Teaching Note - The Case for Vulgarity and Irreverence in the Classroom

James Norman

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This does not mean we have to coddle them. What it does mean is that with all of the challenges we deal with on a day-to-day basis, it’s easy to forget that our prime directive is not teaching, but inspiration. All students can be inspired. I propose an increase in the use of profanity-laden dialogue and irreverent behavior in the classroom. Transgression. Want them to stop staring at their smart phones and texting in class? Pound your fist on the lectern to drive home the power of a Dickensian dash! Want to grab their attention — permanently? Consider adding some variety to the style of your presentation: drop an f-bomb, look ’em square in their eye, and finish that point you were making on the utterly glorious decadence of George Eliot’s Middlemarch!

Vulgarity is explosive. It demolishes preconceived notions of who we are and what we do. Admittedly, this type of language and behavior involves risk, which I’ll discuss a bit later; but I know I’m doing something right when a student voices her concern about the uncertainty in her own ability to perform at the required level for an entire semester, on the very first day, in front of the entire class, not after or during an office hour; or when a student with a documented disability, one that prevents them from speaking in public spaces, becomes a main contributor to class discussion. In a (student) culture where silence, not chatter, is the norm, getting one student to contribute often means others will follow.

Swearing, political incorrectness, uncomfortable and irreverent situations, dissent: these are hallmarks of great literature. Shakespeare has innumerable references to bawdy behavior, tells dirty jokes, and even has Malvolio in Twelfth Night spell out a particularly offensive term for a woman’s private parts. Huck Finn gets banned for racism. Slaughterhouse-Five gets banned for the term “motherfucker.” Have you read Naked Lunch? The point is, the language students encounter from me as a professor in the classroom is no different than, even tame in comparison to, some of the language they will encounter...
encounter in their careers as English majors. Vulgarity, irreverence, challenges social norms and stereotypes: these are a band of brothers, not mutually exclusive foes.

Swearing is also the norm in our society. Demographically, working- and lower-middle-class students dominate BSU. As one of them, I feel justified in saying that the way I talk in the classroom more closely resembles the way they talk out of the classroom, generally, than more “polished” professors. Also, there is some research to back this up. Professor Timothy Jay, of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and author of “Why We Swear,” and “Cursing in America,” highlights the fact that working-class individuals swear more frequently than either their “elite” or middle-class counterparts. Part of the reasoning behind his argument goes something like this: the working class swear the most because they have the most to gain and view this as an equalizer; the elite swear because they can, they already have the power; and the middle class swear the least because they have the most to lose. You can taste the Marxism. But nearly everyone swears; it’s part of our everyday vocabularies. U.S. News and World Report informs its readers that the average person spends 0.5% of their vocabulary per day swearing. So, most people swear regularly. The aversion to swearing, then, derives not from the swearing itself, but from the fact that swearing, erroneously, tends not to be associated with the Academy.

The author sports his bandana while outside of the classroom. (Author’s Photo)

Our job, as professors, is not simply to achieve course objectives/outcomes; our prime objective involves student engagement. In a 2016 article in The Atlantic, “Teaching: Just Like Performing Magic,” Jessica Lahey interviews Raymond Joseph Teller — of Penn and Teller — and argues that “Education, at its most engaging, is performance art. From the moment a teacher steps into the classroom, students look to him or her to set the tone and course of study for everyone, from the most enthusiastic to the most apathetic students.” Teller builds upon this, recalling his six-year tenure as a teacher of high school Latin: “The first job of a teacher is to make the student fall in love with the subject. That doesn’t have to be done by waving your arms and prancing around the classroom; there’s all sorts of ways to go at it, but no matter what, you are a symbol of the subject in the students’ minds.” Vulgarity performs wonders.

It’s not all about language, and language represents only one part of a performance. One of my most...
memorable English courses was taken with Professor Austere back when I was a student at BCC: freshly starched shirt, crisp tie, suit and briefcase, polished shoes, stern aspect, not a hair out of place, looking as if he recently purchased the latest model E-class Mercedes rather than the fifteen-year-old Nissan Sentra with 300,000 miles on it that was parked in the lot. (Professor Austere was an adjunct; he spent lots of time living paycheck to paycheck and driving between three different campuses to make ends meet.) While this may work for some — the high-powered attorney schtick — I choose a slightly different approach because students understand that if their professors willingly risk talking like that in the classroom, it’s okay for them to risk speaking up in class or reaching out for help when they otherwise may not. This morning I was finishing my final draft of this essay, I found this email, prophetically perhaps, in my inbox. Here’s part of what it said: “…Okay, I'm not sending you this to tell you how bad I am at writing, but you made me feel comfortable enough to express myself and also participate in your class, which I never would have done back when I was in high school. I'm looking forward to learning and becoming a better writer…” This is what inspiration looks like. This is winning.

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At 5′10” and nearly 270 pounds — it’s not all fluff: hashtag ‘fluffyisthenews-exy’ — I don’t quietly slip into a classroom. I have tattoos on my forearms, biceps and shoulder, and one that goes from my neck all the way up my head to my temple, just at the hairline, an untrimmed beard. On the first day, I wear a black bandana tied widely around my head and pulled down to cover my eyebrows, and a cut-off T featuring Slayer, Motorhead, or Black Sabbath. I also wear black jeans, and walk with my backpack swung over my shoulder because this is how I tend to look when I’m not being a “professor.” My appearance tells them: Question. Everything. Their looks tell me, “This is not what professors look like. This is not how professors talk.” Then, I start teaching: direct engagement with the text; exploring ideas through writing and conversation; workshops; collaboration. Then they see that intelligence, sophistication and class — okay, maybe not the last two — have nothing to do with the way one speaks or looks. After the first day I revert to a presentable appearance the rest of the semester: black jeans and a button-down. But first impressions, yeah? What I give

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If we want students to connect with our respective fields of study, they must first connect with us. Vulgarity and irreverence facilitate that connection. But they are two tools among many. Such behavior, in such spaces, in roles of authority, involves risk. Some students find my language offensive; some will report me to the chair or dean. It has happened more than once. I take that risk willingly, knowing that the rewards far outweigh the risks.

James Norman is Instructor in the Department of English.

(The author on stage with Joe Hill, Stephen King’s son and author of Horns, a text that the author teaches in many of his literature courses. (Author’s Photo)