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# Student Generated Curriculum: Censorship Issues In A Problem-Based Environment

Ann Legore Christiansen and Cathy A. D'Agostino

Our expectations with inquiry-based learning and censorship were, like many worthwhile classroom lessons, born out of a set of circumstances particular to us. As the Coordinators of Reading and Writing Programs in our high school, we were involved in the initial stages of a new program for Regular Level students that would redesign the traditional curriculum. Problem-based (or inquiry-based) learning would allow teachers from English, history, math, and science to work toward a more integrated and student-centered curriculum. Those teachers would plan a series of problems that would conceivably involve several disciplines. Students, then, would work together in resolving the problems, with the teachers as resources, not the "keepers of the answers."

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Our involvement in the initial stages of the program motivated us to consider a single problem-based lesson in our own classes, not so ambitious as to include several disciplines, but one that forced students to confront social and

ethical issues of their own society. As "luck" would have it, a few parents' rather distorted views of literature forced us to confront the issue of censorship in our department. The parental concerns were typical: the literature was too depressing for students, too violent, too sexually explicit. Even though our district follows the American Library Association guidelines for dealing with censorship issues, our problem had presented itself to us.

## ***Introducing The Problem-Based Learning Unit***

One approach to the unit is to assign a journal entry to be completed as homework: "Topic-Censorship. What does censorship mean and how has censorship affected you? Explain." The assignment requested that students write at least one page and be detailed in their explanations. Students knew that the journal entries would be shared the next day in class. The following were typical comments:

*Society cannot tell us what we can and cannot see.*

*Censorship should not exist. We should all be able to express ourselves in clothes and music.*

*Covering up material that we should be exposed to hides our creativity, personal expression and beliefs.*

*Censored books are good books.*

*Teenagers and adults need information.*

*Children are unaware of real life situations if literature is censored.*

The class discussion generated by this assignment was lively and personal. Most teenagers feel very strongly about their freedom. The exchange of ideas generated by the journal assignment led naturally to questions students have about censorship:

*Who gets to decide what is obscene?*

*What about movies or books with flagrant examples of racism or sexism?*

*What is the government involvement in censorship?*

*Does the government use censorship as a cover-up?*

*Was censorship once needed, but has it become out-dated?*

*Isn't censorship unconstitutional and against the First Amendment?*

*Will children be damaged with sexual references and profanity?*

*What is censored?*

*Should the parents be the ones concerned with censorship?*

An alternative method of introducing the unit is with an article which will precipitate discussion. Two possibilities are "Why is Maurice Sendak So Incredibly Angry?" from the October 1993 issue of *Parenting* magazine or "Who is Alvin Schwartz and Why do Parents want to Ban his Books?" from the *Chicago Tribune*, Monday, September 20, 1993. Many students are already familiar with *Where The Wild Things Are* and *Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark*, so they already have opinions to share with others in the class and the discussion moves quickly and easily.

### **Hypothetical Situation**

The next day when students arrived in the classroom, a hypothetical situation was written on the chalkboard: "A teacher has assigned the

book *The Catcher In The Rye* to a group of sophomore students. A parent read an article which asserted that this book is on a list of most commonly banned books. The parent has called the principal and wants to know why a banned book is being used in the school." Through class discussion, students offer possible scenarios about the subsequent events. The class decides that the principal would talk to the teacher. The principal would take the situation to the superintendent who in turn would discuss it with the school board. The parents sign a petition wanting the book banned from their school. At this time the class identified the problem: What is the school policy regarding the choice of materials used in the classroom? The class determined that the problem could be resolved by the school board holding a public meeting to hear all sides of the issue. The school board will reach a decision about school policy.

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### **"Most teenagers feel very strongly about their freedom."**

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If the teacher prefers more control over the presentation of the problem, the following is another suggestion:

*You are a teacher at Adlai E. Stevenson High School.*

*You have received a memo from the superintendent about the novel your class is currently studying: Huckleberry Finn. A community member has issued a strong complaint about the racist element of the book and the message it sends to students in this predominantly white suburb. The superintendent has instructed you to suspend the study of the novel in as unobtrusive a manner as possible until the matter is resolved. In addition, he has informed you that this community member is on the agenda for the next board meeting. Your attendance is requested, also. The meeting is in two weeks.*

The class identifies the roles which people would take in a public meeting: students, teachers, parents, administrators, censorship groups, media, and possibly authors and artists.

Once students have identified the roles of those who may participate in such a public meeting, the article previously mentioned, "Who is Alvin Schwartz and Why do Parents want to Ban his Books?" gives the viewpoints of different groups consulted about censorship and helps students understand various responses to censorship. For example, a mother believes that children will be frightened by the content of the stories while another editor of children's stories believes the stories help children deal with reality. Students now volunteer to assume the identity of one of the interested parties who will appear at the public meeting and agree to role play that identity at the simulated meeting.

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**"Possibly the most enjoyable and valuable part of this unit is the evaluation."**

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Students divide into groups according to the role they have chosen and generate a list of questions relevant to that group for library research. For example, the group who will play the school board came up with questions like: "What is the history of censorship issues in this district? How many times have the issues of censorship come up in the district? What exactly is the law regarding censorship issues?" In addition to their library research, students also interviewed actual members of the school board.

The following is a suggested schedule for classroom activities. Obviously, the teacher would tailor the schedule to fit the abilities, needs, and interests of a particular class.

### ***Schedule for Problem-Based Learning***

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
<b>Week One</b>	Share Journals	Full class Discussion	Full class Discussion	Roles Assigned	Small Groups
<b>Week Two</b>	Library Research	Library Research	Small Groups	Outline Due	Full class Discussion
<b>Week Three</b>	Video Taping	Video Taping	Evaluation of Discussion	De-Brief	De-brief
<b>Week Four</b>	Final Exam Question				

### ***The Public Meeting***

Finally, the long-awaited day arrives. The students assume their roles, and the role-playing School Board members conduct the meeting. Before the meeting begins, students review and agree upon the rules for conducting public meetings and public meeting behavior. Also, it is not possible for the teacher to evaluate each student during the public meeting. As a class, we established some criteria for the evaluation of public meeting behavior, and each student in class agreed to evaluate two other students' participation in the meeting. This worked very well, and students carefully wrote comments that were accurate and helpful. One student videotapes the meeting and discussion begins.

After discussion, solutions for the problem are presented, and the class decides which solution fits best.

### ***Evaluation***

Possibly the most enjoyable and valuable part of this unit is the evaluation. Once a solution has been agreed upon by the class, the role playing is over and the class is free to evaluate the solution from their own perspectives. Students watched the video and did a flow chart of the discussion. From the flow charts, the class evaluated their performance in discussion.

The culminating activity of the unit was one final exam question. Each student was required to write a comprehensive school policy for the use and choice of materials in the classroom. As might be expected, students reflected the concerns and values of the society in which they live. Some saw censorship as necessary and made eloquent cases for it. Others were just as eloquent in their defense of the First Amendment. Still

others sought a compromise with parental involvement or choices among reading lists.

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**"We found ourselves dealing with the unknown each and every day"**

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**The Goals**

1. Promote thoughtful and real engagement in the classroom.
2. Remove teacher as the central figure in the classroom.
3. Develop thinking, reading, speaking and writing skills more naturally.
4. Focus always on student learning, not "won't this be so much fun?"
5. Commit to the process of discovery.
6. Recognize that neat, tidy resolutions are not always part of the world in which our students must live.
7. Develop several forms of on-going assessment.

As we ventured into this new teaching situation, we realized the enormous break we were making from traditional instructional methods. We would not be the central focus in the classroom any longer; our classes would be "chaotic" to a traditionalist, with some students working in small groups, some in the library researching, others conducting interviews with teachers, students, and administrators. We were right about all of that. And our time wasn't spent preparing daily lessons, essay assignments, and tests for students. We found ourselves dealing with the unknown each and every day — it's impossible to prepare for the process of discovery. This list of goals was valuable to us as we moved through a labyrinthine month of activities, and we returned to it weekly for consistent focus. Next year, when a contemporary problem naturally presents itself to us, we will be ready.