Theme: Capital Punishment

Supplementary Lesson Plan for 2016-17 Campus Read “Just Mercy,” by Bryan Stevenson

Capital Punishment

“Why do we want to kill all the broken people?” Bryan Stevenson

“Death penalty is not about whether people deserve to die for the crimes they commit. The real question of capital punishment in this country is, do we deserve to kill?” Bryan Stevenson

“...we would never think it was humane to pay someone to rape people convicted of rape or assault and abuse someone guilty of assault or abuse. Yet we are comfortable killing people who kill, in part because we think we can do it in a manner that doesn’t implicate our own humanity, the way that raping or abusing someone would.” Bryan Stevenson

“Capital punishment means ‘them without the capital get the punishment’” (p.6) Bryan Stevenson

Total Time: 50-60 Minutes

Required Materials: Projector/Screen

Lesson Objectives:

By the end of this discussion/panel/lesson students or participants should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of universal human rights
- Examine and discuss their views about the death penalty
- Discuss the economic, social, and psychological impact of capital punishment on families and communities
- Justify the role of compassion in the criminal justice system

Beginning the Lesson

- Lesson Awareness/Caveat: Before beginning this discussion please inform the participants about the topic and allow any of them to exit or leave if they feel affected or emotional. Refer them to the Carruth Center for Psychological services center
- Begin lesson with an ice breaker activity of your choice
- Distribute index cards to students and ask them to indicate whether they agree or disagree with death penalty and the reasons for their choice. Allow volunteers to share their answer and rationale to the whole group
- Pause a reflective questions:
  - Does death penalty deter violent crimes?
  - How do executions related to death penalty affect us as a society?
- Ask participants to brainstorm various historical figures who have been executed

Body of the Lesson

- Share basic information about death penalty (see Appendix A)
- Divide participants into groups of fours and ask them to discuss alternatives to death penalty
- Discussion on Universal Human Rights
- Ask the participants to share stories about death penalty
• **Just Mercy**
  o Discuss the core message of Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* based on the excerpt below
    “We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent….We are bodies of broken bones. I guess I’d always known but never fully considered that being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we’re shattered by the things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion….We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means embracing our broken natures and the compassion that remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness, forswear compassion, and, as a result, deny our own humanity” (p.289)  
    “In fact, there is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can’t otherwise see; you hear things you can’t otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.” (p. 290)  
    “…Walter had taught me that mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven’t earned it, who haven’t sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion.
  o Discuss the effect of death penalty and how it affects all parties  
  o Should it be abolished (refer to facts about death penalty listed in Appendix A)  
  o Provide a brief description of the WVU’s innocence project and also the number of innocent people who have been wrongful executed due to:  
    • Eye witness misidentification  
    • Improper scientific/forensic evidence  
    • False confessions  
    • Unreliable informant testimony  
    • Inadequate legal counsel\(^1\)

Closing the Lesson

• What can we do?
• Ask participants to share any lingering questions or thoughts they have regarding death penalty or what has been discussed in the panel/lesson

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\(^1\) WVU Innocence Project: [http://wvinnocenceproject.wvu.edu/caus](http://wvinnocenceproject.wvu.edu/caus)
Appendix A: Notes on Capital Punishment

Bryan Stevenson

“There was a shamefulness about the experience of Herbert’s execution I couldn’t forsake. Everyone I saw at the prison seemed surrounded by a cloud of regret and remorse. The prison officials had pumped themselves to carry out the execution with determination and resolve, but even they revealed extreme discomfort and some measure of shame. Maybe I was imagining it but it seemed that everyone recognized what was taking place was wrong. Abstractions about capital punishment were one thing, but the details of systematically killing someone who is not a threat are completely different.

…we would never think it was humane to pay someone to rape people convicted of rape or assault and abuse someone guilty of assault or abuse. Yet we are comfortable killing people who kill, in part because we think we can do it in a manner that doesn’t implicate our own humanity, the way that raping or abusing someone would. I couldn’t think that we don’t spend much time contemplating the detail of what killing someone actually involves.” (Bryan Stevenson, pp. 90-91).

Facts about capital punishment

- 31 states that allow capital punishment
- 19 states plus the District of Columbia have abolished or do not allow death penalty
- The likelihood of a death sentence is 4 times higher for cases with white victims than for cases blacks victims
- The likelihood of a death sentence is 11 times higher in cases in which blacks killed whites than for cases where whites killed black victims
- There are about 2,943 people on death row
- Death is expensive
  - To prosecute
    - Pre-trial and trial costs
    - Automatic appeals
  - To investigate
  - To incarcerate
- By end of 2015, only 102 countries had abolished death penalty

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2 Amnesty International: https://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/deathpenaltycurriculumguide.pdf
3 Ibid.
5 See: http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/costs-death-penalty