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Asking the Tough Questions: Teaching Literature and Nonfiction through Critical Literacy to Recapture Our Voices, Agency, and Mission

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Exploding the Myth of Mental Illness

CONTEXT: Online humanities class (English 110) at Northern Michigan University

Over a period of six weeks, students read five novels, watch one film, and read a short story, a few poems, and some news articles. In addition to completing a literary analysis, a character analysis, and multiple discussion boards, students are asked to create public blogs in which they respond to the readings each week.

Sample Questions:

What do you already know about mental illness? How has literature (stories, films, books) or popular culture (advertisements, television, radio, music, etc.) shaped what you know about mental illness?

How do the poems by Kaitlyn Tramp inform your understanding of mental illness?

How does reading *The Lovely Bones* or *My Friend Dahmer* give you insight into mental illness/psychological problems? What did you know/believe about serial killers before reading? What do you know/believe about serial killers now? What can we do to reach out to individuals *before* they kill anyone? How does reading the book influence what you know/believe about the human condition?

- 1 in 5 youth aged 13-18 experience a “seriously debilitating mental disorder” This means 3 million high schoolers have experienced mental illness.
 - Disturbed. Nuts. Freak. Psycho. Spastic. Crazy. Mental. These are among more the 200 labels researchers identified in British study of youth.
 - Studies report that there are many stereotypes about individuals with mental illness; often, they are considered incompetent, dangerous, and responsible for their own illnesses.
 - A lack of understanding & persistent stigma encourage many young adults to “other” those with mental illness.
 - Reading novels focused on mental illness can help students investigate language choices and explore how characters with psychological problems are treated by peers, bullies and community members.
 - Asking questions that help students examine language and stigma and to connect their own experiences, popular culture, other literature, news, etc., helps them think critically about the novels they read.
 - Using blogs helps students to use images, music, video, etc. to demonstrate their understanding of literary content.
 - Teaching novels about depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, OCD, etc., can positively affect students’ beliefs about mental illness and encourage them to confront othering/stigmatization.
- Richmond, K.J. (August 23, 2017). *Language and Symptoms of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature*. (Dr. Bickmore’s YA Wednesday Blog).
- Richmond, K.J. (2014) Using literature to confront the stigma of mental illness, teach empathy, and break stereotypes," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 30 (1), Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2038>
- Richmond, K.J. (forthcoming). *Mental illness in young adult literature: Exploring real struggles through fictional characters*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO (Greenwood Press).