



Today's slides  
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# *Canon Meets Counter-Narrative*

The Power of Pairing Traditional and Contemporary Voices





# This Session

As educational policies and oversight evolve, counter-narratives are increasingly under scrutiny, especially in some communities. One way to foster critical thinking and inclusivity while navigating these challenges is by pairing controversial topics with canon texts. This session explores the ERWC unit pairing of *Othello* with "Gender, Language, and Culture" and strives to demonstrate how traditional, classic literature can serve as a bridge to new perspectives. By framing complex social issues within widely accepted texts, students engage with counter-narratives in a way that feels accessible and relevant. This approach empowers students with the language and tools to analyze challenging themes thoughtfully, encouraging open-minded discussion and deeper understanding.

We will share our journey in planning and adapting both units.



# Who We Are



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(she/her)

Community College & Independent  
Study Teacher, Doctoral Candidate,  
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**Grace Adcock, M.A.Ed**  
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Classroom Teacher, Reading  
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# Today's Agenda

- 01** Our Situation
- 02** Approaching a Solution
- 03** Communication
- 04** Adapting Units
- 05** Final Thoughts

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01

# Our Situation





# Our Situation

## Demographics

- 93,502 population (2024)
- 52% Republican
- 21% Democrat
- 18% no preference
- 9% Other
- 78.2% white
- 26% Bachelor Degree
- 92% High School Graduate
- Median household income \$69,443
- 13% in poverty
- Known for natural scenery, outdoor activities, trails, recreation
- Largest employers: Bethel Church, Dignity Health, Blue Shield (medical), Win-River Casino, County/government offices, Forest Service
- Carr Fire





# Our Situation

## Background & Objections

**1st attempt:** Taught “Language, Gender, and Culture” during COVID and post-2020 election. It was a very charged time. In response, we watered down material significantly to avoid pushback.

**2nd attempt:** Followed an issue with a teacher’s ‘supplemental’ materials choices that created backlash and heated board meetings, the resolution was a new policy *that if a teacher wants to use some form of supplemental material as part of a lesson (a video, article, song, etc.) that includes violence, nudity or profanity, parents will be given the opportunity to review the materials and students will need parent permission to participate.* There were no parameters for what constituted violence, nudity, or profanity and the board and public had varying definitions.





# Our Situation

## The Challenge

The issue was teaching a controversial unit that may not have been widely accepted by parents and/or the community at the time, but understanding the importance of students experiencing counter-narratives.

**How can we teach it responsibly, intentionally, and in a way that bridges what is widely accepted with what might not be?**



02

# Approaching a Solution





# Approaching a Solution

Insights, thoughts, and possible options

**Our essential question became:** how could we get students talking about ideas, their own identities and their own development without crossing lines, making waves, etc?

**We discussed our options:**

1. Avoid the topics all together?
2. Do it anyway and take what comes?
3. Create a bridge to link ideas?

**We decided:** A bridge from what we know and have experienced to what we don't know and could possibly never experience.





# Approaching a Solution

Insights, thoughts, and possible options

**Our Justification:** We understood it is important to use counter-narratives in a way that builds human connection and understanding while avoiding a token or cliché interaction and presentation. Building empathy is imperative and worth the risk.

**However:** It can be easy to fall into the trap of using counter-narratives simply to check a box or because it seems like the ‘right’ thing to do. It can also become a powder keg.

**How Do We Do It?** By using counter-narratives alongside canon texts we can build human connections by deepening understanding of human experiences outside of our own. Who opposes Shakespeare? It is an accepted norm of curriculum selection.



03

# Communication





# Communication

1. Pre-Inform Parents (Syllabus with unit materials listed, signed)
2. Intentionally focus on language first in the “Language, Gender, & Culture” module as well as *Othello*
3. As issues arose (they did, this wasn’t ‘perfect’) admin was notified and situations were dealt with individually
4. Normalized these conversations; didn’t sent out ‘trigger warnings’ or notifications to parents



04

# Adapting Units





# Adapting Activities

We provided definitions for students to make sure we were all on the same page and there was no ambiguity. These are the definitions for the purpose of this unit and *Othello*.

## Essential Vocabulary

**Language (n):** The principal method of human communication, consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing, or gesture.

**Gender:** refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

**Gender Roles:** what is expected of a person as a male/boy, or a girl/woman. The behavior and characteristics expected of a person based on their gender in their culture.

**Culture (n):** the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. also : the characteristic features of everyday existence (a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.





# Adapting Activities

We linked the ideas to our previous unit, “Juvenile Justice,” to build a connection and understanding of how this might look in regards to something they know and understand.

## Pre-Viewing Question:

Think back to the Lionel Tate case. How, if at all, might his treatment have been different if he was a different gender? A different culture/race? If he had been called a 12 year old child rather than a young man? What difference might any of that have made?





# Adapting Activities

Keeping it linked to a familiar topic, we chose to show a film to provide further access to the ideas and apply them to a real life situation. It was laying foundations building on prior learning.

## During Viewing Questions: *Murder to Mercy:*

### *The Cyntoia Brown Story*

1. Record the words/descriptions (adjectives/characteristics) used in regards to each of the following people in the documentary.
2. What is the cultural background of Ms. Brown? Consider family history, family traditions, area where she was raised and traditional beliefs, supports and expectations of/for Ms. Brown.
3. How has race played a role in Cyntoia Brown's trial, sentencing and treatment? How might her experience have been different if her race was different, if at all?
4. What role did gender play in this case? How was each person's gender role (see vocabulary) portrayed and used in the trial?





# Adapting Activities

No changes were made to the activities in the module. Activities were selected and presented as we would do for any ERWC unit. The one adaptation made was in the culminating assignment: students were asked to speak as an expert from their own experience in high school. This narrowed the focus to prevent tangling with community politics, relying on underdeveloped personal beliefs, and other static that might have taken away from the task and intended understanding.

## SUMMATIVE ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS:

CREATE AN INSPIRATIONAL PRESENTATION TO MOTIVATE CHANGE FOR AN AUDIENCE OF FRESHMEN, SOPHOMORES, AND JUNIORS.

**Step 1: Reflection** - What experiences have you had with oppression in regard to your gender, culture, or identity OR what have you observed? Use this slide to establish your credibility on this topic for your audience.

**Complete slide #3**

**Step 2: Give Some Context** - Answer the question, "How does language influence gender & culture?" to explain to your audience why you're talking about this in the first place.

**Complete slide #4**

**Step 3: Take a Stand** - Choose an issue of gender, culture, or identity that you want to take a stand about. This can be something you have experienced or something you just don't agree with. Just be sure your topic (gender, culture, or identity), your specific issue (i.e. the gender stereotype that "men shouldn't cry"), and your position on the issue (i.e. telling males that they're better off emotionless is harmful) are clear.

**Complete slides #6-10**

**Step 4: Call to Action** - Leave your audience with a call to action. What do you want your audience to do/say/think after hearing your argument(s)?

**Complete slide #12**

**Step 5: Embrace Other Perspective** - Choose one of the articles from this unit to encourage your audience to read in order to get further information.

**Complete slide #14**

**Step 6: Finishing Touches** - Add some finishing touches and inspirational flare to your presentation.

**Complete slides #1, 5, and 13**





# Adapting Activities

12/3



## *Rhetorical Situation*

*Act 1, Scene 3, lines 197-261*



**Instructions:** Review the specific part of the text (linked at left) & complete the chart.

Speaker	Audience	Purpose	Occasion
Who is the <b>speaker</b> ? The person actually talking, not the author.	Who is the <b>audience</b> ? The person the message is intended to reach. How does the audience feel about the speaker?	What is the speaker trying to accomplish ( <b>purpose</b> )? What do they hope to achieve or do?	What is the <b>occasion</b> for this conversation? Where/when are they & what is going on now/has gone on to lead to this moment?
Desdemona			
<b>Rhetorical Strategies used by speaker</b> ( <i>ideas</i> )			
Brabantio			
<b>Rhetorical Strategies used by speaker</b>			
The Duke			
<b>Rhetorical Strategies used by speaker</b>			

This is our example of the original activities provided in the unit. The focus prepared student for the culminating assignment.



# Adapting Activities

4/9



## Language, Gender & Race:



**Instructions:** Follow along in class as we review one excerpt from A4 and explain how language in the play is used to reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, reflecting the societal attitudes of Shakespeare's time. Then complete the one assigned to you. Be prepared to share in a give one, get one activity.

Language (lines)	Speaker & Audience	Situation (occasion/purpose)	Gender Implications	Race Implications
A4, S1, L18-21: She is a protectress of her honor too./May she give that?/Her Honor is an essence that's not seen;/they have it very oft that have it not.	S: Othello A: Iago	Othello and Iago are talking about Desdemona and what she is allowed to share.  Iago has pushed Othello to question Desdemona's virtue and he is thinking out loud about it before making a decision	If Des is property can she give away things, does she own them or does someone else? Iago believes very few women, if any, actually still have their "honor" to give or keep (most women are cheating liars)	None in this instance (but later in line 25 they mention a raven, which is black and thought to be a bad omen that spread infection...hmmm...)

This how the reworked assignment looks. It has some elements of the focus from before, but refocuses student to match previous unit and guide student to revised culminating activity.





#### Creative Writing:

- **Task:** Write a journal entry from the perspective of Desdemona or Emilia, reflecting on the gender dynamics and racial prejudices they experience throughout the play. Consider their thoughts and feelings regarding their societal roles, relationships with other characters, and the impact of gender and race on their lives. Use direct quotes from the play sprinkled in the journal entry to validate their own words and thinking.
- **Product:** A handwritten or typed journal entry, formatted as if it were written by the character, with detailed reflections and insights.

#### Visual Analysis:

- **Task:** Create a series of visual posters or slides that highlight key quotes from the play related to gender and race. Accompany each quote with a brief analysis of its significance in terms of character development, societal norms, and thematic exploration.
- **Product:** A set of visually appealing posters or slides, each featuring a quote from "Othello" along with an analysis written below or beside it.

#### Role-Play (2-3 people per group):

- **Task:** Prepare a script for a role-play scenario in which characters from "Othello" engage in a conversation about gender and race. Use direct quotes from the play to guide your dialogue and focus on exploring the characters' perspectives and attitudes towards these themes.
- **Product:** A script for a role-play performance with participants taking on the roles of characters such as Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Emilia, and others.

#### Literary Analysis:

- **Task:** Write a critical essay analyzing the language and imagery used to depict gender and/or race in "Othello." Using direct quotes, explore how Shakespeare's choice of words and phrases contributes to the portrayal of characters and the development of themes related to gender roles, racial prejudice, and societal expectations
- **Product:** A well-structured essay with a clear thesis statement, supported by textual evidence and analysis from the play, demonstrating a deep understanding of the language around gender and race in "Othello."

#### Podcast Discussion (2-3 people per group):

- **Task:** Write a script for a podcast episode in which you and your classmates engage in a discussion about the language of gender and race in "Othello." Select key passages (quotes) from the play to analyze and discuss, focusing on how they illuminate the characters' relationships, motivations, and struggles with societal norms.
- **Product:** A script for a podcast episode featuring group discussions, close readings of quotes, and insightful commentary on the themes of gender and race in "Othello."



# Adapting Activities

The final step was to modify the culminating task to push students' understanding and mastery with concepts further. They were to create a fictional experience that applied their understanding of not only what was happening in *Othello*, but also their learning from "Language, Gender, and Culture."



# Final Thoughts

These ideas and human experiences that so easily upset people today, are not new. They are readily present in works from over 500 years ago. Find your canon.

Questions?





# Thanks!

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Please use the QR code to share your thoughts about our session with us. We value your feedback!

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