Exploring big ideas

ERIN RILEY-LEPO doesn’t shy away from big ideas. The veteran English language arts teacher at Mount Olive High School believes part of her role as an educator is to help students “become more socially and culturally aware, encourage them to think critically, and question the world around them.”

In a recent unit for her two AP Language and Composition classes, Riley-Lepo asked students to explore the depiction of race, class, and gender in works from various mediums. This included literature, podcasts, movies, and visual depictions in photographs or videos, many of which the students selected themselves. Students wrote individual analyses on the various pieces and worked collaboratively in small groups on final presentations that examined how race, class, and gender are connected in the source material they reviewed.

These assignments were designed to hone the higher order cognitive skills and communications skills that are assessed in the AP Language and Composition exam. They asked students to employ sophisticated techniques to analyze, synthesize, make evidence-based arguments, compare texts, express their own opinions, and describe the points of view of the authors.

The unit, which Riley-Lepo originally developed with ELA teacher Lori Tatsumoto, introduced students to diverse voices and different perspectives from the past and present. Among the works examined were a satirical essay on class by 18th century humorist Jonathan Swift and a speech by Sojourner Truth, a former slave who became a prominent abolitionist. More contemporary pieces included the essay “The Myth of the Latin Woman” by Puerto Rican American author Judith Ortiz Cofer and the article “How to Restore the American Dream” by Fareed Zakaria, a well-known broadcast journalist.

Students added their own examples to the discussions too, culling from sources as wide as the 2018 hit film “Crazy Rich Asians” and an interview with members of BTS, a Korean pop band.

Making the connections

The real-world relevance of the subject matter helped students relate to the texts in a way that made them stand up and take note. Issues involving race, gender, and class make front page headlines every day because these are universal themes affecting people around the globe. Yet, social and cultural issues aren’t typical topics in American schools because of the perceived sensitivity surrounding them.

“In a school environment or even outside when just talking to your friends, you kind of avoid topics such as class and race and gender just because you don’t want to get into a situation where you may not agree with each other,” said eleventh-grader Amulya Kuntamukkala. “But this [unit] made us really think about these topics and look at our own viewpoints, and gave us the reason to talk about them.

By its universal nature, the unit compelled the students to look inward. That was the unit’s true power. In their workgroups and in their classes, students opened up to each other and shared occasions when they have seen or felt race, class, and gender differences in their own lives.

“I am Asian and I’m a female, so that’s two factors that add up to give me a really complex feeling of ‘differentness’ in certain situations,” said HenitaSharon Lawrence. “It’s a feeling of isolation, but at the same time, I would say that it also gives me motivation. When I see someone who has succeeded despite facing issues of race or gender, it just makes me push harder because I understand that they overcame so much and I feel I can, too.

When we started, I would say I had a good gauge of these topics and how they impacted society, but I see now how they all work together. All of them ultimately have a role in people’s lives and how they become the people they become. I haven’t realized that until this unit.”

Amulya recalled a childhood trip to India that forged an indelible memory.

“I remember standing at the end of the road in front of my grandmother’s house and across [the street] were these little huts,” she said. “The people there were not dressed as well as the people on the side where my family and I were living. And I remember asking my grandmother one day, ‘Why do those houses look so different from ours?’ There was literally a textbook class divide that I could see between my side of the road and their side of the road. That really stuck me as a kid.”

As this unit was concluding and in the few weeks that followed, the media was abuzz with U.S. news related to race, class, and gender, including the trial of a former Minnesota police officer charged with causing the death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. The events and coverage underscored the unit’s relevance.

“The current situations, like with George Floyd and the protesting, everything that is happening in the world and everything in this unit just clicked,” said Vinaya Patel. “We were really able to bring the discussions outside of the classroom. We were able to look at the different pieces that we read and take the overall messages and apply them to things that were happening in the country. It just shows how real this unit is.”

Equity and inclusion instruction

In 2021-22, assignments such as the one Riley-Lepo presented to her students will be seen more frequently in Mount Olive and throughout New Jersey.

In March, Governor Phil Murphy signed a state law requiring schools to provide lessons in grades K-12 that highlight and promote “economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance.” Character education, with its emphasis on respect and inclusion, has been a hallmark of New Jersey education for years; however, in specifically defining that diversity, inclusion, and equality be taught in the classroom, the state has joined a handful of others across the U.S. to mandate such instruction.

Mount Olive High School has long been a state leader in offering courses that explore contemporary issues and highlight the contributions of marginalized populations. For example, MOHS has specific courses that explore the immigrant experience, LGBTQ literature, women in literature, gender studies, human rights, human acceptance (i.e., the depiction of people with disabilities in literature and non-fiction texts), and African American literature.