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The Novel as a Bridge to Understanding Violence and Oppression

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Abstract

“The Novel as a Bridge to Understanding Violence and Oppression” is the academic path described in this paper. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat was the novel used as that bridge in a city college critical reading class. The question—How does one engage the student and facilitate the development of sustained critical thinking?—drove the research. The instructor used a critical pedagogy inspired by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. The paper sheds light on the importance of relationships and methods used to facilitate the development of critical literacy. Various media were woven together to sustain intellectual engagement. Over a three-month period, the classroom community explored and confronted issues of gender, race, sexuality, family, and class. The students broadened their understanding of social justice. Their experiences produced a number of outcomes. Students examined the kinds of violence produced in society and designed presentations that exhibited their understandings; they wrote extensions to the novel which reflected their empathy with the female characters; they produced Venn diagrams as they explored historical and current events. In the end, there were implications that the hegemonic impact of globalization called for the need for a paradigm shift in education.

Key words: critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, gender, violence, hegemonic globalization

Introduction

At the city college, an instructor teaching developmental reading classes is faced with the challenge of stimulating students' interest in reading and writing. Students entering these classes present with assessment measurements that indicate they are not reading and writing at the standard required to manage higher-level study activities. They are also often negative about their abilities and have no particular interest in reading. This attitude is combined with a lack of awareness about national and global issues. Even though the classroom population is diverse, this reality is pervasive. How, then, does one engage the student and facilitate the development of sustained critical thinking?

Student surveys, personal response journals, and classroom discussions reveal that, on the whole, these students have not been exposed to a pedagogy that examines critical issues and, consequently, they do not see themselves as participants or change agents in the larger society. In a constantly changing world where borders are being crossed and societies, at home and abroad, are experiencing globalization's impact, knowledge of how nations affect other nations and how the individual and the group play a role in outcomes is crucial. (Chua 2003; Chomsky 1991, 1999). If education is to contribute to social justice students need this awareness.

In the light of these phenomena, "we must press for an educational environment in which youth can develop the capacity and commitment collectively to control their lives and regulate their social interactions with a sense of equality, reciprocity, and community" (Bowles & Gentis 1976, 14). To that end, educators have a challenge and a responsibility to find bridges between the worlds of students and the worlds across borders in order to develop critical thinking skills and facilitate critical literacy. The novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat, was chosen as one of those bridges in a city college classroom. This paper describes and explains the environment and the projects that were created in order to hone in the students a sustained interest in global issues as they explored *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Danticat 1994) as a bridge to the global community.

Background information

The city college population that participated in this class was made up of approximately 25 students. These students came from many countries; spoke many languages; were of various races and classes; represented many cultures. It was a classroom well suited to border crossings. Ideas of hope (Freire 1997) and change influenced the classroom procedures. One example of an activity as a form of critical pedagogy was the project Rebuilding Haiti. It was aimed at extending and expanding the students' understanding of "violence" in order to make the possibility of change transparent. The pedagogy was designed and organized in a manner that allowed the elements of critical literacy to take root and blossom.¹

¹ According to Freire "the capable and serious progressive educator must...challenge the learner to critically think through the social, political, and historic reality within which he or she is a presence..." (Freire 2004, 19). "Socialist teachers must not only demand control over their activities; we must also extend this control to students and to the broader community" (Bowles and Gentis 1976, 287). "To teach in a manner that

The critical thinking environment included opportunities for students to build a community that bonded student to student and teacher to student. In this space, there were occasions for students to use dialogue; they were given many opportunities to gather information through research; they worked in small and large groups; they responded to surveys, they conducted interviews; they designed critical thinking questionnaires and questions for written examination assessment. They produced reading logs and presented information. Their input was sought out in all aspects of the process and their contributions were validated. The instructor made her pedagogical choices transparent by explaining her choice of reading material and her methods for facilitating the learning process (Freire 1998; hooks 1994).

Included in the theoretical underpinnings of the pedagogy was the knowledge gained from Gardner's multiple intelligences. According to the tenets of Howard Gardner's "multiple intelligences" theory (1993), people acquire knowledge in multiple ways. Therefore, in the learning environment, it was crucial to introduce and utilize approaches that incorporated visual-spatial charts and maps, bodily-kinesthetic hands-on projects like skits, musical performances, interpersonal group activities, intrapersonal reading logs, linguistic opportunities, logical activities such as creating provocative and interrogative questions, and dialogic opportunities for students to access learning.

The desired outcome of critical pedagogy is a well-informed citizen who has become aware of his or her ability to question society and the circumstances that make up human existence (Kozol 1981; Mayo 1999). The learner eventually makes informed decisions independently and sees herself as a part of a community and an agent of change. In the words of Paulo Freire, "Education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing ... Education makes sense because in order to be, women and men must keep on being" (2004, 15)

Critical literacy

The idea of critical literacy grew out of the historical search for equality as peoples were mired in social structures of patriarchy. Emancipation did not give blacks equality; public education did not make an equal society; a holistic curriculum did not create a classless society. People are still pawns of the system.

Literacy has to give the people a voice. It has to give them access to their own power. They have to see and believe in their possibilities in order for them to contribute to change. Therefore, literacy development has to encompass the critical aspect of examination. Hence, this is the function of critical literacy.

respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks 1994, 13). "In sum, the relationship between educators and learners is complex, fundamental, and difficult; it is a relationship about which we should think constantly. How nice it would be, nevertheless, if we tried to create the habit of evaluating it or of evaluating ourselves in it while we were educators and learners also" (Freire 1998, 60).

Paulo Freire (1921–1997), the well-known Brazilian educator, has been one of the major proponents of Critical Literacy as it is understood and practiced today. Freire understood that as people became literate their minds were being shaped. Therefore, pedagogy had to recognize the mind in this process of construction as well as understand the need to counteract oppressive forces.

Critical literacy unveils the actions of larger powers; it makes links between these powers and the lived situations of the masses; it unifies the people as it magnifies the yin and yang of human life; it opens channels of communication. The act of being involved is empowerment. Educators such as bell hooks (1994) and Paulo Freire (1992, 1997, 2004) have championed this call for decades.

Why critical literacy is needed

Critical literacy is a fight for freedom. In the context of life today, liberation has become a pressing need. Systems of education are caught in continuous tugs-of-war over funding, curriculum, and the ability to attract well-trained faculty. There is constant turmoil over concrete results and the need to go “back to basics.” Information is delivered, but not questioned. This leaves very little room for dynamic and progressive pedagogy. Consequently, many are deprived of a well-rounded education (Bowles & Gintis 1976).

The lack of knowledge leaves vast numbers of people vulnerable to possible exploitation and other forms of domination. Ignorance means that within borders many are left unaware of the voices of their neighbors as they fight for freedom. Education can bring with it the kind of unity necessary to fight the forces of globalization.

The world over, nonviolent resistance movements are being crushed and broken. If we do not respect and honor them, by default we privilege those who turn to violent means... Unfortunately, if peaceful change is not given a chance, then violent change becomes inevitable... In the twenty-first century the connection between religious fundamentalism, nuclear nationalism and the pauperization of whole populations because of corporate globalization is becoming impossible to ignore.

(Roy 2003, 13–14)

If it is as Arundhati Roy, an Indian novelist and social critic, states, that our nonviolent protests are not gaining ground and, at the same time, the mechanics of power are rushing to victory, we need to be creative about our action; and we need to fortify already proven methods with new energy and determination. Further, it behooves us to shout it loud and clear that “being poor is not the same as being weak. The strength of the poor is not indoors in office buildings and courtrooms. It is outdoors, in the fields, the mountains, the river valleys, the city streets, and university campuses ... That’s where negotiations must be held. That’s where the battle must be waged” (Roy 2009, 64). Therefore, when we approach this crisis of violence, we must understand that we are a part of a large community of voices. Already stories are being told; it is into that chain of experiences that we transcend borders and join hands. In order to make this unity possible, it is

important to hear these stories and understand the conditions of people around the world. One way of sharing and hearing these stories is through education: education is a form of liberation and without it change is slow.

In, *Education for All a Distant Goal*, it was reported that “Of the world’s 101 million children out of school, between 50 and 70 per cent are from minorities or indigenous peoples.” It was also stated that “the costs of failing to provide education for all are massive: holding back economic growth and sowing the seeds for inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict” (Minority Rights 2009). These are the disturbing realities that we are witnessing today.

Consequently, pedagogy must recognize that large majorities of the people exist in marginalized communities away from formal avenues of education. Under such conditions, education must find its way to the people wherever they are: schools, community centers, churches, living rooms, the workplace, and libraries. Liberation cannot afford to wait for people who are not in the formal educational system to find their way to schools. Like Freire, we must meet the people where they are now. And they must be met with love and respect, and any material used in this process of empowerment must be relevant to their lives.

Freire, in *Pedagogy of Indignation*, emphasizes the importance of this collective vision. As an educator he understood that “Awareness of the world and awareness of myself make me not only a being in the world, but one *with* the world and *with* others. It makes me a being capable of intervening in the world and not only of adapting to it” (2004, 15). Awareness of self and the link of self to others is the powerful knowledge that one does not stand alone. In unity, action and change become real possibilities. Freire understood that education had to be for the people and about the people. This understanding led him to design a program that included the knowledge of the learning participants. He then used the material for literacy development. Freire did not see learners as empty vessels to be filled by others. He saw the need to create a student-centered environment that welcomed learners and gave their existence voice and value.

Critical pedagogy

A certain kind of pedagogy is necessary in the fight for freedom. There is an approach that will give students the determination and the confidence to become change agents. That pedagogy is a critical pedagogy; it is not a new idea. But in today’s atmosphere of increasing violence, it needs momentum, strength, and dedication.

Critical pedagogy recognizes that reading is a developmental process, so there are phases to the construction of knowledge. First, and most importantly, the positions of teacher and student must be understood and recognized as a shared relationship. The instructor, as facilitator, contributes her experiences. Included in those experiences is her training. Then, the students bring with them many experiences. There is push and pull and at times leadership roles are exchanged. The facilitator recognizes that the population (multicultural, multiethnic, multileveled, multi-gendered) arrives with a pool of information that must be validated and incorporated; in this position she is a student. She must gather this information to expand her knowledge and weave that knowledge into her

pedagogy. The instructor's responsibility is to learn from the population, to understand the process of extending and expanding information, to make prior knowledge transparent and to create opportunities for the students to make bridges between what they know and what they must learn (Freire 1997, 1998; hooks 1994).

The novel as a bridge

In the critical thinking classroom, the choice of novel is a deliberate one made by the instructor for various reasons. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a narrative based on real-life issues and events. There are many opportunities to ask questions and participate in research as the story moves from Haiti² to New York.

Danticat makes it possible for the facilitator of critical literacy to deal with a variety of issues that are familial, local, and global: ancestry, family love and loyalty, sisterhood, sexism, patriarchy, slavery, resistance, traditions, poverty, and violence.

In New York, Sophie's life is turned upside down as she encounters the alienation of an unforgiving American culture. It bites into her as she experiences the rejection of her skin color, her language, and her native origins. Juxtaposed against these alienating forces is a young woman who is determined to survive and who must create and maintain meaningful and healthy relationships. As Sophie morphs into a multidimensional woman, her journey invites a critical reading of life in Haiti and the United States.

The two settings of this novel, Haiti and New York, beg the questions of power in the historical sense as well as in its present manifestations. Who benefits and who serves? And, how do forms of oppression play roles in maintaining these divisions?

Thus, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* becomes the foundation for the development of critical skills by providing the material for questioning society and opening doors for the activism that creates change. It raises the voices of the oppressed. It calls for equality; it calls for change. It calls for critical literacy.

Creating the environment

According to Vygotsky (1978, 84–91), making connections to students' prior knowledge and scaffolding information for students are the methods that shrink the "zone of proximal development." This zone, the gap between what is known and knowledge that is to come must be a comfortable stretch for the learner. All senses are involved in this growth. The activities in the classroom were designed to build bridges of connection as the participants formed a community.

In order to build a community, the instructor sent a letter of welcome to the students. In the letter she shared details about family, educational background, hobbies, travels, and

²In 1804, Haiti became the first black slave revolution to succeed and win the slaves independence. Dominant Western powers committed to the slave trade made it pay a price for its stupendous valiance; whereas today, after years of despotic rule and desperate poverty, it struggles in the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake of January 2010. In New York, oppression in the forms of economic, gender, and cultural violence is revealed as the narrative unfolds.

teaching philosophy. The teaching pedagogy was described. Students learned what was expected of them and what they could expect from the instructor. At the end of the letter they were requested to use the welcome letter as an example and they were asked to reply. Along with the personal information, they were encouraged to include positive and negative school experiences and describe the kind of learning environment that they preferred.

The beginning of the bonding process was immediate. The letters arrived with the students and the smiles on their faces reflected the beginning of comfort. The letters themselves confirmed the students' willingness to share their private selves.

“Been through many difficulties that somehow I survived...” (female)

“I can clearly remember having the sense that my English teacher did not enjoy my presence within her classroom.” (female)

“It seems to me that we will be having fun with you in class and at the same time learning... I don't like to feel tense and pressured...” (male)

“Like in the book that I enjoyed reading last semester, *The Alchemist* by Paul Coelho, I am looking for my personal legend.” (male)

“I am a very hands-on learner. I like to touch the fire to learn that it is hot.” (female)

“Compared to other high school students, I was never the best within the classroom, or had the highest grade, but I was the one to always walk into class with a smile and a willing to learn personality.” (male)

The many honest responses indicated that the door was opened for purposeful dialogue, the possibility of open minds, and, therefore, visions of new futures.

The first sessions of the class were spent building a bridge from student to student and student to teacher. These activities formed relationships that Freire (1997) acknowledges are the glue that will take learners through and beyond oppression. Students learned how to express themselves orally; they learned to have an informed opinion and take a stand; they learned the importance of using their voices in a collective manner; they learned the meaning of critical literacy; they learned how to use the word to read the world. On a concrete level they saw their writing output increase and improve.

Partner interviews were the first venture because they allowed the students to move slowly. As a class, they decided on the appropriate questions for the audience and they sat with their partners; the chatter, smiles, and laughter confirmed that the process of building community continued. After the interviews, the students sat in a circle allowing for face-to-face contact and they introduced their partners. Inevitably the styles varied and laughter was always a by-product. After the interview, the instructor and the students gathered in a large circle (this became routine) and they were asked to express their opinions about the interviews and share their experiences. Many people noted that familiarities were found between partners; they recalled laughter and the recognition that “it broke the ice.” To seal the connections of the first steps, a name game was introduced to the members.

The game we played was a memory game and it was a lively and engaging activity. It was the final step of the introduction. At the end of this game, the students and the instructor had memorized all the names and in the process laughter and relaxation were manifested. Friendships were formed. And, as Middendorf pointed out in *Learning Student Names*, it was obvious that after the names were learned “a sense of community among the students begins to grow, fostering learning both inside and outside the classroom” (1996). Overheard after our name game were the exchange of numbers and plans for the future. The groundwork was laid and the connections became the foundation for cooperation between the members of the class.

Classroom process and projects

The novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, was introduced as a vehicle to conscious response. The plot of the novel was reviewed in the large group and the instructor made the expectations clear. The students learned that they were expected to produce a reading journal every week and use it to develop their thinking and their writing. The structure of the journal was described and the foci broken down. The journal sections, a list of main points, a short summary, and the personal response, were explained. In the personal response section, the students gave their opinions of all aspects of the reading; they connected themselves through experience and observations; they made comparisons between cultures, families, societies, and between eras. They found evidence to support their thinking; created critical thinking questions for small group discussions, and learned to lead large group discussions.

Danticat is Haitian; the narrator of her story was born in Haiti and there her story started, but my students knew nothing of Haiti. This lack of awareness was revealed when a survey was used as a tool to expose gaps in their knowledge. The survey revealed that they were almost completely ignorant and what they did know was reason for concern. For example, “I know about Haiti—it is an island next to Cuba where **poverty** runs high” was one student’s response; another “It was an island where people lived.” “**Not too many wealthy people**,” was another. Similar content summed up the responses of the 25 students. They were also unaware of Haiti’s importance in history.

The students had very little prior knowledge of Haiti for scaffolding, but they had a lot of human experience to use as a bridge. Information about Haiti had to be provided. The students were asked to research and provide information on Haiti’s history; they were asked to find the island on a map. Then, with this knowledge, we entered the novel.

Edwidge Danticat is the creator of the story in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and the students met her through technology. Her lecture at the University of California at Santa Barbara was taped and available on Youtube. Students were able to see her face and hear her purpose in writing. She became real to them. They were asked to note her reasons for writing: to raise the voices of those who had little power. As a follow-up, the students did research to find out about her life and her accomplishments. She became someone to admire. This was made obvious because the combined knowledge gained from hearing her words and learning her biography elicited comments of wonder regarding her accomplishments at a young age and her achievements as a woman.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is a novel of love, of family, of survival and resistance; it is one of power, politics, and multiple forms of violence. The stories of violence lunge at the reader from between the pages: a child is born in poverty, she is torn from love; a woman is brutally raped, her psyche is torn; suicide traumatizes; women are tested on many levels. But through it all, women keep standing; they fall and rise again; their spirits of grave determination born of family and support keep them steadfast and loyal. This dramatization of human life held the attention of the students.

As this journey of women held the students fast, a journey of a different sort, but also one of violence was happening in the real world. The January 2010 earthquake had devastated Haiti. The Haitian population was caught in the aftermath of this destruction. It was in the midst of this tragedy that the project “Rebuilding Haiti” was born.

Armed with a plan to develop an understanding of the human condition, highlight the everyday plight of women, and facilitate a consciousness of violence, the instructor and the students brainstormed their understanding of the word “violent.” For the majority of students “violence” meant physical abuse. The instructor shared the dictionary definition of the word in order to move beyond ordinary meaning.

Violence - the definition

- 1 a** : exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse **b** : an instance of violent treatment **2** : injury by or as if by distortion, infringement, or profanation
- 3 a** : intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force **b** : vehement feeling or expression *also* : an instance of such action or feeling **c** : a clashing or jarring quality
- 4** : undue alteration

In conjunction with the above definitions of violence, and the reading of the novel, the instructor exposed the students to The Real News Network documentary, *Haiti: The Politics of Rebuilding*, that gave voice to the Haitian people and connected directly to current events. In this documentary, the students learned from the voices of the Haitian people information about the sweatshops, their pay struggles, the challenges of poverty, and the effects on family; they learned about the island’s resources and the reasons behind the destruction of its economy. As they analyzed this growing information, they were asked to reevaluate their understanding of the word “violence.” Over time, as the students created questions and discussed their journeys through fiction and non-fiction, their definition of this word “violence” expanded.

Words and visuals embodied the work. The students worked collaboratively to create maps, Venn diagrams, and charts that helped them to better understand the connections between people. They learned what it meant to be overpowered, to have voices silenced, and to be the recipients of multiple forms of violence.

The instructor continued to introduce material at appropriate moments so that the global connections became “real.” As the students continued to encounter the challenges of female characters in the novel, they were faced with the human characters of the world. In the journals, they practiced designing questions and this developed a meta-awareness of the importance of questions. These questions became the engine that drove the process of discovery. Various materials were used to stimulate the thinking behind the questions and these materials aided the students in the crossing of borders.

Crossing borders in the classroom

Running alongside the novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and the research on **Haiti**, the students were also using the word to cross borders; they were also using the word to find the voiceless people Danticat mentioned. They read about Chief Seattle, the Native American leader who lost his people and his land in the **United States**. In his speech delivered in 1854, Seattle addresses the power of the invaders of his land, he recognizes the genocidal intentions, and he acknowledges his inability to stop the violence.

Students were given an assignment to gather information on the 19th century boarding schools built to Americanize Native American children. They learned of a system of schooling that was designed to attack the substance of many indigenous cultures. “Kill the Indian, and save the man.” This was the goal. In these schools the students were forbidden to speak their native languages and they were forced to adapt to European American ways of being (Mintz 2007).

Together the students made the connections across borders and across time. As they expanded their understanding of violence, they asked questions. As they read the novel, they engaged in dialogue that brought these connections to light and again they asked questions.

The movie *Rabbit Proof Fence* is a story based on the lives of Aboriginal sisters in **Australia** who suffered under the Australian policy that legalized the kidnapping of children. The policy directed its attack on biracial children born to Aboriginal women. The children were torn from their families and communities and placed in schools designed to alienate them from their histories and indoctrinate them with another. Again the plan was genocide. The students learned of violence against women, children, land, and culture.

As they viewed the movie *Amazing Grace* their emotions were again aroused as they witnessed (saw and heard) the struggle against the institution of slavery. The story, based in **England**, covered the life of William Wilberforce (the Haitians and the Haitian revolution are mentioned) who contributed to the fight against murder and oppression on the slave plantations built and maintained on the lands stolen by the British.

Sankofa, the movie, was shared. The main character of this story is taken back into her past to experience the trials and tribulations of her ancestors. The movie depicts the brutality of slavery in the **Caribbean**. Students are made to witness the horrors of rape

and murder on a sugar plantation and they are asked to contemplate the reasons behind the decisions made by characters.

The research went along with the readings and discussions. For example, students were asked to find information on the Haitian slave rebellion, Ton Ton Macoutes, and virginity testing, and return to class with the written summaries. The instructor made it clear to the students that the research was needed to bring life to the novel and to contribute information to their questions; it was also needed for them to view the world.

Research helped to build bridges as the class dealt with the issue of gender in the novel. We attempted to answer the questions: Who has power? How did they gain that power? How do they keep it? What are the consequences for others? What is the effect on women? How do the women (in the novel and in real life) go about finding their power and making change? In order to handle these questions, we watched *The Shape of Water* made by Kum Kum Bhavnini (Professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara). The documentary was inspired by student questions that motivated her to make a journey to various parts of the world to raise the voices of women who were engaging in fights for human rights. The documentary introduced women in **India** who were fighting for their land; women in **Brazil** who were fighting for their forest; in **Senegal** who were fighting against the mutilation of their bodies; and in **Israel** who were fighting for the right to live in peace.

As the examination of gender continued, students did some research and found information on female circumcision and identified other practices of mutilating the female body. Forms of virginity testing were discussed, and other forms of gender violence highlighted. They also used the information as a lens to examine their own behavior. The culminating activity for the discussion on gender was provocative. The instructor introduced the idea of switching genders for an hour of the class. The activity was explained and the students asked the instructor her reasoning behind the activity. She explained that she was concerned with the ways in which men and women interacted and that understanding those relationships mattered to the success of the community. She also explained that it was necessary to find ways to walk in each other's shoes.

The activity required the men and women to split into two groups with large pieces of paper, piles of old magazines, and a bag of crayons. They were asked to make a chart of what they thought they lost and what they thought they gained when they changed their roles from male to female or from female to male in society as it is today. The results of this activity were eye openers for all involved. The male students expressed surprised realization as their common experiences constructed knowledge that proved the inequality that was a constant part of women's lives. The female students witnessed this realization and expressed a willingness to share more of their experiences. A bridge appeared between the two groups.

The subject of history entered the discussions and the students contributed their opinions on the value of history. The class discussion on pedagogy was further enhanced when the students read the printed copy of an interview *Why Students Should Study History: An*

Interview with Howard Zinn (Miner 1994), and readings about traditional education versus a more open-ended approach. This reading material was used to open discussions in which opinions and experiences were shared. In his interview, the historian and author, Howard Zinn, claimed that what was considered to be historical truth by some often left out stories. As a follow-up to these discussions, a Medgar Evers biographical movie was introduced as an example of that phenomenon in the history of the United States. Questions were raised after viewing the movie. Following which, the students came up with various reasons why particular stories are left out of major history books.

As a final project the students were asked to work in groups to present the project “Rebuilding Haiti.” It was simple. They were asked to use the information they had gathered over time and create a presentation that answered these questions: What did we know about Haiti at the beginning of the class? What do we know now? What are the global connections we have made? In the light of what we now know of Haiti, what do we think are the necessary steps that the Haitians need to take to bring about change? How can the global community contribute?

All of the contributions to this reading class and project were meant to engage students in a form of border crossing that would stretch their understanding of community and common human challenges. The approach was carried out throughout the semester. It was also meant to get them thinking along fresh lines.

The outcomes

Over the three months of meeting twice a week, the students produced various products. The gender activity, where the men and the women switched roles, produced large graphs and charts; each group presented and taught what they collectively felt they had lost and gained. One of the results was that the men stepped into Martine’s shoes and noted the emotional and physical trauma of rape. Women noted the anger and frustration of police profiling.

Venn diagrams were created that showed the similarities between the cultural violence perpetrated against the Native Americans and the violence against the indigenous population of Australia. For example, symbols like lips sewn together were the visuals that some students drew on their Venn diagrams as metaphors to reflect oppression.

As one of the final assignments related to the novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, students were asked to step into the author’s shoes and become writers. They were asked to produce a three-page extension of the novel. In this way they used Danticat as a model. Some of the written extensions created by the male students indicated that the act of stepping into Danticat’s shoes as a woman writer and into the lives of her female characters gave them bridges to the issues confronting women. Below are a few excerpts from their written extensions to the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Danticat 1994).

“How are things going with you and Joseph?” Rena has a contented look on her face, as if she knows that Sophie is recovering from her issues.
“Communication is easier between us. His actions toward me have

become much more comforting, and he understands now what I've been going through. And **I still struggle with enjoying sex**, but I no longer feel any need to double."³

"From the emotional trauma I have been through, I have nothing left. **I feel as though I am empty inside as a pumpkin that has had its pulp and seeds sucked out of it.** As I fall into deeper sleep, I all of a sudden find myself face to face with my mother."

"During the time I wondered what should be my next step. **Would I be strong enough to confront him? How would I react in front of him?** These questions were haunting me every night. I tried to think about something else, but I couldn't; it was deep into me. After two weeks I couldn't stand it anymore."

"I immediately asked what his name was. Atie responded her name is Ramona. 'Ramona' I said, 'what kind of guy's name is Ramona?' Atie responded, 'I said her name is Ramona. She is my girlfriend, Sophie.' This was unusual and never heard of in my culture. **Men were supposed to date women...the same sex never dated the same sex. But something in me changed; I decided to accept Atie's decision.**"

The above quotations suggest that given the opportunity to explore the lives of women from the pages of a novel, male students are able to empathize with the plight of women as they continue to struggle for equality.

Another student-generated outcome from the novel was an interview with a family member. As they read the novel and brought their thoughts to the large group discussion, students commented that they did not know much about their own families. This comment led to the design of a questionnaire for a family member. The novel had stirred a need to understand the issues of immigrants that had affected their families. Again, some of the questions gave them insight into discrimination. For example:
How were girls and boys treated in the old country?

- a) Boys had better treatment than girls in Russia when it came to education and jobs. Most girls could not go on to higher levels of schooling and were relegated to menial jobs.
- b) Women traditionally took responsibility for the family. There is almost no divorce because the courts strip women of property if they leave the marriage.

³ In the novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie "doubles" when she is having sex. Sex is a painful experience because of the trauma she experiences so she removes herself mentally. She goes to another place. The reader learns that the women in the family use "doubling" as a coping mechanism.

At the end of the three-month journey, the “Rebuilding Haiti” projects were presented. They reflected the outcomes of the students’ work together. The group had the responsibility of using the project to teach the class. Here are answers to some questions that were a part of their Powerpoint presentation.

- What are our goals? Learning how to help society in need and being prepared in case a disaster occurs. Having the essential materials and knowledge to rebuild and improve what was once lost.
- What did we know of Haiti at the beginning? As a group we knew very little about Haiti.
- What do we know now? By reading *Breath, Eyes, Memory* we got a sense that traditions in other cultures are always being passed down to generations.
- Why research is important? Research is important because it provides us with educational information regarding past events. It also provides us with a better understanding and educates us on certain topics.
- What is the condition of Haiti now? The conditions are very poor; they can’t provide aid for themselves. The earthquake which occurred in January for many Haitians changed their lives forever. Many lost loved ones.
- How can Haiti be made healthy and independent? Haiti can be healthy and independent by first starting to educate its people so then in the future they can share their knowledge and provide Haiti with necessities such as dealing with financial situations. Haiti can be made healthy by rebuilding their agriculture and making their economy grow. By providing health services and developing well-paying jobs, making their structures stable so they can last for a lifetime.
- Types of violence learned: Anger in people’s eyes, sweatshops sent crashing by the earthquake, many loved ones lost, not giving them their freedom, rape of young kids who are taken away from their families, not having their families there to protect them.

The idea that people were being exploited, in various ways and in various places, scandalized them and the knowledge that they might benefit from sweatshop activity unsettled them. The conversations were further enhanced after they saw the DVD, *Made in L.A.* They heard the stories of garment workers (most of them immigrant women) who were protesting against discrimination and exploitation in the workplace. In response to this information and to a student suggestion, the students researched the names of a number of companies known to be involved in garment manufacturing in the developing world and wrote a letter to their headquarters communicating the students’ concerns for fair treatment of workers.

It was a beginning. The responses above were promising: they promised the possibility of continued questions and concern for people across borders. The students made connections and broadened their understanding of the concept of violence. As an assessment they were also presented with a number of questions. The answers below also indicated an expansion of their thinking.

1. How has your understanding of “violence” changed over the semester?
 - My understanding of violence changed over the semester because of the deeper context we went into as a class. The class discussions we’ve had really helped me to look more into the different kinds of violence that are out there; how not only individuals can be affected by this, but countries, races, and religions, which really paints a bigger picture than I had planned on.
 - My understanding of violence has changed in a lot of ways. I realized that violence is not just physical it’s any put down.
 - But I have learned violence can be psychological too over this semester.
 - As the semester draws to a close I realize that my knowledge on violence that occurs all over the world has increased immensely. I have a much better understanding of the torture and pain that people go through.
 - Violence is not just physical, it can be psychologically damaging, and it is a shame that it exists within every single culture around the world. It baffles me to see that there is such sickening hate throughout the world. It has motivated me to make a difference in the things I say and encourage in my daily life.
 - Well I have always seen violence as a horrible thing. What I have learned throughout the semester is that violence can come in different forms, from global to sexual violence. I have a better understanding of how violence can affect people’s way of life.

2. Did the books connect with society today?
 - What made the class interesting were the books and how they still relate to modern society. We found many links across the globe giving us a better understanding of issues such as rape, incest, body modification, terror; these are all current issues today.
 - Very much so. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was one of the best books I have read in a very long time. It was so intense and I involved myself in the book and was able to comprehend more of what is going on in Haiti.
 - We were able to have a lot of good discussions and connect them with things that are happening in our lives and don’t seem to have gone away.

- Each book we read showed numerous aspects about life that are all around us each day but many are oblivious to what is going on and are stuck in their own daily routine.

The above student answers to these questions expressed the connections that they made during the reading journey they took in the class. The answers suggested that they were on the road to critical literacy.

Conclusion

“The future does not make us. We make ourselves in the struggle to make it.” (Freire 2004, 34).

How, then, does one engage the student and facilitate the development of sustained critical thinking? This was the question posed at the beginning of this paper and it was the question that hovered as the participants in this classroom became a community and took on the challenges of critical thinking.

The novel as a bridge to understanding violence and oppression is a worthy endeavor. Observations of the students, as they journeyed with Sophie in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, suggest that over time, in a classroom where the facilitator uses a pedagogical approach based on unity and critical examination, students become more aware of themselves as community members with opinions and voices. In the midst of building bridges of solidarity and communication they learn to see themselves and others as change agents. Participants who feel appreciated and whose voices are valued are much more inclined to confront barriers that might stand in the way of self-actualization and freedom.

At the same time, change is a struggle and it is ongoing. It is important to recognize that there are challenges that must be confronted when the goal is social justice for all. An understanding of the hegemonic forces that saturate minds and, consequently, shape human behavior informs practice. Educators who see themselves as social justice workers must acknowledge the barriers that impede the development of critical consciousness. Awareness of these barriers will lead facilitators of critical literacy to question the existing education paradigm.

Today, the crossing of borders for trade and the waves of migration stimulated by this process of globalization make the exchange, collection, and use of that knowledge crucial in the interest of freedom. Students must come to understand the importance of interrogating all that they read, hear, and see.

The stories of all groups whose voices have been stifled must be found, they must be told. A future where people are respected as humans worthy of equal treatment is possible; it will take work and dedication. As Freire wrote, “Dreams are visions for which one fights. Their realizations cannot take place easily, without obstacles. It implies, on the contrary, advances, reversals, and at times, lengthy marches. It implies struggle” (2004 32).

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