

“TOGETHER, TOGETHER!” READING SELECTION IN CLASSROOM RELATIONSHIPS

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“Now! Oh, what can be done now?... “Together, together!” she repeated, as if beside herself, embracing him again. “I will follow you to prison.”

—Feodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

I have recreated a failure in writing this essay. But any attempt not to fail would be a critical violation. Failure is not without its benefits. Noted Queer Theorist Halberstam (2011) reminds us, “failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent” (p. 88). In this essay, I ruminate on a class situation during which a student critiqued social perceptions based on my identity positions. Specifically, a straight Black man questioned the socio-cultural perspicacity of a Queer white man—which is not in itself an unproductive or unwarranted line of inquiry. I will refer to him as the Theorist because he kept his discourse in the realm of abstraction through postulating a monolithic Black community and a monolithic Gay community, which were in opposition and without overlap. This theoretical worldview occluded the perspective of another student—a Queer Black woman, who existed in and tried to share insights from a permeable zone between these hypothetical and abstract communities. I will refer to her as the Sage.

Here we arrive at the crux of my failure. In describing how I tried to make space for the Sage to share observations from her complex, concrete, and intersecting identities, I did not depict her brilliance, pathos, and joy. Yet my failure is important because those qualities and experiences are hers, and it would be a profound violation for someone in my power position (a white instructor) to parrot them. Instead, I focus on my encounter with the Theorist who provided the opportunity for me to think about the complicated implications of my intellectual inheritance and how course materials can offer oblique ways to engage in complicated discussions without direct and unproductive confrontation.

The dynamic happened in a college-level literature course for adult students that focused on Feodor Dostoevsky’s (1866/1989) novel, *Crime and Punishment*. In my youth, I would have argued the universality of the book. But I have come to understand the claim of universality as camouflage for hegemonic, normative power structures including whiteness and heteronormativity. Yet the novel has many themes that resonate in the contemporary U.S. context. Amplifying these resonances is important because I believe literature is experienced as a contemporary event that creates new networks of possible meaning. Literature is not a historical artifact divorced from present encounter (Hayes, 2012, p. 20). From an andragogical perspective, these resonances may keep classic literature relevant through alignment with Knowles et al.’s (1998) contention that adult students need to understand how what they are learning applies to their lives (pp. 64–65).

EXPERIENCE AND ABSTRACTION

Dostoevsky’s (1866/1989) *Crime and Punishment* is a novel I have returned to frequently. As a senior in high school and as an undergraduate who had Russian Literature classes peppering his degree program, I was frequently assigned this book. But I love it. I would write poems about the malcontent young men I had crushes on

and call them Rodya (a nickname for the protagonist, failed revolutionary, and murderer Rodion Raskolnikov.) As an adult, I have returned to Raskolnikov and his compatriots regularly.

The polyvocal nature of the book has allowed me to expand beyond my teenage infatuation. Now that I am older, I understand and identify with other characters. I also understand that my relationship with the characters will change as I engage in critical conversation about them with others. The changing relationship is in turn inextricably linked to the subjectivity of other readers. My relationship with those I am in conversation with also changes as we discuss the text. Psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger (2006) argues that visual art can act as a matrixial borderspace where traces of artist and other viewers create “instances of transsubjectivity that embrace and produce new partial subjects.” (p. 149). Visual art allows us a context in which we can think past our singular and isolated selves. I have found literature provides an analogous mechanism.

The last two times I taught the course I integrated supplemental readings to show how the novel’s themes were potentially manifest in the U.S. context. The penultimate section of this course ran in Spring Quarter 2017. I tried to integrate essays and stories into the readings between classes. But these texts in addition to the novel and essays students were writing proved to be too onerous. Thankfully, I was able to teach the course a final time in Spring Quarter 2018 before it was retired due to a change in degree structure. In this iteration, I integrated poems that we would read at the beginning of each class session. The poems included Audre Lorde’s (1978/2000) “Power,” Shin Yu Pai’s (2010) “Model Minorities,” Harryette Mullen’s (2002) “We are Not Responsible,” and Margret Hesse’s (2016) “Come Home, Our Sons.” The poems address systems of power, justice, and race in the U.S.

Using a poem as a class-opener was beneficial for a few reasons. This was an evening class with working adult students, so they often were tired when they arrived. I would hand out copies of the poem. We would take a few moments to review them quietly then a volunteer would read the poem aloud. Reading poems collectively gave us a shared experience to discuss. It was a chance to analyze literature in a contained, low-stakes context since the language and society depicted were familiar. Students could connect their experiences to this literature. hooks (1994) addresses the importance of experience as a location for knowing while cautioning the “need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively” (p. 91). For me, the connections that students made with the literature, their experiences, and their classmates provided a diversity of standpoints. Additionally, since everyone was experiencing the poems simultaneously, there was less anxiety about sharing reflections. The contemporary language and ideas allowed us to begin our discussion, so we were already engaged in conversation before we turned to the less familiar phrasing of the novel.

The poems allowed me to engage in discussion with students in an oblique way. Perhaps this is evidence of me taking Emily Dickinson’s (1860/1998) advice to “tell all the truth but tell it slant” (p. 507). I used strands of conversation as well as novel themes to help me select poems. The class conversation after these initial readings was congenial and often critically generative. The Theorist homed in on the discrepancies of U.S. culture as related to race. At first, this fruitful expansion of themes about justice and minority populations let us compare and contrast our lived experience in the U.S. with the depictions of minority groups (like Polish immigrants) in the novel. But his comments became inflected with abstract assertions about the Gay community. When he said “Gay,” he reduced the entire nexus of sexual and gender minorities to a subset

of the general white population. The abstractions emerged from his experience and perceptions about culture. But the Theorist resisted discussions rooted in complexities and intersections of lived experiences that did not coincide with the abstractions that emerged from his own understandings. This prevented him from acknowledging the Sage’s voice or experience.

The Theorist focused on the differences between himself (Black and straight) and me (white and Queer), obscuring our similarities of both being cis male with a nominally Christian religious heritage. The Sage bonded with me in part because of our similar sexual minority. As a Black woman, she had a shared cultural experience with the Theorist. However, as a Muslim, she felt alienated from our religious heritage, especially considering the frequent biblical allusions made in *Crime and Punishment*. The Theorist continued to reduce our individual and collective complexities by retreating to the Black/Gay binary. This thinking prevented more interesting explorations about how identity positions can provide partial subjectivity where various identifications and differences can appear.

His reduction of the diverse LGBTQIAA+ population to Gay white men created tension. In asserting the abstract opposition of Black and Gay, the Theorist created a struggle that could not be resolved and that served only to destabilize his recognition of the full identity and experiences of his classmates. Repeatedly, the Sage, other students, and I encouraged him to see the complexity of Queer lives and to not conflate them with whiteness. Direct conversation left him retrenched in his objectifying abstraction.

A rift was forming within the class because he was not recognizing the nuance of these intersections. To deepen and broaden the conversation, I brought Christopher Soto’s (2016) poem “All the Dead Boys Look Like Me.” This poem about the Pulse Night Club shooting delved into the violence against the bodies of Queer BIPOC individuals. Reading it, we contemplated the results of violence (which resonated with the murders in the novel). But we also saw a discussion of Queerness that was definitively not white. The Sage spoke about how the poem evoked the grief and anger Queer BIPOC communities felt as witness to the massacre. My hope is that this poem created a borderspace in which more subjects were able to appear.

Perhaps a more compelling narrative would have the Theorist struggle with reconciling the poem and his peers. A 19th century novelist might be able to get away with creating a situation for a tortured confession—most likely in a lantern-lit English garden. I must fail. I cannot crawl into someone else’s head to see what they are thinking. If I could, it would not be my place to dredge it forth. I was not privy to any subtle changes that happened to him. But after reading and discussing the poem, the student stopped finding ways to present Black and Gay communities as inherently monolithic and necessarily oppositional. I suspect ... I hope that returning and taking different approaches to discussion about the complexities of community and identity helped the Theorist go through a process of double-loop learning. But at least this experience offered me a chance to think through my understandings of intersections of sexuality and race in order to confront problematic ideas of some Queer theorists.

SINGLE AND DOUBLE LOOP

The trouble the student had in reconciling his perception of communities seemed to be a challenge of double-loop learning. Knowles et al. (1998) speak of single- and double-loop learning as important processes for adult students. Single-loop learning conforms to our existing perceptions about the world. It lends itself to the assumption of aggregates and abstractions (p. 140). Perhaps, it is even a useful process in business or professional

environments, which tend toward the dehumanization necessary for corporate efficiency. Double-loop learning conflicts with our earlier assumptions. We must return to a new idea until we can incorporate it into our intellectual frame (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 140). Because double-loop learning requires us to move past our intellectual prejudice, this process can undermine social abstractions and their harmful effects.

Raskolnikov's crisis in the novel can perhaps be seen as an instance of double-loop learning since he must overcome his philosophy of the extraordinary man in order to reconcile with community. His dehumanization of some like the pawn broker is only possible through a process of abstraction, which torments him as his theory's applicability dissolves once applied to real life. Pinar (1979/1994) offers an additional warning about how abstraction prevents us from seeing others: "Without explicit grounding in the concrete . . . , the abstraction becomes only an extension of the speaker, a sign for something of oneself that is hated or loved" (p. 101). In reworking or expanding our intellectual framework through double-loop learning, we can see individuals in the unique complexity of their experiences and intersections. In turn, this may allow us to better understand our own complexity. As a Queer, white instructor, this forces me to reflect on the intellectual history I bring with me.

DISCOURSE AND ABSTRACTION

When Blackness and Gayness are presented as oppositional forces, it feels like someone is walking over a grave or at least stepping on Leo Bersani's rectum. In his seminal Queer Theory essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave," Bersani explored the complicated intersections of sexuality and power during the AIDS crisis. But buried within the essay is the complement of the oppositional dynamic my student asserted. Bersani (2010) contends a monolithic Black community is more politically valued than the Gay community (pp. 9–11). The nuance presented elsewhere in the essay is lacking in his seemingly tacit assumption of Gayness being synonymous with cis, white men. In critiquing Bersani's (1995) book, *Homos*, Knadler (1996) recognizes this: "The unconscious fear that drives Bersani's elaborate rationalizations of narcissism stems from an angry awareness that recent trends toward postcolonial and multicultural studies represent a new form of discipline for gay and straight white men" (pp. 174–175). In other words, Bersani expresses anxiety that white men will not be able to use gayness or Queerness to justify oppression, silencing, or ignoring gender and racial minorities if complex or intersectional identities are acknowledged in discourse. In Bersani's writing, I see a reflection of a pernicious white Queer consciousness I was exposed to in my youth and have had to teach myself to reject, engaging in my own process of double-loop learning.

Bersani is not the only Queer Theorist to err in this way. But Queer Theory has not been bereft of BIPOC adherents. It is no coincidence that Soto references the Cuban American Queer Theorist José Esteban Muñoz in "All the Dead Boys Look Like Me," since this theoretical tradition encourages personal reflection and meaning making.

I suspect that both my student and Bersani surveilled their own experiences and perceived broader social acceptance of a group to which they did not belong. They reduced these groups to monolithic abstractions as a shorthand to highlight their lived oppression. Such reductions obscure the unique trajectories and intersection of individuals, rendering them as partial objects. In an educational zone reliant on the relationship between teacher and student, this reduction can be especially damaging. This is particularly true when we consider the heterogeneity of a group and the individual in their complexity.

In the classroom, we can alight on large scale issues only briefly before the session or term ends. But relations between instructor and student and among students remain a dynamic (albeit brief) zone of engagement. In this zone, we can see the issues from Pinar’s (1979/1994) discussion of the concrete over the abstract come into play. Large issues that deal with groups of people often can do this at the cost of individual uniqueness (Pinar, 1979/1994, p. 105). It allows us to talk about Gay culture or Black culture. But it also creates a comfortable disassociation of the phenomenon that would allow some to contrast the groups without realizing the fact that compositions and origins of the groups emerge from radically different contexts (though both are socially determined.)

FINAL THOUGHTS

Classroom discourse must allow students and teachers to challenge and scrutinize ideas so that they can be opened further. It is, of course, not the imperative of students to be universal experts on their identity positions, and the instructor should not be final arbiter of learning. Instead, multiple participants through partial identifications can engage in creating a space for new learning. The autobiographic reflection of one student must be brought into conversation with the reflections of other students and instructor.

In such conversations, we might be able to fully experience the ephemeral social space of the classroom. When we make ourselves vulnerable, the likelihood increases that we grow and change and settle in different contexts. Acknowledging change in others and ourselves requires us to be more fully immersed not in grand agendas but in localized possibilities.

The selection and discussion of an introductory poem for each class session allowed my students and me a small place to challenge artificially rigid frameworks of abstract assertions about society. In so doing, I hope we were able to more closely engage with and acknowledge our individual and intersectional complexities and the narratives that emerge from them. To do this we can benefit from literature’s static and elastic qualities in that we can return to it for however many loops we need to extend our learning.

The second epilogue of *Crime and Punishment* foreshadows a new hopeful narrative that continues after the novel ends. The omniscient speaker declines to say more because “that is the beginning of new story, the story of the gradual renewal of a man, of his gradual regeneration, of his slow progress from one world to another, of how he learned to know a hitherto undreamed-of reality” (Dostoevsky, 1866/1989, p. 465). I hope that as I progress on my own slow, looping path from the world of abstraction to the world of the concrete I can help my students on theirs.

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