

## ELA EA #20

### Instructional Context

[1] The students in this 8th grade English I class are 13-14 years old. There are 16 girls and 12 boys, and there are 24 European-Americans and 4 African-Americans. On the most recent inschool assessment (MAP), students scored from the 68th to the 99th percentile in Reading and from the 63rd to the 99th percentile in Language Arts. Even though English I is considered an advanced class, it obviously contains students with a range of ELA achievement. This is partially true because different students are strong in different ELA skills. This spectrum is stretched wider as our school often honors parental requests to place students into this class when students have failed to qualify based on a comprehensive matrix of academic success, statewide test performance, in-school benchmark tests, and teacher recommendations. Additionally, students come from a wide range of economic and experiential backgrounds. Some belong to families of very humble means while others come from affluent families. Some students have no computer in their homes, and some have vacationed in Australia or Costa Rica. Recreational activities also vary. From soccer to orchestra, the after-school calendars of some students are quite full. These opportunities contrast sharply with those of students unable to participate in similar activities.

[2] The textured make-up of this class has strengths and challenges. It can be difficult to scaffold sufficiently for the less developed ELA student while providing adequate challenge to the most cognitively advanced. But, in the end, the diversity of this class is much more an asset than a liability. In this rich soil of gifts and experiences, I believe my students and I have tilled a community rooted in a love of learning, a spirit of respect, and an atmosphere of encouragement. My yearlong goals for this class are many. There is incredible talent in this class, so I predicate all my teaching upon the belief that my students can, must, and will provide some of the significant answers to the problems and challenges of the 21st century. I take seriously my responsibility and privilege to encourage, prod, and inspire these students to make the most progress possible in one year toward becoming better communicators (as writers and speakers), better thinkers (as readers, writers, and viewers), and better citizens.

### Planning

[3] As a teacher of literacy and life, my overarching ELA goals attempt to foster just this kind of progress. My goals are for students to learn how to: (1) ascertain the meaning of an author/speaker/artist's works, (2) examine that meaning through the lens of one's own understanding, (3) decide whether the author/speaker/artist's message dovetails with one's own knowledge, experience, and worldview, (4) let one's new understanding inform one's life decisions, (5) decide when/if it is desirable to share one's knowledge through writing, speaking, performance, media, artistic or other means, and (6) create meaningful, fluid, and convincing communication. All these goals are ongoing and recursive processes that are intended to equip students for academic success as well as success far beyond the classroom.

[4] In the unit in which the included video occurred, the specific student instructional goals were to learn how to (1) infer the meaning of a particular text and determine whether that meaning supports one's own understanding and/or the overarching theme of an entire text, and (2) evaluate a text and make valid connections between its theme and the following: current events, historical incidents, fictional characters, and situations in everyday life. As one can see, these unit goals merge perfectly with my overarching yearlong ELA goals as they, too, seek to teach students first how to discern meaning (Goal 1 & 2) and then how to determine whether that meaning

squares with one's prior knowledge (Goal 3). Students must then judge the decisions of themselves and others in light of this meaning (Goal 4). These goals also hone critical thinking and communication skills necessary within the ELA classroom and beyond (Goals 1-6). Additionally, the in-class dialogue and notes (during the video) and the Info-skits (after the video) require fluid and meaningful communication skills (Goals 5 & 6).

[5] During the unit, before the video, this class read and discussed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail. As we progressed through the reading of this text, students wrote open-ended reflection assignments on important quotations from the text. I let them share these reflections in a variety of ways: whole class, small groups, and pair share. After reading, discussing, reflecting, and sharing, an informal formative assessment assured me that my students had sufficient mastery of the text to proceed with the lesson featured in this video. I determined that teacher-guided small group discussion would be the best format for this lesson. First, since this lesson called for students to apply Martin Luther King's (MLK) quotations to a variety of situations, it provided a perfect opportunity to capitalize on the diverse experiences of my students. I knew McLeod or Judah would be sure to make current event and historical connections whereas Coleen or Aleyah would probably be more apt to contribute examples related to teenage life.

[6] Since I require all my students to read recreationally at least 150 minutes per week in books of their own choosing, I was confident all would have examples from fiction. In essence, their broad spectrum of experiences and preferences would add richness to group responses and give every student a "seat at the table." Next, in addition to being a convergence of different experiences, small groups would also provide a chance for more academically developed students to model higher order thinking for those students who use these skills less frequently. I built these groups with their most recent MAP scores in hand, placing students with the highest, middle, and lowest ELA scores in each group. I also factored personality, careful to assign some quieter students with some outspoken ones. I was also careful, though, to group a student who tends to dominate groups with another outspoken one. For example, Judah is a great contributor, but I knew Sophie would make sure he was not the only voice heard. Finally, since these groups would be the same for the follow-up skits, I dispersed my budding actors like Minna, Justice, and Ayron throughout the groups so they could model enthusiastic creative expression.

[7] Overall, I set out to provide a context of equal access. I wanted all my students, with their rich range of maturity and experience, to build upon and challenge respectfully the opinions of each other as they mastered this content. The groups did indeed prove to be dynamic, inclusive learning communities, perfectly suited to my goals.

[8] In this featured lesson, before the video starts, I begin to utilize best practice strategies. I introduce my students, through a PowerPoint presentation, to the learning goals of the lesson and the overarching question of the day: How can/will Letter from Birmingham Jail inform our understanding of our very real past, present and future? In the PowerPoint presentation, I also review the featured quotations from the letter and explain the group tasks they will perform. To provide for multiple learning styles and for reference after the PowerPoint advances, I give students printed (green in video, yellow in packet) copies of the quotations (Instructional Materials #1, top) and the task. I also support their upcoming tasks with an anchor chart on the board listing their tasks and a printed (green) example I created of a completed task (Instructional Materials #2) using an MLK quotation from another of his works ("I Have a Dream" speech) and showing its application to the required settings. The task of each group is to: (1) select one quotation of MLK's from the list, (2) explain on the (yellow) group sheet (Instructional Materials #3) the context and meaning of this quotation in Letter from Birmingham Jail, and (3) brainstorm and

offer one example of a situation in which this quotation applies in three of four categories: everyday teenage life, a fictional character/incident, a historical happening, and a current event. Empowered with this instruction and support materials, the students begin to meet the challenges of the lesson in their assigned small groups.

### Analysis

[9] The video begins as students are already actively engaged in these tasks. Most groups have selected their MLK quotation and are busy brainstorming appropriate real world applications for that quote. Traveling from one group to another, I facilitate the stated goals by first ascertaining the progress of each group and then providing guidance, clarification, redirection, and reconciliation, as appropriate. I also answer student questions. In short, I foster a respectful, trusting climate where students can take intellectual risks and, as they do so, feel a healthy balance of challenge and support from their peers and teacher.

[10] The video begins as I am facilitating Group 1. I ask an open-ended question inquiring what images their connection brings to mind. As I had hoped, this inquiry leads them to state aloud their underlying premise about the Holocaust: in order to effect atrocities on such a large scale, Hitler had to convince others that the persecuted were "less than human."

[11] Group 2 has chosen "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" and is busy making valid connections. However, I detect that they need to begin to move from general brainstorming to placing their connections into categories. Hence, I suggest that McLeod's (Adidas hoodie) connection about the volunteer army might fulfill Category 5/current events. As the discussion continues, I am pleased when Alex (grey shirt) remembers and restates that the example can be placed into Category 5, thus propelling the group from brainstorming to writing.

[12] As I move to Group 3, I begin by trying to tell them that it is fine to be wrong or unsure. Ironically, I proceed to show them that it is indeed fine to be wrong. I misunderstand the word that Mary (Aero shirt) is struggling to spell and tell her that privilege is one of my personal spelling demons. However, she is trying to spell superiority, not privilege. In an attempt to tell her that even teachers/adults can be imperfect spellers, I show her that adults can be imperfect listeners. Sometimes teacher missteps can teach volumes! This group is currently making connections between their MLK quotation and the novel *Watership Down*. This book was required reading for this class last summer. In the first quarter, I used summer reading texts as a context for teaching literary elements since all students had read these books. Once again, in this new situation, having these common texts proves to be invaluable. Every student in the group understands, and can therefore endorse, this application of the chosen quotation because he/she is familiar with the book. As I ask about the *Watership Down* choice, Colleen's delight (Jean jacket) is evident when she says in an enthusiastic whisper "My idea!" In whole class discussions, Colleen is a relatively reluctant participant; hence, this engagement and her obvious joy are particularly gratifying. Of course, I congratulate her. After Mary explains the *Watership Down* connection, I ask questions to engage and include two of the members of the group who are being quiet. I ask Indya if this interpretation makes sense to her and ask Bishop (blue collar) what connection the group has found to a historical event. He begins by merely reading written answers, but, as he gains a measure of confidence, he moves "off the script." Next, I hear Colleen making a connection to teenage life in whispers with Bishop. Since I see how much this small group success is building her confidence, I break in and ask her to explain. She does a great job of explaining her example, and, because of this success, I feel she will be even more willing to participate in the future.

[13] As I am continuing to the next group, I detour because of a question from Group 1. It is apparent that they are uncomfortable for some reason. Ayron (green jacket) "volunteers" Allison (white sweater) to ask me the question. Allison asks me hesitatingly, without eye contact, if they can use "sex trade" as a current events example of people interacting with other people in "an I-it relationship." Hunter (white shirt) assures me they wanted to receive permission before including this example. It is evident that they think this choice is a risky one, and I am proud of them for taking a perceived intellectual risk. Whereas this would not be a subject I would introduce to my eighth graders, my "Certainly" (you may use it) and my response of "It seems very real to me" seek to affirm these leaders of tomorrow as real thinkers in our real world. When a teacher encourages authentic connections, she or he never knows what topics students may suggest!

[14] When I arrive at Group 4, Machi and Will are having a spirited discussion. They, too, have decided to use the common text of *Watership Down*. Their argument is over which Warren best illustrates their quotation "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever." I encourage them to explain their positions so that I can observe their thinking. I also take the opportunity to invite Michael (grey AE shirt), who is being reserved, into the discussion. I am proud that Stella is stepping into the role of arbitrator and am tempted to stay quiet. However, for two reasons, I decide to step in and help mediate. First, Will, who is often quiet in large and small discussions, is investing so much that I want to affirm his contribution. Also, I think it is important to explain that it is even better when concerned citizens address oppression at moderate levels instead of waiting until they become extreme. Therefore, I encourage the group to include both examples.

[15] Once again, as I arrive, Group 5 is having a lively discussion. I encourage them to continue. Judah is insistent that their current event should be Cuba, but, as the conversation unfolds, it is evident that the rest of the group prefers Egypt. As I predicted, Sophie (dark jacket), with the aid of Ayleah (NY shirt) and Amy (red hair), is giving Judah push-back. Because the will of the group is so evident and well-reasoned, I suggest to Judah that his ideas are good, but the group wants to go with Egypt. To my surprise and delight, Sophie immediately redeems Judah's loss with "Could we possibly do Cuba in the history one?" I surely hope that her response was fostered in part by my intentional shaping of a supportive learning community.

[16] When I revisit Group 1, they are almost finished. I suggest that they review their answers to see if there are places their responses can benefit from more details or elaboration.

[17] My visit to Group 6 is the last segment on this video. I prod Isabelle (teal shirt) to explain their literature connection. With genuine respect I celebrate their choice of *Peter Pan* as an exceptional fictional example. Not only is it a great example, but sometimes-shy Isabelle does a great job of explaining it!

[18] After the groups finish their connections, students complete a blue exit slip (Instructional Materials #1, bottom) that asks for three cheers (things they enjoyed) and one wish (a suggested change or deletion). The exit slips made my heart smile as these seemingly engaged learners indicated they really were having fun as they applied some pretty challenging text to real life. As I have encouraged them to do all year, these eighth grade students elegantly perform some difficult tasks and take intellectual and social risks as they consistently challenge and encourage one another with a respectful and energetic spirit. This lesson and these activities are the foundation for the next step in their learning process. The students are now ready to move up to the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy and create videos that communicate their understanding of their chosen quotations. With the guidance of a rubric and a pacing chart, the next day they pen skits, and, after another day of preparation/practice, the Info-skits begin!

[19] This lesson is permeated with ELA strands, but space permits only a small sampling of the ways it reflects the standards. Standard V: Equity, Fairness, and Diversity states that accomplished teachers "use a variety of texts to promote opportunities to learn acceptance and appreciation of others." Many people consider MLK's Letter from Birmingham Jail the quintessential document for the teaching of tolerance, equity and fairness. It is an obvious fit for the teaching of this standard.

[20] Standard X: Listening, Speaking, and Viewing says that in (good) teachers' classrooms, students "pay attention to one another's comments about texts, ask each other questions, challenge one another, defend their individual opinions, and work cooperatively toward reaching consensus or ...understanding differing perspectives." This quotation seems to describe perfectly what a viewer sees as she/he watches the discussion on this video. The students collectively discover, ask each other questions, and listen, really listen, intently to one another as they find multiple applications for MLK's quotations.

[21] Next, Standard XII: Integrated Instruction states that "accomplished ELA teachers integrate... learning activities within the ELA classroom and across the disciplines." This lesson not only utilizes a text from the Social Studies discipline, but it also asks students to make connections to events in human history and current events. This standard also says, "Accomplished teachers use available technology to support curricular goals." From the use of a SmartBoard and a PowerPoint presentation to student use of video cameras to film their Info-skits, the use of applicable technology is evident. Likewise Standard VI: Instruction Resources asks teachers to give students "opportunities to produce various products." Included in that list are skits and videos. Last, but not least, the high level of student engagement (Standard III: Engagement) is evident throughout the video. Even though these are just a few of the ways this lesson integrates ELA standards, it is quite clear that this lesson is deeply rooted in our reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing strands.

### **Reflection**

[22] I am very pleased with the results of this lesson. I did indeed achieve my instructional goals for this lesson and this unit. As one can see, students are actively engaged throughout the lesson. It is clear by their selections that they understand MLK's quotations and the major themes in Letter from Birmingham Jail. Not only are they exhibiting facility with these themes at Bloom's Application level, but they are also analyzing their choices and evaluating the relative merits of multiple suggestions. Every single group made excellent choices. Particularly poignant illustrations include: Group 2's volunteer army, Group 3's lunchroom situation, Group 4's two examples from Watership Down, Group 5's Egypt and Cuba, and Group 6's Peter Pan connection.

[23] It also made me proud when students felt safe enough to take intellectual risks and stand up for their ideas like Group 1's connection to the sex trade and the "skirmishes" in Group 4 (Machi vs. Will) and Group 5 (Judah vs. everyone else). Incidents that revealed a supportive, respectful climate were also important. Examples are when Stella arbitrated and Sophie suggested that Cuba could serve as a historical example. But my best teacher-dream-come-true moment was when Coleen jubilantly whispered "My idea!" indicating she was loving learning and loving applying her new knowledge in a meaningful, cogent way. It just doesn't get any better than that!

[24] The video Info-skits, informed by this lesson's content, were another indicator of success. Supported by a rubric and a pacing guide, these empowered young writers/actors communicated their new understandings to the world. In short, the videos were fabulous and fun! The settings varied from the school cafeteria to the streets of

Libya, from 1940's Germany, to the classroom. I surely was giggling inside when four eighth graders simulated a flight to Never Never Land! I am happy to say that all the videos were credible and entertaining renditions of valid applications of quotations from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, Letter from Birmingham Jail.

[25] If I re-teach this lesson, I will do some things differently. I will keep the fiction category but make it strictly print text, and I will add a film-only category, allowing documentaries or feature films. With the growing importance of video in our society, I think this will be an appropriate change. I invited some quieter kids into the conversation with both objective and open-ended questions, but next time I will nudge reserved students even more in order to build confidence in those shy students. Finally, I want to add an interview component during which students explain their quotation to an adult and ask him/her to suggest a connection. I think intergenerational dialogue will add another rich layer to this already multi-textured lesson.

[26] Every class influences the next class with those same students. Possible adaptations are countless; here are a few. Having seen such a spirited Machi and Will, I will be prodding them to be more active in other settings. Some other students still need more encouragement for oral participation. In particular, I need to keep encouraging Shetara, Katie, Cam, Indya, and Emily. Allison, even as she stammered, displayed leadership potential and led her group to make an unexpected connection and request that it be considered. Therefore, I plan to foster Allison as an emerging leader. Finally, since these students grappled so successfully with this substantive text, I will certainly continue to use this format with equal and even more challenging tasks! In conclusion, I did meet my objectives for this unit. The knowledge and skills that my students learned are very valuable indeed. However, these skills are even more important as an extension of my stated year-long goals. It is great that my students can discern the meaning of quotations in a text and apply it to a variety of situations; it will be greater when they use their ever-growing cache of wisdom to discover the answers to important questions in tomorrow's world. It is great that my students can think critically enough to create and perform entertaining and meaningful Info-skits; it will be greater when they employ those same skills to communicate their reconciling and innovative solutions to the challenges of the 21st century. This future for my students is my constant hope, my ardent wish, and my fervent prayer. May it be so.

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