

COMING TO CONSCIOUSNESS: REWORKING RACIAL TENSIONS IN STUDENT TEACHING

*A Play in Three Acts by Hayley Rathburn
High School English Language Arts*

**COMING TO CONSCIOUSNESS:
Reworking Racial Tensions in Student Teaching**

A play in three acts

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Summer 2019

ACT I
Scene I

SETTING:
Third period in a regular sophomore English class at a small, 2A high school. The class is in the middle of a unit on Macbeth.

AT RISE:
The class has just finished reading the scene of Shakespeare's Macbeth. There are ten minutes left in the class period, and Ms. Rathburn is concerned about finishing the next scene before the bell rings. She is taking volunteers to read the next scene.

MS. RATHBURN
Okay, great job, guys. We have some time left to read today. I need three volunteers for this scene. Who wants to go this time?

(Three students raise their hands.)

Okay, how about Apantzi, Sam, and...

(Noticing Jay raising his hand, she glances at the clock and sees that only five minutes are left in the class period, and she wants to get through a *Fourpage* scene of the play before the bell rings. She realizes she needs to pick a student who will read the part quickly without multiple pauses or mistakes.)

Oh, Jay, you've already read today. Let's get someone new.

(As she's getting more anxious about running out of time, Mary raises her hand.)

Okay, Mary. Thanks!

Jay
What?! Mary already read today!

(She turns toward the two people sitting next to him.)

That's racist!

(Mary, Jay, and the students near Jay laugh quietly. Ms. Rathburn immediately feels embarrassed and sick to her stomach. Her face flushes. She glances up at the clock and sees they now have eight minutes left in class.)

MS. RATHBURN
Oh! You're right. I'm sorry. Well, we'll have you read in the first scene tomorrow, Jay. Okay. Let's start so we can finish this before the bell.

(The class looks down at their books. Apantzi, Sam, and Mary begin reading the scene on the page. Ms. Rathburn's mind begins racing as she thinks through what just happened.)

(BLACKOUT)

ACT II
Scene II

SETTING:
Fifth period planning period in a regular sophomore English class at a small, 2A high school.

AT RISE:
Ms. Rathburn is leaning about a writing rubric her mentor, Mr. M., has given her. Students have recently completed an analytical paragraph assignment on Macbeth, and her mentor would like her to use the rubric he created. As they are talking, another member of the English Department walks in the room and joins the discussion.

MS. M.
So, this is what I've used to grade their writing first semester. It works pretty well. It's pretty standard and asks you to just look at conventions and content. I have it broken down into four categories - below Proficiency, Approaching Proficiency, Proficient, and Excellent.

MS. RATHBURN
Okay, thanks. I'm kind of nervous about grading this assignment.

MS. M.
Oh, you'll be fine. Just stick with the prince on the rubric.

(Ms. S., another teacher in the English Department, walks in the room.)

MS. S.
Hey! How's it going?

MS. M.
Good! I'm just showing her the writing rubric.

MS. S.
(Looking at Mr. Rathburn)

Oh, yeah. Even without a rubric you can pretty much tell right away the difference between A, B, C, D, and F quality papers. It's pretty obvious which kids try and which don't.

MS. RATHBURN
Oh, really? What do you mean by that?

MS. S.
Just that you can tell pretty quickly if a kid put in time and effort into the work. It's easy to see if there are typos and errors. Lots of kids are lazy and don't care. Don't waste your time trying to read every last word of everything.

MS. RATHBURN
I guess I'm just nervous that that would cause me to assume a lot about kids. I totally appreciate your advice. I'm just trying to make sure that I'm being fair to everyone and not grading based off of pre-conceived judgments of students.

MS. S.
Well, you'll get the hang of it and find your own methods. Just thought I'd share. Okay. I'm heading over to the office.

MS. M.
I'll go with you so she can have some quiet.

(Mr. M. and Mr. S. leave the classroom as Ms. Rathburn sits down to start grading. Before she opens her Chromebook, she thinks through the statements that was just made by Mr. S. After thinking about this, she sits down next to the stack of student paragraphs and the writing rubric from Mr. M. As she starts reading student writing, she makes sure to question her perspective and evaluation. As she encounters white students' work, she thinks.)

Okay, what are the areas of strength and the areas of growth in this? Do I see this as "strong" just because this student has a similar writing "style" to mine?

(As she encounters the work of students of color, especially male students of color, she intentionally questions her initial

ACT III
Scene I

SETTING:
Fourth period in a regular English classroom at a small, 2A high school. The period right after lunch, this is Ms. Rathburn's largest and most challenging class.

AT RISE:
Ms. Rathburn is giving instructions for the next activity and notices the entering class of Isaiah, a Black male student who is in a video game device and not engaged in the class.

MS. RATHBURN
Alright, everyone. Let's get with our 9 o'clock partners. Don't forget to fill out the first two sections of your character chart completely.

(Noticing Isaiah on his device)

Isaiah, put that away. We go through this every day. Come on, let's stay focused.

(Isaiah puts his game device away and reluctantly moves to sit with his partner. After a few minutes, he takes his device out and starts working. Ms. Rathburn sees this and thinks.)

Ugh, he's got it out again! I don't know what else to do. I've e-mailed and called home, talked to his one-on-one and in front of the class, asked him to talk to him. This is just ridiculous. What is his deal? Why does he never try?

(The class period ends, and Play period begins. Isaiah takes a seat in the corner of the room, puts his hood up, and gets on his phone. Ms. Rathburn looks over and thinks.)

Oh my god! This is so frustrating. I don't know what his problem is! He's got so many missing assignments and he's getting all this time to work on them, but all he ever does is get on his phone. I'm so sick of this. It's getting to the point where I

dread fourth period every day because I know he'll be sitting there doing nothing. I have to say something.

(He walks over to Isaiah as the other students are working and kneels down by his desk.)

Isaiah, I don't know what else I can do for you. You're seriously always on your phone or your games, and there's nothing else I can do.

(Isaiah looks at her out of the corner of his eye.)

I can't guide you every step of the way. This is on you now. You have lots of making assignments you could be working on right now, so it's up to you. The choice is yours.

(She walks back to the desk and sits down. A few moments later, she looks across the room back at Isaiah. Her phone is away and his Chromebook is out. His hood is still up, he is slumped back in his chair, and he begins typing. Ms. Rathburn thinks.)

Well, at least he's doing something now. I don't think I will last long, though. I bet he'll be back to being on his devices tomorrow.

(BLACKOUT)

EPILOGUE

There are numerous ways I could have altered my interactions with these three students in order to make the incidents less harmful. Each scene could have been changed hundreds of times, and yet I am aware that there are still various issues present even in the altered scenes I have written.

What I have come to realize is that in real life, the "choice" seldom is chosen. As a white female teacher, there is always the potential that I will have students of color, especially Black male students, who by ingrained societal perspectives, and I cannot avoid moments and change them. I have also come to realize that there are structural issues that my students of color live with every day. I can perpetuate harm toward students of color, or I can intentionally interrupt my biases and be on alert in order to prevent myself from reacting these racist structures in my classroom.

The biggest thing I have learned is that the work is never done. Recognizing these elements of bias and racist tension within my own practices is a starting point, but I cannot stop there. I need to continue to interrogate my positionality and values and commit to the work of re-examining and implementing anti-racist teaching practices. Also, I need to keep in the back of my mind that every interaction I have with students of color can be a step toward progression on my part or a regression to the status quo of racist classroom structures.

My journey on this lifelong path starts now.

"I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humiliated or debumanized."

-Bain Glantz



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HAYLEY RATHBURN ARTIST STATEMENT

I created this three-act theatrical script to expose complexities and racial tensions that were involved in three separate instances between me and black male students during my student teaching experience. These instances were all fueled by my lack of awareness regarding the extent to which my white-centered background and positionality has significantly affected my perspectives toward students and classrooms.

The script is intended to be an exploration of how I could have altered these three instances during student teaching so as to be less harmful to male students of color. Each act begins with a scene written as the incident really occurred. There is no dramatization or added content. Every piece of dialogue and stage direction depicts what happened in my Sophomore English classroom. The second scene of each act shows how I would change these interactions now that I have reflected back on them and done research into critical race and anti-racist teaching theories. The changes are all bolded in the second scene of each act in order to demonstrate the differences between what really happened in the first scene and an option of what I wish I would have said or done differently in retrospect. These changes are by no means included to imply that there is a “quick fix” to deep, systemic issues such as racism, prejudice, or bias. Rather, they are meant to demonstrate my personal thinking as a beginning white educator and the steps I would take to alter these specific incidents.

Creating this script has helped me see the power of language and internal dialogue. Before writing this script and examining myself from a removed, third-person perspective, I did not realize how much the judgements, assumptions, and biases I carried in my mind negatively affected my interactions with these three students. While painful and even shocking to uncover these biases within myself, it has been crucial for my future teaching practice to engage in this work and begin my journey of culturally competent teaching.

This project serves as an example of my commitment to this work as it provides a framework for my thinking that I will continue to use as I enter the full-time teaching force. It is my hope that this project will aid other white educators in examining their own biases and provide a way to rethink interactions with their own students. While the process of self-reflection is difficult, it is our duty as educators to continually engage in this work in order to strive to create equitable classrooms for all of our students.

Works Cited

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