

Teaching the N-Word

By Michelle Kenney

My students—black, white, Latina/o, Vietnamese, and Cambodian all sighed and rolled their eyes in unison when I asked them to write about the n-word. This was not the first time that a middle-aged, white English teacher in sensible shoes tried to get down and dirty over a sensitive subject.

It was the first day of my unit on *Fences*, August Wilson’s play about an African American family in 1940s Pittsburgh. *Fences* was always a favorite with my 10th and 11th graders, but I wanted the class to discuss the use of the n-word before we read and performed the play.

One boy in the back of the room mimicked falling on a sharpened pencil to a chorus of giggles. But eventually the students, all 10th graders, got into the warm-up, and wrote more quietly and longer than usual.

“So, what do you know?” I asked after 10 minutes.

“It was used to describe black people,” one student began in a singsong.

“It’s a derogatory word for black people,” someone suggested. Derogatory was a new word from a previous unit, and it was encouraging to hear a student using it. This was progress.

“It’s a bad word,” another student said.

“No.” José picked his head up from his desk. “It was only bad a long time ago, until rappers started to use it.”

“It’s not such a big deal anymore, Ms. Kenney.” Meredith yawned over a SpongeBob doodle she was drawing on the cover of her spiral.

Thus began our n-word talk, a discussion I have repeated with almost every English class for the past 12 years. Many high school teachers like me, white and middle class, approach the topic with trepidation. I can still remember how my own English teacher, Mrs. Kleeg, addressed the n-word only once, while we were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 8th grade, and then only after James Parker, the class clown and aspiring pain in Mrs. Kleeg’s butt, raised his hand and asked her what it meant and how to pronounce it. “That word . . . well . . .”

Mrs. Kleeg blushed and clutched her pearls. “It’s not a very nice word for Negroes. I don’t suppose I really know the pronunciation.”

I probably would have stumbled down Mrs. Kleeg’s path when I began my teaching career in the Portland, Oregon, public schools if it hadn’t been for a local controversy surrounding the teaching of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Several African American students at a mostly white high school objected to the novel, specifically because of the use of the n-word. But even as a novice teacher, I wondered whether the problem in this case was the use of the n-word itself in *Huckleberry Finn*, or the way many teachers handle it.

I made a commitment to teach my students about the n-word at least once a year. At first, I taught the lesson to avoid offending and marginalizing my African American students, who made up less than 10 percent of the student population. However, over the years, the reaction I got from many of my students convinced me that this was a lesson every student needed to learn.

Meredith’s response to the n-word discussion was typical. “I don’t know why we have to talk about this, Ms. Kenney. We have a black president now, and things aren’t racist anymore.” Because I can still remember a time when I was as youthful, optimistic, and sheltered as Meredith and many of my other white students, I spent a few seconds mentally composing a response that would question her attitude without hurting her feelings. “I agree that things have changed a lot, Meredith, but some people might disagree with the idea that our culture is no longer racist. Why don’t we have a closer look at the history of the n-word, and then find out what some modern writers and your classmates think?”

We watched the first 30 minutes of “Awakenings,” the first episode of *Eyes on the Prize*, a documentary that uses images and stories from U.S. history to tell the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. I chose this episode because it provides good historical background for *Fences*, and also because I wanted my students to see the connection between the use of the n-word in the United States and centuries of slavery, violence, and poverty, as well as resistance. The images are disturbing at times—graphic still photographs of lynchings, the famous close-up of Emmett Till, not much younger than my students, his head half blown away by a shotgun, his features warped and bloated after his body was dumped in a river by men old enough to be his father. In the section describing the murderers’ trial, the students learned that African American reporters were forced to sit together around a card table in the courtroom, and that an African American

congressman was nearly denied access to the proceedings because the police didn't believe a "nigger congressman" could exist.

Then it was time to gather evidence to prepare for discussion over the use of the word in modern U.S. culture, a problematic step for me as a white teacher. Previous failures, when I relied on my own faulty knowledge and point of view to teach this issue, showed the importance of introducing African American voices. Students of all races should be exposed to the spectrum of African American opinion on the evolving use of the n-word. They need to be aware of the current debates among African Americans from all walks of life—students, poets, entertainers, lawyers, teachers, activists, and academics. So, the next day I introduced some film clips to gather evidence.

I began by showing a CNN report, "Funeral for the N-Word," which highlights a symbolic funeral that the NAACP conducted for the n-word in Detroit in 2010. Then I told the class: "Take out a piece of paper. Draw two columns to take some notes while we listen to a televised debate between an African American scholar, Michael Eric Dyson, and an author and CNN reporter, Roland Martin, over the use and ownership of the n-word. Write one name at the top of each column and listen carefully to each side of their debate."

Because Dyson and Martin speak quickly and use words my students are unfamiliar with, I needed to stop the video often to help discuss and paraphrase the debate, demonstrate my own note-taking under a document camera, and give students time to take their own notes. For example, I prompted: "Dyson claims that 'white people just got upset. They now have a word they can't use. We took the meaning of the term away from them . . . we use it as a term of endearment.' What do you think he meant?"

"That black people changed the word somehow?" Lynn, a Vietnamese student, suggested.

"He meant that black people turned the word into something that couldn't hurt them," Tre'Vaughn, an African American student, explained. "We just use it as a way to show affection."

We continued our discussion and note-taking as Martin described his experiences growing up with the n-word and ultimately rejecting it, despite "hearing it at the park, all over the place, it became ingrained . . . it became accepted."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

“I guess it means that when you hear a word a lot, you just start using it.”

We also listened to an elderly Maya Angelou scold rappers Snoop Dogg and Kanye West for throwing around the n-word so lightly in their music. “The vulgarity that comes out of a black mouth or a white mouth or an Asian mouth is still vulgarity . . . it’s all the same.” Angelou’s take on the n-word got added to the bank of opinions and vocabulary. I also showed a discussion between Oprah Winfrey and Jay Z. Winfrey took Angelou’s side as Jay Z echoed Dyson’s opinion that black people “have taken the power out of the word.” I also asked students to listen to Richard Sherman, the star defensive back for the Seattle Seahawks football team, explain to reporters that the word “thug” many applied to him after his televised blowup following the NFC championship game was just a more socially acceptable form of the n-word.

By now, the listening was over. Kids generally don’t like it when some old lady messes with their music, famous poet or not, and more than a few of them were nodding at Jay Z, bristling at Winfrey and Angelou’s suggestion that rap should be censored, and getting worked up over the Sherman controversy. Three distinct points of view emerged from the discussion: Some kids thought it was OK to use the n-word; some thought it was never OK; some—the majority of the class, in fact—thought it was OK for some people to use the n-word, but maybe only some of the time. But there was no time to discuss it further since our 90 minutes was up.

The next day, I asked students who shared the same opinions to get together in groups and stake out territories in different parts of the room. “We are going to have a quick conversation about the n-word. To prepare, take five minutes to pool your notes and evidence, and discuss in your group where you stand on the use of the n-word in our society. Use the language and ideas you heard in the Angelou and Winfrey clips, the Sherman press conference, and the debate between Dyson and Martin.”

After the groups talked among themselves, I opened the larger discussion: “I want everybody to speak but class norms still apply, so no interrupting, no put-downs, and, for now, please do not use the actual word.”

Everyone had an opinion, and no one was shy about expressing it:

“You should never use the word,” Meredith said, in a big change from her initial position. “It makes black people remember bad times.”

“How do you know? We’re not all the same. Anyway, a lot of black people use it all the time,” Marcus, an African American student, insisted. “You can’t tell us not to use it. It’s a term of endearment, like that guy in the tape said. We took the word back.”

“Yeah, we took it back, like Jay Z said,” Tre’Vaughn said. “We took the power out of the word. Mike Dyson said: ‘If we can’t make the n-word our own, it’s like the white people won. Now only black people can say it.’”

“Context matters. It’s not such an easy question to answer. It depends on who you’re hanging out with,” Lynn insisted. “Even white or Asian people can sometimes say it around black people if they’re all good friends.”

“White people can say it. Technically, we have free speech in this country,” Jason, a white student with a flaming red fauxhawk, insisted.

“Then how come you don’t say it?” asked Meredith.

“Cause I’d get my ass beat.”

“You can say it around me,” Marcus said. He and Jason exchanged high fives.

“Not all black people like it,” argued John, an African American student. “My grandma says not to use it. She thinks it’s vulgar, like that old lady said on the YouTube thing.”

“Let’s all say it together!” Jason, class clown and aspiring pain in my butt, suggested.

“You better not.” This was the first time Danisha, an African American student, had spoken up. “Mike Dyson said white people can’t use it. So don’t use it.” She glowered at the two boys from her desk. Danisha excelled at questioning, and sometimes sabotaging, my lessons. I was secretly pleased that she had intervened. If she hadn’t, I would have done it myself.

I sent the students back to their desks to write a brief persuasive essay on the use of the n-word in modern U.S. culture. We had already practiced using evidence to make persuasive arguments, and before they began, we brainstormed a list of essay criteria on the board. They wrote for 40 minutes.

I finished the period by asking my students to briefly share the “hottest” parts of their essays. (As I did during the discussion, I asked them to refrain from

reading the n-word out loud if they used it in their essays.) Even though I always enjoy student writing, this time, I was blown away by their ability to weave their own stories and experiences into solid and well-developed arguments using the evidence they gathered.

Some students, like Gloria, a Latina student, thought that the n-word should disappear. “According to Oprah, the word is ugly and hurtful to a generation that fought and fought to get rid of the word so that people would stop thinking about them differently and labeling them that way.”

Mya objected to the use of the word in rap lyrics: “Jay Z said that blacks took the power out of the word and turned it into a term of endearment. Maybe that’s true for him, but not all African Americans. I for one know I hate it when rappers use the n-word in their music.”

Other students came out in favor of Dyson and Jay Z’s opinion that African Americans have taken the word back and changed the meaning. Esmeralda, a Latina student: “Black hip-hop and rap artists reclaimed the word that kept their ancestors and parents prisoner and gave it their own meaning. These days, the n-word has replaced ‘friend’ and ‘buddy.’ There is no longer any malice in the word.” Danielle, an African American girl, agreed and added that “most black people say ‘nigga’ out of love, not out of hate. There is a song that continuously says ‘nigga,’ but they are talking about being good friends and never turning their backs on each other.”

Jonathan, an Asian student, quibbled with the focus on semantics: “Words are words. The power behind them is from the person saying them. According to Jay Z, the word is not the problem, racism is the problem.” Another student referred to the Sherman press conference: “Richard Sherman made me think that we need to deal with racism instead of words. If you ban the n-word, racist people will only come up with a new word like ‘thug.’ “

Marquandre, an African American student, had this to say: “Although I disagree with using the n-word in rap, I don’t disagree with using the word completely. I think the n-word should be another word for ‘brotha’ when we are speaking to a fellow black citizen, not the joke that it has become. I just think the use of the word should have a deeper meaning on the surface than what it has been made out to be.”

Some of the most heartfelt and personal arguments came from students of mixed races, including Cindy. “Being part black puts me in a confusing position. Many blacks think that only black people can say it. But can I say it? I

don't feel like I am 'worthy' of saying it, in fear of being viewed as a racist. Overall, my relationship with the word is like my room's lightbulb flickering on and off."

It was finally time to discuss the best way to handle the n-word as we read and performed *Fences*. I explained to my students that, although it was important to see and discuss the n-word in an historical context, we would refrain from using it in class or reading it out loud when we were performing the play.

"Wait a minute." Danisha measured her words out slowly. "Are you seriously telling me that I can't say nigger?" She looked around in a silent appeal to Marcus, who shrugged his shoulders. "Did you hear that white lady say we can't say nigger? What happened to taking the word back?"

"She just doesn't want us to say it in class."

"Oh, shut up, nigger." She tossed her braids, and the class dissolved into snickers as, once again, Danisha pulled my lesson out from under me like a tablecloth trick.

But her point was clear and hit home: "Who the hell are you, white lady, to tell a black student not to say the n-word?"

I managed to stop my hands from groping, Mrs. Kleeg-style, for an imaginary string of pearls. "Yeah, sure, I'm white, and that makes me feel a little awkward teaching a lesson like this. Plus, like Oprah, I'm older, and I was around when that word was only a derogatory term.

"I'm not telling you to never say the word, but I am trying to point out the difficulty of using, even reading out loud, such a sensitive word in a classroom. And as you just heard in all of these marvelous essays, there are a lot of different opinions on how the n-word should be used. Marcus, you say you'd be OK hearing your white friend use the n-word, but some kids don't want to hear it at all. Others only want to hear it in certain contexts. I'm willing to bet that no one would want to hear it from me. Anybody?"

The Ferris Bueller allusion almost never gets the laughs I hope it will, but I couldn't help but try. At least no one disagreed.

"Now, I would never dream of telling a black student not to say the n-word outside of my class, but while we are all here, I have to help create a safe

environment for all of us, and these discussions are part of that. So, can we make this agreement about the use of the n-word in class?”

A few heads nodded. The discussion faded as the kids opened their copies of *Fences* for the first time, and the room filled with the sound of voices arguing over who was going to read the parts out loud. Maybe no one but me noticed, but as we settled into Act I, the atmosphere gradually relaxed and lightened, the same way it does when you open a window and let some air into a hot and stuffy room.

Resources

- Blackside. 1995. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement 1954-1985*. PBS Video. Available at pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize.
- “Funeral for the N-Word” (with Michael Eric Dyson and Roland Martin). 2008. *American Morning*, CNN. June. Available at youtube.com/watch?v=T62PysJizXs.
- “Jay Z on the N-Word.” 2011. *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Jan. 17. Available at oprah.com/oprahshow/Jay-Z-on-the-N-word-Video.
- “The Power of Words” (with Maya Angelou and Russell Mitchell). 2007. CBS News, April 15. youtube.com/watch?v=0n9Pq1LNLwM.
- Sherman, Richard. 2014. “Thug Is the Accepted Form of the N-Word.” Jan. 22. youtube.com/watch?v=OXOsSko2AFQ.

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