

# Teaching 'intersectionality' through literature

by Robert Craig

## I. Our intersectionalities

Before we teach intersectionality, we need to think about how to teach intersectionally. What do our pupils' or our students' lived experiences look like? How many different worlds do we have in front of us in the classroom on a Monday morning? What do they see and hear when they watch and listen to us talking at the front of the class? We'll never come close to fully knowing; but to give our pupils and students the best launching pad for later life, we need a sense of where they've come from and how their particular combination and intersection of circumstances has shaped who they are. Just as importantly, we need to help challenge and curb the [alarming popularity](#) of the politics of the far right among young people, both here in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

For some pointers on thinking about our pupils' and our students' intersectionalities, I recommend checking out the resources in the '[Portal Intersectionality](#)' in German, below, as well as [this article published by Monita Bell in 2016](#). [Jessie Kwak's article](#) of 2021 is also very useful, as is this recent piece published on the [University of Connecticut website](#), even if they are more focused on university than school education. The English-language pieces I've listed below are fairly US-centric, but many of the insights apply – with some adaptation – to Europe as well. As our continent faces the substantial social, political and cultural challenges of our currentage of migration, it has never been more important to think and to teach intersectionally.

## II. Intersectionality in the classroom:

One of the specific challenges of discussing intersectionality with school pupils is the risk that it can exaggerate the differences and distances *between* pupils from different backgrounds, rather than highlighting the very many things they have in common. Precisely because of that, it's a concept that requires careful introduction and contextualization. If you're a schoolteacher, you also need to make sure – in consultation with senior colleagues – that you are able to discuss these ideas in the classroom; and if you are, then you will need to make sure of the terms and conditions under which you can discuss them.<sup>[1]</sup>

For children in *Klassen 1-6*, I strongly recommend checking out the materials provided and workshops offered under the aegis of the project [Film Macht Mut](#), which is coordinated and run by [Vision Kino](#).

Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" is best read and discussed with motivated and engaged pupils in English who are close to completing their *Abitur*, and who already have at least some knowledge of American culture and history. Studying it offers excellent preparation, for example, for those who might want to continue with English and American Studies; and it also makes a very satisfying first- or second-semester text on an English and American Studies programme at university.

There are, of course, innumerable films, and TV series – in both English and all other European languages – which might be used to illustrate ‘intersectionality’. The following set of lesson plans first covers the concept of intersectionality and secondly turns to focus on the short story, “Recitatif”; but you can adapt the basic structure to many different kinds of text.

Depending on the ability and motivation of your class, and on whether you’re teaching school pupils or university students, there may be material here for two, three, or even more sessions: **the timings are ambitious and can also be freely adapted**. But first, here’s a *non-exhaustive* selection of principles and practices to think about when preparing this topic.

### Guidelines for teaching intersectionality:

1. **Familiarize yourself closely with the guidelines for your own political self-expression in the classroom – and if in any doubt, talk to senior colleagues.** The *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* has published an excellent article on this subject, titled “[Wie politisch dürfen Lehrkräfte sein?](#)“
2. **Make and maintain a safe space.** While different views should certainly be encouraged, you should make it gently clear from the start that there will be no space for language and argument that is racist, sexist, classist, or ableist, or which degrades, humiliates, or intimidates. We can’t continually control for all the feelings and sensitivities of every single pupil; but before conducting the lesson, it’s a good idea to think about a few hypothetical ‘borderline’ scenarios. What kinds of comments, if left unchecked and uncriticized, might make a pupil of colour, or a pupil with a migration background, feel less secure in this group? What kinds of comments risk leaving a lasting impact on the group dynamics? There are always hidden classroom dynamics of which you’re not (fully) aware: let your intuition be your guide, and if in doubt, err on the side of caution.
3. **Know yourself and know your class.** It’s generally a good idea *not* to address a sensitive theme like this until you’ve taken a few months to get to know your class, and for them to get to know both you and one another. That way, you’ll have a much better sense of personalities and dynamics; and you may be able to better anticipate certain twists and turns and develop strategies in response. At any rate, this certainly isn’t a topic you should avoid just because you have a particularly challenging group.
4. **Don’t over-personalize.** Do by all means encourage pupils to share their own experiences – after all, this is a topic which comes alive through their input! But try not to *over-personalize* a topic like ‘intersectionality’, especially if your class is a diverse one. Pupils with a migration background shouldn’t feel under any pressure to serve as ‘representatives’ or ‘spokespeople’ for their or their parents’ communities and cultures: loaded (if well-intentioned) questions directed towards a particular ‘represented’ community – even if not at an individual – should be avoided; and we should gently steer our pupils away from these as well. Perhaps less obviously, we should also avoid inducing feelings of guilt or inadequacy in pupils who may come from more privileged backgrounds. Intersectionality is a tool to help us think in a more sophisticated way about identity and positionality: we have an opportunity to show how it **can enrich** rather than **undermine** German and European identities.

5. **Do be ready and willing to challenge – respectfully.** Expressions of outright prejudice should be firmly challenged and called out. Simplistic misunderstandings of ‘intersectionality’ can *also* be challenged, but in a way that is respectful and does not humiliate. There may well be disagreement – it is our job to train our pupils in the art of respectful debate – but no pupil should come away from the lesson feeling that they have been humiliated in front of their classmates. And if they do feel unsafe, angry or upset, pupils should always feel able to talk to you honestly and confidentially: remember to make that clear as well.
6. **Keep the big picture in mind.** The political discussion in Germany – and throughout Europe – is currently taking a dark turn. Opinions regarded as extreme a few years ago are now being expressed more and more openly, and a number of our pupils will hold far-right opinions or sympathies. As teachers, we have a duty of care and respect towards all our pupils, but we **should not** allow the boundaries of acceptability in the classroom to start drifting towards political extremes. Racism is rooted in ignorance, and it should be firmly confronted with rational argument, not with attempts to sweep it under the carpet or domesticate it.

### III. An Intersectionality lesson plan (3-4 sessions)

#### Goals and objectives:

- To introduce school pupils (especially in *Klassen 11, 12 or 13*) to the concept of ‘intersectionality’;
- to demonstrate its value and usefulness;
- to explore some of the difficulties and controversies around the term;
- to practise the art of ‘close reading’ through a detailed discussion of Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif”;
- to use this short story as a gateway for thinking about intersectionality on the one hand, and the history of race relations in the US in the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the other.

#### Part I: Intersectionality (sessions 1-2):

##### 1) Overview:

Germany is a country with very strong anti-discrimination laws. It is also a less unequal country than (for example) the USA. But it’s also a country which, despite skills shortages in all areas of its economy, is still marked by **significant inequalities**.

##### Activity 1 (30-45 minutes):

Organize the pupils into groups of two or three to spend 15-20 minutes discussing the following two questions:

- What are some of the specific reasons why some individuals – from childhood onwards – may find themselves at a disadvantage on account of their background?
- Discrimination has been outlawed in Germany, and both federal and regional governments strive to ensure equality of opportunity. But why do you think this so hard to achieve in practice? Try to come up with at least two specific reasons!
- Allow your pupils to share their findings in a group discussion (c. 15 minutes).

## 2) The concept:

Start by giving a **brief overview of the concept**, and of its roots in critical race theory (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Explain the outline of the concept with the help of a hypothetical illustration or thought experiment: you might want to adapt the example with which I opened my video! But try not (yet!) to explain the metaphor of ‘intersections’ behind the idea. You’ll get round to that in a bit...

### Activity 2 (30-45 minutes):

- What image(s) come to mind when you hear or say the word ‘intersectionality’? After explaining the concept, ask each pupil to **visualize** the concept for themselves with the help of a simple drawing or sketch, and without showing their neighbours.
- Ask one volunteer to come up to the front of the classroom to draw another pupil’s picture on the whiteboard (traditional or virtual) on the basis of that pupil’s instructions.
- Depending on the time available, you may want to ask for further volunteers (especially if different pupils have come up with different images).
- Ask the volunteers: why did you choose *these particular* images? How do they illustrate the concept?

Building on what the pupils have drawn, and with the help of a Powerpoint graphic, you can now explain the crossroads imagery behind Crenshaw’s concept: see my video presentation for some ideas about this.

You could also take the opportunity to explain that intersectionality had become quite a controversial concept in recent years – not least among right-wing populist politician and journalists. The important takeaway from this part of the session is that intersectionality is **not** a tool to be used by ‘liberal elites’ to discriminate against white people.

The message of intersectionality is *not* that “each and every white person enjoys more advantages than each and every person of colour” (as it is sometimes caricatured). By contrast, at its best, it represents a tool for thinking in a more sophisticated way about identity: we have a chance to show how it enriches rather than undermining German and European identities.

### Part II: "Recitatif" (Lessons 3-4):

I would recommend providing a **glossary** that can help set the narrative in its historical contexts. To give just a few examples of some (brief) possible entries:

- What are the traditions (even the stereotypes) most closely associated with black (and African) American Christianity?
- Who was Jimi Hendrix?
- Where is Newburgh, New York, and why did Morrison choose this particular (deindustrialized) city as one of her locations?
- What was segregation?
- What was desegregation busing, and why is it an important part of the story’s plot?
- How has US police brutality towards people of colour become ever clearer in recent years (cf. George Floyd)?

### Activity 1: (pre-class) homework exercise:

Ask your pupils to create a document with a table split into two columns, one headed 'Twyla', the other headed 'Roberta': **in other words, a kind of balance sheet**. While reading and noting, the pupils should ask themselves who (of Twyla and Roberta) is black. Once they've read the story once, they should note down the pieces of evidence for either argument on both the 'Twyla' and the 'Roberta' sides of the ledger. Encourage them to look for 5-10 pieces of evidence for each character – together with a page number and a **brief** justification. On the basis of the accumulated textual evidence, they should then come to an overall verdict and record it below the table. Do encourage them *not* to use Google to try to find possible answers; and you've provided a good glossary, they shouldn't need to! 😊

### Activity 2: small group & class discussion (20 + 30 minutes):

Your pupils should compare notes with each other, this time in **different** groups of 2-3:

- Did they come to similar conclusions, and why/why not?
- Why do they suppose that Toni Morrison chose to write "Recitatif" in this particular way?
- What game is she playing with us as readers, and what point(s) is she trying to make?

The following class discussion (c. 30 minutes) should be a chance to compare verdicts. The idea of this part of the activity is to demonstrate to pupils the value and importance, as well as the particular challenge, of close literary reading. It's also a chance to show pupils the possibility of coming to very different interpretations and judgments, depending on your perspective.

And what game *is* Morrison playing? The point of this question is not to accuse your pupils of prejudice, but rather to show them how Morrison confronts us with our own socialized prejudices and reveals how we've come to associated certain social and cultural codes with particular racial and ethnic identities.

### Activity 3: pre-class homework & small group and class discussion (30-45 minutes):

Pupils should imagine that they are either Twyla or Roberta. They have been asked by a teacher at the orphanage to explain their behaviour towards Maggie. On the basis of the evidence in the short story:

- Why have they been joining in with the bullying of her? (Try to give two or three different reasons.)
- How might Twyla and Roberta try to explain their behaviour towards Maggie?

The pupils should try to put themselves in Twyla's and Roberta's shoes and make notes on these questions, before discussing it in class, once again in **new** groups of 2-3.

### Activity 4: small-group and class discussions (30-45 minutes):

Go back to the diagrams of intersectionality from lesson 1. In small groups, the pupils should discuss the following questions:

- How many 'roads' does Maggie find herself at the intersection (or the crossroads) of? As a character in this story, why does she embody and illustrate the principle of intersectionality?
- Maggie doesn't speak, and she's largely **absent** from the short story. But why does Toni Morrison make her such an important part of the narrative?
- What **message(s)** is Morrison trying to convey to her readers through the figure of Maggie?

The concluding part of this cycle of sessions should gather all the contributions together. The aim should be to show how Maggie – as the 'lowest of the low' in the America of the 1950s and 1960s – embodies the principle of intersectionality at its most extreme. If time allows, you could discuss the central role that race still plays in American politics and society. In this sense, Maggie embodies the traumatic legacy of both slavery and segregation, which endures to the present day.

It's clear from the text that Maggie is a woman of colour who's intellectually and physically disabled. She's disempowered. She has no words to tell her own story. Of all the story's characters, she most clearly embodies its intersectional dynamics, and the bullying she faces recalls many of the darkest moments in America's interracial history. But she also reminds us that the lives that are seemingly the strangest and the most distant from us – the lives situated at the most complex intersections – are also the ones we need to try hardest to understand.

<sup>[1]</sup> For some general pointers here, see Wrase, Michael. "Wie politisch dürfen Lehrkräfte sein? Rechtliche Rahmenbedingungen und Perspektiven." *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (2020), Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BPB), March 27, 2020. Accessed June 16, 2024. <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/306955/wie-politisch-duerfen-lehrkraefte-sein/>.

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Toni Morrison & "Recitatif" (web and print):

*NB: Various PDF versions of the short story are easily accessible online. However, I would recommend tracking down the following edition, which includes Zadie Smith's excellent introductory essay (also listed below).*

Morrison, Toni. *Recitatif*. Introduced by Zadie Smith. London: Chatto & Windus, 2022.

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