Big Inequity in Small Things:
Toward an End to a Tyranny of Practice

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In his book, *Slavery in Small Things: Slavery and Modern Cultural Habits*, James Walvin chronicles how London, Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool, and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British cities thrived on slave commerce. This commerce took many forms. It was found in the transportation of enslaved Africans to the Americas, where they functioned and died as captive laborers. It was also evident in the distribution of slave-produced goods such as tobacco, sugar, cocoa, coffee, tea, and mahogany that shaped tastes and social norms in Europe and elsewhere. And it manifested itself in the creation of whole industries that were tightly connected to slave-produced goods such as porcelain (for sugar bowls and tea sets), pipes (for tobacco), exquisite furnishings (made from mahogany), and cowrie shells (for currency). In short, the British Isles and European mainland were inextricably linked with slavery. However, unlike the American continent, where, as Walvin notes, “the modern American state came into being in 1787 arguing about slavery” (Walvin, 2017, p. 3), slavery by and large remained out of sight in Britain and Europe, even if it “had become part of the warp and weft of British commercial and social life” (Walvin, 2017, p. 4).

The distorted British and European view of African chattel slavery had to do with one thing—geography. The overwhelming majority of African slaves—numbering in the tens of millions by various counts—labored in Europe’s colonies, and not on European soil. Put simply, a vast oceanic expanse separated the bulk of the British and European populace from the harsh realities of the Atlantic slavery world, even if their economies profited immensely from goods produced by Africans ruthlessly transported to the new world as a captive labor force. This physical distance skewed the British and European historical perception of slavery. Walvin characterizes this dynamic as a “tyranny of distance”—a system that allowed Brits and Europeans of all classes to benefit economically from slavery while divorcing themselves from the day-to-day brutal realities associated
with the practice (Walvin, 2017, pp. 4–5).

Now before you start wondering, no, you did not accidentally pick up the American Historical Association’s Perspectives on History or the Organization of American Historians’ Magazine of History. You are, in fact, reading this month’s installment of the National Teaching and Learning Forum. And yes, this essay is, in fact, about teaching and learning.

Small Unquestioned Practices

Specifically, it is about how small unquestioned practices frequently used in introductory courses often reinforce systematized inequity in ways completely unseen by those who use the practices. These classroom practices most deleteriously impact students who are historically least likely to enroll and subsequently succeed in higher education in the United States. Like the tyranny of distance in which the bulk of British and European consumers unknowingly participated, instructors using these common and unquestioned practices are unwittingly engaging in a tyranny of their own—a tyranny of practice. Through this tyranny of practice, instructors are unintentionally maintaining a systemically rooted inequitable status quo—one that most disadvantages students from poorer and/or nonwhite families. A brief scan of accounts of U.S. history from even just the twentieth century would allow one to quickly compile a list of policies and laws that have harmed persons of color and the poor in the United States. These policies and laws, in turn, limit both educational preparation and opportunity. It is beyond the scope of this essay to chronicle them all. It suffices simply to share that practices such as immigration laws, “redlining,” dejure and defacto forms of segregation, property tax–based school funding, voter suppression and redistricting efforts, and mandatory sentencing requirements have left poor and nonwhite students less likely to go to college and highly unlikely to complete a degree even if they do attend (Anderson, 2016; Thurston, 2017). Sadly, today, the greatest determinant of the probability of going to and completing a degree in college is family wealth. And wealth correlates directly with race in the United States (Asante-Muhammad et al., 2017).

The approaches used by many instructors in their courses may be inadvertently exacerbating contemporary structural inequities.

I am not saying that the use of certain teaching practices equates in any way to the harsh realities of slavery. The only thing that equates to slavery is slavery. However, the effect of centuries of legalized inequity in the United States still shapes the preparation of the increased number of minority and low-income students who are coming to college in the twenty-first century. These inequitable practices are founded on a history of slavery in the United States. And the students who are deleteriously impacted by this unequal preparatory experience are being met by practices in college classrooms that were never designed for them and that don’t facilitate better learning and outcomes for them once they enroll. In short, collegiate teaching practices did not create systemic structural inequity in the modern United States, but they are doing little to mitigate it.

Lecture, Curves, and Extra Help

For example, the use of didactic teaching practices (a.k.a. lecture) prominent in introductory courses...
**Editor’s Note:**

NTLF’s series of feature articles on social justice/social equity in this issue dives deep into the systemic infusion of long-standing if not ancient prejudices. These so thoroughly saturate our society that even among the well-intentioned and good-hearted they can go unnoticed. But those being affected by them notice. They understand suffering from injustice. This whole series of articles has been based on faith that social justice and social equity can be achieved, especially in academe. Our lead feature by Andrew K. Koch of the John Gardner Institute will be disquieting to many readers. But “Big Inequity in Small Things: Toward an End to a Tyranny of Practice” should also be encouraging. Koch believes that among all the players in academe, perhaps faculty are best positioned to take significant steps to unravel this old oppressive social fabric and weave for us all a lighter, cleaner one.

Perhaps it will take study, a long honest look at our practices, at what works and at who benefits—and who does not benefit. With this issue of NTLF, we introduce a new column—SoTL in ACTION, by Nancy Chick of Rollins College. Nancy has played a prominent role in not only “doing SoTL,” but also explaining it and its value, and promoting its practice among faculty. She brings that voice to NTLF beginning with her piece, “An Origin Story,” a brief history of where SoTL came from and why it’s come about. Many NTLF readers will have heard of SoTL, and undoubtedly many already have incorporated this aspect of the scholarly life into their lives as teachers, but all will benefit from Nancy’s experience and seasoned perspectives.

Perhaps—indeed, almost certainly—weaving that new social fabric will require thinking that is both critical in the best sense and creative. This issue’s CREATIVITY CAFÉ column by Charlie Sweet, Hal Blythe, and Rusty Carpenter of Eastern Kentucky University discusses the inevitable intertwining of these two modes of thought. One really never exists in any potent form without the other, but we tend to forget that and discount our own creativity and the need for it in any critical thinking we do. The Kentucky trio compare the interaction to the protein bonds in the double helix of our DNA. I like the comparison. Just as DNA lies at the heart of life, it is this interaction between the critical and the creative that generates the most robust and valuable thought.

Sadly, however high-minded we try to be and enjoy being in thinking about the challenge of teaching in higher education, all faculty know the job has many annoying and burdensome features. Students turning in papers late and asking for extensions is certainly one. Yan Huang of Weber State University has looked into the matter, surveying the way other faculty have dealt with it and then come up with a set of clear and detailed policies he puts in his syllabus that seem to have gone a long way in eliminating the problem in his classes.

Finally, “motivation.” What to do about motivation? All faculty want students to succeed and all faculty know that they play a role in motivating students to succeed. Research has had a lot to say about motivation, but it has not found a silver bullet. It has found a quiver of arrows, but which one to use when remains the challenge. Choice? Rewards? Competition? In this issue’s AD REM..., Marilla Svinicki of the University of Texas at Austin explores this important challenge.

—James Rhem
We cannot tell students and families that we help promote social mobility and advance justice if, in fact, we limit possibilities for all but an already well prepared and more affluent select few.

Just as the physical distance between Britain and its slave colonies had profound effects on the way the British experienced and understood slavery, so the distance between the college classroom and the systems that created and sustain inequity in the United States influence how contemporary instructors teach their college courses. The connection is real, even if unnoticed. And that dynamic means that the approaches used by many instructors in their courses may be inadvertently exacerbating contemporary structural inequities.

I don’t know a single instructor of college courses who, when presented with this reality—especially when supported with evidence from his or her own courses—has called for upholding this tyranny of practice. On the contrary, they are moved to look for alternatives and take action. Alas, few postsecondary institutions encourage their faculty to examine and redesign their introductory courses with a lens toward addressing historic and systemic inequity. Even fewer support their faculty in efforts to do so. And, for at least two main reasons, this must change.

**The Necessity for Change**

First, colleges and universities in the United States are experiencing one of the greatest demographic shifts they have ever encountered. Declining birth rates starting in the early twenty-first century and continuing at least until 2036 mean that there are simply fewer traditional-aged students who will be coming to college (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). The demographic makeup of this smaller traditional-aged college going population is also undergoing a massive shift. By 2045, the United States will become a “majority-minority” nation (Frey, 2018). But for children under the age of 18, that tipping point has already been realized (Yoshinaga, 2016).

In other words, the majority of the college-going student body soon will be constituted by the very same students who historically do not fare well in introductory college courses. Failure to recognize and take active steps to address the needs of this shifting demographic will mean that institutions will lose even more public trust—as a result of not serving well the students they enroll—and resources—since declining enrollments will lead to even less state support and/or tuition revenue.

But there is a second and more compelling reason why what is done in introductory courses must change. It comes down to living up to our institutions’ core values and mission statements. We cannot tell students and families that we help promote social mobility and advance justice if, in fact, we limit possibilities for all but an already well-prepared and more affluent select few. This is where faculty come in.

I must strongly assert that I am by no means blaming faculty for the systemic inequity described in this essay. But I am openly naming them as a primary agent for change in the contemporary postsecondary reform movement—change that directly addresses structural racism and classism. I am also not calling for a reduction of standards in the courses these faculty teach. In fact, I am calling for something else—an increase in expectations for our learners and for those who teach them, with strong support and incentivization for the faculty reform agents. Faculty of all types—full-time, part-time, tenured, adjunct—should be supported and rewarded for this work. They should be introduced to transparent and inclusive pedagogies—teaching methods that most of them never learned about in graduate school.

And they should be helped to intentionally work with others at their institutions to continuously improve teaching, learning, and student success in the courses they teach. In a chapter in a recent book on the first college year, John Gardner and I note how, unfortunately, faculty have been largely left out of the contemporary postsecondary student success movement—often through no choice of their own (Koch & Gardner, 2017). This has been detrimental to us all—especially to our students. This sin of omission has led to the promotion of the tyranny of practice.

And this brings us back to tyranny. It is more than just a bit ironic that some of the very same “founding fathers” who led the
revolution against “tyrant kings” and wrote the nation’s enabling documents were themselves tyrant slave holders who used the documents they wrote to enable a slaveholding system. This did not go unnoticed by some of their contemporaries. Disgusted by how the Constitution failed to address the nation’s “peculiar institution,” James Madison referred to slavery as our nation’s “original sin.” And less than 30 years after the ratification of the Constitution—and over 40 years before the Confederates first fired shots at Fort Sumter—John Quincy Adams called for “the extirpation of slavery from this whole continent” even if this required a war that pitted portions of the Union against each other.

It did indeed take a bloody Civil War to bring about an end to the tyranny of slavery in the United States. But the legacy of that system remains—manifesting and reconstituting itself in subtle but persistently powerful ways in all facets of American life since the end of that conflict. As this essay shows, this includes the contemporary college classroom.

In Faculty Hands

But faculty—particularly those who teach introductory courses—can help change this. Doing so will be hard but important work. In fact, as educators, it may be the most important work we undertake in our careers. And, if successful, it would mean that faculty are able to do, at least in part, what the nation’s founding fathers were unable to do themselves.

It should be no surprise then that the college classroom can and should be a site for positive action in this centuries-old struggle for justice. And it starts with changing small things that have big consequences, thereby putting an end to the tyranny of practice in the college classroom.

References