

Tolerating Intolerance

Resisting the Urge to Silence Student Opinion in the Writing Classroom

When a student's work for a first-year college writing workshop introduces inflammatory issues, author Sarah Rider has to reconsider her classroom practice and examine the ethics of allowing students to explore such potentially disturbing material.

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I guessed William was about twenty-three years old. He had dark red hair that curled over his head and around both of his pierced ears. His skin was pale and lightly freckled, and he had close-set light blue eyes. William was quiet but laughed often and easily. He joked with fellow classmates as they worked together in groups. When he chose to speak in class, it was with careful conviction. He was also a white separatist.

I learned this fact about three weeks into the spring semester when he cut his hair short enough to reveal the "White Pride" tattoo of inky green old-English letters stretching over the back of his head. I snuck looks at it from the back of the classroom as students presented their work on the overhead projector. Later, I noticed the rest of his tattoos; they filled his forearms, shoulders, and calves: swastikas, dragons, skulls, more curling letters.

Initially, foolishly, I hoped that the tattoos were a remnant from what had been a



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passing phase of William's younger, wilder days. I could not reconcile my first impression of William as a thoughtful, curious, polite student with the discovery of his tattoos. I watched him warily with a mixture of curiosity and dread.

The class, a first-year college writing course, is structured around student-led workshops designed to offer constructive criticism for revision. Throughout the entire semester, students are required to facilitate the workshops, act as participants, and bring at least one paper to the

workshop for critique. The workshop process makes up much of the student work in the classroom; this is the place where students—even the quiet ones—begin to show their expertise as critics, offering advice timidly at first, and

then taking pride in their ability to offer explicit text-based suggestions.

During the second half of the semester, students began work on ethnographies—research projects that rely on participant observation and that focus on subcultures of student choice. The assignment asks that students gather, document, and describe the rituals and traditions of a group, and then explain how the group's activities and language reveal meanings and ideologies shared by its members. As a part of the assignment, students are

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required to gather from the subculture artifacts that they believe help to illustrate the meanings the members make for themselves.

William chose to focus his research on Odinism, a pre-Christian religion, focusing on human beings' communion with nature that has been appropriated by modern-day white-supremacist and white-separatist groups. William's paper describes a ritual of Odinism that marks the change of the seasons, called a Blot. The first draft is a useful description of his participation in the Blot itself. In it, he begins to do the work of an ethnographer by detailing the ritual drink (a honey mead), food (roasted pork, meat pie, squash, and roasted acorns), and dress (white silk robe, ritual dagger, and Thor's hammer) and by including excerpts from participants' conversations. He makes mention of the religion's many gods and goddesses and briefly describes a speech that he was allowed to make during the ritual. This did not present a problem.

The artifacts William chose to include were another story. At the end of the first draft of his paper, he included among his artifacts a sort of manifesto titled "88-Precepts"—tenets of white-separatist life, a combination of Nietzschean expressions such as "the truest form of prayer is communion with nature," Freemanesque antitaxation and antigovernment rhetoric such as "an unarmed or nonmilitant people will be enslaved," as well as the kind of racially based welfare-mother anecdotes common to Rush Limbaugh's talk show. An example: "Today we see the white man taxed so heavily that he cannot

afford children. The taxes raised are then used to support the breeding of tens of millions of nonwhites."

In addition to the manifesto, William included a flyer designed to look like an ad promoting the preservation of endan-

In silencing [William], I would also have silenced his classmates, denying them the chance to think deeply about the issues he presented. . . .

gered species. However, this flyer features a soft-focused photograph of a white woman wearing heels and dancing in a filmy gossamer nightgown. The text reads: "Earth's most beautiful Endangered Species" and goes on to warn white men to choose their mates carefully for the sake of preserving the white race:

Look long and hard, White man. Images like hers may soon cease to exist forever. Judeo-Christianity and Judeo-controlled world governments perpetuate genocide through doctrines of universalism. No race can survive without nations of its own. America denies us White nations, White schools, White neighborhoods, White organizations, and everything necessary for racial survival, then promotes inter-racial mating. The highest law of nature is the preservation of one's own kind. There is no time remaining for White men to indulge in reality denial or cowardice. If our women are not worth fighting for, then I ask you, "What is?" Live the 14 words! "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white

children." Here is why: "Because the beauty of the White Aryan woman must not perish from the earth."

I read with a kind of horror and dismay that seems nearly comical. I laughed helplessly and felt the sudden onset of something that seemed like heartburn but wasn't. These artifacts were not linked to the text of William's ethnography; therefore, without them, it was possible to read the paper as an account of a benign Odinitist ritual of celebration. Without the artifacts, which revealed the underlying beliefs and values, the Blot and its participants seemed a quaint, warm group, enjoying a ritual meal and telling stories about ancient ancestors. Somehow the stark contrast made the addition of them more disturbing.

At assignment due dates, students exchange papers and respond to each others' work in writing. These peer response assignments are given a lot of weight in the course. Students are expected to critique their colleagues' work with the care and attention they would like others to use with their own assignments. They have a week to complete the critique, and the final product is a polished piece that appears in their final portfolios. William's peer responder, a serious and thoughtful student named Steve, offered sound advice for revision, but as I read through Steve's peer response, I was shocked to find no mention of the racist views expressed in the artifacts. Steve was not the type of student to take these things lightly. I wondered if he had been at a loss about how to tactfully comment on such disturbing texts; perhaps he had chosen to

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ignore them rather than enter into a difficult conversation with William.

Throughout the semester, I meet with students at individual appointments designed to evaluate student progress. This is a time to begin collecting and arranging work for the final portfolio, but it is also a place to address specific concerns about the revision process and the quality of student work in the classroom. One of the goals of these conferences is to give students a clear picture of where they stand in the course. In my meeting with Steve, I also used the opportunity to find out why Steve had not responded to William's artifacts. When I asked what he thought of William's ethnography, Steve launched into a detailed description of the changes he thought William needed to make, including the specific details that needed to be included for the reader unfamiliar with the religion. I complimented Steve on his response, but asked him directly why he hadn't commented on the artifacts.

"What artifacts?" he asked. He had received William's paper without the accompanying artifacts.

I pulled out my copy of the paper and showed the work to Steve. He read silently for nearly five minutes and then lifted his head. "This is Mein Kampf kind of stuff," he said.

At this point, I was unsure how to proceed. It was unprofessional to say what I wanted to say, which was something along the lines of, "Oh my God, I *know*! What am I going to do?" Instead I decided to state the obvious. "It changes the paper, doesn't it?" I asked.

Steve agreed and then volunteered to revise his response using the artifacts. I was thankful for Steve's help but knew

that the problem wasn't his to solve. I continued to worry. William's turn to bring a paper to the workshop was fast approaching.

Shasta Community College is a racially and socioeconomically diverse campus. Not surprisingly, the students in this course were from all backgrounds and races. I worried particularly about students coming upon precept 27 among the artifacts in William's presentation, which reads:

It is not constructive to hate those of other races, or even those of mixed races. But a separation must be maintained for the survival of one's own race. One must, however, hate with a pure and perfect hatred those of one's own race who commit treason against one's own kind and against the nations of one's own kind. One must hate with a pure and perfect hatred all those people or practices which destroy one's people, one's culture, or the racial exclusiveness of one's territorial imperative.

Teresa, a smart and engaged student, active in the class, is a white woman whose husband is a first-generation Mexican American. She has racially mixed children. Should I be shielding Teresa from the subject matter of William's paper? And thinking beyond her, I was unsure of how any of the students would respond to the inflammatory rhetoric of the "manifesto" and other materials William had included. Should I ask that William work on something else? What was my responsibility as an instructor? What was the balance? Every time I thought about it, my hands began to sweat.

How could I give William's work the attention it deserved when the thought of his point of view made me feel angry, sick, and sad? How does an instructor, whose work is supposed to be about promoting critical thinking and equal access, resist the temptation to silence a student because she finds his views repugnant? Would the other students be able to focus on the text when they read that the religion asked that he "hate [them] with a pure and perfect hatred"? Would I?

William did not match the stereotypical views I held about racists. He was not stupid or backward; he was kind, smart, and funny. Reading his ethnography and being in class with him twice a week forced me to confront my own stereotypes. Here was a complex person, another human being. If I quickly categorized him and dismissed him, wouldn't I be guilty of the same discriminatory practices I claimed he was committing? I knew William as well as an instructor can after such a short time. If I knew anything, I knew this: if I prevented him from speaking—if I silenced him—he would no longer respect our classroom as a place that considered him important. If William knew there was no chance that we would listen to him, then how could he believe that the writing he did was important?

The day William brought his paper to the workshop there was a nervous energy throughout the room. Students had read his ethnography (and artifacts) as homework and seemed both anxious and hesitant to discuss it.

Teresa's eyes were wide as she asked me about the work before class began. "I don't know if I am going to be able to stay calm during this workshop," she said plainly. "It's me and my children he's talking about."

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William was nervous as well. Although he had expressed dread at the prospect of bringing his paper to workshop, he seemed determined to bring the ethnography instead of his two other possible assignments.

I prefaced our discussion with a short request that we focus on the text itself and turned the room over to the student facilitator, secretly wishing to be at home in bed with the covers pulled over my head. What occurred next was remarkable. Students began to ask very text-specific questions about William's ethnography. First, they asked him to expand on some of the references he made to pre-Christian gods and goddesses. Next, they wanted more analysis of William's part in the ritual; then, they began to broach some of the more difficult issues his project presented.

"What counts as white?" asked John. "If you look white, are you white?"

"Am I white?" asked Linda.

"I'm Italian. Is that white?"

"Um, I know this may sound stupid to you, but what's so bad about other races?"

"What if I looked white, and we were friends, and then you found out I wasn't white? Would you not like me anymore?"

These questions were civil and genuine. Students wanted to understand. They wanted to know how William thought. They were curious, and they were kind, but they were also critical.

Joseph commented, "I think it's interesting that precept 86 says that 'a wise man judges others by their actions and accomplishments.' Don't you think that's kind of funny?"

"What do you mean?" someone asked.

"Well," Joseph struggled to explain, "If the entire white separatist idea . . . is about race, which is outward appearance, then I think it's funny that this says to judge by actions."

A collective "Ohhhh" rose from the room.

Here, William interjected. "We use the word *race* in another way. When everybody else says *race*, they mean 'ethnicity,' but when we say *race*, we mean 'culture.'"

"So you're saying that you're trying to be separate so you can preserve your *culture*?" asked Teresa.

"Yes."

Another "Ohhhh" from the class.

This distinction began a discussion that not only addressed competing definitions of common terms but also raised questions about what defines culture—practices, ethnicity, or both. Throughout the discussion, the students who obviously did not agree with William's point of view were able to ask probing questions, make constructive comments, and focus on William's text and the assignment criteria without deteriorating into the screaming matches so commonly associated with politically charged and emotionally fraught issues. Teresa, the student with an interracial marriage and mixed-race children, fought visibly at times to choose her words carefully as she critiqued William's work. But she participated (later telling me she felt compelled to), and she gave extremely useful suggestions.

As I think now about the students and the way that they were able to critique William's work, I realize that the same scenario would not have played out had he offered the paper earlier in the semester. Students had been having

candid conversations about their writing since the first week of class. Because the bulk of the coursework centered on their own writing processes, the students quickly began to recognize that their contributions in the workshop were valuable to their colleagues. They were unwilling to let unsubstantiated claims in another student's paper pass. Classmates would press each other to expand or explain their comments until they made sense. This, I think, was only partially the result of modeling the workshop process; they felt a responsibility to each other. The students paid more attention and were more deeply invested because the subject matter was their own work. In the classroom's economy of meaning, it was disrespectful to be disengaged; students gained status with their classmates by giving valuable feedback on their work in the form of articulate verbal and written responses.

By the time his workshop date came around, William's active participation in the course had been recognized by his fellow students. He was one of them; they felt a responsibility to him and to his work regardless of whether or not they agreed with him. In addition, if I had attempted to dissuade William from writing about the white-separatist movement or asked him not to use his ethnography in the workshop (as I was tempted to do), he would never have been confronted with the pointed questions of his peers—intelligent people he had come to respect. The fact that William recognized his colleagues' contributions is evident in the preface introducing his final portfolio, where he writes about the revision of his ethnography:

If there was something that I could show you in this portfolio that

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showed that I had evolved into a more distinguished writer it would have to be my revision of paper two [the ethnography]. I feel that the constructive criticism that I received was very useful in helping me to polish it into the final draft. [The emphasis is William's.]

In another assignment, called a revision synopsis, William details the changes he had made from the first to the second draft. In it, he writes about his decision to remove the artifact "88-Precepts": "I did not include the artifact 88-Precepts in the paper. I feel, as many others do, that it takes away from the ethnography because the only reason I put it in in the first place was because I was asked to. The 88-Precepts did not give an accurate description of the beliefs of the group." William also goes on to explain that he included the artifact because a member of the separatist group had asked him to, and that after the writing workshop, he realized that the precepts distracted readers from what he felt was the true meaning of the gathering.

Later in his portfolio preface, William acknowledges the value of his own work in the course, detailing something that I had felt about him as a student but did not know how to articulate:

I believe my greatest contribution to this class was to bring controversial subjects to the class that everyone had an opinion on. I believe this is important because it gave individuals the opportunity to speak their opinion without worrying about what I thought. My attitude to my classmates showed them that they could be honest toward my

point of view and that by myself being honest they would feel OK with talking about such issues. The greatest thing that I did this semester was the way that I interacted in

It is only through sustained and respectful contact between people who don't think alike that meaningful conversations can be initiated and continued.

class. I believe that I was an important part to class discussions and group projects.

I like to think that William's preface reveals that he had a clear idea of his value as a student. William further solidified the statements he made in the preface by choosing to read it to the rest of the class at the final meeting of the semester, where students were asked to select and read a short excerpt from the work they were most proud of. His reading was met with a vigorous round of applause.

I continually grapple with what it means to be an instructor who helps a student with racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, or misogynistic views in their writing. I question whether it's ethical to help a student present and argue those views more effectively; however, I also firmly believe that students refine and redefine their opinions as they explore them in writing. If students with these views are prevented from writing about them, they will be denied the opportunity to reflect critically with the help of their peers. Another writing project teacher, Charles Bazerman, comments on this thinking in

his article "The Diversity of Writing." He explains that harnessing students' vested interests is the key to their development as writers and thinkers: "We know that students only really begin to

work on their writing and to grow as literate beings insofar as the literacy tasks become important to them. And they only attend seriously to the advice, correction, or even dialogic support we offer them insofar as the tasks in front of them have so focused

their minds that they need to draw on every relevant source they can get their hands on" (15).

It is only through these difficult and uncomfortable conversations about subjects that have "so focused their minds" that students are able to interrogate their own beliefs. I do not claim that William's involvement in the course did anything to make him want to remove his tattoos, but I do think that students in the class were able to subtly peel up the edges of some of the assumptions present in his ethnography, perhaps helping to pave the way for a more critical examination of his beliefs. The evidence for this becomes more apparent through a series of emails William and I exchanged after I had written a draft of this paper.

I had some trouble locating William to ask for his permission to use his work in this article. A secretary at the college found among several William Hawthornes one whom she considered a close match. I called the number she gave me and spoke to his mother.

"I'm wondering," I began after a brief introduction, "if we are talking about the same William."

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"Is this one covered from head to toe in tattoos?"

"Yes."

"Then that's my William," William's mother said, assuring me that she would pass on the message through William's girlfriend. I anxiously waited for his call.

A day or two later, I heard William's voice on the line. He sounded sleepy but agreeable, and he gave me his email address, one of many "aryanfronts" on AOL. I sent him the paper as an attachment. He responded quickly and expressed interest in using his real name in the work, which I saw as a positive sign. But he took offense at the way that I described him in the paper. His reply:

I enjoyed your paper. I would like to ask you if you would change the way that you expressed your feelings. Using such words as "sickly" and words of the same sort made me lose some of the respect that I had for you as an instructor. I believe that you can still reveal your dismay without using words that offended me. I would also like to see my name because I feel that it is important. I would also like to say thank you for choosing me in your writing. I feel that it is an accurate description of how the semester went. Again thank you. Please feel free to call me and let me know how it is going.

I had expected some resistance to the ways that I had described William as a student but was unsure about what he wanted me to change. I understood that he was reacting to my personal feelings as expressed in the piece, and I pointed this out in my reply. Again, William responded promptly, and what he wrote surprised me:

Thank you for appreciating my feelings about the paper. If you can accommodate my feelings then it would be unkind if I did not do the same for you. So with that, any feelings that you felt and you chose to write about in the paper, should also be valid. Therefore I believe that you should not have to revise how you feel. The only reason that I wanted you to change them was because I was mad that you did not have the same views as myself. And that I scared you as a teacher. With that I need to offer an apology. I am sorry.—William Hawthorne

I was floored by the idea that William was "mad that [I] did not have the same views." I had been perfectly clear about my opinions on race and politics. But when I thought more deeply about his reaction, I realized that, in a way, it was just another version of my own shock and dismay when I first noticed his tattoos; perhaps he, like me, was comparing his stereotypical ideas to the living person. Perhaps his shock mirrored my own when I first tallied up my ideas about racists and realized he didn't fit. William's final email reveals an acknowledgment that, even though he and I have deeply divided points of view, he is able to respect my feelings because I extended him the same courtesy. This is, if nothing else, a first step.

It was because William was so deeply invested in his topic that it became necessary for him to struggle to write clearly and, in doing so, to rely on advice from his peers. The white separatist movement was important to William, and I am now convinced that if I had denied him the chance to write on his interests (however repellent they were to me), he would never have heard the clear dissent

expressed by his classmates. In silencing him, I would also have silenced his classmates, denying them the chance to think deeply about the issues he presented and the opportunity to think critically and to formulate arguments and opinions about the views he expressed. It is only through sustained and respectful contact between people who don't think alike that meaningful conversations can be initiated and continued. Of course, the solutions to classroom problems are never tidy, and the temptation always exists to dismiss opinions that we see as backward, politically incorrect, or just plain creepy; however, having William as a student reminded me that the value of diverse opinions in the classroom should not be restricted only to those that please us as instructors.

References

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To Our Readers

Sarah Rider made the decision to allow William to present material that took a quantum leap beyond the "on the one hand, on the other hand" discussions we have with our students about, say, abortion or gun control. To Rider, William's racism is one of those issues that, as Tevye says of the pogroms in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "There is no other side." Yet she allows William to be heard. Have you found yourself in similar circumstances? Send your story to editors@writingproject.org