




Spring 2019

# Inclusivity in Higher Education Core Curricula: Cultivating Justice in the Classroom

Joanna Timmerman  
*Ursinus College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/cie\\_essay](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/cie_essay)

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Latina/o Studies Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)  
**Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

## Recommended Citation

Timmerman, Joanna, "Inclusivity in Higher Education Core Curricula: Cultivating Justice in the Classroom" (2019). *CIE Essay Writing Contest*. 6.  
[https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/cie\\_essay/6](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/cie_essay/6)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Common Intellectual Experience at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in CIE Essay Writing Contest by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact [aprock@ursinus.edu](mailto:aprock@ursinus.edu).

Inclusivity in Higher Education Core Curricula: Cultivating Justice in the Classroom

Joanna Timmerman

Dr. Volpe

CIE 200

6 March 2019

Debates over the general—or core—curriculum occur at every institution of higher education. Deciding what students “need to know” is not an easy feat, nor should it be taken lightly. Each decision has implicit (or explicit) implications for what the college values; they are choosing what stories they would like to tell and have their students learn. In reading texts assigned to prompt discussions about identity, worldview, and history, I have come to better understand what should matter to me: the inclusion of and consideration for the narratives of underrepresented groups in higher education curricula. While some texts clearly emphasize inequity in our social institutions, others neglect to acknowledge certain populations or even the larger sociocultural environment. The way that professors and students explore these texts makes a difference in the broader context of the higher education mission. While texts like Douglass’ “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” and Gonzalez’s *Harvest of Empire* highlight the importance of cultural perspective, Camus’ *The Stranger* specifically excludes these narratives; however, all three have important implications for achieving the goals of a liberal arts college: critical interpretation, analysis, and consciousness. Both in presence and absence, the narratives of underrepresented groups are what should matter most in these texts, and their acknowledgement in curricula and lesson plans have great significance for outcomes of critical thought at the postsecondary level.

In “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” Douglass speaks about the lack of inclusivity in American discourse in his time (and perhaps the present), and therefore calls students to question the fundamental values of “liberty and justice” presented to them in their previous general curricula (e.g., high school history courses, etc.). Douglass argues that the national holiday celebrating independence is not for *all* Americans, but for *White* Americans: “This Fourth of July is yours, not mine” (Douglass, 4). He questions whether the “great principles of

political freedom and of natural justice” in the “Declaration of Independence” are extended to African Americans during this period. Douglass notes that slavery and racism in the United States inhibits freedoms and is in opposition to the values propagated by Independence Day when he writes that the “celebration is a sham” and that “for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without rival” (6). In doing so, Douglass establishes a strong stance against a holiday that is still widely celebrated and calls to attention the oppression of a minority population. In reading a transcript of Douglass’ speech, students are encouraged to think about the ways in which American leaders and the White American public were hypocritical in their time, and to consider the ways that these contradictory ideals still exist today. These reflections demonstrate that the intended discussion of hypocrisy and exclusivity in fundamental American ideals are what truly matter to me in a core curriculum. This brings a challenge to the values and traditions that many students at a predominantly White institution hold upon matriculation, and it encourages them to take on another perspective. Further, it is an important aspect of the higher education curriculum because it fosters critical interpretations of texts, so that students may be able to detect these contradictions in other works and therefore become better advocates for justice.

Similarly, in *Harvest of Empire*, Gonzalez writes of the ways that American imperialists and government policies have, over time, oppressed language in indigenous populations of the United States. This text therefore presents students with a cultural perspective with which they may be unfamiliar and encourages them to question and discuss the implications of social and legal practices in the United States. First, Gonzalez titles his chapter, “Speak Spanish, You’re in America!: *El Huracan* over Language and Culture,” which is effectively juxtaposed with contemporary discourse about language and immigration in the United States (Gonzalez, 2006). In

the text, Gonzalez distinguishes between different populations and their relationship with the English language, demonstrating the ways that Latinx and African American individuals were forced to give up their languages and were discriminated against for using them (208). He writes that discrimination against certain populations and the requirement of English in education actually inhibited students from becoming literate at all; in the midst of Americanization policies in the late 1800s, “40 percent of Cherokee children became *illiterate in any language* and 75 percent dropped out of school” (210). After advocating for populations that have been discriminated against in these types of oppressive policies, Gonzalez suggests a new approach: “we need a renewed emphasis on Spanish instruction...as part of a newfound appreciation for our own country’s multicultural roots” (227). In this way, Gonzalez’s work highlights an important aspect of higher education: critical analysis of social and political institutions. The inclusion of this text, and others like it, in a higher education curricula matters because it encourages students to think about the ways that governmental policies and social biases oppress others’ cultures. Therefore, this may help policymakers, administrators, and faculty to achieve the mission of higher education in fostering individuals conscious of the implications of their actions, and the institutionalized problems of their society.

Conversely, some might argue that we must still read texts that do not explicitly acknowledge concerns of discrimination or social justice (to uncover other merits, like scientific theories, in the work), but it is important that institutions and their curricula decisions do not attempt to divorce these works from their context. Camus’ *The Stranger* does not acknowledge the sociocultural context (e.g., French imperialism in Algiers) of the work in a consequential way, but the decision to be conscious of this should be a value of higher education institutions. In *The Stranger*, Meursault refers to the man he kills only as “the Arab,” and does not acknowledge

how his actions fit into the violent context of the French occupation (58). Further, Meursault's trial focuses only on his own personality and actions, with no reference to the man he killed, because he is seen as simply an object in the eyes of the French government. For instance, there is an emphasis on Maman's funeral (90) and his relations with Marie (95). However, perhaps most significantly, Meursault is most happy when Celeste notes that the situation was "just..bad luck" (92). In this way, it is perhaps inferred that Meursault's situation is the only one that matters in the narrative of this murder, that the "luck" of "the Arab" has no relevance or consideration, and this is emblematic of the exclusion of minority populations. In addition to discussing Camus' absurdism, it is imperative that these details of oppressive social relations (or lack thereof) make their way into the classroom conversation. We must encourage students to take another perspective, to see how this looks from the point of view of the oppressed. This matters because, in doing so, we are able to teach students to be conscious of how dangerous it is to remove a work from its context, and how unjust it is to overlook the narratives of certain populations. If we continue to do this, we are perpetuating oppressive systems by being complicitly a part of them. Thus, the careful consideration of narratives of minority groups in a text like *The Stranger* should matter in creating a more socially conscious and just public.

The inclusion of texts like "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" and *Harvest of Empire*, and pointed, justice-oriented discussions of *The Stranger* are integral to facilitating conversations about social justice in the classroom—which is what should matter to me as a future professional in higher education. For many, especially with the current economic climate, higher education is a means to which the end is employment; however, it is important not to forget the mission of post-secondary education in cultivating critical thinkers and potential leaders, in creating a more just and equitable society. If we are to achieve this mission,

inclusivity and perspective-taking *have* to matter in the construction of a core curriculum. The theory of the school as a microcosm of society becomes especially prevalent in this context: the exclusion of certain narratives from our curriculum reflects the oppression of these groups in a larger social environment. Without consideration for the narratives of underrepresented groups, we continue the cycle of oppression and injustice.