

How to Teach Students About the Capitol Riots Using A Social Justice Framework

Dr. Crystal Belle

"I was going to die, if not sooner, then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you."

- Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde reminded us back in 1977 that our silence cannot protect us. Drawing on the spirit of social justice and radical Black feminism, I welcome you into this written testimony of what it means to be a social justice educator after the [Capitol riots](#) that violently catapulted us into 2021. We entered the new year, still in the throes of the devastating impact of [COVID19 in 2020 upon school districts nationwide](#) and the intersecting [police brutality upon Black lives](#) , as witnessed through the murder of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd (and countless other BIPOC and LGBTQ+ victims nationwide). Our collective imagination could not have conceived of the fact that on January 6, 2021, a day that also marked radical change in [Georgia's](#) runoff elections and a pending new presidency, that we would also experience an insurrection at our nation's Capitol. As vigilantes stormed the historical building, waving Confederate flags and carrying weapons, all I could think about was, how teachers can lean in to this historical moment in a way that explicitly names social justice teaching and learning practices.

Education is a political act in itself, since to be educated means to be armed with multifaceted knowledge that helps you make sense of the world around you and more importantly, your space and place within the larger sociopolitical landscape. Although the Capitol represents democracy and the legislative branch of government, it is also apparent, through [Critical Race Theory](#) frameworks, that the legislature also upholds oppressive policies and practices connected to healthcare, housing and of course, education. Thus, the Capitol also represents the unequal distribution of power and

wealth in this nation. Young people are aware of this unequal distribution of power, especially [in urban and rural school districts](#) that have been historically marginalized. When we ignore what is happening in our nation in schools -- those events and trends that directly impact our students, we are sending a clear message: we are not committed to radical teaching and learning practices that can change education from the inside out. Increasing students' academic outcomes requires us to help them see themselves as active civics education scholars in the classroom, a key feature of social justice education.

A social justice education framework requires us to center our collective humanity in the pursuit of liberation. As such, we must be willing to critique what is currently working with respect to democracy and what is not. Because education is a critical component of creating more equitable democratic practices, when the state of the democracy is vulnerable, as witnessed through the recent Capitol uprising and the perilous practices espoused and enacted by the previous presidential administration, school leaders, coaches and teachers have a responsibility to create spaces for students to analyze their learning and their lives through current events.

As we begin to reimagine education in 2021, we must also make space for pushing against traditional conceptions of [civics education](#). Traditionally, civics education has been viewed in school curriculum as a generic way for students to make sense of the democratic process. These students are often explicitly named as "citizens." However, education research continues to reveal that not all of our students are treated as citizens or Americans. As such, social justice education frameworks call for a more inclusive approach to civics education that embraces undocumented students, international students and historically marginalized populations that feel erased within school curriculum and American political discourse due to oppressive laws and culturally insensitive school policies. So, what can educators do, as a way to incorporate a social justice approach to teaching and learning using the Capitol riots as a curricular tool? I have created a helpful list of 10 pedagogical activities that can work in chronological order or as a selection of social justice resources for getting started.

10 Social Justice Pedagogical Practices for Using the Capitol Riots As A Curricular Tool

1) **Preamble Analysis:** Have students read The Preamble of the Constitution and analyze the language of the time. Students will determine if that language is reflective of the current US population and government policies. Students should apply annotation and critical thinking skills to complete this activity.

2) **The Great Debate:** Develop student-centered debates about whether The Preamble is inclusive of all people who reside in the United States. (Create groups of proposition and opposition sides)

3) **Critical Race Theory and the Constitution:** Allow students to develop speeches in which they revise The Preamble to explore the Constitution through a Critical Race Theory lens.

4) **Evolution of the Capitol:** Incorporate a humanities unit that investigates the historical origins of the Capitol as a way to ground students into how the Capitol came to be.

5) **Capitol Gallery Walk:** Students will analyze various photos of what occurred at the Capitol on January 6, 2021 and will be instructed to write a critical race literacy analysis of the events as a way to lean into social justice teaching and learning practices.

6) **Photo Dive:** Students will create their own digital photo collages that portray visual depictions of what the Capitol riots represent for the state of education as well as within their own lives.

7) Capitol Video Analysis: After exploring visual literacy through photos, students will analyze video clips that feature what happened at the Capitol. As they watch the videos, they will point out aspects of justice and injustice as a way of becoming immersed in social justice ways of knowing and being through Socratic seminar discussions and exit tickets.

8) Student Video Essays: Upon completion of their video analysis of the Capitol riots, students will create video essays in which they discuss their overall understanding of the insurrection and its direct connection to their lives.

9) Social Media Campaign: Students will share aspects of their #CapitolRiots artifacts on social media. Students can create a new hashtag connected to their schools/classes or use #CapitolRiots to engage in public discussion via Twitter/fb.

10) #CapitolRiots Virtual Unconference: With the support of teachers and school leaders, students will lead and present their intersectional work, drawing upon multiple modalities (written work, videos, photos and discussions) to the public as a way to become part of the national conversation on how to improve our democracy.

As students study, analyze and critique the events at the Capitol, they will begin to see themselves as civics education scholars in school, thus allowing them to reimagine their conceptions of what it means to be civically engaged outside of school. Furthermore, creating public opportunities to share student work will build their confidence in civic engagement, while inspiring more students, teachers and school leaders around the nation to become social justice leaders, teachers and learners. Our silence will not protect us. It is our voices, our lived experiences and our collaborative approach to sustaining social justice ways of knowing and being that will support the development of more equitable and democratic schools.



Dr. Crystal Belle is currently the Director of Curriculum Partnerships at [EL Education](#) and a seasoned educator and scholar with 15+ years in the education field. Her work centers urban education, culturally responsive literacy practices and DEI programmatic development. Her experiences include: NYC public school teacher, literacy coach, education consultant, professor and director of education. Also an author, Belle is working on her first professional learning book, *Start with Radical Love: Developing Social Justice Educators in the 21st Century*. Her education research has been featured in *Journal for Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Education Week* and *Education Review*. She is also the author of *Woman on Fire* (2009), a collection of poetry.

Start with Radical Love, Dr. Belle's debut book with Corwin, is scheduled to publish in early 2022.