Elizabeth Williams

Objective: To help students analyze both how events are influenced by the past and how events might influence the future by examining a relatively current event, researching possible influences, and then drawing a conclusion.

Grade Level: Grades 9-12.

Subject Area(s): Social Studies and Language Arts

Procedure:

During a unit on the history of slavery or AA race relations, pair off students and then discuss the definition of the word “hypothesis” with the class. Explain that they will be choosing within their groups an issue related to a current event impacting the AA community. Once their topics are chosen, they will then be hypothesizing the historical and contextual causes and contributors to that current event. Explain that they will use ipads and have class time in the computer lab to research. Practice doing this kind of hypothesizing by using this fictional “current event” from tolerance.org as a way to discuss why people of different backgrounds often see

events differently and how a history of racism might lead to the reactions seen in this story.

*A big trial has been taking place with lots of media coverage: entrepreneur, Ty Jones, the first African-American billionaire, is accused of embezzling millions from his own company. Students have been talking about it at school a little but not as much as it has been showing up on the covers of the tabloids and entertainment magazines. When the time comes for the verdict, tension rises a little in the school, but teachers aren’t worried because the students get along well there, and lots of white and black students both like and support Jones. Still, when the guilty verdict comes down, black students erupt in anger, talking loudly in the hallways and in the*

*cafeteria. Many white students look nervous and seem confused by the strong show of emotion. During the “Current Events” section of her social studies class that day, Ms. Wilson asks students their opinions about the trial. The class is split neatly by race: black students think Jones got a bad deal; white students think the verdict was fair. When students start explaining their position, it becomes clear that they don’t understand one another. Jason, a white student, says, “Hey, I admire Ty, but, let’s face it, he’s guilty! Did you see all the evidence against him? They have e-mails between him and his vice president about how they were moving money around. How is*

*that not proof!?!” Danielle, an African-American student, responds, “Look, you don’t know! How easy is it to plant evidence!?! “Anyone could have faked those emails!” Jason asks, “Why would they do that?” Seemingly worn out, Danielle explains slowly, “You don’t get it, do you? That’s how we get treated. We’re always suspected and we never get a break. Every time a black man does something good, they’re just looking for ways to tear him down.” The black and white students eye each other warily and seem to retreat into their own worlds.*

Ask students to share hypotheses with the rest of the class and discuss why the students saw things differently. Once students are comfortable with making a hypothesis, assist students with choosing a topic.

Some possible topic ideas for connecting more current and past events may be:

1. Study the abundance of hate crimes in the late 1990s, such as the dragging death of James Byrd, Jr. and the racist shooting spree of Benjamin Smith. Research the history of lynching and hate crimes in the United States and/or the history of backlash against groups when they receive increasing civil rights and prominence in media and the larger culture.
2. Examine articles about the housing crisis and mortgage foreclosures in 2008 and how they describe the cause of the problems and the people who were losing their homes. Connect this to decisions made by legislators and the banking industry. Then connect it to discriminatory lending behaviors in the past, such as redlining neighborhoods, and charging different interest rates to people depending on their race.
3. Study maps that represent the racial distribution of residents in your city or

engage students in conversation about why different areas of your town or city are populated by

people of different races. Relate this to the history of the great migration of African Americans

from the south to the north during the 20th century, redlining, and block busting.

4. Examine the racial distribution in the U.S. Congress or the intense interest in the

2008 presidential race because of the race of Senator Barack Obama. Look at the history of voting acts, reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, racism, and white

privilege in the U. S. to understand and explain the above.

5. Compare the riots in Feguson/Black lives matter to the riots of 1919 “The Red Summer” 1965 in Watts, 1968 assassination of MLK.

Grading:

Choosing a relevant topic 10 points

Researching influences 50 points

Drawing an appropriate conclusion (hypothesis) 40 points