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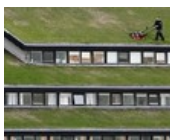
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Let's Talk About Sex—in English Class

High school educators often get in trouble for teaching "promiscuous" literature, but conversations about these texts come with lifelong lessons about relationships and attraction.

ANDREW SIMMONS | FEB 4 2015, 9:00 AM ET



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I imagine that many parents of teenagers may envision their kids' school classrooms as refuges from the hormones that hurtle through the hallways outside. Students may watch racy movies, enjoy soft-porn music videos, and post revealing photos on Instagram, but for the time he or she has their attention, the teacher acts as the surrogate guardian of virtue. Parents may balk

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at the prospect of their 16-year-olds, seemingly only a few years removed from Legos and stuffed animals, talking about relationships, abuse, and body image with a mysterious adult who shook their hand at Back to School Night. The classroom should be one place where teenagers are forced to have something besides sex on the brain.

I understand why parents want to protect their children, but a properly contextualized conversation about sex in literature class might be the best protection they can hope for.

Last year, a North Carolina school board [nearly banned](#) Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* from high schools in its district. In the book, budding land baron Esteban Trueba rapes peasant women and abandons the children they bear. In the warped world of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, another novel [frequently targeted for banning](#), children dodge pedophiles and suffer horrific sexual abuse.

Yet, these books, despite their fantastical elements, represent reality. Among their lessons: Sex can be an expression of love or violence, and relationships that don't feel awful can be profoundly unhealthy. How can the ugliest of acts feel like love to an outcast who has internalized society's disdain? Why does a man with land and money revel in his power by assaulting those who have none? Even a story about unrequited passion or a couple that sacrifices everything to stay together will resonate in the lives of students. Running away from the tough questions does an injustice to the material; failing to use them to make meaningful connections to the students' lives does an injustice to the students. English class is where teenagers get to talk about the human condition. Students may have emotional reactions to characters experiencing heartbreak, trauma, or a loss of innocence. There are no perfect formulas for addressing them, but they should be addressed.

Still, even in places where books aren't banned, teachers who capitalize on these teachable moments can run afoul of authority. In December, the Los Angeles-based charter school company Green Dot Schools [fired my friend and former grad-school classmate Daniel Yoo](#) from his job at Animo Venice High School. When nearly 600 students marched out of class to protest the firing, local media identified a parent's complaint about a poem as the catalyst, although, according to Yoo, no parent complained to him.

If students don't have literature to help them think about unhealthy relationships and why physical pleasure plays the role it does in human life, they risk getting their clues from inferior sources.

In "[Victoria's Secret](#)," by former U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins, the narrator is transfixed by the language and images contained in a lingerie catalog he finds in his mailbox.

Social media responses bemoaned the "[needless puritanism](#)," but it wasn't the first time Yoo didn't play it safe. For another ninth-grade English class the previous year, for example, Yoo designed a mock trial focused on a rape case; the trial had been a big success when he'd taught in South Korea. Then, for a drama class this year, Yoo organized a few installments of a teenage version of [The Moth](#), the popular storytelling program featured on NPR. He asked his students to write personal narratives and

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perform them in front of peers, parents, and faculty. One student touched on abuse. Another used the words "boob" and "ass" in her monologue.

Over several years of employment, these transgressions appear to have contributed to Yoo's firing. Green Dot's "Chief Talent Officer" Kelly Hurley, who oversees human resources for the charter organization, wouldn't comment for this piece. But according to the school administration's report, Yoo "utilized instructional content ... with controversial topics focused on sex and rape," and "permitted students to use inappropriate material in performances."

By the poet's own admission, "Victoria's Secret" is not erotic. Yoo used it to discuss the language of advertising. The mock trial case both improved students' persuasive speaking skills and permitted a student-driven conversation about consent. Same with *The Moth* assignment: Only two of the 16 storytellers touched on sexuality, according to Yoo. The first student spoke about a family weathering the trauma of a false accusation, while the other advanced the idea that a woman's true sex appeal rested not in her curves but in her intellect.

In creating his lesson plans, Yoo wasn't trying to make kids talk about sex. Connected to identity, gender, and their relationships with their bodies and others, sex looms large in the lives of students. In anticipating their needs and making space for their voices, Yoo was acknowledging that he cared deeply about his students as people as well as scholars. He was being a good teacher.

Good teachers know that a caring environment is the foundation for classroom lessons about any book. Good teachers also have another untestable imperative: to encourage students to become confident young citizens. Good teachers want them to be able to speak and write when no one else in the room can. Good teachers want them to be bold and unafraid, comfortable in their own skin. Good teachers envision class as a refuge from a world that often encourages them to feel helpless and insignificant.

High school students have sex lives. They throw themselves into relationships like lemmings. They cling to one another before and after classes and exchange wistful looks from across a divide of desks and plastic chairs. When relationships implode, they sometimes lose motivation and drink vodka before school. High school students are sometimes beaten up by the people who claim they love them. They are sometimes sexually abused by family members and acquaintances. They see loved ones experience the same hardships. Sometimes they hate their bodies, their hair, their eyes, and their voices. Sometimes they're attracted to their friends and they don't know why.

It's okay if reading a work of literature triggers something in a student—literature is supposed to encourage empathy, identification, and fresh perspectives.

To be bolder, braver, smarter, and safer, they need to be able to talk and write about their reality.

Most students receive some degree of formal sex education—typically sex broken down in terms of biology and personal health. I remember seeing slides of herpes-coated lips and pocked penises when I was in the sixth grade. Yet, a picture in words is too provocative? Conversations about the emotional component of sexuality are controversial?

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In literature classes, conversations about sexuality are usually about fictitious characters or strangers in a work of nonfiction. The distance from the stories allows students to hypothetically discuss situations without fear of being called out or expected to share anything truly personal. Narratives in which characters negotiate sexuality give students roadmaps for their own lives. Of course, with such lessons, teachers should tread carefully, having parents sign release forms at the beginning of the year, for example.

My 10th graders at a public high school in northern California just finished reading selections from Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning work of fiction *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. One story, "Ask Me If I Care," concerns a group of San Francisco teen punks stumbling toward adulthood in the late 1970s. Jocelyn snorts coke and runs off with Lou, a middle-aged music producer, while Rhea watches her best friend disappear and searches for an authentic sense of self. In the second story we read, "You (Plural)," a few of the same characters reunite more than two decades later, when Lou is dying and Jocelyn is in recovery, pining for the time she's lost. While reading the stories, students debated why teenagers make poor decisions even when they're fully cognizant of the possible short- and long-term risks.

"We think we're invincible," a girl wrote on the board.

"Our brains haven't fully formed," a boy said.

Students read about the unbalanced, repellant relationship growing between Lou and Jocelyn: He picks her up in a red Mercedes while she's hitchhiking and plies her with drugs. The book includes a graphic sex scene, but titillation is not the point. His relationship with her is about power—and his efforts to remain youthful despite the inexorable passage of time. Jocelyn, meanwhile, is so insecure that Lou's controlling attention feels like love.

I asked my students what they thought the teenage characters wanted out of their first relationships. Trust, love, common interests, affection, security, and comfort, they said. They were likely talking about themselves without making a pretense of doing so.

Later on, the students wrote letters with advice to one of the three characters. Some scolded Lou ferociously as if they were enraged parents; others gently asked him to act his age, wondering candidly what trauma from his past compelled him to prey on a young girl. Students pleaded with Jocelyn to practice safe sex, eschew hard drugs, and reconsider her devotion to such a doomed relationship. They applauded Rhea for resisting conformity. They told her to feel good about her freckles. And girls told characters about their own concerns—feeling too tall to talk to boys, for instance, or too overweight to pose for a picture without covering their cheeks.

Even though I designed the writing exercise primarily to reinforce students' proofreading skills and reading comprehension, I hope that in the future they're more likely to take the advice they gave.

I've discussed "Woman Hollering Creek" with the child of a domestic abuse survivor and have read *The Bluest Eye* with students on a first-name basis with Child Protective Services caseworkers. It's okay if reading a work of literature triggers something in a student—literature is supposed to encourage empathy,

identification, and fresh perspectives. Students should be reassured that the experiences they've endured, whether abuse or minor-league heartbreak, are not foreign to the rest of the world. The most tortured moments in literature affect humans because they reflect a reality that can torture us, too. Talking and writing about it is a blow against secrecy and shame.

According to Juana Rodriguez, a professor of women's and gender studies at UC Berkeley, young people need to learn how to be "good sexual citizens." She believes that students should practice handling sexual situations even before they're actually faced with them. Literature class, in her mind, helps them with this.

"They can try on the language of feeling in a way that is not about them," Rodriguez said. "They can talk about a character's situation and think, 'How would I respond? How does it feel to be turned down? How does it feel to be looked at that way?' It gives them authority to speak about sexuality and, as they grow into themselves, learn to communicate feelings."

Moreover, as Chapman University sociology professor Bernard McGrane pointed out, sex is a lot easier to have than to talk about—and that's troubling.

"Sex education is developing the ability to communicate about our own sexuality within our culture," he said. "Desire, gender, identity—there's no end to it. It needs to be in grammar school, high school, and retirement communities. We're not comfortable talking about [sex]. Anything that opens that up and gives us skills is extremely valuable."

If students don't have literature to help them think about unhealthy relationships and why physical pleasure plays the role it does in human life, they risk getting their clues from inferior sources.

Students have been taught narratives about sex and relationships since they were little kids. They watch Disney movies in which princesses with fluttering eyelashes and low-cut dresses pine for absentee princes—in which romance is celebrated but sex is invisible. "Kids get the idea that you do anything for a loved one," Rodriguez said. "If someone loves you, they can never hurt you. If you love someone, you can trust them with all your heart."

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But the consequence of that mindset, according to Rodriguez, is that kids subsequently miss out on the more nuanced narratives of love and hurt, trust and betrayal. Some might fret over what they see as overtly sexual themes in high school classroom discussions, but they may not look below the surface of innocuous entertainment. Parents want to shield their children from stories about sex, but kids are force-fed powerful narratives about physical attraction a decade earlier. I used to teach preschool, and I can't tell you how many times I saw 4-year-old girls donning plastic tiaras and twirling

in slow-motion in front of mirrors, all the while casting searching eyes around the class to see who was watching.

Moreover, a high school kid can access an infinite array of pornography via a

smartphone and send and receive naked pictures over Snapchat. Kids are buried beneath an onslaught of Iggy Azalea songs, trashy Twitter memes, and MTV's *Guy Code* (and *Girl Code*). They are in trouble if their literature teachers can't curate controlled discussions about sexuality and related issues without worrying about their job security.

"It's setting up a bad theatrical stage on which to play out our lives," Chapman University's McGrane said. "It's paradoxical. We're Puritan pornographers."

Culturally, maybe Americans are less inclined to think of ways to set students up for healthy sex lives than to applaud the punishment of those who intend to damage them. Programs like *To Catch a Predator* hatch salacious entertainment from this tendency. Shows like *CSI*-whatever embolden amateur criminologists. A teacher willing to talk honestly about sexuality when it arises in literature can help students understand healing before they're hurt. It can also stop potential assailants before they're compelled to act. I have taught students who have been abused, surely many more than the number who have confided in me via essays or private conversations, and far more envision a future career in criminal justice than counseling.

Students who can't talk and write about what characters go through, according to Rodriguez, are more likely to self-medicate and avoid confiding in an adult when they go through something themselves.

With underfunded schools increasingly short on counselors, students often start the process of opening up in class. When Yoo shared *The Moth* with his drama students, he wanted to provide students with a public forum for their ideas and opinions.

"I allowed students to find confidence through personal narratives," says Yoo, who has already found a new teaching job for the remainder of the year. "I thought that the opportunity to express their identities would be powerful and meaningful to them."

Making a point of allowing students to see themselves in texts—that's good for meaningful, life-altering education. That's good for getting students to come to class, especially at a school like the one at which Yoo taught, where [the student population is mostly low-income](#) and almost entirely African American or Latino.

Yoo's students certainly didn't wave placards on the Venice sidewalks because they liked reading poems about underwear.

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