

# Dangerous Words: Recognizing the Power of Language by Researching Derogatory Terms

*A high school teacher describes an assignment in which students study the histories and social reception of words (in some cases considered obscenities) used to insult people of various social categories. Students come to recognize the powerful, sometimes damaging effects of language, enabling them to fight those effects intellectually. Many derogatory terms are cited as examples in this essay.*

**S**ticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Yeah, right.

Those of us who have survived the verbal exchanges of the playground, the cafeteria, and perhaps even the faculty room know all too well how wounding words can be, and we don't believe for a minute this platitude about the innocuousness of language. Words are powerful, and that power can be used for good or ill. This essay describes a research assignment that provoked students into grappling with the potentially destructive force of fraught words. The project gave students from oppressed groups the opportunity to “fight back” intellectually against the forces that sometimes seem arrayed against them. It gave students of privilege a new lens through which to see and understand discrimination. And in both cases, most students enjoyed and felt proud of the work that they did so that it was a positive personal as well as academic experience; they clearly felt intellectual ownership over their research and their argument.<sup>1</sup>

Be warned: The assignment requires a safe environment, a commitment to facing squarely difficult language, and a certain deftness on the part of the teacher and his or her administrators in responding to students' bravery and boldness. I received the blessing of both my department chair and upper school head before launching this assignment for my eleventh graders, and I'd recommend similar caution to those thinking of adopting this project.

Another warning:

Because this assignment takes the study of language seriously, in this article I have not used euphemisms or ellipses to replace the actual words my students and I studied. We researched troubling and vulgar words, and so those words appear in this essay, as they did in my students' work for the duration of the assignment. This is not language we expect in either classroom settings or in scholarship, and yet it is language that we all recognize as powerful and thus, I would argue, as worth serious study. My students and I talked intentionally and at length about why and how they were ready to tackle such a topic with maturity and critical thinking but also why they needed to be careful about the contexts in which they discussed their chosen words and their research; this caution was a common refrain in our work on this assignment, since I didn't want younger students or siblings to be affected negatively by a project that was a challenge even for high school juniors.

## The Assignment

Last year, faced once again with teaching Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and its powerful, troubling language, I decided to tackle more directly than I ever had previously the challenge of the novel's 200-plus uses of the word *nigger*. Certainly I had never allowed students to wade into

those linguistic waters unprepared, but I had always found my students disturbingly willing to accept without much questioning that Twain's offensive language worked for his larger purposes in the novel. (I teach in a suburban school with a majority white population, a social context I discuss more fully below.) I wanted students to wrestle more with the power and problem of language, not necessarily to arrive at a different conclusion about Twain's use of *nigger* but to do so more thoughtfully.

I was pushed to do more than fret about this situation by my participation in the July 2009 National Endowment for the Humanities workshop "Huckleberry Finn in Post-Reconstruction America: Mark Twain's Hartford Years, 1871–1891." In particular, I couldn't get out of my mind a presentation by Ann Ryan, who is troubled by the casual dismissal of complaints against *Huck Finn* in high schools. She asked, What if we decided to teach a

novel that used the word *cunt* 232 times, but we said to our students, "It's really a novel of liberation, one that's arguing for women's freedoms, with a main character who's doing the best he can within his social context"? Would English departments embrace the novel under those circumstances, or would we decide that it was too destructive to have our female students metaphorically punched in the gut every time they read this word? Troubled by her question, I read Randall Kennedy's *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, and slowly the idea for a research assignment formed, one that grows

out of Gaylyn Karle Anderson's "I Search a Word" assignment that I had used successfully before but that takes for its subject not abstract words such as *envy*, *joy*, or *success*, but derogatory slurs such as *kike*, *bitch*, and *chink*. We were going to face the dangers of language head on.

I launched the project in March, at which point my students and I had been working together for several months, had developed mutual trust

within our classes, and had several times discussed the power of language and the significance of rhetorical context and audience. We took a short break midway through *Huckleberry Finn* to read and talk about the lengthy first chapter of Kennedy's book, in which he provides extensive etymological, historical, political, and cultural history of the word *nigger*. Kennedy confounds students' expectations by ultimately siding against what he terms "eradicationists" who are calling for the elimination of this word; rather, he argues that it can be a powerful and anti-racist word when used for some purposes and in some contexts (such as Richard Pryor's early comedic work and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*). Kennedy's work is flying in the face of taboo, and the students were intrigued and nervous but rose to the occasion in their response to Kennedy.

After a couple of days of discussion, I gave my students their Dangerous Words assignment. They were to write a personal, researched essay—that is, a first-person essay that included their thoughtful reflections on their research and possibly their own experiences—on a "dangerous word," a vulgar slur about an ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual identity, religion, or some other social category. This word did not need to apply to their own social categories, but it needed to be a word about which they had personal questions, opinions, or experiences. Their essays were to explore the history, usage, and connotations of the word and make an argument about what its use should be in the contemporary world.

After they had been doing research for a couple of weeks (during which we continued reading *Huckleberry Finn*), I provided another model to complement Kennedy's, a sample essay I had written on the word *dyke*, which none of the students had chosen for their own papers. Going through the same research process I was requiring of the students, I wrote an essay that reflected both intellectually and personally on my research, thus modeling what it means to engage meaningfully with the results of one's research. I made a different argument from Kennedy's, taking a more eradicationist stance in terms of the general public's use of the word but reserving the right for an in-group to adopt language to describe itself, and in doing so I stressed the spectrum of arguments that was available to the students for their papers. Many of the students

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relied heavily on this model as an example of one way to organize material, to respond to research, and to cite sources correctly.

## The Words

My assignment sheet ended with this note, one that I reiterated in the first and subsequent classes in which we worked on the project:

This is a challenging assignment, one that I'm giving you all because I've been impressed with your thoughtfulness and maturity this year. I recognize that spending quality time on and thinking deeply about an offensive word can be difficult, emotional, frustrating, even frightening. Please know that I am happy to talk with you about this assignment and to help with the personal and academic challenges that it poses.

However, I seemed to worry more than any of the students about the emotional costs of the dangerous words. Perhaps because they chose wisely (as I'd recommended) to tackle words that would not pose a serious threat to their well-being (and there were a couple of students who chose less politically charged options, such as *lame* or *nerd*), or perhaps because, as many of them argued, the words that seem dangerous to one generation are often regarded as milder by the next generation, it was not the immersing themselves in disturbing rhetoric that troubled my students, at least on the surface. It was the actual research and writing that caused them difficulty, ranging from some students' exhilarating intellectual challenge to others' frustration at making sense of the sheer quantity of information that they uncovered. Still, the majority of students found it exciting to do serious academic research about a vulgar word of their own choosing, many of them afterward noting that they had found rewarding the experience of becoming experts on the histories and nuances of their selected words.

I teach at a girls' high school, and so it is probably no surprise that the largest category of words the students chose to investigate were those about gender, with

*bitch* as the most commonly selected (chosen by six of my 40 students). Related gendered terms that included sexuality were the next largest category, with three students choosing *whore*, one *slut*, and two *pussy*. Interestingly, the students who wrote about *bitch*, *whore*, and *slut* were divided in their ultimate arguments about the appropriate use of the word in modern society, with some students maintaining that these were dangerous words that should be eliminated and others insisting that the words had by now lost most or all of their negative impact and were available for casual, friendly discourse. The two students who chose the word *pussy* both argued that it was in all circumstances demeaning to women, and one of them wrote a sophisticated analysis of the synecdoche of referring to a woman in terms of her genitalia. The few students who wanted to research language of sexual identity did so by choosing the word *faggot*, a term about men that clearly did not apply to anyone in the all-female class; they were universal in their condemnation of the word, rejecting its potential use as in-group language by those who might positively reclaim the word.

Although predominantly white, my school has a significant population of international students and domestic students of color, and many of these students chose words that could be applied to their own ethnic or national communities, researching words such as *wetback*, *oriental*, *Jap*, *FOB* ("fresh off the boat"), and *dark/darkie*. Two Jewish students also selected the word *kike* to explore. All of these students were unanimous in their condemnation of their chosen dangerous words, to the extent that a couple of times I reminded them of the different position that Kennedy, an African American, had taken about the word *nigger*; I didn't want to change their minds, but instead I wanted the students to arrive at their conclusions thoughtfully rather than automatically.

Another common choice of words was *retard*, a consequence both of the school's active Best Buddies program, in which our students are matched with people



Troubling words are powerful and thus worthy of serious study. (© Photos.com, a division of Getty Images.)



After the students had chosen words to study, we spent a day together in the computer lab, working through the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of their words and the Online Etymology Dictionary (Harper). (Thompson-McClellan Photography)

of a similar age who have mental disabilities, and of the word's presence in the news in spring 2010. Because of the Special Olympics "Ban the R-Word" campaign, I had to push this group of students a little more than the others to think independently rather than simply to reiterate the rhetoric they were hearing in Best Buddies meetings. At the same time, these students were probably more primed than others to recognize that, in the words of the R-Word campaign, "Our language frames how we think about others" (Special Olympics).

I did not offer students a list of words from which they could choose, although in talking about Kennedy's work we brainstormed a list of possibilities. After the project was over, several students suggested that my giving them a list of words to choose from would have been a welcome addition to the assignment, but that is one piece of advice that I don't plan on taking in future years because it doesn't seem necessary in our school's social context, and I think that each student's figuring out which words seem offensive is one of the important components of the project. Moreover, several students chose terms that I either didn't know or wouldn't have thought about putting on a list, and I would hate to have my own list cut off meaningful possibilities for student investigation.

That being said, the social context of one's school is clearly a significant factor in determining guidelines and parameters for this assignment. I teach in a girls' school of under 500 students in grades 6 through 12, a school that privileges the ideal of sisterhood and what we might call "niceness," so I wasn't particularly worried that this assignment would exacerbate tensions within the school, and it didn't. Moreover, and perhaps in the spirit of "niceness," students mostly steered away from words that might touch on any intra-community difficulties, particularly areas of class difference and of sexual identity, and chose only those ethnicity-related terms that applied to themselves, reducing the possibility of offending fellow students. (A 2010 student diversity survey indicated a largely healthy and welcoming school environment, with 85% of upper school students agreeing that "It is easy for people like me to be accepted here," but did highlight international differences, class status, and sexual identity as the tensions within the student population.) Obviously school situations differ widely, and it seems paramount for a teacher considering adopting this assignment to think carefully about his or her school's social context and student body when determining parameters for this research paper and the words that students may choose. In different school contexts, a teacher might, for example, ask students to choose only words that apply to themselves.

## The Research

After the students had chosen their words, we spent a day together in the computer lab, working through the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of their words and the Online Etymology Dictionary (Harper). I suggested that students look up their words in a couple of dictionaries of slang that I had put on reserve in our library as well as use the Urban Dictionary, an online reference for slang (<http://www.urbandictionary.com>); this research provided opportunities for interesting discussions about the difference between "authoritative" and "common" definitions of words. I also asked students to investigate historical uses of their chosen word by looking it up in the Historical *New York Times* or ProQuest Newspapers, as well as in Bartleby.com, a compilation of quotations, poetry, literature, Shakespeare's

works, and the King James translation of the Bible. Finally, I asked students to search for their word in the academic journal *American Speech* (available through Project MUSE and other online academic databases). I had to make clear to students that they would probably not find their word in all of these sources, which for many of them was their first, frustrating experience of the multiple dead ends that inevitably characterize a true research project.

My assignment sheet clearly laid out these many resources and gave students explicit instructions (including the school's passwords in some cases) for accessing these mostly electronic research tools. Despite these extensive instructions, most students' initial move was to go immediately to the Google search. This wasn't a bad impulse—although I could wish it weren't their very first—but it required careful, usually one-on-one discussion about the evaluation of Web sources, an important but time-consuming lesson. For example, every student who wrote about *faggot* ran across the same website, one with no author, institution, or research listed, which claimed that the word derived from the European Inquisition, in which gay men were forced to gather the wood (that is, the fagots) used to burn witches and were then themselves thrown onto the fire when the wood ran out (“The Origin of the Word: Faggot”)—a misleading assertion for which there is no evidence, but the fact that it appeared online made it difficult for some students to wrap their heads around its fallibility. Every librarian and teacher who works with student research deals with this issue, and this assignment was no different, although the stakes seemed higher, both for me (after all, I didn't want them to get misinformation about vulgar words in current circulation) and, fortunately, for them, which meant that most students were willing to work harder than usual to track down good information. And most of them rose to the challenge of correct citation as well; I found that making it a question less of “correctness” than of fairness—giving credit where credit is due—seemed to tap into students' beliefs about justice.

Because we were conducting sociolinguistic investigations, I also allowed students to interview and poll other people about the word, which led to their conducting some interesting conversations with parents, grandparents, and older family friends about earlier generations' understandings and uses

of their researched word. Many students particularly liked this aspect of the assignment because it enabled them to have honest, thoughtful, and mature discussion with people they respected. In some cases, students also contacted friends from other countries to find out about cultural differences in the understanding of a vulgar word. A few students had difficulty in recognizing that their school friends were not necessarily an authoritative source for a word's wider use, as in the case of one student who insisted that the word *kike* was no longer part of the language because the three high school friends she'd asked about it didn't know the term.

This assignment thus had the usual difficulties of any research project, but I found most students were more willing to do the hard work of finding and evaluating sources and thinking through their implications because they were invested in the topic and found it personally meaningful. Indeed, the next autumn several of the students, now seniors, identified this research assignment as one of the more profound academic experiences of their high school education, and I certainly found it such as a teacher. At the end of the project, one student articulated clearly what had worked so well in this research paper: “This assignment helped me realize the power that words hold. I liked the idea of learning so much about one specific word that holds so much power because we often take words for granted and forget the impact that they actually have.”

Most of the students who embarked on this research project were doing scholarly work at a level that would be appropriate for college; for many of them, it was their first experience of making an original academic contribution, a level of scholarly achievement that students rarely attain in high school. The vast majority of students found it exciting to become an expert on words that so many people use simplistically or unthinkingly, and I'm

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proud of my students for working to understand language more fully than do many of the adults around them. As one student noted afterward, “I liked that I had never read something just like what I was writing. . . . I felt what I was saying was original, new and mine.”

### Preparing for the Public Sphere

The Dangerous Words assignment was thus a deeply intellectual research project that was at the same time unapologetically personal and political, and my hope is that the students are as a result better able to make connections for themselves between their education and their relationship to the society in which they live. If one of our goals as teachers is to prepare young people to take their place in the world, it is paramount to recognize that, for most of them, that world contains vulgarity as well as poetry. How many of my female students will at some point be told, “Hey, don’t be a bitch” or hear from a date, “I’ll tell everyone you’re a slut”? How many young men will be faced with ethnic slurs or have their masculinity questioned? My hope is that this assignment helps some students move from an adrenal to an intellectual response when derogatory language is hurled at them, perhaps allowing them to make more responsible life decisions as they face a world of poorly behaved

peers. And if the language of the public sphere continues to trade in divisive innuendo and insult, then it may be that only students who have thought historically, culturally, and linguistically about derogatory language will be equipped to take their place as citizen-rhetors. 

### Note

1. My thanks to Sarah Dylan Breuer, to *English Journal*'s two anonymous reviewers, and to editor Ken Lindblom for suggestions that improved this essay.

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Like the assignment described in the article above, some important and effective classroom activities can be charged with controversy. “Teaching Racially Sensitive Literature: A Teacher’s Guide” is a resource from ReadWriteThink.org that can help support teachers’ efforts to read with their students any piece of literature that may be deemed racially sensitive. [http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson1118/Chadwick.pdf](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson1118/Chadwick.pdf)