

Rationale

Without even realizing, our students are constantly inundated with media and technology, consuming information that has been censored or edited to a certain degree. They currently live in a world where information can be downloaded in a few seconds with just a swipe and a scroll, but this unabridged accessibility of information can have both positive and negative effects on students' intrapersonal and interpersonal lives. Because of the absolute necessity of voice in self-discovery and identity, the overarching theme that has linked our units together this school year is censorship and its effects on the individual. We also feel that it is necessary for students to be able to think critically about the information they consume—this is the only way our students can be globally-minded citizens who are prepared for “the real world,” so to speak. We want our students to grapple with questions about the legitimacy of available knowledge and to think about the implications of censorship beyond any of the works of literature we have chosen to read. Our ultimate hope is that through the exploration of censorship as a theme in literature, our students will be able to further interpret their roles as students in the classroom and as individuals in our society.

Censorship may seem like too lofty of a subject for a ninth grade honors English Language Arts classroom to tackle; however, it is a theme that is certainly applicable to our students' lives. At North Springs Charter High School, our students engage with a diverse group of peers, and consequently learn how to self-censor in their daily interactions. Johnson (1981) examines these types of peer-to-peer interactions in his research and argues that “students imitate each other's actions and identify with friends who have admired competencies” (p. 6). This self-identification through the imitation of peers include but are not limited to “the way in which ingroup messages are phrased, the nature of clothing and hair styles, the music valued, what is

defined as enjoyable and what is defined as distasteful, what competencies need to be practiced and developed” (Johnson, 1981, p. 6). Student interest is diverse and falls on every end of the spectrum, ranging from junior varsity and varsity athletic teams, theater, Pride Alliance club, recycling club, and Habitat for Humanity to name a few—the students in our class create a microcosm of our society with their varied interests and contexts that they bring to the classroom. Technology has been a major component of their lives, as many of them feel like they must have a device near them at all times, such as a cellphone or an audio player. We have seen this in our classroom where students are resistant to unplugging from their technology and feel the need to be completely hooked into the Internet through social media or video games to name a few examples. Adolescence is a complex period in any individual’s life, where identities are continually being assessed and reevaluated as individuals begin to learn more about themselves and the world around them. Research into young adult identity formation shows that “adolescents expend tremendous energy defining and redefining themselves and trying on various identities and roles” (Freedman and Johnson, 1994, p. 357). By understanding how censorship affects a society at large, students may apply the same logic to their more immediate environments and vice versa.

Students must navigate their way through what is acceptable and unacceptable in the different spaces they find themselves in, whether it is in the classroom, at home, at extracurricular activities, or other public areas. Students rely on their surroundings, which includes the media and information they consume on a daily basis, around them to assist in the formation of their identities. In order to be successful as they attempt to carve out a niche for themselves, they must negotiate with their peers, authority figures, and their own inner dialogues on a daily basis. If we can develop our students’ critical thinking skills to help provide them the

tools with which they can adequately challenge the media created purely for entertainment and the control of knowledge and narratives, then our students will be better equipped with understanding how censorship affects their own unique voices. According to Childs (2017), “Censorship is a broad impediment that encompasses both passive and active hindrances to access, such as leaving certain materials out of a collection or purposefully removing materials out of fear, pressure, discrimination, or a number of forces” (p. 61). This removal or omission of information is “not always as obvious as the banning of a book, especially when censorship is happening on the Internet,” so we feel that it is absolutely vital that students become aware of the dangers and implication of censorship in their lives at the beginning of their high school careers, rather than the end (Childs, 2017, p. 61).

Cook and Heilmann (2013) distinguish between private self-censorship and public self-censorship where one is the “process of regulation between what an individual regards as permissible to express publicly” and the other is an internalization of “some aspects of the public censor” that manifests publicly, respectively (p. 179). Whether it is for self-preservation or to spare the feelings of their peers, students may engage in self-censorship. Censorship at the larger level also directly impacts our students, whether it is at the school-level, governmental-level, or even parental-level—however, we have chosen to focus on censorship by societies or governments in our literature selections for the semester with the hopes that an organic transition to thinking about censorship at every level will occur in our classroom. As Smith and Wilhelm (2010) state we not only “want [students] to transfer the knowledge they have gained about people and stories to their understanding of the literature they read, and to their writing,” but we also “want them to transfer what they learn from reading one text to their reading of other texts” (p. 11). We want to push our students to think in ways they have not before and to “transfer the

understanding they've gained from reading to the way they think through problems and live their lives" (Smith & Wilhelm, 2010, p. 11).

Students entering high school are also well-aware of our country's current political climate and the tensions that trickle down from Washington D.C. into our local communities and are just as effected by media narratives as adults. As Childs (2017) asserts, "Censorship and surveillance are impediments that go hand in hand and are embedded in recent policies and practices that have further compromised individual privacy, thus impinging on the ability to consume information without scrutiny" (p. 58). These tensions impact the way young adults regard gender identity, race, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and many other issues that our students must confront. Students may be unaware of their internalization of hurtful or dangerous narratives, and our hope is that through the exploration of literature, we can expand our students' minds, if only just a little, to become more cognizant of their interactions with their peers and more accepting of themselves and others. Cook and Heilmann (2013) touch on this issue and urge us to think of

cases in which an individual gradually internalizes public censorship, such as followers of a sect who are successfully indoctrinated by repeated censorship, or disempowered individuals whose self-expression is suppressed such that they come independently to anticipate, extend and even embrace the censorship regime that oppresses them. (p. 188)

If students can become more aware of how they self-censor, then they can think more critically about the proponents of certain censorships.

To further touch on the question of why this particular text at this particular moment, we believe that Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* aids in the natural transition of discussion about censorship's effect on the individual since the novel presents a fictional interpretation of what

life would be like if information and knowledge did not fall into the public domain. The society in Bradbury's novel is one that is absolutely consumed by their interactions with the media, as demonstrated by the parlor televisions. The characters live in a world where books have been banned, and firemen paradoxically do not put out fires, but instead, are the ones who start fires out of illegal books. Residents can call the firemen, who act as the enforcers of authority, on their neighbors for having illegal texts, which cause some of the citizens to live in paranoia. As educators, we felt that teaching this text was necessary, especially during this year's Banned Books Week. Freedman and Johnson (1994) argue, "When teachers abandon their right and responsibility to select literature, they sacrifice their students to protect themselves. Self-censorship silences both teachers and students" (p. 357). This silence imposed by self-censorship can potentially be problematic since it is the reality of our students' lives. Bradbury's dystopian reality presents a hypothetical situation that allows students the freedom to question the morality of censoring information. Some of the questions that we hope our students ask are of the following: Who has the right to control knowledge? Is there knowledge that exists that the general society should not have access to? Does anyone have the right to censor others, and if so, who? If anything should be censored, what and why?

Our semester has been linked through the broad theme of censorship. Smagorinsky (2008) supports this connection of texts through theme since "archetypal experiences provide a compelling way to organize an English curriculum," providing a curriculum that is "responsive both to recurring patterns in all art forms and to students' authentic interests in learning" (p. 133). In other words, our students will be "engaged in integrated inquiry into topics that parallel their social development or help lead to their development," which is our ultimate goal as English Language Arts instructors (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 118-119). With each selected work of

literature, we unpacked the theme and expanded upon it to relate censorship directly to our students' lives. We began the school year with the young adult novel *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld (2005) as an introduction to censorship, but included discussion about the morality of government surveillance and the pros and cons of a utopian society. This unit required students to consider dystopian communities and question who gets to set societal standards and if we are required to follow them as citizens. Following *Uglies*, we moved to the novella *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1989). In this unit, we chose to read a more canonical work of literature to introduce allegories and satire to our students. We were also able to further explore the influence of censorship through the character Squealer, this time relating the theme to historical context rather than fictional. Again, students were able to build on the knowledge of utopian and dystopian societies, as well as the control and spread of information. Subsequently, our current unit occurs during Banned Books Week, so we decided that it is only fitting for us to continue with *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, a novel where burning books is a societal norm. We will continue to unpack the definition of censorship, allowing students to redefine their understanding of the term and its implications throughout the learning segment. Students will continue to grapple with the consequences of censorship, only they will begin to focus on the effects of censorship on the individual through various *Fahrenheit 451* characters. To end our semester, students will use the foundation we have built through the three works of literature to create a researched argumentative essay about the validity of censorship in our society.

One of our goals for the unit is for our students to be able to identify development of censorship as a theme through the connection of the selected works of literature. We agree with Smith and Wilhelm (2010) when they argue that theme is more than just an “aphorism, main idea, moral, central focus, or gist” and that theme is “a rich understanding, expressed through a

crafted work of art but applicable to life beyond the work, and situated in an ongoing cultural conversation that tests and complicates it” (p. 155). The framework of what constitutes a theme is highly debated, but we believe that a theme can be unique to each individual reader depending on the context that each specific learner brings to the conversation. We have already begun laying out the foundation of what theme is and what theme is not with our students in the previous units. By identifying the role of censorship in *Fahrenheit 451*, students will be better prepared for the Georgia Milestones Ninth Grade Literature and Composition End of Course Assessment that they will take at the end of the school year. This goal directly accomplishes what the Georgia Department of Education (2015) requires in the ninth-grade classroom by meeting the Georgia Standard of Excellence ELAGSE9-10RL2: “Determine a theme and/or central idea of a text and analyze in details its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text” (p. 1).

However, beyond meeting state-mandated standards, we want to push our students’ understanding of theme so that they leave us as experienced readers who “attend directly to clues about character, setting, perspective, and events, and infer—using their own personal and world knowledge—to fill in gaps, and see and interpret implied relationships” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2010, p. 159). To meet this goal of enriched reading, we understand that we must supply our students with the necessary strategies to move them from dependent, passive reading to independent, active reading. Students will create a Teacher Correspondence Notebook in which they will respond to various writing prompts throughout the two-week learning segment. Using this low-stakes assignment to assess comprehension will build student confidence in their ability to respond to the text by creating what Beers (2003) calls “opportunities for success” (p. 260).

Inside the notebook, students will engage in various writing strategies from Quick Writes, short writing workshops, and Cornell Notes in order to engage with the text and identify the development of censorship in the novel. Students will have three forms of participation throughout the learning segment: total classroom, small group, and “personal reflection that they can choose to share with no one or perhaps only with [us]” (Beers, 2003, p. 264). Our hope is that by scaffolding these active reading strategies and involving our students in meaningful discussions about *Fahrenheit 451*, they will be able to uncover a richer understanding of the novel’s theme beyond censorship as the broad term we have provided.

Our second goal for the unit involves students analyzing the implications of censorship in the novel and related texts by applying the concepts to various character from the novel and their own lives. Through the exploration of censorship as a theme during the semester, we hope that we can “help [students] consider pivotal experiences in their lives, such as their relationships with their friends or families” (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 119). Smith and Wilhelm (2010) build upon Smagorinsky’s ideas of theme by advocating for students to “develop an understanding that is consistent with the details of the text and that can be applied to other situations in our lived experience out in the world” (p. 159). In order to synthesize their analysis into a formal written product, students must first be able to analyze diverse characters. By accomplishing this type of analysis, we will be meeting the Georgia Standard of Excellence ELAGSE9-10RL3 where students must be able to “analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop theme” (Georgia Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). We will scaffold this skill by preparing students for a Jigsaw Discussion activity that relies on students’ abilities to engage in character analysis of dynamic and static characters. Students will be assigned a single

character to analyze at first, before engaging in small group discussions about three other characters. Students will use these character analyses to objectively compare and contrast the different events that affect character motivations and actions. Ultimately, this goal asks that students be able to put themselves into someone else's shoes and demonstrate empathy for those who are different from themselves.

The final goal of the unit is for students to assess and defend an argument by taking a position either for or against censorship. We felt that in order to prepare our students to write a larger essay, we needed to focus on the implications of theme and character analysis and providing the right strategies to get our students engaged in active critical thinking—this is precisely why our culminating assessment for this unit on *Fahrenheit 451* will be a thesis statement. As Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, and McCann (2010) state, it is an English Language Arts teacher's job to “help the students move from generating and analyzing data to writing about their interpretation” (p. 9). Students will be able to write a well-organized statement that is based off of textual evidence and textual analysis, assessing and defending their stance on censorship. This thesis will be the one used in the following unit on argumentative essays, which is why it is critical for students to be able to write a thesis statement on their own. Daniels, Zemelman, and Steineke (2007) argue that writing not only “helps student get more actively engaged in subject matter,” but it also helps them “understand information and concepts more deeply, make connections and raise questions more fluently, remember ideas longer, and apply learning in new situations” (p. 5). This summative assessment will allow students to begin accomplishing a Georgia Department of Education (2015) writing standard, ELAGSE9-10W1: “Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (p. 2). We hope to ease our students into the

process of writing formal and academic essays; though a thesis statement is a small part of a larger, more complex assessment, learning how to effectively convey an opinion is a necessary step in writing a proficient paper.

To aid students in their understanding of censorship as a theme in *Fahrenheit 451*, students will be required to read either an excerpt of *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003) or “The Sneetches” by Dr. Seuss (1953) in small groups. These supplemental texts will require students to make text-to-text connections, demonstrating the pervasiveness of censorship in our literature and society. These texts will also guide students in their analysis by presenting censorship in a nontraditional form of text: *Persepolis* is a graphic novel and “The Sneetches” is a children’s picture book—both of these forms of text require students to use visual literacy skills. These types of additional mediums will help the visual learners in our classroom. In a class survey on multiple intelligences we took at the beginning of the school year, we discovered that over half off our students were either visual or auditory learners. Being able to discuss their analysis within their small groups before reconvening as a class will allow students to participate in low-stake conversations before presenting to the entire class. Students will also read an article from *WIRED* in small groups. This article by Klint Finley (2017), “Why Big Tech is Clashing with Internet Freedom Advocates,” covers a censorship algorithm being used by Facebook and Google, two big names on the Internet. The purpose of this article is to present students with a real-life example of how censorship directly impacts their lives, whether it is through books, Internet search engines, or social media. This text-to-world connection will serve as a guide for students as they take their final positions on the validity of censorship in our world, helping them to think through their opinion statements, which will eventually be workshopped into a functioning thesis statement.

We acknowledge that there may be some backlash at the pacing of our unit or even the topics being covered. That being said, we truly believe that our students are capable of accomplishing all the tasks at hand. We agree with Beers (2003) when she says that we should not give into the temptation to make curricula easier when we see “students struggle with reading (specifically) and learning (in general)” (p. 261). We believe in the success of our curriculum because we have kept and will keep expectations high by fostering an environment that encourages our students to take risks and trust that we will provide the scaffolds needed for success. As for our choices in literature, we believe that it is important to read texts that make us uncomfortable in order to better understand the human condition. The reality of *Fahrenheit 451* may seem far-fetched, but “literature often deals with common human experience about the pressures, changes, dilemmas, aspirations, conflicts, and so on that make growing up (and being grown up) such a challenge” (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 141). We believe that the point of reading literature is to make us feel uncomfortable and to examine precisely *why* or *what* made us uncomfortable as a way to uncover not only the text’s literary significance, but more about humankind in general. If students can “come to a better personal understanding” of the text and their related experiences in regards to censorship, “gain fluency” that will “enable them to read and produce new texts in the future,” and “work within a social context in which they can develop this new knowledge to the best of their potential,” the goals for the unit will have been met to the fullest (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 112). Ultimately, this unit, *To Burn Or Not To Burn*, will challenge students to reassess our society and their own experiences with censorship, identity, and voice.

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