

Young Adult Literature, Race, Arts, & Confidence: At-risk Students Building Critical Literacy with Lester's *Othello*

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"Stop watering down the curriculum; make it more rigorous."

"Oh, you're in that class."

The first statement could come from any one of the many critiques of English classes in general, particularly classes incorporating young adult literature. The second could come from a student addressing an at-risk student in a special freshman English class. Whether a general attack on the "dumbing down" of the curriculum or a personal judgment of someone's intellect, the instructional strategy of having at-risk students read young adult literature and respond through art would be looked upon by many as watering down curriculum for kids who couldn't handle anything tougher. However, as one of our students commented, "They [other students and teachers] think we're stupid, but we're not."

We also believe these students are not lacking in intelligence, and so we challenged them with Julius Lester's excellent adaptation of *Othello*, encouraging them to pose questions, make hypotheses, and argue interpretations to critique not only the world of the text, but also the world around them. We wanted the students to experience the rewards of thoughtful and engaged reading of literature as we addressed significant themes and issues. We wanted the students to know they were indeed capable of higher-level thinking sometimes thought to be the exclusive territory of those labeled gifted. In short, we wanted to help them build critical literacy skills and confidence through reading young adult literature and responding through music, visual art, and poetry writing.

For typical ninth-grade at-risk students, like the ones we describe here, Shakespeare is often either non-existent, or read aloud at a sleepy pace, wringing out most of the beauty and emotion of Shakespeare's language to attain a literal, plot-level understanding. At-risk freshmen don't learn to savor language, or story in and of itself, through such tactics. Instead, we think students should ponder the complexities of plotlines still relevant today. They should get excited over characters, betrayals, and rich descriptions embedded in figurative language. They should enjoy literature, engaging with texts in ways that will help them think not only about literature, but also about their own lives. They should experience the rewards of thought-provoking books and poetry to encourage them to seek those rewards through a lifetime of reading.

Lofty goals for any students, let alone at-risk freshmen? Yes, they are lofty, but we also believe they are feasible, as we let the

students' work and words describe. In this article, we advocate three ways of engaging students with literature to develop critical literacy: incorporating young adult literature, responding through the arts, and addressing issues and themes (even the controversial ones). We argue that accessible literature, thought-provoking artistic methods, and genuine, higher-level questions encourage in-depth thinking that all students deserve.

Setting the Scene

For six weeks, we co-taught a unit with Julius Lester's *Othello: A Novel* as the core text. Stacey's class consisted of five¹ at-risk-labeled males who were part of the school's Occupational Work Adjustment (OWA) program. Students in this program attended a regular four-year high school, but their academic day consisted of four classes, as opposed to seven. The students earned the remainder of their credits by working at a fast food or retail job in the community. Students in this class were considered at-risk for reasons such as excessive absences, truancy, low grades and test scores, extreme personal or home problems, family financial difficulty, substance abuse, or a dislike of school in general. The small class size and individual attention help students increase their chances of graduating. The small class size may also reflect the culture of the community. Many parents do not want their eligible students in a program that places them in a low-status job, which they view as a stigma. Some of the students themselves do not want to take part in the OWA program for the same reason. While this group certainly had challenges to their learning, they supported one another as a group, in a sense bonding based upon their at-risk label and showing genuine concern for one another.

Our Goals: Critical Literacy and Confidence

"I want to teach a critical literacy that equips students to 'read' power relationships at the same time that it imparts academic skills" (Christensen 210). Linda Christensen nicely sums up our main goals for students in all classes, but particularly those who, through their own or others' actions, have been alienated from school. Critical literacy "questions the basic assumptions of our society" (Christensen 212)—assumptions about OWA students, for example, as Bob critiqued, or assumptions about race, as Icy would later critique. A teacher who does not help students address unjust representations in literature "allows readers to silently accept these practices as

¹ Of course the small class size benefited the students, but we have also seen the power of young adult literature, artistic response, and significant issues in large classes as well.

just" (Christensen 212). Like Christensen, we want students to be engaged by literature, to be enlightened by it. She explains, "But beyond illuminations, students must use the tools of critical literacy to dismantle the half-truths, inaccuracies, and lies that strangle their conceptions about themselves and others. They must use the tools of critical literacy to expose, to talk back to, to remedy any act of injustice or intolerance that they witness" (211). Christensen's point is crucial: Students not only need to learn to read literature critically but also the representations of the world around them, as Paulo Freire advocates. Examining the realities of students' lives plays a significant role in developing critical literacy; for, "in critical literacy, their lives are part of the text of the class" (Christensen 213).

Othellos

With our goals of critical literacy and building students' confidence in critiquing the world of texts and their own world, we encouraged students to interrogate social and historical contexts. Lester's *Othello* provided a space for this interrogation, as we heard the story of a strong and respected African man who saw flaws in white, European society—the lack of hygiene due to infrequent bathing and eating with their fingers—but most importantly the racist views of many of the characters.

As a society we readily accept popular adaptations of the Bard in film or on stage. The most recent version in the theaters, "O," sets Othello's tale in a high school with the main characters on a basketball team. Similarly, PBS recently aired a contemporary *Othello* with the main characters as law enforcement officials. Lester's novelization of *Othello*, as with the two recent film adaptations, provides readers an opportunity to ask different questions regarding plot, themes, and characters, while experiencing the power of Shakespeare's borrowed tale. In fact, Lester incorporated some of Shakespeare's phrases and boldfaced them in the book, so students read not only Lester's poignant metaphors and images, but also many of Shakespeare's. While we addressed differences between Lester's novel and Shakespeare's play, we wanted to expose the students to a tale not usually taught in high schools (especially not to at-risk freshman) through this YA novel. We both found Lester's "reconceptualization" (xv) of Shakespeare's *Othello* a fascinating and well-written work of art.

In his introduction to the novel, Lester explains the differences between his novel and Shakespeare's play. While Lester changes some names (Lord Bertrand for Brabantio, Desdemona's father; Emily for Emilia), the most intriguing adaptation is the change of the ethnicity of Iago and Emily to black African from white European. Lester wanted to explore the complexities of betrayal from within the same ethnicity and community. According to Lester, it would have been too simple to label Iago a racist—end of story (xiii). Instead, Lester adds another level of complexity by having Iago, Emily and Othello come from the same tribe.

The OWA Students Meet Othello

An initial survey of students' attitudes reinforced our suspicions that this group, either by experience or hearsay, had negative thoughts on Shakespeare. On an interest level of 1 (low) to 5 (high), the majority of the students rated Shakespeare's works a 1 or a 2. One exception was a student who wrote, "I love poetry, and he helps guys get girls nowadays."

After some initial background on Shakespeare, the Globe Theatre, and Elizabethan society, we engaged the students in a pre-reading activity of interpreting the cover art. We asked students to tell us what they saw and how they interpreted these images. Depicted on the cover, we see a shirtless Othello, muscular arms crossed, looking directly left. In front of him a pale-faced Desdemona, her small frame with her head just below his chin, peers up and to the right. In the background, a stormy sky with daylight breaking through creates an eerie effect. Brad started our discussion by observing, "He's [Othello] really, really big!" Proudly, Icy (the one black student in the class with four white students) added, "A big black man!" Noticing another element of the cover art, Ryan yelled out, "Background!" and Brad picked up on that and analyzed

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it further. "Cloudy. . . but it's sunny. If you go left to right, it'll be good in the end and bad in the beginning." We asked the students, "What about Desdemona?" Bob responded, "She looks like a living dead girl." Icy added, "Her dad keeps her in the shadows . . ." and Bob eagerly tagged on, "Yeah! He keeps her in the shadows, but she's trying to speak!" We asked, "How about the fact that they're looking opposite ways?" Bob replied, "Opposite. She's white, he's black." And Brad closed with, "Opposites attract!" While

not all of their predictions were correct, they had already begun considering relationships and complexities the text would raise.

Because of the half school day-half workday design of the OWA program, students were not typically assigned homework. In addition, some students had learning disabilities and individualized education plans that required extra help with reading. And so we read *Othello: A Novel* aloud in class. At first, the two of us took turns reading dramatically, and then students started volunteering to read. Some would read only a paragraph, others an entire chapter, helping each other with difficult words. We were excited to see the students' interest and reading skills rise as the book continued. Like good readers engaged in a novel, they often tried to predict what would happen next, and choruses of "uh-oh's" and "ooh's!" were particularly evident toward the climax. Rather than assuming students labeled at-risk could not enjoy or understand a Shakespearean plot, the YA literature helped them experience success as readers—rewarding their efforts through an intriguing plot they could comprehend, which built their confidence and encouraged them want to read and discuss further.

² This could be an intertextual reference to the students' prior reading of Anderson's *Speak*.

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Experiencing Literature through the Arts: Wake Up and Hear the Music

However, we too had our gray days with students trying to stay awake. On one particularly disheartening day when we were still in the exposition phase of the novel, Bob, a Shakespeare-hater from day one, asked, "Do we have to keep reading this book?" With his head down on his desk, he said he was sick of Shakespeare. Coincidentally, that was the same day that we had planned to assign a music response to the novel. We asked the students to bring a piece of music that represented a character. We had barely gotten the words out of our mouths when the students came to life. They began thinking of ideas for songs, and even Bob surprised us by asking, "Can I do two? Can I do as many as I want?" "Sure!" we enthusiastically replied. In the next 5 minutes, Bob had come up with six characters and songs, as well as charted how the songs revealed relationships among characters. Bob wisely asked, "Do the CD's have to be clean?" (i.e., language appropriate for school). While appropriateness is important, we opted to allow any music as long as it was relevant, with clear connections to characters. By the end of this class period, Bob had asked twice if he could take his book home to read. The book went home, and read he did, bragging that while the class was only up to chapter eight, he had read to chapter eleven.

With the weekend to select, interpret, and apply music and lyrics to a character, students arrived on Monday ready to present their music responses. Yes, we frowned through some inappropriate language, but students' music analogies were right on target. One of Bob's many songs (that he continued for two weeks to present to the class) was "Kryptonite" by 3 Doors Down. This song contained more than one example of metaphoric thought. He said, "Desdemona needs Othello to protect her [from her father, toward the beginning of the story]. Iago is like kryptonite because he is the one person who can destroy the "superman" Othello. Embedded in Bob's music response is the metaphor of Iago as kryptonite, as well as the allusion to Superman and his one weakness.

Icy selected Jackson Five's "I'll Be There" to represent Othello and Desdemona. Having only read half of the novel at this point, Icy was intrigued by the intensity of the love and commitment between Desdemona and Othello. Icy's music response encouraged Ryan to think about other committed, loving relationships. Ryan commented that the song was "kind of a mixture for Lord Bertrand [Brabantio, Desdemona's father], Othello, and Desdemona." Ryan's comment reminded us that loving, dedicated relationships are not solely wife-husband relationships, but also daughter-father relationships.

Greg presented Earthride's "Under a Black Cloud," explaining that Iago's hatred for Othello symbolized a black cloud over him. While many of us would assume, as had Greg, that

Iago is the metaphoric black cloud, Bob, who had to some degree identified with Iago's manipulative nature, challenged this assumption. He and Greg then debated who was the black cloud—Othello or Iago? If, as Lester has Emily ponder, Iago had wrongfully been denied the promotion given to Cassio so that Othello would not be accused of favoring one of his own race, then perhaps Othello is the black cloud over Iago. Here and in the previous example, we see that the music analogies encouraged students not only to define their own views, but also to debate and question those of their classmates. What initially seemed like a given was now open to question.

While we believe in the value of art to help us think metaphorically and interpretively, we were surprised at the power of students' interest in music to motivate them and to help them engage more deeply with the literature. Unfortunately, at-risk students are often given primarily literal-level comprehension questions, such as simply recalling character names or setting, as they study literature. Higher-level thinking, interpretation, and critique of the text and the world are not only possible for at-risk students, but also more engaging and motivating, especially when students' interests are taken into account. At the end of the *Othello* unit, all the students commented that the music assignment was "cool." Greg stated, "Music from our generation, we got to match it with *their* generation, which was *sooo* long ago." The music responses led the students to realize that literature can and does connect to their lives—to the very music they love.

Digging into Issues

With the many negative portrayals of race in *Othello* and the conflicts relating at least in part to race, we thought it was important to address this from a social and historical perspective. Students viewed and discussed several film clips from the documentary *Ethnic Notions*, which presents and critiques negative images and metaphors of blacks throughout the history of media and art in the United States. Next, we linked the discussion to *Othello*. When asked what they thought of the clips and the white characters' ideas of blacks in the novel, Icy stated, "It was worse in our country." When we probed about the connotations of blackness believed by some whites in the novel, Icy remarked, "Black is ugly and bad." Some whites in the novel considered blacks savages, to which Icy replied, "I'm not a savage." It is important here to note that Stacey had established a very close relationship with her students. At school, both in and out of class, they often spoke from their hearts, telling her things they might not speak to others. Ignoring the painful images and beliefs about blackness in *Othello* would be a mistake³. In this class, Icy (and all the students) talked back to the text, confronting others' discriminatory beliefs rather than letting them remain silent and undebated.

³ One of Angela's preservice teachers had recounted her painful experience reading Shakespeare's *Othello* in which the teacher never mentioned the racial conflicts. As a student, she had inferred that the slurs were either sanctioned, or not important enough to merit class time.

The clips from *Ethnic Notions* led to a discussion of stereotyping. Icy noted one stereotype: "All blacks steal." Bob added, "All guys are players." And Brad responded, "All women are cheaters." All of these stereotypes can be found in *Othello*—Lord Bertrand's notion that Othello had stolen his daughter, Iago's portrayal that Cassio was having an affair with Desdemona, and Othello's notion that Desdemona was cheating on him. Again, students noted that literature parallels life—even in our stereotypes.

As noted, perhaps the most intriguing change in Lester's novel is the race of the characters Iago and Emily. This added layer made the book more interesting to the students. Here is a teacher/student exchange from a class discussion:

Stacey: We told you the one huge difference from the book to the play—

Icy: Is that Iago's black instead of white, and Emily's black instead of white.

Stacey: What did you think of that as a theme?

Icy: It made it more interesting. 'Cause if Iago was white, like he normally is, it could just be a racist thing. But since he's the same race, it makes the book more interesting. 'Cause it's like, why's he doin' this? They're from the same tribe and all that.

Lester's changes definitely made the students more aware of the complexities in the plot. Addressing rather than dismissing the prejudices and negative portrayals of both blacks and whites in the novel helped the students think not only about the plot, but also about motives of characters and their own realities of being stereotyped or stereotyping others.

In addition to the racial conflicts, another issue we addressed was deception. For example, Greg noted that Iago always made up lies. Here is his exchange with Icy, when asked if themes of deception stood out for them.

Icy: Desdemona deceiving her father.

Greg: Iago making up lies.

Icy: Hey, but they weren't lies—it just stuff that he said. He said you didn't have to believe him—they were just my [Iago's] words, my thoughts.

Greg: Yeah, he said that, but he said that in a lie.

When asked if manipulation played a factor, Greg replied, "That was a big part of it." Here, Icy and Greg were essentially debating who was to blame for the tragedy—Iago for spreading rumors, or Othello for believing him. They continued:

Greg: Just bringing up those subjects [a wife's infidelity] to your best friend—who you *think* is your best friend—can really throw you off, and like, you want to believe him, so you do.

Icy: I know. 'Cause he's been like a son—he's [Othello] been like a father to him [Iago]. It's kinda hard *not* to believe him. . . . It breaks people down. . . . You wouldn't think your best friend would make all this stuff up. *I* wouldn't think my best friend would make all this stuff up.

Greg and Icy debated this dilemma—believing a longtime

trusted friend versus a new wife, who appears to be very loving and faithful. Their discussion flowed between the world of the text and their own worlds. Occasionally, they used first person pronouns, indicating their identification with characters. Icy explicitly turned the scenario toward himself, predicting what he would believe if he were in that situation: "*I* wouldn't think my best friend would make all this stuff up." Directly confronting major issues in the novel allowed the students room to find and explore their own thoughts and beliefs through literature.

Icy and Greg continued to debate whether or not they would have acted as Othello had—believing his so-called friend, or his new wife.

Greg: Still, I don't care what anybody else thinks. I'd have to have one hundred percent proof. I'd have to do the research and make sure [Desdemona was unfaithful to Othello].

Icy: Iago set it up that it *was* proof that she was havin' an affair.

Greg: That wouldn't be enough proof! Just because, just because that *rag* [handkerchief], for me, wouldn't be enough proof.

Icy: [somerly] It was for him, 'cause it was *very* important to him.

Greg and Icy's debate exhibited a depth of emotion and engagement regarding the deception and perception versus reality themes in *Othello* absent from our previous discussions. By encouraging students to express their own interpretations and pose authentic questions on issues that reflected the reality of today, students sharpened their critical literacy skills by empathizing with characters, exploring moral issues, and debating their interpretations.

The students also debated whom they pitied most. Greg said he felt most sorry for "Othello, by far. Because he was lied to and took the life of his love. Then he killed himself. I feel bad for Desdemona, too. I could care less about Iago. He deserved to die!" Greg's reaction is fairly typical, but Bob surprised us by saying he felt most sorry for Iago. Why? "'Cause he was caught." Greg yelled, "SO?!" Bob responded, "He got stabbed and hung. He had to admit his whole plot. I think I'm kinda him—but I'm not as mean as he is. I'm just sneaky." Although he had been bored with the early stages of the novel, over the course of the unit Bob had come to identify with a character, and interestingly enough, one who typically receives no pity—a character we love to hate. We then discussed how Iago with his cruel nature could be considered a sad character. For students who initially wanted little to do with a Shakespearean story, these emotionally and intellectually charged exchanges were encouraging. Again, we see the students finding themselves in literature, experiencing the rewards of a stimulating conversation about good literature, and critiquing the world of the text and their own world.

Visual Art and Issues

Based on the students' previous conversations and work in class, we knew they held solid opinions regarding *Othello*. From the quality of presentations done in the music response, we thought another artistic medium might be appropriate to end our study of Lester's novel. Often students have thought more deeply about the literature than their writing evidences,

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and writing was not a strong point for this group.⁴ As Purves, Rogers, and Soter note, “Limiting the form through which we respond to literature actually inhibits what we may be able to communicate about our response” (127), and so we provided an opportunity for the students to express their thinking in a visual manner. Through the visual response, students’ thinking on racial issues became evident once again. After reading the entire novel, we prompted students to create a visual representation of their thinking on the novel—either by drawing or creating a collage. They could respond to one of several general prompts (e.g., What did the novel make you think of? Did it connect to anything you’ve ever experienced?) or explore one of their own. Students then wrote a few sentences explaining the meanings of their art. We brought art supplies and a variety of magazines for the collages, and students completed and presented their artistic responses during one class period.

Ryan, who was often quiet in class, produced some of the most interesting art.

Though only asked to do one artistic response, Ryan created two. As with the music response, we were both surprised and impressed that some of the students went beyond the assignment, doing more than was asked of them. One of Ryan’s art responses depicted a landscape split into thirds, symbolizing Desdemona, Othello, and Lord Bertrand with each section. On the left third was a green section (Desdemona), in the middle a light blue section (Othello), and on the right a brown section (Lord Bertrand). Ryan explained:

“The brown represents dirt [Lord Bertrand] and the blue represents water [Othello] so when they mix they create mud. So also saying Othello is making the lord stuck, no matter what, he [Othello] wants to be with Desdemona which is the green representing grass. And when water hits grass it just sinks in, so Othello the water fitting right in with Desdemona the grass.”

Early in the novel, Lord Bertrand is stuck with no choice in his daughter’s husband, and he is also stuck with his own prejudices. However, when Othello, the water, mixes with Desdemona, the grass, they combine naturally as during the early phase of their love. Though the art is simple, its meaning is significant in relation to the novel. Ryan’s own metaphors of natural elements provide a way to think about the triangle of Othello, Desdemona, and Lord Bertrand.

The art of Icy’s collage was also simple, yet its message carried much meaning. Icy displayed two paparazzi photos of white women actors joking with and being kissed by black men musicians. To explain his collage, Icy wrote, “Black and white people can have a good social life. Why isn’t good for them to marry [marry]?” Again, the racial issues in the novel come to the forefront. Icy connected the text to our current society, talking back to the text’s portrayal of prejudice against Desdemona and Othello’s marriage. Through his popular culture art, he showed that while we are certainly not free of prejudice now, whites and blacks can have, as he put it, “a good social life.” While some students found themselves relating to characters in the novel, as a black student, Icy met negative portrayals of blacks. It was important for him to confront these negative portrayals of blacks and interracial marriage in the novel, and the visual art response provided one avenue for this resistance. At the end of the unit,

all students agreed that expressing their ideas through visual art was “awesome.” Again, for us the music and visual art responses were important reminders that, for at-risk students in particular, we need to offer a variety of ways for students to express their thoughts on powerful YA literature.

A visitor who passes by Stacey’s classroom and notices that the students are making collages or drawing pictures may judge that the students are playing—wasting time. Quite the opposite is happening. Students, those who might not be most intelligent in the linguistic sphere, are shaping their interpretations, relating the world of the text to their own world, critiquing it, and shaping hypotheses. Rather than sitting at their desks passively taking in (or not taking in) a teacher’s interpretation of literature (which may be well beyond their grasp), students engaging with YA literature through artistic experiences that ask them to pose questions and ponder new ideas can enhance their critical literacy.

Connection and Critique through Reading and Writing Poetry

With the formal study of the novel completed, once again we wanted to connect the novel to themes and issues currently facing teenagers. Selecting themes of perception versus reality to parallel *Othello*, we chose poems from Betsy Franco’s edited collection, *You Hear Me? Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys*. We were encouraged that students volunteered to read poems aloud, browsing and selecting ones they wanted to read. Icy chose 16-year-old Michael Tobias Bloom’s “Joker”—a poem about a class clown who, in reality, is hurting. Brad immediately applied this poem to a friend whose mother was battling cancer, saying, “I should give this one to Dave. He’s the funny man, but sad man.” Through the powerful words of another young adult, these young men found again that literature can and does connect to their lived realities, and that we must question our assumptions about others.

Next, Brad volunteered to read “What I Am (In the Eyes of My Father),” by Dwight Beavers, age 17. The poem speaks of a son never good enough for his father, with his father metaphorically (and perhaps literally) beating him down: “he puts me/beats me/down, down” (Franco 45). A powerful silence followed Brad’s reading, and then in a choked voice, all he said was, “Sweet. Awesome.” Icy whispered, “That’s my dad.” While we could have pushed the connections of perception versus reality in *Othello* (our initial idea), the moment urged us to respect the students’ personal experiences with the poems. The power of the students again finding themselves in YA literature and experiencing the power of the written word were perhaps the best lessons we could have taught that day. More importantly, they understood they could resist negative images of themselves by empathizing with another through poetry.

After seeing the work of other teenage male poets, we asked the students to try their hand at poetry. Christensen reminds us that “critical literacy creates spaces for students to tackle larger social issues that have urgent meaning in their lives” (220). Throughout the unit, we saw students such as Icy who questioned and talked back to texts that shape what they, or others, might think of themselves. Issues of race in society are certainly of urgent meaning to Icy. His poem took us into a powerful critique of the realities of his life, as well as back to the race issues in *Othello*:

⁴ Stacey focused intently on writing instruction at a later time.

You could say
I'm sick
You could say im down with the sickness
I'm a beast
You could say Im the king of the jungle
I'm a animal
You could say I am a wolf
I'm Black
You can say Im a thug
But this is what you say, you say, you say
Not me

Though as teachers we can't change our students' home lives or protect them from prejudice or poverty, through YA literature, artistic response, and exploring serious issues, we can teach all students critical literacy skills necessary to read through injustices and to question societal assumptions.

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