

“You Have Forever Changed My Life”: The Need for Academic Rigor in Teaching Humanities in a Global Society

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Abstract:

Teaching Humanities to an increasingly globalized, diverse and non-traditional student body needs to inculcate and develop what Kysilka has called thinking skills, to equip students to approach material and concepts that may seem challenging and unfamiliar. Educators may benefit from employing the approaches Gardner has developed in his theory of Multiple Intelligences, to maximally engage students with widely differing academic exposures and skills. Reader Response journaling allows students to explore and engage with unfamiliar texts. Twenty-first-century educators need to be prepared to assess student success less by testing content acquisition and theory repetition than by evaluating student development of analytical strengths and mastery of the skills of analytical performance.

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Education in the United States faces an andragogical crisis. The breadth and depth of learning expected of American children a century ago challenges today's adult American educators. A popular reference in discussions about current American education is using early twentieth-century middle and high school end-of-year exams that cannot be passed by not only American college students today but their professors, as well. As an associate professor of literature newly arrived at an historically African American university in the twenty-first century's first decade, when students repeatedly told me that I had “taught them to think,” I took the statement as a self-denigrating assessment of native capacity and argued vociferously against it. I thought my ethnic minority students were calling themselves stupid. But I was mistaken, both in my interpretation of my students' assessment of what I was teaching them and in my assumption that there was no need to teach it. It is with good reason that Marcella Kysilka argues that educators must be trained to

incorporate the teaching of what she summarizes as thinking skills in basic education: “Individuals need to know how to learn and how to think and should not be receptacles for facts” (Kysilka 1998, 198). This need was identified in the 1980s when standardized testing revealed that American students had little to no analytical or abstract reasoning ability in comparison to students from other countries. Kysilka’s breakdown of trends in American education per decade from the 1960s through the 1980s calls for packaging the teaching of thinking skills in the transmission of basic educational content.

Ethnic minorities in the United States may have been taught to equate education with Anglicization, as described by Carter G. Woodson in *The Mis-education of the Negro*. Sensitive about this potential equating of scholarly achievement with whitewashing, throughout my first half decade teaching at an HBCU, when students stated in my classes that I had “taught them to think,” it took several unappreciative responses on my part and patient rejoinders on theirs to clarify that they were actually telling me that they had learned to self-analyze, self-criticize, self-observe, and self-instruct. They were articulating to me that they were observing themselves becoming lifelong self-educators, a commonly held goal that we had not expressed to each other. My students were right to call what I was teaching them, along with the literature I expected them to read, the skillset necessary to understand, analyze and apply it.

Well analyzed Humanities material develops the capacity for real-world application of abstract literary, psychosocial, philosophical, and historical concepts. For example, a traumatized nineteen-year-old with a newborn baby who had watched her father die of a heart attack on a cot in a shelter during escape from Hurricane Katrina’s flooding of New Orleans left a letter on my office door, defending her absences and her defensive responses to my corrections. In her letter, she described her Katrina ordeal and its impact on her adjustment to both the strange city where her family sought shelter and the unfamiliar university she was presently attending, by quoting the imprisoned and castrated Chinese historian Sima Quian in her effort to, as she stated, help me “understand her ways”: I too have ventured not to be modest but have entrusted myself to my useless writings [...] though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret should I have? (Sima Quian 1958, 67)

An ex-felon who later became a wealthy young entrepreneur read to his class about his self-inflicted self-discipline, regularly subjecting himself to solitary confinement in a closet in his apartment where he recited passages from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* until he overcame each bout of depression and discouragement. Another young professional read aloud about combating her depression following date rape by comparing her terror to that of abducted child soldiers’ brides in Uganda, as recounted in Els De Temmerman’s *Aboke Girls*. This student went on to marry across racial barriers, a practice formerly condemned in her family, and to raise two well-educated, socially adjusted and broad-minded sons with her husband’s and broader family’s support. A six-foot-four former child soldier and political refugee from West Africa, who was learning English in college as a third language after his tribal language and French, stood before his class with his hands, voice and body trembling to read one carefully crafted page with painfully selected quotes from the assigned texts, describing his mother’s rescue of him from his kidnappers and her sending him to asylum in

the United States. A father who had been cursed by his own mother, community and traditional nation and exiled from his West African homeland because he refused to have his daughters circumcised wept upon hearing his classmates' sustained applause for his decision to protect them from female genital cutting. This breakthrough and appreciation of the power of their support spontaneously occurred to the class after they had all read Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Waris Dirie's *Desert Flower* or Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and listened to their fellow student's confessional journal entry, describing the personal cost of his choice to break tradition on behalf of his daughters. An Iranian Muslim asked permission to stand and read before her class her essay apologizing to its Baha'i guest speaker for her country's religious persecution of him, his family and his entire Baha'i community. A young woman resistant to reading anything beyond the Bible wrote about her renewed religious conviction after reading Ben Okri's vision of Nigeria as seen through the eyes of a spirit-child in *The Famished Road*. A young woman's Master's Thesis vented her shock at losing her stillborn newborn and her unfaithful fiancé in the span of a few months, quoting multiple volumes of men's African and Diaspora Literature to vindicate her uncompromising new high standards. She eventually married a faithful man, and together they gave birth to a live daughter.

I share these vignettes from my literature classes to demonstrate that my global ethnic minority student body has chosen to use literature as a tool with which to grasp an often hostile, frequently threatening twenty-first-century world and to define the roles they choose to develop for themselves in it. A formerly sullen single mother, upon determining to become a top student, slipped a note under my office door saying she wanted me to know that learning to analyze texts had taught her academic self-confidence. Her note concluded with, "You have forever changed my life."

The wide range of these skill acquisitions illustrates potential outcomes of the admittedly hard work that goes into adopting Kysilka's and Howard Gardner's theories about thinking skills and Multiple Intelligences, toward the widespread (re)development of analytical reading, writing and oratory skills in diverse adult student populations. In order to embrace Kysilka's teaching of thinking skills, and to struggle toward mastering how to teach toward Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, educators need to be granted a certain non-abusive range of pedagogical freedoms.

In 1983, Gardner officially proposed teaching to multiple intelligences. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory, MI, assumes that all learners have specific capacities and potential strengths that may not be targeted by standard curricula. Gardner argues that thorough but fluid teaching and individualized learning of basic content and skills will of itself initiate and encourage the development of thinking skills. Since students thrive in different ways, it is not only crucial to differentiate instruction to reach and teach them, but it is equally important to differentiate methods of assessment to evaluate what each student has successfully learned.

While teaching African, African American, and multiethnic women's literatures in the early twenty-first century at a private women's college in the Midwest with very few ethnic minority women students, I developed a policy that my predominantly Anglo-American women students were not going to be allowed to hide behind the term "interesting." I had quickly discovered that the

young women I was teaching seemed to rely upon this popular euphemism instead of exposing their sincere assessments of a problem with more precise, declarative words that risked sounding authoritative or critical. The words these women students were avoiding using by euphemistically labelling controversial statements “interesting” were such position-taking evaluations as “hypocritical,” “self-contradictory,” “ironic,” “judgmental,” “condemnatory,” or “superficial.”

As it will, word soon got around about my impatience with the false neutrality that the non-committal term “interesting” afforded young women who might have been raised to avoid appearing assertive, and my predilection for interrupting a student on her third or fourth iteration of “interesting” to insist that she clarify what she wanted her listeners to understand. If the banned “interesting” was then closely followed by, “You know what I mean?” the inevitable answer had to be, “No, I don’t, and I won’t until you tell me.” Eventually, each semester, students who came to my classes despite my demanding reputation would begin to comment on what they were learning by working hard to self-correct and sidestep use of the forbidden word “interesting” and the phrase “You know what I mean.” Not only were their vocabularies forced to grow, but so were their capacities for dynamic self-evaluation as active group contributors to social and historical analysis. Young women who perhaps had never previously been in multiethnic interactive arenas learned and began to examine their realizations that euphemisms, verbal avoidance, silence, and self-conscious refusal to comment are in themselves definitive position statements. Perhaps, for example, everyone but the speaker is aware that she has taken a position of extreme conservatism or even of social cowardice by labeling assault on ethnic minority women’s voting, salary, immigration, bodies, or reproductive rights “interesting.” One young woman decided that, if she were going to be corrected, anyway, she might as well have said what she really meant, in the first place.

These young women who were predominantly diligent readers but unused to writing down, reading aloud and vigorously exploring independently-derived opinions – the work of Reader Response literary analysis – thereby adjusted to observing their impact on discussions by their selection of precisely the words that aptly described their experiences of texts, presentations and arguments. When no one else was going to speak up for them, before them, or louder than they would, these young women leaders-in-training articulated the challenges and rewards of learning to form, write, deliver, and articulately *ad lib* in ongoing discussions their potentially controversial stances. They correspondingly discovered the profundity of the impact of their carefully chosen words and the reality that their opinions always – without fail – matter. In learning to articulate scholarly presentations, they learned social leadership.

Reflecting on the women’s college as a teaching experience, I particularly remember a group of students studying African American Women’s Autobiographies. Each student chose a different text from my list of twentieth-century classics such as Rosemary Bray’s *Unafraid of the Dark*, Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, asha bandele’s *The Prisoner’s Wife*, Waris Dirie’s *Desert Flower*, Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, and Anita Hill’s *Speaking Truth to Power*. As the semester progressed, students took these sessions far beyond my intended teaching of literary analysis to initiate cathartic healing encounters.

After the first few class sessions spent reading aloud their journal entries with quotes from their selected texts that helped them explore self-silencing and self-empowerment, students began to encourage each other to increasingly reveal in their journals some significant personal tragedy: one had been raped by a brother, one verbally abused by an abandoning father who then became the only close relation supportive of her being in college; one smiling young woman had been institutionalized for self-cutting; and another came late to the last class on a stormy afternoon to read her journal entry about resenting the father whose alcoholism reduced her family's financial standing from wealth to relative penury. They wrote with candor and read with tears on their faces and catches in their voices. My efforts as professor-turned-facilitator to remind them that they were under no obligation to read such private material aloud – indeed, my strenuous efforts to dissuade them from doing so – were doggedly ignored as they helped each other confront and banish by sharing and airing their personal demons, just as each of the autobiographers had done. Though this was not my intended lesson, it became my andragogical lesson-to-self: when a philosophically Idealist educator meets with a practically Existentialist dilemma – to allow my students to self-teach what it is that they wish to learn upon exposure to material I have provided them, or fail them utterly by teaching only what I wish them to know – the Existentialist must be permitted to appropriate the course and facilitate students' self-directed learning. When my adult students take my lessons and run with them far beyond where I intend that they go, do I have the right to tell them where to stop? I must argue with myself that, in today's world, if they are not harming themselves or others, I do not have the right to dictate to them their learning acquisition limits. Today's adult students are facing world crises, even in the formerly safe havens of wealthy and powerful nations, that former generations may have had to travel or read newspapers to learn about. *Exeunt* professor to become silent facilitator.

As educators, we hope to empower adults to situate themselves in a world that has changed while we sought to survive the competitive environment of our ivory towers. A young biology major returned to her class at the women's college from her medical school interviews to announce in some astonishment to her classmates that she had not been asked about her science classes but about the issues that arose in discussing multiethnic women's literature. Could she speak to women patients from different cultures? How might she approach them? She had received specific praise from her interviewers about the sensitivity, thoughtfulness and promptness of her responses to challenging intercultural awareness questions, an aspect of my literature courses that she had, until her medical school interviews, resented and resisted.

Not all the women's college students had mistrusted intercultural exposure or cross-cultural vulnerability. After reading Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, one large Freshman Composition class learned that I possessed a copy of the sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, and organized a dormitory lending system so that each student who wanted to read *Talents* had two hours with my copy before the group returned the book to me in class the following morning. That same year, a senior class wanted an extra session discussing Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Midwest icy winter weather notwithstanding. Therefore, we rose at dawn to meet before the day's final exams began, to further

analyze this text which they found historically and artistically complex. These anecdotes serve to illustrate that the goal of simply teaching bright students to become somewhat familiar with elements of a literature that was foreign to their own cultures and antithetic to everything they had previously read or known about their worlds simultaneously taught them abstract reasoning, debate, intercultural sensitivity, and social and academic self-confidence.

However, one of the difficulties in advancing teaching and learning to suit individual learners' unique intelligences while meeting standardized expectations is dealing with the overwhelming responsibility and accountability that accompany the freedoms instructors and institutions need to put such ideas into practice. The threat of accusations of perceived dereliction of institutional responsibilities toward students or infringement on students' rights may inhibit an institutional effort to adopt Gardner's MI or project-based learning systems. Simultaneous pressure on instructors to maintain a level of constant self-assessment and revision may prove overwhelming and deter even the most useful experimentation. For implementation of such individualized learning systems to work, instructors, like institutional administrators, will need to be sufficiently trained to assess performance data collected in their own classrooms in progress, as their methods of instruction shift.

Twenty-first century educators may need to personally resolve to believe that learned incompetency is not intellectual incapacity. In the Humanities, traditional canons have been overturned, and traditional teaching methods are being dismantled. While the disruption of exclusionary canons bodes well for student learning outcomes in that a more diverse range of material may appeal to a broader demographic of students, the loss of traditional teaching methods may prove somewhat problematic for them. Students may no longer read certain books by a certain age. Penmanship, timed writing exercises, formal debates, and other exercises in rigor and discipline that supported habits of learning may no longer be taught. For this reason, even motivated students may find themselves lacking necessary skills and perspectives that would have enabled them to increase both content recall and skill mastery. As canons and curricula in the Humanities change, educators should prepare themselves to experiment with previously untried material and approaches but also revisit subjects and best teaching practices of the rapidly fading past. In allowing educators to share the excitement and challenges that make up the foundations of their own ability to continually self-educate, and to experiment with new and innovative methodologies without fear of censorship, instructors may maintain and share with their students the enthusiasm and energy of their own discovery of lifelong learning.

During my first year teaching at an historically African American university (HBCU, meaning Historically Black Colleges and Universities) established to facilitate the continuance of and mitigate the damage done by *de jure* educational segregation, I discovered that none of my 120 Freshman Composition students knew any of the fairytales that I had thought informed basic American preschool and kindergarten story time. One well-planned lesson was completely stymied; how could we explore Louise Gluck's poem "Gretel in Darkness" if I was teaching the poem to 120 non-traditional adult students who had no idea what had happened in the original "Hansel and Gretel"

fairytale? That day's lesson was altered: approximately thirty predominantly African American adult faces per each of my four classes stared thoughtfully up at me well into their break between class periods rather than leaving the room because they wanted to know how the misadventures of Hansel and Gretel were going to end. Each time I concluded, groups of students left shaking their heads and moralizing: about the willful blindness of the widower who married again, supposedly for the benefit of his motherless children; about the egoistic selfishness of the stepmother; about Gretel's childish adoration of her helpless brother; and about Hansel's willingness to abandon the sister whose courage saved his life. Lesson-to-self about andragogy: it is crucial that the educator does not confuse a possible history of educational deprivation with intellectual incapacity or lack of scholarly curiosity.

For, upon becoming informed about the missing fundamentals in their approach to Louise Gluck's poem, these same students then brought their wealth of real-world knowledge to bear upon presentations of their acquired information, hurling efficacious quotes at each other not only from Gluck but from Aphra Behn, William Blake, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks as they debated volatile aspects of the topics of love and gender. My HBCU students are, in their passionately invested and emotionally raw academic environment, ready and compelling literary analysts, writing engaging essays about their encounters with such diverse texts as ancient Egyptian love poems, twentieth-century African and African American fiction, and medieval Asian histories and mythologies. They tackle *The Bhagavad-Gita*, *The Inferno*, *Clotel*, and *Chaka*, changing their own, each other's and my life with fresh perspectives and unblushingly blunt philosophical excavations. The son of Mexican immigrants wrote for his final presentation that he had decided he could accomplish any goal because he learned from *Gilgamesh* that human beings were descended from the gods. A large man in his forties approached me in the parking lot and hugged me. When he released me, he asked if I remembered him because he had dropped out of my general education class for personal reasons. But he wanted me to know that he had read *Our Nig* cover-to-cover and needed to thank me for showing him what his orphaned mother had probably gone through when her Anglo-American mother abandoned her because of her father's African American race, as a child. He said that, now that he felt he understood his mother, they were able to be close without her opening up about experiences she had always refused to disclose. Thanks to their conversations, he was once again back in college, close to completing his bachelor's degree.

This student was referring to the complete and unabridged version of a short creative nonfictional text that other classes were reading in abridged form, if at all. For many reasons, twenty-first-century educators need to return to the teaching of whole texts and contexts. In an American curriculum that, in the mid-1950s, expected a middle or junior high school student to read complete and unabridged nineteenth-century novels and take part in discussions about the meanings of memorized poetry and speeches, that student would have mastered current college-level reading, analytical and abstract reasoning skills well before graduating from high school. Kysilka reminds educators that the back-to-basic-skills acquisition push of the 1970s, emphasizing reading, writing and arithmetic (the three Rs), resulted in elimination of exploratory and experimental – meaning

abstract and analytical – approaches to the humanities, social sciences and literature. Tragically for intellectual development, today, even college students majoring in English may find themselves assigned the reading of excerpts and abridgments, in which a textbook's editor has done the bulk of critical thinking and analysis for the student, before the student has even had a chance to attempt to do so. An excerpt or abridgment has lost material that the student will probably not have another opportunity to encounter, contextualize and evaluate in dynamic discussion with other scholars. The college student majoring in English or other humanities may find that s/he is deprived of the tools to begin to experiment with critical thinking skills until entering upper division college courses and encountering complete texts, perhaps for the first time, in debate with a professor over a graded essay.

However, even upper division college English courses may not utilize complete texts or require students' research and reading of primary texts. Some college and university educators and institutions are beginning to require of upper division and graduate Literature students extensive secondary resource research rather than the close reading of primary texts. Worse, compiling secondary source lists may involve no reading whatsoever beyond the author, title and citation information of published essays about primary texts the student has never read and, at this point, has been given no reason to read. How can a student who has not subjected the primary text to analytical scrutiny, and who may never have developed the skills to do so, possibly assess the applicability of the secondary resources s/he is listing?

On an even more troubling note, American students' basic reading and literacy skills have continued to decline. In college and university classes in the early twenty-first century, students may struggle to read aloud. Interpretation, a skill that implies not only ease of reading but familiarity and confidence with the tools of analysis, including a grasp of intercultural contexts and symbolisms, is not a reasonable requirement for students who cannot sound out words. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa note that the twenty-first-century United States college student accomplishes little more than an hour of independent study per day, pursuing courses that require insubstantial amounts of reading and composition; therefore, Arum and Roksa call for educators to agree on professionally realistic preparatory curricula and standards, toward a positive performative change. According to Arum and Roksa, the developmental path from learned incompetency to preparation for continual skill and content development is the implementation of the disciplined learning of basics.

As an example of a country with progressive learning goals, Finland grants pedagogical freedom to its instructors to reach students of varying classes, ethnicities and experiences. Finland prides itself on an educational system that neither caters to the affluent nor alienates the immigrant. A public-school education is universally expected of all Finnish students, regardless of financial or ethnic background. There is no private school safe-haven in which the affluent may escape the education offered the less wealthy. As a result, Finland enjoys some of the fastest-growing measurable student achievement, globally. Finland's universal success illuminates Gardner's statement that respecting and serving the multiple intelligences of a diverse student population can

result in measurable success and deep learning, assessable even through use of debated standardized exams such as are currently relied upon in the United States.

Gardner advises a spiral approach to learning, exposing students to a specific rudimentary framework of concepts which they will encounter again and again in increasingly sophisticated settings, rather than learning facts in the isolation of a semester or school year. Each stage of learning theoretically lays the groundwork for future learning and accomplishment. This spiraling educational approach seems to have been in use in some systems such as the Los Angeles Unified School District in the late 1960s where and when I attended elementary school, when Kysilka identifies the United States' push to improve learning through encouraging analytical, abstract and creative thought, to compete with Russian innovations.

Another approach that uses some of the same repetitive application of basic skills in increasingly sophisticated scenarios would be project-based learning. Once students are equipped with the basic skills and information necessary to accomplish tasks, they are left to figure out for themselves how to begin to critically and selectively apply those skills, to accomplish desired outcomes. This is how project-based learning achieves higher scores in standardized tests: students are prepared to address end-of-year exams because independent and selective application of learned material and skills is the purpose of the year's curriculum. By embracing students as individualized learners with multiple and unique intelligences, school systems see marked improvement in standardized test results. In an environment such as that in the United States that relies heavily on standardized evaluation, it is nevertheless possible to modify standards of pedagogical practice and learning evaluation.

To arrive at such rewarding results, many andragogical adaptations must be made. Recalling that each Freshman Composition course at the racially exclusive and financially elite women's college was accompanied by corresponding laboratory time, I alternated literary discussion sessions with writing intensives when I arrived at the HBCU. With hands-on supervision, HBCU students who had initially found college-level writing too daunting to tackle learned within one semester to write eloquently, quote appropriately and cite accurately. Upon discovering that my Ancient and Medieval World Literature classes full of thirty to forty undergraduate students each had no background knowledge or working definition of a quest – rendering relatively pointless introducing them to translations of *Gilgamesh*, *The Papyrus of Ani*, *The Aeneid*, *The Metamorphoses*, *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, and *Sundiata*, for example – my students have been sent from the classroom and dispersed campus-wide in cross-cultural, multi-gendered groups to experience the quest via episodes of *Haunted Planet* on their group leaders' cell phones.

Students return to class with journals describing group quests. One previously disengaged future leader began his essay, "Today was a terrible day to be a student at my University, which my World Lit class has discovered is haunted." One group's quest into a dark, dusty maintenance facility read like the Sumerian goddess Inanna's descent through the Seven Hells; a student whose Gulf War-traumatized father avoids suicide by rereading *The Inferno* made her analysis of his lifesaving annual trek through Hell her final essay; another whose semester was blighted by strep throat and prolonged

absence from class wrote a final essay describing her self-assigned quests to rebuild her self-confidence by undergoing increasingly challenging episodes of *Haunted Planet*.

Foreshadowing this supra-modular method of strengthening student learning experiences, twenty to thirty years ago, Mexican children in grade school studied Greek and Latin etymology, and high school Mexican students undertook interdisciplinary science and craft activities that supported concepts of sustainability, such as the slaughter, anatomical study and use of all parts of a whole pig. Gardner favors some forms of “core knowledge” in the form of an educational consensus on what constitutes foundational concepts and informative processes of learning. Not only were Mexican students trusted to learn fundamental but complex information to be applied throughout their educational careers, but they were granted the opportunity to develop specialized skills that could serve them well into their professional futures. In the same way, my predominantly African American HBCU students discovered and defined their global citizenship by taking ownership of literature from all over the world and all periods of history when they independently tackled and wrested meaning from every international work of literature put before them.

Upon leaving the women’s college and becoming a professor at an historically African American university in the South that had been instituted to both maintain and compensate for *de jure* racial segregation, I was appalled to discover not only that my most advanced African American students were being taught literature in predigested bits from anthologies, but that they were neither expected to quote the assigned material nor to argue their own opinions. In rebellion against this systematic institutionalized under-education and academic disadvantaging, my literature courses at the HBCU were taught from the same syllabi and curricula I had developed at the private women’s college: from eight to ten texts per course, per semester, at every level of instruction, expecting written journal entries prepared before or developed in class, that students were expected to read aloud to each other to jumpstart discussion. My students were African Americans, immigrants, refugees, and scholarly visitors from around the world. Significantly, I soon discovered that, among this group, I had no need to ban reliance upon the word “interesting.” Instead, my task was to forbid the researching of secondary sources and critical opinions about the assigned literature, which threatened to lead to parroting or pirating of such material. In my classes, students are called upon to articulate first in writing, next in reading aloud, and then in class discussions about their Reader Responses to the texts. Only then are the most advanced students allowed to conduct secondary-source research toward the completion of more extensive essays, theses or dissertations.

In today’s United States educational environment with a disrupted and thereby expanded canon, the concept of text similarly needs to be expanded. Disaffected students fall into engagement like a line of tapped dominoes upon exposure to historically recorded Blues, Jazz or music taped during a Pokot or Kikuyu rite of exorcism, or when shown historically creative films such as *The Journey of August King* and *The Desert Ark*. Even more eye-opening and mind-expanding may be the out-of-classroom, campus-wide class field trips to the university’s Museum, its library’s Arts exhibits, its historic murals, current event lectures, literary readings, town halls, and archives. To get

the most out of them, such events should be followed up with class readings of reflective journal entries that encourage finding a quotable line from the assigned readings, to begin making personally relevant links from experience to literature. As Gardner has explained, "Sometimes it is possible to use an area of strength as a bridge to an area that has posed difficulties" (Gardner 2008, 144).

Assigned overcrowded basic writing courses for interdepartmental graduate students, I have increasingly opted to get them out of the classroom and into the university's artistic and political milieus as soon and as often as possible, awarding extra credit for good questions and comments offered at public events. During in-class discussion about the potential interpretive meanings of individually selected African texts in relation to these students' graduate degrees, one student lectured his Education colleagues on their resistance to learning what he took to be the most pedagogically obvious and fundamentally impacting of the lessons available in my course: get to know students' varied learning styles, he argued, by taking them on field trips and having them return to tell each other what they have learned. Then the educator will know how and what to help them write. So authoritatively persuasive were this student's arguments for his educational leadership in sharing his insights with his peers and convincing them to adopt experimental techniques that he successfully passed the graduate writing course he had previously repeatedly failed.

I had a similarly overpowering experience teaching composition to a body of over forty graduate students from multiple disciplines. A group of these students were from Nigeria and, pursuing personal interests, chose *en masse* to read books by Igbo writers, including *Arrow of God*, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Efuru*, which inevitably led to intense end-of-the-semester final essays and presentations that debated biases against and among the Igbo, about which I had previously known nothing. While each of these writers had come beforehand to my office to make sure they were following the rules of composition that would earn them passing grades, the theme and content of their essays was, as always, their own. I sat in wonder at the depth and intensity of the learning experience they afforded not only themselves but their African American, Latinx, Asian, and Yoruba classmates as one after another of these Igbo essayists took the floor to expand the group's unselfconscious exploration of issues of self-perception, history, power, and identity.

That same evening, African American men and women who had read *Finding Fish*, *Black Like Me* and *The Prisoner's Wife* stood to read aloud their essays that addressed abuse, abandonment, social injustice, and the empowerment of self-definition. A Saudi woman in a chador who had read *Speaking Truth to Power* decried the U. S. Congress's refusal to believe a woman who had come to them, trusting them with her account of how she had been sexually harassed, and stated that such humiliation by men in power would not have happened in her country. A Latino star athlete, the first-generation son of immigrants, who had read *Myth, Literature and the African World*, overlaid the struggles of the suicidal god-king Shango upon his own triumphs and frustrations as the perfect son who is supposed to rescue his community but fears he has failed them. It is my hope that students leave such end-of-the-semester class conferences with their thoughts expanded and their minds opened

to see themselves in a workable global context. Kysilka summarizes that, "Subject matter is a means, not a goal" (Kysilka, 1998, 198), and these courageous academic explorers demonstrate that truth.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge the chronic exhaustion, frustration, disillusionment, and disgust with administrative obstructionism that accompany andragogic experimentation as described in this essay. However, this is the lesson my students have taught me and that I wish to share with educators and educational administrators worldwide: the twenty-first-century classroom must become an arena wherein moral vigilance and innovative rigor are daily requirements that each educational facilitator demands of herself, toward successfully introducing students to the dynamic arts of identifying who and what they wish to be, studying the world they have inherited via active exposure to its written traces, and maintaining unrelentingly high expectations of students' potential to describe and apply perceptions and perspectives. For, from where our fractured and mistrustful academic community is entering the new millennium, the rebuilding of the love of acquiring the tools of critical thinking and the capacity to confront and enjoy scholarly challenge is the only way forward.

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