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Editorial: Teaching Wicked Problems: Critical Pedagogy, Personal Transformation, and Social Action through Popular Culture

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DIALOGUE
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Teaching Wicked Problems: Critical Pedagogy, Personal Transformation, and Social Action through Popular Culture

The "wicked problems" of our day continue as first discussed by Rittel and Weber (1973). As a means to address such problems, Donna Mertens (2020) suggests transformative research to bring together solutions for the wicked problems needing interdisciplinary thought and practice to solve (e.g., hunger, poverty, educational access). What has changed since first discussed is a commonly accepted awareness for addressing these problems. For those of us in higher education, we have opportunities to consider the ways in which we work with students and communities to affect a greater understanding of worldwide issues as well as personal level concerns affecting growth and development. In our classrooms, we have a chance to introduce new ways of thinking and deeper learning and self-awareness to become more effective global citizens.

The three articles for this issue speak to these fundamental aspects of being global citizens in a world increasingly marred by seemingly intractable socioeconomic inequalities. Yet as the articles that follow show us, the classroom remains a space of "possibility," one where, as Wayne Au, Bill Bigelow and Stan Kar suggest (2007), "students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality" (p. x). As teacher-scholars who take seriously the socially transformative and pedagogical potential of popular culture, the authors in this volume prompt us to consider how the study of (and thinking with) popular culture invites students to seriously grapple with questions of identity and identification, of ethics and representation, of difference and sameness. At the same time, these case studies highlight the profound significance that teaching popular culture has, be it in the literature or philosophy classroom, for students' interrogation of their personal lives, for their reflections on the power differentials evoked by their social identities, and on their ability to translate such discussions to the public realm.

Thus, if popular culture, as Nadine Dolby (2003) argues, is a "cultural practice that has its own power to create social change — to alter social conditions and the very foundation of people's lives," (258) how can the practice of critical pedagogy through popular culture help tackle the "wicked problems" of our contemporary moment? Further, given that popular culture is not neutral but rather a site of contestation, how can educators empower students to openly challenge, make meaning of, negotiate, and reshape popular culture in ways that prove to be (socially) transformative? Finally, how can both educator and student, as co-conspirators in learning *and un*learning, help promote cultural citizenship, self and social empowerment, social justice, and more just futures vis-à-vis their critical consumption of popular culture?

Across these articles, we see a deep engagement with such questions, each tackling the intersections of critical pedagogy, popular culture, and social action in potent and imaginative ways. In this issue's first article, "Conceptualizing Empathy and Prosocial Action: Teaching Film within the Literature Classroom," Mayuri Deka explores the pedagogical potential of integrating socio-affective strategies in the literature classroom. Using films like *How to Train Your Dragon*, Deka argues that "including film within the literature classroom

would allow for a critical interrogation of the socio-cultural and economic negotiations between various ethno-racial and cultural communities while attempting to alter and subvert the traditional power structure with the marginalized Other." In turn, cultivating empathy in the literature classroom, as Deka suggests, "could play a crucial role in creating a student body that better negotiates the Self/Other divide and enhances their moral emotion, motivation and action."

Along similar lines, our second article, "Experimental Forms and Identity Politics in 21st Century American Poetry," takes up questions of inclusion, representation, and canon formation in the teaching of contemporary poetry. Through the inclusion of poets of color who disidentify with or disrupt the rigid forms and conventions of "traditional" (read: white and cisheteropatriarchal) American poetry, Ronnie Stephens argues that poets such as Jericho Brown, Franny Choi, and Natalie Diaz, among others, employ dissentive poetic forms to conjure "more expansive conceptions of gender, race, and the human experience." Thus, emphasizing "dissent poetry's" fluid quality and its relationship to the rigidity of "traditional" poetry allows students to effectively learn poetic conventions all while tapping into the emancipatory potential that such poetic disruptions invite. By incorporating "dissent poetry" into their curriculum, Stephens argues that educators are uniquely poised to promote students of color engagement with the "literary canon on their own terms."

This issue's third and final article, "What We Owe Our Students: *The Good Place,* Pedagogy, and the Architecture of Engaged Learning," invites readers to consider how NBC's hit television series, *The Good Place,* effectively models how a "well-constructed 'classroom' can prepare students to meet ordinary challenges, extraordinary obstacles, and even existential crises." Putting in conversation *The Good Place's* "architecture of learning" with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' *Global Challenges* "real world" blended model, Shala Mills and Darrell Hamlin argue that both similarly "engage students through content connected to issues that confront them personally and professionally, providing them with opportunities for repetition and mastery." The "students" in the show's diegetic world and those who take part in the "real world" case study are thus empowered to tackle the "wicked problems" of our present moment through an architecture of learning that offers "engagement pathways for the common good." Ultimately, Mills and Hamlin urge educators to deploy a pedagogy of engagement that helps "awaken students and build skills for purposeful work to solve wicked problems."

In addition to the full-length articles, this *Dialogue* issue features two "Musings" on pedagogy and popular culture, and a book review. Tyler Sheldon's Musing piece takes up questions of academic voice, independent thinking, and the craft of academic writing in the college composition classroom. In the second Musings feature, Craig Wynne considers how the disproportionate representation of "coupled" peoples across varied media forms reinforces the primacy of the nuclear family and the reductive gender and sexuality tropes it consolidates. Lastly, this issue spotlights Tyler Sheldon's review of David Gooblar's *The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You About College Teaching*. Educators interested in constructivist pedagogy will find Sheldon's review of Gooblar's teaching approaches particularly useful.

These articles, Musings, and book review have been brought together into a full issue through the hard work of a dedicated team. We would like to thank those amazing people who helped to make this possible: Copy Editors - Miriam Sciala, Robert Gordyn, and Arlyce Menzies; Reference Editors - Joseph Yapp and April Manabat; Creative Director - Douglas CohenMiller; and our authors and peer reviewers.

Overall, *Infusing Pedogogy with Empathy, Social Action and Value through Popular Culture* offers readers illuminating case studies that foreground the generative intersections of critical pedagogy, popular culture, and social action. Indeed, all three articles explore the potentialities of using the critical study of popular culture to help fashion solutions to the "wicked problems" of the 21st century. At a moment where students are feeling increasingly dejected and apprehensive about their futures and the future of our planet, approaching popular culture in personally and socially meaningful ways proves ever-necessary. It is thus our

hope that this issue inspires innovative and socially conscious approaches to the teaching of popular culture and that these ultimately lead to more liberatory ways of being, thinking, and seeing.

Karina Vado
Book Review Editor
Musings Editor

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