Advocacy for Students & Democratic Citizenship

*Black Ants and Buddhists* Presentation
Black Ants and Buddhists Presentation Artifact

This PowerPoint presentation was created during my second semester at the State University of New York at New Paltz in my Issues in Multicultural Education class. At the beginning of the year we were each asked to inform our professor our first and second choice books out of a provided selection. The professor then assigned one to two groups of students a particular book. We were then asked to read the book throughout the semester, create chapter summaries, find the top ten key points of the novel, create a PowerPoint that overviewed the key points, then provide discussion questions for the class. I selected Black Ants and Buddhists by Mary Cowhey because of her mission to develop a critical thinking classroom, even in elementary school.

The presentation covers the main topics of the book, and shows all of the important lessons I took away from the novel to apply to my future classroom. Creating the presentation and then discussing it afterwards with the students in the class really accentuated important aspects of the book as well as the purpose behind critical pedagogy in the classroom. Some of the many useful pedagogy and practices I learned from Mary Cowhey’s class are as follows:

Critical thinking is a civic duty. It develops a sense of justice and fairness within the students, as well as creating an active, informed participant in democracy. Teachers and students are “co-investors” in education, meaning the teacher is not the authority on information. Instead he or she acts as an emotionally responsive and curious learner equal to the students, and guides the learning process. Authentic teaching involves integrating connections to personal experiences throughout the curriculum. These personal experiences should be from both the students and the teacher. Peace is taught through an activism infused curriculum. Students consider the perspectives of others, the ramifications of their actions, and that peace is difficult to achieve. A way to expose and engage students in different professions and people is to invite them to the classroom to speak. Inviting a variety of professionals, educators, scientists, and so forth, over the course of the year to interact with and demonstrate for students is a great learning experience. Communication with families is essential. They are viewed as partners in the education process, and should be involved and informed of the classroom activities. Students are not always confined to a classroom. Some of the most important lessons and issues can be taught by bringing them outside the classroom. Community resources can be utilized through field trips to connect worldly problems on a local level, and show the students that they have access to these institutions. History is taught from multiple perspectives, especially the normally unheard perspectives. History and current event issues are used to teach students concepts that are needed to better their understanding of the world in which they live. Classrooms and teachers can go against the grain. She advises teachers who go against the grain to be brave, listen carefully to criticism, find allies, support networks, and fight institutional discrimination. “The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world your best anyway.” - Mother Teresa.

Overall, Mary Cowhey’s class hopes to build a different way of teaching and learning, to make a bit of change for the better. That is how I want my future mathematics classroom to be. I want students to view mathematics in a different way; one that is positive and shows value in mathematics. I can do that by incorporating some of Mary Cowhey’s practices, and making sure my lessons use mathematics for a purpose and incorporate solving problems. This will not only help make my students more critically thinking citizens, but prepare them for college, careers, and the world outside the classroom. Overall this project and class really helped me view the world and the classroom more carefully, democratically, and through a multicultural lens; all important factors in a well developed and safe classroom environment.
Black Ants & Buddhists

BY MARY COWHEY

Discussion By: Amy DeNitto, Noah Gallagher, Justine Heroux, and Amy Mottola
"Black Ants and Buddhists describes a teacher's dedication to forging a nurturing and caring environment where children learn to become socially responsible and critical. While it is a book about creating community and hope in a first- and second-grade classroom, this powerful book is mostly about real children coming to consciousness about the world around them and taking steps, to paraphrase Paulo Freire, to learn to read both the world and their world."

- Sonia Neito, Forward, p. 9
Teaching the Unheard Perspective

“Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other.” - Paulo Freire (Cowhey, 2006, p. 14)

When many students in the Peace Class began stomping on the unwelcomed black ants, a seemingly normal action for children to take, Mary emphasized listening to Som Jet's perspective, the "unheard" student who explained why students should neither fear nor kill the black ants.
Cowhey tries to teach critically in a social justice classroom. She explains using Sonia Nieto's definition of multicultural education her classroom and teaching goals:

- Multicultural education *is antiracist education.*
- Multicultural education *is basic education.*
- Multicultural education *is important for all students.*
- Multicultural education *is education for social justice.*
- Multicultural education *is pervasive.*
- Multicultural education *is a process.*
- Multicultural education *is critical pedagogy.*
“I am talking about thinking critically and learning to learn, learning to use basic skills like reading, writing, solving mathematical problems, analyzing data, public speaking, scientific observation, and inquiry as an active citizen in your community” (Cowhey, 2006, p. 18)

Cowhey believes critical thinking is a civic duty:

- "Children are capable of amazing things, far more than is usually expected of them." p. 30
- Creates lifelong learners
- Think critically about issues, view them from multiple perspectives
- Actively participate in democratic process: voting, petitioning, debate, etc.
1. The purpose of education in an unjust society is to bring about equality and justice.
2. Students must play an active part in the learning process.
3. Teachers and students are both simultaneously learners and producers of knowledge.

- Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Link)

Reasons to critically teach:

• Create lifelong learners
• Build habits of mind-critical thinking, intellectually curious behavior
  o "How can we find out? Where could we look for more answers? Who might know more?"
  o Students are actively seeking out the answers
• The teacher is not the authority on information, but a guide
• Empower students to recognize their strengths and what they already know
• Encourage one's own learning process
• Keeps teaching fun, interesting, and fascinating
• Can connect academic content to personal experiences

Link: Short documentary on Freire for more information
"Peace Class"
Teaching peace through an activist infused curriculum

"I welcome you"

"If we are to reach real peace in this world, we shall have to begin with the children."
- Gandhi

Through open discussions, the children consider other people’s perspectives and the ramification of actions on others.

This authentic communication accesses critical thinking skills by noticing and pursuing contradictions in everyday reality of the past and present.
How can children make real peace in this world?

Peace is hard, requires personal sacrifice, risk and forgiveness.

Students ponder the effect of a children's strike against the war in Afghanistan.

Walking with dignity in the hallways like Gandhi in the Salt March or MLK Jr at Selma.

Impromptu discussions about multiple identities: race, ethnicity and religion.

“Does children's participation in a dialogue about responsibility for personal action, which might involve risk or sacrifice...make a difference?

I think it does, if that dialogue is authentic, powerful, trusting, and thought-provoking enough to resonate, if it changes the perception of reality from static entity into something that can be transformed, if that dialog has the power to continue into homes, into the community, into a school across the ocean.

It makes enough of a difference to keep doing it." Mary Cowhey
Teaching through Activist framework

Learning through activism...
- helps develop a sense of social justice, fairness and equity
- broadens and deepens authenticity
- connects personal and community experience to global and historical events
- empowers children and their families in concrete, replicable ways
- recognizes and honors everyday activists, which in turn cultivates more activism
- cultivates important critical thinking skills in addition to vital academic skills such as writing, reading, listening and gathering and analyzing data.

Classroom Strategies:
- Inspirational literature, poetry, quotes.
- Sensory integration
- Debates
- Problem solving brainstorms
  - What is the problem?
  - What ways can we solve it?
- Role play
- Music
- Field trips
- Guest speakers
- Letter writing
- Captioned drawings
To learn about the democratic process of voting, students organized a voter registration drive. Students learn about voting rights, civil rights and suffrage movements, citizenship criteria, immigration, the Electoral College, and where and how to register.

**Academic/social skills used:** how to make an effective poster, approach an adult and engage in effective dialogue, how to speak to reporters as well as write their own news stories, how to talk to local politicians, how to target and reach specific constituencies in the community.
Children are naturally inquisitive, and teachers should take the opportunities posed by those questions to help students understand what it is they are interested in exploring. This may require teachers to veer off from lesson plans, but this time is valuable.

Model habits of mind and behaviors that promote critical thinking:
"Where can we find the information?"
"Who might know more about this?"

Link: Where’s your shirt from?
“Each teacher has a unique story. Bits of that story can be woven into the day and become part of the fabric of the classroom community.” (Cowhey, 2006, p. 169)

Authentic learning takes place by making connections to the "real world", applying one's knowledge, and becoming a mindful apprentice to the experts - learning to think like a mathematician when doing math in class.

Link: A funny thing happened on the way to the test
“Compassion, Action, and Change”

Link: The Thanksgiving Lesson

Cowhey uses the ubiquitous holiday food drive to redefine poverty and those affected by it.

She makes every moment a teaching moment, and integrates her own personal connections.

- Instead of oversimplifying the problem of poverty, Cowhey uses the food drive to teach her students why or how people suffer from poverty. She explains that circumstances outside people's control can affect the financial vulnerability of people.

- She utilizes children's literature to provide various perspectives and attitudes faced by poverty.

- Cowhey shares her personal experiences such as how she was at one time denied food stamps and child support and found relief at the survival center. A reason she inspires her students to provide support for the center.
Involving Family and Community in Education

The teacher cannot possibly have experience in every area, and bringing other perspectives and expertise into the classroom can really help the students connect to the content.

Be resourceful!! Use guest speakers, class volunteers, parents, family members, community members, teaching staff, professionals. Find out what skills and knowledge can be shared.

Examples of community in the class from the Peace Class:

• Adult ESL learners
• Philosophy students from local university
• Chemist who makes ice cream from liquid nitrogen
• "Bird lady": Local ornithologist
• Mystery math guest: community members with cool jobs that challenge gender/race stereotypes
• Muslim high school student
Critically teaching children means you have to build trust with the students and their families:

- Cowhey makes informal home visits to each student and family before school begins. Learns about family dynamic, expectations, lifestyle in addition to student's interests and demeanor.
  - "What would you like me to know about our child? About your family?“
  - Occasionally asks them for any good resources or advice so she learn more about that type of family unit.
- Cowhey writes a weekly newsletter describing assignments, field trips, and discussions. This gives parents context and insight into class curriculum.
- Talking about family members and meeting new people sparks class discussions on diversity. For example, her students have open discussions on same sex parents, and about family members who have and have not gone to college. Cowhey then brings visitors into the class to help educate the students on people they may not have experienced within their families.
• Facilitating exploration outside of the classroom not only promotes engagement but allows for connections to be made and students to see why what they are learning is important.

• Field trips throughout the community reinforce curricular content and resources that are available to students and their families.

• Field trips can include: nature preserves, museums, universities, community businesses, civil offices, historical landmarks, and farmer's markets.
“What I have observed from my limited teaching experiences is that first and second graders are hungry for interesting stories. Spend a single recess period on the playground with young children and you can see how they are fascinated by conflict, passionate about clashing perspectives, eager for truth and fairness...tend to take history quite personally. They take it to heart. They empathize with historical characters whose names might not be known. They want to hear multiple perspectives on the same incident. They aren't traumatized or depressed by it. They are charged by it. They become aggressive learners, demanding evidence in search of the multiple truths that make history.” (Cowhey, 2006, p. 163)
“Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.”

-Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Cowhey encourages teachers to teach history honestly and to encourage critical thinking about the way history is traditionally taught. She teaches all sides and perspectives of issues to the best of her ability, giving a voice to issues and people often glossed over history classes.

Not only does this give students a more well-rounded perspective on the world, this helps students think more critically about the way the world is portrayed in textbooks, books, and the media, including issues of bias.
Viewing History through Multiple Perspectives

- Teaching history “with rough texture, complete with flaws and conflicts and complexities, not a slick, sealed, sanitized version.” p. 124
  - enables her students to search for the truth and develop reasoning
  - pursue questions, contradictions, mysteries that do not have easy answers
  - become critical thinkers and stand for justice
- Mary's yearlong activism curriculum lends itself to their normal subjects (art, science, math, history, and so forth) but teaches the qualities and characteristics above while addressing issues of “power, perspective, and privilege” p. 124
What do explorers do? Learn about contemporary explorers like Ann Bancroft and Liv Arnesen. Logistical planning of explorer-transportation, methods of navigation and communication. (One of Mary's resources)

Why did trading matter? Learn about motivations for exploration, economics. Field trip to farmer's market, community business.

How did humans get on the earth? How did people get to the Americas? Learn about significant roles that storytellers, historians, anthropologists play in explaining theories of human evolution/migration.

Taino life, culture and landscape Learn about Native people in Puerto Rico and their lifestyle pre-European contact. Study rainforest, petroglyphs. (Taino Resource here)

Various versions of Columbus story Read historic version and native perspective. Compare and contrast descriptions using primary sources, biased reporting, quality of evidence. Ask how do you get at the truth in history?
Below are a few examples of the many unique books used in the Peace Class to learn history:

- *Lies My Teacher Told Me: everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* by James Loewen to form lessons that help her and her students “question what we think we know, consider multiple perspectives, and search for the truth in history” p. 145

- Cowhey stresses the importance of primary sources, and the different viewpoints they provide.

- *A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn

- *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* by Ron Takaki

- *Rethinking Columbus* edited by Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson
  - The story of Columbus is much more than the sanitized rhyme "He sailed the ocean blue in 1492" and the names of his three ships
"I never know when tragedy will walk through my classroom door, but I've learned it has no qualms about dropping in on the first day of school. How we respond to tragedy, as teachers, as parents, as humans, not only provides comfort and security, but also can provide hope and power for children in a world that is often unfair, and sometimes unspeakably violent."

- (Cowhey, 2006, p. 181)
What do you, as the teacher, do when a tragedy happens in the world, in the community, or in the school itself? Likely, you won't see such things coming, and you will have to think on your feet. Children come into your room with preconceived notions and anxieties that need to be addressed.

For example, the morning after 9/11 Cowhey:

- Answered the children's questions, clarified any misinformation and confusion, and reassured them we were safe in school (p. 184)
- Helped students write letters to relatives and firefighters about what happened
- Told them there was a lot they could learn from 9/11 about hoping, healing, and helping
  - "Should not prejudge the value of your gift or act of kindness no matter how humble it seems" (p. 185)
- Realized that students had a lot of stereotypes about Muslims, so used that as an opportunity to teach about Islam and prejudice
“Rules of Thumb” for talking to children about tragedy

Cowhey recommends:

• Eliminate, limit and/or supervise exposure to mass media, TV, radio, internet.

• Check in with family/friends to see how/if they may have been personally affected.

• Listen to the children. Help them to identify their feelings, concerns and questions. Allow for spontaneous connections.

• Be truthful but brief. Clarify misinformation.

• Focus on those who survived, those who helped and stories of hope.

• Assure children of their own safety. In case of natural disasters, offer realistic assurances.

• Brainstorm with the children some action they can take to help survivors.

Link: What would Mister Rogers do?
“People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway. If you are successful you will win some false friends, and some true enemies; be successful anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, others may be jealous; be happy anyway. The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.”

- Mother Teresa, p. 209
“Let no man drag you down so low as to make you hate him”
George Washington Carver

Being different can make others feel defensive or threatened. Teaching critically is very different from the dominant culture in schools. Cowhey advises teachers to follow their instincts.

• Find allies in administration and colleagues.
• Articulate your ideas with a trusted colleague, mentor. "If I can't talk through it, I probably am not ready to do it." p 223
• Listen carefully to criticisms, not matter its source. Try to find a valid point and get another perspective.
• Always be professional, your critics will always be on the lookout for evidence against you as a professional.
“Whether you are a teacher, parent, student teacher, administrator, professor, potential teacher, or someone who just cares about the education of children, I hope this book gives you the willingness to try to wield this hammer to build a different way of teaching and learning, to make your bit of change for the better” (Cowhey, 2006, p. 228)

Supplementary video -The Girl who silenced the world for five minutes: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQmz6Rbpnu0

For your own teaching use, the video is from "Persuasion Across Time and Space" Unit by Stanford University (check it out!): http://ell.stanford.edu/teaching_resources/ela
FYI, Some Useful Texts and Web Sites

- *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Social Justice* edited by Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson
- "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*" by B.D. Tatum
- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* both by Paulo Freire
- *The First Six Weeks of School* by Deton and Kriete
- *Affirming Diversity* by Sonia Nieto
- [www.syrcculturalworkers.com](http://www.syrcculturalworkers.com)
- [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org)
- [www.nativebooks.com](http://www.nativebooks.com)
- [www.mtholyoke.edu/omc/kidsphil](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/omc/kidsphil)

Please see her book or [website](http://www.syrcculturalworkers.com) for more great books, literature resources, and websites not listed!
Thank You!