Huck or Chuck: Using Online Role-Play and Ning to Negotiate Race in the High School English Classroom

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Introduction

I cringed when reading the newest discussion topic on the class online role-play forum:

I read it again, this time with my administrator mouse hovering over the "Delete Discussion" option. Did this question have anything to do with our dialogue about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? I knew Sheila, the student who posted this question, did so earnestly, and it would assuredly elicit interesting responses from her peers. I was beginning to see that Twain's 1885 work certainly "provokes more questions than it provides answers" (Methelis), but was this question provoked by the text, and if not, did that really matter?

I was not sure how our online dialogue surrounding Twain's often banned book fostered this question, but I knew after a few minutes of internal debate that I would not hit that "Delete Discussion" button.

I teach eleventh grade American Literature Foundations classes for students whose transcripts and work in previous courses suggest they struggle in English class. These classes are not representative of the mostly white, middle class students who attend this first-ring suburban school. A third of the students in these classes are African, Asian, Hispanic, and Mideast immigrants, first-generation Americans, African Americans, or open-enrolled students from other school districts.

Conversations about race never occurred in any classes I taught until last April. Class discussion, what professors and other teachers told me was the pillar of the English classroom, didn't happen much either. Last year I abandoned my annual attempt at the Socratic Seminar by the end of October, after a few wrenching days of near silence, and I fell back to call and response: I called on students and they responded— sometimes.

The idea of having a truly participatory dialogue about racial issues seemed to me unrealistic. I was afraid to talk about issues of race before I even began my career. I still remember feeling paralyzed by anxiety, shame, and nausea as I sat in the principal's office at the Minneapolis high school where I student taught. To my student-teaching horror, three girls had complained that I was being racist.

I was not flinging racial slurs or promoting racist sentiments, but I was trying to be colorblind. My white, Midwest, middle class attitude reflected the belief that skin color should not matter in the classroom. My own skin color, I believed at the time, had little to do with my education. I know now that "a teacher who professes to be 'colorblind' is not going to understand how unconscious biases can influence expectations, actions, and even the way a teacher addresses students of color…The fear of appearing racist also throws up roadblocks" (Scruggs). I had no vocabulary to talk about issues involving race, and for these young women, race not only mattered, it was central to their identities and to their learning.

Not Talking About Race in the Classroom

At the start of my first year teaching over ten years ago, a more senior member of the staff instructed me that the one thing "you just don't do in class is talk about race." I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but at the time I had little awareness of the role race would eventually play in my classroom. Her comment, coupled with my episode student teaching, left an indelible scar on me. I kept this scar in the back of my mind and took it forward into my practice, avoiding conversations about race.

In my current district, dialogue about race and equity *is* happening among the staff. In August of 2008, all teachers attended a kick-off event centered on the discussion of race with our colleagues. One of the strongest messages to come out of the presentation echoes Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton's claim that "the most devastating factor contributing to the lowered achievement of students of color is institutionalized racism" (33). The speaker asserted this racism still exists in education today because schools unintentionally uphold racial bias and foster white advantage.

The speaker asked the primarily white teachers in the auditorium about the discussions of race within our schools. One person raised her hand and said that "We teach books by writers of color, but we don't talk about race." The audience response to this comment was hushed but harsh. I heard grumblings from people who disagreed with this statement and asserted that they did talk about race. Folding my shoulders inward, I shrunk back a bit and dug deeper into my chair. *My* experience talking about race fell into the description given by Linton and Singleton: I see myself "become silent, defiant, angry, or judgmental when the topic comes up" (18). I earnestly wanted to teach literature written by diverse authors to students, but I avoided talking about race.

Not Teaching *Huckleberry Finn*

One way I justified the absence of any class dialogue about race was by teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an antislavery book. I piled onto my students social criticism of the work, examples of satire from the text, and my own opinions that were based on the aforementioned illustrations. I used it to teach the power of friendship and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. I was an enthusiastic guide, navigating students through the symbolism of the river and the irony of the duke and king. We read excerpts from *The Damned Human Race* where Twain labels man as "avaricious and miserly." We studied its history as a censored book and the controversy it still stirs today. I also felt that I did at least address race: I showed the provocative PBS *Culture Shock* documentary *Born to Trouble*, which follows the unsuccessful

effort of a group of Tempe, Arizona parents to have the book removed from a required reading list at a high school.

When I started teaching foundations classes, the book—in my judgment—was never an option. My reasons for keeping it out of my classroom were numerous and practical, even if they did contradict all my reasons for including it in the first place. It was now too long and the dialect too difficult for the students in these classes. The novel was convoluted and messy. Each year students in my foundations classes saw the rest of the juniors in the school reading the novel at some point. I was inevitably asked by many of them if they were going to read it, too. I always had a prepackaged and polite "no" answer, providing them with a reasonable excuse that never implied I thought it was too difficult for them to read.

I found the novel quite rewarding to teach when my classes were made up of mostly white kids. They took no issue—or at least not one they publicized—with the book's use of the word "n[redacted]r" or its portrayal of Jim. When finished with the novel, I was confident these students understood that "Twain uses the term to show the contrast between society's dehumanization of slaves and Jim's nobility of character…and humanity" (Johnson 37). Ironically, I always felt a pang of hypocrisy when I used the book in a "regular" class and not in my foundations class. As I taught more foundations courses, I began to question if my job was to teach it as an antislavery book that modeled satire. I also began to question my exclusion of it from my foundations curriculum. Was it really too long? Too messy? Did I place low expectations on these kids that I did not place on kids in the other classes? Or were my personal scars dictating what I offered to my students? Were the issues about race and language in the book something I did not know how to adequately present to a class where the faces weren't mostly white?

It was the last question and my inability to clearly articulate an answer to it that made me realize that, after years of a basically self-imposed ban, I needed to use it in my foundations course. If I learned that I didn't know how to adequately present it to kids of color, there were deeper issues about teaching the book in my class and about the lack of culturally relevant instruction in my practice that I needed to examine. Ladson-Billings states that teachers who practice such instruction "demonstrate a connectedness with all their students and encourage that same connectedness between students" (25). I believed my classroom was a safe place for my students; I worried that bringing in this text would disrupt the relationships I had worked for months to establish. I was not certain how relationships between students would be impacted, but I felt that open and even potentially quarrelsome communication was better than no communication at all about the issues in the book. If the relationships I had with students were as strong as I believed, I would be able to mediate the potential conflicts.

The N-Word

By the spring of last year, I believed the students in these classes were prepared to look at this book critically and even question its appropriateness as a required text. I was also eager to try the Ning as a forum for debate, and the controversy surrounding the book seemed an ideal topic. I shared my enthusiasm with my students, and I studiously prepped them with background about Twain and the book's controversial legacy.

We had just finished reading August Wilson's *Fences*, and the kids took no offense to the use of word "n[redacted]r" in that work. My African American students volunteered to read the parts of Cory and Troy, and did so with zeal; most of these students decided to use the word as it was

written. They understood Wilson's choice to use dialect. My students who weren't black generally chose not to say it aloud and substituted, on my counsel, "man" instead of "n[redacted]r."

Before reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, students wrote about a word they believed held particular power in American society today. "N[redacted]r" was included in some of their lists. This preceded the reading of Gloria Naylor's article "The Meanings of a Word" where she shares her first childhood realization that the term could be used to denigrate African Americans after a boy in her third-grade class used the word to insult her. She explains how she had heard the word many times previous to this incident but that members of her family used it quite differently than whites. She states that "The people in my grandmother's living room took a word whites used to signify worthlessness and degradation and rendered it impotent" (246). Even before beginning the novel, we talked about how Twain's use of the word was a deliberate and provocative act, and I referenced professor David L. Smith's comment that emphasized "even when Twain was writing his book, 'n[redacted]r' was universally recognized as an insulting, demeaning word" (107). This fact would offer later fodder for a lecture about author intent.

I became uneasy, however, while we were watching *Born to Trouble*. The documentary attempts to provide both sides of the modern controversy surrounding the book. Many of my students became noticeably upset, however, during a montage in the video where several media clips feature offensive and excessive use of the term. One African American student asked me (and audibly the rest of the class), "Why are we watching this?" His tone was one of anger more than curiosity. Several others—black, white, and brown— echoed his question or nodded.

I found myself again folding my shoulders inward and shrinking back a bit more deeply into my chair. In the years of showing the video, I had never been asked this question. I explained the video's context before viewing it, and I thought my pre-viewing commentary would allay any emotion evoked from watching it. I was wrong. These students were offended by the use of the word in the video. Staying silent behind my desk was not the responsible option. I paused the video and told them that debate about the use of the word in the book, as well as in our own society, would be at the center of our Ning.

Using Ning to Examine Language

Using the Ning, I expected all my students to participate in the dialogue. While the novel and its events would drive initial conversations, I expected students to transfer ideas Twain presents in the novel to those at the center of our debate today: race, power, and language.

An online role-play would be an engaging and novel activity that provided a forum for my students to examine multiple perspectives without the same anxieties present in a classroom discussion. I followed the online role-play protocol described by Beach and Doerr-Stevens where "students adopt roles and positions related to a certain issue and then conduct a debate on a blog or online discussion tool over an extended time period. These debates involve students voicing their roles' positions and responding to other roles' positions" (463). Although I would know their online identities, they would not know each other's new guises. This added to the activity's novelty while disconnecting students from each other just enough to focus on the issues rather than on what they already knew and believed to be true about each other.

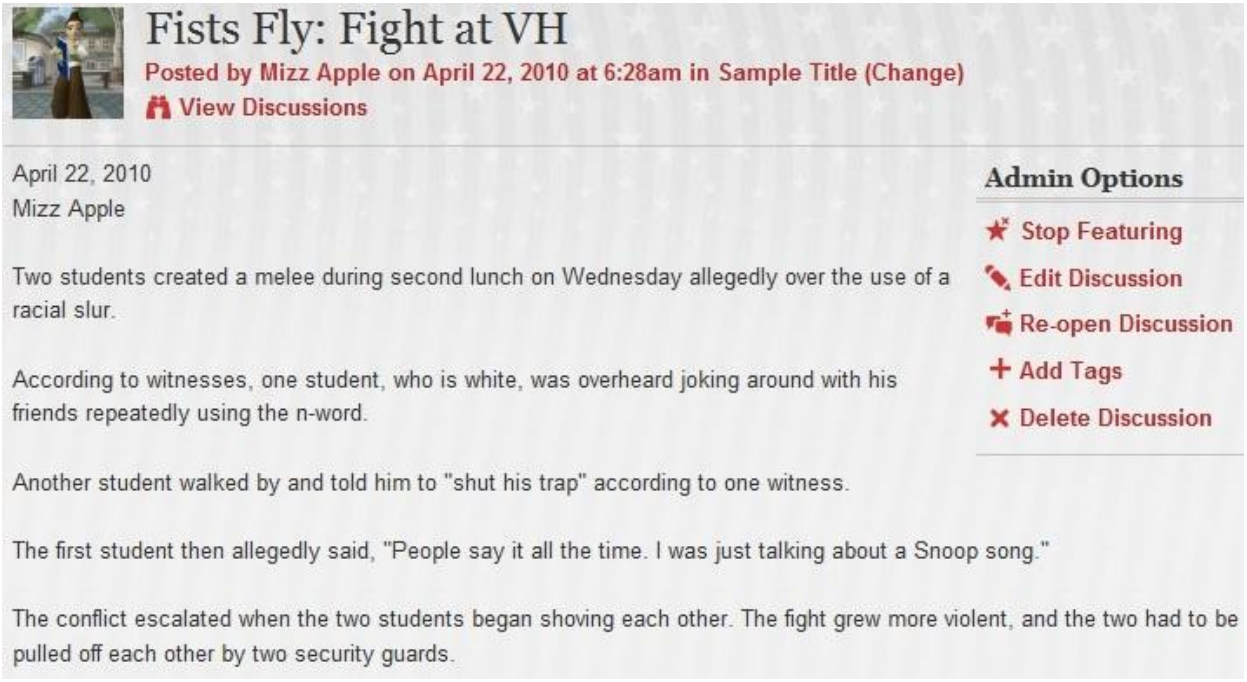
Our online platform was the Ning, a social networking site similar to Facebook, and our debate was framed by the following question: Should *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* be a required text in high school English course? The school we created, Valley High, was facing a controversy similar to the one detailed in the documentary in Arizona. We read an additional

article, as well, involving local schools in St. Louis Park and Lakeville that were challenged in 2007 by parents who questioned the necessity of the book in the curriculum.

Planning with the end on mind, I did not want to use a Ning only for novelty. My objectives included having several dialogues in class about the controversy surrounding the book where students shed their Ning identities. Additionally, students would craft persuasive essays arguing for or against the use of the book as required reading in a high school. This latter activity would also involve dropping their Ning identities but using arguments and ideas generated from the Ning in their own pieces.

In this role-play I became a media representative, Mizz Apple, a reporter from the Valley High Press who was covering the controversy. I also posted most of the original forum topics, and the first topic was about the use of the word "n[redacted]r" in schools. As a teacher, I do hear the word regularly in school, and I wanted students to dialogue about it.

In the initial discussion forum, I posted an article written by Mizz Apple that detailed a recent fight between two students at the school:



The previous year, a fight did occur at our school under allegedly similar circumstances according to one student involved. I did not revisit the event with students, but I felt it was a relevant situation to their own experience. Under the discussion forum, I posted questions about the situation and the use of the word in schools: Should the word be banned in schools? Are there certain people who should be "allowed" to say it? Should teachers step in when they hear anyone of any race use it?

In retrospect, I realize my first discussion was flawed. Although the students at Valley High were reading Twain's book, I created a situation unrelated to the text. Exploring the *Born to Trouble* documentary, considering students' strong reaction to it, would have been a better opening forum. Despite my belated awareness, student reactions to our first forum were compelling, telling, and immediate. Students reluctant to say anything in class suddenly became engaged in conversations with other students. Debates developed, and disagreements were

explored. For the first time all year, students questioned each other and challenged their peers' arguments.

Argument and Analysis, Online

Mr. Bob, a Valley City policeman, and Hitoshi Kiyo, a Valley High student working to remove *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the required reading list, shared the following dialogue:

I noticed several things immediately reading over these initial dialogues. Many students strayed from their role-play identities or were ambivalent to them in their responses. I pushed them to stay "in character" for the first few days, but I realized it was as instructive for them to respond as they wanted rather than as the boxed persona they assumed. My objective was to have students think and talk about issues of race related to the text as well as to our modern society in ways they may have not done before; whether or not they stayed in the voice of their character seemed irrelevant to achieving that goal.

Also ineffectual was my overwhelming English teacher urge to police conventions in their writing on the Ning. I was not as concerned about the punctuation in their writing as I was about the reactions other people—colleagues I invited to view this Ning—may have when reading their comments. Would students' lack of conventional precision reflect poorly on me? Evelyn and Andrew Rothstein, citing Joos, state that "Teenagers speak in a different register to fellow teenagers in contrast to how they are likely to speak to their parents, known often as 'intimate' or peer group register" (13). Although they were initially to write as their assumed identifies, it was unrealistic to expect them to acquire the jargon of their personas. While such an expectation could be useful, it was not one of my objectives.

As their discourse developed, the Ning was clearly a platform for students to prewrite and think about the topics more deeply. Dialogues in the classroom don't necessarily encourage participation from those individuals who need more time to process others' comments before they contribute. Students now had that time.

My misjudgment of one student's aptitude was evident when I read his initial Ning response. Will, a soft-spoken if not silent student, showed little engagement with any text we had read, and I assumed this lack of interest would carry into this unit, as well. He struggled with Twain's novel but became engrossed with the Ning, and his writing was more critical and analytical than at any other time in the year. In his first entry, using lyrics from the song "Letter to the King" by The Game, Will sought to clarify the difference between the word "n[redacted]r" and the word "n[redacted]a," including this portion of the song in his response:

Reply by **Peter Chao** on April 22, 2010 at 10:10am

Send Message

there is a difference between the way african americans use the word among themselves. these lyrics exemplify the difference.

"The word n*****
Is nothin like ni**a
Dont sound s*** alike
Like game, like Jigga
One came before the other
Like aim and pull the trigga
One slang for my brotha
One hang and take a picture

I did my customary cringe when I read the lyrics; songs like these are not standard texts in our class. There was certainly a time in my teaching career when I believed such lyrics had absolutely no place in my class. How could I censor this example, however, when it was central to the issues we were addressing? He explained his use of this song in the same entry:

this controversy shows how words and their meaning change over time, and people disregard the seriousness of words and their actions. these days there are right and wrong ways to use the n-word. the game shows the difference in his song. it can be used as a weapon to make someone feel inferior, but black people countered this by using the word among another but with a different meaning behind it. in the past the n-word was normal (not saying it was ever a proper way to refer to someone) but as slavery ended and the world became more open to the idea of equality the word was "socially banned" no one would use the n-word in an everyday sentence unless they had very strong emotions towards african americans. It is strange that it is normal for a black person to say nigga to those around him, but when a white person says it, its racist. i feel that this is a "black only" thing. they use it because it is their own definition of the word. a word they can use that isnt offensive at all. but that is also because there are different ways of using the word. also, a black person may take offense to a white person using the n-word because they have experienced white people throwing around the word as a joke. these are my feelings at least. what do you think?

Will's analysis brought Rothstein's assertions about registers into our classroom and provided a platform for a discussion among the students about dialect, slang, and register switching.

I was not sure how many ideas we would address on the Ning, but as reading of the novel continued the variety of dialogue topics was endless. I set up forums about the portrayal of Southerners in the novel, quotes of controversy, and the prejudice of Pap. I also began

encouraging students to develop forum topics and a few did. In addition to the forum about the use of the word "n[redacted]r," Matt created a forum that asked students who they thought should select books that are read in schools. Should parents have more of a say since their tax money goes to fund schools? Are teachers the experts in book selection? Should there be a committee of students, parents, and teachers that decide? Dan's forum questioned why there is a need to spend time focusing on issues around race when there are numerous other social problems the book exposes. Students tackled these complex questions with enthusiasm I had not seen before in class. One student wanted to focus more on the abuse of Huck in the book:

Send Message

i agree. people can be offended by racism but honestly how many people went through the time of the civil war and that degree of racism? none. no one from that time is still alive. people go through abuse from parents every day and that is even worse in my eyes. i would rather be racially discriminated against than physically and emotionally abused by my own parents. i think that we should spend more time educating kids on physical and emotional abuse than racism. that topic at least applies to our time and is not talked about enough.

In reading responses like these it was hard for me not to become overly critical or frustrated with what I perceived as a lack of racial awareness, and I looked for opportunities to encourage students to question their own assertions. My response to the above statement posed multiple questions that I hoped would cause this student to think a bit more reflectively and personally:

What a thoughtful response! Have you ever been racially discriminated against? Do you think this book allows us to talk about physical and emotional abuse? For example, we have Huck who is abused clearly by Pap, but what about Miss Watson? She takes him into a closet and makes him pray!! Is that abusive? Also, slavery itself, because of the nature of it, was certainly emotionally and physically abusive. What a great topic you have started!

In addition to student-generated questions, forum topics reflected current events. I admit I was oddly excited last May after I read about a controversy involving a white student at a local Christian college who donned blackface for a costume party where he masqueraded as rapper Lil' Wayne. Reaction to this episode was emotional—many of the college's students took offense to the act—and the story was covered in several local newspapers and Internet sites. The incident was a local, timely, and relevant illustration of how issues of race still exist despite claims made by some students that racism is no longer pertinent. After reading several articles and blogs, students connected this modern- day debate to minstrelsy and the ambiguous portrayal of Jim in the novel. By this time most students had shed their role-play identities; the dialogue on the Ning was revealing of student attitudes about race and reaction to the Lil' Wayne controversy was clearly divided as seen in the following excerpt:

Reply by **Commander Gure** on May 12, 2010 at 10:09am

Send Message

I think people should be angry over this incident because the student was trying to be funny by painting his face black. Blackface is a way to degrade an african american and what he did was a shame. There is a line where you cant cross and he crossed that line. Somethings are funny and other things are'nt

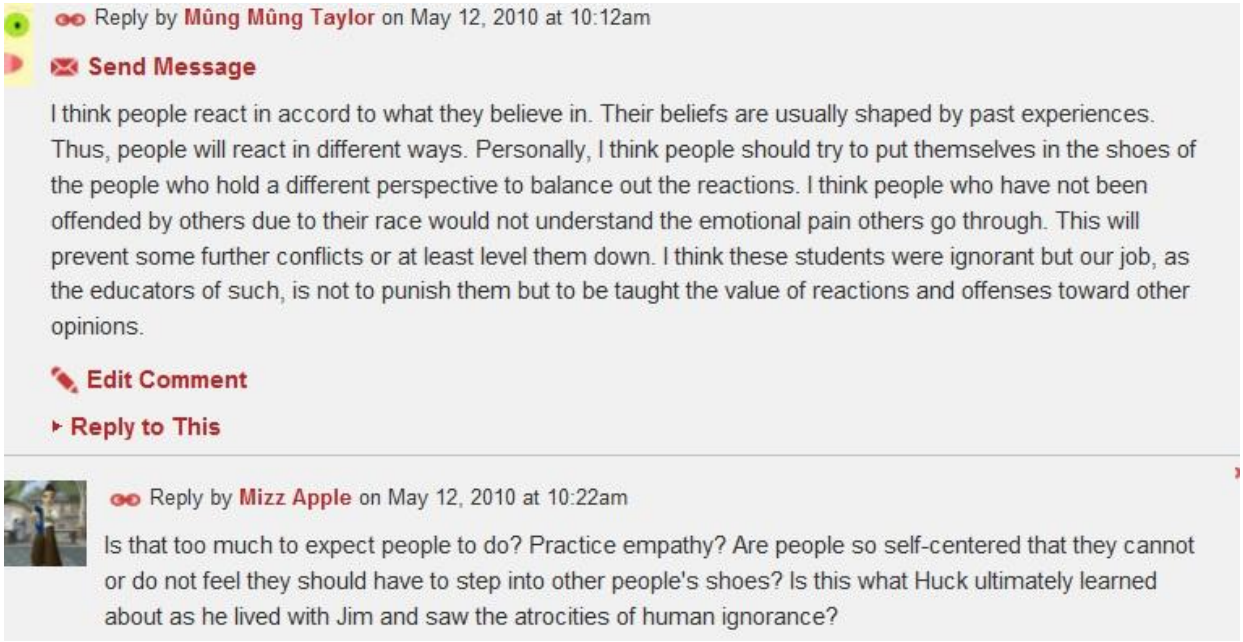
Reply to This

Reply by **Cinderella Princess** on May 12, 2010 at 10:09am

Send Message

I understand that it wasnt the best idea for the student to do, but i dont think he was trying to offend anyone. I think people are overreacting because it was just a skit and they were just trying to have fun. I would tell someone who was offended that the students were not trying to hurt anyones feelings they were just trying to act as Lil Wayne. For the most part, i would guess that the crowd enjoyed the skit.

I, too, saw a change in my response to what students wrote as I had more time to think about my own reaction. On the Ning, kids discussed topics related to the book and issues in it, and I consciously connected students' comments with events and ideas in the text. Although students' observations about these issues were independently valuable, I hoped that my comments would stress Kelly Gallagher's emphasis of providing "an opportunity to think deeply about issues that will affect their lives" (89). In the following exchange, I underscored arguments made by one student who did not relate her assertions to the novel but that were clearly connected to the text:



Reply by **Mûng Mûng Taylor** on May 12, 2010 at 10:12am

Send Message

I think people react in accord to what they believe in. Their beliefs are usually shaped by past experiences. Thus, people will react in different ways. Personally, I think people should try to put themselves in the shoes of the people who hold a different perspective to balance out the reactions. I think people who have not been offended by others due to their race would not understand the emotional pain others go through. This will prevent some further conflicts or at least level them down. I think these students were ignorant but our job, as the educators of such, is not to punish them but to be taught the value of reactions and offenses toward other opinions.

Edit Comment

Reply to This

Reply by **Mizz Apple** on May 12, 2010 at 10:22am

Is that too much to expect people to do? Practice empathy? Are people so self-centered that they cannot or do not feel they should have to step into other people's shoes? Is this what Huck ultimately learned about as he lived with Jim and saw the atrocities of human ignorance?

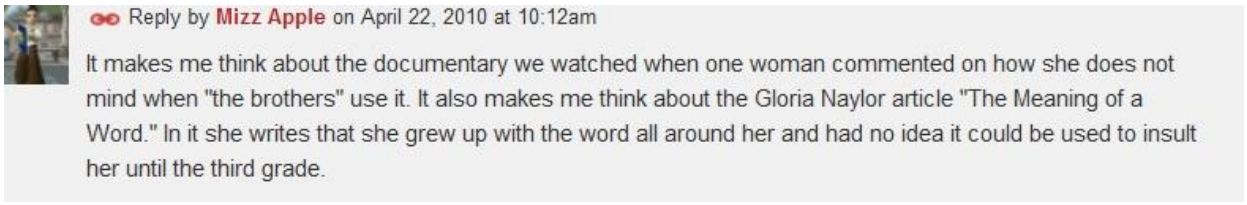
The questions I posed to individual students often went unanswered on the Ning. However, those questions came into the dialogue we had in the classroom away from the computers. Face-to-face conversations did not go away with the Ning. Instead, our class discussions became more deliberate and specific. There were no more long moments (or

minutes) of silence. I came prepared with comments from the Ning that needed examination, and the kids were also expected to bring selected posts they wanted to revisit with their peers in small groups.

Conclusion: Dealing with Difficult Issues

I have never felt that I needed to be the exclusive authority of my classroom content. I am comfortable being a student as well as a teacher, and there have been many times when students have pointed things out to me that I never before considered. I acknowledge their insights and honor their perceptions. On the other hand, being a white female, I believed I had no place bringing such deeply personal and sensitive issues into my class because I felt inadequate in leading discussions about them.

The Ning allowed me to lead the class without necessarily directing it, and I found that my place on the Ning was natural and metacognitive. While I made considerable effort questioning students' claims, I found that there were times when I just wanted to participate, as I did in Sheila's forum about African Americans using the word:



With every forum and student response I, too, was realizing the necessity of talking about difficult issues with students.

The final persuasive essays came in, and there was a difference in students' depth of thought. Students were thinking both more critically and more broadly after interacting with their peers on the Ning. Students returned to the Ning when writing their essays to collect arguments and review their own perspectives. Of course, things were not perfect with the Ning. I never found a "best way" to grade student participation. While I read through responses, I realized I did not have time to reply to every comment made. I decided to grade the Ning entries as I would short, formative writings that I have kids do in class and submit before leaving for the day. For each entry completed, they received five points. If students were not meeting my minimum expectation—expectations I established at the year's start— I spoke with them individually. My most effective tool was modeling the type of responses I expected and presenting strong student examples I read in our forums.

I returned to school this fall, and the focus of the district kick-off was less provocative than the previous year's event. Nonetheless, my colleagues still recalled being asked last year to determine the influence of race in our lives and the reaction to the speaker's claim that race impacts our lives 100% of the time. While I have students who openly claim racism no longer exists or isn't an issue worth spending time on anymore, I saw how significant it is to many of my students and how race and issues around it are part of their lives every day. Our district has created equity teams at each school and its members—teachers, administrators, and other staff—are meeting to continue this conversation, a conversation I had been told early on to avoid at all costs.

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