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When the Nazi’s Are Misunderstood: Addressing Racist Rhetoric in the Composition Classroom

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Cover Page Footnote
N/A
A few weeks ago, one of my students shared his desire to own a Nazi uniform. This was in response to a journal prompt that asked the students to identify two to three items they would like to own.

I also spoke with the student to further gain his perspective and to discuss the discomfort brought to the classroom. He shared that he is interested in “alternate history” and that although the “SS uniform is a symbol of evil” he believed “the Nazis are misunderstood,” and overall he didn’t mean to offend anyone. Although he did not intend to make anyone feel uncomfortable, I could not dismiss the effect of his words.

His comments were deeply troubling to me, but I used his phrasing to help him see the problem with sharing this “symbol of evil.” He agreed and recognized how his expression made other students (and me) uncomfortable. I encouraged him to always consider his audience and reflect on our responsibility in regards to free speech.

As of late, it’s common to hear dismissive rhetoric claiming that people “are too sensitive” or “enjoy making others feel bad for their own problems” or “just need to move on.” Such comments are violent, silencing tactics. Yet this is precisely the rhetoric that has been commonly spewed in response to claims of racism on campus. To think specifically about this rhetoric as applied to my scenario, could you imagine me telling my Jewish (and other non-White) students to simply “move on?” Of course not— that would be a crass response for me to give.

I imagine that we don’t use such dismissive rhetoric when our family and friends express that we have harmed them or made them uncomfortable— at least I hope we don’t. No, we listen to them, find ways to respond differently, and change our actions, even if we didn’t intend to hurt. This approach can and should be applied to our students and colleagues. This is where we can start, shifting the ways we respond. For you and me… we are always responsible for the things we put into this world. I’ve only been teaching for 15 months now and the best/worst part of the job is the unpredictability but it’s still the greatest thing I’ve ever had the pleasure of doing.