



Notes from the Pandemic Field: Challenge or Opportunity

EDITORIAL

Bethany Dietrich
Champlain College

Kristen Hines
Saint Michael's College

Coming Together, Staying Apart

It's happening! There are 150 people—students, faculty, and staff from two different academic institutions—in the virtual waiting room. There are twenty faculty and staff ready to facilitate virtual small group discussions on one of the most emotionally challenging aspects of a year that had no shortage of emotionally challenging moments. The event organizers and speakers are mentally running in circles around the event, but separately, in our own homes or offices miles away from each other. Here we go: an intercollegiate collaborative film discussion on *The Hate U Give* is ready to begin.

Why This Book This Year?

In the pre-pandemic month of January 2020, the authors of this article connected about the possibility of partnering for Vermont Reads, a state-wide reading program through the Vermont Humanities Council (VHC). Each year the VHC selects a book and participating libraries are asked to partner with other local organizations to host a series of public events/discussions around that book. The book selections regularly cover topics of racial and social justice, most often through young adult literature.

The 2020 book selection was *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas, which tells the story of teen Starr Carter in the aftermath of witnessing a police shooting of her childhood friend. It was an important topic before the summer of 2020, but even more timely with the unrest and protests after the death of George Floyd.

When investigating the Vermont Reads program, Beth Dietrich quickly identified St. Michael's College (St. Mike's) as an ideal partner for several reasons. Beth had recently left employment at the institution and had strong relationships with the librarians there. Champlain College (Champlain) and St. Mike's are of similar size, and though

our student bodies differ in their majors and interests, both campuses have a strong social justice ethic as demonstrated through our missions and academic programs. The two campuses are also located fewer than five miles from each other and connected by a free (to the students) public transit system.

Kristen Hines was immediately receptive to the invitation and reached out to the education department's Common Read committee at St. Mike's, who were also excited about the collaboration. The Common Read (then in its eighth year) provides opportunities for discussion, critical analysis, and connections to school learning communities while also engaging participants to explore deeper questions, such as what are social justice, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness (Hines 2021). The selected book is explored by individual classes, departmental gatherings, and campus-wide events. The

“We knew that this was a great opportunity for both of our campuses to address complex issues of racial inequity and that we could enrich the discussion by including more students from diverse backgrounds”

existing history of successful programming from the Saint Michael's College education department's Common Read led Beth to invite the Champlain education program to join the partnership. The existing collegiality of the two education departments was a natural fit for collaboration and bringing students in through curricula.

We knew that this was a great opportunity for both of our campuses to address complex issues of racial inequity and that we could enrich the discussion by including more students from diverse backgrounds. However, we also knew that a collaboration of this magnitude would be a challenge: meeting the academic and programmatic needs of both campuses, co-locating events and managing transportation for students, and making students from each campus feel comfortable to enter discussion with each other. It was also difficult to coordinate meetings with all the necessary stakeholders to plan the event.

Our marquee event was to add to the other campus integrations with a screening of the film version of *The Hate U Give*, complete with popcorn and refreshments, followed by an intercollegiate discussion. We knew that we had a fantastic ally in Dr. Margaret Bass, the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Inclusion at St. Mike's. A former professor of English literature, Dr. Bass had taught a 1-credit pop-up course on *The Hate U Give* in 2019, with a specific focus on the film.

Enter the COVID-19 global pandemic.

How to Come Together While Staying Apart

The state of Vermont quickly locked down and began to establish guidelines for social distancing, mask mandates, and even limiting travel into and out of the state. In response, our campuses established guidelines with reduced classroom density, regular surveillance testing, and strict "no guests" policies.

Because of these policies, our fall semesters and our nascent collaboration were beginning to look a lot different. We realized we were not going to be able to be together in-person. Some students were not going to be on-campus at all, and because of college guidelines we were not allowed to mix our student populations in a physical location. Both campuses were locked-down to our own, regularly-tested student bodies. We decided to focus on this one event or collaboration and keep other related events on our respective campuses. We received seventy-five copies of *The Hate U Give* to be shared between the two colleges, so we could get copies of the books into the hands of students. Even so, how could we still pull this off? Do we cancel and try again another year? NO!

Enter Zoom breakout rooms and streaming film availability.

Dotting the I's & Crossing the T's

At the time we were planning this, Zoom and other virtual meeting spaces were still relatively new to us. We were getting used to them in small group settings, but had not used all the advanced features. One of the benefits of hosting a film discussion via Zoom was that we could host up to 300 people in breakout rooms without needing to find a physical space large enough to accommodate that many people and groups, which would have been a stretch even in non-COVID times. We quickly realized that the breakout room feature would offer us a level of control over the make-up of the discussion groups that we would not have had in a physical setting. We wanted to make sure we integrated our two campus populations as much as possible. Each group needed at least one prepped facilitator, so we recruited faculty and staff from both institutions to fill those roles.

We wanted attendees to pre-register so we could plan the make-up of the discussion groups in advance and so we would know that we had enough facilitators. We determined that the ideal group size would be 8–10 people so that we could easily see everyone onscreen and we aimed to recruit twenty-four facilitators. Ultimately, we ended up with sixteen groups, each with a facilitator and one other faculty or staff member and a combination of both Champlain and St. Mike's students.

Because of the racial tension over the summer of 2020, we also wanted to be particularly mindful of our Black, Indigenous, & People of Color (BIPOC) students' needs and reactions to this discussion. Students would be required to attend the event for class credit and we needed to have a safe space for those most emotionally impacted by the events of the summer. At the suggestion of our campuses' diversity advisors, we created two affinity groups, one for students, faculty, and staff identifying as Black and one for students, faculty, and staff identifying as Indigenous or People of Color, acknowledging that those two groups might be differently impacted by the discussion. Attendees were able to self-select whether they wanted to be in one of these affinity spaces or randomly placed in another discussion group.

Talk Amongst Yourselves

To set the tone for our small group discussions, we wanted to create a common experience for attendees. We invited Dr. Bass to give a brief keynote address to share her thoughts on the importance of the film, including current and historical aspects of it that would be critical to the conversations about race in our breakout rooms. The film and book are full of references to civil rights and racial justice movements, such as the Black Panthers and the murder of Emmett Till. In anticipation that not all students would have the context for understanding these references we created a guide to library and online resources to support their learning (see *Primer for Historical and Pop Culture Context*, 2020). To welcome people, we also began the session with an acknowledgment of our residence on the lands of the Abenaki tribe, Mohican tribe, and the Massachusetts tribes (specifically Pennacook and Pocomtuc), and a brave space meditation (ScottBey Jones 2021). After Dr. Bass's keynote, we transitioned into our small group discussions by setting ground rules from *Courageous Conversations* by Glenn E. Singleton (2015).

For our breakout rooms, all facilitators were given a script for the evening's timeline and were given a curated list of discussion questions. (See Appendix A). A week before the virtual film discussion, we had a training session with the facilitators to build confidence for hosting the event and guiding the discussion. We covered the order of events, answered questions, and gave space for them to voice concerns to empower them to use the questions as fit the conversation within their space. We also instructed them on how to use a Jamboard (a collaborative online whiteboard platform), which was going to be used at the end of the conversation to capture lingering questions and thoughts to help us move forward. While in theory this was a simple meeting, this is where the magnitude of our collaboration began to manifest. Coordinating twenty-five thoughtful, opinionated academics from two institutions into the same virtual meeting space felt like an accomplishment. It also gave facilitators the opportunity to suggest additions and improvements.

A Sigh of Relief

The discussion is over. The event went well, our months of careful planning paid off. Beyond us all surviving the moments of panic before the start, we have evidence that meaningful discussions took place. At the end of our discussion

period, we asked each group to make a post to a Jamboard, including what questions the group was still grappling with or with the questions that will drive their thinking going forward. We received over thirty comments and questions, all of them thoughtful, such as “How can we, as allies, go from learning about these issues to performing action in order to help resolve these issues?” and “How can we educate ALL people about racial issues, including those who do not seem interested in learning?”

In closing, we encouraged participants to stay engaged and reiterated a statement from our Courageous Conversation norms: “To stay engaged is a refusal to let your heart and mind ‘check out’ of the conversation while leaving your body in place. It is a personal commitment each person makes, regardless of the engagement of others. It means remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the dialogue” (Singleton 2015).

Takeaways: Opportunities aplenty

So that is what we are doing—we are staying engaged. We tried a huge messy collaboration during a really challenging time and found that it enabled us to deliver a well-rounded program with robust student engagement. It gave us new kinds of support and infrastructure for having difficult conversations around race and social justice, and created the basis for our two campuses to continue to collaborate. Our success came from working within existing relationships and growing from there.

We used Zoom out of necessity and felt that our event was largely successful in part because it simplified planning the event; we did not need to coordinate transportation or book a room large enough for everyone. Zoom gave us the opportunity to have important discussions but it felt a bit like a barrier for building community between campuses. Given that and our campus cultures, we are more likely to choose in-person events over an online model in the future.

In fall 2021 we made our collaborative circle larger by adding The University of Vermont and together we programmed a successful, in-person author visit with Jacqueline Woodson to discuss her book *Harbor Me*. The book’s themes include immigration, race, bullying, forgiveness, friendship, and family, and how these topics are discussed among and affect young people. We had great turnout from all three campuses and students asked thoughtful questions during Q & A. After this year we firmly believe that our conversations around *The Hate U Give* and *Harbor Me* were made more meaningful by including more people and by enlarging the community. We hope to continue to provide opportunities for cross-institutional discussions and are looking forward to fall 2022 programming.

References

- Bishop, Rudine Sims. 1990. “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors.” *Perspectives* 6 (3): ix–xi.
- Dietrich, Bethany. 2020. “LibGuides: Vermont Reads *The Hate U Give*.” Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://subjectguides.champlain.edu/c.php?g=1075872&p=7836350>.
- Hindes, Kristen. 2021. “LibGuides: Education Department Common Read: Past Common Reads.” Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://lib.smcvt.edu/commonread/past-common-reads>.
- Primer for Historical and Pop Culture Context: *The Hate U Give* Film Discussion. 2020. Last modified October 28, 2021. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GgNdtPMTTyzuMP0HmpUSVBrGMmwX6eX3rFRDFh-gz04/edit?usp=sharing>.

- ScottBey Jones, Micky. 2021. "An Invitation to Brave Space." <https://thepeoplessupper.org/resources>.
- Singleton, Glenn E. 2015. *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin, A SAGE Company.
- Thomas, Angie. 2017. *The Hate u Give*. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.
- Tillman, George, Robert Teitel, Marty Bowen, Wyck Godfrey, Audrey Wells, Amandla Stenberg, Regina Hall, et al. 2019. *The Hate U Give*. Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.
- "Vermont Reads | Vermont Humanities." n.d. Accessed January 28, 2021. <https://www.vermonthumanities.org/vermont-reads/>.

Appendix A

Discussion Questions:

1. Rudine Sims Bishop introduced the concept of "Windows and mirrors" (1990) to explain how we see ourselves as well as learn about the experiences of others in what we read [explain for students who aren't familiar with this]. Starr often has to shift her behavior and language depending on whom she is with and her environment--what are the implications of this for how Starr navigates through two very different worlds? What are your thoughts about 'code switching,' and how might you relate to that? For some Black students, this movie may provide painful mirrors, which is why we have provided affinity spaces. For others, this movie provides important windows related to race and racism, which is the focus of today's conversation. What are the most important windows for you in this movie?
2. How does the movie deal with racism/issues related to race? How does the movie portray acts of protests, resistance, and activism?
3. Are lessons learned by characters? If so, how would you describe them? What do you think Lisa means when she says that "white folks want diversity but not too much diversity?" Are the lessons learned by viewers the same as the lessons learned by the characters?
4. What was the impact of violence in the film on you?
5. How do the characters display courage and compassion through their words and actions? How do they demonstrate compassion? Why are these important character strengths?
6. Phones play a significant role in the story, both for communication and recording important events. How does Starr's phone give her power in a situation where she otherwise wouldn't have any? What role are phones playing in the movement for Black lives?
7. If you have read the book: What did you like most about the movie, and what, if anything, did you miss?