

Write-Arounds: Engaging All Voices in Courageous Conversations

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Author Biography

Dr. Bethany L. Scullin has a B.S. in Elementary Education and Special Education from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, an M.Ed. in Educational Leadership from the University of South Florida, and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with Specializations in Literacy and Urban Education from Kent State University, Ohio. Currently, she is an assistant professor in the Department of Literacy and Special Education at the University of West Georgia where her passion lies in teaching undergraduate students to utilize authentic children's and adolescent literature in meaningful and purposeful ways.

Goal of the Activity

Currently, I am conducting research in my Children's Literature course regarding how undergraduate preservice education students engage in race talk utilizing diverse picture books as a catalyst for discussing race in elementary classroom settings. Sue (2015) explains that many people "find race talk uncomfortable, anxiety provoking, and threatening" (p. 189), which made me aware that some students might display resistance in engaging in these types of often awkward, but courageous conversations. Moreover, White students tend to shy away from discussing topics they perceive as controversial or uncomfortable. They will listen, but rarely will they talk for fear of saying something wrong or offending another student (Sue, 2015). Here, the predicament lies in engaging my preservice education students in race talk when they actively try to avoid race-based discussions. Thus, I set a goal of engaging my students in the often-resisted conversations about race with an activity called "write-arounds" (Daniels & Daniels, 2013, p. 155), where students draft their conversations in writing before verbally engaging in discussion with their peers.

Write-arounds, a form of written conversation, consists of four to five students sitting side-by-side or in a circle, engaged in writing their thoughts to each other, serially exchanging these notes, commenting, and building upon each other's ideas. Ultimately, write-arounds serve as a written rehearsal to promote meaningful conversations without the ever-present hesitation of "What should we talk about?" when discussing difficult or uncomfortable topics in small group settings. While write-arounds have a multitude of uses in a university classroom setting, for my purpose, I chose this activity for their first race-based discussion as it scaffolds, or gradually acquaints, students talking about race by first writing about their thoughts, responding to others' reactions in writing, then (hopefully) talking about it.

Structure of the Activity

Since my purpose was to engage my preservice education students in race talk utilizing children's literature, I read aloud, *The Case for Loving: The Fight for Interracial Marriage* (Alko, 2015), which details the personal and legal strife Richard Loving and Mildred Jeter endured from 1958-1967 in order to be legally married in the state of Virginia. Richard Loving, a White man, and Mildred Jeter, part African American, part Cherokee, were married in Washington, D.C., where it was legal for them to marry. Upon returning to their home in Virginia, Richard and Mildred were arrested in the middle of the night and taken to jail as they were charged with "unlawful cohabitation" even with their marriage certificate hanging on the wall.

After reading this text aloud to the class, I gave every student a 5 x 8-inch lined index card and instructed them to write their name at the top right corner of their index card. Then, I had students move into their predetermined groups, which consisted of three to four students in each group. Keeping discussion groups small to include no more than five students is advised as larger group dynamics tend to silence others. On an overhead screen, I projected Figure 1 while verbally detailing each step for engaging in the write-around.

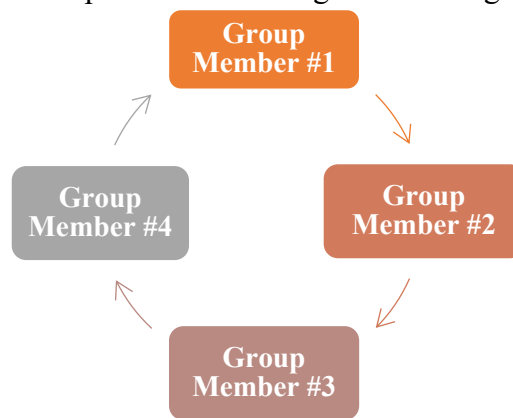
I explained that I would be keeping time on my watch to let students know when to move from one step to the next.

STEP 1: Consider the **prompt below** for 1 minute.

What was your reaction to learning about what interracial couples endured a little over 50 years ago? How do you think these racial attitudes might impact the way we think today? Please explain your thoughts.

STEP 2: Respond to the **prompt** by writing your thoughts on your index card. (2-3 minutes).

STEP 3: Pass your card to the **person on your right**. Take 1 minute to read and consider their response. Respond to their thoughts in writing for 2-3 minutes.



STEP 4: Pass the card to the **person on your right**. Take 1 minute to read through the responses on the card you just received. Respond to their thoughts in writing for 2-3 minutes.

STEP 5 (and on): **Continue in the same manner** until you receive your original index card.

STEP 6: Once you have your original index card, take 2-3 minutes to **read through all the responses** written to your original thoughts. Based on these responses, **jot down several points** you would like to point out and/or discuss with your group.

STEP 7: **Turn and talk** to your group using these points as the basis for your discussion. (5-8 minutes)

Figure 1: Student Write-Around Directions

Reflection on How the Activity Meets the Author's Goal

As I observed my students actively talking about points they noted on their index cards, I felt a great sense of relief. I knew there was a strong possibility that my students would avoid the entire discussion altogether. Providing a space for students to rehearse their thoughts and discussion points rather quickly in a written format seemed to prepare them for engaging in a courageous discussion with other students. As I circled the classroom to listen in on each group's meeting, students did talk about race. Several of my jottings include student statements:

I can't imagine having to walk into a courtroom to defend my marriage based on our skin color. It is truly awful!

I read a book over break that said, “love is love until it’s not.” During this time, love was love; unless it was between interracial couples, then it was illegal. I hate that anyone had to go through that and hate even more that people still experience these issues today.

I agree. This book made me even more aware of the racial issues in our country. I could never imagine not being able to marry someone simply based on the color of their skin! This doesn’t make any sense.

This (interracial marriages being illegal) went on for too many years. People still have negative views towards interracial marriage. It is so important to talk and have these discussions.

As we finished our small group discussions, I asked the students to consider and reflect on their participation in this activity. Below are several excerpts representative of their feedback:

I like this (write-arounds) because you get to hear what your peers believe and their thoughts about it as well. I like how you can look back and take a moment to look at everything and write about your final thoughts and what you want to talk about. It really makes you think.

Shows different perspectives on a controversial topic that we might not be ready to talk about right away. Writing our thoughts down and then reading what other people wrote helped me think about what I wanted to point out when our group got the chance to talk.

I think this is a great method to integrate discussion into the classroom about things we don’t normally talk about. It’s a quiet activity, and everyone gets to use their “voice.” It can also help connect students by sharing similar opinions.

The activity was interesting to see others’ thoughts and ideas on the topic. This is a great way to get quiet students’ voices heard because it is less confrontational than speaking up in class. It’s a great activity for tough topics.

This activity is by no means limited to children’s literature; it would be a purposeful exercise in any discipline to encourage students to move out of their comfort zone and engage in meaningful conversations. For example, write-arounds could be implemented in a history course where students are asked to provide their thinking on a particular topic recently covered in class to help students consider multiple perspectives around historical events. Additionally, an instructor may choose to assign a reading before a class session, so students come into class ready to write their reflection. Another idea is to assign steps one and two (see Figure 1) as homework. Students compose their written reflection beforehand and then participate in steps three through seven (see Figure 1) in the classroom setting. In short, write-arounds have the potential to invite deeper thinking and encourage substantial discussion even in precarious classroom contexts.

References

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