

Critically (Re)Writing Narratives

Shawna Lesseur, *University of Connecticut*

Alex Kreidenweis, *University of Connecticut*

Please feel free to adapt and use in your own classrooms.

DO NOT DISTRIBUTE WITHOUT ATTRIBUTION AND AUTHORS' WRITTEN CONSENT

Assignment Description

Critically (Re)Writing Narratives is designed to enhance students' familiarity with critical thinking as a process, enhance their information literacy, and to help them better understand the analytic value of empathy. It achieves these objectives by putting students in the position of collaborative playwrights who are tasked with retelling news stories from popular media from perspectives not explored by those stories. In so doing, students are compelled to imaginatively inhabit life-worlds very distinct from their own. Such empathetic imagination then serves as the basis for understanding the power of perspective, narrative, identity, and positionality.

Format Options

There are two overarching approaches to the lesson's format: a single-article approach, and a multiple-article approach. Which approach one chooses hinges on a number of factors which include: the amount of time available for course-prep; an instructor's desire to have students scaffold difference through their work or for others' work to scaffold for them; availability of pertinent news media; received (information) literacy of students.

Under both approaches, the central work for students is the same: retelling a story provided by the instructor from a different vantage than offered by the provided story. The prime difference lies in whether playwright groups will be working from the same, or different news stories. Below are listed the common foundation of the lesson, and then separate descriptions for the single- and multiple-article versions, followed by a brief description of the summative discussion.

General Requirements

Time required: at least two class meetings. Preferably within the same week.

Guidelines: Assignment guidelines direct students to collaboratively author a one-act play in small groups (see sample guideline document).

Single-Article

Prep-work:

- 1) News article
- 2) Assignment instruction hand-out

Lesson Plan: At the beginning of class, students are organized into small playwright groups (3-4 member groups are preferable) and provided with the assignment guidelines and a news article.

The guidelines direct students to spend the rest of the class period beginning to outline and draft one-act plays, noting that they should *not* expect to finish the plays during class, but should return to the next class having with final drafts.

The directions should additionally stipulate that during the drafting process, students should be considering answers to three questions: 1) why the group chose to (re)tell the story from the perspective they did, 2) what other perspectives were or could have been considered by the group, 3) what might be an audience's reaction to watching a performance of their play.

At the start of the following class, students are rearranged into small groups which *do not* contain their co-authors for the assignment. Students are directed to share their answers to the three above-listed questions with one another during a 5-7 period. At the end of each period, groups are rearranged to allow students to both recount their answers to a multiplicity of their classmates, and to ensure each student has listened to at least one member from each of the other playwright groups. Once the groups have been rearranged several times, the instructor refocuses attention on large-group discussion, asking students to voluntarily share their answers.

Students' responses to the above questions should actively scaffold a summative discussion of the power of perspective; how different perspectives can lead to different understandings, reactions to, and feelings about the same phenomena.

Multiple-Article

Prep-work

- 1) Pre-determination of total # of groups (3-4 student per recommended)
- 2) One news article per group covering the same political event
- 3) Assignment instruction hand-out

Lesson plan: At the beginning of class, students are organized into small playwright groups (3-4 member groups is preferable) and provided with the assignment guidelines and a news article. Each group should receive a different article. The assignment instruction hand-out directs students to spend the rest of the class period beginning to outline and draft one-act plays, noting that they should not expect to finish the plays during class, but should return to the next class having with final drafts.

The directions should additionally stipulate that during the drafting process, students should be considering answers to three questions: 1) why the group chose to (re)tell the story from the perspective they did, 2) what other perspectives were or could have been considered by the group, 3) what might be an audience's reaction to watching a performance of their play.

At the start of the following class, students are rearranged into small groups which *do not* contain their co-authors for the assignment. Students are directed to share their answers to the three above-listed questions with one another during a 5-7 period. At the end of each period, groups are rearranged to allow students to both recount their answers to a multiplicity of their classmates, and to ensure each student has listened to at least one member from each of the other playwright groups. Once the groups have been rearranged several times, the instructor

refocuses attention on large-group discussion, asking students to voluntarily share their answers.

General Debrief

Discussions stemming from either the single- or multiple-article version should largely both be scaffolding the same summative discussion. Instructors should highlight how student responses align with the instructor's expectations for 1) critical thinking practices, 2) information literacy, 3) empathy as an analytic device.