VOICE OF WITNESS

Nowhere to Be Home Curriculum

Lesson One: Youth Stories from Burma: A "Living Sculpture" Activity

Time Needed: Two to three class periods and one homework session.

Materials: Nowhere to Be Home, journals or notebooks, Living Sculptures handout, the New York Times online Myanmar (Burma) Country Profile (*http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/myanmar/index.html*), Human Rights Watch: World Report Burma (*www.hrw.org/world-report2011/burma*).

Objective: To bring oral histories to life in order to better understand and connect with the lives of youth in Burma.

Related Core Curriculum Standards: Reading History RH.9–10.1, RH.9–10.5, RH.9–10.7, Writing, W.9–10.3, W.11–12.3, Speaking and Listening SL.9–10.1, SL.9–10.2.

Connections: This activity can be done with any set of narratives from the Voice of Witness series.

Overview

Borrowing techniques from theater arts training, this lesson will enable students to develop their empathy skills through direct physical and emotional engagement with several youth narrators from *Nowhere to Be Home*. Through collaborative group work and analysis, students will engage with the stories of young people living in a police state, allowing them to experience "walking a mile in someone else's shoes."

Essential Questions:

- *How can I use my body, voice, and emotions to "read between the lines" of history?*
- *How can I use my own interpretations and experience to connect with the lives of the book's narrators?*
- *How can I connect the realities of a police state with my own life, community, and country?*

Narrative Excerpt: "There was a special door for prisoners to walk through, and it was very hard for us because we had to kneel down when we walked. After that we had to take off our hoods, and I saw that it was all females in the room with me. I was the youngest. Everybody knew each other from working in politics, and they said, 'Don't cry, don't be afraid. We can go back home one day. They can't do anything to us, we will take care of each other.' There were some old people, like sixty-five- and eighty-year-old women in our group. I felt sorry for my father when I was at the prison, because they wrote my family name on a piece of paper that I had to hold when they took my prisoner photo—one photo from the front, and one from the side. I thought, I am the daughter in prison. But I hoped maybe my father would still be proud of me.

After that, they put me directly in a cell. It was in a special place, usually for people with a death sentence or for people who break the prison rules—solitary confinement." —*Mau Su Mon*

Teacher Preparation: Take some time to become familiar with recent Burmese (Myanmar) history. Among other sources, the *New York Times* Country Profile of Myanmar is a good place to start (especially as it is constantly updated). *Human Rights Watch: World Report Burma* is another good (and updated) resource. This information should be compiled into a one-page Burma Fact Sheet for students.

Day One

Step One: Hand out Burma Fact Sheet. Present an overview of Burmese history, focusing on the period of the military coup (1962) up to the present. Provide details as to what defines a police state and specifically how it may affect the lives of youth (15 minutes).

Step Two: Introduce *Nowhere to Be Home* and break students into cooperative learning groups of four. Each group will read one of the following four narratives: Byin Pu (26 pp.), Mau Su Mon (28 pp.), Khine Kyaw (18 pp.), and Hla Min (15 pp.). Allow time for groups to begin reading their narratives aloud to each other. Encourage them to employ active reading strategies. The remainder of the reading should be done as homework or at the beginning of the next class period (25–30 minutes).

Step Three: Share the Living Sculptures and Inner Monologue handouts. Introduce the activity by announcing that groups will be "walking a mile in their narrators' shoes." They will be reenacting pivotal moments from their narrators' lives by creating a series of "living sculptures." Providing a definition of "empathy" may be useful (see discussion questions). If needed, show examples of sculptures to help students visualize the activity. Also introduce the Inner Monologue activity and definition. If needed, provide literary or film/video examples of inner monologue or "subtext" (10–12 minutes).

Day Two

Step One: If needed, allow time for students to finish reading narratives (7–10 minutes).

Step Two: Answer any questions about the activity—living sculptures, supporting text, inner monologue, "sometimes I feel," etc. (5 minutes).

Step Three: Students get into their groups and put together their four living sculptures, which include supporting quotes for each sculpture and an inner monologue paragraph ("Sometimes I feel"). Groups will need consensus about the four "impactful" moments as well as the physical composition of each sculpture. Each group member will also need time to compose his or her inner monologue for the sculpture in which he or she represents the narrator (30–35 minutes). During this work session, the following prompts or "side-coaching" may be helpful:

- *What are the details of your quote? How can you physically tell the "story" behind the quote?*

- *Allow your entire bodies to be expressive!*
- *You may find it helpful to write the "Sometimes I feel" paragraph after you have created each sculpture. Your body language will give you ideas about what your narrator is feeling.*
- *Make sure you "rehearse" all four sculptures, quotes, inner monologues several times. It is a great way to check your work.*

Day Three

Step One: If desired, give groups time to do a final "rehearsal" before their presentations (7–10 minutes).

Step Two: Groups present their sculptures. Sculptures should be presented in chronological order of the narrative. Some students may be testing their comfort zones, so remind everyone about any "class agreements" that are used (*30-35 minutes*).

Step Three: After each group has presented their sculptures, facilitate a debrief/class discussion that enables students to respond to the activity. It may be useful to begin with each group describing their experience (10–15 minutes). *Note that this step can also be done as a combination journal writing activity.*

Discussion Questions:

- *Did creating physical sculptures to represent your narrator's experience allow you to better understand his or her life in Burma? How?*
- *The dictionary definition of* empathy *is "being aware of, and sharing another person's feelings, experiences, and emotions." Did this activity enable you to do that? If so, how?*
- *What personal connections did you make with you narrators? Do aspects of their experience resonate with you?*
- *"Police state" is a basic term that describes a complex situation. How can you apply the term outside of Burma? Can you find any parallels in the community? In the United States?*

Possible Oral History Project: Class creates an oral history project exploring local policies or laws, examining the complications and sometimes unintended consequences resulting from them.

Media Option: Video: *Words of Kyaw Zwar* (dir. Takaaki Okada). Short video of narrator featured in *Nowhere to Be Home: www.vimeo.com/30103194*

Organizational website: Albany Park Theater Project (APTP). APTP creates original theater that shares the real-life stories of urban teens, immigrants, and working-class Americans. APTP humanizes issues that impact real people but too often get discussed as abstract concepts. *(www.aptpchicago.org)*

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Living Sculptures and Inner Monologue

Creating Your Sculptures

Each group will create four sculptures that represent four important moments from the story of your narrator. They should be "impactful" moments in their story. Each sculpture needs to relate to a short selection from the narrative (no longer than a paragraph). Everyone in the group needs to be in each sculpture. One person in each sculpture needs to represent the narrator—make sure you trade off!

Sculptures can represent moments from your narrator's life in many ways—you can represent or "show" what is happening in the moment with other "characters" in the narrator's story, or you can create sculptures that represent the narrator's emotions or feelings. You can also create visual symbols and metaphors—the possibilities are endless!

Quote From Narrative

Once your group has arranged itself into each of your sculptures (four total), one member of the group will briefly step out of the sculpture to read the selection from the narrative that inspired the sculpture. When he or she is done, he or she should step back into the sculpture. You will repeat this for each sculpture.

Inner Monologue

Inner monologue is a term that describes the "voice" in each of our heads that represents the thoughts and feelings we have but do not say. If our "outer monologue" is what we choose to express out loud, then our inner monologue is the powerful stream of information we choose to keep to ourselves.

During each of your sculptures, whoever is portraying the narrator will *step out* of the sculpture and read a prepared inner monologue that begins with the phrase "*Sometimes I feel…*" This inner monologue or speech should be no longer than a paragraph and should relate to the quote that the sculpture represents. Think about what your narrator is *feeling* but not *saying* and use it for your inner monologue. Whoever represents the narrator in each sculpture should write the inner monologue.

Running Order for Sculptures

1. Sculpture One (held throughout sequence).
2. Quote from Narrative
3. Inner Monologue ("Sometimes I feel…")

Repeat this sequence four times. Each sculpture/reading should take about sixty seconds.

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Lesson Two: Burma's Political Prisoners

Time Needed: One class period

Materials:

- Ma Su Mon's narrative from *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma's Military Regime*
- Class set of index cards (half with "Government" and half with "NLD demonstrator" written on them)

Objective: Students will examine the rights and oppression of political prisoners in Burma through first person oral history narrative, and make connections to political prisoners around the world. Students will practice empathic listening through partner interviews.

Related Core Curriculum Standards: Speaking and Listening SL.9–10.1, SL.9–10.5. Writing W.9–10.3. Language L.9–10.5. Reading History RH.9–10.2, RH.9–10.4

Connections: This lesson can be adapted for many of the narratives in *Nowhere to be Home* or used in conjunction with Adama Bah's narrative from *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice*.

Narrative Excerpts: "I saw the police come and beat our student leaders. This was really my first experience seeing people beaten in front of me. We had to run. Some of the student leaders pulled me along because I was young and I didn't know where to go. We went to hide, and later we heard on the radio that the police had arrested a lot of student leaders. Some of them had been beaten very badly, almost to death. General Khin Nyunt announced that the military was just protecting the security of our country."

"We weren't allowed to read or write in prison, but we found many ways to communicate with each other secretly. We would write on plastic bags, using our nails to carve messages, and then roll it up and throw it into someone's cell when we crossed the hall. We wrote messages mostly just about good news we had heard, rumors in the prison. Sometimes it was about a problem, or just taking care of each other. We didn't know anything about the outside world."

—Ma Su Mon

Essential Questions:

- What makes someone a political prisoner?
- Ma Su Mon says "The government can do whatever it wants." Do you feel this way about the government in your country? What are the limitations of government, if any, and how are they enforced?
- What are some of the physical, mental, and emotional challenges of living in exile?

Step One: Students respond to the following written prompt (5 minutes):

- *Would you participate in protests and demonstrations for a cause you believed in even if you knew you were risking arrest? What would be the determining factors for you in speaking out?*

Step Two: Ask for volunteers to share their responses with the class (5 minutes).

Step Three: Using popcorn reading, read the introduction to Ma Su Mon's narrative on page 111 of *Nowhere to Be Home* and pages 119-127 of her story (15 minutes).

Step Four: Ask students which questions they think the interviewer asked Ma Su Mon, and facilitate a brief discussion with the class about open-ended questions. On the board, give examples of two questions, one open-ended and one not, and ask the students to brainstorm the different answers those questions would elicit. Example:

- *Where are you from?*
- *Describe where you grew up.*

The first question could be answered with one word (a city, a state, a country), while the second question would likely evoke a more detailed, descriptive answer. If time allows, practice by asking the students to change the following questions into open-ended questions (10 minutes):

- *How did you feel?*
- *Do you feel supported by your government?*
- *Who has been the most influential person in your life so far?*

Step Five: Distribute index cards to students, making sure that there are an even number of cards labeled "Government" and "NLD demonstrator." Ask students to look at their cards and imagine themselves in the role of someone in the Government or as an NLD demonstrator/protestor, depending on their card. On the other side of the index card, students should craft four open-ended questions for a person in the other group (10 minutes).

Step Six: Partner Interviews. Assign each student a partner—students with the "Government" cards should have a partner with an "NLD demonstrator" card. Encourage the pairs to break off into different corners of the room, hallway, or outside if that's an option. Each student will interview their partner for 5-7 minutes, using the open-ended questions they've written on the back of their card. Urge students to really get into character, imagining a life for themselves as part of the Burmese military government or as an NLD demonstrator (15 minutes).

Step Seven: Interview debrief as a large group. Write the following prompts on the board and use them as a reference point for a class discussion about the interview process (10 minutes):

- What was the interview experience like for you? Did anything surprising come up?
- Did interviewing your partner make you consider the political situation in Burma any differently? If so, how?

- How can we use interviewing and storytelling as a way to dismantle stereotypes and preconceived notions about people?

Media Option: Nonprofit Organization: Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma). AAPP was founded in 2000 by former political prisoners living in exile on the Thai/Burma border. AAPP advocates for the release of Burma's political prisoners and for assistance programs for political prisoners after their release. http://aappb.org/

Poems: Salman Rushdie reads poems by Tin Moe at the 2008 PEN event Reading Burma: A Benefit for Cyclone Relief and Freedom of Expression in Burma: https://pen.org/book/salman-rushdie-reads-poems-by-u-tin-moe