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Teaching Discussion in the English Methods Seminar: Climbing the Stairs to the High School Classroom


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Diane Kern, Kathryn L. Johnson, and Padma Venkatraman

Insert photos: Teaching Discussion in English Methods Seminar: *Climbing the Stairs* to the High School Classroom
Diane Kern, Ph.D., Kathryn L. Johnson, Ed.S., and
Padma Venkatraman, Ph.D.

“Talk is the sea upon which all else floats.”
-----James Britton, 1970

Enlarged first letter

‘Climbing the stairs’ to teaching high school English became the central theme in Diane’s (first author) Secondary English methods seminar after meeting with colleagues Kay (second author) and Padma (third author) in the Summer session offered at the University of Rhode Island (URI). Padma had recently published *Climbing the Stairs* (2008), a young adult novel set in India in the 1940’s, where the nonviolent Indian independence movement (led by Gandhi) and India’s position during World War II are integrated into a coming-of-age story about a young woman’s personal freedom struggle. Padma, an oceanography professor and Director of the URI’s Office of Graduate Diversity Affairs, volunteered to become an author in residence in Diane’s methods seminar; Kay agreed to offer her experiences teaching Kingian nonviolence in her URI elementary language arts methods courses.

On the first day of our secondary English methods seminar, we presented the concept of ‘climbing the stairs’ as a metaphor of our own difficulties and challenges in learning to teach.

This led to an open discussion on the hopes, fears and dreams of student teaching. It helped us as instructors to recognize the fears and anxieties that our students have and gave us the opportunity to try to alleviate those fears and scaffold their learning in methods seminar so that they entered teaching with more confidence and a variety of best practices for working effectively with high school students.

The conversations and collaboration over the course of the semester provided a dynamic context that led to innovation of instructional approaches in the teaching of literature that we hope you may find useful in your classroom. Specifically, we share three practical ideas for your classroom: teaching theme while incorporating principles of nonviolence education; engaging high school English teachers in discussions while teaching discussion methods; and modeling professional collaboration across disciplines. Before we examine these three areas, we provide background information about the young adult novel *Climbing the Stairs*.

Climbing the Stairs, the Novel

When Padma began writing *Climbing the Stairs*, she was the head of a school in the United Kingdom. She saw students faced with different kinds of violence - overt and subtle – name-calling, bullying, and caste-like cliques. At that time, she also decided to become an American citizen and was thus thinking deeply of the issues facing our nation. We were at war then, and we still are.

As Padma grappled with the question of whether a person should ever act in a violent manner, and when, if and why a nation should engage in war, she reflected back to a different era, a different circumstance, a different culture, and her own family, in which people she knew had debated the same questions, many years ago: India, 1941--the time of Hitler and Mahatma

Gandhi. This was an era when the British fought for the freedom of the world, while denying freedom to the dark-skinned natives of its colonies; when Indians rose to protest inequality using their powerful and age-old tradition of ahimsa or nonviolence, and yet practiced the caste system within their own society; when women, even of the highest caste, were ill-treated by men; when that cycle of cruelty was continued in so many extended families by women who oppressed one another.

Vidya, the protagonist in *Climbing the Stairs*, is a fifteen-year girl old living in British occupied India during the time of World War II. Her philosophical father, who is committed to Gandhi's peaceful philosophy, is severely injured during a nonviolent protest march. Vidya, her mother and brother are forced to move in with her father's conservative relatives. In this oppressive extended family home, men live upstairs and the women who live below are expected to be married, not educated. Vidya discovers her grandfather's library, which is forbidden to her, and she secretly escapes there every day to find comfort and love. Through the pages of the books she reads, Vidya gains an insight into other cultures and a deeper understanding of the inner realities of her Hindu faith. She also befriends Raman, a boy living in the house who treats her as an equal. But when her brother, Kitta, makes a shocking choice that goes against their father's ideology of nonviolence, Vidya is forced to question her own beliefs. After the family disowns Kitta, Vidya must find the strength to battle through the whirlwind of personal and political complications she faces.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Climbing the Stairs offers a rich context for teaching meaningful life lessons and literacy strategies to high school students. It offers a context for infusing nonviolence education into the curriculum.

Teaching Theme Using Principles of Nonviolence Education

As every educator knows, school violence is a major concern in our schools today. In 2011, students in middle and high school reported more nonfatal victimizations (theft and violent crimes, such as rape, sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault) at school than away from school (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Statistics, 2011). Approximately 13 million students, or nearly one third of school-aged children, are bullied each year, (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This paper presents a few ways that teachers can incorporate the theme of nonviolence into their English/Language Arts curriculum as preventive measures to give students the knowledge and strategies for dealing with potential problems of violence in their everyday lives.

Kay began with a PowerPoint slide show of a brief history of the nonviolence movement in America. Afterwards, the English teacher candidates studied and defined the concepts, “violent” and “nonviolent.” They brainstormed behaviors associated with each word that might be present in a classroom. For example, “violent” yielded a list that included name-calling, betrayal, telling lies about someone, poking fun, hitting, etc. “Nonviolent” actions included, *ignoring negative remarks, speaking up when someone is put down, avoid stereotyping, walking away*. Next, Kay activated their prior knowledge and respected their experiences as she directed candidates to make text-to-self connections by writing personal reflections about a violent or nonviolent experience. Then, Kay presented the six principles of Kingian nonviolence (Figure 2),

which are the fundamental tenets of Dr. Martin Luther King’s philosophy. English teacher candidates worked in small groups to study one of the six principles. They discussed their assigned principle, generated everyday examples to illustrate it, and presented their ideas to inform the entire class. The next step applied the knowledge about Kingian principles to the book they were studying, *Climbing the Stairs*. Each small group identified a specific scene from the book that connected to the principle. They read the scene aloud to the class and explained ways in which the principle was relevant (Figure 3). Afterwards, the English teacher candidates discussed this process and how they might incorporate this method into their teaching.

<Insert Figure 2 here>

<Insert Figure 3 here>

Discussion—in pairs, in small groups and whole class—was essential to the success of Kay’s lesson with the teacher candidates. Learning to facilitate effective classroom discussions is an important skill set for teachers of English language arts (Alvermann, 1986; Cazden, 2001; Mercer, 1995; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Rubin, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2001). Kucan and Palinscar (2013) suggest that teachers must learn to prepare quality reader-text interactions, such as questions, prompts and activities in order to improve student reading comprehension. The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) call for regular reading and discussion of complex texts and their academic language, as well as reading and speaking about literary texts that is grounded in evidence. According to Snow and O’Connor (2013), “one of the most unfortunate consequences of a move toward close reading may be a move away from classroom discussion” (p.7). Instead of reducing authentic classroom discussion, teachers must join close reading and

authentic discussion in order to help students achieve. We assert that even though students in the middle and high school grades may not be tested on their ability to make connections to and to discuss texts, teachers must help students make personal connections, text-to-text connections, and text-to-world connections in order to be well-educated, critical thinkers who are successful for the demands of not only college and career, but also a fulfilling, literate life. In the next section, Diane's methods of instruction focuses on how high school English teachers can plan for effective discussions during close reading of a literary text in their own classrooms.

Climbing the Stairs to Leading Effective Discussions

“Leading an effective discussion can be one of the most difficult tasks of teaching” (Barton, 1995, p. 336). As Barton reminds us, teachers—both new and experienced—are often challenged learning the most effective ways to facilitate discussions. As teachers of English, this is a particularly important teaching method to learn.

Diane opened this seminar with James Britton's quote noted at the start of this article and then moved to a read-aloud from McCourt's (2006) *Teacher Man* in which McCourt describes his efforts at leading discussions that more accurately would be called storytelling, because he did not know where to begin to facilitate an effective discussion with his high school English students. The teacher candidates responded to the quote and the read-aloud with connections ranging from nervousness to excitement about how to lead a discussion and acknowledgement that learning to lead a discussion was a high priority for all. Next, Diane shared the following quote from Cuban (1993):

Of the 26 teachers who engaged students in question and answer for a portion of the period, all but 6 (74%) depended largely upon factual recall

questions...Seldom did a student in these classes (whether college-bound or noncollege-bound) recite answers more than a few words in length (p. 237).

Discussion ensued about the experiences many of us have had where the teacher lectured or led discussions in a teacher *Initiation*, student *Response*, teacher *Evaluation* or teacher *Feedback* (IRE or IRF) format and the limitations of this most common classroom discourse pattern. Barton's (1995) discussion continuum was shared and model questions from "The Protest" chapter of *Climbing the Stairs* were presented (Figure 4). In the final segment of the seminar, candidates applied what they had learned by writing questions using the Barton discussion continuum for a different chapter of *Climbing the Stairs*. This work was posted on the course Wikispace (<http://uri-englishlanguagearts.wikispaces.com>) so that each pre-service teacher could refer to one another's discussion questions when planning lessons for *Climbing the Stairs* in their own classrooms one day.

<Insert Figure 4>

In this final segment, the power of professional collaboration across disciplines and beyond school walls is addressed. Teaching can be an isolating profession. Teachers are often assigned to one classroom, twenty-five students per period over the course of a day, with little time between classes. Professional learning communities, such as the one practiced in Diane's pre-service methods class and seen in many schools today (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Little, 2002) provide teachers with networks for teachers to plan, innovate, and examine instruction in action (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Collaborative learning supports professional learning and change (Hadar & Brody, 2010). Furthermore, creating a professional space—for teacher candidates, teacher educators and students--“that respects and cares for the

souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately can begin” (hooks, 1994, p. 13).

Climbing the Stairs to Professional Collaboration

The ‘climbing the stairs’ project in Diane’s methods course became more meaningful as each participant learned with and from one another over the course of our experiences and discussions. The fact that the three authors were from different fields enriched our instruction and our collective learning. In a course reflection journal entry, Amy, a teacher candidate wrote,

The *Climbing the Stairs* sections [of methods class] with Padma and Kay are where I learned that collaboration is fine. Also from having Padma in class with us I learned that if at all possible use sources that directly relate to what you are teaching. We were very lucky and fortunate to have Padma in the classroom with us, and if I have the opportunity to bring an author into the classroom I will.

We hope that our experiences in teaching high school English methods will inspire you to teach young adult literature in innovative and student-centered ways in your own classroom, to carefully plan for meaningful discussions, and to foster collaborative relationships across disciplines, and perhaps even beyond the walls of your school.

To this end, we invite you to join our professional collaboration by visiting Padma’s website (Venkatraman), downloading materials from Diane’s course Wikispace (Kern), and engaging in innovative methods for teaching nonviolence in your high school English classroom.

DIANE KERN is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Rhode Island and a former public school teacher. Her research interests include transformative pedagogy, preparing teachers for licensure tests, high-stakes testing, and improving English language arts and literacy teacher education. Diane is actively involved in the International Reading Association and is the IRA's Specialized Professional Association (SPA) Coordinator to the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), which reviews and nationally recognizes reading specialist and literacy coaching teacher education programs in the United States.

KATHRYN LEE JOHNSON has been a lifelong educator has taught Language Arts Methods courses and supervised elementary student teachers for the past 18 years at The University of Rhode Island. An advocate of nonviolence, she is an affiliate of URI's Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies and takes students to Nepal each spring break for nonviolence training workshops with Nepali students, NGOs, and peace activists. An avid writer, Kay has recently published a book, *In Peace and Freedom* with Bernard LaFayette, Jr., a colleague of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

PADMA VENKATRAMAN turned to writing, her first love, after obtaining a doctorate in oceanography at the College of William and Mary and conducting post-doctoral research in Environmental Engineering at Johns Hopkins University. She enjoys reading from her work and speaking to students, teachers and librarians and participated on panels at Harvard University, provided keynote addresses at teacher and librarian conferences, and was the commencement speaker at Lincoln school in RI. Her work was featured in the documentary *Library of the Early Mind*. Although born in India, Padma is an American and she lives in RI with her family.

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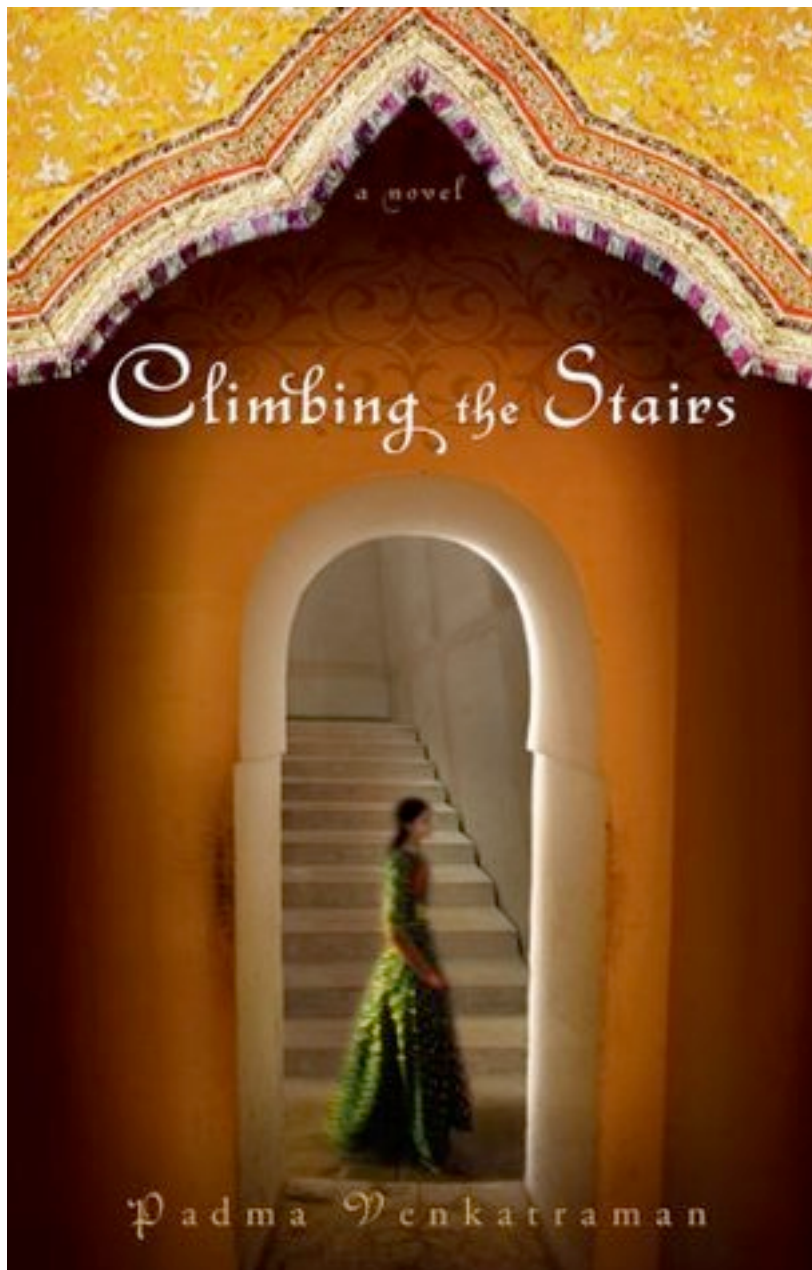


Figure 1. Climbing the Stairs book cover. Reprinted from *Climbing the Stairs* by P. Venkatraman, 2008, New York: Penguin. Copyright 2008 by Padma Venkatraman. Reprinted with permission.

Six Principles for Nonviolence: The Kingian Philosophy

1. **Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.**

Nonviolence is an active resistance against what is wrong. It requires the courage to stand up for what is right and just, sometimes in the face of strong social pressure to “just go along,” and the courage to resist impulsive “lashing out.”

2. **The Beloved Community is the framework for the future.**

The goal is not to humiliate others, but to win them over to a new, shared view. At the end, you want to be able to join forces. Pursuing justice and truth together brings the “beloved community” closer, where everyone lives together in peace.

3. **Attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil.**

The goal is to solve problems, not to attack people. People who seem evil are also victims of the conditions that make up the problem. Attacking them personally can lead to more problems.

4. **Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause.**

Nonviolent people are willing to “put themselves on the line” in order to stop the cycle of violence and create better conditions. Remember that there is already a lot of suffering going on. Let suffering be for a worthwhile purpose, but never inflict it on others.

5. **Avoid internal violence of the spirit as well as external physical violence.**

Physical violence starts with attitudes and feelings of anger, hatred, and resentment. The person who has those feelings is hurt first and most by them. Feelings are contagious, and also affect many people who are not the “target” of the moment.

6. **The universe is on the side of justice.**

Justice inspires people, and injustice does not. Dr. King said, “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The outcome of the struggle will be justice. It may not be today or tomorrow, but eventually faith and justice will prevail.

Figure 2. Six Principles for Nonviolence: The Kingian Philosophy. Reprinted from the Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies, University of Rhode Island, 2008. Reprinted with permission.

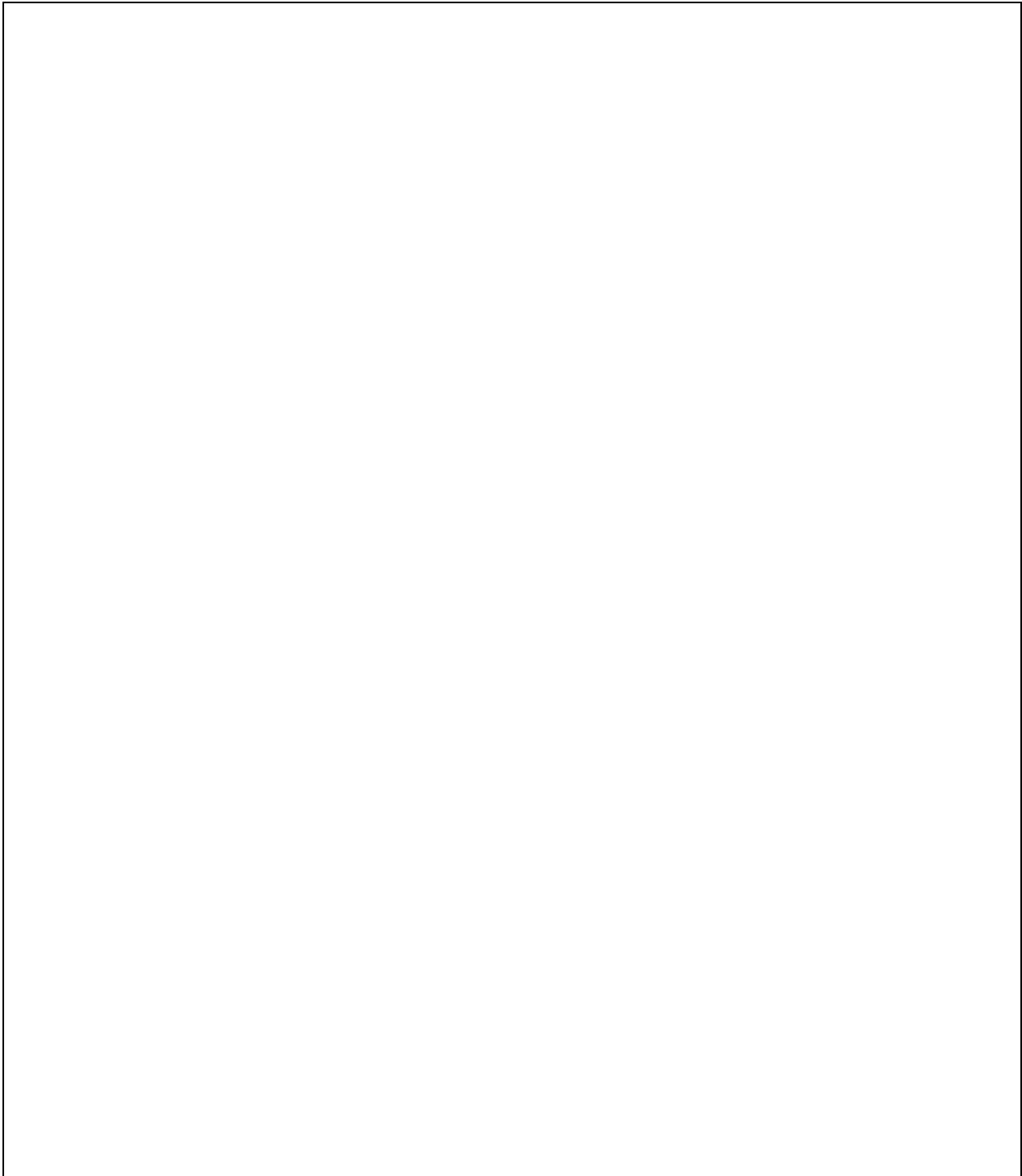


Figure 3. Climbing the Stairs Connection Guide. Created by D. Kern and K. Johnson, 2008.
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Life knowledge: Have you ever stood up for something you believed in? Describe. What motivated to stand up for your cause? Which, if any, Kingian nonviolence principles did you use?
Literal: What was the main event of this chapter? How do you know? Cite the text at least 2 times during The Protest March chapter.
Text implicit: How did Appa feel once he knew the protest march was “coming this way” and he had Vidya in the car with him? Be sure to use text cites to support your response.
Literature connection: Do the events of The Protest March chapter remind you on events in other print or nonprint texts?
Application to new context: Why do people choose to respond to violence with nonviolence? Would you do if <i>you</i> were Appa? Why?

Figure 4. Climbing the Stairs Discussion Questions using Barton’s Discussion Continuum, by Diane Kern, 2008. Reprinted with permission.