Resources for Anti-Racism Education

by Members of the Boston Anti-Racism Study Circle

Introduction: How We Got There From Here

A couple of years ago, a group of teachers in the Boston region began meeting to discuss racism in adult education. My agenda, as facilitator, was product-oriented: I was hoping to see a collaboration among instructors that resulted in materials for classroom use. I envisioned these materials as pro-active attempts to deal with inter-ethnic conflict in the classroom as well as to challenge prevailing racist ideas and behavior in our culture. But groups often have their own agendas, as we know. Most of the participants agreed that they wanted time to step back, to discuss their own responses to, and experiences with racism before jumping in to create materials or curriculum units. So that's what we did.

For about a year, the group-three black women and three white women-read a variety of articles dealing with racism. These included pieces by authors like Patti DeRosa, bell hooks, and minni bruce pratt. (Issues of classism and homophobia found their way into our dicussions, too, but our emphasis remained on racism.) We read, talked, argued, clarified our own opinions. We analyzed the different models and frameworks for "teaching tolerance," especially focusing on the way in which many models, under the rubric of "diversity training," fail to confront institutional racism head-on.

After a year or so, the A.L.R.I. sponsored an intensive, all-day anti-racism training facilitated by Judy Hofer and Tracey Tsugawa. We hoped that the training would help recruit new members to the study circle in order to follow up with some of the ideas and experiences offered that day. After the training, the composition of the study circle did change. We gained two new members and lost two (due to job and relocation moves). And our focus changed, too. In response to many requests from programs for on-site training to better deal with inter-ethnic conflict and racism, we decided to shift to a more pragmatic perspective. We began to review handbooks and useful hands-on resources that could help programs set up their own structures for exploring these issues. Members of the study circle continued, then, to read and discuss materials, but this time with an eye toward their value in classroom or program application. What you see in this issue of the newsletter-the "reviews" printed here-reflects the beginnings of our research.

We welcome new members and new energy. If you're interested in joining us in our discussions and efforts, call me at 782-8956 or e-mail me at lballiro@K12.oit.umass.edu. (P.S. If you are hesitant to approach the subject but feel compelled by its importance, try visiting one session. In the words of Tracey Tsugawa, we just need to learn to take the plunge and "get over ourselves" so we can get the work done.)

--Lenore Balliro

The Price of a Child **by Lorene Cary (Knopf, 1995)**

Introduction: **The following is a brief description of a novel suitable for pre-GED and GED level students. This is not a lesson plan or a fully-developed curriculum. This is a guide, actually an example of the approach I used when planning for classes. The novel provides the foundation for class work.**

I place great importance on reading and writing and know that the only way students improve reading and writing skills is to read real books and to write about what they have read. Students with strong skills reading and writing will do well on GED tests and EDP (External Diploma Program) diagnostics and tasks. We do students a disservice by concentrating exclusively on workbook-like exercises rather than content-based instruction and on GED pre- and post-tests to measure academic progress.

When an instructor decides to use so-called "non-traditional" material in class, students are exposed to writers and ideas they may not seek out independently. Consequently, I tend to choose materials that I believe are thought-provoking, interesting, and accessible for adult students.

The Novel: The Price of a Child **tells the story about the cost of freedom. A Black woman, born Ginny but later reborn as Mercer, is forced to accompany her master to a diplomatic post in Central America. To ensure her "loyalty," she is allowed to bring only two of her three children on the journey. The youngest child remains in the South. He is a kind of insurance policy for her master, a guarantee against her escape while waiting for passage from Philadelphia. Freedom has never been out of Mercer's mind. Now, however, she is forced to consider the cost. Is it worth the price of her youngest child?**

This is one of those rare books that does not rely on sensation or stereotypes to draw readers in. Ms. Cary presents us with a variety of Black characters not usually given center stage in novels set in Antebellum America. Instead we are introduced to characters with depth and nuance. This tale of freedom gives readers the opportunity to explore the effects of slavery, oppression, and racism on free Black communities and on individuals involved in the abolitionist movement. We see real people struggling with change. I have chosen Ms. Cary's book because the viewpoint is that of Black people in the urban North.

Using the Book: **The audience could be intermediate and advanced ABE students, along with pre-GED, GED, and pre-EDP students. The goal would be to use the novel as an analytical tool to: improve reading and writing, deepen understanding of history using a particular context or theme, view history through the perspective of people whose viewpoint is not usually present, and introduce students to the inherent value of literature.**

How does this approach connect with other classroom activities, specifically GED topics, including writing assignments and practice essays? Here are some examples:

In Social Studies: --the economics of freedom; how did ex-slaves earn their living?; --the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation; --the Supreme Court decisions of Plessy v. Ferguson and Dred Scott; --assignment to design a free community, keeping in mind economic, political and historical considerations, or to research a free Black community like Mound Bayou, Mississippi.

In Literature: --tone, setting, character, plot in fiction; --period newspapers; comparing and contrasting coverage of actual events relating to slavery in the Black press and the White press; --reading related material in other forms, such as narratives, poetry, drama.

In Math: --problem-solving--what route might runaway slaves have taken North, and what obstacles might they have faced?; --tools to solve the problem: map making/reading using period maps (if possible), computing mileage, understanding topography, the logistics of period travel, weather patterns.

In Writing: on-going and variable (these topics are broad and general and obviously need to be narrowed down considerably before assigning)--quality of life in the North; --the rural South and

urban North; --the Abolitionists; --making a living; -- education and housing; --what price did Mercer pay?

Approach: **There may be a need to lay some groundwork for this topic, or any other topic you choose when planning a theme-based curriculum. Generally, I structure reading assignments and class discussion/activities to connect with journal writing, classroom practice, and essay writing practice.**

I always keep these thoughts in mind: Our students come to ABE programs with a variety of educational experiences: a few good, some mediocre, most dismal. Because of this, I have no hard and fast rules regarding my approach except to be flexible. Using "alternative" materials may surprise some students initially and throw them off-balance. Don't be discouraged. My classroom always feels like a work-in-progress and that's fine because, in the words of one of my early mentors: "Teaching is chaotic and messy; a good instructor has to be willing to work amid the chaos and the disharmony until both the students and instructor find their own educational truths."

-Marsha Watson

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40 Ways to Raise a Nonracist Child **by Barbara Mathias and Mary Ann French (Harper Perennial, 1996)**

General Description: **Two women writers-one black, one white-have collaborated on a book for parents on how to "respond to the racism that permeates their children's world." After discovering that the majority of parenting books don't even mention racism within the context of child development, they have deliberately framed 40 Ways as a practical guide in the genre of popular parenting books, rather than offering a great deal of theory and history.**

There are two introductions to the book, each written by one of the authors. It's worth reading them because they reveal, not only personal biases and experiences of the authors, but stories of how it was for a black woman and a white woman to work together on such intense personal/political issues.

The first section of the book is entitled "Advice to All Parents." A few chapters invite the readers to engage in personal history and self- reflection regarding prejudice and racism. Other chapters offer ideas for involving the community and schools in "creative ideas and skills that can shape an atmosphere of fairness for their children." There is also a chapter in this section entitled "Why White Parents Should Care," an important inclusion.

The second section identifies the various stages of child development from infancy through high school within the context of living in a racist culture. Topics include selecting schools, telling the truth about history, looking at anti-bias curricula, avoiding "cultural tourism," and being honest with kids about your own uncertainties around these very complex issues.

Strengths/Weaknesses: **The value of this book, in part, depends on how much reflection one has done and how much action one has already taken around issues of racism. For more experienced readers, the authors may appear superficial in some of their suggestions. However, some of the concrete advice will probably prompt even the more "aware" readers to take another inventory of whether their ideology and life practices are indeed congruent. In other words, the book may help raise the question: How actively anti-racist am I in my daily life practices? How can I be more active, especially in providing models for my kids (or, by extension, my students?)**

A Final Note: **Though intended for parents, one could think of this book within the context of teaching as well. (This book is available at general bookstores in paperback.)**

-Lenore Balliro

Anti-Racist Education and the Adult Learner: A Handbook for Educators in Adult and Continuing Education Programs **(Toronto Board of Education, 1991)**

Target Audience: **This handbook is aimed primarily at teachers and other staff at adult basic education programs. The portions that are intended to be used in class with students don't require much reading, but they do require that participants have sufficient language ability to discuss these fairly complex issues. This probably means any classes where students and teacher have a common first language (English or otherwise) and ESOL classes where students are at an intermediate or advanced level.**

Description: **The handbook contains three parts:**
--Part I: Issues and Initiatives--A discussion of racism and the anti-racism policy adopted by the Toronto Board of Education.
--Part II: Responding to Racial Incidents--Staff development to help teachers and other staff learn to analyze and deal with racial incidents involving staff, students, and institutions. Includes eight scenarios that ask participants to analyze situations and decide what action to take.
--Part III: Anti-Racist Education in the Adult Curriculum--A look at some anti-racist principles that should underlie all teaching and some specific activities to use in class. Includes seven class activities intended to promote multi-cultural understanding and further an awareness and understanding of racism.

How This Material Could Be Used: **The handbook is primarily valuable as a resource for staff development. Part II in particular should be useful for staff at any program who are looking for help in figuring out how to respond to racial incidents, whether these concern students, staff, or institutions. The specific scenarios provide realistic starting points for discussion and give staff a structured way of thinking about how they would and/or should respond to these situations. (The specific recommendations for action to be taken that are made in this handbook for programs operating under the Toronto Board of Education won't necessarily transfer directly to all programs operating outside that city, but these scenarios should certainly help staff and programs reach their own decisions on how to respond to these sorts of incidents.) The material in Part III could be used by teachers to help review their curriculum for aspects of racism, and the activities could be useful for some classes.**

Positives/Negatives/Other Points: **Positives: 1) One major advantage of this material for us in adult education is that the handbook deals specifically with-and is aimed specifically at-teachers and students in adult basic education. 2) For teachers, it is both reactive and proactive in that it deals with both reacting to racial incidents and creating an affirmative anti-racist curriculum. 3) It says that simply knowing more about other cultures doesn't guarantee non-racist attitudes; that certainly helps but is not by itself sufficient, and people must also explicitly examine issues of racism. 4) The fact that the Toronto Board of Education has developed an anti-racism policy provides a good example for others to follow.**

Other Points: This handbook uses the term "racism" in a way that's different from how it's often now used in the U.S. by others doing anti-racism work. I believe that their writing demonstrates essentially the same understanding of the dynamics of racial prejudice, discrimination, and oppression and that their particular use of the specific word "racism" reflects a terminological, not conceptual difference, but to avoid unnecessary arguments it's important that people using the book read Part I and understand how the writers are using the term.

-Steve Reuys

Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children **by Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1989)**

Target Audience: **This book was written for pre-school teachers and programs (2-6 year olds). It could be a useful tool for teachers in ABE/ESOL programs and for family literacy programs and programs that deal with issues of parenting. The text has a curriculum guide for working with parents, and it could easily be adapted for use in adult ed. programs with teachers and students.**

General Description: **The curriculum deals with issues of gender identity, disabilities, racial differences, cultural differences, an anti-bias environment, resisting stereotypes, activism, holiday activities, and working with parents. It has a very extensive reading list for young children and a resource list for adult educators and parents.**

It looks at how racist attitudes are shaped in society and where/when they begin and what actions need to be taken to help children make sense of their world before these questions and comments manifest themselves into "real prejudices." The authors talk a lot about integration of this work into the existing curriculum and point out what teachers and parents can do to be pro-active.

The curriculum starts out talking about child development of 2-6 year olds and looks at where they are in asking questions about who they are and who others are around them. Here there is a heavy emphasis on environment, for example, on setting up a classroom that is "free" of bias. I think this is important for adult educators in order to ensure that their classrooms aren't promoting sterotypes and that there are images that reflect who the students are. The curriculum also shows people how to look critically for bias at the materials they choose; this is another useful section for adult educators.

The authors use a lot of story-telling with dolls to get important issues across. They usually use them as a problem-solving tool in response to questions a child may have or a situation that has arisen in class or an issue the teacher thinks needs addressing. This approach is not really applicable to adult education, although it may be a good tool for parents. Another way to do this with adults would be through social action theater. This would be a great way to problem-solve issues in the classroom around race and stereotypes and conflict. It takes the teachers out of the defensive role and gives students a chance to talk to the characters themselves.

There are sections on talking to parents about the why of an anti-bias curriculum; through these sessions parents themselves are asked to look at their own backgrounds and their attitudes about race, gender, and disabilities. They do this through asking parents to respond in small groups and pairs to questions like: What would you like your children to know about your race, and What do you want to teach them? These activities could also be relevant to adult education to explore similarities and differences, to share experiences, and also as an assessment to see where prejudices may be. There is also a whole curriculum devoted to parents in the back of the book. With a little adaptation these activities could be used with our ABE/ESOL teachers and students.

Areas for Concern: **1) This is a pre-school book. Would adult ed. teachers use it? Do there need to be more explicit suggestions for using it, such as which pieces and how?**

2) Is its purpose to work with the unaware? Will some of the activities and information shared in this book have a real impact on the racism we see in class and the community? The curriculum deals with the issues in a very natural, non-threatening way. This works for children (some) but adults are less willing to talk through some of these issues and have more of their own bias to overcome in order to get to some of the issues.

3) It is also important to deal with situations where there is prejudice underlying actions. This text includes activities and strategies that assess where conflict is really coming from and working from there. The assumption is that children are willing to understand and change at this age, that they are seeking answers and an explanation. If teachers find that there is prejudice underlying actions then a long-term plan is developed with the parents. But how would this play itself out in the adult education classroom? The strategies they give to assess where conflict is coming from are valuable and I think not that different from conflict resolution techniques. To find out where prejudice is coming from but not to let it slide is a key concept for our adult education classrooms.

Recommendations: **For me it was very telling how early this all starts in children and where it comes from and to see that there are very good suggestions that will help children along the way. I would recommend the book for staff as a resource to understand how racism manifests itself in children and what children pick up from the adults around them. I would also recommend it because it gives good suggestions on how to deal with racist remarks and how to evaluate materials for bias. It gives equal attention to disabilities (important because children pick up on that very very early), gender, cultural differences, activism, and community. It also has a section on holidays that I think is really important. If we look at the materials either developed by teachers or in published texts, they often take the Disney approach to holidays, which is very patronizing and often not inclusive or accurate. This chapter takes a look at ways to teach holidays or rather how not to teach them.**

Throughout the book the authors emphasize the integration of anti-bias/anti-racism into curriculum and how this can be done. They link child development theory with racism and emphasize the importance of environment (meaning pictures on the wall, books chosen to read, people chosen to speak, etc.) and the importance of finding the source of actions and what is underlying them. And they include a great resource list.

-Alison Simmons

Celebrating Diversity, **from the Personal Development Curriculum (Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, 1991)**

Target Audience: **The curriculum was developed for young adults enrolled in an Urban Corps Expansion Project, an alternative high school/GED program that includes job readiness and life skills components. It can be adapted for other youth programs and, with more extensive editing, for adult education programs. It would be appropriate for low-level literacy and ESOL programs. Some aspects might be good for workplace or corrections-based programs.**

General Description: **This particular Corpsmember Learning Activity (CLA) concerns understanding terms such as stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination; identifying with groups; planning and conducting oral histories; and sharing experiences through group discussion. The objectives state that when this activity is completed, participants will have: increased their awareness of how others feel when they are put down or discriminated against; clarified their understanding of the interlocking concepts of stereotype, prejudice and discrimination; shared experiences they have had as members of specific identity groups; and interviewed someone representing a group of people who have faced discrimination in their community. The activity consists of one two-hour workshop, followed by a 45-minute workshop, a field assignment of approximately one hour and a debriefing discussion of 30 minutes.**

Integration with Other Activities: **The basic skills connected to this lesson are writing, listening and presenting. The planning component of the oral history piece requires sequencing, evaluating, and reasoning skills. The presentation of the oral history interview could be expanded to involve media skills. Some vocabulary words are included in the lesson. Follow-up or related lessons could include:**

Literature--reading stories, etc., about individuals or groups of people that have dealt with racism; History--applying or comparing individual oral histories to larger societal movements or the history of groups of people; Political Science--researching legislation regarding discrimination and civil rights; Geography--studying the movements of different groups of people through immigration, migration, and forced relocation.

Areas of Concern: **This lesson would be most appropriate in a program that already includes a Life Skills component, where students are accustomed to spending considerable time in group activities that are not specifically concerned with a particular outcome, such as the GED test. In other cases, I think it would work best if included as part of an established academic activity, such as a period devoted to History or Political Science. Since a certain level of group cooperation and trust are required, this lesson would be inappropriate in programs where those relationships have not been established or where instruction is individually conducted.**

Another concern is the potentially hurtful nature of the first exercise where students respond to a listing of different groups of people that have experienced prejudice (elderly, the homeless, racial and ethnic groups, etc.). The group facilitator can control this aspect to a certain extent by selecting the groups carefully, but s/he should be prepared for strong reactions and potential conflict. Whether or not this risk is worth the gains of the lesson would be up to individual programs to determine.

A final concern, and one that has surfaced several times in our study group, is the emphasis on teaching our students about the effects of racism, i.e., "increased awareness of how others feel when they are put down or discriminated against" as stated in the objectives for this lesson. Our students are more likely to be painfully aware of these feelings than to need a lesson in recognizing them.

Recommendation: **With the above concerns in mind, I would recommend this lesson for its intended audience: out-of-school youth. I would not particularly recommend this material for adult education programs in general. I think that there are better materials available to address this topic. (The entire curriculum is available at the A.L.R.I. library.)**

-Clare Shepherd

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Tough Life, Tough Book

A Review of: *Push* by Sapphire (Knopf/Random House, 1996)

by Marsha Watson

Performance poet Sapphire has written an extraordinary and uncompromising first novel. *Push* is the story of Claireece Precious Jones, a young woman from Harlem who has been unnecessarily and repeatedly brutalized by the adults supposedly responsible for her well-being. She is initially brutalized by her physically- and sexually-abusive parents-to describe this family as dysfunctional would be an understatement-and then by a support service network so frayed that there is no intervention offered when at age 12 she bears the first of two children fathered by her own father. She fares no better in the public school system: They pass her through to grade nine rather than undertake the treacherous and difficult job of educating her. Precious is a non-person, a failure, someone we look through when we pass her on the street or see her on the bus, someone we decide is distasteful and should disappear.

The only place, really the last place, Precious has left to turn is an adult education class at a Harlem alternative program. There she encounters other students from similar circumstances and her first teacher, Miss Blue Rain. Blue Rain instructs these throwaway people in an atmosphere strong on support and high on expectations. She empathizes with the students but never pities them. It is here that Precious learns much more than how to read and write; she learns that her life has meaning and importance to herself and to others.

This novel exposes us to students who are not "typical" of the ABE students usually paraded out to express gratitude for a second chance at education and for a life of opportunity in America. Claireece Precious Jones is many things but she is not grateful. She is sullen and belligerent, physically unattractive (or so she believes) and full of self-loathing, but still terribly vulnerable. She knows those closest to her "jus' pour(ed) my life down the drain like it's nothing."

Sapphire writes in a straight-forward, take-no-prisoners style. She captures the voice of a young Black woman struggling to overcome the burden of illiteracy. Make no mistake-this is not a simple story of a child learning to read after being forced to bear burdens no one should ever have to. And although poverty, racism, incest, welfare, public schools, and social workers are all among the cast to characters, at its heart this is a book about failed social, economic, and educational policy and the devastating effect it has on one child. It is amazing to watch Precious beginning to become visible, to become a real person after 16 years of invisibility.

***Push* does have one serious shortcoming. Unfortunately, the characters of the students and the teacher are not as fully defined as Precious. I found myself wondering about their stories, particularly the teacher. I wanted to know who she was and what made her tick. How did she succeed in reaching students everyone else had written off? Nevertheless, Push is an important book. The circumstances of Precious' life are disturbing and horrendous and make for uncomfortable reading. Her journey from the darkness of illiteracy and victimization takes her, and the reader, to places most of us would rather not go. In the end she finds redemption through education. My favorite line is something Blue Rain writes to Precious in her dialog journal: "You are learning to read and write, that is everything." She is absolutely right.**

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