

Who Can Use The N-Word? That's The Wrong Question

By Gene Demby, NPR's Code Switch, September 6th 2013

"The impulse to make the world neat and simple, with hard and fast guidelines, bumps up against the messiness of real life all the time..."

"We don't need universal rules around this stuff — not that we could enforce them if we had them — but we *do* need a much better understanding of our contexts. We need a stronger, more considered sense of why some things are received differently in one place than they are in another. We need to be more thoughtful, more deliberate *and* more fluid about the many spaces that we navigate, which require different levels of conscientiousness and clarity, so that we aren't misunderstood.

And if we venture outside of the very tiny universe of safe behaviors and interactions, we also need to accept that there will be consequences. Some good, some disastrous, but none neat or simple."

Profane and Triggering Words in the Classroom

Unit Goals and Selecting Materials:

- When considering whether to use a document that contains profane or triggering words, go back to the standards and the backwards design model. **Is this the BEST text to meet the objective of your lesson?** Is there another text that could meet the objective as well that does not contain one or more of these words?
- The only time in which it *might* be appropriate to use profane or triggering words in classroom curriculum is when they are in the context of a primary source document, or from a curriculum-specific text with a known author (NOT a blog post). **It is never appropriate for students to speak out loud particularly triggering words** (i.e. n***er, f***ot, r***rd, c**t, etc – this is an ever-evolving list), even in the context of curriculum.

Creating a Safe Space:

- Have you **set up guidelines for dialogue and critical inquiry** in your class?
- Do you have a **procedure set up for if things get escalated in class or you need a moment to think?** (e.g. one-minute writing reflection, pair share, or some other tool to slow things down and support students to reflect about what's going on in the class re: whatever conflict might be up)
- If the text you selected is the best text to meet your student learning objective, what is the BEST mode for reading, interpreting, and analyzing the text?
- If the best mode is hearing the text out loud, and the word refers to an identity that has been historically marginalized (i.e. a person of color, a person with a disability, etc), can you find an audio recording of it by someone who identifies with that marginalized group?
- If you cannot find an audio recording, consider a substitute word like n-word, person, etc depending on the word and the context it is being used in, if the text must be read out loud.
- Regardless of whether you use a substitute word, use an audio recording, or have students read silently the profane or triggering word, **surround that lesson with the historical context of the word and information about how it is modernly interpreted in different spaces among different people.**

Support Systems:

- Always stay in communication with your department, the administrators, the school counselors, and any other peers in your teaching support network around lessons that contain these words. No one person knows all the rules on any given day, so it is vital that we have conversations early and often around our practices. Also, go back to your team if things do not go as planned to reflect on what you can do differently next time.

Final thought... Freedom of Speech does not mean freedom from consequence. If we recognize a "Do No Harm" approach to education, then it is apparent that an educator saying out loud the n-word (and other words like it) in the classroom is not a harmless experience for some students – including students of color, white students, students who identify as LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, etc. We cannot subject students knowingly to harm, so we must hold ourselves to a higher standard than musical artists, celebrities, athletes, and others that our students look up to. Please reach out if you feel that you need support with this in the classroom. We are all here to help!