

1993

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### Recommended Citation

Burke, Jim, "Tackling Society's Problems In English Class" (1993). *Special Topics, General*. 71.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen/71>

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# Tackling Society's Problems In English Class

Jim Burke

**A high school teacher's impromptu unit on "Social Problems" gave his students an opportunity to develop their writing skills while expanding their concept of community.**

Every day I drive by homeless people on my way to teach in Castro Valley, a quiet suburb in the East Bay near San Francisco. As many of my students walk to school along the town's serene, picturesque streets, it is difficult for them to imagine the dejected people I see each morning or the ravaged individuals in the hospitals and on the streets who have AIDS. Confronted with this sharp contrast from home to work, I feel obligated to develop in my sophomores an awareness of social problems that they may not otherwise know of or feel concerned about.

So, come spring semester, we embark on a multifaceted project, titled simply "Social Problems."

## Identifying the Problems

To begin, I ask students at their desks to generate a list of social problems. Walking around the class, I note that several topics are common to many lists: the Greenhouse Effect, homelessness, pollution. Scanning farther down their lists, I see that several have listed abortion, gun control, the death penalty. I give them a few more minutes to come up with problems that are important or of interest to them.

Next we make a master list of topics on the chalkboard. I put up whatever they say, not yet ready to make the first distinction between problems and issues. By the time Brett calls out "gun control," it seems that we have

exhausted their lists.

I ask Brett how he arrived at gun control as a social problem. "Well, it seems like so many people are getting killed with guns these days," he says. "So are the guns the problem here, or is there something else?" I ask. Andrea points out that the guns are not the problem, but that one problem society faces is a skyrocketing crime rate. "So we might look at the idea of gun control down the line as more of a possible solution to the crime problem in society," I suggest.

Just for fun, we take a minute to see how many people in the class own guns. About 75 percent. Upon further questioning, we learn that four students have used automatic weapons. I move on, thinking that gun control will probably not be a big-ticket item when they come to solutions for the crime problem. After distributing the project assignment, which includes my expectations and the rubric for the project, I give them time to go over it and get an idea of what they are in for.

For the remainder of the quarter—we pursue this project while continuing to study the required literature—I arrange the class into workshops. Because the project requires different types of work, the students need the opportunity to do many tasks while I am available to assist them. Today Sean and Jim are having difficulty locating articles on the diminishing rainforests, and they expect to have the same trouble finding experts to



interview. The workshop format gives me the chance to accompany them to the English office to research the phone numbers of appropriate agencies.

When Sean and Jim return to the class, their enthusiasm is obvious. They tell me that they talked to "some guy" who wants to send them all sorts of "stuff" on the rainforest. All year, these two students have been passive participants in the class as we have studied literature and tried to learn new writing skills. Suddenly, finding themselves in charge of this project, needing to communicate with "real people" in their community, they are into it and eager to share what they learned with other students who are studying the rainforest.

## Searching for Solutions

On workshop days, we begin to form spontaneous groups according to topics, so that students can cull from one another's research and findings.



By writing letters to political representatives, my students realize that, even as young people, they can have a say in matters that affect them and their community.

investigating. Once they begin their research, students must submit a series

assignment, students learn to incorporate information from many sources into one paper to support a larger idea, how to interact with people in a variety of situations, and how to conduct serious discussions about important matters.

### Observing a Work in Progress

Next the students begin to organize their findings, their interviews, and their own thinking about the subject. After nearly a month, I am hearing no complaints. In addition, I am witnessing fine work by some previously unenthusiastic members of the class. Most—but not all—are ready to get down to some draft writing. So, cooperating with Joanne, the teacher who heads the computer lab, the students begin going to the lab on workshop days to prepare their papers—which must be, as I told them right off, *typed*. Our use of the workshop format continues to provide the needed flexibility to adapt to the changing directions of the project.

As the unit progresses, I begin to detect a different tone and maturity in many of my students. Suddenly they are aware of problems that concern

We pause to confer as a class as needed. In the informal groups I observe fascinating transformations and transactions.

One day, for example, some students want to know whether they can work together to develop one survey that all can use. "What would the advantage of that be?" I ask. "We could get more ideas and organize our efforts to interview more people," they say. Other students have decided to keep their surveys individualized, because they want to focus on different aspects of the problem than the rest of the group.

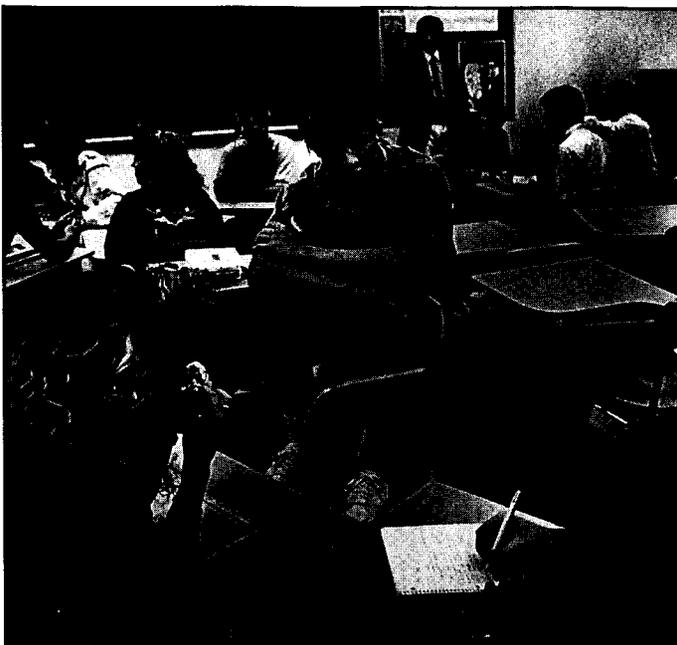
I begin to regard the momentum of this project with a certain awe: it is my first year teaching, and before my eyes I am watching things I studied and learned come to life.

The librarian is excited by the opportunity to let the students use her facilities and the new binders of articles on many of the topics they are

of assignments to me to let me know they are moving ahead and in what directions. I ask them to find at least two articles on their chosen subject—"No, a three-sentence blurb in the *Oakland Tribune* does not constitute an article." I also ask for a summary of their articles, which identifies the three main points that they will stress.

When it's time for students to outline their papers, I do not require any strict format. Instead, we brainstorm the attributes of an effective, thorough paper. I compile their ideas and mine and give the sheet to them as a handout the next day.

For their interviews and surveys, students must follow the same procedure, summarizing their findings and identifying at least three main ideas to pursue. We spend some time on the mechanics of the process, looking at sample interviews and questionnaires, and discussing the appropriate etiquette. During this part of the



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them, that are significant, and that they can actually *do* something about. This last revelation is especially important, for the study of large problems can easily lead to feelings of helplessness. However, after plugging into such organizations as Greenpeace, Rain-forest Action Network, and local homeless agencies, the students' fears are stemmed. They may not be able to solve these vast problems, but they are learning what can be done to, at least, arrest them. Feelings of civic involvement, of the ability to make a difference, abound.

Their empowerment is further bolstered by the next step in the project. Once they have begun to write their papers, my students feel informed enough to write at least one letter. So I send a group to the library to gather the addresses of local, state, and federal politicians. By writing letters to their choices of these representatives, they see the power of writing in the real world. Even as young people, they realize that they can have a say in matters that affect them and their community.

Meanwhile, their notion of a community is expanding daily. My students are no longer safely hidden away in this bedroom community with only one high school. They are writing to Washington about what is going on in South America, to Sacramento about hunger in Africa, to local politicians about the homeless in the Bay

Area. And as their research continues, they are able to propose meaningful solutions, citing reputable and irrefutable sources from magazines, newspapers, and experts.

A young woman who once spent the whole period

trying to sneak a look in her pocket mirror and dab her makeup is now telling me that she talked to homeless families over the weekend, while shopping in San Francisco for her prom dress. One or two others tell me that they felt uncomfortable spending money on party clothes after seeing or talking with the homeless. This outcome is not what I want necessarily, but it relates to the objective: developing a social conscience for the world and people around you.

### **Nearing the Final Stretch**

My students are now editing and responding to one another's papers. Because they are all informed on a common topic, they can make educated appraisals of others' work. They see, for instance, how Shannon, one of the top students in the class, approached a particular problem that many of them initially had difficulty with.

The end of the quarter nears. Because our sophomore classes emphasize public speaking, the next tasks my kids face is to present their papers to the class. Very much like a convention of scientists, social scientists, and social workers, the students attentively listen as each person presents his or her findings on an amazing array of topics—from transportation to waste disposal, from the Greenhouse Effect to AIDS. As each student steps down from the front of

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the class—a place I have stood very little in the last quarter—the class gives thunderous applause.

It is the last day. I call them up one at a time and check off their papers—nearly every one of them more than 10 typed pages, illustrated with cut-out pictures or personal drawings. One by one, they place their neatly assembled papers onto my desk, smiling with pride at the substantial thud that the weight makes.

When all the projects are turned in, the class sighs in unison. But it is not the sigh of "Thank God, that's done." It is the sigh of satisfaction that comes after hard work. It is the sigh of having done their best work about a problem that they came to care about. It is the sound I hope they will make in future years after they walk out of the ballot box or when they write a politician about an issue important to them. It is a feeling, that sigh, I imagine them experiencing again and again in the future, as they act as members of a larger community than Castro Valley, or even America. ■

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