

Authoring Counter-Narratives: Showcasing Student Voice through Critical Stance

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ABSTRACT

In this teaching tip, we provide a method for teaching middle and secondary English language arts (ELA) students to assume a critical stance while reading and responding to diverse literature and media. Specifically, we address the infusion of critical literacy as a pedagogy to enable students to engage in criticality by identifying negative stereotypes and harmful biases, and then take action by offering counter perspectives. We begin with a brief discussion on critical literacy as a means to promote critical stance, followed by the learning activities for classroom instruction and a student example to illustrate the power of critical stance to promote student agency. Our method for critical stance instruction draws upon Rosenblatt's (1978) seminal work on literature-based instruction that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text and Leland et al. (2018) who explicated that readers need to engage in critical transactions—a dimension of critical literacy.

KEYWORDS

critical literacy;
literature-based
instruction;
critical
transactions;
middle and
secondary ELA

Teachers and teacher educators in English language arts (ELA) share a common goal—we all strive to engage students in critical discussions of texts. We further share an understanding that today's literature instruction involves more than simply reading and responding to texts. Our readers from diverse backgrounds need a forum to analyze multiple perspectives on social justice issues, interrogate texts, and try out new reading identities as they create counter-perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2010). From this stance, we recognize Rosenblatt's (1978) seminal work on literature-based instruction that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text, both emotionally and intellectually. In other words, a transaction occurs because meaning is created; the meaning made requires the interaction between the text and the reader. Additionally, we agree with Leland et al. (2018) who explicated that readers need to engage in critical transactions—a dimension of critical literacy. Specifically, readers assume a critical stance as they learn to challenge the author's words, talk back to the text, and provide alternative perspectives by rewriting texts to correct the social injustices encountered while reading. As Bean and Moni (2003) so aptly stated, "critical literacy takes the reader beyond the bounds of reader response" (p. 643).

The purpose of this teaching tip is to share an ELA lesson that centers on critical literacy practices to develop critical stance. We begin with a brief discussion on critical literacy as a means to promote a critical stance, followed by the learning activities for classroom instruction and a student example to illustrate the power of a critical stance to promote student agency. The basis

for our method to teach critical stance began in 2022 when the second author, Ali Ameduri, was a graduate student in the first author's (Dr. Lina Soares') course titled *Young Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. The course provides an in-depth study of early adolescent and young adult literature, coupled with pedagogical theory and practices for helping students develop both oral and written personal responses. Based on her experiences in the course, Ameduri subsequently developed a two-day lesson for her seventh-grade ELA grade students to assume a critical stance while reading young adult literature. The two-day lesson is featured in this teaching tip.

Critical Stance to Promote Student Agency

Incorporating critical literacy pedagogy involves creating opportunities for students to experience ownership, empowerment, agency, and heightened awareness in their communication (Craddock & Pettit, 2023). Through critical literacy practices, teachers will find that students develop a heightened awareness of the world around them, enabling them to analyze texts, media, and events with a more critical eye (Craddock & Pettit, 2023; Gavell, 2021). Agency plays a crucial role in critical literacy, empowering students to act as agents of change in their lives and communities (Craddock & Pettit, 2023). As a result, we encourage teachers to design activities that prompt students to actively question and analyze texts, fostering a classroom ethos where they feel empowered to express their perspectives. Teachers can offer thought-provoking prompts, encouraging students to connect a concept or lesson with a current, relevant event and use that knowledge to envision alternate perspectives. In doing so, students learn to take a critical stance when reading and responding to the ideas presented in a text (Craddock & Pettit, 2023; Gavell, 2021). Giving students the opportunity to think differently or critically about an issue further gives students a voice and, in turn, promotes student agency (Craddock & Pettit, 2023). According to Benner et al. (2018), voice is important for student agency because it is a manifestation that a student is willing to self-advocate, to be heard, and to speak-up for the rights of others.

Instructional Activities

To engage students in a critical stance, we implement an approach to have students confront the author's implicit messages that are inherent in texts—stereotypes and author biases. The approach requires students to read with a critical lens to dispel the negative stereotypes and author's biases and challenge them when responding to diverse texts and media. Correspondingly, the approach further requires students to take action by presenting alternative perspectives through counter-narratives. The ultimate purpose is to provide an instructional context for students to become agents of change through their voices and pens.

Pre-reading. We recommend giving students time to brainstorm their understanding of stereotypes and biases, and thus, a two-day lesson may be appropriate depending on the time allocated for ELA. Knowing the importance of activating students' prior knowledge (Reichardt et al., 2023), we begin with a series of minilessons on day one. It is important to keep in mind that students may have some knowledge of stereotypes and biases, but many students may have yet to explore the relationship between the two words in-depth.

Minilesson one features the stereotypical stepmother in Cinderella. Because Cinderella is a well-known fairytale, we begin with a whole class discussion on stereotyping. We ask students to analyze the stepmother's behavior and describe her characteristics. Specifically, we ask them to describe what they know about the stepmother in the story and how she fits the role of the "ugly stepmother." As students respond, we talk about how the "ugly stepmother" is generalized, and

we point out that as a group, we have instantly formed our assumptions about another group of people; we have stereotyped them.

For minilesson two, we split students into groups of 4–6, give them chart paper and markers, and encourage them to think about stereotypes related to different groups, such as racial, gender, religious, ethnic, or cultural stereotypes. It is important to note that students may have diverse perspectives, and this group discussion time will help amplify students' voices, which is a protocol for student agency. As students work in groups, we pose the following questions for them to brainstorm:

- Do you think stereotypes are accurate?
- How can stereotypes influence our perceptions of others?
- What assumptions do you make about groups of people or individuals?

As a concluding activity for minilesson two, we allow each group to share their thoughts on the questions posed during the minilesson. After group responses, it is important to end with a whole class discussion, emphasizing that when there are assumptions about a group of people due to differences in norms of behavior, culture, and even appearance, the assumptions can become stereotypes. Stereotyping individuals can lead to discriminatory practices, prejudice, and the potential for bias to form (Bourke & Titus, 2020).

For the final minilesson, we allow time for students' reflections. We ask them to address: Have you ever experienced or witnessed someone being treated unfairly because of a stereotype? Students anonymously write one stereotype they have encountered personally or witnessed on a sticky note, drop it in a box, and if time permits, the teacher reads a few aloud. We have found this final minilesson significant because when students share that they have been stereotyped or know someone who has, they become more aware and sensitive to the unwanted consequences that can result from stereotyping.

The Reading Lesson. With a focus on critical literacy practices to develop critical stance, the ELA lesson offered in this teaching tip is an actual lesson that Ameduri taught to her seventh-grade students over a two-day period (Figure 1). On day one, Ameduri introduced her students to the concept of critical stance by engaging her students in the three minilessons to develop an awareness of the relationship that can exist between stereotype and bias. On day two, Ameduri continued the lesson by having the seventh-grade students read Rona Maynard's "The Fan Club." While reading, the students engaged in a literacy activity to view the text from a critical stance by responding to the questions posed on the graphic organizer. The final step enabled student agency by permitting the students to actualize their voices and pens through counter-narratives. The work of one seventh-grade student who participated in the lesson on critical stance is shared (Figure 2). For purposes of this teaching tip, the following is a brief synopsis of "The Fan Club":

The main character, Laura, is a high school student who is alienated by her popular classmates. They mock Laura for being different. Despite this, Rachel who is another marginalized student shows kindness to Laura. In an English class, the students have been asked to present a speech on a topic of their choice. Laura speaks about civil rights, but her message is met with laughter. Rachel also struggles with her speech about shells and faces ridicule. As the story continues, Laura reluctantly joins in the mocking applause directed at Rachel, highlighting the harsh realities of

discrimination and prejudice in high school when students are perceived to be different.

This story can foster discussions around peer pressure, conformity, and the internal conflicts young people face when navigating social acceptance. Through examining Laura's choices, students are encouraged to reflect on how societal pressures can influence personal values and actions, ultimately shaping one's sense of identity and integrity.

Figure 1: Assignment Instructions

Directions

- You will read the short story, "The Fan Club" by Rona Maynard, to analyze the text's portrayal of characters and events, to identify stereotypes or biases present in the story, and to write a counter-narrative that challenges these stereotypes or biases. A copy of the reading selection is provided. While reading, you will use the graphic organizer given to you to record your responses in the blank spaces under each prompt. After reading, you will write a counter-narrative to offer an alternative perspective to the text's portrayal of characters and/or events.
- For this lesson, you have been given options on the type of counter-narrative you develop. You will post your counter-narrative to present to the class on Google Classroom. Include a written explanation that includes the choices you made and helps the class understand your approach to your counter-narrative. You should also state why you chose the character you did and the importance of this decision.

Materials Needed

1. The short story, "The Fan Club," by Rona Maynard
2. Paper and pens or pencils
3. Fan Club Graphic Organizer
4. Digital Tools

The Fan Club Graphic Organizer

Perspective: How does the character's point of view influence the way the story is told?	Bias: Are there any unfair opinions or prejudices affecting the characters' actions or thoughts?	Stereotypes: Do the characters or situations fit into common stereotypes? How does this affect the story?
My Perspective: How does reading this make me feel or think about the characters and their situations?	Challenging Bias: How could the story be different if certain biases were not present?	Alternative Perspective: How might the story change if told from a different character's point of view?

Options for Counter-Narrative

- Pick a counter-narrative medium.
 - **Letter:** Write a letter from one character to another, expressing their feelings and thoughts about the events of the story.

- **Poetry:** Write a poem from a character's point of view, expressing their inner thoughts that highlights the biases and stereotypes present.
- **Newspaper Article:** Write a newspaper article reporting on the events of the story, but from a perspective that challenges the original narrative.
- **Essay:** Write an essay that analyzes the story from a critical perspective, highlighting the biases and stereotypes present and proposing a new interpretation.
- **Play Script:** Write a scene or short play that reimagines a key moment from the story, challenging stereotypes and biases.
- **Fairy Tale Retelling:** Retell the story as a fairy tale, incorporating elements of magic and fantasy to explore stereotyping.
- **Storyboard:** Create a storyboard that visually outlines a scene or series of scenes from the story, reimagined from a different perspective.
- **Written Story:** Write a new version of the story from a different character's perspective, challenging stereotypes or biases.
- **Comic Strip or Graphic Novel:** Create a comic strip or graphic novel that tells the story from a different angle, using visuals to support the new narrative.

Figure 2: One Seventh-Grader's Responses to "The Fan Club"

"The Fan Club" Graphic Organizer		
Perspective: How does the character's point of view influence the way the story is told?	Bias: Are there any unfair opinions or prejudices affecting the characters' actions or thoughts?	Stereotypes: Do the characters or situations fit into common stereotypes? How does this affect the story?
Popular Girl Diane: Diane's point of view influences the story by showing both sides of the bully and the victim (the grey area). Example: spewing ill of Laura and seeing the popular kids as antagonists.	The characters speaking ill about Laura and her background when they aren't truly aware and fully informed about her father's job or "greasy little shop," and Rachel's thoughts about the popular kids that they're all the same and aren't unique as individuals when she doesn't even know them.	Yes, it affects the story by creating the whole plot and conflict essentially. To add on, the stereotypes of the popular kids bullying, and the stereotypes of "weird kid," all build up the plot of prejudices and biases.
My Perspective: How does reading this make me feel or think about the characters and their situations?	Challenging Bias: How could the story be different if certain biases were not present?	Alternative Perspective: How might the story change if told from a different character's point of view?
I feel pity for all of the characters and their situations. I feel pity because all the bullies are likely to be pressured of fitting in, while Rachel is struggling with being left out (and the "in"	If no biases were present, it would be likely that there would be no negative aspects in the story. Example: If Rachel wasn't seen as the "weird kid," she wouldn't be teased and the "in"	It could show a character's thoughts and reasoning behind their actions or toward other people's actions. Example: From Rachel's point of view, she

crowd most likely bully to fit in and not be teased).	crowd wouldn't exist or be the same.	could view Laura as the same as Laura views the "in" crowd.
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Counter-Narrative Option: Apology Letter for Harassment

I approached the counter-narrative, using an apology letter to convey my message because I wanted to find a realistic format, where the bully could speak to the victim on their decisions and views on society. In addition, I chose Diane so that it would show how she was not just a soulless bully, but a sympathetic character who had to realize what's wrong with both her choices and the choices of society (Diane's friends, Laura, and the counselor, who wasn't in the original story):

Drip. Drip. Tears stained my paper, smudging my insincere words of "sorry." My face felt hot of anger and sadness. I don't regret what I did, I tell myself. Even when such a claim is just as untrue as my "sorry."

This empty classroom felt so suffocating, I felt like I was drowning in guilt. Was this letter enough to atone for what I did? I already apologized to you in front of that dopey counselor and Terri, Carol, Steve, Bill, Nancy, even Laura... and you, who deserved more than an apology of just guilt. Suddenly, I felt a throng of tears, cooling down my burning face.

"Diane Goddard," I suddenly remembered Ms. Harris, saying my name. I looked up from my shiny, new shoes to see Terri, Carol, Steve, Bill, and Nancy, sitting across from me, and then, the little, gaudy duo: you and Laura. "I have been concerned with the matter of persecution at our school," Ms. Harris said, firmly.

"Wait, me?" I asked, scoffing.

"Yes, you, Diane. We had observed bullying in our school; look at this card. Many students also reported to me as witnesses." Ms. Harris said, glancing calmly at my group of "friends," while I felt betrayed with anger.

I could feel tears, crawling out of my eyes; I felt so sad and betrayed. "Terri, don't act innocent! You bullied Rachel too! Those cards, you also made them!" I shrieked, pulling out the crumpled cards from my plastic purse.

"No, I didn't! You started it! I just wanted to be friends with you, so I did what you told me to do!" Tears started to fall on Terri's candy-pink sweater.

"Yeah, it was all your idea, Diane!" Bill suddenly chimed in. I could feel my hot face, when I caressed my soft skin with cold, guilty hands. I wonder if Terri's hands were just as cold, and if any of them in that forsaken room felt an ounce of guilt.

"Diane, don't try to blame it on us!" Carol shouted.

Steve started shouting at me too, even Nancy, and Laura, whose stringy hair that covered her eyes, couldn't cover her tears and anger, while you just sat there, quietly, with pitiful eyes.

"I'm sorry," I managed to spit out, with tears that should have just hanged from my eyes, but eventually, started to creep down towards my chin in an absurd path. Still, you sat there, quietly.

I don't know how you were just sitting there quietly. I admit I did something—no, I admit everything I did was wrong. But, Rachel, you knew they bullied you, you knew! I'm not angry that you didn't defend me, I know I deserved it, but no one defended you, they didn't apologize to you, they didn't realize what they did wrong. Your "friend" too, all she did was watch your embarrassment, and deep inside you, you always knew that she was always ashamed of you and your gaudy sweater. Even, Ms. Harris knew about everything, but she didn't think much of it. That's just what kids do, is what she thought. She only cared about you when the school's image was in jeopardy. It's cruel.

After the day when we were all grouped together in such a suffocating room with such shameless people, I understood how you felt. They laughed and giggled at me when I had a speech, they talked behind my back, my "friends" didn't care about me, and they made cards of me too. I finally felt what it's like to be in your shoes, not my shiny, new shoes, but the shoes that were deemed peculiar by society, and the shoes that everyone judged and didn't want to wear, or even be near.

I wonder if you can even call this an apology, if this is what it takes for me to apologize. I wouldn't say so. This isn't a satisfying apology that heals all your wounds, but even if it's a feeble, little bandaids that you want to cover your scars with, then, I'm sorry.

Concluding Thoughts

The infusion of critical literacy in an ELA classroom for middle and secondary students can be a powerful mechanism to promote a critical stance. Teaching students to dispel negative stereotypes, identify the biases in texts, and create alternate texts through alternate points of view (Lewison et al., 2015) are strategic classroom practices that embrace a critical stance. The fact that the seventh-grade student whose work is shared in this teaching tip took a critical stance was evidenced in her written counter-narrative. The response demonstrated not only her social consciousness but also her need to speak out against the unwanted and harmful consequences when students are stereotyped and then bullied for being different. Subsequently, the student's responses may offer a compelling reason for critical stance instruction. A critical stance puts power in the hands of students to change the realities they read by using their agency to write alternative perspectives.

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