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TEACHING NOTE

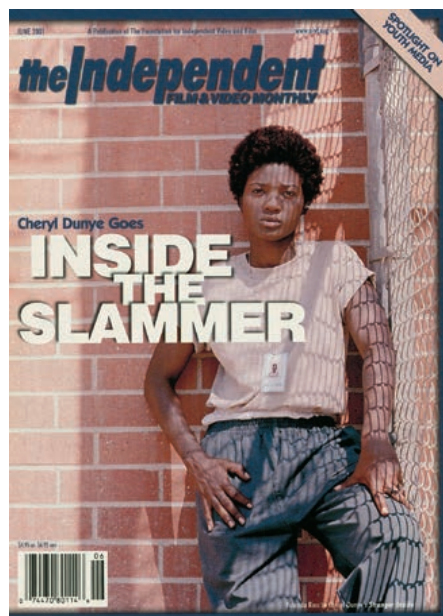
Inclusive Curriculum: Not Only How We Teach, But What and Why

Michele Meek

Conversations about inclusive teaching often emphasize specific pedagogical methods and tools to improve students' learning. But if we truly want to build an inclusive education, then we also need to focus on our curriculum itself—not only *how* we teach, but *what* and *why*.

Bridgewater State University, where I work as an Assistant Professor, has a fairly diverse student body with people from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. In response to this fact and an awareness of long-standing discrimination, BSU has an Office of Institutional Diversity to address students' needs campuswide and numerous systems are in place to help faculty and staff better meet the needs of all our students. As a widespread priority, inclusivity has impacted classroom design, assignment structure, teaching methods, and campus resources.

The results of these types of pedagogical shifts towards inclusivity have been measurable. Thomas F. Nelson Laird in his essay "Reconsidering the Inclusion of Diversity in the Curriculum" in the *Diversity and Democracy* publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) notes that inclusivity "creates more equitable opportunities for students from marginalized groups to participate in higher education and...promotes the kinds of outcomes for all students that employers and society need, such as complex thinking skills, the ability to work across difference, increased civic participation, and decreased prejudice."



Cheryl Dunye's interview about her film Stranger Inside, included in Meek's book Independent Female Filmmakers, was featured as the cover story for The Independent in June 2001. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of Independent Media Publications)

Two of the nine elements in Laird's "Diversity Inclusivity Framework" relate to curriculum. A course's "content," he states, can range from the least inclusive as "monocultural," to "additive," and ultimately to the most inclusive as "multicultural." Certainly, adding different voices and works into the curriculum represented an

important first step, but it could not be considered truly multicultural since "additive" content often brought in individual works "in a way that makes nonmainstream groups seem exceptional, deficient, or marginal."

The other element related to content pertained to an instructor's own comprehension of inclusivity—how aware were they, in other words, of their own biases, privileges, or oppressions that might factor into the curation of their course material. Laird's continuum here ranges from an instructor whose point of view might be described as "unexplored" to "exploring" to "understands own views, biases, values."

Nearly a decade ago, when I first had the opportunity to teach the course Independent American Film as a PhD student, I gathered suggestions from fellow film scholars. The names that often arose in these conversations, such as David Lynch, John Cassavetes, Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson, were the same indie "auteurs" who came to my mind when I imagined "independent American film." Yet what about women and minoritized filmmakers? Perhaps most alarming was my realization that I could not rattle off a list of a dozen female or Black or Asian independent filmmakers to include in such a course.

That first year, I opted for the "additive" approach—inserting a few films directed by women and people of color for inclusion's sake. At the time, I had no other tools with which to approach race and gender in the course. The students, it turned out, weren't the only ones who had much to learn.

Throughout five years of teaching the course, I prioritized my own discovery of independent films directed by women and people of color. Every year, I reworked both our syllabus and class exercises to be more inclusive. Partly, I was educating myself to an American film history that had been all but erased. These films did not make lists

like the National Film Registry or the American Film Institute's 100 Greatest Films of All Time. They were often passed over for Academy Awards, and they were generally not in wide distribution. And yet the films I encountered broke gender, race, and sexuality barriers; influenced film movements; and represented some of the most innovative, unconventional, and important works of their era.

When I began also to teach gender and women's studies at University of Rhode Island, I came to see the necessity of tackling biases head-on. Instead of sprinkling in a few texts and works in order to call my syllabus "diverse," the entire lens of my courses began to shift so that our study always recognized the role that gender, race, and class plays. As one student exclaimed in one of my Film Decades courses, "I had no idea that I'd learn so much about gender in this course!"

I created class activities that directly compelled students to think about and discuss how depictions—and our own responses to them—might be biased. For example, in one close reading exercise based on the #OscarsSoWhite movement, we watched trailers for the recent Oscar-winning or



In her book *Independent Female Filmmakers*, Michele Meek interviews Director Jennifer Fox about her documentary career and transition to narrative filmmaking with the autobiographical film *The Tale* starring Laura Dern, Isabelle Nélisse as versions of herself at different ages. (Photo Credit: Copyright of HBO Films)

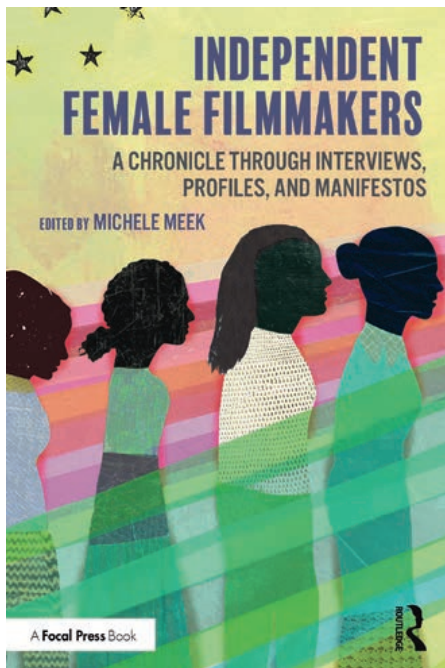
Oscar-nominated films featuring Black actors and actresses, including *Selma*, *Twelve Years a Slave*, *Precious*, and *The Help*. When seeing these together, students thought critically about the ways these individual films were marketed and recognized the recurring themes of hardship and oppression and portrayals of poverty that tended to be "award worthy." I found that students

had important revelations during such discussions. The mainstream norms and prejudices that they had never noticed suddenly became strikingly clear.

In working towards understanding my own biases and aspiring to improve, in other words, I had started to find a way to help students recognize their own biases too. Now, several years later, as an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Bridgewater State University, I routinely build these types of conversations, texts, and activities into my syllabus. But I am not done learning, and I never will be. You might say the first step towards inclusivity is to recognize how much more there is to know.

Demonstrating that, as the "teacher," you too are limited in your views and knowledge is revolutionary and transformative—and scary. But it might be one of the most important steps to opening ourselves up to works by and about people who have been marginalized throughout history. As bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress*, faculty who aimed "to respect 'cultural

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diversity” also “had to confront the limitations of their training and knowledge, as well as a possible loss of ‘authority.’”

In Laird’s study, he found that women and faculty members of color were “much more likely” than their male and white colleagues to incorporate diversity into their courses. There might be no other reason for this than an awareness of one’s own privileges

and oppressions. Consider how when I started this process, I was no expert on women filmmakers—despite actually being a woman.

So, how do you identify what you need to learn? In their chapter “Critical Self-Knowledge for Social Justice Educators” in the book *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J. Goodman, and Rani Varghese, recognize this difficulty and suggest that “we regularly reflect on our identities and positionality in communities of other scholars or learners who are different and similar to us, knowing that a lack of awareness can lead us to have limited perspectives or leave out information and views that are central to a social justice curriculum.” By constantly questioning our assumptions and expertise, we open ourselves up to the off-putting but transformative experience of further learning. The effects not only positively impact us; they directly improve how we teach.

As Paulo Friere first argued half a century ago in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive

critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.” What a liberating practice it is to be able to work with students to not only study individual texts but also to analyze them as part of a curated arrangement—whether it be an economics textbook or a film registry or your syllabus—and recognize that each of these documents is a fallible work that might try or not try to address widespread biases.

As teachers, scholars, and editors, we have tremendous power to work against such imbalances and omissions. Inclusive teaching certainly means instituting fair policies and recognizing the unique learning needs of our students. But it should also mean individually and collectively re-examining our course content and curricula to acknowledge and dismantle longstanding existing discrimination.

Yes, it will certainly take effort on our part. And it will likely mean teaching ourselves—working towards the discovery of writers, economists, artists, filmmakers, scientists, political figures, theorists, and others who have too often been ignored. It might sometimes mean experiencing work that feels unfamiliar or makes us uncomfortable. And it will likely mean confronting *who* and *what* we study and *why*.

But, I believe, it is vital that we do this work. As bell hooks writes, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”



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