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Censorship and the Student Writer

I have long been disgusted with America's attempt to stifle learning through censorship. When I was younger this applied only to music for me. I was not necessarily interested in the particular albums that I could not buy because of censorship, but it bothered me that some invisible committee deemed me incapable of determining for myself what was wrong and what was not. As a future teacher of English, the idea of censorship has a much deeper impact for me than it used to. In fact, as I think about future interviews with potential employers, the school's list of banned books is at the top of my list of questions. It is very important for me to know how my potential employers view book banning and how I am expected to implement those policies in my classroom.

I will introduce the unit by discussing the history of banned books that spans a large part of America. The Comstock laws were initially implemented in the Eighteenth Century and continue to affect the books of today. Early texts that were banned include Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/banned-books.html>). These books were all, at one time or another, confiscated by the U.S. Postal Authority and Americans were denied access to these texts. It is interesting to note that most of these books are now obviously widely accepted and highly acclaimed. There is also a selection of books that have been banned in schools specifically, including countless Shakespeare texts for use of sex and violence, Grimm's fairy tales for use of underage drinking, and Mark Twain for innumerable reasons (<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/banned-books.html>). Although most of these books are no longer banned by a widespread audience, there are still many books that are being censored on a regular basis. Certain texts have been hacked at by well-meaning censors: "[He] censored 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' and deleted the profanity and other strong passages" (<http://www.thefileroom.org/FileRoom/documents/dyn/DisplayCase.cfm?id=314>). I do not know, if I were an author, if I would prefer the cutting up of a story, to the other possibility of people just not using my text.

Although banned books are easily considered a topic for a class focusing on reading, I think that it also highly applies to students of writing. By showing the class what books have been banned and detailing the reasons that they are, it shows the students what is expected of them by the public as writers. We will focus on popular books that have been banned and we will especially focus on the students' own writings as potentials for censorship. This unit is intended for a creative writing class and is most likely best used at the end of the semester when most of the writing has been done for the year.

This unit will focus on banned books and the countless reasons that groups give to censor them. Part of the unit will consist of a debate between teams in the class. Prior to the debate, however, each team will be responsible for researching a particular book that has been banned. The teams will be responsible for selecting the text and organizing data that supports and refutes the censorship of the book. The teams will submit the material that they have collected as a group and then, individually, write a paragraph on how they feel about that particular book being banned. My intention is to develop an educated mindset in the students as to whether they agree with censorship in general. I anticipate that many of the students, being of the age that they cannot buy certain CDs, will answer that they disagree with book banning, but perhaps I will be surprised.

The students will then be divided into teams based on their determination in the banned books argument. A technique that I have found to be very interesting in my educational career is to take the side that you actually oppose. What I hope to do is group the students by their agreements and then assign them to argue the opposing side. They will then be required to submit a one page essay with supportive evidence to the contrary of what they already disputed. Once done, the debate will begin. I expect that the debate will last approximately two class periods unless I can set up a time outside of school so that parents and other teachers can watch.

This entire debate is dependant on several variables. First of all, I am counting on a fairly equal number of students agreeing and disagreeing with book banning. I am also depending on a class size that would not make a debate overwhelming. Although I am not sure how I will deal with these factors if they are not ideal, I will find a way to make it work.

The classroom will be set up in a debate style. Each team will have one side of the room

and there will be a mediator set in the middle. If class size proves to be a problem, I may determine that a team of mediators will be used. The students will be expected to dress in a professional manner and act and speak as though they are in a public setting.

Although it may be hard to link such a unit and lesson to creative writing, the debate is not the climax of this unit. The debate, although intense and time consuming, is merely a warm-up for the conclusion of the unit. The unit will conclude in the classroom, focused on the students writing from the semester. I will ask the students to select their favorite piece of writing from the semester – I want them to choose a poem or story that came from their heart and required effort and emotion to write. They will then trade the text with someone else in the classroom; I will most likely assign a partner from the opposing debate side. The students will be assigned to take the stories or poems home and find every possible reason that it could be banned. The students will be brutal – rip the texts apart with criticism based on the research that they did for the debate.

The literary critics will also rewrite parts of the stories so that they are no longer offensive. They will remove words and phrases that are considered violent or blasphemous, potentially changing the entire focus of the piece. When the texts are returned to the authors, they will find that their efforts have been futile.

Date: Monday, first day of new unit

Topic: Introduction to Censorship

Objective: By the end of the in-class discussion, the students will have a thorough understanding of censorship in the public and private spheres.

Materials:

1. “Teaching Censorship to the Next Generation” by Ken Stein
2. “Hearts Uplifted and Minds Refreshed” by Alison Parker
3. Access to (probably written on the board) the First

Amendment

Activities:

I. I will do a mini-lecture (3-4 minutes) on America's history with censorship

A. Comstock Laws

B. Famous authors that have been censored

II. I will pass out two articles (the Stein and Parker ones) and we will read them together, most likely out loud (15 min).

III. Discussion on the articles (30 min):

A. Any first reactions to the articles?

B. What are some reasons to censor, according to Parker?

What about according to you?

C. How does censorship affect your life?

i. Movie ratings?

ii. Music?

iii. School appropriate material?

iv. Speaking in different situations?

v. Your writing?

IV. I will assign the homework for the following day. See Evaluation.

Evaluation: I will provide the First Amendment and ask that the students write it down. For homework, they will be required to re-read the two articles from class, keeping the Amendment in mind. The class will be required to construct three questions or comments that they have while reading. Grade will be based on completion only.

Date: Tuesday

Topic: Censorship, continued

Objective: By the end of today's exercises, the students will have a more concrete idea of the many different levels that censorship affects their lives both positively and negatively.

Materials: Homework questions

Activities:

I. The students will be asked to get out the questions or comments that they developed while re-reading the articles from yesterday.

II. Discussion (25 min):

A. What ideas did you come up with while reading the articles again last night?

B. How did keeping the First Amendment in mind change your ideas at all?

C. Looking at the Amendment again, how does censorship affect those same parts of your life that we discussed yesterday?

i. Movie ratings, music, school appropriateness, writing?

III. Assign and discuss homework due tomorrow (see evaluation)

Evaluation: The students will be asked to bring in song lyrics from a controversial song, preferably one that has been banned. If certain students would like to, they can bring in the censored versions of the songs to play.

Date: Wednesday

Topic: Censorship, continued

Objective: By the end of today's lesson, the students will be capable

of making a decision as to whether they agree or disagree with censorship.

Activities:

I. We will do a short (10 min) writing exercise on the songs that each student brought in.

I will ask them to answer the following questions in what they write:

A. What about this song makes it censored?

B. Do you agree or disagree that everyone should be able to hear the song with the original lyrics?

II. The students will be allowed to play the censored versions of the songs that they chose to bring in. We will discuss them as we hear each song.

III. While we are listening, the principal (or vice principal) will come into class and begin yelling about the disgraceful way that I am leading my class, encouraging them to question authority and leading them to higher learning. (S)He and I will, of course, have to be quite convincing to the students.

IV. Following the disruption, the students and I (and hopefully the principal) will discuss censorship in schools and the idea of “school appropriateness.”

Evaluation: No evaluation for the day.

Date: Thursday

Topic: Group assignment and introduction to the debate

Material: “The Art you (Almost) Didn’t See” by Tim Miller

Activities:

I. The students will be divided by whether they agree or don’t agree with censorship.

II. The students will be instructed that they will actually be arguing the opposite of what they believe. So, for example, the students that don't believe that censorship should be evoked at any time will be arguing in favor of censorship.

III. The groups will both be given a copy of the Miller argument. They will be asked to develop their arguments into a debate. The debate criteria and rules will be handed out the following day.

IV. The remainder of the class period will be spent in the library. Each group will be researching and developing their arguments.

Evaluation: The evaluation for the entirety of the debate will be next week.

Date: Friday

Topic: Research with the debate criteria

Objective: The groups will be doing the final preparation for the debate that starts on Monday.

Materials: "Teach Me Today" by Erica Rand

First Amendment will again be up on the board

Hand out with the debate rules, roles and criteria

Activity:

I. The class period will be spent in the library, again. They will have the period to ask me questions and find material to back up their arguments.

II. See attached debate sheet.

DEBATE

The purpose of this debate is to determine whether or not censorship has a place in America's society. Each group will be arguing as an opposing side of lawmakers, determining whether or not the painting from the Miller article should or should not have been censored. Because you will be debating as lawmakers, you will be required to dress and act as professionals.

What does "professional" mean, according to Ms. Brown?

1. Dress like you are a congressional member. Yes, that means that you can't wear jeans. (If you do not want to wear dress clothes for all of your classes, you can keep them in my room for the rest of your

class periods.)

2. Demeanor -- You will not interrupt members of either group while they are talking. If you have a point or counterpoint to make, you will need to raise your hand and wait until the debate official calls on you.

3. You will need to be informed and prepared about your group's opinion on the debate issue. Have material in front of you, ready to be referred to. Give your lead speakers notes and information that can help.

* We will be having the debate in the cafeteria. Please tell your parents or guardians that they are invited to come and watch. There will most likely be administration and other teachers there as well.

Date: Monday and Tuesday

Topic: Debate days

Objective: The debate will make the students actively a part of the censorship issue. They will be required to think on their feet and be well-informed of the issue.

Activity:

- I. I will set up the tables so that the teams each have a side.
- II. The debate official (hopefully the principal) will have a seat in the center of the floor.
- III. The debate.
- IV. When the debate is over, the audience will be asked to give an informal judgment on which side was best convincing. The debate official will then give the final ruling.

Evaluation:

The students will be required to turn in any research notes or notes taken during the debate for a completion / participation grade.

Date: Wednesday

Topic: Debate evaluation

Objective: The students will be determining the value of the debate. They will also express how the debate changed their mind or reemphasized their initial beliefs about censorship.

Activities:

- I. The students will choose groups of 4 and discuss the previous two days activity (10 min)
- II. The students will individually write a reflection -- see evaluation (10 min)
- III. We will discuss authors and censorship (40 min):
 - A. How does censorship affect “the author”?

- B. How does censorship affect you as an author?
- C. What texts have you read that have been censored?
- D. Do you understand why they have been censored?
- E. Do you agree or disagree with the censoring of particular pieces of literature?

IV. The students will be assigned to bring in two pieces of literature. Two copies of something that they have written and one copy of a favorite poem or short story written by anyone. (Both texts will be limited to 2-3 pages because of time constraints.)

Evaluation: The reflection written in class will focus on the process and relevance of the debate in a creative writing class. Completion grade only.

Date: Thursday

Topic: Being a censor

Objective: By the end of the class, the students will be active participants in the censoring process and experience the emotions, first hand, of an artist being limited.

Activities:

- I. Find a partner and exchange one of the copies of your written piece.
- II. Censor both your own work and the copy of your partner's writing (10 min)
 - a. Use reasons for censorship that we learned in the discussion, reading and debate
 - b. Be "brutal"
- III. Have each pair determine which one of the favorites they can present as a censored piece (we will not present the student-written texts in front of the class as it could provoke hurt feelings). They will have 5 minutes to censor the piece as a team.
- IV. Each team will have three to four minutes to explain to the class why they censored

the text (remainder of period)

Evaluation:

The students will be evaluated in pairs according to the presentations. These are highly informal presentations with no outside class time to prepare so the point values will be quite low.

Date: Friday, last day of the unit

Topic: Wrapping up censorship

Objective: Following today's class, the students will have a firm grasp on the idea of censorship and how it affects authors.

Materials: Presentations that were started yesterday

Activities:

- I. We will finish the presentations that were started yesterday (20 min).
- II. I will hand out the same worksheet done at the beginning of the unit. Students will complete it and compare the results from last week to this week (10 min).
- III. Discussion
 - a. Reflect on the changes made in worksheets
 - b. Wrap up unit
 - i. Ask if there are questions
 - ii. Ask students for suggestions for next time I teach it

1. i.e. do the actual censoring before the debate; debate closes out the unit?

Evaluation: Evaluation of this entire unit is largely based on participation. Although the entire unit is only worth around 50 points, the students will be looking at creative writing through a different, invaluable perspective.

Works Cited

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