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ABSTRACT

Yale's Cooke Teaching Program is designed to diminish the sense of imperviousness and immobility that the university often conveys to its surrounding community. During the academic year, one Yale graduate student attended a high school senior honors English class twice weekly. It was an advanced class (mostly minorities), many were college-bound, and there was a range of talent and motivation in the class. The graduate student functioned as a team teacher, participating in regularly scheduled classes. Her presence created a more open and dialogic atmosphere of learning, helping the students to become more confrontational--and to challenge the texts and the idea of authoritative readings. Her most rewarding moments occurred in reading poetry with her students. Although the mere word "poetry" produced instant resistance, the idea of privileged access that poetry suggests became an advantage with the students. Close reading and discovering formal "keys" to the poetry set up reading as a puzzle that requires engagement and effort, not merely the passive reception of inflexible literary meaning. Having the students write their own poems (sonnets) reinforced their familiarity with the technical aspects of poetry and further encouraged them to consider the reader's agency in creating poetic meaning. When the grad student elected to help one student who had been expelled and then readmitted, she found that he fit easily into the atmosphere of Yale's Sterling Library--falling asleep over his books like the undergraduates. Evaluations from her students were positive about the "Yale teacher," especially in the socio-cultural sense. (NKA)

Jeannine Johnson
CCCC Convention, Nashville
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Bringing New Haven into the Yale Experience: A Graduate Student's Perspective

Yale's Cooke Teaching Program is designed to diminish the sense of imperviousness and immobility that the University often conveys to its surrounding community. To many New Haven residents, the university is synonymous with the buildings on its campus: the stone and ivy structures of Yale pronounce its longevity and its intellectual tradition, but they also attest to its elitism and its tax-exempt real estate status. The environment that Yale creates by virtue of its physical plant is to a great extent beyond the control of those who attend the school. But, as my father, who is on faculty at the medical school of the University of Minnesota, says to me time and time again, a university is best defined not by its location, or its endowment, or its charter, or its football team, or even by its faculty, but by its students. Given that this is a somewhat self-serving, if not self-aggrandizing, definition of the university, I won't push the point too far. Still, I think it is intriguing that, at least in my father's mind, the most fluid component of the university--its student body--can be its most distinguishing and defining feature. On the most basic level, the Cooke program employs this mobile human component of Yale as part

of carrying out what we envision as the university's responsibility to its community.

As a graduate student at Yale I feel very much the tension between my role as a privileged member of an insulated academic society and as a regular citizen of the city of New Haven. I live in an apartment off campus, but the house is Yale-owned and the neighborhood is patrolled by Yale police; my car is registered in Connecticut, but its rear window displays a large Yale decal. Any sense of responsibility that I personally feel toward the community is ineluctably channelled through my identity as a Yalie. While this identification can prove a liability, it also can be used to my and to Yale's advantage, as we have found with the Cooke Teaching Program.

Though it is nearly impossible for me to lose my identity as a Yale student, by placing myself outside the artificial boundaries of the campus, I can help to change what that identity signifies for those in the city not directly associated with the university. As a Cooke teacher, I like to think that I did just that. From October to April, I went to the same class at Hillhouse High School in New Haven twice a week. It was a senior honors English class, with about 25 students, all but one of whom belonged to minority groups. This was an advanced class and many of the students were college-bound, but there was a range of talent and motivation in the class.

The first few days, I observed the class, getting a feel for the general level of achievement and a dose of the classroom dynamics I had not experienced since I was in high school. I was paired with a teacher who had worked with another Yale graduate student the previous year. We met before my observation began and continued to meet throughout the year to discuss the possible ways I could be used in the class.

Our program wants first and foremost to be of help to the full-time teacher, but we want the graduate student to be more than a part-time tutor. Yale undergraduates run a strong after-school tutoring program at the high school called "Branch" that the Cooke program does not see the need to duplicate. Our program has the advantage of reaching students during regular school hours, and, though the Cooke program has conducted after-school sessions, our primary function is to participate in regularly scheduled classes.

The way in which we graduate students envision our function in the classroom is as a team-teacher. Team-teaching can take a variety of forms, and is a very flexible model by which we can take into account the differing strengths, needs, and personalities of the full-time teacher, the graduate student teacher, and, of course, the high school students.

When I worked at Hillhouse I got the opportunity to try several different teaching methods. The teacher with whom I was paired was extremely enthusiastic about my presence in

her classroom, as is the case with the vast majority of the teachers in our program. Sometimes I led the class alone while the teacher sat with the high school students. Other times, both the teacher and I led discussion together, taking turns commenting upon a text and asking questions of the students and of each other. Most often, the teacher and I split the class into smaller groups, or even met with students individually in one-on-one conferences.

Whatever my role, my presence in the classroom created a more open and dialogic atmosphere of learning. When I stood in front of the class, the students got the opportunity to see their regular teacher in what they had previously understood as exclusively their role, the role of learner. They also saw me in that role, as I observed and participated in discussion when the teacher led class. More than introducing another perspective on the material--in itself a valuable effect of having a second instructor in the classroom--, my function as lecturer or discussion leader suggested to them the elasticity of the interpreter's position. The students were invited to see that interpretation is a process that is never finally resolved. They learned to be more confrontational, challenging the texts and the idea of authoritative readings.

Of course, the idea that there is no one right answer was sometimes cause for some concern among the students. Even with my relatively advanced students, I found that they expected that I would provide them with the tools by which to

gain access to the material that they were expected to learn, and rightly so. The moments I found most rewarding in presenting to them the "secrets" of some skill I possessed and that I could pass on to them occurred in reading poetry together.

Even though we as teachers can try to de-emphasize the reading of poetry as bearing a mark of luxury, in this day and age there is no escape from the implication that the study of poetry is made possible by a certain entitlement. The challenge of literature's irrelevance to the students' lives became especially vociferous at the beginning of the poetry segment. The mere word "poetry" produced instant resistance if not revulsion. I found, though, that the concept of entitlement or privileged access that is an appurtenance of poetry could be used to my advantage with these students. With only a minimal effort I could demonstrate to the students poetry's accessibility, and not just in the specific canonical instances on which we practiced, but in all poetry that appealed to them. Close reading and discovering formal "keys" to the poetry set up reading as a puzzle that requires engagement and effort, not merely as the passive reception of inflexible literary meaning.

Having the students write their own poems--mine wrote sonnets--reinforced their familiarity with the technical aspects of poetry and further encouraged them to consider the reader's agency in creating poetic meaning as an active

explorer of a deliberately wrought piece of art. By creating their own poetic structures, the students saw those structures less as hindrances to their being admitted into the privileged realm of poetry and more as familiar signs by which they could interpolate themselves into something that would otherwise be foreign or alien to them.

To further personalize my testimony as to the benefits of the Cooke program, let me tell my favorite story about my experience at Hillhouse. Myron was one of the students in my class who was bright, though rather quiet and not especially self-motivated. He preferred living in New Haven with his mother, as he did then, to living in New York City with his father, where he felt he was subject to too many temptations and susceptible to illegal activity. Still, he felt New Haven was a rough place, and was looking forward to the discipline and relative safety of joining the Marines in August following graduation and of going to boot camp in the South.

Myron was expelled from school part-way through his senior year for circumstances surrounding an arrest. As it turned out, the charges were dropped and after some negotiation, administrators at the school realized that Myron was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, and allowed him back into school. However, by the time he was re-admitted, he was behind on his English credits, and in danger of not graduating.

In this unusual case, for a few weeks, instead of my regular classroom duties, I took Myron to the library and helped him with his final research project. Some days we even worked after school, and once we decided to go to Yale's library together where he could find more material for his report on Kipling. On the walk from the high school to Yale, we stopped by Myron's house so he could pick up some notes. On the way, we followed part of the route I usually took walking to the high school from my apartment. Earlier in the year, one morning as I was walking to school a delivery man had stopped his truck and, frowning at me asked me what I was doing in that part of town. When I had told him I was an assistant teacher at Hillhouse High School, he showed no relief and simply warned me to be careful where I walked. I never felt unsafe walking to the school, although I was often cause for comment or wonder for those that I passed.

At any rate, Myron and I reached Sterling Library where we did a computer search and found some relevant books for his project. I left him at the library with the books and his notebook, and returned a couple of hours later to find him asleep in a carrel. He fit right in with the undergraduates around him who were pursuing their studies in exactly the same fashion. Myron hadn't fallen asleep, however, before taking extensive notes. A few days later, he completed his assignment, eventually passed all his English requirements, and finally graduated that spring.

All the students in my class completed evaluation forms

on which they rated my performance in the classroom. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, and all the students indicated that they would like to see the Yale teacher, as I was called, spend even more time with the class. When asked to relate the best thing the Yale teacher did, most of the students cited the elucidation of a poem, assistance with a writing project or test, or general improvement of their grade. In response to this question, though, Myron didn't mention my direct impact on his schoolwork, despite all the extra time we had spent together. Instead, when asked "What was the best thing the Yale teacher did?", Myron wrote, "She walked through my neighborhood without being offended."

One hears a lot of talk these days about "environmental factors" and their role in influencing the lives of urban adolescents. Rarely is this concept so literally brought to bear as it was in the case of my experience with this one New Haven high school student. Of course, in this case, the student's environment was significant for its effect--or rather, lack of effect--on someone from outside that environment. This dynamic involving the correlation between physical surroundings and personal, social, and cultural identity cannot be granted too much importance. As Yale graduate students, as inhabitants of the ivory tower, we can't help but bring the tower with us when we venture out into the unprotected urban terrain of New Haven. But simply by leaving the confines of our own environment, by activating our individual mobility, we loosen our exclusive hold upon

our resources. When we let ourselves be seen outside our natural habitat, we help ourselves and others to be less influenced by the architecture of our surroundings, even as we grant those surroundings considerable determining force in establishing our identity.