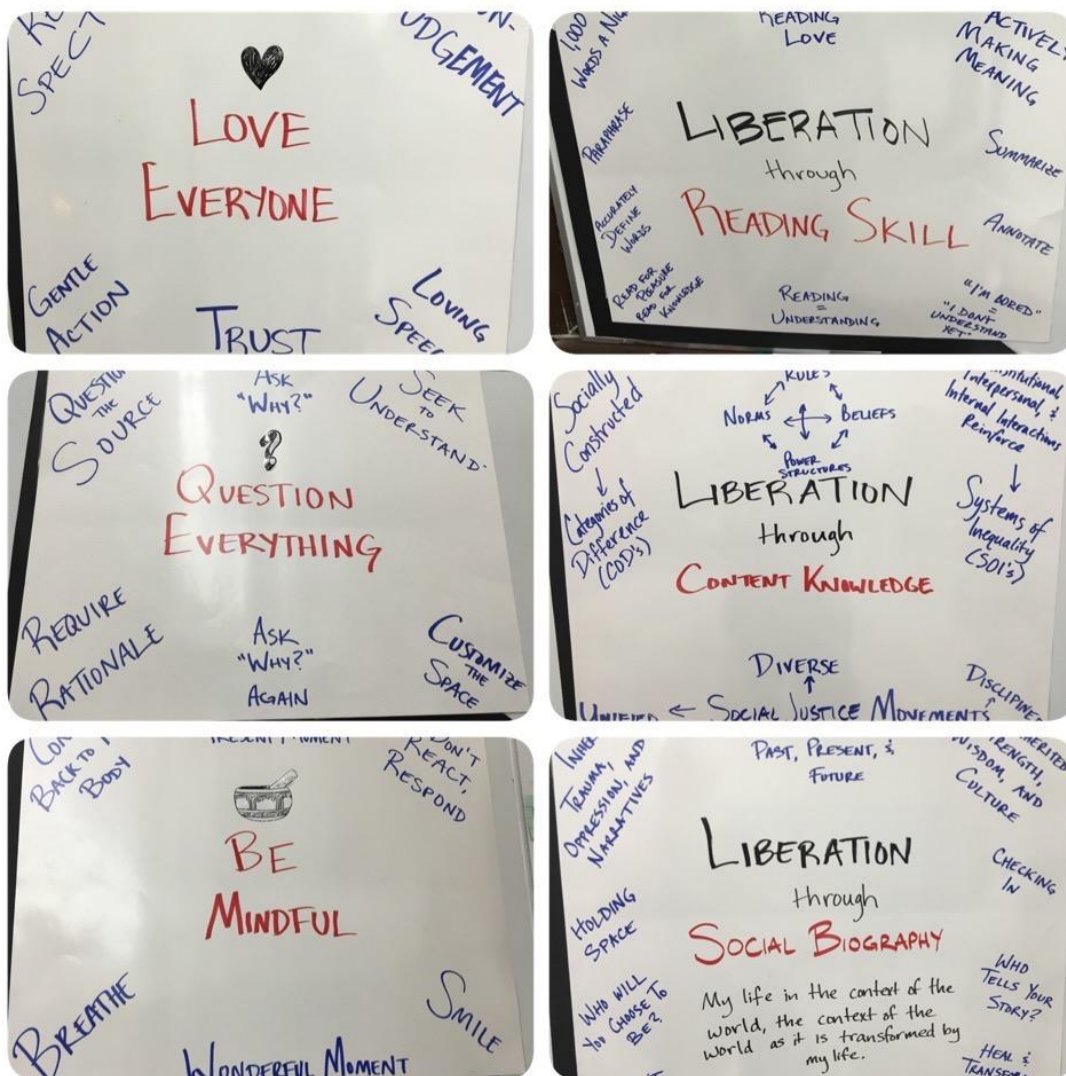


# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Teaching High School Cultural Studies in the Age of Trump

by DJ Cashmere

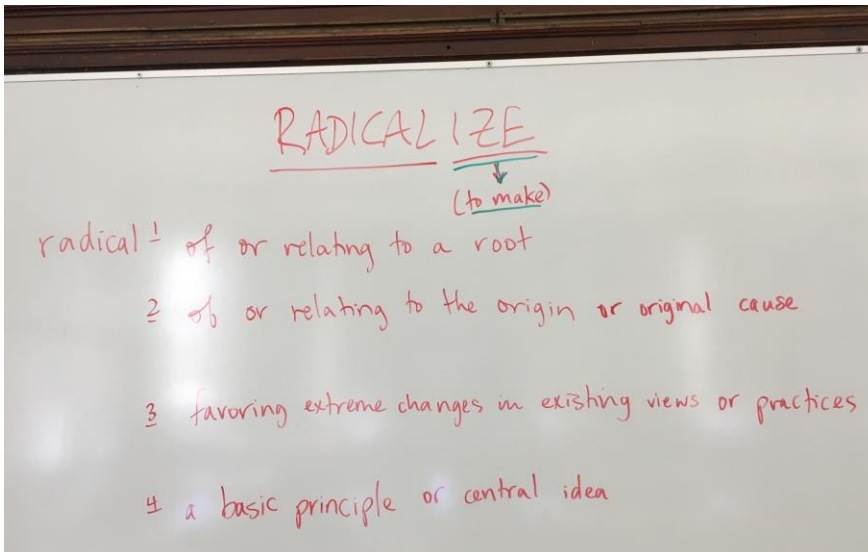


A COLLECTION OF CLASSROOM ANCHOR CHARTS

*"Certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation... They talk about the people, but they do not trust them: and trusting the people is the indisputable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust."*

-Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

In the high school Cultural Studies Seminar I co-taught in 2016-2017, my students knew that when we didn't know what a word meant, we looked it up. One day during the school year, a few weeks after President Trump's inauguration, we came across the word "radicalize" in an article about DeRay Mckesson and other Black Lives Matter activists.



A SERIES OF POSSIBLE DEFINITIONS DISPLAYED ON THE CLASS WHITEBOARD ON FEBRUARY 9, 2017

According to the article's author, Jay Caspian Kang, Mckesson was radicalized during a tear gas-laden protest in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. "Radicalize," in the context of the article, meant "to make one favor extreme changes in existing views or practices."

This was a bit of a "meta" moment because the class itself also favored such changes. In Cultural Studies, my co-teachers and I sought to empower students to transform negative views they had about themselves and the self-sabotaging habits those views sometimes engendered. We also sought to provide students with language and tools for understanding their own oppression (and privilege), analyzing social justice movements past and present, and transforming the world. We sought, in both pedagogy and curriculum, to be intentionally antiracist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, and anti-heterosexist, even as the new presidential administration was proving itself to be quite the opposite.

In other words, Cultural Studies was a class specifically designed to radicalize. So, it was particularly important to look up this word.

## Developing Cultural Studies Seminar

In the fall of 2016, I began my third year teaching Cultural Studies Seminar at Chicago Bulls College Prep (CBCP), where I'd been working as a teacher since 2010. CBCP is a campus of the Noble Network of Charter Schools and is located on Chicago's Near West Side.<sup>1</sup> The school serves a population of students that is roughly 2/3 Latino and 1/3 African American, and about 90% of CBCP's students receive free or reduced-price lunch. Every year, 100% of seniors are accepted to college. This year, I would be teaching ninth-graders.

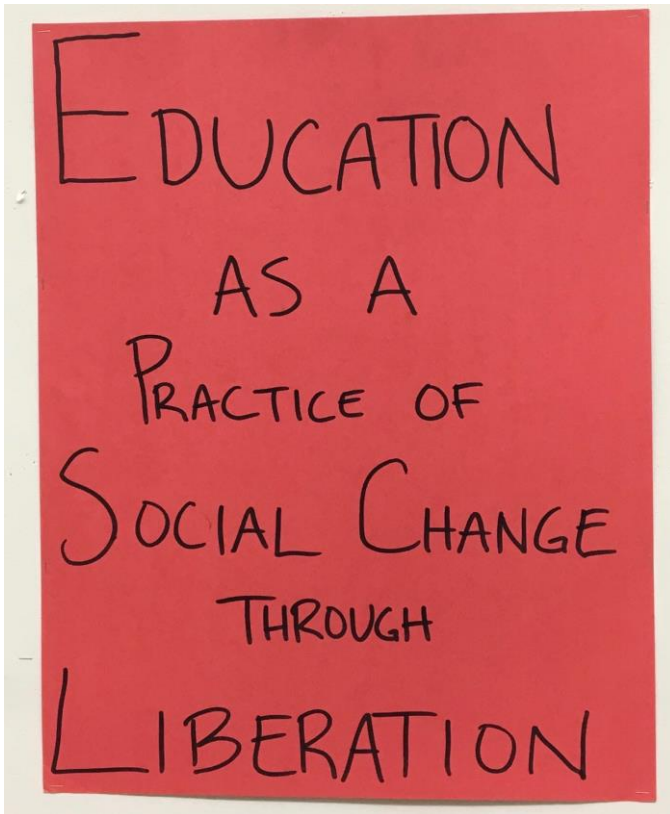
I had first devised the course in the fall of 2014, when my principal and assistant principal gave me permission to re-focus the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade literacy class I was teaching. I wanted to specifically study racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism in America, with an eye toward how those systems operate and how they can be—and have been—resisted. We put our heads together and came up with the name "Cultural Studies Seminar."

I'm not sure I was the right person for this job. At the time, I was just beginning to come to terms with what it meant to be a straight White able-bodied cisgender male from a middle-class Judeo-Christian household. I had not even begun to understand what it meant to carry that identity into a classroom with students whose identities were quite different than my own. I was still deeply individualistic, an attribute that had been subconsciously reinforced throughout my

life, and I asked for little help or guidance from the people around me. I was extremely privileged, having experienced virtually none of the traumas many of my students had survived (and in some cases were continuing to survive on a daily basis). And I hadn't yet confronted the socialization which caused me, on a subconscious level, not to fully trust my students.

As a result of all this, the first year of Cultural Studies Seminar was a difficult one. My individualism left me groping in the dark, not realizing, for example, that exploring narratives of oppression without also exploring counter-narratives of resistance was ultimately re-traumatizing, not empowering. My privilege made it difficult for me to respond to student struggles in trauma-responsive ways. My lack of trust undermined the goals I set out to accomplish. To put it another way: during that first year, my class was not radical. It was rooted in liberal values, not liberationist values, and as a result, authentic empowerment was not possible.

Thankfully, my community lifted me up. In my second year of teaching Cultural Studies, this time with sophomores, a native Chicagoan and veteran educator at CBCP named Christine Peralta agreed to co-teach the class with me. Her brilliant mind for data, sharp organizational systems, and deep understanding of student psychology filled significant gaps in my skill set. The perspective she brought as a daughter of immigrants of color, and her willingness to share that perspective with me, led to deep and difficult conversation and reflection on the nature of our curriculum and our interaction with students.



A CLASSROOM SIGN AT THE START OF THE 2016-2017 SCHOOL YEAR, INSPIRED BY THE WORK OF MICHAEL JAMES.

By that time, I had also begun learning from elders. At the University of Puget Sound's Race & Pedagogy National Conference in September 2014, I heard Dr. Robin DiAngelo explain that racism was always at work in our society: it was never a matter of *if*, but only ever a matter of *how*. Other speakers, such as Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Dr. Angela Davis, pushed my thinking further, giving me a greater sense of how much I did not know.

In February 2016, I saw Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade speak twice in Washington, D.C. Ms. Peralta and I then visited him at his school in Oakland, California, called *Roses in Concrete*. He was generous with his time, touring us around the school and answering our questions, transforming our understanding of what an educational space could be. At *Roses*, there was a focus on both educational excellence *and* healing, a belief in people over process, a trust in students to create rituals, and a deep intentionality around physical spaces.

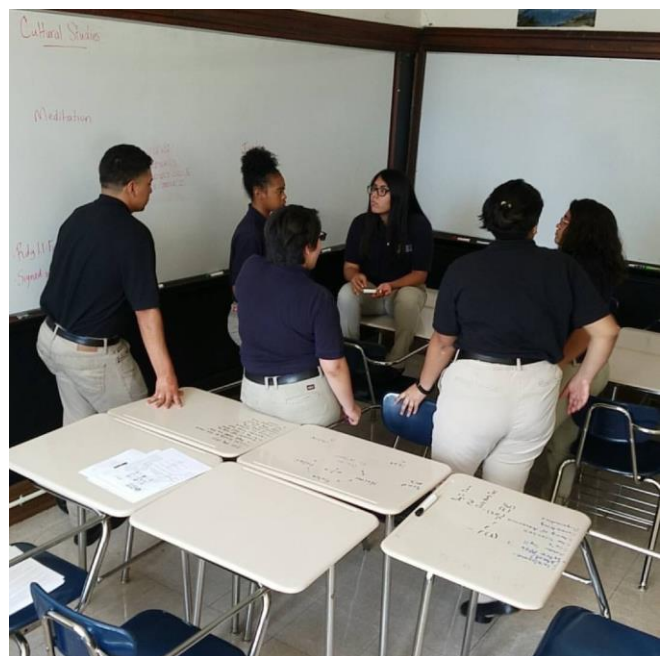
We also visited with Michael James, a long-time educator who worked directly with Paulo Freire years ago. He, too, was wildly generous with his time, driving us around San Francisco and inviting us to a session of his high school leadership fellowship. There, we learned about the power of students learning to construct their own "social biographies," in which they contextualized the story of their lives using their understanding of systemic inequality, then continued on to also explain the ways in which they would use their lives to disrupt the status quo.

Each of these elders had a direct impact on my practice in the classroom. I still can't believe it took me so long to seek them out.

## Getting Started

A few days before classes started for my incoming ninth-graders in the fall of 2016, a group of juniors who had taken Cultural Studies with Ms. Peralta and I the year before came up to the school to help plan the first week's agenda. They were volunteering some of their last hours of summer vacation, and they worked largely on their own. The following week, they came once again, this time to welcome the ninth-graders and implement the agenda they'd created.

On the first day of class, my new students walked by a sign on the door reading, "I Love You. I Trust You. I Believe in You." I said these words aloud at the beginning of class on day one and repeated them regularly throughout the school year. Then, when I found myself resorting to years of socialization that had taught me not to trust young people of color, my own words would ring in my head or call out from the classroom door. *You said you trusted them. You have to trust them. It's right there on the door!*



JUNIORS MEETING IN AUGUST 2016 TO HELP PLAN THE FIRST WEEK OF CLASS FOR NINTH-GRADERS.



Empowering my former students to be front and center during the opening days of class sent a number of important messages. For one thing, this was going to be a classroom in which discussion between students was the main event.

For another, we were going to value diverse voices beyond those which were in the classroom every day. Over the months to come, I would invite staff members of color from the teaching, discipline, and custodial/maintenance teams to speak to the students. I also welcomed alumni into the classroom and gave them the floor to talk about their experiences in college. One alumnus, Daniel Ibarra, a 2013 CBCP graduate, took over for Ms. Peralta and became the second teacher in the room for the duration of the 2016-2017 school year. (Ms. Peralta continued supporting behind the scenes.) Mr. Ibarra's tireless consistency, cheerful demeanor, and intelligence benefited our students immensely. As someone who'd been in the students' seats just a few years prior, he had a unique ability to connect and inspire.

Ms. Peralta, Mr. Ibarra, and I made another important choice at the beginning of the year: we hosted a family barbecue for current and former Cultural Studies students and their families. This gave our juniors another chance to mentor the incoming ninth-graders, which they would continue to do in office hours during the school year. It also gave us a chance to build community.

Finally, I took the time, at long last, to intentionally decorate our classroom. Inspired by *Roses in Concrete*, I

After the meet-and-greet, we'd all take part in a guided meditation. Usually, either myself or Mr. Ibarra would lead, though sometimes a student would take the responsibility. The idea here was to become fully present in the room, clearing our heads and coming back to our bodies. (Another core value was "Be Mindful.")

If students came in with a lot of stress, we'd also take a few minutes to talk in whole-group about what was on their minds. Some days this wasn't necessary, but often, especially on Mondays, it was. Students shared everything from shopping trips they'd taken with their parents to personal experiences with gun violence they'd had over the weekend. When a student had experienced something particularly traumatic, they always knew they could share, though they were never forced to. The rest of the room slowly learned to hold the emotional space for the person sharing. They did this by listening closely, expressing sympathy and concern, and sometimes relating their own experiences which were similar to the one that was shared. If the room got heavy, we'd acknowledge this and sit with it for a moment before intentionally putting it away and moving on with our agenda.

Sometimes, it took a long time to put things away, and on rare occasions, we never did move on to the agenda. One such day was November 9, 2016, the day after the presidential election. In each class period, the fear and disappointment were palpable, and we spent as much time as was needed allowing students to process their feelings and clear up their misunderstandings about what was and wasn't happening in the country. It was a crucial time to



THE CLASSROOM PRIOR TO THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. DECORATIONS INCLUDED AN "UPSIDE DOWN" MAP, A "MIGRATION IS BEAUTIFUL" POSTER, AND IMAGES OF VARIOUS ACTIVISTS. WE WOULD GO ON TO FILL THE RED AND BLUE BULLETIN BOARD WITH PHOTOS OF STUDENTS' ANCESTORS.

made sure that our walls reflected back the identity of our students and the philosophy of our class.

Throughout the year, most days followed a familiar pattern. When the bell rang, students were required to be sitting silently in their seats, as they were across the school. Once we said hello to each other, however, we'd have a meet-and-greet. This was an informal practice taken from LaVaughn Cain, another colleague and a trusted elder, during which students would mill about and greet each other and catch up on life. The only expectation was that they greet expansively, as opposed to sticking to cliques or self-segregating along lines of race and gender. If we were going to "Love Everyone"—one of our three classroom core values—it had to start in the opening minutes.

uphold and act out our third core value, "Question Everything." It was also a time in which I was grateful to be in the classroom. Where better to be on that day than amongst my students, working toward social change together?

The current political climate continued to shape our lives in the classroom. When students decided to stay home on the Day Without Immigrants, we made sure they felt validated in their choice. We also connected students who were undocumented or had undocumented family members with emotional support and information about legal resources.

On most days, though, we didn't spend too much time on the news. The best way to arm our students against the indignities of the new administration wasn't to digest each new assault on cultural norms and marginalized groups.

The best way was to remember why we were here: liberation. Not from Trump, but from oppressive systems which pre-dated him by centuries.

We'd move from meditation into our daily quiz, an open-note eight-question affair designed to give students an opportunity to prove their comprehension of the previous night's reading. From there, now about 20 minutes into the period, we'd transition into our discussion groups.

Students were grouped into five tables of roughly six students each. Sometimes, they'd spend the rest of the class working on question sets with their entire table. Other times, they'd split further into pairs, and work that way. Our class discussions lasted the remainder of the period, roughly 50 minutes.

Class work on question sets alternated between small-group work and whole-group check-in. Students would work together with their partners or groups for a few minutes, then I'd ring a bell and center the attention on a single speaker. If I noticed a common error being made, I'd note it and send them back to work. If I thought we were ready to hear an answer, I'd call on someone and then others would give them feedback on their response.

If a student was stuck during their small-group work, they could go to another table or ring the bell and ask the whole class for help. Students had free reign of the classroom, so whether they needed to get a tissue, a

dictionary, a writing utensil, a laptop, or a clarification, they knew they were trusted to do so without needing to ask for permission. *You said you trusted them. You have to trust them.* Eventually, students ran virtually the entire discussion by themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Our question sets were always comprised of three types of questions: reading skill, content knowledge, and social biography.

## Reading Skill

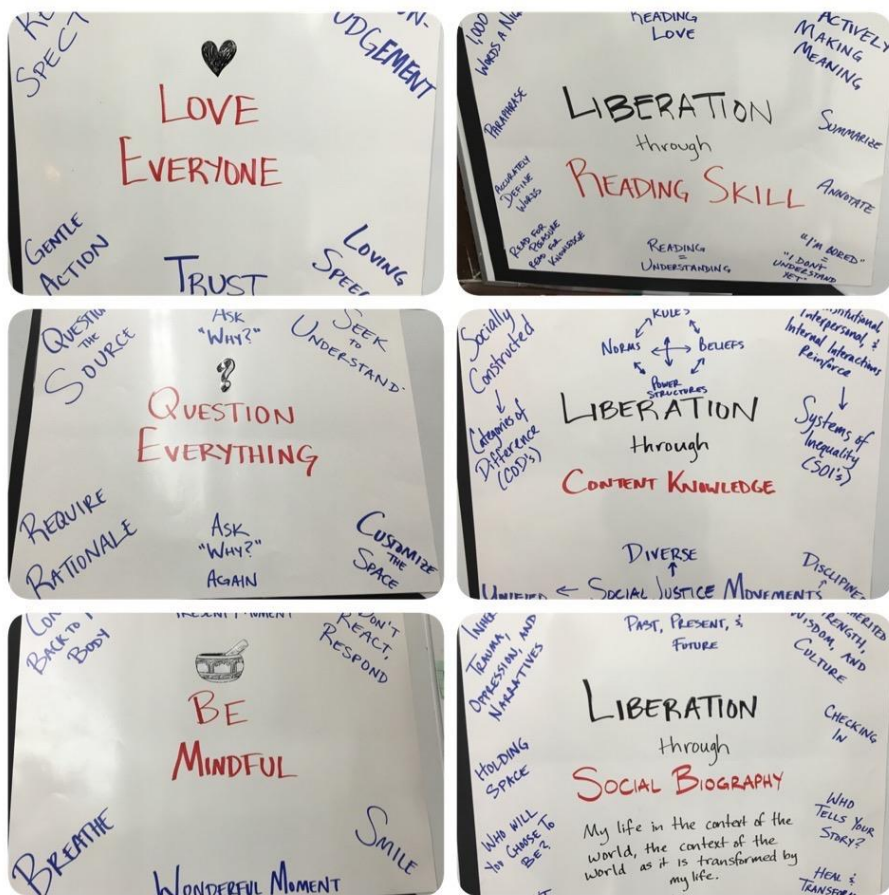
My students came in at an 11.4 on the Reading ACT. This was about ten points below the national average for high school juniors. It was also slightly worse than what they would receive by bubbling in "B" for every question and closing the book.

Granted, they had nearly three years to make up the ground, but the median historic growth for ninth-graders across the Noble Network was 2.76 points—and the Noble Network was getting some of the best results in the entire city of Chicago. Even reaching the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile for historic network growth would get us only 2.91 points.

The ACT Reading test is an imperfect measure of reading ability, let alone intelligence. It is not an adaptive test, it is administered under a severe time constraint, and its passages rarely reflect the language or culture of millions of students who take it every year. It measures neither creativity nor character. Nonetheless, the ACT—or a similar test—would play a huge role in my students' college admission and, by extension, their future. And in a high-stakes charter school environment, I was directly accountable to my students' results. Test score growth became a sort of currency with which to justify radical spaces within the institution.

We spent only twelve days on test prep over the course of the school year, and even those days were less about the test and more about coming to see stamina and positivity as direct challenges to the status quo. As one student reflected, doing well on the test would challenge "beliefs and power structures, because the system was set up for students of color to fail." Another student added, "most of the class believes they can't do the ACT, but they can... we as a family just have to have a positive mindset and support each other through everything." A third argued that improving would move "our brains one step closer to liberation."

We spent the bulk of our time reading and discussing high-level



A COLLECTION OF CLASSROOM ANCHOR CHARTS.

non-fiction texts by authors such as Audre Lorde, Eric Schlosser, Malcolm Gladwell, James Baldwin, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, John Eligon, Mary Crow Dog, and Richard Rodriguez. Each night, students read and closely annotated 1,000 words, meaning that some longer articles took us more than a week to read.

In Cultural Studies, reading was equated with understanding. Our “reading skill” discussion questions were focused on comprehension above all else. Time and again, we explained what individual words meant, paraphrased sentences, and summarized short passages. If we needed to spend a whole class period on a single sentence, then that’s what we did.

This is why our core values of Loving Everyone, Being Mindful, and Questioning Everything were so important in the classroom. Students who had gotten away with wrong answers and incomplete understandings for years were often visibly frustrated when told over and over again that they were not, actually, correct. Without loving speech, respect, and gentle action, the criticism would have been disheartening instead of empowering. Without breathing, smiling, and pausing often to praise all the wonderful aspects of the work being done, relentlessness would have become drudgery. Without constantly asking why, requiring rationale, and allowing students to customize their space, the right answers would have remained forever lost.

Still, it was extremely difficult. Many students struggled to follow through on their homework, and some struggled with staying disciplined and focused in class. I did my best to work within our school’s discipline system to be both consistent and sympathetic, firm and loving. The students who got in trouble the most also got the most one-on-one support and encouragement. It wasn’t always enough.

I knew that it was going to take a while for the hard work to pay off. I made sure never to give a student less than 50% on any assignment. That way, the grade book had a bottom, and students could always bounce back. As the year progressed, I weighted assignments more and more heavily, so that students who struggled early on had a chance at redemption as they grew, and students who were already doing well were incentivized to stay focused.

Of course, once we had done the hard work, we could put comprehension exercises aside and creatively reflect on what we now understood. Here, for example, are some excerpts of students’ letters to James Baldwin, in response to his 1963 speech “A Talk to Teachers,” which we read a few weeks after the election.

*“Your speech was very empowering to me because you opened my eyes to know that just because I’m a child, I*



NINTH-GRADERS IN AFTER-SCHOOL OFFICE HOURS BEING ASSISTED BY ELEVENTH-GRADERS.

*don’t have to take the injustice. You also made me realize that I don’t have to be White in order to change something that I don’t like about society...”*

*“History is repeating itself as people who are not liberated keep quiet. History repeats itself when Blacks and Whites don’t even know who we are, what we have been through, what we have accomplished...”*

*“You taught me that it’s up to me to change things in the world—but the only way I will be able to do that is to get liberated and find my self-worth...”*

## Content Knowledge

Content knowledge was our second pillar, because our students needed to learn *things*, not just *skills*. They needed to navigate between texts and units with a common vocabulary and a set of references that grew and deepened over time.

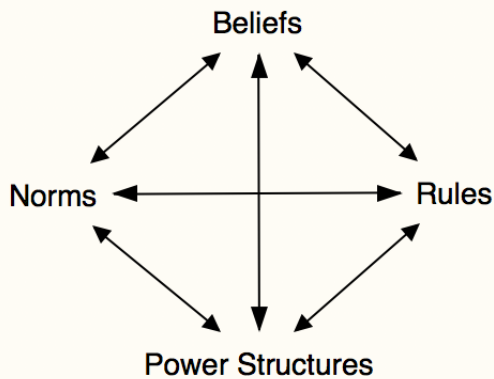
Inspired by the explanation of institutions in Tracy E. Ore’s *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality*, we created four units: Social Justice in the Media, Social Justice in Education, Social Justice in the State, and Social Justice in the Economy and in the Family.

In each unit, we focused on two main pieces of content knowledge: understanding how systems of inequality worked within a given institution and understanding how social justice movements fought back against that inequality.

We taught four systems of inequality: racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. A system of inequality was defined as a collection of rules, norms, beliefs, and power structures that worked together to privilege one group and oppress another group. After mastering these four elements, in order to understand each individual



system, students simply had to plug in the proper privileged and oppressed group. This meant that later ideas, such as Audre Lorde’s “no hierarchy of oppressions” and the concept of intersectionality, made a certain kind of organic sense.



“THE DIAMOND” WE USED TO DISCUSS SYSTEMS OF INEQUALITY.

We drew these four elements—rules, norms, beliefs, and power structures—in an interconnecting diamond shape. “The Diamond” then became an analytical tool we used to unpack oppression in both written and multimedia texts. In studying *Selma*, for example, we were able to identify rules (the poll tax, the literacy test), beliefs (White supremacy), power structures (elected officials, court clerks), and norms (unchecked violence against people of color) that worked together to privilege Whites and oppress people of color.

Indeed, in one of our quarterly parent meetings, students formed circles with their peers and family members and taught their family members “the Diamond.” We then watched clips from *Selma* and the parents and students worked together to identify examples of rules, norms, beliefs, and power structures in action.

We had another mechanism for understanding social justice movements called “the Triangle,” which consisted of three elements: diversity, unity, and discipline. Over and over, whether reading about Black Lives Matter or watching *How to Survive a Plague*, we searched for evidence of these three things. We noticed that homogeneity, discord, and impetuosity among activist groups impeded progress. But when they brought on allies, worked together, and carefully crafted and followed plans, they brought about significant change.

As current and former Cultural Studies students started expressing interest in, and even participating in, activism themselves—such as attending the Chicago protest which shut down a planned Trump rally or

participating in the Women’s March—the immediacy of these ideas became ever greater.

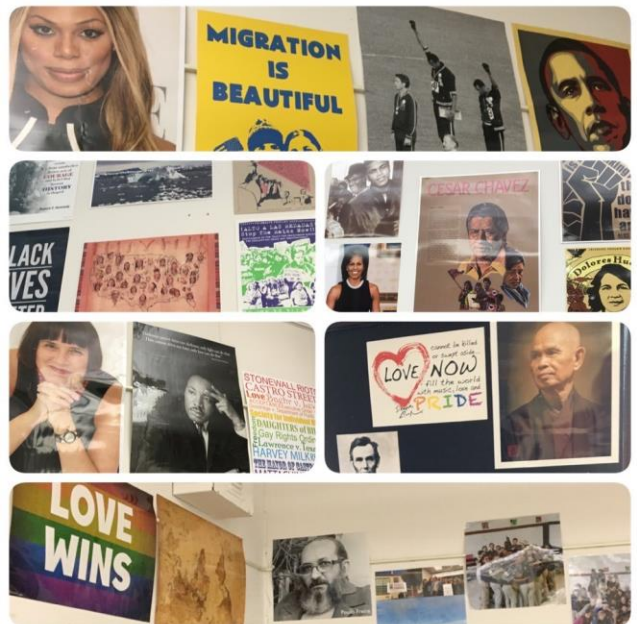
## Social Biography



A MARCH 2016 PARENT MEETING IN WHICH STUDENTS AND PARENTS DISCUSSED “THE DIAMOND” AND APPLIED IT TO *SELMA*. WE REPEATED THE EVENT THE FOLLOWING YEAR.

A social biography is an intentionally radical retelling of a life story in connection to the wider world. We first learned about social biographies from Michael James and came to define them for students in the following way: *my life in the context of the world, and the context of the world as it is transformed by my life.*

The social biography questions provided a space for personal reflection and academic application. They started off quite simple. Students were asked to discuss how they felt when they first walked into the classroom, for example,



OUR CLASSROOM WALLS REFLECTED SOME OF THE ACTIVISTS AND ACTIVIST GROUPS WE STUDIED, INCLUDING ACT UP, BLM, AND THE UFW

or whether reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “We Should All Be Feminists” had changed their own relationship with the notion of feminism. As we got deeper into the year, the questions became more personal.

At the end of each quarter, students were asked to write a social biography essay. For example, at the end of Unit 2, Social Justice in Education, students were given 8-10 paragraphs to write a three-part essay. In Part 1, they were asked to tell specific stories about their own pre-high school educations. In Part II, they drew direct connections between their stories and our texts from the unit. Using direct quotations and classroom language (rules, norms, beliefs, power structures), students contextualized their experiences. In Part III, they reflected on what mindsets or habits they’d developed about themselves as a result of these experiences, and whether transforming these might have a positive impact, both personally and on the wider world.

Each of these parts proved crucial. Students personally reflected on failing to get into selective schools, being bullied by classmates, and even being called names or physically abused by former teachers. By contextualizing these experiences through the application of their academic understanding, they were able to discover hidden truths about some of the things they had survived. All of a sudden, what had seemed like a personal failure was recast as an oppressive norm. A silenced moment of danger was revealed to be a systemic lack of rules. A personal attack was re-understood as an abusive power structure with harmful beliefs.

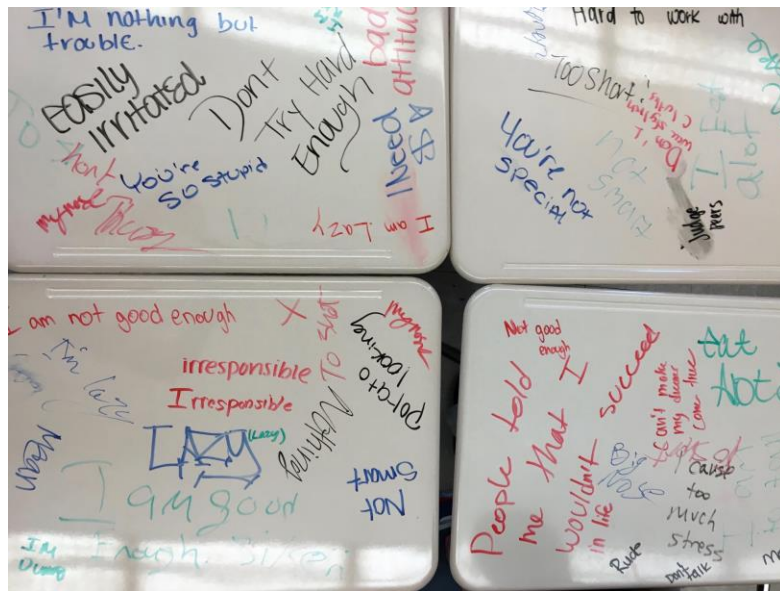
It was through this contextualizing that the class rescued itself from being group therapy. Before I learned how to help students contextualize—before the trip Ms. Peralta and I took to the Bay—personal reflections had been extremely ineffective in Cultural Studies. Some students would reveal deep wounds, going through a process of re-traumatization that may have been cathartic, but wasn’t truly *healing*. Other students, sensing the lack of emotional safety, would put up walls, finding ways to distance themselves from the material, noting little details in a story that would allow them to claim, “that’s not about me.”

What eventually made it a radical space was not that students were free to share their trauma—though they were, and they did. What made it a radical space (for our final weeks with the tenth-graders and for the ninth-graders after them) was that they spent time learning

about the systemic roots of their struggle. In so doing, they learned that they were connected to the world around them. As James Baldwin said, “You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world. But then you read.”

One of our students reflected on his oppression as a person of color whose family was low-income, but *also* reflected on his own sexism, and his expectations of submissiveness from his girlfriend. Another got fired up over the racist and classist education system that had allowed him to get to high school without learning the names of the world’s continents. Multiple students worked through their experiences with sexual assault.

We had a student who struggled mightily with both grades and discipline share a story about being sexually harassed in middle school. At the time, she’d been punished for the incident along with her harasser, and she had internalized a sense of guilt and shame. Over the course of many conversations and assignments, she was able to analyze her own story using the diamond—



AN ANONYMOUS STUDENT BRAINSTORM ABOUT NEGATIVE BELIEFS THEY INHERITED ABOUT THEMSELVES FROM THEIR FAMILIES AND/OR OTHER SOURCES.

realizing, for example, that such assaults were a sexist norm—which helped her understand she was not alone.

Another student who struggled with grades and discipline shared a story about his encounter with racial profiling at the hands of the police. In the middle of class one day, he was able to move from a place of barely-restrained anger (“cops are pigs”) to a place of intellectual analysis (“that was an example of a racist power structure”).

The radical nature of the reflection did not stop there. Students were encouraged to go a step further and imagine transformation, both personal and systemic. It wasn’t just “my life in the context of the world,” but also “the context of the world as it is transformed by my life.”

The student who had been struggling since her middle school harassment started bringing up her grades and stopped getting detentions. The student who had been mistreated by police did the same. He also became a mentor to a younger student who was dealing with similar academic and behavioral struggles. Eventually, a large group of our students were asked by the assistant principal to share their contextualized stories in other classrooms in



order to bring a higher level of consciousness and authenticity to their peers.

It wasn't just trauma, but healing.

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STUDENTS LED DISCUSSION CIRCLES WITH THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS DURING THE FINAL CULTURAL STUDIES PARENT MEETING OF THE YEAR.

It took a student asking me about my own social biography for me to realize that I didn't have one. Pretty soon, I was forcing myself to answer the same questions as my students. With their help and the help of my colleagues, I came to realize that my ancestors, like those of my students, had experienced oppression when they arrived in America. Many of their stories, like those of my students' ancestors, had been silenced or lost. Their suffering had been transmitted, in different forms, from generation to generation. And now, in place of the identity with which they arrived, I possessed a dehumanizing privilege that had been impeding my personal relationships and making me a less effective teacher.

This set of realizations led me to finally understand the words of the indigenous activist Lilla Watson, who famously said, "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." In other words, I had skin in the game. For years, I had fallen into the "White savior" trap of "coming to help" my students. As it turned out, I needed liberation, too.

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I have no doubt that the Cultural Studies students will go on to lead transformational lives. They certainly didn't wait for the future in order to get started. I watched the Cultural Studies tenth-graders do so well at the end of the 2015-2016 school year that an extra section of AP US

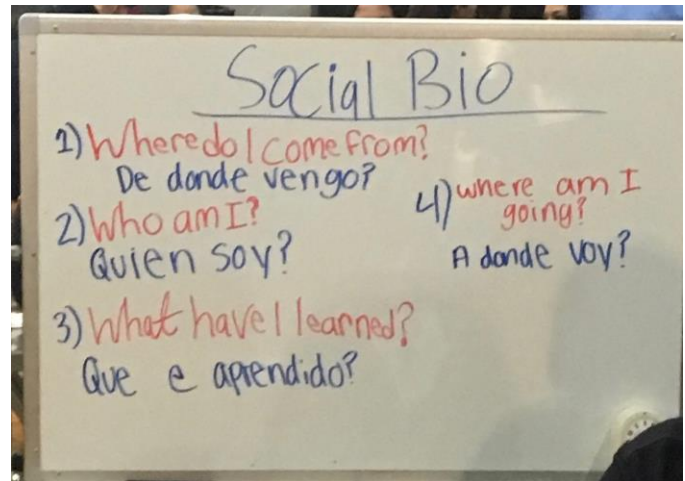
History had to be added to the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade course offerings in order to accommodate them. I watched the Cultural Studies ninth-graders outpace their predecessors, reaching 3.96 points of growth on the Reading ACT—just 0.16 points shy of beating the historic record across the network. I watched students in both classes sit down with their parents at the end of their respective school years and share their final social biographies.

They were stories of survival: of border crossings, sexual assaults, and run-ins with the police. They were stories of awakening: of learning family history, of owning up to privilege, of caring more about the world. They were stories of liberation.

For over an hour, students led their families in a discussion in which they actively contextualized their pasts and talked about their futures. One student was in tears talking about not having enough food on the table at home. Another came out of the closet to her parents, protected by the students in her group—and their families, too, who were all in the circle together. Parents hugged other parents' children.

These were the most radical nights of the entire course.

The ninth-graders' gathering was on May 31, 2017, four months into the Trump presidency. Young students of color from Chicago's inner city were leading their own meeting, surrounded by their families, un-silencing their stories and their identities and talking openly about what they hoped to do to change the world.



CUSTOMIZING THEIR SPACE, A GROUP OF STUDENTS GRABBED AN AVAILABLE WHITEBOARD AND OUTLINED THE FOUR BASIC QUESTIONS OF THEIR FINAL SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENT IN BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH. THIS SERVED AS A VISUAL AID AS THEY SHARED THEIR STORIES WITH THEIR FAMILIES AT THE FINAL PARENT MEETING.

## Ending the Year

After graduating from Chicago Bulls College Prep in 2013, Mr. Ibarra had tried his hand at a four-year university, but hadn't made it. When he started co-teaching with me, he was taking community college classes and was unsure about his path forward.

One day, he told our students the story of his college experience. He talked about not being properly counseled about course selection, not being assigned an engaged advisor, and not feeling comfortable with the clear class differential between him and some of his peers. The students helped him contextualize this and other struggles using "the Diamond." Before the year was out, he was once again enrolled in a four-year school, and is now on track to earn his bachelor's degree in 2020—the same year the students we taught together will enter college.

The last two weeks of class were made up of a student-run "final exam." After receiving a set of criteria and creating their own class agenda, they watched and discussed *Viva la Causa*, a film about the United Farm Workers. They switched back and forth between the film, their partners, and the whole-group setting, employing the class vocabulary of "the Diamond" and "the Triangle" to analyze what they were seeing. They also reflected, individually and collectively, on their growth in reading skill, content knowledge, and social biography, and explored what liberation meant to them. Their rubric was based on three criteria: diversity, unity, and discipline.

I disappeared as fully as possible. *You have to trust them.*

They crushed it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I realize *Radical Teacher* readers may have strong reservations about charter schools. I believe there are inherent flaws in both traditional public and public charter school models, just as there are examples of both excellent traditional public schools and excellent public charter schools. In my experience at CBCP, I was surrounded by

compassionate, driven, high-performing colleagues. The school's emphasis on autonomy and innovation was what empowered the creation of Cultural Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Our discussion system was a variation on a school-wide instructional model, which made implementing such a student-focused structure much easier—they were used to taking the lead in their other classes, as well.



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