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# The Messages Are Everywhere: An Intersectional City as Text™ Approach to Enhance Honors Preprofessional Student Learning

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**Abstract:** This essay recounts efforts to teach liberal arts to engineering, nursing, pharmacy, and pre-medicine majors. Showing how various forms of public media reinforce harmful ideologies about social identities in the United States serves as a convergence between preprofessional disciplines and the liberal arts. At the same time, City as Text™ offers exploratory learning beyond the traditional classroom. This educational approach fosters students' transformation in thinking about power and privilege, enabling a dialogue about the miseducation of various economic, racial, ethnic, gender, and (dis)abled communities.

**Keywords:** higher education—honors programs & colleges; City as Text™; intersectionality; inclusive education; University of Toledo (OH)—Jesup Scott Honors College

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## INTRODUCTION

Patrick Fazioli's (2022) lead essay for the Forum on "Honors Beyond the Liberal Arts" is a call to action in enhancing the learning experiences of honors preprofessional students. The value of the liberal arts has been contested in the context of the current U.S. climate of neoliberalism and fake news, leading to ongoing anxiety that the liberal arts are an antithesis to a market-driven economy. As instructor of a City as Text™ (CAT) course titled "Multicultural Toledo," I teach around nineteen students each semester,

90% of whom major in engineering, nursing, pharmacy, and pre-medicine programs. The purpose of Multicultural Toledo is to teach students to think reflectively and analytically about the nature and impact of multicultural resources in the city. The multidisciplinary nature of CAT allows a seamless transition to students' preprofessional interests while delivering an exploratory experience that stimulates dialogue about privilege and oppression.

Two questions guide my thinking in liberal arts and students majoring in engineering, nursing, pharmacy, and pre-medicine. First, how are students miseducated about the nature and history of privilege and oppression in the U.S.? Second, what teaching strategies uncover how various forms of oppression manifest within their preprofessional learning experiences? I begin with a brief discussion of the scholars who helped me understand how to teach an intersectional CAT experience. I then describe the course materials about the mass media that connect to their majors, walkabouts, class debriefs, and reflection papers. I will focus on engineering, nursing, pharmacy, and pre-medicine majors because they represent career-focus fields represented in my class in the past three years.

## **INTERSECTIONALITY AND CITY AS TEXT™**

Intersectionality is a theory that examines race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other social identities and how these identities intersect and interact with each other (Collins, 2019). I am inspired by the work of Black feminist-minded scholars, such as Crenshaw (2015), hooks (1994), and Ladson-Billings (1994). I have sought to incorporate their vision of education for liberation into the CAT pedagogy by teaching students how to map, to listen, and to observe the connection among built environments, community interactions, and the sociopolitical and historical contexts; we focus on racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and ways to dismantle these systems. Scholars in honors such as Braid and Long (2010) and Davis (2018) helped me understand the connection between intersectionality and honors education, and I concurred with Cargas's (2018) claims that honors professors should start teaching about U.S. normative values as an effective strategy for social justice education. For instance, the observation of built environments reveals the dominant values in public spaces. Students' reflections on these observations elicited value-laden terms such as "meritocracy," which allowed a dialogue about students' life histories. Many students come from rural areas and agricultural communities, so a walkabout and mapping of a trip to a rural area exposed the observable impact of redlining: the shift in

housing conditions, property values, and quality of public accommodations for travelers. Interviews and deep listening to community members exposed the contradictions among values, policies, and practices that shaped communities. This process is translated into the students' educational experiences, disclosing similar value-laden notions that dominate their fields. An intersectional CAT experience helps students better understand the possibilities and limitations of their majors.

## **WALKABOUTS FOR CHANGE**

The first weeks of the course are devoted to the impacts of the mass media and public wellness. This process re-educates and transforms students' attitudes, beliefs, and values about social identities. Inspired by Osajima (1995), I provide a list of concepts to ease students' discomfort about the appropriate terminology for various racial groups as well as gender and ability-neutral speech. I assign three explorations to help them unpack the overt and covert messages in public media that align with topics in engineering, nursing, pharmacy, and pre-medicine. I assign readings and films. Then, student teams of two or three go on a walkabout, after which we have a class debriefing. Finally, students write a 500-word reflection paper. The course concludes with final presentations that are open to the public.

## **COMMUNITY HEALTH ADVERTISEMENT WALKABOUT**

The first recent walkabout involved an exploration of public advertisements throughout the campus. I assigned the film *Killing us Softly 4* (Lazarus et al.) and a lecture by Jean Kilbourne about gender oppression in advertisements. Students were charged with observing public advertisements and mapping their locations. During the debriefing, I asked them if they saw the influence of advertisements in their preprofessional fields. Many students pointed to the pharmaceutical companies bombarding them with logos on office materials such as pens, notebooks, post-it notes, and stickers. We discussed pill mills and the impact of the pharmaceutical industry on the public. We discussed the crack era in the 1980s, the suspected role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the geopolitical impacts on the built environments of communities of color. I included a reading from Hart's (2021) book *Drug Use for Grown-Ups*, dispelling the racial and gender stereotypes of drug abuse in the media. Other students pointed to breast cancer marketing and how the Power of Pink movement has been commodified while propagating

narrow views about gender expectations, heteronormativity, and consumerism. I included a chapter from King's (2008) book *Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy*. Students completed a walkabout at a Power of Pink Breast Cancer Walk, inspiring them to think about the role of stereotype imposition, capitalism, and corporate power in their fields.

## **BODY POLITICS WALKABOUT**

The second walkabout required students to view and analyze any Disney film and to unpack the overt and covert messages about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and taken-for-granted ideas about normalcy. We watched the documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood, and Corporate Power*, which shows how social identities get constructed in harmful ways. Students were assigned a chapter from Giroux and Pollock's (2010) book *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Some students talked about their personal drive for thinness and the feelings they had when exposed to Disney imagery as a child, leading to discussions about eating disorders and drawing on the work of Bordo's (2003) influential book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. We discussed how people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds may express symptoms of anorexia and bulimia differently. Some students' final presentations noted how the drive for thinness is manifested in narrow sidewalks, hallways, and entryways. Students believed that this discussion would be helpful in their careers because it has implications in the fields of engineering, nursing, pharmacy, and pre-medicine.

## **ACCOMMODATIONS WALKABOUTS**

The third walkabout deviated from the focus of media and pointed to a more applied approach to built environments. Students explored (dis)ability accommodations across campus, leading to discussion about the need for public accommodations that go beyond the bare minimum. In the summer session of 2021, for instance, the engineering students and experienced farmer students built an ADA-compliant raised garden bed for an urban farm. Students often vocalized the appropriate measurements of infrastructures to accommodate people with diverse abilities. The public accommodations walkabout led to intense debriefings about bioethics and the need for people to be free from oppressive environments. I also recall a lively discussion about the Ashley Treatment, a medical procedure that significantly alters the bodies

of people with severe cognitive disabilities (Kittay, 2019); we debated about the caregivers of Ashley X and whether they had gone too far in altering her body for the sake of effective caregiving. Students were able to draw from this discussion when composing their final public presentations, especially in constructing designs to make neighborhoods more accessible.

## STUDENTS' POSITIONALITY

The course starts with where the students are in their lives. Although they are majoring in preprofessional fields, teaching them about multiculturalism within the liberal arts involves managing differences that students bring to the class. The intense debriefings about body autonomy, messages of thinness, stereotype impositions, and limitations of built environments point to gaps within the preprofessional majors. As a result of an intersectional CAT experience, students grow in understanding of the possibilities and limitations of their majors and their prospective careers. They seek ways to transform outdated paradigms in their preprofessional fields, mirroring the goal of Lorde's (1984) aim to dismantle the master's house and other practices that may work against their college education. Students become more attuned to their positionality through the CAT race and ethnicity section of the course. Lastly, students are inspired to take social action. An intersectional CAT experience provides a time-efficient and holistic approach that inspires preprofessional majors to bear witness to and transform social problems for the good.

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