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Writing About Genocide in the Classroom

Background:

The need for this assignment came directly as a result of encountering a student's writing that was so racist, so backwards, so pre-Civil War America that it made my head spin. The student wrote about a specific people group using derogatory racist terms. She said *they* ruined her Easter, wrecked her high school years and were currently ruining her life. The unnamed student's paper was peer reviewed and critiqued by a diverse set of classmates before making it into my hands to be graded by me. When I first read the offending paragraphs I was so stunned I could not comment or make a grade on the paper. Finally, I decided that I was reading an inexperienced writer's work and that although the paper certainly sounded racist, this was not the writer's intent. I wrote quite a lengthy follow-up explained to the student how such writing could be interpreted and asked her to please revise. I handed her the paper back.

A week later, she e-mailed me and asked if she could please be excused from my class to attend the Yolanda King meeting. Overjoyed, I told her that not only would I excuse her from class, but that I would award her extra credit if she wrote a reflection paper after listening to Yolanda King's speech. She bounced into class the following week and plunked down both her revised paper and a reflection paper. It wasn't until I got home that and sat down to read the revision that I realized I had a serious problem on my hands. In her revision, she rewrote her paper so that there would be no mistake of what she meant. She wrote how much she hated one certain group, how stupid she thought they were and wrote in such eloquent language that I could no longer have any doubt at what she was trying to express. I then picked up her reflection paper on Yolanda King and was stunned to read that she thought this woman was a "drama queen" who was loud and irritating as she talked about her father being gunned down for his beliefs.

When I confronted her, I realized that I would never change this student's beliefs through rationale and reasoning. She argued that in her high school, she had been the minority and been discriminated against. Yet when I looked up her high school and the demographics for the area she was from, I found her race constituted 62.8% of the population. The second highest group was only 18%. Even with facts like these, I was unable to change this student's mind.

Goal:

What I could change was my curriculum. For our final unit our class is learning to prepare and write in class essay exams. I let them vote on the assignment, but I picked the content we would read and write about. I chose movies and online narratives that all deal with the issue of genocide. The goal is to expose students to literature from several survivors of genocide and other types of persecution. The students will have to write about these issues using question prompts. I have formulated the questions so that they are not only reflective in nature, but cause the students to analyze and critically think about issues of prejudice in the context of their own lives. It is my hope that students will not only walk out of my class with better reading and writing skills, but a better understanding of how prejudice develops in individuals and drives entire societies to persecute those that are different than they are.

Materials Used:

Movies (Dramatizations): *The Pianist*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *The Hiding Place*
Movies (Documentaries): *Orphan Trains*, *One Drop of Blood*

Online Narratives: <http://www.holocaustsurvivors.org/>

<http://remember.org/>

<http://www.appealofconscience.org/>

http://www.loungung.com/ung_biography.php

Essay Questions:

All essay questions would ask the student to examine social and political systems that support acts of genocide. In addition, the student would be asked to examine and write about the acts of individuals that chose to break the law and rescue those appointed to death under oppressive, radical regimes. Finally, the student must think about the survivors in these stories and compare and contrast their own life experience to that of the survivor. As part of this assignment, the student must come up with a logical plan of what they will do within their own circle of influence to promote a society of tolerance.