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Can I teach that? Negotiating Taboo Language and Controversial Topics in the Language Arts Classroom

Edited by Suzanne Linder and Elizabeth Majerus

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Turning Minefields into Fields of Opportunity

Critics expressed outrage recently when political comedian and television personality Bill Maher jokingly referred to himself as a “house ni****” while declining a suggestion from Senator Ben Sasse that Maher could come to Nebraska and work “in the fields” (Felber, et al., & Casey, 2017). Politicians and news personalities condemned Maher’s behavior, and many called for HBO to cancel his program. Then, having spent its 24 hours in the uncomfortable scrutiny of the news cycle, this story quickly took its place in the seemingly inexhaustible history of racist language, controversial attitudes, and outright social ignorance in America. But one must wonder whether, to what extent, and with what kind of pedagogical skills the incident found its way into U.S. middle or high school classrooms. What “lesson” could teachers who were willing to address the incident teach their students? It is precisely this kind of situation and this sort of question that makes *Can I Teach That? Negotiating Taboo Language and Controversial Topics in the Language Arts Classroom* (2016), edited by Suzanne Linder and Elizabeth Majerus, a valuable resource for middle and high school English teachers.

The book is a collection of case histories, teacher stories, and commentary regarding a wide range of topics that tend to cause controversy in the classroom. Essays cover topics as diverse as teaching popular banned books, taking a queer theory approach to a classic text, adjudicating the use of obscene or profane language such as the “F-bomb” in student writing, and developing “the fine art of defusing an N-bomb” (p. 85). In the preface, Linder and Majerus stake their position on the question asked in the book’s title, stating,

Unlike the language police, who fear that any use of profanity in the classroom (or unfiltered Internet in the school) will expose children to material they aren’t ready for, skillful teachers who address these issues head-on have an opportunity to mentor students in the development of critical-thinking skills that are essential to their development as mature and thoughtful young adults. (p. viii)

The editors go on to speak of “claiming our rights as professionals in a democracy” (p. xi) and cite oft-censored young adult novelist Judy Blume in advocating against the kind of dull, lifeless texts that will teachers will choose for school readings if the prevailing concern is to find “materials to which nobody could possibly object” (as cited in Linder & Majerus, 2016, p. xi). That being said, the book stops short of advocating complete freedom in language use and

materials selection. As Linder cautions in Chapter 3, “knowing yourself, your students, and your context is essential for a long career” (p. 15). Majerus even explains, in Chapter 4, her own objections to students using the “F-bomb” in its literal sense, as referring to a sexual act, in their classroom writing, which she considers an obscenity. The caveat “know yourself, your students, and the school context” stands as good advice, especially for new teachers, but it disappointingly does not claim the mandate to challenge or change the contextual factors. Such challenge or change could be a compelling rationale for teaching the taboo in the first place—to help communities and individuals grow and evolve.

Two competing notions of teacher authority operate through the question “Can I teach that?” The most obvious and presumably intended meaning, given the essays in the collection and the editors’ commentary, implies the permission to use materials and facilitate conversations that push the envelope and perhaps raise concerns among students, parents, school officials, and communities. Claiming the freedom to explore controversial material will resonate with English language arts teachers everywhere, and professional associations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, the American Library Association, and the International Literacy Association have all issued statements supporting teachers’ use of potentially objectionable materials in the classroom.

A second interpretation of the question, one that the book glances at but does not foreground, is “Do I have the skill to teach that effectively?” As quoted above, the editors believe that “skillful teachers” can use controversy to foster critical thinking and develop maturity in their students. On the other hand, many teachers may avoid controversial content in their classrooms due to a lack of confidence that they are able to address profanity, racist language, or political hot-button issues in ways that will not further problematize the materials or get themselves into trouble. The chapters in this book offer advice for teachers interested in generating challenging discourse with students around difficult real-life situations and complicated expressions. In addition, this book contributes important background on the history of documented challenges to content on the basis of revisionist history, obscenity, multiculturalism, and marginalized political perspectives.

The first chapter in the book, “Don’t Shy Away from Books about Tough Issues” by Jabari Asim, is a four-paragraph commentary on the importance of kids being able to see themselves reflected in books they encounter in school. The second chapter, “Teaching the Banned Books Project” by Stephen Rayburn, describes an assignment in an eighth grade classroom that required students to research a challenged or banned book they wanted to read and then make the case for reading it, with their parents being the audience for the argument. Linder’s chapter, “A True War Story: Addressing the Real Obscenities” (Chapter 3) then compares the kind of obscenities students are typically prohibited from using to what she considers the “real obscenities” of oppression, war, profiteering off the poor, and the killing done in our name by corporations and governments. She provides good key questions for selecting texts, and she asserts that having tough discussions using the characters in a book as the focal point, rather than the students themselves, is safer for students. She also advises teachers to let go of “feeling responsible for correct thinking,” which may lead them to take coercive stances during discussions of books about which they have strong personal connections. Students who can freely exchange their thoughts on literature, as opposed to simply offering what they think the teacher wants to hear, develop personal agency in interpreting texts.

In the only chapter fully devoted to student writing, “Creative Profanity: Strong Language in Student Work” (Chapter 4), Majerus illustrates two variant uses of the word “fuck” in student poetry. One student uses the profanity to great artistic effect, whereas the second student uses it gratuitously, in Majerus’ estimation. To her credit, while she advised the student to remove what she felt was a poor choice of profanity, Majerus did not forbid it, and used the situation to examine her own objections to the word in that context. She adds that none of the other students in the creative writing workshop objected to the word.

Three chapters in the book address strategies for facing teaching challenges, whether the challenges stem from the material itself or the teacher’s approach to the material. “Defending Arnold’s Spirit: Battling a Big Book Challenge in a Small Town” by Amy Collins (Chapter 5), offers a strong beginning-to-end narrative of a teacher’s experience defending her use of Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2009). The chapter describes how parents of one of Collins’ students initially wanted to control what their daughter read by opting her out of reading *Diary*, and then attempted to extend their prerogative to control what other people’s children read by attempting to ban the book altogether. They failed in their quest, yet succeeded in driving the teacher out of the community. The story is important in how it invites us to consider the emotional pressure and potential implications of going against norms, even if those norms are not even necessarily community norms.

In Chapter 6, “Challenging Homophobic and Heteronormative Language: Queering *The Merchant of Venice*,” Stephanie Ann Shelton illustrates again the balance between agency and discretion when taking challenging approaches to teaching materials. Classroom teachers may enjoy this chapter because it clearly describes a series of classroom interactions, placing primary focus on student exchanges in class. Shelton starts her unit on *The Merchant of Venice* by addressing frequent use of the casual yet hurtful pop phrase “that’s gay” among her students and traces their growing awareness of the phrase’s toxicity as they work their way through the text, employing a queer theory lens.

Following Shelton’s chapter, Loretta Gaffney’s well-researched “From Canon to Pornography: Common Core and the Backlash against Multicultural Literature” (Chapter 7) offers a good bit of background history on challenges to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970, 2000) as an exemplar of conservative attacks on the Common Core Standards and multicultural literature. Gaffney situates these attacks within the larger context of Common Core critique. She describes the uneasy coalition of progressives who object to the standardized testing focus of Common Core and conservatives who object to multiculturalism as represented in the evolution of the literary canon to include works by people of color. Unlike the other chapters in this book, hers is not a case study of a teaching dilemma. Instead, it traces the public face of such challenges via online blogs and newspaper stories covering school board motions. She connects conservatives’ denigration of *The Bluest Eye* as pornography to the larger conservative agenda to dismantle public schools on what they see as moral grounds. In her conclusion, she warns her readers to expect an increase in such attacks.

Two chapters focus on racist language. Matt Mitchell’s “The Fine Art of Defusing an N-Bomb: The Challenges of Navigating Racially Charged Language in the (Majority White) African American Literature Classroom” (Chapter 8) makes a good case for foregrounding the role of

controversial language in a class that cannot function without frequent encounters with currently socially unacceptable language. He claims, rightfully, that the N-word is much more objectionable today than the F-word, and he shows how he introduces students to use of the word in literature and in classroom discussions of the literature. He cautions that, although classrooms can be safe spaces to examine language use and the intent of language use, such safe spaces do not make everything all right when the N-word surfaces. Again, context matters. With frequent examples, Mitchell distinguishes between instances when the word is best replaced or avoided and instances when it must be said, read, and discussed as vital to the literary piece, regardless of whether the piece is a “classic” novel or contemporary rap lyric. Most importantly, the chapter reveals how ongoing discussion of the term builds a critical pedagogy and critical literacy around it. The chapter contains an excellent section on Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987, 2004), showing how Morrison’s technique of shifting the narrative perspective shocks the reader. Given its thoughtful treatment of the complexities of racially charged language, Mitchell’s chapter is worth the read, especially considering our current political climate. It would be good background reading for teachers using *Native Son* (Wright, 1940, 1989), *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952, 1995), or other works on topics related to race and racism in their classrooms.

Jalissa Bates’s “Too Close to Dead: Addressing Racist Language Head-On in the African American ELA Classroom” (Chapter 9) claims that avoidance of racial content in the classroom further dehumanizes marginalized students. By articulating racist language and addressing it thoughtfully with African American students, in class, teachers allow spaces for those students to challenge the dehumanization of silence and therefore to develop agency. One part of this essay includes student responses to an exercise using panels from the book *March: Book One* (Lewis, Aydin, & Powell, 2013), a graphic novel about the Civil Rights movement. In having to construct language for blank thought bubbles in the panels, some students chose to assign the “n-word” to a White proprietor of a diner as he encounters civil rights workers in his space. They used the activity to understand and give language to the perspectives they saw operating in the constructed scene, and as a result, they were able to demonstrate a variety of perspectives on the scene.

The last chapter in the book, “Libraries Unfiltered: Increase Access, Grow the Whole Child,” was written by two librarians, Frances Jacobson Harris and Amy L. Atkinson, and addresses two major functions of the library in terms of access: the negotiation of how to allow internet access to students in the age of the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and using the library as a community space to address shared controversial issues in the community. Jacobson Harris addresses the access problem. She explains how, in a university lab school not subject to CIPA, she found that students essentially respected appropriate guidelines by being treated as adults in terms of accessing web sites. But, importantly, whereas these same students worked within guidelines on one hand, they exhibited all kinds of problematic behavior toward one another in online communication venues.

In mentioning that many schools filter materials in their libraries far beyond what is mandated in CIPA, the authors address the problem of letting “filtering device” vendors essentially set policy for what is acceptable, rather than allowing teachers or schools to determine acceptability for themselves. Thus, teacher authority again surfaces as a dominant theme in the volume.

Language arts teachers wanting to ask the “can I teach that?” question can look to this book for specific examples of how teachers challenged themselves to teach controversial materials or implement controversial approaches. First-person teacher narratives have tremendous power to cause other teachers to reflect on and contemplate ways to transform their practices. We encourage teachers to examine related materials on this topic to further develop their own toolkits for teaching controversial curriculum; for example, Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks’ *Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom* (2017), Rick and William Ayers’ *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom* (2014), and Diana Hess’ *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (2009). Teachers may look to these and other resources not only to have theoretical guidance in teaching what some may consider off-limit topics for classrooms, but also to learn from stories about other teachers teaching controversial issues. Further, teachers can leverage concrete examples of others’ efforts in developing democratic practices and critical thinking skills with their students.

In the case of Bill Maher’s offensive comment, he either ignorantly or purposefully (in a sad attempt at humor) misinterpreted Senator Sasse’s invitation to come to Nebraska and “work in the fields.” Being from Nebraska, Sasse’s context for extending the invitation does not include a background of slavery, Nebraska having never been a slave state. In Sasse’s world, working in the fields generally implies using heavy (and dangerous) equipment, working long hours for months on end, and handling one’s own business. When the *New York Times* (Morris, 2017) referred to Sasse’s “unfortunate choice of words” (para. 16), they, too, misinterpreted the context from which it arose. As this collection reminds us, English teachers are well positioned—perhaps in an ideal position—to help students recognize such interpretive errors. Interpretation of texts is our area of intellectual expertise, and we do well to help students develop their interpretive skills in order to negotiate “taboo language and controversial topics” in their lives. While this collection of essays leaves a few stones unturned in the field, it stands as a valuable tool toward that end.

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