

"I find this very offensive!": The Unintended Consequences of Teaching
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Student A: "I have to leave."

Student B: "Why are we reading this?"

Student C: "Excuse me professor, I find this very offensive!"

Student D: Silence, tears...

As educators, we renew our commitment to teaching every time we enter a class, design a syllabus, and contribute to our profession. I had always thought that my teaching practice, grounded in progressive, humanistic education and time-tested for over twenty years, held steady. Recently, when a lesson on a great work of literature unraveled before my eyes, revealing my own failure, I decided it was time for change. As I reflected on the experiences that profoundly influenced me in my education, I realized that I wanted to share what I value with my students so much that I had failed to acknowledge, or even see, their dissonance. I reevaluated and re-envisioned my entire teaching practice by applying to myself what I have been asking of my students—"deeper learning." I came to the realization that teachers not only decide what students should know but what actually constitutes knowledge. Teachers are, in effect, "constructors of knowledge."

Flashback 1974— In a predominantly white working class town, I am a newly minted community college student. Still a high school student enrolled in a college bridge program, I am a nervous wreck about my new status. James Haskins, an African American scholar and prolific author of children's books, was my first professor. The late Professor Haskins, whom we all referred to Haskins, not out of disrespect but more out of

fear, held a commanding presence. Dressed meticulously in a suit and tie, and as formal in his classroom demeanor, he contrasted with the casual style of the other, mostly male, white professors. While students found Haskins' "suffer no fools" and "take no prisoners" teaching approach to be a refreshing challenge, only the mighty few could make it through his rigorous course material and merciless authority. That semester Professor Haskins assigned Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, *Native Son*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *The Fire Next Time*, Nietzsche's *Man and Superman*, as well as other works of philosophy—Sartre, Camus and even more than I can recall. *Invisible Man*, and Professor Haskins' teaching, however, stayed forever burned in my memory.

What has also stayed burned in my memory was his commitment to us; James Haskins lived true intellectualism. His expectations that our young minds read *all* the course material astounded us, but it also indicated that a teacher held us to a high standard. James Haskins also lived in pursuit of truth, and confronted us with race realities at a time when such confrontations were a risk. He often began the class with a personal anecdote that would correspond to his lessons. I recall a story he told us about his meeting white man, a fellow colleague in his department. After being introduced and shaking hands, this man then proceeded to wipe his own hand as if wiping off a stain, not even realizing it. "Now why do you think he did that?" Professor Haskins rested his gaze on a young man seated next to me. "Because you're invisible?" the student said, with his fresh copy of *Invisible Man* not cracked open a hair. Haskins had the ability to laser through you with his glare, particularly when he called you out in class. Haskins continued to rest his gaze, cutting him as if to say, "You ignorant fool!" He immediately turned to me. As this was the first time I had to speak out in class, a very tiny and shaky voice emerged, "Because he didn't want you to rub off on him," which

drew instant laughter from the class. "Don't laugh," he said, "She is right," and the class fell silent.

At the mostly white high school I had attended, the minority of black students, under constant threat, seemed to me just as segregated as in the days of Jim Crow. Haskins faced many of these very same white youths who waged violence against the black students. As a victim of segregation in the Deep South in the 1930s, James Haskins was prohibited from attending school. He had to fight for his own education, and I believe, for his place in academe. The literary and philosophical works that Professor Haskins introduced me to at a young age greatly influenced my social consciousness, my philosophical beliefs, in short, who I am today. James Haskins was a constructor of knowledge. He was also a brave educator, someone I wanted to emulate.

Flash Forward to 2000 – A professor of English, I teach a class of adult students of color, many who, like me before, are reading literary masterpieces for the first time. I introduced the first chapter "Battle Royal" as a short story as it had been originally published. I had the opportunity to take my lessons out of the classroom. We visited museums, exhibits and city spots that were alive and rich with educational opportunities. In 2005, The New-York Historical Society displayed a groundbreaking exhibit "Slavery in New York." Professor Horton, chief historian of the exhibit said, "One of my things that I say as often as I get the chance to, is that African-American history is American history. It is made by Americans and it's made for Americans." Ralph Ellison published "The Battle Royal" eighty years after the Emancipation Proclamation and prior to the civil rights movement. Ellison remains a powerful voice to the historical moment. I still find his writing thoroughly fresh, and although it is of specific period in time, it is a timeless masterpiece. My students delved into the text with great interest.

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture displayed early American photographs and drawings of African Americans circa late 1800s to early 1900s in an exhibit titled "Stereotype versus Realtypes". This exhibit provided us with another lens into race studies, further enriching the experience of Ellison's work as well. Most notable were the period depictions of African Americans. Racist cartoon images that were prevalent in newspapers, magazines and posters of the period were arranged alongside photographs (realtypes) of real people of the era who were dressed elegantly, exuding dignity. As with the Slavery in New York exhibit, we shared in this experience and students felt validated. I developed a blackboard site dedicated to Black History and Culture, posting historical documents, popular culture, and the online link to the "Slavery in New York" exhibit. I utilized this site for many classes. However, this past semester, 2011, something went very wrong.

I relied on the material I developed from my previous classes, but the off campus activities were no longer doable. I had not realized how much I had relied on these exhibits to enhance my teaching, and even substantially fill my lessons! Perhaps what I thought to be exceptional learning experiences were driven by the exceptional displays that captured attention and provided context. I questioned myself: were their learning experiences really serendipitous and not the result of carefully designed constructs? Was I really a constructor of knowledge? I had been passing on, actually transmitting my own interests, but I was not transacting with my students. As a learner, I may reminisce about the 1970s classroom, but as a teacher, I would never expect what I experienced then to be appropriate for today's students. In transmitting what I had decided was important, I failed in my construction of knowledge, specifically, in my ability to engage students and transmute the brilliance of Ellison's work.

Another reason why I failed with "Battle Royal" is that those students, who are now generations apart from me and my former teachers, have very different perceptions of the story than I have. According to several students, "Battle Royal" is a tragic story that puts down the black race. My students expressed their indignation and even rejected it as racist. Some of the more mature students who appreciated Ellison's work nevertheless felt fatigued by rehashing slavery, Jim Crow, the struggle for civil rights. A young student stated outright, "I have never read such bad things about black people." Another student trivialized *Eyes on the Prize*, the documentary that I also included in the course, as the film with all the black people singing We Shall Overcome. These reactions astounded me at first. I had to face the issue of whether I drop *Invisible Man* from my repertoire—rendering it invisible—or figure out how to make it relevant. I reexamined everything that I had done for the series of courses I taught over the decade. After deep thinking I decided to do a major shift in approach, pedagogy and expectations.

New Beginnings

There was also a shift in the climate of school that was happening as my own internal shift began. I had been teaching at two colleges: a diverse community college with a sprawling campus and a small private college with degree programs in Human Services and Education. Many students entering college for the first time are facing enormous challenges. Students come out of prison programs that now have reduced education to nothing; others are in, or have undergone, drug treatment and a good deal of them are dealing with serious illness such as HIV-AIDS. Yet many of these students are the most compelling and focused, demanding much from their educational investment and from me. At the community college, where I teach composition, young, easily distracted students bring their set of issues and demand much as well.

I thought that I was a talented enough educator who has, for the most part, been successful in reaching out to students, but somehow I had gone off-track. In spite of deep struggle, I had to stay firm in my belief of what I value as an educator. I felt indebted to my predecessor Professor Haskins, and knew what he would want for these students—as much as he had demanded from my generation. I decided to develop my classes under a Course Management System (CMS), reframe teaching literature and writing from taught subject matter to a dynamic, evolving multidimensional experience. My aim, which is to place students at the center of their own learning, actually brought me to the center of my learning.

The Value of the CMS as a Construct of Knowledge

Philosophical and epistemological grounding underpins constructs of knowledge. Still, to be a constructor of knowledge is not to enforce cultural and ideological hegemony. As Michael Apple (2004) states, "Education is an *inherently* (author's italics) political and ethical –and a fully human—act" (*Ideology and Curriculum*). To be a constructor of knowledge is to include students as co-constructors and co-creators their learning experiences. Moreover, in using the CMS students are interacting with multi-level modalities of learning and may, in fact, resist dominating forms of institutionalized education.

In designing the CMS I was introducing a new curriculum approach and teaching methodology for the contemporary classroom and student. I needed to see the entire breadth of what I was actually teaching. In taking a hard look at all the course material over the years, the texts, assignments, the demands upon students, my teaching practice had evolved, but I had become too comfortable, The course management system presented me with a means to "see" the totality of my work, and then to make choices about the body of work that would be the

"knowledge base" of the entire system. It also forced me to see through the eyes of the learner as I engaged with new course material, especially social media. I became a learner all over again; given my age, in my education these formats did not exist.

Deep learning is defined as learning that promotes the development of meta-cognition through communities of inquiry (Weigel 2002). Wenger (1998) states that in order to encourage in what is termed 'deep learning,' it is necessary to facilitate learners' identification with a community of practice. The CMS is a virtual community. Students are not only accessing information, they are taking ownership for the learning experience and participating in a learning community, as they post, share, engage with the course material, and contribute to the CMS. Their contributions will also impact the knowledge base of the CMS and students can participate in the knowledge-making process. These efforts, I hope, will make relevant and enduring their learning experiences.

I selected a theme on "Civility" that would be an umbrella for many sub-themes. Many other colleges around the country are instituting civility campaigns in light of recent tragic events. Civility became the burning issue at our community college, as well. I proposed a new curriculum approach to my department and presented a case for Civility.

The following is an excerpt of my proposal:

What is civility? Civil discourse? Civil disobedience? What constitutes civic engagement? How is civility fostered as a practice, not just a subset of cultural behavior?

The National Curriculum for Social Studies states, "An understanding of civic ideals and practices is critical to full participation in society and is an essential component of education for citizenship" (NCSS, 2011). College students need to understand their part in participating in civil discourse. Moreover, we must create those opportunities for students to enact civic ideals and further their intellectual

and social commitment....Drawn from the tradition of liberal, humanistic education, this curriculum approach fosters strong participation in a democratic society...The concept of civility, based on core values, includes (but is not limited to) respect, ethical behavior, philosophical ideas and ideals, awareness of others in diverse social systems, and consciousness of self and others' values and lifestyle choices. ...Students will be guided to explore the idea of Civility in all its ramifications and manifestations. As students explore this theme they will develop and demonstrate their understanding of a personal philosophy of responsibility to promote a more just society. Whereas studies of diversity and multiculturalism as "difference," have been integral to civil discourse, also exploring what we share in our humanity is at the heart of understanding civility.

I was clearly disappointed in my students' dismissal of Ralph Ellison's genius, but I had to light a lamp for them to even recognize greatness, including their own capacity for greatness. Moreover, they must see themselves as participants in a society and in their own active engagement with learning. Their participation must reach beyond the confines of the classroom to the level of social engagement.

Great literature, such as *Invisible Man*, is enlivened in discourse that encompasses a full human experience. Opening up the novel to other levels of examination enables one to enter into the beauty of the novel in spite of its pain. I reflected on ideas of critical thinking and asked myself: What do we, as educators, ask students to do when we ask them to critically think? Are we really asking them to think as we do? Critical thinking has become an exercise that teachers often rely on in place of doing the more difficult work of actively engaging students in the complexity of thought. Although this was not the intent in education, critical thinking has come to mean something we do, a skills set. This is based on the idea that learning is hierarchical, an ascent toward higher

order thinking, as credited to Bloom, in the taxonomy of knowledge, consisting of comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). Of course, the aim here is not to refute any of the above but to consider the complexity of the thinking process. Deeper learning principle (DLP) has been the growing focus in higher education for over ten years (Wickersham and McGee, 2008). DLP differs from CT skills in that deeper learning cannot be taught as if "... the learner proceeds in lock-step fashion with little or no adaptation or deviation from a content-driven script (Wickersham and McGee, p.74). Critical thinking is best applied as a habit of mind that leads to deeper learning. Tagg (2003) has stated, "Deep learning is learning that takes root in the apparatus of understanding, in the embedded meanings that define us and that we use to define the world." Recasting critical thinking in terms of deeper learning demands that students sit with ideas before rushing to judgment, that they avoid dichotomizing ideas into positions of duality. Deeper thinking is not dictated by a taxonomy; it is the totality of thought. Deeper learning demands that the thinker become aware and conscious.

Practical Considerations

In order to avoid making the CMS a virtual behemoth by overloading too much material, the teacher as course manager must be willing to invest a great deal of time to carefully organize the scope, sequence and pacing; students must also be instructed on its utilization. Not all students have equal access to the digital world and not everyone is a self-directed learner. Therefore, I constructed the CMS for various learners: as a hybrid of online and face to face time, and as an enhancement to a traditional class, and eventually a fully online course for the advanced level research class. The CMS, unlike Blackboard, is a foundation for a body of coursework or for several courses. Like Blackboard, the CMS gathers powerful data on course effectiveness,

learner performance and satisfaction in more dynamic ways than the traditional "paper" syllabus and student evaluations. A teacher may build in components to maintain and update the system in ways that copies of syllabi cannot. As the instructor designs courses that are managed and operated under the system, the instructor gauges the effectiveness over time. Instruments measuring students' learning experiences, such as satisfaction, quality of students' work and usage of online and distance modalities are also key components of the CMS. A dedicated instrument, such as the Distance Education Learning Environment Survey (DELES) measures students' responses so that assignments and expectations can be adjusted as is necessary. I designed other instruments to measure students' ability to use the CMS. Drawing on anthropological field testing of "triangulation" and "member checking," I taught students these terms to use in posting responses and sharing. I instructed students to not "react" to each others' posts, but to 'deeply' respond. (Therefore, I set down specific rules of engagement—no blogging, text language, substitute words, or other vernacular codes, but fully written prose.)

Using the CMS

I selected the overarching theme "Civility and its Discontents." An obvious spin on Freud's Civilization and its Discontents," this theme invites deep discussion on what makes us "civilized" to what makes us "civil." I stated under the theme that "civility is the highest exercise of humanity" followed with the questions: What compels us, as human beings, to strive for moral, ethical and personal greatness and what compels us to great destruction and even evil? This is a key deeper thinking question (technically several questions). However, this question does not stand on its own. I put into practice my own sense deeper learning as I constructed the CMS, drawing from my own educational experiences while adding the new experiences. Weigel, (2003) also

regards reflective thinking as "an art," that the learner taps into curiosity and sets out for "discovery" (also cited in Valcarcel Craig and Patten, 2006). I designated these categories as possibilities for intellectual discovery: The Historical Moment, Political Voice, Aesthetics, "This I Believe," (personal values) and evidence-based inquiry (science). These categories also function as sub-themes to organize the complexity of all the modalities of the CMS. For example, within these categories are selected "Great Works," links to sites, such as TED and PBS podcasts, the African American Public Radio Consortium, and other social media with themes related to civility, civic engagement and social consciousness. As a student works with the overarching theme and, with direction, selects two or three categories and several writing assignments, they will create their own self designed writing unit. I now call these writing units "continuums" because of their recursive nature. Students will revise by returning to the readings and utilizing information in the categories. They are also continuous discussions that lead to new discussions, and new essays. A theme should be explored from a diversity of perspectives. There is an interrelated-ness between the course material and the writing students produce over the full extent of the course. With units, there is a sense of finishing one topic and beginning a whole new one. Continuums require staying with key ideas for a duration of time; as such they also require deeper thinking.

My previous students had experienced emotional pain from reading "Battle Royal." Writing through emotional pain is a beginning to a deeper thinking experience. Skimming the surface in a class discussion is a missed opportunity. Failure taught me that it was my responsibility to guide the student, steer their affect toward making associations to ideas and issues that arise from the literature. To foster deep learning, a teacher will work with a student to explore beneath the surface of her feelings and move from high affect to articulation, and then to analysis.

Students must mine the texts for "embedded meanings" that socially circumscribe issues, particularly those that cut to the core of who we are as human beings. In "Battle Royal," the loss of humanity, the depravity of humankind that enables such loss of civility are issues that cut to the core. For example, the abuse by the white male hierarchy of young black men was socially sanctioned, even expected. Using analytical texts (such as Freud from the course category) to work through the "embedded meaning," a student is guided to complex analysis. In DLP what is necessary is that one be given the tools to examine multiple levels of theory and analysis. Deeper learning is a process; it is not a mechanistic set of operations.

I will present two examples of how the categories came to life in the classroom.

Pre-reading exercise: We utilized the CMS to build prior learning, and to contextualize the story. Whereas in the past my students had field trips and exhibits, in the CMS we took virtual museum tours and accessed related online links to material that served to "scaffold" students into deeper meaning of the story. Students completed a timeline and noted particular events based on an exercise from *Cultural Proficiency* (Lindsey, Robbins, Terrell, 2003), called a "Cultural Proficiency Continuum." In this exercise, each student draws an individual timeline that pinpoints significant moments from his or her life that informed a personal understanding of culture, race and ethnicity. In one example a student wrote on her timeline of how her color impacted the way her family and closest friends treated her: First racial slur (age 8), "My cousin did not want me to play with her friends because they were all afraid that I would steal their boyfriends because I have 'good skin'" (age 10). "Aunt says my life will be easier because of my skin color" (age 18). "Was told I was best for breeding" (age 23). She then concluded, "Over the years I

have been called Clear, Wet Paper Bag, High Yellow, Piss Color, Blanco, Inside Out Oreo, Light Skinned Heifer, Want to be White, More beautiful, Desired (only for physical gratification or eye candy). She wrote: "...by the time I got to high school I realized I was being treated differently because of my skin color. I tried to darken my skin so I would blend in better. I currently try to remain invisible." She wrote this before we read the story, although to me this is quite stunning. In class she discussed how race has defined her. Her honesty and willingness to share helped others to partake in the dialogue, rendering greater depth of the connections among students' experiences and foreshadowing Ralph Ellison's narrative.

Political Voice and Aesthetics: Students used these categories to read and analyze parts of the text. In class a student read the opening:

It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!

I played Miles Davis' recording, "E.S.P." (The Miles Davis Quintet, 1965) as a backdrop while students read scenes of their selections. One student read this particular scene that seemed to fit the music:

And then she began to dance, a slow sensuous movement; the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils. She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea. I was transported. Then I became aware of the clarinet playing and the big shots yelling at us. Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not. On my right I saw one boy faint. And now a man grabbed a silver pitcher from a table and stepped close as he dashed ice water upon him and stood him up and forced two of us to support him as his head hung and moans issued from his thick bluish lips. Another boy began to plead to go home. He was the largest of the group, wearing dark red fighting trunks much too small to conceal the erection which projected from him as though in answer to the insinuating low-registered moaning of the clarinet. He tried to hide himself with his boxing gloves.

There is a great deal to say about what happened in the class—too much actually. But to give the basic idea we suspended analysis until after this "experiment." I invited students to do their own experiments selecting their own music and reading. Eventually the class exploded with ideas, connections to the theories we were exploring and, of course, deep discussion.

Follow Up: A student read the lines of the scene in which the narrator replaces the words "social responsibility" with "equality."

The speech seemed a hundred times as long as before, but I could not leave out a single word. All had to be said, each memorized nuance considered, rendered. Nor was that all. Whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it. I used the phrase "social responsibility" and they yelled:

"What's the word you say, boy?"

"Social responsibility," I said.

"What?"

"Social . . ."

"Louder."

". . . responsibility."

"More!"

"Respon—"

Repeat!"

"—sibility."

The room filled with the uproar of laughter until, no doubt, distracted by having to gulp down my blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private.

"Social . . ."

"What?" they yelled.

". . . equality—.

The laughter hung smokelike in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes, puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room. The M.C. rushed forward. They shouted hostile phrases at me. But I did not understand. A small dry mustached man in the front row blared out, "Say that slowly, son."

"What, sir?"

"What you just said!"

"Social responsibility, sir, I said.

"You weren't being smart, were you boy?" he said, not unkindly.

"No, Sir!"

"You sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?"

"Oh, yes, Sir," I said. "I was swallowing blood."

"Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech."

During the class, one student stood at one corner of the room and recited the lyrics to Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." The experience of the text transformed from being originally only tragic and painful to being a creative and powerful force. The classroom experience was also kinesthetic—it was a 'felt sense' of knowledge. In the second example, the class contributed their personal essays drawing from the category, "This I Believe" that is based on a National Public Radio program in which influential people recite their essays on personal values and ethics. We listened to several of them, and then students wrote their own versions of "This I Believe" inspired by "Battle Royal". To achieve this, I instructed students to return to their original initial reactions. They examined their values that underpinned their emotional shock. The additional theoretical readings that they previously read, along with their discussions and posted online responses also presented a means to further analyze their personal reactions and Ellison's story. In class a student read his essay then played the video of Flobot, a rap group whose originator is an MIT graduate, and who writes, sings and creates music and video that is socially and politically conscious, dynamic and thought-provoking.

Deep learning requires learners to commit themselves to a new field of learning and to "see themselves as the 'kind of person' (author's quotes) who can learn, use, and value the new semantic domain" (Gee

qtd in Rohleder, et al, 59). We may extend this notion of a semantic domain, as "domain of community". We want students to commit and see themselves as stakeholders in a civil society.

This last point, being a stakeholder in a civil society, I deem as most important. A masterpiece of literature, as Professor Haskins introduced to me, is appreciated for that that which it teaches us and for elevating our own humanity. A great literary work brings one toward civility, decency and compassion. Such works brought me to places I had never traveled. I won a President's Faculty Innovation Award for this proposal but the more significant work of engaging in deeper learning is unfolding. That stated, what I have learned from this experience is that a Course Management System –or any construct of knowledge – is the manifestation of the teacher's own deeper thinking, a creation of all that she has chosen as necessary and valuable for a student, a learning community, for society. As such, it is much more significant than it appears.

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