

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Issue 24 Spring 2018

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Recommended Citation

Nave, Lillian; Aguilar, Alejandra; Barnes, Matthew; Knauer, Aliesha; Lubamba, Erica-Grace; Miller, Kendall; Slawson, Verolinka; and Taylor, Taylor "On Confederate Monuments, Racial Strife, & the Politics of Power on a Southern Campus," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 24 (2018), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss24/3>

On Confederate Monuments, Racial Strife, & the Politics of Power on a Southern Campus

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ON CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS, RACIAL STRIFE, & THE POLITICS OF POWER ON A SOUTHERN CAMPUS

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On Saturday, August 12th, 2017, a group of white nationalist protesters congregated around a prominent bronze statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee near the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville, Virginia. Violent clashes with counter-protesters increased in intensity throughout the day until one man drove his car into a crowd of people which resulted in the death of 32-year-old counter-protester Heather Heyer.¹ In Durham, NC, the following Monday the 14th, a group of protesters toppled a bronze statue representing the young men who fought for the South in the American Civil War, pulling the bronze effigy from the plinth that read “THE BOYS WHO WORE THE GRAY.”² Just a few days later, sometime late Wednesday night of August 16th or in the early morning hours of August 17th, the stone statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee at the entrance to Duke Chapel on the campus of Duke University was vandalized.³ Still further, under the cover of darkness, late Sunday evening August 20th, University of Texas at Austin officials removed several bronze Confederate statues from a prominent area on campus just before the start of the fall semester.⁴ And on the following Tuesday, August 22nd, over 800 demonstrators on the University of North Carolina flagship campus at Chapel Hill congregated around the 105-year-old bronze memorial sculpture of a young Confederate soldier nicknamed ‘Silent Sam,’ to call for the statue’s immediate removal.

On the same day of the Chapel Hill protest, an “Identity Evropa” banner was unfurled⁵ on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, where I (Lillian) currently am a faculty member. Although it was taken down within 20 minutes of its appearance, it still warranted a campus-wide email response⁶ from Chancellor Sheri Everts. The email reassured the community of the safety of all people on campus, explained what the administration was doing to foster diversity and inclusion, and offered guidelines to students on how to help in these efforts. Soon afterwards, the Chancellor received emails from student leaders and campus groups noting their dissatisfaction with the administration’s policies stated in the email. On the day after the offending banner was mysteriously placed and then removed from our campus, I met my students for the very first time to begin our First Year Seminar class on “Arts4Peace.”

Although I had planned to focus on international movements in the visual and performing arts that had been successful in crossing borders to create peace, I changed the focus of the course to what mattered to the students as they were setting foot on campus for the first time. The very

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/durhams-civil-war-monument-and-the-backlash-to-the-backlash/536889/>

³ <http://www.heraldsun.com/news/local/counties/durham-county/article167702402.html>

⁴ <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/08/20/ut-austin-removing-confederate-statues-middle-night/>

⁵ <http://college.usatoday.com/2017/08/24/appalachian-state-students-greeted-by-white-supremacy-banner/>

⁶ <http://chancellor.appstate.edu/messages/id/135>

controversial matter of what universities in the south and especially North Carolina public universities were to do about Confederate monuments and public sculptures was a far more immediate topic than far-flung international peacemaking. My students were visibly concerned about what their fellow students and the administration were going to do. I changed the focus of the course to address this concern, but honestly, I was not very sure how I was going to do that. Would I miss something in the topic because of a bias I didn't even realize I had? Would I be able to fully integrate our course learning goals into the topic in a meaningful way? Could I account for each individual and their understanding of the events and how they affected each student's life? Just addressing the topic successfully felt risky to me, but it was the first of many risks I would soon discover.

The class was the most diverse group of first year students I had ever taught at Appalachian State. This small seminar of 21 students was comprised of many students from outside North Carolina including a non-traditional former military returning student, Congolese and Liberian students, African-Americans, Latin-Americans, first-generation Americans and a large percentage of first-generation college students. In fact, the overwhelming majority of my students in this class were from historically underserved college-going populations. While this does reflect the great diversity in our current college-going generation, it far exceeds the 14% minority make-up of the Appalachian State University student body.

I have taught at this university since 2007, first as an adjunct, then as a ¾-time instructor, and finally as a full-time Lecturer in the fall of 2014. Just this year I moved into a Senior Lecturer (4/4 teaching load) position which allowed for a three-year contract after 10 years of tenuous, year-by-year appointments. As a non-tenure track instructor, my position in the university is not guaranteed. I believed my background in art history would serve me well to guide students through the history of public sculpture and art analysis techniques, but my lack of training in inclusive pedagogies at the time also made me apprehensive to tackle such a sensitive topic. Would I offend students unintentionally when addressing their concerns? Would my student evaluations plummet? Could I endanger my future employment at the university if I failed miserably at teaching this topic? Would I be able to bring all of the diverse students in the room to a place where they felt valued, heard and effective? Therefore, not only the topic, but the very diverse student composition of the class made me doubtful that I could authentically teach on the topic when so many perspectives needed to be addressed. I had to try a different kind of pedagogy as well. Students voices would need to be the dominant voices in this class, and that was a risky pedagogy for me. It was not very comfortable, especially at first, to give over the authority that comes with being the instructor, and I feared students might not appreciate this style either, but as they also risked their voices being heard, we began to feel more comfortable together.

I was also fearful that my very presence in the classroom, as a six foot tall, white female, might be a barrier, in some senses, that I would have to overcome. Would students expect that I had all the answers and become frustrated when I wasn't "teaching" in the way they might expect? Would my position of authority cause students to censor themselves? Would the different nationalities, races, personalities, assumptions, and the variety of learners present in the class make it too difficult to broach such a personal and difficult topic? It became clear to me that the

diversity of students, the lightning rod topic, and change in my pedagogy required a different ‘classroom ecology’ that would vary greatly from what both the students and I were familiar.

In order to foster a classroom community of equals, I asked the students to call me by my first name. I also made it a point to have the students physically above me for some portion of each class. Therefore, I would arrange their chairs in a circle and then sit on the floor amidst them. We also spent some part of each class with students assigned in small groups to get to know their fellow classmates as much as possible. I explained that this was a vital part of our course. These class interactions in which students spent much of their time learning from each other instead of from their instructor were initially approached with caution, but eventually that hesitancy was replaced with trust and a sense of cooperation and openness.

Usually students think of a college classroom in which they are passive receptacles of knowledge judiciously dispensed by their instructor. I explained to the students that I viewed my role as a co-learner along a journey of discovery. I offered the analogy that our classroom should be viewed much more like a spelunking expedition. Perhaps I have been in this cave before and perhaps I do know a good deal about it, but if I am the only one with a headlamp pointing out the parts that I think are interesting, there is no way we will be able to see the whole cave. However, if we all have headlamps on and have the opportunity to call each other over to see something new or interesting, we will have a much richer and more nuanced understanding of the cave (or topic) than if any one person were leading the tour. It is impossible for me to know everything about a topic, and there is certainly no way that I can know everyone’s perspective on a topic, either, and so giving over the reigns of the class to the students seemed to be the most appropriate thing to do, and also, the scariest thing I had ever done as a university instructor.

I wanted the class to help determine the topics that we would investigate as well as the shape of the discussions. This meant that there were now large holes in the course calendar that would later be filled with topics of the student’s own choosing, depending upon what questions they had early in the semester. This was definitely an uncomfortable moment for me as an instructor as for the first time I did not have the entire semester of topics, readings, and assignments laid out for the students. But, it was also the first time that I was finally being authentic in acting out the philosophy I had been so readily sharing with students for years. We were now in a part of the cave that I hadn’t seen before as I gave over the control of some of the content selection to the students. This was also uncomfortable to students. One student mentioned that the lack of structure initially brought anxiety but he eventually determined that this would allow for more freedom and appreciated the flexibility. We slowly began to work together to select those topics that they viewed as important and I helped them to acquire credible sources and multiple perspectives along the way.

As the semester progressed, we discussed public sculptures on North Carolina campuses and the varied perspectives of people on all sides of the issues. We studied multiple reasons why Confederate statues were erected and various critical analyses of their creation, why people want them to remain, why people consider them racist, why others did not, and how art in general, and public sculpture in particular, could offer a multitude of interpretations. We also looked at similar situations in the re-making of public spaces in post-apartheid South Africa (Durban and Pietermaritzburg) and the triumphs and pitfalls, actions and inactions, that impacted public

sculptures in these communities after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the Government of National Unity. And we also learned quite a bit about each other in our class--how many languages were spoken at home, where we grew up, what was expected of us, what we hoped to do, and what we thought about each issue we discussed.

Our classes were surprising, delightful, sometimes tense and even embarrassing at times, but always open and accepting of one another and each other's viewpoints. My fears of disrupting the free-flow of discussion because of my position of authority were eventually quelled, in part due to the relaxed atmosphere, the physical changes of the classroom (where I often sat on the floor) and the emphasis we placed on getting to know each other. As a group of equals, exploring an unfamiliar cave together, we found a certain comfort in our shared uncomfortability. We became very aware of the identities in the classroom after having so many conversations with each other, and we also had time to reflect upon our words and listen to each other. These were the practices that made it possible for us to discuss such sensitive topics. Just knowing who was in the room was a very important part of each discussion, so that meant knowing each other on a deeper-than-surface level.

Wondering what changes worked well for the students in our newly created "classroom ecology," I asked them how they felt they could bring their full selves to the class experience. Many students mentioned that the classroom felt like an open-minded community where we could "bring up topics and issues that were recent in society to the class, where they would be addressed with intellectually challenging conversations." Another student noted, "I felt like Lillian had my back and that no matter what direction I wanted to go in I would be supported. I felt like I had a say in the final outcome of a project." Several students echoed these sentiments and emphasized how important it was for them to feel heard, safe and supported by their instructor as well as their fellow students as they approached these sensitive topics. Students also said that they felt their opinions were valued and how important it was to be respectful of others' opinions. They realized that they all had something to learn from each other. One student had much to say on this topic:

I felt very safe and supported in the classroom environment created by Lillian and the other students. We never got mad at each other for having different opinions, we decided to be open-minded and learned from these different perspectives. There was no arguing, just discussions. Anger did not exist in the room, but people were still very passionate about these topics. Questions were asked to make us think about situations outside the box we were used to. No opinion or question was dismissed either, all were equally valuable. This has been very different from many classes I attended where certain opinions were more authoritative than others based on age or position. I loved hearing what everyone had to say, since it was all different and insightful. I felt very safe to give my own thoughts to the group, since those thoughts would be heard and reflected upon. Even though I'm soft spoken myself, I do feel like my voice was just as important as everyone else's.

The new "classroom ecology" did seem to make discussing the topic more comfortable for students, but would they risk even more as the class progressed?

Midway through the semester I asked the students if they were interested in undertaking a risky venture with me by holding our final exam as a conversation with Chancellor Everts. After a week to think about it, the class agreed that they did want to meet with the Chancellor to express their views and what they had learned. To our astonishment, the Chancellor agreed to meet with us for 90 minutes and invited her Chief of Staff and the Provost to join her. We also invited the Student Government Association President that represents every student body from the 17 affiliate campuses of the University of North Carolina system.

Student reactions varied to this new “epic finale” in place of a final exam. One student was extremely nervous because she was concerned the class would not pull together a great presentation in front of the Chancellor. While another student initially described the new plan as “terrifying,” her apprehension turned to excitement along with her classmates when they considered the unique opportunity the class was given. Students said they were surprised, nervous, excited and one noted, “my reaction about meeting the Chancellor for our exam was delighted. I honestly felt like it was a great idea and the way each student contribute to the project was amazing.” Another student wrote, “I was especially excited for us to talk to her about the monuments since it is such an important issue currently going on, and investigating it was incredibly interesting with Lillian.”

The potential meeting, although anxiety-producing, was something the students felt was worth the trouble and the risk of feeling foolish, unprepared, or even intimidated. One student in particular felt a great need to go through with the meeting despite her fears. She stated:

I was very nervous about possibly presenting in front of someone so important. However, I did know the students who wrote the letter of criticism and I understood their frustration with the Chancellor; I did think that the presentation was a good way to show her exactly what the students thought about recent issues that people claimed she wasn't handling well. Because of this, I was also worried about the responsibility we held as ‘student representatives’ and if we were going to do a good enough job.

There was also a great camaraderie among students that helped to assuage the students’ collective anxiety. One student put it this way: “I didn’t feel scared about the meeting because the whole class got to meet her as a group, so there wasn’t too much pressure to be individually perfect, since we are all in this together and I trusted that everything would work out great as long as we all did our best.” They buoyed each other’s confidence and felt empowered as a group, even if individually they felt uneasy about this prospect.

As the date approached, students formed groups and created a website for the Chancellor.⁷ I facilitated with group deadlines and spent most of my time and energy asking the students how and what they wanted to accomplish in their meeting. They would be in charge of the presentation and discussion, not me.

On the day of the meeting, the students decided to arrange the room in an inclusive but open circle that allowed space for an initial presentation but also encouraged equality during the discussion portion of the meeting. This not only continued the new “classroom ecology” we had

⁷ <https://art4peace17.wixsite.com/home>.

adopted, but also provided an inclusive space where the students felt they were on common ground with the administrators.





The students introduced themselves⁸ and then a group of students explained the main theories we discussed throughout the semester centering on the role of public art in times of conflict along with hand-picked, personally significant examples that the students had researched.⁹ Another group of students presented multiple perspectives on the recent controversy surrounding Confederate Memorial sculptures on Southern college campuses and the parallel reconstruction and recontextualization efforts that have taken place in South Africa.¹⁰ Students were able to articulate a plan of action to manage conflict through artistic means if protesters or antagonists were to arrive on our campus so as to avoid an outcome similar to what happened Charlottesville. And finally, the last group of students offered questions for discussion with the administrators. The prompts on their webpage soon sparked a very honest and lively discussion with equal participation from students and administrators.¹¹ In fact, the discussion continued well-past the original time limit that the Chancellor had cleared on her schedule and she stayed almost twice as long as originally planned. Throughout the conversation, the Chancellor requested student input and even asked if several of the students would consider serving on a task force she had commissioned to address the lack of cultural diversity in the public art on campus. It was during her conversation with the students that she recognized there was no student representation on the task force and asked to rectify that with the students' help.

I asked students specifically about the role reversal that we undertook when students became the “producers of knowledge” while I moved to the background and eventually the Chancellor became a student. Students remarked that they felt a great sense of pride upon stepping up to the challenge even when they felt uneasy or lacked confidence in the beginning of the semester or initially when meeting with the Chancellor. One student response encapsulated many reactions noting that the role reversal

felt natural, believe it or not. Maybe it was because of the respectful environment and sense of equality that existed through the course. I think the confidence I felt in order to

⁸ <https://art4peace17.wixsite.com/home/who-we-are>

⁹ <https://art4peace17.wixsite.com/home/waging-conflict-nonviolently>

¹⁰ <https://art4peace17.wixsite.com/home/reducing-direct-violence>

¹¹ <https://art4peace17.wixsite.com/home/transforming-relationships>

be at ease in front of such important people was probably more because of the respectful class dynamic where everyone's insights, opinions, and ideas were always well respected and reflected upon. Never did it feel that someone was better than someone else. And throughout the whole course, Lillian always started the discussions, but then let us share all our insight and thoughts in a communicative environment. Lillian would watch and ask questions that responded and bounce off of the ideas we were sharing with each other. We felt equal to her and everyone else, because in her eyes and in our discussion we were equal. Discussing issues in front of Chancellor Everts, Lillian, and everyone else just felt like all the other discussions we had, so it was natural to be confident.

Students also said they felt very encouraged that their instructor had enough faith in them to meet with the Chancellor. As one student noted, "although this was stressful, I learned a lot more than I would have had I been lectured at or had just taken a written exam. I think this can be an effective method of examination that forces students to take charge of their education." Another student mentioned, "I think that this relationship between the students and Lillian needs to be mirrored across all disciplines. It is very effective and I learned so much about leadership and teamwork in this class!" They saw the opportunity as a helpful exercise that would prepare them well for the rest of their college experience.

A few days after our "epic finale," I asked my students if there were anything they thought other professors and students should know about the unusual partnership we undertook this semester. In each response, students noted that this unusual class partnership was difficult and made them feel uneasy at times. However, each student also enthusiastically endorsed the experience as integral to their learning, growth, and development. One stated, "I'm proud of what we accomplished as a class, even though I'm sure Lillian was anxious and nervous throughout the entire process. Even more than the students were." I would have to agree with this statement. I was very anxious throughout the whole process, and especially leading up to the meeting with the Chancellor. I have left control of the content, organization, pacing, interaction, and everything that was going to happen up to my students. It was stressful, overwhelming and exciting at the same time, and I, like my students, was comforted by the knowledge that we were all in this together. One student wrote to me:

I can understand that you putting us in such a position can be laughable. This opportunity you gave us was risky because no one knew what we were going to say and if it was going to be beneficial to the Chancellor, but I'm happy for this chance because we demonstrated to important figures of this university that the students have many concerns to voice and solutions to offer, and that it is very important for us to be heard in this rapidly evolving world because we are the future and soon our words will be the most important in years to come. I think this was a risky partnership and I'm very grateful for the opportunity.

Despite my own anxiety about the "class ecology" and the "epic finale" with the Chancellor, I also felt a tremendous responsibility to my students. My desire to serve my students outweighed my nervousness about the controversial topic, new pedagogy, and unorthodox ending to the class. The events that surrounded the students' entrance into the university were so dramatic for the students who had chosen this topic Arts4Peace, that I felt I owed them a relevant class, and a

class in which they could participate wholly, explore their own self-efficacy, and actually make a positive difference on their campus and in their community.

The “epic finale” truly was a risky venture, especially for me as an instructor. I had never given so much control of the content of the course and the structure of the time used in the class over to the students. However, in the end, this class also produced my biggest reward. It was both fulfilling and inspiring to see these students so very invested in their research, and so dedicated to their work, that they hardly even cared to ask about their grades. It was a rare chance to address a current issue in a meaningful way that made a difference in the lives of the students and the campus at large. I think it was well worth the risk.

Would I do this again? I will certainly employ this new “class ecology” that allows for students to open up about sensitive topics and bring their whole selves. I hope to employ many of the things that I learned throughout this semester in the future. And if there is a challenging topic that directly affects my students, I do hope to address it in a timely manner, and may even be able to devote a whole semester to that process again with an authentic task as an “epic finale.” I doubt I will be able to have every class meet with the Chancellor, but perhaps together my students and I can go on other risky, yet fulfilling, spelunking expeditions in the future!

