

CHOOSING RESOURCES¹⁹

Choosing resources for classroom study can be somewhat difficult since almost all texts have the potential to be controversial. Even literature's best books may contain material that students, their parents or the community find troubling. Does this mean that teachers should avoid any texts that might be controversial? To do so would undermine one of the central purposes of education. If teachers opt out of discussing sensitive issues arising from literature and other texts, they are doing their students a disservice.

Students are exposed to sensitive and controversial messages daily. Such messages can be disturbing and confusing if students are not taught how to look at them critically, in light of their own values. Literature and other texts provide students with opportunities to "rehearse" for life through careful exposure to controversial issues, giving students the chance for personal growth in a safe environment. Sensitive topics can be handled in the safety of the classroom, where the opportunity for discussion exists, and an infrastructure of support staff is also available within the school and community to address personal problems should they surface as a result of classroom reading and discussion.

Literature, in particular, has the power to connect students with sensitive, complicated human issues that are not clear-cut and simply resolved. Texts that explore issues and dilemmas of the human experience, such as gender, class and race, provide a rich medium for helping students develop empathy and understanding, which goes beyond their reading of the texts.

Alberta Learning Authorized Resources

Teachers must be free to select and use literature and other texts that genuinely address the hopes, fears, frustrations and experiences of adolescents. At the same time, teachers must use care in selecting texts that respect their students both morally and intellectually. While all texts that are authorized by Alberta Learning have undergone extensive review to ensure that they are appropriate for Alberta classrooms, teachers must also use their knowledge of their own students and communities to select resources from authorized resource lists or to select other resources that are appropriate for their particular situation.

The list of authorized resources for English language arts may be found on the Alberta Learning Web site at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/curriculum/bySubject/english/ELA10_12list.pdf.

Alberta Learning has developed a number of valuable nonprint resources that support the English language arts program of studies:

- **LearnAlberta.ca:** This online resource (<http://www.learnalberta.ca>) offers digital video, animations, laboratory demonstrations, simulations, interactive discovery tools and reference materials.

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- *Room for Five*: This resource includes nine 30-minute videos that focus on the real-life application of oral and written communication strategies.
- *Researching and Making Presentations: Grades 5 to 12: English Language Arts* This resource features video clips of students demonstrating five aspects of researching and making presentations, at four increasingly advanced levels.

What Is Sensitive?

Everything from William Shakespeare’s plays to *National Geographic* magazine have been targets of controversy. Classics as well as contemporary works can be open to criticism.

There are no easy rules to determine what might be targeted as controversial. However, potentially sensitive areas include: mythology, legends, the supernatural, magic, fantasy, witches and witchcraft, death and suicide, sex and gender, violence, abuse, profanity and swearing, evolution, politics, religion, race, bioethics, drugs, and ideologies.

In determining what might be considered controversial, teachers should consider the following questions:

- What is the issue?
- What are some causes of the issue?
- What are some consequences of the issue?
- What alternatives to the issue might be considered?
- How can society respond to the issue to prevent or alleviate negative consequences?

What is controversial changes over time. Societal changes bring different issues into the forefront each year. Being attuned to what might be considered sensitive means that teachers must be cognizant of the “tenor of the times.”

Considerations When Determining Resource Sensitivity

Teacher Review of Resources

Know your students, know your materials, and use your own judgement. Resources such as teacher guides and annotations cannot provide all of the background information necessary to deal adequately with issues that may be considered sensitive by one person or community and not another.

When selecting texts to be read, heard or viewed by an entire class, take into consideration literary value, readability, validity, appeal to the intended audience and contribution to achieving curriculum outcomes. What you select this year may change for a subsequent year based on some or all of the following elements.

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Who Is Enrolled in Class?

Consider your students' backgrounds and experiences. Respect students, their sense of self and their ability to deal with sensitive or controversial issues in what you assign them to read. Remember that some of your students may have personal connections to the issues in the texts through their own experiences or those of people they know. Some students will be more emotionally affected by a topic and may require extra attention.

Community Values

Recognize that personal and religious beliefs may cause individuals or groups to object to texts or discussions of some topics. Talking with community residents and the school administration, as well as other teachers, can help to determine what areas are likely to be sensitive. This does not mean you should not use the text in question, but you need to be aware of how carefully to handle issues with students and the community.

Current Events in Lives of Students and Community

Local interests and issues are important considerations when selecting texts for student use. For example, in a school where there has been a recent death, it may not be judicious to engage students in texts focused on the topic of death.

Passage of Time

Deciding on specific texts to retain should be part of an ongoing school review process. What may be acceptable today and in one school or community might be judged controversial at another time or in another setting.

Connection to Program Outcomes

Texts chosen, regardless of their controversial nature, must have a clear connection to curriculum outcomes. The literature must have a clear, pedagogical purpose.

Relevance to Students

Texts should be accessible to students in terms of readability, their background knowledge and personal experiences, and their maturity. In determining what is appropriate, also consider whether students are likely to have been exposed to such subject matter previously.

Literary Quality

Teachers should always endeavour to choose good-quality texts that use language artistically and that engage the reader. Characterizations should be believable and sensitive, and plots carefully crafted.

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Explaining Program and Choice of Texts

English language arts teachers are the most qualified professionals to make informed choices in selecting texts for students to study. As such, they can be active in establishing an atmosphere in the school and in the community that promotes reading. A school English department should have a policy explaining the value of teaching literature and how texts are chosen for classroom use.

Inform the community about your school policy regarding the selection of materials. Explain the value of literature and the right to read. Endeavour to provide a textbook for each student to use as his or her own for the entire course, so parents can be familiar with the resource and its selections. Provide information in newsletters about the English language arts program and policy and about the texts students are using. Host informational meetings with interested individuals.

Encourage students, both through direct assignments and informal conversation, to talk with their families about the literature they read. Engage parents in sharing with students their responses to texts through discussion or dialogue journals. Invite parents into the classroom to join in literary discussions and see what is actually happening in the classroom.

Strategies for Dealing with Sensitive Texts and Issues

Before addressing a text that encompasses a sensitive issue, teachers need to feel comfortable themselves in discussing the topic. The tone teachers use in talking about a controversial topic conveys their respect and attitude about it and any people who may be connected with it. It is advisable to acknowledge the controversial issue, in order to make it easier for students to ask questions and discuss the issue in a mature way. However, it is not necessary to draw undue attention; for example, reading aloud a passage including profane language, which will possibly make students feel uncomfortable. It is useful to talk about profanities and other sensitive aspects of texts, why they are included, and how the author uses them effectively, but unnecessary to verbalize the exact words.

Establishing an Appropriate Classroom Climate

A fundamental responsibility of English language arts teachers is to establish an atmosphere of rapport, tolerance and respect in the classroom. As our world becomes more diverse, so do our classrooms. Dilemmas and contradictions arising out of sensitive issues are an inevitable part of daily life in our schools. Before students can engage in discussions about sensitive or controversial issues, it is necessary to develop an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable doing so.

As teachers we must create harmony in classrooms, where students and teachers care about each other. Though we may not be able to anticipate every sensitive reaction in advance, we can always offer a sincerely compassionate response to students upset by something in a text. Use your own classroom climate-building activities or try some of the following.

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Respect

Respect is essential in discussions about controversial issues, and using language and image to show respect is part of the English language arts program. Have each student pair up with a peer, whom they do not necessarily know well, to discuss the concept of “respect.” What is respect? How do you show respect? How do other people show respect? Share students’ responses in a class discussion, emphasizing that respect does not mean we all need to think and act in the same ways. In fact, respect allows us to learn from our differences.

Historical or Additional Information

When any text is used, it should be within a context that explains its historical background or other relevant information. The text itself may not provide sufficient background to deal adequately with a sensitive issue. For example, racial dialects and racial and religious slurs in Brian Doyle’s *Angel Square* should be presented to students as examples of the times depicted in the story. The greater message of the novel’s indictment of racism should be stressed. A careful examination of the author’s intended purpose and message will be necessary at times, particularly when the social commentary or criticism is subtle or satirical. It may be important to emphasize that a character’s voice can be quite distinct from that of the author.

It is vital that the teacher establish the context of the literature or other texts directly or through student activities, revealing the particular attitudes as situated in an accurate historical setting or in additional factual information about the controversial issue. Reading a text that includes controversial issues gives students the opportunity to compare historical treatments of individuals and situations with what we like to think of as today’s more inclusive, multicultural and fair treatment of others. Re-examining texts helps readers challenge their own beliefs and perspectives in a continuing dialogue that relates the past to the present.

Providing all relevant background information prior to students’ reading of a text may hinder the students’ personal responses to what they are reading. However, providing accurate background information at the relevant time will help students better understand the issues and their responses to them.

Personal Response

There is no one interpretation or meaning to a text. Activities that guide students in connecting what is in the text with what they already understand will help them ask questions and comment on issues in a secure forum. If a topic is difficult to talk about or if the classroom environment is not amenable to class discussion, have students record their personal responses in journal entries that no one else will read (except the teacher if that is the normal process). Invite volunteers to share what they have written or parts they feel comfortable divulging.

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Personal response can help students see the similarities and differences between their own feelings and thoughts and those presented in the text. Some texts may even encourage students to see themselves or their own situations as presented through the lens of the author. Teachers must give students time to process the feelings that literature can elicit. Through assisted discussions and activities, students are challenged to see the many perspectives of complex controversial issues—perspectives that go beyond their immediate responses.



See pages 44 to 52 for ideas on personal response.

Focus on the Literary Value of the Text

A good piece of literature, or a good film, is more than the controversial issue it includes, and will stand up to a careful examination of its artistry. Though the experience of reading literature or viewing a film is often personal and emotionally charged, teachers can help students become more analytical by focusing upon the artistry of the text over and above issues. Such study of technique allows students to approach texts more critically, applying a professional distance in order to assess not just the impact of the message but the manner in which that message was constructed. By learning “the how” as well as “the what,” students become more skilled at deconstructing all types of images and texts, and perhaps less vulnerable to advertising or manipulative messages. Discussion of controversial issues is best considered within the context of the author’s style and the broader meaning of the piece of literature.

Debriefing

When a text confronts students with sensitive issues, it can be confusing and uncomfortable. Students will need to respond to the motives, feelings and events communicated through the text. It is important that the teacher carefully debrief the sensitive and complicated issues that often cause students to examine their own value systems and personal biases.

Teachers will not be able to answer all students’ questions about sensitive issues. An honest response might be, “I don’t know, but perhaps we can find the answer” or “That’s a difficult question and I don’t know how I feel about that.”

Teachers must be ready to provide students with further resources should they need them to help deal with the emotional responses that might arise from discussing a sensitive topic. It is difficult to know which students might experience difficulties with which issues. Knowing where students can go for further information, help or answers to personal questions is an important component of the debriefing process.

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Dealing with Challenges

There are basically two kinds of challenges regarding the use of materials in schools:

- A parent does not want his or her child to read or view a particular text.
- A parent, teacher, administrator or school board member does not want anyone in the class or school to read a text.

How to deal with concerns surrounding controversial literature or other texts varies for each circumstance. Generally, the classroom teacher can deal with the first type of challenge. Explaining the curricular merits of a text or the context of the questionable part and how it has been carefully used and debriefed with students will alleviate some parents' concerns. The offer of an alternative reading or viewing assignment for the student is in some cases the most appropriate solution to the first type of challenge.

The second kind of challenge, depending on its intensity, must often be dealt with at an administrative or school board level. Sometimes complaints come from people who have heard or read something in the media. Their positions are often based on arguments that the text is not "age appropriate" or it "goes against community standards." Clear communication and a forum for dialogue allowing all to be heard is perhaps the best approach for dealing with issues that verge on censorship. Consider the following:

- Being proactive is always better than being reactive. Schools and districts should have developed policies outlining their belief in providing students with a wide range of materials and explaining the basis for their selection. The policies should also include the process to be followed should challenges arise.
- Challenges to literature are fraught with tension and volatility. Listen to the challenge and treat the person with respect. Through careful handling, many challenges can be alleviated at the classroom or school level. Becoming argumentative or defensive can produce conflict.
- Take each criticism seriously. Involve the school administration if the issue is not settled after discussing it with the person. You may wish to contact the National Council of Teachers of English (<http://www.ncte.org>) for further information.
- Ensure that you are able to explain the educational value of the text and how it helps meet the outcomes of the curriculum. The National Council of Teachers of English has a CD that may be useful, which includes more than 200 rationales for commonly challenged works.
- Collect student responses reflecting how they have reacted to the text and how you have used it in the context of the curriculum.
- Part of a school policy for dealing with challenges may be to have a committee of teachers, parents, librarians, students and other educators to review challenged materials.

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