

***The Poet X* Discussion Post with Peer Responses**

My Original Post

In *The Poet X*, Elizabeth Acevedo brings up multiple socially taboo topics such as masturbation and teenage sexual desire. From a teaching perspective, how would you cover these scenes and topics in the classroom? Would these topics cause you to hesitate to include this novel for a unit in your eventual high school classroom?

I think approaching these topics as openly as possible will create a classroom environment where such serious discussions can take place. If the teacher is uncomfortable, hesitant, glosses over, or flat-out ignores or skips them, they are showing students that these are things that should never be discussed; thus, perpetuating these "taboo" societal norms. Students should know that topics like menstruation, desire, coming of age, puberty, sexual orientation, dealing with unwanted sexual advances, and so on are extremely worthwhile topics to discuss.

By allowing students to be open about these issues in a controlled, safe environment, they are able to explore these topics without harsh criticism and retaliation from outside forces. Students should be able to understand and talk about these things, as they pertain to a majority of students in some form. By not discussing them in class, we are telling students that we shouldn't discuss them and that they are too personal or taboo to talk about. These topics could really open up to a deeper conversation among students. There are a lot of pertinent issues today that pertain to these topics. I think that discussing them can be informative and could create a deeper sense of empathy among students whether they experience these situations or not.

Although I may not be completely knowledgeable in some of these areas being a gay man, like periods or combatting unwanted sexual advances by men as a woman, I can open up an environment to my students to have a discussion about those things. I can also explain or even have them explain to me why these topics are important to talk about or why the author chose to include these things. I remember in Milnor, Milnor, and Mitchell, not entirely sure where, they had an example of a teacher who wasn't sure how to teach a topic so he had this rigid lesson plan, so the students were given all the "right information." Well, he ended up having the class take control of the conversation instead, much to his own hesitation to giving up control of the lesson. They surprised him. They asked so many powerful questions about the text and they were creating their own understanding and studying of the material. This is how I would approach these things. I would open it to the students creating the classroom narrative for the book. They'll know what they want to pull out of the novel.

I also think with a book like this, the reading itself isn't going to cause too much difficulty for the students, so I believe this would be a great book to really delve into the literature, rather than worry about getting through the text.

Peer 1:

Hi William!

I'm so glad you chose to provide your own answer to this particular discussion question. You definitely gave us all some valuable insight.

As with approaching any topic in a novel (in my opinion), I similarly believe it is important to approach taboo subjects in an open and honest way. If students don't feel comfortable in the classroom, it is very unlikely that they will open up and speak about topics that are typically brushed under the rug and ignored. I like how you noted that if a teacher shows their own uncomfortableness or are hesitant to discuss hard issues it will inadvertently imply that those subjects "should never be discussed; thus, perpetuating these 'taboo' societal norms," as you so wonderfully put it. Teachers are the leaders of the classroom. If they, as adults, are unable to talk about subjects such as masturbation and sexual desire, as well as others listed in your response, students will feel extremely uncomfortable speaking about those topics in front of their peers. As the teacher, we must start the conversation and approach the issue head-on and create a classroom environment in which our students feel comfortable enough to ask questions and speak about those taboo topics.

Because *The Poet X* is written in verse vs. prose, the book actually reads pretty quickly. In your last paragraph you touched on how this novel isn't going to cause too much difficulty for the students. I'm assuming it's because it is such a fast read, (but if not, please correct me). Because of this, although the book takes place over quite an extended period of time, it actually goes by pretty quickly. The form also allows for discussion on the pros and cons of writing in verse, as well as discussion about the content itself.

Thanks for the post,

Peer 2:

I'm happy that you addressed this question, William. Dealing with taboo topics can be stressful for teachers. I agree with your idea that it's better to be open about uncomfortable topics. I agree with your thinking too, [REDACTED], when you said that it's better to be open and honest so that kids feel comfortable enough in the classroom to have a conversation about taboo issues. I think it's important that kids have a safe place to talk about these things in a meaningful way. The only thing I worry about are the parents.

There are some conservative/religious parents who would be angry if their child came home and informed them that their teacher discussed masturbation in class, or led the class in a discussion about teenage sexual desire. Imagine how Xiomara's mother would respond if one of her children's teachers discussed either of these topics? Not that Xiomara would tell her. I'm conflicted because I think these are important issues for young people to discuss, but our students will be minors. And, because they are minors, their parents are part of the equation.

I asked my cooperating teacher how she determines what to include in her classroom library. She said that she allows anything that is written specifically for young adults, and that hasn't been banned. I will definitely be setting this book aside to include in my classroom library, but I'm not sure if I would use it, in its entirety, for a whole class book study. I plan to ask my cooperating teacher how she approaches taboo topics with her students. She follows many of Nancie Atwell's teachings. She has her students read for fifteen minutes at the beginning of every class. Her library includes many of the books we've been studying, and she often recommends books to her students. I think having students read about taboo issues in a young adult book is a good way to approach difficult topics. I'm still not sure how to have open discussions about some issues.

Dr. Kirchoff's Response:

Thank you, [Peer 2], for bringing up parents.

As those of you who have completed ENGL 484 already know, sex is one of the main reasons YA books are banned and challenged. Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which contains numerous references to masturbation, continues to be challenged for this very reason--even today.

Other reasons books are banned or challenged include references to use of drugs/alcohol, violence, religion, and profanity. Interestingly, a group of parents in North Carolina is currently suing a school to have Acevedo's *The Poet X* removed from the classroom. The reason they provide is not sexual content, but religion. You can read about it [here](#).

An open conversation about sex sounds nice, but the likelihood of it (a) going well and (b) not coming back to bite the teacher (and potentially the school) is sadly more than likely a fantasy. The question posed is thus a bit more complex than it looks. Are you willing to risk your career over this book?

My Response to All:

Thank you all for responding. I'll address you individually but know I'll also be talking to all those who responded as well.

[Peer 1] - That is where I was going with The Poet X not being a difficult read. I think that because of the poetry as well as the connectivity the themes have to the reader, this would be a quick read for most students. (I actually used the audiobook narrated by the author for this one, and it made everything so much more passionate, I think. You could hear how the author wants the poetry to come out and where the emphasis (or lack thereof) was. I usually use an audiobook with our readings, but this one definitely takes the cake!)

[Peer 2] - As Dr. Kirchoff had stated, I am also glad you brought up parents because I hadn't even been thinking of them!! I should have been! Gosh, what if I had done this in my classroom without even thinking about them, and I had to suffer the consequences, as Dr. Kirchoff also stated about?! Oi. Not good. I think, though, you do bring up a good point: I could always include this in my classroom library and recommend it to others who may benefit from it. I appreciate that insight.

Dr. Kirchoff - I have not taken 484, but I'm excited to discuss about this topic more in there. When I was in 10th grade, Sherman Alexie's book you had mentioned was the book I chose when my teacher assigned Lit Circles. It was between Absolutely True Diary, A Long Way Gone (which we are reading for this class), and Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I wonder how my teacher set this book up for us or how the Lit Circles were put together, like what we did for them because I definitely don't remember. But I definitely remember reading Sherman Alexie's book. I don't remember much backlash about it, but I do remember enjoying it... probably because I was a 16-year-old boy and thought it was a hoot. But definitely a good point... I need to consider all aspects of not only teaching a book to students but also where that teaching might be transferred or leaked to (the principal, the school board, parents, etc.). That's definitely something to think about going forward. If you teach something controversial or "banned," you better have a good reason to back yourself up!! :)

Thanks everyone! Very helpful information!!