

Cultural Daily

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Can Liberal Arts Education Get Past Identity Politics? (Part I)

Daphne Stanford · Wednesday, November 1st, 2017

How can we democratize education, eliminate unfair advantages for the haves versus the have-nots, and recognize that power is subjective? The context in which we find ourselves is connected to how much power we have, in any given room. We may not know how we are received, amongst our peers, if we never meet them in person—apart from what we say, speak, or type. Can a liberal arts-based education provide a way for us to judge each other based on what we say—rather than how we look?

The ideal of democracy proclaims that anyone—regardless of their socioeconomic background—can and should prosper. The amount of social and economic inequality in this country is staggering, and it keeps growing daily. However, the new ‘Control Left’ would argue otherwise. Identity politics dictates a way to speak, to address others—as well as who is bestowed a platform for speaking—all for the sake of elevating the voices of those who have historically been oppressed.

Look, I was severely bullied in grade school and junior high. I know what bullying and intimidation look like. This is what the new control-left is doing. No matter the intention—to lift up the historically oppressed—the impact and effect of these actions, with all their performative characteristics, amount to bullying and intimidation. When students bully an assistant professor—one who happens to be gay, Latina/Latin-x, and someone who herself has been historically oppressed—and accuse her of siding with her white oppressors to silence her, bringing her to tears, how is that not considered bullying?

This kind of nitpicking among thinkers, artists, and writers on the left is what will upend us. Rather than focusing on [tools that will help us](#) go farther as business people and freelance writers in need of making a living, we may fall prey to the kind of identity politics that isolates us from the majority of our potential clients and customers. We have to strive for diversity while searching for points of commonality, rather than points of contention. In that way, we must work for unity—rather than seek to further divide people.

If the far left is so busy fighting with others left of center who aren’t as ‘enlightened’ as they profess to be, how are we going to get anywhere? Yes, we must fight against discrimination against immigrants, Muslims, and the like while working to [increase diversity](#), but we can only do so by engaging with the rest of the culture.

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For example, our society is horribly out of touch with writing and arts, in general. Parts of the poetry world consist of an echo chamber, right now. It is exhausting to wrap my head around all the nuances of it all, because it triggers my own memories of vicious bullying I had to deal with, growing up.

I am sick of bullying and intimidation. We need to get beyond this. As [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recently argued](#), the left is cannibalizing itself. Yes, being a minority in the United States sucks. If you are in Arkansas or the middle of Iowa, you will likely feel out of place. However, if you are in Los Angeles or Portland standing in a room full of social justice advocates, good luck to you. [If you majored in social work](#) but are not one of the chosen, you will likely not feel welcome in that room. You can kiss your progressive politics and desire for everyone to have a voice goodbye, because, sadly, you are likely to somehow be one of the oppressors.

If this kind of ‘purity politics’ is what we have come to, we are truly in danger. At my alma mater right now, protesters are staging a sit-in in Hum. 110 because [the syllabus](#) dares to teach Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman literature. The students staging the protest—they call themselves Reedies Against Racism (RAR)—are protesting the syllabus because the Greeks and Romans were supposedly “white.” Nevermind that the Mediterranean region, at that time, did not consider itself ‘white’—rather, it distinguished itself from the pale Nordic, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon cultures of the north. Nevermind that critical thinking, logic, and reason provide tools with which to argue against what you don’t believe.

First year students haven’t even had a chance to read or discuss said texts—how are they supposed to know what they disagree with, if they aren’t given a chance to learn about said texts? Enter the new control-left. They want to control the discussion. They don’t care what you have to say about it. They don’t even want the discussion to take place, because the texts chosen for the syllabus are supposedly ‘racist.’

If this is what arts communities have come to, I don’t want to be a part of it. I want to encourage discussion—not shut it down. I would prefer to call people in-to discussions, rather than call people out, in a crowd. Rather than shaming and [shutting down discussion](#), isn’t it better to increase discussion amongst ourselves? How will we ever come to a greater understanding of what it is we are all striving toward if we are so full of hate and vitriol that we can’t refrain from bullying each other into submission?

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