The McCarthyism Lesson

Lesson Objective: Students will connect Arthur Miller’s The Crucible to McCarthyism through a kinesthetic learning activity and an individual writing assignment.

Standards Addressed:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.9 Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.10 By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Anticipatory Set

The teacher will divide students in groups of 7 to play the “human knot game” (for instructions on how to do this, check out: http://leadership.uoregon.edu/resources/exercises_tips/team_builders/human_knot). Before beginning, the teacher will give each student a small, folded piece of paper with a dot on it, saying aloud, “One person in each group will receive a paper with an “x” instead of a dot. If you have the “x,” your goal is to subtly sabotage your group’s efforts to untangle the human knot. Everyone else, be looking for signs of subversion. You have seven minutes to become untangled. Go.” In reality, there were no papers with “x.” After seven minutes, the teacher will ask each group to name their traitors, and why they picked whom they picked. After a moment, the teacher will “confess” the truth, and discuss the group a few follow-up questions: “Why did you think there were traitors? Why did you trust me? What expectations do you have of me as a teacher? How did that type of thinking affect what you saw? Whom do you automatically give trust to, and whom do you automatically distrust? Why?” Upon discussing these things, the teacher will reveal his/her motive: to give students a personal glimpse of a bit of the mob hysteria surrounding McCarthyism, the topic of the day, and how quick humans can be to interpret mistakes or small gestures as subversive if we think we are in danger, or if someone in authority tells us we are in danger. Unexamined beliefs can lead to fear, uncertainty, and the disintegration of stability.

Objective

“Today I want us to peer into the psychology and the history behind McCarthyism—the context in which The Crucible was written, and see if we can make connections between this historical event and what we’ve been reading in class.” (The teacher begins the Prezi, which can be found here: http://prezi.com/85rop9hcpzve/mccarthyism/). “In order to really get into what we’re doing
here, though, we need to look at this word: mancinism. Has anyone heard this word before?“ (The teacher then shows mancinism in a sentence: “When I was a child, I never wrote, threw, or ate with my right hand, so my parents quickly decided I had mancinism.” The students can easily infer from the context clues in the sentence that mancinism means “left-handedness”). “The big idea here is that context creates meaning. What’s the point of context? Outside of school, for example. Why is it important to know the context of information? Of a story? Of a person? (In addition to their answers, the teacher will note that knowing the context helps a person understand foreign languages, understand what is happening in a story, and remove stereotypes and prejudice with the simple realization of, “I don’t know this person’s context”).

Input

Once the teacher has convinced the students about the importance of context, she will present the McCarthyism Prezi, which outlines the events leading up to McCarthyism (The Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the Soviet testing of the atomic bomb, Mao’s takeover of China, and the Korean War), the biography and purposes of Joseph McCarthy, key events during the period known as the Red Scare II (McCarthy’s “I have a list” speech, the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the hearings of the “Hollywood Ten”), the biography and accusation of Arthur Miller, the downfall of McCarthyism (in the Army-McCarthy hearings), and the consequences of McCarthyism on thousands of “blacklisted” people.

Modeling

Throughout the Prezi, the teacher will “think aloud,” while making connections between McCarthyism and The Crucible. For example, “Just like Abigail, McCarthy seemed to be accusing people for personal gain. He, however, wanted political gain, and she wanted personal gain—an unhindered relationship with Proctor.”

Check for Understanding

Throughout the Prezi, the teacher will ask questions to the students: “What exactly is Communism, and why were we afraid of it in the first place? Why would HUAC target Hollywood? How does Hollywood influence us today? What power does Hollywood have over other nations’ perceptions of America, or our perceptions of other nations?” Also, after describing the process of HUAC’s investigation (see Prezi), the teacher will take a class poll: “Who has either seen the movie or read the book The Chronicles of Narnia?” The teacher will ask a student who has seen the movie or read the story, “Do you believe that Narnia really exists?” Once the students says “no,” the teacher will then say, “Prove it. Prove to us that you do not believe that Narnia exists.” The point is to reveal how difficult it is to provide evidence for an accusation on a person’s ideology—which was exactly the method of HUAC during McCarthyism, as well as the method of Abigail in The Crucible. And, finally, “What was Miller’s purpose in writing this allegory and why did he choose this medium?”

Guided Practice + Independent Practice
The students will then work individually on a writing assignment for 10-15 minutes: “Compare and contrast the methods and purpose of two “accusers”: Abigail in *The Crucible* with Joseph McCarthy. Use two quotes from the text as evidence for your claims about Abigail.” The teacher will walk amongst the students, helping where needed.

**Closure:** The students will produce an “exit ticket” of what they learned today, as well as a critique of the lesson for the teacher’s benefit.

**Differentiation:** This lesson includes cooperative and kinesthetic learning in the anticipatory set, inquiry-based learning, a visual Prezi, and individual seatwork to diversify instruction. The teacher’s movement amongst the students during Independent Practice also creates a space for individualized attention and thus differentiation.