Jocelyn A. Chadwick

We Dare Not Teach What We Know We Must: The Importance of Difficult Conversations

[With literature and teachers] they are taught self-respect and confidence. They are taught that the true motives of life are to reach for the highest ideals. . . . And best of all, they are taught to think for themselves. It is his self-thinking that goes to make up the true public opinion.

—Sam Clemens's interview with the Brooklyn Eagle news special, November 24, 1907

I'm not convinced we have to group ourselves—race, gender. . . . Human beings are the most wonderful things. Why are we not loving one another?

Open doors, let them in, give permission, and see what happens. Students make you think. I learn faster and more when I am teaching.


As for all educators, my undergraduate and graduate training, along with my teaching and research, have all melded to chisel how I read, think about, teach, and interact with literature. First, literature is writing, is rhetoric, is conceived within a historical context—whether that context is ancient or modern—there is always one historical context, and, as with Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the context is imaginative and informational. Literature is always anchored in audience, occasion, purpose. Furthermore, just about any literary text taught at the preK–12 level can be labeled as insensitive in terms of its treatment of race, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, ethnicity, or language.

These ideas frame my reading and teaching of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as well. As I read the contributed articles, I was impressed by what was written, but also struck by what was missing:

• An in-depth understanding of the two historical periods that engendered the piece

• Any distinction and synthesis of the author, Mark Twain, and the man, Sam Clemens. Though quite different, Mark Twain and Sam Clemens informed each other, challenged each other, empowered each other. Clemens’s life with Olivia Langdon, his experiences among the best thinkers of his time, and his youthful history informed Mark Twain; Mark Twain, the writer, the satirist, enabled, persuaded Clemens to “act” beyond the pages of text into life itself.

• Any reference to the relationship Sam Clemens and his family had with African Americans: John Lewis, George Griffin, Frederick Douglass, Mary Ann Cord, and others—all of whom tremendously influenced his view of the world

• Conversation about Mark Twain’s exploration of voice through various characters, including a teen, a runaway slave, a freedman professor from the North, and members of a slave community—all of whom provided vivid variations on important themes

The author encourages educators and researchers to foreground the voices and experiences of youth and youth culture in discussions about power and privilege in canonical and contemporary texts.
Our high school students today, Generation Z—post-9/11, post–Great Recession, living through a protean and morphing redefinition of all terms and distinctions—this generation feeds on curiosity and risk and daring and inquiry, regardless of ethnicity, class, gender, or sexual orientation. Indeed, they question most of the codifications to which we have become inextricably enmeshed. These students also reject the specious metaphor of their being monolithic based on our old codifications. As Morrison stated, these students want to go there and beyond. Suburban, rural, urban, African American, White, Latino, Asian, American Indian, Catholic, Muslim, Baptist, Southern Baptist, and others, upper, middle, working class, some schools literally in war zones, whereas others reside in pristine environs—all of these students today are made of sterner stuff and demand, demand to be heard. They reject benevolent hobbling. They engage with a text such as Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and take me and their teachers through our paces. Students are part of the context in which literature is read, studied, and interpreted.

So far, in all the years I have been with students exploring such texts, not one, not a single one, has been aware of the presence and import of the Black periodical press of the 19th century. An infinitesimal few have been aware that freemen existed—African Americans who were never slaves, such as Ann Plato. And not one was familiar with “who knew whom” during these historical periods; for example, with whom did the Langdons associate? Were they really abolitionists? Did Sam Clemens actually know any African Americans? What happened to his writing and philosophy after he completed The Adventures of Tom Sawyer—where he really begins Huck’s conscience-awakening regarding race, voice, responsibility, and identity—and after “A True Story,” Huck Finn, The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson, essays, speeches, interviews? Only with this new generation have some of these probative queries begun to emerge. Needless to say, their teachers and I are initially shocked and keenly excited. Now, with this generation of students, I have learned to prepare myself and expect the “out of the traditional box” queries, and, no, I never have preconceived responses. I have even been known at times to say to students, “Well, this is the first time anyone has ever posed that question. Let’s explore
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further.” Or—“Oh, wow, I never, ever thought about this kind of interpretation of view. Now that is deep.” Thank you, Generation Z.

I have often described ELA teachers such as myself as hybrids: educators with experience in both K–12 and university. I think that my experience and continued work with teachers and students are critical as we formulate ideas and perspectives about what should or should not be taught at the high school level. Until our postsecondary colleagues have sustained opportunities to work with these students and these texts—to see students themselves take up the fight to defend their teachers’ rights to keep these books in front of them, students who ask such amazing queries that I often tell them no graduate student I had has ever posed such a question—until this happens, we should all take a break and inform ourselves by collaborating with colleagues who do teach Huck Finn.

This past summer, I was surrounded by 60 amazing sophomores being taught by an ELA/NCTE teacher and a museum educational director at the Mark Twain Museum in Hartford. We explored and drilled not only into the obvious tensions around race, but also we looked at how Mark Twain/Sam Clemens’s comments and ideas in the novel and in his life resonate today. For those of you who are adamant that this text ought not be taught, take a look at our list:

**Issues Today**
- Immigration
- Religion
- Racial insensitivity
- Gender insensitivity
- LGBTQ insensitivity
- Women’s rights
- Education reform
- Being “American,” Americans first
- Civil disobedience
- NAFTA, outsourcing
- Hazing, bullying, intolerance, guns

Ironically, Mark Twain/Sam Clemens until his death in 1910 wrote about, spoke about, and reflected on many of today’s most significant issues. As we discovered and explored, shared and learned together, two representative queries reflected the incredible capacity for depth young readers possess.

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In response to the first student, I told the class that I do not use racial slurs, nor profanity at all, and that I request that those around me refrain from doing so. That said, I fight for the right of artists, including writers, to use terms necessary to compose their narratives and the rights of teachers to bring these works to the classroom. Examples I gave included Jefferson, Morrison, King, Hughes, Schuyler, Flannery O’Connor, among others. To the other student, I explained that too much blood from too many people still populates the word nigger. Nothing—no one person and no group—can redact the sting and import of this word. And make no mistake, it does sting and has import in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, just as other literary slurs such as when Iago calls Othello the “black ram,” or Solanio calls Shylock “Jew dog” sting and have import.

**Mark Twain: Adventures of Huck Finn and Speeches, Interviews, Letters, Journals**
- Human nature
- Immigration
- Religion
- Education—“self-thinking,” critical thinking
- Women’s suffrage
- Jews
- Technology: telephone, gramophone/phonograph, photography
- Free trade, tariff, protective tariff
- Revolution, patriotism
- Plagiarism
- Fashion
- Hazing
- Civil disobedience
- Racism
Our ELA classrooms take our children around the world and beyond—into past, present, and future worlds. We provide safe and trusted spaces for them where difficult conversations can and do take place. If at times teachers, at whatever level they teach, hit a roadblock, perhaps this impediment is due to or own predilections of codifying our students, stereotyping them before we even listen to them, much less get to know them. We can learn much from students if we listen and allow ourselves to learn along with them in lieu of our wanting to shut down, close out, and shun uncomfortable conversations because I am of color and my students are White or you are White and your students are of color. And despite many differences, the last time I checked, we teach students—not colors, not types. Perhaps it is we who need to stop and reread all of the texts we teach from the 21st-century perspective of students’ empowerment—empowerment that our literature provides. Trust me, our secondary students are far more resilient than we give them credit for; they always have been. It has been some of us who have been demurring, listening to the voices of others, telling us we dare not teach what we know we must.

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Jocelyn A. Chadwick, formerly of Harvard Graduate School, returned in 2012 to teach a seminar, guest lecture, and work with secondary teachers and students around the country. She is vice president of NCTE. Her most recent book is Teaching Literature in the Context of Literacy Instruction and her most recent article is “21st Century Challenge: Necessary Perspectives on Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as Anti-Slavery Novels” in Mark Twain: Critical Insights.