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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—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," de jure and de facto 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

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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

in many disciplines does not work particularly well with twenty-first-century learners—especially those from historically underrepresented and/or underserved backgrounds (Freeman et al., 2014; Paul, 2015). The practice of grading on a curve—common in many foundational-level courses—can favor those with the greatest prior preparation and postsecondary cultural capital. In other words, students from underresourced high schools and families without a college-going tradition will disproportionately constitute those who fall on the left-hand side of a normal distribution (Darling-Hammond, 1998). And providing academic support outside of class as an optional experience favors those who do not work full-time and who are not "underprepared." As the educational scholar Kay McClenney quipped, "At-risk students don't do optional" (McClenney, 2012). Whether considered individually or collectively, these practices may seem like small things. But they lead to big, harmful results.

In an article published in the May 2017 edition of *Perspectives on History*, I shared the findings from a study of grades and other outcomes in introductory U.S. history courses showing that failure rates were anywhere from 20% to more than 100% higher for students of color, first-generation students, and/or low-income students when compared to those of white, non-first-generation, and non-low-income backgrounds. I also shared how these higher rates of failure directly correlated with significantly greater rates of college departure, particularly for students who were otherwise in good academic standing. In other words, failing even one foundational-level course was correlated with leaving college even if the student was otherwise doing well academically (Koch, 2017). While the article focused on outcomes in introductory history courses, Dr. Brent Drake (the person who did the statistical analysis used in the

article) found the same trends in introductory college accounting, biology, chemistry, calculus, college algebra, English rhetoric and composition, and general psychology courses. In other words, there is a widespread issue across introductory “gateway” courses of many types. While the issue might have historic roots, it does not simply manifest itself in history courses.

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. |||

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CREATIVITY CAFÉ

The Double Helix of Critical and Creative Thinking

Charlie Sweet, Hal Blythe, and Rusty Carpenter
Eastern Kentucky University

Over a decade ago, we were selected for a campus committee that was charged with developing a response to our accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), that mandated a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), or a value-added element that enhanced the university degree. After focus groups and surveys of faculty, staff, and students, the committee discovered that four main ideas vied to be our QEP:

- Critical thinking,
- Creative thinking,
- Information literacy, and
- Communication (written and oral).

The traditional mindset of the academic committee was to vote for one idea and one idea alone, but we held out for some combination, a synthesis of these key ideas. Finally, we demonstrated on a whiteboard that the QEP theme could be something like “[Our university] will develop informed critical and creative thinkers who communicate effectively.” Our demonstration was effective, as the committee adopted the theme word for word.

Our background in English, including creative writing, doubtless contributed to our ability to employ what creative thinkers call perception shift, which, as we’ve written elsewhere, “involves looking at a person, idea, or situation from a new perspective” (Carpenter, Sweet, & Blythe, 2012, p. 28). But our main point in this column is the importance