

TEACHING FERGUSON: MEANINGFUL CLASSROOM DIALOGUE ABOUT THE MICHAEL BROWN CASE

By **Crystal T. Laura and Deborah Lynch**

This past summer, mainstream news outlets introduced us and the rest of the world to Michael Brown, the unarmed black teenager who was shot and killed by—and some witnesses say while surrendering to—a white police officer, in the small Midwestern town of Ferguson. The public nature of the incident ignited a firestorm and sparked new momentum behind a movement, possibly a revolution, toward fundamental change. Thousands of protesters took to social media and to the streets in cities across the country, reacting to the long, dark U.S. history of racial profiling and injustice, police brutality and repression of communities of color, and the perceived worthlessness of black lives.

As faculty in the College of Education at a predominantly black-serving institution, in a large urban area, that educates and graduates the largest number of African American males in the state, we watched the coverage closely. Consequently, we began to ponder how to infuse these embedded messages from these events into classroom instruction. We further understood that we would be remiss in ignoring the educational opportunities with our alumni teachers in Chicago-area classrooms.

We wondered what teachers planned to say to their own students—particularly when reports surfaced of school district-wide bans on the topic of Michael Brown and current events in Ferguson. For example, a school district in Illinois banned all conversation surrounding events in Ferguson, although they were located less than thirty minutes away.¹ We understand that some educators typically do not welcome the idea of having classroom discussions about the thorniest, most emotionally charged, and heart-wrenching issues of our time, for fear of broaching such topics incorrectly² or opening Pandora's proverbial box.³ However, we find gumption and inspiration in the words of poet Audre Lorde, who wrote: "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed. But when we are silent we are still afraid."⁴ Therefore, as the leaders in training African American educators in the Chicagoland area, we understood our responsibility to lead the dialogue around not only events occurring in the media, but more important, ways to guide classroom conversations around these topics.

As co-directors of the Center for Urban Research and Education (CURE) in the College of Education at Chicago State University, our role is to promote academic excellence, systemic school improvement, and social justice. We quickly developed a plan to create a safe space for conversation regarding Michael Brown and the events in Ferguson and how to address sensitive questions pertaining to these events within classrooms. We organized an evening summit specifically catering to pre-service and in-service, faculty across the metropolitan area. Over 100 local educators attended, representing various fields, types of schools, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This made for richer dialogue supported by multiple viewpoints and perspectives. Participants ranged in experience, but it appeared that, regardless of how long they had been teaching in the classroom, they struggled with how to address this type and level of cultural inquiry.

Therefore, to engage the audience in dialogue and to provide opportunities for self-reflection, we asked three guiding questions:

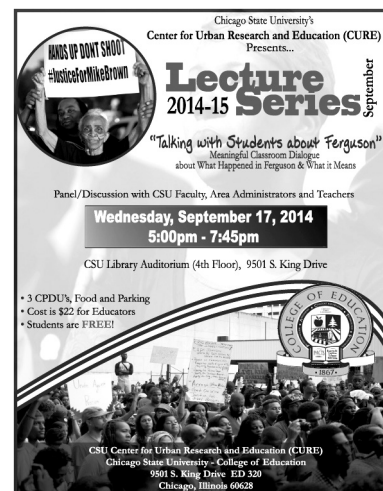
1. What happened in Ferguson and what does it mean?
2. What issues does Ferguson raise for us as educators?
3. How do educators address this and similar issues in the classroom?

To address the first guiding question, we convened an expert panel of local discussants—a teacher educator, a university administrator, a public school teacher, a school principal, an assistant superintendent, and a community organizer—who spoke to their understanding of what happened in Ferguson from unique vantage points, offering insights and perspectives such as (a) the role of the educator in facilitating these courageous conversations in K-12 settings, (b) the wider implications of the events in Ferguson, (c) the impact of these events on African American males across the country, and (d) the need for mobilization and community advocacy. This helped to transition participants into discussing the next two guiding questions.

Following the panel, attendees divided into small groups to grapple with the concerns that the tragedy in Ferguson and its larger context raised for them as educators (guiding question #2). Many of the participants voiced concerns regarding a lack of capacity and curricular resources to discuss such controversies with confidence within their classrooms. Educators overwhelmingly felt they were ill-equipped to lead these discussions with their students, but understood the significance of this task within their roles as educators. Therefore, the small group structure enabled them to brainstorm for guidance and solutions to tackling diversity-related issues that sometimes arise in the classroom.

The evening concluded with a whole-group debriefing of the small group sessions and sharing of strategies and approaches for classroom use (guiding question #3). Such approaches included (a) vital discussions about the manner in which events in Ferguson were portrayed in the media, (b) encouraging students to think critically about related issues such as responses to authority, (c) the school-to-prison pipeline, and (d) taking a broader look at other current and previous examples of police brutality toward people of color. Further, guiding recommendations for classroom dialogue included (a) ways to talk to principals and other administrators and (b) creating support networks with like-minded individuals when additional insight is needed to address diversity-related situations in the classroom.

We are aware of the complexities embedded in the Ferguson incident. Therefore, it requires both micro- and macro-levels of examination through various lenses of inquiry. Participants left with many ideas and suggestions, and evaluations of the event were overwhelmingly positive. However, many questions lingered about concrete next steps to better prepare staff and students in their schools to make sense of and talk about sensitive topics. Therefore, we recognize that additional conversations are imperative, and CURE has accepted the challenge to lead more dialogue on topics that assist in identifying best practices for supporting future critical conversations in the classroom.



Notes:

1. Valerie Strauss, "School district bans classroom discussion on Michael Brown, Ferguson," *The Washington Post*, August 26, 2014, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/08/26/school-district-bans-classroom-discussion-on-michael-brown-ferguson/http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/08/26/school-district-bans-classroom-discussion-on-michael-brown-ferguson/>
2. Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton, *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2006).
3. Rick Ayers and William Ayers, *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).
4. Audre Lorde, *Black Unicorn* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).



Crystal T. Laura, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership and co-director of the Center for Urban Research and Education at Chicago State University, located in Chicago, Illinois. Her research focuses on the social contexts of education; educational leadership/leadership preparation for social justice; and qualitative inquiry. Email: claura@csu.edu



Deborah Lynch, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Graduate Programs in Education and co-director of the Center for Urban Research and Education at Chicago State University, located in Chicago, Illinois. She taught in Chicago's public schools for 20 years and worked for the American Federation of Teachers and the Chicago Teachers Union. Email: dlynch21@csu.edu

LESSON PLAN**TEACHING FERGUSON: UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN A MINI-UNIT**By **Crystal T. Laura and Deborah Lynch****Connections to Middle and High School**

This lesson focuses on evaluating various explanations for actions or events and determining which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain; evaluating authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence; and integrating information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Lesson Plan Goals

Students should be able to:

- assess the credibility of sources and apply the criteria for analyzing evidence;
- analyze the reasoning in an argument and support their reasoning with evidence;
- identify bias and stereotypes; and
- write an essay on their position on an issue and prepare a paper.

Objectives

- Develop a deeper understanding of the facts of the Ferguson case
- Comprehend criteria for analyzing evidence and steps involved in reasoning
- Develop a deeper understanding of the characteristics of bias and stereotypes
- Demonstrate the components of persuasive writing and elements of grammar

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Social Studies Themes

1. Culture
2. Time, Continuity, and Change
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
6. Power, Authority, and Governance
10. Civic Ideals and Practices

Stage 1 - What Essential Questions Will Be Considered?

- What makes an effective claim?
- How does perspective affect interpretation of events?
- What is sound reasoning?

Stage 2 - Determine Acceptable

What evidence will show that students understand?

Culminating Performance Task

- Goal: students will write an op-ed piece on their position;
- Role: presenting a high school student's perspective;
- Audience: to citizens in the Ferguson community;
- Situation: presenting their response to the grand jury decision on Michael Brown's shooting;
- Purpose: to support their own position on the decision;
- Standards: rubric incorporating standards for persuasive writing and argument.

Evidence (quizzes, tests, prompts, observations, dialogues, work samples)

- KWL chart: what I Know, Want to know, Learned in the unit;
- Quiz identifying facts, opinion, bias;
- Analysis of an essay on Ferguson;

- Quiz on elements of persuasive writing;
- Identification of elements of successful persuasive writing;
- Peer review of partner's essay;
- Student presentations of their essays;
- Teacher observation of class discussion and participation.

Student Self-Assessment and Reflection

- Journal: five-day journal entries reflecting on in-class activities and discussions;
- Assessment of their essays using a persuasive writing rubric;
- Completion of "what I Learned" on their KWL charts;
- Reflection on what was learned from the unit.

Stage 3 - Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

Day 1

1. Students will view a video clip on the announcement of the grand jury decision on the Michael Brown shooting.
2. Each student will complete the first two columns of a KWL Chart (Column 1: what I Know, Column 2: what I Want to know, and Column 3: what I Learned).
3. Teacher will lead the class in a discussion of what they know about the case.
4. Small groups will analyze the "what we know" column and determine whether each entry is a fact or opinion.
5. Teacher then leads a whole class discussion on what the students want to know about the case, asking them to identify how they might be able to find the answers to their questions.

Day 2

1. Teacher presents a mini-lecture on the credibility of sources.
2. In groups, students view three or four different media accounts of the grand jury decision and analyze the credibility of each source.
3. Groups report their findings to the whole class.

Day 3

1. Students will read articles about the steps in the reasoning process and supporting claims with evidence.
2. In groups, students will analyze three or four examples of opinion pieces on Ferguson, identify the credibility of the sources, and analyze the reasoning and support for the claims in each.
3. Groups report their findings to the whole class.

Day 4

1. Teacher presents a mini-lecture on the persuasive writing process and provides models of effective persuasive essays.
2. Students take a quiz on elements of persuasive writing.
3. Students individually begin to plan their first drafts of their culminating performance task: an op-ed piece on their response to the grand jury decision.

Day 5

1. Students finish their first drafts of the op-ed pieces.
2. Student pairs read and provide constructive feedback on each other's essays.
3. Students revise their essays based on peer review feedback.

Day 6

1. Students make final edits to their essays.
2. Students share their essays with the class.
3. Students mail their essays to the local newspaper editor.

Day 7

1. Students write a reflection on “What they Learned” on their own KWL charts.
2. Whole class completes/discusses the “What I Learned” column on the class KWL chart.