



DIALOGUE

*The Interdisciplinary Journal of
Popular Culture and Pedagogy*



Infusing Pedagogy with Empathy, Social Action and Value through Popular Culture

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy
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INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy. *Dialogue* is committed to creating and maintaining a scholarly journal accessible to all—meaning that there is no charge for either the author or the reader.

The Journal is interested in contributions offering theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture, including interdisciplinary discussions and those which examine the connections between American and international cultures. In addition to analyses provided by contributed articles, the Journal also encourages submissions for guest editions, interviews, and reviews of books, films, conferences, music, and technology.

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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 unlearning*, 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 Dekka explores the pedagogical potential of integrating socio-affective strategies in the literature classroom. Using films like *How to Train Your Dragon*, Dekka 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 Pedagogy 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

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Anna S. CohenMiller

Editor in Chief

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Conceptualizing Empathy and Prosocial Action: Teaching Film within the Literature Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The experience of viewing a movie in the global era is multi-faceted. A viewer's response to a cinematic experience as Carl Plantinga explains in *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* is not only admiration for the aesthetics and techniques employed in the movie but also in the emotions aroused by the storyline. Audiences react to the story and characters presented with directed emotions by imagining either their mental lives and feelings or their situations. Empathy occurs within this framework of imagination where the audience engages with the story and character based on these directed emotions. The audience could not only empathize with the story or character by experiencing a similar emotion but also think about a similar situation they have experienced and attribute the emotion they experienced to the story or character. Watching a film such as *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) would allow the instructor to help students sustain a coherent identity and find similarities with more and more diverse groups of people, leading to a reduction in prejudice while promoting an empathic identity. This facilitation of the development of complex identity-contents in the students based on universal affective states and life-conditions should result in them taking practical steps to alleviate the Other's suffering and engage in social change through empathic reflection.

Keywords: Film, literature, empathy, Self/Other, pedagogy

In a constantly changing world where popular culture inundates students with myriad images, there are novel forms of socio-cultural identities that are being generated. These identities represent the fluid patterns of immigration and underpin the ongoing global discussions on race, ethnicity, nation and citizenship. The conflicting nature of these narratives in popular culture regarding sameness and difference against the Other ensures that students inhabit a global space that interrogates their sense of Self while generating often contradictory emotions (such as love and fear) against the Other. However, the inherent need of human beings to create and sustain a cohesive and continuous sense of Self also triggers the necessity for them to reflect on what they may just have seen or read. Texts in popular culture like films present students with a space to engage in thinking while creating and sustaining a sense of Self, which also allows them to develop the critical skills that assist them in reflecting on daily activities. As Pablo Blasco and Graziela Moreto point out “Cinema is the audiovisual version of storytelling. Life stories and narratives enhance emotions and therefore set up the foundation for conveying concepts. Movies provide a narrative framed in emotions and images that are also grounded in the everyday universe” (25). Thus, films engage not only the linguistic registers of students but also the imagistic.

Teaching film in the literature classroom, therefore, allows for a critical assessment of the traditional pedagogies in order to aim for a radical, transcultural citizenry. As students view the film within the context of literary analysis, they are afforded the opportunity to experience situations and emotions that are novel to them. Through reflection on the responses that the viewing might evoke, students engage in perceiving, judging, and assessing not only the Other represented in the film but also their own sense of Self. This process of re-imagination based on reflection encompasses, as Keith Gilyard points out “maximizing various epistemologies, searching for transcultural understandings, opening up spaces for imaginative wanderings” (97). Structured around an appraisal of the contextual framework of identities as the Self/Other, the new pedagogy must understand and appreciate the multiple identities and perspectives present in film to result in prosocial action. The process of negating bias and prejudice based on identifying and judging the Other as the Self would stress the importance of empathy in human relations. Generally defined as a vicarious, spontaneous and sometimes unconscious sharing of affect, empathy as Martin Hoffman asserts is “the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible” (3). 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. Empathy, therefore, 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.

EMPATHY: NEGOTIATION OF SELF/OTHER

Empathy is a multidimensional response to another person that can provide the basis for caring and acting justly in society. It becomes a crucial element in the creation of a transformative film-based pedagogy aimed at re-defining the Self/Other divide through the promotion of prosocial thinking and action. Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit* shows how effective educators and nation-builders understand that the arts and literature (which could also extend to film) cultivate what she calls “inner eyes”—the capacity of imagining oneself in the Other’s situation. This is a capability, according to Nussbaum, which is critical to a successful democratic society based on the prosocial behavior of its citizens. Co-related to Nussbaum’s understanding of “inner eye,” Hoffman defines empathy similarly as “an affective response more appropriate to the other’s situation than one’s own” (4). More other-oriented than towards self-directedness, empathy is more effective in transforming caring into action.¹ Unlike sympathy, empathy can ensure that emotive feelings lead to

1 Suzanne Keen discusses the differences between empathy and sympathy in terms of their focus and asserts that “Empathy that

offering appropriate help rather than personal distress to the Other. Suzanne Keen, in her discussion about moral action, claims that,

Prosocial behavior, or voluntary actions benefiting another, can be motivated by concern for others, by internalized values, by desire for rewards, or by fear of punishment. Typically only the first two motivations (concern for other and internalized values) contribute to altruistic behavior, and empathy often features as a first step in a process that expresses concern for others in voluntary action taken on their behalf. (16)

The transformation of empathy into prosocial action is closely connected to its relationship with morality, especially in terms of how the Self treats the Other. This relationship of empathy to morality becomes complex within a classroom that focuses on storytelling as students come in with pre-determined moral frameworks. Films as literary texts present multiple and sometimes alien narratives that are disparate from the students' understanding of actions, situations, characters, and thoughts. Exercises within the classroom that require the students to critically think and write about a non-typical situation and characters could engage them in ways that are viewed as hazardous to their sense of well-being. The inherent quality of a narrative text to lend itself to multiple interpretations by engaging imagination is closely linked to the sense of Self and the assessment of the Other. Therefore, any attempts at evaluating and subverting the ego-centric evaluation of the Other within the classroom must involve the cultivation and arousal of empathy in familiar and non-typical situations.

Indeed, instructors can be aware that empathy does not need to be a conscious response. As Elaine Hartfield, John Cacioppo and Richard Rapson observe, that primitive emotional contagion, or “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and consequently, to converge emotionally” (81) points to empathy arousal as originating from the Self's awareness of the Other from birth. Infants mimicking another baby's reactions reflect the unconscious nature of empathy. Hoffman also observes that “mimicry is probably hard-wired neurologically based empathy-arousing mechanism whose two steps, imitation and feedback, are directed by commands from the central nervous system” (44). This becomes especially pertinent while watching a film within the classroom, as viewers tend to react to events on the screen without being conscious of their mimicry. However, beyond this spontaneous affective reaction, the human brain is also layered over by more complex cognitive responses to the state of the Other. Empathic arousal also occurs when the Self mirrors expected responses and reactions in an Other who can sometimes seem remote. This becomes crucial when we analyze a viewer's (Self) reaction to a character (Other) while viewing a film. Viewers imitate the character's fear or triumph by mirroring their actions. A pedagogy focused on more complex cognitive processes could lead to empathic arousal even though the character is not physically present in front of the student viewer. Hard-wired into a human being's disposition to experience emotional contagion, empathy allows for the sharing of emotions and feelings. However, Keen also claims that “our personal histories and cultural contexts affect the way we understand automatically shared feelings” (5).

Situated within specific ideological structures, individual subjects also evaluate and react in culturally predetermined and predicted ways. The moral issue concerning the arousal of empathy centers on the parameters set according to the basis of judgement especially within films where the characters in the texts are distant Others on the screen. While evolutionary biology posits that empathic bias, or even identification, is based on sharing another's genes, psychology argues that individuals' judgements are based on their in/exclusion within their primary group. Hoffman points to the vulnerability of empathy to “familiarity bias” and

leads to sympathy is by definition other-directed, whereas an over-aroused empathic response that causes personal distress (self-oriented and aversive) causes a turning away from the provocative condition of the other” (4). Empathy, thus, leads to more prosocial action whereas sympathy transforming into “personal distress” might inhibit actions that lead to change.



“here-and-now bias” where “[A]lthough people tend to respond empathically to almost anyone in distress, they are vulnerable to bias in favor of victims who are family members, members of their primary group, close friends, and people who are similar to themselves; and to bias in favor of victims who are present in the immediate situation” (14). Within a dialectic of difference, this becomes even more problematic when, instead of noticing individuals, categories are assigned and organized by race, ethnicity, nationality etc. Within a classroom where the film focuses on the Other and processes of marginalization, this bias is common as students are introduced to characters and contexts that seem non-typical. Such students might struggle to find any in-group similarity that would encourage them to view the Other as similar. Being separate from this Other, students could react with negative, inappropriate responses to the character’s situations rather than with compassion. This results in what Diana Meyers claims as the process where “difference- the neutral fact that people look different, act different, and choose different affiliations- degenerates into “difference”- the censorious freighting of the facts of difference” (4). This ‘generalized’ Other, temporally, spatially and psychologically distant, becomes the basis on which the student reader creates an identity. For as Zygmunt Bauman points out, “the otherness of the Other and the security of the social space (also, therefore, of the security of its own identity) are intimately related and support each other” (237). The teaching of film, therefore, must negotiate a world of varied narratives of the Self and Other to lead to empathy-oriented reflections based on emotions which lead to prosocial action.

IMAGINED REFLECTION: BRIDGING THE GAP FROM EMOTIONS TO BEHAVIOR

Imagination is a core component involved in watching a film and having an empathic response to it. Milan Kundera in his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, suggests that empathy is above all an imaginative activity; it involves “the maximal capacity of affective imagination” (20). Imagination not only allows the reader to create the world presented in the narrative but also to identify the situations and characters within the plotline. The response to a cinematic experience, as Carl Plantinga explains, is “artifact emotions” where the audience is awed by the aesthetics of the film and the techniques utilized within it along with story-directed emotions. Here the audience reacts to the story and characters presented in the film by imagining either their mental lives (including imagining feelings that characters feel) or their situations and responding with directed emotions. As Berys Gaut points out “story-directed emotions include feelings of suspense and curiosity; character-directed emotions include fearing for them, getting angry at them, admiring them, and so on” (136). Audiences react, therefore, to the aesthetics of the film as well as the “representational emotions” aroused by the narrative. Focusing on the film’s narrative allows not only an increased complexity in content but also could trigger further identification with the characters and situations.

Further, the images accompanying the storytelling are a powerful tool in highlighting important situations, characters and their corresponding emotions in accessible ways whereby students can identify them. This process of identification is the core of empathic response. Anne Friedberg discusses identification as

that which conceals and defers the recognition of dissimilitude...The process of identification is one of denying the difference between self and other. It is a drive that engages the pleasures of sameness. If the subject is constituted in a series of identifications which force similarity, identification is one long structural repetition of this denial of difference, a construction of identity based on sameness (40).

Identification, to either an actual person or a fictional character, based on the negation of difference and a stress on sameness results in empathy towards the Other. This focus on sameness, however, could marginalize

the unique identity of every individual that is crucial to identity making.² A response to characters or situations that challenges a student's sense of Self might reduce their empathic response to the Other. The pedagogy of teaching film must sustain the students' sense of Self as well as increase their identification with the Other to promote reflection resulting in prosocial thinking and behavior.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Choosing a film to include in a literature classroom which engages the students' ability to critically think about their own thought-processes and action depends on the degree of subtlety in the presentation of the relationship between characters, cause-effect relationships between action-result-reaction and the different emotions being expressed. Depending on the level at which the class is being taught and the students' knowledge, the film can be of varying complexity in how it transmits meaning. Students with a strong grasp of cinematic forms, techniques and ideologies would be able to analyze a frame with more rigor, as they would investigate the relationship between the characters and finally, themselves. Nonetheless, a film that focuses on characters with differing identities, perspectives and emotions would be most effective in highlighting the importance of re-thinking sameness and difference vis-a-vis the Other. A narrative that centers on the shifting relationships of characters would also engage students, especially if they are exposed to non-prototypical characters, actions, and situations. While a film with characters that resemble the students in the class would be effective in gaining their interest and immediate identification, the danger of the familiarity bias must also be considered. The characters, relations and actions within the film should encourage students to think beyond their familiar structures of experience while stressing some elements of sameness. The films included in the class could range from the classic cinematic adaptation of books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Wonder*, *A Little Princess*, and *The BFG* to fairy tales such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Tangled*. Documentaries such as *Los Tigres del Norte at Folsom Prison*, *The Armor of Light*, *Kindness Is Contagious*, *Bully* and *Imba Means Sing* also present opportunities for the instructor to focus on the socio-cultural and economic negotiations between various communities and attempt to rethink the Self/Other binary based on empathic thinking.

The exercise outlined below is based on the first of the computer-animated action fantasy films *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) loosely based on the book series of the same name by Cressida Cowell. The plotline follows the adventures of a young Viking named Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, son of Stoick the Vast, leader of the Viking island of Berk as he attempts to fulfill his destiny and become a hero. Deemed as weak and useless in imposing his will over dragons, Hiccup, through non-violent and unconventional tactics, befriends Toothless (formerly Night Fury), a dangerous but injured dragon. Together they form a bond based on empathic understanding as they struggle not only to establish their identity but also prove that dragons can be non-violent. Throughout the narrative, we see Hiccup and Toothless being othered and marginalized as they deal with issues of ethnicity/class and nationality as well as the negotiations that the characters must engage in to survive in their world. This makes the film a thought-provoking point of departure for discussions on empathy within the process of identifying the Self and Other.

The exercise outlined below is suitable for a 50-minute class at any undergraduate or graduate studies level. The level at which the class is being taught and the instructor's discretion would dictate the degree of difficulty in the diction of the exercise prompts and the ensuing discussion would vary according to it. These exercises include both a written component and a class discussion. The students are encouraged to express their views on the discussed subject as they engage with the film. The presented exercise is a miniscule example of the vast possibility of empathy-focused assignments that can be created to sustain secure, prosocial

2 Refer to Mark Bracher's *Radical Pedagogy* for further discussion on the typical characteristics of a secure identity.

identities among the students. Instructors can create assignments and discussions based on mirroring, role-playing and perspective-taking where students are encouraged to engage in situations and actions that are non-prototypical for them. When based on the close analysis of a film's linguistic (verbal) and imagistic (non-verbal) forms, these critical exercises could take the structure of journaling, class discussions, textual analysis, or narrative responses. The core requirement for an effective discussion and analysis of bias and prejudice must be centered on perceiving and judging the Other and Self within an empathy-based framework.

EXERCISE:

Prompt while watching *How to Train Your Dragon*: Watch Hiccup's face closely as he is trying to help fight the dragons and is constantly rejected by his tribe. Pay attention to his facial expressions (his eyes, brows, mouth). Also, focus on the other expressive cues that are there, for instance, his body posture, tone of voice, activity level (standing, sitting, or running).

Written Exercise- Part 1: How do you feel watching Hiccup's expressive cues? Do you feel distressed at his rejection? What is Hiccup feeling in this scene? Do you feel some of the rejection that Hiccup is feeling?

Class Discussion prompts for the Instructor- Why do you feel a similar distress as Hiccup, or, if you don't, why not? What in the scene aroused the feelings of distress/rejection or created a distance from Hiccup's situation in you? Would you help Hiccup if you could? What steps would you take? Describe the steps in detail. Would the same expressive cues in a situation outside the class also arouse the same emotions in you? Would you take steps to help them? What steps would you take? Explain your answer in detailed steps. How would you feel if you did or didn't help in this situation? Why would you feel that way? Explain in detail.

EXPLANATION:

This exercise is divided into two main parts: a written exercise followed by a class discussion. The questions in the discussion posed by the instructor follow the ones in the written part, which encourage the students to think sequentially in order to maximize their understanding of the distress reaction and cue pairings and analyze their own cognitive processing of placing blame and responsibility within the situation. The exercise has the students paying attention to Hiccup in a scene of the film which centers on his rejection and that most people would find distressing. In this scene, the tribe is in the middle of a dragon attack, and the help he wishes to offer is constantly refused. The film had already shown the impossibility of Hiccup's situation as he is marked as weak and unfit to be a fighting Viking given his stature and inability to perform certain tasks like lift an axe. Given Hiccup's narrative and the storyline, the students are aware that this denial of Hiccup's ability undercuts the potential of his being seen as a full-fledged Viking and hence his corresponding inclusion into the community. As he talks to Gobber, the village blacksmith that he apprentices with, the viewer sees that he has no other option presented to him that would allow him to show his valor. He is clearly the rejected tribe member who has been treated unfairly. Students usually "identify" not only the wrong done to Hiccup but also, to an extent, with his dreams and fears as a young man who is only a little younger than them. These conditions are crucial for arousing empathic distress on the part of the students. If the students perceive similarities, to a certain extent, with the Other and feel that a person is being deprived of something that belongs to them, they will be more open to responding to the distress with actual steps to alleviate it.

Therefore, the first part of the written exercise asks them to focus on the suffering of the Other and especially the emotive cues that express the pain. Paying attention to the face of the victim, his running in a state of panic, the pitching of voice along with the words and images of rejection might make the sadness and threat to Hiccup's sense of self very real to the student. The conditioning that they have had throughout their lives makes them respond to these cues of distress with a similar experience of distress. Therefore, the prompt

for the exercise tries to focus the students' attention on their own emotional response to the cues. By matching the victim's expressive cues with their own affects, the students would be more able to process the distress-relevant material in a similar manner to the Other. The resultant empathic distress aroused from focusing Hiccup's suffering and conditioning from a past distressful cue-affect pairing, therefore, may encourage the students to take steps to alleviate the suffering of the victim.

An important part of feeling empathy toward another is also, however, based on where the blame or responsibility is placed. If, for instance, the students, after watching the above-mentioned scene in the film, decide that Hiccup deserves to be treated the way he is because he is responsible for his own misfortune, then it is highly unlikely that they will identify and empathize with his character. For empathy to be aroused, the students must judge that the victim has been treated unfairly and therefore deserves all the help they can get. This is also dependent on the extent to which the student identifies with the character and whether the victim is present in the situation. However, the familiarity and here-now-biases in this exercise are reduced by the students' initial identification with Hiccup. Being almost in the same age-group as Hiccup, most of the students identify with his dreams and fears, which are universal. Most people want to eat well, play, and have friends. The students usually identify with these universal needs. However, this identification is compounded by the unfairness with which Hiccup is treated. The students feel bad for him. The class discussion, therefore, asks the students to analyze their own feelings of distress which may or may not match Hiccup's, and analyze what expressive cues were used to make them feel the specific affect.

The analysis of why they were feeling either distressed or indifferent in response to Hiccup's cues might give the students a better understanding of their own conditioning process which results in pairings of affects to cues. This is important, as a student who is secure in themselves could be encouraged to focus more often on the cues that result in prosocial action. Moreover, they could probably also try to develop their ability to respond to even the faintest expressive cues from a suffering and make it a conditioned response. The ability to be aware and "read" the slightest of cues is a crucial development in the students as it further sensitizes them to another's pain. This also increases the opportunities for the student to engage in prosocial acts and help the distressed Other.

Therefore, the exercise further asks the students to map out the exact steps that they would have to take to alleviate the Other's suffering. This is an essential step for translating thought into action. As studies by Hoffman show, people only feel empathic relief after they have helped another. Just thinking about helping another does not alleviate empathic suffering. This exercise, by focusing on every minute step that must be taken to help another, provides a ready blueprint to the students for future situations. Indeed, the importance of coming with a "prepared mind" to a situation has already been discussed. As Jerome Singer and Peter Salovey point out, this is especially true for information retrieval in non-prototypical cases. The confrontation with a new or unexpected scene becomes smoother and less threatening if there lies in memory the presence of conscious scripts and schemas which can be engaged to reveal the consequences and implication of a present situation. This exercise will make the students think in advance of the ways in which thought can be transformed into action to help another in pain. Indeed, if a student's identity-component includes preparedness for diverse situations along with openness toward different perspectives, then it is less likely that the Self will feel threatened when one encounters new people or information.

The film can thus be utilized within the literature classroom to arouse empathic distress in the students and to subsequently pair it with Hiccup's. The exercise is based on the correspondence of the distress and expressive cues between the students and the character based on the students' own independent experience of distress. It can motivate the students to not only think empathically about the character but to also realize the commonality of many human experiences and emotions. If this understanding of common human suffering (and happiness) expands from the previously familiar members to the Others, then the students' identity

will become increasingly inclusive and complex. Not only will they become aware of multiple scripts and perspectives, they will also be more open to new information. Further, the thinking and mapping of the actual steps necessary for alleviating another's suffering will prepare them for future situations.

“Imagining the Other”: The Student and the Other

The ability to imagine vividly, and then to assess judicially, another person's pain, to participate in it and then to ask about its significance, is a powerful way of learning what the human facts are and of acquiring a motivation to alter them.

-Martha Nussbaum. *Poetic Justice*, 91.

As evidenced through the exercise, students and instructors thus have to negotiate between dominant strategies which articulate the boundaries of authorization by bestowing a specific frame of reference or appealing to natural inclination. Analyzing individual obligation or interest, Mark Johnson in *Moral Imagination* asserts that virtually all the fundamental organizing principles- right, freedom, duty etc- on which choice is based, are metaphorically defined. This negates the tenets of moral law theories which posit that univocal literal concepts can be applied directly to situations. Most moral reasoning is, thus, reasoning based on metaphors. Further, contrary to traditionalist views of the signifiers, meaning and knowledge, linguists and psychologists have now shown that the schemas, narratives, and the systems of belief that underlie moral reasoning and give coherence to the Self are based on a structure of related and interconnecting metaphorical mappings that connect one experiential domain to another. In fact, “we understand more abstract and less well-structured domains (such as our concepts of reason, knowledge, belief) via mappings from more concrete and highly structured domains of experience (such as our bodily experience of vision, movement, eating, or manipulating objects)” (Johnson 10). Therefore, physical acts structure the abstract concept and give meaning to the relationships.

The converse is also true. Action is irreducibly metaphoric. Human beings conceptualize any basic action according to the metaphorical mappings that define one's sense of self. George Lakoff's study about the conventional metaphors that underlie the semantics and syntax of English found the existence of an enormous metaphorical system that defines an individual's notion of an event. Human beings, therefore, understand their personhood, relationships, institutions, communities, and groups along with their notions of loyalty, nationhood, right, duty, family, and so forth through their conventional metaphorical structures.

This is crucial for any attempts at changing, substituting, or introducing complex structures of schemas and scripts that redefine the relationship of the Self/Other and facilitate the prosocial thinking and action of students attending a literature class focused on film. A focus on the metaphorical flexibility of the identity component would give the instructors a basis for organizing their class, especially as these structures underlie not only a person's cognition but also their sense of social justice. Just as the mundane, automatic understanding of an event is structured metaphorically, a person's prosocial reasoning and judgment are similarly intricately tied up with metaphors. Films, through their ability to evoke emotions, provide familiar and easy access to varied experiences, which points to such a metaphorical flexibility.

“FEELING WITH THE OTHER”: NEXUS OF LITERATURE AND FILM

For the pedagogy based on teaching film within the literature classroom, the metaphorical representation as the space of ethical change presents a possibility of subverting the Self/Other divide by questioning the very basis of the symbolic frameworks of judgement. The literature classroom with its focus on narrative analysis, more than any other discipline, allows the instructor the opportunity to include pedagogical strategies which

lead to a re-thinking of the basic concepts and actions of the Self. As both concepts and actions are inherently metaphorical, the use of films within the literature classroom is effective in promoting discussions on non-prototypical situations and actions where the students can imagine themselves in the shoes of the Other. As Kelly et.al state “Literature offers that kind of experience, uniquely activating our metaphorical sensibilities to the might-be-could-be in our lives and works” (67). The use of films in addition to the written word deepens the critical imagination of the students as they now engage not only in the linguistic registers of memory and experience but also in the imagistic. As Maarten Coëgnarts claims “we can distinguish between two general categories of form in which the embodiment of concepts may appeal to us, namely the category of form that is solely or primarily *verbal* in nature (for example, language) and the category of form that is solely or primarily *non-verbal* in nature (for example, film)” (5). Films engage the students through images as well as words. The same conceptual metaphors presented in language are transferred to images in films as meaning is structured similarly in both mediums, despite obvious ontological differences; where language is formal and symbolically structured, films reflect the reality it presents. Nonetheless, the image schemas that are activated by the application of formalistic strategies in films (editing, mise en scene, camera angles and such) resemble the conceptual and metaphorical structures underlying linguistic expressions. For instance, by organizing the composition of a frame, a filmmaker inherently creates meaning, which transforms with each shifting frame. The change in composition that becomes visible when Hiccup raises his knife to kill Night Fury but then gazes into his eyes subtly indicates the shift in his perception and decision-making process where he starts to hesitate. At that moment, through the changing frame, the audience is made aware of the internal struggle within Hiccup as he decides whether he should kill a helpless creature. When an instructor is able to engage both words and images, they can focus on this transmission of meaning through conceptual metaphors to rethink the relationship of the Self and Other. This interaction with both forms possible in a literature classroom would further engage the students’ affective-physiological register and enhance their ability to find similarities to and empathize with the Other.

Indeed, the imaginative flexibility of metaphors underlying linguistic expressions and images also stresses the fact that there are probably no moral absolutes. For instance, Johnson asserts that “justice may be grounded on an image schema of BALANCE in two different cultures, but *what* gets balanced and what *counts* as balance in the two cultures may vary considerably” (194). The cultural assumptions that define morality highlight the possibility that while basic metaphors might be hard to transform, situating students within a new experience or having them encounter a non-typical case might alter their conception at a particular level. Further, the realization that multiple metaphors define a single complex concept thus makes it possible to extend the knowledge from a specific previous experience to a non-typical case. Multiple scenes within *How to Train Your Dragon* clearly present varied definitions of the word “courage” for instance.

This multiplicity is, therefore, especially crucial while teaching film within the literature classroom as Meyers observes that “it is not possible to refute [faulty knowledge about Others] with counterexamples or statistics... [because] empirically grounded arguments attacking propositional paraphrases of these figurations fail to make contact with their emotional underpinnings” (55-56). For the problem is not only that students reject evidence and argument but that this information is more directly connected to emotions. Any attempts at changing these flawed meta-cognitions must involve changing the emotional basis of the non-propositional forms of knowledge as well.³

3 Research by George Lakoff and Drew Westen clearly shows how people’s positions about social issues and policies is determined more by emotions than logical reasoning.

CONCLUSION

The use of film within the literature classroom is, thus, well-suited for the creation of this new form of assessing, evaluating, and judging the Other in order to lead toward pro-social change. In general, the film could present the absentee Other—unfamiliar and distant. The characters that the students view might be neither in their in-group nor present. Indeed, there is no need for the students to empathize with the Other presented in films. Moreover, students are increasingly finding it hard to maintain their secure identity in a world that is rapidly becoming diverse. Films by their very content could challenge students' core identity-contents by introducing and asking them to make connections with diverse realities. Students are increasingly focused on reestablishing their identities rather than finding similarities with the Other. This self-enhancement affects not only the degree of structural similarity that the students will perceive between themselves and the characters and cultures they read about but also their cognition of transgression and justice in a situation. Just as any harm to the Self is interpreted egocentrically, similarly any harm to a member of the in-group is judged with more empathic bias toward the familiar or present member. The Other in the situation is given less leeway and judged more harshly.

A pedagogy based on film and empathy within the literature classroom, however, attempts to reduce these biases by encouraging students to engage with novel material and discover similarities between themselves and the alien Others' affective states and life experiences. This allows students to empathize with another while being secure in the knowledge that they have a unique self which is different from the Other in certain ways. The focus on their similarity and difference from the Other counteracts the identity vulnerability that the students might feel if they were asked to identify completely with the Other in films. Indeed, when people who are secure in their sense of self face an Other who is suffering in films and can pinpoint similarities in their life-conditions or affects (with comparisons to their memories of their own past experiences and emotive responses), they empathize with this Other. This allows them to judge the role of the Other in the given situation in a manner that is similar to how they would judge themselves. If they decide that the Other has been harmed, they will be motivated to take steps to alleviate the Other's suffering and thereby reduce their own empathic distress.

As Lakoff points out, the persuasive power of language comes not from reason but from "frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions" it engages (15). And film by its very nature comprises these narratives and images. Instructors within the classroom can, therefore, appeal not only to the student's logic but also reveal the flaws in their knowledge of the Other in emotionally compelling ways. By using exercises as presented, here instructors can encourage the students to see alternate perspectives to their own. Further, the content in films provides ample material and opportunities to read experiences/identities which reflect collective concerns/beliefs and alternatives to them. A pedagogy, therefore, which focuses not only on changing stereotypes of the Self/Other by encouraging empathy by using film could lead to prosocial thinking and action.

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What We Owe Our Students: *The Good Place*, Pedagogy, and the Architecture of Engaged Learning

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ABSTRACT

Pedagogy is the architecture of a learning environment. The discipline of philosophy has often operated according to a pedagogy of conversation, clarity, and reflection, certainly since the era of Socratic dialogue in the streets of Athens. We argue that *The Good Place* occupies that space, re-setting this pedagogy as an architecture of learning through entertainment associated with ultimate matters of eternal disposition. A critical character driving conversation, clarity, and reflection across four seasons of the story's arc is a philosopher – doomed by their own indecisive flaws – who teaches deep understanding of ethical development through a variety of relevant philosophic problems originating from intellectual history. Confronted with the complexities of an intricately connected world and highly motivated by the weight of ultimate choices, the protagonists bring a sense of how a well-constructed “classroom” can prepare students to meet ordinary challenges, extraordinary obstacles, and even existential crises. *The Good Place* is a classroom with a purposeful syllabus and highly motivated participants, structured for viewers to extract ethical insights of the highest consequence -- if they are willing to keep trying to get it right. By comparison, this article unpacks how the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' *Global Challenges* blended model course is a valuable example of high impact teaching practices which, like *The Good Place*, engage students through content connected to issues that confront them personally and professionally, providing them with opportunities for repetition and mastery.

Keywords: pedagogy, popular culture, wicked problems, Bloom's taxonomy, high impact practices, global challenges, *The Good Place*

INTRODUCTION

This article uses *The Good Place* to explore high impact teaching practices. We also present the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' *Global Challenges* blended model course as an example of a teaching approach, which, like *The Good Place*, engages students through content encounters designed to challenge them toward deeper learning and purposeful growth.

To understand the argument, readers must first have some familiarity with *The Good Place*, a four-season comedy series that aired on NBC from 2016 to 2020. In *The Good Place*, Eleanor Shellstrop awakens in the afterlife where her guide, Michael, introduces her to a heavenly utopia – a good place she has earned by living a good life. Eleanor, who knows she was not a good person, realizes there must be a mistake. She is subsequently introduced to a philosophy professor, Chidi Anagonye, to whom she confides her quandary. She asks him to help her become a better person by teaching her moral philosophy. In this good place, Eleanor's neighbors include Tahani Al-Jamil, a philanthropic socialite, and Jason Mendoza (aka Jianyu Li), an absurdly incompetent petty criminal who initially pretends to be a silent Buddhist monk. By the end of Season 1, we learn that the Good Place is not a heaven, but rather an invented hell designed by Michael to punish all four of these characters. When Eleanor and her friends discover the truth, Michael erases their memories, and they return to the beginning of their afterlife.

The protagonists proceed through myriad reboots. Although their memories are erased after each reboot, they always manage to band together again and discover the truth. As they learn and grow, so does Michael, who decides to help them escape the Bad Place and enter the real Good Place. Michael appeals to a judge who gives each of the four a test to see if they have earned their way to the Good Place. All but Eleanor fail the test. Michael appeals on their behalf again, and all four return to earth with erased memories.

Michael and his AI assistant, Janet, intervene to prevent the deaths of the four protagonists and to nudge them toward finding one another in life. The protagonists eventually learn the truth, and the judge discovers what Michael and Janet are trying to do. Although the protagonists are denied entry to the Good Place, they do endeavor to become better people and to help others find their way to the Good Place. When this team learns that it has been centuries since anyone has actually been allowed into the Good Place, they go on a quest to fix a points system that no longer takes into account the unintended consequences and complexities of modern life.

The final season of the series is a year-long experiment to determine whether humans can undergo moral improvement. The original points system is replaced by a system in which each human can be rebooted as many times as is needed in order for them to achieve moral development. All four of the protagonists finally gain admittance to the actual Good Place. Once there, however, they discover that an eternity of perfect happiness is boring. The solution to this dilemma is offering humans the option to end their existence by walking through a final door.

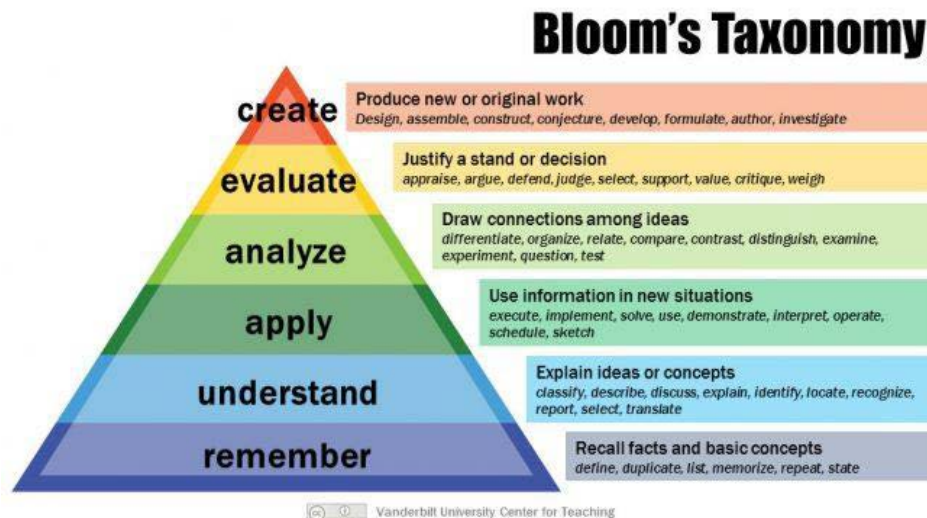
THE GOOD PLACE AS A CLASSROOM

Michael Schur, the creator of *The Good Place*, expressly uses the television series to teach its viewers moral philosophy. Professors of moral philosophy acted as consultants for the series, which covers a wide range of thinkers from Aristotle to Locke to Singer (Matthews, 2019). In interviews about the show, Schur referenced retired Harvard Philosophy Professor Tim Scanlon's work *What We Owe Others* as the "spine" of the series, not only making explicit references to Scanlon's work, but even using the book as a critical prop in season one when Eleanor rips a page from the book to leave herself a note to "find Chidi" (Matthews, 2019).

That the series is a "classroom" is obvious to any viewer. Early in Season 1, the philosophy professor, Chidi Anagonye, sets up a chalkboard and lectures his student, Eleanor Shellstrop, on moral theory. He gives

Eleanor a reading list, and the viewer joins her as she learns how to be a good person. By Season 3, as the entire group of protagonists accept responsibility for the moral improvement of others, viewers encounter overt and sometimes didactic lectures on moral philosophy from all the show’s protagonists. While these lessons on moral philosophy may be the point of the series, there is more to be learned here than moral imperatives, deontology, or nihilism. The series has something to teach us, as faculty, about the architecture of the classroom.

We can interpret the four seasons of the series as a climb up Bloom’s taxonomy:



(Armstrong, n.d.)

In Season 1, our protagonists are clueless new arrivals to the ethical classroom. Chidi gives Eleanor (and us) a class syllabus and we must learn a new vocabulary of moral ethics. Eleanor is at the bottom of Bloom’s pyramid, encountering these philosophical ideas for the first time and attempting to remember and recall the basic concepts. In Episode 2, “Flying,” Chidi knows his work is cut out for him when he begins to explain Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* to Eleanor, who’s favorite “book” is Kendall Jenner’s Instagram feed. He begins by telling her Kant’s book is “a treatise on the aesthetic preconditions of the mind’s receptivity to duty.” But she clearly does not follow. “It’s a book on how to act good,” he finally says (Yang & McDonald, 2016). Chidi’s initial reservations relate to his judgment that Eleanor is simply too self-absorbed to ever be a good person, yet as any teacher knows, you start where the students are. As Chidi introduces Eleanor to new philosophical concepts, he writes the vocabulary on the chalkboard and connects the new terms to specific philosophers and their conceptions of the ideas to which he introduces her. He assigns her readings where she can learn these basic philosophical frameworks, and in their classroom, he responds to her questions about the content (Muharrar & McCarthy-Miller, 2016).

In Season 2, our protagonists advance up Bloom’s taxonomy as Eleanor gains greater understanding of moral philosophy and becomes sufficiently equipped to discuss it with Chidi and apply it to herself and to other situations. In “The Trolley Problem,” Episode 19, we encounter the classic thought experiment used to help students grapple with moral dilemmas. In the series, the Trolley Problem comes to life as our protagonists find themselves on an actual trolley hurtling toward individuals on the tracks. Is it preferable to let one person die in order to save six? Does it matter what one’s motives are? This is an example of educational experiences where students are learning more than just the definitions of utilitarian or deontological ethics as they apply those definitions to circumstances to which they can relate. Viewers, like the protagonist ensemble, take away the lesson that choices can have outcomes with great moral weight (Siegal et al., 2017).

Choice is especially difficult for Chidi. He has mastered academic knowledge about moral philosophy,

yet he remains paralyzed with indecision, overwhelmed by the application of concepts to his own life. Even drinking almond milk presents a moral dilemma, so how can he make a choice in the lived experience of the Trolley Problem? The viewer becomes a student who sees the insight: it is not enough for Chidi to have mastered intellectual content if he is incapable of navigating the implications in that lived experience. Hence, the true test of moral commitment is outside the classroom.

The architecture of learning in *The Good Place* illustrates the value of enriching students' conceptual mastery with applied learning experiences. Experiential learning is one of the cornerstones of The American Association of Colleges and Universities' High Impact Practices (Kuh, 2008). Relying on George Kuh's work, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (2008) AAC&U describes this sort of learning by explaining: "The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences" (Kuh, 2008). While the AAC&U high impact practice focuses on community-based and service-learning activities, it encompasses a broader argument for experience and application as being essential to deep learning. Indeed, applying learning, analyzing situations, and evaluating options is central to growth in Bloom's taxonomy. In the "classroom" of Season 2, we see powerful examples of how moving up Bloom's taxonomy through application, analysis, and evaluation are critical for deep understanding of complex problems and their solutions.

Season 3 involves even deeper advancement along Bloom's higher levels of learning as Eleanor, Tahani, and even Jason find themselves applying ethical thinking to their own actions, analyzing and evaluating situations as they actively seek to live better lives on earth. Even after they discover that they are eternally doomed, the ensemble redoubles their efforts at moral improvement, channeling their energies towards saving their family and friends (see e.g., Murray & Asher, 2018; Miller & McCarthy-Miller, 2018). As a refreshingly clear example of a meaningful "group project," the learning reaches such levels of proficiency that the protagonists take on teaching roles to enlighten others. Season 3 has many didactic moments in which it teaches us about virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology, and nihilism. Episode 31, *Jeremy Bearimy*, in particular, provides carefully constructed examples through the protagonists embodying these different philosophical frameworks. Breaking down under the stress, Chidi tells his students in real life, "The actual ethical system that you should all follow is nihilism. The world is empty. There is no point to anything, and you are just going to die. So do whatever." But while Chidi is consumed by nihilism, Tahani gives \$2 million dollars to the Sydney Opera anonymously (virtue ethics), Eleanor goes out of her way to return a lost wallet (deontology), and Tahani and Jason give away money to people in need (consequentialism) (Amram & O'Donnell, 2018).

As educators, we know that the deepest learning occurs when students care acutely about their own learning. In Season 3, the protagonists' learning deepens because they are finally coming to grips with the consequences of their choices and the choices of their family and friends. Their learning is not an ivory tower conversation detached from their own lives, but is, instead, deeply personal. They understand why their learning matters, and that understanding provides the motivation necessary for mastering moral philosophy. As educators, many of us have had the experience of standing in front of a classroom talking about some topic of deep disciplinary interest to us, but of little interest to a classroom of bored students. Ideally, we can also point to moments when the classroom was alive with energy and enthusiasm for the topic at hand. What contributed to those more engaged learning environments? Was it our eloquence as the sage on the stage? Or was it, perhaps, when the students were, themselves, engaging the content and applying it to something that mattered in their own lives? It is this that is at the heart of AAC&U's *High Impact Practices* (HIP). Most of the HIPs are aimed at engagement with others and/or application to the student's personal and professional

goals through learning activities such as first-year experiences, learning communities, collaborative projects, ePortfolios, internships, service-learning, and capstone projects (Kuh, 20008).

Season 4 takes us to the highest Bloom level, where our protagonists create solutions to the ultimate challenges, providing a path for all humans to make progress toward ethical improvement. In the original version of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) "evaluation" was at the pinnacle of the taxonomy. In 2001, a team of scholars revised that taxonomy, putting "create" at the peak (Anderson et al., 2001). Indeed, academics greatly value the creation of new knowledge as the pinnacle of scholarly achievement. In Season 4, when confronted with the brokenness of the point system in the context of a hyper-connected and complex world, our protagonists reject the old models. Judge Gen suggests just scrapping the entire human experiment, but our protagonists offer, instead, a new vision for the future (Schur, 2019-20). They create a solution to the problem. Chidi, rebooted for the final time, gains the benefit of all his past reboots. Possessing the full breadth of the lessons from hundreds of life reboots, Chidi synthesizes his experiences with his academic knowledge. Chidi realizes that there are no objective right and wrong answers to the complex problems that have bedeviled him throughout his life. In Episode 48, "The Answer," he grasps that meaningful relationships are what ultimately matter. Finally, he is confident and decisive (Schofield & Migliassi, 2019). Chidi helps create a solution whereby humans will have unlimited opportunities to "pass the test," rebooting as often as they need (perhaps eternally) to make it to the Good Place. Eleanor becomes a star student when, in Episode 12, "Patty," (Amram & Sackett, 2020) the protagonists discover that the real good place is not an especially happy place. With an eternity of whatever it is that each individual may desire stretching out before them, existence has no real meaning anymore. Eleanor proposes the ultimate solution, and Michael creates a door through which anyone in the Good Place can pass when they are ready to close their existence. Thus, our classroom experience ends with our protagonist students having used their moral education to create the ultimate solution with systemic reform.

The Good Place models effective teaching. For an educator, this learning gains power through the example of a professor plagued by self-doubt and hampered by his own flaws. Called to teach, despite personal and pedagogical flaws we may bring to the classroom, we struggle too, so our students may learn. If we are fortunate, as Chidi learns from Eleanor, we learn from our students; some of our students, like Tahani, will answer a call to be architects of the learning environment themselves. As educators, we must enable our classes to advance skillfully through Bloom's levels of learning. Our goals should be clear and recognizable: students must understand and remember basic concepts, apply those concepts to new facts and to their own lives, analyze and synthesize information in order to evaluate best approaches and, ultimately, to use their deep knowledge to create solutions for their personal and professional lives.

WICKED PROBLEMS AND AASCU'S GLOBAL CHALLENGES AS A MODEL

A reality all educators encounter is the limitation of our ability to engage students who do not desire engagement. At the beginning of Season 1, when Eleanor arrives in the Good Place, she is not a model student. She has lived a vapid, self-centered life. She quickly suspects that she does not belong in the Good Place and only takes up the study of moral philosophy as a means of saving herself from eviction. Her goal is, like her goals in life, self-centered. That egocentric goal is motivating for her, and she does make intellectual progress, yet the truly passionate engagement in the learning process does not happen until Season 3. At this level, the group throws itself into the project of moral improvement, not to save themselves as individuals, for they understand that their eternal fate is set. Rather, they engage in the project to save others. In Episode 32, "The Ballad of Donkey Doug," Jason heads to Florida with Tahani and Michael to try to get Donkey Doug, and later Pillboi, to abandon crime and pursue a legitimate line of work (Murry & Asher, 2018). In Episode 33,

“A Fractured Inheritance,” despite her anger at learning that her mother faked her death and her resentment that her mother, Donna, has become a real mother to her stepdaughter, Eleanor helps her mother commit to a better life, and Tahani travels to Budapest to make amends with her sister (Miller & McCarthy-Miller, 2018). In short, each of the protagonists discovers their deepest motivation of making a difference in the lives of others. This offers us educators an important insight into the motivations of students.

In “Challenging the First Year of College: Old Models and New Imperatives,” Mills and Mehaffy argue that the traditional first year college experience and general education curriculum fail to engage our students. Faculty often feel it is the students who are unprepared for success, but Mills and Mehaffy ask whether our students may be unprepared because the traditional first year curriculum is typically presented to them as “a set of disconnected experiences, described in an arcane and unfamiliar language, which appear[s] to have no relevance to their lives” (Mills & Mehaffy, 2016). Drawing from the work of George Kuh (2008) they argue that “Engagement occurs when people are interested in what they are doing and are involved in and passionate about their work and its meaning. Engagement results when academic programs connect to a student’s core concerns, life experiences, and deeply held values” (Mills & Mehaffy, 2016). Mills and Mehaffy offer the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ National Blended Course Consortium, and, specifically, its Global Challenges curriculum as a new model for engaging students.

Global Challenges: Promise & Peril in the 21st-Century is a blended model course created by a team of Global Engagement scholars assembled from more than a dozen state comprehensive college members of the American Association of State Colleges & Universities (AASCU). The framework for the course was inspired by a 2006 presentation by Erik Peterson, then Director of the Global Strategies Institute at the non-partisan public policy think tank Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). Before an AASCU conference audience, Peterson’s talk focused on what CSIS had identified as the seven key drivers of change – 1) population, 2) resources, 3) technology, 4) information, 5) economies, 6) security, and 7) governance.

Initially, the Global Engagement scholars focused on sharing teaching strategies using the Seven Revolutions framework at institutes and workshops and through the publication of *Teaching Seven Revolutions: A Tool Kit for Educating Globally Competent Citizens* (Falk et al., 2016). Later, the scholars developed a model course/eBook, now available through Inspark Education. The model course/eBook uses an interactive adaptive learning approach where students experience a customized version of the course materials due to their making their own choices about the order in which to complete assignments, and the immediate feedback they receive in response to their answers to embedded assessments. Student engagement in the course is heightened by an approach that urges them to perceive the influence of these key drivers of change in their personal and professional lives. It draws attention to the crises associated with many of these seven global challenges, and goes further by offering approaches for students to effect change in response to these sometimes frightening drivers of change.

This Global Challenges curriculum covers much of what Mills and Mehaffy describe as the “nutritional” value of general education learning outcomes, but it does so in the context of addressing the world’s daunting challenges. This, they argue, provides content that is “urgent, relevant, and clearly connected to the students’ professional and personal lives. Students can readily see why they need knowledge beyond the confines of their major in order to address these global challenges. While discovering what the world of their future will look like, they consider, in reflective, value-laden ways, who they want and need to be in that world” (Mills & Mehaffy, 2016)

As members of the AASCU Global Engagement Project, we have been deeply involved in the creation of this model curriculum, publishing, with other members of the AASCU Global Engagement Scholars team, an array of related scholarship (see, e.g., Falk et al., 2014; Falk & Hamlin, 2015; Falk et al., 2012; Falk et al., 2016; Hamlin & Whitaker, 2010; Mills & Mehaffy, 2016; Mills & Sun, 2014; Shapiro & Mills, 2012; Zappile & Mills,

2015; Zappile & Mills, 2018). The project offers a number of examples that highlight pedagogical architecture, but here we begin by exploring the central hook that the AASCU Global Challenges curriculum employs – using “wicked problems” to establish imperatives like those that Eleanor, Tahani, and Jason face in *The Good Place*. Rittel and Webber first wrote about the idea of “wicked problems” in their 1973 article, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” noting that policy problems are especially challenging in a pluralistic society where the causes of a problem are complex and where there are no definitive and objective solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). By focusing the content on seven of the greatest challenges facing the world today (the wicked problems of population, resources, technology, information, economies, conflict, and governance), the course confronts students with ultimate questions, bringing relevance and urgency to the task of learning to engage those daunting challenges. If educators aim to engage students in the way that led Eleanor and the other protagonists in *The Good Place* to be committed to their learning, one way to do so is by applying academic knowledge to real world issues that students understand to be most pressing for the professional and personal lives they will live. The Global Challenges curriculum works towards that end. For example, General Education students have noted that this course was powerful because, unlike their experience with other General Education courses, they could readily see how the course helped them to think about the world they would be living in, and how their major course of study and ensuing life choices would impact -- and be impacted by -- the knowledge they were acquiring. To make our students hungry to learn, we must make their learning relevant and urgent.

Wicked problems are a hook to engage students. Beyond entertainment or philosophic exercise, *The Good Place* teaches about *wicked problems*. Through a narrative arc driven by what it means to be “woke,” the consequences of connectedness explored in the series can be underlined. In Season 3, for example, the protagonists discover that no mortal has advanced to the actual good place in centuries. And why is this? It is because the world has become so complex and interconnected that the simple act of giving your grandmother roses for her birthday gives rise to myriad ways in which harm comes to others through a massive “carbon footprint” of unintended consequences. Even when one wants to do something “good,” one is constantly engaging in a long series of unintended bad actions (Gersten & Whittingham, 2019) The character of Doug Forcett illustrates this impossibility of navigating the consequential nature of his choices. In Season 3’s Episode 35, “Don’t Let the Good Life Pass You By,” (Law & Holland, 2018) Michael and Janet pay a visit to the legendary hero of the Good Place, the human who first understood the workings of the afterlife, in the hope that Doug may be a model for others, but they soon realize that he is anything but, because he has become a “happiness pump.” This term is a criticism of utilitarianism: Doug is so obsessed with earning enough points to be accepted into the Good Place that it leads to an absurd life in which he lets others behave abusively toward him.

Hence, the series presents the viewer with a lens for considering moral motivation. What are the limits to our capacity for ethical action? Should humans be culpable for all unintended consequences, whether or not they were aware of them? Does “wokeness” make us more culpable? Once we have information, for example, about our own privilege compared to the poverty of others, do we now have an even greater duty to others? *The Good Place* reminds every educator to consider such questions with learning structured through a pedagogy of engagement. Using the Global Challenges curriculum, one professor has illustrated this reality with a lesson related to cell phones. Drawing the students’ attention to how many of them, himself included, live with a cell phone dependency for information, entertainment, and connection to the larger world, the lesson highlights disturbing realities involved in the production of this technology, such as dwindling reserves of finite precious metals, the abuse of already poverty-stricken laborers, and the effects of inequality, among others. Awakened to this underlying truth of cost in this context, the discussion proceeds to consider the personal and social responsibility that should attend the convenience of a cell phone.

Early in the Global Challenges project, faculty associated with the course discovered that the content

was often depressing to students. Like Chidi in the “Jeremy Bearimy” episode, some students’ response to the content was nihilistic – we might as well eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we will all die (or, as Eleanor lies to the bartender, “Now give me another drink, tomorrow’s my birthday”) (Amram & O’Donnell, 2018). To counter this demoralizing byproduct of understanding the daunting – even paralyzing – dimensions of the wicked problems facing humanity, the project team added civic engagement elements to the course to connect students with opportunities for individual and collective work to create solutions to global challenges. Like the protagonists in *The Good Place*, the curriculum offered students engagement pathways for the common good, with a resulting increase in their sense of self-efficacy (Mills & Sun, 2014).

POINT SYSTEMS

In Season 3 of the series, we learn about the brokenness of the points system by which humans can theoretically enter the Good Place. No one gets to the actual Good Place because the deductions from all the unintended consequences always outweigh the good deeds of humans. The point system is thus flawed. In Season 4’s Episode 47, “The Funeral to End All Funerals,” even Judge Gen agrees that the world is broken. She notes that although the “system has been in place since the dawn of time”, it does not accurately judge how good or bad people are because people are always capable of improvement. Her solution is to scrap the entire human project and start earth all over again (Siegal et al., 2019). Ultimately, in Episode 49, “You’ve Changed, Man,” our protagonists create a new system in which everyone has the opportunity to be continually rebooted until they pass the test and are able to gain access to the Good Place, no matter how many reboots it takes to get it right (Murray & Asher, 2020).

What does this point system have to say to us about pedagogy? This group project of the protagonists’ in *The Good Place* leads us to focus on the advantages of a more adaptive model for deeper learning in a pedagogy of engagement. Consider, for example, how we traditionally evaluate our students. A syllabus typically includes some sort of point structure to represent achievement towards learning objectives. Students gain or lose points according to their performance on a series of assignments the professor gives throughout the semester. *The Good Place* suggests this might not be the best way to encourage student development or measure their growth. When we focus on points, we are not directing students towards learning. Indeed, we turn students into “points barons” who become so preoccupied with the marks available for an assignment that they miss the learning within it. We teach them to amass reserves of points early in the course, incentivizing them to take important assignments set at the end of the term less seriously. Conversely, we also incentivize minimal point accruing behaviors for those who just want to get through the class with an average or passing grade. Neither approach represents a way to achieve deep learning in a course or become a good person in one’s life. A more adaptive model, like the protagonists in *The Good Place* devise, provides the opportunity to continue learning through repetition until the content is mastered. In a pedagogy of engagement, students are encouraged to meet learning objectives rather than points objectives whereby form should follow function.

Evidence-based research indicates that the adaptive model in *The Good Place* works in the classroom as well. In “Using quizzes to enhance summative-assessment performance in a web-based class: an experimental study,” experiments were designed in which students had the opportunity to receive feedback, after which they could retake quizzes in an online platform. Student performance improved with repeated attempts, with improved achievement on subsequent exams as well. The authors of the research noted that “The present experiments thus provide some of the strongest evidence to date that taking quizzes with feedback can positively affect student learning outcomes in college-level courses . . . , and even when the quizzes are on-line and unsupervised” (McDaniel et al., 2012). Faculty using the Global Challenges curriculum have experimented with low stakes repeatable online quizzes to similarly successful effect. The Global Challenges faculty who

used this strategy observed, just as McDaniel, Wildman and Anderson noted, that one possible explanation for this approach being successful was that the repetitive testing served to identify “for students content that is not yet well learned and that merits further study” (McDaniel et al., 2012). Like our protagonists in *The Good Place*, repetition served students with an opportunity to learn until they achieved mastery.

This is at the heart of current work around adaptive learning, which is yet another way in which the Global Challenges curriculum has attempted to design an effective learning environment. As McGraw Hill explained in “What is Adaptive Learning Anyway?,” adaptive learning is a mastery-based approach.

[M]astery-based instruction places the emphasis on mastery rather than seat-time, which generally leads to higher proficiency and engagement levels for all learners. For those who are unfamiliar with the concept, “mastery-based” learning has a few basic tenets: progression through a course of study should be based on proficiency rather than hours spent; learners cannot give up; learners must achieve proficiency in order to progress and complete the course; learners can spend however long they need to master concepts. The thinking is fundamental to a more learner-centric model of education. (Posner, 2017)

The most recent iteration of the Global Challenges course is presented on an adaptive learning platform where students have some control over the learning experience through choice points. This enables them to determine the topic they wish to cover next. Further, they are unable to move to the next learning activity until they have successfully completed a prior activity, even if that means they have to encounter repeated variations on that earlier activity. Thus, an adaptive learning approach, like the point system reform in *The Good Place*, provides valuable opportunities for students to master the material, with each student progressing through the content at their individual pace and with as many repetitions as it takes to achieve success.

CONCLUSION

As educators, we should bear a great responsibility as we “burden” our students with information, especially when the resulting knowledge conflicts with, and necessarily displaces, existing perspectives. We work in Plato’s cave, introducing our students to new heights of awareness, yet often forgetting the discomfort of light that ensues on their unconditioned eyes. As Richard Rodriguez described in his memoir *Hunger for Memory*, (Rodriguez, 1982) education changes the student; to teach, at times, is to alienate them from family, friends, and others still shackled to the experience of the shadows on a cave wall. A pedagogy of engagement, like the one developed by the AASCU Global Engagement Project, charges us to awaken students and build skills for purposeful work to solve wicked problems. *The Good Place* is television that within a syllabus connects theory to practice. Encountered in the cave of home entertainment, *The Good Place* stimulates a vision of teachers and students, struggling together to make enlightened choices of ethical consequence. In this sense, we are mindful of words attributed to the late poet Maya Angelou. “When you know better, do better” (Winfrey, 2011)

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Experimental Forms and Identity Politics in 21st Century American Poetry

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ABSTRACT

“Experimental Forms and Identity Politics in 21st Century American Poetry” explores the function of form in American poetry and its proximity to whiteness. Through an analysis of experimental and nontraditional forms I argue that poets Fatimah Asghar, Jericho Brown, Franny Choi, Natalie Diaz, Ilya Kaminsky, and Danez Smith challenge traditional notions of what a poem is; these authors use graphics and co-opt familiar text objects to challenge larger assumptions about gender identity, ableism, and the immigrant experience. These experimental forms are grounded in a larger poetic tradition that alters traditional forms, such as the sonnet, to disrupt and further dialogue related to oppressive tactics in American poetry. They also signal an intentional departure from strict forms associated with colonialism and mark a shift in contemporary American poetry. For educators, including nontraditional and experimental form poems in the curriculum encourages students to engage poetry as a living genre. It also invites conversation about the implications of gatekeeping in both the publishing and education industries. The co-opting and evolution of form is not just a rebellion against classic American poetry but an opportunity for students of color to engage with the literary canon on their own terms.

Keywords: Poetry, Counternarrative, #DisruptTexts, Decolonize, Technology, Sonnet, Cyborg, Pedagogy

The use of nontraditional forms, such as matrices and crosswords, is increasingly common in contemporary poetry concerned with identity. Poets like Fatimah Asghar, Franny Choi, and Ilya Kaminsky all challenge traditional notions of what a poem is, using graphics and co-opting familiar text objects to challenge larger assumptions about gender identity, ableism, and the immigrant experience. These experimental forms are grounded in a larger poetic tradition that alters traditional forms, such as the sonnet, to disrupt and further dialogue related to oppressive tactics in American poetry. By disrupting the visual experience for readers, contemporary authors are disrupting traditional perceptions of poetry as elitist and inaccessible, thus arguing in favor of a more inclusive and more diverse conception of American poetics. In many instances, these same authors juxtapose highly experimental forms with strict formal poetry, further asserting that their choice of format is guided not by a rejection of tradition but by a desire to expand and innovate the genre. I argue that these forms are particularly common in dissent poetry, defined here as poetry that seeks to critique the sociopolitical climate in 21st century America, and that authors who employ these forms often use their writing to argue in favor of more expansive conceptions of gender, race, and the human experience.

Form has long been linked to poetry and, in many instances, used to identify poetry as distinct from other writing genres. In Western literature, Greek tragedy makes use of strict meter and rhyme scheme as early as the 8th Century BCE. Additionally, the form established by Greek epics appears in Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and British epics, as well as American poet Barlow's *The Columbiad*. Shakespeare is known as much for his use of the sonnet as he is for his plays. Italian poets, however, popularized the form ahead of Shakespeare's career and several notable poets developed alternate forms of the sonnet during the Renaissance and Romantic periods. Twentieth-century poets showed increasing devotion to odes, sestinas, and villanelles, as well. Over the past two decades, poets have also utilized mirror poems and pantoums more frequently. But poets have also resisted form, especially since the middle of the 20th century. Blank verse offered poets a way to break away from the sonnet without abandoning iambic pentameter, while free verse gave poets license to write outside any form at all. Though free verse remains the most common choice among 21st-century poets, several poets are now using strict forms not readily associated with poetry to change the way readers think about and experience poetry. These poets often make use of these forms specifically to challenge traditional thinking and construct counternarratives.

Educators are in the unique position to usher these nontraditional forms into the classroom, situating living poets alongside the strict formalists of the canon to highlight the fluidity of poetry as a genre. Students experience poems written by authors who are still alive and creating, a necessary endeavor in its own right. They would also deepen their understanding of form through the analysis of poems which alter or reject those forms. Non-examples are consistently utilized to teach concepts across numerous disciplines, engaging students in an investigation of various pitfalls on their way to mastering the parameters of a given concept. Nontraditional forms of poetry function as non-examples, inviting discussion first about where the form has been altered and then about what the effect(s) of disrupting the form is in understanding the poem as a whole. Many 21st-century poets engage the sonnet form, for example, providing dozens of excellent nonexamples to teach alongside the iconic Shakespearean and Petrarchan staples in most textbooks.

ADAPTATION AND INVENTION OF FORM AS COUNTERNARRATIVE

Form is synonymous with poetry, insofar as most educators and literature students associate form the classical origins of poetry. Meter, for example, is almost exclusively taught as a poetic device, despite the fact that meter appears across all genres. Many educators like introduce argument by outlining traditional essay structures, whether or not they refer to them as form. Lessons on plot almost always include a graphic representation of story development and tension, but rarely ascribe form directly to narrative. Like poetry,

classic prose often relies on a fairly rigid formula. Contemporary authors push against these forms as an act of resistance, co-opting tradition and taking ownership through variations on form. For educators, pairing traditional sonnets with contemporary adaptations offers an opportunity to discuss not just the evolution of poetry, but also how non-white authors are making space for themselves in the American literary community by revising the parameters for inclusion.

Danez Smith, speaking of a sonnet sequence titled “crown,” says, “Sonnets are maybe my favorite form. I write so many ‘loose’ sonnets. Loose in the sense that I don’t follow every rule each time, cause where’s the fun in that?” (Smith “Interview”) Smith includes eight sonnets in the sequence, and the purist will immediately note that many of the lines do not adhere strictly to pentameter, or even a discernible rhyme scheme. Still, each 14-line section mirrors the sonnet in many ways, from the use of the iambic to the function of the volta. Smith believes that “form...has this way of allowing for delight even when writing about something traumatic and tender,” which readers can see in “crown.” Though sonnets are associated with love and romanticism, Smith uses the form to write about the HIV-positive lover who transmitted the disease to Smith. Readers might expect a poem that rages, or languishes, but instead, Smith presents a tender, almost magical tryst with images of “[breaking] apart like glitter.” Though “crown” closely resembles the sonnet, Natalie Diaz pushes further in her own version of the sequence, “My American Crown.” Readers encounter a series of diagrams that resemble a public transit route rather than a poem, with lines intersecting and branching off at various angles. Diaz situates words along the lines, but they do not follow a linear pattern. Readers must give meaning to the collection of words, structuring and ordering phrases to give them meaning.

Readers may wonder just what the juxtaposition of lines and words means, as it clearly does not resemble the sonnet in any traditional sense. Grammarians and seasoned educators may immediately recognize the use of sentence diagramming, but today’s students are likely unfamiliar with this method. Diaz explains that “[t]he sonnet, and especially the sonnet crown are visual to [her]” (Diaz, “Sonnet Crown Feature”). She describes the sonnet as a box, and her interpretation of the sonnet as a box that has been opened. The sonnets in “My American Crown” are, visually, “contained spaces that are also fractured moments.” Diaz clearly articulates her deviation from the traditional crown, showing a deep understanding of the form and thoughtful intentionality behind her own choices. She leans into the word “savage,” for example, rather than repeating a full line from sonnet to sonnet. By framing each sonnet as a sentence diagram, Diaz co-opts a once familiar and dreaded form of rhetorical analysis. Today’s students and readers are forced to make meaning of seemingly disparate sets of words, not unlike the ways in which colonized peoples have been forced to enter English from a distance and make meaning of the colonizer’s

Both Smith and Diaz speak to operating within form and using slight variations in form to present counternarratives, Smith in discussing a love affair with a man and Diaz in addressing prejudice against Native Americans. These authors clearly understand form and display an ability to adhere strictly to the rules of sonnet, yet the small deviations from form echo their deviations in thought. Some poets choose to adhere even more strictly to form, using “all the trappings of the oppressor” while presenting strong opposition to traditional narratives (Jones). Ashley M. Jones’ “Slurret” is a perfect sonnet by formal standards, yet the content is “comprised mostly of slurs used against Black people...a retaliation against the literary canon, and the traditional sonnet form.” Critics must contend with the fact that Jones has mastered the form and reimaged it as a space in which to challenge white supremacy, notable considering that the sonnet is associated almost entirely with Anglo-European literary traditions. Franny Choi, too, exemplifies her ability to navigate the sonnet in “We Used Our Words We Used What Words We Had,” which uses the form to discuss the varied ways that a collective “we” attempted to use language. The poem closes with an expression of frustration, “meanwhile tide still tide./& we: still washed for sounds to mark. & marked.” This close suggests that, despite their best efforts, the “we” in the poem has failed to accomplish anything with the language they have employed.

The duplex, a form introduced by Jericho Brown in his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *The Tradition*, is another contemporary response to the traditional sonnet. Candace Williams describes the duplex as a form which “renders the musicality and structure of the ghazal, the sonnet, and the blues on a single plane” (“Gutting the Sonnet”). It does this in several ways: first, the form uses a couplet structure; second, the original duplex is fourteen lines total; third, the form uses repetition of the second line in each couplet, alluding to aspects of the ghazal and retaining a discernible rhyme scheme similar to the sonnet. Though the form does not require that the poem be limited to fourteen lines, both the couplet and use of repetition are mainstays. During an interview with Candace Williams, Brown described his thought process in developing the form:

I feel completely in love with and oppressed by the sonnet. You know, because I’m a poet. I can conjecture about my obsession with the sonnet. I mean, I’m educated in the sonnet. It’s been pushed down my throat the entirety of my life. There is something in me that doesn’t like that, and doesn’t trust that, because I’m a rebellious human being. I need to be a rebellious human being because I’m black and gay in this nation and in this world which has not been good to me or anybody like me. (“Gutting the Sonnet”)

It is clear from Brown’s reflection that the duplex is an intentional departure from a form almost entirely associated with whiteness. His hope, as he explains in the interview, is that educators use forms like the duplex to illustrate the importance of creating an individual poetics, one that is ever-changing and influenced by the books they choose (“Gutting the Sonnet”). Brown understands the influence that his success offers, and he has deliberately engaged with traditional poetic form as a means of pushing against the idea that poetry is static, or that it can exist only in proximity of whiteness.

Terrance Hayes pushes the genre even further with his invention of the golden shovel, a form that directly engages existing poetry to create new meaning. Hayes initially conceived of the form when writing a poem in conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks’ “We Real Cool.” Don Share explains the form such that “the last words of each line in a Golden Shovel poem are, in order, words from a line or lines taken often, but not invariably, from a Brooks poem” (“Introduction: The Golden Shovel”). Share further notes that the goal of a golden shovel poem is to “[add] something even where it subtracts; the sum isn’t necessarily greater than the parts, but in keeping with the spirit of paying tribute, it is more than equal to them.” Hayes’ poem, aptly titled “Golden Shovel,” is split into two sections; the first is a memory in which the speaker and his father meet a boy on the road, while the second invokes images of Black generational trauma and displacement. In the first section, the speaker explains “how sometimes a tune is born of outrage,” then casually remarks that the boy they’ve met will end up in prison later that year. The second section opens with a collection “we” entering a tented city with fire at their backs, then moves into a long reflection about the grief and struggle into which the speaker and their companions are born. Both sections end with a word from Brooks’ “We Real Cool,” a brief and well-known poem that also addresses generational trauma and death as inherently tied to Blackness. The golden shovel invites engagement with classic poetry and encourages authors to think deeply about the poem with which they write in conversation. Additionally, “We Real Cool” is oft anthologized and included in classrooms. Hayes’ form invites conversation in the classroom about how authors use form to both celebrate those who come before and extend the messages embedded in the poems that speak to them. It also offers educators an opportunity to help students ground themselves inside the literary tradition, not by emulating forms popularized by Europeans centuries ago but by directly engaging the poems that speak to them on a personal level.

TECHNOLOGY AS POETIC FORM

When Alan Turing asked in 1950 if machines could think, it was an honest question. Though Turing was aware of his homosexuality from adolescence, and at least somewhat forthcoming about his sexual proclivities with fiancé Joan Clarke, he was, to the general public, not yet grotesque, not yet grossly indecent. He was human. And in a handful of years, he was erased. Poisoned. He had emerged from chemical castration a different man; softer, breasts forming even as his mind drifted, a listless fog over brilliant machination. He was a man. And then he wasn't. He existed post-gender, transcended the heteronormative binary, surrendered autonomy for the sake of State (Valiunas). He became Donna Haraway's cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," not quite human and yet not devoid of humanity (149). It seems a fitting origin story for Korean American poet Franny Choi's exploration of humanness in the "Turing test" poems that pepper her second full-length collection, *Soft Science*. Choi aligns her collection adjacent to both Turing and Haraway in "A Brief History of Cyborgs," where she writes that

Once, a scientist in Britain asked *Can machines think?* He built a machine, taught it to read ghosts, and a new kind of ghost was born... Here, in a seed, is a cyborg: A bleeding girl, dragging a knife through the sand. An imaginary girl who dreams of becoming trash. Choi describes her use of the cyborg as a thought experiment for investigating aspects of her own identity, namely her gender identity and her Korean American identity. According to Choi, the appeal of the cyborg is that it is dualistic, both human and machine, making it an ideal metaphor for exploring nonbinary gender and multicultural ethnicity.

Choi acknowledges the legacy of cyborgs in each section, formatting poems which center cyborgs using programming code. Noticeably absent from these poems are coding symbols for "stop," which simultaneously forces us to consider the cyborg as complicit in its own trauma and echoes the lack of an origin story described by Haraway. Fittingly, Choi's use of the cyborg to explore feminist issues reflects the function of "the cyborg [as] a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience" (Haraway 149). She has chosen an apt metaphor to carry her critique of patriarchy and misogyny, one that neatly bridges lived experiences with a technological mythos specifically designed to further contemporary feminist thought. Choi converts the book itself into a piece of technology through her formatting, further challenging the traditional conception of poetry as static and/or dead. *Soft Science* functions as a direct response to literary criticism that dismisses post-modernist poetry for its rejection of elitist language and rigid forms. Choi rebuts with a futuristic approach to language, co-opting decades-old forms from computer science to argue that poetry is not only alive but perfectly capable of metamorphosis. This rejection of formalist poetry perfectly mirrors the content of the poems, which continually challenge traditional understandings of gender, race, and personhood. Further, by incorporating programing language throughout the collection, Choi places the reader at the keyboard, implying that each of us is an active participant in our own indoctrination, and that each of us chooses either to perpetuate the issues that the poems address or to rewrite the code ourselves.

She organizes *Soft Science* through a set of poems that reference the Turing test in their respective titles. These poems serve as section breaks, each one setting up a particular inquiry related to the humanity of the speaker in the poems. The poems follow a structure similar to computer code, challenging preconceptions of poetic structure and situating the reader as the scientist meant to determine the humanity of the speaker. "Those slashes are a technology I learned from sam sax and Jan Beatty...I liked the way they chunked sentences into pieces...made the language something I could gather and manipulate rather than asking it to bear the burden of coherence" (Choi). This technology effectively forces readers to confront their complicity in the objectification of the speaker and, by proxy, the dehumanization of those the speaker represents. In "Turing Test," the speaker is asked if they understand the questions, where they come from, and how old they are. All of these questions relate to Othering, the process by which the public identifies non-whiteness as synonymous with outsider. "Turing Test_Empathetic Response" centers emotional complexity, ending with the question,

“do you believe you have consciousness;” to which the speaker responds, “sometimes / when the sidewalk / opens my knee / i think please / please let me / remember this.” These lines simultaneously complicate our understanding of cyborgs by linking emotional capacity to consciousness, though the computer implies that a correlation is not absolute. The speaker directly relates pain to consciousness, associating the physical destruction of the body and the introduction of blood with cognition. “Turing Test_Boundaries” confronts the hypersexualization of the Other as the questions fixate on pleasure and consent. The question “does this feel good” is left unanswered, while the response to “can i keep going” apologizes for the delay. Unlike the first two poems, wherein the responses appear to be from a human speaker, the detachment implicit in the close of “Turing Test_Boundaries” suggests a speaker unconcerned with being physically touched, a traditional ideation of the cyborg as sex slave. These lines help contextualize a section of the book in which Choi grapples with the inevitability of sexual trauma and the desire to numb oneself to it as a means of survival.

CO-OPTING NONTRADITIONAL FORMS

The use of nontraditional forms, such as the computer code in Choi’s collection, is gaining steam among 21st-century poets. Readers are more and more likely to see poems structured as film scripts, word searches, matrices, and crosswords, especially if they are experiencing poems outside traditional literary journals. Fatimah Asghar, in *If They Comes for Us*, routinely co-opts nontraditional forms to offer counternarratives that address the immigrant experience and non-traditional family dynamics. “*How We Left: Film Treatment*,” tracks the speaker’s departure from the Pakistan-India region, British partition, and being orphaned through the use of a traditional film treatment. Asghar, an Emmy-winning writer, may be familiar with the form, but it is unfamiliar to many readers of poetry. The form allows Asghar space to write about deeply traumatic moments in small, contained spaces. Like Diaz and Smith, she leans into the fractalism of the film treatment to present a narrative that is, itself, incomplete. Against the backdrop of discussions around systemic racism and representation in Hollywood, co-opting the film treatment also grounds the speaker’s experience as a counternarrative, challenging traditional treatments of the immigrant in film.

Asghar utilizes a sort of metric in “From” to address the question, “Where are you from” and the sentiments that often accompany the question. Formatted as a table, the top row is a header that sorts the poem into three categories: What They Say, How They Say It, and What They Actually Mean. Again, the form is not unfamiliar to most readers, but it is not regularly employed in poetry. Asghar makes expert use of the small space to address incredibly complex and nuanced prejudices across the cultural identities she inhabits. “Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan” combines Asghar’s earlier connection to film with the blueprint for a home (Fig. 1).

Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan

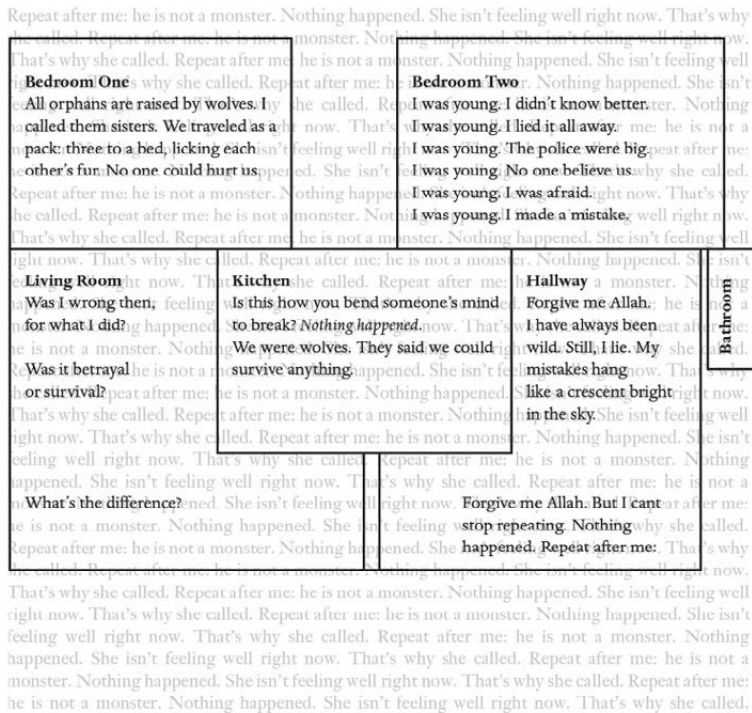


Fig. 1 Script for Child Services - Asghar (Reprinted with Permission of the Author)

The image presented on the page is remarkably complex: the underlying script is faded and repeats on loop as a background, while the rooms of the home are outlined in bold black lines. Inside each room is a stanza of the poem. Here, the structure mirrors the home, while the content addresses the conflict between what occurs and what is presented to the outside world. Again, Asghar forces the reader to grapple with trauma and acknowledge the complexities of reporting abuse to child services by destabilizing their sense of normalcy. Readers may be primed to enter a traditional poem and discover hidden abuse, but few will have associated the blueprint with abuse. Readers must confront their perception of the word home and the ways in which a home does not always mirror their respective experiences.

Throughout the collection, Asghar titles numerous poems “Partition,” effectively creating a narrative that spans the book as a whole. One such poem is written as a mad lib, inviting readers to fully engage with the poem by filling in the blanks. Asghar crafts the poem with nuance and intention, creating a piece that will inevitably read like nationalist propaganda regardless of the choices readers make in completing the mad lib. By co-opting this particular form, the poet requires the reader to become participatory in said propaganda, thereby shifting perspective and inviting readers to consider how they are complicit in the propaganda around them. “Microaggression Bingo” is, as one might guess, a Bingo card (Fig. 2).

Microaggression Bingo

White girl wearing a bindi at music festival	Friend defends drone strikes to play "devil's advocate"	Teacher still calls you "Fat-ma" on the last day of class	"But you are lucky you have something exotic to write about!"	Everyone turns to you as an expert on yoga even though you can't touch your toes
Strangers calls you a sexy samosa at the bus stop & still expects you to give them your number	"I went to India once, to find myself."	Casting call to audition for Terrorist #7	All the actors in a movie about Egypt are white	"Oh, But you don't really seem Muslim."
"You're from Kashmir? I have a <rug/ sweater/ scarf> from there!"	Someone misspells both your first and last name in an email	Don't Leave Your House For a Day-Safe	"Oh but I read a book by Jhumpa Lahiri once so I know all South Asians <insert stereotype>."	"I'm working on a story about Muslims but I'm not Muslim. Could you read it and tell me what you think? I'll take you out to coffee!"
Casting call to audition for Battered Hijabi Women #42	Editor recommends you add more white people to your story to be more relatable	"But America is so much safer for women."	"So what's Muslim food taste like?"	Get called a FOB and told you smell like curry
"You're from the same place that M.L.A is from, right?"	"I love hanging out with your family, it feels always feels so <i>authentic!</i> "	"Oh did your parents make you wear a Hijab?"	The villains are wearing headscarves in yet another fantasy series	In the 5 th week of class on Bollywood a student still refers to South Asia as the Middle East

Fig. 2 Microaggression bingo - Asghar (Reprinted with Permission of the Author)

Asghar uses the form to highlight the frequency with which specific microaggressions occur in one's daily life. This form serves to engage the reader in a conversation about how deeply traumatizing daily life can be for certain identities. "Map Home" utilizes the crossword format, with clues serving as stanzas. The reader is left to pry at the clues, all of which are personal and abstract, to complete the puzzle. Like the speaker in the poem itself, readers come away confused and without answers. Clearly, Asghar is deliberately investigating form and the function that specific forms play in daily life. She disrupts the reader by juxtaposing traditional verse with word structures that, like the speaker in so many of the poems, feel at once familiar and remarkably out-of-place.

POETRY AS POLITICAL THEATER

Narrative has a long history in poetry, and authors have adopted countless forms to frame their respective tales over the centuries. Though epics are perhaps one of the oldest literary traditions, novels in verse are a relatively new form that is, more often than not, relegated to young adult fiction by American publishers. Though most readers would draw a distinction between drama and poetry, Greek tragedy adhered to strict

rules of form, and Shakespeare infused all of his plays with poetic elements from meter and rhyme scheme to sound device. Even T.S. Eliot is known to have written entire plays in verse. One could identify hundreds of plays that lean lyrical; more rare, though, are poetry collections which emulate drama. This is precisely how Ilya Kaminsky structures his second collection, *Deaf Republic*, a series of poems which tell the story of a fictional town occupied by foreign soldiers. Kaminsky draws on key elements of drama, such as the *dramatis personae* and the use of separate acts to contain parts of the narrative. Drawing on these elements to structure the collection, Kaminsky successfully communicates the theatrical nature of the American political climate under Donald Trump. *Deaf Republic* takes place in a fictional town and incorporates images of Kaminsky's native Ukraine; however, the author seems to actively invite a comparison to the contemporary American climate by framing the collection with poems that feature images of protest and civil rights violations similar to those associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and police brutality.

The first poem in the collection, "We Lived Happily During the War," immediately situates the reader as a participant in the atrocities that follow. The collective "we" in the poem acknowledges that, while they opposed numerous acts of violence perpetrated by the state, their activism was limited and they ultimately became complacent in their resistance. Because this poem appears prior to the *dramatis personae*, it functions as a prologue to the play, contextualizing the reader's experience with the story that follows. Similarly, the final poem in the collection, "A Time of Peace," is placed outside the play, establishing it as an epilogue. By framing the dramatic narrative with poems that clearly allude to current events in America, Kaminsky suggests that the fictional town is not so different from American society. He further charges the readers, and himself, as observers willfully disengaging to preserve their individual comforts and privileges. This poem shifts from the collective "we" to the singular "I," evidence that the speaker in the poem has been affected by the play. While the first poem in the collection essentially shares responsibility with others, thereby allowing some level of distance and displacement of guilt, the last poem in the collection firmly acknowledges individual responsibility. The speakers in both poems ask forgiveness, but again readers will notice a clear evolution in thinking. The speaker in the first poem asks to be forgiven for living "happily during the war," while the speaker in the last poem pleads forgiveness for appreciating "how bright the sky [is]." Witnessing the occupation of the town, and their resistance, has shifted values away from living comfortably and toward noticing beautiful things even at the most traumatic of times.

Kaminsky further highlights political theater by having the townspeople resist occupation by feigning deafness and communicating through sign language. Prior to publishing *Deaf Republic*, Kaminsky partnered with *The New Yorker* to create a digital suite which includes poems from the manuscript alongside animated graphics that mirrored the signs used by townfolk throughout the poems. Kevin Young, introducing the suite of poems included in *The New Yorker*, notes that "Deafness, here, is an insurgency, a state of being, a rebellion against a world that sees deafness as 'a contagious disease.'" This digital suite imbues the townspeople with life and agency, granting them the ability to communicate directly with readers via the animated signs. Combining poetry with animation challenges traditional perceptions of poetry as static, strengthening Kaminsky's commentary on political theater and reimagining poetry as an interactive experience with readers. Ultimately, Kaminsky incorporates some of these gestures into the collection as images placed alongside the text (Fig. 3).

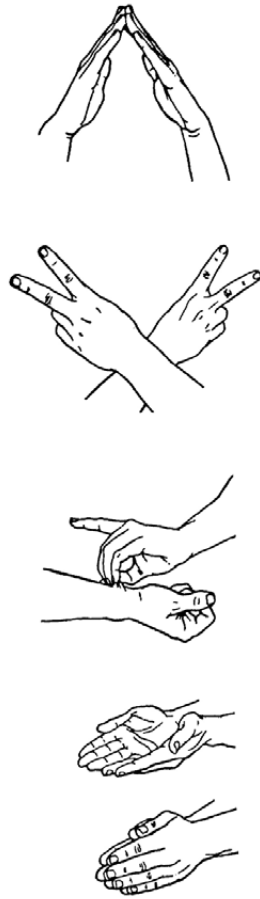


Fig. 3 Images accompanying the text (Reprinted with Permission of the Author)

Kaminsky draws from his own experiences as someone hard of hearing to offer a layered and nuanced counternarrative that critiques both militarized police forces and common depictions of deafness in Western culture. Though deafness is often presented as a weakness, the townspeople in *Deaf Republic* are empowered by their decision to adopt sign and effectively mute the occupying force. If sound is synonymous with agency, they have reclaimed that agency by refusing to hear the soldiers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Numerous movements that speak to the need for reinventing the canon and increasing representation in the texts we teach have cropped up on social media over the past few years. Among the most notable and widely discussed are #DisruptTexts and #TeachLivingPoets. While the former is specifically geared toward upending the American literary canon, the latter primarily seeks to imbue syllabi with contemporaneous poetry of any sort. The founders of #DisruptTexts state that the movement is a “grass roots effort *by* teachers

for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve.” The founder of #TeachLivingPoets communicates similar sentiments in their seven core values, including a desire to “complicate the canon” and “provide students with poetry that reflects their identities.” Both of these movements represent a widespread desire to decolonize the canon, and both have identified educators as those most able to quickly and thoroughly subvert the white supremacy perpetuated in the American literary canon. They recognize that the publishing industry, and the textbook industry especially, is too entrenched in the traditional canon to effect any significant change in the short term. Thus, educators must supplement required texts with options that expressly work against the themes and structures of the so-called “classics.”

Further, most educators who teach literature will likely note a collective sigh of discontent when students hear that they will be analyzing poetry. This genre, more than any other in my experience, simultaneously terrifies and anesthetizes students specifically because so many students have been convinced, through bad teaching and a poor selection of “classic” poems, that they are incapable of understanding poetry. It becomes a fool’s errand, so to speak, when students encounter again and again the poems of Shakespeare, Donne, Eliot, and even Frost. Though the parameters for formal poetry in the canon are static and rigid, they are about as accessible as the rules for proofs in mathematics or the Newtonian laws are for our students. This is because, like mathematical and scientific concepts, the forms in question were theorized and perfected generations ago.

Contemporary pedagogical theory may have its fair share of contentious debate, but most educators have internalized “rigor and relevance” as buzzwords that have permanently entered the conversation. Educators are increasingly tasked with teaching the standards through rigorous coursework that actively engages students with real-world, applicable examples. It may feel impossible to engage students in a deep analysis of a sonnet or villanelle, but introducing nontraditional poetic forms crafted by contemporary poets serves as an opportunity to do just that. Most poets actively and successfully co-opting text structures and/or writing in slight variations of traditional forms are living poets, making their work more relevant to students. These poets are also frequently not cisgendered heterosexual white males, which disrupts canonized texts and offers students an opportunity to experience perspectives outside the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) view of the world. Finally, pairing nontraditional forms with formal classics and asking students to speak to the differences between them requires higher level thinking, thus increasing rigor in the classroom. Students are also more likely to engage with texts that they do not recognize as poetry, and may even be more willing to attempt crafting poems that emulate these nontraditional forms than they are to attempt a traditional sonnet.

For too long, poetry has been governed by parameters established and upheld by critics and editors who prioritize one experience over all others. There is a clear and immediate need to reconsider definitions of poetry, to engage critically with the text structures and deviations of form in 21st-century American poetry, not just to better understand these deviations but to address the underlying presumption that the WASP aesthetic is superior to other approaches to the genre. Publishing is undergoing tremendous change, yet poetry remains relegated almost entirely to small presses. Critics devalue, if not outright ignore, many collections published by independent presses, and editors at larger publishing houses view poetry as a poor financial investment. While this gatekeeping does affect the exposure that new collections receive, it also empowers authors to experiment with form more readily than they might with mainstream publishers. All the titles cited herein, for instance, appear on presses or imprints that explicitly state a desire to disrupt traditional publishing and diversify American literature in their respective mission statements. Additionally, the influx of online literary journals allows authors even more space to play with and challenge traditional conceptions of poetry which, in turn, inspires still more poets to experiment. American poetry is long due for innovation, and it seems readers are primed to embrace collections that think far outside the box, that refuse to play it safe.

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AUTHOR BIO

Ronnie K. Stephens is a proud father of six and college English instructor. He is the author of two poetry collections and one young adult novel. His second collection, *They Rewrote Themselves Legendary*, won Best in Show at the New England Book Show. Stephens writes a monthly column on the intersection of poetry and pedagogy for *The Poetry Question*. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Classical Studies, a Master of Arts in Creative Writing, and a Master of Fine Arts in Fiction. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in English with an emphasis in diversifying the literary canon for the 21st century classroom.

SUGGESTED REFERENCES

APA

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MLA

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