Study Guide

NOT LIGHT, BUT FIRE

HOW TO LEAD MEANINGFUL RACE CONVERSATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

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SUMMARY

While the subtitle of Matthew Kay's book is *How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*, the author spends an ample amount of time in the first half of the book establishing what it means to simply have meaningful **conversations** in the classroom. In his introduction to the book, Kay writes, "Each chapter grounds itself in the dialogic tradition that understands that great learning happens when both teachers and students explore the limits of their own understanding through rigorous discussion" (5). The author focuses in on what he terms **dialogic pedagogy** in the classroom: how to establish dialogue with students, how to make room for meaningful dialogue in the classroom, how to develop dialogue in your practice, and then how to engage in discussions about race with students through this pedagogy. Kay makes a second important note in his introduction about this approach to teaching: "Perhaps most importantly, dialogic pedagogy disrupts the traditional classroom power dynamic, positioning school as a place where students have an equal share in their education. Students are not empowered; rather they are shown that their inherent power has been recognized—and that it matters. Well-crafted discussions build confidence, and confidence is a sacred currency to students and teachers alike" (5). The dialogic pedagogy is built specifically to transform the classroom, and its effects are far reaching: students see and are part of a change; teachers, engaged in transforming the power dynamic in the classroom, are transformed; and by virtue of the previous two changes, the curriculum begins to bend towards the dialogic pedagogy as well.

In the second half of the book Kay begins to dig deeper into the specifics regarding discussions about race. The author examines four separate conversations from his own classroom in "A Study of Conversations." He offers examples for putting chapters 1-4 into practice, and makes a deeper dive into the topic of race: addressing the n-word, an exploration of the cultural significance of names, cultural appropriation, and reflections on teaching after the 2016 election.

Most importantly, as Kay reminds his readers early in the book, it is a misnomer that we are either "cool enough to have great conversations or we aren't, and no amount of professional development can stretch the limits of our intuition" (11). That kind of thinking is just too simple, Kay says, and there is nothing in teaching that some hard work and self-reflection can't change. With that notion in mind, it is a good idea for a teacher reading this book to reflect on his or her teaching before even starting on the path Kay is detailing in his work.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What in your classroom do you feel you are doing really well? What could use some work?
2. At this point in your teaching, how are discussions in your classroom currently conducted?
3. List the ways in which students express themselves in the classroom.

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CHAPTER ONE

Demystify the "Safe Space"

"Just as we cannot conjure *safe spaces* from midair, we should not expect familial intimacy, vulnerability, and forgiveness needed for meaningful race conversations to emerge from traditional classroom relationships" (29).

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

This is the first of four chapters that make up Part 1 of the book. They help build what the author terms the "ecosystem" of the classroom. Kay's point about the ecosystem is that teachers cannot expect to have thoughtful and honest discussions about race if they have not established an environment conducive to building healthy relationships within the classroom. He states, "In order to nurture hard conversations about race, first we must commit to *building* conversational safe spaces, not merely *declaring* them. The foundation of such spaces is listening" (16). Chapter one is developed with specific attention paid to three suggestions Kay makes to build a safe space: listen patiently, listen actively, and police your voice.

To Kay, *listening patiently* means, "First, hands should not be raised while someone is still talking . . . Second, listening patiently means that students should never be interrupted" (18).

He follows in the next subsection by describing *listening actively*: "By the middle of the year, I can tell how well my students are listening actively by how often the comments appear daisy-chained together by citation . . . The trick is to never stop redirecting and to ceaselessly praise students for citing each other" (20-22).

And finally, he defines *policing your voice*: There are two parts to policing your voice according to Kay: 1) students direct their comments to each other, not just to the teacher and 2) "understanding that students (and teachers) should speak succinctly" (22).

The remainder of the chapter provides a set of examples for how Kay builds in space and time in his classroom to practice what the author refers to as "House Talk." Kay highlights three activities he uses in his work to demystify the safe space: burn five minutes, good news, and high-grade compliments.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What rules for classroom discussions do you already have in place?
2. Do you teach students to be good listeners as Kay suggests? If so, how? If no, can you see avenues in your teaching to implement what that Kay recommends?
3. How are you allowing time in your classroom to build relationships with your students? Are the techniques you use creating relationships that encourage what Kay calls familial intimacy, vulnerability, and forgiveness?
4. Is there a way to implement some of the author's suggestions about allowing time for relationship building in your classroom?

CHAPTER TWO

Developing Your "Talking Game"

"No discussion plan survives contact with the students" (55).

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

This chapter spins the dialogic teacher's lens around and asks that we look reflectively at ourselves as teachers. Kay keeps his readers grounded with clear suggestions about what we might do to support healthy dialogue in the classroom: we express ourselves clearly by orienting conversations and thoughtfully summarizing discussions, we can learn to resolve conflicts more efficiently when they arise, and we can learn to shift gears when a class discussion goes in an unpredicted direction.

With regards to expressing ourselves clearly, Kay writes ". . . orientation removes a lot of pressure from students who have not learned it [subject matter] any differently from how I did. It positions me not as an intimidating authority about to publicly expose their ignorance, but as a fellow traveler, someone who has also been exposed to the myth" (45).

Once we have gotten into our discussions, offering a summary of what was said is key. "Over the years, I have developed a habit of summarizing as comments happen, usually with a healthy dose of compliments" (45).

When it comes to having discussions in the classroom, Kay writes, we cannot assume that it will come without disagreement among students: ". . . if we wish to create a dialogic curriculum that engages race, it stands to reason that our students' opinions will eventually clash. We should be ready to thrive in these moments" (49). He continues, "It is important for teachers to recognize what sort of conflict we are dealing with." 1. Over facts and data. 2. Over process and methods. 3. Over purposes. 4. Over values (50–51).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Kay states: "Meaningful race conversations depend on teachers understanding the implications of their own racial and cultural perspectives. And few such conversations are inspired if our curriculum does not have multifaceted diversity" (42).

1. Write your racial autobiography. When did you become aware of race? How did your understanding of race develop over the course of your lifetime? How has it changed? How does your racial biography affect your teaching?
2. What is the narrative of your school's curriculum? What voices are present, and what is their message? What voices are missing?
3. Kay makes a series of suggestions for developing your talking game at the end of the chapter on pages 59–61. Choose one of his challenges for each subtopic: Expressing Ourselves Clearly, Resolving Conflict, and Shifting Gears. Reflect in writing or with colleagues after trying a suggestion.

CHAPTER THREE

Structuring Your Dialogic Curriculum

"When planning curriculum meant to engage race controversies, a teacher's first question shouldn't be which text to teach. It should be, *What kind of scholar do I want to help mold?* Followed closely by, *What kind of citizen do I hope to encourage?*" (80).

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

Chapter three covers a lot of ground. Kay begins by addressing three modes he uses to engage students in discussions in the classroom: whole-class discussion, small learning communities (SLC's), and one-on-one conversations. By mid-chapter he moves from how students are having discussions in the classroom to what they are actually discussing as topics driven by a curriculum. The author wraps up the chapter with two examples of what he calls "Preacher's Dilemmas."

For *whole-class discussions,* Kay writes, "Whole class, like whole grain, is a staple for long-lasting energy. The teacher's position as a focal point allows us to set and maintain a lively and conversational tone. When the energy level gets low during whole class, a savvy teacher might crack a timely joke or reconnect the students through a clever analogy" (63).

The role of *SLC's* is pretty big in the author's classroom: "In SLC conversations ideas can bounce around like atoms in a tight space, leading to a kinetic heat that can be especially scary when the topic is race. . . As long as ideas are expressed in an understood language of respect, it's all good. In small groups, it's good for students to speak in their own language, and not spend much energy checking themselves for the right scholarly words" (72–73).

One-on-one conversations, Kay states, "No structure is more dependent on classroom culture than the one-on-one conversation. Yet no other structure can be more beneficial in growing classroom culture" (74).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Kay challenges his readers to try mixing up our "conversational package" in the classroom (75).

1. Track your own classroom discussions over the course of a week or so of teaching.
2. What modes does your class tend to operate in and why?
3. What happens when you try to you mix it up?

For the next section of the chapter, Kay makes the case for what he terms "threaded conversations." "Race issues are *human* issues, and a threaded approach makes it easier for us to avoid segregating them into a silo, which might diminish their value" (91). The author's argument for the threaded conversation is driven by his effort to avoid what he calls "February Soup," referring to that month of the school year where many schools and teachers address issues of race, and then move on from the conversation.

Kay finishes the chapter with two "Preacher's Dilemma's."

Preacher's Dilemma, Part 1: "Ultimately, dialogic teachers face a preacher's dilemma: We see meaningful connections between often archaic texts and our students' very modern lives; our mission is to make these connections clear without boring our students into inattention or complacency" (94).

Preacher's Dilemma, Part 2: "The preacher's dilemma isn't just the struggle to make important issues feel relevant; it's the challenge to store the fruits of such conversations to last through a storm of distractions" (107).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Take a moment to ask yourself "Am I offering my students multiple opportunities to engage with discussions about race as a human issue?" Make a list of those opportunities and reflect.
2. This might also be a good time to ask yourself, "To what extent is my curriculum 'threaded?'"

What one or two meaningful topics are you exploring from multiple angles throughout the course of the school year? How do they appear in your curriculum?

3. With regards to addressing issues of race throughout your school year, to what extent is the discussion threaded or offering students a February Soup? Reflect and discuss.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Establishing Your Purpose

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

In this chapter, Kay encourages his readers to begin reflecting on their purpose behind having discussions about race in the classroom. It is one thing to learn how to engage students in dialogue effectively, but it is something entirely different to engage with tough topics such as issues surrounding race. Kay states, "We must begin our discussion planning with honest reflection on our personal catalysts for two reasons. First, they are usually glaringly obvious to our students . . . Second, and more important, our personal catalysts can push race conversations to the satisfaction of *our* needs, with less attention to showing kids the power of their voices" (120).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

Explore the five catalysts that Kay references on pages 118 and 119.

1. Which one do you feel most driven by?
2. What are the benefits of that catalyst?
3. What are the disadvantages?

In addition to his five catalysts for having discussions about race, Kay also offers three propositions that are indispensable when it comes to establishing our purpose: 1) In order to discuss hard problems regarding race, students need space and time to "locate their sphere of influence" and "explore personal pathways to solutions." 2) "Design race conversations that encourage students to follow *new* lines of inquiry." 3) We should encourage our students to publish their hard work (120–21).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. As a teacher, what is your sphere of influence within your classroom? Within your school? Within your community? Reflect.
2. Are you currently encouraging your students to publish their hard work? What opportunities do your students have to publish pathways to solutions?

CHAPTER FIVE

The N-word: Facing it Head On

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

Perhaps the most important point Kay wants to leave his readers with on this topic is stated at the end of the chapter: "Let's all try not to focus on the wrong things—spelling the slur on the board, or a teacher's speaking the word aloud, are the *least* important parts of this chapter's conversation. Don't let it be the decision that undermines everything" (168). The "everything" that Kay is referring to has to do with deeper explorations behind the word's meaning, its historical roots, and present-day complexity. While deciding how the word will or will not be used in the classroom is one decision teachers will have to make, Kay is pointing out that it is hardly the only decision, and he spends a majority of this chapter elaborating on the other things he does to highlight the complexity of the n-word: discussing students' perceived relationship to the word, the complexities of choosing to say the word or not, the emotional power of the word, and the history behind the word. Kay offers an important note to teachers before they choose to enter into such a discussion, "Even if we have created a familial, house talk environment, we must allow students to *opt out* of sharing intimate details that their classmates might find controversial" (150).

The author moves the chapter forward by addressing the everyday possibility when an administrator walks through the door to see or hear students engaging in discussions about race. "If we are going to do this right," Kay writes, "it must be with humility. Dialogic teachers need the council of administrators when planning thorny conversations. We need their backing when we mess up, their support when our students' vibrant conversations end up antagonizing the world's real bullies" (167).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

Read the paragraph on page 150 regarding Kay's work with students on the book *Kindred* where the teacher writes the *n*-word across the board and prompts students to "describe their relationship to this word."

1. How would you approach this lesson, this prompt, in your own classroom?
2. Do you feel your actions would be supported by the administration at your school? If you don't feel you have the support of administration, explore some possible strategies you could use to build that support.

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CHAPTER SIX

"Say it Right"

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

Kay describes working with students on exploring the importance of names in this chapter. His students begin by digging deeper into the meaning of their own names. He prompts the class about their relationship with their name: "Did they like it? Not like it? Were they aware of its meaning? How had their name affected their movement through the world?" (173). From there, the author shares a text from Hiwot Adilow titled "My Namesake" and students begin to share lines they feel connect to their own experiences with their names. As the unit progresses, Kay shares a second mentor text, an excerpt from *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* by Feroozeh Dumas, and students begin engaging in a whole-class discussion about their names, the proper pronunciation, and some students discuss the changes they have made to their names to avoid the mispronunciations they commonly encounter with their names. Kay also adds an excerpt from the *Freakonomics* documentary "A Roshanda by Any Other Name" as the class explores research behind more common names versus those that are more unique.

The series of steps Kay and his students take through this unit lead to what the author terms "Hard Problems." For Hard Problem #1 Kay asks the following question, "why are uniquely black names not more appreciated as compositions?" (191). Hard Problem #2 is also a question, "How should BouBou, Georjelis, Oluwatobilboa, Amani, and J'mia interact with people who *just don't like to learn*?" (194). The author closes the chapter by encouraging teachers to push students to write about their own experiences and push them to publish when and if they are ready.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. As the author offers what is essentially the basic framework for a unit on names, what thoughts do you have about trying out this unit with your own students?
2. What struggles would you anticipate?
3. What would a successful outcome look like?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Playing the Other

". . . the lens of cultural appropriation . . . point(s) students toward one of life's most necessary—and difficult—lines of inquiry: the quest to more authentically see one another through a mist of cultural separation" (239).

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

Like chapter five, Kay makes it a point to draw his students into a deeper discussion about a tough topic. He states, "Definitions are important. But in this case, the effort to define *cultural appropriation* is the *least* interesting part of any powerful class conversation" (203). There are some tough questions to be addressed that go beyond the strict definition of the word. Questions such as, "What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?" and "Must people who appropriate black culture always stand up for issues that concern the black community?" (202). From this point Kay outlines his lessons with students through two subsections where he explores cultural appropriation through his work with *Native Son.*

Later in the chapter, the author reflects on the importance of the choices we have to make as teachers in the dialogic classroom, "The choice to make discussions student-centered means that we, as teachers, must discern which student comments are rich enough to be redirected to the rest of the class and built on. We fail at this nearly as often as we succeed" (206). And still later in the chapter Kay outlines two points for teachers to keep in mind when engaging with students in discussions: 1) I must remember to deal in probing questions, not declarative statements. 2) I've got to remember that good sparring partners know when to ease up (229).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Towards the end of his section "There's Something About Mary: Cultural Appropriation in *Native Son*, Part 2" Kay explains the transformation of student's thinking about a character in the book after taking some time to dig in and discuss the complexities surrounding her death. What books are your students reading where you can dig in deeper towards a more well-rounded understanding of a character or key scene?

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Pop-up Conversations

"Pop-up conversations terrify me for two reasons. First, I have to consider the demotion in value that they impose on my regular curriculum . . . Second, and perhaps more important, the lack of discussion planning leaves me too many blind spots" (242).

Chapter Summary & Key Quotes

Kay's final chapter reflects upon the 2016 election and its aftermath for him and his students. He narrates about a day filled with pop-up discussions that come both inside the classroom and outside of that structured time. Kay begins by reflecting on the challenge the dialogic teacher faces with the pop-up conversation. By nature, these discussions lack preparation on the part of the teacher, and can leave him with too many blind spots. "Dialogic teachers are bouncers deputized to decide which non curricular issues get to supplant, or supplement, our students' current discussion threads. Just because a controversy is outside making a fuss doesn't mean we have to open our doors to it" (242).

First, Kay is visited during his prep time by a young lady who seeks out his council and expresses her experience of election night and the start of the school day. This discussion is followed by Kay's first class, a group that states, "We were waiting to get here to talk about it [the election]" (246). In a classroom charged with so many who want to share their experience, Kay admits that his ability to provide space for each student to speak is more limited than it was when a single student visited. He asks students to share one word to express how they are doing, and the discussion grows from there. Kay states, "Chapter 1 argued that we build community before we hold meaningful conversations about race, and this moment proved the merit of these priorities. Students' eyes were latched onto whoever was speaking" (250). In another example of pop-up discussions, the author shares a series of emails from his students.

The second half of the chapter focuses on a pop-up conversation that takes place outside of the boundaries of the bell as Kay addresses the complexities of a school environment where opinions may vary. He tells the story of one student whose opinion on the election differs from his peers, and he pays a price for sharing that opinion. Kay reflects at the end of the chapter, "If, hypothetically, Alex had expressed joy on November 9, I would have had to . . . quickly nudge everyone to the center of the Venn diagram: *What do we agree on?"* (259).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Think of a time where you allowed or did not allow a pop-up conversation to occur in your classroom. What was the outcome? What went well in a pop-up conversation you have had? Why? What did not go well? Why?

EPILOGUE

At the start of the epilogue, Kay cites a quote from Frederick Douglass for insight into moving forward with discussions about race. Douglass writes: "If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground" (261). Kay reminds teachers, "we would do well to remember Douglass's curt dismissal of easy roads" (261).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

After finishing the book and reflecting on your own teaching and curriculum, where do you see yourself headed as a teacher? What thoughts do you have about the current curriculum you are teaching? Are there any changes that need to be made?