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CI 403
Professor Willis
December 13, 2010

A Letter to the Principal Banning or Accepting *Catcher in the Rye*

Time and Setting

The lesson is a fifty-minute lesson in a Sophomore English Honors class. The class consists of twenty-five students, with thirteen females and twelve males. There are thirteen white students, five African-American students, four Asian students, two Hispanic students and one Native American student in the classroom.

Theory Into Practice Background

In the class prior to this lesson, students learned about censorship and the practice of banning books in school districts. I wanted to take this debate and have students form their own opinion on it, in context to *Catcher*, which they just completed reading. *Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most controversial books taught in schools across the country and it would be ridiculous to teach it without mentioning its banned status in the past. To make the assignment feel authentic, I gave them a scenario that the principal is considering to take *Catcher* out of the curriculum and off the library shelves because of complaints, and they needed to show their support for the principal's decision or persuade him to change his mind by sending him a letter. I feel giving this scenario and a real person to address it to, even though they are not actually sending it, can help them practice writing for particular audiences. Tchudi and Mitchell strongly support this practice, stating in *Exploring and Teaching the English Language Arts*, "an audience... is essential to the veracity of the writing process... the trick is to find ways to turn the writing class, with all of its incumbent school-created artificiality, into a place where the vitality of audience reigns" (272). Writing a letter to an authoritative figure is a task they will come across time and time again beyond school, whether it is through cover letters or e-mails. Regardless of the form, students need to learn how to address those in their professional world. In the literature perspective, the students would not only practice writing for an audience, but this also gives students the chance to reflect on the novel as a whole and whether they feel the swear words and inappropriate content are miniscule compared to the message and lessons behind the book. This could also give me a look at how students feel about the novel and whether I should teach it again.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Compose a persuasive letter to the principal
- Appropriately express the support for or against the banning of *Catcher in the Rye*

Materials

- Copy of *Catcher in the Rye*
- Persuasive letter assignment and rubric

Preparation

While some students may have taken advantage of grabbing a copy of the assignment yesterday, be sure to have additional copies for those who opted out. Also, the class was warned to meet in the computer lab, so put a note on your classroom door telling those who forgot to go to the computer lab for class.

Procedure

- As students walk into the computer lab, give them the persuasive letter assignment, if necessary.
- Give students time to get settled in and logged into computers. This also gives those who forgot to meet at the lab time to get there (**five minutes**).
- Introduce the assignment as a final product of yesterday's discussion and debate about banned books, explaining the assignment (**five minutes**).
 - Students are to write to our principal, Principal Thomas, on whether they feel *Catcher* should be banned or stay in the curriculum.
 - Make students aware of the provided rubric to show how they will be graded.
 - Tell them this is due by the end of class and needs to be typed.
- Give them all but the last five minutes of class to work on their letters (**35 minutes**).
 - Go around answering questions, helping with computer issues
 - Anyone that has a major computer problem will be allowed to e-mail you their letter by midnight that night.
 - Make sure students stay on task
- Give students a **five minute** warning, asking students to begin printing out the letters and giving them to you
 - Any remaining free time students have can be used to work on other homework.

Discussion Ideas

- The time in this lesson is dedicated to the students so they can work on their letters. However, if there was more time in a period, the class can create their own rubric, discussing criteria that should be graded and what makes a good persuasive letter.

Bilingual/ ESL and Englishes Accommodations (ELL Spanish-Speaking Student)

This would be an ultimate test of ELL student's English skills. My main concern for these students is feeling overwhelmed not only because of the time constraint, but also by the language itself. I would give students, on the previous day, the option of taking the assignment that day so they have the night before it's due to prepare for it. While I would offer this to the whole class for the sake of being fair, I would strongly recommend my ELL student to take advantage of this opportunity. I would recommend this for my AAE student as well, and tell them they can do whatever they want in terms of preparation. However, I would remind them to look at the rubric carefully and talk to me if they have any questions, especially regarding grammar and punctuation.

Special Education Accommodations (Student with Asperger's Syndrome)

I would strongly recommend my student with Asperger's to prepare for the letter ahead of time, especially if they have a study period or meet with a special education teacher. They would also benefit from this additional time and can take class time to ask me final

questions before they turn their letter in. Also, if they find working in silence best, this can be a problem in the computer lab. While a class may be asked to be quiet, there is always the low murmurs and tapping of keyboards, which could possibly distract the student. After I give the directions of the assignment, I would ask them if they would like to work on the letter in the library rather than the lab.

Assessment

My rubric for the persuasive letter is my sole form of assessment for this lesson. It is on a twenty-point scale and categories considered include, salutation and closing, sentences and paragraphs, spelling and punctuation, ideas and persuasiveness. This is a simple way to not only show the students what you want and it is easy to grade, but also to show them where they excelled and where they need to improve.

Extension Ideas

As mentioned earlier, having the students decide the rubric would be an inclusive, even fun way to get students involved in the assessment process. Having them participate in this would also make them more inclined to complete all the requirements. One other idea would be to actually give the principal the letters. As daunting as this may sound, the principal would be aware of the situation, and would ideally send a response back to the whole class. This would make the lesson feel more authentic, although I imagine it would be difficult for the principal to comply and have the time for.

Source of Activity

I would like to thank my peers, Gintare Radvila, Jason Mormolstein and Anna Lee for the inspiration! I would also like to thank Rubistar for some of the ideas in my rubric.

Resources and References

Illinois State English Language Arts Goals

- **State goal 3.A:** Students use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and structure.
 - The students are required to fulfill these requirements in their persuasive letter, as stated in the rubric.
- **State goal 3.B:** Students compose well-organized and coherent writing for specific purposes and audiences.
 - The persuasive letter activity is meant for students to practice writing on a professional basis, establishing their principal as their audience and writing well organized pieces to cater to that audience.

Reflection

Writing these lessons make me wish there was more time in the day, and the unit in general! I think if I actually taught this, I would probably move this activity to an earlier date. I would do this simply because the students have their essay test on the following Friday, making this week writing-intensive. While I feel there is nothing wrong about this for an honors class, I would consider this if the class were not as strong writers put on the spot as I would hope.

He's Banning *Catcher!*? **A Letter to the Principal**

Principal Thomas has gotten complaints from parents about *Catcher in the Rye*. They think the language is offensive, and some subjects matters (like drinking and sex) are inappropriate for high school students. He is considering banning it, as in taking it out of the curriculum as well as the library! He has asked students who have read the novel to give them their opinion and to write a letter to his office. That's where you come in!

Write a letter to Principal Thomas explicitly stating why you think *Catcher* should stay in the curriculum, or why you think it is a good idea to take it out. Either way, you need to convince him that your stance is the way to go.

Please remember that your grade will not be effected by whatever stance you choose, so be honest!

Provided here is a rubric on what I expect in the letter. Please review the rubric carefully so you understand how I am grading you. The letter will be turned in at the **end of class on Wednesday!** We will spend Wednesday in the computer and you will have most of the time to work on your letters.

You can prepare notes, outlines or what not if you wish, but it is not required. Don't hesitate to ask me any questions.

Good luck in your pursuit for justice!

A Letter to the Principal Rubric

Category	4 pts.	3 pts.	2 pts.	1 pt.
Salutation and Closing	Salutation and closing have no errors in capitalization or punctuation.	Salutation and closing have 1-2 errors in capitalization and punctuation.	Salutation and closing have 3-4 errors in capitalization and punctuation.	Salutation and closing are missing.
Sentences and Paragraphs	Sentences and paragraphs were complete, well-constructed and of varied nature.	All sentences complete and well-constructed (no fragments, no run-ons). Paragraphing generally done well.	Most sentences are complete and well-constructed. Paragraph needs some work.	Many sentence fragments or run-on sentences OR paragraphing needs a lot of work.
Grammar and Spelling	Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling.	Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling.	Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling.	Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar or spelling.
Ideas	Ideas were expressed in a clear and organized fashion. It was easy to figure out what the letter was about.	Ideas were expressed in a pretty clear manner, but the organization could have been better.	Ideas were somewhat organized, but were not very clear. It took more than one reading to figure out what the letter was about.	The letter seemed to be a collection of unrelated sentences. It was very difficult to figure out what the letter was about.
Persuasiveness	The letter expresses the needs of the writer and actively persuades the reader.	The letter expresses the needs of the writer enough to persuade the reader.	The letter vaguely states what the reader needs, but does not persuade the reader.	The letter does not persuade the reader at all.

Grade: /20 Points