Decision-Making in a Democratic Classroom

Sojourner Truth was an African-American woman and a former slave who was active in the women's rights movement of the 1850s. Her participation was frequently challenged by white activists who did not want woman's suffrage associated with abolitionism in the public's mind. At the 1851 Akron, Ohio women's rights convention, Sojourner Truth delivered one of the most famous speeches in U.S. history. Truth could neither read nor write; however, a report on her address and the audience's response was included by Frances Gage, the President of the convention, in her reminiscences. In her report, Gage presented readers, as best as she could, with Sojourner Truth's accent, syntax, and grammar. Her version of the speech has been edited and re-edited numerous times over the years.

The first version that follows is by Frances Gage (Stanton, 1889:116), and was published in *History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. 1.* The second version is adapted from an attempt to modify and modernize the language for use in a high school classroom (Millstein, 1977:116-117). The third version is from Diane Ravitch's *The American Reader: Words that Moved a Nation* (1990:86-87). In the original Gage version, Sojourner Truth refers to herself and other African Americans as niggers. Ravitch changed the word to Negroes. Other editors have substituted Blacks or Africans.

Which version should we use in our classes? If we use Gage's original text, how do we handle the painful impact of certain words on many people? Should we remain committed to historical accuracy? Should we follow Dewey's lead and involve students in making these decisions?

1. Frances Gage's version of Sojourner Truth's speech
 "Wall, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de North, all talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? . . . Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it? ['Intellect,' whispered someone near.] Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do wid womin's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

2. An edited version of Sojourner Truth's speech
 "Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that between the niggers of the South and the women of the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about? . . . Then they talk about this thing in the head; what do they call it? ['Intellect,' whispered someone near.] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

3. Diane Ravitch removes the word "nigger"
 "Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the Negroes of the South and the women of the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about? . . . Then they talk about this thing in the head; what do they call it? ['Intellect,' someone whispers.] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negro's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?"

Supreme Court Justice William Brennan
(*The New York Times*, October 13, 1985, p. 36)

 "We current Justices read the Constitution in the only way that we can: as 20th century Americans. We look to the history of the time of framing and to the intervening history of interpretation. But the ultimate question must be, what do the words of the text mean in our time? For the genius of the Constitution rests not in any static meaning it might have had in a world that is dead and gone, but in the adaptability of its great principles to cope with current problems and current needs."