

**COURSE TITLE:** CONNECTING WITH HARD-TO-REACH & MARGINALIZED STUDENTS  
**WA CLOCK HRS:** 50  
**NO. OF CREDITS:** 5 QUARTER CREDITS  
[semester equivalent = 3.33 credits]  
**OREGON PDUs:** 50  
**PENNSYLVANIA ACT 48:** 50  
**INSTRUCTOR:** John Creger  
jcreger@fusdk12.net

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This course introduces an approach that prepares teachers to counter the harm inflicted when students internalize the negative stereotypes society aims at black, brown, native, and other groups of marginalized students. In our course text, *The Innocent Classroom*, author Alexs Pate reveals how internalized stereotypes create a sense of unwarranted *guilt* in these students that adversely affects their engagement in learning.

One of the most timely and important concepts you'll encounter in this course is Alexs Pate's idea of filling the "relationship gap." The course is designed to help teachers create individual relationships that can guide our hard-to-reach and marginalized students to shed the sense of unwarranted guilt mentioned above, restore their *innocence*, and re-engage in learning. The Innocent Classroom approach is natural and intuitive. Be prepared to learn a strategic process for building relationships with your disconnected and underserved students, enabling you to create a classroom environment of trust, safety, recognition, and acceptance.

In the past decade, the Innocent Classroom organization has trained over 10,000 teachers in this approach. After piloting the approach for three years in my classroom, I reached out to the Innocent Classroom organization for support, began offering trainings in my district, and trained a school staff in a neighboring district. This course originally included FlipGrid videos, which Microsoft has now phased out. Instead, at your convenience we'll schedule several Zoom calls, a very significant course improvement. The course is well-suited for individuals and works especially well for teams of school-site or district colleagues.

This course is appropriate for teachers K-12.

Course text: *The Innocent Classroom* by Alexs Pate, available used on Amazon for under \$15.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:** Upon completion of this course, participants will have:

- Gain an understanding of how children of color and other marginalized students internalize stereotypes that produce what Alexs Pate calls *guilt*, and how this affects children's consciousness and attitudes toward school.
- Learn a process of identifying a student's *good* - what a hard-to-reach child needs a teacher to recognize to gain their trust.
- Learn to strategize ways of creating authentic relationships with children who are marginalized by stereotypes and other life circumstances.
- Gain an understanding of the value of students' *innocence* -- what remains when the burden of guilt has been lifted.
- Examine "laboratory" classrooms and other examples for developing strategic responses to a student's good.
- Learn strategies for nurturing and protecting students who regain their innocence and understanding of their own good.
- Learn to create a classroom environment where marginalized students can leave their sense of guilt at the door and are free to express their curiosity for learning.
- Learn further strategies to create a classroom environment nourishing connections with and among all students.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

Completion of all specified assignments is required for issuance of hours or credit. The Heritage Institute does not award partial credit.

The use of artificial intelligence is not permitted. Assignment responses found to be generated by AI will not be accepted.

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**HOURS EARNED:**

Completing the basic assignments (Section A. Information Acquisition) for this course automatically earns participants their choice of CEUs (Continuing Education Units), Washington State Clock Hours, Oregon PDUs, or Pennsylvania ACT 48 Hours. The Heritage Institute offers CEUs and is an approved provider of Washington State Clock Hours, Oregon PDUs, and Pennsylvania ACT 48 Hours.

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## UNIVERSITY QUARTER CREDIT INFORMATION

### REQUIREMENTS FOR UNIVERSITY QUARTER CREDIT

Continuing Education Quarter credits are awarded by Antioch University Seattle (AUS). AUS requires 75% or better for credit at the 400 level and 85% or better to issue credit at the 500 level. These criteria refer both to the amount and quality of work submitted.

1. Completion of Information Acquisition assignments 30%
  2. Completion of Learning Application assignments 40%
  3. Completion of Integration Paper assignment 30%
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### CREDIT/NO CREDIT (No Letter Grades or Numeric Equivalents on Transcripts)

Antioch University Seattle (AUS) Continuing Education Quarter credit is offered on a Credit/No Credit basis; neither letter grades nor numeric equivalents are on a transcript. 400 level credit is equal to a "C" or better, 500 level credit is equal to a "B" or better. This information is on the back of the transcript.

AUS Continuing Education quarter credits may or may not be accepted into degree programs. Prior to registering, determine with your district personnel, department head, or state education office the acceptability of these credits for your purpose.

## ADDITIONAL COURSE INFORMATION

### REQUIRED TEXT

Shortly after I found Alexs Pate's book while visiting the ASCD site, I immediately began applying its approach with my students. Pate's approach helped me understand more clearly my intuitive attempts to reach unresponsive students, and provided me options for next steps I had never considered in 35 years teaching. Pate's approach is intuitive, rigorous and humane.

Text available used on Amazon for under \$19.

None. All reading is online.

### MATERIALS FEE

None

## ASSIGNMENTS REQUIRED FOR HOURS OR UNIVERSITY QUARTER CREDIT

### A. INFORMATION ACQUISITION

Assignments done in a course forum will show responses from all educators who have or are taking the course independently. Feel free to read and respond to others' comments.

Group participants can only view and respond to their group members in the Forum.

#### Assignment #1: Introduce Yourself

**Meet and Greet:** Please email me at [jcreger01@gmail.com](mailto:jcreger01@gmail.com), so we can find a convenient time for a 30 minute Zoom conversation.

Come prepared to talk about such things as:

- Your name and teaching position.
- A brief account of your teaching career so far.
- Why you became a teacher.
- How you feel about your job.
- Overview of your least successful connection with a difficult student.
- Summary of your fondest connection with a hard-to-reach student.
- Your reason for taking this course?

## Assignment #2: Building Bridges With Students

Respond to the following in 300+ words:

- How are students in your classes likely to be on the edges or marginalized in ways that can make them hard for you to reach? By race or ethnicity? Religion? Academic achievement or learning challenges? Wealth or poverty? Privilege or lack of privilege? Mental or emotional health? Gender or sexual preference or identity? Other ways?
- In which of these groups are students at your school sometimes labeled or stereotyped? How so?

Post your response.

## Assignment #3: Successful or Unsuccessful Relationships

In our Zoom conversation for Assignment #1, you spoke briefly about two relationships with students. Here you'll go deeper into a single relationship. In 300+ words, choose and complete **one** of the following:

- Describe a successful relationship you built with a difficult-to-reach student. What challenges did the relationship face? What strategies did you follow, whether intuitively or consciously? What specific steps did you take? What made the relationship ultimately work? What did you learn in the process?
- Describe an attempt you made to build a relationship with a hard-to-reach student that ultimately did not succeed. What challenges confronted the relationship? What strategies did you follow? What specific steps did you take? What made the effort fail? What would you do differently if you could?

Post your response.

## Assignment #4: Introducing the Innocent Classroom – A New Approach

1. Read *The Innocent Classroom*, Preface (xiii-xvi).

2. Read the Introduction: (1 – 20).

3. In 300-400+ words, summarize Pate's definitions of *guilt* and *innocence* and explain how he believes these ideas are important in education. Include:

- Your two or three key takeaways from the introduction?
- What question(s) do(es) the preface and/or introduction leave unanswered in your mind?

Post your response.

## Assignment #5: Deepening Understanding

1. Read Chapter 1: Deepening Understanding (21-34).

2. Create a list in response to this question: What does American culture tell you about children of color? (p25)

3. Identify three students to actively think about as we proceed. (p33)

4. In 200 to 300+ words, complete **one** of the following options, **A** or **B**:

**A.** Read through the list you created in Step 2 about American culture's perspectives on children of color. Consider the following:

- ?What was your experience creating this list? What thoughts and feelings arose during the exercise?
- Think about the children in your classroom or school. Does this list encompass all your students of color? Does it include students of all genders? Are there any groups you left out?
- Did you find yourself wanting to reflect on what you believe rather than on the messages that we know exist in society? Did you hesitate to write down any answers that came to mind, or try to put a positive spin on some to make them less negative?

**OR**

**B.** Can you think of an occasion when you were aware of a stereotype that existed about you?

- How did you experience this awareness?
- Think about how you felt physically and emotionally.
- How did this affect how you "showed up" in that situation?

Post your responses.

**5. Schedule a Zoom call:** jcreger01@gmail.com to share your overall response to Chapter 1.

- What in this chapter did you find most challenging?
- Most enlightening?

**Assignment #6: Discovering Students' Good**

1. Read Chapter 2: Discovering Students' Good (35-52).
2. Complete Practices in your online course space:

- p40: What is your good?
- pp44-45: Question to help you identify a student's good
- p50: What might be the good for each of your three students?

3. Write 300+ words on your choice of **two** of the following five questions:

- Spend a day listening to what children are saying to you, to other educators, and to one another. Can you identify a narrative of guilt in what you are hearing? How about in ways educators are responding to children—or communicating about children with one another?
- Why is it important that your process of discovering a child's good be like that of a detective, without being obvious or explicit about what you are doing?
- The process of discovering good is not rocket science; in many ways, each step might seem familiar. How do you think intentionally focusing on each step of this process can help you build a relationship with a child?
- What are some of the things (e.g., time, class size) that you see as barriers to discovering a student's good? How might you address those barriers to create the opportunity to try this practice?
- On page 38, the author says, "good is not the opposite of bad; it is neutral." Think about the books you read, the television shows you watch, and the movies you see. Can you identify characters in each of these and begin to see how good operates?

Post your responses.

**Assignment #7: Valuing**

1. Read text, Chapter 3: Valuing (53--66).
2. Complete Practice in your online course space:

- p63: How does your good serve your students' goods?

3. In 300+ words, respond to **two** of the following three questions:

- How would you describe the relationship you have with each of the children you are focusing on? How do you think they would describe their relationship with you?
- It can be hard to notice progress when you first start this practice. What are some ways you might track progress in your relationships with the three children you are thinking about?
- On page 57, the author says, "good generates empathy, which increases our effectiveness with the child in front of us." What are the challenges for you in "leaning into" this level of empathy for an individual child?

Post your responses.

**4. Assess your readiness to build relationships with students who've been harmed by stereotypes.** Begin by responding to the following:

On page 62, the author lists the following three checkpoints to help you assess your readiness:

- Many of our children of color are mired in the way American culture portrays them.
- Students' response to you and to their education is often prescribed by the stereotypical images and narratives about them that they have absorbed.
- Knowing and responding to students' good increases the likelihood that they will accept you and your efforts to educate them.

**Prepare to share in Zoom call:** Where are you in your readiness? What have been the challenges? What have been your successes?

**Email to schedule a Zoom call:** jcreger01@gmail.com.

### Assignment #8: Engaging and Responding to Students' Good

1. Read Chapter 4: Engaging, Responding to Students' Good (67-84).
2. Complete Practices:

- p70: Five things you might do to let a student know you care.
- pp72-73: Three ways you might try to engage a student's good
- p74-76: How to help a student feel respected, cared for, and safe?
- p78-79: How to help a disengaged student feel connected and cared for?
- p80-82: How would you help a student feel validated, accepted, seen?
- p83: How would you engage and respond to one of your own students' good?

3. Write 200-300+ words on **one** of the following questions, **A or B**:

**A.** Throughout this chapter, you were asked to create strategies for the children in the vignettes.

- How easy or hard was this for you to complete?
- Did you find certain goods more challenging to engage than others?
- What else would you want to ask about these specific children to help you create strategies?

**OR**

**B.** Part of a child's willingness to share who they are with you is allowing them to see you for who you truly are.

- What are some ways you allow children to get to know you?
- What are some things you could share with these individual children that would demonstrate your commitment to your relationship with them?

Post your responses.

### Assignment #9: Nurturing Innocence

1. Read Chapter 5: Nurturing Innocence (85-100).
2. Study figures and complete practices:

- p87: How will you help one of your students reciprocate to your interest in them?
- p93: Figure 5.1 Tracking Relationship Progress
- p94-5: Figure 5.2 Forms for Tracking Relationship Progress
- p97: Figure 5.3 The Good Good Wheel

3. Write 200-300+ words on **two** of the following four questions **A, B, C, D**:

**A.** The script our kids are handed (the guilts) is also a script that is "handed" to us as educators. The behaviors our kids show us are driven by this script. For example, a student who consistently speaks out of turn might be referred to as "disruptive" or "rude" when that behavior demonstrates her eagerness to learn. Think of three students you are focused on. Are there some behaviors you are seeing from each student that you are observing through the "script" that is running through your own head? Is there another way you could see what this student is truly asking you for through the lens of their good?

**B.** At this point in your development, you should be trying new ways to engage individual students' goods. If you have not started this process, discuss what is standing in your way?

**C.** On page 97, the author writes, "you can't be put off by or quit on a student who has not responded to your effort." Have you experienced a student not responding to your strategy in the way you wanted? If so, take the time to refine your guess at the student's good and create new strategies to engage with this child.

**D.** You have chosen three children to focus on as you embark on this practice, with the ultimate goal of committing to doing this for every child. What would you need to establish this practice with consistency in your role or classroom?

Post your responses.

**Email to schedule a Zoom call:** [jcreger01@gmail.com](mailto:jcreger01@gmail.com).

### Assignment #10: Protecting and Advocating

1. Read text, Chapter 6: Protecting and Advocating (101-112).
2. Once you have engaged in this practice for individual children in your classroom, it is crucial that you begin to reflect on the *narratives*, the shared stories or perceptions, that exist in your classroom. In 200-300+ words, thinking of your classroom, reflect

on these questions:

- What is the narrative operating in your classroom about your classroom?
- What is the narrative operating in your classroom about the community?
- What is the narrative operating in your classroom about what is possible for individual kids?
- What changes might you make to your classroom to subliminally foster innocent engagement?
- Do you believe it is possible for you to create an environment where innocence is in reach for every child in your care? Why or why not?

Post your responses.

## ADDITIONAL ASSIGNMENTS REQUIRED FOR UNIVERSITY QUARTER CREDIT

### B. LEARNING APPLICATION

In this section, you will apply your learning to your professional situation. This course assumes that most participants are classroom teachers who have access to students. If you do not have a classroom available to you, please contact the instructor for course modifications. Assignments done in a course forum will show responses from all educators who have or are taking the course independently. ?Feel free to read and respond to others' comments. Group participants can only view and respond to their group members in the Forum.

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### Assignment #11: Observing What You've Learned in Practice: Erin Gruwell and Freedom Writers

1. Watch or read one of the following accounts of Erin Gruwell's relationships with her students traumatized from gang violence in Long Beach, CA, in the mid-90s:

- [Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from the Freedom Writers](#) Erin Gruwell. (2007 book available used for under \$5 – This is a fast read: you can focus especially on Chapters 1-3 and 12-17 @ 67 pages)
- [Freedom Writers](#) (2007 feature film w/Hillary Swank) – Currently available on AppleTV, and possibly other streaming services. The film continues to be popular, and has been available for rent recently on Amazon and Youtube. It seems to surface on several platforms on and off. If you can't access it by streaming, try checking your local library for a DVD.
- **Freedom Writers: Stories from the Heart** (2019 PBS documentary featuring original Freedom Writers reflecting as adults.) (Was recently available through PBS in some areas, though it now seems not to be. Very worth searching for if you have time. Again, also check with your local public library.

2. Write a 750+ word paper on the following:

Pick **two or three students** Ms. G cultivates a relationship with. For each,

- What "good" or "goods" does Ms. G recognize in this student?
- What strategy(ies) does Ms. G. follow to cultivate a relationship with this student?
- How does the student respond?
- What "good" of Ms. G's might be driving her efforts to connect with this student?

Post your response.

**Email to schedule a Zoom call:** [jcreger01@gmail.com](mailto:jcreger01@gmail.com).

### Assignment #12: Cultivate Classroom Atmospherics for Deeper Connections

1. Download and peruse the following six strategies from research on designing a classroom environment to help students feel open to trusting teachers and classmates. The first is academic research from the University of Chicago. The rest are from my classroom research.

- [Four Key Beliefs for an Engaged Mindset](#) (from Camille Farrington's research)
- [Four Kinds of Openness to connecting with hard-to-reach students](#)
- [Updated Model of Deepened Curriculum](#) (a framework for teachers to design courses to help their students discover themselves while gaining academic skills around a continuum of deepened learning)
- [Two-Legged Design](#) (a design strategy for weaving an arc of self-discovery through academic curriculum)
- [Empathetic Exchange](#): Video clip of interchange between two students after one concludes his presentation for the [Personal Creed Project](#)

- \* Exchange demonstrates how students can build empathy through sharing with classmates and teachers when a curriculum is deepened with self-discovery. (Empathy, according to Alexis Pate, is a result of engaging students' "goods.")
- Cultivate the practice of [Classroom Banter](#) to connect with students in the moment and on the fly (unfinished article).

2. Write 750+ words on the following:

- Which two or three of the above insights or strategies above look most interesting and relevant to you for keeping your classroom environment open to connections?
- How might you incorporate these approaches in your classroom?

Post your response.

**\* Note: Designing for deepened learning using the Personal Creed Project is the focus of my other Heritage course, [Teach Your Students to Find Themselves](#).**

### Assignment #13: Lesson Plan

Complete one of the following options:

#### Option A)

- Adapt/create an activity or lesson reflecting what you've learned in this course. Include descriptions, links to, or screenshots of any distance learning apps involved.
- Implement your lesson with students in your classroom.
- Write a 400-500 word commentary on what worked well and what could be improved.
- Include any student feedback or noteworthy student products.
- Submit your lesson to your instructor via the lesson tab below.
- Share what you've learned with other teachers taking our courses by checking the [lesson library](#) box when you submit your lesson.

OR

**Option B)** Use this option if you do not have a classroom or students available.

- Adapt/create a lesson to reflect what you've learned in this course. (Do not implement it.)
- Write a 500+ word article concerning any noteworthy success you've had as a teacher with one or more students.
- Please refer to the guidelines for our blog [What Works: Teaching at its Best](#) prior to writing your article.
- When you submit your article to your instructor, please also email a copy to Renee Leon ([renee@hol.edu](mailto:renee@hol.edu)) THI blog curator.
- Indicate whether or not you are OK with having your article considered for publishing on our website.
- Submit your article to your instructor via the Response field and the modified lesson via Submit Lesson.
- As you submit your lesson, consider sharing it with other teachers taking our courses by checking the lesson library box.

### Assignment #14: (500 Level ONLY) Share Your Takeaway in a Culminating Presentation

1) Prepare a 10-12 minute presentation for your colleagues in which you:

- Point to the 3 or 4 most significant insights or strategies you've learned from this course. What makes them significant for you and your students?
- Share how you might utilize these insights or strategies with your students this year. How will you follow through on implementation?
- Discuss how you might collaborate with your teammates (in this course or at your site) in implementing any of the approaches in your classrooms and/or share them with colleagues beyond your team.

**Note:** Individual students and group leaders: **Please email [jcreger01@gmail.com](mailto:jcreger01@gmail.com)**, to schedule a time for your individual or team culminating presentation on Zoom.

AND

2) Find five (5) resources that provide additional learning in any of the following areas: disengaged, marginalized, or hard-to-reach students. These may be YouTube videos, online articles, studies, and/or curriculum materials. Document the key points you learned in a 500+ word paper. Include an analysis of how these resources support or contrast with the course text or assignments. Include a bibliography of your sources.

AND

3) Identify four-five (4-5) things that your current school or district or previous school or district could initiate or change to serve better

the needs of students who are hard-to-reach or marginalized. (If you are not associated with a school or district, develop a plan that could be implemented at most schools and districts). Your plan may include professional development, specific interventions, curricula, or a communication plan. Write this plan (500 to 750 words), or create a slideshow (minimum eight (8) slides).

### C. INTEGRATION PAPER

Assignment #15: (Required for 400 and 500 Level)

#### SELF REFLECTION & INTEGRATION PAPER

(Please do not write this paper until you've completed all of your other assignments)

Write a 400-500 word Integration Paper answering these 5 questions:

1. What did you learn vs. what you expected to learn from this course?
  2. What aspects of the course were most helpful and why?
  3. What further knowledge and skills in this general area do you feel you need?
  4. How, when and where will you use what you have learned?
  5. How and with what other school or community members might you share what you learned?
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#### INSTRUCTOR COMMENTS ON YOUR WORK:

Instructors will comment on each assignment. If you do not hear from the instructor within a few days of posting your assignment, please get in touch with them immediately.

#### QUALIFICATIONS FOR TEACHING THIS COURSE:

English teacher John Creger learned from sophomores at American High School in Fremont CA from 1988 through 2023. In his publications and presentations since 1998, John communicates to educators what his sophomores' continuing response to his Personal Creed Project teaches him about a deeper kind of literacy. He published his first book, *The Personal Creed Project and a New Vision of Learning*, in 2004, along with articles in professional journals in 2002, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020. He launched this first Heritage course for teachers in 2020, following up the next year with his second, *Connecting with Hard to Reach and Marginalized Students*. In 2023, he and a team of former students formed The Personal Creed Organization to promote and support self-discovery, launching an online course for the general public on the Udemy platform: *A Journey of Reflection into Your Values and Your Life: Discover Yourself with the Personal Creed Project*. He earned a B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley, and an M.A. from San Francisco State University, both in English. In recognition of the Personal Creed Project, the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project presented John the James Moffett Memorial Award for Teacher Research.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### CONNECTING WITH HARD-TO-REACH & MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

#### Main Course Text:

- **Pate, Alexs.** *The Innocent Classroom: Dismantling Racial Bias to Support Students of Color*, ASCD, 2020, paperback, 120 pages, ISBN 978-1-4166-2933-7. A truly groundbreaking book that could revolutionize American education by providing teachers a well-researched way to close their relationship gap with students of color and other marginalized children.
- [Optional Discussion Questions for Assignments #3-8 -- not required \(from ASCD website, w/permission from authors\)](#)

#### Supplemental Texts:

- **Pate, Alexs.** ["To be Young, Gifted and Innocent"](#) (article, ASCD November 2020)
- Gruwell, Erin. *Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from the Freedom Writers*, Crown, 2007, paperback, 272 pages, ISBN 978-0-7679-1584-7. Erin Gruwell tells her story of connecting with teens traumatized by gang violence in 90s Long Beach CA after the Rodney King riots. (Amazon, used for less than \$5.)
- Gruwell, Erin and Freedom Writers. *Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and The World Around Them*, 2019, paperback, 424 pages, ISBN 978-0-385-49422-9.
- [How California Teacher Erin Gruwell Inspired a Generation of Writers \(PBS Interview\)](#)

#### Videos:

1. Alexs Pate [2020](#)  
(Start @5:20 to 27:30; Q&A follows; @22 min)
2. Alexs Pate ASCD Webinar 9/2020 (Requires registration with ASCD, an excellent resource)

3. Freedom Writers (2007 feature film w/Hillary Swank -- free youtube version w/ads
4. Freedom Writers: Stories from the Heart (Fine 2019 PBS documentary featuring original Freedom Writers reflecting as adults – unavailable in some areas. May be available through local libraries.)