

## GROUP COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP, AND CRITICAL THINKING LESSON PLAN

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A MULTI-TIERED LESSON PLAN FOR CCBC'S CBC FOR 2022-2023

FOR *UNDER A WHITE SKY: THE NATURE OF THE FUTURE*

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

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### OVERVIEW

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This is a multi-tiered and scaffolded lesson plan (suitable for one class session or to be used throughout the semester) and resource guide oriented around concepts drawn from *Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future* by Elizabeth Kolbert. The core of the lesson plan is organized around the group communication and leadership unit in CMNS101, leading up to a group problem solving exercise where students make decisions regarding one or more of the issues Kolbert discusses in her book and a group debate, to apply critical-thinking, information literacy, and logical-fallacy avoidance to discussions of climate-related topics. Beyond this core lesson plan, additional assignments may be organized, up to using the book as a guiding text for the entire course. Broken apart, parts of the lesson plan can also be used in ethics, science, sociology, theatre, English, and other communications courses.

In addition to the pedagogical basis for teaching critical thinking, effective research and writing skills, and information literacy, this lesson plan is also based in culturally responsive teaching and collaborative work, as it centers a scaffolded group project and begins by asking students to evaluate and develop their own arguments based on their own funds of knowledge. Additionally, because the book is oriented toward a global outlook, students will be considering ideas from the perspective beyond their national borders.

The estimated number of class hours that you may devote to these activities can vary depending upon your course needs and your implementation; 9-12 hours would be advised, but you may choose to use just one or two activities throughout the semester.

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## CURRICULAR GOALS

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This lesson plan and resource guide supports all of the curricular goals, specifically:

- from ALL the credit and non-credit CCBC Schools and Pathways
  - This lesson plan is derived from communication but can be adapted for use in other disciplines as well.
- That draw on a “CBC best practice” of scaffolded activities: reading the book, attending campus event/s, and incorporating writing assignments.
  - This lesson plan will use concepts from the book, but also involve exercises drawn from other establish techniques, and include opportunities to attend CBC-related activities, and write reflections both in and out of class.
- that draw on current practice and theories in a disciplinary field or that reflects currents in educational research, most especially research on High Impact Practices (HiP).
  - In addition to critical thinking, research, and information literacy, the HiP practices of Diversity/Global Learning and Collaborative Learning Projects are significant for this lesson plan.
- that recognizes the centrality of writing, literacy, and critical thinking in student success.
  - All of the above methods encourage literacy development and critical thinking skills, and writing is central to the group and speech work in class – these will be built into the lesson plan.
- that builds on students’ experience and interests—and may lead to student publications or presentations.
  - Students in CMNS101 must give presentations and this lesson plan will incorporate personal experience in those presentations.
- that incorporates relevant learning experiences outside of the classroom (community learning, activism, field trips, presentations, workshops, etc.)
  - Workshops on these techniques for both instructors and students could be integrated into this lesson plan.
- that crosses disciplinary boundaries.
  - This lesson plan can be used and adapted in a variety of classrooms, and these techniques already cross boundaries between ethics, science, sociology, theatre, English, and other disciplines.
- that promotes Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion goals by engaging with one or more of our many outstanding student success initiatives, such as Culturally Responsive Teaching, Global Education, ALP, ACDV, Pathways, MSSSI, WIDAC, among others.
  - This lesson plan will engage in an embodied approach to Culturally Responsive Teaching and Global Education.

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## BACKGROUND

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Communication professors will already be familiar with instruction in group communication and leadership. However, you do not need a deep background in either to approach this lesson plan.

Funds of knowledge is a two-decades-old theory about considering students' own backgrounds and abilities as a resource in the classroom. Some supplementary resources for this concept are available at the end of this lesson plan. You will see how funds of knowledge will be utilized as you read through this plan.

As you dive into this lesson plan, think about these questions:

How do the themes and issues in *Under a White Sky* relate to the topics covered in CMNS101? How can you use your students' funds of knowledge and critical thinking skills be used hand-in-hand to discuss these themes and issues? How do can these themes and issues be used in group communication and leadership units?

How do you engage your students' funds of knowledge in your class? How do your students respond to your course material differently when you incorporate their funds of knowledge?

How do effective group communication and different styles of leadership effect real-world problem-solving? Specifically for this academic year, how do these address the problems that Kolbert writes about in her book?

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## WHERE TO BEGIN

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This lesson plan has multiple components, and you may use them all or choose one or two items. It was designed for the CMNS101 classroom, and it was designed to use the entire text of *Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future*, read over the course of the semester, rather than all at once.

The different components of this lesson plan can hopefully be inserted into your current syllabus as additions to the great work you are already doing.

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## FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

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While you can gather funds of knowledge by speaking with you students about their personal backgrounds and experiences, you can also have students do this for themselves. Begin by pointing out how much knowledge they have accumulated in their lives, with their life experiences. Then there are two assignments you can use – use only one or use them both in either order.

### **The Matrix**

Ask them to write down or type up the following categories:

Economics, Geography, Politics, Agriculture, Sports, Technology, Religion, Language, Health, Childcare, Art, Cooking, Entertainment. (You can also print out the table in the appendix for the students to use.)

Ask them to keep this table close by as they go about their lives for a week and to record their observations about their lives that fall into each category. These observations fall under the “Home/Community Practices” column.

At the end of the week, you can ask them to hand these in, to type them up and submit them on Brightspace, and to share them with a partner and/or with the class.

You can use these observations for your classroom applications throughout the rest of the semester. Ask yourself how you can use the knowledge and abilities your students already have in classroom activities and assignments.

If you want to be more specific, as a second step, ask your students to collect their observations based on some of the themes and issues from *Under the White Sky* that they bring up in classroom discussion.

### **The Personal Essay**

Once you have begun reading and discussing *Under the White Sky* and pulling out some of the themes and issues, ask your students which ones they can speak to – what have their own lives taught them about some of these themes and issues? Then ask them to choose one and write an essay connecting the theme or issue to their own lives.

Both of these assignments will give your students a chance to connect the environmental themes and issues in the book to their own lives, which is needed for the next parts of the lesson plan. Even if you are not using all of this lesson plan, I encourage you to use this section before using any of the others.

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## CRITICAL THINKING

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Once you have some insight into your students' funds of knowledge, and you have read and discussed at least some of the book, it is time for a trip to the library and an examination of critical thinking and information literacy.

The CCBC Librarians can give excellent instruction on using the library resources, the importance of evaluating sources, and guides related to the CBC book and the issues within it.

You can supplement these as needed. I find instruction on logical fallacies to be helpful. There is a resource in the appendix to a website with a lovely layout and description of logical fallacies.

If you would like to use this lesson plan throughout the semester, you can design your informative speech assignment and your persuasive speech assignment to tie into the themes of the book, as well as into funds of knowledge, critical thinking, and information literacy.

For the informative speech, make sure they have had library use and information literacy instruction first. Then ask them to prepare their informative speech on one of the environmental issues discussed in the book. You can go a step further and ask them to take that environmental issue and use local (state, county, or city) examples within their speech.

For the persuasive speech, have them return to the same issue, make it local, and prepare a persuasive speech about what their audience should believe or do about this local issue. Of course, the "local" aspect is optional, but it will be helpful for the group activity.

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## GROUP COMMUNICATION & LEADERSHIP

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Introduce the group communication units and use your existing lesson plans as needed. Tie discussions into the book – where in the book do they see examples of group communication, decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership styles? Where do these different approaches to group communication and leadership come into conflict with one another? How do groups tackle the same problem in different ways throughout the book? What do the students' funds of knowledge bring to these issues?

Have students pick out an issue and discuss different approaches to solving it. Where do they encounter disagreements? How do they solve these? How do funds of knowledge, information literacy, critical thinking, group communication, and leadership styles come into play in these real-world examples?

At this point, if you haven't yet asked your students to "get local," now is when they should. If either their informative or persuasive speeches were not locally-based, have them choose a local environmental issue to research and either write about or present on. These local issues are important for the next part of the lesson plan, the simulation game.

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## SIMULATION ACTIVITY

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In this part of the lesson plan, your students will work in small groups to solve a local environmental issue. This will require research into the issue, as well as communication and problem-solving skills.

Divide students into groups of approximately six people per group. They will be working with each other for the next few weeks. You can ask them to divide themselves, but I usually find it useful at this point in the class to divide them myself – this way I can group folks who have different communication styles, who aren't good friends, who will challenge each other, etc.

Once you have students in groups, their first task is to present their local issue to each other, and to argue for why their issue should be the one that they work to solve. Don't let them off easy – they should want to fight for their issue – to believe in its importance. But they must come to an agreement by the end of this step. Of course, alternately, you can choose the issue for each group, if you need to skip this step for time.

Once they have this issue, assign each student their “role” in the group. These are not fully drawn-out characters (though you can invent character profiles if you have chosen the issues for them), but rather community roles – they can bring more detail to the characters using their funds of knowledge. Broadly, there should be:

- A local CEO
- A local council member funded by the CEO
- A second council member not funded by the CEO
- A community organizer/head of a not-for profit
- The CEO's Head of Philanthropy
- A Neighborhood Association President

(If your groups have more than six people, add roles as you see fit – perhaps another community organizer/NFP leader, or a mayor, or another CEO.)

Once the students have chosen their issue, you can help them get more specific (what company is the CEO the head of? What community organization? What neighborhood?)

They should then spend time researching the issue through their lens. For example, if the issue is cleaning up the inner harbor, how might the CEO of Under Armor approach this issue differently from the head of the Sparrow Point Neighborhood Association?

Once they have their research, which should give them a persuasive argument for solving the issue, as well as evidence to back up their argument, give them one to two class periods to come together to meet to solve this issue.

If you want to make this simulation a deeper experience, you can prepare some ideas or secrets to share with one or another member of the group, or the group as a whole, regarding the issue. For instance, perhaps halfway through the first day, you pull aside one of the council members and tell them they are planning to run for mayor and they will need to support financial of the CEO for their run. Or tell the

community organizer they have evidence that the CEO's proposal would cause health issues for the local community.

Play with the formatting and structure of this simulation, making it work for your classroom. However, after the amount of time given for the simulation is over, record if the groups reached a resolution, what it was, and open discussion as to how the groups functioned – how did they see group communication concepts and leadership styles play out during the simulation? Did someone emerge as a leader? How did that happen? Did the group come to a conclusion or not? If they did, how did that happen? What worked? What was frustrating? How did they decide who would take notes or keep track of the discussion? Were their gender, race, or cultural influences or implications for these decisions? Etc.

Finish up with a group discussion or have each student or each group write follow up reports on the meetings.

### **Rubric for the Simulation:**

I base my course grading on 1000 points. Depending on how significant the simulation is to your assignments, you may use a different scale or weight.

Based on 200 points for the entire assignment, I would break a rubric down according to the following:

25 points for deciding on an issue (perhaps an extra 5 points for the student whose issue won out)

75 points for research according to their role

100 points for the simulation (perhaps an extra 10 points for the student whose solution won out). 20 of these points are reserved for the group and only given if they reach an agreement.

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## EXAMPLE FOR STRUCTURING LESSONS

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You should use these various components of this lesson plan as they fit within your curriculum. You can stick to one set of exercises, devote one class to a sample of them, space them out over the semester or the course of several weeks. Below is an example of how one might use this plan over the course of an entire semester of CMNS101.

Weeks one-two: “funds of knowledge” lesson/discussion with matrix and/or writing reflection, as well as introductory exercises, and beginning discussion of *Under a White Sky*.

Week three: Library visit and begin discussions for research and informative speeches. Continue discussing the book.

Weeks four-six: More information literacy and critical thinking lessons and discussion.

Weeks six-nine: As students begin to give their informative speeches, continue discussion the book. Perhaps introduce them to some local issues that relate to the book. Introduce persuasive speaking, ethos/pathos/logos and argumentation, and if you haven’t yet, logical fallacies.

Weeks ten-twelve: Once their persuasive speeches are finished, introduce the unit on group communication and leadership. Introduce the group project, break them into groups and begin preliminary steps.

Weeks thirteen-fifteen: Allow time for researching the issue within their roles, and class time for the simulation exercise. I recommend devoting at least two class periods to the simulation, then follow-up with follow-up reports and class discussion on the simulation, and next steps into semester wrap-up.

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## RESOURCES

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### Funds of Knowledge:

Funds of Knowledge toolkit (the matrix in the appendix is from this pdf):

[https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/migrantbilingual/pubdocs/Funds\\_of\\_Knowledge\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/migrantbilingual/pubdocs/Funds_of_Knowledge_Toolkit.pdf)

“Formation and Transformation of Funds of Knowledge Among U.S. Mexican Households” by C.G. Velez-Ibanez and J.B. Greenberg – this is the source of the original concept

<https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1992.23.4.05x1582v>

“Curricula and Pedagogic Potentials When Educating Diverse Students in Higher Education: Students’ Funds of Knowledge as a Bridge to Disciplinary Learning” by Angel Daddow

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1183619>



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APPENDIX

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Funds of Knowledge Inventory Matrix (from the Funds of Knowledge Toolkit):

Funds of Knowledge	Home/Community Practices	Classroom Application
Economics		
Geography		
Politics		
Agriculture		
Sports		
Technology		
Religion		
Language		
Health		
Childcare		
Art		
Cooking		
Entertainment		

**Bad News Game:**

<https://www.getbadnews.com/#intro>

This online game is great for helping students understand disinformation and how it spreads online. Play together and see who can gain the most followers, or have students play outside of class and discuss together afterwards.

**Logical Fallacy and Critical Thinking Posters and Cards:**

<https://thethinkingshop.org/>

This web site is a great resource for free pdfs of a poster on logical fallacies and critical thinking.