

Arts in Action: Creating Opportunities for Equity and Change

Critically reflecting on their To Kill a Mockingbird unit helped two teachers rethink their instructional approaches to the novel.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published sixty years ago, was voted "best-loved novel" in PBS's *The Great American Read* poll in 2018 (PBS Publicity). Recently the book has undergone much-needed scrutiny about how it deals with issues of prejudice. In an NCTE blog post, Julia Franks writes, "I've been trying to pull *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the curriculum for decades . . . because the messages about race and the status quo are so very outdated." So why choose to read it in a high school classroom?

For the last fourteen years, we have taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* in a variety of ways: as a text students read to answer quiz questions; through the theme of coming of age; and by centering Lee's craft as she breathes life into the town of Maycomb. None of these approaches felt like they were doing the novel, or our students, justice because Lee doesn't breathe life into *all* her characters. It occurred to us that we were trying to teach the novel the way we wanted it to be, rather than calling attention to and discussing its shortcomings. We realized what needed to change had nothing to do with the book, but rather its place within the narrative of our curriculum.

To address this realization, we engaged *To Kill a Mockingbird* in a conversation with a multitude of voices. We turned from allowing the narrative to tame our perspective to engaging the narrative with the present tense of our world. We created Arts in Action, an initiative that took students beyond the classroom walls and encouraged them to dive into

real-world issues and firsthand experiences: first, through a spoken word poetry unit that acted as an introduction to the novel's themes; second, through a critical examination of the novel that asked students if we've realized Atticus's vision for justice in the United States; and third, through an invitation to our community to collaborate with students' action-based research to make a change in our shared world.

STEPPING INTO MOCKINGBIRD THROUGH SPOKEN WORD POETRY

We began our unit with spoken word poetry. We saw the opportunity to explore some of the themes we knew our students would grapple with in the novel, specifically the themes of social class, gender, and racial prejudice. By harnessing the voices of poets and asking students to write alongside them, we were able to provide the students with an introduction to the main lesson *To Kill a Mockingbird* tries to teach: the importance of seeing things from another point of view.

We continuously add to our collection of poems, but a few of our favorites include "Adrenaline Rush" by Rudy Francisco, "What the Dead Know by Heart" by Donte Collins, and "Lost Voices" by Darius Simpson and Scout Bostley, the poem students are most drawn to. The two poets speak for one another in an exchange of perspectives: Simpson shares Bostley's experience as a woman, and Bostley shares Simpson's experience as a Black man.

We start by viewing "Lost Voices" on *YouTube* as a class, focusing on the performance. Before uttering

a word, the poets inhale, switch places, and begin with Bostley speaking for Simpson. This action highlights the theme of this poem: in speaking for someone else, there's a danger of losing sight of that individual's lived experiences.

After viewing the performance as a class, we ask students to turn and talk. We make our way around the room, listening in, commenting when needed, and distributing the text of the poem. Then we watch the performance again, keeping our focus on the words by asking students to annotate lines, words, or phrases that stand out. One of the lines students often highlight is when Bostley, speaking for Simpson, says: “[T]o tell me you know my pain is to stab yourself in the leg because you saw me get shot. We have two different wounds and looking at yours does nothing to heal mine.” On the surface it reads as if the goal is to draw attention to the inequality felt by women and people of color. When students dig deeper into not only what they say, but *how* they say it, they see the poets' goal is to make viewers uncomfortable with the fact that they are speaking for each other. The final lines remind us why bringing this novel into conversation with other voices is so important: “I fight so my voice can be heard, I fight for the voices you silence all in the name of what is right. The problem with speaking up for each other is that everyone is left without a voice.” As teachers, we can also learn from this poem's message. We can ensure the novel isn't the loudest voice in the curriculum, and we can make sure we are not leaving any student without a voice by inviting them to write as our next step.

Spoken word poetry offers students the opportunity to explore their own identities through writing, as well (Muhammad and Gonzalez; Somers-Willett). One of our students, Lynn, seized the opportunity to express her experiences growing up Asian American (all student names are pseudonyms). She begins her poem with the idyllic “Once upon a time” and draws the reader in by asking us to listen to what we think is a kind of fairy tale. The poem's tone shifts when she writes, “March 13, 2020 / The day the whole world shut down. / And the same day this girl changed her whole perspective on life.” From this point the poem

begins to reveal her experience, one she feels she must voice in a way no one else can. She describes how she felt during the COVID-19 pandemic:

People started doing things that she would have
never even expected
They would shy away from her in public
They would ask her why *she* started the
coronavirus
They would give her dirty looks in public just
because of the shape of her eyes.

It is easy to recognize that our students are experiencing some of the prejudices we are discussing. Lynn concludes her piece, “Masks and gloves became a way of life, / But even with the mask, you are only able to cover up your face, / It can't cover up who you are as a person.” In the given context, these lines may seem to refer only to her—that she can't cover up who she is. But the broader meaning of that line is important. All of us are defined by our actions.

Spoken word poetry tosses out the idea that poetry should be standardized and structured (Dyson; Fisher; Gregory; Low). Student poets begin to develop not just literacy skills, but also their personal identities and democratic values as they write and share about their own personal experiences and worldviews (Ingalls; Jocson). Spoken word performances allow students to experiment with craft, content, style, and art, to engage with their experiences in ways that most curricula can't predict, and to explore another point of view and express their own.

FOLLOWING TOM ROBINSON BEYOND THE NARRATIVE

One of the places we struggle most when teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* is at the end of the trial, after Tom Robinson has been convicted of a crime he didn't commit. Atticus pleads with him to have hope and tells him they will appeal the verdict. Devastated, Tom walks out the courtroom door and we never see him again. We find ourselves telling students: “This is the point where I want to part from the narrative. I want to follow Tom out that door. I want to know his story. Instead, Lee takes us back to life as it was in the Finch house.” Christina Torres, in “We Shouldn't

Always Feel Comfortable: Why *To Kill a Mockingbird* Matters,” reminds us: “It’s easy to forget that the story of Tom Robinson and the injustice he faces often hits people right in the gut, makes them feel . . . not-good in some capacity, and the general reaction many have to that feeling is to try and squash the source.” Just as we cannot allow ourselves as teachers to think the past lies neatly and unobtrusively behind us, when we, as readers, follow Tom Robinson out of the courtroom door, we come to understand how the past connects to our present day.

We see the power words can have through poetry, through writing and speaking about our experiences. Arguably, there is no moment in the novel more focused on the power of words than during Tom’s cross-examination. When asked why he continually

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helped Mayella Ewell with her chores, Tom replies honestly, “I felt right sorry for her.” Even when Atticus returns to Tom’s comment in his closing statements, calling out Tom’s “unmitigated temerity to ‘feel sorry’ for a white woman,” the gravity of that moment isn’t

clear (Lee 232). Tom’s reply feels more like a slip of the tongue than a conscious and deliberate response.

To push students to delve beyond the narrative, we explore how Aaron Sorkin reimagines this scene, and the character of Tom, in his 2019 Broadway adaptation. We show students a clip of Jeff Daniels performing the closing statements and ask them to examine the differences (“Jeff Daniels”). They immediately notice the Atticus of Sorkin’s play knew the prosecution would ask Tom why he helped Mayella. In fact, Sorkin’s Atticus and Tom practiced for that very question, “for six weeks, five hours a day.” Tom was instructed to simply say: “It looked like she could use a hand” (“Jeff Daniels”).

When this version of Atticus returns to the moment in the closing statements of Sorkin’s play, the significance of Tom’s words is made clear. His answer “wasn’t a slip of the tongue. Tom Robinson said exactly what he meant. In fact, he said it twice.

Because he forgot his place? Because he forgot who he was? What he was? No. Because he remembered” (“Jeff Daniels”). Tom is given a voice and agency in Sorkin’s play that is largely stripped from him in Lee’s novel.

To close this unit, we ask students to consider four final discussion questions. The first is a question about Lee’s craft. We watch two of John Green’s Crash Course videos on *To Kill a Mockingbird* and ask, “What’s worth talking about regarding Green’s comments about the novel?” Students rely on their reading to connect their own insights about Lee’s writing and Green’s commentary.

Our second question, “To what extent was Harper Lee’s novel affected by the historical time frame in which she lived?” asks students to draw connections between the historical context of the novel and the narrative itself. Students draw connections between Lee’s upbringing and family dynamics and the novel’s ties to the heart-wrenching cases of Emmett Till and the Scottsboro Boys, as well as the origins of lynching and Jim Crow laws.

Third, we ask students, “What connections can you draw between *Mockingbird* and our poets?” to challenge them to draw connections between the poetry we read and the novel. They often draw connections between the pressure on Scout to “become more like a lady” and the complexity of Tom’s experience and the message of “Lost Voices.” Tom is left “without a voice” when his honesty gets him convicted on the stand. His only choice is to let Atticus work to make an appeal, but his lack of agency leaves him hopeless.

Finally, we ask students a question scholars and teachers have been arguing about since the novel’s publication and implementation into curricula across the United States: “Should the novel be taught in schools?” We read two articles, one by Christina Torres arguing in favor of teaching the novel, and the other by Julia Franks arguing for its replacement. We find ourselves surprised each year by how many students feel reading this novel is important. However, students often admit that what makes it important to them is not necessarily the novel itself, but the opportunity to discuss the hard issues of prejudice as a class.

WALKING INTO THE FIRE WITH ACTION RESEARCH

Becoming aware of the history *To Kill a Mockingbird* represents is only one avenue to engaging in the discussion. Amplifying the voices of people’s lived experiences is only a step toward walking around in another’s shoes. There is also the present tense of our students’ lives that needs to be addressed. Matthew Kay, in his book *Not Light, but Fire*, tells the story of Frederick Douglass, who became weary of answering questions about race from his White audiences that he knew they already understood the answers to. Kay writes, “[Douglass] offered his audience a challenge: ‘It is not *light* that is needed, but *fire*.’ Douglass knew what many are noticing now: we never seem to graduate to the *next* conversation. The hard one” (4). Douglass was challenging his listeners to “infuse our conversations with *fire*—to seek out and value historical context, to be driven by authentic inquiry, and above all, to be honest—both with ourselves and with those with whom we share a racial dialogue” (Kay 4).

We finish our work with the novel as we began, by asking our students, “What change do you want to see in the world? And how will you bring about that change?” The goal of this move in the curriculum is twofold: first, we wish to continue to honor the voices and perspectives we’ve set out to hear during this unit; second, we want to encourage students to see that they can effect change.

We begin by asking students to write a *New York Times* student editorial based on the prompt. Students may choose any topic to research, and they research extensively. Again, we begin by examining mentor texts. We read student essays linked to the *New York Times* website. Some students focus on the issues within *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and others begin research on ideas such as bookshelf diversity, cancel culture, the pro-life versus pro-choice debate, and second amendment rights. What’s most important to us is that students engage with a topic they are passionate about, that they have a topic they want to bring not only light to, but fire as well.

After the editorials are written and submitted, we ask students to take their work another step

forward. We want to know what change they wish to see in the world and how they will bring about the change. One way we have addressed the need to engage students in action has been by partnering with a local organization. Through that partnership, we created Arts in Action, a project that brought artists and other local creatives into our school to share their experiences using art to advocate for change. Students began to realize members of the community were not only interested in what they had to say, but also their willingness to help.

Working on her editorial about how the US educational system should work harder to destigmatize mental health issues, Catherine wrote, “I don’t want to be the ‘hero’ that saves the mental health of students. I am doing this project so we can all exist in an environment where mental health is normalized and celebrated.” Inspired by the artists and empowered by her research, Catherine acted by teaming up with two of our artist-mentors to produce an original song, “Master of Disguise.” In her song, Catherine writes,

I know it seems they’ve never cared
I know you’re shaking by the stares
Master of Disguise, but now
you’d call for help but don’t know how . . .
Don’t go and sell your grip on things and be
“master of disguise.”

Catherine’s song gives voice to those who struggle with mental health. Through it she connects to others and empathizes with those who wear a mask to cope.

Two other students, with the support of our extended learning opportunity coordinator, a former news reporter, challenged the athletic dress code. Lesley and Morgan began their work by researching gender equality in sports. Despite being in separate classes with different teachers, they decided they would team up to survey classmates and teammates and meet with the athletic director to discuss the steps in making an official statewide change. In the conclusion of Lesley’s news article for the school paper, she wrote, “The fight for females to be respected and feel comfortable while playing their best is going to continue until these athletes get to choose what they wear. Big changes take time, but

the time put in will be worth it in the long run.” Morgan would agree. In a presentation of their work, she reflected on the project, “We never felt we had the power to speak out about this. We never felt we were important enough to be heard.” Morgan added that hearing from the artist-mentors compelled her to speak up and act: “We can’t predict what’s going to happen in the future, but we do know we are going to try to make a change.”

Community members were inspired by the students’ thorough work and began to realize they, too, had the ability to help make change. After hearing a TED Talk-style presentation by another student,

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Eli, on the need to diversify novels within classroom libraries, we partnered with members of our community to create Bookshelf Diversity, a grant that aids teachers in adding diverse books to their classroom libraries. For Eli, the aim of this initiative was “to widen perspectives of people through books that are

focused on telling stories of minorities and amplifying minority authors.” Real change happens when all children see themselves represented in books available on school bookshelves.

This work, we feel, was a small taste of the fire Douglass spoke about. It’s the kind of work that begins to change the discussion in the classroom from “I read this book” or “I wrote an essay” to “I’m working on making change based on the research I have done in my classroom.” And it’s the kind of work that begins to change the world our students are growing up in and will one day lead.

KILLING THE MOCKINGBIRD


Through our reflections on this unit, we have realized that whatever a teacher’s reasons for not liking *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the reason for dropping it from the curriculum should not be that there is no good way to deal with the novel’s shortcomings. We have started many school years with the intention to

“kill the *Mockingbird*.” However, just taking a book out of a curriculum is not as simple an answer as we would like. No matter how deeply entrenched in the canon or new to our classrooms a text is, we need to ask ourselves: What message(s) is this work of literature sending to our students? What is being left unsaid? Whose voice or perspective is missing from this narrative?

Our role as educators is to make decisions that reflect that awareness and understanding as a matter of curriculum. This reflective work opens the classroom lesson to a point where the teacher’s focus is on the ability of a student to present their ideas in a well-organized, thoughtful, or creative way. The classroom community will engage in the tough conversations that teachers can mentor or guide students through.

It is important to note that after completing this unit with two months remaining in our school year, we chose to introduce book clubs as our final unit. We offered choice in content and form: young adult literature (*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *You Should See Me in a Crown* by Leah Johnson, and *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline), novels in verse (*Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo), graphic novels (*Hey, Kiddo* by Jarrett J. Krosoczka and *New Kid* by Jerry Craft), and nonfiction (*Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, *The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater, and *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore). The students’ conversations were not limited to the narrative. The books students were reading became something more than a one-shot representation of what someone else’s life is like.

In a speech closing his tenure as the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, *Long Way Down* author Jason Reynolds said, “I want you to love my stories, but not nearly as much as I want you to love your own, right? Love your stories. There’s freedom there. There’s power there” (“Jason Reynolds”). Too often, teachers expect the novels we read with students to take center stage in our classrooms. Whether we decide to take this book out of our curriculum or not, the important decision lies more directly in the actions we take to gather a diversity of perspectives for the classroom to discuss. As

teachers, we must recognize there are other voices that could lend themselves to a narrative that comes packed with a long and storied past. Voices that offer insights into how that past is still operating in the present. Voices that inspire and empower us to make a change. 

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