

I had the pleasure of attending a symposium led by Linda Christensen, Director of the Oregon Writing Project at the Graduate School of Education at Lewis and Clark College. While listening to her lecture on “Unearthing voices Silenced by History”, she said something that really resonated with a lesson I taught this week in IB American History. Linda was speaking on why kids skip school often and the overarching idea was it’s due to a lack of engaging curriculum. She asked the room, “how do you engage students from historically marginalized groups to see themselves as activists? You have to bring classes to life by having real curriculum that matters to them.” (Linda Christensen, personal communication, 2/25/12)

This really resonated with me because this week I’ve been teaching about immigration during the Industrial Revolution. Before starting my PowerPoint on Thursday 2/23/12, I asked the class to raise their hands if they were either first or second generation US citizens. All but 3 people of 27 raised their hands. I then asked how many languages they speak. I as the teacher am one of 3 people in the room that only speaks English. I told the class that all I know about immigration comes from books and that what I’m teaching them is information they need for the test. They as the students know more about it than I do since they are living the life. Adam Fletcher writes “Meaningful student involvement engages *students as teachers* as a way to strengthen learning and teachers efficacy.” (Fletcher 12) That statement is exactly what happened; in this lesson, the students were the teachers. Because of this role change, students were much more active during class discussion and their body language as evident by sitting up, eye contact and alertness to name a few, was much more positive.

At the end of the lesson we looked at political cartoons from the Industrial Revolution as well as some from today. We interpreted them and then afterwards I asked the class if they thought perspectives on immigrants had changed over time. The final exercise of the day was one that I couldn't have been happier with. With the final 20 minutes of class I told them to work in their pairs and they were to create a political cartoon expressing how they feel people look at immigration today. What I saw was incredible. They got down to work quickly. They drew rough drafts. They compared with others to see what they were doing and shared ideas. The best part was that they talked about how they had been treated personally and how they could incorporate it into their cartoon.

I've attached a couple cartoons to show how they viewed themselves in American society. I am completely convinced the entire class was engaged in the activity because it was so personal for them. As Linda Christensen expressed during her symposium, students who believe a lesson has personal significance to their own lives are much more engaged. The evidence of engagement I witnessed during this class was unmistakable. Every student was not only on task but working furiously. Students asked questions like "does the fact that I can't draw matter here?" This is evidence that they were willing to do something they believe they are not naturally good at just because they liked the activity so much (. Other evidences include: 1. body language, students were actively participating with each other 2. Staying after class to continue working even though the following period was their free period 3. Seeking assistance from others in the class and sharing/comparing ideas 4. Wanting more time to finish because they kept thinking of ideas to

add/make their work better 5. Physical evidence such as, eyes wider in anticipation of better work, excited voices, looking information up in books and other classroom resources.

This lesson hit home for the students, the activity even more so because the students got to share their own experiences. For example, in the artifact labeled "Cartoon 1" you can see the representation of Uncle Sam is welcoming people from all over the world but in the bottom corner a character in a Phillies shirt is whispering into Uncle Sam's ear "no". Philadelphia immigration was nothing we discussed in class so this reflects that the student, who is Russian, does not feel welcome in Philadelphia. She is depicting the idea that as a nation we love the idea of being a melting pot society but it doesn't look the same when brought down to the local level. In the artifact labeled "Cartoon 2", you see two people labeled "immigrant hopefuls" wanting to walk through the US border legally but being stopped by "Congress indifference". The student who drew this is in the process of gaining his citizenship. He told me that there are so many hoops to jump through that he wonders at times if it's worth it. His drawing portrays this idea. He's doing all that is asked of him and still there are walls up restricting his access.

These students, as evident by their work, took this activity personally. They could have just done cartoons that reflected information we discussed in class but instead they used personal elements to really make these cartoons come alive. The personal element engaged these students as evident by their high quality of work even when they might not have been "good artists". Validating what Linda Christensen talked about during her symposium, giving students the opportunity to

relate to the material personally often times results in genuine student engagement. I witnessed this first hand during IB American History. The evidence to prove it was overwhelming.