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Featured Faculty

A SEMESTER IN THE LIFE: REFLECTIONS OF A FACULTY MEMBER



Theresa Tensuan, Assistant Professor of English at Haverford College, used her Contemporary Women Writers class as a context in which to explore culturally responsive pedagogical practices. She worked with a Student Consultant, Zanny, an undergraduate student not enrolled in the course, to identify and develop pedagogical approaches that would make the classroom more responsive to the diverse students enrolled in her course. The following is the second installment of excerpts from the weekly blog she kept during the semester.

To learn more about Theresa Tensuan, visit her bio page at <http://www.haverford.edu/faculty/ttensuan>.

Defining Culture: Clarifying and Complicating Assumptions and Practices (2.15.08)

How do I define culture? First response: cultures are those things in yogurt that are good for your intestinal health. Follow up on that response: culture is the medium through which you digest the world. For me, culture is the fact that when I eat I use the spoon in my right hand and my fork in my left, with the spoon performing all the primary functions of cutting and conveying sustenance while the fork plays a supporting role in getting the food on the spoon. Culture means that we say grace before we eat, but since around the table we have two and a half Catholics, one half of a heretic, and a free-range mainline Protestant, we don't say the Lord's Prayer but sing a song thanking God for hands, food, and family. Culture means that even though I am the one who cooked the meal, I am also the one who cleans up and does the dishes. Culture means that if people are coming over for a meal, I cook enough that there is enough for people to take food with them when they go. Culture means that if there are students coming over for a meal, they will sit on the floor, the window seat, crammed four on the couch, but will leave the faux-suede slipper chair for me to sit on since it is the "nicest" (and most uncomfortable) piece of furniture in the living room. Culture means that I will tell visitors not to clean up but will resent them secretly if they don't actually wrest the sponge from my hands. Culture means that I will bring baked goods to my children's teachers and classes in the hopes of maintaining favored family status. Culture means that I've adopted my in-laws' saying that "if you stand while you're eating, you make the house poor." Culture means that I pour for at least one other person before filling my own glass. Culture means that when there is a big occasion to celebrate, you get a whole roasted pig. Culture means that if you invite friends who are Muslim, you should think to have another main dish. Culture means that you might not end up inviting the vegans to this particular meal but that you feel obligated to dust off that recipe for squash soup for the next gathering.

If culture is the medium through which we digest the world, one of the courses that I'm teaching this year is the equivalent of the dining room at the country club where Yorkshire pudding and Waldorf salad is still on the menu because the older members complain if they don't see it, even if they don't order it themselves anymore. The members are proud of the fact that they

integrated before most of the other clubs of their caliber, though they don't really address the fact that by "integrated" they mean that they hired that one pro from the West Indies (who read history at Oxford and has that fabulous accent) and that while the Gentleman's Bar has been renamed "The 19th Hole," a woman who sits at one of the stools is conspicuous by her presence.

The other course that I'm teaching is a row of street carts that occupy an entrepreneurial zone in a transitional neighborhood – spaces open up as proprietors manage to open their own restaurants (one famously got featured on the cover of *Gourmet* magazine in 1993, and has a fancy place out in Princeton but still keeps a cart on the street); others get passed on to newly immigrated cousins; the Chinese cart has been there since forever but the food is still absolutely fresh and cooked to perfection; the burrito cart is getting a lot more business now that it advertises "wraps." The folks who like to eat at the country club would like to get some of people who eat from the carts to join the club, and have talked about relaxing the dress code and maybe offering espresso-based drinks, but people get prickly when you start talking about overhauling the menu even if the prime rib is notorious for giving people indigestion and is way more expensive than the skewers of beef satay that you can get on the street.

In conversation with my Student Consultant, Zanny, yesterday we talked about the last three classes that she's visited. Interestingly, from her perspective, a class that I felt went well because there was a lot of rich and varied responses from the students felt a little all over the place for her; the one that focused on small group work and that I felt dragged a bit she saw as mellow and more comfortable, with students freely addressing one another and building off of one another's points more organically. In the last class, she noted that my wrap-up lecture on *The Bluest Eye* (which was the first part of a class that then moved into a discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*) had a lot packed into it and that it would have been useful to give students more time and space to take things in and reflect on what I was putting forward. I noted that I've been trying to be more transparent about my own critical investments in the works that we're reading and to give students what one of my colleagues in the natural science division calls "the takehome." Zanny raised the question of whether "the takehome" should in fact happen at the end, or if there are other points over the course of a conversation on the text during which I can bring these issues and concerns forward to give students time to think through and work through these issues (though I do try to impress upon students that we don't leave these issues behind with each text, but try to extend and expand our understandings as we move through the works).

This helped me think through the question of how much defining we need to do, how much of the framework we need to make explicit so that students can have a sense of where these points are fitting in (reminds me of the line from *Clueless*; she's so Monet! It looks good from far away, but when you get up close, it's all messed up!). How, and how much students are able to digest vis a vis a particular pedagogical strategy is a question that I'm facing very explicitly in relation to the student with visual, speech, and hearing impairments. We've been having check ins after nearly every class, and often during office hours and at other scheduled meetings re. the class. My sense is that the issues that she is bringing up with me are, basically, amplifications of issues that many, if not all the other students are contending with: She notes that she really begins to lose focus about an hour into class conversation, which she was attributing to medication that she's been taking but which is a long time for anyone to be focused on some succession of talking heads. She doesn't always hear everything that other people in class are

saying, which we're trying to contend with by having selected folks post reflections on blackboard after each class. Nevertheless, this poses a particular challenge in situations like today, when she was taking part in a group presentation: the always challenging process of facilitating a discussion was augmented by both her nervousness and her inability to hear the tail ends of people's comments (as she said to me afterwards, "In that role, I couldn't choose what to focus on and what I could tune out since I was leading the discussion" which struck as perhaps emblematic of how any of us tune into /zone out of most large group conversations).

This student and I had met that morning to discuss the questions she was planning on bringing to class, which were well cast and considered; in addition, she had three pages of quotations from the text to help her facilitate the conversation. During the actual presentation, she had a garden variety case of the jitters which was augmented by the issues re. her hearing impairment – other students responded with really thoughtful comments, in part because the questions were generative and in part because, recognizing her nervousness, students were coming up to bat; while I could tell that she truncated her presentation and had a few deer in the headlights moments, it was perfectly fine and the next student picked up the discussion quite smoothly, moved with real ease through her part of the discussion though through shallower waters. But so it goes.

After class was over and I had spoken to some students who had some bits of class-related business to work through, I realized that the student who had struggled through some moments in her presentation was quite upset; we took about 30 minutes to talk through her concerns, and I was trying to attend both to the structural obstacles created by the classroom set up, as well as to the issues that come with the territory – What do you do when you have this wonderfully detailed outline and your mind goes blank? Was I just repeating the same thing over and over again? Did people think that I was brushing off their comments when I just couldn't hear them? I was trying to be responsive a) to what I'm probably being quite dismissive of when I speak of garden variety anxieties – just because poison ivy is common doesn't make it any less painful when you come into contact with it; and b) attending to structural obstacles that I thought I was attuned to, but really wasn't – part of my role in this class was to restate what people said when the student couldn't hear what was going on, and I realized that I wasn't always able to read her to figure out what was registering and what wasn't, which methinks, based on my experience with my very charming and challenged son, is part of the ways in which students compensate to contend with social codes and practices that don't match up with the ways in which they experience and understand the world.

In the midst of this, she began to tear up, and I was faced with one of those moments – do you hug, is this crossing a boundary? I didn't, and over the course of the conversation she collected herself. But then before she left, she gave me a quotation that she had taken from Kerouac's *On the Road* that reminded her of the class:

"Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The trouble-makers. The round heads in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules and they have no respect for the status-quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify, or vilify them. But the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."

Now I must admit that I have never been able to get past the first 14 or so pages of *On the Road* and the cynic in me views this kind of the quotation as precisely the kind seized upon by sheltered seventeen year olds as emblematic of their own misfit/idealist/rebellious status but nonetheless I got all choked up and hugged her which was probably completely inappropriate, then excused myself to erase the blackboard hoping that one of my colleagues wouldn't see me all Monet. Part of what got me is that she gave me the quotation just after I ascertained that it was 4:35 and wishing that culturally responsive teaching wouldn't take up so much damn time.

Two quick thoughts here: I'm thinking a lot more actively about how to be transparent about my expectations and more explicit about disciplinary conventions and practices – for example, in talking with students about group presentations I've been focusing as much on pedagogical strategies as the material the students are thinking about covering, whereas in the past it would have been closer to 10%/90%.

I've been thinking about the issue of our embodied positions in the classroom – something that I've been attuned to re. racialized and gendered differences, but which I am now thinking of in terms of how people digest material vis a vis their physical capabilities – as the student said re. her terror of oral presentations and her comfort with writing: “The words don't make it from my brain to my mouth but they make it from my brain to the tips of my fingers.”

Cartographies of Silence¹: Whose story are we not hearing? And what is so necessary about the one we are hearing? (2.25.08)

Good class on Thursday; wrapped up conversation on *The Woman Warrior* by drawing from one of the reflections that a student had posted in response to Tuesday's class, both to students' reading of their “talk-stories” that had been the assignment for the day, as well as to the conversation on Kingston's memoir: “The chapters haunt each other in the interesting way that the stories in class connected and haunted each other.... The chapters are in conversation with each other and transcend centuries, oceans, geographical and physical spaces. Each chapter is a story of ways of building a woman's self and ways in which violence is done by or to her. What was also interesting to mention in class was the connection that speaking was a kind of violence and that is most clear in the interaction between the two silent girls and the confession by the daughter at the end of the novel. I think there is also another kind of violence in the telling of such stories because voices are left out and perhaps misread. Whose story are we not hearing? And what is so necessary about the one we are hearing?”

I've been making an effort at the outset of class to draw directly from the reflections, an assignment that I had added on to the syllabus (cutting down on writing elsewhere) in response to the request to attend to the accommodation for the hearing-impaired student to have an in-class note taker; I don't know if the other students in class are reading these on a regular basis, but they've been incredibly helpful for me in figuring out what threads to pick up from one conversation and weave into the next. Another student had started his posting off with what I think is a satire on academic writing (wanted to ask him in class but he was the one absent body), an italicized paragraph that stated the writer's intent to show how the breakdown of family dynamics in Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit stories led to an otherwise moral rabbit resorting to thievery.

The entry itself riffed off of a class conversation about silences and gaps with a level of insight and theoretical complexity (or, some could say, sophistry) that is akin to the interpretive strategies we foster in our Junior Seminar (our country club course). This provided me with an opportunity to speak directly about conventions of academic writing in essays involving literary analysis, complete with my four-page handout that goes over the specificities of quotation and citation with embedded examples of what close readings look like, and what kinds of analyses they could engender. I had them read it out loud, so that we could literally and figuratively be on the same page about some basic conventions, speaking to the fact that these conventions have embedded in them implicit systems of value; I let them know [prompted by our discussions about being as explicit and transparent as possible re. our individual and disciplinary expectations] that one of the expectations of the course is that they will leave knowing how to write a 5-7 page literary analysis, but that was only one of many writing strategies that we would be cultivating in the class. I told them that I would expect them to write at least one “formal literary analysis” over the course of the semester, but that the essay assignments would provide opportunities for different kinds of creative and critical approaches, which I’m going to have to figure out over this weekend when I write up the assignment prompts for Tuesday.

The first student’s comment that I quoted to the class provided a nice segue way into what I wanted to focus on for the reading for the day, Alison Bechdel’s graphic narrative *Fun Home*: we started off by reading the first five pages of the book, with my instructions to pay attention to the ways in which the images presented in the frames work in relation to, or in generative tension with, the narrative that is being presented and the various voices that are put forth. After the students shared some of their initial impressions (the question is “what do you notice?”): “Look, there are basically three different voices being presented in this frame – the view of our narrator, the perspective of the child in the frame, and this side commentary that seems to be from someone else in that moment”; “Do you notice that the father never makes eye contact with anyone?”; “This image of the father really reminds me of the image of the daughter on the first page”; “What do you make of the image at the beginning of the chapter – the style is really different. Is that really the father? Why is he naked?” I broke them down into their presentation groups with the assignment to choose a frame, or a page from the first two chapters that they found to be interesting/provocative.

I gave them about 10-12 minutes to confer while I put some basic terms on the board related to reading comics: “frame,” “gutter” (the space between the frames where the reader has to make an interpretive connection, hence the joke that when you’re reading comics, your mind is always in the gutter), “sweaticules” (those little beads of perspiration popping off of a character who is feeling anxiety, coined, I think, by Art Spiegelman when making fun of people like literary critics who have an obsessive need to define terms); had a couple of minutes to myself to organize the papers that they had turned in during the last class, during which I found a note from a student thanking me for the assignment (which was, in essence, “write a familiar story in a voice not your own”) because it helped her contend with her memory of finding out about her mother’s cancer. Gulp.

I turn to the class to ask the groups to volunteer to discuss the image that they had chosen for their discussion and the first group (and the second, and the third) had selected a series of images in which the narrator (as well as the viewer) is confronted with the image of a cadaver in the private basement sanctuary of the family Fun(eral) Home, which opened up a really rich and

generative discussion: the first group was focusing on the shock of coming upon the image of this hirsute man with his abdomen carved open, and spoke to the three different interpretations of the scene that the narrator gives us; the second saw biblical resonances to the story in Genesis of God taking a rib from Adam in order to create Eve, as well as in an image that called up the scene from the Sistine Chapel in which God is extending His hand to Adam's; the third group focused on the narrator's question about whether she is following in her father's footsteps in "attempting to access emotion vicariously through others" in relation to the way in which Bechdel uses shadowed silhouettes and other formal strategies in the work.

I found all of this to be incredibly generative for me as a reader (and what about our needs as teachers? scholars?), giving me a sense of how to get back into my long abandoned chapter on Bechdel's work, in which I am reading it in relation to David B.'s amazing memoir, *Epileptic*, which I need to get from the back burner onto an active flame because the emails from my editor are growing increasingly less polite since he expected my full manuscript at the end of last summer. And it was good for my inner control freak to be in a position in which the students were directing the conversation because I wouldn't have gone to this particular moment in the text, in part because it hadn't been a point that I was particularly focused on, and in part because I would have avoided "scenes with cadavers" knowing that a student had just written a story from the perspective of a surgeon who had found the cancerous tumor that had originated on her mother's liver, metastasized, and had taken her life within weeks of its discovery.

Which in turn raised the question of whether my sense that I should "protect" a student by steering conversation away from potentially traumatic scenes and issues might in fact rob the student of vocabularies and frameworks that can help her make sense out of whatever situations and struggles that she is facing. Also a reminder that one rarely knows all the histories a student brings into the classroom. Whose story are we not hearing? And what is so necessary about the one we are hearing?

Technical Difficulties, Differently Embodied Experiences (3.19.08)

Technical difficulties today: to create a link between the conversations that we were having before spring break on the work of Muskoke poet Joy Harjo and the conversation that we were going to begin on Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, I had wanted to show a short video of a talk by Jill Bolte Taylor, a scientist who specializes in the functioning of the brain. The presentation is entitled "My Stroke of Insight," and in it Taylor speaks of her experience of having a stroke as the result of a blood clot in the area of her brain that controls language functions. Part of her narrative delineates her fear and frustration as she began to feel the effects of the stroke – for example, after laboriously working through a stack of business cards to find the phone number of a colleague, and realizing that she can no longer read and can only identify the numbers on the telephone by matching the shapes that she sees on the card with the figures that she sees on the buttons of the phone, she finally succeeds in dialing a number, which takes her 45 minutes all told; when her colleague picks up, what she hears when he speaks is the bark of a golden retriever and when she tries to inform him of this, she hears herself barking right back at him. Another part of the story illuminates the fact that even as all this was happening, she thinking that it would really cool as a brain scientist to have this first-hand account of how the brain functions if she actually survived the experience.

For Taylor, the experience gives an extraordinary sense of the difference between the left side of the brain (which is the “analytical” side of the brain, the part that sees patterns, establishes order and meaning) and the right side of the brain (the part of the brain that takes in the sensations around us). Taylor speaks of that right brain experience as both Nirvana and near-complete discombobulation; the terms that she uses are familiar to me from narratives of spiritual conversion, and much of it resonates deeply with the ideas and themes in Harjo’s poetry which were brought to life quite vividly in the student presentation.

The four students (three female, one male) opened up with a video clip of a performance that Harjo had given at Berkeley back in 1997: Harjo is a musician as well as a poet, and opened and closed her reading of poem by playing a Creek melody on her soprano saxophone. We didn’t have the proper sound hookup in the classroom, and I experienced the frustration that the student with the hearing impairment must feel constantly since I couldn’t make out all the words of Harjo’s poem, but eventually I settled in to listening to the music of her voice as she was speaking. This helped me realize how rarely I fully appreciate the lyricism of poetry because I’m so focused on discerning the meanings made manifest in the words that I’m not fully attuned to everything else that is going on – rhythm, intonation, measures of breath. I’ve never found myself to be particularly good at scanning poetry, figuring out where the beats are, which I sometimes attribute to growing up in a small town in Southwestern Pennsylvania with the long, flat, drawn out vowels of and local locutions of Pennsylvania Dutch and the Tagalog-inflected English I heard at home in which grammar was formally pristine but accents were in unusual places, at other times attribute to the fact that much of the canonical work that is taught favors a British tradition and British inflections in which the “natural” stress in a line is sometimes difficult for a North American reader to assess.

The students then had us participate in a kinesthetic exercise: they had chosen motifs that reappear throughout Harjo’s poetry – crows, monsters, maps, flowers, perfume – and had us stand in a circle, which in and of itself was great since it broke the division between those who sit at the table and those who are consigned to (or who choose) the row against the side wall. One of the students, a kid who I recently learned has a reputation as a spectacular dancer, instructed us on the protocols of the exercise: he would act out one of these motifs to the person on his right, who would have to interpret what she saw, then reinterpret and enact it to the person on her right, and so on around the room. Those of us who were audience to the interactions were asked to try to identify what we thought the subject was, and to be attuned to the points at which the subject seemed to change.

He started us off, making a fluid gesture with his arms that was beautiful but to me completely incomprehensible given the “crows, monsters, maps, flowers, perfume” that we had as references. I was two students away from him, and in that short space the movement had morphed onto one in which the student next to me sprung at me with her hands curved in front of her face. This made me think of a bird pecking, so when I turned to the student next to me I enacted “crow landing with her wings outstretched and beginning to strut across the ground” which in my highly self conscious state felt more like “look at me, I’m such a spaz”; I wanted to make sure that my arms were outstretched in part because the student who sits next to me has a congenital impairment in which she can’t bend her arms; she paused for a moment, turned to the student next to me and did this little shimmy that made me think of a sparrow making its way

across a yard. The student next to her took her own moment, then enacted what seemed to me to be a flower opening and on we went through the exercise.

I was reflecting on how the exercise helped illuminate some of the questions that students had raised in reading Harjo's work: one of the students who was leading the presentation had asked in an earlier class what to make of Harjo's references to crows – sometimes a crow is part of a flock of birds, at one point a crow is characterized as a charming drug dealer who lives down the hallway from the poet's Los Angeles apartment. In response, another student pointed out that Crow could refer to the tribe, leading me to remark out loud that this particular register of possibility had completely gotten past me all of the years that I've been reading this particular collection, something I wanted to make explicit to them to show how poetry can continually surprise a reader (in another context and place I might just nod sagaciously while making a mental note to myself "crow as Crow; look up tribal histories and practices to figure out what this reference could mean"). This in turn led me to a long and rambling digression in which I was trying to speak to the ways in which both the practice of interpreting poetry and the trickster figure of the crow have a shapeshifting quality to them. This was articulated with far more grace in the fabulous exercise that the students had devised.

So I tried to recapture some of that with the video of Jane Bolte Taylor speaking about the bodily knowledge she had gained through her stroke of insight; I couldn't get the sound to work and thus ate up the first 20 minutes of class struggling futilely with cords and wall jacks – I asked students to "talk amongst yourselves" before finally giving up and launching into what became a good discussion of *A Thousand Acres* (to collect my thoughts since I was making adjustments in my course plan mid stream, I had the students engage in a silent board discussion in which they wrote out a line from the first chapter that, in their eyes, told the reader something important about the story that unfolds); in retrospect, I should have just asked someone to dance or to sing to get us back into that moment as well as into the present.

Definitions of Responsibility: Consumerism vs. Cultivation (3.24.08)

I'm thinking about definitions of responsibility. In particular, I'm thinking about the ways in which education gets narrated in the language of consumerism – shopping for classes, getting a good grade in a course, etc. – that shifts the notion of responsibility in the classroom into a question of how we can best "service" students, which figures them as, say, Lexuses in for an oil change and tune up, or figures us alongside those who are often part of the working poor, slinging burgers or polishing toenails. Neither characterization is either fair or fit, but might get at some of the issues we encounter at our particularly privileged institutions – indeed, part of the stipend I am receiving for this seminar is going into my kids' college funds, since every time we have a discussion on faculty floor about tuition hikes, I have a bit of an out of body experience since if one of my kids were now attending Haverford and I were paying full tuition, I'd have enough left over to take care of my share of family expenses for, oh, maybe three or four months.

Back to the business of education: it was interesting to hear one of the Student Consultants speak of the translatability, or lack thereof, of academic expectations and achievements into the workaday world, and to listen to her take on the hidden curriculums of the colleges. It made me think of a line from a Gerald Graff essay, "Our Undemocratic Curriculum," in which he speaks about an encounter that he had with a student who had just graduated from college with a major

in English; Graff had asked her what she had learned about “larger issues in literary study,” and the student’s response what that she became quite attuned to “the assumption...that if I was any good I already knew what those issues were and why they mattered. I couldn’t ask, since I didn’t want to look dumb.” Here, I’m particularly appreciative of Freeman Hrabowski’s story about his colleague’s mother who asked him each day, “Did you ask any good questions today?”

To what extent do we, or our institutions, promote particular models of performance that privilege the ability to go from zero to sixty in a minute, and a high-polished sheen on the exterior rather than a model or series of models that encourage students to take in the world around them at a deliberate pace?

In my view, by engaging in the practices of a liberal arts education we are collectively taking time not only to smell the roses but also to become attuned to larger life cycles evident as we witness how a rose buds over the course of a season; to learn to ask if the rose is native to the region and, if not, what forms of life it might have supplanted; to wonder about the history of its hybridization and the labor that goes into making it bloom; to figure out if the scent and the vision of its beauty is worth whatever impact the fertilizers are having on our collective water supply; to take up or contest Gertrude Stein’s assertion that “a rose is a rose is a rose”; to learn how to cultivate what is of interest to us in this world, and to be mindful of how this can transform the worlds through which they move in destructive as well as productive ways. To learn to be accountable as well as answerable, to be able to maintain a concrete sense of the different communities to which we are responsible, to have a full sense of how what we are cultivating in the context of a classroom or a project can be an integral part of the work that we do in this world, that, for me, at this moment, also includes teaching my three year old daughter and six year old son to be mindful of the poison ivy as well as aware of what will feed their bodies, minds, and spirits, hoping that what I can impart to them is generative and knowing that what they will need in this world, and what they will make of this world, goes beyond my own purview.

[1] Rich, Adrienne. “Cartographies of Silence.” *Dream of a Common Language*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993. Print.