

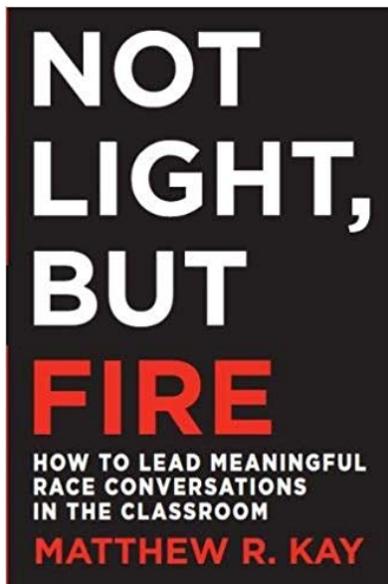
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Not Light, But Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom

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In an increasingly polarized national political climate (Pew Research Center, 2014), a shifting focus in our classrooms from argumentative prowess to dialogic problem-solving is essential if we hope to prepare today's students for full participation in our democratic society. In a recent op-ed piece, Gardoqui (2018) suggested that the current laser focus on argument makes students "susceptible to an epidemic of our time: the tendency to select facts that support a certain perception of reality" (p. 1).

In his 2018 book, *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*, Matthew R. Kay tackles the logistics of purposeful dialogic instruction, focusing specifically on conversations around the complicated subject of race. Kay writes that "[D]ialogic pedagogy disrupts the traditional classroom power dynamic, positioning school as a place where students have an equal share in their education" (p. 5). Kay's book arrives at a crucial moment, when educators must design instruction and facilitate discussions that serve a more diverse student body than ever. By 2020, 50.2% of children under 18 are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnic group (Colby & Ortman, 2015). *Not Light, but Fire* empowers its readers by arguing—convincingly—that facilitating powerful and meaningful discussions about difficult topics like race is a skill teachers can learn and refine through practice.

The book is organized in two halves. Part One focuses on establishing rationales and guidelines to help teachers create classroom "ecosystems" (p. 11) that facilitate meaningful and intentional race conversations. Part Two takes a closer look at specific race conversations Kay has facilitated with his students in order to show what a dialogic ecosystem might look like in practice. In both parts, Kay shares his thinking, theoretical frameworks, and dialogic teaching experiences with equal parts of expertise and vulnerability.

Part One's practical guidance is broken down into four chapters. Chapter One demystifies the notion of classroom "safe spaces" by insisting that teachers may not simply declare them to be so; such spaces require the cultivation of patient and active listening. Practical suggestions for building safe classroom relationships include daily sharing of good news, informal talk with students to build relationships, and explicit social skills instruction in how students can share the significant social currency of specific praise with each other through "high-grade compliments" (p. 32).

Chapter Two reads like a conversation with a skilled colleague whose suggestions seem facile but prove to be deeply nuanced and carefully considered. Kay suggests that dialogic classrooms require "mindful orientation" to conversations and "thoughtful summary" that highlight conversational decisions, agreements, and action steps (p. 45). He also breaks down types of conflict and suggests that dialogic classroom teachers help students pinpoint what type of conflict they are discussing (e.g., *is this a conflict of facts and data or one of values?*). He takes an honest look at the need for agility on the teacher's part, which he defines as "the ability to direct the discourse when it goes in a thoroughly unanticipated direction" (p. 57).

Chapter Three tackles the structuring of a dialogic curriculum that can support meaningful race conversations. Here Kay discusses specific approaches to discourse: whole-class discussion, small learning communities, and one-on-one conversations. He addresses concerns specific to classrooms that embrace race conversations. He discourages "the Jeffersonian dismissal" (p. 78) – the presentation of minority narratives as flat, single-issue stories about racial struggle, rather than dynamic, round depictions of full humanity. He challenges the practice he calls "February Soup" (p.

96) – the conflation of an often-confusing portrayal of Black history and Civil Rights timelines with “sound multicultural education” (p. 96) and offers examples of student-led inquiry as a worthwhile alternative.

He suggests that dialogic teachers face a “Preacher’s Dilemma” (p. 94) in finding connections between archaic texts and the modern sociocultural problems that students face, and further suggests that relationship-building work will help teachers solve such dilemmas. He considers the power of student voices as levers of change, asserting that if teachers “want to encourage deliberation...we should ask ourselves how often we give our students the opportunity—and permission—to be *convinced*. So many of our traditional ways of dealing with controversial issues in the classroom involve students trying to convince *others*” (p. 81).

Kay uses Chapter Four to make the case for purposeful conversations about race, revealing the great degree of intention required to facilitate such discussions. He offers practical suggestions for helping students, a not-yet-enfranchised population, find their spheres of influence and ways to share their voices with the wider world about race issues raised in their dialogic classrooms.

While race is at the center of Kay’s rationales and guidelines in Part One, the elucidation of his thinking on dialogic instruction provides a helpful framework for any classroom teacher who wants to ramp up discourse in the curriculum. A deeper dive into meaningful race conversations in Kay’s own classrooms in the subsequent chapters allows his readers to vicariously experience his application of this framework.

Part Two (Chapters Five through Eight) examines three specific race conversations Kay has facilitated over eleven years, and one “pop-up conversation” (p.

241) about the 2016 election. In these chapters, he addresses racist language, the cultural significance of names, and cultural appropriation. As a longtime classroom teacher in both middle and high schools, I found Kay’s decision to recount and retrospectively analyze specific discussions compelling. These chapters are analogous to a masterclass structured as a think-aloud, with Kay integrating his internal dialogue into narrative vignettes from his ninth- and tenth-grade classrooms. Most significantly, that he consistently connects these conversations to larger purposes (usually writing, speaking, or exegesis tasks) is a reminder of how powerful the “fire” of discourse can be in driving students’ reading, writing, identity, and voice.

Each of the book’s eight chapters ends with suggestions for professional practice. After Chapter Two, for example, Kay addresses the skill of resolving conflict with three activities to help aspiring dialogic teachers strengthen their “talking game” (p. 39), and to help them think ahead of their students in order to develop discursive agility as a facilitator. Each collection of end-of-chapter suggestions seems designed to help readers cultivate not just a dialogic teaching practice, but a dialogic mindset.

While it can become tedious to read through pages of classroom conversations like the ones presented in Chapters five through eight, Kay’s talent for threading personal, in-the-moment insights through them makes the journey worth it. His approach avoids pedantry or an overly-theoretical presentation of dialogic pedagogy by embracing vulnerability, asking hard questions, and admitting personal failures. When recalling one particularly uncomfortable experience around racially charged language, he writes, “One year, I allowed confidence in my ‘safe space’ to completely overrun my good sense” (p. 151).

Classroom teachers may especially appreciate his acknowledgement that facilitating difficult conversations about race can feel risky. In Chapter Five, Kay assigns one section the subheading “When An Administrator Walks In” (p. 165). Here he advocates for establishing a classroom as a dialogic space not only with students, but also with peers and supervisors, through transparency and humility in discussions about curriculum.

Written for practitioners by a long-time educator, the book might easily be incorporated into Professional Learning Community book studies or secondary teacher preparation programs. Individual practitioners in secondary social sciences or ELA classrooms will find it of particular value since many conversations about race and culture may take place there.

Dialogic instruction has powerful implications for literacy educators in particular. The Common Core State Standards for Speaking and Listening (2010) address “collaborative conversations with diverse partners” as early as Kindergarten, with increasingly complex expectations each year. Literacy research bears out the Standards’ significant focus on dialogic skill and growth. Johnston (2012) advocated for classrooms whose dialogue is constructed around texts, citing the work of Nystrand (2006), who found that students in dialogic classrooms “recalled their readings better, understood them in more depth, and responded more fully to aesthetic elements of literature than did students in more typical, monologically organized classes” (p. 400). Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) found that “students whose classroom literacy experiences emphasize discussion-based approaches in the context of high academic demands internalize the

knowledge and skills necessary to engage in challenging literacy tasks on their own” (p. 723).

Not Light, but Fire may help teachers address the challenges of building a dialogic community for their students. The book provides rich examples and honest reflection, and offers a student-centered approach to building dialogic classrooms, emphasizing an intentional and purposeful approach to conversations about race. Kay lays out practical activities and suggestions for improvement. He also acknowledges the vulnerability and perseverance required to improve one’s teaching practice, writing in the epilogue:

It’s hard to get better. Many of us work in school systems that use a barrage of empty platitudes to mask their fixation with our imperfections. With our confidence under such assault, risks are disincentivized.... I hope this book has provided a counter vision—one that, while acknowledging our inherent challenges, respects our universal ability to overcome them. (p. 270)

As teachers persevere in seeking out ways to engage an increasingly diverse student body and help students navigate an increasingly polarized culture and era, this book is a vital resource for creating dialogic classroom communities that impact students in meaningful and lasting ways.

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