11-2014

Teaching Equity Through "Gatsby" in the Age of CCSS

Allisyn Mills

Seungho Moon
Loyola University Chicago, smoon3@luc.edu

Recommended Citation

Allisyn Mills and Seungho Moon

Teaching Equity through *Gatsby* in the Age of CCSS

Influenced by CCSS, the authors provide options for teachers who share the need to design curriculum to incorporate more perspectives in the classroom.

The American dream represents hope, and the opportunity for a new life with liberty and rights. . . . This is not always a happy experience . . . . [T]he tree, representing the new life, gets cloudy and it is hard to see what is ahead. People expect a good life from the start, but it ends up being a struggle. At the start immigrants do not usually have a lot of money, which can make the opportunity for education distant . . . . [For] a person with a situation like this and a limited economy, an education becomes a dream rather than reality (see Figure 1).

—*Drew*

The Idea[1]

Addressing issues of equity is urgent as our society becomes more diverse, requiring students to develop culturally sensitive dispositions (Haddix and Price-Dennis 247; Sassi and Thomas 25). However, doing so is not an easy task, and teachers need to find creative ways to present ideas to students. The implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across the country necessitates revising the English curriculum, asking us to incorporate and analyze more perspectives in the classroom. We wondered if this reform might provide an opportunity to examine social equity by studying an anchor piece of classic literature through multiple perspectives. Specifically, we decided to explore this possibility by investigating eleventh-grade students' understanding of the American Dream and equal accessibility as they read *The Great Gatsby* and related texts. We hope our experience provides a pedagogical framework so that other teachers are able to create a similar unit with the text and thematic topic of their own choosing. We highlight strategies of anchoring a unit with a centerpiece for developing theme-based, equity-oriented curricula and connecting students' experiences in analyzing text, and we share our students' understandings.

The Unit

People do not encounter "big ideas" in isolation or from a single point of view when they are out in the real world, so CCSS requires students to compare texts to one another rather than read them individually without connection (CCSS.ELA.RL11-12.7). We knew finding an anchor or *fulcrum text*—a complex text that may be lengthier than other ancillary texts or considered a classic, traditional whole-class text—could provide the framework to create a conversation among texts (Wessling 24).

We started with a text frequently considered an American literature standard—*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Many teachers traditionally teach symbolism and the theme of the quest for and corruption of the American Dream with this book. However, we found that it presents plentiful opportunities for thinking about social inequity and used it to advance the big ideas of the unit (Wiggins and McTighe 67): the American Dream and accessibility. By focusing on how characters' social classes related to the accessibility of their dreams, we encouraged students to apply these ideas to today's society, and by bringing in additional texts, we expanded the discussion of class inequity to include

other factors that might influence a person's ability to achieve the American Dream.

We knew that a creative approach to teaching equity and challenging the myth of meritocracy would be needed. The school in which we presented the unit, Stillwater High School (SHS),[2] is a public school in Oklahoma with a predominantly White/Caucasian student body (White/Caucasian, 75 percent; American Indian, 7 percent; Black/African American, 5 percent; and Asian, 4 percent). Most students are from middle-class backgrounds, and more than 80 percent of students are college bound.

Focused on the new standards, the junior English teachers planned to revise the curriculum to change from genre-specific units (e.g., "drama," "nonfiction," "short stories") to thematic units. We determined that connecting *The Great Gatsby* with multiple genres of texts addressing similar themes would be an interesting and engaging way to guide our students toward deeper analysis (see Table 1).

Since the idea that Americans typically get what they earn was well-established among students, we sought to compare and contrast different perspectives. Besides integrating the traditional literature with informational texts and visual media, we also relied on many hands-on activities to provide opportunities to examine other people's perspectives (Thein, Beach, and Parks 57). Students participated in extensive discussion and reflective/analytic writing, but they also identified major ideas from the texts through collages and multimedia presentations, and created original photography to capture their final ideas about the theme (see Table 2).

To introduce the concept that people view the same things differently, students played an educational board game (Dixit) that uses cards with abstract images to share open-ended interpretations. The "storyteller" secretly chooses a card and announces its theme, for example, "immigrants." All players play the card from their hand they think matches the theme, explaining why, and then a consensus is reached regarding which one is the "right" one. The game generated excellent discussion and a recognition of multiple perspectives, and it provided material for future dialogue as well.

As students progressed through *The Great Gatsby,* we also presented the nonfiction text "Land of Opportunities," a book chapter from *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James W. Loewen, to highlight class inequity. Loewen analyzes how textbooks omit both the struggles of the working class and the continuing issues of social stratification in the United States. Students analyzed this text and excerpts of Adam Howard's article, debating whether every person can achieve his or her goals with enough effort in the context of social class.

Students also worked with ideas about racial/ethnic inequity as they examined more multigenre texts. They read and analyzed the poem "Harlem (A Dream Deferred)" and watched the *60 Minutes* bio piece on Jeremy Lin. Students also completed a family tree project in conjunction with viewing the PBS miniseries *Faces of America*, in which they investigated their own heritage and discussed the obstacles faced by underprivileged groups throughout our country's history. Finally, students created a portfolio of original photographs they felt encapsulated the American Dream and wrote reflective essays detailing their thoughts on the theme in light of all the texts they had examined (see Figure 1).

We analyzed students' artifacts, discussion, and writing to see how students' perceptions

TABLE 1. Major Texts during the Unit

Genre	Content
Literature	*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald
	"Harlem (A Dream Deferred)" by Langston Hughes
Nonfiction	*Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James W. Loewen (Chapter 7: "Land of Opportunity")
Visual Media	*Faces of America* by Henry L. Gates Jr.
	The Great Gatsby film by Newdon Company (1974)
	The Color of Fear film by Lee Mun Wah (1994)

TABLE 2. Hands-On Activities and Sample Task Questions

Activities	Description (Task questions or guidelines)
Making family trees and Guest Speaking of immigrants	• Create a visual representation of your family tree and/or immigration history (if applicable).
Debates about Accessibility and the American Dream	• Share your ideas about the extent to which you support these statements: (a) Moving between different classes of people is not difficult. (b) We can achieve our goals with enough effort. (c) Wealth is the best advantage for success.
Photograph Portfolio of the American Dream	• Explore your surroundings and take pictures of scenes, objects, or people that you think connect to your ideas about the American Dream
Educational Board Game Dixit	• Use cards and share open-ended interpretations.
Collage representation of *The Great Gatsby*	• In groups, use words and images to represent each chapter.
Writing reflection paper and reader's theater	• What is your personal "American Dream" that you want to pursue after high school? • In your own words, what is the American Dream? • If you could create a character, what would his or her American Dream be? • Write an essay to defend or challenge the statement: *America still provides access to the American Dream, to the "tired, poor, and the huddled masses."*

changed. Through thematic analysis, we coded students' understandings of the American Dream vis-à-vis the American Reality (Riessman 53). Major themes included effort, resistance, inequity, social structure, and perspective change. Conventional understandings of freedom, social promotion, and opportunity were predominant in students' representation of the American Dream. Students confirmed that not all people have the same resources or starting points, but they stayed firm in their beliefs that "hard work" is sufficient to overcome such barriers. Yet, at least a third of the students shared that their ideas about the American Reality changed—that hard work alone does not guarantee success. We analyzed samples of student work to contrast perspectives about effort, accessibility, and equity from opposite ends of the spectrum; analysis revealed how students challenged conventional understandings of the American Dream.

FIGURE 1. Photograph Portfolio of the American Dream by Drew

Contrasting Voices about the American Dream and Reality

Students were all familiar with the concept of the American Dream before beginning the unit, so we were able to start discussing influences on the American Dream right away. Easily the best understood form of inequity in the unit was class inequity, as many students could find examples of this in their own lives. While they mostly agreed that class inequity exists (both in *Gatsby* and in our society), they grappled with the causes of this disparity, and many students clung to their belief in effort-based success. Other forms of inequity posed an even greater struggle for students. Although we attempted to expose them to other races and ethnicities through written texts, video, and guest speakers, most students did not seem to connect to or empathize with "other." Overall, some students expanded their critical-thinking skills with real-world issues of equity and justice when exposed to multiple perspectives, although resistance still remained in most students.

Through analyzing *The Great Gatsby*, students readily understood that class inequity existed in 1920s society, and meritocracy did not work in Jay Gatsby's quest to achieve his American Dream. He became a financially successful person but could not remove his label as a "West-egger." To connect class inequity issues appearing in *The Great Gatsby,* we introduced an excerpt from a professional article to explore class inequity and privilege for students. Howard analyzed how high school students from an affluent boarding school perceive self and others. Some interview excerpts from the article generated emotional responses from SHS students. Nicole, an affluent boarding school student in the study, said, "I think students at Parker just work harder than students at poor schools and public schools" (Howard 1977). This comment elicited outrage from students. They argued that public school students' inability to afford tuition does not mean that they do not care about education. In other words, *we are working hard as well!* Students suggested that Nicole's statement came from ignorance about public school students and indicated an arrogant attitude.

With the hope of connecting students' understanding of class inequity to racial/ethnic inequity, we showed a video clip from *The Color of Fear* in which Victor and David talk to each other about racism in the United States. David kept blaming people of color for unsuccessful lives or failure and stated that White people do not block opportunities for people of color—the door is equally wide open for everyone. Victor exploded after listening to David's beliefs about meritocracy, choice, and liberalism. After watching the clip, students sided almost exclusively with David. James said that "Victor was a hypocrite" because he lives in the land of Native Americans as a Black person. Derik responded, "Most African people who come to USA, their circumstances in Africa are much worse, so he should be happy. He isn't a slave; he lives in the biggest, richest country in the world. Slavery has passed." Furthermore, Travis mentioned that "Racism is turned around. White middle class can't get a job as easily because of business quotas," highlighting the reverse racism that is part of discourse in affirmative action. We observed opposite reactions when students discussed class inequity and racial/ethnic inequity. Unlike the issue of class inequity, most students remained committed to the idea that even if people of color "start from behind," they can come out ahead if they just work harder.

At the end of discussion, Ryan pointed out that his classmates criticize *the rich kids* while not recognizing the struggles of the socially marginalized groups. We requested Ryan to elaborate his ideas by email. He stated, "[W]hen faced with questions about lower class children getting to college, [classmates responded] in the same way as the private schoolers! [Gatsby] is a good example of a lower class person [who does] not hav[e] the opportunities of other people. . . . [H]is only way to achieve Tom's level of high class was to cheat." Ryan's comment emphasized that meritocracy is an illusion, and fair competition is impossible. Several students recognized that because of structural inequity, individuals do not always overcome barriers simply through effort, as indicated in *The Great Gatsby*.

We also used Jeremy Lin's story as a relevant and timely way to discuss equal opportunity and the American Dream. Most students highlighted Jeremy's ability to overcome racial adversity through hard work. Donna states, "Most people made fun of him because he was Asian, and after he graduated high school he never got any scholarships for

basketball. He then never gave up and kept working hard toward his American Dream. He then succeed[ed] [in] his dream and played basketball for the NBA." Audrey found a different meaning. She said, "For some people, there are obstacles that cannot be overcome, and our backgrounds affect more of our fate than we think." Audrey does not underestimate Jeremy's hard work as a successful NBA player but emphasizes the different opportunities a person has due to his or her race, gender, or cultural background. Unlike Donna's belief that hard work is the deciding factor for success, Audrey clearly challenges the myth of meritocracy and notices an inequity of opportunity for success. She states, "Hard work can certainly help a person's situation, but it is luck that gets people to where they are. It would be cruel to say that people are put in poverty because they deserve it or because they are simply lazy." Her argument made a good case for considering structural inequity and challenging the assumptions embedded in the rhetoric of hard work.

> **We suggest that CCSS has space to engage students in a conversation of equity with multiple texts.**

Instructional Strategies for Developing Theme-Based, Equity-Oriented Units

We suggest that CCSS has space to engage students in a conversation of equity with multiple texts. The study on the "self," which is discursively constructed by the interaction with "others," is a starting point in understanding the complexity of race, class, and gender inequity. We suggest two instructional strategies in the age of CCSS: (1) anchoring the unit with a centerpiece and (2) connecting students' lives to reading texts.

Anchoring the Unit with a Centerpiece

Literature allows students to safely view an issue from a fictional character's perspective and can be used as a springboard for exploration of current real-world issues. Maxine Greene emphasizes the value of aesthetic experience in literature to "break through the crusts of conventions" in our lives by engaging students with new and multiple perspectives (146). Concurring with Greene's call for imagination through literature, we initiated an investigation of social inequity in today's society and chose *The Great Gatsby* as an anchor text for discussing it.

The Awakening by Kate Chopin is another candidate for an anchor text in the conversation about inequity. This short novel features Edna, a young wife and mother in 1899, who feels constrained by gender roles. She begins asserting her independence, including moving out on her own and straying from her marriage, but then must face that society and the men in her life continue to have different expectations. Several students focused on gender inequity while reading *The Great Gatsby,* frequently focusing on Daisy's belief that "a beautiful little fool" is the ideal for a girl (Fitzgerald 17). For example, at the end of the unit, Michelle recalled a Dixit card depicting a cat looking up at a cage containing a bride and groom. She elaborated that the trapped couple shows Daisy stuck with Tom due to the limitations of her gender and her desire for social status and wealth. Daisy, like Edna, could have been happier in her situation if she were free to pursue her true beliefs about gender equity. Paired with other texts, such as Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," these texts allow educators to further expand the discussion about privilege as a means to address social inequality in today's society (Sassi and Thomas 26).

Connecting Students' Lives to Texts

Teachers need to consider preparing texts and activities to connect students' lived experience with other versions of social inequity. The theme central to our unit—the American Dream and its accessibility—is something our students had heard of before. They could all share their ideas about what the American Dream is and what it means to them personally before we began our study. However, we wanted to expand the experience to be a more in-depth exploration of its implications in real society, hence our focus on equity. Many students have experienced one form of inequity or another, and how to advance students' empathy toward other people is an important pedagogical issue. To increase students' understanding of people

who are struggling due to hatred and injustice, we suggest teachers carefully consider their "audience" when choosing multiple genres of texts and diverse, hands-on activities to add context, connect prior knowledge, and provide alternative viewpoints of the theme (Wessling). For example, we suggest that students keep a dialogue journal of a theme or major characters to connect literature with their daily experience (Kenney 19).

Toward Equity-Oriented Pedagogy in the Era of CCSS

The new standards are, in many cases, worded more broadly than the individual state standards preceding them, and they also emphasize college/career readiness. While numeracy and literacy skills are highly emphasized within this age of accountability, we value that CCSS also provides an opportunity for teachers to creatively address students' future needs by connecting content-area skills to the real world. In our case, promoting equity was an important aspect of real-life society for students to consider. We acknowledged that some students kept the rhetoric of working hard, freedom, and choice for the American Dream. Literature on equity and diversity has addressed the challenges of teaching equity for high school students (e.g., Howard; Kenney). We don't believe that simply providing and sharing different ideas will guarantee that students actively challenge existing belief systems. As Jacques Derrida theorizes about democracy, the project of equity-oriented pedagogy is always "to-come," leaving space for hope and struggle (86). Our unit plan exists in this constant, in-the-making struggle and hope of promoting equity in a society by revisiting students' taken-for-granted understandings of equal accessibility and the meaning of effort for success. Overall, in the midst of changing expectations across the country, we encourage teachers to find creative ways to incorporate new standards with a mix of old and new texts to explore challenging questions about equity. *EJ*

Notes

2. All student names appearing in this article are pseudonyms. We use the real name of the high school with permission from the district administration.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason.* Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby.* 1925. New York: Scribner, 2004. Print.

Greene, Maxine. *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995. Print.

Haddix, Marcelle, and Detra Price-Dennis. "Urban Fiction and Multicultural Literature as Transformative Tools for Preparing English Teachers for Diverse Classrooms." *English Education* 45.3 (2013): 247–83. Print.

Howard, Adam. "Elite Visions: Privileged Perceptions of Self and Others." *Teachers College Record* 112.8 (2010): 1971–92. Print.

Kenney, Michelle. "Of Mice and Marginalization." *Rethinking Schools* 28.1 (2013): 14–19. Print.

Loewen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Simon, 2007. Print.

Riessman, Catherine Kohler. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008. Print.

Sassi, Kelly, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. "Walking the Talk: Examining Privilege and Race in a Ninth-Grade Classroom." *English Journal* 97.6 (2008): 25–31. Print.

Thein, Amanda, Richard Beach, and Daryl Parks. "Perspective-Taking as Transformative Practice in Teaching Multicultural Literature to White Students." *English Journal* 97.2 (2007): 54–60. Print.

Wessling, Sarah Brown. "Everything's a Conversation: Reading away Isolation." *Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards: English Language Arts, Grades 9–12*. (2011): 24–27. NCTE. Web. 23 May 2014.

Wiggins, Grant, and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design, Expanded 2nd Edition.* New York: Pearson, 2005. Print.

Allisyn Mills teaches English at Stillwater High School in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and is constantly seeking new ways to connect classic literature to her students' lives beyond school. **Seungho Moon** is an assistant professor at Oklahoma State University, and his research encompasses theorizing curriculum as sociopolitical, cross-cultural discourse. Contact Dr. Moon at smoon.tc@gmail.com.