

Creative Approaches to Social Justice

INTRODUCTION

In this set of lessons, students learn about creative approaches to social justice and develop empathy for those who are different from themselves. The essential questions and first two steps of the lesson plan apply to all three resources listed below.

- Essay: Langston Hughes, "Fooling Our White Folk"
- Short Story: Mohsin Hamid, "Of Windows and Doors"
- Video: Nipun Mehta, "Designing for Generosity"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpyc84kamhw>

Essential Questions:

1. What are some traditional activist approaches to social justice? What do you imagine would be the impact of using imaginative, innovative, and/or unexpected approaches?
2. How can creative approaches to social justice increase a person's empathy and understanding?

Lesson Plans:

1. Today you will introduce your students to non-traditional forms of activism as a means of confronting and addressing social issues.
2. Begin by asking the following questions:
 - a. What are traditional activist approaches to fighting for a cause?
 - i. Some possible answers: speeches, protest marches, protest songs, sit-ins, walkouts, and boycotts.
 - b. What are alternative ways to get attention for the issue or to promote change?
 - i. Some possible answers: doing things differently and unexpectedly, creative writing, humor, performance, dancing, even handing out flowers.
3. Review and choose one of the provided resources that use creative writing exercises or creative approaches to an issue. Ideally, they will help develop your students' ability to empathize and understand a group of people impacted by inequality and injustice.

FOR THE TEACHER: LANGSTON HUGHES, “FOOLING OUR WHITE FOLKS”

1. Assign Hughes’ essay and accompanying worksheet. Discuss with your students how reading an essay like this could help develop people’s ability to empathize and understand a group of people impacted by inequality and injustice.
2. Ask your students:
 - a. Why is it important to understand the rich and complex experience of a marginalized group rather than simply their oppression?
 - b. Reflect on works you have read in school about marginalized groups and individuals. How do these stories differ from stories about the dominant culture?
3. After students have read the essay and completed the worksheet, use both to develop a class discussion.

FOR THE TEACHER: MOHSIN HAMID, “OF WINDOWS AND DOORS”

1. Assign Hamid’s short story and worksheet. Discuss with your students how reading a short story like this could help develop people’s ability to empathize and understand a group of people impacted by inequality and injustice.
2. Ask your students:
 - a. How can reading a fictional account of a world event create empathy and understanding for the actual event?
 - b. How might a story help a reader become an agent of social justice and change?
3. After students have read the short story and completed the worksheet, use both to develop a class discussion.

FOR THE TEACHER: NIPUN MEHTA, “DESIGNING FOR GENEROSITY”

1. Ask your students to consider how greed motivates us differently than generosity.
2. Introduce Mehta’s Ted Talk, “Designing for Generosity,” in which Mehta offers several examples of how thinking with generosity rather than greed transforms human interactions.
3. As a group, watch Mehta’s Ted Talk. Use the worksheet to help with notes and discussion. Discuss with your students how adopting a philosophy like this could help develop people’s ability to empathize and understand a group of people impacted by inequality and injustice.

Worksheet: Creative Approaches to Social Justice

LANGSTON HUGHES, "FOOLING OUR WHITE FOLK"

Langston Hughes' essay "Fooling Our White Folk" offers a number of ways African Americans have cleverly dealt with prejudice and ignorance by outwitting the system that oppresses them.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, **passing** "refers to the practice by which a person of a given group, gender, class, age, or sexual orientation adopts the guise of another to escape discrimination or persecution or simply to attain economic, social, or psychological advantages." Langston Hughes considered passing to be a joke played on white Americans. It took a great deal of bravery and "guile" (as Hughes himself says) because if a person's ancestry were revealed they could face grave consequences.

1. Explain and discuss how Hughes uses the story of slaves "slyly trimming off the biscuits" as a way to frame his story about how persons of color have successfully and creatively beat the racist system.
2. Closely read Hughes' essay and find examples of each:
 - a. Passing for white
 - b. Passing for another nationality
 - c. Speaking a different language
3. How would you describe Hughes' tone? How does this tone serve his purpose?
4. Do you think it's effective to present a potentially demeaning approach such as passing as positive and sly?
5. Consider a marginalized group today and discuss ways they have or might outwit an inherently discriminatory or unequal system.

Worksheet: Creative Approaches to Social Justice

MOHSIN HAMID, "OF WINDOWS AND DOORS"

1. Hamid's story is fiction, and uses characters, setting, and plot in order for us to more closely engage with the details of current events—to give a personal face to the news. As you read the story, try to identify specific moments and scenes that help you to empathize with Saeed, Nadia, and Saeed's father. What is it specifically about those moments that make you feel something?
2. Think about the title: what is the significance of windows and doors in Hamid's story?
3. Highlight or underline the actual dialogue in the story. Who speaks most? What is the first dialogue and the last? How does dialogue alone suggest the point of the story?
4. Where do the doors take people? How do characters react to doors?
5. What are the themes of this story? List them.
6. What is the geographical setting of the story? Does the city in the story seem to resemble another city you have read about or heard about in the news?
7. What do you think Hamid's story says about the current state of the world? Explain your answer.

Worksheet: Creative Approaches to Social Justice

NIPUN MEHTA, "DESIGNING FOR GENEROSITY"

1. Explain the philosophy of "giftivism."
2. What happens when someone looks at life as if "there is no enemy" and "there is no opponent"?
3. What can happen when we assume that people want to live selflessly?
4. Are you feeling skeptical about Mehta's philosophy? If so, why?
5. How is Mehta's philosophy an alternative and unexpected approach?
6. How can Mehta's philosophy increase a person's empathy and understanding of other people and cultures?
7. What is one way you might practice generosity? Elaborate on your plan.