



Kay, M. R. (2018). *Not light, but fire: How to lead meaningful race conversations in the classroom*. Stenhouse.

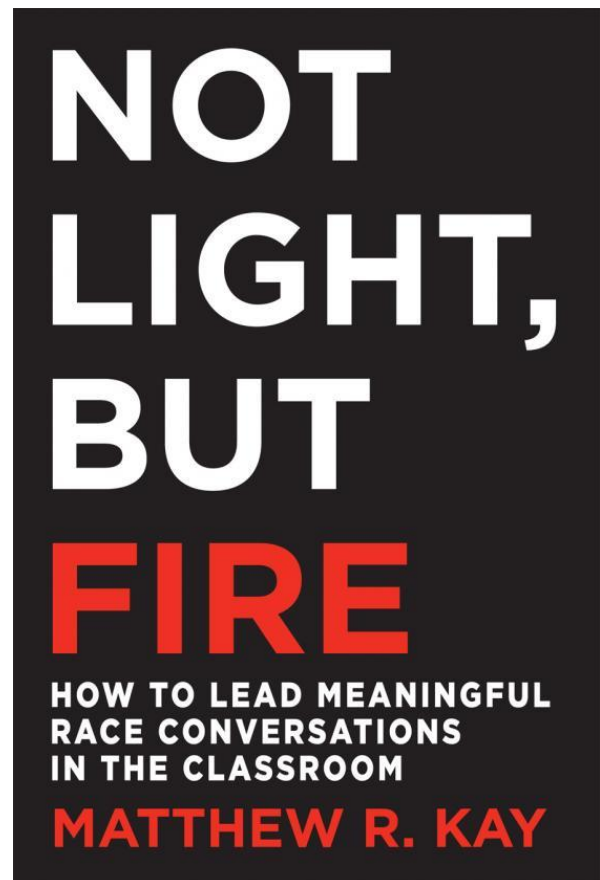
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There is a great need to discuss race in the classroom, and to establish civil discourse around difficult topics, especially in these trying political times. However, it is often difficult to do this effectively. What educators need is a practical how-to guide to facilitate productive conversations about race, and Matthew Kay's *Not Light, But Fire* is just that. Kay moves beyond empty rhetoric and superficial stances and lays the foundation for a classroom environment that is conducive to rich, engaging, and meaningful dialogue.

Kay is an African American high school language arts teacher at Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia. In the introduction, Kay quotes Frederick Douglass's abolitionist challenge that "It is not *light* that is needed, but *fire*" (p. 4). Douglass was responding to the critique that he, along with many other abolitionists, were too direct in their rebuke of race discourse, and that he needed to shed more light on the race problem in this country. However, Douglass knew that the challenge then, as it is now, is that we never seem to graduate to the next level in our conversations on race. We have a great tolerance for empty



talk, especially when a racial incident takes place, but it remains as just that –talk. What we need are conversations with substance that move beyond superficial discourse and into meaningful action. We need to infuse our discussions with fire, engaging in honest and authentic inquiry. Just as fire irrevocably changes the environment it passes through, Kay maintains that our students should have meaningful race conversations that leave an indelible mark in our world. His book is an attempt to help us move to this next level, for it is an “action book with a movement mission” (p. 5).

Kay builds his book around the principles of dialogic pedagogy and divides it into two parts. He never explicitly states the theoretical framework that he uses; the book is very much practitioner-focused, aiming to give teachers practical tips they can immediately take into the classroom. However, there are echoes of Paulo Freire (1970) in how he approaches his students and his teaching. He writes of disrupting the traditional classroom power dynamic, giving students equal voice in their education, and empowering students to enact change in the world. In the first part of the book, he explores the ecosystem that must be in place before any discussions of race can even occur. The second part provides case studies of four conversations that Kay has facilitated in his classroom: facing the N-word head on, unpacking the cultural significance of names, tackling cultural appropriation, and addressing pop-up conversations, specifically related to recent events.

Without a foundation for healthy classroom relationships and guidelines for conversation structures, discussions of race cannot thrive. Kay maintains that it is simply not enough to declare that a classroom is a “safe space.” These spaces need to be intentionally built. Kay outlines three discussion guidelines: listen patiently, listen actively, and police your voice. In listening patiently, students should never be

interrupted. In listening actively, students are encouraged to cite each other in moving the conversation forward. And in policing your voice, the teacher is no longer the prime audience, and students need to understand that they need to speak succinctly, being humbly aware of the space that they are occupying. It is important to note that while Kay outlines these guidelines specifically for students, they certainly apply to educators as well. These skills need to be practiced, especially during the first few weeks of class. Kay gives a “training camp” period during this time when students practice conversations in large and small groups, and reflect not just on the topic at hand, but on how well they listened to each other.

Kay notes that teachers must earn their way into these conversations through “earnest humility” (p. 29). They cannot force their way into meaningful race conversations. The familial intimacy that is required for these types of conversation requires a sense of trust and community. He differentiates the kinds of discussion that typically take place in a classroom from “house talk,” which is the familial, genuine, and vulnerable conversations that happen in our closest relationships. It’s within “house talk” relationships that meaningful conversations around race can happen.

Kay outlines three activities that help build trust and community in his classroom. He stresses the importance of engaging students as humans before engaging them as students, and he tries to use the first five minutes of class to simply banter with them (which he calls “Burn Five Minutes”), asking them about their interests and lives. Although these conversations only take a few minutes each day, he says that “this banking of conversational democracy buttresses all other classroom dialogue” so that students are more willing to take risks and handle missteps (p. 31). In an activity he calls “Good News,” Kay asks students to share any good things that are

happening in their lives each week, which helps to lay a foundation of empathy that later conversations depend on. Finally, Kay uses “High-Grade Compliments” every few months to help bolster the class and deepen community, because the focus is on seeing who the person is as a human being. Some might view this first half of the book as not necessarily relevant to their course content and may be tempted to skip over these sections to examine the case studies he presents. However, Kay makes a compelling case for how this foundational community-building is needed before any conversations on race can happen.

In addition to building trust and a classroom community, teachers need to self-assess and reflect on their own racial experiences, because these influence their ability to hear and respond to their students, who may come from very different backgrounds. Teachers also need to be able to facilitate discussions, which requires a certain level of interpersonal intelligence. Kay maintains that the traits that are most needed are expressing oneself clearly, resolving conflict, and shifting gears. Kay quotes research by Silberman and Hansburg (2000) in reinforcing that the more rigorous the discussion, the more there needs to be an effective summary of that conversation. In resolving conflict, Kay cites research by Lebedun (1998), in which the latter categorizes the different kinds of conflict that exist about facts/data, processes/methods, purposes, and values – and the importance of recognizing them when they arise in the classroom. Teachers also need to have a certain level of agility in navigating classroom conversations, especially when they go awry or in unanticipated directions. While the importance of interpersonal intelligence is duly noted, and while understanding how to manage conflict seems to be a given when discussing how to facilitate conversations about race, Kay could have delved a little deeper in citing more current research, and in developing these

concepts further. It would have been helpful if he had been more explicit in acknowledging the ways that people typically cope with conflict. Discussing proactive ways that teachers can preempt conflict could have been useful as well. Toegel & Barsoux (2016) maintain that conflict prevention is much easier than conflict resolution. Including a deeper discussion of how to address areas of potential conflict before they become causes of concern could be a useful addition to the book.

Kay notes that the biggest controversies often have to do with racism – what counts as racism, the outcomes, and what should be done about it. One case study involves examining the N-word head on. The unit’s essential question centers on what influences people’s sensitivity to words, abuses, and ideas. In this, Kay opens the discussion by writing the N-word on the board, claiming that everyone has some relationship with the word, and having students reflect on it in writing. They then examine the rules around the word – who can say it, who cannot, and in what context. As he guides the discussion, the class highlights the word’s complexity; and as the class period wraps up, he has the students summarize the conversation that took place and list any observations that were unearthed during the discussion. He also outlines suggestions for educators to prepare for these types of discussion, because as he emphasizes, race conversations should never be haphazard. It is important to note that as an African American male, Kay is able to approach this unit from a particular stance that others might not be available to. Still, he invites educators to take stock of their own strengths and weaknesses, their students’ cultural and academic backgrounds, and to adjust accordingly.

Another tricky topic that Kay handles head on is cultural appropriation. He uses Richard Wright’s (1940) *Native Son* as the text to examine notions of “playing white,” which

leads to discussions of minstrelsy and cultural appropriation. This chapter, more than the others, involves a much closer reading of multiple passages of *Native Son* as a frame for these larger conversations, and is particularly suited for upper level language arts teachers.

Kay writes that the meat of the conversation on cultural appropriation comes when students dissect why it is that people appropriate, why it can be so offensive, and what responsibility people have to the cultures they copy. He mentions that his students spend more time arguing about cultural appropriation than other contemporary racial issues, because of its proximity to their own lives. By unpacking these themes in the novel, students unearth a white world/black world dichotomy where each side thinks it knows the other, but whose realities are only formed by stereotypes of each other. The white and black characters in the novel cannot see each other authentically, because they are mired in their own misperceptions and stereotypes of each other. Kay connects these themes in the book to his own class, where he wants his students to “measure just how much they are allowing stereotypes, past grievances, and myths to cloud their ability to see each other, to be fair with each other—so that they might eventually spend a little more time building relationships, and less time at each other’s throats” (p. 238). This gets to the core of the struggles the U.S. has with its race discourse, and how we have a need to see each other more authentically through our cultural separation.

It is obvious that Kay’s students are very diverse in race, ethnicity, and religion. His students are in close contact with a multitude of perspectives and experiences, and all of this comes to the fore in his classroom. This may not be the experience of some readers of this book, who may have students from more homogenous backgrounds. In such cases, teachers have to be mindful of how they frame and approach any discussion of race, being sure not to tokenize students from minoritized backgrounds, and being sure to not frame the discussion around “them” versus “us.” I appreciated Kay’s emphasis throughout the book on focusing on students as humans first, and in developing empathy. It echoes Kendi (2019) in that the ultimate struggle in having conversations about race is “the struggle to be fully human and to see that others are fully human” (p. 11).

The book is compelling and clearly written, with very practical tips that educators can use immediately in their classrooms. Doing this kind of work requires a great deal of intentionality, and the payoffs could be tremendous; but at the same time, things could go awry very quickly and could potentially be quite negative, especially for students of color. Educators must walk a fine line so that they do not inadvertently tokenize or put them in uncomfortable positions for the benefit of their white classmates. This is a useful and necessary book for all educators who are looking to have productive, meaningful, and consequential race conversations in the classroom.

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