A Conversation with Linda Christensen on Social Justice Education

Golden, John; Fink, Lisa Storm, RWT

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DO THE RIGHT THING

John Golden

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High school teacher John Golden interviews social justice educator Linda Christensen. Golden and Christensen begin by expanding on an understanding of social justice and a teacher's role in the social justice classroom. They continue by addressing complicated issues of student empowerment, meeting state standards, and choosing appropriate texts and writing prompts for students. Christensen also shares her thoughts on how to set up an environment that supports social justice and encourages student empathy.

This is the only class where I don’t have to wear a mask.
—Student in Linda Christensen's class

I have always hated movies and TV shows about teachers. The teachers are always too... well, too good. They’re not like the rest of us. They dress better, have better hair, and teach only twenty students a day. But what really gets me is that they always seem to be better teachers than I am. They care, deeply. And they somehow reach those kids that I can’t. But for the past eight years, I have been able to work with a real-life Michelle Pfeiffer (without the leather jacket or the karate) who reaches the kids that Hollywood only dreams of saving. In this issue of English Journal dedicated to doing the “right thing” in the English classroom, it would be wrong for anyone in our field not to know about the work of Linda Christensen.

As a teacher, writer, curriculum specialist, and activist, Linda challenges her students and herself to not accept the world as it is, but to envision a world without racism, sexism, and other barriers to a just society. And somehow she manages to do all of this without making other teachers feel guilty (unlike the guy in that one movie who teaches the kids calculus simply by tapping on the desks and a little bit of tough love) or by trafficking in simplistic, feel-good sanctimony. Linda’s work, instead, has always been about empowering students—and other teachers—with well-developed, rigorous curriculum, research-based strategies and, yes, even a little bit of tough love.

I am so fortunate to call myself a colleague of Linda Christensen and to have had the opportunity to sit down and talk with her about her passion for social justice and the nuts and bolts of how it actually works in a real-life classroom. Who knows, maybe I can sell the film rights to this interview and Hollywood finally might get it right for once. Also, I ought to note that even though Linda is a most eloquent speaker, I conducted this interview after a long day of teaching, so what follows has been lightly edited for the inevitable “ummm” and some organizational concerns.

Linda Christensen is currently the director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis and Clark. She is the author of Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, Ltd., 2000) and coeditor of Rethinking School Reform: Views from the Classroom. For the last thirty years she has taught high school language arts and worked as a language arts curriculum specialist in Portland. For most of the last twenty years, she directed the Portland Writing Project, a satellite of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis and Clark.
Creating a Social Justice Classroom

John Golden: Let’s start with your definition of social justice and how you’ve come about to get at that definition.

Linda Christensen: I want to put the definition broadly and it actually comes out of my work with Rethinking Schools as well as with my work in the classroom. So it’s not just a definition. It’s kind of what it means to be a social justice teacher and to create a social justice classroom. First, it is grounded in the lives of our students. We use situations out of their lives as text[s], so we use what’s happened to them as additional texts in the classroom. The curriculum should be rooted in the students’ needs and in their experiences. It should be multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice. We bring in texts that honor the literature of diverse backgrounds, so that it includes everybody in our society. As much as possible we’re actually using the voices of people from those ethnicities rather than people reporting about them.

There is also a fundamental belief that all students have the capacity to learn and to grow. When they come in with skill deficits, it does not mean that they have deficits in the ability to change or to understand.

A social justice classroom is participatory and experiential. In other words, I’m not just delivering the Paulo Freire thing that teachers are not bankers depositing checks every month in the students’ brains. Rather, we are engaging in a dialogue with them, so that they are partners in their education. It’s hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary. It’s true that there’s a lot going on in society that needs to change, but we’re also giving students an opportunity to see how people have worked for change over time.

It’s academically rigorous; we don’t do social justice at the expense of students’ gaining the kind of skills that they need to be able to traverse the world. It’s activist; it takes the learning outside of the classroom, and engages students in the community in some kind of way. But not ever in a way that puts students in a position where they feel uncomfortable, that it doesn’t take them to marches or demonstrations, doesn’t foist the educator’s point of view on the students.

And the last and I think the most important piece, the piece that I think people don’t get is the critical piece, that often teachers do multicultural, they do antiracist, and even service learning kinds of activities. But the piece that I think is essential in social justice education is actually the critique of society. It’s a critique of the normalization of privilege and power held in the hands of few, at the expense of many. And so social justice education really examines society to help students understand how things came to be. That, yes, we live in a democracy, but that the democracy was not set up to serve everyone in it. Part of students’ understanding racism, classism, sexism is understanding how our society has been set up to perpetuate those hierarchies. The critique is essential in a social justice classroom and that’s the part that’s most commonly not done.

JG: Within a social justice classroom, what’s the role of the teacher?

LC: I think that actually in a social justice classroom you’re really carefully choosing what you want to teach. And so the role of the teacher is to find places in society, whether it’s a contemporary issue that’s going on now, or it’s a text, that helps students read the society. They begin to see how the society works and how it’s been set up. And so, the teacher is really the facilitator of that process but allows the students to come to their own understandings based on observing historical patterns over time.

JG: What would you say to a teacher who says, “I think I need to leave my politics out of my classroom?” or, “How do I remain neutral?”

LC: Well I think that we’re never neutral in a classroom. That to not talk about the way that society is set up is to be political in a classroom. Because it’s politics that allows students of color and poor students to think that the way things are is the way they have to be and that somehow there’s something wrong with them. My students of color come to understand that the system has been rigged against people of color. That’s not political; I don’t see it as political. I see it as actually examining the fabric of our society.

Empowering Students

JG: Sometimes a complaint is that when we teach students about all the historical sins of the past they can easily become cynical rather than empowered. How do you address that in a social justice classroom?

LC: It’s one of the things that I think I did originally, and I learned my lesson when [a student] Omar threw a chair across the room and said, “Didn’t we ever do anything right?” So that was a big lesson in needing to put in how people work together for changes. William Stafford [talking about poetry] says that sometimes a star is too faint to see straight on, that you need to see
it out of the corner of your eye. And I think that’s true with social justice education. That sometimes coming at it straight on is too harsh, and so coming at it through student lives, coming at it sideways, through pieces of reading, where students learn to empathize with characters and to care about them. Then to come into the social critique of why or how the character is treated in a certain way—like the flower girl in Pymotion or the Joads in The Grapes of Wrath. And then to always, always, come back to how have people worked for change. That has to be a component of everything that we do. And I think that’s why it’s important to focus on these social movements—civil rights movement, women’s movement—all of those movements are so important as well as the contemporary social justice movements.

What Students and Teachers Learn

JG: Just about every English teacher today is faced with the issue of testing and standards. How can I become a social justice teacher or keep social justice at the forefront of my work and still meet the standards and requirements of my state tests and my administrator?

LC: I don’t think that it’s an either/or situation. For example, I think that in many ways my class is more rigorous because I am asking students to do more than read and write about what they’ve just read. Actually I’m really getting them to examine things much more deeply. So in any given unit my students are writing narratives, they’re writing poetry, and they’re writing a critical analysis. If you take any day in my classroom, I could name five standards that I am meeting. So I think that it’s more like the kind of work that you get when you’re in college, when you’re at a university seminar, where you’re understanding the historical influences of the literary text. And we need to fight against the overtesting of students that steals time from our teaching.

JG: What about the learning that happens in the classroom that primarily has social justice at its center?

LC: Jennifer [a student] said last week when I was working with a group of students on their college essays, she wanted to write about our class as part of her essay, and what she said was, “What I learned was that there are things that have happened in our society and that I want to do something about making a change.” That’s what I hope students get. That critique of what’s happening and the sense that they can be empowered to change it.

JG: How can teaching social justice affect teachers? What can they learn?

LC: Here’s the thing, for me there’s so many points that intersect on this, the National Writing Project, the National Coalition of Education Activists and Rethinking Schools . . .

JG: So part of it is that it opens you up to other coalitions and groups?

LC: Well, yeah, ultimately we’re not just working to change an individual classroom; we’re working to create a different kind of society, and so part of envisioning that kind of society is living it in a classroom. What is the kind of society that I want to live in, how do I create that in a classroom so that students can feel it, for at least fifty minutes a day for a year? And then how do I create that kind of society for myself, how do I create communities where I feel empowered? So I have a lot of intersecting communities where we work together. That’s not me as an individual teacher in a classroom: I am part of a much larger community.

Selecting and Teaching Texts

JG: Can you describe a few of your favorite texts that you like to work with in a social justice classroom?

LC: I’m going to use the word text broadly. I really love Warriors Don’t Cry [by Melba Pattillo Beals] about the integration of Central High School in Little Rock. And the reason is that it’s about school. It’s about education, and so it’s situated precisely where students are: it’s in a high school. And so they can see themselves in it, and see her struggles. But it’s also situated in a movement. And so it helps students understand that piece of history. We do a lot of role plays and we read other kinds of texts and videos so that they can understand how people have struggled in order to get an education.

Linda’s Key Questions in a Social Justice Classroom

> Who benefits?
> Who’s marginalized?
> Why is a practice fair or unfair? How could it be different?
> What kind of society would I like to live in and how could I get there?
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So I love the text for that because we can look at integration, we can look at freedom schools, citizenship schools, so there's just great places to go with these Little Rock Nine heroes that put their lives on the line for education.

The other text I love is Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw, because it is about language. And I think language is another key touchstone issue in a language arts classroom. We're always correcting the students, so we need to get students to look at the issue of who gets corrected and who doesn't and why. By using this play and other stories and articles, I can put language in its colonial context and help students see how the politics of language plays out in different colonial contexts around the world. We study how language is one of the first things taken away when you want to take away someone's power. That you not only take a country's natural resources away, you take people's language and art away, and you make them ashamed of it.

JG: With so many texts to choose from, what's the process that you go through in trying to select the right text for the right group of students?

LC: One of the questions I ask is, What's going on in the world? Because, for example, when Katrina hit, and watching the race and class issues in that, Katrina had to become a text. So often I will look at what's happening that I think kids need to understand more about. For example, I chose Persepolis [by Marjane Satrapi] because of the current struggle with Iran; I wanted students to understand the history behind that struggle and have more of a context for it. A second type of text is the kind that is empowering, that turned pain to power. And so how do we look at characters who have overcome challenges and obstacles to change? The Color Purple. Their Eyes Were Watching God. A Place to Stand. The Grapes of Wrath would be examples of those kinds of texts. And then a third category of text that I call texts where somebody has come to a new understanding of the world and the way the world works. And so that's where I like a text like The Kite Runner [by Khaled Hosseini]. His central question: Can I ever be good again, acknowledging our mistakes and rethinking the world?

Creating an Environment for Social Justice Education

JG: How do you go about setting up the proper environment to have this work get done?

LC: I think depending on where students are I usually start with something in the classroom that says right away "I'm an antiracist teacher." For students of color, right away they know I'm on their side and there is kind of a letting down of the guard. One of my students last year said, "This is the only class where I don't have to wear a mask." Sometimes teachers [talking about their students] will say, "I don't see color." Well, if you don't see color then you don't see the students who are there. So for a student, Alex, to say, "You see me, you know I can be loud, but you are appreciative of who I am." I believe students need to feel that I understand their culture [and] their background, and not only understand it but that I am giving place for that to be in the room. So I think that's a piece that unfolds for students.

We sit in a circle, we do read-arounds where it's mandatory that people read, not every piece, but they have to share. They have to talk; they have to
be kind in their comments to each other. One of the things I say is, “listen with an empathetic heart.” Somebody is sharing their life with you, that’s an important piece. They take notes on each other’s pieces because the whole idea is that we learn from other people, so the class is actually constructed to model that. And after we’ve read pieces, I ask, “What did we learn from your classmates?”

One of the things I try to do throughout the year is find places where the students have to take their learning outside of the classroom. So frequently it will be to write a children’s book about something they’ve learned and then we go to elementary schools and then read their books and they teach what they have learned. I also take them to college classes, so that everybody has the opportunity to speak before a college class about what they’ve learned. And there are multiple reasons for that—to see that it’s not scary, to see that they can be brought in as speakers says something about the fact that even though maybe nobody in their family has gone to college and maybe no one has graduated from high school, college is possible for them. These field trips create real community events where students relate to each other and me in different, more playful, and authentic ways.

Linda's Former Students on a Social Justice Classroom

John Golden: How was Linda’s class that focused on social justice different from other English classes you took in high school?

Mira Shimabukuro (Jefferson High School, Class of 1990): I enjoyed it so much I didn’t even think about it. I’ve always felt I had to do with the fact that by the time we wrote in her class, I actually wanted to write. I always had something to say because the material called us to speak. I became both a writer and a teacher of writing because of Linda, and because of her approach. Social justice was an intricate part of it. I know a lot of teachers shy away from it because they think it’s going to force a kid to do something they don’t want to do. But in my experience, the opposite happens. That curriculum gave me a reason to write, and I did. I still am.

Jennifer Overman (Grant High School, Class of 2008): This class was very rich. It had depth. It wasn’t just a read-a-book, write-a-paper English class. We studied touchy subjects, such as slavery and African American rights, in detail. We were allowed to form our own opinions about them, hold our own on discussions, really dig deep into our feelings. My favorite part about this class was comparing things back then to how they are now. We were able to see how things have changed and how things are still the same.

Lakeitha Elliott (Jefferson High School, Class of 1994): Honestly, I don’t remember any other English classes in high school, probably because there is nothing that stands out to me, or because I felt that nothing I learned applied to the real world. The environment was welcoming and comfortable, not the average classroom where students sat in rows facing the teacher. Mostly we sat in a circle, which made everyone equal and a part of the group, everyone’s voice was heard and respected. Linda also sat in the circle, which made us feel like she was one of us, not some all-powerful, all-knowing dictator. Linda’s class felt like a safe place where you could share anything without fear and you never felt like there were wrong answers, just differing opinions.

JG: What were some of the insights you gained from her class?

MS: You can learn to write quite well just from paying attention to writing that is going on around you. Everybody has something worth saying, even though lots of people are never heard from. Poetry can heal the soul, which, in turn, can help you move mountains. The way we speak in our families and in our communities is just as valid as the ways upheld as the most “proper” in society.

JO: This class being a predominantly African American class was something that I am absolutely grateful for and really added to my own personal growth and education. To be in a class where people of the same race had so many different points of view, feelings, and attitudes about these touchy subjects has allowed me to incorporate them with my own and allowed for a better connection. I feel that it has opened a door for me. After taking this class I feel that everyone should be required to take a class centered on social justice.

LE: The most important insight that I gained in Linda’s class was that I had a voice, that me—a young African American child of a drug addict mother and criminal father—had a voice, that I could change the world by speaking out against injustice and untruths. “Question Everything” was what one of the signs said on the wall. Linda’s class empowered me to question everything and not just accept what was written as truth, whether it was in a history book or a newspaper. I continue to apply many of the things that I learned (in) Linda’s classes. I speak out against injustice wherever I see it, especially as it relates to educating children. I have also been able to be a better advocate for my own child because of some of the things that I learned in Linda’s class.
JG: Typically teenagers are not known for their empathy, but it sounds like so much of what happens in your classroom requires a great deal of empathy. How do you teach that?

LC: It’s [through] the writing more than it is the literature. I mean the literature does it somewhat, but it’s really the writing. So in the “acting for justice” unit where people are writing about times when they were targets of discrimination or writing about a time when they stood up for themselves, students’ personal stories help them see each other in new kinds of ways. Their humanity kind of starts leaking out, partly it comes out honestly because I prompt it by giving examples from myself. I was a battered woman, and so I talk about that openly. My father was an alcoholic, a lovely man, but he was an alcoholic and so I talk about that. So I am constantly demonstrating my vulnerability. I talk about the fact that I was discriminated against because I was lower class and what that felt like. So because I am open and honest my stories open up students’ stories to be honest as well.

When I was over at Jefferson [a majority African American high school in Portland], I can remember Scott who came in from Beaverton [a mostly white suburb of Portland] and he said, “You know, racism is over, that was the sixties” and one of my students who came from a middle-class African American family said he was driving his family car, which was a BMW, and he got pulled over and slammed to the ground by the police because they didn’t believe that he was the owner of the car. That made a huge impact on Scott’s understanding that racism is not dead. And the more students told stories, the more he understood that.

So it’s hearing about somebody you love who’s sitting right next to you, or maybe you don’t love them, but you’ve been in a classroom with them for a year and you understand something about them that makes them tick that you didn’t understand before. So the more open and vulnerable, the more honest I can get students to write, the more authentic their voices are, and the more that empathy builds.

Linda Christensen has written and published articles in numerous education journals, including Language Arts, English Journal, Rethinking Schools, and Education Week. She received the Fred Hechinger Award for use of research in teaching and writing from the National Writing Project, a community service award from Self Enhancement Inc., Portland Public Schools Hero Award, and the US Outstanding Teacher of the Western United States. John Golden teaches English at Grant High School in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of the NCTE publications Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom (2001) and Reading in the Reel World: Teaching Documentaries and Other Nonfiction Texts (2006). email: goldenlull@hotmail.com.

Readwritethink Connection

Golden wrote about a colleague who affected his teaching. All of us have had a teacher who has made a profound difference to us—someone who changed our lives, made us think more deeply, set our feet on the right path. Perhaps it was a teacher we met in a classroom, but it could have been a coach, youth group leader, family or community elder, or religious leader. “A Significant Influence: Describing an Important Teacher in Your Life” invites students to write a tribute to such a teacher, someone who has taught them an important lesson that they still remember. The personal essays that students write for this lesson are then published in a class collection. Because writing about someone who has been a significant influence is a typical topic for college application essays, the lesson’s extensions include resources for writing more traditional, formal papers. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=824

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT