

We, the Jury: Documenting Diverse Responses to Delia's Culpability in Zora Neale

Hurston's "Sweat"

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Abstract

Our qualitative study explored how students in a college composition course used their language and social interactions to interpret, analyze, and synthesize information from four texts to determine a fictional protagonist's culpability in her antagonist's death. Before class, 21st-century, self-identified White students read Zora Neale Hurston's (1926) short story "Sweat" about early 20th-century African Americans confronting racial and economic injustice. They also read a handout of current murder charges with definitions, ranging from first-degree murder to not guilty,¹ and two contemporary academic articles: a psychological article about the definition and symptoms of Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS) and a legal article about the use of BWS as evidence in court.² Drawing on Nussbaum's (1995) notion of the "judicious spectator," Bakhtin's (1986) ideas about dialogue, and Bruner's (1996) explanation of cultural community building, we analyzed students' collaborative discourse to understand their language in use and the possible influence of literature to humanize public judgments.

¹ The handout of murder charges is a compilation of charges taken from Gerald N. Hill and Kathleen T. Hill's *The People's Law Dictionary*, retrieved from <http://dictionary.law.com/Default.aspx?review=true>.

² a.. Definitions of Murder Charges from *The People's Law Dictionary*. b. "Admissibility of Battered-Spouse-Syndrome Evidence in Alaska" from Duke University School of Law/*Alaska Law Review*. c. "Battered Women Who Kill: Impact of Expert Testimony Type and Timing" from *Psychiatry, Psychology & Law*.

Keywords: Authenticity, classroom discourse, cultural communities, heteroglossia, speech genre, judicious spectator

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