

Making Space for Dialogue:

Practical Implementation of Critical Pedagogy in the Secondary ELA Classroom

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English Language Arts (ELA) educators widely agree on common goals like stimulating critical thinking, promoting empathy, developing informed citizenry, and encouraging social action through dialogue, aligning with Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy. However, translating these theoretical aspirations into daily classroom practice can be particularly difficult to implement in today's teaching contexts given the ever-encroaching nature of technology-centered learning environments. Time, resources, and a noticeable decline in students' comfort with interpersonal communication seem to present an ever-changing and increasingly-complex environment for prioritizing the very human-centered goal of teaching our students to prepare for a future as collaborative problem-solvers. While dialogue is widely acknowledged to be essential to critical pedagogy as a way to address these challenges from a humanistic, empathetic perspective, many classrooms struggle to move beyond "surface-level talk" to truly foster critically informed empathy, the internalization of significant ideas, and application of new knowledge to student's lives—all of which constitute concrete, accessible, and manageable strategies for integrating authentic, constructive dialogue into constrained secondary ELA curricula. This presents a very real challenge for classroom teachers. This paper addresses this gap by presenting a practical, adaptable solution that bridges the divide between pedagogical intent and classroom reality: the Socratic-informed Fishbowl Discussion activity. This ELA-adapted framework provides guidance on how to prioritize and scaffold critically-informed dialogue and encourage student reflection and reflexivity during curricular discussions. Ultimately, by providing a structure for authentic, ethical, critical conversation within the curricula, this paper provides a solution for empowering ELA students to become active collaborators on and agents of their educational journeys.

Keywords:

Critical pedagogy, dialogue, curriculum, ELA, Socratic discussion, English writing instruction, secondary education