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Diversity Dialogues: Addressing Conservatism in HONR 203

Background:
In my Honors Humanities Sequence courses, I have often required students to respond to weekly writing prompts in the "Journals" section in Blackboard. When I first started teaching these courses, these weekly assignments provided students with opportunities to resolve some of the questions that lingered after what sometimes felt to me like wandering discussions of texts, art, history, and ideas. As I’ve gained proficiency with Honors Humanities content, skill in handling class discussion, and a better sense of purpose for the discussions that I lead in these courses, these weekly writing assignments have started to feel unnecessary—and superfluous. So, I’ve decided to revamp this series of weekly assignments for my fall 2016 HONR 203 class to better meet the needs of students in the course.

I am particularly concerned with facilitating the growth and learning of the many students in my Honors classes who hold extremely conservative political and social beliefs. As described in Jeanine Weekes Schroer’s “Fighting Imperiousness with Vulnerability: Teaching in a Climate of Conservatism,” some students of this type perceive their ideology as “impervious” and “will dismiss any criticisms of their protected ideology out of hand” (193), which makes it difficult for them to learn about and appreciate the value of diverse perspectives. My proposed Diversity Dialogues short writing assignments will help these students to achieve that which I perceive as one of my most important learning goals for students in all of my Honors Humanities courses (which also overlaps with some of the stated objectives for the Sequence according to the master syllabi): to recognize the importance of context and perspective in the construction of knowledge and action in the world. In other words, I want my students to understand that every person sees the world differently—and for legitimate reasons.

Overview of the Assignment Sequence:
As in my previous Honors Humanities courses, students in HONR 203 will write in response to weekly prompts, but the prompts will ask them to compose letters to each other, to respond to each others’ thoughts and experiences, and to reflect on their interactions with each other. To begin, students will be grouped into pairs comprised of individuals who are very different from one another in terms of several diversity axes, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, politics, and mental health. Then, students in each pair will write a series of letters to each other throughout the semester. They will explain to their partners how literary texts and works of art of their own choosing resonate with them because of their own personal experiences and values, drawing on particular incidents in and elements of the texts, art, and their own lives. They will then respond to each other by comparing their interpretations and life experiences with those of their partners. Students will also compose reflections on their interactions with their partners for me, discussing the new insights that they gain into their partners’ experiences and how the exchange of letters has impacted their thinking on the texts and art discussed in the class and on aspects of their lives. Each assignment will require students to write about 350 words and to discuss at least four specific examples, including those from the texts and art and those that they draw from their own lives.

The Diversity Dialogues assignments will allow students to feel that their experiences and interpretations are valuable. I also hope that, as they form relationships with their peers through these
assignments, they'll become more willing to entertain challenges to the ideology that they have previously perceived as impervious to critique. Even if they don't attend to issues typically perceived as controversial in their letters and reflections, the weekly writing prompts will help them to develop empathy, critical thinking, and openness to diverse perspectives.

**Setting Up:**
After introducing the Diversity Dialogues sequence and discussing my goals for this series of short writing assignments, I will invite students to enter into a discussion with me about the different types of diversity and to brainstorm a list of axes of diversity on the board. I will then ask them to write brief descriptions of themselves in terms of at least four axes of diversity, in order of importance, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, politics, mental health, and/or any other categories of diversity that they deem central to their identities. After gathering their written responses, I will create pairings, each comprised of students as different from one another as possible.

Outside of class, I will activate both the “Groups” and the “Journals” areas in Blackboard. I will create a space for each pairing in “Groups.” Partners will be able to compose their letters to each other in the “Discussion Board” within their “Groups” space. So that their partners will not be able to read them, students will compose their reflections for me in the “Journals” area in Blackboard.

On a second day in class, I will ask students to work with me to establish some ground rules for the Diversity Dialogues assignments. I will make sure to suggest that students agree to not convey anything in their letters that they wouldn’t be comfortable with a larger group of people knowing but that they also agree to share that which they learn about their partners with others in or outside of the class. In addition to establishing ground rules, I will ask that students use kindness, humility, and grace in their interactions with each other throughout the Diversity Dialogues sequence, and I will model for students the kind of language that they can use in their letters in order to practice active listening as well as empathy and forgiveness in their interactions with their partners.

**Maintenance:**
I will post all writing prompts in their appropriate places in Blackboard after pairings have been formed in the class. This will allow students to know at the beginning of the semester where the Diversity Dialogues will take them throughout the remainder of our time together. Diversity Dialogues assignments will be due on Mondays and will be graded on completion and adherence to the requirements of each prompt. As I read through the students’ writing each week, I will respond empathetically to the reflections that they submit to me and guide students through any difficulties that arise in their interactions with each other, referring back to the kind and empathetic language that I will introduce at the beginning of semester. When doing group activities in class, I will sometimes ask that the Diversity Dialogues partners work together, hopefully providing them with opportunities to deepen their relationships in person-to-person interactions.

**Weekly Writing Prompts:**
Week 1 (in “Groups”)—Choose at least four of the following categories of diversity, or others that are important to you: race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, politics, and mental health. Describe yourself in terms of your chosen categories, explaining at least one example from your life to support your discussion of each. After your partner posts her or his letter, respond with a quick message thanking her or him for sharing.
Week 2 (in “Journals”)—Discuss your reaction to your partner’s letter. You may write about how certain parts of your partner’s life and experiences coincide with the assumptions that you previously held about her or him and/or the parts of the letter that challenged the assumptions that you previously held about her or him. Or you may explain the commonalities that you share with your partner. Use at least two specific examples from your partner’s letter AND two specific anecdotes from your life to support your points.

Week 3 (in “Groups”)—Discuss one literary text or work of art from the Romanticism unit that resonated with you, and explain why. Examine at least two specific segments of the text or elements of the art AND at least two episodes from your own life to support your points.

Week 4 (in “Groups”)—Respond to your partner’s discussion of a certain work of literature or art from the Romanticism unit by extending her or his interpretation of the piece. How does it resonate with you similarly to how it resonates with your partner, and/or how did your partner’s letter help you to see it in a new way? Use at least two examples from the text or art AND two examples from your own life to support your points. (Remember that the purpose of this assignment is to view the piece from the perspective of your partner, NOT to disagree with your partner.)

Week 5 (in “Groups”)—Discuss one literary text or work of art from the Materialism unit that resonated with you, and explain why. Examine at least two specific segments of the text or elements of the art AND at least two episodes from your own life to support your points.

Week 6 (in “Groups”)—Respond to your partner’s discussion of a certain work of literature or art from the Materialism unit by extending her or his interpretation of the piece. How does it resonate with you similarly to how it resonates with your partner, and/or how did your partner’s letter help you to see it in a new way? Use at least two examples from the text or art AND two examples from your own life to support your points. (Remember that the purpose of this assignment is to view the piece from the perspective of your partner, NOT to disagree with your partner.)

Week 7 (in “Groups”)—Discuss one work of art from the Modernism unit that resonates with you, and explain why. Examine at least two examples or elements of the art AND at least two episodes from your own life to support your points.

Week 8 (in “Groups”)—Respond to your partner’s discussion of a certain work of literature or art from the Modernism unit by extending her or his interpretation of the piece. How does it resonate with you similarly to how it resonates with your partner, and/or how did your partner’s letter help you to see it in a new way? Use at least two examples from the text or art AND two examples from your own life to support your points. (Remember that the purpose of this assignment is to view the piece from the perspective of your partner, NOT to disagree with your partner.)

Week 9 (in “Groups”)—Choose a non-objective work of art from pages 399-415 in your Landmarks in Humanities textbook that we have not discussed in class. Based on what you have learned about your partner’s life experiences and belief system, how do you think that he or she might relate to this piece? You might discuss that which you think she or he might appreciate about the piece or what about the piece might anger or excite her or him, for instance. Discuss at least two specific aspects of your partner’s previous letters AND two specific aspects of the piece that you’ve chosen in order to develop your points.
Week 10 (in “Journals”)—React to the last Diversity Dialogues assignment. How did it feel to write your letter? How did it feel to read your partner’s letter? Did she or he fairly and accurately characterize your experiences and beliefs? Did she or he seem to understand how you feel and think about the art discussed in the letter? Use at least four specific quotes from the letters to support your points.

Week 11 (in “Groups”)—Respond to your partner’s discussion of how you might understand a work of non-objective art. Explain how the piece that your partner chose resonates with you, kindly pointing out the parts of your partner’s letter that accurately characterize what you might think of the piece and the parts that don’t accurately characterize what you might think of the piece. Use two examples from the piece AND two examples from your partner’s letter to make your points. After your partner posts her or his letter, respond with a quick message thanking her or him for taking the time to respond to your letter.

Week 12 (in “Groups”)—Discuss one aspect of Middlesex (the history of racism, the history of Detroit, immigration, romantic love, familial relationships, adolescence, etc.) that resonates with you, and explain why. Examine at least two specific segments of the text AND at least two episodes from your own life to support your points.

Week 13 (in “Groups”)—Respond to your partner’s discussion of Middlesex by extending her or his interpretation of the piece. How does it resonate with you similarly to how it resonates with your partner, and/or how did your partner’s letter help you to see it in a new way? Use at least two examples from the text AND two examples from your own life to support your points. (Remember that the purpose of this assignment is to view the piece from the perspective of your partner, NOT to disagree with your partner.) Since this is the last time that you’ll exchange letters with your partner, after she or he posts her or his letter, drop her or him a note thanking her or him for engaging with you over the course of the semester.

Week 14 (in “Journals”)—Reflect on the Diversity Dialogues series of letters and reflections. How might you perceive an aspect of your life or experiences in the world differently because of your better understanding of the perspective of another person? What value have these assignments have for you? What have they shown about initial impressions, communication, or empathy? Are there other thoughts that you would like to share about this sequence of writing prompts? Use at least four specific examples from your interactions with your partner or from your own life to support your points.
Works Cited