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The Right to be Politically “Incorrect”

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THE student who slid the note under my door last semester obviously did not realize I was in my office. Otherwise he probably would have knocked and confronted me directly. He is not the shy type. As it was, the handwritten note, single spaced on a piece of notebook paper, allowed me time to gather my thoughts and decide on how to reply. I had heard the term “political correctness” before. As the director of journalism at a small liberal arts college and adviser to the school’s two student publications, I had even attended sessions at collegiate conventions that dealt with the topic. I had heard the term defined and the subject dissected by more than one learned colleague. But now I was facing the issue in my own classroom from one of my own students. The Japanese student who had written the letter was upset over an incident that had occurred just a few days before in my News Editing class. It was the class’s first attempts at headline writing. I had given them five short newspaper articles for which they were to write one or two-column headlines. The difficulty, of course, lies in trying to fit an appropriate, accurate, clearly understandable headline in a limited amount of space. This is the challenge all headline writers face daily, I had told the class when I gave them the assignment. Anyone can write a good headline if he or she has all the space in the world. It is the challenge of writing a good, readable headline when one has only four or five words with which to work that separates the good headline writers from the mediocre ones.

We were on the final exercise, and I had called on an international student from India to share his headline. The story was about Japanese fishermen protesting an international ban on whaling. The student used the word “Jap” in the first line of his one-column headline, noting correctly that the word Japanese was too long and would not fit.

I remembered that I had immediately responded that this word was inappropriate because it was a racial slur and was considered demeaning to people of Japanese descent. As I recall, the young man from India seemed somewhat surprised and puzzled by this, but he did not protest and we continued on with the exercise. I had thought, perhaps smugly, that I had handled the whole incident rather well.

Until I got the Japanese student’s note.

“I’d like you to be more aware of use of language in the class,” it began. “The word ‘Jap’ is a hate-word, or as you said, a ‘racial slang’ which should not be allowed to be used in public, especially in front of a Japanese citizen. . . . For Japanese, being called ‘Jap’ is most humiliation to ourselves. Whether it is spoken commonly in this country or this community, I do not like to be humiliated in the classroom. I’ve been having too many racial prejudices since I got in this university.” (sic)

The letter writer also complained that his classmates had snickered when they heard the word used and were insensitive to his feelings. He closed his letter to me by saying:

“Please teach him that he used an offensive word and hurt my dignity as a Japanese citizen. I need an apology from the person, or I’ll never forgive him.”

I was troubled after reading this young man’s letter, not only because he was obviously deeply hurt over the incident, much more so than I had realized, but I also felt dismayed that, somehow, he felt I was the one who should resolve this problem for him. As I told him, when we spoke about the matter a few days later, this was a golden opportunity for him to go to the other student—an international student like himself—and in a polite, but firm way, educate this student on how improper his use of the word was.

“Perhaps he honestly did not know this word was offensive to Japanese individuals,” I said. “Perhaps in his culture this word does not have the connotation it has in your culture and mine. Perhaps he just needs to be educated . . .”

But the Japanese student just snorted in disgust. “Do you really believe he is that stupid, that anyone could be that stupid? You tell him if he does not apologize publicly in class, I will never forgive him.” With that he stomped off.

I never delivered the message, partly because I felt this was a personal matter between two students that I should stay out of and partly because I doubted very much whether the student from India would care whether his classmate forgave him or not. In fact, judging from the student’s initial puzzled reaction to the incident in class and his ongoing difficulty with the English language in general, I doubted very much he would even understand what all the fuss was about.

But I have wondered since then if I made the right decision. Should I have gotten more deeply involved? Should I have acted as an official mediator between these two young men? Does a university professor have a responsibility to ensure that ALL language within a classroom is “politically correct”? And if that IS a teacher’s responsibility, how in the world can one hope to achieve it in a university environment that is supposed to promote and foster open discussion of ideas? What if some of those ideas are NOT “politically correct”?

As a journalism faculty member, with six years of experience working on a large metropolitan newspaper, I have found the question becoming even more troublesome. Journalists live—and even die—by the First Amendment. That means protecting the rights of individuals to express opinions which I may personally disagree with, or may even find repulsive. At least that’s what I teach students in my Introduction to Journalism classes. And that’s what the masthead on the editorial page of the campus newspaper says. We are here to serve as an open forum for ALL opinions, even those the editors may vehemently disagree with. Part of higher education is learning to tolerate, and even appreciate, diversity, is it not? Ethnic diversity. Religious diversity. Political diversity. Diversity of lifestyle. How can that appreciation of diversity thrive and flourish in an atmosphere where freedom of speech and thought must constantly give way to “political correctness”?

New York Times columnist Anna Quindlen, in a column not too long ago (June 14, 1993), discussed recent incidents on more than one college campus in this nation where groups of students destroyed thousands of copies of the campus newspaper because they found certain writings inside to be “offensive.” On one campus the group doing the pitching was “liberal.” On another campus the group was “conservative.”

As Quindlen points out, the political labels don’t matter. Somewhere in these students’

education they missed the point of what “being educated” is all about. In Quindlen’s words, “Someone should have taught those students that a pointed exchange of letters, columns and counter columns always does more to further human understanding — and usually the just cause—than censorship.”

I am not suggesting faculty members or students be insensitive to racial or sexist slurs. I am not suggesting ethnic jokes are suitable lunch table conversation. Like Quindlen, I realize “there are good inhibitions, and there are bad inhibitions. “ When people are so afraid of being “politically incorrect” that they no longer feel comfortable discussing their differences, that’s bad. If people are making fewer “dumb blonde” jokes, that’s good!

The point is, sensitizing students and faculty to words that hurt is best done in an open, honest atmosphere. Let’s talk openly about words and expressions that hurt—and WHY they hurt. And sometimes that may mean using those ugly words in a classroom or printing those words in the campus newspaper. And, yes, even admitting, that sometimes people may be so ignorant or stupid that they don’t realize the full ramifications of what they are saying.

Rather than whispering, “Shush, that’s not politically correct,” and banning those hurtful words to the dark corners of our society, let’s shine the light on them. Let’s put them center stage, in big bold type, and focus the spotlight on them. We must be free to discuss them in our classrooms, to reflect upon their insidious meanings, and, as John Milton would no doubt advocate, to let truth go a few rounds with them.

We may even have to accept, and learn to tolerate the notion, that despite all our education and all our good intentions, there will always be those in our society who are not and who never will be “politically correct.” And that’s OK. The First Amendment protects them too.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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