



# CURRICULUM CAMP

OREGON WRITING PROJECT'S SUMMER INSTITUTE ADDRESSES SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

BY BILL BIGELOW AND LINDA CHRISTENSEN

It's another summer day at an Oregon Writing Project Curriculum Camp. Three teachers spread photos and historical documents across tables as they organize their curriculum guide, *Queer Portland: Unearthing History & Reclaiming Space*, which offers lessons on hidden stories of queer activism, history, and social justice.

Across the hall, science, social studies, language arts, and art teachers from different high schools work

together on a curriculum about who gets access to health care in our country — and why. Down the hall, several middle school teachers piece together a curriculum on Black Lives Matter, and a group of chemistry teachers works on activities leading up to a schoolwide climate justice fair.

Other teams collaborate on the impact of U.S. imperialism on Pacific Islands and the literary and political history of Luis Valdez's 1979 play, *Zoot Suit*, the first Chicano play on

Broadway.

The Oregon Writing Project Curriculum Camp provides spaces where teachers can work together as intellectuals to grow their own curriculum about issues that matter to their communities, from gentrification to high school student activism to Mexican immigration.

The Curriculum Camp supports teachers to become activists who develop lessons that help their students gain critical social insights while at the



In this vision, professional learning should:

- Be part of a broader effort to make the world more equal and just;
- Engage teachers as one would engage students to model the teaching strategies we value;
- Demonstrate exemplary curriculum for social justice and point out problematic aspects of other curriculum;
- Engage themes of injustice and planetary crisis in ways that are joyful, sometimes even playful, and not grim;
- Honor the lives of participants, drawing on their experiences and insights; and
- Treat people like professionals, with respect and trust.

**CURRICULUM CAMP MODEL**

The summer institute glimpsed above, known as Curriculum Camp, is one model that demonstrates our approach to professional learning. For almost two decades, we have put the principles of teaching both social justice and literacy skills into weeklong Curriculum Camps for multiple districts in the Portland, Oregon, area.

The Curriculum Camp was birthed in 1999, when Linda Christensen worked as a language arts teacher on special assignment after co-teaching a literature and history class with Bill Bigelow at Portland’s Jefferson High School for many years.

Christensen collaborated with a group of language arts teachers representing each of Portland’s district high schools in designing a curriculum writing camp designed to give teachers time to rethink the traditional canon, bringing a more diverse, multicultural, contemporary reading list into high school language arts classrooms. Since the early years, Curriculum Camps have expanded to include other

disciplines and grade levels, but four key components remain.

**1. Commit resources.**

Instead of just buying books for teachers to use, Christensen and fellow language arts teachers secured a grant to pay teachers their hourly wage to come together and write curriculum guides to teach literature.

It would have been cheaper and faster to buy packaged curricula, but the district’s high school department chairs wanted to hone teachers’ capacities to create curriculum from the ground up, so they chose to spend the time and money sharing and building teacher knowledge.

Because the books — such as *Donald Duk*, *Kindred*, *The Color Purple*, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, and *Always Running* — include sensitive cultural, racial, and gender issues, as well as events that not all teachers were familiar with, teachers knew it was important to spend time educating themselves about the social and historical context of the literature as they talked about teaching strategies to bring these works to life in the classroom.

**2. Experience and examine model lessons.**

The first three of the camp’s five days begin with morning workshops that frame our work pedagogically and politically. These foundational workshops engage teachers in the kind of learning experiences we want their students to experience. Our goal is for teachers to draw on strategies from the morning sessions as they construct their own curricula, so we pause to make explicit aspects of the activities they participate in.

The workshops offer interactive activities that enlist participants in rethinking a piece of history or culture that is normalized and taken for granted. One morning session

questioned the legitimacy of “standard English” by looking at the ways colonial countries oppressed home languages. Another explored the history of the border with Mexico through a roleplay activity on the 1846-48 U.S.-Mexico war, followed by a critique of a problematic textbook used in Portland schools that ignores the war’s causes and fails to explore the war’s social impact.

Teachers participate in these workshops first as students — engaging in mixer role plays (see box on p. 49), reading documents, and writing narratives, poetry, and essays — and then as teachers, reflecting on the content and the methodology of the lessons. We encourage them to ask questions and use critical reading strategies, such as analyzing curriculum materials for perspective and bias.

They then contribute to a “theme and evidence wall,” a transparent, public display of ideas developed throughout the workshop that creates a collective curricular vocabulary and serves as a reference when they begin writing.

**3. Collaborate in work groups.**

Each afternoon, teachers gather in grade-level or content-area groups, often working with teachers from other buildings or districts, to build engaging curriculum about a social issue that they think will resonate with students.

After deciding on the unit of study, they share and read materials and map out a curricular route that includes “show, don’t tell” activities, such as role-plays or simulations; personal narratives that ground the curriculum in students’ lives; critical reading activities of historical, literary, or scientific documents; artistic expressions like poetry, interior monologues, or historical fiction; and a culminating project — for example, an essay, pamphlet, or podcast that allows students to demonstrate their grasp of complex issues.

During these work times, Oregon Writing Project coaches advise the groups — sometimes providing direction when a group gets stuck, bringing in additional materials, bringing the focus back to a social justice issue, helping generate ideas for student work, or writing a role for a mixer or directions for a reading strategy.

Of course, not everything produced in Curriculum Camp is new. Some of it draws on lessons teachers have already taught. Some of it incorporates or repurposes aspects of the existing curriculum. And some of it draws on this established curriculum but invites students to ask about its silences or biases — whose voices are missing, whose stories pushed to the side?

#### 4. Reflect, extend, and share.

Curriculum Camps do not end in the summer. Teachers come together four times during the school year to share their curriculum guides, examine student work inspired by the units, and build upcoming lessons with colleagues across the district.

We ask one or two groups from the summer to present a lesson from their unit as morning workshops. During these curricular rehearsals, participants praise what went well, but also point out pieces that need revision, such as confusing role-play roles, articles that don't quite match the intent of the lesson, or unclear instructions, and contribute ways to extend them.

We encourage teachers to share their work with colleagues, so that even individuals who were unable to participate in Curriculum Camp become its beneficiaries. Curriculum Camp participants have presented pieces from their units in department and faculty meetings, at local and national conferences, and in professional journals.

Social justice professional learning imparts new strategies and content,

but also creates forums for teachers to develop and enact curriculum that rises up from the classroom and reflects students' needs, interests, and contexts.

#### CURRICULUM CAMP IN ACTION

The Portland Public Schools' curriculum office, under the leadership of Van Truong, supported the Oregon Writing Project to hold a Curriculum Camp in 2015 with a focus on civic engagement. Too often, civic engagement translates to electoral politics, with an implicit message to students: When you're older, you can vote and make a difference. We wanted to seed curriculum that would offer young people a more expansive version of political activism.

We focused our morning curriculum modeling on environmental justice. Rethinking Schools had just published *A People's Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis*, edited by Bill Bigelow and Portland high school teacher Tim Swinehart. A grant from the Lannan Foundation enabled us to provide copies of the book to educators who participated in workshops on teaching environmental justice themes. In addition, the school district's curriculum on climate change was inadequate, and the two of us wanted to begin to address this.

Bigelow began the week by leading a role-play on La Vía Campesina, the global collection of what it calls peasant "food sovereignty" organizations — considered by many to be the world's largest social movement. This first activity asked participants to imagine themselves as members of La Vía Campesina organizations in Haiti, Brazil, Mozambique, the Basque Country, India, and South Korea.

The G7, the organization of the world's richest economies, was meeting in The Hague to address the question: "How will we feed the

world?" La Vía Campesina was not invited, but members planned to show up to articulate a grassroots response. After distributing role sheets, we asked participants to write interior monologues to deepen their empathy with members of the organizations they were to represent.

Next, they met one another through a mixer activity that helped them think through the common problems they confronted and look for what unites these far-flung organizations as members of La Vía Campesina. Each group read and analyzed a G7 proposal — which features corporate-driven, export-heavy agriculture, patent protection for genetically modified crops, and other laissez-faire policies — then expressed their critique and offered alternatives through placards they designed.

In a subsequent morning session, Tim Swinehart shared a strategy for writing personal narratives on the joys and loss of special places, and then showed how he puts it into action by weaving students' own lives with accounts of the fossil fuel "sacrifice zones" described in the film *This Changes Everything*.

On another morning, Christensen led a series of critical reading and essay-writing lessons about the impact of toxic waste in a Tijuana barrio and the inspirational work of environmental justice *promotoras* (women community organizers) to force the U.S. and Mexican governments to clean up the pollution.

Each afternoon, participants worked in groups to identify the problems they sought to address. They brainstormed, and many groups used strategies from the model lessons as prompts for their own curricular expression. But the curricula generated were by no means copycats.

In this civic engagement Curriculum Camp, Amy Lindahl and

Amy Polzin wrote *Sugar Subterfuge*, blending the social justice question, “Who is responsible for the rise of childhood Type II diabetes?” with the science question “What are the four macromolecules essential to cell structure and function?”

Anabel Muñana and Donald Rose developed curriculum on Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican WhiteBoy* — “a unit examining definitions of identity, how they are constructed, and how persons may struggle with determining or expressing theirs.”

Hyung Nam, Julie O’Neill, Chris Buehler, and Sylvia McGauley wrote *Civics, Social Justice, and Nonviolent Direct Action: Rebels with Causes*, explaining in their introduction that their lessons make up “a different kind of civics,” one “that is more radical, in that it addresses issues at their deep roots and

may even include civil disobedience.”

These were first drafts, not yet tested in actual classrooms. But the week was a festival of imagination and social justice engagement. And teachers would come back together throughout the following year to reflect, extend, and share the results of their experiments, bringing a commitment to learning and growing this work together.

**CURRICULUM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The aim of Curriculum Camps, of course, is not just the production of lively and relevant teaching guides that can be shared throughout the school district, although that’s important. The broader objective is twofold: to expand people’s vision of what curriculum is and where it comes from, and for teachers to see themselves —

individually and collectively — as leaders of a movement to infuse social justice into curriculum. Curriculum Camp teachers are activists.

At this moment of increasing xenophobia, racism, and inequality, we need sites of professional learning that help educators teach for a better world. We owe it to our students. We owe it to everyone.

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**Bill Bigelow (bill@rethinkingschools.org) is curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine and co-director of the Zinn Education Project. Linda Christensen (lmc@lclark.edu) is director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, and an editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine. ■**

Equity through mutual accountability

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acquiring the academic skills and knowledge needed to be successful in college, careers, and life.

If educators are to counter the forces that generate inequity in society, they need intentional professional learning that builds their knowledge and capacity to break down barriers and ensure that all children get what they need to thrive. With that knowledge and capacity, they become equipped to hold each other accountable for promoting equity.

Without it, solutions like culturally responsive education or engaging teachers in bias training are unlikely to produce greater equity. A commitment to equity in education is a commitment to personal and collective growth.

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**Joaquin Noguera (noguera.joaquin@gmail.com) is a member of the education faculty at Bard College’s Masters in Teaching program and a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA. Pedro Noguera (pnoguera@gseis.ucla.edu) is a distinguished professor of education at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA and founder of the Center for the Transformation of Schools. ■**