Dealing with Sensitive Topics

I. Negotiating Differences

Sometimes the most difficult aspect of dealing with sensitive topics is getting students engaged in working with them. Students might:

- Want to avoid offending classmates or the professor.
- Feel unsure about how to argue productively.
- Prefer the safety of supporting their professor’s opinion.
- Doubt a topic affects their lives.
- Feel apathetic about literary discussions.
- Have very personal reasons for holding certain opinions.
- Fear ridicule for stating unconventional reactions.
- Assume that others universally share their own views.

Many teachers find Mary Louise Pratt’s conception of the classroom as a “contact zone” useful (Profession 91). They see the classroom as a forum where students can negotiate differences that come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

Some questions:

How do we turn the classroom into a contact zone instead of a war zone? How do we invite a range of ideas to be expressed? How do we deal with responses that polarize or shock? How do we facilitate rather than prescribe discussion? How do we get students to take responsibility for what they say? How do we get students to take the initiative?

II. Designing Activities for the Contact Zone

The following sample activities come from a “Writing About Literature” course where students read seven titles under the thematic rubric of “the sacred and the profane”:

- Showings, Julian of Norwich
- Merchant of Venice, William Shakespeare
- The Monk, Matthew Lewis
- Flowers of Evil, Charles Baudelaire
- Major Barbara, Bernard Shaw
- Days of Obligation, Richard Rodriguez
- Almanac of the Dead, Leslie Silko
- A Short Guide to Writing About Literature, 7th ed., Sylvan Barnet

Short activities such as the ones here served as bridges to more traditional literary analyses.

Surveying Readers from the Outside: In her email journal, one of your classmates asked, “In this literature class, why read a religious treatise about a woman who may or may not have experienced hallucinations?” Why read Julian’s Showings, indeed? Introduce someone outside this class to Julian and interview her/him—e.g. a religious studies student, a Protestant or Catholic clergy person, an atheist, a psychologist, a feminist, a person who practices a faith other than Christianity, a gay or lesbian person, a Christian fundamentalist or liberal. Write a reflection on the interview. Discuss passages you shared & why (Jesus as mother, for instance), tell what reactions you got from your interviewee, & explain how the interview has affected your own interpretation of the book. We’ll talk about your findings next week.

Exercising Imitatio: Choose a poem from Baudelaire’s Flowers of Evil that you think is especially controversial (e.g. “Litany to Satan,” “Lesbians,” “What a Pair of Eyes Can Promise”) and write an 8 to 14-
line “reply poem,” representing your own view. Try to imitate Baudelaire’s style. Then in two or three short paragraphs, discuss why you chose the poem, what you find most controversial about it, and by what criteria you do or don’t evaluate it as a piece of literary art.

**Structuring Small-group Work:** Today you’ll work in groups on *Major Barbara*. Each member must find evidence from the play to back up your group’s answer to a set of questions. A group recorder will write down each person’s contribution and document your group’s synthesis of what you all think. We’ll share each group’s answers in class, in preparation for the midterm.

**Group 1:** How effectively does the English church help the poor, and what keeps the poor from helping themselves? What about America’s churches?

**Group 2:** What are the main fears/concerns of the English upper class—and how are the poor affected by them? What about rich Americans?

**Group 3:** How does the English government help the poor—and how is government help problematic? What about our own government’s policies toward the poor?

**Group 4:** What moral/economic/physical impact does weapons manufacture have on Major Barbara’s society? What impact does it have on ours?

**Group 5:** How does—or doesn’t—education solve the problem of poverty in Shaw’s England? In current American society?

**Creating a Forum:** One journal entry this week says the topics in *Almanac of the Dead* are depraved—drug addiction, homosexuality, prostitution, suicide. Another says Silko carries on too much about injustices that happened to Native Americans years ago. People use reasons such as these to censor books. Why is/ isn’t *Almanac* appropriate for this course? Find and summarize a passage that a censor might object to. Find a passage that might demonstrate its value for readers. Give reasons to go on—or stop—having it taught in this course. You’ll write for a while, then we’ll share responses.