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Intellectual Rigor, Community, and Embodied Praxis: A Pandemic Case Study

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I thought that teaching online during the 2020–2021 academic year meant the end of community and the end of intellectual rigor—and I initially mourned the loss of both in equal measure.

I stared at my syllabi last summer, trying to imagine what class would look like without the joyful embodied experience of students thinking hard together while brushing a knee or elbow against a neighbor wedged beside them at the seminar table. As I scrambled to devise ways to forge real connections online, I had a second realization. I had to slash my readings. A lot. There was no way I could expect my students to maintain the typical pace of reading, writing, and thinking when I myself could barely focus on anything for longer than five minutes.

In Fall 2020, I was scheduled to teach three classes—literary theory, a new community-engaged poetry class, and a human rights literature course—only two of which I had taught before. My pre-pandemic theory syllabus was jammed with as many examples as possible of various schools of thought, and my literature syllabi required 100-page chunks of novels for each meeting. I wanted to cut things but winnowing seemed impossible. *What is queer theory without excerpts from at least two of Judith Butler's books? And an essay by a Two Spirit Native theorist?* And so on.

To omit readings that I had previously assigned, or to stretch out discussion over additional class periods, felt like going soft, losing my edge, lowering the bar—whatever ill-advised metaphor you prefer. The longer I sat with those syllabi, though, the more I realized that a desire for intellectual rigor was more about *my ego*, about my need to perform knowledge, than it was about students' learning. Pre-COVID, my enthusiasm for the topics, and an assurance that my students seemed happily engaged, quieted any doubts about whether this was the best way to create an intellectual community, and whether it was the best way to teach. Now that the pandemic had torn off the façade of equanimity—and disabused me of an unconscious fantasy that my responsibility to students extended only to the classroom—I began to rethink my pedagogical commitments.

And, so, slash I did. I decreased the average number of assigned pages of reading by roughly two-thirds. I got rid of one of my paper assignments and replaced it with guided

asynchronous creative exercises designed to help students engage with their current environment (roommates, elders, the natural world) or return to their bodies after so much time on a screen. I created "durable small groups" early in the semester that students could convene at any time, and where they could talk about suggested topics or just support one another. I subtitled my poetry course "experiments in slow reading and vulnerability"; this was the new ethos that guided all of my courses.

My students were enthusiastic about this shaken-up mode of learning, and they shared frustrations about other courses where professors expected them to maintain a "normal" pace of work, to listen to long lectures and write research papers. Despite their positive feedback about my courses, however, I still harbored doubts about whether intentional, slow reading of fewer texts and asynchronous, embodied practices counted as "real" intellectual work. I worried that I was perpetuating what's suggested in those metaphors I listed above: losing, softening, lowering. But I began to consider what I was *actually* losing—and whether my desires for both intellectual rigor and a classroom community of care were fundamentally opposed. "Intellectual rigor" denotes excellence and discipline—an adjective befitting classes offered at prestigious colleges and universities. But if the hallmark of intelligence is nimbleness and flexibility of thought, rigor promotes the opposite. The Oxford English Dictionary's etymology of rigor traces it to the Anglo-Norman word *rigour*, which connotes "inflexible severity. . . harshness." I began to investigate the roots of the word "rigor" and its arrival in the realm of education. The investigation led me first to Ralph Waldo Emerson and eventually to bell hooks.

I'm not an expert in American Transcendentalist thought (I study African literature), but as far as I can tell, the equating of intellectual rigor with excellence traces, at least in part, from Ralph Waldo Emerson. In an 1838 address titled "Literary Ethics," Emerson claimed that American scholars, and therefore the American Mind, had failed to progress adequately. His prescription for scholars: turn away from the indulgences of society, and spend time suffering:

> You will pardon me, gentlemen, if I say I think that we have need of a more rigorous scholastic rule; . . . . Let us live in corners, and do chores, and suffer, and weep, and drudge, with eyes and hearts that love the Lord. Silence, seclusion, austerity may pierce deep into the grandeur and secret of our being, and so diving, bring up out of secular darkness the sublimities of the moral constitution. (p. 17)

Emerson promised the spiritual-intellectual sublime to those willing to undergo the rigors of physical self-denial and social isolation. Theoretically, the pandemic should have provided the perfect primordial soup from which my students would emerge as fully formed, rigorous scholars. Their isolation should have brought a redoubled ability to write, think, and grow; their physical and emotional suffering should have elevated them to spiritual-intellectual sublimity. It didn't. What they needed was time to think and *be present* in their full humanity, not just as disembodied minds.

Clearing space on my syllabus that was previously allotted for traditional course work allowed time for creative activities and small-group meetings, which in turn invited students to reconnect with themselves and with their communities. In practice, this looked like (for example) 1) discussing a handful of poems over multiple sessions rather than just one; 2) assigning "mindful walks" where students would leave their phones behind and follow prompts about how to notice the space and their bodies moving through it; 3) comparing and synthesizing these different kinds of reading experiences (textual and sensory) in small- and large-group discussion. Students found this new approach transformational, as did I. It changed how they read literature, and, perhaps more important, afforded moments where their bodies were vibrantly alive rather than just susceptible to a virus. I witnessed how this integrative methodology, unexpectedly, enabled students to engage with traditional course materials with renewed attention. Even more, I was also changed as I allowed myself to share how those same embodied practices were respites for me, despite initial worries that this sort of vulnerability would compromise my authority. It was, however, only by laying down my claims to rigor and authority that community could emerge.

Though I'm no longer teaching online, I continue to ask why certain forms of difficulty are celebrated in academe—particularly those that hold disembodied intellectual enquiry as the zenith of human activity. bell hooks (1994) offers one answer. In *Teaching to Transgress*, she revises the Emersonian self-abnegating ethic by placing the scholar firmly *in the world.* For her, the scholar—whether teacher or student—grows by negotiating the conflicts of community while integrating mind and body, society and self:

> [T]he objectification of the teacher within bourgeois educational structures seemed to denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of the mind-body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization. This support reinforced the dualistic separation of public and private, encouraging teachers and students to see no connection between life practices, habits of being, and the roles of professors (1994, p. 16).

hooks's intersectional feminist pedagogy challenges students and professors alike to pursue meaningful understanding, rather than maintaining *de rigueur* practices. It took a pandemic to prompt me to reexamine long-held assumptions about intellectual rigor and the bourgeois, white-supremacist educational structures that maintain them. I adapted, then witnessed my students overcome the hardship wrought by learning online. Our efforts to build community across distance—and to practice generous reading of not just texts, but the world and ourselves—effected the deepest learning. This semester, and for the foreseeable future, lighter reading schedules, creative exercises, and unmonitored small-group meetings will remain the touchstones of my pedagogical praxis.

References

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