

Contemporary Topics in Fiction: Preparing Students for the Real World

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Introduction

“Every human has four endowments - self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom... The power to choose, to respond, to change.” -Stephen Covey

These words from author and educator Stephen Covey truly resonate with me, especially when I consider my high school students. Self-awareness? They've got that down. Conscience? Well, some of them, anyways. But what about independent will and creative imagination? According to Covey, all of these things combined give us the “ultimate human freedom” and “the power to choose, to respond, to change.” Sometimes I worry that students don't realize the power of their own voices. Often I worry that because many of my students are already at a disadvantage due to their race or socioeconomic status, they will fall through the cracks of society. So I asked myself, what if I could teach students how to exercise independent will *using* creative imagination? The result was this curriculum unit.

Now four years into my teaching career at Howard High School of Technology, I have taught all four grade levels (9-12). While dancing between grade levels, learning new texts, and developing content from scratch at the start of every school year has proved a huge challenge, to be sure, it has also afforded me the opportunity to closely examine each grade's strengths and weaknesses, and identify gaps in student knowledge across the secondary spectrum. Because of my unique situation, I have a perspective that is much broader than that of most of my contemporaries. What I have found is that beyond the obvious and prolific discrepancies between maturity level, writing ability, and academic knowledge that exist among students across all secondary grade levels, there are commonalities as well.

From my experience, I have found that a critical growth opportunity for all high school students lies in their understanding of the world around them. In a society that thrives on hyper-connectivity, it's a wonder that students are so disconnected from the global society. Ask them about their Facebook or Instagram feeds and students can tell you about that crazy thing Brianna did during homeroom, or about Michael and Maya's dramatic lunchtime breakup. But when asked about political figures, global issues, health, and social inequities – topics that are highly relevant and with arguably much greater impact on students' lives – students often have little to contribute, and little awareness,

even, of the most pressing issues facing our world. While this was, admittedly, not a huge shock to me, it is hugely concerning, nonetheless. How can we say with confidence that we are successfully preparing students for college and career when they would not stand a fighting chance in a professional conversation about contemporary societal issues and ethics? Generally speaking, I see this as a major gap in education across the board, and one that can, and should, be tackled in every classroom, regardless of content area. The demand for more global awareness is beautiful in the sense that is not limited to any one subject. Current events fall under a wide range of topics – math, science, social studies, etc. – but here we will focus on bringing a global perspective to the English/Language Arts classroom.

The ability to speak knowledgeably about global issues is a skill that graduating seniors must have in order to be successful in college and a variety of careers. When I learned about the Delaware Teacher’s Institute, I saw it as my opportunity to help students recognize the issues in their community and around the world that, if left alone, could grow and create bigger, perhaps irreversible problems for generations to come. When I sat down to complete my application, and read through the seminar descriptions, I was struck by something David Teague pondered in the description for the *Things that Happen in Fiction* seminar.

“I’ve always thought it a shame that the world of facts is so firmly walled off from the realm of imagination. [...] I do advocate using creative writing as a tool to teach other disciplines, like history, social studies, chemistry, music, and yes— even math. After all, as the great Neil Gaiman suggests: the things that happen in fiction really do happen.”

As I poured over these words, it became immediately clear to me what I could do with my curriculum unit. What if I asked students to investigate contemporary topics, and then build creative narratives that explore those very issues? If given not just the information that matters, but also the license to say something about it, would students not be more invested in their world? I intend to find out.

Rationale

“Modern civilization has become so complex and the lives of civilized men so interwoven with the lives of other men in other countries as to make it impossible to be in this world and not of it.” -Franklin D. Roosevelt

Contemporary Topics in Fiction is a senior level English/Language Arts curriculum unit designed to allow students to explore a wide variety of topics and themes that are important in our current society. Students read a variety of literature as well as non-fiction texts that focus on themes of modern identity, the environment, technology, and health sciences. Students will closely analyze narrative texts for commentary on major

societal or cultural topics to gain a better understanding of their relevance both at their time of publication and still today. Finally, the culminating assessment of the unit asks students to conduct research on a topic of their own choosing, and construct a narrative that explores that topic through major themes.

Overall, the course seeks to prepare seniors to enter college and career by introducing them to texts that expose and explore the real issues that matter in our world today. Especially in a vocational/technical school, students need to develop a deep understanding of the things that will directly affect them in their careers and personal lives. This course attempts to bridge the gap for students between high school and independent, adult life. Through rigorous, self-driven research of the topics covered in this course, students will emerge as engaged, global citizens, more cognizant of the world around them and better able to not just contribute in their professional pursuits, but be productive voices of change in society.

The need for a more globalized approach to education is not just one that I have personally observed, but is also one that is supported by academic research. According to findings in Merriman and Nicoletti's "Globalization and American Education," "Educators have a duty and responsibility to present critical global issues that impact the world by fostering awareness in their classrooms. Global issues such as environmental challenges, the ongoing threat of war and terrorism, the discovery of new infectious diseases, the exploitation of workers, and gender discrimination need to be explored by students through creative and effective lessons."¹ The authors go on to recommend strategies for increasing student access to such topics in the 21st century classroom. "To promote and improve global education, the authors recommend these strategies: [...] infuse global topics in traditional courses that will help students' global awareness where the implementation of global studies is difficult due to logistical concerns."² In other words, the exploration of 21st century global topics can be woven into any course, regardless of content area.

Objectives

"Seeing students being aware of a bigger world, bigger than their own backyard, is a first step toward global education." -Silvia Rosenthal Tolisano

In terms of particular skills, students will learn to further their ability to research, analyze, synthesize information, and portray major contemporary topics through creative narrative, with the goal of developing their own viewpoints on hotly debated issues. Students will gain a better understanding of the cultural influences that shape literature. Not only will students emerge from the course better equipped to participate in an increasingly competitive society, but they will have also learned the invaluable critical research skills necessary to succeed in any post-secondary setting.

In a Learning-Focused school, a heavy emphasis is placed on backwards planning from the final student assessment – in this case, a research-based narrative. Additionally, all instruction is built around and rationalized through the Common Core State Standards. To be successful in this unit, students must interact with seminal fictional texts, research social issues, and create an original narrative. With these things in mind, this curriculum unit will focus on the following learning standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively, and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Under the Learning-Focused framework, and based on the educational theory of Wiggins and McTighe's *Understanding by Design*, Essential Questions provide a roadmap for student learning and are the cornerstones of each lesson at Howard High School of Technology. An effective essential question does the following:

- 1) causes genuine and relevant inquiry into the big ideas and core content;
- 2) provokes deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions;
- 3) requires students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas, and justify their answers;
- 4) stimulates vital, on-going rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons;
- 5) sparks meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences; and
- 6) naturally recurs, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects. These open-ended questions lead to higher order thinking, and require students to connect content knowledge to the topic at hand.³

This unit is unique in that it gives students the autonomy to choose from a bank of topics on which to focus their reading, research, and ultimately their narrative writing. The rationale for this is that seniors are on the threshold of a world that will require them to call the shots and chart their own paths. Gone are the days when teachers and parents are there to direct every single move they make. Therefore, students will choose one of the following four unit essential questions to guide their research: 1) How has racial, class, and gender oppression impacted the way in which people view the modern world? 2) How do the complexities of the relationship between man and nature affect our environment's future? 3) How has the Internet and technology changed our lives? 4) How do we analyze the health issues and concerns that are plaguing the modern world? Each unit essential question comes with a series of learning essential questions to further guide

student learning. Additionally, each student will ultimately answer the question: How can writers creatively present meaningful truths in fiction?

Demographics

“It is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as subjects of the transformation.” -Paulo Freire

Howard High School of Technology is a vocational/technical, urban school serving 900 students in grades 9-12, and situated in the heart of Delaware’s largest city, Wilmington. Opportunities abound for the students, with a wide range of opportunities that satisfy a variety of interests both inside and immediately outside the doors of our school. By the same token, it is impossible to ignore the unprecedented violence and poverty rates in the surrounding city. These factors are a big part of the rationale for this unit. When one is educated about one’s community, both locally and globally, one can successfully contribute to bringing about positive change and preserving a vibrant and diverse professional community – one that has defined the city of Wilmington for years.

Change is no stranger to Howard, which is triumphantly emerging from a three-year period as a Partnership Zone school. This period was the result of the identification of Howard as one of the State’s lowest achieving schools, based on the academic proficiency of students on the State’s assessment in reading and mathematics over a period of four years. The effects of this phase were not lost on the students and the school saw dramatic changes as the Partnership Zone initiative unfolded, starting with a major overhaul of faculty and staff. For a student body that is made up primarily of minority students, many of whom rely on free and reduced lunch services, most of whom come from “non-traditional” families, and some of whom are homeless, losing familiar faces in what is perhaps the only consistent setting they know can, not surprisingly, be detrimental to the psyche and spirit. The initiative brought new leadership, new structure, and new expectations. At the same time, the school building itself was undergoing its own transformation in the form of a multi-million-dollar structural renovation. This transitional time was, no doubt, challenging for students and staff alike, but all proved resilient in the long haul, and although it is still a work in progress, the school is unquestionably better for it. As the school has risen from the proverbial ashes, our popularity has grown. More and more students who apply to the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District list Howard as their top choice for enrollment. As admissions become increasingly competitive, the school culture has measurably improved.

Students at Howard come from all corners of New Castle County, so in any given classroom, you might find students from urban settings learning alongside others from suburban or even rural home settings. During their ninth grade year, students choose from

a variety of career or “shop” areas. Over the course of their high school career, students will learn skills in one of the following 13 areas: finance, computer networking, building automation systems, carpentry, biomedical sciences and allied health, dental assisting, cosmetology, culinary arts, legal administrative assisting, legal support services, auto diesel technology, and engine technology. This vocational aspect of the educational program at Howard allows students to graduate prepared to enter a career of their choosing, *or* enter the post-secondary world with additional skills and experience already under their belts. Many students hold internships and cooperative jobs that give them on-the-job training and experience. In these settings, it is critical that students be prepared to participate in professional conversations on contemporary topics.

Howard is a unique bird in more ways than one, and the fact that the word “technology” finds itself in the school’s name is no accident. Technology integration is a huge priority at Howard, where every teacher has a MacBook and SmartBoard, and most have an Elmo/Ladybug document camera. Students at Howard are in a unique bubble in the sense that we are part of a 1:1 technology initiative that gives each student his/her own personal iPad, which follows them in and out of school, to be used for educational purposes. An iPad in the hands of every student opens up a world of possibilities for both students and teachers alike. With the world at their fingertips, no longer is there the chance that students might be left with unanswered questions. This has revolutionized the learning process, making independent research and classroom “flipping” not just an option, but rather a common practice.

Through the English/Language Arts curricula at Howard, students are regularly charged with the task of producing creative narratives. Across all grades levels, I have observed that an area of weaknesses lies in students’ ability to construct meaningful conflicts within their narratives. As any English teacher knows, a story does not exist sans conflict. It is perhaps the most critical element of a narrative plot structure, so to lack it means the story is not compelling, and cannot have a satisfying resolution. This specific weakness is the area of focus that this unit is designed to address. By giving students a contemporary topic that is naturally in conflict, they will be armed with the tools to create a captivating narrative, and on top of this, one that addresses an issue that is both culturally relevant and controversial in nature, allowing stories to almost write themselves.

The Narrative

Story telling has been used across cultures for generations. It is used to entertain, to preserve tradition, and to teach morals and values. Stories can move us, perhaps even toward action. Perhaps the most influential way to use narrative writing is to expose or explore a relevant, pressing topic of a society’s culture. Take Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, or Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or *anything* written by George Orwell – these seminal, fictional stories shed light on actual problems, or hot-button

issues within the writers' societies. They weave engaging storylines into current events, reaching and engaging a larger audience in the process. Beyond that, in many regards these stories lead to real and lasting change and contributed to the greater good of society. They frightened people, educated people, inspired people. Their authors were educated, and motivated to force a conversation about a topic that directly affected society at large. They used creative writing to make a statement, to make their mark on history. This is precisely what I think graduating seniors need to be capable of in order to be taken seriously, and to succeed in a world that is defined by conflict. But therein lies the problem.

Creative narrative writing activities are scarce in the classroom, because the SAT doesn't test a student's ability to write moving, poetic prose. However, since the dawn of time humans have learned about each other and the world around them through story telling. Osler and Zhu wrote about the importance of narratives in teaching and research for justice and human rights. They assert, "We are inveterate storytellers.' Narration is one of the most commonly used communication modes. Narratives are said to be able to elicit and disseminate knowledge (Snowden, 2002), encourage collaboration and generate new ideas (Lelic, 2001) and ignite change (Denning, 2001). Moreover, narratives are well liked because they enable materials to be readily accessible, intriguing and engaging; they foster a sense of our common humanity with the narrator."⁴

Conflict. For students who face so much of it in their day-to-day lives, it comes as a surprise that this is the one element of a narrative that does not come easily to them. I have read countless student narratives in which the most problematic moment for characters is deciding between Pepsi or Coke at Wawa. Therefore, the goals of this unit are threefold: expose students to the sort of writing that addresses societal issues, give students the tools to explore a specific issue of their choosing through self-guided research, guide students through the creative writing process that yields powerful, influential narratives.

Reading

In an essay about the role of literature in education today, Marita Wenzel posits that "Literature acts as a facilitator for culture, language and critical thinking,"⁵ and "Through literature, the human being can explain (natural sciences), understand (humanities) and preserve (history) his environment, hone his intellectual abilities (relating to other relevant disciplines as well) and exercise and express his spiritual needs (religion)."⁶ This idea is the foundation of the first phase of this unit.

Students will read and closely analyze fictional texts for elements of social commentary. Texts will include stories that explore major themes related to social injustices and global issues such as modern identity (gender, class, and race), man's relationship with nature, the internet and technology, and modern health. Students will

choose a theme of focus and read texts related to that issue. Texts will include influential stories such as *The Bluest Eye*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *1984*, and *Never Let Me Go*. This process will allow students to experience fictional writing and its effect on the individual and society, and will prepare students to employ narrative techniques in their own creative narratives.

Research

A big part of the rationalization for this course comes from the observation that students at Howard High School lack much, if any, experience with academic research, particularly in the style that they might be expected to do in college or the workplace. This lack of exposure to focused research has cultivated a student body that is largely disconnected from global ideas. Merriman and Nicoletti note that

As we start the 21st century, an altered mind-set with a focus on globalization is required for all involved in the American educational system to ensure that American students, as potential workers, can compete in an ever-changing, global marketplace. Our students must be prepared for global economics, information and technology, and politics. Isolationism is not viable if the United States and its people are to maintain leadership in the global arena.⁷

In a world that punishes the ignorant and rewards the informed, it is essential to their success that the students at Howard High School learn how to 1) research a topic, and 2) foster their own global awareness. Therefore, a large component of this unit will require students to research their chosen topic (modern identity, man's relationship with nature, the internet and technology, and modern health). Students will spend a week utilizing advanced research tactics to gather information, and ultimately they will produce a six to eight page research paper in which they explore the facts and issues that surround their topic of choice. This research will serve as the foundation for their narrative writing – the culminating assignment in this unit.

Writing

Creative writing is hard to find in the Common Core-aligned, SmarterBalanced-driven classroom because such a heavy emphasis is placed on informational texts and argumentative writing, particularly at the secondary level. However, the value of literature and its place in the global arena should not be overlooked. Osler and Zhu assert that

When applied to human rights education, narratives permit learners to: address their multiple and suppressed identities; to examine historical and contemporary inequalities; stimulate empathy and solidarity among all humanity; and demonstrate the import of human rights as principles of living together at all scales

from the local to the global in contexts of diversity and in various overlapping communities of fate. [...] In adopting narrative as a pedagogical tool, we are inviting teachers and students to make links between their experiences and those of strangers in distant places, including links between these strangers' struggles for justice and their own. Narratives, used in this way, can be used to advance justice and human rights through education. The links that students are able to make between their own struggles and those of the subject of the narrative not only support recognition of our common humanity, but also may inspire action for justice and human rights.⁸

Students will not only learn about relevant, modern topics, but will also have the opportunity to write creatively about them, and perhaps even begin conversations that lead to solutions. Once the research portion has been completed, students will begin to create a narrative that in some way explores their chosen topic. Their narrative might illustrate potential problems that could arise in their chosen topic, or perhaps even present a fictional solution to a problem. After all, "Through the use of narrative, teachers can play a vital role in realizing justice and peace in the world, empowering learners not only to articulate their own rights but also advocate for the rights of others."⁹

Essential Questions

The Unit Essential Question for the unit is as follows: How do writers creatively present information on a meaningful, relevant topic? Students will then choose one of four topics as their focus for independent research and exploration, and will be responsible for answering each Lesson Essential Question for their topic.

Topics

Modern Identity - Gender, Class, and Race: Students who choose this topic will explore the complex social hierarchy that is based on gender, class, and race. Students will be exposed to such texts as Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Ultimately, students will need to answer the following Lesson Essential Question: How has racial, economic, and gender oppression impacted the way in which people view the modern world? Through in depth independent research, rich discussions with classmates, and narrative writing, students will gain a deeper understanding of the issues that surround the modern identity. Such ethnic studies "teach students about long-neglected slices of America's cultural heritage by exploring different perspectives in literature, history and social justice."¹⁰

Man vs. Nature: Students who choose this topic will explore the multi-faceted issue of man's relationship with nature. Students will be exposed to such texts as John Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Ultimately, students will need to answer the following Lesson Essential Question: How do the complexities of the relationship

between man and nature affect our environment's future? In their research about globalization and education Merriman and Nicoletti note, "Other important environmental concerns that are related to globalization are depletion of natural resources, reemergence of coal and nuclear energy production, population growth, and food production capacity. These environmental issues are important for all persons on this planet. Consequently, American schoolchildren must study these issues in their classrooms to help them make informed environmental decisions as adults [...] because they will affect them at some point in their lives."¹¹

The Internet, Technology, and Society: Students who choose this topic will explore issues related to a world that is increasingly driven by innovations in technology. Students will be exposed to such texts as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *1984*. Ultimately, students will need to answer the following Lesson Essential Question: How has the Internet and technology changed our lives? "The fact that virtually all segments of society have changed dramatically by information technologies and will continue to change in the future cannot be ignored. Schools must be a part of these changes and research should proceed with the assumption that technology is and will continue to be a growing element within the schools."¹²

Modern Health: Students who choose this topic will explore issues related to modern health issues and the conflict that surrounds them. Students will be exposed to such texts as Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and Siddhartha Mukherjee's *Emperor of All Maladies*. Ultimately, students will need to answer the following Lesson Essential Question: How do we analyze the health issues and concerns that are plaguing the modern world? "Health agencies and colleges of public health and medicine have recognized the potential for schools to improve the health of young people and the adults they will become."¹³ Through the exploration of these issues, students will become a voice in their communities about disease in the modern world.

Time Frame

This unit is designed to require at least four and a half weeks of instructional time.

Research Strategies

During the first week, students will be introduced to each topic through a short reading (short story, informational text, etc.), and will also review important narrative techniques (irony, foreshadowing, conflict, characterization, etc.). The purpose of this week is to expose students to the topics and give them a quick glance at the types of literature they will encounter in the unit.

Texts for the first week include five texts related to the four topics of focus: "Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin, "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes, "Nothing Gold Can

Stay” by Robert Frost, “The Flight from Conversation” by Sherry Turkle for *The New York Times*, and “The Obesity/Hunger Paradox” by Sam Dolnick for *The New York Times*.

After the first week students will choose a topic on which to focus their research and writing. Students will become responsible for finding a current event related to their topic on a weekly basis. Students must prepare a short narrative based on the event from the perspective of a reporter or eyewitness. This practice should expose students to timely information about their chosen topic as well as get students in the habit of thinking about their topic in a fictional context. “By telling stories about ourselves (especially to come to terms with personal grief or political injustice) or about other people or events that the media report on every day, is the way we try to make sense of our world.”¹⁴

During the research stage of the unit, students will gather relevant information on their topic. Students must produce a research paper using six to eight credible sources in which they report on their research findings of their chosen topic. This will ensure that students have a well-rounded and deep understanding of the topic, and are able to speak about it knowledgeably.

Writing Strategies

Once students have thoroughly researched their topic they will read literature related to it, as well as practice creative story telling. In the “Story-Starter” activity, students will be given a story starter and must practice creating a story that involves their topic using the starter. The story starter will give the student just enough information to jump into narrative writing, but not enough to stifle their creativity, such as: “Three kids get locked in the mall. What do they decide to do?” This will be used as a technique to help students start writing and experimenting with characters and ideas.

As an extension of the previous strategy, students must choose a familiar character (Mickey Mouse, Kanye West, etc.) and insert him/her/it into a story starter situation. This activity is designed to help students understand perspective and characterization.

To aid students in the formation of the plot of their narrative, I will ask them to create a fictional solution to a problem related to their chosen topic, or a fictional result of a problem that is left unsolved related to their chosen topic. This would take the shape of an in-class writing activity, and is designed to help students identify the central conflict of their story and help generate ideas for the plot. According to Jonathan Gottschall, “Neuroscience has long recognized that emulation of the future is one of the main businesses intelligent brains invest in. By learning the rules of the world and simulating outcomes in the service of decision making, brains can play out events without the risk and expense of attempting them physically.”¹⁵

Students will be given a short story or familiar narrative and will be asked to re-tell it in their own words. This activity is designed to help students develop a personal narrative style and voice.

Students who choose the same topic will be grouped together to create a podcast about their chosen topic. The podcast will allow students to collaborate, learn from each other, and uncover even more information about their chosen topic. This activity will also provide an outlet for their research findings that can be shared on a school-wide level.

While writing the final narrative of the unit, students will create a digital storyboard that outlines the highlights of their narrative and gives classmates a “sneak peak” of their story. Classmates will make predictions about the outcome of the plot.

The Assessment

The culminating assessment of the unit will be a creative narrative. Students must write a creative narrative that incorporates some aspect of their chosen topic into the central conflict and/or theme(s) of the story. Students must use what they have learned and practiced about creating compelling characters, conflicts, and themes. The story should explore the research topic in a way that both establishes what is already known about the topic and explores a possible future for the topic, such as: create a fictional solution to a problem, or create a fictional result of a problem that is left unsolved.

Appendix A

Common Core State Standards – English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.2

Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.a

Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.b

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.c

Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.d

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.e

Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.¹⁶

Appendix B

Lesson Essential Questions and Assessment Prompts

- Topic 1: Modern Identity - Gender, Class, and Race
 - Lesson Essential Question: How has racial, economic, and gender oppression impacted the way in which people view the modern world?
 - How are gender and gender roles continually evolving in society?
 - How does social class alter a person's perception?
 - How does racial oppression define a person's viewpoint?

- Topic 2: Man vs. Nature
 - Lesson Essential Question: How do the complexities of the relationship between man and nature affect our environment's future?
 - How does the environment affect who we are?
 - Are we destroying our environment?
 - Can humans and animals coexist?

- Topic 3: The Internet, Technology, and Society
 - Lesson Essential Question: How has the Internet and technology changed our lives?
 - What is the Digital Age?
 - Living in the Network - How is the Internet affecting our brains and how we interact with one another?
 - The Culture of the Internet -- Can the Internet be Used as a Force for Change?
 - Digital Rights - Do we have a right to privacy on the internet? To freedom of speech?
 - New Digital Ethics — Is pirating music and movies wrong?

- Topic 4: Modern Health
 - Lesson Essential Question: How do we analyze the health issues and concerns that are plaguing the modern world?
 - Modern Health: How should we approach the issues of nutrition and obesity in American society?
 - What are the issues surrounding disease in the modern world?
 - What issues and debates are being raised due to advances in the science of health care?
 - Is our current system the best way to provide health care in the United States?

Appendix C

Possible Major Texts

- Topic 1: Modern Identity - Gender, Class, and Race
 - *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich
 - *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison
 - *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
 - *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri
 - *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago
 - *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore

- Topic 2: Man vs. Nature
 - *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway
 - *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair
 - *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson
 - *Into the Wild* by John Krakauer

- Topic 3: The Internet, Technology, and Society
 - *1984* by George Orwell
 - *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

- Topic 4: Modern Health
 - *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot
 - *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro
 - *Emperor of All Maladies* by Siddhartha Mukherjee

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Notes

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- ² Ibid.
- ³ Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005), Expanded 2nd ed.
- ⁴ Audrey Osler and Juanjuan Zhu. *Narratives in teaching and research for justice and human rights*, (2011), 6.
- ⁵ Marita Wenzel, *The crucial role of literature in the generation of knowledge and critical thinking : research article*, (2005), 26.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Merriman and Nicoletti, *Globalization*
- ⁸ Osler and Zhu, *Narratives in teaching*
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Stephen Ceasar, *Standardized ethnic-studies curriculum for high schools to be studied*, (Los Angeles Times, June 2, 2014. Accessed January 10, 2016), <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-ethnic-studies-20140603-story.html>.
- ¹¹ Merriman and Nicoletti, *Globalization*
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http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/books/review/the-storytelling-animal-by-jonathan-gottschall.html?_r=2.

¹⁶ English Language Arts Standards, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>

Curriculum Unit Title

Contemporary Topics in Fiction

Author

Kathleen O'Connell

KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.

Writers can use creative fiction to explore and comment on contemporary, polarizing topics.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT

How does literature reflect and comment on contemporary, polarizing topics?

CONCEPT A

CONCEPT B

CONCEPT C

Narrative Elements

Research

Personal Narrative

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C

What elements are necessary to create a compelling narrative?

- How has racial, economic, and gender oppression impacted the way in which people view the modern world?
- How do the complexities of the relationship between man and nature affect our environment's future?
- How has the Internet and technology changed our lives?
- How do we analyze the health issues and concerns that are plaguing the modern world?

How do writers creatively present information on a meaningful, relevant topic?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES

Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago, *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson, *Into the Wild* by John Krakauer, *1984* by George Orwell, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Emperor of All Maladies* by Siddhartha Mukherjee