I have a vision of bringing meaningful writing tasks to students. While we need to teach the craft of writing, we also need to teach the art of writing. Like fake news, fake professional learning communities (PLCs) confuse the truth about how and what we teach in our content areas and grade levels. Five-paragraph formulas and paragraph templates such as MEL-Con stifle student creativity and authenticity, engagement, and empowerment. Teacher-directed formats are destroying our opportunities to enable students to develop their creative and critical thinking skills. Our current state of “synchronized” teaching, standardized testing, and quantity-over-quality curriculum design not only disengage our students but also the teachers. My vision is to teach writing that will engage and empower my students to effect change.

While my passion lies in our need to bring real-world importance to the curriculum, my cynicism about the realities of this world inspires my need to provide opportunities for change. As I contemplate reasons to bring in real-world education, I only have to watch the news to find evidence for the need to bring social justice issues to our curriculum. For example, in early November 2018, USA Today ran a headline that “Male Students at an (Almost) All-White High School Gave a Nazi Salute” on the steps of the courthouse in Baraboo, Wisconsin (Nelson). Ultimately, according to a follow-up in late November, the “students’ actions were protected under the First Amendment” (Pinsker). Still, as reported in the Wisconsin State Journal on December 5, 2018, the Baraboo School District proposed instituting changes such as “yearly field trips to the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie, Illinois, and developing teachers’ social justice instruction skills” (Aadland). In a similar story, students from Minnetonka High School in Minnesota posted on social media an advertisement for their school dance, reading “Sweethearts would be a Hit(ler) w/you, and I could Nazi myself going w/anybody else. Be Mein? Yes or Nein” (Moritz-Rabson, 2019). Also, many of us remember the viral video...
of students from Covington Catholic High School in Kentucky, all wearing MAGA hats, reportedly intimidating Native American protester Nathan Phillips and other activists after the Indigenous Peoples March at the Lincoln Memorial in January 2019. We soon learned, though, of many conflicting accounts of what happened that day. As Robin Roberts, news anchor for ABC’s Good Morning America, said in reference to the encounter, “Only people who were there know the truth” (as cited in Wootson, Olivo, & Heim, 2019).

In each of these instances, the schools stated that the actions of these youth do not reflect the core values of the district. This leads me to ask what we are doing to educate students about how to instigate change surrounding justice issues and learn to respect the real world we all share. It is important that we start building a generation of youth that understands social justice and injustice and knows how to use its education to make this country really great. That starts with learning fact from fiction, understanding multiple perspectives, and considering the most effective words and actions to bring about change.

“Social Justice: The Power of Choice and Voice”

During the Greater Madison Writing Project’s 2017 summer institute, I designed and proposed the course “Social Justice: The Power of Choice and Voice” to be offered during the 2018-2019 school year. “The Power of Choice and Voice” suggests that we employ methods that engage and empower students and also engage and empower the teachers responsible for these students. It is important that we widen our students’ vision of education and our own vision of the teaching profession in a system often polluted with standardized testing, misrepresented professional learning communities, poorly practiced instruction, and stifled creativity.

The uncertainty of the course’s approval inspired me to research what this idea of choice and voice could mean. Is it a feasible idea? Will it teach critical thinking, creative thinking? engage? inspire? meet the CCSS? prove to students that they have the power to effect change? Isn’t that important if we want them prepared to be global citizens? The
work I did for this workshop introduced me to sources that will help shape this course and assured me that the answer to all those questions is “yes”!

The purpose of the course is to blend critical and creative thinking skills alongside presentation and performance skills. Students will understand the concept and power of different genres to change the world. Major concepts include the study of social justice and culturally charged issues that affect our world globally, locally, and, possibly, very personally. They will study different genres of writing as they research social justice topics: Words on paper, images on digital screens, messages encoded on other surfaces such as canvases, sculptures, billboards, music, video games, websites, social media, narrative, documentary films, television, advertisements, maps, illustrations, letters, magazines, digital texts (Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015, p. 92). In fact, the study of these genres will inform them of how we are influenced through different texts and how they can create influence through the production of different texts. Ultimately, this is one of the choices students can make.

The meaning of voice is multi-faceted: students give voice to an issue they care about (another choice), the voice in their texts will establish the writer’s authenticity, and the voice is the format through which they choose to express their ideas: poetry, performance, letters, memorials, plays, photography, action research, columns, blogs, digital storytelling, documentary film, autobiographies and biographies, speeches, music, comics, visual arts. Pipher (2006) argues that “All kinds of writing can change the world” (p.15), and we need to share that secret with our students, for “You want to search for what you alone can say and then how you can say it most effectively” (p.27). This means, too, that our students choose the genre of communication created from personal strengths. To this end, they will study the elements of different genres of communication; study, research, and discuss social issues; plan, write, revise, and/or rehearse their choice of genres based on the research of self-selected social issues with the ultimate goal for public performance/presentation/publication.

This course will run for the entire year, beginning with immersion in genre study. We will discover and evaluate the effectiveness of words and images in their many forms and
come to understand that meaningful expression rarely shows itself in a five-paragraph format. Later, we will consider how genres bring notice to environmental and human justice issues. The students will then choose one issue they want to impact, at what level (i.e., local, state, or national), and the genres of texts they will create to achieve this impact.

During the second semester, they will create multi-media projects that include a cross section of texts from the genres we studied. By the end of the school year, I envision a Social Justice gala where they display and/or perform their projects for parents, students, teachers, administration, and the general public. This is a great opportunity for them to show their activism and involvement in and beyond the community.

I will also encourage and help them to actively network to complete research from primary resources in the community and deliver their messages to others directly through letter writing, billboards, public service announcements, council meetings, whichever outlet is best matched for the social issue. I want to see them complete as much research and create influence outside the classroom as they do within the classroom because it is outside those cinder block walls that their words will effect the greatest change.

**Assessment**

Currently, we are implementing the use of portfolios in our English courses. I imagine this yearlong experience will build a telling portfolio of engaging and empowering instruction that will house evidence of several common core state standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language standards. The artifacts in the portfolios will illustrate the process of learning, researching, creating, revising, and reflecting. Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) discuss portfolios in the Arts PROPEL project, arguing that “portfolios become evidence of growth and change over time in terms of reflection, involvement in long-term projects, self-concept, and visual awareness” (p.164), which epitomizes the outcome of this course. They also cite Norman Brown, an arts PROPEL teacher who lists the components of the portfolio: 1) the portfolio review, which is ongoing and allows students to discuss ideas and be part of the evaluation process; 2) pivotal
pieces, which provide them with new insight and sense of direction; 3) companion pieces, which involve the same idea constructed in different ways; and 4) footprints, which are the pieces they will refine (p. 164). The artifacts may also be digital evidence of audio and/or visual texts. They could possibly be the culmination of both paper and digital portfolios. I see the portfolio review, pivotal pieces, and companion pieces as formative grades and the footprints in their finality to be summative along with quarterly portfolio reviews and conferences and narrative reflections following these conferences. This process will engage and empower the students in their own learning, growth, and assessment in their quest to effect change.

While teaching different genres will present a challenge, this particular class is for juniors and seniors. I know they are capable navigators of technology, and I can offer guidance for what they don’t know or what we can learn together. The teaching of writing is the backbone of the course; morphing that writing into an appropriate genre that maintains the voice, the message, and the effectiveness to instigate change is the nuance of the course with the real distinction being the choice and voice given to students who can address the injustices of the world.

Was It Approved?
The course proposal was approved for the 2018–2019 school year. However, only seven students registered for the course at my building while the cross-town high school registered thirty students, so my students took the course via teleconference. While my teaching intuition tells me that teleconferencing will not do this class justice (no pun intended), I learned that I’ll teach my first section in the 2019-2020 school year. My mind is flooded with ideas and excitement and impatience for the time to arrive. My next step is to consider how to incorporate the ideas of this course into the core courses that have a dictated curriculum in content and time frames, which also means getting other educators, administrators, curriculum coordinators, and learning support specialists on board to bring engaging and purposeful content to our classes.
Additional Course Resources
I do not plan to have a course text but rather a collection of texts. If I were to have an anchor text, it would definitely be Pipher’s *Writing to Change the World*. I prefer, however, to offer my students a library of resources. And, of course, we will access the world wide web, documentaries, news sources, video and audio sources, and a plethora of print sources to study genres of writing and social justice issues which will lead to choosing their own issues to effect change through multiple genres of writing.

Of course, there’s no need for a new course to engage and empower our students to effect change in their communities: we can give them choice and voice across ages and content areas in order to develop their critical and creative thinking skills. This should matter to every teacher who hopes to inspire students to feel engaged and empowered when they walk across the graduation stage.

Janis Joplin sings “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” and we truly have nothing left to lose in our classrooms or our world that we haven’t already, so let’s grant our students the freedom to have that power of choice and voice in their education so they can instigate the kinds of change our world needs!

References

**News Articles**


Annotated Bibliography

The following sources are all very useful in defending our need to give students the power of choice and voice to affect change—the really crazy part is we have to defend providing our students with a “real” education:

Berdan, K., Boulton, I., Eidman-Aadahl, E., Fleming, J., Gardner, L., Rogers, I., & Solomon, A. (Eds.). (2006). Writing for a change: Boosting literacy and learning through social action. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. This text provides the link between reading and writing to build literacy skills that will affect change. It provides “real” examples of how students can become engaged and empowered if we can incorporate the power of social action, and it provides clear activities that are usable. This text is useful because it shows the reader how to approach literacy and learning through social action (just like the title suggests). It discusses different genres of text, how we give to our students a voice, and what is social action. The information in this text can be applied across content areas and grade levels!

Garcia, A., & O'Donnell-Allen, C. (2015). Pose, wobble, flow: A culturally proactive approach to literacy instruction. New York: Teachers College Press. This book discusses literacy instruction, discussing the reading and writing connections and incorporating culturally proactive approaches to literacy. The authors acknowledge teachers’ needs to try new approaches to literacy while reminding us that it may take us out of our comfort zone. It’s an interesting and inspiring read that makes me think about what I model as a teacher to my students. It makes me think about who I am as a reader and writer and what I expect from students. It provides to me the
ammunition I need to take to our next PLC to explain why a lot of what we are trying to do is not the best practice! The information in this text can be applied across content areas and grade levels!

Pipher, M. B. (2007). *Writing to change the world*. New York: Riverhead Books. Pipher’s text discusses the importance of connectedness and how writers can achieve that through their own experiences and the different texts writers can employ to share those experiences. She also talks about the writing process and offers reader-friendly discussion from getting started to the revision process. Pipher suggests and discusses the different ways our voices “call to action,” such as letters, speeches, personal essay, music, and poetry. I was introduced to this text through the Greater Madison Writing Project. It is an incredibly reader-friendly text that successfully convinces the reader how important one’s own stories are and the power these stories have to affect change. I am considering proposing her book as the anchor text for a new course at our high school *Social Justice: The Power of Choice and Voice*. It is a text that I think will inspire any writer to keep writing for change. The information in this text can be applied across content areas and grade levels!

**Additional Resources**


I also recommend the periodical *Rethinking Schools*, “dedicated to sustaining and strengthening public education through social justice teaching and education activism.” Readers can go online and purchase single copies or full subscriptions. This resource is useful across grade levels and content areas.

*Teaching Tolerance* is another publication free to educators. This publication addresses social justice issues, how to teach to the issues, and what other schools and their students have done to affect change. Teachers can also receive FREE resources for their classrooms! This resource is useful across grade levels and content areas.

*English Journal* is a useful resource published through the National Council of Teachers of English. While it is a content specific publication, materials could also be applicable to other content areas, especially social studies. There are issues that address social justice issues, reading and writing to achieve social justice, empathy, genres of writing, so much applicable to giving students choice and voice to affect change! Articles address different grade levels.