

Symbols and Words of Hate

Overview

In this activity, students will explore controversial hate symbols and hate speech, the historical significance behind such, and the harmful effects of hate symbols and hate speech when used today. Students will also grapple with how First Amendment rights should apply to symbols and words that are considered hateful. While this lesson puts very controversial symbols and words out in the open, the purpose is to highlight such material so that students themselves are tolerant, and that they understand the importance of a tolerant community. Likewise, learning to discuss such controversial topics in an open and respectful way is a key to ensuring a healthy classroom, school, and community.

North Carolina Essential Standards for Civics & Economics

- CE.C&G.3.8 - Evaluate the rights of individuals in terms of how well those rights have been upheld by democratic government in the United States.
- CE.C&G.4.3 - Analyze the roles of citizens of North Carolina and the United States in terms of responsibilities, participation, civic life and criteria for membership or admission (e.g., voting, jury duty, lobbying, interacting successfully with government agencies, organizing and working in civic groups, volunteering, petitioning, picketing, running for political office, residency, etc.)
- CE.C&G.4.4 - Analyze the obligations of citizens by determining when their personal desires, interests and involvement are subordinate to the good of the nation or state (e.g., Patriot Act, Homeland Security, sedition, civil rights, equal rights under the law, jury duty, Selective Services Act, rule of law, eminent domain, etc.)
- CE.C&G.4.5 - Explain the changing perception and interpretation of citizenship and naturalization (e.g., aliens, Interpretations of the 14th amendment, citizenship, patriotism, equal rights under the law, etc.)

North Carolina Essential Standards for American History II

- AH2.H.1.3 - Use historical analysis and Interpretation...
- AH2.H.4.3 - Analyze the social and religious conflicts, movements and reforms that impacted the United States since Reconstruction in terms of participants, strategies, opposition, and results (e.g., Prohibition, Social Darwinism, Eugenics, civil rights, anti-war protest, etc.).
- AH2.H.5.1 - Summarize how the philosophical, ideological and/or religious views on freedom and equality contributed to the development of American political and economic systems since Reconstruction (e.g., "separate but equal", Social Darwinism, social gospel, civil service system, suffrage, Harlem Renaissance, the Warren Court, Great Society programs, American Indian Movement, etc.).

Essential Questions

- What is hate speech?
- In what way does the historical significance of an image or word impact its current meaning?
- Why might a word be offensive or hateful to one person, but not to another?
- What gives hateful words or symbols their power?
- What role does the First Amendment play when considering hate speech?

Materials

- Symbols and Words of Hate Power Point, available in the Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format):
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to cnorris@unc.edu.
- Should the “N-Word” be Abolished?, writing assignment attached (optional)
- “Arrest that Book” and “N-Word or No N-Word, That is the Question,” articles attached (optional)

Duration

1 class period

Teacher Preparation

- While this lesson deals with sensitive topics (specifically words and symbols typically considered hate speech), it is important for students to explore such controversial issues to ensure they learn exactly what is considered hate speech and why it can be hurtful. Likewise, learning to discuss controversial issues in a respectful and mature manner is a key life skill for students to master. In order to lead this lesson effectively and safely, teachers must have established a safe classroom with clear expectations of respect, open-mindedness, and civil conversation. Students should be prepared in advance that offensive words and concepts will be directly addressed within the lesson. They should likewise be reminded of the point of the lesson: to examine the hateful material out in the open so that they can all learn why it is detrimental to a society.
- While a large part of this lesson involves discussion and students sharing their opinions, it is important for teachers to immediately address any incorrect information shared, or to redirect any student exhibiting opinions that may be supporting the use of hate speech. (For example, if a student expresses the belief that displaying a swastika is not offensive, the teacher should counter this with evidence as to why that symbol is considered hate speech and what the student is risking and conveying by doing such.)
- See the Consortium’s “Activities” section of the Database of Civic Resources for ways to ensure a classroom environment conducive to the effective exploration of controversial issues.

Procedure

What is Hate?

1. As a warm-up, project slide 1 of the accompanying Power Point and ask students to brainstorm what comes to mind when they consider the word **hate**. (What words, phrases, emotions, things, people, etc. do they associate with it? What does hate look like? What does hate sound like?)
Further discuss:
 - In what ways does hate materialize itself? What examples of hate can you think of?
 - When you think of hate, what symbols or images come to mind?
 - Allow students to share their thoughts, then introduce the definition of **hate crimes** on [slide 3](#).
 - Why do you think hate crimes take place?

Exploring Hate Symbols

2. Tell students you want to examine some images that are generally classified as hate symbols. Let students know that the images they are going to see may arouse negative feelings, which is natural. However, it is important to be able to respectfully discuss the images and work together to prevent hate and hate crimes. Remind students of the class expectations for respectfully discussing controversial issues and let them know you trust them to be mature and considerate in their discussion.
 - **Teacher Note:** Teachers know their students best, so if you feel in any way uncomfortable with a particular image, or suspect your students are not prepared to handle the material respectfully, do not continue with the lesson until laying a foundation for respectfully addressing controversial issues. See “Teacher Preparation” for suggestions.)

3. Begin the examination of symbols by projecting slide 4, which contains an image of the Confederate flag. Explain to students that some people debate whether this is a hate symbol or a symbol of Southern heritage. Discuss:
 - Why do you think many people consider this to be a hate symbol?
 - Remind students that the Confederate flag was the battle flag of the Confederate (Southern) army during the Civil War. Since it was the Confederates who fought on the side of the war favoring **slavery**, the flag is to many a reminder of a period of history when African Americans were treated inhumanely. The experiences that enslaved people endured is unimaginable, even though it occurred in our country less than 150 years ago.
 - The flag has also been adopted by the KKK and other racist hate groups, thus further supporting the argument that it is a hate symbol. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, more than 500 extremist groups use the flag as one of their symbols.

4. Let students know you are going to move on to the next image, which may be difficult for many of them to view and can bring up various emotions. Project slide 5 (which is an image of a burning cross) and discuss:
 - Who can identify this symbol? Why is this characterized as a hate symbol? What groups typically associate with this symbol? What history is associated with this symbol? What modern significance does this image have?
 - Explain to students that the burning cross is most closely associated with the **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)**, a hate group advocating for white supremacy. The KKK, first formed by Confederate veterans of the Civil War in 1866, has often used terrorism, violence, and intimidation measures such as cross burning and lynching to oppress African Americans and other groups they feel are “different” or “inferior.”
 - Continue on to slide 6 and ask students to comment on the difference in the two images (one a burning cross, the other a cross without fire.) Why does the same symbol take on such different meanings?

5. Continue with this point on slide 7, which shows both a pile of rope, as well as rope formed into a noose.
 - What is the difference in these two images? Even though they are made of the same material, why does the material take on a very different meaning and create a very different emotional response when in the shape of a noose? Why might some people be offended, hurt, or frightened by a noose?

- Explain to students that “From the 1880s to the 1960s (up to only 50 years ago), at least 4,700 men and women were lynched in this country. Lynching is the process of humiliating, torturing, and killing people by mobs acting outside the law. These murders, most of them unpunished, often took the form of hanging and burning. The noose represents this process and remains a terrifying symbol. It continues to be used by racists to intimidate African Americans, who made up more than 70 percent of lynching victims. (Source: *NY Times*) For a visual organizer showing reported sightings of nooses over the past several years, go to: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/opinion/25potok.html>.
 - Why is it so hard for us today to imagine such outward violence?
 - When someone today hangs a noose from their rearview mirror, or from a tree in a school yard (as happened in Jena, LA in 2007), why is ultimately disrespectful and an act of hate?
 - While we have made strides in ensuring such mob violence isn’t condoned or allowed, why is it still important to know about such history, even though it might make us sad, angry, or uncomfortable?
 - Discuss with students how a major point of this lesson is to be educated and informed because when we know better, we can do better. If you see someone use one of these symbols, perhaps before you would have thought, “What’s the big deal?” or “They are probably just kidding around.” Now you understand the seriousness of the history attached to these symbols and you know it’s not something you joke about.
 - What is dangerous about hate symbols?
 - Explain to students that the Anti-Defamation League argues that hate symbols are more than mere signs: “These symbols are meant to inspire a sense of **fear** and **insecurity**. [They] give haters a sense of power and belonging, and a quick way of identifying with others who share their ideology.”)
6. Tell students you’d like them to examine one last image and project [slide 8](#). Discuss:
- Who can identify this symbol? Why is this characterized as a hate symbol? What groups typically associate with this symbol? What history is associated with this symbol? What modern significance does this image have?
 - Ensure that students understand the swastika became the symbol of Hitler’s Nazi Party during WWII, when approximately six million European Jews (and others who were considered “different”) were persecuted, tortured, and killed. This period of time and murder is called the **Holocaust**. Today, various groups of political extremists and Neo-Nazis have adopted the symbol.
 - In Germany, the symbol is banned. Germany has further proposed banning the display of the swastika across the European Union.
 - Why do you think Germany banned the display of the swastika and why do they want to extend the ban? Do you agree with this decision? If a symbol is considered hateful and has such negative history associated with it, should it be banned? Why or why not?
 - Explain to students that Hindus in Europe joined forces against the German proposal to ban the display of the swastika across the European Union. In 2007, Ramesh Kallidai of the Hindu Forum of Britain said the swastika had been a symbol of peace for thousands of years before the Nazis adopted it and that a ban on the symbol would thus discriminate against Hindus. "The swastika has been around for 5,000 years as a symbol of peace," he said. "This is exactly the opposite of how it was used by Hitler...Just because Hitler misused the symbol, abused it and used it to propagate a reign of terror and racism and

discrimination, it does not mean that its peaceful use should be banned." The group said banning the swastika was equivalent to banning the cross simply because the Ku Klux Klan had used burning crosses. While the swastika is already banned in Germany, a 2005 attempt to ban it across the EU failed. (Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6269627.stm>)

- How many of you already knew that the symbol's origins are actually peaceful? What other peaceful or positive symbols have people altered so that they are associated with hatred? (i.e., cross) Is there any way to reclaim a symbol such as this and restore it to its peaceful origins?

Exploring Hate Speech

7. Tell students you want to come back to Germany's decision to make the swastika illegal and discuss it more in just a moment (this will take place in step 9). Project [slide 9](#) and tell students that you first want to add another level to the discussion, that of **hate speech**. After going over the definitions on slide 9, discuss:
 - In what ways can words project hate? Why can hateful words at times be just as hurtful as physical violence?
 - What words do you think classify as hate words?
 - **Teacher note:** Rather than have students speak out examples of hate words, teachers may want to write the word HATE in the middle of a piece of chart paper and have students come up and partially write hate word examples on the paper. "Partial" writing means that teachers can instruct students to place symbols within the hate word, replacing particular letters so that the word is only suggested. For example, a student might write fa##ot or ni##er. Again, remind students that the purpose for putting the words out in the open like this is so that they all understand what words count as hate speech. This way, they can be vigilant about stopping people who may use such words and making their community more tolerant and safe.)
 - How might these words make someone feel and why?
 - Just as with the symbols we reviewed, are there certain words that some people consider hate speech but others might not? Explain. (Again, teachers should let students know how to refer to particular words in the discussion. If they should only use the first letter of the word when referring to it, let them know this.)

The "N-Word" Controversy

8. Tell students that there is much debate surrounding use of the racial slur that has become known as the "N-word." Explain to students that this is a word with heavy historical and modern meaning and that there is still great controversy around the word. Discuss:
 - Why is this word offensive and hateful?
 - Discuss the history behind the word, and that it was commonly used as a derogatory reference to blacks enslaved during **slavery** and the **Civil War**. It continued to be used to humiliate and **disempower** African Americans throughout **Reconstruction** and the **Jim Crow** era. In this regard, the word carries deep negative significance and is associated with periods of history when black people were enslaved, beaten, raped, murdered, separated from their families, excluded from **equality** and **justice**, **segregated** because of their skin color, etc. (See the quotes located on the attached writing assignment.)
 - Based on its history, in what ways does this word represent or spread hate when it is used today?
 - What gives hate words their power?

- Why can this word have different significance when used by a white person rather than a Black person?
 - Discuss the concepts of **white supremacy** and **white power** with students, and how the word can take on a very different meaning based on who says it.
- Some people have called for the complete removal of the word from the English language. Why might some people feel so passionately? Can the fire ever be removed from a word that has been used to inflict so much pain and hate throughout history?
- A speaker's intention is one of the things that can give a word power. Famous rapper Jay-Z believes that if we eradicated the "N-word," a word with the same hateful significance would take its place. What do you think? When is a word just a word and when does the historical context matter?

The First Amendment

9. Next, remind students of Germany's decision to ban the display of the swastika. Ask students if they feel any of the symbols or words they have discussed should be made illegal in America. If so, why and if not, why not? Next, ask students what keeps our country from making particular hate symbols and words illegal. Project [slide 10](#), which contains the text of the First Amendment, and ask a student to read it out loud. Further discuss:
 - Where does the First Amendment come from? What is it setting forth?
 - Think back to the symbols we viewed. Are symbols speech? (Let students know that for the purposes of the law, symbols are generally considered speech and usually covered by the First Amendment.)
 - Why is the First Amendment, and freedom of speech, important? How might our society be different if we didn't have this right?
 - Should symbols and words that offend us be protected by the First Amendment? Why or why not? (Remind students of Germany's movement to ban the display of the swastika.)
 - If the KKK wants to hold a public event, as long as they get the proper permit and are not violent, they can do so. Should our law allow for this? Why or why not?
 - While symbols and words of hate, as well as hate groups such as the KKK, are dangerous, what is also dangerous about restricting freedom of speech and making certain symbols or words illegal? What makes this such a difficult thing to consider - freedom of speech versus protection against hateful and/or offensive symbols and speech?
 - Are there limits to the First Amendment? Meaning, is there speech that is not permitted, despite the First Amendment?
 - Explain to students that within the law, the right to free speech ends where another's rights begins. Meaning, our safety ultimately comes first. Thus, speech such as threats, blackmail, bribery, yelling "fire" in a crowded space, sexual harassment, etc. are not considered legal and are not protected under "free speech."
 - Likewise, while students do not entirely "shed their constitutional rights when they enter the schoolhouse door" (*Tinker vs. Des Moines*), school boards and administrators have a far greater ability to restrict the speech of their students than the government has to restrict the speech of the general public. Schools balance student freedom with their main goal of meeting legitimate educational objectives and ensuring school discipline. Thus, schools are able to have rules such as dress codes, profanity restrictions, etc.

When We Know Better, We Do Better

10. Ask students to consider the various reasons that people use hate speech and/or hate symbols. While these words and symbols have been associated with hate crimes, they can also be just as dangerous when used “in ignorance.” Ask students to think about the following: Have you ever heard someone use a hate word? Do you know someone who bought, wore, created, or displayed something containing a hate symbol? Have you ever heard someone tell a joke that was making fun of a group of people based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. – whether they were just kidding or not? While such actions may seem “innocent” enough compared to something like a government committing genocide during the Holocaust, these actions are still dangerous. Discuss with students how ignorance is not an excuse. And, while sometimes people may use certain words or symbols without truly understanding the entire history or implications of such, it doesn’t make it okay. Explain to students that the point of discussing these issues and learning about this material, even though it can be offensive, is that when we learn and know better, we can do and be better. Discuss:
- Why are hate symbols and speech dangerous?
 - Why is it important to let someone know (be they your friend, family member, etc.) when they have used a word or symbol that is considered one of hate? Even though this can be one of the hardest things to do, why is it so important to speak up?
 - Does it make it okay to use such words/symbols as long as you laugh and say “just kidding?” Why?
 - If someone feels that they are the victim of hate speech, or a hate crime, why can this be so much more harmful and emotional than just a “typical insult?”
 - If you think you’ve ever offended someone in this way, how should you handle it?

Optional Culminating Activities

11. Complete one or more of the following culminating activities:
- **Create an anti-hate poster**
Instruct students to create a poster with the purpose of stopping hate and/or promoting tolerance. Posters should contain a clear and creative anti-hate slogan (for example, “Put Your Fists to a Better Use”). Posters must also contain a well thought out and detailed image (for example, a white hand and Black hand clasped together in a handshake).
 - **“Freedom of Speech”:**
Have students examine Faith Ringgold’s work of art, “Freedom of Speech,” and discuss what message they believe she is trying to convey. The art can be accessed at <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2001.288>. A copy is also included on [slide 11](#) that can be projected for students to view. Note that some of the text on the flag will be illegible however. After allowing students to discuss their own interpretations as a class or in small groups, share additional information about the piece with them:
 - In *Freedom of Speech*, the artist interprets the meaning of the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights as it applies to the civil rights of *all* people. Across the red stripes of the flag are the words of the First Amendment (ratified in 1791) protecting freedom of speech, the right to religious practice, peaceable assembly, and lawful redress of grievances. In opposition to these noble ideals, however, Ringgold writes an array of names and words over the white stripes and stars that reference serious breaches of these freedoms. Painted in October 1990, *Freedom of Speech* was commissioned by the National Constitution Center in

Philadelphia as a poster design for an exhibition commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, which was celebrated in 1991.

Teachers can additionally instruct students to create their own art that represents the First Amendment.

- **Should the “N-Word Be Abolished?**

Have students complete the attached writing assignment in which they write a news article discussing the controversy surrounding the “N-word” and their opinion of the situation. The following PBS link offers some approaches teachers can take to avoid making any students feel uncomfortable: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/teachers/huck/section1_2.html

- **Debate/Discuss Free Expression**

For a deliberation activity on freedom of expression verses hate speech, go to <http://www.deliberating.org/>. Under the “Lessons” tab, go to “Free Expression” for the lesson materials and content. The procedure for leading student deliberations on this subject can be found under the “Lessons” tab by clicking on “Lessons Procedure.”

- **The Huckleberry Finn Debate**

“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” is a classic novel set during the Antebellum period. Given the time period in which it is set, the “n-word” appears 219 times throughout the book. In 2011, Twain scholar Alan Gribben and NewSouth Books decided to release a version of *Huckleberry Finn* that does away with the “n” word (as well as the “in” word, “Injun”) by replacing it with the word “slave.” The debate over the new edition has been a loud one. While some people feel erasing the n-word will free teachers to teach Huck Finn and make students more comfortable with the book, others believe this is an untrue rewriting of history, as well as a form of censorship.

- Provide students with one or both of the attached articles and discuss their feelings. “Arrest that Book” discusses banning books based on content consider controversial and “N-Word or no N-Word, That is the Question,” talks about the decision to remove the word from Huck Finn.
- After reading and discussing the article(s), instruct students to write a letter to Alan Gribben sharing their support or disagreement with his new edition of the book.

Should the N-Word Be Abolished?

Some people contend the “N” word has absolutely no place in American culture. Others believe it is appropriate to use in certain situations and contexts between certain people. Throughout the past years, the NAACP held a symbolic funeral for the word, *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines (popular African American publications) ordered authors to stop using the word, and several cities have even proposed legislation to impose fines on people who use the racial slur. On the other hand, many believe that the meaning of the word has changed in recent decades and is socially and culturally acceptable for use among African-Americans.

Write a five paragraph editorial discussing the meaning of the “N-word” and your thoughts/opinions on whether its use is acceptable (and if so, for whom) in today’s society. You may use the following information, your own experiences, observations, and/or readings.

Quotes from famous African Americans regarding use of the “N-Word”:

- “If you look at how black artists have used that word, historically, they have used it in creative ways... the word is used to capture the complexity of black life.” The real debate should be over “stopping the *negative* use of it.”
-Mark Anthony Neal, *Duke professor of Black popular culture*
- "When whites use it (the “N” word), they use it to hurt. When the black community uses it, they disrespect themselves.” -Mayor Kenneth Corley, *Brazoria, TX*
- "That word reminds me of lynchings and black men disappearing in the night and all of the dehumanizing things that used to happen to African Americans. I think no one should ever use that word. I think it should be against the law."
-Jennifer Lowery-Bell
- “The word nigger is not in the African community a bad word. It's a term of endearment and I don't see it as derogatory or offensive.” -Rev. James Meeks, *Illinois State Senator*
- [Using the word isn't] necessary... It's just become part of the way we communicate. My generation hasn't had the same experience with that word that generations of people before us had. We weren't so close to the pain. So in our way, we disarmed the word. We took the fire pin out of the grenade.” - Jay-Z
- "That word can still start a fight... I still say it in personal conversation with my friends, I say it sometimes on stage at the comedy club and I'm not gonna make a promise that I won't say it again on television, but right now I just feel like people aren't responsible enough [to use it properly]. There are certain things I've been through in the last year and there's certain things I've heard people say and also all of the older black women in my family... they really get on to me about it.” -Dave Chapelle, *Comedian, on trying to cut the use of the “N” word from his television show*
- “The audacity of one group of individuals to dictate to another what is appropriate absolutely galls me. The same people who eschew the term 'nigger' have no reservation using the substitutable 'PC' term 'N word' - with the same meaning.”
-Colin Quashi, *artist*

Arrest that Book!

by Jim Carnes, Teaching Tolerance

In 1905, the directors of the Brooklyn, N.Y., Public Library declared *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* unsuitable reading for children because "Huck not only itched but scratched, and ... he said 'sweat' when he should have said 'perspiration.'"

Ninety years later, the standards of literary propriety have changed, but Mark Twain's classic 1884 novel remains one of the most frequently banned books in America. Ironically, the focus of controversy today is a matter that would hardly have raised a single Victorian eyebrow: Huck's use of the "N-word."

Racial epithets are no longer acceptable in public discourse, but everyone knows that they persist in private speech. This discrepancy poses a difficult dilemma for many parents and teachers: Excluding such terms from conversation fosters a more respectful atmosphere; excluding all literature that contains them, however, may deprive students of valuable opportunities for understanding what gives hateful words their power.

In a school where *Huckleberry Finn* is banned, for example, young readers won't get to see how Huck comes to regard the runaway slave, Jim, as a real person.

The sticking point in most debates over book-banning is context. For those who advocate removing objectionable material, the only context that matters is the reader's own social or moral sphere.

In this view, all literature discussed in a classroom should mirror the values of that classroom community. A word, action or idea deemed offensive by a community member or leader thus becomes grounds for removing the book in question.

Others argue that a work of literature constitutes its own world, whose values may differ from those of the reader (or even the author) and thus offer points of comparison and contrast.

Of course, the moral discernment that this kind of reading requires is not an innate capacity. It must be cultivated, and that, perhaps, suggests the crucial question: Do we expect parents and teachers to help children learn to think for themselves?

The Chinese government didn't when it banned *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1931, explaining that "animals should not use human language."

Teachers at Venado Middle School in Irvine, Calif., didn't when they inked out every "hell" and "damn" from student copies of *Fahrenheit 451*. (That Ray Bradbury novel is about the savage consequences of book-banning and censorship.)

In the early 1990s, heated controversy surrounded two children's books, *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*, which depict nurturing parents who are homosexual.

Other well-known books that have been removed from libraries to "protect" American students in recent years include *To Kill a Mockingbird* ("represents institutionalized racism"), *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* ("defines obscene words") and *Where's Waldo?* (shows a woman sunbathing topless on a crowded beach).

Periodically, someone proposes banning the Bible because it contains stories of "lewd, indecent and violent conduct," but so far no such effort has succeeded.

Art that is true to life will reveal new facets of the familiar, as well as startle with recognition of the unknown. It will depict both the good and the bad, the light and the shadows of its subject.

Helping young people navigate the patchy moral ground of literature (and life) is a daunting responsibility — but one that good teachers relish.

How much simpler it would be to follow the example of one school district administrator in Wild Rose, Wis. In 1974, supporting the removal of Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* from a local school library, the official commented: "If there's a possibility that something might be controversial, then why not eliminate it?"

Source: <http://www.tolerance.org/activity/arrest-book>

N-Word or no N-Word? That is the Question

by Debra Solomon Baker, Teaching Tolerance

By now, most people have heard about the new edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* being released next month. In it, the n-word has been slashed 219 times and replaced by “slave.” Discussions over this edition have been loud, particularly in literary and education circles. Erasing the n-word would, theoretically, free teachers to teach Huck Finn again. After all, year after year, the novel appears on the American Library Association’s [list of most frequently challenged or banned books](#) [2].

But what have we heard from our young people about this issue?

On our first day back from winter break, I challenged my students to read about the controversy and then to enter the debate. This year, they have already read *Of Mice and Men*, in which the character Crooks is victimized with the slur. We are about to begin *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is often challenged for its use of the n-word.

I teach in a community in which books have not been banned—at least so far. For this debate, I asked my students many questions, among them, “If I could have given you a copy of *Of Mice and Men* that did not have the n-word, should I have done so?”

“Absolutely not,” was the sentiment of the majority of my eighth-grade students of all races. Leave Mark Twain alone. And John Steinbeck. And Harper Lee. We are mature. We have heard worse. We trust our teachers to put the word in context, to teach *about* the word.

My students seem to understand the danger inherent in fiddling with history. Perhaps Andrew explained this best.

“...the n-word being replaced with slave, slave being replaced with servant, servant being replaced with assistant, assistant being replaced with secretary, and, before you know it, there were no slaves.”

Zachary echoed his concerns.

“Tainting Mark Twain’s words would increasingly soften and lighten the load that he is placing on our shoulders, until the shadow of slavery and the use of the ‘n-word’ is a tall tale.”

They are 14-year-olds and want to be treated maturely. They want to be viewed as capable of handling complex texts and emotionally charged words.

I feel like cheering when they so eloquently grasp the destructive power of censorship.

But then, I am not a 14-year-old African-American girl, like Jordan.

Jordan does not often offer opinions in class discussion, but in an online forum she boldly stated, “Yes, I do agree with the choice to remove the n-word, because that word makes me feel uncomfortable and makes me want to throw the book in a pit of fire and dance on the ashes!”

I don’t want Jordan to dance on the ashes. I want her to love literature, to feel empowered by it. I want her to read the n-word and understand why the writer used it, to put it in context. But ultimately, I

doubt that I will be able to convince Jordan of anything. I suspect that she will feel what she feels—angry and disenfranchised.

Do I ignore Jordan's pleas because, after all, she is a small voice in an anti-censorship parade? Do we reconcile the tension by offering two stacks of books, one with original versions and one with the "purified" adaptations, allowing students to choose? Do we silence our students (and our parents) and make decisions based solely on our own moral sense of the power of words and purpose of literature?

The removal of the n-word will not begin and end with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. So as teachers, we must decide as a matter of philosophy whose voices will reign.

What do you think?

Baker is a middle school language arts teacher in Missouri.

Source: <http://www.tolerance.org/author/debra-solomon-baker>