Promoting Social Imagination Through Interior Monologues

LINDA CHRISTENSEN, with BILL BIGELOW

An Excerpt from Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word

“Why reading, writing, and rising up?” author Linda Christensen asks in the introduction to her book of the same name. “Because during my 24 years of teaching literacy skills in the classroom, I came to understand that reading and writing are ultimately political acts... (and) should be emancipatory acts.”

With this thought, Christensen begins the journey through this collection of work focused on teaching for social justice. What follows are eight practical and inspirational chapters—essays, lesson plans, strategies, and student writing—each quite different from another and yet cohesive in their bend toward their common goal of supporting reading and writing while inspiring a sense of social justice.

The heart of the book, conceived during Christensen’s time at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon, comes out of her work with colleagues and parent activists in communities fostered by organizations such as Rethinking Schools, National Coalition of Education Activists, and the National Writing Project. Through that work, Christensen discovered that when she and her students “stopped reading novels as ends in themselves and started reading and examining society—from cartoons to immigration laws to the politics of language—and taking action” through lessons such as those found in her book, her students became more engaged in learning.

—The Editors

One of the most important aims of teaching is to prompt students to empathize with other human beings. This is no easy accomplishment in a society that pits people against each other, offers vastly greater or lesser amounts of privilege based on accidents of birth, and rewards exploitation with wealth and power. Empathy, or “social imagination,” as Peter Johnson calls it in The Reading Teacher, allows students to connect to “the other” with whom, on the surface, they may appear to have little in common. A social imagination encourages students to construct a more profound “we” than daily life ordinarily permits. A social imagination prompts students to wonder about the social contexts that provoke hurtful behaviors, rather than simply to dismiss individuals as inherently “evil” or “greedy.”

Imagining Thoughts of Others

One teaching method Bill Bigelow and I use to promote empathy, and return to unit after unit, is the interior monologue. An interior monologue is simply the imagined thoughts of a character in history, literature, or life at a specific point in time. After watching a film, reading a novel, short story, or essay, or performing improvisation skits, the class brainstorm particular key moments, turning points, or critical passages characters confronted. During a unit on the Vietnam War, we watch the 1974 documentary Hearts and Minds. The film (available in many video stores) weaves interviews
It doesn’t matter that I would be going against all the values by which I’ve lived my life. It doesn’t matter that I would break all of God’s commandments. It doesn’t matter that I would have to murder and torture innocent human beings. It doesn’t matter that this war has been caused by my own government. It doesn’t matter that I have no idea why we’re fighting. It doesn’t matter that my government is poisoning soldiers with Agent Orange. It doesn’t matter that my “enemies” are fighting only for the right to govern themselves. It doesn’t matter.

As is true any time we wonder about other people’s lives, our monologues are only guesses, at times marred by stereotype. But the very act of considering, “How might this person experience this situation?” develops an important “habit of the mind” and draws us closer together. We write the monologues along with our students and can testify to the startling insights and compassion that can arise. Usually, we—students and teachers—tap into our own well of pain, pride, sorrow, confusion, and joy. Although we may never have experienced war, we know the pain of losing a family member or

Using the soldier’s words as a jump-off point, Deanna explores how she might feel if she were in the soldier's place. Throughout the poem, she also uses other information she learned during the film.

In our classroom circle, students read their pieces aloud and give positive comments on each other’s work. Listening to the collection of writings offers students an intimate portrait of the social consequences of the war. We feel rather than observe from a distance. These portraits provide us a way to talk about the film without writing typical discussion questions. The issues embedded in the text are viewed through a more personal lens. The different lives that students imagine and their different interpretations give us opportunities to explore the film or reading more thoroughly.

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with U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese with newsreel footage of the war and unexpected scenes of daily life in the United States. Student suggestions included writing from the points of view of an American pilot who has become critical of his role in the war, a North Vietnamese man whose entire family has been killed in a bombing raid, a Native American Marine who was called “blanket ass” and “squaw” by commanding officers, and a Buddhist monk who solemnly lectures the United States on the futility of trying to conquer Vietnam.

Sometimes students choose to write from the situations we brainstorm; sometimes they don’t. The monologue technique gives structure to the assignment, but the freedom to write from anyone’s point of view allows students to mold the piece to the contours of their lives and interests.

Deanna Wesson chose to write her interior monologue as a poem. She picked a quote from a soldier who said, “We’re taught to obey our government. I would have to go if I were called.” She wrote:

**Jacob Lawrence—The Migration**

**By Corinne Rupp**

“I wanted to create a work that was very sparse. You’d see it immediately—the dark, the light values, very high in contrast. The warmth in the red.” —Jacob Lawrence, 1992

i saw it immediately—
the starkness
the desperation
the pain
faceless men pounding on steel with steel
faceless women crying
at the rope on the tree
faceless children writing
numbers on the chalkboard
i saw it immediately—
seven basic colors, each portraying
one emotion
one feeling
one more problem
i saw it immediately
i can’t be blind to this part
of my history
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friend; we have experienced the difficulty of making a tough decision. Likewise, we have felt joy. From these shared emotions, we can construct a piece that allows us to attempt a momentary entrance into another person’s life.

In our literature and U.S. history class, we read “A Jury of Her Peers,” by Susan Glaspell, a 1917 story about rural women’s lives. In the story, Minnie Wright, who lives on an isolated farm, strangles her husband in desperate retaliation for his strangling her bird, the creature that brought her the only moments of joy in an otherwise bleak life. We suggested students might begin their monologue or poem with “Write that I . . .”

Maryanne assumes the persona of Minnie Wright and tries to imagine what in her life would lead her to commit such a horrid crime:

Write that I was young,
tender like the gardenia blossom . . .
I know that you think
I killed my husband,
my keeper, protector.
I stayed in that house, broken
chairs beneath me, husband on top
pushing his fury through me . . .

Please don’t forget the bird.
You must tell them about its voice.
It was strangled.
We were strangled.

Interior monologues tap other people’s pain, but they also tap people’s hope. After watching The Killing Floor, about the World War I black migration to Chicago and union organizing in the stockyards, Debbie wrote an interior monologue from the point of view of Frank, a black worker recently arrived from the South.

I sit and listen to the unfamiliar air of music drifting in through my window.
Crickets had made music in the South,
but never in a tune like this one.
I want Mattie to hear this new music.
The sound of white men’s feet on the dirt
avoiding our Black bodies on the sidewalk.
Oh, to share the sounds of coins clinking together as I walk.

As students read their pieces aloud in the circle, we ask them to take notes on the “collective text” they create, to write about the common themes that emerge or questions they’re left with. Or we might pose a particular question for them to think about. For example, after we watched the film Glory, about the first regiment of African-American soldiers who fought in the Civil War, we wrote a dictionary definition of the word glory on the board and asked students as they listened to each other’s interior monologues to notice: “Where is the ‘glory’ in the film Glory?”

Students’ own writings and observations became different points of entry to explore the many contradictions in the film and the events it depicts. For example, Eugene wrote, “In our class reading it was commented that there was mostly pain and not much glory. I think that their pain was their glory, the fact that they were willing to be martyrs. They were fighting for a freedom that they knew they would never have, because most of them would die in the war.”

Empathy and sympathy are different. When Ghantel writes her interior monologue from the...
Points of Departure for Interior Monologues

In our experience, success with interior monologues depends on:

- Drawing on media or readings that are emotionally powerful
- Brainstorming character and situation choices so most students can find an entry into the assignment
- Allowing students the freedom to find their own passion—they might want to complete the assignment as a poem, a dialogue poem, or from the point of view of an animal or an object (Minnie Wright’s dead bird, for instance)
- Giving students the opportunity to read their pieces to the entire class
- Using the collective text of students’ writing to launch a discussion of the bigger picture.

Writing interior monologues won’t necessarily have students hugging each other as they sing “We Shall Overcome,” but they are a worthwhile piece in our attempt to construct a critical, multicultural curriculum. Students need opportunities to think deeply about other people—why they do what they do, why they think what they think. They also need chances to care about each other and the world. Interior monologues are a good place to start.

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