

Jokes, Excuses and Why Words Matter

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, January 2016



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Words matter. Our words can comfort and express that we understand or that we “see” the other person in front of us. And of course, our words can do the opposite: they can hurt, isolate and make someone feel insignificant.

For better and for worse, our words signal our values and beliefs.

For the past several years, I've been hearing students use the word "terrorist" to mock or joke about any student who looks Middle Eastern or is Muslim. Like many other times when my students use racist terms to make jokes, their usual defense is they don't mean anything by it. I've even had Jewish students defend their right to use these terms by saying they also make anti-Semitic jokes about Jews.

In other words, they think that as long as you make racist jokes about yourself, it's acceptable to make racist jokes about others. Their justification continues that as long as no one objects, there's obviously no problem. If you don't complain, the only interpretation for your behavior is you don't care. And if you do complain, you're "blowing things out of proportion" so it's entirely reasonable to dismiss the objection.

I have had countless conversations with young people about these issues and what I always remind myself is that I'm probably not going to get them to agree with me in the moment. In fact, I may get a response that I find highly irritating and frustrating like the ones I cited above.

But my goal is to start them on the path that gets them to reflect about the things they say in the future. That our conversation is somewhere in their head so the next time they see someone degrading another person, our discussion springs right back up and makes them so uncomfortable they are compelled to pay attention to what those feelings are telling them.

When I do have the opportunity to have a group discussion with my students about these kinds of comments, I ask these questions:

- If the joke is meaningless, if you don't mean anything by what you're saying, why are you saying it? What are you are trying to communicate?
- Have you ever had someone say something to you that made you incredibly angry or embarrassed but you didn't say anything? How do you know that the same thing isn't happening here?

- If you were told that you are offending someone, regardless of what you think about the hurtful intent of your words, what would be your most likely response?
- If we accept the possibility that people may not be admitting how they feel, why is it so important for you to have the right to make these comments? What are you getting out of it?

I know that some of our students may think we make “a huge deal” out of these moments. They may think that we blow things out of proportion. That’s okay. Our job is to pierce the bubble some of our students (and of course some of the adults in our lives as well) are in – that just because it’s “common” doesn’t make it right and banking on other people’s silence doesn’t give you a pass to say things that serve to denigrate others.

Our job is to speak out so other young people see what we stand for and it gives them a little bit more confidence to do so themselves.

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