

Adding Friction. A Teacher Asks, "How Can I Bring a Social Justice Lens to Our Famous Person Report?"

Article

"As a social studies teacher, I've always given my middle school students some kind of biography assignment. Sometimes I've partnered with English or Science teachers to assign investigations of notable literary or science figures from some historical period. The kids love dressing as their character to deliver their monologues in a live wax museum or enact a 'dinner party' conversation with other legendary figures. But I've always felt that they're basically remodeling an encyclopedia article."

Students are drawn to figures whose vision, courage and perseverance they admire. Their research ends in a project or essay in which the subject is typically depicted as a larger-than-life changemaker. As this teacher began describing her ancient Greek "tragic heroes" project, I wondered if we might shift students' from thinking they were assembling a timeline of notable events about a legend to focusing on the legacy of a "flawed" leader—the current relevance of a multidimensional human being, replete with imperfections and contradictions.

Finding an Appropriate Flawed Hero(ine)

To focus on social justice, we chose Margaret Sanger, a controversial activist who is often described by students as a crusader for women's reproductive rights. As a nurse on New York's Lower East Side, she saw poor immigrant women choose abortion to terminate pregnancies because they had no access to other family planning methods. The Comstock Act (1869) made it illegal to publish or distribute information about birth control. Disturbed by these conditions, Sanger established a Brooklyn clinic to provide contraceptive advice and, subsequently, created the American Birth Control League, a forerunner to Planned Parenthood. In her eighties she spearheaded the development of the first contraceptive pill approved by the FDA. Sanger also argued that women's reproductive rights could be a vehicle for eradicating global problems like overpopulation, poverty, and disease.

Today, her legacy is disparaged by opponents of abortion and contraception and lionized by promoters of gender equality and women's rights. Her critics point to her attraction to the American eugenics movement. She endorsed a 1927 Supreme Court decision that upheld compulsory "sexual sterilization of inmates of institutions... afflicted with an hereditary form of insanity or imbecility."

A wide variety of critics condemn her alliance with the eugenics movement because of its connection to the Nazi "racial hygiene" policies that resulted in the extermination of "inferior" groups including six million Jews, Roma, the disabled, and blacks.

Students will see that some encyclopedia articles and websites ignore or downplay Sanger's connection to eugenics. For example, Facing History and Ourselves, an organization that provides teaching materials to address "racism, antisemitism, and prejudice at pivotal moments in history," doesn't have any information on Sanger. Students can read a well-reasoned view of Sanger's legacy from Planned Parenthood, but its point of view could be questioned because Sanger was the organization's founder (https://www.plannedparenthood.org/files/9214/7612/8734/Sanger_Fact_Sheet_Oct_2016.pdf). A more nuanced evaluation of Sanger, which draws extensive evidence from her own writing, can be found at the Margaret Sanger Papers Project (https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/articles/sanger-hitler_equation.php).

Society deals imperfectly with arguments that proffer "scientific" evidence of biological differences to justify racism. According to Angela Saini, the author of *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (2019), current scientific research around biological racial differences continues to make sense to our current society in much the same way that "eugenics sounded so logical and attractive to progressive liberals in the early twentieth century" (84). "Race science" raises a number of interesting issues related to social justice. Racism is socially and politically constructed (105), so everything from ancestry testing to population genetics can animate racial biases and justify racist arguments.

Instructional Friction: The I-Search Paper

In traditional biography projects or dramatizations, we are aiming to motivate students to learn about a person. As students perfunctorily gather their biographical "facts" for an engaging conclusion, their interest may be caught by a quirk of character or a tangential association with their own lives. The benefit of assigning an I-Search rather than a "re-search" is that it situates students' attention on their own intellectual and emotional discovery process. They are instructed to notice the "itch of curiosity" and to scratch it (162). Interim assignments encourage students to consider what piques their interest, how they react to new information, and to examine their feelings during the journey. Personal meaning is front and center throughout their process.

The advantage of focusing on one person is that students will collectively realize the depth of that person's legacy. The instructional challenge is to identify a single figure whose life can carry that weight. Social justice is a broad term that includes diversity, inclusion, equity, multiculturalism, sustainability, globalism and civic engagement. Margaret Sanger's story is relevant to both science and public policy, raising questions about race, poverty, immigration, women's rights, genetics, disabilities, genocide, discrimination, and law. Choosing a public figure with a complex and controversial legacy increases the likelihood that students will find a personal connection, rather than just an appealing costume, to motivate their inquiry.

Set the stage with a curated set of resources focused on the person's legacy. A key reading, jigsaw readings, or class discussions can build students' background knowledge. In their how-to manual for managing an I-Search process with middle- or high-school students, Tallman and Joyce recommend repeated use of personal webbing, reflective writing and learning logs to elicit personal connections to the content (41). Rather than focusing on the flawed hero(ine), students' attention is on issues that the person's legacy raises for them. We brainstormed the following personally relevant questions that students might ask during an I-Search:

- What access do I and my peers have to birth control information?
- Do I have what it takes to be an activist?
- Do I want to know my genetic ancestry?
- What kind of flaws would make me change my opinion about a leader?
- Do I believe certain "scientific" facts that aren't actually true?
- What advantages and disadvantages does my membership in certain identity groups give me?

Macrorie explains that an I-Search paper is to be written in one's own voice: "Your language and style should belong to you" (64). He suggests using narrative writing with "situation, motivation, and consequences" (99). Once students have taken a bite into their subject, they are expected to contact one or more people, such as family members, friends, or even experts who could help them learn more. Eventually students' reflection logs, personal webbing, and interviews will fuel the writing of an I-Search paper. The I-Search essay is divided into four parts (64):

1. Prior understanding and viewpoint: What I already knew (and didn't know). What I believed.
2. Connection: Why I'm writing this - my real need, why this makes a difference to me.
3. Process: Story of my hunt, my sources, my reactions, my dead ends.
4. Reflection: What I learned (or didn't) and how it relates to where I started.

For planning purposes, I suggest you ballpark the same amount of time that you assigned previously to the biography project. The difference is that your students no longer feel as if they're jumping through your hoops, but instead are involved in a personally relevant exploration of their own identities. One can hope that by asking them to reflect on social justice issues like diversity, equity and inclusion, we can participate in fostering new changemakers for a better world.

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If you're contemplating a Margaret Sander project, you can access a full Chicago-style reference list at <http://noodle.to/sanger>

Related Readings in School Library Connection

Abilock, Debbie. "Adding Friction. A Teacher Asks: 'How Do I Teach Students to Develop Rebuttals?'" *School Library Connection*, March 2018, schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Display/2140898.

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