Banned Books: A Study of Censorship

Jennifer Rossuck

Inspired by Carole A. Williams' "Studying Challenged Novels: Or, How I Beat Senioritis" (*EJ,* November 1988), I created a senior English elective in my all-girls school in Tacoma, Washington, called simply, "Banned Books." It has become an immensely popular course, and I have taught it every year since 1992. One reason for its popularity, I believe, is that students put to a practical, real-world use the literary analysis and critical thinking skills they have been working on since ninth grade.

The local newspaper has proven an excellent testimony to the immediate relevance of the course. This past spring, we read about the House of Representative's National Security Committee's vote to ban the sale of adult publications as well as sexually oriented audio and videotapes from all military bases and ship stores. We have also tracked a local censorship battle (in Lakewood, Washington) waged over the sex education book, *It's Perfectly Normal* (1994), from the initial complaint to the School Board's final decision to remove the text from the elementary school library. There is no time like the present to explore censorship and no better place than the English classroom.

UNIT ONE

Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* frames the issues of the course beautifully: why might books be considered dangerous; freedom of speech and the consequences of losing it; and the role of technology in shaping society's values. Part One explores the emptiness of Montag's life and the lure of ideas (books) to fill that emptiness. Part Two presents various arguments concerning the questions, "Why read?" and "Do books have value?" Part Three explores the need to remember and understand The Great Books (or Canon) via the band of hobos who turn out to be walking, talking "books."

By the senior year, most students have developed a love for at least some author or genre of literature. As pre-reading exercises, we consider the role of books in our lives. We share individual reading profiles, respond to cartoons (e.g., Wasserman's "Once upon a time, there were funny-looking things called books that mothers and fathers read to their children . . ." *1988 The Boston Globe*), conduct interviews modeled on those done by Gordon and Patricia Sabine (1993) for the National Books That Made the Difference Project, and, when the course is taught in September, we celebrate the American Library Association-sponsored Banned Books Week.

Once into the novel, students lead the discussions, and I act as scribe, jotting notes on the board. Each young woman responds to a different critical thinking question and presents her ideas to the class in seminar fashion, reading from her original analysis. We end the unit with a timed in-class writing. The question from the 1987 AP English exam works well:

> Some novels and plays seem to advocate changes in social or political attitudes or in traditions. Note briefly the attitudes or traditions that the author apparently wishes to modify. Then analyze the techniques the author uses to influence the reader's views.

A teacher offers a detailed unit on censorship.

UNIT TWO

Next we tackle the quintessential banned book: J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye.* Helen Frangedis' article "Dealing with the Controversial Elements in *The Catcher in the Rye*" (*EJ,* November 1988) provides the basic structure for our close and very active reading. She identifies every reason the work might possibly be banned and related issues raised by each objection. Consequently, for each section of reading, students address only one particular point of controversy: profanity, lies/dishonesty, atheism/disdain for religion, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, homosexuality. They identify which passages might be the target of a censor,

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what literary purpose each passage serves, and how they personally react as a reader to seeing such ideas and incidents in print.

After we finish studying the text itself, we prepare for a mock school board meeting during which we debate the use of *Catcher* in our high school classroom. We watch segments from the films *Field of Dreams* (1989) and *Footloose* (1984) to study other "simulations" of school board meetings (called to discuss the banning of literature and dance respectively). It is also useful to show students Will Smith's monologue about *Catcher* in the movie *Six Degrees of Separation* (1994). Smith expounds an interesting thesis about the negative effects of the novel on several of its more deranged readers.

Students draw "roles" out of a hat: anything from the parent who files the complaint to the teacher who uses the text, from students in the class, to the local clergy. Next we divide into three research teams which investigate the author, the literary criticism, and the censorship history of the novel with the purpose of gathering even more "evidence" for both sides of the battle. Teams present their findings to the class in a clear and creative lesson.

We then create a master list of all possible reasons to ban and not to ban the book. Students determine which character in our role-play would be most likely to use which line of reasoning and attempt to evenly distribute the supporting materials to ensure a more varied and exciting simulation.

Finally, students write position papers using the voice of their characters to articulate an argument either for or against the use of *Catcher.* On the paper's due date, we conduct the role-play.

Available faculty and administrators act as the school board members to whom students must address their remarks as well as hecklers in the general audience to add atmosphere. Costumes and props are optional but strongly encouraged. The "school board" is instructed to vote based solely on the merits and strengths of the arguments presented; outcomes have varied year to year. We end the unit with a debriefing.

This unit models for the students what they must do on their own in an ongoing independent research project. Students choose any other banned book—not only the likes of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Color Purple,* but also works such as Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* or Judy Blume's *Forever* and *Deenie.* Anything found on the American Library Association's Hit List works well.

As students read, they record in journal entries specific lines and passages that might be targeted by a censor and write about why they are controversial and whether or not they serve any literary purpose. Students research the work's author, literary criticism/book reviews, and its banning history. All research culminates in another position paper in which students state if and where the work belongs in our school's curriculum. They may ban it altogether, place it on a reading list, in the library, or in what they deem as the most appropriate classroom. Students give 20-minute oral presentations of their position papers during the final week(s) of the course.

UNIT THREE

To add variety to the readings and to broaden our discussions about censorship, we read *Inherit the Wind* next and enter into the Creation-Evolution debate. Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's drama extends our discussion from the banning of individual works of literature to that of standardized textbooks. In addition to discussions about church and state, religion and science, we grapple with the question, "Who should have the greater voice in deciding what is read in school: teachers, parents, schoolboard, clergy, the community at large, politicians, the students themselves?" Once again, our topic is timely. The Tennessee Senate recently considered legislation to fire any teacher who presents evolution as fact, and there is a Broadway revival of the play starring George C. Scott and Charles Durning.

UNIT FOUR

Lastly, we read Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* to consider censorship of the arts. The novel raises questions such as: What is the purpose of art? What is the artist's responsibility to society, and what is society's responsibility to the artist? Can art hurt people? If so, what do we do about that? We compare Asher Lev's paintings to our study of literature as the author intended. Edward A. Abramson, in his work, *Chaim Potok,* quotes the author as saying, "Asher Lev [is] the metaphor for the prob-

lems of the writer." Although perhaps not entirely suitable for use in the classroom (it contains nudity), one student suggests viewing segments of the film *Sirens* which explores a similar moral conflict between art and religion.

If time allows, students could research banned art such as Edouard Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe,* the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit, and related issues: the television V-chip, censorship on the Internet, and the various ratings systems used for movies and music.

LESSONS

During the oral presentations, students draw several conclusions about literature and challenges to it.

1. Context is crucial. Many censors do not read most or all of the texts they challenge. Students learn to never isolate one word, sentence, scene, or passage but to consider the whole in order to properly analyze each part. Alana and Lucy point out in their presentations on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* that censors who decry the use of the word *nigger* seem to overlook the facts that Huck would rather go to hell than betray his friend (Jim, the slave) and that Atticus defends Tom Robinson in both the court of law as well as before an angry mob at the jailhouse.

2. Weigh the positive against the negative aspects of the text and base your analysis and interpretation on which outweighs the other. In her presentation, Valerie recommends that because *Slaughterhouse-Five* has merit as an example of an alternative way to tell a story, of modern satire, and of a 1960s popular anti-war novel, it should be taught around the tenth- or eleventh-grade level, or used in any class with a focus on war novels or alternative tellings of novels despite the use of science fiction (a sub-genre to many high literary critics), obscenities, graphic violence, and casual treatment of religion and morality.

3. Most censorship is a form of denial. Students already know much of the truth and reality from which parents attempt to shield them—either by direct personal experience, second-hand knowledge from peers, or exposure to the modern media. Students want and need to confront painful and controversial issues in the presence and under the guidance of responsible adults. Not many parents that we know take the time to read and discuss the racism, child abuse, teen pregnancy, and homosexuality of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* with their children. Yet we read and hear about these "newsworthy" issues on an almost daily basis.

4. Banning a book denies the author the right to express his/her ideas. Jill illustrates this concept for us during her presentation on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World.* After asking us to write down one fear that we hold, the origin of that fear and its expression in our daily lives, she goes around the room and reads each paper one at a time, responding with statements like: "This is trash!" (she crumples the paper in her fist), "Not valid!" (tosses the paper to the floor), and so on. Her position: banning Huxley's work is like calling his past life, his concerns for the state of present society, and his warnings for future societies invalid garbage.

5. Respect students' abilities to read critically, to think logically and to use plain old-fashioned common sense. In her presentation, Brianna shares her own childhood memories about the poetry of Shel Silverstein as well as data collected during interviews with neighborhood children. No one remembers a desire to break dishes in order to get out of doing chores or to make oneself sick in order to manipulate parents into extravagant purchases. "I'm not that dumb! I know these poems aren't *real,*" the children reply to her queries. Instead, what they do remember are the sounds and rhythms, the music and magic, and the moral lessons found in poems like "Hug O' War."

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CLOSURE

During the two-hour final examination at the end of the course, we consider, once again, the role books play in our lives. Each student assesses her literary education and how the books she has read during her high school career, including the books in this Banned Books course, have contributed to her growth as a reader, writer, speaker, and thinker. One prewriting step asks the question, "You know in advance that you are to be marooned on a desert island for the rest of your life. In preparation, you are allowed to take ten books. What titles will you

choose, and why?" Another solicits a comprehensive list of all texts read in English and beyond during each year, grades 9–12. We reminisce, we share favorite titles and authors, we become excited about and enthusiastically proclaim our love for books. We have come full circle.

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En Route—Andover to New London

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I pass five bogs, three mountains, and four lakes
each day on my way to dropping off my son at school.
He informs me of these facts en route.
This numbering of nature somehow cheers me
when reports of random murders in Miami
and homeless bodies nearer by move me to
forego for awhile my relentless radio.
We begin to count the bogs together,
including this time three bits of Blackwater,
and next, limitless possibilities of
hidden beaver and black bear.
By the time we pull up at the school
we have the world pretty well in hand
except for untold miseries elsewhere,
the unforeseen, and as he says,
more unicorns than we can name.

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