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The Power of Creation: Critical Imagination in the Honors Classroom

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Abstract: The article examines how to incorporate issues of social justice and diversity in the honors classroom through critical imagination. Inclusion and diversity are among the five strategic pillars of honors education, but the challenge is to create space for social justice as an academic inquiry. This article describes an honors project where students were tasked to come up with their own concept for a television show, using their imagination to bridge gaps in representations on television. Critical imagination allowed the students to move beyond analyzing television in its current state and conceptualize what more inclusive television could look like in the future. Students often feel overwhelmed by issues like racism that seem insurmountable, and they can feel pressured to come up with a right answer rather than trusting their own observations. Critical imagination requires students to examine issues from multiple viewpoints and explore their own thoughts on the problem in front of them. The article concludes with suggestions for incorporating critical imagination in a few classroom scenarios and assignments.

Keywords: imagination, diversity, inclusion, social justice, creativity

A challenge that has been a focal point in the recent discourse about honors education is increasing diversity, which was recently added as one of the "five strategic pillars" of the National Collegiate Honors Council (Badenhausen). A challenge that has received less attention, in contrast to critical thinking, is creative thinking and how to encourage students to use their imagination in interpreting and changing their world. Creative thinking is one of the tools that honors educators need to use so that students can have awareness and find solutions to issues of social justice in their future lives. The challenge is to take ideas that seem insurmountable and find a way to engage

individual students in creative problem solving: to make space for all students to work on a problem of their own choosing and use their imagination to solve the problem while at the same time maintaining structure within the classroom. My answer to this question has been to have each student imagine and design a television pilot that addresses issues of diversity and social justice.

Sean Michael Morris, Director of Digital Learning at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, has described the imagination as a "precision instrument that delivers a certainty that things can be otherwise." Morris suggests that the usual players in education, such as formal essay and exams, are not enough to conceptualize what the world is beyond a problem to be considered. In a junior year tutorial entitled "Television as a Site for Social Justice," I designed the TV Pitch Project as a way for students to use their imaginations to see the possibilities for the medium as a conduit for issues of diversity, inclusivity, and representation. Using the knowledge that they had gained from weekly readings, viewings, and in-class discussion, students identified gaps in diverse representations. Rather than sit in class and lament that television portrayals of diverse populations were not "accurate enough," students used their weekly observations and critiques to fuel their television design. They would journal weekly about the assigned materials and use that information to inform their own imagined television show.

One of the primary issues that students identified throughout the semester was superficial representation. For a television show to simply add a person of color or a gay character is not enough. Characters need to be fully developed to be recognized as people shaped by the multiple facets of their identity. As a group we used the concept of intersectionality to illustrate how a character can be developed beyond a singular identity marker. Kimberle Crenshaw describes intersectionality as a response to what she has called "a framing problem." As Crenshaw argues in her Ted Talk, "The Urgency of Intersectionality": "Without frames that are capacious enough to address all the ways that disadvantages and burdens play out for all members of a particular group, the efforts to mobilize resources to address a social problem will be partial and exclusionary." Students noted that, as they journaled each week, the concept of intersectionality played a key role in the function of their imagination, and the concept of "widening the frame" was particularly useful. One student, Maddy Jackson, said that the concept helped her to see and "fill the gaps we decided were still there even after a semester of analysis."

For Maddy, this gap "in representation of women who work on television" was showing either complete success in one's field or failed attempts to

make a dream happen but rarely the complexities of career highs, lows, and in-betweens. She wanted to see a television show that explored the dynamic relationships of women at various stages of their careers. She also wanted to move beyond the racial and gender binaries often depicted on "friend" shows and depict characters from various races and ages, with at least one transgender woman. Inspired by her own group of friends, whose conversations about "what comes after college" are frequent, Maddy saw this show as an opportunity to "encourage women, just like the friends who inspired this show concept, that there is a place for them" in the working world.

Another example of "widening the frame" came from Evan. Having learned American Sign Language at an early age in order to communicate with a family member, Evan was keenly critical of television's lack of representation of deaf people's experience. His television show, *Blazing Starships*, a space western in the vein of *Firefly*, became a venue through which he could make sure the character's deafness was not seen as a problem that needed to be fixed. In fact, the character herself was an integral part of the ship's operations: the mechanic. Evan also created a character who could act as interpreter for the mechanic in the hopes of normalizing the use of ASL. When researching deaf characters on television, he also found that of the very few who have existed, most have been white. He decided that the character should be black as he wanted to explore the intersectionality of race and deafness. "The experiences of a Deaf woman and a hearing woman are different, and the experiences of a white woman and a black woman are different, so why wouldn't the experiences of a black Deaf woman and white Deaf woman be different?" Evan's choices allowed the rest of us to see how he had conceived of a problem and found a way to look beyond the frame of what currently exists on television.

When asked to reflect on the final project, students discussed increased engagement, agency over their own work, and multiple ways they could use their imagination to see solutions to the common struggle of representation. Overall, the students noted that:

- Having the imagination at the center of this project allowed them to conceptualize what progress could look like.
- They could claim intellectual ownership over their own ideas instead of regurgitate information learned from an expert.
- They had to be fully present in order to imagine what their classmates' shows might look like in order to listen and provide feedback.

- There was the freedom to create within the parameters of the assignment and because the classroom was a safe space where trust had developed among the students.
- The project emphasized critical reflection on choices with room for students to be innovative and use their own voice.
- They were engaging more parts of the brain to develop solutions to real-life issues.
- It was the first time in years (perhaps even since childhood) that they had been in a space where the imagination was encouraged.

Two students made particular note of this final point but also noted that imagination did not play a role for its own sake, but, as Liz said, "it created a unique platform for engaging with uncommon ideas for sending messages" about identity, equality, and issues of social justice on television. Evan echoed this sentiment when he wrote, "This has been an incredible opportunity to exercise my imagination and to do so for the sake of social justice in areas that I think are being neglected." The power to conceptualize what television could look like allowed them to see what gaps still exist and what avenues those in the television industry might take to create space for more representation and acknowledgement of social justice in everyday society. The students thus achieved what Maxine Green referred to as "wide-awakeness" as they were both conscious of their imaginative power and critical of their own creation, deliberately and thoughtfully examining their choices with intellectual care and engagement.

The critical imagination allows students to find and practice agency. They bring their own voice to the issue and recognize the possibilities of engaging with a topic without always knowing the specific answer or outcome. Helping students find their agency or voice through the critical imagination does not have to require an elaborate project such as designing a television show, nor does it have to be part of a specialized class that has a central focus on social justice. The imagination can function in a number of contexts. For example, a teacher might ask students to imagine what the outcome in *The Metamorphosis* might have been if Gregor's family had understood mental illness and treated him better. An assignment might ask students to rewrite portions of *Frankenstein* from another character's point of view and to uncover what they might learn about gender if they saw the story through Elizabeth's eyes. Even these small examples require students to use creative learning and engagement to examine significant topics and apply an individual perspective to the

issue at hand as the television project did, encouraging students to use their own experiences, values, and identities to fill what they saw as a gap in representation. Issues of social justice have a way of coming into the classroom whether we expect them to or not. The critical imagination gives students a way of examining justice issues outside the context of correct answers. Instead they explore what they think and what they have to say about it.

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