



## **Liber-acy: Liberation from Trauma through Literacy**

Curriculum Unit 16.02.05  
by Jessica Grande

*...cry , child, for those without tears have a grief which never ends.*

*Luis J. Rodriguez*

### **Inspiration**

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I spent ten years teaching creative writing at Central Juvenile Hall in Los Angeles, CA, the largest juvenile detention center in the country. California is a state with more prisons than anywhere in the world along with a school to prison pipeline epidemic; I quickly learned that most of my students were functionally illiterate, part of Special Education in their home schools, or considered Below Basic in California State Standards. As a group, we explored poetry by women, people of color, and at times I sprinkled in William Blake and Charles Bukowski. We used the topics of these literary figures as a beginning structure to build their own writing.

The goal was not to make everyone a poet; my class was about developing the tools to express and be self-reflective which allowed them to see themselves for the first time on a page, and their relationship to the world, in a new way. In my experience, as the students began to open up to the writing process, they genuinely gained a love for poetry and language. The participants began to read on their own time, and to create writing pieces that exposed deep trauma. It was like poetry therapy—which I later found was a real field in psychology. I am not trained as a psychotherapist, but I created a space where they could see themselves as humans—not the last name that the staff called them. They reflected, came to understanding, cried in public, spoke their truths, found resolutions, craved change, and healed each other, sometimes. Literacy levels unexpectedly improved. Their critical thinking skills and writing exercises, in my short two hour a week classes, had an effect that produced confidence and mostly the love for words. Imagine a room of about fifteen gang members, some from rival gangs, battling in a spelling bee! This happened. Because I have seen severely traumatized young men and women gain tools to build resilience and literacy, I know that my teaching skills could be transferred to classrooms.

It is important to note that I do not take credit for somehow “saving” or “liberating” these youth; in contrast, they slowly did it themselves through their willingness to be vulnerable in a classroom setting. At times this liberation meant they were okay with being considered intelligent, and this did not take away from their tough identities. Other times it meant they could write poems about absent fathers or their abuse. They learned to conceptualize the disparity, institutions, and systems that affected them. They were empowered and had what Dr. Duncan Andrade would call *critical hope*, via Cornel West, which “stands in solidarity with urban communities, sharing the burden of their undeserved suffering as a manifestation of a humanizing hope in our collective capacity for healing.”<sup>1</sup> I must add from these severely traumatized and incarcerated youth, I learned social emotional health was directly tied to education and this was before I became a credentialed classroom teacher. The knowledge that language can change lives is what inspired me to teach. I saw the results of what literacy can do to a mind even when the body is subjugated. I saw imprisoned youth of color socialized to be racist towards each other discuss and connect to poems by people different from them. I knew that as Dwayne Betts, a formerly incarcerated youth, and Yale School of Law graduate, stated in a meeting with my Yale seminar: “literature is a free elixir.”

This idea of free can simply mean to shape one’s own identity, to realize connections between people, or to be resilient when facing challenges. I am working under conditions that strongly focus on new Common Core Standards testing, and so this idea of healing in the classroom is not the priority. Although some school systems have figured a way to deal with the whole child and provide wraparound services, many do not. At my school, we have one full-time counselor, a part-time counselor, a part-time psychologist, and a part time social worker to serve about 650 children ages 4-14. My students do not have sufficient social/emotional support unless their teachers attempt to create a safe space to consider all their needs.<sup>2</sup> I am approaching my unit as if my classroom is the place where my students will understand why literacy, literature, and healing are crucial for their growth and humanity.

## Rationale

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I recently moved to New Haven, Connecticut, and a recent study by the Economic Analysis and Research Network claims that the state has the highest income gap in the country. 70% of students at my school qualify for the free lunch. They specifically suffer from conditions of poverty and the social implications that come with that—including high levels of “toxic stress.” In fact this toxic stress is slowly being recognized in the New Haven Public School system. In May, 2016, I attended a film titled *Resilience: the Biology of Stress and Science of Hope*, where the mayor, the director of a local mental health clinic, a principal, and local third graders either discussed or demonstrated how trauma is being treated in New Haven.<sup>3</sup> The notion that resonated with me for my classroom is that children carry stress, and they require support systems to build resilience, and this is how learning is possible.

My current students often and casually speak about domestic and community violence. They feel safe enough to discuss past situations in their life. From these casual conversations, and feeling entrusted with my student’s narratives, I naturally became interested in the ACES study (Adverse Childhood Experiences) initiated by Dr. Felitti and Dr. Anda. These doctors surveyed 17,500 adults about their history of exposure to what they called [ACES]. There are 10 potential experiences that humans may experience as children, and through a survey those may be tallied. Those categories are: physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, physical or

emotional neglect, parental mental illness, substance dependence, incarceration, parental separation or divorce, and domestic violence. One point is given for each of these lived experiences. The higher the ACES score the more serious the trauma and the more severe the health issues. From these experiences physical health and mental issues arise and this obviously cannot be disconnected from their educational environment. They found that ACES are very common, and that health outcomes were linked. The increased health risks include: obesity, alcohol and drug use, depression, suicide attempts, diabetes, cancer, strokes, sexually transmitted diseases, and even broken bones. <sup>4</sup>The brain's development is deeply affected in children, the children I teach and the adults they will become, so I am invested in creating a haven in my classroom where literature is a tool for healing.

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris discusses how adverse childhood experiences affected children of color in Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood in San Francisco in her TED talk, "How childhood trauma affects health across lifetimes." She explains, "A lot of kids were being referred to me for ADHD...but when I actually did a thorough history and physical what I found was that for most of my patients I couldn't make a diagnoses of ADHD. Most of the kids that I was seeing had experienced such severe trauma, that it felt like something else was going on. Somehow I was missing something important." <sup>5</sup>

Teaching what most call "urban" youth—perhaps a code for children of color, or impoverished children—takes more than just knowing the curriculum and building solid relationships. I believe that a safe space, where meaningful learning happens, is the responsibility of the teacher to help the child build resilience or hope. This concept was also fostered through the writings of a child psychologist.

Reading *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook* by Dr. Bruce D. Perry furthered my belief that the learning in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom must be meaningful enough to help my students gain literary tools and access; consequently; this can mean that we build a safe space where they can build their resilience and learn about themselves through literature. <sup>6</sup>

## Teaching Methods

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*Language is never neutral--Paulo Freire*

As I have stated, trauma in children is not an anomaly. It is an anomaly that we assume they can quickly get over their stressors and that they do not affect the classroom environment. Working with disenfranchised children, who at times need food, empowerment, reading lessons, and coping mechanisms has led me towards a critical literacy pedagogy. By this I mean one that "[questions] power relations, discourse, and identities in a world not yet finished, just or humane." <sup>7</sup>In my early years of teaching, I thought my middle school aged children enjoyed controversy, but in fact, I now see that they appreciate truth. We will be reading *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, a novel with an incarcerated youth as protagonist. It is impossible not to acknowledge the powerful prison industrial complex that affects us consciously or unconsciously while reading the book. In fact his lawyer tells him her job is to make him seem human in the face of a jury that believes he is a monster simply for being a young black youth. By connecting the novel to a societal issue, students become curious and have more reason for inquiry. This immediately connects personal or communal

experiences they may have lived through.

My students must be purposefully engaged in works of literature. The methods I utilize include creative and critical reading and writing, debates, and conversations. I like to use a multi media approach as well. I present using songs, lyrics, videos, images, collages, political posters, guests and any possible way to hook their attention. Once they buy in, we can learn. I say we, because I like to consistently remind them, that they guide the learning and that one class period may be very different from another. I also state that I am learning from them and the experiences they bring into the classroom. It is necessary to honor their knowledge.

I choose these strategies because my students are energetic, resilient, artistic, and I am considering their multiple intelligences. <sup>8</sup> I emphasize their strengths and explain we are all intelligent in our own ways. My approach directly links to individual and community trauma because we have a space where the personal can be voiced, where the trauma can be observed, and where in a classroom we can support each other in learning and in life. Our internal and external conflicts are connected to that of characters. As Ira Shor states, “Since the 1960s, dialogic and student-centered methods from expressivist, feminist, and other critical teachers have foregrounded the personal and the social as the subject matters Dewey called for in his reference to ‘vital impressions and convictions.’ ” <sup>9</sup> In our class I teach and speak and have them explore, think and create, with conviction. This reduces—if not--erases disruptive behavior, lack of motivation, and any other distractions. Words have the power to heal us.

## Objective

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I will be using *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers as a core text along with informational texts and poetry to develop my curriculum. I want my students to learn the different features of writing, while creating their own pieces. This will require them to think about their lives and how they can be resilient in the face of negative or oppressive forces.

They will create scenes, poetry, and a narrative as a final project.

## Activities/Praxis

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Interestingly I am required to teach *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers as one of the core texts part of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. 46.9 % of the children at my school are African American while the second largest group is Latino. The demographic of incarcerated people in the United States clearly ties to my student’s experiences, and may very well be adding to their ACES scores. “One in 9 black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five was behind bars in 2006, and far more were under some form of penal control—such as probation or parole.” <sup>10</sup> Because of this reality, it is imperative to understand the prison industrial complex, and the very definition that still legalizes slavery in the United States. In fact when asked if they know someone incarcerated most of the youth will know someone.

Week 1: I will begin by projecting the 13th amendment on the board with the phrase “except as a punishment

for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted” in a much larger font. I will ask my students to deconstruct the amendment--but first, they must understand what it means.

*" Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."*

I will ask my students to identify unknown words, and I will write simpler words above. For example, I am sure *whereof* will be a problematic word, and I will simply write “of which.” If they ask about servitude I will write forced labor right above.

After discussing these terms in a discussion, I will have students write their own version of the amendment in their own words. We will come back as a class and discuss what it means and how this may affect them either hypothetically or in reality.

I will then show them a short animated video about the prison industrial complex titled *Mass Incarceration in the US* by [www.prisonpolicy.org](http://www.prisonpolicy.org) because it’s necessary to use visuals, technology, and information as a segue to engage my students in literature.

Exit ticket: I will have my students write their thoughts and questions about the information we discussed and saw.

Day 2-5: I will give a basic overview about the novel. I will explain that it is written as a screenplay with a few journal entries in the voice of the protagonist Steve Harmon who is an African American child on trial for attempted murder.

I will define the camera angles in the book--for example: Close Ups, Fade In, Fade Out, Cut to, and Voice Over--and I will include samples of these in short snippets of either movies or commercials, easily found on YouTube.

We will have a class discussion and I will ask students why Steve may be telling the story in this manner? Why is the author writing the narrative in this manner?

How do you think Steve feels?

Writing exercise: I will use a theatre method called “Circles of Attention” by Constantin Stanislavski, a Russian actor and teacher. There are three realities in these circles of awareness. There is a small, medium, and large one. This allows the students to tap into their emotional memory and personalize the learning. The student will write from three spaces/voices. I will make sure to draw an organizer on the board showing a stick figure in the middle within the three layered circles.

The first space is a small circle. The student will explain what it is like to be on trial for such a serious crime. I will ask them to describe how their bodies feel, and what is on their mind.

The middle circle will be when students describe the effects of their situation on immediate people in their surrounding. How will their parents and siblings feel? How will they react? What will they say and do?

The third large circle represents how the community will react. What will their teachers, neighbors, and even the city say? What if they are written about in a newspaper? How is the big circle going to react? I will ask them to make connections to the videos we saw the day before and potentially use language from the 13th

amendment or the video.

I believe this activity may take about two days to complete. I will introduce dialogue in this section. I will ask students to be authentic in what their smaller circles will actually speak. I will also ask them to write as the people in the middle circle. How may neighbors describe them, and how may teachers describe them? I will ask them to pay attention to language. For the last circle I will ask them to pay close attention to the language used to describe them on the news or the newspaper. I will ask them to focus on rhetoric being used. How does this language make them feel or shape the view of themselves? How does power play a role in the language that is used?

After this written exploration, I will group kids in groups of three. I will have them determine who will share out (present) to the class on one of the three circles. For example, whoever has the strongest small circle writing will represent that circle in the performance. They will have to add information at this point if needed. They will also have a phrase that they will repeat in a whispered manner as the other group member is reading their circle. This phrase will come from their writing. For example, the phrase could be “she cannot be guilty” as the voice of a mother would sound when speaking of her child. The phrase could be, “guilty as charged,” in the voice of a judge. Whatever the phrase is, it will come from their explorations with the “Circles of Attention.” I will have the children share out in front of the class standing in three different parts of the room. I will guide them into creating short performances. If they are comfortable they may create a beat, or a movement, or sing their repetitive phrase.

This activity will not happen early in the school year because trust has to be established, and a safe space has to be claimed by all participants. I believe it will happen when we have a bond beginning to build and where my classroom expectations have been reinforced. I have seen it performed by educators, and the results were phenomenal, so I hope to inspire movement, creativity and literacy simultaneously through this theatrical exercise.

## Pre-reading the core novel

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*Reading is not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them-* Paulo Freire

I like to mix creativity in every lesson, so the first day we will read a photocopy of the preface. In this section, Steve Harmon describes the tense and traumatic environment inside the jail. It is a fantastic hook for the students. They will create a found poem with Steve’s words, but they will create a poem that relates to their own world. Perhaps they will think of a situation that stresses them out. They will use his words to build their own meaningful activity that can potentially have them reflect on their own troubles and circumstances. They cut the words and paste them in whatever shape suits them onto the chosen color and types of paper available. I have seen fantastic designs from this activity in the past, including a jail cell. Again, each child’s strength is considered. Some have simpler designs with incredible poetry. Others have meaningful shapes with more abstract language choices. Their artwork will ultimately be displayed in the classroom.

We will spend about two days on this activity, and I will take volunteers to share out. After each child shares out, we will snap our fingers and show each other love for being brave and sharing our poem. When writers or

students say something powerful, meaningful or something that merely catches the attention of the class, we snap, say a word, say “yes” or anything affirmative and positive that shows the performer we are on their team. Lately students have been using the word “facts” as an affirmative (even when I speak) to simply show a verbal praise. This is a common practice in my room, in spoken word spaces--and even churches. This call and response appeals to my students because it encourages kinesthetic learning and interaction--not just quiet listening to information.

## Reading the novel

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As we listen to the required recording of the text being read, it is important to front load courtroom vocabulary. I will have a courtroom projected on the board with labels for attorneys, jury members, witnesses, defendants and the judge. This gives them visual cues on who is talking and why.

As we begin to listen to the audiobook, students will have a Tweet sheet. This is a sheet split into sections where they will be writing as if they are on Twitter, a social media site that only allows 140 characters per posting. Students will be required at least 10 tweets per day. They will write their tweets on this sheet as they follow along with the audio book. They will be able to create their own hashtags, reactions, and opinions as we begin to meet the characters. In the past students are fully engaged and creative with their live tweets. At times students react using their voices. When I see reactions as this, I gauge if the section is worthwhile discussing. If there is confusion, these are the moments I stop to ask questions or give explanations.

## Activities

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### Poetry

In between our core text days, I will provide them with a poem from Dwayne Betts’ poetry book *Bastards of the Reagan Era*. The title is “For the City That Nearly Broke me,” on page 40; there are several poems by this title. I’d like my students to discuss the language and imagery, topics, and style of the writer. I will introduce literary techniques, so they can formulate their own poems. Again, performance and receiving praise for courage will be a continuous action in the classroom.

I witnessed this in the drama therapy practiced at a local elementary school in New Haven. At the film screening, a classroom of 3rd graders performed with their drama therapy teacher. They started by repeating norms that declared children should be safe, taken care of and loved. They then took turns reading personal letters to their drama teacher. A nine-year old girl confessed her brother was dead due to gun violence. After she said this the teacher replied, “Isn’t she strong?” The kids agreed, and then she asked them to touch their own hearts and say, “you are very strong.” The girl headed to her seat with a look of satisfaction as if she knew a community was there to support her with her hardships. Children are praised and their strength is acknowledged when they express vulnerability. We will discuss how the reader deals with his pain and trauma through writing.



We will explore ways in which writing can be a tool for healing, and I will share works by some of my incarcerated students at this time. <sup>11</sup>

## Scenes

As we read *Monster*, we will observe how the writer constructs scenes and dialogue and why certain close ups and fade outs happen in screenwriting. I hope to guide them into seeing their creative writing as mini movies that show pieces of their life.

An assignment will be to create a crucial scene in their life, and how they would want the outcome to have been. If the situation didn't have a positive outcome, how could they write one? I'd like them to write the reality they would like to see. This is an empowering exercise and may prove to be cathartic. There will be a focus on the power of words, and how their creativity can empower them to new possibilities.

## Narrative

Before the final project, we would have built enough rapport and trust in the classroom. I will ask students to take the ACES survey and to observe it as an informational/functional text—which is a major focus of Common Core Standards. They may share their score with me or keep it private.

I want the narrative to be based on an interview of a family or community member. The requirement will simply be to extrapolate the life lesson from the interview. From this we will focus themes on resilience, and how people of all ages use their personal experiences as strengths when dealing with difficult times.

## Closing

From the start of my teaching career, I have been invested in the power that language has to transform an individual, society and the world. I have seen the clichés happen before my eyes. Books have changed lives. Books have saved lives. I have received numerous prison letters thanking me for literacy. I have students who are still imprisoned, yet write and read to be free. This is liber-acy.

I am confident that this unit will provide new lenses for my students to approach literature and themselves. It will empower them to create healthy lives even while living in dire conditions; as educators we must all be hopeful that this can actually happen. I care deeply about my student's understanding, but after my research, their health is also my concern.

The etymology of the word doctor is "to teach" from the Latin, *docēre*. What if all teachers knew this role? We are not simply knowledge givers but actual healers.

## Notes

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1. Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey. "Note to educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete." *Harvard Educational Review* (Harvard Education Publishing Group) 79, no. 2 (July 2009): 181-194.
2. McLeod, S. A. (2014). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Retrieved from [www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html)



3. Bradwell, Jen. *Resilience: the Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope*. Documentary. Directed by James Redford. Produced by Karen Pritzker. 2016.
4. Staracheski, Laura. *Take The ACE Quiz — And Learn What It Does And Doesn't Mean Facebook Twitter Google+ Email*. March 2, 2015.  
<http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean> (accessed June 2016).
5. "How Childhood Trauma Affects Health across a Lifetime." Nadine Burke Harris: Accessed May 1, 2016.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine\\_burke\\_harris\\_how\\_childhood\\_trauma\\_affects\\_health\\_across\\_a\\_lifetime](https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime)
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7. Shor, Ira. "What is Critical Literacy?" *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice* (Lesley University) 1, no. 4 (1999).
8. Gardner, Howard. *Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.
9. Shor, Ira. "What is Critical Literacy?" *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice* (Lesley University) 1, no. 4 (1999).
10. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2012.
11. See Appendix

## Appendix

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### Teacher resources

Betts, Reginald Dwayne. *Bastards of the Reagan Era*. New York, NY: Four Way Books, 2015.

### Student resources

Myers, Walter Dean, and Christopher Myers. *Monster*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

### Websites

<http://www.insideoutwriters.org/current-publication/>

[www.prisonpolicy.org](http://www.prisonpolicy.org)

## Implementing District Standard

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CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3 Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3.B

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

## **New Haven Public School District K-12 Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards and Indicators**

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### **Self Awareness**

- 1A. Develop self-awareness skills to have knowledge of one's emotions.
- 1B. Demonstrate knowledge of personal strengths, challenges and potential.
- 1C. Demonstrate awareness of how to get help and support when needed.
- 1D. Ability to accept personal responsibility.

### **Social Awareness**

- 3A. Demonstrate awareness of other people's emotions and perspectives and respond appropriately
- 3B. Demonstrate consideration for others and positively contribute to one's community
- 3C. Demonstrate an awareness of cultural factors and respect individual differences

### **Relationship Skills**

- 4A. Use communication and social skills to positively interact with others

4B. Develop constructive relationships with individuals of diverse backgrounds, abilities and lifestyles.

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