

# ALL CHINESE ARE OBSESSED WITH DRAGONS

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In the spring of 2007, we co-taught Liberal Education 3010A: *Orientalism*. This was a seminar series course for senior students interested in exploring a significant topic and issue from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

Typically these seminars are team taught and include presentations by guest scholars from a range of disciplines across campus. The topic for this class was based on Edward Said's book *Orientalism* and how his observations and arguments were influential far beyond his specific study and disciplinary framework. This seminar group included about 15 students from a variety of disciplinary majors across the Faculty of Arts and Science.

The following is a conversation about our experience in the style of a duoethnography,<sup>1</sup> reflecting on the course seven years later, considering why we felt it was successful and how it has influenced our subsequent teaching.

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**Kevin:** I tell this story all the time to people. One of my favourite experiences teaching the class was reading the papers. We had two students who took the class because they thought that the title implied the class was going to be about the Orient, a kind of regional studies treatment of East Asia. This was partially confusion over English scholarly language and colloquial terminology. But this course was based on Edward Said's *Orientalism*,<sup>2</sup> which is about 18th- and 19th-century European academic misrepresentations of the Middle East, and an exploration of how Said's ideas had been influential across disciplines.

**Bruce:** Yes, and we chose this topic (like *Progress* or *Genocide* or *Food*) because it inherently gets at the four main pillars of liberal education: multidisciplinary breadth, integrative thinking,

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1. See for example: Madden, B. and H. McGregor (2013) "Ex(er)cising Student Voice in Pedagogy for Decolonizing: Exploring Complexities Through Duoethnography" *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 35:5, 371-391; Sawyer, R.D. and J. Norris (2013) *Duoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

2. Said, E. *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003 [1978].

## A CONVERSATION ABOUT TEAM TEACHING, AUTHORITY, AND LIBERAL EDUCATION



critical thinking, and citizenship. This was the first time for this topic and I think it was you who suggested it.

**K:** Right. Exactly. So once we talked to these two students and explained to them what the course was about, they thought it was a really interesting idea and decided to stick it out anyway even though it wasn't what they had expected it to be. At one point we had an assignment where they had to watch a film and deconstruct it based on a kind of Saidean approach. One of the students chose *Big Trouble in Little China* starring Kurt Russell, a favourite of mine but filled with these kinds of representations of the East. One of the comments she made in the middle of her paper made me actually burst out laughing; she made the declaration that "white people think that all Chinese are obsessed with dragons—this is true." Then she proceeded to explain all the different ways that the Chinese are obsessed with dragons. It really struck me as quite an interesting statement because we were working on this post-colonial approach to explain how these different ways of stereotyping were problematic and then we had somebody with an emic voice from that culture saying that this stereotype is 100% true and defending it. That sort of posed interesting issues for the way we were problematizing misrepresentation and it also posed other interesting problems for me as the instructor in terms of sorting out what I should do at that point. Should I say, "No, you're not understanding how we're not understanding your culture?" And where did my authority to say this come from since this is exactly the kind of problematic hierarchical cultural communication that we were supposed to be problematizing in the class.

**B:** I don't recall exactly how we responded except that this particular student and her friend raised a number of conundra for us in teaching. I remember at times struggling to clearly understand what they were trying to say in the paper and having to do some interpretive work. I think I remember having a conversation about whether the issue was about the students just not expressing accurately in English what they were thinking of? Or was it something they were actually thinking?

**K:** Because on the one hand it could just be a misunderstanding of the assignment but I think, here, in this case, this was actually subverting the basic post-colonial argument that was being made ... arguing that there is some validity to what we were calling misrepresentations.

**B:** But again, I think because of some of the language difficulties I don't recall us—apart from saying "very interesting point" or something to that effect on the assignment— we didn't really get into the issue in class discussion in any depth and I don't think we got into it in any depth in our written comments. But in hindsight, her

comment looks far more interesting now than it did at the time--because at the time we were very much working hard to help the students understand Said's argument--and now I think with more distance perhaps even we're a little more critical of some aspects of Said's argument. The paper could have served as an example of a critique but perhaps we weren't there then.

**K:** That might be the case. We could have been so focused on trying to get over the basic understanding because the prose of Said's text is so dense and so difficult on first read-through and it has been such a misunderstood text in its various iterations and re-readings since the 1970s. So we just focused on that. And I think one of the things that is often missed in reading

*"[Students] expect there to be one authoritative voice and they expect that authoritative voice to deliver an authoritative perspective which is "the" perspective they have to learn and demonstrate that they know."*

Said's book is that he argues that we should embrace this kind of polyvalency in readings. So here was an example of a different type of reading that we actually shouldn't have been surprised about.

**B:** And, you know, we were both there but we had different experiences and read what happened in different ways and remember what happened in different ways. And for you and because of your

work and your research this particular incident is salient.

**K:** It really is. I go back to it over and over again actually in terms of the other stuff I've been doing since.

**B:** See, and for me that incident didn't stick out in that same way and I don't remember it in the same way. There are other things I think about that course, more in terms of helping me think about what liberal education is and how to run these seminar topic courses and how to invite different scholarly voices and different colleagues in to address a topic—which still gets at this polyvalence that Said is talking about in a way.

**K:** Yes, and an example of this was the final paper where the students read Derek Gregory's book *The Colonial Present*.<sup>3</sup> Here the students were expected to comment on a book that had been written clearly in dialogue with Said but applying his ideas to contemporary political situations. I remember the quality of the papers was extremely high and there didn't seem to be problems with engaging with Gregory's book or with the higher-level ideas. We basically left them on their own for this essay, treating them like independent scholars, and didn't even discuss the book in class. The papers were fantastic and showed a nuanced reading of what we had worked through in the course.

**B:** Yeah, I agree. I mean it worked so well that for me it's served as a template for all the subsequent seminar courses. And sometimes some of the very best students achieve a similar sort of level of engagement with the material and independence of approach and maturity with the way they deal with it that is exactly what you want to see. So then what I find problematic is how to help students in first or second year mature and develop to the level that in their third or fourth year they could do a seminar like this and become those serious, mature, engaged, thoughtful academics really sinking their teeth into the subject. And, so, looking back I wonder why was this class so successful in that way? I think some of it was in the design and some of it was in ... what else? Some of it was in the accident of the students who were involved.

**K:** Uh huh, because they really were excellent and the subject matter enticed a certain type of student who was already engaged, who'd want to be engaged in this manner.

**B:** Yeah, I think that's a good point actually, that this particular topic attracted a particular subset of the university population and in some ways the narrowness of the topic then was beneficial.

3. Gregory, D. *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*. New York, NY: Blackwell, 2004.

**K:** I think the course modeled what actually happened in the academy. This one book came out, causes a tremendous sensation. So we started the class reading just that book, just to experience Said's book first. We worked through how these ideas had meaning beyond just the narrowness of what Said was talking about, because the book is very narrow—it's about 18th- and 19th-century scholars studying the Middle East. But by the end of class, we were talking about traditional Chinese medicine, or dance in Lethbridge.

**B:** So for me, then, one of the values is to try to find other topics and key texts that can serve as an entry point because that worked particularly well with *Orientalism*. We didn't have that in the *Progress* course but *Genocide* has worked very well with Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil*.

**K:** Now that I am not teaching in Lib Ed anymore but in Archaeology, I still try to replicate this success in my seminar class on *Archaeological Theory and Methods* and one thing I've noticed in teaching that class is that I've not been as successful at breaking down my own authority in the classroom. I just haven't been able to convince the students that I'm being honest with them—that there is no right answer and that there's no right answer for me to give them—that they should not treat me as the authority but that they have to interact with the ideas on their own terms.

**B:** See, this is where the team teaching or having two authority figures with different views and different opinions and who read a text differently in some ways helps to break that authority down. I think perhaps when we work in tandem this way it becomes quite clear that we don't have a right answer but we are also in dialogue with the text and with the subject matter, we're also in the process of trying to make sense of it and theorize about it and understand it. And maybe our different voices help then to break down the single authority for students.

**K:** Yeah, I agree completely. We have such different approaches to teaching and to interacting with the data that they can see that there are these two different approaches that seem to work and don't need to be harmonized. With teaching I prefer to lecture and you prefer Socratic methods and that's very clear. When we're team teaching I think we both give in to the other in some ways. So I lean more toward the Socratic when you're around. And I think you end up leaning a little more toward the lecture style when I'm there in the room. So that's at a very practical level but also the different engagement with the sources, the different kinds of questions— that helps to illustrate that polyvalency we were looking for.

**B:** Yeah, highlighting different passages in the text that seem relevant to us because of our research interests or other experiences.... Yeah, absolutely.

**K:** And there's no clear voice that they have to try to model their reactions to because if they try to please one of us too much, it's going to not please the other one. So it sort of suggests then that they need to find their own voice.

**B:** And the other thing that was good in the *Orientalism* course was the number of strong students who were quite comfortable with each other as well. They were happy to turn to each other to continue their conversation so it wasn't always a conversation between student and instructor, or instructors, but it became quite a conversational community, a culture where everyone was contributing.

In terms of liberal education I think what we want is students like we had in this class: students who communicate well, disagree respectfully, listen, understand really complex material and complex arguments, analyze the world around them with their own individual perspectives, be self-critical as well, understand breadth of disciplinary points of view, see the value of disciplinary

points of view, see connections across those disciplinary boundaries, and see that the subject has some relevance in the world today. That's what we want. But, the experience of teaching first- or second-year students.... My frustration is with trying to help students to mature to that end result, when they seem initially anyway--or, many of them—to expect there to be one authoritative voice and they expect that authoritative voice to deliver an authoritative perspective which is "the" perspective they have to learn and demonstrate that they know. So when I try, I guess, to subvert that Socratically by refusing to say I have the right answer—I'm always asking "What do you think?"—many students get uncomfortable with that and resist. So, again, we had a particular group of students at a particular level with a particular interest and perhaps that's one of the main reasons that made this *Orientalism* so successful. But, apart from replicating the structure of the course, what else can I do to help those younger students mature? What else could you do in Archaeology to help students mature so that when they come to the theory course they're more willing to say, "Well, this is my theoretical perspective and this is why I think it's the strongest."

**K:** Right. You know, I had been teaching Arky 1000 before Lib Ed and now after my Lib Ed term I'm in Archaeology full time—I teach Arky 1000 every fall— and I radically changed the structure of that course after my experiences teaching in Lib Ed, and I think it works better for the first-year students in terms of getting at those goals.

**B:** Maybe that's one of the key differences between a Lib Ed course and a disciplinary course: because our Lib Ed courses are full of people based in different majors they already come with a diversity of perspectives and a diversity of voices, whereas when you're dealing with theory within your discipline that's—

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