Lisa K. Winkler

Celebrate Democracy! Teach about Censorship.

Lisa K. Winkler believes it is essential for students to understand how and why censorship operates in school libraries and classrooms so that they may have the tools to "speak for themselves to preserve their freedom to read." Her unit on censorship combines free-choice reading, mock trials, and writing assignments.

What I worry about most is the loss to young people. If no one speaks out for them, if they don't speak out for themselves, all they'll get for required reading will be the most bland books available. And instead of finding the information they need at the library, instead of finding the novels that illuminate life, they will find only those materials to which nobody could possibly object.

—*Judy Blume,* Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers

Teaching students to "speak out for themselves," as Judy Blume writes, is one of the basic tenets of democracy. We teach to promote critical thinking. We teach to ensure that students can become responsible citizens capable of meeting complex challenges in society. We teach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Part of our charge is to teach about censorship.

For years, I smugly told students that censorship issues in public schools didn't occur here. However, two years ago, I had a book challenged.

Every year, I "celebrate" Banned Books Week, scheduled in early fall by the American Library Association. I hang ALA posters in my classroom that cite challenged or banned books. In the Banned Books Week unit, I teach about freedom of speech and what NCTE calls "The Students' Right to Read." We discuss book selection and reasons for banning books, and we conclude the unit with a mock trial.

It Can Happen . . . Anywhere

The lessons I teach have greater relevance to students because of a book challenge in our socioeconomically diverse community about twelve miles west of New York City. In my contacts as a parent and teacher, I always considered the community as politically progressive. For years, I smugly told students that censorship issues in public schools didn't occur here. However, two years ago, I had a book challenged.

As preparation for standardized testing, I had given students short-story anthologies to read and respond to in writing. Students could choose from many titles drawn from my classroom anthologies and the school library. Some students chose to read as a small literature circle, selecting a story to read for homework, writing in their journals, and then discussing the story and sharing journal entries the next day. This was an option; many chose to read and work independently. Students were also given the option of replacing an anthology for another title at any time. They could read one or all of the stories in an anthology.

Donald R. Gallo's anthology, *No Easy Answers: Short Stories about Teenagers Making Tough Choices,* was popular among many students and became the subject of a censorship challenge. My supervisor asked me to stop using the book based on a complaint from a parent. I checked the Board of Education policy about the removal of books and found that the

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removal violated board policy, which required that a committee be formed to examine the work in question. I then contacted NCTE's SLATE field representative, Charles Suhor, who notified the board that it had acted without consulting its policy, and he requested the creation of a review committee composed of community members, staff, and board members. (I was not allowed to be on the committee.) The committee voted to retain the book. Knowledge of the school district's book acquisition and removal policy was essential, as was the support from NCTE.

Introducing Banned Books Week

Reading

The ALA posters serve as prompts for the unit's discussions. Often they attract attention and incredulous comments from students. Many rush to the school library to borrow a book because its title appears on one of the posters. We define *censorship* and I post the First Amendment. I emphasize that our study will focus only on public school classrooms and libraries, not town libraries. I stress that any book, anytime, anywhere, for any reason could be the subject of a book challenge or banning. Discussion also includes the role of the elected school board members from the community and who is responsible for selecting and approving book titles for classroom use and school libraries.

I distribute Edward B. Jenkinson's list of the twenty-five most common reasons books are challenged (see fig. 1) and encourage students to read whatever fiction book they'd like for this unit. Often they want authors whose works have been challenged or banned. Sometimes I suggest titles that are not on the ALA list because I know they are great reads and include topics from the list of reasons. Reading such books makes the subsequent writing assignment easier. As with any free-choice unit, I urge students to read a chapter or two to be sure they'll like the book, and I support changing titles until they are happy. Though the Harry Potter series and the Lord of the Rings trilogy are popular, I encourage students to read different books so that the writing assignments will not be too similar (and too boring for me to read). Students begin reading for homework and complete two journal entries a week, using a letter format and topics adopted from Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle.*

FIGURE 1. Reasons Books May Be Challenged or Banned

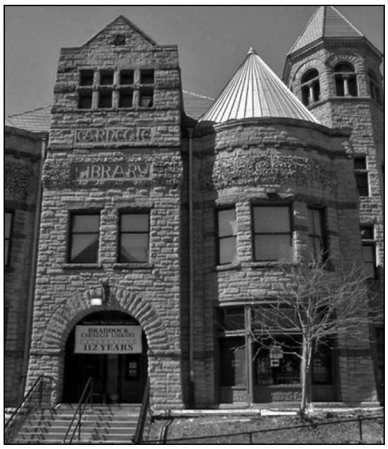
1. Children questioning authority of parents and other authority figures
2. Profanity
3. Characters speaking in non-Standard English
4. African American literature and dialect
5. Portrayals of women (Some groups object to portrayals of women in traditional roles and others to portrayals of women in nontraditional roles.)
6. Mythology
7. Non-Christian culture
8. Supernatural, occult, witchcraft, Halloween
9. Ethnic studies
10. Violence
11. Sexual acts, sexually explicit language
12. Invasions of privacy, asking readers to examine personal backgrounds
13. Abundance of cartoons
14. Works by or about homosexuals
15. Works that do not champion the work ethic
16. Books that do not promote patriotism
17. Negative statements about parents, authority, US traditions
18. Science fiction and fantasy
19. Works by "questionable" authors: Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, Ogden Nash
20. "Trash": *The Catcher in the Rye, Go Ask Alice, Flowers for Algernon*
21. Nontraditional family units
22. Books promoting self-awareness, self-understanding
23. Books promoting critical thinking
24. Works unfavorable to African Americans
25. Use of masculine pronouns to refer to male and female

(adapted from Jenkinson, 28–29)

Picture Book Mock-Trial Simulation

While students are reading their books, the discussion of censorship continues in class. I place students in groups of four to five and distribute a different picture book to each group (see fig. 2). Students read the book and then select roles for a mock trial. Roles include a parent (or two, depending on the group size), a student, a school administrator, and a community member. Sometimes students must select a role that does not represent their opinion. Using the list of twenty-five reasons, students prepare their positions on whether the book should be banned, restricted, or retained. Each student then presents his or her position to the entire class, which acts as a school board and votes on the outcome of the book. Students enjoy reading the picture books and detecting ways they might be challenged. Many bask in the opportunity to take a stance contrary to their true opinions, relishing the laughter they receive from classmates.

I then share lists of the most challenged books (using an ALA Banned Books resource guide) to validate that the picture books they just voted on have been subject to censorship attempts. Many students are surprised that some of their childhood favorites, such as Shel Silverstein and Roald Dahl, are among authors frequently challenged. They chuckle that books such as *Where's Waldo?* or *In the Night Kitchen* are challenged based on nudity, or that people consider William Steig's books unacceptable because authority figures are questioned.



Braddock Carnegie Library, America's Oldest Carnegie Library, Braddock, Pennsylvania. Photograph courtesy of Braddock Carnegie Library.

Another approach would be to ask students to bring in their favorite picture books that they might either still have at home or could borrow from town libraries. Students can then defend either retaining or banning a book based on Jenkinson's list.

To assess students on this activity, I create a public speaking/presentation rubric that focuses on student delivery, preparation, and knowledge of subject matter. The picture book activity helps create a better understanding of the topic while allowing students to experiment with formulating opinions with accessible, familiar, and enjoyable material.

FIGURE 2. Picture Books for Mock-Trial Simulation

(An * indicates that many titles by the author could be used.)

*Allard, Harry. *The Stupids Have a Ball.* New York: Houghton, 1978.
*Dahl, Roald. *Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes.* New York: Penguin, 1982.
*Dr. Seuss. *The Lorax.* New York: Random, 1971.
Greenberg, David. *Slugs.* Boston: Little, 1983.
Handford, Martin. *Where's Waldo?* Cambridge: Candlewick, 1987.
Mayer, Mercer. *Liza Lou and the Yeller Belly Swamp.* New York: Four Winds, 1976.
Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach.* New York: Random, 1991.
*Sendak, Maurice. *In the Night Kitchen.* New York: Harper, 1970.
*Silverstein, Shel. *A Light in the Attic.* New York: Harper, 1981.
*Steig, William. *Abel's Island.* New York: Farrar, 1976.

Writing

Once students are about halfway through their books, I introduce the writing assignment. As with the picture-book simulation, I create a hypothetical scenario that the book they are reading has been challenged. Their task is to identify why the book has been challenged, form an opinion about what should be done with the book, and write their opinions in a persuasive letter to the school board. Once again, students enjoy assuming a position they don't believe in and have fun creating their defense.

The letter assignment mirrors requirements students will face in the state test given in March. With the test in mind, I structure the prewriting and drafting procedures to give students more exposure to formal essay writing. By combining a practice test with a real unit, I hope that students will be better prepared to take the state test.

I provide a graphic organizer for students' essays and require that each essay include (1) a strong introduction that states the student's opinion and identifies the book and author; (2) a short paragraph summarizing the book; (3) one to two paragraphs

stating the reasons for the opinion, including references to censorship and the First Amendment; (4) a qualifying paragraph or rebuttal that shows an understanding of the opposing viewpoint; and (5) a conclusion.

The essay must be in proper letter format and is assessed using Vicki Spandel's six writing traits. I require students to write a first draft, to peer edit, to conference with me, and to write a final draft. By engaging in the letter-writing process, students also are sharing book titles and authors with peers. This unit gets kids reading!

Students gain an understanding of censorship through engaging in a mock trial, reading a free-choice book, responding to reading in journals, and extending their thinking in the persuasive letter. Through discussion with classmates about the books, they get ideas for their next free-choice selection. I hope that this unit helps students speak for themselves to preserve their freedom to read. What better way to promote democracy: free choice, free thinking.

Works Cited

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Lisa K. Winkler's interest in book censorship in public schools stems from her master's thesis on the subject in 1992. Sadly, censorship is still a concern. Contact Winkler at South Orange Middle School, 70 North Ridgewood Rd., South Orange, NJ 07079.

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