"Can We All Get Along?" Evaluating Racism in the Media

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Index:

Overview
Rationale
Objectives
Strategies
Classroom Activities
Annotated Bibliography and Resources
Appendix A: Standards

Overview

This unit is intended to be implemented in the high school English classroom and has been designed with 9th graders in mind. Assuming one-hour class periods, the lessons can be covered in approximately 6 classes. The overall goal of this unit is to enable students to effectively evaluate racial stereotyping in the media and be able to identify situations where racism or individual prejudice plays a role in historical events and media portrayals. The lessons and classroom activities in the unit are designed to present students with historical case studies which they can analyze, interpret, and discuss. Through inquiry and discussion, students will gain critical thinking and media literacy skills which will enable them to be more effective and knowledgeable consumers of mass media.

This unit focuses on racist stereotypes of African-Americans. First, we will begin by developing some basic media literacy skills and students will explore some examples of news features containing racist stereotypes. We will discuss how the coverage of a news story shapes public opinion about race relations. There are classroom activities centered on the events of Hurricane Katrina (both the government's response as well as the media coverage and aftermath). There is a lesson on racial implications of the police brutality suit stemming from the 1991 beating of Los Angeles resident Rodney King, and the subsequent riots that occurred in South Central LA for three days following the trial verdict. We will analyze and discuss a 2011 Forbes article, "If I Were a Poor Black Kid" by journalist Gene Marks, a text which was intended to provide low-income urban teens with some tips on how to get ahead in life, but contains some fairly egregious stereotyping. Finally, students will examine news coverage and discourse relating to the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin. Students will participate in class discussions and debates

and construct organized and detailed writing prompts in order to demonstrate understanding of, and engagement with, the content.

Rationale

A recent article in the *New York Times* discussed the various ways in which some schools in New York City were experimenting with implementing the new Common Core Standards for teaching and learning, particularly in the English/Language Arts classroom. The Common Core Standards are designed for use across the country—replacing separate systems of state standards—and are intended to better prepare high school students for college-level discourse. The article says that the Common Core recommends that "students should be reading more nonfiction texts as they get older, to prepare them for the kinds of material they will read in college and careers… in the eighth grade, 45 percent should be literary and 55 percent informational, and by 12th grade, the split should be 30/70" (Santos 2011). I had previously known most English courses to be heavily weighted towards fiction and poetry, with less emphasis on informational and other nonfiction texts, so this surprised me.

In anticipation of Pennsylvania's impending transition to the Common Core Standards, teachers would do well to investigate ways we can work within the existing timelines specified in Philadelphia's Core Curriculum to expose students to more nonfiction, and explicitly teach reading strategies that relate to nonfiction while doing this. Unfortunately, the existing School District of Philadelphia does not meet these needs. The current textbook, Holt's *Elements of Literature*, did not contain much in the way of engaging nonfiction, apart from a small collection of articles on differing theories of Edgar Allan Poe's death and some outdated articles about technology in the workplace. Moreover, the curriculum's emphasis on texts such as *The Odyssey* and *Romeo and Juliet,* plus lengthy units on literary terms such as characterization and allegory, doesn't leave much room for extended discussion of how to effectively read nonfiction. Given this state of affairs, teachers can and should work beyond the existing curriculum, wherever possible, to include nonfiction texts in their lessons.

Along with teaching nonfiction texts and nonfiction reading strategies, teachers should also take into context 21st century media issues. Readership of traditional newspapers and magazines has declined in recent years as news becomes widely available over the Internet: in fact, reports the Pew Research Center, "the newspaper industry has shrunk 43% since 2000" (Mitchell and Rosensteil 2012). Fortunately, consumption of news media is on the rise now that Americans are more likely to own devices such as laptops, iPads, and smartphones. A recent study by the Pew Research Center reports that 34% of Americans read news on both computers and smartphones (Pew Research Center). The report states, "People are taking advantage…of having easier access to the news throughout the day—in their pocket, on their desks and in their laps" (Mitchell and Rosensteil 2012).

The world our students are growing up in is one in which being able to read and interpret nonfiction texts is essential. It is our duty to prepare them to navigate the modern world skillfully. Students will use these skills for success on standardized tests, success in college, and success as citizens. We owe it to our students to provide them with media literacy strategies so that they can effectively assess and analyze the information they come across in their academic and everyday lives. Unfortunately, media literacy is not addressed in the 9th grade English curriculum provided by the School District of Philadelphia; therefore, teachers have the opportunity to create interesting and relevant learning engagements for students that can reinforce these important 21st-century skills.

This begs the question: how to approach nonfiction reading skills and necessary 21st century media literacy skills in a way that energizes and engages students? This is what I hope my unit will address. By creating a series of lessons that examine certain events—and the media's coverage of those events—through the lens of racial bias, I hope that students will be able to gain all of these skills concurrently.

Objectives

In today's media-saturated world, it is incumbent upon educators to form in our students strategies by which they can critically evaluate the different messages they're being sent: by putting together this unit, I hope to provide other teachers with activities that will best serve students in the modern world.

Following is a list of overall objectives and skills students will achieve as a result of completing the unit activities. The unit as a whole is designed to instill in students a consciousness of how the media portrays race. Processes to identify and deconstruct racial bias in the media can then be applied to future situations as the students become active consumers of 21st-century media.

Students will be able to understand informational articles after reading, demonstrating an ability to identify main ideas and supporting details. They will also be able to identify author's point of view, including any bias the author might have, and evaluate the assumptions made by the author.

As they read, students will determine the rhetorical strategies used by authors—ethos, pathos, and logos—and evaluate author's purpose as well as the effectiveness of these strategies. When appropriate, students will also be able to situate the rhetoric of a text in a historical and political context as it relates to contemporary events.

Students will engage in scholarly discourse and debate as they respond critically to informational texts, including any video clips used in the unit, through articulate

discussion as well as in writing. As they write, they will be able to develop independent thinking skills as they formulate their own opinions.

Through completing all the unit activities, students will gain a historically informed understanding of the interplay between racial politics, historical events, and the media's explicit and implicit presentations of race and racial issues. This unit will open their eyes to things they might never have noticed before and prepare them to evaluate new information critically, in college and in the "real world."

Strategies

Using multimedia—videos and video clips, photographs, graphics, and the like—inside the 21st-century classroom is a no-brainer: teachers across the country are encouraged to do it and do it often. However tempting it may be to simply pop a DVD in and allow the video to teach for you, this might not always be the best way. Effective use of the media inside the classroom takes some planning. There are several strategies that teachers can implement in order to make their use of multimedia more impactful, keeping students engaged and therefore making the best use of limited classroom time.

One highly effective engagement technique is what I like to call the "pause-and-think-aloud" and it is particularly useful during video clips. Teachers can prepare to execute this strategy by viewing the video or video clip before teaching and planning a few points to put the video on "pause" and model a certain thought process or point out an important idea that was just conveyed in the video. I've also used this technique to paraphrase complicated ideas for students. What a teacher says and when they say it, and how many times to pause a video, all depends on the instructional objectives (both for that particular day and for the overall unit of study) and the specific video being shown. When showing traditional informational videos (as opposed to news reports or shorter clips) this technique is very helpful for breaking up monotony.

Similarly, pausing a video and asking questions during the video (what I've termed "pause-and-ask") helps keep students on track in relation to attaining the learning objective for the day. If the teacher calls on random students, regardless of who has their hand raised, it's even more impactful than taking raised hands, because it communicates the expectation that everyone should be paying attention and that everybody's viewpoint is worth listening to. As in "pause-and-think-aloud," "pause-and-ask" requires the teacher to preview a video and then simply plan out what questions to ask and when to ask them. The questions can put the cognitive "heavy lifting" on the students by asking them to paraphrase. Students can voice their opinions on an idea within a video. The teacher can facilitate a super-quick review of an earlier concept by asking students to compare/contrast ideas from an earlier class. As the teacher plans the questions, they should keep in mind the daily objective as well as the unit objectives. "Pause-and-ask" has the effect of turning a one-way informational stream (the video) into a two-way

conversation; it injects activity and energy into the passive process of video watching and therefore is a way to better engage students.

In some classrooms, it might be most helpful to have students practice note-taking skills during viewing of a video. The teacher might design a graphic organizer for the students, provide a set of guided viewing questions to be answered during the video, or have them jot down bullet-points on a sheet of notebook paper. Depending on the teacher's instructional style and the routine academic expectations set forth by the school or the classroom, the teacher can choose for themselves which engagement method is best suited for each particular situation.

The same techniques described above can be used to activate students' attention during reading assignments. During reading, the teacher can pause and ask students questions or paraphrase important ideas. Planning for this type of format is fairly simple and does not take too much time beyond pre-reading the article and deciding where to pause and what to do during those pauses. Additionally, the teacher can involve students kinesthetically by asking them to complete notes, guided reading questions, or a graphic organizer as they read. If students need to develop their skills at annotating texts through highlighting, underlining, and making notes in the margins, the teacher can implement that requirement instead.

In order to assess understanding of any text (whether it be a news article, a short story, a video, or a still image) teachers often assign writing prompts to students as an assessment strategy. The task of completing a so-called "constructed response" writing prompt also has the added benefit of preparing students for high-stakes standardized tests such as the PSSAs, the forthcoming Keystones, and the SAT. Students should learn and use the strategy of "Say it, Support it, Explain it" to respond to these writing prompts. When given a prompt or question, they should begin their response by saying what their answer is, then supporting it with evidence from the text, and finally explaining why their supporting details effectively address the question as well as providing any other relevant details.

TAG is another strategy that many teachers use when instructing students on how to answer Constructed Response questions. When using the TAG technique, students first turn the question into a sentence stem, then answer the question, then give the correct number of examples. I find this approach helpful when students struggle with answering questions in complete sentences, but when using TAG, I've noticed that students often forget to explain why their textual examples are relevant to the question at hand.

Each year, I ask my students what kinds of activities they prefer, and students invariably request to participate in formal debates. For this reason I have included a debate as part of the classroom activities portion of the unit. The debate format allows students to work both collaboratively and competitively. Using the team structure, the

teacher divides students into two large groups and provides groups with a list of questions or topics to be addressed by the debate. Each group is assigned one side of an issue and they must work together to formulate their side of the debate using supporting evidence. During the actual debate, then, each group chooses a representative debater to articulate their stance and defend it using appropriate evidence. Groups can also choose to attack their opponents' anticipated arguments as a debate strategy. In order to evaluate which team won the debate, the teacher can pull students out of both groups to act as impartial judges. Using a highly structured debate format allows students the opportunity to prepare remarks that will be fully heard out by the class; in other words, students know that they won't be interrupted or talked over during the debate. Additionally, students learn a great deal through the process of being assigned to argue views they might not necessarily agree with personally.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One: Identifying Stereotypes (One class period)

The goal of this classroom activity is to encourage students to think critically about the way the media represents and engages with the issue of race (and, tangentially, social class), particularly regarding responses of media and government to the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina.

We will begin by viewing a short video clip of a *Saturday Night Live* skit poking fun at the way the sports media spoke about basketball player Jeremy Lin in comparison to the industry's lack of tolerance for stereotypes concerning African American athletes. Through a parody and satire, the SNL skit merely exaggerates what's already happening, and in so doing opens up a dialogue about how sportscasters are perfectly willing to describe Lin's spectacular skills couched in racist stereotypes (such as "wax-on/wax-off," a phrase taken from the 1980s movie *Karate Kid*) while at the same time becoming offended when a white sportscaster references the racial stereotype that African Americans are always late.

After viewing and discussing the double standard ridiculed in the SNL video clip, students may become aware of stereotypes they have encountered in their own lives. The teacher might want to engage students in a brief discussion in which students can compare past experiences. In a classroom with any sort of diversity (such as mine, where students come from a variety of racial, religious, cultural, and economic backgrounds) this discussion will likely be quite illuminating as students begin to learn from each other's experiences. The teacher should make sure that the discussion remains respectful and constructive.

Next, the teacher should introduce and define some terms: stereotype, bias, race, prejudice, bigotry, and racism. It's important that students understand that race is a social

construct and racism is a structural issue, while prejudice and bigotry are individual attitudes. Oftentimes, they can be easily mixed up, conflated, or misapplied. Internalizing these definitions at the start of the unit will definitely improve the quality of the discussions students have with each other—inside and outside the classroom—about race. Students should be mindful of how they use these critical terms throughout the unit, as it's important to differentiate between structural/societal and individual attitudes when it comes to race.

Some students might be too young to remember the larger social and political issues the U.S. government's actions raised in the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina. If this is the case, the teacher should absolutely take a few minutes to review some basic facts. Hurricane Katrina arrived at the end of August 2005 on the Gulf Coast and predominantly affected the New Orleans area. According to the Discovery Channel, it was the largest and strongest hurricane in recorded history to make landfall in the U.S. and it killed over 1,800 people, mostly in Louisiana (Discovery Channel). Due to flaws in the levee system along the coast, storm waters breached the levees and this caused massive flooding in lower-lying areas of New Orleans such as the impoverished Lower Ninth Ward (Discovery Channel). Though about 1 million residents were able to escape, the 150,000 left behind were predominantly poor and black (Cyril 2005). A September 2005 article points out that the news coverage of Katrina was "saturated with descriptions of blacks chest-deep in water 'looting' food, while referring to whites in virtually the same circumstances as survivors 'finding' food" (Cyril). The rest of the class discussion will then focus on these images as well as some questions relating to the role of government in the lives of the American people.

Students should then view a comparison of the "Looting vs. Finding" graphic, focusing on their captions. Widely circulated as an example of the media's unspoken racism, this juxtaposition shows white people "finding" and black people "looting," however, the individuals portrayed in the two different photographs are essentially doing the same thing. The teacher can then facilitate a class discussion on what could have prompted these two different descriptions, and why so many people interpreted it as racist. Might there be something we don't know about the actions of the "looters" in the video in comparison to the actions of the "finders," something that wasn't captured in the picture? Is that important? Why or why not?

Next, the class should proceed to a discussion about the disparate impact of Hurricane Katrina on the poor African-American community of New Orleans. The teacher may choose to have students read the article published on MSNBC.com and identify the main ideas within; a summary follows here. In late 2005, survivors stated, in a Congressional session, that the government's failure to rescue so many black and poor citizens of the New Orleans area was an instance of racism and a lack of value placed on the lives of poor black people (Sanders 2005). There were rumors of bombings of levees; in other words, many believe in what others would call a "conspiracy theory": that the

government deliberately caused the levees to fail so that they could dispose of the poor black community (Sanders 2005). A few other survivors who testified before Congress in 2005 did speculate that the hardships faced by poor people were a result of poor government planning (Sanders 2005). With so much conflicting information about what really happened and when, it is difficult to place blame on any one entity. Students should be able to discuss which reasons seem plausible and what kind of further information would need to be gathered to identify true causes.

At any rate, the fact remains that when there is a large-scale disaster those with the fewest resources are usually the hardest hit. Without the means to get themselves out of New Orleans, many people were left to depend on the local or federal government to help them out. When this didn't happen—for whatever reason—they languished on rooftops and in attics. The next step of the lesson should be for students to evaluate the larger question of what role government should play in aiding citizens with no means to help themselves. Is the government obligated to help everybody? Why or why not? What kind of resources should the government provide to people who cannot help themselves due to their low-income status? Or are people responsible for themselves, regardless of their resources? If people are without means, is it their fault? Is the government responsible for making sure that people have access to jobs? These and other questions will surely be raised through the discussion. The teacher can facilitate a full-class discussion or have students discuss among themselves (in groups of 3-5 students) before sharing their ideas with the other groups.

At the end of the class period, students should spend approximately five minutes writing down their independent thoughts. If assigning a constructed response writing assignment to students, the teacher might want to word the prompt in the following way: Does the media's different portrayals of white and black Hurricane Katrina victims support or debunk the idea that people, and not government, are responsible for taking care of themselves? Students should be directed to explain their views thoroughly using appropriate evidence and paragraph development techniques.

Lesson Two: Rodney King (One class period)

The aftermath of what is known as the "Rodney King Verdict" and the media's coverage of the subsequent L.A. Riots is another interesting example of race issues in America. By evaluating implicit and explicit racism, students will cement their knowledge of the terms introduced previously and will begin to effectively analyze and discuss the way race is portrayed in the media. Students will show their mastery of these terms by responding to a writing prompt or participating in a short debate after synthesizing information from a variety of journalistic sources.

The class should begin with a review of the terms and concepts discussed in the previous class: stereotype, bias, race, prejudice, and bigotry. As the previous lesson's

content might have sparked further independent thinking on the part of the students, it would also be beneficial to ask students if they had any remaining thoughts or opinions on the government's and media's response to Hurricane Katrina. A brief discussion on the prior class will prepare students for the new content to be introduced in today's lesson on the Rodney King Verdict and the L.A. Riots of 1992.

The teacher can have students read the *New York Times* obituary of Rodney King, written by Jennifer Medina and published on June 18, 2012, which presents the basic facts on the occurrence and relates King's own reactions on how his ordeal contributed to the advancement of race relations in America. A summary of the events follows. In 1991, Rodney King was on parole after spending time in jail on robbery charges, and he was pulled over by the Los Angeles police after being observed driving over 100 miles per hour. King was worried that he would get arrested as violating parole, so he tried to run away. When the police caught up to him, they beat him severely with fists and batons, and he was also evidently Tasered. As it happened, a neighbor caught the beating on videotape and it ended up on the news. Accusations of police brutality were made, and many minority citizens spoke up about brutal treatment they had undergone at the hands of police departments in many American cities, but particularly in Los Angeles. The four officers involved in the beating were brought to trial in 1992, but none was convicted. The *New York Times* article notes that there were no black jurors involved in the trial, evidence of possible racial bias.

What happened after the verdict was announced is now known as the "L.A. Riots." According to the *New York Times* article, these riots were "among the worst in the nation's history" (Medina 2012). According to the History Channel's account of the riots, traffic was stopped and people were dragged out of their cars and beaten. The riots primarily occurred in South Central Los Angeles, which was then a predominantly African-American neighborhood. Due to the slow response from the LAPD, the National Guard reported to the area in an attempt to pacify the neighborhood, but at that point many buildings had already been burned and businesses destroyed. The History Channel has some statistics on the aftermath: "The three days of disorder killed 55 people, injured almost 2,000, led to 7,000 arrests, and caused nearly $1 billion in property damage, including the burnings of nearly 4,000 buildings" (History Channel). The police officers ultimately went to prison about a year after the riots, having been charged with violating King's constitutional rights. Rodney King, who was widely quoted as asking "Can we all get along?" as the riots were occurring, won a sizable amount of money in damages, and then went on to lead a troubled adult life, culminating with his death in 2012 at age 47 (Medina 2012).

After presenting the above information to students, the teacher should have students discuss whether the Rodney King beating, the trial, the verdict, and the riots changed anything about how people of different races interact. Are black people still treated unfairly by the police? By whites? Additionally, what was the media's role in spreading

the news (which the black community had already known) that the police routinely brutalized black people? Did the media contribute to public outrage in a constructive or destructive way? Chris Gentilviso's article published just after King's death, from *The Huffington Post*, provides a helpful framework for the discussion as it includes quotes from a variety of journalists relating to how things have changed in the 20 years since the riots. Students can engage with the article through discussion as they bring their own experiences into the discourse. Philadelphia classrooms should take note of the article's mention of police brutality in Philadelphia, where charges were brought by an attorney interviewed in the article.

As a culminating lesson activity designed to assess learning, there are two options. The teacher can facilitate a short debate centering on whether race relations have changed since the Rodney King verdict and the L.A. Riots. A secondary debate question can ask students to evaluate the impact of the media on the events in Los Angeles. Alternately, the teacher can assign a short writing prompt that asks students this same question ("Have race relations changed since 1992? What role did the media play in the riots?"), requiring students to provide evidence from personal experience as well as facts garnered through reading the articles in this lesson. As always, students should be mindful of paragraph organization as they write.

For a more sophisticated analysis of the lesson's content, students could also be asked to suggest ways that race relations can be improved in our society: in other words, how might they raise awareness and change perceptions about race? And what might the government do to promote policies that foster greater interracial understanding and communication, and less compartmentalization between different racial groups? This question, too, can be addressed as part of the writing prompt.

Lesson Three: Gene Marks' "If I Were a Poor Black Kid" (Two-three class periods)

The article "If I Were a Poor Black Kid," published on Forbes.com in late 2011, was the original impetus for this curriculum unit. The overall objective of this classroom activity is for students to identify and evaluate Marks's ideas in terms of what they reveal about his negative perceptions of inner city black youth. Attaining this objective will require multiple steps, and this activity will certainly span more than one class period. Students will begin with a practice of their nonfiction reading strategies. They will read the article and be able to identify author's purpose, main ideas, supporting details, bias and assumptions, and rhetorical strategies. The discussion of racial and class-based assumptions may require some degree of familiarity with Ruby Payne's foundational work on social class and poverty vs. middle class "habits of mind." Students will then engage with a response to the article, written by Science Leadership Academy student Rashaun Williams (who graduated in 2012) and write their own responses to the article. This series of activities may comprise two to three class periods, depending on how the tasks are divided and how lively the class discussion is.

The lesson should begin with students discussing the provocative title of the article: what kind of information might this article contain? Who might be the writer and who might be their audience? After generating some hypotheses about the article, the teacher should read the first 2-3 paragraphs aloud, pausing to "think-aloud" during the reading. The modeling strategy of "thinking aloud" will enable the teacher to draw attention to the focus of today's objective, which is to identify main ideas and biases (implicit and explicit) in the article. Students should be provided with printouts of the article so that they can create annotations and record their own responses in the margins. Gradually, throughout the process of reading the article, the teacher can transition from reading and thinking aloud, to having students read aloud and think aloud, and finally to silent reading and reflection. The pace at which this transition happens is wholly dependent on the needs and strengths of the students in the classroom. At any rate, as they finish the article, students should be able to identify the main ideas and describe some of the biases found, if not all.

Following is a summarization of the main ideas in the article "If I Were a Poor Black Kid." Though neither poor nor black, Gene Marks has some advice for what "poor black kids" should do in order to set themselves up for success in the world beyond school. The article articulates the highly optimistic idea that anybody can be successful, no matter where they come from, as long as they work hard and make good use of resources. Marks points out several resources—usually ones that require access to technology and the Internet—that can be utilized on the cheap, or completely free, by "poor black kids." Regardless of what your home life is, Marks argues, you can scrape together some money for a computer and Internet access, and once you have those tools set up you can use free services (such as Google Books and Google Scholar) to help add to what you're learning in school. And speaking of school, if Marks were a "poor black kid" he would learn independently, even if he went to a failing school. He would find other kids who were interested in learning and work with them on Skype outside school hours. And he would make sure he made himself marketable to private schools, which are interested in adding diversity to their student bodies and would want to give the kid a scholarship. Marks would read as much as possible if he were a "poor black kid" and develop good work habits. Marks admits that there are severe obstacles that result from poverty and economic instability, but Marks believes that these obstacles can be overcome by anyone who is willing to overcome them.

Reading this article aloud was enough for my students to generate plenty of their own opinions in response to Marks's ideas, and I didn't have to do much work as a teacher prompting them to identify where Marks makes unfair assumptions and places the blame on "poor black kids" for their low position on the social hierarchy. So after identifying the main points of Marks's article, it's important to delve into the biases within Marks's argument: the ones Marks states himself (such as his lack of familiarity with what it's

like to be poor and black) and the ones Marks doesn't state and is perhaps unconscious of holding.

What follows is a list of guiding questions that can be used if students have difficulty identifying the biases in the article and the effects of these biases. For example, what does Gene Marks tell us about what he knows and doesn't know about poor and black communities? Does he mention having any direct contact with minorities or low-income communities? What types of resources is he assuming even the most impoverished Americans have, or have access to? What is incorrect about his assumptions, and how does this make his argument fall apart? For example, Marks implies that kids (specifically "poor black kids" in Philadelphia) should make good use of computers at public libraries. When he says this, it shows that he is out of touch regarding the state of libraries in Philadelphia (as well as the computers at those libraries.) My students were quick to point out, in our initial discussion of the article, how many library branches have recently closed or cut back on their hours due to budget cuts. They also mentioned something I hadn't paid attention to the last time I went to my local library branch: the sorry state of most library computers.

Within this one example, there are several assumptions made as well as many barriers the author might not know. Assuming computers are available and working, which (according to my students) is a risky assumption to make, library policies state that you must have a library card to sign up for a computer. At times, library cards have been distributed at schools, but if that isn't the case, a parent (and some paperwork proving custody and residence) is required to obtain a card. If a parent is unable to provide the acceptable papers and/or can't make it to the library branch during its limited open hours, the kid won't be able to access the library's rich print and online resources. Gene Marks, in his article, is unaware of all of these difficulties.

For an introduction to the study of rhetoric, students should reread to re-examine the article in terms of its rhetorical strategies. Rhetoric is often defined as the process of using different types of language strategies to persuade, and there are three different types of rhetorical appeals whose definitions date back to Aristotle. Ethos is persuasion via the credibility of the speaker or writer; pathos is when a writer or speaker uses emotion to sway his or her audience; and logos is the process of using logic, facts, or statistics to back up an argument. At some point in the discussion of Gene Marks's article, the teacher should have the class identify where the author uses pathos and logos; they should also evaluate the quality of Marks's ethos, or credibility, as a speaker on the obstacles faced by "poor black kids."

To cement this knowledge, students should go back through the article, rereading to identify and label examples of the three rhetorical appeals. Struggling students may benefit from being arranged in groups of three, where each student takes ownership of one of the appeals and presents their findings to the other two. Alternately, students may

be able to look through the article for examples of all three appeals. Either way, the rhetorical appeals are considered prior knowledge in many "Freshman English" college classrooms, making it a worthwhile endeavor for inclusion in a high school curriculum unit.

Next, students should read and evaluate Rashaun Williams's blog post from SLA Principal Chris Lehmann's blog, "Practical Theory." Williams skillfully articulates some of the flaws in Marks's argument; although I came across many well-structured critiques of "If I Were a Poor Black Kid," I chose to use this particular text because it was written by one of my students' peers (a fellow public school student in Philadelphia who can speak to the difficulties of being poor and black in 21st-century America.) Students should read the article—the teacher may want to provide some definitions for the challenging vocabulary Williams employs—and identify its main points. What disagreements does Williams have with Marks? Does he find any merit to Marks's article? Are there any points of contention that Williams failed to address? Which of Marks's ideas might students focus on if they were the ones writing a response?

This last question—which ideas of Marks's might students focus on if they were the ones writing a response—provides a transition into the last portion of the activity. Students will complete the activity cycle by composing their own responses to Gene Marks's article "If I Were a Poor Black Kid." Depending on the needs and strengths of the students, the teacher can assign a specific length (a certain number of pages, paragraphs, or words) or require that students address a given number of main points in their response. The teacher can also design the assignment so that it asks students to evaluate the rhetoric in the article (this would be more appropriate for advanced and above-grade-level students). If there was one particular point or idea that got students particularly excited or engaged, the teacher can design the written response around that idea. At any rate, after having read, discussed, and annotated "If I Were a Poor Black Kid," and examining a well-crafted response, it is appropriate to assess their independent views via this writing assignment.

Lesson Four: Trayvon Martin (Two class periods)

The February 2012 killing of an unarmed Florida teenager, Trayvon Martin, by a mixed-race neighborhood watch member, shows us that racial issues are extremely complex and that decades after the civil rights movement, racism still exists in America, both in Americans' attitudes and institutional perceptions. Two class periods will be dedicated to exploring this news story, culminating in an informal debate. The first class period will be spent exploring the facts of the case and parsing out the racial issues raised in the news coverage and discourse. The second class period will be spent preparing an informal debate centered on addressing some discussion questions. By participating in this debate, students will be able to apply and use the knowledge they have gained over the course of the unit.

A great deal of media focus has centered on debating the merits of evidence that George Zimmerman, the shooter, engaged in a fight with Trayvon Martin shortly before Zimmerman shot him. Many politicians and news commentators have debated the merits of Florida's "Stand Your Ground" Law, which evidently permits citizens to shoot people in self-defense. Additional media attention has been given to whether Zimmerman has been illegally concealing financial resources. Although there were initially several conversations happening about the racial issues raised by Zimmerman's classification of Trayvon Martin as "suspicious" (seemingly because he was a black male wearing a hooded sweatshirt), these issues have not dominated the conversation for some time and seem to have fallen by the wayside.

At the time of writing this unit, the Trayvon Martin case has not yet gone to trial and each day, new information is coming to light regarding the incidents that transpired the night of the shooting. Therefore, it is difficult to write a lesson plan concerning an event that still seems to be fully in progress. What follows is a brief outline of some discussion and research questions that form the starting point of a lesson. As teachers prepare to implement this unit in their classrooms, they should do some further research to flesh out the body of the lesson.

Students should begin by evaluating media coverage of the Trayvon Martin case, focusing particularly on the period in March 2012 when the story broke. If necessary, they can review the article "The Trayvon Martin Case: a Timeline" from *The Week*, which is comprised of a list of significant developments in the case and the dates on which they occurred. Should it become necessary to complete any further reading, most of the timeline entries contain links to other news stories in *The Week* detailing the various events as they unfolded. Through reading the timeline, one can get a sense of the many twists and turns this story contained and still contains. As students evaluate the events, they should look for instances of racism (on an institutional level, such as perpetrated by the media) and bigotry (individual attitudes involving prejudging individuals due to their race.)

In terms of evaluating the racial politics of the shooting, there are several possible focus points. We can look at the way race played into George Zimmerman's actions: in other words, was he doing a sort of "racial profiling" when he called 911 and described Trayvon Martin as "suspicious"? We can also look at the way the media portrayed Zimmerman and Martin in terms of their respective races. Another angle from which we can read race into the case is to assess whether reporters showed racial prejudice in the way they initially described Martin: a more provocative version of this question could involve discussing whether journalists chose their words carefully in order to *avoid* accusations of racism or bigotry. In order to assess learning and ensure that students have the appropriate amount of background knowledge to discuss the case in detail, the teacher

should have the students either write a summary or respond to one of the focus questions listed in this paragraph.

Debate questions:
Does it matter that Zimmerman is half-Hispanic?
Is Zimmerman just a victim of negative stereotyping in the media?
What does our society need to do differently to address negative stereotypes of black male teenagers?

Annotated Bibliography and Resources

Breitkopf, Emily. "Race 101 for Media Literacy." Race 101 for Media Literacy. The Lamp NYC (Learning About Multimedia Project), 22 Feb. 2012. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <http://www.thelampnyc.org/2012/02/22/race-101-for-media-literacy/>.

This article is a concise primer on how to talk about racism in the media; the author includes some helpful definitions as well as examples. The article contains a link to the *Saturday Night Live* video on Jeremy Lin and racial stereotypes, which was used in the first classroom activity of the unit.

Cyril, Malkia A. "Racism or Relief?" *AlterNet.org*. AlterNet, 8 Sept. 2005. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <http://www.alternet.org/katrina/25181/>.

Published in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this brief article details some allegations of institutional racism and media racism in terms of the government's response—or lack thereof—to citizens trapped in New Orleans by the Katrina flooding.

Discovery Channel. "Surviving Katrina: Facts About Katrina." *Discovery Channel*. Discovery Channel, Inc., n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/katrina/facts/facts.html>.

There is some overlap between this article and the others about Katrina, but in this article I found important statistics about the death toll and other statistics about the storm and the aftermath.

Gentilviso, Chris. "Rodney King Death: 'Can We All Get Along?' Plea Measures His Lasting Meaning." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 17 June 2012. Web. 18 June 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/17/rodney-king-death-can-we-all-get-along_n_1604450.html>.

Written just after the death of Rodney King, this article contains comments from several prominent figures in the contemporary civil rights movement about the lasting impact of Rodney King's police brutality suit and the subsequent LA Riots of 1992. It forms the basis for the debate in the second classroom activity.

History Channel. "This Day in History: Riots Erupt in Los Angeles." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 12 May 2012. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/riots-erupt-in-los-angeles>.

For background on the 1992 LA Riots and some facts about the damage they caused, as well as some information about the Rodney King verdict and the subsequent federal trial of the police involved in his 1991 beating, this article was quite helpful.

Looting vs. Finding. Digital image. *Sad Like a River*. Jean Trumbo, 8 Sept. 2005. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <http://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/6536/753/1600/lootfind.jpg>.

This is an image of two juxtaposed pictures and their captions (written by the Associated Press.) Widely circulated in the aftermath of Katrina, in the midst of allegations of media racism, the two images show white people and black people doing essentially the same thing; however, the black people are described as "looting" whereas the white people are merely "finding" supplies. The original source of the image is unknown; the link here is the most high quality I was able to find.

Marks, Gene. "If I Were A Poor Black Kid." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 12 Dec. 2011. Web. 28 Feb. 2012. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/quickerbettertech/2011/12/12/if-i-was-a-poor-black-kid/>.

This article forms the centerpiece of the unit and was, in fact, the unit's original impetus. Gene Marks is a Philadelphia-area columnist writing for *Forbes*, and in this article he gives some advice for "poor black kids" on what they can do to build skills that will lead them towards success in the 21st century information economy. The article garnered a great deal of controversy in the media and is sure to stimulate classroom discussions.

Medina, Jennifer. "Rodney King Dead at 47." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 June 2012. Web. 18 June 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/us/rodney-king-whose-beating-led-to-la-riots-dead-at-47.html>.

Providing coverage on Rodney King's death, this article also details the events surrounding his capture by police and beating, as well as the outbreak of the riots and King's subsequent personal problems.

Mitchell, Amy, and Tom Rosenstiel. "Overview: State of the Media." The State of the News Media 2012. Pew Research Center, 19 Mar. 2012. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <http://stateofthemedia.org/2012/overview-4/>.

This article, part of a Pew Research study on media consumption, provided some helpful statistics and background facts that make the case for teaching media literacy in the classroom.

Pew Research Center, Project for Excellence in Journalism. "The State of the News Media 2012." *The State of the News Media 2012*. Pew Research Center, 19 Mar. 2012. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <http://stateofthemedia.org/?src=prc-headline>.

This site provided some statistics about where Americans obtain their news; surprisingly, Americans today consume more news than ever before, even though the newspaper industry is in decline.

Sanders, Kerry, and Associated Press. "Katrina Victims Blame Racism for Slow Aid." *Msnbc.com*. Msnbc Digital Network, 06 Dec. 2005. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10354221/ns/us_news-katrina_the_long_road_back/t/katrina-victims-blame-racism-slow-aid/>.

This MSNBC article details Congressional hearings on varying perspectives on the government's response to victims of Hurricane Katrina. It briefly describes the bombing conspiracy theory as well as conditions in New Orleans and at some of the rescue camps. Overall, it presents the idea that perhaps institutional racism was to blame for the slow response of government officials to the flooding.

Santos, Fernanda. "A Trial Run for School Standards That Encourage Deeper Thought." *NYTimes.com*. New York Times, 24 Apr. 2011. Web. 28 Feb. 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/25/nyregion/100-new-york-schools-try-common-core-approach.html>.

This article provides some background on the forthcoming Common Core Standards, which Pennsylvania schools are supposed to adopt in the 2012-2013 academic year. It provides a rationale for reading more nonfiction than fiction in the high school English classroom and suggests some strategies teachers can use to make the shift from predominantly fiction.

The Week. "The Trayvon Martin Case: A Timeline." *The Week*. The Week, 13 June 2012. Web. 19 June 2012. <http://theweek.com/article/index/226211/the-trayvon-martin-case-a-timeline>.

This article, recently updated (at the time of writing this unit) is composed of a timeline of major events related to the case, in the order that they happened. It’s extremely helpful for understanding the events of the case. For further reading, please refer to the many links in the article.

Williams, Rashaun. "Guest Post - Response to "If I Were a Poor Black Child" [sic]" *Practical Theory*. Chris Lehmann, 10 Jan. 2012. Web. 28 Feb. 2012. <http://practicaltheory.org/serendipity/index.php?/archives/1328-Guest-Post-Response-to-If-I-Were-a-Poor-Black-Child.html>.

This response to “If I Were a Poor Black Kid” was written by Rashaun Williams, a student at Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, a magnet public school for the sciences. It provides an exemplar model for students as they plan to write their responses to the Gene Marks article in the third classroom activity.

Appendix A: Standards

The following Pennsylvania State Standards are addressed in this unit.

1.1.9.A: Apply appropriate comprehension strategies to interpret and evaluate an author's implied or stated purpose using grade level text.

1.6.9.A: Listen critically and respond to others in small and large group situations; respond with grade level appropriate questions, ideas, information, and opinions.

1.4.9.B: Write complex informational pieces (e.g. reviews, research papers, instructions, essays, articles.)