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L533: Library Materials for Children and Young Adults
Fall, 2002

Censorship Debate: Group Project Evaluation

Team Assignment: Public Library: Advocating Removal

Titles:

1. *Lord of the Flies*
2. *Of Mice and Men*
3. *Go Ask Alice*
4. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
5. *The Witches (Roald Dahl)*

This assignment was difficult in a number of ways. Every group project is difficult, of course, because of the logistics involved in coordinating the efforts of each member. The very nature of this particular assignment can make a librarian-in-training feel rather at a loss, when assigned to argue the removal of books. In order to do well in the assignment, the group must do good research and present it effectively. Since we're training to be librarians, rather than lawyers, however, it can be difficult for us to see our way clear to argue for book removal, or at least to do so with a straight face. One hopes that we will have learned some understanding of the "other side", as it were, that will help us be more sympathetic and more prepared when we face book challenges in the professional world. I suspect, however, that many of us found this assignment to be an exercise to endure, rather than a learning opportunity. The fact that both "removal" teams took the softer tack of calling for controls on the books, rather than absolute removal from the library, underscores this point. We were all too squeamish to take the positions normally held by those who challenge library materials, thus lessening the effectiveness of the exercise.

The SLIS program tends to emphasize group projects for the obvious and very good reason that in the real world, getting work done almost invariably requires working well with other people on a team. In the real world of the workplace, however, your co-workers are normally available to you during work hours, and you all (in theory, at least) have time dedicated to the work assignment. In the real world of SLIS, none of us share schedules, and time to focus on the assignment must somehow be found from among the shards your other obligations leave free. The large size of our class made this project especially troublesome to coordinate, with seven people per team.

Our group in particular found it nearly impossible to meet. Meeting after class as a complete group almost never happened due to absences by one or more members, usually due to sickness or to family or work obligations. Terry's religion requires keeping the Sabbath on Saturday, making her unavailable from Friday evening to Saturday evening. Sundays were difficult for Van and Erin because of church, and as a father Van has family obligations that sometimes take him away from class or force him to miss a group meeting unexpectedly. I work full-time during the week, and generally only have weekends and evenings free; getting away from my office during the day is complicated by the fact that I already have 3 hours per week to make up in order to attend class on Tuesday mornings. Sam is a Resident Assistant in the IU dorms, and often cannot meet in the evenings. Aaron, too, often has to work evenings.

Krista was in theory more flexible, but blew us off at least twice (once because she had gone out to dinner and a movie with a friend the night before, and decided she needed the rest of her weekend to do other assignments), until we came down to the wire with our first debate session, and she realized how little she had contributed to the project. She missed our final meeting the day before the last round of the debate, even though she was scheduled to read the central report for our final session, because she had failed to look up quotations from Go Ask Alice that she had promised the group (I knew I should have insisted on doing that part). I am ashamed to admit that I, too, once missed a meeting—for the rather embarrassing reason that I was spooked by a violent storm accompanied by a tornado watch.

Email should have been a viable alternative for conferencing. For me, email is ideal, because I work on campus and am continuously “plugged in” to my IU email during the day. Except for Terry, my teammates are not so fortunate, and our email communication was sporadic at best because (until the end) not everybody was checking their email regularly.

Communicating and meeting together should not have been as difficult as it was. My teammates are all smart and capable (including Krista), and despite our initial bewilderment at how to proceed in challenging these particular books we were all committed to getting the job done as best we could. We should have done better at seeing around our other obligations earlier in the process, and finding some way to making meetings work. I think at first we were counting on seeing each other in class, but that didn't happen, and we floundered for a while.

A lot of the credit for focusing us belongs to Van, who did an excellent job as a very jovial leader. He wrote the introductory statement for our first debate presentation, compiled our bibliography, and prepared the conclusion of our closing statement for the second debate presentation (with input from the group). Sam was also a terrific teammate, whose enthusiasm over the research he did into *Lord of the Flies* and *The Witches* was infectious. Sam and Van were also our best speakers (in my opinion), with their ease and experience in front of a classroom as teachers. Aaron did a great job on the day of the first debate presentation, and was a pleasure to have on the team. He

found it hard to take the assignment seriously, since his views are so opposed to those of book-banners, but his sense of humor made a lot of the work easier.

Erin did some very valuable research into, among other things, the viewpoints of those who challenge library materials and their feelings of cultural disenfranchisement and lack of representation in the library (which should not be ignored). Terry contributed her expertise in child and teen development, and did research into the MPAA's rating standards. Krista gathered research on teens and sex, drugs, and violence (although I had to look up the primary sources—she used Factiva and found popular magazine articles from *Psychology Today*), and prepared the first draft of the body of our statement for the second debate session. I researched case studies of challenges to our five books, with special attention to *Go Ask Alice* (which I had not read before), prepared our arguments regarding *Go Ask Alice* with some help from Krista, and revised Krista's statement for our closing session.

Erin, Terry and I were all three physically drained on the day of our first debate, having devoted much of our energies to completing our Reading Logs, which were due the same day. Since no one came to our Monday morning meeting on Dec. 2 except Van and I (Erin was still on her way back to Bloomington after Thanksgiving, and the others apparently missed or forgot the email notice or couldn't get away), and time on Tuesday was limited, we never rehearsed our presentation before going before the class. I believe only Van had a complete written statement to speak from. Fatigue and lack of complete preparation led to some rambling in our presentations, particularly by Terry (who spoke for approximately 8.5 minutes, rather than the 4 minutes we had agreed on), leaving Sam to (quite adroitly) do a Cliffs' Notes version of the great work he had done for *The Witches*, and sum up for our team.

I have mixed feelings about this assignment. In some ways it might have been more productive to dedicate these two class periods to group presentations of case studies of challenges to particular books, rather than to the somewhat half-hearted attempts at "challenges" that we actually performed. Groups could have been smaller, each group taking one or two of ten or twelve books, making coordination of effort less frustrating. We would have learned more about why these books are challenged, and what real-life outcomes have been, than what we did in preparing for these somewhat irregular "debate" sessions. We could also have been assigned readings from groups that challenge books, so that we could better understand their positions. Finally, it might be time to reconsider some of the books used for this assignment, updating it to the top 10 or 12 titles on ALA's most current list of frequently challenged books.

In many ways, this was neither a real debate, nor a fair representation of how challenges actually work in libraries. I did learn a fair amount, so of course it wasn't all in vain; but it seems to be time to re-evaluate this assignment as a means of studying the censorship issue in this course.