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Hearing the Marginalized Voice in the Great Books Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of a two-year Honors Civilizations sequence based on a Great Books curriculum, students at the University of Maine write a reflective essay that describes their personal and intellectual journey with the texts they have encountered over the previous four semesters. In the creation of this “intellectual portfolio,” the students can describe a theme or narrative that has emerged in their thinking, using not only the texts but the classroom dynamic, weekly lectures, and assignments to demonstrate what they have found most beneficial and/or frustrating in their journey. The first year I read these essays, I encountered deep disappointment in the absence of voices: students wanted more women, more texts produced by people of color, more non-European narratives, more attention paid to class systems. In short, students wanted more than the white Western European male narrative.

As a long-time instructor trained in women's, gender, and sexuality studies, I had already begun to incorporate various pedagogical exercises into the honors classroom to make room for marginalized voices. The essays, however, struck a deep chord. The Great Books curriculum is the historical and pedagogical backbone of many honors programs, yet it has significant limitations in opening doors to underrepresented populations. I had always strived to make my honors classroom a space for intersectional learning and, with each passing year, have constructed a set of pedagogical tools that encourage students to hear voices in the texts that otherwise might be silenced.

TEXTUAL ADDITIONS TO THE GREAT BOOKS CURRICULUM

Faculty in the University of Maine Honors College have long believed that the reflective essay at the end of Civilizations is not just an intellectual portfolio designed for student reflection but also a learning tool for faculty to determine both the breadth and depth of students' desired outcomes for the sequence. Over the years, in addition to staples such as Homer, St. Augustine, Shakespeare, Locke, and Darwin, the curriculum has incorporated more and more texts to represent larger populations. The first semester now includes *Inanna*, Laozi's *Tao Te Ching*, and *Dawnland Voices*, a collection of essays and letters by New England's Native populations. Religious texts in the first two semesters address the three major monotheistic religions with the Torah, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. The third semester begins with a collection of Michel de Montaigne's essays to accompany either *Othello* or *The Tempest* and ends with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The final semester covers the end of the nineteenth century to the present, including weeks dedicated to Primo Levi, Frida Kahlo, and a unit on climate change.

The steady increase in appreciation for these notable changes among students' final reflective essays does not imply a simple "add and stir" approach to the curriculum formula. When marginalized voices are relegated to a special week, students tend to express empathy or pity and to distance themselves from the person, identity, or experience central to the narrative. For example, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* might become a narrative in which slavery becomes a historical tragedy that happened a long time ago rather than an oppressive system that shaped the experiences of many generations after abolition. This isolation of a voice speaks more to privilege and less to the need for a more nuanced understanding of difference as a series of complex interactions between "history, power, culture, and ideology" (McLaren in *Multicultural Education* 43).

A text such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* readily lends itself to incorporating McLaren's notion of difference. In my classroom, we begin with a discussion of what each person learned about slavery in high school and then move on to what voices they did and did not hear in their past education. We ask why there are not more slave narratives written by women, why we do not discuss the sexual or psychological abuse experienced by slaves as readily as physical abuse, and whether sexual abuse and mental health are only now breaking out of the taboo space they once occupied. Questions such as these become what Paulo Freire calls "problem-posing" education through which the teacher no longer possesses all knowledge and students none (in what Freire calls "banking education"). Into Freire's model of education, students are exposed to "problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world" and "feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (81). Discussions of slavery can become discussions of systemic racial and/or sexist oppression that easily connect to the current day. Students often open this door by asking, "Why didn't we learn about her/this in high school?" and "Why don't we talk about this kind of abuse more?" leading to greater questions of inclusion and power structures.

Still, questions remain about treatment of the more traditional texts included in the Great Books. In their final reflective essays, students often ask questions such as "Where are the women?" Students are asking about women as producers of texts: they want more Mary Shelleys and Harriet Jacobses. As a scholar and teacher trained in feminist pedagogy, I appreciate the opportunity the Great Books curriculum gives me to ask such questions about the texts we use in the classroom, which go beyond "Where are the women producers?" to involve a close critical reading of how marginalized populations are addressed or neglected by white Western male authors. Through such questions, I demonstrate to honors students that the absence or minimal representation of an identity group can be just as significant to understanding cultural and social ideologies as their presence. Furthermore, when we use an intersectional lens of analysis in the classroom, we can see how subtle differences among characters or historical agents can give us insight into systemic structures of power and oppression.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE GREAT BOOKS CURRICULUM

In her 1994 essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that "sameness," i.e., a "color-blind" society, is not the path toward combating

oppression. Instead, liberal ideologies must seek to understand the complexities of differences:

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring differences within groups frequently contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that frustrates efforts to politicize violence against women. Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as “woman” or “person of color” as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling. (358)

Crenshaw invites her readers to see how the intersection of race and gender serves as a space where the stories of violence against women of color can be told. In the decades following publication of this essay, “intersectionality” has become a term more widely used to encompass issues including but not limited to class, race, ethnicity, religion, education, and sexual and gender identity. However, as Crenshaw reminds us more than two decades later,

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things. (“Intersectionality”)

As educators, we should help students see beyond a monolithic oppression against an identity population or a particular -ism (sexism, racism, etc.) and understand that oppression is increasingly complex the more identity markers are included in a social issue.

An intersectional lens in the classroom, particularly given the time constraints of a Great Books curriculum, is easy to neglect when students are

digesting a text a week. With so little time to discuss each text, the temptation to under-complicate the material is ever-present. Conversely, to include every intersection might prove confusing for students, leaving them with a feeling that the issue is too big for them to conceive. However, if we are to conceive of a “problem posing” educational approach, then intersectionality is a crucial component. Students need not be introduced to every intersectional angle in every text but can consider a component of the narrative where an intersectional lens gives them deeper critical insight into the text.

FRAMING DISCUSSION TO ENCOURAGE AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

As educators, we frame issues, texts, and problems for students in order to lead classroom discussion. While students often get the “what” of the Great Books curriculum, i.e., what books are about, they need a guide to lead them to the “why.” As we introduce students to systems of meanings, we must also “shape the way knowledge is selected, sequenced, paced, and evaluated” (Toolkits 54). Intersectionality encourages us to widen the frame to provide students tools they need to critique a text through different lenses of analysis. Below is a list of advice for framing questions and ideas based on my classroom experience:

1. Students should not expect a marginalized author to write a marginalized hero. For example, students are always disappointed to read *Frankenstein* and find that Mary Shelley, daughter of feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, has written seemingly weak female characters. Students should recognize that authors are products of their society and might have to find subtler ways to write about characters of their identity group.
2. Tell students from the outset of the semester that they should look for missing voices. Who is not represented in the text and why might that be? This question will give them a way to examine the historical power structures from the text’s time period.
3. Ask students to think about their own preconceptions about race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Where do those ideas come from? Are they necessarily applicable to the text or is there a different historical perspective to consider regarding the identity markers?

4. Ask students to consider their experiences with a text prior to class. Have they heard of the text before? What have they heard, seen, or read about the text? This question is not about a previous reading of the text but about the text, encouraging students to challenge what they think they already know. An example might be their understanding of Eve from stories in Genesis.
5. Encourage students to challenge the representation. For example, when an author represents women in a certain way, does this mean that is how women were? Was society made up of whores, beacons of light, Madonna figures, and hags, or are these representations describing a larger conception of women in society? Do these representations still bear relevance to the world students live in?
6. When adding a text to the Great Books curriculum that is from an underrepresented group, make sure students see it as part of the canon. For example, *Inanna* can be read as a creation story. When students see how such a text fits into the canon, they move beyond such labels as “woman’s text” and can integrate ideas of institutions and power into discussion in a more nuanced fashion.
7. Students might also ask questions about the authors. Who were they? Why did they write what they did? What do their perspectives, likely privileged in some manner, say about those in society who may be oppressed? Might the author have experienced both privilege and oppression? How does that complicate the narrative?
8. Ask students to avoid “grouping,” that is putting agents within a text in a group just because they may all be of the same gender or class. Instead, students should look for differences in order to find tensions and intersections within the text. Below I use Shakespeare as an example.

THE INTERSECTIONAL SHAKESPEARE

The third semester in the Honors Civilizations sequence opens with two essays by Michel de Montaigne (“Of Monstrous Child” and “On Cannibalism”) paired with a classic Shakespearean text, *Othello*. Charged with reading these texts in August to be prepared for first-day discussion, students often come into the classroom ready to discuss Montaigne’s critique of the

European notion of barbarism. Students almost always begin discussion of Montaigne with a passage from “On Cannibals”: “I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country.” This passage ties in nicely to classroom discussion of the Moor, Othello, whom Brabantio describes as a savage who must have “enchanted” his daughter, Desdemona, with “magic” to make her run to his “sooty bosom” (*Othello* I:2, 70). Classroom discussion inevitably turns to racism, discrimination, and applications to the students’ present understanding of their world, all within our first fifty-minute class period together.

This type of discussion about race in *Othello*, while valuable in itself, is not necessarily an intersectional lens. In this reading of *Othello*, students have identified the problem (Iago is cruelly destroying the lives of Othello and Desdemona because of his racial prejudice) without complicating the struggle; before the end of the first fifty minutes, I make sure that we complicate it. We start with naming the identity markers of each character in a list that looks like this:

Othello: Moor (read as black), wealthy, married to Desdemona, military hero

Desdemona: woman, wealthy, married to Othello

Cassio: wealthy background, military experience, involved with prostitute Bianca

Iago: lower class than Cassio or Othello, married to Emilia

Emilia: Desdemona’s maid, married to Iago

Bianca: prostitute, assumed to be woman of color

From this list alone, an intersectional approach becomes clear. Race, class, gender, education, employment, and marital status become integral points of motivation and behavior for each character involved, leading to a series of questions posed by myself and/or the students about the play:

Is Iago’s cruelty motivated by losing the position to Cassio given to him by Othello?

Why does Emilia stand up for Iago when he appears to treat her like dirt?

Why does Desdemona stay with Othello when he obviously cannot trust her?

Why would Othello trust Iago over Desdemona?

Why would Cassio sleep with a prostitute?

Why is it assumed that Bianca is a woman of color?

What do we make of the verbal and physical abuse?

In the construction of these questions, we have begun more to pose problems than to find answers. A sample classroom dialogue among students might go like this:

“Does Othello not trust Desdemona because men hold more power than women?”

“But wouldn’t Othello understand being mistreated and therefore be more sensitive to his wife?”

“Maybe, but it’s possible he cares more about his status and wealth than his marriage.”

“If that’s so, why would he get so jealous?”

Clearly, time does not permit us to answer all these questions—it barely affords us space to ask them—but we have begun to complicate issues within *Othello* that go far beyond the words of a few cruelly racist men and demonstrate the distinctions of power, privilege, marginalization, and oppression that not only exist in the same social paradigm but can reside within the same person.

The second class session includes acting out a scene from the play to examine the role of women through an intersectional lens. I ask two people to play the roles of Desdemona and Emilia and to read—or if they are so inclined, act out—Act 4, Scene 3, in which Desdemona considers if it is possible that there are wives who cheat on their husbands and says that if there are, she “wouldn’t not” do “such a deed for all the world.” Emilia replies, “The world’s a huge thing. It is a small price for a great vice” (4:3, 52–55). Within a few lines, Emilia delivers her monologue in which she ultimately states that if women strike their husbands or cheat on them, the men only have themselves to blame for teaching their wives such behavior in the first place. We spend time dissecting this scene afterward, analyzing Emilia’s meaning and

how her position as a lower-class woman affects her belief system. Next, we discuss why we have read this scene, as opposed to another from the play, out loud. Students often admit that they skimmed through this one because it did not seem as important as what was happening between Iago and Othello, but it helps them to understand the motivations of both women, based on their status as women and also their social classes, as the play progresses. Some say that it makes sense to them that Emilia, the one without class privilege, would “cuckold her husband to make him a monarch” (4:3, 60–61) as it would mean the possibility of greater security or comfort in a world that had possibly already been cruel to her. The students who have read the scene aloud, especially those who have read Emilia, find themselves moved by the words that so blatantly challenge the rights of wealthy men to dominate women in Shakespeare’s Venice.

By the end of our week on *Othello*, race, class, and gender become inextricably linked. The outset of the play, when Brabantio accuses his daughter of betraying him to marry a man of color, suggests that deeply intertwined racist and patriarchal structures of power and dominance are in motion. In the classroom, we do not set out to unravel those structures but to acknowledge their existence. With these exercises, I have two goals for students:

1. That they recognize that issues of race, class, and gender are not limited to singular instances relating to one or two individuals in the play but are linked in a much larger structure of power and ideology.
2. That they can use an intersectional lens in all the texts they come across in the semester to come.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE SINGLE-ISSUE STRUGGLE

One of the first steps in a “problem posing” approach to education is to work beyond the assumption that there exists one problem singularly remote from all other problems. The notion of “woman as oppressed” will appear in several of the texts students encounter, but this should not be an indicator that oppression comes in the same form or experience. In *Sister Outsider*, black feminist scholar and activist Audre Lorde writes, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle as we do not live single-issue lives” (138). Lorde illustrates that the struggles of black people, while particular to the individual, are not isolated experiences but are shared by many. Though Lorde’s essay

predates Crenshaw's first use of intersectionality by several years, she powerfully shows the problem of singularly identifying a text. One of my students, Keely, noted that thinking about intersectionality in this way allowed her to move beyond herself and the "it's not my problem" mentality that is so easy to adopt in just trying to get her assigned reading and homework done. Keely's classmate, Erin, noted that intersectionality is useful for students at the predominantly white University of Maine to bridge the gap between themselves and social movements such as Black Lives Matter.

As evidenced by the 2017 National Collegiate Honors Council conference, honors programs are continuing to strive toward addressing questions of justice and equity in their classrooms and programs. A Great Books curriculum that offers up a rather homogenous array of authors and producers of texts can seem counter to these objectives, yet the goal of including marginalized voices does not necessarily mean the eradication of the Great Books tradition, which can teach students how to find and analyze these voices when they do appear. For example, Penelope in *The Odyssey*, Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, and Desdemona in *Othello* all provide opportunities to analyze the role of women in the literature of a Great Books curriculum. Teaching students to read these characters not as representatives of an entire sex but as existing with their own set of identity markers can go a long way toward forming an intersectional lens.

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