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Textual Revolution

Reading and Writing about Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in High School Humanities Classes

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Abstract

This article provides a rationale for why high school humanities classes need to discuss the sensitive topics surrounding terrorism and counter-terrorism. It provides lesson plan ideas on the topics of lone wolf killings, domestic terrorism, the language of terror, related current events and larger social issues, and counter-terrorism. These lessons have the potential to reimagine secondary English and Social Studies classrooms to further focus on human development, relationships, and social justice.



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The world is increasingly complex. We are living in an era of mass shootings, domestic and international terrorism, and radical violence in America and abroad. Citizens of the world no longer feel completely safe in movie theaters, shopping malls, nightclubs, and sadly, even in our nations' schools. One of the greatest challenges facing educators and students today is how to better understand, identify, discuss, and ultimately prevent the cycles of radicalization and violence that are occurring in our midst. As such, educators have a responsibility to provide students with greater opportunities to develop their abilities to critically read the world.

Critical Literacy as a Framework to Teach about Terrorism

One of the concepts that critical literacy theory promotes is that liberating education consists of acts of cognition, rather than transfers of information (Freire, 1970). From a critical literacy perspective, the purpose of empowering education is to engage participants in problem-posing that leads to meaningful dialogue, transformation and social action. Freire, the founding father of critical literacy, and proponents of critical literacy who have expanded upon his ideas in recent years (Apple, 2014; Gee, 2014; Freire & Macedo, 2013; Janks, 2013; Rogers, 2013; Vasquez, 2013), believe that as learners continue to engage in problem-posing and problem-solving that relates to both themselves and the world, they come to view these challenges as part of a larger context, rather than simply as academic exercises or questions. This results in increasingly critical comprehension and transformative action. Teaching and learning become reciprocal, providing both students and teachers with opportunities to develop critical literacy and the deeper habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking to which Shor (1992), another champion of critical literacy, often referred.

It is my belief that the role of the humanities, social studies, and literacy studies is to provide students with safe spaces to engage with, analyze, and discuss events of terrorism and violence. Until now, high school humanities classrooms have not typically been places where terrorism and counter-terrorism are read about, written about, spoken about, or considered critically from multiple perspectives. I argue that now is the time for curricular units, reading and writing assignments, discussions, and student-driven action research on terrorism and anti-terrorism to become commonplace in ELA and Social Studies classrooms across America. Only by interacting with texts on these complex, real-world topics and having opportunities to understand, debate about, and interrupt existing structures, will our students become more engaged participants in critical social change.

Critical thought and habits of mind enable students to focus “on issues of power and promote reflection, transformation, and action” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 54). As one proponent of critical literacy argues, “What matters is that critique is not the end point; transformative and ethical re-construction and social action are” (Janks, 2012, p.153). This underlying principle of critical literacy is one that takes on vital importance when terrorism and violence are the topics under consideration. In fact, all of the most heavily-emphasized principles of critical literacy in the literature, including the importance of continually questioning and unpacking issues of power, language, and text (Behrman, 2006; Freire & Macedo, 2013; Giroux, 1987; McDaniel, 2004; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), make critical literacy a sound theoretical approach to classroom discussions about terrorism and violence. Critical literacy is a theoretical framework that lends itself to the discussion of uncomfortable, off-limits topics such as terrorism and violence because it “transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one’s world” (McDaniel,

2004, p. 474). Critical literacy also lends itself well to discussions of terrorism and violence because of its emphasis on learners constantly questioning power relations and viewing complex problems from multiple perspectives. Terrorist propaganda, on the other hand, does the complete opposite and is dependent upon its readers blindly accepting texts and their intended messages. If we want our students to resist becoming victims of radicalization and terrorist propaganda, it makes sense that part of this resistance should come from systematically fostering students' abilities to question and deconstruct text.

The remainder of this article provides lesson plan ideas on topics related to terrorism; including lone wolf killings, domestic terrorism, the “language of terror,” related current events, larger social issues, and counter-terrorism. Connections between the suggested classroom activities and specific tenets of critical literacy that provide the theoretical framework for these activities are explored. It is important to note that critical literacy proponents consistently caution against prescribed methods for “doing” critical literacy in classrooms and argue that teachers and students should invent their own critical literacy practices as they arise in the context of the classroom and its own unique problem-posing and problem-solving (Behrman, 2006; Comber, 2001; Luke, 2000; McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004). It is for this reason that the following classroom activities are presented as *possibilities* of ways to engage students in critical literacy activities about terrorism and violence, rather than fixed or required methods for achieving these important goals. The lesson ideas presented are fully intended to be modified by individual classroom teachers to meet the needs of their own unique students.

Lone Wolf Killings and Domestic Terrorism

Two of the areas in which our secondary students and teachers need to increase their critical comprehension and transformative action are the complex, rarely spoken-about subjects of lone wolf killings and domestic terrorism. There are several texts that can be employed in secondary humanities classrooms to increase awareness of these topics, including *Age of the Wolf: A Study of the Rise of Lone Wolf and Leaderless Resistance Terrorism* (2015), a special report from the Southern Poverty Law Center. The *Age of the Wolf* is an excellent text to use to begin conversations about lone wolf killings from a critical stance for several reasons.

First, this particular text was published by a nonprofit organization that combats hate, bigotry and prejudice through both education and litigation. The SPLC tracks the activity of hate groups, monitors militia and other extremist antigovernment activity in the US, and files lawsuits against hate groups for the violent acts committed by their members. One of the hallmarks of critical literacy involves students questioning whose viewpoints are being expressed, what the author wants readers to think, whose voices are missing, silenced or discounted, how might alternative perspectives be represented, and what actions readers might take on the basis of what they have learned (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 53). When employing a text such as *Age of the Wolf*, teachers who seek to promote reading from a critical stance can easily engage students in discussions that question author stance, voice, tone, perspective, and purpose.

A second reason why this specific text is good for promoting critical literacy is because the SPLC sponsors an interactive Teaching Tolerance Project that is designed to foster respect and understanding in the classroom. The project (accessed at: <https://www.splcenter.org/teaching-tolerance>) produces an assortment of anti-bias resources that they distribute, at no charge, to educators across the country, including classroom documentaries,

lesson plans, curricula, and *Teaching Tolerance* magazine. *Age of the Wolf* contains “A Timeline of Terror” that details 63 terrorist incidents that occurred on US soil between April of 2009 and February of 2015, the ideologies driving the extremists, the number of people killed, photos, and other important information that can fuel intriguing class discussion from multiple perspectives. The report also contains an interview with Joe Navarro, a former FBI agent and author of many books, including *Hunting Terrorists: A Look at the Psychopathology of Terror* (2013). Excerpts from this book and others that Navarro has written are also outstanding contributions to a critical text set on domestic terrorism because they are written from the particular perspective of a former FBI agent and that particular lens or viewpoint can be made explicit in class discussions and explored from a critical stance.

There are countless ways in which texts that focus on domestic terrorism, such as the *Lone Wolf Report*, can be employed to increase critical comprehension in secondary humanities classrooms. Students can be asked to respond, either verbally or in writing, to controversial quotations, explaining what they think the quotes mean in their own words and discuss whether or not they agree or disagree with the quotes and why. For example, one excerpt from the Leaderless Resistance essay section that could readily be used to fuel discussion reads, “America is quickly moving into a long dark night of police state tyranny.... Let the coming night be filled with a thousand points of resistance. Like the fog which forms when conditions are right and disappears when they are not, so must the resistance to tyranny be” (SPLC, 38). Students can analyze quotations such as this one and also be asked to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections to the quotations, using textual evidence to support their responses. McDaniel (2004) writes, “By developing critical perspectives toward texts, students can transfer these skills to the larger society, thereby ‘reading’ their world through a critical stance that leads to empowerment” (473).

Finally, the *Lone Wolf Report* and similar texts can be used to engage students in critical discussions about the media and how they portray domestic terrorism in comparison to terrorism that occurs abroad. Texts such as the *Lone Wolf Report* can be used to engage students in larger discussions of the politics surrounding terrorism and help them to become more educated consumers of media surrounding terrorism and its profound causes and effects.

The Language of Terror

Another area in which secondary humanities classrooms can focus on terrorism and counter-terrorism from a linguistic perspective is by engaging students in lessons about the language used by political leaders and the media with regard to terrorism in America and abroad. When I was a high school English teacher, I created a similar series of lessons on the theme of genocide and the usage of that word or lack thereof by various political figures and newscasters. I used excerpts from Samantha Power’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (2002) to help students better understand the politicization of the word genocide and the United States government’s unwillingness to use the word genocide to describe many of the holocausts that occurred worldwide in places throughout history, such as Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s.

Similarly, students today can be asked to look at newspaper articles and video clips of media portrayals of particular terrorist acts and analyze when and why they are termed a variety of things, including terrorism, acts of terror, mass murder, mass shootings, hate crimes, and mass

killings to name a few. According to Behrman (2006, p. 480), “Among the aims of critical literacy are to have students examine the power relationships inherent in language use, recognize that language is not neutral, and confront their own values in the production and reception of language (Janks, 1993; Lankshear, 1994, 1997; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Shor, 1999).”

In addition to looking at the language of terrorism with regard to word choice and why political leaders and media personnel might choose to label acts of terror in particular ways, there are many vocabulary lessons that can be done in a secondary humanities classroom with regard to domestic and foreign terrorism. Words such as Al Qaeda, jihadist, ISIL, genocide, lockdown, and radicalization are frequently used by the media, but how many of our high school students really know and understand what these words mean? Along similar lines, how many students know about and understand the ramifications of The Patriot Act or the definition of a hate crime in the United States? It would be helpful to our students to incorporate vocabulary instruction and classroom discussion on terms such as these into our teaching, so that they can read about and discuss these concepts from a place of knowledge and understanding. Once again, if our students are being expected to read and write the word and the world, then it is important for us to use the secondary humanities classroom as a place to discuss words and language that are continuously evolving within an ever-changing world.

Finally, lessons on the language of terrorism and anti-terrorism should also include analyses of photographs, videos, and other kinds of representations of terror-related concepts that promote controversy, critical dialogue, and discussion from multiple perspectives. From a critical literacy standpoint, the definition of texts is expanded to include images other than the written word. Therefore, reading and writing the word and the world should include imagery, as well as language. McLaughlin & DeVogd (2004) suggest that students can even create what they term *alternative texts* by examining the “message conveyed by a text, photo, or song and then write an alternative text, take or find an alternative photo, or create alternative lyrics” (p. 59). They suggest that the *alternative text* represents a different perspective about the topic the reader experiences and that by creating it, the reader “perceives the text in a different way and begins to understand the complexity of the issue examined” (p. 58). Other proponents of critical literacy term these *countertexts* (Behrman, 2006, p. 494).

For example, on June 22, 2016, there was a controversy on the social media website Facebook that gained the attention of the national media regarding a picture that a mother posted of her three-year-old daughter standing up on the toilet bowl in their home. At first, the mom thought her child was simply doing something funny, but after she took the photo and questioned her daughter about what she was doing, she was shocked to discover that her daughter was actually practicing a lockdown drill that she had learned in preschool for what to do if an armed intruder entered. The very young students were instructed to hide in the bathroom stalls and climb up onto the toilets, so that the intruder would not see any feet on the floor if he entered a bathroom where children were hiding.

A photo such as this one would provide an excellent opportunity for secondary students to debate about the age at which children should be taught to practice lockdown drills. After initial discussions, students could be asked to have a formal debate about this important issue or write persuasive essays, either individually or in pairs or small groups, that synthesize their opinions on this topic related to terrorism and attempts at counter-terrorism. Using the McLaughlin & DeVogd *alternative text* concept, students could be asked to take or find their

own photos that they believe represent the ways in which schools might better approach the issue of lockdown drills with young children. They could write captions or narratives to accompany their alternative texts and be asked to articulate the messages they wish to portray in their alternative texts in pairs or small groups.

Related Current Events and Larger Social Issues

Classroom discussion of terrorism and counter-terrorism often leads organically to dialogue and debate of related current events and larger social issues, such as school shootings, gun control, stiffer penalties for perpetrators of offenses classified as hate crimes, former President Obama's Drone Program, whether or not Apple should open up suspects' locked and encrypted iPhones for the FBI, and the civil rights and privacy of citizens, to name a few.

One example of a lesson that relates to current events could be created in response to the *burkini* controversy that occurred in France in August of 2016. In the aftermath of 86 people being killed in a terrorist attack in Nice, France on July 14, 2016, several beaches on the French Riviera banned Muslim women from wearing *burkinis*, full-body swim suits, which they claimed were a threat to the public and could be used to conceal bombs or weapons that could be used in terror attacks. The *burkini* ban led to human rights groups arguing that the bans were in breach of French civil rights laws, and the mayors of the towns in support of the ban said it was necessary to protect the public.

Controversial current events such as this one provide opportunities for students to read and write the word and the world, both of the immediate present and of the future. Students in high school classes could become active participants in this worldwide debate by engaging in a variety of reading, writing, speaking and listening activities, such as viewing controversial images of police enforcing the *burkini* ban, watching videos of women being fined by police for wearing their *burkinis*, reading texts about Muslim women's views of the ban, reading French law on secularism and religious clothing, writing letters of support or condemnation to the mayors in support of the ban, and conducting formal or informal classroom debates.

Critical literacy approaches explicitly focus on issues of power and analyze differences in the treatment of citizens across race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth. "It is essential to point out that critical literacy educators examine these differences not as isolated occurrences, but rather as part of systemic inequalities or injustices" (Cervetti, Pardales & Damico, 2001, p. 88). Using a current event such as the *burkini* ban as a springboard for class discussion, a critical literacy educator can help guide his or her students into larger, more complex discussions, such as the one concerning the underlying social injustices that enabled the ban to occur in the first place. "Democracy requires citizens who can think, challenge, and exhibit long-term thought. This means that public schools need to become places that provide the opportunity for literate occasions, that is, opportunities for students to share their experiences, work in social relations that emphasize care and concern for each other, and be introduced to forms of knowledge that provide them with the opportunity to take risks and fight for quality of life in which human beings benefit" (Giroux, 1987, p. 181).

Increasing Understanding and Reducing Discrimination against Muslims

One of the ways to counter terrorism is to increase students' understanding and reduce discrimination against others. Two anchor texts that a high school Social Studies teacher in New York selected for a unit aimed at increasing understanding and reducing discrimination against Muslims were *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time* (Mortenson & Relin, 2006), and *Infidel* (Ali, 2007). At the conclusion of the unit, several students in the class chose to continue reading further on this topic with *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, Mortenson's (2010) sequel to *Three Cups of Tea*. To introduce the unit, the teacher began by presenting the class with two writing prompts to answer for homework. These prompts could easily be adopted in a high school English class:

The first read:

You lost a family member in the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center on 9/11/2001. You receive a letter telling you that a new mosque is scheduled to be erected a block away from Ground Zero next year, but the landowner wants to take your opinion and those of other family members who lost loved ones on 9/11 into consideration before finalizing his plans and beginning construction. What would you say/do and why? (Darvin, 2015, p.114).

The second read:

You have volunteered, with your parents' permission, to host an exchange student from another country in your family's home for three months during your senior year of high school. The exchange student will live in your home and attend your high school. You will be spending a lot of time with him/her. You receive a letter from the school explaining that there is a Muslim exchange student from Afghanistan who is interested in coming, but he/she can only do so if you and your parents will agree to serve as a host family. What would you say/do and why? (Darvin, 2015, p. 114).

Not surprisingly, the majority of the female students chose to read *Infidel*, the true story of Hirsi Ali, a Muslim woman who survived, despite many extraordinary challenges, including civil war, beatings, female mutilation, escape from an arranged marriage, and other injustices. Conversely, the majority of the male students chose to read *Three Cups of Tea*, a book with an American male protagonist, who was also a champion of Muslim women's right to education. In 1993, mountain climber Greg Mortenson attempted to climb K2 in Pakistan and failed in his attempt, nearly killing himself in the process. The mountaineer was so moved by the kindness of the Pakistani people who saved his life and nursed him back to health that he promised to return to their remote mountain village to build a school. *Three Cups of Tea* is the story of how Mortenson later returned and fulfilled that promise by building not one, but fifty-five schools for girls in that region over the next ten years (Darvin, 2015).

While reading the unit anchor texts, the students engaged in many literacy activities, several of which included the use of shorter texts that related to the overarching themes of the

unit and class novels. For example, at the time that the students were studying this topic, there was a real controversy brewing about a proposed mosque and Islamic cultural center being built near Ground Zero in Manhattan. The teacher, in an effort to incorporate authentic current events that could be viewed from multiple perspectives into the unit, had students read several newspaper articles about the real Park 51 Debate.

At the conclusion of the unit, the students engaged in several post-reading activities that encouraged them to reflect on changes in their thinking about Islam and the acquisition of new knowledge throughout the unit. They were instructed to look back at their earlier responses to the mosque and exchange student writing prompts and reflect on specific changes in their thinking and why these changes occurred. They were also encouraged to engage in continued, extended projects after completion of the unit and to share aspects of what they learned with schoolmates outside of their own classrooms, a hallmark of critical literacy.

Anti-Terrorism

There are many lessons and school-wide campaigns that can help promote anti-terrorism or at the very least unbiased thinking, even if they involve small acts of kindness or social gestures that merely prevent students from feeling isolated or shunned by their peers. For example, students can choose to participate in social activities, such as “Mix It Up at Lunch Day,” a national campaign launched by Teaching Tolerance in 2002, which encourages students to identify, question and cross social boundaries on the last Tuesday of October each year. This social movement was created because in surveys conducted by the Teaching Tolerance Project, students identified the cafeteria as the place where divisions are the most clearly drawn. For only one day, students are encouraged to move out of their comfort zones and connect with new and different schoolmates at lunch. The teaching Tolerance web site claims, “It’s a simple act with profound implications. Studies have shown that interactions across group lines can help reduce prejudice. When students interact with those who are different from them, biases and misperceptions can fall away” (accessed at: <http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix>).

A second way in which topic of anti-terrorism can be actively explored in secondary humanities classrooms is through student-driven action research on hate groups and groups that promote acceptance and tolerance in America. Students could be asked to use technology and analyze web sites that promote hate and those that promote acceptance. They could be asked to then create public service announcements, blogs, brochures, or disseminate information to their schoolmates and community members about the information they uncover using a variety of techniques. They could speak to middle school or elementary school students to teach them about hate groups and how to avoid interacting with them online and in person. Behrman (2006) writes, “For student-choice research projects to cultivate critical literacy, however, the activity must go beyond simply selecting a topic and finding library books or websites on the topic. Students must become engaged participants in a problem affecting them and be able to reflect upon the social and cultural forces that exacerbate or mitigate the problem” (p. 495). The aforementioned research projects, because of their built-in action components, would be considered those that promote critical literacy because they are “aimed at making a real difference in their or others’ lives” (p. 495).

Finally, students can be given journal, essay, or discussion topics, such as “What would you do if you began to see one of your friends becoming radicalized?” or “If you had a friend

who was getting involved with a hate group online or face to face, what are some of the things you could do?" These writing assignments and class discussions can be used as springboards to promote dialogue about real actions that they can take if they see someone becoming radicalized and potentially dangerous to themselves and others.

Conclusion

Justice-minded educators believe that the interactions that students have in school have the potential to create positive change in other areas of their lives and in the society as a whole. Giroux (1987) affirmed that "Schools need to be defended as an important public service that educates students to be critical citizens capable of exhibiting civic courage" (p. 180). One of the ways for secondary humanities teachers and students to become more active participants in the fight against terrorism at home and abroad is to begin to critically evaluate and reflect upon texts that deal with these evolving, controversial, sensitive, dangerous, and germane issues. Texts that are studied in humanities classes should reflect the complex challenges of the society and should ultimately have the potential to positively influence it. The aforementioned kind of critical literacy-based lessons on terror and violence, if done mindfully and consistently throughout our students' years of schooling, may prove to be a key component in preventing our youth from becoming radicalized, joining foreign terror groups such as ISIS or domestic terror groups like the KKK, and perhaps even committing acts of terror or violence.

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