Teach for Authentic Engagement

LAUREN POROSOFF

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2800 Shirlington Rd., Suite 1001 • Arlington, VA 22206 USA
Phone: 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600 • Fax: 703-575-5400
Website: www.ascd.org • Email: member@ascd.org
Author guidelines: www.ascd.org/write

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Introduction: Defining Authentic Engagement

My first year teaching, I didn't know I was supposed to worry about family conferences. I was super excited to meet the people who were raising the wonderful little humans I got to spend my days with. However, my colleagues described "the parents" with such dread that by the time conference day rolled around, I was freaked out, too. I was most anxious about meeting families of students who had track records of academic, behavioral, or emotional struggle because maybe I was failing to support them, but these conferences went smoothly. We were just people talking about what it meant for students to be engaged in their learning and how we could work together to foster their continued engagement.

My last conference of the day was with Lia's parents. Lia was an academically strong, well-behaved, generally happy student with friends. I welcomed her parents into my classroom, thinking this conversation would be a breeze and then I could go home feeling great about myself and my teaching. After we sat down and exchanged pleasantries, I told Lia's parents that she was doing great and asked if they had any concerns we should discuss. They did

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have a concern. Their child was an academically strong, well-behaved, generally happy student with friends, so how was I going to make sure she didn't fall through the cracks? I don't remember what I said to Lia's parents; I don't even remember the gist of what I said. I must've said *something*, but the truth is, I didn't know the answer to their question.

The deeper truth is, when I was a student, I was a lot like Lia. I was academically strong, at least according to the standards by which we were assessed. I was generally quiet and well behaved, and the times I got in trouble were for skipping class because, guess what? I didn't feel engaged. I had friends, but I didn't feel like I was part of a learning community where I truly belonged. When my parents met with my teachers, they probably heard a similar story to the one I told Lia's parents, even though I often felt bored, lonely, and empty at school.

As a teacher, I wanted to make sure *all* my students—not just the ones like Lia who reminded me of myself—were authentically engaged in my class. That would become a career-long endeavor. This book represents what I've learned (so far) about how to foster authentic engagement in classrooms and what that might mean for you and your students. Before we get to that, though, I need to define what I mean by *authentic engagement*.

Authentic Engagement Is Active

Engage is a verb, so *engaging* is an action—but whose action is it? We might speak of teachers, lessons, activities, or books that *engage* students, which makes students the passive object. We might also speak of students *engaging* in class. As teachers, instead of looking for ways we can engage students, let's think of ourselves as creating the conditions for students to engage.

This book is about how to design instruction such that students with diverse interests, strengths, needs, identities, and values will be able to connect to their learning. Because engagement is their action, not ours, we can't guarantee that all students will engage. However, we can structure our classes so students know *that* they can engage, *how* they can engage, and *why* their engagement is worthwhile.

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Authentic Engagement Is Affiliative

Students can't engage in a vacuum; they need to engage in or with something. The three parts of this book are about designing instruction so students engage with the content (Part I), their work (Part II), and each other (Part III).

Authentic engagement means students are not merely going through the motions of school—studying enough to get good grades and advance to the next level, completing assignments to check them off a to-do list, and remaining more or less indifferent to their peers. Authentic engagement is a choice. It means students choose to bring themselves to their learning, work, and relationships.

That choice can lead to tremendous growth and satisfaction, but it also makes students vulnerable. Authenticity means sharing our experiences, identities, histories, and ideas. It means asking questions and asking for help. Authentic engagement means trying new things without knowing how they'll go. It means making messes and mistakes. It means seeing, hearing, and caring for others—and allowing ourselves to be seen, heard, and cared for.

Authentically engaging with the content, their work, and each other opens students up to frustration, disappointment, embarrassment, fear, longing, and loss—and also joy, enthusiasm, amazement, and hope. Authentic engagement means students feel authentic emotions because something authentically important is at stake for them. If we foster authentic engagement in our classes, we need to be willing to feel whatever we feel when our students feel whatever they feel, because that's what it means to fully live.

Authentic Engagement Makes Academic Learning a Source of *Meaning, Vitality, and Community* in Students' Lives

Decades of research tell us that when students are engaged, their academic achievement improves (Cobb, 1972; Lahaderne, 1968; Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018; Li & Lerner, 2011; Newmann, 1992; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990).

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Academic achievement improves (but doesn't guarantee) a student's ability to get into college, find a fulfilling job, support a family, participate in society, make a positive difference in the world, and build close relationships. In short, students achieve academically so they can build lives filled with meaning, vitality, and community. If our goal is for students to build that kind of life, why make them wait until they're adults to start? Why not start right now?

Student engagement might promote academic achievement, but that's not what engagement is *for*. This book proceeds from the assumption that academic content should be a source of meaning, academic work should be a source of vitality, and academic classes should be a source of community. Finding meaning, vitality, and community is the purpose of engagement—and of school itself.

Using This Book

Each chapter of this book includes practical tools and strategies you can use on their own or in combination to design instruction for authentic engagement. You'll also read stories from my experiences as a teacher and a student to give you a sense of what authentic engagement looks like, what hinders it, and where the tools and strategies came from.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I offers instructional design strategies to help students engage with the content so it becomes a source of meaning in their lives.

- Chapter 1 is about making course materials inclusive so students see themselves reflected in their learning and encounter unfamiliar stories, perspectives, and ideas.
- Chapter 2 discusses how to write prompts that help students connect to the content so they can say something meaningful about it and make it relevant in their lives.
- Chapter 3 describes how to orient students within their own learning by creating rituals to mark transitions between topics.
- Chapter 4 shows how to give students a choice of learning tasks and help them make those choices in accordance with their values.

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Part II offers strategies for helping students engage with their work so it becomes a source of vitality.

- Chapter 5 is about how to design affirming assignments that ask students to create things that matter—to them personally and in the world.
- Chapter 6 describes work processes that empower students to make projects intrinsically fulfilling.
- Chapter 7 discusses how students and teachers can co-construct definitions of *success* that reflect established learning objectives as well as what matters to the student.

Part III offers strategies for helping students engage with each other so the class becomes a source of community.

- Chapter 8 describes how class discussions can become a site of actively respectful relationship-building within the group.
- Chapter 9 includes various collaboration protocols that foster academic understanding and interpersonal connection.
- Chapter 10 is about using end-of-activity and end-of-unit reflections that help students appreciate their own learning, one another, and the group as a whole.

There's intention behind how this book is sequenced. Students more easily engage with their work when they feel connected to its content, and they're more able to use learning as a context for building community when they feel like that learning matters. Because each chapter provides some foundation for the next, I would recommend reading them in order. That said, if you start with whichever chapters seem most interesting to you (which, to be honest, is how I usually read professional books), you'll be able to use the tools and strategies in those chapters without having read what came before. Either way, I hope you'll engage as authentically in reading this book as I did in writing it.

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PART

I

Engaging with the Content

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Inclusive Materials

Reading books and watching movies in the 80s when I was growing up, I always waited for the girl. The protagonist was usually a boy or man—as in *Star Wars, The Phantom Tollbooth, The Dark Crystal, Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, The Goonies*—but eventually, the girl appeared. Sometimes she was a love interest, sometimes a rival, sometimes a friend. Sometimes she died. Often, she embodied gender stereotypes and taught me harmful lessons about my reason for existing, but I didn't yet know how to read (or watch) critically for that. I just wanted to see the girl.

It was similar in school. We read boys' and men's stories. Sometimes there was no girl to wait for, like in "The Cask of Amontillado." Sometimes the girl was awful, like Sally in *The Catcher in the Rye*, or she was idealized, like Phoebe in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Sometimes the girl had no name, like Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*. As a teenager, I learned to hate the girl, so it's not much of a surprise that I was also learning to hate myself.

It wasn't just in English class. The pictures in all our textbooks rarely showed women, and the few women there were mostly white. Our history books were all about white men leading battles and countries, exploring

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and stealing lands, inventing technologies, and exploiting other humans for profit. Some chapters may have had a paragraph about women such as "women on the home front" during the Revolutionary War, as if there was only one home front and only one set of things women did. In biology, we read about the passive egg and the heroic sperm, and it wouldn't be until a college course on gender psychology that I read a takedown of that narrative (Martin, 1991)—but by then, I'd internalized what role I was supposed to play in the world.

At least in waiting for the girl, I occasionally saw one. I'm Jewish, and even though the stories of science, mathematics, politics, and music are full of Jews, we didn't talk about them in school. If we learned about them, we didn't learn they were Jewish. You can probably guess the single event I read about in history class that mentioned Jews, but I'll tell you anyway: the Holocaust. The message this imparted? We could study our history only when we were murdered by the millions.

It wasn't just myself I longed to see in my learning. I remember repeatedly saying I wanted to study "other cultures." That phrasing makes me cringe now, but given how thoroughly Black and Brown people had been otherized in the lessons I was taught (starting with when my preschool teacher had us make feather headdresses out of construction paper), it's not a surprise. In every subject, I encountered materials that stereotyped, subjugated, and silenced entire groups of people. "I want to study other cultures" was how I expressed a longing to encounter important perspectives my education had missed or misrepresented.

All students need opportunities to see themselves reflected in their learning *and* encounter unfamiliar ideas and perspectives—but so many have to wait for those opportunities, if they come at all. This chapter is about how to create those opportunities right now by making your course materials more inclusive.

Mirrors and Windows

To borrow a well-known metaphor from education professor Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), students need to encounter materials that serve as mirrors reflecting their own experiences and as windows into unfamiliar ideas and

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perspectives. Mirrors help students build a healthy sense of self, windows help students understand worlds beyond themselves, and both help students engage with the content.

Although students need both windows and mirrors, some course materials overwhelmingly reflect dominant groups—or they reflect stereotypes of marginalized groups. Bishop (1990) explains the danger of providing too few mirrors: "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (p. ix). Mirrors help students situate themselves in a larger story—of science, mathematics, art, and every other subject. If students never see themselves reflected in academic materials, they might think the content has nothing to do with them and feel like outsiders in their own learning.

Conversely, providing too many mirrors and not enough windows can lead students to believe that *their* story is *the* story. By seeing themselves constantly reflected, students in historically dominant groups (such as boys or white students) might see their own experiences as *right* or *normal* and that anyone who doesn't share these identifiers is *lesser* or *other*. Diverse materials send the message that there isn't only one right way to think, act, and be.

There's a third part of Dr. Bishop's metaphor. Window stories can become "sliding glass doors" when students "walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author" (Bishop, 1990, p. ix); the student not only *sees* unfamiliar experiences but *empathizes* with the people who live them. Empathizing is an active reading process, not a feature of the story itself. Chapter 2 addresses how teachers can invite students to connect with people, places, and events they learn about—what Bishop might call opening the glass door. For now, we'll focus on mirrors and windows: materials that show experiences like and unlike the students' own.

Full-Length Mirrors and Bay Windows

In the stories I read for school, I rarely encountered people who shared the identifiers that felt central to who I was—and that experience is hardly unique. Bestselling author Nic Stone (2020) describes how she met only three Black characters in the books she read from 8th through 12th grade: Tom Robinson

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in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Crooks in *Of Mice and Men*, and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. These books are all by white authors and about Black suffering: getting falsely accused of a violent crime (Tom); living in physical anguish and social isolation (Crooks); or being enslaved, imprisoned, shot, and repeatedly betrayed (Jim).

Of these reading experiences, Stone (2020) writes,

> I hated all of it. The stuff I could actually get into as a teen: *Harry Potter* and *Gossip Girl*? I wasn't in it. As far as I knew then, Black girls like me didn't exist in books. And as physics would have it, people who don't exist can't go on adventures or solve mysteries or fall in love or save the universe. Which meant that I, as a nonexistent entity, wasn't capable of any of those things. And I wasn't the only person getting this message. Anyone reading books without me in them was getting it too." (paras. 10–12)

Another bestselling author, Nicola Yoon (2021), distinguishes "issue books" about oppression from "non-issue books" that center people in oppressed groups but are not about their oppression. According to Yoon, non-issue books "afford marginalized people the full measure of their humanity. There is more to them (and their lives) than the painful, heavy issues imposed upon them by society. There is also joy" (para. 20).

The materials we offer students cannot be funhouse mirrors that reflect and reinforce stereotypes. The windows cannot be tiny peepholes that show only pain and oppression. Truly inclusive materials offer full-length mirrors and wide bay windows to show a range of experiences—pain and struggle as well as joy and triumph.

Intersectional Inclusivity

As a high school senior, I took a women and literature elective. The reading included one book by an indigenous woman, one by an Asian American woman, one by a Black woman, one by a Latina, and a fifth book we each chose for ourselves. I took that class only three years after Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality* to describe how legal discourse excludes Black women's experiences by focusing on either racism or sexism

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but not on how their combined effect fundamentally differs from each one on its own. People now use the word more broadly, referring to how various aspects of our identities—race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, age, and so on—interact to shape our experiences.

As windows, intersectional materials help students push past biases about particular groups and about the discipline itself. My Women and Literature teacher had selected our course texts to ensure we didn't equate stories with *men's* stories, or women's stories with *white* women's stories. By reading intersectional women's literature, we developed a more expansive understanding of women—and of literature.

As mirrors, intersectional materials help students with diverse backgrounds and identities see different aspects of themselves reflected in the same story. Many years after I'd taken that women and lit course in high school and I was teaching 7th grade, my students read *A Raisin in the Sun*, in which the characters Lena, Beneatha, and Ruth Younger offer three very different portrayals of Black women's strength, vulnerability, and joy. Black girls might see themselves reflected in one or more of the characters, but Black students of other genders and girls of other racial identities might recognize aspects of themselves, too.

Even if a story reflects many aspects of a student's identity, it might not reflect *them*. A story about a white Jewish woman writer in her mid-forties living in the suburbs with her two children isn't necessarily about *me*. (In fact, the show *Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce* was about a white Jewish woman writer in her mid-forties living in the suburbs with her two children, and I can assure you, it was not about me.)

Conversely, almost any story will have *something* that feels familiar. Nic Stone (2020) mentions *Gossip Girl* as a book she, a Black girl in Georgia, "wasn't in." I can't say I see myself in a story about ultra-wealthy teenage Manhattanites, either, but that doesn't mean I have *nothing* in common with those characters. I've had friendship betrayals, unrequited crushes, and selfish tantrums. These parts of *Gossip Girl* are relatable, even if the wealth and access are less so.

To be clear, the fact that almost any student can find something familiar in almost any story does not make it OK that Nic Stone encountered only

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three Black characters in five years' worth of school books. Teachers have a duty to incorporate culturally sustaining stories into every course *and* to realize our students won't always relate to our course materials in the ways we expect.

Local and Current Inclusivity

Learning materials should reflect not only *who* the students are (identity) but also *where* they are (local environment) and *when* they are (present moment). Before I taught 7th grade English, I taught geography at a different school that had a robust service learning program. Each grade did a project that met a community need and pertained to one of their academic classes. For example, if 8th graders were learning elements of critical literacy in their English class, then their service learning project might be to create critical reading questions they can use to discuss picture books with younger buddies. The 8th graders deepen their critical reading skills as they prepare for and have these conversations, and the younger children get to select books, receive one-on-one attention, and develop their own literacy skills. By working together, the students and their buddies get to know each other, link their communities, and make literacy more accessible.

As a 7th grade teacher, I wanted my students' service learning experience to feel meaningful. My predecessor at the school had been involved with an organization that led landmine removal efforts in Southeast Asia and southern Africa, and she'd created a service project that benefited the organization and aligned with the geography course.

As important as landmine removal is, I was concerned that the service learning project reinforced stereotypes of Southeast Asia and southern Africa as war-torn, poor, and in need of white saviors. I also thought service learning was supposed to be hands-on and involve building relationships. We couldn't travel to Cambodia or Angola and remove mines; we could only raise money for the organization that did. I thought it was important for my students, who were learning about people they didn't meet and places they didn't visit, to apply the knowledge they gained in their geography course to local efforts.

My colleague who taught the other two sections of geography had worked for an organization that protects the Chesapeake Bay watershed. By focusing on something closer to home, we could connect sustainability topics our

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students learned about during the various regional geography units to similar issues with which they were more familiar. For example, when we learned about deforestation in the Amazon during our Latin America unit, we also learned how forest buffers protect the Chesapeake Bay watershed, visited a forest in Virginia, talked to people working to protect local forests, and wrote to congressional representatives who could help. Our service learning project gave students a different kind of mirror—one that reflected their local environment and present moment.

It's Not Just Books

When Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) introduced the mirrors and windows metaphor, she specifically discussed how children need to see themselves in books, but students encounter stories in all kinds of learning materials, all across the curriculum. In their history classes, they hear stories about various people and events. In science, they hear stories of biological, geological, chemical, and physical phenomena—and about the people who make and interpret observations. A lab procedure is a kind of story. The act of sculpting is a story, the finished sculpture tells a story, and the sculpture and sculptor are part of the ongoing story of art. In language classes, when students learn to describe their clothing or ask for change at a store, they're imagining themselves in a story.

Even in math, we have story problems that make the content relevant in the real world—yet that world might not be the one in which students see themselves. Education professor Anita Bright (2016) studied story problems and discovered that although they "are supposed to be the most humanizing part of math education," they often contain assumptions that "perpetuate consumerism, reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes, and maintain classism and unsustainable approaches to the Earth" (para. 3). Bright's examples include calculating cheap wages to hire migrant workers, the area to recarpet a home, and the calories in a breakfast consisting of foods typically eaten by white Americans.

Math problems, photographs, videos, websites, maps, posters, and games tell stories. The spaces students visit on field trips tell stories. What mirror and window stories did you encounter as a student? How did these stories

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affect your sense of self and belonging? What did that mean for your engagement in your classes? If you imagine your students at your age now looking back on your class, how would you want them to answer these questions?

The Willingness to Critically Self-Reflect

I've never met a teacher who actively sought out instructional resources *because* they were by and about white cishet men, yet many (if not most) courses overrepresent these voices or treat them as *normal* and everyone else as *other*. Even those of us who believe in equity and inclusion have biases when choosing and using instructional materials, which is why Figure 1.1 offers a set of critical reflection questions you can use to assess them.

You might feel uncomfortable at the thought of questioning your materials. You might worry that you'll find evidence of bias and wonder what that says about you. You might dread the effort it will take to change.

FIGURE 1.1

Critical Reflection Questions About Instructional Materials

Looking at your course materials:
• Whose voices are predominant? • Whose voices are present but not predominant? • Whose voices are absent? • What beliefs about what's "good," "right," or "normal" do these materials reflect? • Where do those beliefs come from? • How might these materials inform a student's sense of self and belonging?
Looking at a historically marginalized group:
• What kinds of stories do your course materials tell about this group? • Do the materials represent this group in rich, affirming, and accurate ways, or do they reinforce subjugation and stereotypes? • How do your course materials actively challenge stereotypes?
Looking at the students in your class:
• Which aspects of themselves will they see reflected in their learning? • How will they see their local community represented? • How will they see current events and issues represented? • How might their identities inform their learning and work?

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Maybe you're thinking you'll skip the assessment, telling yourself your materials are already inclusive. Maybe you feel angry because you think I'm implying your class must be racist or sexist or transphobic. Maybe you're rolling your eyes: "Not *this* again."

Maybe you feel fine for now, but as you reflect, you feel uncomfortable emotions such as embarrassment, guilt, or despair. Maybe you find yourself not wanting to write certain things down or pushing those thoughts out of your mind. Maybe you even have uncomfortable physical sensations such as muscle tension or queasiness.

Psychology professor Kelly Wilson eloquently explains that "values and vulnerabilities are poured from the same vessel" (Wilson & DuFrene, 2009, p. 8). The very things that matter most to us are also sources of our deepest pain and our greatest struggles. If, as you assess your instructional materials, you have any uncomfortable thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations, notice them, because they mean you're getting close to something important. What is that something? What will you choose to do? How will your choice affect your students? How satisfying will it ultimately be for you?

Functional Replacement

When I moved to a new school, one of my first acts as an English teacher was a math problem. I looked at the stack of books I'd been charged with teaching and wondered, of all the pages my students would read that year, how many were written by white men? The answer was 74 percent.

The most egregious offender was a book called *21 Great Stories*. All 21 were written by white men. We also read *Of Mice and Men* (white male author, white male protagonist), *The Catcher in the Rye* (white male author, white male protagonist), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (which, despite some interesting theories about Shakespeare, was most likely by a white male author, too). The remaining two books were *A Raisin in the Sun* (Black female author, Black family of protagonists) and *I Am the Darker Brother* (an anthology of poems by Black poets).

As I approached my second year in that teaching position, I wanted to make some changes to our course materials, beginning with *21 Great Stories*. Instead of simply ditching it, though, I asked myself what functions the book

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served—what the book *did*—regardless of whether those functions were intentional or explicit. I came up with six functions:

- Providing access to “classic” literature and famous authors (implicit but probably intentional).
- Teaching students to identify and analyze key themes in stories (explicit and intentional).
- Teaching students to compare and contrast different authors’ styles (explicit and intentional).
- Helping students use great texts as models for their own writing (explicit and intentional).
- Appeasing parents who complain that the middle school curriculum is too easy (implicit but probably intentional).
- Sending the message that “great” stories are by and about white men (implicit and probably unintentional).

Of the functions I identified, some were helpful in teaching students important reading and writing skills, some were harmful in perpetuating oppressive systems and ideologies, and some seemed more or less neutral (if anything in education can be). Of the helpful functions, the two that felt most important were teaching students to identify and analyze key themes in stories and helping students use great texts as models for their own writing. I looked for another book that could serve these same two functions but that was by and about people who belonged to a historically underrepresented group. I came up with Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, which is by a Latina author and features a Latina protagonist.

My next step was to list all the functions *The House on Mango Street* could serve, beginning with the two I’d already identified. Here’s what I came up with:

- Teaching students to identify and analyze key themes in stories.
- Helping students use great texts as models for their own writing.
- Providing a relatable coming-of-age story for students who are roughly the same age as the main character.
- Guiding students to write about people, events, and things that matter to them.

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- Appeasing parents and colleagues who want students to read "classic" literature.
- Sending the message that Latina stories matter.

When I compared my functional analyses of *21 Great Stories* and *The House on Mango Street,* I found that *The House on Mango Street* served more functions my school community and I would deem helpful. I didn't want to make teaching choices for the sake of appeasement but was honest with myself that the book would serve this function. More importantly, it would offer my Latina students a mirror the course had lacked. Providing a mirror for Latina students, and providing a window into Latina experiences for students who didn't so identify, is more than just an added bonus. It is itself an important function of learning materials.

The following protocol is designed to help you do a functional analysis of your course texts or other resources. You'll list all the functions the resource serves, identify the most important functions, and think of another resource that serves those same functions but represents a group that has been stereotyped, subjugated, or silenced in the curriculum.

Functional Replacement Protocol

1. Identify a learning resource you're willing to reconsider and potentially replace—a book or anything else students encounter as they learn the content.
2. Identify all the functions that resource serves. What does it *do*? Some functions will be intentional; that's what you're trying to accomplish. Others will be unintentional; that's not what you were aiming for, but the resource has that impact. Some functions will be explicit; you've stated it out loud or in written communication. Others will be implicit; you never actually state the function, but it exists.
3. Classify the functions as helpful, harmful, or neutral.
4. Of the helpful functions, identify the one or two you consider most important.
5. Find an alternative resource that fulfills those most important helpful functions *and* that is by and about people from a historically underrepresented group. These groups might include Black, Indigenous,

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Asian, Pacific Islander, Latine, LGBTQIA+, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, disabled, neurodivergent, chronically ill, immigrant, poor, elder individuals or communities, or any other historically underrepresented group.

6. Identify more of the new resource's functions—what the new resource *would do*.
7. Identify the functions that serve your values as a teacher and school community member.

What you or anyone else considers most important depends on values. You always bring your personal values to everything you do, including the selection and use of instructional materials. Your values don't exist in a vacuum, though, so you might think about the values of various communities to which you belong: your school, professional organizations, and cultural communities. If you want more perspectives, ask a trusted colleague to do this protocol with you.

Finding Resources

Teachers often have trouble finding resources by members of underrepresented groups because they're just as underrepresented by publishers as they are by schools. Try searching a library catalog or social media site using keywords such as *lesson plan* or *learning resource*, along with your subject and the group you're looking for. Keep in mind, though, that anyone can post anything—including resources that look like meaningful representation but in fact reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate myths. It's a good idea to look for conferences, websites, and online communities where members of historically underrepresented groups discuss instructional resources by and about your subject or grade level.

You might also find inclusive materials in unexpected ways. One of the best books we used in my English class came from a science teacher. She was driving to school one morning and heard an NPR story about the then-new book *Poetry Speaks Who I Am* (Paschen & Raccah, 2010). Its poems by diverse writers were all about identity in one way or another, and the book came with a CD of the poets reading their work.

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I taught a unit called Poetry with Purpose that had students explore what poems do and how poetic devices help communicate an idea and establish the poet's voice. After reading and discussing various poems, students tried out the poetic devices they'd explored in their own poems, which they assembled into their own collections.

Poetry Speaks Who I Am provided many excellent, accessible poems we could explore in all these ways. Although the poetry book we had been using, *I Am the Darker Brother,* offered important examples of classic Black poetry, most of the poets were men and no longer alive, and too many of the poems were about Black suffering. I wanted my students to read about diverse experiences—painful *and* joyful—from diverse and mostly living poets. *Poetry Speaks Who I Am* had an introduction students could use as a model when writing introductions to their own collections, and they could record selected poems that I could assemble into a class CD (which later became a class playlist).

A science teacher suggested a great resource for an English unit. Just imagine how many excellent resources your colleagues might know about, even if they teach a different subject or grade level. The following protocol (adapted from Porosoff, 2020) is designed to draw on the collective knowledge of your faculty so you can all discover learning resources that might serve as mirrors and windows for your students. You'll need index cards, lots of sticky notes in four different colors, and pens.

Resource Crowdsource Protocol

1. Each teacher gets an index card and three sticky notes in each of four colors (for a total of 12 sticky notes).
2. Each teacher writes a unit topic on the index card.
3. Each color sticky note is assigned to one of the following four categories of resources.

    People: Whose expertise could help students learn about this topic or pursue this inquiry? Consider experts of all kinds, including those in the students' families and in historically marginalized groups.

    Places: Where could students go to learn about this topic or pursue this inquiry? Consider places on school grounds and in your area.

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Think of nearby places your students or their families visit or that have cultural, historical, or ecological significance.

Texts: What could students read or view as part of this unit? Consider all types of verbal, visual, and audiovisual texts, both in print and online, such as fiction and nonfiction books, magazine articles, poems, data sets, works of art, and videos.

Activities: What could students do to discover the content for themselves? How could they deepen their thinking about it? Consider activities of all kinds, such as writing, conducting an experiment, playing a game, dramatizing an event, and making art.

4. Teachers leave their index cards on their desks or tables and walk around the room, looking at the topics and essential questions on each other's cards. They suggest resources for their colleagues' units by writing their own ideas on the appropriate sticky notes and sticking them near each card.
5. The process continues, ideally until each teacher has no sticky notes left and each index card has three sticky notes in each color beside it.
6. Teachers return to their own index cards and read the suggestions.
7. The group debriefs using the following discussion prompts:

— Of all the resources your colleagues suggested, which are you most excited to explore? What can that excitement tell you about your values?

— Of all the resources your colleagues suggested, which is most different from what your students usually encounter in your class? How might they benefit from encountering it?

— Of all the resources you suggested, which do you most hope a colleague will actually use? What can you learn about your values from the fact that you hope your colleague uses that resource?

Any resource that meaningfully advances students' understanding is potentially useful. Look out for cultures and perspectives typically left out of your subject's narrative when you have conversations with students and their families, explore local environments, and follow current events.

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When you find instructional resources, notice how you judge them. Which resources do you consider *good,* and which resources do you dismiss as *inappropriate* or *unworkable*? What can those judgments tell you about your own beliefs regarding goodness, appropriateness, and workability? Where do those beliefs come from?

Asking yourself these questions helps you develop what educator Liza Talusan (2022) calls an "identity-conscious practice," which means constantly noticing "that who you are informs and impacts how you act, how you interact with others, and how you see the world around you" (p. 18). Although we might focus on how our course materials reflect our *students'* identities, our own identities shape the ways we select materials in the first place.

Interrogating Materials Selection Systems

By the time I moved from 7th grade English to 6th, the course materials were much more inclusive than they had been. In addition to replacing *21 Great Stories* with *The House on Mango Street* and *I Am the Darker Brother* with *Poetry Speaks Who I Am,* we replaced *The Catcher in the Rye* with Francisco X. Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World,* which features a neurodivergent protagonist, to anchor a unit about personal journeys.

We kept *A Raisin in the Sun* and had students write their own dramatic scenes based on personal experiences with injustice. We also kept *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Of Mice and Men* out of fear of what parents would say if we removed them. We added two books by Asian authors: Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories,* which anchored a unit that had students write their own fantasy stories based on true learning experiences, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis,* a memoir written in graphic vignettes. Students created a graphic adaptation of one vignette from the collection they'd written after reading *The House on Mango Street.*

Although our booklist wasn't perfect, I'm proud of the changes we made. Seventh graders were encountering mirrors and windows they hadn't encountered before. However, making the changes took eight years—long enough for hundreds of students to pass through 7th grade having never seen themselves in their learning.

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As you work to make your own instructional materials more inclusive, it's important to root out why it's exclusive in the first place. What systems are in place that make it less likely for certain students to see themselves reflected?

At my school, one requirement was for students who had different teachers to have "similar experiences." The logic was that it shouldn't matter which teacher a student had for any particular course; the school should be able to guarantee a certain experience. That might sound like an equity-based practice, but "similar experiences" didn't mean all students had to have equivalent opportunities to develop certain understandings and skills; it meant teachers of the same course had to give the same major assignments and use the same materials. For me, it meant I couldn't use a book unless my colleague who also taught 7th grade English used it, too.

That might have been fine if he and I were both open to change and both valued inclusion. However, my colleague had been at the school teaching the same books for many years, and he resisted any book I suggested. That, too, might have been fine if our policy had been for each teacher to choose an equal number of books on each year's list. Instead, the books remained the same from year to year unless everyone teaching the course agreed to a change. If I—an experienced teacher but new to the school—couldn't convince my white male colleague to do otherwise, his white male-authored book choices stayed in place, and I had to use them.

After that colleague left the school, my new grade-level partner and I were able to make changes, but we encountered a new obstacle. We were discouraged from changing more than one or two books from any given year to the next. This unofficial policy existed for two reasons: to save teachers from having too much preparatory work (which I would have gladly taken on so my students could have more mirrors and windows) and to appease powerful parents who expected their children to have certain literary experiences.

In addition, if we wanted to use a different book, we had to submit a written proposal explaining and justifying the change. This policy was an important procedural safeguard against frivolous changes to a booklist that helped our students become more skillful readers, writers, and thinkers, and it prevented us from adding books we liked into the required reading list without considering what students would learn. However, if we wanted to

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keep a book, we did not have to write anything or justify its continued use. Change required labor that maintenance of the status quo didn't, and if the status quo is overwhelmingly white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, and neurotypical, then barriers to change are problematic.

Our booklist's evolution demonstrates what educator Paul Gorski (2019) calls "pacing for privilege" (p. 57), or changing slowly enough that those with power remain comfortable, even if it means denying justice to those who have been marginalized. In this case, school policies operated to keep our mostly white population of adults happy—and deny mirrors to the very students who felt most invisible in their own learning.

We can't just ask how to make our resources more inclusive; we also need to ask what systems perpetuate exclusion. Figure 1.2 offers a set of critical reflection questions you can use to assess the process by which your instructional materials are selected.

FIGURE 1.2

Critical Reflection Questions About the Process of Selecting Instructional Materials

In conversations about instructional materials:

- Which voices are heard and taken seriously?
- Which voices are heard but not taken as seriously?
- Which voices are never heard?

In evaluating instructional materials:

- What criteria are used to determine whether to use a particular resource?
- What beliefs about what's "good," "right," or "normal" do these criteria reflect?
- Where do those beliefs come from?

In deciding whether to use instructional materials:

- What is the process for proposing and vetting new resources?
- What is the process for reviewing resources that have been used before?
- What is the process for making decisions? For example, must decision-makers reach consensus? Do they vote? Do they split up the decision-making, each choosing some materials?
- Why are these the processes your school uses?
- What's the impact of these processes? Who benefits from them and who loses out?
- What factors or policies prevent changes in instructional materials?
- Who can help you think of creative workarounds within the existing policy or advocate for changes to the policy itself?

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Making our materials more inclusive might cost us time, labor, money, and relationships with those who maintain the status quo. I wish I could take away these costs, but I can't. I can only ask you: What are the costs of *not* making your materials more inclusive—to your students' engagement in your class and to their sense of self and belonging? What are the costs to your colleagues who have less historical and institutional power if you don't take risks to fight for inclusion? What are the costs to you?

Onward

This chapter was about how to engage students by providing instructional materials that both reflect their own experiences and show them unfamiliar ideas and perspectives. As important as inclusive materials are, they don't guarantee our students will connect to the content. The next chapter is about how to help students locate themselves in their learning and make their learning relevant in their lives.

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About the Author

Lauren Porosoff is the founder of EMPOWER Forwards, a collaborative consultancy practice that builds learning communities that truly belong to everyone and where everyone truly belongs. An educator since 2000, Lauren has taught at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx, New York; the Maret School in Washington, DC; and the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Maryland. She has taught 2nd, 5th, 6th, and 7th grade, mostly in English and history, and has also served as a DEI coordinator, grade dean, and leader of curricular initiatives.

Lauren's commitment to transforming the psychological experience of school has been a constant in her teaching practice, leading her to learn about values-guided behavior change in contextual psychology. Informed by research and practices from this field, and by her 18 years as a classroom teacher, Lauren develops tools and protocols that empower students and teachers to make school a source of meaning, vitality, and community. Her work includes the instructional design processes she describes in her book

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Teach Meaningful: Tools to Design the Curriculum at Your Core (2020), the professional learning strategies in *The PD Curator: How to Design Peer-to-Peer Professional Learning That Elevates Teachers and Teaching* (2021), and the approaches to social-emotional learning in *EMPOWER Your Students: Tools to Inspire a Meaningful School Experience* (2018), *Two for-One Teaching: Connecting Instruction to Student Values* (2020), and *EMPOWER Moves for Social-Emotional Learning: Tools and Strategies to Evoke Student Values* (2022).

Lauren lives in New York with her co-everything Jonathan Weinstein, their two children, and a cat named Benedict. Learn more about Lauren's work at empowerforwards.com, or follow her on Twitter @LaurenPorosoff.

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