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TEACHING CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS
EXPLORING RACE IN *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

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I. Introduction

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is considered a controversial American novel; still most children encounter it in secondary schooling. Some critics conclude that the racial epithets and conflicted characters should not be exposed to youth, but the novel has survived because of its canonical position and lasting importance. Twain is widely accepted as a literary genius and even strong critics of *Huck Finn* are aware of the novel's attempt to portray racially diverse characters whose identities are changing and developing. Phillip Barrish, an expert in American literary realism, insists the n-word reveals an "unconscious excitement" in its speaker contributing to white supremacy.¹ John H. Wallace extends the case against *Huck Finn* by calling it "racist trash."² But others believe the novel provides pedagogical opportunities to talk about highly disputed issues. Peaches Henry, supports the use of Twain in schools, saying, "the factor of racial uncertainty on the part of Twain, its manifestation in his best-loved piece, and its existence in American society should not be a barrier to *Huckleberry Finn*'s admittance to the classroom."³ David Bradley, supports Henry arguing that this racial barrier is actually, "a reality that you cannot avoid."⁴ So the question remains: How should we teach the book in today's schools? Arguments about race in *Huck Finn* cannot be taken

¹ Phillip Barrish, *The Secret Joys of Anti-Racist Pedagogy: Huckleberry Finn in the Classroom*, Project Muse (John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 118.

² John H. Wallace, "The Case Against Huck Finn," in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn 1991*, ed. James S. Leonard, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, (Duke University Press, 1999), 16.

³ Peaches, Henry, "The Struggle for Tolerance" in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn 1991*, ed. James S. Leonard, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, (Duke University Press, 1999), 44.

⁴ ""Huckleberry Finn" and the N-word." YouTube. CBS, 11 June 2011. Web. 16 Dec. 2014. 6:30.

heedlessly due to the feelings of sorrow and empathy it has the power to expose. Teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to students potentially creates substantial confrontations; meaning there must be a strategy to relieve some pressure from exploring the contentious material.

I will argue that critical literacy may be a solution to teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, because it challenges students to be aware of how their own identities shape and form their opinions. Maureen McLaughlin defines critical literacy as a practice that “helps teachers and students to expand their reasoning, seek out multiple perspectives, and become active thinkers.”⁵ With this practice, students are encouraged to challenge the text, explore identity, and read beyond the bias. Critically aware teachers have a more manageable task when dealing with highly controversial texts. It pushes students to question Twain’s motivations and reject an essentialist view. This helps student to realize how the prejudice in *Huck Finn* still has relevance today. In a lesson I taught at Pike High School, students openly expressed diverse opinions about the controversial issue of race in *Huckleberry Finn*. This framing lesson helped students to confront the issue and take an analytic approach as they continued to read. Controversial issues in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are undeniable, but important for adolescents who learn to form opinions, debate and take a stand.

II. Critical Literacy: Establishing a Reader-Author Relationship

Critical literacy, a relatively new education theory, challenges teachers and students to be judgmental of information. Today’s students are expected to discover a text’s meaning and

⁵ Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVoogd, *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students’ Comprehension of Text*. (New York, Scholastic Teaching Resources, 2004), 48.

purpose through deep comprehension. Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVoogd recently researched and implemented the practice in classrooms around the nation. Paulo Freire, the founder of critical literacy, said that, “reading is much more than decoding language- it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world.”⁶ Freire is known for “reading the world,” the ability to apply a text to a personal context. McLaughlin and DeVoogd borrowed Freire’s ideas and practiced them in modern classrooms.

McLaughlin and DeVoogd redefined the practice, writing, “Critical literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text’s message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors.”⁷ In other words, it encourages a deeper comprehension through challenging the text. McLaughlin and DeVoogd define the four essential purposes of critical literacy:

1. To establish equal status in the reader-author relationship
2. To understand the motivation the author had for writing the text and how the author uses the text to make us understand in a particular way
3. To understand that the author’s perspective is not the only perspective
4. To become active users of the information in texts to develop independent perspectives, as opposed to being passive reproducers of the ideas in texts.⁸

Students could use books, websites, videos, presentation tools, and even cellphones to encounter information during the school day. McLaughlin and DeVoogd create a guide helping students to sort through information to determine biased opinions. Students become stronger readers and better interpreters when they apply these strategies.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

Katie Van Sluys designed a particular four-dimensional framework for critical literacy inviting students to disrupt the commonplace, consider multiple viewpoints, focus on the sociopolitical, and take action.⁹ This approach causes students to move beyond general comprehension by questioning their own identities. Van Sluys believes to connect with students teachers must “begin with students’ current experiences.”¹⁰ She believes activating student’s background knowledge, unique to each individual, will promote interest and engagement. Van Sluys suggests that, “learning about our students’ lives means angling inquiries toward issues rather than events, topics or ideas.”¹¹ Responsible teachers expose students to multiple viewpoints through various supplemental materials. Students have more room to explore information that personally interests them when dealing with issues. Van Sluy’s theory challenges students to think about real tensions occurring both in their books and in their world.

Van Sluys recommendations are especially relevant for adolescent’s developmental stage. In Erik Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development, adolescence is associated with children between the ages of twelve and eighteen. At this stage, students face the conflict of identity vs. role confusion explained by the following outcome: “Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself , while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self” (Erikson)¹². Controversial topics are interesting for

⁹ Katie Van Sluys, *What If and Why? Literacy Invitations for Multilingual Classrooms* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), 21-22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹¹ See note 9 above.

¹² Saul McLeod, “Erik Erikson,” *Simply Psychology*, 2008, <http://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>

adolescents because they influence the formation of opinions and identities. Erikson's 5th stage of development characterized by, "negotiating and struggling with social interactions and 'fitting in,' and developing a sense of morality and right from wrong."¹³ The controversy of race in *Huck Finn* is beneficial to students because Huck is developing his own understanding of morality and race relation.

To many teachers, critical literacy is simply a theory with no clear transition into practice. This suggests, those who value teaching literacy should spend considerable time developing as critical readers themselves. McLaughlin states, "It is a process that involves learning, understanding, and changing over time."¹⁴ The implementation requires teaching both a strategy and a lesson that applies the strategy.

Teachers can introduce students to the many critical literacy strategies with *Problem Posing* and *Alternative Perspectives*. *Problem Posing* encourages students to question an assigned text. The teacher presents students with questions like: 'What does the author want the reader to think? Who is represented in the text and who is missing?' It is essential to use questions that inspire further inquiry. *Alternative Perspectives* helps students analyze a story from different positions. McLaughlin suggests introducing supplemental texts writing, "When creating an alternate text, the reader perceives the text in a different way and begins to understand the complexity of the issue examined."¹⁵ The strategies discussed are only a small

¹³ See note 12 above.

¹⁴ Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVoogd, "Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text," 33.

¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

sample of critical literacy in action. This broad understanding is much easier to digest when applied to a particular text. I will apply strategies to *Huckleberry Finn* in sections IV and V.

III. Controversy About Teaching Race and *Huckleberry Finn*

The race controversy in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has existed since the 1950s, and reflects a tremendous diversity of thought and action. One of the most debated arguments against the novel is Twain's incorporation of the word 'nigger' over 200 times. For many, when the word is obliterated the book is more powerful because it allows readers to avoid the controversy. However, many teachers, scholars and readers value the original version, believing the status of Twain's writing as an American classic outweighs any controversy. Jonathan Arac sums up this conversation in *Huckleberry Finn As Idol and Target*, writing that, "Whether blaming bad teachers, bad students, or weak administrators, whether claiming from scholars, the support of history, of ironic subtlety, or of deep meaning, all of these responses presume, and build from, the sacred status of *Huckleberry Finn*."¹⁶ While idolatry of *Huckleberry Finn* may be harmful, it is essential to recognize it's historical and modern importance.

As Kenny J. Williams suggests, "To ban the novel is to condemn the messenger for the message."¹⁷ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has a great correspondence with America's past and is relevant to the present, as we still seek operative policies for immigration and race relations. William's infers that Huck and Jim rise above racism writing, "The novel does suggest- and rightly so- that the fates and fortunes of the races are so closely intertwined that one cannot

¹⁶ Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn As Idol and Target The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 68.

¹⁷ Kenny J. Williams, "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; or, Mark Twain's Racial Ambiguity," 1991, ed. James S. Leonard, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, (Duke University Press, 1999), 237.

exist without the other.”¹⁸ Supporters believe that the book’s value transcends its use of racist language and serves to make a bold statement about the connection of races. F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of America’s most famed authors, praises Twain writing, “*Huckleberry Finn* took the first journey back...There were mountains at the frontier but he wanted more than mountains to look at with his restive eyes--he wanted to find out about men and how they lived together. And because he turned back we have him forever.”¹⁹ The defense of *Huck Finn* concludes that the book secures a place in the high school curriculum because of its national status and realist ability to portray human relations. Peaches Henry further supports this defense, writing, “Active engagement with Twain’s novel provides one method for students to confront their own deepest racial feelings and insecurities.”²⁰ For Henry, the novel provides a foundation for tackling inequalities and racist attitudes.

Charles Nichols, in *A True Book- With Some Stretchers*, claims *Huckleberry Finn* is “indispensable” for both black and white youth. He supports this claim with four favorable explanations:

- “(1) it unmasks the violence, hypocrisy, and pretense of nineteenth-century America;
- (2) it reaffirms the values of our democratic faith, our celebration of the worthiness of the individual, however poor, ignorant, or despised; (3) it gives us a vision of the possibility

¹⁸ See note 16 above.

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, ”Yours Truly, Huck Finn.” *Huck Finn*. Bromall: (Chelsea House, 2004), 96.

²⁰ Peaches, Henry, “The Struggle for Tolerance” in Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on *Huckleberry Finn* 1991, ed. James S. Leonard, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, (Duke University Press, 1999), 44.

of love and harmony in our multiethnic society; and (4) it dramatizes the truth that justice and freedom are always in jeopardy.”²¹

Nichols acknowledges the issues that are central to *Huck Finn*, but believes that they are something all readers can benefit from. Nichols suggests that Huck’s moral development is dependent on Jim’s. When addressing teaching *Huck Finn*, Nichols writes, “A teacher is morally obligated to deal candidly and honestly with slavery, discrimination, and the status of Afro-Americans in America.”²² Nichols presumes readers will take away a valuable understanding of how it feels to suffer and struggle in America.

In contrast, a multitude of academics valuably object teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* since the content can be difficult, particularly for adolescents. In “The Secret Joys of Antiracist Pedagogy: *Huckleberry Finn* in the Classroom,” Phillip Barrish discusses how powerful the word ‘nigger’ is in Mark Twain’s novel. For Barrish, using the n-word perpetuates racist thoughts and ideals. The n-word creates in its reader a “jouissance” which Barrish defines as “a pleasure in the real.”²³ Barrish explains this unconscious pleasure using a quote from Dennis Foster: “I use the term to distinguish an experience of intensity, of a loss of ego control and boundaries, from those pleasures of satisfaction of ego gratification.”²⁴ Barrish believes that forcing students to use the n-word might causes them to develop this ‘loss of ego control.’ Barrish dedicated class time, when teaching *Huck Finn* to college students, to discussing the

²¹ Nichols, “A True Book-With Some Stretchers,” 210.

²² Ibid., 213.

²³ Barrish, “The Secret Joys of Anti-Racist Pedagogy: *Huckleberry Finn* in the Classroom,” 121

²⁴ See note 23 above.

word and its meaning within the novel: “I leave with churning feelings, mostly of guilt, confusion, and shame, as well as a sort of depressive helplessness,” he explains about this class, “It is a dictum of Freudian thought, however, that where there is guilt there is also unconscious desire.”²⁵ We must not forget that Barrish continues to teach *Huck Finn*. He explains his method to teaching the novel as such: “I have tended to resort to the Twain-uses-it-in-ironic-quotation-marks approach” and “I have tried to devote a full class session to having a ‘metadiscussion’ about the word ‘nigger.’”²⁶ Barrish is somewhat admirable because he has recognized how Twain requires specific teaching strategies and a sense of self-awareness to be successful.

John Alberti, author of “The Nigger Huck: Race, Identity, and the Teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*,” concludes that ignoring the problem of race “is not a defense of the text but an avoidance of it.” That being said, there is not a simple way to discuss racism in the classroom, and Alberti suspects the discussion is limited to a “distinctly middle-class point of view.”²⁷ This means that all students’ opinions and backgrounds are not necessarily allowed to emerge. Alberti believes this roadblock in the discussion “secures the racial identity of the reader and affirms that reader’s innate innocence and goodness rather than exploring how the constitution of that racial identity implicates any reader in the dynamics of race and class privilege.”²⁸ Readers must be aware of their own identities and analyze how they have attained that identity; only then can students begin to understand Huck and Jim’s identities.

²⁵ Ibid., 132.

²⁶ Ibid., 131.

²⁷ John Alberti, “The Nigger Huck: Race, Identity, and the Teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*,” *College English* 57, no. 8 (December 1995): 935.

²⁸ Ibid., 934.

John H. Wallace argues for the replacement of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in school with censored versions. He opens “The Case Against *Huck Finn*,” saying the book “is the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written.”²⁹ In response, Wallace wrote a revised version called *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Adapted*. This edition eradicates the word “nigger” and replaces it with “slave” to lessen racial tensions. Wallace believes *Huck Finn* becomes a “frustrating and painful experience for black students” that can cause, “embarrassment about their heritage.”³⁰ How can we control this troublesome discomfort? Wallace says teachers are not equipped with the skills or background knowledge required to resist the exposed racist attitudes: “Teacher attitudes are important to students. Some teachers are marginal at best, yet many school administrators are willing to trust them with a book that maligns blacks.”³¹ This means teachers must prepare strategies and practices when handling contentious materials that would encourage students to read beyond it. Wallace’s distaste stems from the readers exposure to an emotional response, particularly a response for African American readers.

I agree mostly with the careful approach to teaching *Huckleberry Finn* which Alberti and Nichol’s defend. Both authors recognize that the novel has the capability of causing conflict rather than combating it. I believe it is necessary to use specific strategies and identity formation activities with the novel. However, it is foolish to overlook opinions against teaching the novel because they suggest a more sympathetic and sensitive approach. I conclude that ignoring the

²⁹ Wallace, “The Case Against *Huck Finn*,” 16.

³⁰ See note 28 above.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

controversial issues would cause “colorblindness.” Afi-Odelia Scruggs defines colorblindness as, “the idea that ignoring and overlooking racial and ethnic differences promotes racial harmony.”³² I believe that *Huckleberry Finn* is a teaching opportunity that could challenge students to recognize racial tensions in their own environment. When prepared with the proper strategies and teaching methods, *Huckleberry Finn* can assist adolescents with identity formation.

IV. Critical Literacy Practice applied to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

It is easier to envision a critical literacy strategy’s benefit when it is applied to a particular context. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should be seen as more than a racially corrupt novel that causes much controversy and hurts student’s feelings. It should be seen as an opportunity to encounter real-world issues as they previously occurred and as they prevail. Peter Smagorinsky has written a chapter about teaching “Perspectives on *Huckleberry Finn*” for The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) based on a specific case study of Joe Gorin, a high school English teacher. Smagorinsky explains Gorin’s traditional approach to teaching *Huck Finn* as;

“To lead student discussions of the novel, and through this arrangement he had always suppressed any complaints about the novel’s emotional impact on readers by telling students that they needed to move beyond their initial affective response and take a more

³² Alfi-Odelia Scruggs, “Colorblindness the New Racism?” (Teaching Tolerance, 2009)

appropriate analytic stance that would enable them to see the novel's ironic intention and great literary merit.³³

After teaching the novel this way for years, Gorin realized his students became disengaged. He identified the need for change and decided to "reconsider how he might teach *Huckleberry Finn* in a way that allowed students affective response, that provided students a greater role in constructing a meaning for the novel, and that granted students greater authority in determining the processes of classroom discussion"³⁴ This dilemma shows the importance of divulging student's opinions to get them absorbed in the content.

Huckleberry Finn is a considerable starting point for promoting critical literacy skills, skills that are remarkably relevant to today's information packed world. To begin teaching critical literacy, a teacher should first explain the chosen strategy. After demonstrating how the strategy is used, the teacher should allow students to apply the strategy to the material. Lastly, the teacher should reflect on how the strategy helped the students read from an analytical stance.

³⁵ The main strategies that McLaughlin and DeVoogd believe should be modeled are *Problem Posing* and *Alternative Perspectives*.

Problem Posing encourages students to use questioning to engage in deep analysis. Questions that the teacher might ask are: Who or what is in the text? Who or what is missing from the text? What is marginalized? What does Twain want you to think? For example, students

³³ Jonathan Arac, "Forty Years of Controversy," in *Huckleberry Finn As Idol and Target The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 86.

³⁴ See note 31 above.

³⁵ Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVoogd, "Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text," 52.

could examine the tone and meaning of Twain's stern "Notice." The "Notice" states, "Persons attempting to find a Motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a Moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a Plot will be shot."³⁶ Here, right at the start of his novel, Twain establishes a tone of irony and self-consciousness. The reader is naturally impelled to uncover some sort of motive, moral or plot in the story and this statement almost urges us to do so. Students could answer questions about Twain's intentions in including this "Notice" as a disclaimer for racist attitudes in the novel.

The ultimate goal of *Problem Posing* is action. Students are inspired to make a personal change or help others to change once they have examined an inequality. A teacher could use the scene where Huck sees Jim mourning on the raft about his family. Twain writes, "He hadn't ever been away from home before in his life; and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks do for their'n...He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was."³⁷ Here we see Huck, whose own family life is in complete disarray, empathize with Jim's feelings. With *Problem Posing*, students could analyze Twain's intention in causing Huck's voice to overshadow Jim's. Students could then think about how this happens in their lives. They would answer questions like: How will my attitude or actions change about race? How does my race overshadow others? How can I support those who are treated unfairly because of their race?

³⁶ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁷ Twain, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." 215.

Switching challenges students to think, What if the characters were given different racial characteristics?³⁸ What if Jim was white? Or what if Huck was Black? How would the story change? This strategy would work particularly well with having students reimagine a particular scene or interaction between Huck and Jim. A *Race Switch* could be used with Chapter 15 when Huck tricks Jim into believing he was dreaming, leaving Jim upset about being fooled. Huck ends the chapter saying, “It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger- but I done it, and I warn’t ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn’t do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn’t done that one if I’d a knowed it would make him feel that way.”³⁹ Students could think about how this particular scene would transform if Huck were black or if Jim were white. Switching helps students recognize inequalities in the novel and even allows them to, in a sense, fix these inequalities.

Alternative Perspectives is a critical literacy strategy that can be approached in several different ways like: juxtaposing, using alternative texts, and creating focus groups. *Mind and Alternative Mind Portraits* are techniques that encourage students to look at two opposing points of view. In this activity, students sketch the two characters and compose stories, drawings, or collages that represent their perspectives. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim hides Huck’s father’s death from him. When the two enter the floating house Jim warns Huck saying, “Come in, Huck, but doan’ look at his face- it’s too gashly.”⁴⁰ Critical readers would think about Jim’s motivation here, to protect Huck or to protect himself? Elaine and Harry Mensh discuss this scene in their

³⁸ Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVoogd, “Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students’ Comprehension of Text,” 33.

³⁹ Twain, “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” 105.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 69.

book *Black, White & Huckleberry Finn*. They write, “Jim is noble if he tells Huck the news of Pap’s death to comfort him or withholds the news to protect him, but Jim is selfish if he withholds the news to protect himself.”⁴¹ Students could think about internal conflict and about how Jim’s thoughts are different from Huck’s.

Van Sluys suggests implementing a critical literacy practice called *Invitations. Literacy Invitations* present students with multiple viewpoints and invite them express their own opinions. They are often used as supplemental materials for units or lessons encouraging deeper comprehension and further inquiry. *Invitations* could include activities like *Problem Posing* or *Switching* for students to encounter individually. Teachers could create an *Invitation* about race in *Huck Finn* which presents several sides of the conversation. *Literacy Invitations* ultimately encourage students to make a change in their community.

With a close reading, there are many instances where critical literacy makes it necessary to intricately dissect *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Students who read with an analytical lens will be aware of the racial viewpoints involving *Huck Finn*; and will form opinions based on evidence from a careful examination.

V. In Class Research/Experience

I had the opportunity to teach a lesson using the critical literacy approach with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at Pike High School. I have spent the semester co-teaching with a 10th grade English teacher Farrah Weiss. Pike High School, a public school in Indianapolis is known for being Indiana’s most diverse high school. The school has recently gained a lot of

⁴¹ Elaine Mensh and Harry Mensh, *Black, White & Huckleberry Finn Reimagining the American Dream* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 43.

attention for their rapid improvement and increased test scores, and was even named one of America's Most Challenging High Schools by the Washington Post⁴². According to the School Improvement Plan, the student population consists of roughly 2,400 is composed of 63.4% African Americans, 16% Hispanics, and 11.4% Caucasians.⁴³ Also, a substantial 59% of students at Pike High School receive free/reduced lunch.⁴⁴ Sophomore Honors English students at Pike High School read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in three weeks.

Farrah Weiss has been teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at Pike High School for two years. She previously started the unit by discussing the controversy in the novel. This year, I worked with Weiss to create a critical literacy engagement to introduce the unit. This lesson addressed the four quadrants of disrupting the commonplace, considering multiple viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical issues, and taking action.⁴⁵ We agreed to open the unit by showing a video from *60 Minutes* and leading a discussion on the n-word. This lesson was meant to disrupt the commonplace and peak student interest in the material. The lesson included a 12 minute video clip, a pop culture tie-in, a short discussion, and a handout with critical literacy questions. The video from *60 Minutes* explained the different opinions of scholars regarding the removal of the n-word. The skills addressed in this lesson included identifying and

⁴² "America's Most Challenging High Schools." Education. Washington Post, 2014. Web. 16 Dec. 2014.

⁴³ Inman, Troy. School Improvement Plan. Rep. Indianapolis: Pike High School, 2013-2014. Print. 6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁵ Katie Van Sluys, *What If and Why? Literacy Invitations for Multilingual Classrooms* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), 21-22.

analyzing alternative viewpoints, thinking about Twain's intentions, analyzing power relationships and reflecting on how this affects our modern environment.

The lesson started with Weiss talking briefly about the controversy of censorship and banning of *Huckleberry Finn*. She told students that the book included the n-word 219 times. Gasps and hushed exclamations of "Oh God!" and "Wow!" filled the classroom. At that moment, students were already hooked and we had successfully disrupted the commonplace. Weiss proceeded to show the *60 Minutes* video clip titled, "*Huckleberry Finn and the N-Word*". Students listened attentively as the video discussed the *Huckleberry Finn* teaching dilemma: to use a different edition or have an important race discussion. The video was primarily focused on the differing opinions of Randall Williams, the co-owner and editor of New South Books, and David Bradley an author and professor at University of Oregon. Randall Williams believes that even after substituting the n-word with the word slave Twain's novel is "still powerful."⁴⁶ His choice to eradicate the word thus saves students from having to confront a "volatile and decisive subject."⁴⁷ Bradley is a strong advocate for maintaining Twain's original version in classrooms because he believes the word can have a positive meaning. He says the n-word brings an "awareness that your (African American) people have overcome centuries of oppression."⁴⁸ He even admits to making students say the word aloud 6 or 7 times. Bradley says, "Yeah. Nigger. Get over it. Now let's talk about the book."⁴⁹ He even lightheartedly claims to "love it,"

⁴⁶ ""Huckleberry Finn" and the N-word." YouTube. CBS, 11 June 2011. Web. 16 Dec. 2014. 2:14

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2:33.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6:30.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3:30.

supporting his argument that the word is the teachable moment of the book.⁵⁰ This video created the pedagogical opportunity to talk to students about the n-word in the classroom. It allowed students to make direct references to the opinions of more knowledgable scholars.

We also presented a short clip relating pop-culture to the n-word debate to provide a modern application. The video included Oprah Winfrey and Jay-Z, both prominent African American celebrities. While Oprah believes the word is used too casually and finds it racially offensive, Jay-Z argues that his music's objective is to take the power out of the word.⁵¹ This was particularly relevant for students who admitted to using the word often. Several students in our classroom claimed to use the slang word "nigga" to address people. Spontaneously we began to discuss the difference in meaning between the slang word "nigga" and the n-word itself. A student in the class addressed this issue saying, "The n-word used with an 'A' is different from the 'ER.'" All students acknowledged the word's multiple meanings and its more trivial role in their environment.

After the video, Weiss asked students to "Raise your hand if you would say it right now, no problem?" About half of the class tentatively raised their hands. This provocative questioning peaked student interest by discussing a topic that may otherwise seem inappropriate. This disruption of the commonplace opened up a unique learning opportunity for students and they seemed to take advantage of the freedom to share their opinions.

Student's opinions about the use of the n-word greatly varied. One student confidently said, "I don't think it should be said or allowed ever. Under no circumstance should it be said.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8:02.

⁵¹ "Oprah and J Z Discuss the N Word." YouTube. 4 Feb. 2014. Web. 17 Dec. 2014. <<http://youtu.be/RIC5pQkpA0A>>.

And especially not by white teachers in school.” Yet another student expressed their relaxed opinion saying, “I don’t really care. It’s in the book. Let’s not take it too seriously. It’s in the book, that’s what it’s for.” The students opinions fell on all areas of the spectrum. Weiss treats the word like a cuss word and gives discipline write-up’s to students who use the word.

Student opinions also varied when discussing whether *Huck Finn* should be replaced with censored editions. Most students thought that a variation could cause a slight loss of meaning, but we could not come to a general consensus about this. A student shared her opinion saying, “An aspect would be lost, but that wouldn’t destroy the book.” While another student believes that “it takes away from what Twain is getting at.” Although readers will never be able to determine Twain’s exact purpose in using the word in such frequency, the students made valuable assumptions. Students are expected to analyze multiple perspectives by listening and interacting with peers in critical literacy learning. This lesson helped students begin “reading the world,” because students applied opinions about the novel to their own lives.

I was impressed with my students maturity when dealing with the subject. Almost every student in the room shared his/her opinion at some point during the discussion. Surprisingly, Student opinions were not deeply rooted in their racial backgrounds. There were several White students who admitted to using the word and several African American students who claimed they never would. Overall student responses were very mature and thoughtful. A student summed up the diverse opinions expressed in class by saying, “It’s all about knowing who you are and how you use it. It means different things to different people.” This answer proved his ability to use his critical literacy skills because he showed an awareness of multiple perspectives. He acknowledges that the word means different things to different people and believes the word

should only be used with good intentions. In conclusion to the lesson, we told students to read the novel with a lens of comfort. There is no direct answer to the censorship debate, but students should be confident in their own opinions. We also encouraged students to take action in their school environment by taking a more sensitive approach to using the word and educating people about its potential harm. I was very pleased with student engagement during this lesson and I think it was a great way to introduce students to the controversy. Introducing *Huck Finn* using critical literacy was successful in relating course material to student's personal lives.

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