“YOU ARE RACIST”

Artist Book by Austin Docter
High School
This topic has been on my mind since it happened. I knew right away that I didn’t make the right choice, but at the same time I didn’t really know what the right response was. Over time through reflection and conversations had in class I really began to understand that the biggest issue was that I had completely ignored the aspect of race in the event. My response only further solidified the students’ impression that I had no regard for his thoughts or needs in the classroom. Coming to the conclusion that I am racist and that it was impacting my relationships with my students was incredibly uncomfortable and not something that I wanted to face. The work was difficult and I wanted my project to reflect that work.

I chose a “book” because it presents the “reader” with a progression. At first the reader is confronted with the statement “you are racist” and then are faced with my initial response on the first page. “You’re the one breaking the rules” was my response initially at the time. This response completely avoids the topic of race and puts the blame for the situation on the student. It’s the easiest response to give and came naturally to me at the time (in the same way that turning to the first page of a book comes naturally to those who read it).

After the first page the reader can find the next possible response. After reflection at the time I realized that avoiding race was definitely not a good idea but still couldn’t face the fact that maybe race did have something to do with the situation. “This isn’t about race” acknowledges that race was brought up at the time but even more directly signals to the student that race isn’t even a component of my thinking. This response isn’t one that I would come to naturally, race was very uncomfortable for me for a long time and still is in some ways, but it is still an “easy” response and doesn’t face the real issues at hand.

The final page takes work to get to. The page is held together and requires physical effort in order to open. When working through variations of this project I often had friends, family, and peers ask “does this page open?” when they got to that point. I think it illustrates my own journey well. I don’t like doing things that take a lot of personal effort if I don’t have to and I think a lot of us default in the same way. Facing the response “You’re right” took a lot out of me and takes a lot out of the reader trying to access the last page.

The learning for me hasn’t been limited to just being faced with a statement like “You are racist,” but has branched out to my overall reflection of my teaching practices. I want to be able to ask the question “could race have something to do with this?” when faced with a difficult interaction with one of my students. I now realize that facing various aspects of racial dynamics in my classroom may be difficult and require a lot of effort on my part, but if it’s for the good of my students, if it helps them feel included and involved, important in my teaching practices, then the work is more than worth it to do.