

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Pushing the Line: Teaching Suburban Seventh Graders to be Critically Conscious through Historical Inquiry and Civic Letter-Writing

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## Introduction

"This is as close to the line as you can get without crossing it." This was the response from my supervisor when I explained a new project I developed for my seventh grade social studies students. I teach in a high-achieving K-12 public school district located in an affluent, suburban and conservative town and this statement is instructive for understanding the challenges and envisioning the possibilities of critical teaching with non-marginalized students in the Age of Trumpism.

The ascendance of Trump to the presidency has created an urgent opportunity to engage students in a meaningful and critical analysis of our government, military, economy, and society. We have a president who has demonstrated a disturbing lack of knowledge regarding both US and world history (Le Miere, 2017) and a casual disregard for the facts (DePaulo, 2017). Trump's ahistorical and fact-less approach to the presidency threatens our democracy and democratic norms and calls for a pedagogy that focuses on justice-oriented content while placing an emphasis on evidence-based arguments.

### ***The ascendance of Trump to the presidency has created an urgent opportunity to engage students in a meaningful and critical analysis of our government, military, economy, and society.***

Education is not a neutral endeavor (Zinn, 1994). Students should be exposed to issues occurring in their school, town, state, country and world and understand why and how they are affected by these issues. Teachers can facilitate this process by seeking to elevate and transform the consciousness of students and help them see possibilities for change (hooks, 1994). Fortunately, students are more interested in current events and politics than I have seen in previous years, a trend that has been noted in schools across the country (Harris, 2017). However, there is also a legitimate concern among teachers of backlash by administrators and parents when broaching political topics with our students (Kenworthy, 2017). As such, while the need for critical education is clear, especially in the time of Trump, the means to practice such teaching is complicated.

In the inquiry-based learning project I will describe, I combine critical pedagogy theory with historical literacy pedagogy in order to enable seventh grade students in a world history course to critique current problems in the United States under Trump through the comparative analysis of different historical and modern sources and action-based letter-writing to the president.

Several questions guided this work: To what extent can a seventh grade world history course be an effective venue for students to consider and critique problems in the US under Trump? How can I navigate the current political climate and constraints of an affluent, suburban public

school district while engaging in critical teaching? To what extent can I push non-marginalized students to think and write critically through a social justice lens while avoiding an indoctrinating style and maintaining space for student-centered inquiry?

## Description of School District, Course, and Culture

Mountainview, New Jersey is an upper-middle class suburban community located about 25 miles from New York City with a population of 26,000 and a median household income of \$106,875. The Mountainview Public School District serves students in the town from kindergarten through 12th grade. Mountainview Middle School currently has 753 students in grades 6-8 of which the students are 78% white, 10% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 3% Black, and 2% of two or more races.[i]

The Mountainview Public School District boasts high levels of student achievement. The high school graduation rate is 96% and half of the students there take Advanced Placement courses. Students at Mountainview Middle School outperform the state average each year on standardized assessments and go on to either attend the district high school or one of the nearby private or magnet schools. Students in seventh grade experience a broad and diverse curriculum which features core courses of math, science, social studies, language arts, and a foreign language as well as health and physical education and shorter cycle courses including art, public presentation, service learning, robotics, and Internet research. Within these classes, students are often engaged in student-centered, project-based learning and are expected to read, write and think analytically. The school would most closely resemble what Anyon (1980) classified as an "affluent professional school" in terms of both socioeconomic demographics as well as curricular and instructional approach. In this context, inquiry-based learning and a focus on higher-level analysis and critical thinking is encouraged; in fact, this philosophy is reflected throughout the social studies course description on the district's website.

However, in my experience, while this style of instruction is promoted, the content of that instruction is more scrutinized. For example, when teaching about Islam last year, a parent and member of the district's Board of Education, questioned the project I assigned about Islam even though students had completed a nearly identical project about Christianity earlier in the year. As part of that same unit, I developed a lesson focused on Trump's travel ban and the advice from my supervisor beforehand was: "Be careful and remember where you teach". Despite the fact that many teachers and administrators in the district are progressive in their individual politics, there is a general apprehension about combining politics with pedagogy.

This year I am teaching 92 students across four sections of the seventh grade social studies course. While the course ostensibly focuses on world history, geography and culture, I have used the historical content as a

platform for exposing students to contemporary issues and helping them think critically about social justice themes that transcend time and place like inequality, discrimination, and war and peace. This is where I find myself constantly flirting with “the line” referenced earlier. Using documents to drive instruction, encouraging students to develop and share their perspectives, creating a sense of balance in the content, and not explicitly sharing my political views, has generally been seen (based on feedback or lack thereof from students, parents and administrators) as not crossing the line. My current struggle is how to operate within these constraints, while pushing students to be more critically conscious and not falling prey to false equivalencies and normalization in the Age of Trumpism.

## Description and Theory of the Inquiry-Based Learning Project

I designed this project as an inquiry-based study in which each day students would examine a different factor leading to the Roman Empire’s decline and, in the same lesson, analyze how the United States is dealing with the parallel issue today. The culminating assignment for this project was writing and sending a letter to the president explaining the lessons he can learn from the fall of the Roman Empire in the context of comparable problems facing the country today. The inquiry model is the instructional approach embedded in critical pedagogy (Friere, 1997; hooks, 1994; Swalwell, 2013) but it is also reflective of a new understanding of historical literacy and history instruction that emphasizes skills such as analysis, synthesis and writing for understanding as part of teaching historical content (Downey & Long, 2016).

### ***What lessons can the president and country learn from the fall of Rome?***

The guiding question for this inquiry study was: What lessons can the president and country learn from the fall of Rome? In each lesson, students would end class by returning to that overarching question in the context of the specific problem that was the focus of that day (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998). These written reflections helped students synthesize their understanding of the topic and served as the content for their letters (Downey & Long, 2016). The letter-writing assignment was an attempt to have students politically engage with the world outside the classroom through their writing. (Christensen, 2000). Ultimately, this project was designed to help students synthesize historical content (Downey & Long, 2016), develop a critical awareness and understanding of issues in the US, and introduce them to concept of civic action (Freire, 1997; hooks, 1994).

## Inquiry Project in Action: Lessons, Struggles and Successes

I began the project with an introductory lesson focused on how the decline and fall of the Roman Empire can serve as a cautionary tale for modern empires like the United States. After assigning a brief textual overview of the decline of Rome, I had students free-write and discuss the challenges they see facing the country today. This introduction served as the foundation for the next seven lessons, each of which focused on a different factor leading to Rome’s fall and comparable problems in the US today: societal divisions, economic inequality, political instability and a lack of trust in government, taxation and economic policies, overexpansion and military spending, migration and refugees, and ongoing wars and military decline.

Over the course of the following lessons, two noteworthy trends emerged as I attempted to push students to be more critically conscious through document-based inquiry, discussion and writing. First, the students struggled to understand and/or resisted acknowledging these contemporary issues as systemic problems. This dynamic occurred for three reasons: a lack of experience and interaction with marginalized groups in society, only having lived during a time of endless war and widespread mistrust in government, and their collectively-advantaged socioeconomic position. Second, as students analyzed and discussed these issues in class, one of three reactions occurred: some were moved to embrace a critically-conscious position in their writing, some only moved a little but not to the point of supporting a systemic change in society, and some were completely unmoved. Due to the similarities in the class discussions, pedagogical challenges and student responses, I have grouped the lessons together as follows: 1) societal divisions with migration and refugees; 2) political instability and mistrust in government with overexpansion and military spending as well as ongoing war and military decline; and 3) economic inequality with taxation and economic policies.

### **Societal Divisions & Migration and Refugees**

Students began the lesson on societal divisions by considering the importance of unity in a country. Students noted the value of people feeling connected to one another and that a country is stronger when people are not divided. Next, they analyzed a timeline illustrating the rise of Christianity in the context of Rome’s decline and read an excerpt about internal conflicts that arose in Rome as a result of the growth of Christianity. Students then examined images reflecting societal divisions in the US including the violence at Charlottesville, NFL players taking a knee, Black Lives Matter protests, and vandalism of a Jewish cemetery and a Muslim mosque and charts featuring statistics on discrimination such as the perception of how Black Americans are treated, the reported levels of discrimination among American Muslims, and the percentage of LGBT youth who have heard negative messages about being LGBT.

The discussion that ensued across my classes was both interesting and frustrating. Of all the information presented, the most common topic of discussion was about

NFL players like Colin Kaepernick kneeling in protest during the national anthem. The students dominating the discussion expressed outrage over Kaepernick's actions and characterized him as disrespectful to the military, flag and country. I was careful not to explicitly share my own views but explained that Kaepernick was kneeling as an act of protest against racial injustice throughout the country and referred the students back to the data shared earlier. However, most students continued to focus on the action and individual as opposed to the issue of systemic racism in America. This inability or unwillingness to see the issue instead of the person exposed the difficulty non-marginalized students have with understanding a problem that doesn't affect them directly. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of students have a different lived experience than those who are affected by racial discrimination.

However, several students were moved by the data and discussion. For example, Aly, wrote: "In the U.S people are not accepted for their race, beliefs, color, or other people from their race. This is not good and can lead to something greater than riots and that will be very bad for the future of the U.S." Here, Aly recognized societal divisions as a problem but only insofar as it causes a disruption to the status quo. Ellie went further in her response, writing: "We need to please try to unite our country instead of dividing it by discrimination, racism and isolating minority groups. Humanity will always have its flaws but we can at least try to make this world a better place." This response reflects a sense of hopefulness and a vision that a society free of racism and discrimination is beneficial for all, including those who are not directly affected by its far-reaching effects.

A related discussion and dynamic developed in the lesson covering migration and refugees. In that lesson, students analyzed a map of migrations into Rome during the 4th and 5th centuries and watched a video clip about the migration of the Visigoths into Rome as refugees as well as the subsequent mistreatment by the Romans and rebellion by the Visigoths. Next, students examined a graph showing the numbers of undocumented immigrants in the US and a chart illustrating the increase in arrests of undocumented immigrants by Immigration and Customs Enforcement under Trump in 2017 compared to the same period in 2016 under Obama. Students then analyzed a map and chart showing the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis and how few refugees the US has taken in compared to other countries.

This data led to one of the more divisive discussions. Many sought to justify deportations because of the fact that undocumented immigrants came to the US illegally. On the other hand, some students expressed concern over the number of refugees caused by the war in Syria and the relatively low number the US has accepted. I was careful not to explicitly share my view and instead posed questions in an attempt to push the students further: Does the US have an increased responsibility to take in refugees if they are from a war we are fighting? And, what message does it send to other immigrants in the US when there is an increase in deportations?

The students' writing mirrored the divide evident in the class discussions. Some students, like Bryce, argued that Rome's problem stemmed from their mistreatment of migrants and refugees and therefore focused on the need for the US to treat immigrants and refugees better. He suggested: "The U.S. should relieve tension between undocumented immigrants and U.S. citizens by being a role model. They should also further develop a humane way to deal with undocumented immigrants that is agreed upon by the public." Here Bryce wrote about the importance of our government leading on this issue with humanity, thus demonstrating empathy for an oppressed and unfamiliar population.

***The struggle for the students when learning about the plight of undocumented immigrants and refugees extends from the fact that they are culturally and geographically removed from the issue.***

However, even when exposed to new information and pushed on this issue, there were students who remained unmoved from their position. Some, like Riley, understood Rome's mistake as taking in too many immigrants and refugees and therefore the lesson for the US is to deport more and take in less. She argued that Trump should "...not let illegal immigrants into the country. I think this because they could attack and bomb the country when they are not even supposed to be there. Another problem is that they could steal and take many things." This sentiment reveals what Seider (2008) warned about suburban students fearing the loss of their privilege and what Swalwell (2013) noted about the limitations of critical teaching with a non-marginalized population. The struggle for the students when learning about the plight of undocumented immigrants and refugees extends from the fact that they are culturally and geographically removed from the issue. For most, this topic doesn't connect with their lives in a personal way. These students do not know people who have been deported or experienced an ICE raid and this student's response reflects that lack of understanding as well as a disregard for people who live that reality.

**Political Instability and Mistrust in Government, Overexpansion and Military Spending, & Ongoing War and Military Decline**

Students began the lesson on political instability and mistrust in government by discussing the idea of trust, the value of people trusting the government and what leads citizens to lose trust in their government. There was broad consensus among the students that if people lose trust in the government it can lead to rebellions, chaos and a lack of protection and noted that people lose trust when government leaders abuse their power, make bad decisions and are dishonest. Students then analyzed a chart depicting the violent turnover of emperors in Rome followed by a text describing how one emperor came to power through bribery to understand why Romans lost

trust in their government. Next, students examined a poll tracking the declining level of Americans' trust in the federal government from 1958-2017. Students asked smart questions related to the chart and wanted to know what led to the specific periods of decline. Some pointed out that there were low levels of trust under Obama as well as Trump which led to a tangent about the political divide in the country between the two major parties. This is where I felt like I had to be particularly cautious about pushing the students to understand how Trump is uniquely eroding trust. The vast majority of my students do not have the political nuance to identify where I stand politically simply based on my teaching. To most, they understand political views in the context of Democrat or Republican and Hillary/Obama or Trump. Therefore, I was careful to avoid seeming explicitly critical of Trump and instead pushed only to the point of asking students to consider why there may be a lack of trust in Trump. However, by exercising this caution, it allowed some students to conclude that Trump was no worse in fostering mistrust than Obama.

As a result of the discussion, students were generally in agreement that trust is important but, for many, how they applied that idea to the US today varied. Billy was very direct in his suggestion to Trump about how to restore trust in the government: "...tell people the truth. Without honesty there is no trust. You can't expect anyone to listen and believe you if you always lie. If you lie it will come to haunt you when it comes out that you lied and less people will trust you as a leader." However, Paxton did not move from his original position and argued that the problem is with others in the government besides Trump: "The other problem that is arising among government positions below presidency such as in the secretary or governor positions is government corruption. Although it is not a huge problem (yet) in the U.S. many are running for governor in the fifty states of America in November who I personally believe, believe in lies and power for themselves." Importantly though, both responses reflect a limited vision of how the government can and should operate beyond simply being more honest and less corrupt.

***This lesson exposed the challenge of teaching young people how to envision a government that instills trust when all they have known over their relatively short lifetimes is a country of people largely mistrustful of the federal government.***

This lesson exposed the challenge of teaching young people how to envision a government that instills trust when all they have known over their relatively short lifetimes is a country of people largely mistrustful of the federal government. This struggle, combined with the risks of teaching explicitly about politics under the perceived constraints of the school, limited the extent to which some students moved on this issue.

A related challenge emerged in the lesson about overexpansion and military spending. In that lesson, the students read an article excerpt about Rome's attempt to control its large amount of territory by increasing military spending followed by an excerpt from a Germanic leader's speech illustrating the level of motivation Rome's enemies had to bring down the empire. Next, students analyzed a chart of Trump's proposed budget showing the military constituting the majority of the discretionary spending and a chart comparing US military spending to the next eight countries combined. These charts led to several students expressing concern about the amount the US spends on the military once they understood it in the context of the total budget and in relation to other countries. They also examined maps identifying the location of US military bases and US Special Forces around the world. Unfortunately, this information did not have the intended effect on most of the students. Several argued that having bases around the world is not the same as Rome's overexpansion and that it helps keep Americans safe. Some went further connecting back to military funding, claiming that the US should spend as much money as it takes to maintain the best military in the world. I tried to push students further by asking questions such as: How might other countries perceive this large US military presence? And, what are some other spending priorities of the government?

The result was that several students were critical of the military spending in their writing but stopped short of criticizing the overall imperialist approach of the US. For example, Ashley wrote: "...try to think of how much you are spending on the military. Do you really need to spend that much on the military or can you use that money for something else that the citizens may want or need?" It seems the charts on military spending resonated more with the students because they could see the disproportional amount of money spent compared to other aspects of the government as well as compared to other countries. However, the map of the bases and presence of US troops had far less of an impact. Again, like the government mistrust lesson, this connects back to the point that the students have only lived in a time when the US has been engaged in repeated foreign conflicts.

This theme reappeared in the lesson about ongoing wars and military decline. In this lesson, students began by analyzing a map and historical atlas depicting the multiple invasions faced by Rome in the 4th and 5th centuries. Next, they watched part of a video describing the invasions of Germanic tribes and the increased use of non-Roman soldiers in the Roman legions. I then shared a list of all of the countries in which the US is currently fighting a war, launching drone strikes and/or engaged in combat operations and had students analyze data showing the gradual decline in US military enrollment combined with the increased use of private contractors, particularly those who are non-US citizens. Students were generally not bothered by the extent to which the US is fighting wars, although several were concerned with the decline in participation and rise in use of contractors. Overall, most agreed that the US needs a strong military and it is problematic when that military is declining in any way. I

have found that students will often criticize historic empires, like Rome, but are less inclined to apply a similar critique to US imperialism.

The challenge here, as with previous topics, is the students have only known a post-9/11 world in which the US is engaged in ongoing military conflicts like the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Equally significant is the fact that the students aren't personally affected by war. None of them have siblings or parents who fought in Iraq or Afghanistan and these wars are taking place far away where they don't see the deadly effects of drone strikes and bombings on civilians.

However, some students were moved to recognize this increasing US militarism as a problem. For example, Jeff suggested the following: "A solution to invasions of other countries is not abusing our power. If we abuse our power, it is almost definite that the country will turn on us." This point indicates a recognition of the negative effects of US imperial foreign policy but only insofar as it would affect Americans. What is left out here is any mention of how these policies impact the people who are victims of US wars and attacks.

### **Economic Inequality & Taxation and Economic Policies**

For the lesson on economic inequality, students read a secondary source connecting the shift in Roman values with the concentration of wealth among the senatorial class and then a 4th century primary source featuring commentary on the moral decline of Rome's wealthy and poor. Students then examined charts and graphs illustrating the concentration of wealth and income in the US, wealth inequality disaggregated by race, and the lack of social mobility in the US. I intentionally had students examine the data in that order.

Many were surprised to see that the concentration of wealth is worse in the US today than Ancient Rome and even more surprised to learn that there is such a wide wealth gap between White and Black Americans. However, several students argued that this inequality is not a problem because people who are rich earned their money while people who are poor didn't work hard enough and made bad choices. I anticipated this argument as it's one I've heard from students throughout my career which is why I saved the chart illustrating the lack of social mobility for last. I was particularly careful in my explanation of the chart because I wanted students to understand that most people who are born poor stay poor and most who are born wealthy stay wealthy but I didn't want them to think that individual agency is irrelevant. The students' reactions ranged from quiet surprise to fierce skepticism. One student even questioned the validity of the source which led to an important exchange between me and the student where I explained the value of thinking about where information is coming from but not to the point of automatically dismissing information with which one disagrees. Ultimately, I think this data more than others challenged the students' understanding of American society and their collective standing within it as part of the socioeconomically-advantaged.

Through this discussion, several students moved on this issue. One interesting idea was offered by Krish, who saw this issue as threatening to the stability of the country: "A solution for economic inequality is to make taxes fair for everyone so the poor can support themselves. The reason it would be important that the poor can support themselves is so they can stay happy and will not rebel..." Most of the students may not embrace the argument that economic inequality is a moral failing but this quote illustrates the understanding that inequality creates a level of instability that could have a negative impact on the wealthy and poor alike.

A related lesson focused on taxation and economic policies. Students began by discussing different types of taxes and how tax revenue is used by the government. Many expressed negative views of taxes but at the same time didn't quite understand how taxes were used by the government. This initial conversation was useful because it helped students see the necessity of taxes in a society. They then analyzed a chart and primary and secondary source texts describing the policies of currency debasement and the abuse of taxation in Rome and how the rich and poor each reacted. Next, students examined a chart illustrating the amount of tax paid by large American corporations as well as a chart of Trump's original individual tax rate proposal. The individual tax rate proposal chart generated a lot of reactions among the students. Almost all agreed that the poorest people should not pay more in taxes but the students were much more divided on whether the wealthiest should pay less. A common suggestion was that everybody pay a lower tax rate. In an effort to push the students further, I explained how a flat tax rate affects people differently depending on their level of wealth although the complexity of this issue was a limiting factor for many students.

Despite not necessarily grasping all of the nuances of tax policy, I was pleased to see some students tie together the issue of taxes with economic inequality in their writing. For example, Sami wrote in her letter: "I think that you should see how it (taxes) affects everyone, not just the people that are wealthy." This is another example of a student moving a little but not completely to a more critical stance.

### **Student Reflections**

After students wrote their letters, they reflected on what they liked about and learned from the project. Two prominent themes emerged in these responses. First, students identified how the past can help inform the present. For instance, John wrote: "I learned how lots of things from the fall of Rome could apply to the US" and Alexis shared: "I learned that people still make the same mistakes that they did a long time ago, and we just don't realize it". These statements reflect the value of connecting the past to the present to both better understand history as well as our current world (Downey & Long, 2016). This was the first exposure for most of these young students to contemporary issues like US imperial militarism and systemic social and economic inequality. These ideas are

now part of their collective vocabulary and burgeoning understanding of the country and world.

The second theme that emerged was how much the students liked the authenticity of the assignment by sending their letters to Trump. For example, Isabelle wrote: "I liked the fact that we got to share our opinion on what lessons we thought Donald Trump needed to learn." Similarly, Joe wrote: "I liked that we were able to send our letter to the president after we wrote it. It encouraged me to make sure my letter was the best it could be." And Shriya wrote: "I liked the fact that we were writing letters to the president and possibly get a real response." The notion of contacting an elected leader to express one's concerns was a foreign concept to most students before this project and that has now changed. This point was reinforced even more when the students received a response from the White House months later thanking and praising them for their letters.

## Conclusions and Limitations

It is through critical inquiry, dialogue, writing, sharing and reflection, that students learn to think more critically and completely about their world with the goal of developing a sense of thoughtful and informed agency (hooks, 1994; Friere, 1997). In this project, seventh grade students grappled with contemporary issues, were pushed to think critically about their views, and then exercised their civic right in a democracy to speak truth to power by articulating their own ideas to the president.

Suburban public school teachers are constrained in many ways that make critical teaching difficult, especially in the current political climate. The unique challenge of engaging in critical teaching with non-marginalized students is finding the balance between pushing this pedagogy while avoiding the alienation of the students and accusations of indoctrination from parents and administrators (Swalwell, 2013). In my school in particular, I am constantly concerned about navigating the line and being mindful of every word I say to my students as well as the documents I select and questions I pose. I struggle with how far to push and how to help my students think about issues from different and more critical perspectives. In this context, inquiry-based activities that incorporate a diverse set of texts coupled with writing activities designed to help students synthesize information and develop their own ideas allowed me to increase the critical consciousness of my students while shielding myself from critique.

However, while some students embraced critical positions on these contemporary issues, others adopted only slightly more nuanced positions and still others' views remained completely unchanged. The overall age, life experience, and collective socioeconomic status of the students certainly influenced their ability and/or willingness to think critically about systemic issues in the US and the perceived constraints on me as the teacher definitely affected how far I was willing to push the students. That said, despite those limitations, I believe this learning experience was one step toward elevating the critical consciousness of these students and introducing them to

the idea of civic action. "The line" is different at each school and for each teacher but, to me, teaching in the Age of Trumpism calls for pushing that line as far as possible under the existing constraints and helping students think critically about the world and their role in shaping that world.

## Notes

i. The town data is from the United States Census Bureau and the school data is from the National Center for Education Statistics. The name of the town and school district are pseudonyms. All student names used have also been changed to ensure privacy.

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