Curriculum Design Project

Susan Huang

University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education EDUC 6101: Curriculum Development and Enactment Dr. Jennifer Valerio

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Narrative Introduction: The Contemporary Trial

In 2024, I served as the project planner for the Shenzhen Children's Library's "Twist on Classic" initiative, in which students from more than thirty elementary, middle, and high schools reinterpreted classic works and brought their adaptations to the stage. What stayed with me from that experience was not the polish of the final performances, but a pattern I noticed in almost every rehearsal room: students could tell me why a text was considered a classic long before they could tell me whether they actually believed that. They had learned the answer, but not the question. This curriculum, "The Contemporary Trial," began as my attempt to close that gap, to build a classroom where students are not only allowed but required to interrogate the authority of the texts they are handed.

Rationale

Traditional approaches to classic texts tell students that these works matter because they have stood the test of time. What they rarely ask is: Who administers that test? By what criteria? And whose work never made it into the courtroom to begin with? Left unexamined, these questions produce what I have come to think of as performative literacy—students who can perform reverence for a text but who have never been given permission to say, "I disagree with this," or "There is a problem here." The Contemporary Trial framework restages this dynamic quite literally: students place a classic text on trial, assembling evidence, assigning roles, and arguing whether the work deserves its canonical status. I designed this structure around three converging rationales.

First, high school freshmen are in a critical stage of identity formation. What they need is not to be handed conclusions, but practice exercising their own judgment against claims that arrive dressed in authority. Classic texts are ideal material for this kind of practice: they are authoritative enough to be worth scrutinizing, yet complex enough to resist easy refutation. A trial format gives students a structure sturdy enough to hold that ambiguity without collapsing into either blind reverence or empty dismissal.

Second, students at international schools often live inside a particular kind of cultural dislocation—moving fluently between cultural contexts without necessarily having the tools to analyze the tensions between them. The trial format requires a student to take a position and defend it publicly. That act of staking a claim is, in itself, a form of training in cultural self-positioning; it asks students to locate themselves rather than simply observe from the space between cultures.

Third, drama education bridges the gap between emotion and cognition in a way that reading alone often cannot. Students may understand a historical situation intellectually while remaining untouched by it emotionally, and that kind of understanding tends not to travel. When students physically inhabit a role—prosecutor, witness, juror—inside a conflict, the resulting understanding is more durable and more transferable to situations well beyond the text in question.

Context

This curriculum is built around a blended structure of regular classes and a project week. Regular sessions—two per week, forty-five minutes each, ninety minutes total—are devoted to knowledge construction: reading texts, researching historical and cultural context, and preparing arguments. The project week, which follows ten regular sessions, is reserved for the trial itself: the public, theatrical presentation, the rewriting of findings, and structured reflection.

The Contemporary Trial targets high school freshmen at an international school in Shenzhen. The student body is predominantly local Chinese students, and instruction is conducted in English, though the classroom itself moves fluidly between English and Chinese. Some students arrive with prior experience in theater or performing arts; others are notably reserved when asked to externalize emotion in front of peers. This range matters: a

framework that assumes universal comfort with performance would exclude precisely the students who might benefit most from being gently pushed into it.

For this first iteration, I am the sole instructor, responsible for every dimension of the course—instructional design, classroom facilitation, dramatic coaching, and assessment. Combining drama education with critical pedagogy inside a single classroom makes real demands on a teacher's ability to improvise, which is why the framework itself needs to be teacher-friendly: clear steps, defined time limits, and predetermined points where the instructor is expected to intervene. Looking ahead, I have designed the structure to accommodate interdisciplinary collaboration, should it become possible—literature teachers handling textual analysis, history and social studies teachers handling contextual research, and drama teachers guiding the physical and situational work. For now, though, the coherence of the unit rests entirely on my ability to hold all three of those roles at once.

Influences

My central argument is that meaningful learning requires both curiosity and friction; it rarely unfolds as a smooth or comfortable process. Like Freire, I do not subscribe to the "banking model" of education, in which knowledge is deposited into passive students (Freire, 1970). My approach instead combines constructivism with elements of critical pedagogy: students build understanding by engaging in genuine tension with the material, and that process has to happen within social relationships rather than in an isolated individual mind. I also want students to feel the pressure of having to take a position. Comfortable classroom discussion tends to let students avoid that pressure entirely, even though it is an unavoidable part of thinking and decision-making outside the classroom. For this reason, the dramatic activities in this unit are not decorative additions to the "real" learning; they are cognitive tools in their own right. I treat embodied knowledge as being as legitimate as conceptual knowledge, and I treat emotional engagement not as a pleasant bonus but as a necessary condition for understanding that lasts. Finally, I hold a strong commitment to project-based and problem-based learning. Independent, critical thinking matters enormously to me, but I do not want it purchased at the expense of collective learning; I want students to practice communicating, collaborating, and holding responsibility within a group, because that shared responsibility deepens not just individual thinking but the intellectual life of the class as a whole.

Schiro's (2013) framework of curriculum ideologies has been useful for locating my own commitments within this design. Of the four ideologies he outlines, I recognize my thinking most clearly in the learner-centered ideology: I am oriented toward students' individual needs rather than toward the demands of the academic discipline or of society at large, and I believe education should support the harmonious development of a student's intellectual, social, emotional, and physical capacities together. I want this course to function less as a body of content to be transmitted and more as an environment that provokes students into constructing meaning for themselves. My explicit philosophy in designing this course is that classic texts are not authorities to be accepted, but witnesses to be cross-examined. I have to acknowledge, though, that no course ideology exists in a vacuum; it sits inside a larger institutional paradigm. At an international school in Shenzhen, the real tension this framework will face is whether the school's broader curricular philosophy actually supports students in questioning authoritative texts, or whether that questioning is welcome only up to a point.

H. Richard Milner IV's (2017) "Reimagining the Null Curriculum" has shaped my thinking about this unit in a way I am still working through. The null curriculum—what is deliberately or unconsciously left out—matters here, but I have come to believe the hidden curriculum may matter even more precisely because it is so much harder to control. Consider something as basic as role assignment in a mock trial: if the students who speak English most

fluently consistently become prosecutors while quieter students are routed into the jury, the activity risks reproducing the very power structures it was designed to interrogate. Assessment carries the same risk. If I reward only linear, fluently delivered arguments in English, I am privileging a Western debate tradition and quietly devaluing forms of Chinese argumentation that may be indirect, narrative, or relationship-oriented rather than adversarial. This is not a hypothetical concern; it is a design problem I have to actively build against, through how I assign roles, how I scaffold argument, and how I define what counts as "good thinking" in the assessment rubric.

The null curriculum also requires me to be honest about what this framework leaves out. In emphasizing critical interrogation of classic texts, I have given comparatively little room to their aesthetic and linguistic beauty—the pleasure of the language itself, apart from its politics. Students may leave this unit knowing how to question a classic without ever having been invited to love it. I do not think that trade-off disqualifies the design, but I want to name it rather than let it operate silently. Like Milner, I believe that reimagining what curriculum is—and what we assume students are supposed to learn—is one of the more concrete ways educators can work toward changing the world their students will inherit. What I want most from this course is not that students master a particular reading of a particular text, but that they leave it more willing to embrace their own identities, more capable of critical thinking and problem-solving as transferable skills, and, ideally, a little more in love with learning than when they walked in.

Unit Overview: Understanding, Judgment, Creation

Overarching Goals

This course aims to help students develop the capacity to engage with inherited knowledge critically and creatively — not only to understand what a text says, but to question why it holds authority, whose interests it serves, and what new meanings can be made from it. Each module addresses one stage of a single cognitive arc, so that the way the modules are sequenced is itself part of the argument the course is making: understanding must precede judgment, and judgment must lead somewhere, or neither is worth much.

Unit Goals

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

- Analyze a classic text closely enough to reconstruct its historical, cultural, and rhetorical context, distinguishing informed critique from surface-level reaction.
- Construct and defend a position on a text's authority under public scrutiny, using evidence rather than instinct, while also articulating the strongest case for the position they oppose.
- Transform critical analysis into original creative work — a rewritten scene, a transplanted conflict, a new ending — that demonstrates a considered relationship to the source material rather than a rejection or an imitation of it.

Module	Focus Question	Overarching Module Goal(s)
Entering the Text	Whose story is this, and who gets to tell it?	Students will develop an understanding of how historical, cultural, and social context shapes the creation of a text, and will gain the ability to read a classic work both on its

		own terms and through a critical lens.
The Trial	Does this text deserve its authority?	Students will develop the ability to construct and defend an evidence-based argument, and will gain an understanding of how power, perspective, and bias operate within canonical texts and the institutions that preserve them.
Rewriting the Canon	If we were to tell this story today, what would we keep, and what would we change?	Students will develop the ability to translate critical thinking into creative action, and will gain an understanding of how reimagining a classic text is itself a form of cultural and ethical positioning.

Modules Summary

The three modules are arranged according to a deliberate cognitive sequence — understanding, judgment, creation — and each one requires something the previous module could not have prepared students for on its own.

Module 1: Understanding lays the foundation for everything that follows. Without a sufficiently deep grasp of the text and its context, students in Module 2 would have nothing to argue with — only impressions to argue from. This module exists precisely to prevent that outcome: it slows students down long enough that their eventual critique in Module 2 is grounded rather than reflexive.

Module 2: Judgment asks students to do something Module 1 deliberately withholds: take a side, build an argument, and defend it under public pressure. This is the moment "questioning authority" stops being an idea and becomes an action with consequences a student has to stand behind. Both prosecution and defense are required to take the assignment seriously — the students defending the text must construct the strongest possible case for its value, which means that even students arguing to convict a text have to understand, in detail, why it was worth putting on trial in the first place. This requirement is what keeps critical thinking here from collapsing into mere negation.

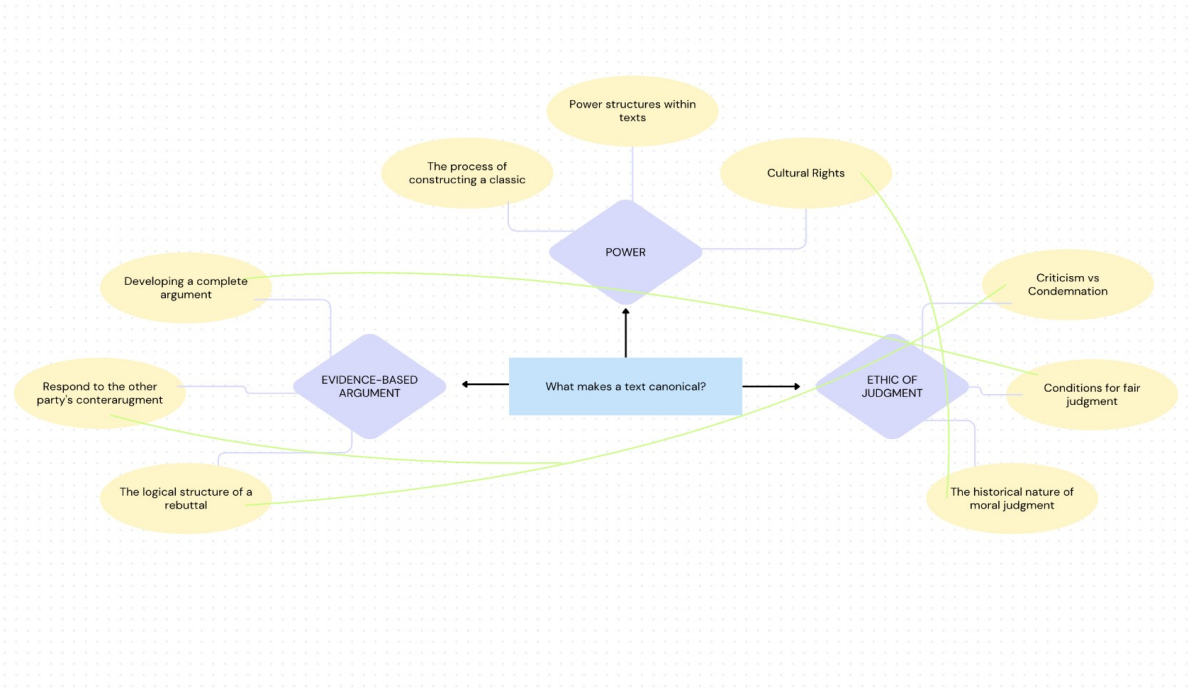
Module 3: Creation moves students from analysis to authorship. Having built an evidence-based understanding in Module 1 and a defended position in Module 2, students now transform that critical stance into a creative act — rewriting a scene, relocating a conflict, inventing an ending the original never offered. When students rewrite a classic under these conditions, they are not producing fan fiction or free imagination; they are establishing a new relationship with the source text, one that is neither reverence nor rejection but dialogue (Freire, 1970). This is the capacity the course is ultimately built to cultivate: creation that knows its own lineage.

Module Plan Desired Results & Content Inventory

Content Inventory

The content map for Contemporary Trial translates the module's Desired Results into a navigable structure. The essential question — What makes a text canonical? — anchors the center, with bidirectional arrows to Power, Evidence-Based Argument, and the Ethic of Judgment, showing that each branch both derives from and answers back to that question, in direct service of the module goal of building evidence-based argument alongside critical awareness of power and bias.

Each diamond's yellow subtopics operationalize the acquisition goals — argument construction, rebuttals, power analysis, criticism versus condemnation. The two green nodes, Complexity Tolerance and viewpoints/arguments/reasoning, mark the transfer goals: introduced at one subtopic, then threading across branches to show that sustaining productive tension is a habit that outlasts any single lesson.



Desired Results

Module Title: The Contemporary Trial **Duration of Module:** 10 sessions, 45 minutes each	
Desired Results	
MODULE GOAL(S)	***Meaning***

<table>
<tr>
<td>What goals will this module address?

• Students will develop the ability to construct and defend an evidence-based argument, and will gain an understanding of how power, perspective, and bias operate within canonical texts and the institutions that preserve them.</td>
<td>ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS
What key understandings will students gain from this module?
• Students will be able to distinguish among viewpoints, arguments, and reasoning and explain how they relate to one another.
• Students will be able to define cultural power and analyze how it shapes which texts are preserved, taught, and recognized as “classics.”
• Students will understand that canonical status is socially and historically constructed rather than naturally inherent.
• Students will be able to explain how moral judgments are shaped by their historical and cultural contexts.</td>
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<td rowspan="2">ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S)
What thought provoking questions will serve as the focus of this module in order to foster interest, meaning making, and transfer? (maximum=2)

• Does this text deserve to be called a classic?
• Can we judge a text fairly without either excusing it or condemning it?</td>
<td>Acquisition</td>
</tr>
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<td>ACQUISITION GOALS
What specific skills, knowledge, or dispositions will students gain?
• Students will be able to construct a valid, well-supported argument.
• Students will understand the logical structure of a rebuttal and how it effectively responds to an opposing argument.
• Students will be able to identify who holds narrative authority within a text and whose voices are marginalized or silenced, and explain how language and point of view reinforce or challenge that hierarchy — for example, whose perspective narrates key events, or which characters are granted interiority and which are described only from the outside.
• Students will be able to distinguish criticism from condemnation, explaining how criticism evaluates specific ideas, actions, or features through evidence and context, while condemnation renders a totalizing moral judgment that leaves little room for complexity or reconsideration.
• Students will be able to hold two competing interpretations of a text in mind at the same time, identifying what additional evidence would be needed to decide between them rather than collapsing the tension into a premature conclusion.

Transfer</td>
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	TRANSFER GOALS How will students apply this learning? • Students will apply evidence and logical reasoning as the foundation for meaningful dialogue whenever they seek to persuade others. • Students will interrogate who holds authority in any context they encounter and whose interests that authority serves. • Students will sustain productive tension and resist the pull to oversimplify complex issues, even when a quicker, cleaner answer would be more comfortable.

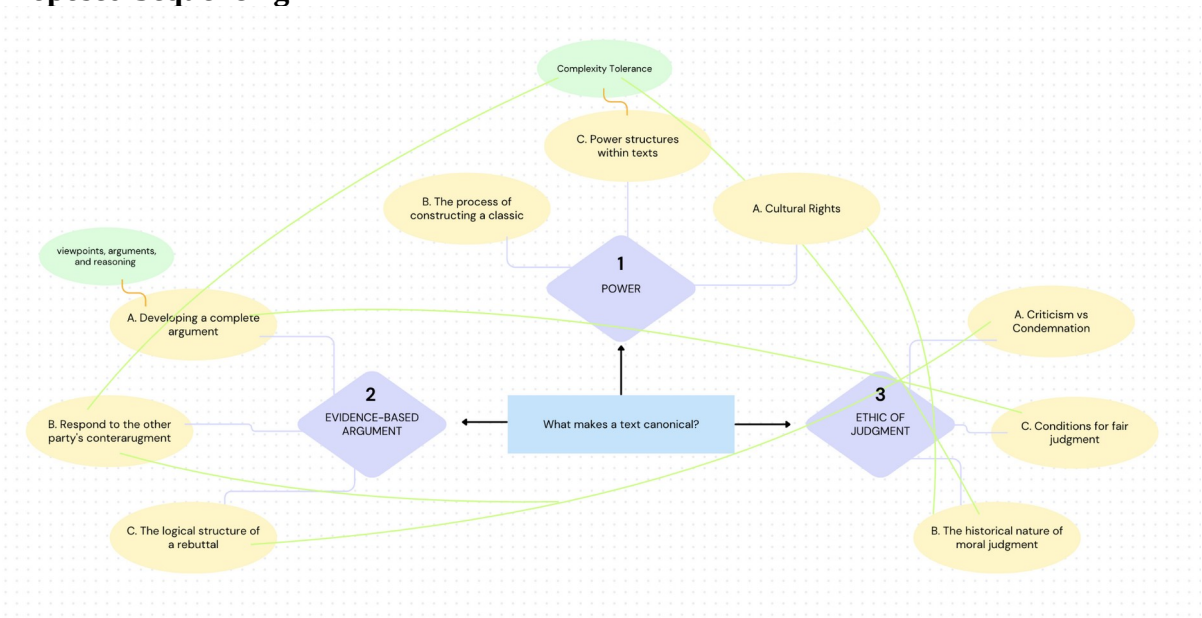
Module Plan Ideal Evidence of Learning & Proposed Sequencing

Ideal Evidence of Learning

Goal ***This should come directly from your desired results**	**Formative Evidence** ***Describe what it will look like if a student is part way to this goal. This is NOT an activity. "Students can _____"**	**Summative Evidence** ***Describe what it will look like if a student has fully attained this goal. This is NOT an activity. "Students can _____"**	**How will evidence of learning be elicited?** ***Describe what activity/assignment you will use to assess whether the student has fully attained this goal.** ***Students will be asked to…** **Students will be given… and will….**
Students will be able to define cultural power and analyze how it shapes which texts are preserved, taught, and recognized as "classics." (Meaning)	Students can define "cultural power" using one disciplinary terminology and apply this definition to analyze a literary work's inclusion in or exclusion from the canon.	Students can define "cultural power" using specific terminology (e.g., canon, gatekeeping, institutional authority) and use this definition to analyze cases of text inclusion/exclusion from the literary canon, explaining whose interests the classification serves and why.	FORMATIVE Book Club Presentation (Oral or Written): Students will present a favorite literary work and apply a key concept related to "cultural power" to explain how and why the work has been included in or excluded from the literary canon.
Students will be able to construct a valid, well-supported argument using the PEEL framework (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link) — stating a clear, defensible claim and supporting it with relevant	Students can construct an argument with a clear Point (defensible claim) and either sufficient Evidence or a logically connected Explanation, but not yet both.	Students can construct an argument with a clear Point, relevant Evidence, and a logically connected Explanation for each point — while addressing at least one counterargument or limitation through a Link	SUMMATIVE Contemporary Trial (Oral or acted): Students will be divided into two opposing teams and provided with core argument cards (given topic) and relevant reading

evidence, logical reasoning, and a response to at least one counterargument or limitation. (Acquisition)		back to their claim.	materials. Each team will construct and present its case using the PEEL framework (Point, Evidence, Explanation, and Link) to develop clear, logical, and well-supported arguments.
Students will be able to sustain productive tension and resist oversimplifying complex issues. (Transfer)	Students can identify and analyze at least two of the three dimensions: individual agency, systemic authority, and historical contingency. And begin to explain connections between them, although their analysis may remain uneven.	Students can integrate multiple perspectives by analyzing issues through the dimensions of individual agency, systemic authority, and historical contingency, and by explaining how these dimensions interact.	SUMMATIVE Case Files (Written): Students will receive “case files” drawn from classic literary works, each containing three to four excerpts describing key events from the plot of the stories. Through reflection, students will examine the forces shaping these events through three lenses: individual agency, institutional authority, and historical contingency, while explaining how these forces interact.
Students will understand how evidence and logical reasoning provide the foundation for meaningful dialogue whenever they seek to persuade others. (Transfer)	Student can present a clear claim supported by some relevant evidence and logical reasoning, acknowledge an opposing viewpoint, and begin to respond to it, although the connections among claims, evidence, and counterarguments may not yet be fully developed.	Student can construct and communicate a persuasive argument using relevant evidence and logical reasoning, respond thoughtfully to opposing viewpoints, and sustain a meaningful dialogue in which claims are examined rather than merely asserted.	FORMATIVE Waver: Students will position themselves along a “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” spectrum, then justify their position with one argument and one piece of evidence. They will also reflect on whether their position shifted, what influenced the change, and which counterargument challenged them most.

Proposed Sequencing



This module moves through three topics — Power, Evidence-Based Argument, and Ethics of Judgment — and the numbered, lettered content inventory tracks both the order of the topics and the sequence within each one. The module opens with students' existing instincts about which books count as "classics," using that starting point to introduce the mechanics of how canonization actually works, before moving to the power structures embedded within texts themselves. Only once students understand how a text becomes canonical are they equipped to ask the harder question waiting at the end of the Power section — Cultural Rights, or whose voices and interests that process serves and excludes. Students cannot meaningfully interrogate a system's beneficiaries until they first understand how the system operates.

The two topics that follow are sequenced according to a "low floor, gradual difficulty" structure, introducing foundational skills before the more demanding applications that depend on them. In Evidence-Based Argument, students first learn to construct a complete argument from claims, evidence, and reasoning — a skill that must exist before students can be asked to respond to someone else's. Only then do they practice identifying counterarguments and building logically structured rebuttals, since a rebuttal is, by definition, an argument built in response to another. Ethics of Judgment follows the same logic: students begin by examining how moral standards shift across historical contexts, which unsettles the assumption that judgment is timeless before students are asked to exercise it. From there, they learn to distinguish criticism from condemnation, and finally arrive at criteria for fair judgment — criteria that only make sense once students have already felt the historical instability of "fairness" and practiced the difference between evaluating and condemning.

The actual work of a trial does not unfold this cleanly; students will move back and forth between judgment and argument throughout Module 2. But the sequence is deliberately staged so that, by the time students reach the ethics of judgment, they are equipped with both the evidentiary habits and the historical humility that fair judgment requires.

Learning Plan

Learning Activity Overview

1. Book Club Presentation
2. Through Text: A View of Cultural Rights
3. Case Files — Role-Play of Characters/Authors
4. Waver
5. How to Write an Evidence-Based Argument?
6. Contemporary Trial (Part 1) — Arguments
7. Contemporary Trial (Part 2) — Judgment
8. Nuance Rewrite / Reflection

Book Club Presentation
Student Objectives: Students will develop an initial understanding of cultural power as a force that shapes which texts are preserved, taught, and recognized as classics. Students will begin applying this concept to a text of their own choosing, explaining how and why it has been included in or excluded from the literary canon.
Content Inventory: Power (1) — A. Cultural Rights, B. The process of constructing a classic.
Summary: Students select a book they personally love and research its critical reception — whether it is taught in schools, reviewed by major publications, or included on "best of" lists. In small groups structured as informal book clubs, students present their chosen text and use the concept of cultural power to explain who has, or has not, granted it canonical status and why. As groups share out, the class compiles a working list of the criteria that seem to determine canonicity, which the teacher uses to formally introduce the module's key vocabulary — cultural power, canonization, and cultural rights.

Through Text: A View of Cultural Rights
Student Objectives: Students will analyze how power operates within a text itself by identifying who narrates, whose perspective is centered, and whose voice is filtered, minimized, or absent. Students will apply the concept of cultural rights to evaluate whether a text's inclusion in or exclusion from the canon reflects its literary qualities or the narrower set of perspectives that canonization has historically privileged.
Content Inventory: Power (1) — A. Cultural Rights, C. Power structures within texts.
Summary: Students read a paired set of short excerpts — one from a widely canonized text and one from a text that has historically been excluded or marginalized — and annotate each for who narrates, whose perspective is centered, and whose voice is present only secondhand. In small groups, students compare annotations and discuss what each text's narrative choices reveal about power operating within the text, not just around it. The class reconvenes for a structured discussion linking these textual power structures back to the cultural rights vocabulary introduced in Activity 1, asking whether the excluded text's marginal status reflects a genuine gap in craft or a narrower set of whose stories have historically been told.

Case Files — Role-Play of Characters/Authors
Student Objectives: Students will construct a complete argument — a clear claim supported by relevant evidence and logical reasoning — using the PEEL framework. Students will practice building that argument from an assigned perspective, reinforcing that a strong claim depends on evidence grounded in a specific standpoint rather than generalized opinion.
Content Inventory: Evidence-Based Argument (2) — A. Developing a complete argument.
Summary: In small groups, students receive a "case file" assigning them a character or author connected to one of the module's texts, along with a set of core argument cards summarizing

relevant textual evidence. Groups research their assigned figure's context and construct a complete PEEL argument (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link) defending that figure's perspective on a specific question — for instance, whether their work deserves canonical status. Each group presents its case file briefly to the class, staying in role as the character or author they were assigned. This gives students low-stakes practice with the exact PEEL structure and team-based case-building format they will use in the summative Contemporary Trial.

Waver
Student Objectives: Students will position themselves along a "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" spectrum, then justify their position with one argument and one piece of evidence. They will also reflect on whether their position shifted, what influenced the change, and which counterargument challenged them most.
Content Inventory: Evidence-Based Argument (2) — B. Respond to the other party's counterargument.
Summary: The teacher poses a debatable statement connected to the module's texts — for example, "This author deserves to be part of the literary canon." Students physically position themselves along a line stretching from strongly agree to strongly disagree, then take turns justifying their position with one argument and one piece of supporting evidence. As classmates share opposing views, students are invited to physically move if a particular argument shifts their thinking, making the act of reconsidering a position visible to the whole room. Students close by reflecting in writing on whether and why their position moved, and which counterargument challenged them most.

How to Write an Evidence-Based Argument?
Student Objectives: Students will learn the formal structure of a written evidence-based argument, distinguishing a claim from its supporting evidence and reasoning. Students will practice incorporating a counterargument and a rebuttal into a single written paragraph.
Content Inventory: Evidence-Based Argument (2) — B. Respond to the other party's counterargument; C. The logical structure of a rebuttal.
Summary: Building on the intuitive counterargument practice from Waver, this session offers direct instruction on the formal structure of a written evidence-based argument: claim, evidence, reasoning, and a rebuttal that anticipates and responds to an opposing view. Students analyze a model paragraph to identify each component, then practice writing their own short argument on a text-related prompt, deliberately incorporating one counterargument and a rebuttal. Peers exchange paragraphs and use a short checklist to identify whether each component is present, giving students formative feedback before they draft arguments for the Contemporary Trial.

Contemporary Trial (Part 1) — Arguments
Student Objectives: Students will apply the PEEL framework to construct a complete, evidence-based case defending or challenging their assigned text's canonical status, incorporating a rebuttal to at least one anticipated counterargument. Students will present this case orally to an opposing team and a panel of peer jurors.
Content Inventory: Evidence-Based Argument (2) — A. Developing a complete argument; B. Respond to the other party's counterargument; C. The logical structure of a rebuttal.
Summary: Divided into two opposing teams, students are provided with core argument cards and relevant reading materials connected to their assigned text. Each team collaboratively builds and rehearses its case using the PEEL framework, ensuring the argument includes a clear point, evidence, explanation, and a rebuttal addressing the opposing team's likely

counterargument. Teams then present their opening cases orally in a formal trial format, while a panel of peer jurors takes notes for use in Part 2.

Contemporary Trial (Part 2) — Judgment
Student Objectives: Students serving as jurors will apply the module's criteria for fair judgment — attending to historical context and the distinction between criticism and condemnation — to reach and justify a verdict. Students serving as attorneys will respond to jurors' questions, defending their case's evidence and reasoning under scrutiny.
Content Inventory: Ethics of Judgment (3) — A. Criticism vs. Condemnation; B. The historical nature of moral judgment; C. Conditions for fair judgment.
Summary: Before deliberating, jurors take part in a short workshop revisiting the historical nature of moral judgment and the distinction between criticism and condemnation, then use these concepts to co-construct a shared rubric of criteria for a fair verdict. Attorneys from each team field cross-examination questions from the jury, defending their case's evidence and reasoning under scrutiny. Jurors deliberate in small groups, applying their rubric to reach a verdict on the text's canonical status, and must justify their decision in writing using specific criteria from the rubric rather than personal opinion. The class reconvenes to hear verdicts and discuss where jurors' reasoning aligned or diverged.

Nuance Rewrite / Reflection
Student Objectives: Students will revisit their initial position on the module's essential questions and articulate how their thinking has become more nuanced. Students will demonstrate the capacity to hold competing interpretations of a text or verdict in mind simultaneously, without collapsing them into a single, oversimplified judgment.
Content Inventory: Transfer Goals (cross-cutting) — Complexity Tolerance; viewpoints, arguments, and reasoning (spans Power, Evidence-Based Argument, and Ethics of Judgment)
Summary: Students return to the essential questions posed at the start of the module — Does this text deserve to be called a classic? and Can we judge a text fairly without either excusing it or condemning it? — and write a short reflective piece comparing their current thinking to their initial position from Activity 1 or Waver. Rather than resolving the tension into a single verdict, students are asked to name at least one aspect of the text or trial outcome they still feel unresolved about, and explain what additional evidence or perspective might change their mind. The module closes by asking students to practice sustaining productive tension, translating the module's central skill into a personal habit of mind rather than a one-time classroom exercise.

Activity Plan
Activity 6: Contemporary Trial (Part 1) — Arguments

Purpose **Learning objective and its connection to your content inventory and module goals**	Students will: ● Identify and select textual evidence relevant to their assigned position (Evidence-Based Argument, 2.A) ● Organize that evidence into a complete PEEL argument — Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link (2.A, 2.C) ● Respond to the opposing team's argument during cross-examination rather than avoiding or repeating their own position (2.B) This session is the culminating application of the Evidence-

	Based Argument branch and directly serves the module goal of constructing and defending an evidence-based argument. It also functions as a hinge point: the exit reflection students complete at the end of this session becomes the entry point for Part 2 (Ethics of Judgment) — an argument a team could not adequately defend is precisely what jurors will be asked to weigh next session.
Materials **Materials, tools, & arrangements that need to be in place for the activity**	• The assigned classic text (a paginated excerpt for quick reference during the activity) • PEEL Argument Builder Sheet — a four-column sheet for Point / Evidence / Explanation / Link • Cross-Examination Log — a sheet for recording the opposing team's challenges and the team's real-time responses • Timer (teacher-facing, to keep each segment on pace) • Whiteboard or sticky notes for teams to organize arguments visually • Core argument cards distributed at the start of the module's Evidence-Based Argument sequence
Activity Structure & Timing **The sequence of the steps; what happens when, including the role of the teacher and the learner**	**0:00–0:05 | Warm-Up Teacher:** Opens with a provocative, text-specific question — e.g., "In this text, whose voice is loudest? Whose voice has disappeared?" No answer is required; the question exists to pull students' attention back into the text world and reactivate the power analysis from earlier sessions. Students: Think silently for 30 seconds, then share one sentence with a partner. Nothing is written down. **0:05–0:20 | Evidence Hunt Teacher:** Announces team assignments (Prosecution vs. Defense), distributes the PEEL Argument Builder Sheet, and states the task: each team must locate at least three pieces of textual evidence supporting its position and write out the reasoning (Explanation) connecting each one to their Point. The teacher circulates without supplying answers, asking instead: "Does this evidence really support your position, or is it just related?" and "If the other team saw this line, how might they use it against you?" Students: Work in teams to search the text and complete the sheet. Informal division of labor is encouraged — one student locating evidence, one drafting the Explanation, one anticipating the opposing team's likely rebuttal. Design note: Evidence must come directly from the text — not general

	impressions or common knowledge. This constraint is the session's central cognitive demand. **0:20–0:30 | Argument Assembly Teacher:** Instructs each team to select their two strongest pieces of evidence and prepare a 90-second opening statement. Reminds students that the statement should be delivered in their own words, not read directly off the sheet. Students: Rehearse within their team, deciding who will speak, in what order, and how to divide responsibility for anticipated questions. **0:30–0:42 | Cross-Examination Strictly timed structure:** ● Prosecution opening statement: 90 seconds ● Defense opening statement: 90 seconds ● Defense questions Prosecution: two rounds, 30 seconds per question ● Prosecution questions Defense: two rounds, 30 seconds per question ● Each side delivers one final 30-second response Teacher: Serves as courtroom moderator — keeping strict time, not judging the content, and intervening only if a team drifts entirely off the evidence ("Return to the evidence"). Observes and records: which argument was strongest, which cross-examination question landed hardest, and where logical gaps appeared. These notes feed directly into next session's feedback and framing. Students: Speakers hold their position; remaining teammates use the Cross-Examination Log to record the opposing team's challenges and their own team's real-time responses. **0:42–0:45 | Exit Reflection** Students independently complete two sentence stems on the back of their log: 1. The strongest piece of evidence we used was… because… 2. The question we couldn't answer well was… and next time we would… The teacher collects these logs to inform both formative feedback and the design of Part 2.
Plans for Responsiveness	**Anticipated situations:**

Plans and principles for responding to (un)anticipated student thinking, needs, and actions during activity	A team's "evidence" turns out to be opinion rather than textual support — don't correct directly. Ask instead: "Can you point to the specific passage in the text that supports this?" The discovery of the gap belongs to the students, not the teacher. One team is visibly stronger, unbalancing the pace of cross-examination — the teacher can intervene with a harder question directed at the stronger team, giving the weaker team room to recover while modeling what a strong cross-examination question sounds like. A student repeats their own point during cross-examination instead of answering the opposing team's question — pause and say plainly: "They asked you X. What's your response to X?" No judgment, just a refocus. **Unanticipated situations:** A student resents being assigned to a position they personally disagree with — acknowledge the feeling first, then reframe: "This is a lawyer's job. You don't have to believe it — you have to support it with evidence. That itself is a form of thinking practice." The discussion brushes against a sensitive cultural or moral issue and emotions begin to rise — pause the activity, step outside of role, and speak as the teacher rather than the moderator: "We just touched on something complicated. Let's pause and speak as ourselves, not as our roles." Offer students a safe way out of the activity before deciding whether to continue.
Social Norms and Practices **Norms for learner interactions and behavior that need to be in place or developed to support activity**	Established explicitly with students before the activity begins — named together, not simply announced: ● Attack the argument, not the person. Cross-examination targets the opposing team's evidence and reasoning, never the individual. Any drift toward mockery or personal attack is stopped immediately. ● Silence is thinking, not failure. When someone pauses during cross-examination, no one laughs or rushes them. Thirty seconds of silence is normal in a courtroom. ● Recording is respect. When the other team is speaking, your teammates are logging their argument, not just preparing a comeback. The act of recording is itself a sign of taking the other side seriously.

	• The boundary between role and self. Students should know that what they say in role does not represent their personal position. Once out of role, they are free to say, "In role I argued X, but personally I think—." This boundary needs to be actively protected by the teacher.
Assessing Learning **Approaches and opportunities for formative assessment integrated into activity**	All assessment in this session is formative and embedded directly in the activity rather than administered separately: • The PEEL Argument Builder Sheet is the primary assessment tool. Through circulation and collection, the teacher evaluates whether students can distinguish evidence from opinion and construct a complete reasoning chain from Point to Link. • Teacher observation during cross-examination focuses on three things: whether students are grounding arguments in textual evidence rather than feeling; whether they respond to a question under pressure rather than deflecting it; and whether they maintain logical clarity while being challenged. These observations are not graded, but they directly shape the feedback students receive at the start of Part 2. • Exit Reflection is the most direct form of self-assessment. The question students name as unanswered is not a loose end — it is the seed of Part 2's Ethics of Judgment: a challenge a team could not fully address is exactly the kind of open question a jury will be asked to weigh.

“I used Chat GPT to refine my English grammar and fluency, and used Claude as a thought partner to help me understand the scope of the material in my unit. I used the prompt: “Shenzhen Teachers International School in China offers a curriculum that integrates drama education, critical thinking, and project-based (or problem-based) education. The students in question are in their first year of high school. What kinds of themes would be suitable for them? We hope the students will develop critical thinking skills, hands-on skills, creativity, collaboration skills, and emotional intelligence.” “Help me brainstorm and develop 'Contemporary Trials' into a modular framework.”

References

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