



# Reading Between Bans

Teaching Through Controversy  
Banned Books and Information Literacy in the First-Year Classroom

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# Session Overview

First-Year Seminar at Drake

The Gen Z Information Environment

Why Teach Banned Books

Teaching Goals

What Worked Pedagogically

What Didn't Work

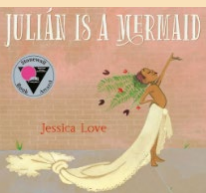
Questions & Discussion





# Drake FYS Learning Outcomes

“Drake's First-Year Seminars introduce first-year students to what they need to make the most of their education, **including critical thinking, information literacy, and communication skills**. As part of Drake's overall first-year experience, they are a place for **building community and establishing a web of support** for our incoming students”.



# Gen Z Experience



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Information is often blended; entertainment, news, politics, music, culture, shopping , activism

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Immersed in social media and outrage cycles

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Algorithmic reinforcement

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Information is built around speed and visibility

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Can be expected to perform opinions and identity online

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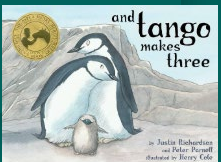
Information is increasingly encountered through influencers/creators

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Disconnected from historical gatekeepers of information like universities, journalist, libraries

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Awareness that online information is manipulated and AI generated, increased skepticism toward all online information

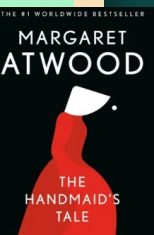


# Why Banned Books

1. Book bans, DEI debates, intellectual freedom, and institutional authority were dominating headlines and social media.
2. Drake was more actively engaging with these conversations that year through campus programming and events.
3. My previous experience as a public librarian navigating book challenges could shape the design of the course.

## Opportunity to teach:

- information literacy
- civic reasoning
- argument construction
- research and source evaluation
- discussion across disagreement



# My Core Teaching Goals

Focus on:

- evaluating online claims and evidence
  - research before opinion
  - understanding reflective vs. academic writing
  - argument construction
  - integrating differing viewpoints
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NOT:

- summarizing books
- ideological disclosure
- reaching agreement
- identifying correct opinions



# My Core Teaching Goals

Slow Down

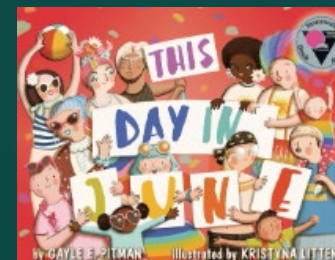
Separate Reactions from  
Analysis

Evaluate Claims

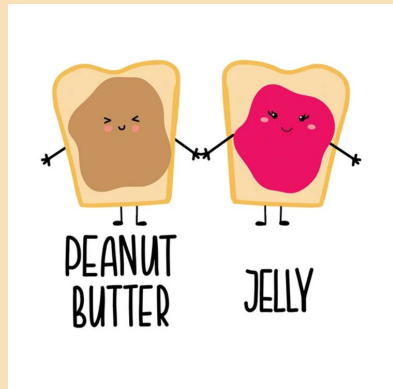
Contextualize



# Early Failure



# React Early and Often



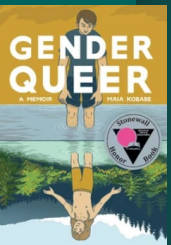
## The Assignment

- Short researched essay on censorship
- Students selected from three possible topics
- Followed two library instruction sessions
- Scaffold assignment by design
- Intended as a diagnostic assessment

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## What Happened

- Weak thesis development
- Limited understanding of evidence-based argument
- Heavy reliance on summary/opinion
- Struggles with research mechanics despite workshop support



**Slowing  
Down:**

**It's intentional  
not nostalgic.**

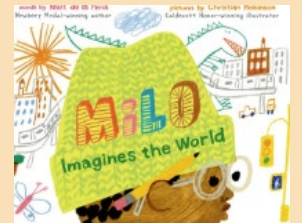
- For some sessions, I removed laptops and all digital screens
- Printed excerpts to read
- Annotated by hand
- Collaborative close reading
- intentionally slowing discussion and interpretation



# Rethinking Safe Space Pedagogy

## Separating Research from Identity

Students experience classroom safety differently depending on identity and perceived risk.



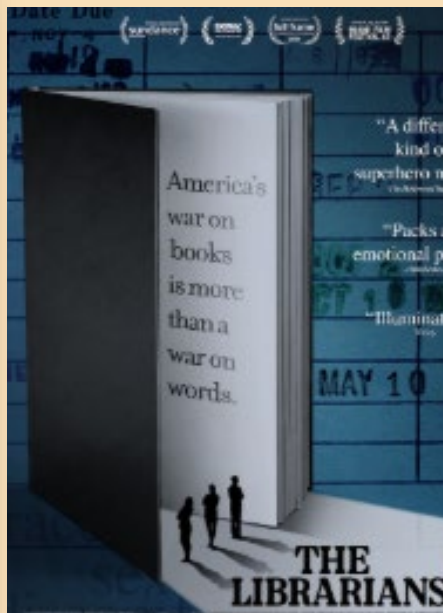
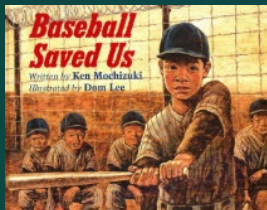
**Collaboration:**  
**Sometimes**  
**students need**  
**to hear it from**  
**someone else**

Learning happens through networks, relationships, and institutional ecosystems.

- Students heard concepts differently
- Multiple pedagogical approaches
- Expanded support network
- Modeled the library as an information ecosystem

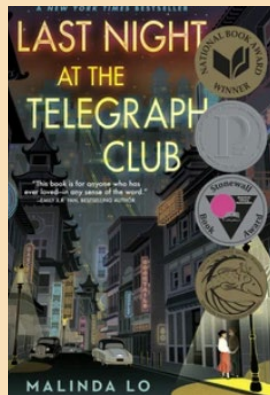


# Connecting to Campus & Community



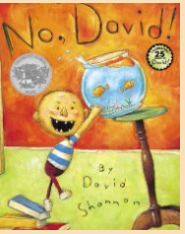


# Activities That Worked



- **Flag That Book: Why was this book challenged?**
  - Students flagged potentially challenged content
- **Does it Pass The Miller Test?**
  - Students applied obscenity standards to excerpts from challenged books
- **Banned Book Reflections**
  - Not-formal short 1–2-page reflections on children's books

Current events  
and online  
discourse  
regularly  
reshaped  
classroom  
conversations.



## Adapting the Course in Real Time

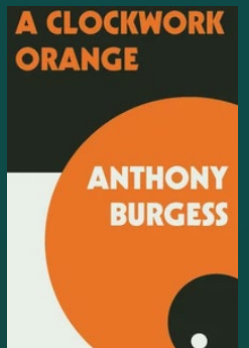
- Social media reactions to everything
- Difficulty distinguishing between free speech, First Amendment protections, institutional policy, and censorship.
- Students struggled to distinguish between censorship and professional or social consequences.
- Students frequently brought online debates and conflicting interpretations of current events into classroom discussions.

# What Worked: Students Engaged Best When

- Debated viewpoints were assigned
- Research activities before discussion
- Participation was structured
- Students heard it from someone else
- Activities focused on claims
- Reflective writing was a part of class work
- Ambiguity was allowed



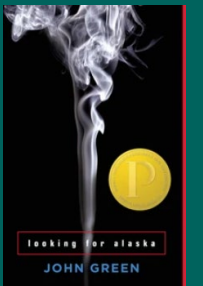
# What Didn't Work



# Not for Everyone

## Some students:

- preferred lecture-based instruction
- wanted more definitive answers
- struggled with constant participation and discussion
- needed more processing time
- found it exhausting



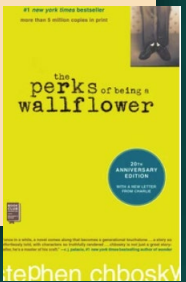
# Discussion-Based Classrooms Are Not Equally Accessible

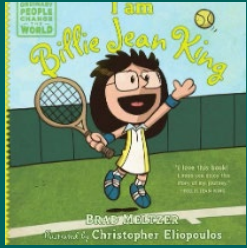
## Participation Looks Different Across Students

- Discussion-based classrooms can privilege students who are comfortable with spontaneous verbal participation
- For some international and non-native English-speaking students, these environments may feel unpredictable or exhausting
- Students may understand course concepts deeply while still struggling to participate publicly in real time

## What I Observed

- Some students thrived in active learning environments
- Others engaged more successfully through reflective writing and private processing
- One student openly communicated these challenges
- Another struggled silently





# The Group Project That Broke Me

## Assignment:

- Groups researched censorship efforts in Florida, Missouri, or Iowa
- Students analyzed legislation, challenges, and patterns of censorship
- Intended outcomes:
  - collaborative learning
  - research practice
  - peer teaching

## What Happened

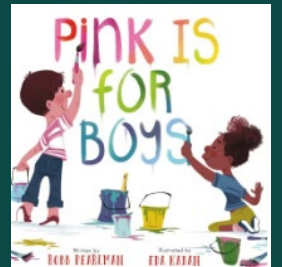
- One group dramatically outperformed the others
- Group dynamics became uneven very quickly
- Groups struggled with accountability and research depth

## What I Learned

- Group work does not create collaboration
- Uneven skill levels can dominate outcomes
- Students often need significantly more structure and accountability in collaborative research projects
- I was already skeptical of group projects. This experience did not improve my opinion.

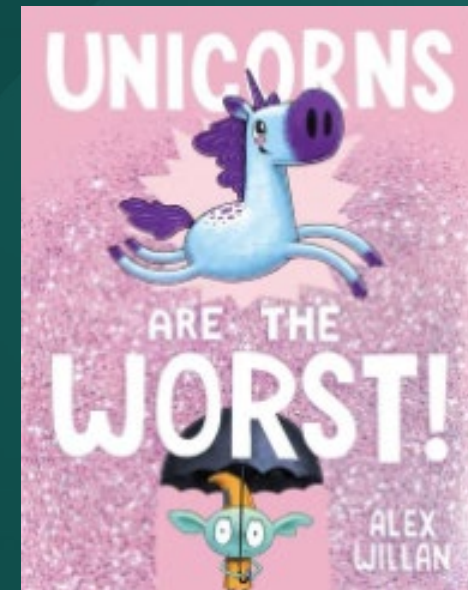
# What Helped Me

- find teaching-focused mentors
- learn classroom management strategies
- borrow K–12 pedagogy ideas
- build teaching communities
- recognize librarians are often not trained to teach discussion-heavy courses



**Controversy created  
engagement.**

**Structure created  
learning.**





# Thank You

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