FRIENDS ALONG THE JOURNEY:

Ken, Leila, and You Look at Teaching Literary and Informational Texts

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As a graduate student, when someone asks me if I’ve seen a recently released movie or television series, my response is usually something along the lines of, “Nah, unfortunately I haven’t,” but my inner monologue is laughing, almost maniacally, at the thought of taking leisure time to watch a two-plus hour movie, let alone an entire television series. It’s not that I don’t thoroughly enjoy a good binge-watching streak or that I can’t shift around my schedule to squeeze in at least an episode or two; it’s more about the wave of guilt that washes over me whenever I find myself vegging rather than writing, reading, or grading at the end of the night. But during the fall of 2016, my resistance collapsed, and I simply couldn’t take it anymore. Left and right from every Tom, Dick, and Harry in my office, classrooms, to out on the streets, I kept hearing the same hyperbolized phrase—“You haven’t seen Westworld?”

So, what can I say? I succumbed to the temptation of satisfying my curiosity. Within 72 hours, I’d finished the entire 10-episode series and was left understanding precisely what all the hoopla was about. The show was addictive and introduced a concept that resonated with me far more than I’d expected from what I had assumed to be yet another overhyped HBO series.

Westworld, a technologically advanced amusement park populated by robot hosts who are programmed to cater to the desires of high-paying guests, is designed to fulfill the fantasies of everyone who’s willing to pay—regardless of how dark or twisted they may be. Although technically androids, many of the hosts have developed the intellectual acuity to perceive and even experience human emotion, despite the software team’s best efforts to thoroughly wipe out their memories and conception of visceral sentiment. In the Wild
West–themed park where laws, regulations, and etiquette of a civilized society don’t apply, but where the actions of the guests—both positive and negative (but mainly negative)—can be felt by the hosts, it seems reasonable to anticipate a societal collapse.

Throughout the series, the park guests eagerly, and with unsettling delight, participate in physically, mentally, and emotionally abusing the android hosts who are specifically programmed only to cater to the guests’ desires—whether that takes the form of compliance or resistance. The guests are even able to execute the hosts, but, despite their valiant attempts to defend themselves, the hosts are not capable of causing any significant harm to the guests and typically concede to passivity. Beyond physical devastation, women hosts are seen as objects and treated as such, men hosts (and guests) are dichotomized as either tough and strong or weak and pathetic based on how much violence and hateful rhetoric they’re willing to participate in, and the man running the show with no regard for the concerns of his safety personnel is Robert Ford, the bully of the whole operation. Despite requests from his programming employees to reduce the amount of stress placed on the tormented hosts, Ford’s callous and arrogant nature simply dismisses any such plea with a simple assertion of dominance: “Don’t get in my way.”

As I observed the dynamics between the power-hungry guests and submissive hosts early on in the series, it led me to wonder about what my own world would look like if the rules of civility didn’t exist. As it turns out, I didn’t have to think very hard since the ongoing incivilities promulgated by Trump and his churlish band of executives aren’t a far cry from those that exist in Westworld. Much like the regressive environment depicted in Westworld where the essentially defenseless hosts experience constant psychological torment from the shameless guests, Trump and his administration have intentionally pursued a variety of methods for turning twenty-first-century progressivity on its head. From verbally assaulting individuals and entire communities based on factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity, to name a few, we have truly seen it all—uncensored and uncut. But for the sake of avoiding yet another political tirade you could find just as easily these days by reading the Amazon reviews of that new shampoo you were considering, I’m more interested in talking about the impact of damaging, unabashed, and insouciant behaviors on our classrooms—and proposing a disruption.

I teach preservice content-area teachers in a literacy methods course during the semester just prior to their student teaching experiences. The course is designed to bolster their understanding of how to employ effective literacy methods in their respective content areas ranging from English to biology to technology education, for example. However, after observing
certain patterns emerge in their comments related to what they’re really concerned about learning before the student teaching experience, I’ve taken the liberty to expand the course to include topics and strategies that they feel are more pressing to their student teaching preparation. Some examples encompass planning for the inevitable challenges and setbacks they’re likely to encounter during their first few years in the field, as well as engaging in small- and large-group discourses surrounding critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching. As those discourses unfold, many of their fears and anxieties begin to surface.

Prior to the emergence of our current political climate, which became noticeably palpable in my classrooms during fall 2016’s election semester, I hadn’t seen my preservice teachers display such prominent consternation amid these conversations. As it became increasingly evident that Trump was potentially going to win the election, my students exhibited distraught commentary and body language. While several students reiterated phrases such as “We’re totally screwed,” others spent the duration of our class periods trying to conceal tears as they expressed their concerns about moving forward as teachers with Trump in office. Having worked with many of the same students when they were boisterous and invincible first-year and second-year students in my Multiculturalism in Education classes, it was clear in their reflections and in-class discussions that Trump’s presidency was eliciting harmful effects on the students’ personal and professional confidence. Correspondingly, with my dissertation research focused on unearthing the factors that contribute to beginning content area teachers’ self-efficacy, or lack thereof, I’m finding that the political milieu plays a significant role in their perceived ability to succeed professionally. What follows are my preliminary insights with respect to the politicized dimension of teaching, presented as renderings of the preservice teachers’ common refrains.

I’m afraid to teach and I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t think there’s anything I can do about it.

Regrettably, as of recent, I’ve heard this phrase far more often than I’d ever anticipated, especially when considering their explanations for such panic. My preservice teachers, much like the hosts of Westworld, feel defenseless and uncertain of their identities in the transition from student to teaching professional. Granted, identity transition has always been a “difficult, messy, and complex [process]” for novice teachers (Alsup, 2013, p. 5), but their insecurities seem heightened now. While students are righteously indignant because they feel their voices are disregarded as merely the jibber jabber of
"millennial social justice warrior heathens," as one student articulated in a reflection, they’re terrified to be disruptive at the risk of being condemned for their pushback against the Trump administration and the uncivil discourse it’s incited.

I just feel like everything’s moving backwards and I don’t think I can or even want to deal with the anxiety of working in the current conditions of education.

Since the election semester of fall 2016, my preservice teachers often describe their fears of entering the field of education as beginning teachers in Trump times. Just as the hosts of Westworld are controlled by a man whose intentions for the park support the uninhibited behaviors of the guests, my PSTs feel powerless in the face of the callous actions and general disposition of Trump, his cabinet, and his bigoted supporters. And they are not alone; my students’ sentiments appear to be in tandem with what teachers are experiencing across the country. According to the results released from an October 2017 UCLA survey of 1,535 teachers at schools reflecting U.S. demographics as a whole, 79 percent of teachers reported that since Trump took office, students have expressed concerns for the well-being of themselves, their families, and their communities at local, national, and global levels. Additionally, 51 percent of teachers reported students experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety, 44 percent reported that these tensions are negatively affecting student learning, and, perhaps most disheartening, 27 percent of teachers reported an increase in sexist and racist comments between students while 20 percent reported “heightened polarization and incivility in their classrooms” (Kamenetz, 2017, p. 1).

My preservice teachers communicate that they see veteran teachers leaving or, rather, running away from their positions, and they’re afraid that teaching in an anxiety-inducing climate where hateful rhetoric and attacks on minority communities are condoned by our nation’s “leader” just isn’t worth suffering the psychologically detrimental ramifications. It’s no surprise that teachers are reluctant to stick with a profession that causes such high levels of daily stress and anxiety, and that current preservice teachers are becoming increasingly more aware of this harsh reality. Currently, our nation’s teacher shortage is estimated at a demand of 250,000 with a supply of less than 200,000 (Camera, 2016). According to a report released by the U.S. Department of Education, the gap between estimated teacher supply and demand will only continue to grow over the next decade, reaching an all-time demand high of more than 300,000 aligned with an estimated supply of just under 200,000 by 2025 (Camera, 2016).
I can’t say that I blame the teachers who feel discouraged to the point of wanting to leave the profession behind, and I’d be lying if I said I’ve never thought about it myself. Coming from a White, middle-class background, I’ve had ample opportunities to pursue higher education and the freedom of choice in exploring my personal interests. Even as I write this piece, I’m fortunate enough to be insulated and financially supported by my graduate school department and faculty members whose views are largely consonant with mine. That said, I recognize that my fearlessness when it comes to challenging regressive dialogue, behaviors, and actions is attributed to my ability to walk away from the profession and pursue career options that may be less angst-inducing. I am protected by my privileges, and I need to be mindful of that when my students’ fears frustrate me.

Nonetheless, my position as a teacher educator demands a disruption and dismissal of the trepidation that I and my preservice teachers sometimes feel. If I do not dauntlessly take on difficult dialogue in my classroom, then how can I challenge students to be courageous, innovative, and resilient when they leave the protective environment of higher education? My go-to method to start students on this pathway is critical reflection, which initially causes moans and groans. However, I’ve found that by the last day of the course, whether incorporated into their final reflections or in person, nearly all students take the time to note how the process of ongoing, reflective dialogue with me and their peers allowed them to release and sometimes resolve their anxieties—many of which are inspired by fear of the future of education in Trump times—and better understand their teacher identities in ways they hadn’t initially anticipated. Fortunately, my preservice teachers are not the only ones who find strength through reflecting on their personal experiences and trepidations, while at the same time tirelessly strategizing about diverse ways to fight the good fight against oppression in their current and future classrooms.

*Plot Twist*

Back in Westworld, once the hosts have endured what the park supervisors consider to be significant physical, mental, and/or emotional abuse, they’re reset to their original factory settings, completely stripped of any memories related to their interactions with the guests. The purpose of this is to maintain the hosts’ originally programmed narratives as they prepare for each round of newcomer guests. Unbeknown to the park supervisors, however, several of the hosts are improperly reset at various times throughout the series, which ultimately enables them to recall memories of physical, mental,
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and/or emotional distress thrust on them by the guests. By the end of the series, the guests’ violent delights are challenged by the hosts who are able to recall and reflect on abusive memories, and, rather than surrender, the hosts fight back. As Westworld begins to unravel, eliciting panic among the guests and park employees, Robert Ford foreseeably remains apathetic to the panicked concerns of the guests, hosts, and employees alike, and instead tries to continue controlling the volatile hosts. Despite his rigorous efforts, the hosts’ insubordination persists as they work to claim their identities in pursuit of freedom from the totalitarian society. While the aftereffects of the hosts’ resistance remain to be seen in Season 2, I anticipate the results will be profound. I hope to have the opportunity to participate in a similar revolutionary uprising in the education world!

In This Issue

Similar to my Westworld-Trump times figuration, the articles in this issue speak to matters of oppression, entrapment, and the critical conversations that must take place if we hope to resist and prevail over our trepidations and the injustice that surrounds us. While reading Carlin Borsheim-Black’s “You Could Argue It Either Way: Ambivalent White Teacher Racial Identity and Teaching about Racism in Literature Study,” I found myself considering how onerous it must be for teachers whose students are sometimes at the forefront of spouting hateful rhetoric. And yet again, here I sit in a position of privilege, working mostly with students who (up to this point, at least) bear views aligned with my political ideologies. Correspondingly, while reading Amy Vetter, Melissa Schieble, and Mark Meacham’s “Critical Conversations in English Education: Discursive Strategies for Examining How Teacher and Student Identities Shape Classroom Discourse,” I considered how I might strengthen the literacy methods I teach to incorporate culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies across the content areas. For instance, while such pedagogies are almost mainstream in English education programs if not yet in ELA classrooms, to what extent are critical pedagogies a focus in secondary technology or biology classrooms? Perhaps more importantly, how can I make the culturally responsive and sustaining literacy methods that are a given for my preservice teachers in the humanities an easier sell for my STEM education students?

Much like my implementation of stream-of-consciousness reflections in the literacy methods course, Mara Lee Grayson’s “Let Your Reader Do Some Work: Twelve Theses (and an Appendix) on Leaving More to the Imagination in Academic Assignments” reinforces the significance of encouraging
students to incorporate their own narratives and write for meaning rather than writing to fit a rubric-based format just to “get the grade.” Her offbeat exposition reminded me of when I taught high school English and my students were required to write research papers based on administration-mandated rubrics; while their papers may have been informative and riddled with statistics to defend their theses, most completely and utterly lacked any sense of authentic student voice. As one might reasonably assume, their papers were dull and uninspiring; the students generally dreaded writing them. Like Mara, now using the lens of a teacher educator, I prefer to model reflective pedagogy and encourage students to think outside the box rather than be confined to the “industrial bulwark of secondary education” (her words) so that they, too, can incorporate meaningful instructional practices in their future classrooms.

As teacher educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that we provide our preservice teachers with the pedagogical support to effectively employ critical conversations and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies in their classrooms, as well as encourage them to teach fearlessly when whatever edu-politics du jour threatens them or their students. We can lead them out of our classrooms designed with courage to challenge injustice, all the while reminding them and ourselves that

[w]e are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other. So we are not trapped . . . we always have possibilities of changing the situation. We cannot jump outside the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I’ve said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free. (Foucault, 1996, p. 386)

Note
1. I used this idiom intentionally to inspire the visualization of three White males—identities analogous to the leading imperious characters in Westworld.

References
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