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## If We Are to Believe in America

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# NARRATIVE

## If We Are to Believe in America

MITCHELL NOBIS

*“All good art is political! There is none that isn’t. And the ones that try hard not to be political are political by saying, ‘We love the status quo.’”*

*—Toni Morrison*

**I**f we are to believe that the Declaration of Independence should orient our stance as citizens...

If we are to believe that the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution should drive our teaching...

If we are to believe that the Bill of Rights applies to all Americans...

If we are to believe that the last six words of the Pledge of Allegiance are actually the foundational idea we are told they are and therefore why we invite students to recite them every day...

If we are to love our students as we know we already do...

If we are to love *all* of our students as we know we should and are called to do...

If we are to engage in culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, and character education...

If we are to teach for a future America...

If we as Americans want to continually strive toward America for America is an experiment, America is an idea always in invention, America is a dream, America is a future...

If we are to believe...

Then English teachers are ethically bound to tackle the hard topics. To be alive in America in the 21st century is to be swimming in the complexity of divisive issues. Teachers can try to avoid sensitive topics, but even then we are still teaching them. When we avoid hard conversations, we are teaching our students that Americans cannot discuss the difficulties, that we let everything lie under the rug, that we let sores fester until they explode. We cannot train students to ignore the oppressions and aggressions of everyday life.

Thomas Mann said, “Everything is politics,” and he’s right. Just as every act of teaching demonstrates a theory of

teaching whether intended or not, every act of living demonstrates a political stance whether conscious of it or not. The basic elements of life are political, as is painfully evident here in Michigan where a corporation gets wildly cheap access to pristine water for profits while Americans in Flint and students in Detroit have no potable water at all. Our very water and air and land are political, and if the water itself is political, then what could possibly be apolitical?

Nothing, really. The only time something seems apolitical is when the context is supported by the dominant political force. As with the old example of a fish who says, “What water?” when asked to describe the water, Americans who fit the profile of the powerful (i.e., upper-middle class and predominantly White, like characters on *Friends*) often have a hard time seeing the politics of the mundane because the everyday for most White people is American culture’s default mode. The American Dream. Baseball and apple pie. Non-saggy pants. Police as protectors. “American,” not Other. When we ask such Americans to “step out of the fish’s water” and encounter discomfort, then we may struggle, but the struggle is worth it. The struggle is progress. The struggle is the pursuit of happiness. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, “We do not err because truth is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because this is more comfortable.” Making curriculum, instruction, and life better for all of our students may be hard, scary work, but if we are to believe in America, it is work we must do.

Schools are a microcosm of society, so of course every moment in school is political as well. There are policymakers who one minute say teachers need to avoid politics and in the next say teachers must help eight-year-olds practice hiding or running from an active shooter carrying a (formerly banned) assault rifle. There are policymakers who one minute say teachers need to avoid politics and in the next say we should not teach a novel that contains an objectionable word or idea. There are policymakers who one minute say teachers need to avoid politics and in the next say we must instruct students to

use “proper” grammar because they need “standard” English or else our society falls apart.

Of course politics are in everything, and therefore politics are rife in education too. To think they are not or should not be is to jam one’s head into the sand like ostriches hiding from the lions, and we know what happens to those ostriches.

But here is where English language arts teachers come in. Where do we practice new skills in our society? Where do we educate the future generations? In schools. Where do we learn how to think in the first place, how to embrace logic and empathy? In English classes. In books. In discussions and writing about literature. Yes, ELA teachers show people where the commas go, but they also teach students how to make sense of words and the world. The only reason teachers even show students where the commas go is so that they can convey their own thinking about the world through their own words. Unless students enter the classroom through a wardrobe door to Narnia, the classroom is already in the “real world.” We all already live in the real world. Our students are part of the real world. Teachers cannot keep them from it, but teachers can help students understand how words—especially their own words—can affect the world. Students have voices. Students live in the real world. For too long, schools have tried to pretend that students don’t see the real world, as if students magically teleport home after school, as if the problems of the world aren’t also the problems of their homes, as if the problems of the world aren’t also the problems of the school.

Yes, English language arts teachers are ethically bound to teach with open eyes and open minds. Let’s set aside for a moment the important point that we need more diversity and inclusion in authors and characters in literature in our ELA classrooms. (We most certainly do.) Even if we look at only longstanding, solidly canonical—and therefore often assumed to be apolitical—texts, they are eminently political, and ELA teachers are ethically incumbent to address their issues. In *Of Mice and Men*, for example, sure George shoots Lennie, but that much is clear. The question isn’t *does* he. The question is *why* does he. Also, when raising *Of Mice and Men* in the past, I’ve been told it is not an overtly political text, but anyone who is poor, female, or Black instantly sees political themes in the book. I highlight the ending scene, though, because without Crooks or Curley’s wife, it might seem less obviously political. It can be viewed more so as a personal scene between George and Lennie.

The moment we jump into the real discussion, whatever

it may be, we enter political, ideological territory. Our answers to why George shoots Lennie may vary widely, but for each and every reader, their response is informed by the politics of their environment and upbringing. I was brought up in the church. I was taught from an early age that it’s important to value everyone, regardless of societal status, that indeed, the most prestigious among us should wash the feet of the most downtrodden. That obviously affected my reading of page 107 of *Of Mice and Men* when I was sixteen and found the book in a closet in our house. I devoured the book, and my soul weighed heavy when I read the ending. That scene is an ambiguous ethical situation if I ever saw one. (WWJD *for real*.) My sense that Lennie’s death is an act of empathy and not mere self-preservation was clearly a result of the many stories and lectures about mercy and helping your fellow humans that I heard in my younger years.

How might one teach this scene without engaging in the politics of empathy? A teacher can either address the political messiness that is life and literary discussion, or a teacher can avoid it, thereby sending a clear political message that empathy is dangerous, unworthy, or outright bad. To be straightforwardly New Critical and merely talk about the words on the page with no personal response is to miss the point of reading altogether. We could teach within dry technocracy, but that is not the purview of ELA. That is not the even purview of being human, so that is no route to apolitical instruction.

It might seem wild to consider empathy political, but here we are (and here we have been, on the backs and bones of the indigenous and the enslaved since the founding of this country). Our current political moment may well be a failing of previous curricula not openly embracing empathy as political. For decades, the majority of ELA classrooms have read, for example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and then taken quizzes on it that ask things like, “Which of the following is like a mockingbird?” (and yes, I’ve asked that questions dozens of times myself, and yes, the answer is always “D: All of the above”) instead of directly asking students to “Explain *how* and *why* this text suggests we should respond to racist injustice?” Years of asking what color Gatsby’s car is instead of asking what *The Great Gatsby* says about materialism as the goal of The American Dream has to have contributed to an

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apparent failing of American empathy among adult generations. After avoiding the difficult conversations, we now have a ruling class incapable of having the difficult conversations. We can answer trivia questions about famous books, but we balk at complicated, critical conversations.

An old college friend and I were talking recently about schooling, and the phrase “net positive” came up often. We have made progress as a society that values both the individual and the collective. Life is better for both the person and the people than it was, say, 400 years ago. Life in America is exponentially better than it was 200 years ago. (While we’re on that topic, please stop asking students things like, “What job would you have been qualified to do 200 years ago?” because for many of our children, that answer leads to a place where they were thought of as property.) Yes, we thankfully have a net positive in education and society, but a single step forward is a net positive. We need more than a step, more than mere net positive. We need a journey.

If we proceed from the Declaration of Independence, from the rights laid out in the Constitution, from the last line of the Pledge of Allegiance, then how are we *not* supposed to address the politics of the individual in society? Indeed, many English teachers use thematic units, and many have taught units titled “The Individual in Society” or something very close to it. I have. There is simply no way to ask students to think about even the unit title alone without delving into political territory. The relations among the individual, the collective, and the state is inherently political. It’s practically the definition of political.

At the heart of this argument is America’s childish fear of the word “politics.” It’s okay to say “political.” Anytime we discuss in class why a character did what they did, we flirt with the political. Teachers can’t broach ethical conversations without delving into political territory. We can debate whether George shoots Lennie as an act of love, self-preservation, or even self-advancement, but regardless, we’re into a political analysis of the self in society, of how others impact our own choices, of how we are or are not responsible for others. To throw students into the hotbed of middle or high school without overtly addressing such issues would be the unethical choice. Discussions about how people affect each other are at the heart of anti-bullying seminars across the country—we just haven’t been admitting that these discussions are ethical *and* political.

When Stanley Fish says, “[n]o issue, question, or topic is off limits to classroom discussion so long as it is the object of academic rather than political or ideological attention,”

he simultaneously ignores reality while also making an entirely valid assertion. We cannot avoid the political. Teaching will have political impacts regardless of the teacher’s intent. We can, however, academically instruct students about the omnipresence of politics. Teachers should not, to be clear, make political decrees, and I suspect the vast majority of us agree on this. No teacher should tell students who to vote for, who to like or dislike, who to support or donate time or money to, and in 22 years of teaching, I’ve never worked with someone who stood in front of a class and said, “Vote for Candidate A instead of Candidate B.” That’s a good thing. Teachers do have a power that should not be abused in ideological pursuits inside the classroom; however, we overreach when we say “no politics whatsoever” because that’s too simplistic. The smallest grammatical correction is political because “correctness” in language is just another way to exert power and control.

Yes, even commas are political. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are *especially* political. As Max Weinreich said, “A language is a dialect that has an army and a navy.” Grammar rules have been used for centuries to determine who gets (to keep) power.

I contend, then, that we accept that reality is complicated and that an English teacher’s job includes helping students come to terms with and grapple with life as we know it. Yes, we need to be careful and sensitive when teaching divisive topics, and yes, ideally, we would have support from administration when doing so. Being careful does not mean avoiding sensitive issues altogether, though, especially in English classes. Of all the subject areas, English is best suited to tackle many of America’s combative concerns. Why? Because literature breeds empathy (Hollander, 2012). Literature helps us connect to each other (Gottschall, 2012). Literature allows us to identify with others’ experiences (Murphy, 2012). Literature provides a way for our brains to grow comfortable with ambiguity (Jacobs, 2013). Literature may even lead to long-lasting biological changes in readers’ brains (Ryan, 2014). Reading fiction literally makes us different, more empathetic, better people who are more equipped to make sense of life itself. Reading complex texts rewires our brains to be better equipped for complex thoughts and situations. The 21st century needs us to read novels and poetry. It needs more student voices. It needs English teachers who thoughtfully allow and encourage students to engage in difficult themes and conversations.

I do believe in America. I believe in America as a future, as a dream. I believe in America as envisioned in its founding

words. I believe in students, and I know you do too. If English classes provide an—and perhaps the best—opportunity for students to engage in deep reading, reasoned thinking, impromptu and revised writing, and discussions and reflections about our complicated world—and I think that they do—then English teachers are compelled to run head-on at ethical, moral issues in literature and life to help students learn how to make sense of it all. We do not need to—and should not—tell students who to vote for, but we do need to help students develop the abilities to read, write, speak, and think. These skills are inherently American, and if you don't think that learning those skills is itself a political act, then ask Malala Yousafzai or Ruby Bridges, among too many others, how easy it was for them to receive an education in the first place.

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