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Introduction: First-Generation Shakespeare

REBECCA OLSON and STEPHANIE PIETROS

This seminar presents essays that developed from the 2018 Shakespeare Association of America seminar “First-Generation Shakespeare,” led by Rebecca Olson. What became clear from the responses to the seminar’s call is that many of us want to learn how other instructors support marginalized students, including students who are the first in their families to go to college or who are otherwise trailblazing a path in higher education. You might assume that a discussion focused on first-generation college students would be one in which participants embraced the opportunity to vent frustrations about the ways underprepared students are let down by institutional systems, and U.S. public education in particular. These issues were not ignored, but what really galvanized our conversation was a collective desire to express the respect and even gratitude we feel for our first-gen students, who consistently enhance our classrooms and challenge our perspectives on literature we (think we) know so well.

That appreciation—the belief that our students, by virtue of their various life experiences, present both challenges and opportunities for our teaching—is evident throughout these essays in ways both explicit and implicit. For some of us, our teaching is informed too by our own trajectories as first-generation college students-turned scholars, and our awareness that our academic success was not always achieved *in spite of* our first-gen status but was instead enriched by it. That said, we want less alienating academic experiences for our own students, and we recognize that our own successes may not be typical. Throughout this issue you will find real-life examples of pedagogical theories and adjustments that are very much in line with what the Center for First Generation Success (an initiative of NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and the Suder Foundation) describe, in their 2018 report, as an “asset-based lens,” one that “celebrates the unique strengths of [first-generation] students and encourages them to use their talents to enhance the college experience.”¹ The report’s authors argue that by moving away—even incrementally—from a deficit-based support model, universities can better address common first-gen struggles, including imposter syndrome.²

Our objective: to make the instruction of Shakespeare a better experience—emotionally, intellectually, socially—for first-generation students. How can we, as teachers and scholars, reinforce the often perilously thin safety nets of students, or help ensure that those nets are less necessary? At the same time, we take for granted that broad generalizations about first-generation students

First-Generation Shakespeare

are counterproductive, chiefly because, when employed as a blanket term, “first-generation” has the potential to obscure a range of social injustices. For example, a recent post on the blog *Working-Class Perspectives* suggests that although the term “first-generation” may be more “inviting” and “inclusive” than “working class” (a category to which many or even most first-generation students belong), it glosses over widespread economic problems and encourages individuals to define themselves in terms of their family unit, as opposed to a “large and varied class that shares many experiences and whose opportunities are systematically—not incidentally or situationally—constrained.”³ In other words, the term “first-generation” may have the unintended effect of obscuring the very real economic obstacles faced by these students by virtue of their class.

Just as there is no one standard definition for what it means to be first-generation—most often students who identify as such are the first in their families to go to college, but not always—many of us find it impossible to conceive of our status as first-gen as distinct from our race, gender, sexuality, ability, age, class, citizenship, religion, and place(s) of education. Advocating for a more intersectional approach to analyzing first-generation students, Thai-Huy Nguyen and Bach Mai Dolly Nguyen argue that the term itself—one “used superfluously and without question”—contributes to universities’ failures to effectively address inequality associated with the first-gen status.⁴ They find that many studies on first-generation students fail to take race, gender, class, and other categories into account and moreover, that the term “first-generation student” “masks [students’] difference across multiple dimensions of social life.”⁵ While the term does help bring “consequential attention to many students who struggle,” Nguyen and Nguyen maintain that we must stay attentive to the “process” of how the term is used, or else risk maintaining inequality.⁶ One of the most valuable aspects of our discussion at SAA in Los Angeles—and represented in this issue—is the fact that its participants teach the same material at very different institutions. This helped us all better understand what “first-generation” means for our particular regions and schools, and how the struggles of our students differ from those considered “first-gen” in other contexts. The approaches and assignments discussed here arose from particular environments, but their learning objectives are widely shared, and they can be adapted to suit a wide range of settings.

The authors of these essays engage with the term to varying degrees; it barely appears in some essays, and is defined or contextualized in others. But as much as we may resist the category—or resist applying it unthinkingly—our seminar used the term as a starting point for addressing social inequality in the classroom setting. The promise of greater economic stability and social standing entices our students to enroll in our institutions; what role do we play in making good on those promises, and just as important, how can we help students understand that the humanities are not just a list of subjects “the educated” can claim to have studied, but rather play a crucial role in their development as independent, innovative thinkers and self-aware, valued members of their communities?

The authors acknowledge that first-generation status relates to a number of other categories of identity, but as described in more detail below, many are

Introduction

especially interested in how we, as instructors of Shakespearean literature, can better support students of color. To that end, they make explicit the link between what actually happens in our classrooms and the fact that the field of early modern studies is predominantly white. Indeed, when read together, the essays in this seminar make the case that the imaginary distinction between teaching and our scholarship is holding Shakespeare studies back from diversifying in many ways. Though they come at this problem from different angles, the authors consistently demonstrate that what we do in our Shakespeare courses, whether those courses take place in liberal arts colleges, research universities, or community colleges, has a direct impact on who enters the field and therefore on the subjects and questions with which our field engages. The energy and strength of our field depends, that is, on pedagogy that validates and values the contributions of all of our students. Therefore, rather than talk about “underpreparedness,” we advocate expanding our own notion of what constitutes preparedness in the first place.

While there are many intersections among the essays, we group them into three broad categories: 1) essays that address issues and questions regarding how the scholarly field of Shakespeare studies relates to the Shakespeare classroom; 2) essays that offer suggestions for inclusive and innovative ways to approach the overall design of the Shakespeare course; and 3) individual assignments and campus initiatives that help all students, but especially first-generation students, in their study of Shakespeare. Regardless of how global or how local the approach of the essay, each in its own way touches on two issues that have emerged for us as critical in any discussion of first-generation students: the importance of attention to place in any attempt to successfully serve students (both geographic location and the specific university community) and the importance of bridging gaps between the university and the wider community.

In the first grouping, Kyle Grady makes a crucial connection between the racial homogeneity of Shakespeare scholars and the racial and cultural alienation students of color face in studying Shakespeare. As Grady notes, part of the alienation students experience is a result of the homogeneity of the field, which unconsciously perpetuates an image of Shakespeare that sees “‘oppositional’ approaches as nonobjective.” Similarly, Cassie Miura connects developments in the field of Shakespeare studies to the alienation first-generation students often feel in studying Shakespeare, in particular those who exaggerate the threats that curriculum reform may pose to Shakespeare studies. She discusses two ways that she seeks to make visible the process of canon formation for her students, one a language exercise in which students translate a passage from Shakespeare into the modern American vernacular and one a reception-based approach to the Shakespeare survey.

Related to Miura’s reception-based approach to Shakespeare study, we have in our second group essays that consider approaches to the design of the Shakespeare course that help engage first-generation students in particular. Drawing on his own experiences with Shakespeare as a student, Perry Guevara addresses the possibilities of affective engagement with the text as a means of opening it up. This mode of engagement informs his design of an inspiring class in which students interface with prisoners who perform Shakespeare. Marjory

First-Generation Shakespeare

Philipian brings to the fore the effectiveness of grounding discussions in Shakespeare's often neglected but highly relatable biography. And in her essay, Stephanie Pietros addresses the value of the lens of the "problem" play, a designation with a temporal component that highlights the values of a historical audience and that helps students to engage with issues of canonicity and bardolatry.

The third grouping is truly a treasure trove of practical ideas for assignments and initiatives that help facilitate students' learning of Shakespeare while also helping to foster the critical engagement with Shakespeare's work and with "Shakespeare" identified by other contributors as necessary to making our field more genuinely inclusive. Dean Clement's and Erin Kelly's assignments, recitation and performance respectively, ask students to literally put Shakespeare's words in their mouths and bodies, allowing them in turn to make those words their own, for they are adapted and changed based on students' interpretation. Whitney Taylor's editing assignment, while seemingly on the opposite end of the spectrum as thoroughly textual rather than performative and embodied, achieves a similar end of allowing students, regardless of previous experience, to inhabit a position of authority relative to the Shakespearean text. Catherine Thomas's book club reminds us of the pedagogical possibilities of activities outside the traditional classroom. And finally, Kerry Cooke's reflections on the need to reconfigure a class exercise that once worked well is an important call to continually examine and reexamine our pedagogical practice, for a new institution or even a new group of students may necessitate that we reimagine what we do in order to engage successfully those students.

The essays represent our current thinking on how to best serve first-generation students. They encourage instructors to be transparent about academic conventions, first and foremost, an act that tends to illuminate outdated assumptions we take for granted and thus fail to interrogate. They inspire us to design syllabi, assignments and activities informed by critical pedagogy and recent data on best practices. And they recommend a number of invaluable sources in their bibliographies; among these, our respondent Ayanna Thompson is the most frequently mentioned author, and we especially recommend *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford, 2011) and *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centered Approach*, co-written with Laura Turchi (Arden, 2016). At the heart of a student-centered approach, of course, is a commitment to really listening to our students. It is not surprising, then, that the truly breakthrough teaching moments described in this issue are moments in which our authors were able to *hear* their students differently, something that typically coincided with or occasioned a greater understanding of their particular institution's dynamics of power. Asking genuine questions—that is to say, questions for which we don't already know the answers—and truly listening to our students' responses can go a long way toward building more inclusive and exciting educational settings, and by extension, a more inclusive and exciting discipline.

Introduction

Notes

1. Sarah E. Whitley, Grace Benson, and Alexis Wesaw, *First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions*. Washington, DC: Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Entangled Solutions, 2018.

<https://firstgen.naspa.org/2018-landscape-analysis>

2. *Ibid.*, 26.

3. Sherry Linkon, “First-Gen or Working Class?” *Working Class Perspectives*, 8 October 2018. <https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2018/10/08/first-gen-or-working-class/>.

4. Thai-Huy Nguyen and Bach Mai Dolly Nguyen, “Is the ‘First-Generation Student’ Term Useful for Understanding Inequality? The Role of Intersectionality in Illuminating the Implications of an Accepted—Yet Unchallenged—Term,” *Review of Research in Education* 42 (March 2018): 146-76, p. 147.

5. *Ibid.*, 148.

6. *Ibid.*

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