Anti-Villainification Strategies for social studies teachers

Cathryn van Kessel, PhD
University of Alberta
vankesse@ualberta.ca

North Central Teachers Convention (NCTCA), February 7, 2019

Image by J.J. at the English language Wikipedia
villainification

= the often unintentional process of focusing on one person (i.e., the villain) as wholly representative of a larger evil, and thus everyone else becomes “off the hook” (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017)

• a common example would be Hitler as the embodiment of the horrors of the Second World War. His actions were horrible, but many others were involved directly and indirectly as well
“when textbook authors leave out the warts, the problems, the unfortunate character traits, and the mistaken ideas, they reduce heroes from dramatic men and women to melodramatic stick figures. Their inner struggles disappear and they become goody-goody, not merely good.”

- Loewen, 2007, p. 36.
Case in Point: Woodrow Wilson

- The Fourteen Points!
- Also, a white supremacist...
Why should we care?

- heroification strips us of our sense of agency to do good in the world, and makes history boring

- both heroification and villainification boil down intricate webs of events, people, and ideologies into a single isolated component—the hero or villain

- also, villainification might prevent us from seeing how we perpetuate evil through our daily actions
Arendt: Banality of Evil

• intent not required to do evil

• thoughtlessness: the banality of evil

• “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or to do either evil or good”
Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders."
thoughtlessness

- lack of critical thought about how we affect others
- how are we part of harmful systems?

https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/reserve-police-battalion-101
Minnich: Intensive & Extensive Evil

• extensive evil = carried out by many otherwise decent people for significant periods of time

• intensive evil = perpetuated by a limited number of people and are exceptions to the norm

https://blog.apaonline.org/2017/03/15/on-the-life-and-death-importance-of-thinking/
Ordinary Folks, Intentional Evil


https://sites.google.com/a/moreaucatholic.org/rwandan-genocide/causes/extermination
Becker: Fetishized Evil

- why ordinary people intentionally harm others

- to feel secure in an insecure world, we see ourselves and our worldview as good

- those different from us are a reminder that our ways aren’t the only ways, and so we tend to see them as “evil” and then we can do terrible things to them and still be the hero
The contaminated “other”

"Which weapons are we going to use to beat the cockroaches for good?"
A **stereotype** is an oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for individual differences.

**Prejudice** is pre-judging, making a decision about a person or group of people without sufficient knowledge. Prejudicial thinking is based on stereotypes. Prejudice is an attitude.

**Discrimination** is the behaviour that can follow prejudicial thinking. Discrimination is the denial of justice and fair treatment in many arenas, including employment, housing and political rights.

**Scapegoating** is assigning blame to a person/group (based upon prejudice).

**Fetishizing evil** is the drive to eliminate these scapegoats whose removal/extinction you see as beneficial. You are the hero who is eradicating evil.
• All immigrants milk the system. (stereotyping)

• I don’t like immigrants. (prejudice)

• Let’s not hire or interact with immigrants. (discrimination)

• Immigrants are the reason that our economy is terrible. (scapegoating)

• If we get rid of the immigrants, then our economy will flourish again (fetishizing evil)
anti-villainification strategies

1. make villains more ordinary

• for example, show pictures of Hitler smiling, and being a “normal” human (see the Grim Educator website for a full lesson plan)

• emphasize how it’s difficult to see similar processes in play now, if we see a villain wholly unlike us

https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4240262/Hitler-s-telephone-sells-161-000.html
anti-villainification strategies

2. discuss with your students how ordinary people, just like us, can do terrible things (e.g., thoughtlessness, obedience, fetishizing evil)

• then, embody the opposite characteristics:

  • discuss the effects we have on others and the planet (e.g., eating habits and climate change)

  • teach historical and contemporary disobedience and provide opportunities for your students to disobey you!

  • reveal the fetishization of evil as its happening in current events (e.g., rhetoric of the “swarm” of migrants at the Southern U.S. border)
anti-villainification strategies

3. Think about perspectives

• ask students how the story of their life so far would be depicted differently if it were written by someone who sees you as a villain or a hero, then apply that to historical figures

• examine complex villains from popular culture to illustrate how it’s not as simple as “good versus evil” (e.g., Darth Vader’s backstory, anti-heroes like Tyrion Lannister from Game of Thrones, empathetic villains like Heath Ledger’s Joker, etc.) Dilate representations of evil!

• don’t debate figures like Columbus as a hero OR villain… how are they both??!!!
in a nutshell...

• educate in the tension between blaming one villain or a faceless mob (e.g., “society”)

• accept personal responsibility without shouldering the blame for everything (the “system”)
It is dangerous to create villains in both historical and contemporary times. A focus on an individual at the expense of groups and systems allows us to shut down our thinking about the part that we all play, or could have played, in the atrocities we are quick to condemn and blame on a select few. Investigating the form and function of villainification can reinvigorate the complexity inherent in our human situation, pushing back against the ways school texts can portray historical actors, in which, “not only victims, but also victimizers, collaborators, resisters, bystanders, and rescuers were all individualized or collectively represented, normalized or exoticized, personalized or abstracted—that is, if their roles were included in the first place” (Schweber, 2004, p. 157).
https://omeka-s.library.ualberta.ca/s/Grim-Educator

descriptions, lesson ideas, lesson plans, and more!
Selected References


thank you!

Cathryn van Kessel
vankesse@ualberta.ca