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Disorienting Experiences: Guiding Faculty and Students Toward Cultural Responsiveness

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Abstract: This essay examines the challenges of integrating culturally responsive teaching into an honors curriculum at a predominantly white institution. Through self-reflection resulting from three specific incidents, one author examines the trajectory of risk-taking as it pertains to assigning difficult or challenging texts. The second author provides a vital complement to self-reflection: the mentorship of a senior colleague.

Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy; Predominantly White Institution (PWI); self-reflection; diversity

Asking students to become more culturally responsive hardly seems like a risk-taking exercise as few students (or faculty, for that matter) are likely to object to learning about other cultures and viewpoints. For a small honors program serving a predominantly white institution (PWI) in a relatively rural area, however, challenging deeply ingrained mindsets, particularly those pertaining to issues of class and race, becomes a risk-taking endeavor for instructor and student alike. The riskiness of such an exercise is exacerbated by the likely lack of diversity within the program itself: just as persons of color are underrepresented in many K–12 gifted and talented programs, so too may persons of color be underrepresented in honors education. As identified by Anthony Pittman in 2001, perceived barriers to entry into honors education vary greatly according to race, with students of color citing lack of diversity within honors as a primary barrier. Pittman studied an honors program with an 18.5% minority population—a relatively small population for

a large university, but quite a large population for some predominantly white institutions. For such programs where recruiting and retaining minority students already proves challenging, such perceptions may further perpetuate a lack of diversity within honors education. Consequently, the “risk” of emphasizing cultural responsiveness within honors education becomes a veritable necessity for both minority students and their peers.

The challenge for honors educators—those at PWIs in particular—is to design an effective approach to such a risk-taking endeavor. The risk often begins with a “disorienting learning and teaching encounter,” a phenomenon described by China Jenkins in a 2016 qualitative study of white educators at PWIs. Jenkins limited her study to established scholars in the field of education, with a primary purpose “to examine the motivation to become culturally inclusive and the transformational experiences that created this motivation and shaped their development” (151). Though neither Jenkins nor those she interviewed reference honors education specifically, the emphasis on continual self-reflection aligns closely with the behaviors that we as honors educators seek to model for and develop in our students. If, like those in Jenkins’s study, we are willing to examine our own motivations for pushing boundaries and expanding cultural responsiveness in our classrooms, we can better encourage our students to follow suit. Examining our motivation seems a straightforward task, but we must be willing to examine a series of events rather than search for a single moment of epiphany; Jenkins suggests these “disorienting incidents occur periodically over time, so that one is always in a state of transformation” (152). To remain in a constant state of transformation is a risk-taking endeavor in itself as it requires vulnerability, a quality that many might consider risky in the increasingly competitive world of higher education.

Rebekah

I have experienced three such incidents in my teaching career to date, the first of which I managed through the guidance of a faculty mentor. Without this personal journey, I would have remained woefully underprepared to encourage my students to grapple with the complex process of identifying their own biases and privileges

The first incident occurred in my second semester of teaching, when I naively assigned Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* in a lower-level literature survey course. I found the book personally moving but didn’t fully anticipate how its difficult subject matter (including issues of domestic violence, sexual assault, alcoholism, and poverty) would be received by my

students. Some suggested we shouldn't read about "those kinds of people," and I found my African American students were particularly dismissive of the plight of poor whites. Puzzled by the backlash, I sought the advice of Angela Salas, who suggested I consider the longstanding, economically constructed sense that poor whites and African Americans were vying for finite resources, thus leading to mutual mistrust and antagonism. Despite having minored in history as an undergraduate, I had failed to consider this vital bit of context and was thus unprepared to lead my students through the difficult emotions and responses arising during class discussion. Consequently, I earned my first negative teaching evaluation: a student noted the readings were "weird and offensive." While I never want to shy away from assigning difficult texts, I wish I could have guided my students through the disorienting experience of challenging notions of class and race rather than leaving them to flounder largely without my direction.

Angela

A senior faculty member working with a sincerely earnest and engaged junior colleague is sometimes in a similar position to a faculty member working with a student. One must encourage an open-hearted and open-minded spirit, as well as a willingness to take pedagogical and personal risks, while also holding firm to the notion that experiments must be undertaken seriously and that the outcomes we hope for our students are sacrosanct.

When my wonderful colleague came to me, unnerved and feeling guilty for not anticipating resistance to course readings, particularly in the contexts of her previous successes, we had a conversation about her desired educational and personal outcomes for the students. We spoke as well about the ways people need to posit themselves as in control of their own narratives. It is possible, I suggested, that the very features that made the authors of these narratives authentic to working-class students might also make them unnerving. The seemingly endless litany of obstacles that can unmoor a person from the path toward a secure economic future could well leave a young student facing similar odds with a choice between realizing the long odds against success or dismissing others who struggle as having less grit, less resilience, and less of the right stuff. "This can't happen to me," they might assure themselves, "because I'm frugal/celebrate/employed/fit. I will prevail."

We spoke a bit about the grief students might feel at learning that people they might have judged before were actually just like them and about the intellectual and emotional pulling away that grief engenders. To an extent, I think, my colleague needed to work through her own grief at having her

gifts to their education rejected with pat phrases like “compassion fatigue”, but she soon did, remaining engaged and refusing to mischaracterize her students’ expressed reservations or detachment as being indicative of some lack in these students’ ability to empathize.

Rebekah

Buoyed by this and similar conversations, I forged ahead until a few years later, when I found myself with another distinctive, disorienting experience: our campus had assigned the controversial *Hillbilly Elegy* as the Common Experience text for the year, and the students in the first half of my Honors Introductory Seminar Sequence did a commendable job leading a campus-wide discussion of the text. Hoping to build on this success, I assigned Rick Bragg’s *All Over But the Shoutin’* to the same cohort of students the following semester. Instead of expanding our discussion of choices, poverty, and related social issues, students expressed frustration about the overlap between the texts, with one noting, “There’s only so much empathy we can have.” I found this reaction baffling as so many of the issues were relevant to our region. In this disorienting experience, I learned firsthand what Angela Salas had observed in our previous conversations: asking students to critically evaluate a culture close to them may be more complicated than evaluating cultures and viewpoints they haven’t personally experienced. When I assigned *Outcasts United* the previous year, for instance, I received no such pushback despite its depiction of similarities in refugee experiences. My students seemed more willing to examine subtle differences in cultural experiences and values when those experiences were vastly different from their own, leading me to wonder about the relationship between empathy and proximity. I would have the opportunity to explore these questions in more detail the following year when our campus adopted Kelsey Timmerman’s *Where Am I Wearing?* for the campus Common Experience text. Students read this book, which included the experience of an immigrant from Honduras entering the United States illegally, during the peak of national dialogue on the migrant “caravan” allegedly threatening the border. My experience with previous difficult texts better prepared me to anticipate student responses, and I was able to guide class discussions away from assumptions about illegal immigrants being “irresponsible” by leaving family at home and instead refocus our attention on a more empathetic dialogue. Notably, a student remarked, “I was a real knucklehead at the start of this semester and thought nobody should come here illegally. Now I watch the news a little differently.”

Rebekah and Angela

As is often the case with teaching, we are continually reflecting on our experiences. Through subsequent conversations, we have formulated a few underlying thoughts about our experience that may be of use to others in similar situations. Few of us in higher education, whether as faculty or as students, would challenge the efficacy of empathy or cultural responsiveness as desirable values within honors education. However, the implementation of these values often requires risk-taking on the part of faculty, whether through assigning difficult texts or encouraging open discussion of difficult issues. Such endeavors present unique challenges when undertaken at PWIs, especially when risk-taking ideas and actions challenge deeply ingrained notions of class and race. With proper guidance, though, we can encourage self-reflection as a result of those disorienting experiences, and we can model the vulnerability and openness to growth necessary for such experiences to change us.

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