Activities: Important to Know and Do

Note: This activity can be used during or after reading Native Son to engage students in discussion about the novel’s theme and symbolism of blindness. After the activity students will be asked to write a response to the following essential questions. This activity could be part of a longer essay writing assignment where students would be required to use contextual evidence and examples from the book as well as their personal experiences to demonstrate their understanding of the themes and symbolism presented in Native Son.

Essential Questions:
1. What is oppression and what forms of oppression did Bigger and his family experience?
2. What are modern forms of oppression?
3. Do we, as individuals play a role in creating an oppressive society. If so, what can we do to avert oppressive conditions?
4. How can someone be symbolically blind and what barriers does it construct?

Objectives:
The students will gain concrete meaning to the abstract term oppression and the symbolic term of blindness as it applies to the book as well as reality. Students will be able to express their understanding of the symbolism of blindness in Native Son verbally and in writing. Students will also express verbally and in writing their comprehension of oppression in terms of Native Son as well as modern society.

North Carolina Standard Course of Study
Goal 1: The learner will demonstrate increasing insight and reflection to print and non-print text through personal expression.
Goal 4: The learner will critically analyze text to gain meaning, develop thematic connections and synthesize ideas.

Materials Needed:
1. Richard Wright’s Native Son
2. Volunteer students
3. Towels (at least four or more)

Time Required:
Time will vary based on class participation and discussion, possibly one hour with the inclusion of the writing assignment and the participation of more than one volunteer.

1. The teacher will ask for a class volunteer. The teacher may want to pre-select and explain to the “volunteer” that his or her head will be covered with several towels for a short amount of time. Some students may have breathing issues or claustrophobia that would hinder their ability to participate as the volunteer.
2. The volunteer will sit in chair at the front of the class as the teacher asks questions, such as what is oppression or blindness.
3. Teacher will then ask students to give examples from the book of the barriers that Bigger experienced, i.e. lack of education, job opportunities, and public access to certain places.
4. As students give examples, the teacher will place a towel over the volunteer’s head.
5. Once the teacher feels that enough examples have been provided, she will ask the volunteer to try to stand up and walk around – the student will not be able to do so on his own and the teacher will have to take his hand and lead him where she wants him to go.
6. She will explain to students that oppression restricts mobility in all aspects of life. When someone is a victim of oppression, they cannot get up and go as they please and must rely on others who can either help or hinder them depending on their agenda.
7. The teacher will then ask students to offer solutions to Bigger’s problems.
8. As a solution is called out, a towel is removed.
9. Once all the towels have been removed, the teacher will ask the student to get up and walk around the room again, demonstrating that the student is “free” of the oppressive towels and can go and make decisions on his or her own.
10. Students will be given 20 minutes to respond to the exercise by writing a paragraph about what they learned from the experience. This paragraph can be considered a form of prewriting and should not be graded based on correctness, but more so on the students’ ability to express verbally and in writing his or her understanding of oppression as it is presented in Native Son.
11. Students will be asked to share their responses.
12. The teacher can modify a second “experiment” for students to identify various modern forms of oppression that create barriers for people. Reminding students that there are a number of other forms of discrimination rather than racial. For example, people with physical or mental challenges, the elderly, homeless, the deaf and so forth.
13. Teachers might want to involve the discussion further to include assumptions they may have about people who are considered different from themselves.