural education: providing students an apprenticeship in becoming critical and productive members of a democratic society. To be critical and productive members, students need opportunities to analyze and evaluate experiences through a curriculum that asserts and supports their voices and their agency.

With classroom curriculum becoming more scripted and standardized, many teachers feel pressured to "cover" certain content, limiting flexibility and creativity to veer from the mandated tasks. Such restrictions make it difficult to respond to breaking news in the classroom with the spontaneity and creative vigor that current events may inspire. Christine Sleeter provides in-depth analysis and practical strategies that take up the challenge of ensuring a vibrant multicultural curriculum in the climate of standards and high-stakes testing. Using the central role of "big ideas" that Wiggins and McTighe have advanced, Sleeter incorporates an analytical approach to content standards that asks teachers to assertively question, "What counts as knowledge?" Her work provides a practical structure for curriculum design that combines Wiggins and McTighe's "big ideas" with critical concepts of teachers' ideology, transformative intellectual knowledge, classroom resources, students and community, academic challenge, and assessment.¹[on website]

In the case that follows, we demonstrate a classroom community's response, in September 2005, to Hurricane Katrina's multitude of natural and political events and to how those events appeared in the news media. The classroom teacher used Sleeter's framework to construct the curriculum.

The events surrounding Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath are certainly worthy of an entire book of integrated curriculum for every content area in PK-12 schools. Much has been written and documented about the natural and governmental disaster that resulted. Many political analysts and social scientists concur that the forces of nature and civic neglect combined to expose America's weakest links in governmental policy by revealing the enduring face of institutionalized racism. One classroom curriculum cannot encompass the depth of meaning that these catastrophic events represent.

When such broad and meaningful current events beckon classroom curricular attention, it is helpful for teachers to start with the big ideas or the enduring understanding that the curriculum aims to accomplish. If teachers are obligated to address specific standards, these may be incorporated explicitly within the big ideas. Otherwise, it is easy to get caught up with dozens of activities that surface and an onslaught of information that may present more detail than is humanly possible for teachers or students to grasp.

TAKING UP THE CALL

In this case, an art teacher in New England started the school year with her usual first-week-of-school unit.² [on website] News about Hurricane Katrina had broken a day or two before school started. The teacher began the first day of school with enthusiasm and freshness and a brief discussion that included locating Louisiana and Mississippi on a map and reflecting on the difficulties of the hurricane. As the days unfolded and the devastation expanded, the American public became more saturated with information and media images about what was happening to the people in the gulf region. This teacher knew she wanted to respond more assertively in her curriculum.

SPONTANEITY AND PREPARATION

Her students were scheduled to take art class for only one quarter of the school year, so every class meeting was precious. She decided to swap out a previously planned unit and instead develop a curriculum about Hurricane Katrina that met similar objectives. She limited the amount of time for the new unit to five class meetings.

The overarching, enduring understanding for this teacher's entire quarter of art curriculum was: *Art is created and understood in a cultural context.*

TEACHER CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL CHOICES

The rest of the art curriculum was designed under the umbrella of the big idea. With cultural context in mind, she considered the possibility of teaching about cultural artifacts of New Orleans, like Mardi Gras masks, to demonstrate the history of rich cultural intersections. She also thought about teaching the architectural designs of many New Orleans historic neighborhoods. These ideas could be cultivated into critical thinking and appreciation for cultural differences. However, as the news reports poured in like a rainstorm and the images flashed continually on the Internet and the television screen, the art teacher was compelled to teach more assertively about visual culture, the media, and sociopolitical aspects of this event. The big idea of the unit drew from goals in her larger curriculum about art being created and understood in a cultural context. It addressed required standards, and more important, it addressed the social inequities exposed by Hurricane Katrina, with the aim of engaging students in critically analyzing the event. The media images drove the development of the big idea for this particular unit, *Mass media images influence our worldview and the world's view of us.*

FIVE ART CLASS MEETINGS

Because of the time constraints faced by the art teacher, it was necessary to limit the activity without limiting the depth of thinking. (Most teachers struggle with the tensions between the demands of the school schedule and the supports required to cultivate student inquiry and expression.) Narrowing the focus to media images helped the teacher plan a sequenced unit to be carried out in five art class meetings. However, the discussion and social activism that sprang from the unit were enduring.

Art Class Day 1 On the first day of the unit, the class discussed the enduring understanding: *Mass media images influence our worldview and the world's view of us.* They discussed vocabulary. What does *mass* mean? What does *media* mean? What does it mean when you put those words together? What do we mean by *images*? What is a worldview? Can the world have a view of us? Who is included in "us" in this big idea? The teacher wrote their responses on large chart paper so every student's words were reflected in the community discussion. After discussing the vocabulary, the class viewed a digital slide show of images collected from current news media regarding Hurricane Katrina. The class discussed four questions while studying the images: (1) What do you see? (2) What do you not see? (3) What does it mean? (4) What can you do? The replies were heartfelt and perceptive:

What do you see?

I see a family wading through the dirty water. I see a mom carrying two babies; she looks tired and worried. I see hundreds of people lying in cots in the Superdome. I see water up to the roof! I see a lot of poor people. I see cars in the water. I see a lot of Black folk. I see people trying to help. I see desperation.

What do you not see?

I don't see whether or not they had a car to get out of there. I don't see any food or drinking water. I don't see if they have any money. I don't see anybody helping them. I don't see where all that water is gonna go. I don't see smiling faces, or people laughing.

What does it mean?

It means our government was not ready for this crisis. It means the poor people are getting left behind. It means the levees should have been fixed earlier. It means so many people lost their homes. It means so many people lost their lives. It means a lot of people are volunteering to help.

What can you do?

I can raise money to help; we can have a bake sale. I can find out whom I should write a letter to in the government. I can collect cans and bottles for money for the Red Cross. I can try to find out if the kids in the shelters want us to send letters or books or toys. I can try to find out why the levees were not fixed earlier. I can write to people in Washington about taking care of all people.

The teacher engaged the students in a critical reflection on each question and group of responses. For example, many students in every class gave variations on the theme of "I see a lot of Black people" or "I don't see any White people in the picture". The teacher tried to model explicit discussion about race by facilitating the discussion with prompts about race and exclusion:

Yes, I see a lot of Black people too, and I don't see many White people either. I am a White teacher in a multiracial classroom and I know it can be uncomfortable to talk about race in our society, but let's try to have honest conversations in the classroom. Since we see mostly African American families—or who we believe to be African American families—does that mean that there were no White people in the Gulf

Coast region? If there were White people, does it mean they all evacuated or had been evacuated? What do we really know from the news images? Someone mentioned "poor people." What do we mean by "poor people"? Is there a relationship between race and class? Skin color and money? What are these pictures? What is this crisis telling us? Were all the Black people in the shelters poor? What are our assumptions? Do we have enough information to know?

This kind of explicit naming of what often goes unnamed seemed to make space for students of all races to voice questions and concerns.

As the discussion continued, the class studied artwork by a range of artists who used news photos and text in their art. The teacher gave the students a homework assignment as a worksheet with the same four questions that prompted the class discussion. The students were assigned the task of finding an image from mass media sources about Hurricane Katrina and answering the four questions about the image they selected. They could attach a photo from a newspaper, a magazine, or the Internet. They could draw a sketch of something they saw on TV or heard on the radio. They could ask the computer teacher to help them download a video clip from a news website.

Art Class Day 2 On the second day of the unit, most students arrived with their worksheet filled with answers and a selected image. Those who had not completed the homework shared images with others. By the following day there was 100 percent class participation in the homework assignment, which the teacher viewed as testimony to the students' high interest in the topic and their hunger to discuss the issues.

The students posted their images on a community bulletin board and they discussed many of them in art class. In this way, the bulletin board became a site of negotiated community text. The students also hung photos in the classroom and talked about the pictures in small groups. For example, one boy found, in a popular magazine, a two-page fold-out photo of a dead body floating in the water. When he asked, with reluctance, if he was required to hang it up, the class thought about it as a group. The teacher asked, "Should we hang this up?" Various student replies included:

It's too sad. Maybe the guy's family does not know he died. We don't know his name; it doesn't seem right. We don't know if anybody claimed his body. Some pictures you just shouldn't hang in the art room. It's too sad, or it's somebody's family sorrow.

The teacher wrote the word *voyeurism* on the board. She asked the students about the voyeurism of the media and the responsibility of making images public. The class discussed the tensions about the media images. The students critiqued the power and control of knowledge by the media. They brought up ideas such as:

If we did not have these images, we would not know how bad it was on the Gulf Coast right now—and that we need to help and that we need to change the government's policies and actions. We need the media in a lot of ways. In some ways, the media controls us. It gets misused. This is confusing. Is it good or bad to have so much of the mass media around us?

The teacher also pointed out the cautions that should be exercised in making art about somebody else's experience. The class discussed the importance of an artist's balancing artistic expression with an awareness of "insider and outsider" status and knowledge in a community. This issue became more poignant when a new student joined the class that week; his family had just evacuated from New Orleans.

By the end of the second class meeting, the examples of visual culture were collected as a group and put on the bulletin board; students placed sticky notes on each photo that they wanted to use in their artwork, so the teacher would know how many photocopies to make. Students selected cardboard that would serve as the foundation for their collage about Hurricane Katrina. They began to paint the background color and to glue colored tissue paper and some text phrases on the piece.

Art Class Day 3 The third day was primarily a studio workday to create their collage. Piles of photocopies of the selected photographs awaited the students. Tempera paint, tissue paper, and white glue were the primary media employed by the young artists. They retrieved their cardboard pieces from the previous day and immersed themselves in their work. Some students simply layered several photos, using little text. Others tried in their brushstrokes to evoke the colors of a storm and the chaos. Some artists emphasized scraps of headlines with little or no representational images, while others traced the photos or painted and colored directly on the photos. Many developed innovative techniques to express their ideas and concerns. The classroom was noisy and active, with students busily retrieving art supplies, sorting through photocopies, discussing their ideas, and reviewing their work.

Near the end of class, just before clean-up time, the teacher distributed a worksheet that looked just like the homework sheet they had previously been given, except it was on differently colored paper. The new worksheet contained the same four questions:

1. What do you see?
2. What do you not see?
3. What does it mean?
4. What can you do?

The teacher explained to the students that this "reflection" page would be part of their assessment of the unit and that they were to write about their own artwork on this sheet, reflecting on their art making—an expansion from the initial homework of writing about a single mass media image. The teacher encouraged the students to work on this assessment sheet throughout the art-making process, pointing out that it was not necessary to wait until their artwork was finished to begin their reflections.

Art Class Day 4 On the fourth day, the teacher facilitated a class discussion about the wide range of approaches that artists employ to express meaning in their work, including using images for their shock value, for subtle communication, for abstract expression, and more. The class discussed how the mass media employs various

methods as well. The teacher encouraged students to reflect on the four questions in their assignment as they completed their artwork, since these four questions could help them make final decisions about what text and images to use or exclude in putting the finishing touches on their artwork. She challenged students to use the questions, their own concerns, class discussions, and classroom resources to push their academic and artistic achievement to their fullest.

The teacher also tapped into the spontaneous discussions that students were engaging in at their art tables and asked students to work in small groups to talk about the meaning in their final pieces. The students in each group offered their peers suggestions about the meaning that each piece evoked and they inspired each other with creative ideas. They conversed productively while adding their finishing touches.

The discussions centered on the difficulty of deciding whether this artwork was complete. The teacher prompted students to reflect on two aspects of their artistic selves for completing the work: personal feelings and political questions. She suggested that personal feelings might include sympathy for loss of life, caring, and empathy for those in need, while political questions might include the following: Would the artwork's message indict power structures? Would it point to our inequities? Would it call viewers to social action? As they finished the pieces, they learned how to craft a construction-paper frame that would exhibit their artwork and their reflection page.

One group of students approached the teacher with the idea of making a video about their work. They reasoned that, after all, the big idea of the project relates to mass media.

Art Class Day 5 The art teacher had little experience in running a video camera but borrowed one from the technology lab that morning. She asked the students if anybody knew how to work it, and 75 percent of the students enthusiastically raised their hands. She explained that the culminating activity and assessment for this unit would be to create a video of each student talking to the video camera about her or his artwork, using the four questions as prompts for describing the work of art. She asked one student to set up the tripod, and then she set some guidelines:

Safety of Students and Equipment The students were expected to set up the camera in such a way that nobody would trip over the cord.

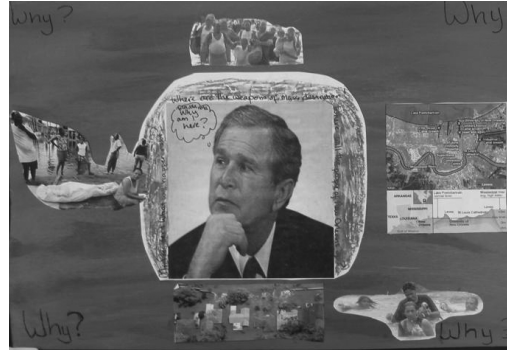
Finish Your Work Each student would create his or her video reflection after the artwork and reflection pages were completed and framed.

Sharing Power Every student would get a turn to run the camera and talk to the camera.

Responsibility The teacher explained that she trusted the students to work out the details of taking turns, teaching one another the camera functions and sharing power, because she wanted to be assisting students in finishing their artwork and constructing the frames, not managing the turn-taking with the video camera. She walked away from the camera and never returned to it until the class was over.



Bridget Kiely, in Patty Bode's art class. *Hurricane Katrina*.
Mixed media, 2005.



Tafadzwa Darius Peyton, in Patty Bode's art class. *Hurricane Katrina*.
Mixed media, 2005.

Here are two students' descriptions of their collages in the video:

I put an American flag in the background that I made all dirty and messed up because it represents all the American people who got hurt in the hurricane. I have a bunch of newspaper pictures of people who got hurt. I scribbled a lot of words like death, hunger—I used newspaper titles like “Death Toll Surges, Body Count Rises, Blame”—to represent all the words that have been said in the aftermath of this hurricane. —*Bridget*

I have questions around George Bush: Where are the weapons of mass destruction? What will happen next? Where will the people of New Orleans go? I raise those questions because I want to know what he is going to do about it . . . I can talk out with my paintings and my words to tell people what I think. I put these four questions in the corners: Why? Why? Why? Why? To represent so many other questions that people could ask. —*Tafadzwa*

COMMUNITY DISCOURSE AND COMMUNITY ACTION

When each student framed their artwork and completed their video reflection, the students and teachers mounted a display in the school cafeteria. Every piece from each student was included in the exhibit. The display was not typical of many school art exhibits, which frequently contain lots of cheerful colors and pleasant imagery. This work was reflective of the tragedies and social inequities that the students saw in the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina.

The exhibit became a hub of lunchtime conversation. Students from all classes and grade levels huddled around the collages, discussing the images and reading the reflections. Many teachers and staff were deeply moved by the exhibit and wrote notes to the art teacher and students about their responses. Some teachers brought their classes to view the exhibit and developed class discussions about it.

ART TO ACTION

Each team in the school launched an action project to contribute to the relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Some teams collected food and clothing. Others held fundraisers for the Red Cross. One team sold colored blue wristbands embossed with the words *Hurricane Relief*.

In an effort to raise critical awareness about the breadth of damage, need, and neglect in the Gulf Coast region, this town and school created a sister city project with a town in Mississippi that was all but destroyed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The devastation in New Orleans was widely known—and should by no means be overlooked or diminished—yet it was clear that students, indeed many people in the nation, did not seem to grasp that a wide geographical area had been affected by the devastating impact of the storms.

Through the sister city project, students connected directly with students and teachers in Mississippi schools. Town officials who had visited the Mississippi site as volunteers visited the New England town classrooms to share photos and stories. They shared quotes from students in Mississippi and cultivated a sense of shared responsibility among the students. Students sent cards, letters, and school supplies to the Mississippi school. While these service projects were meaningful and appeared to be appreciated, they did not quell the sense of outrage that many students continued to voice.

Relief efforts are certainly a valid vehicle for social action. However, relief efforts that lack critical perspective can maintain and even perpetuate the power structures that help create many catastrophic social conditions. To further develop students' critical perspectives, teachers might ask questions about the structural inequities that the media revealed through the images of Hurricane Katrina. Other research topics could be the historical neglect of the levees, the structure that keeps neighborhoods racially and economically segregated and the disparities between New Orleans' tourist attractions and the conditions of New Orleans schools. Students could create action plans to address these issues as well as others.

Clearly, one art project cannot answer all the questions that arise as a result of a project like this, but one art project can encourage critical media literacy and give voice to the questioning adolescent mind. This is precisely why effective multicultural education must be pervasive in every aspect of students' school experiences. A multicultural curriculum cannot make sense of the loss of life, the family displacement, and the wreckage of homes and community. It can, however, teach students to view these events with a critical eye toward the power structures that contribute to such phenomena. A problem-posing curriculum may engage students in "reading" their world, naming injustice, and celebrating solidarity, whether through art, math, social studies, physical education, English, or science. It can teach students to use their paintings and use their words to confront inequality and stratification in schools and in society.

NOTES

1. Chistine Sleeter, *Un-Standardizing Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based Classroom*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).
2. Patty is grateful to her seventh grade art students for the passion and intellectual rigor that they brought to this curriculum at Amherst Regional Middle School, Amherst, Massachusetts.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHING MEDIA LITERACY AND RESOURCES FOR TEACHING ABOUT HURRICANE KATRINA

These resources are divided into three sections: resources for teaching media literacy, professional resources on Hurricane Katrina, and children's literature on Hurricane Katrina.

Resources for Teaching Media Literacy

Adbusters Media Foundation publishes *Adbusters*:

The Magazine and *Adbusters Media Empowerment Kit*, operates a website, and offers its creative services through PowerShift, an advocacy advertising agency. The non-profit foundation describes itself as the new social activist movement of the information age. Available at: www.adbusters.org

Beach, Richard, *teachingmedialiteracy.com*:

A Web-Linked Guide to Resources and Activities (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

Chavan, Bakari, *Websites on Media Literacy and Advertising in Rethinking Schools Online* (1999). Available at: www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/14_02/eweb142.shtml

Goodman, Steven, *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

Hobbs, Reness, *Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

Kist, William, *New Literacies in Action: Teaching and Learning in Multiple Media* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).

Professional Resources for Teaching about Hurricane Katrina

Brinkley, Douglas, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York: William Morrow, 2006).

Center for Community Change, ed. *Dismantling a Community* (Washington, DC: Center for Community Change, 2006). Available at: www.communitychange.org

Childs, John Brown, ed., *Hurricane Katrina: Response and Responsibilities* (Santa Cruz, CA: New Pacific Press, 2006).

Cooper, Christopher, and Robert Block, *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

Dyson, Michael Eric, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Civitas Books, 2006).

Hartman, Chester, and Gregory D. Squires, *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Horne, Jed, *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (New York: Random House, 2006). MP3 AUDIO and hardcover book.

Lee, Spike, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. Produced by 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, Home Box Office (HBO), 2006. DVD.

National Geographic, *Inside Hurricane Katrina* (Hanover, PA: National Geographic, 2005). DVD.

NOVA: *Hurricane Katrina—The Storm That Drowned a City* (2006) Stacy Keach, Peter Thomas (VI) WGBH, Boston. DVD.

Rethinking Schools editors, "Special Report: New Orleans After Katrina." *Rethinking Schools* 21 no. 1 (Fall 2006).

Time magazine editors, *Time: Hurricane Katrina: The Storm That Changed America* (New York: Time, 2006).

van Heerden, Ivor, and Mike Bryan, *The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina—The Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

Resources in Children's Literature about Hurricane Katrina

Barbieri McGrath, Barbara, *The Storm: Students of Biloxi, Mississippi, Remember Hurricane Katrina* (Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2006).

McLaughlin Mercier, Deirdre, *Yesterday We Had a Hurricane* (Chesapeake, VA: Bumble Bee, 2006).

Visser, Reona, and children of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, *Story of a Storm: A Book About Hurricane Katrina* (Brandon, MS: Quail Ridge Press, 2006).