

Profanity as Pedagogy

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Abstract

Modern American curriculum is controlled by the standards created by legislative measures; many teachers and curriculum leaders are choosing to break free from the standardized chains to introduce socially-relevant content into the classroom. Pop culture, world issues, and controversial topics all fall into this category. Many controversial topics can be found in literature. One main area of contention is profanity. This article will explore how profanity, a controversial element in literature, can be used in classrooms as a level of literary analysis. The controversial nature of profanity becomes a pedagogical device used to help students make meaning of their current historical moment. I will argue that philosophical hermeneutics can be used by teachers as a method for relating students' experiences with their understanding of profanity. Through this method, the controversial material becomes relevant pedagogy.

Keywords: *Profanity, Curriculum, Hermeneutics, Controversy*

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This article will explore how profanity, a controversial element in literature, can be used in classrooms as a level of literary analysis. The controversial nature of profanity becomes a pedagogical device used to help students make meaning of their current historical moment. I will argue that philosophical hermeneutics can be used by teachers as a method for relating students' experiences with their understanding of profanity. Through this method, the controversial material becomes relevant pedagogy. During the investigation of the role of profanity in classrooms, I will first discuss what causes a topic to be deemed controversial. Second, I will examine profanity's role in the classroom. Third, philosophical hermeneutics will be used as a lens to examine the controversy surrounding the place of profanity in school curriculum.

What is a controversial issue?

Abortion. Stem cell research. Immunization of children. Free Speech. Educational Standards. All these topics share the same label: controversial. What makes an issue controversial? Controversial topics are deemed contentious due to their effect on an individual's "values matrix" and

are controlled by national hegemony.¹ Controversial topics spark heated debates among the population due to the clear agree and disagree stances, which are usually controlled by political dichotomy in the United States. Burkstrand-Reid et al. supply four ways for a topic to be considered controversial in their article titled *Teaching Controversial Topics*.² A topic can become controversial if it is highly politicized, if people can relate personally to the issue, if a lack of diversity exists among the specified population, or because of idiosyncratic views of people within a group.³ Topics in education, such as homosexuality, profanity, and violence, are deemed controversial due to their highly politicized nature, first or second person personalization by students, and lack of diversity in the classroom.⁴ First person personalization occurs when a person has a lived experience involving the controversial issue at hand. For example, a person who was not immunized as a child may personalize the controversial topic of immunizing children in order to attend public school. Secondary personalization occurs when people who have not been directly affected by an issue personalize it regardless of their experience.⁵

Controversial topics: Within classroom walls

“The most daunting pedagogical task arises when a topic touches all three of the categories set forth: the topic that is simultaneously politicized, personalized, and draws out marginalized or radicalized students.”⁶ Education should be at the forefront of handling these topics; however, many educators renounce controversial topics due to the perceived danger in the classroom. “Because the public school curriculum is embedded in the ebb and flow of the ideological struggles of society at large, the degree to which an issue in the curriculum is considered controversial also ebbs and flows.”⁷ Much like the world of pop culture, the extent to which an issue is seen as controversial can change over time. Due to this fickle nature, students must be engaged with controversial issues in order to help shape the future of the issues. Unfortunately, mandated curriculum is not always current with the true needs of society. Curriculum is dictated in order to protect the public interest of the country, as well as the safety of our youth. Steven Camicia defines “public interest as those claims values, beliefs, and opinions that are believed to be in the common good of a public.”⁸ For most classrooms, controversial issues are deemed too provocative and not in the best public interest. Book-banning and general challenges to the curriculum are solid indicators of what society deems too controversial to be discussed or read within classroom walls. The top two reasons for banning books in the United States from 1980-2009 were 1) sexual content and 2) obscene language.⁹ *Sexual content* includes characters engaging in sexual activity, whether it is by choice or not, as well as sexual orientation. The main worry of reading about sexual activity is that

1. Irving Hendricks, “Developing a Values Matrix for Assessing Curriculum Theory” (PhD Diss., University of California, Riverside, 1997).

2. Beth Burkstrand-Reid, “Teaching Controversial Topics,” *Family Court Review*, 49 (2011):678.

3. *Ibid.*, 679.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Steven P. Camicia, “Deciding What Is a Controversial Issue: A Case Study of Social Studies Curriculum Controversy,” *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 36(4) (2008): 300.

8. Steven P. Camicia, “Deliberation of Controversial Public School Curriculum: Developing Processes and Outcomes that Increase Legitimacy and Social Justice,” *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 6(2) (2010): 1.

9. American Library Association, *Challenges by Reason, Initiator & Institution for 1990- 99 and 2000-09* (2013), <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>.

this will trigger students' curiosity about the topic or be viewed as a guidebook. *Obscene language* includes the usual culprits—four letter words—along with blasphemies and any and all derivatives of both sub categories. Whether or not to use profanity is a choice usually made by parents when raising their children. Allowing teachers to overrule family values raises controversial debates in communities as well as school board meeting rooms.

Educators commonly tip-toe around classroom discussions and study of controversial topics; however, a subset of American college students are now moving towards erasing controversial topics from campuses across the United States. “A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”¹⁰ This movement is mostly focused on transforming college campuses into safe zones “where students are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable,” and anyone who interferes with the safety is punished, thus creating a vindictive protectiveness system.¹¹ Some students and faculty may find this to be a pleasant cleansing, but many educators are aware of the dangers this poses to education.

Vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong. The harm may be more immediate, too. A campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically.¹²

Hiding the issues does not solve the issues. Students cannot simply erase offensive content and words. Shielding high school and college students from opposing viewpoints also has a negative effect on American democracy: “When the ideas, values, and speech of the other side are seen not just as wrong but as willfully aggressive toward innocent victims, it is hard to imagine the kind of mutual respect, negotiation, and compromise that are needed to make politics a positive-sum game.”¹³ Part of the responsibility of public education is to properly educate future citizen-voters. Allowing students to exist with an intolerant mindset toward opposing viewpoints does not allow for proper growth and development, thus creating intolerant and closed-minded citizens. This was not the original goal of American education.

Thomas Jefferson, upon founding the University of Virginia, said: This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it. We believe that this is still—and will always be—the best attitude for American universities.¹⁴

This way of educating should not be limited to universities. Secondary education institutions must adopt this orientation toward educating in order prepare students for success in college.

10. Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt, "The Coddling of the American Mind," *Atlantic*, 316(2) (2015): 42.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Lukianoff, & Haidt. "Coddling of the American Mind," 42.

The learning gap between high school and college increases when educators exclude thought-provoking curriculum, such as controversial topics, from their classrooms. This is evident by the state of American college students' thinking abilities and the way they approach education.

Our students come to the university with many years of training in listening passively and answering brief questions from the teachers with correct answers. Teachers rarely ask students how they arrived at their answers [...] School has not been a place where students and teachers come together to talk about important questions. School has been a place where students try to guess what the teacher wants them to say.¹⁵

Rather than focus on guesswork, “the pedagogical movement should be towards openness and more questions.”¹⁶ If education, by way of controversial topics, can focus on helping students navigate the fringes of their own experiences, then “students are, in large part, guided to find, accept or impose meaning upon their world.”¹⁷

Classroom Methodology

The existence of controversial topics must move beyond merely existing as debate and essay topics. Students should engage with the topics in open discussion and examine the topics in case studies. “Discussion is peculiarly conducive to appreciative understanding of the different positions in a controversy and to empathy with those who hold them.”¹⁸ In a discussion, students will not be trying to convince the other side that they are right. In a true discussion, there is no *right* and *wrong*. Our current culture is not allowing students to grow and develop into open-minded members of society. Rather than promoting open discussion and critical thinking, our popular culture is fostering a cynical view of controversial topics. “By promoting knee-jerk individualism, fostering a hegemony that denies the reality of social inequality, and disseminating prejudice, mainstream culture may influence some individuals to treat issues [...] with skepticism.”¹⁹ Deviating from mainstream ideas “at least in non-statistical terms, connotes something pejorative. Accordingly, students learn to categorize the ‘other’ in a negative light. The norm is preferable, right and good; the deviant should be avoided.”²⁰

Handling controversial topics within the classroom requires several components. First, an opportunity for students to redirect their focus surrounding the controversial topic is needed to foster discussion. Using controversial topics, such as the existence of profanity in literature, in case studies allows students to analyze the content as a third-party observer. “The use of the case study creates a safer environment for students to share their thoughts about controversial issues because

15. Robert B. Innes, “Dialogic Communication in Collaborative Problem Solving Groups,” *International Journal for the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning*, 1(1) (2007): 14.

16. Larry Green & Kevin Gary, “Pedagogy for a Liquid Time,” *Studies In Philosophy and Education*, 16 (2015): 60.

17. Ibid.

18. Michael Hand & Ralph Levinson, “Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom,” *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, 44 (6) (2011): 616.

19. Mark Hedley & Linda Markowitz, “Avoiding Moral Dichotomies: Teaching Controversial Topics to Resistant Students,” *Teaching Sociology*, 29(2) (2001): 195.

20. Ibid.

the focus is taken off their own beliefs and morals to the specifics of the case study.”²¹ This redirection of focus allows students to guide a discussion and navigate toward multiple conclusions. “Because well-constructed case studies have many potential outcomes instead of a definitive, right answer, the power differential between the instructor and students is noticeably less.”²² Discussion and case studies allow for critical thinking and critical engagement with issues.

The second component for handling controversial topics within the classroom is the use of directive teaching practices.

Directive teaching involves both the existence of a favored position and some sort of guidance and encouragement of students toward that position. An endorsement can refer to a particular speech act where the teacher explicitly identifies the favored position to students, but this is not an essential feature. An endorsement may also be shown through particular pedagogical approaches.²³

Micheal Hand, defending Robert Dearden’s “epistemic criterion,” disagrees that a controversial topic should be approached in this way.²⁴ When faced with a controversial issue within their curriculum or classroom discussions, for Hand, educators must suspend their own opinions in order to allow students to develop opinions and viewpoints of their own through non-directive teaching practices. Ultimately, my point is that philosophical hermeneutics provide a method of reaching what Warnick and Smith refer to as soft-directive teaching. Directive teaching occurs when teachers make the claim that one position on a controversial issue is considered correct.²⁵ Some guidance and direction may be necessary when initially investigating controversial issues. By incorporating hermeneutics, teachers and students are able to uncover a *right* position on a controversial issue. Even though a teacher may establish a side of the controversial issue as their own correct view, I encourage students to determine their own conclusions despite my initial direction to one side. As students mature, they will be able to use hermeneutical analysis to investigate any possible issue whether deemed controversial by reason or merely popular contention.

The third component of handling controversial topics is teacher planning and effort. Navigating the flow of opinions within a controversial discussion can be cumbersome for the facilitator. “On the one extreme, educators who penalize students for speaking their truths or censor what is deemed adequate knowledge, subsequently serve the dominant social order” if the popular belief is to silence the issue.²⁶ Students should be able to discuss multiple sides to issues facing their culture. Students must also make sense of the existence of multiple viewpoints. “On the other extreme, educators who simply ignore and excuse student mistakes and rationalize ignorance in an effort to be ‘down,’ likewise further disenfranchise students.”²⁷ Educators must have the skills and knowledge to foster an environment for discussions of controversial topics, the use of profanity for purposes of this paper, without directly teaching students what is considered

21. Karen Mason & Lisa Briggs, "Myths and Moral Panics: An Active Learning Approach to Controversial Topics," *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 5(1) (2011): 7.

22. Ibid.

23. Bryan Warnick & D. Spencer Smith, "The Controversy over Controversies: A Plea for Flexibility and for 'Soft-Directive' Teaching," *Educational Theory*, 64(3) (2014): 229.

24. Michael Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion," *Educational Theory*, 58(2) (2008): 213-228.

25. Warnick & Smith, "The Controversy."

26. Vajra M. Watson, "Censoring Freedom: Community-Based Professional Development and the Politics of Profanity," *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 46(3) (2013): 403.

27. Ibid.

correct. In order for this to occur, teachers must spend time planning and put forth effort in facilitating a true discussion.

The fourth component of handling controversial topics is comfort. Student engagement in discussion of controversial topics relies heavily on students being comfortable with each other. “The most feared entity in the classroom is not the professor or the test, but the classmate.”²⁸ Students must feel comfortable in their educational environment to share their viewpoints. Teachers and students must foster an environment where multiple viewpoints exist. “Turning to the teacher, calmness and assurance are necessary, as well as audacity to expose the limits or frontiers of knowledge.”²⁹ Effectively handling controversial topics in the classroom takes planning and effort on the part of facilitation. Educators must “set clear expectations regarding classroom behavior and discussion decorum without striking so much fear into students that they become reluctant to participate at all.”³⁰ Student participation and engagement with the issues is the ultimate goal.

Without clearly communicated codes of conduct, learning at any level is diminished. Once the rules are developed, instructors must enforce them if they are violated. Students learn which rules are important to an instructor based on the level of monitoring and correction they receive. Those behavioral rules not enforced do not exist in the student’s experience.³¹

These codes of conduct must be applied consistently. Students will be able to ascertain which topics are of personal concern to the facilitator if the issues are handled differently. Many educators may think the effort needed to appropriately and successfully present controversial topics in the classroom may be futile; however, education cannot turn its back on the curriculum of the current moment. “Any classroom activity or experience that teaches students to deal more rationally and effectively with conflicting information and emotions may increase overall learning outcomes of higher education and life lessons in general.”³² Students will benefit from studying controversial topics.

Institutional barriers and ineffective policies, personal idiosyncrasies and prejudices, and the overwhelming social-emotional needs of students come together and often collide inside classrooms. Moreover, implicit and explicit judgments within curricula can further alienate students from their own education. The results are all too familiar: disengagement, discipline problems, and a devastating drop-out crisis. As a solution, listening to who students really are as a basis for learning is not simply a first step, but rather the journey.³³

Who are twenty-first learners? They are students who are immersed in a society riddled with controversial issues being discussed on every twenty-four-hour news channel. They are the students with information always readily available at their fingertips. It is the duty of education to guide students in navigating controversial topics in order to better understand their world.

28. Mason, & Briggs, “Myths and Moral Panics,” 4.

29. Green & Gary, “Pedagogy for a Liquid Time,” 60.

30. Burkstrand-Reid, “Teaching Controversial Topics,” 678.

31. Mason & Briggs, “Myths and Moral Panics,” 11.

32. Ibid., 12.

33. Watson, “Censoring Freedom,” 403.

Why is profanity needed in schools?

Profanity, or the “loosening up of language” has seeped into the pores of American ways of life.³⁴ Sobre-Denton and Simonis define *swearing* as “any conscious use of taboo language for communicative purposes.”³⁵ The value of profanity in speech and literature is a topic of personal opinion that has been affected by culture, religion, and etiquette; however, profanity always finds a way to seep into the cracks of society. “Politics, the arts, economics, social and sexual relationships, and family interactions have all been touched by this greater latitude in speech.”³⁶ Due to this saturation, profanity’s role in classroom pedagogy is an inevitable occurrence. According to researchers at Brigham Young University, most research involving profanity deals with television, movies, and video games, not literature.³⁷ Profanity’s role in literature deserves curricular attention. Teachers should embrace profanity as a teachable element of language that can aide in deeper textual analysis. Profanity becomes a useful literary element if “interpreted through educational and historical context with the aid of hermeneutics.”³⁸ Rather than banning books from high school curricula, educators and students can interpret the meaning and underlying purpose of profanity in literature. Teachers deserve to have the freedom to teach using literature containing profanity. “Academic freedom refers to teachers having freedom to teach and students having freedom to learn without interference from within or from ideological conflicts outside the institution.”³⁹ “Teachers’ academic freedom interests are often viewed as subordinate to a school’s freedom to make its own decisions about the content of the curriculum and research.”⁴⁰ For this reason, many books are banned due to the profanity found on their pages. Books should not be banned for containing profanity; instead, profanity usage should be studied and discussed. Students could then analyze the language usage by certain characters? Students could answer questions such as: Why do literary characters use profanity? What does the profanity usage show about the mindset of characters? Is any factor affecting the profanity usage? Due to book-banning, profanity is oftentimes a suggested reason to avoid curriculum materials. By viewing profanity as a literary element rather than a deterrent, a new realm of literary analysis has been introduced.

“Should profanity be allowed in schools?” is considered a controversial question. “The use of dirty words or discussion of sex is one area of difficulty for parents, students, teachers and administrators alike.”⁴¹ Handling topics of the nature is not easy with children. “Teachers often struggle with representing the forbidden in their classrooms, from banned books to taboo terms.”⁴²

34. Rob Chirico, *Damn! A Cultural History of Swearing in Modern America* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2014), 15.

35. Miriam Sobre-Denton & Jana Simonis, “Do You Talk to Your Teacher With That Mouth?: Fuck: A Documentary on Profanity as a Teaching Tool in the Communication Classroom.” *Communication Teacher*, 26(3) (2012): 180.

36. Chirico, *Damn! A Cultural History*, 15.

37. Sarah M. Coyne, Mark Callister, Launea A. Stockdale, David A. Nelson, & Brian M. Wells, “A Helluva Read: Profanity in Adolescent Literature,” *Mass Communication & Society*, 15(3) (2012): 361.

38. Mychelle H. Smith, “Profanity, Disgust, and Dangerous Literature: A Hermeneutical Analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Chocolate War*” (PhD Diss., Texas A&M University, 2015), 2.

39. James Van Patten, “Academic Freedom,” in *Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education* (2009), edited by Eugene Provenzo and Asterie Provenzo, (New York: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009): 1.

40. National Coalition Against Censorship, “First Amendment in Schools: A Resource Guide,” retrieved from: <http://ncac.org/resource/first-amendment-in-schools/>. n.d.

41. Timothy B. Jay, *Cursing in America* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1992), 33.

42. Sobre-Denton & Simonis, *Do You Talk to Your Teacher With That Mouth*, 180.

“Many English teachers don’t debate or, rather, they avoid debate by avoiding hearing or seeing the taboo words.”⁴³ Personal opinions often dictate the allowance or restriction of profanity. When personal opinions are set aside, the school code of conduct will then step in to dictate the language usage on school grounds. “Swearing is often castigated as the language of the inarticulate, but there is absolutely no evidence for the blatant prejudice”⁴⁴ “When considering the offensiveness of a profanity, simply considering the word alone does not account for the many aspects that affect why profane language is perceived as more odious when spoken by some individuals than others.”⁴⁵ When educators ignore profanity and punish students for using it, “we turn our backs on the language of reality, hiding from and urging our students to hide from life.”⁴⁶ Instead, educators must turn the tables on the use of profanity; the analysis of profanity will allow students to better understand their own environment and language usage.

Profanity mostly enters the English classroom by way of reading curriculum. “Since most teachers want to create (rather than negate) spaces for students to achieve, it is important to consider a form of literacy instruction that is multifaceted, locally constructed, and ever-changing.”⁴⁷ In order to create and learn within a local environment, students must choose reading materials that speak to their culture and current historical moment. This freedom of choice will more than likely result in students choosing literature containing profanity and other controversial topics. “There should be an open-minded account of the genesis of open swearing and how the marked change in turn affected and continues to affect the language we speak and the culture in which we live.”⁴⁸ Profanity now becomes a literary element to analyze and study within the text, which can result in better understanding of student lives and culture, rather than a reason for banning books.

Beginning at the high school level, students should be able to read and analyze the use of profanity by characters within literature. This analysis will result in conversations and understandings regarding students’ own uses of profanity and whether or not they find it controversial. “At high school the curriculum is attuned to society’s needs and the lives of the students after graduation.”⁴⁹ This attuned curriculum allows more room for controversial topics, oftentimes in the form of argumentative writing assignments or structured debates. In the current era of standardized education, educators are not only working toward the educational endeavor, which includes “ongoing series of attempts to make sense of the world,” but now the concern has moved to measuring the sense-making.⁵⁰ The structure and standards allow legislatures to count and measure students’ knowledge and understanding. However, a movement has emerged in the current educational realm away from “contemporary trends in education that seek ever sharper quantification of learning outcomes as well as the most efficient means towards achieving those ends.”⁵¹ An educational shift is occurring beneath the standards and accountability current. “Traditional humanistic concepts of education and personality formation on the one hand, and learning and knowledge, on the other hand, have to be reconsidered from a perspective involving both the virtues of modernity

43. John Bens, “Taboo or Not Taboo,” *College Composition and Communication*, 22(3) (1971): 217.

44. Chirico, *Damn! A Cultural History*, 10.

45. Lora Jacobi, “Perceptions of Profanity: How Race, Gender, and Expletive Choice Affect Perceived Offensiveness,” *North American Journal of Psychology*, 16(2) (2014): 263.

46. Bens, *Taboo or Not Taboo*, 216.

47. Watson “Censoring Freedom,” 389.

48. Chirico, *Damn! A Cultural History of Swearing*, 31.

49. Jay, *Cursing in America*, 33.

50. Green & Gary, “Pedagogy for a Liquid Time,” 48.

51. *Ibid.*

and postmodern skepticism with respect to idealistic and rigid biases of modern thought.”⁵² As teenagers, high school students are living in the juxtaposition of idealistic and modern thought. The curriculum must move away from accustomed meanings and understandings; “by loosening one’s grip on conventional meanings, we are much more capable of registering what is emerging in our culture.”⁵³ Education must embrace the controversial topics that are shaping the future. By cutting the strings of standardization, educators can allow students to move beyond the recitation of facts and move into the realm of questioning, investigating, and understanding. “When teachers validate the perspectives of their students and facilitate deliberation between them, they effectively move away from teaching students about citizenship and instead treat them as the citizens they already are.”⁵⁴ Students are allowed to form their own beliefs regarding controversial topics like profanity.

The use of profanity as pedagogy is not limited to only reading materials. To allow students to use profanity in their own writing and discussions or not is a decision teachers must also face. Watson conducted a study of secondary English classroom poetry workshops. She found that allowing students to write in their own colloquial language can not only affect students’ education but also their lives. Teaching students to write is more important than scores on standardized tests and self expression of ideas; “when death, depression, and various forms of oppression loom so heavily in this world, writing and performing is not simply an act of expression, it is an outlet for healing”⁵⁵ Watson found that the use of profanity affected both the teachers and the students involved in the writing workshops. The teachers discussed how the “controversial conversations also allowed us to go deeper with one another as we wrestled to understand the purpose of school and our role as educators. By fixating on a cuss word sometimes we are remiss to address a teenager’s call for help, explained one of the teachers.”⁵⁶ Due to the content topics, the conversations were considered controversial. Some teachers wanted to prohibit the use of profanity in writing whereas other teachers wanted to allow students to express themselves and their true emotions by allowing profanity usage in written assignments. One participant spoke in support of allowing profanity within the classroom:

To the adults that are concerned about students’ use of explicit language, they are trying to avoid a problem rather than deal with it. The problem is not the profanity. The problem is the source. The source is not the youth. We did not make this world, we were born into it just like every other poet, student, teacher, human being. And in many ways, it’s a fucked up world! This is the environment that raised us so what kind of adult criticizes our attempt to release, reshape, and create our own identity? [...] students cussing is not as profane as an officer pepper-spraying their own college students trying to stand up for their rights, or as profane as a child being murdered by a grown man—Zimmerman—or as profane as the slaughter of Oscar Grant, JFK, MLK, X, Tupac, Diallo ...! Is cussing a big deal when our students are starving? Where are the priorities? One of the schools I work at [...] looks just like a prison. Is cussing more profane than that?⁵⁷

52. Grozdankal Gojkov, "Postmodern Pedagogy," *Journal Plus Education/Educatia Plus*, 8(2) (2012): 19.

53. Green & Gary, "Pedagogy for a Liquid Time," 49.

54. Nicole Fournier-Sylvester, "Daring to Debate: Strategies for Teaching Controversial Issues in the Classroom," *College Quarterly*, 16(3) (2013): n.p.

55. Watson, "Censoring Freedom," 399.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 400.

The entire view of profanity is shifted by the questions referencing current issues of contention in the United States. Using profanity in the curriculum, i.e. spoken word poetry, is one facet of liberatory literacy. “Liberatory literacy does not silence nor does it turn off the microphone. Rather, it cuts open reality in a process that is vulnerable and revealing for artist and audience, teacher and student.”⁵⁸ Profanity lives within the vulnerable spaces. “It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities... Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them.”⁵⁹ Allowing students to delve into the quest of understanding profanity usage will allow education to move beyond measurable standards and into the realm of artistic expression. For the sake of the students, educators cannot hide from profanity. “A world without swearing would not be a world without aggression, hate, or conflict, but a world bereft of a key means of defusing these emotions, of working them out. Swearing is an important safety valve, allowing people to express negative emotions without resorting to physical violence.”⁶⁰ Profanity becomes more than a controversial textual element to study; profanity is a therapeutic device used to survive.

How can Gadamer’s hermeneutics be used to understand profanity?

Using Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics in the curriculum allows teachers and students to bring their own experiences to their understanding of language. “Teachers seek to enrich student classroom experiences of literature as much as possible.”⁶¹ One way to further enhance experiences with literature is to use philosophical hermeneutics to investigate the various interpretations of profanity usage within a text. The use of contextual hermeneutics was used to recognize “social and historical conditions” that play a role in the use and understanding of profanity.⁶⁰ Philosophical hermeneutics allows educators to discover what is missing when books are banned thus allowing for “creative responsiveness to the emergent nature of our culture.”⁶³

Hermeneutics has to do with a theoretical attitude towards practice of interpretation of text, but also in relation to the experiences interpreted in them and in our communicatively unfolded orientations in the world. This theoretical stance only makes us aware reflectively of what is performatively at play in the practical experience of understanding.⁶⁴

Hermeneutics can be used to examine the marriage—or for some the recent divorce—of controversy and profanity, as well as to understand profanity usage in students’ own lived experiences. Why do some people consider profanity malignant when others find it illuminating?

58. Ibid., 404.

59. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 326-327.

60. Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 255.

61. Wei Lim Jia, “What Happens in a Literature Classroom? A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Perspective,” *Malaysian Journal Of ELT Research*, 11(1) (2015): 62.

62. Patrick Slattery, *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 131.

63. Green & Gary, “Pedagogy for a Liquid Time,” 61.

64. Hans George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 112.

“Insight into the usage of profanity allows for deeper insight and understanding into lived experiences” as well as deeper insight into the nature of controversy.⁶⁵ Educators and students can use hermeneutics to better understand their own personal interpretation of profane language by creating a “fusion of horizons.”⁶⁶ “Gadamer views understanding as a matter of negotiation between oneself and one’s partner in the hermeneutical dialogue such that the process of understanding can be seen as a matter of coming to an ‘agreement’ about the matter at issue.”⁶⁷ The dialogue partners could be fellow students or the teacher in a classroom example. In order for an agreement to take place, a common framework must be established.⁶⁸

Obtaining a fusion of horizons requires us to engage with the text in a productive way. This, however, is not something we can learn by coming to master a certain doctrine, method, or theory. It is more like a tacit capacity, which we acquire by following the example of others. The knowledge at stake is like a practical know-how; it resembles the Aristotelian *phronesis*. It is a knowledge that can neither be deduced theoretically, nor be fully articulated, but that rests on a kind of tact or sensitivity that is only exhibited in the form of exemplary judgments and interpretations.⁶⁹

Interpreting profanity will not be a quantifiable task. Students may struggle with reaching an understanding in regard to profanity usage, but this should not deter educators from undertaking this journey with their students. “In the various themes of how literature is interpreted, conceptualised and actualised, there is a difference in what teachers and students value in literature.”⁷⁰ Teachers and students can learn through the “fusion of horizons” created through interpretations.⁷¹ By mediating what is familiar and what is alien, discussion allows participants to move toward understanding, yet understanding is a process, not a final destination.⁷² Viewpoints of controversial topics such as profanity can be stretched without reaching ultimate conclusions. Profanity, although still controversial, has made progress in popular American culture.

Once considered “unprintable, the words are today printed in books, dictionaries, and occasionally in magazines, although not in newspapers, whereas once they adorned only toilet walls and out-lawed hard-core pornography.”⁷³ Profanity can now be found in bestselling novels on the teen fiction list. “Societal norms, beliefs, religions, worldviews, and general consideration of manners affect the reception of profanity.”⁷⁴ Investigating profanity’s role as a perceived controversial element of literary analysis is a creative way to teach students about controversy, language, academic freedom, and literature simultaneously. Book censors, school board members, and parents may find profanity controversial, yet students want to read the banned books and write using free expression. By allowing students to study the controversial

65. Smith, “Profanity, Disgust, and Dangerous Literature,” 126.

66. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

67. Jeff Malpas, “Hans-Georg Gadamer,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2015 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/gadamer/>.

68. Ibid.

69. B. Ramberg, & K. Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2009 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.). 2009. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/hermeneutics>.

70. Lim Jia, “What Happens in a Literature Classroom?,” 62.

71. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1975.

72. Malpas, *Hans Georg-Gadamer*.

73. E. Sagarin, *The Anatomy of Dirty Words* (New York: The Polyglot Press, 1962), 31.

74. Smith, “Profanity, Disgust, and Dangerous Literature,” 129

aspect of profanity, they learn to deal with it in a healthy way. Students can become more involved in their reading experience due to the analysis of profanity. “During the act of reading, fictional speech... becomes ‘real speech,’ and as such, it works in and on the fictional world. At the same time, fictional speech works on the real world, continually shaping a new entity for the reader.”⁷⁵ Focusing on the use of hermeneutics to gain an understanding of experiences and profanity allows for a deeper level of education than what can be bubbled in on a scantron. Students should be questioning, resisting norms, battling standardizations, and making an impact. Studying, discussing, and analyzing the use of profanity in literature allows for better understanding of the current historical and pedagogical moment, and for insight into controversial topics and what that means for young people in today's society. Studying a topic that older generations find controversial when their own generation does not allows students to engage in a historical, self-reflective, and engaging quest resulting in more insight into not only their self but also society. William Pinar further articulates this point: “The educational point of the public school curriculum is understanding, understanding the relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, and processes of self-formation, and the character of the historical moment in which we live, in which others have lived, and in which our descendants will someday live.”⁷⁶ For this reason, students must engage with their lived experiences. “Cognitive and linguistic capacities enable reflection on, and the re-interpretation of, experience.”⁷⁷ Thus there is a restless back and forth movement, or ‘play,’ between tradition and the experiencing, interpreting person.⁷⁸ “The person’s present, past and future are constitutively involved in the process of understanding.”⁷⁹ Student growth and development is intensified.

Conclusion

Without discussion of difficult controversial topics and understanding of lived-experiences, school is nothing more than courses being “mere conglomerations of skills and superficial concepts.”⁸⁰ Is this what we want our students to learn? In the age of accountability, “teachers are subject to extensive accountability measures, for example, through imposed specifications of the knowledge to be ‘delivered’, scripted instruction materials and ongoing inspections.”⁸¹ What happens when students control the curriculum? Introducing controversial issues and topics into the curriculum can stimulate creative and critical thinking. Controversy can be used to stimulate questioning, thinking, and critical discussion.⁸² Having students read and study their language, i.e. profanity, will allow students to engage on a quest to better understand their lived experiences and the role of controversy in those experiences. “Reader-response criticism mixed with hermeneutics allows education to move beyond normal bounds—beyond the page, beyond the words, beyond the

75. Deborah Rossen-Knill, “Creating and Manipulating Fictional Worlds: A Taxonomy of Dialogue in Fiction,” *Journal of Literary Semantics*, XXVIII(1) (1999): 42.

76. William F. Pinar, *What is Curriculum Theory?* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004).

77. Elizabeth Smythe & Deborah Spence, “Reviewing Literature in Hermeneutic Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(1) (2012): 11.

78. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1975.

79. Smith, “Profanity, Disgust, and Dangerous Literature,” 41.

80. Nel Noddings, “Conversation as Moral Education,” *Journal of Moral Education*, 23(2) (1994): 107-118.

81. Teresa Cremin, “Perspectives on Creative Pedagogy: Exploring Challenges, Possibilities and Potential,” *Education 3-13*, 43(4) (2015): 354.

82. Watson, “Censoring Freedom.

scantron—and into the realm of lived experiences in the current historical moment.”⁸³ “If controversial topics and ideas are kept from inquiring young minds because their teachers fear reprisal, opportunities to challenge, inform and enlighten students are being missed in the nation’s public schools.”⁸⁴ Education must move beyond the safety cloak of controversy. Claiming a topic is too controversial for a classroom is no longer an option. Students can engage with their own thoughts, opinions, and experiences in regard to controversial topics; students can make their own meaning.

83. Smith, “Profanity, Disgust, and Dangerous Literature,” 140.

84. David L. Hudson, *The Silencing of Student Voices: Preserving Free Speech in America’s Schools* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center), 2003, 87.