

Disciplinary Literacy, Deep Conversations about Hard Topics, and Lessons Learned

By Kim Moore September 2017

Difficult topics often make teachers uncomfortable....they are concerned that even approaching certain subjects, much less delving deeply into them, will cause heated arguments within the classroom. Also, there is the fear that their own views might creep into the conversation causing reasons for critique by the district or parents. Even though these fears are recognized, the new standards require this very thing.

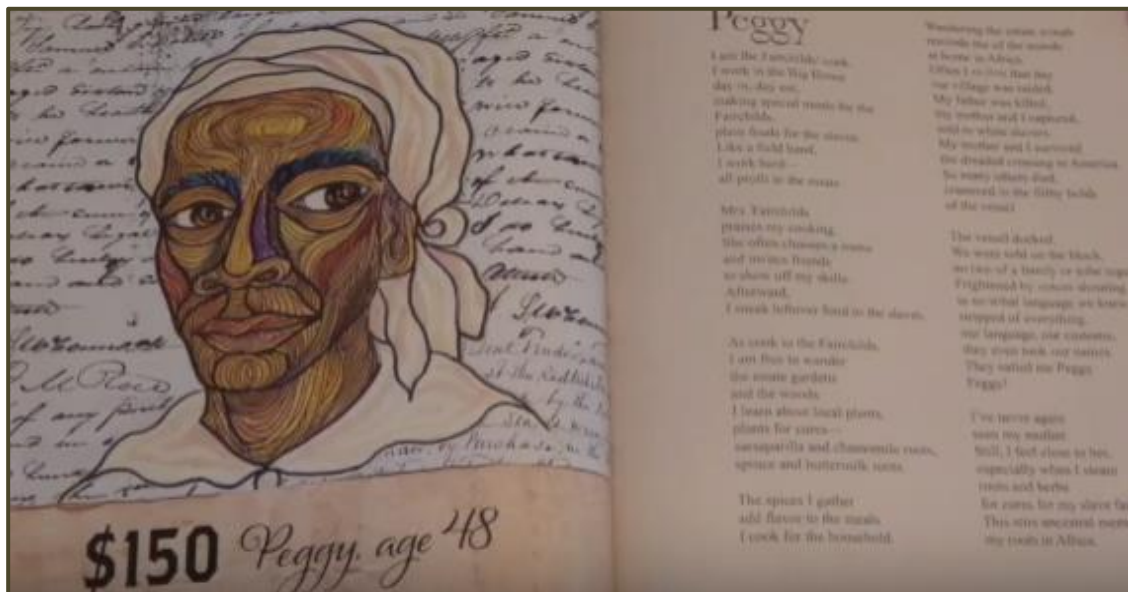
When you look at the current instructional expectations, it is very clear that the structure and strategies for teaching the new ELA, Social Studies, Science, and Math standards expect integration, collaboration, and conversation about the topics that lend themselves to critical thinking. Although these topics are the ones that are often the toughest to teach, they are also the ones that students can become passionate and want to learn more about.

If these skills and strategies are not introduced to students at the very earliest grades, then there is much difficulty in being successful at implementing them when they are to be mastered in middle and high school. Disciplinary Literacy is actually much easier to accomplish at the elementary school level because most elementary school teachers are expected to teach and “feel comfortable” with teaching all subject areas. This cross-curricular integration provides a beautiful platform for looking at learning in a variety of ways successfully. Even with this being the case, though, many elementary teachers still segment their day into silos of instruction without thinking about how these topics intersect within the standards and in real life.

For middle and high schools teachers who are already departmentalized, this may even be a more difficult challenge because of planning time and scheduling issues. Cross-departmental teams are more common now, but there are still challenges that must be overcome regarding this type of thinking. Working in collaborative teaching teams across subjects by grade level can develop a more cohesive learning experience for students. It also moves teachers into the realm of being more content experts than solely curriculum developers for their subject.

They start to make the generalizations and real-world connections that are imperative in developing in their students more critical, higher order thinking skills and strategies. Even though there are logistical, along with paradigm shift, challenges that must be overcome, this approach will provide significantly substantial results. To achieve the standards and the level of disciplinary literacy that is now demanded, it is a “must” for all schools.

Let’s take the work of author, illustrator, storyteller....Ashley Bryan as an example.



This summer, the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta produced a play of his book, *The Dancing Grannies*, and at the High Museum of Art, there is currently a display of his art, illustrations, puppets, and other glorious works. Both of these institutions have videos, images, and activities on their websites to assist teachers in approaching his works in an inspiring and memorable way.

Mr. Ashley Bryan's latest book, *Freedom Over Me*, is a wonderfully illustrated and written work that approaches the topic of slavery in a very unique way. {Even though it is a picture book, it is suited for instruction in all grade levels.} By studying original slave auction papers and plantation estate documents, Mr. Bryan, with his unique artistic style and flowing language, approaches the very difficult topic of "human ownership" contrasting with idea of "freedom over mind and spirit" in a unique way.

This idea is foreign to students who have only known the protection allowed by life lived in the United States of America during this century. Also, the idea that slavery still exists in the world today is even more difficult to understand. According to a Washington Post article published on September 19, "there are an estimated 40 million slaves in the world today". ([There are an estimated 40 million slaves in the world. Where do they live and what do they do?](#))

The idea of one human being "owning" another will be difficult for most students (and adults) to understand. This idea becomes increasingly difficult when you also discuss the abstract feelings of "being free" in "mind and spirit", but in reality, still a "piece of property".

It is, though, a topic that lends itself very well to close reading and inquiry-based/ problem-based learning in all subject areas. There are so many different ways to approach teaching with this book, but I am going to illustrate just one of those ways.

Essential Question: How is it possible for one human being to own another?

Using the shared inquiry strategies that are advocated by the Great Book Foundation (www.greatbooks.org), a non-profit that encourages deep learning through literature, the teacher becomes simply "the asker of questions" instead of the "giver of information". This approach is often times difficult for teachers that are used to lecturing or simply leading discussions, but this approach is

more organic, and it provides a platform for deep collaboration and discussion amongst groups of students.

Cluster One: Why is freedom and the issue of slavery important to Ashley Bryan, author of *Freedom Over Me*? **Analyze**

- Share information found on OERs and articles/ books written about Ashley Bryan's life. (For older students, have them do the research.)
- Have students think about what it was like for Ashley Bryan when he was growing up. (Example: math...He is 93 this year....)
- What were his inspirations? What inspires you?
- Have students listen to tribal music, which was influential in A. Bryan's art, and have them create a work of art based on what they are visualizing. Discuss visualization and how writers and artists are inspired and use visualization.

Cluster Two: What has changed or remained the same for African Americans during Ashley Bryan's lifetime? **Compare/ Contrast**

- Have student read different primary sources about these times in history.
- Have students discuss what they have read in groups, and be prepared to share with the whole group.
- Create a chart showing how things have changed for African Americans and how things have remained the same.
- Create two timelines: one of Mr. Ashley's life and a parallel timeline of what was happening in the US regarding Civil Rights
- Put information in journals outlining the facts that they discovered. Write an essay about what they have learned.
- What is the evidence that African Americans today have retained some customs and traditions from their native lands? (example: science....herbs, medicines)

Cluster Three: How does slavery impact the lives of the people that are slaves? What is the cost of a human life? Are people in the world still subjected to slavery? **Generalize**

- Based on evidence found in readings, have students create journal entries based on a typical day for a slave child in 1860s Georgia.
- Based on evidence found in readings, have students create journal entries based on a typical day of a child of a slave owner in 1860s Georgia.
- Create journal entries based on your (student) typical day now.
- Have a mock auction where slaves are sold. Students create a flyer for themselves as if they were the slave to be sold. Talk to them about attributes of a slave and how the price was determined during the time of the slave trades. [Discovery Ed \(Cost of a Slave\)](#) Have students determine the cost of each slave with supporting evidence as to what that price reflects. (example: young, strong slaves cost more)
- ([Google search for videos of Priceless Campaign](#)). Have students explain the commercials.
- Can you assign a price on a human being? Why or why not? What are the moral implications? Are there any?
- What is the difference between “having a job” and “being a slave”?

Cluster Four: Have we learned from our past? Why or why not? Are people in the world still subjected to slavery? **Synthesize**

- What lessons can be learned from our past? How can we apply those lessons to today and the future?
- What did Edmund Burke mean when he said, “Those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it.”?
- Research slavery today. Identify countries where slavery still exists. Have students work in groups to research information about slavery in these countries.
- Apply what you have learned about slavery in the past to slavery today.

Cluster Five: Think on Your Own/ Think Like aHistorian, Writer, Scientist

- If you were a slave, how would your reality be different from your dreams? Would you have a dream? What would that dream be? Write about your dream and why you would have this particular dream.
- Who else in America dreamed of African Americans having a dream different from their reality? Read, "I Have a Dream" by Martin Luther King, Jr. What inspired him to have a dream?
- Mr. Ashley Bryan had a dream to be an author, illustrator, storyteller, humanitarian. How is he making his dreams come true? What did you learn from his life, art, words?
- How is it possible for slaves who have no freedom to dream of freedom?
- Why do you think slavery still exists today? Why isn't something done about it? What can be done?
- What can you do to bring attention to the problem of slavery that still exists today? How can you make a difference?
- Is there a class project that you can create to bring attention to the problem of slavery today? How can you implement this project in your community?

For additional novels, novel studies, disciplinary literacy unit resources, primary sources, and integrated learning unit resources, please contact Kim Moore at 678-323-5500 or kmoore@perfectionlearning.com. This information is sponsored by Perfection Learning, but is created by Kim Moore for the sole use of classroom teachers. Any questions regarding content should be directed to Kim Moore.