

## **Teaching Restorative Justice through History and Literature**

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What would it be like if you were to teach a civil war unit using restorative justice as an essential question on which to focus? As teachers, we are faced with many pressures and requirements when designing and teaching our lessons. Nonetheless, effective teachers bring current, real life issues into the classroom that can engage, stimulate and provoke students' opinions and thinking; and restorative justice can provide rich opportunities to teach content and controversy at the same time.

At two middle schools in Colorado, teachers are finding ways to integrate restorative justice principles and viewpoints into their lessons and units. Both literature and history have numerous examples of injustice and harm done to other people and cultures. In fact, all stories and histories are based around conflict. Many are based around conflict, which has a powerful character or group that manages to harm a weaker person or group in their search for power, wealth and property. In each era of American History, from the first explorers on, we see several examples of this type of conflict. Since the key ideas behind restorative justice are discovering the harm done, repairing the harm and including key people in repairing the harm done, a lesson or unit can easily be crafted to include these simple principles and questions.

Similarly, most literature is designed around a conflict. The same ideas of restorative justice applied to history lessons can be incorporated into the study of fiction. In fact, fiction allows a less threatening source for the practices of restorative justice since no 'real' people were actually harmed. Wrestling with these concepts in fictional characters can provide students with standards of behavior for peacefully resolving injustice when they face it in their own lives.

So, what would an essential question for a civil war unit be? One might be, "What are the wrongs that have occurred in history, and how have they been made right?" Another essential question may ask, "How have the beliefs of one or more groups during the Civil War Era carried into the present?" A teacher in Fort Collins uses this essential question, "When is an action against a wrong 'revenge' and when is it 'justice'?" Another uses this one, "Which of my choices demonstrate the human capacity for destruction, and which demonstrate the capacity for deliverance?"

Each of these essential questions serves to focus students' thinking on provocative issues that engage students in their understanding of life's passions, conflicts, cruelties and caretaking. They serve to make facts interesting and meaningful. Without it, learning becomes a rote exercise devoid of life. At this time of their lives, adolescents are learning to make sense of themselves in the world. Through integrating issues of injustice, power, internal conflict and the potential for "making things right," we not only assist in shaping students' academic competencies but also their social and emotional competencies by allowing them to take ownership and responsibility within the curriculum.

One of the most powerful questions that one teacher used in her class was this one: “How do I face and overcome the monsters in my life?” She found this question provoked her students’ thinking and feeling deeply and had her students journaling extensively. What most students discovered was that all of us face numerous potentially harmful “monsters”. These monsters are societal, relational, spiritual, and emotional. Harming others or ourselves is something most of us do at one point or another in our lives, and justice and fairness stimulate youth like few other issues. By studying about how individuals and groups have harmed others and how justice was served throughout history and then bringing it down to our own microcosm, we come to make the subject less threatening and more hopeful for change and healing. Identifying our personal monsters is the first step toward seeking ways to heal the harm we have done to ourselves and others.

So how can teachers integrate restorative justice into their curriculum? First, by listing the areas in which harm plays a role in the story or history. Next, by focusing on these areas and finding supplementary literature which brings these areas into focus. Finally, teachers can then begin to design lessons which use the following elements: 1) opening activity, 2) writing activity 3) individual or group project, skill practice activity or role-play and 4) assessment of the skills and content taught.

Students benefit tremendously when they get a chance to re-enact situations and not just read and discuss them. This could mean holding a victim-offender mediation between a slave and a slave owner, a peacemaking circle with settlers, Native Americans and government representative, or a community conference between South Africans and Afrikaners. Duet poetry, in which characters with differing perspectives dialogue about their differences and seek areas of common ground, provides another practical activity.

From our experience as teachers, there is much room for incorporating restorative justice principles and practices into classroom lessons and units. Starting with essential questions and then crafting lessons, which use key concepts and skills of restorative justice, educators can create meaningful educational experiences that revolve around stories and historical issues of injustice and harm to others.

*For more information on integrated units, contact Randy Compton with Restorative Solutions at (303) 449-2737 or visit our website at [www.restorativesolutions.us](http://www.restorativesolutions.us)*