



March 1995

Experiencing the Great Books

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Recommended Citation

Wortham, S. (1995). Experiencing the Great Books. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/107

Reprinted from *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, Volume 2, Issue 2, Spring 1995, pages 67-80.

NOTE: At the time of publication, author Stanton Wortham was affiliated with Bates College. Currently June 2007, he is a faculty member in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Experiencing the Great Books

Abstract

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Comments

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Articles

Experiencing the Great Books

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Should American education focus on "the Great Books?" Neither side in the "canon dispute" looks closely at the relational side of great books teaching. To provide more information to use in judging great books curricula, this article presents a study of relational processes in great books classes. The results show that great books have both strengths and risks. The research focuses on how teachers involve students with the great books by connecting their experiences with the insights presented in the text. Among other devices, teachers use examples to establish these connections: the class explores some aspect of the text by discussing an analogous case from students' experience. This article describes how such examples carry a certain risk. These examples can lead students to experience the text so fully that they act it out. Instead of dispassionately discussing the text, students and teachers enact the roles described in the text and the example, thus creating an analogous interactional event in the classroom. This article describes and illustrates this interactional pattern, drawing on ethnographic observations, interviews, and analyses of transcripts taken from a three year study of high school English and history classes. In light of the findings, the article reassesses the pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of great books teaching and examples as pedagogical devices.

Should American education focus on "the Great Books?" Proponents like Hutchins (1953) argue that seminal texts of the Western tradition offer students unmatched insights into fundamental human concerns. Opponents like Said (1983) argue that teaching these texts can marginalize minority students and perpetuate social exploitation. The arguments made by both sides in this dispute focus on the *ideas* contained in great books. Proponents argue that great books provide ideas central to solving fundamental human problems. Hutchins (1953) mentions rationality and democracy as two central examples. Access to these great ideas will give students of all backgrounds power to take better control of their lives. Opponents argue that students "are almost always taught that these classic texts embody, express, represent what is best in our, that is, the only, tradition . . . that they are to be appreciated and venerated, that they define the limits of what is acceptable, appropriate and legitimate" (Said, 1983, p. 21). Focusing a curriculum around ideas from Western great books—ideas that are already familiar to majority students—makes these students feel at home in school and culturally superior. Minority students, in contrast, find some of the ideas alien, and feel devalued by the school's emphasis on them.

As it turns out, both these arguments have some empirical basis. To discover precisely how, however, we need to go beyond abstract discussions of ideas. Instead, we must study how great books are experienced by teachers and students in actual classrooms. As curricula are implemented in actual events among teachers and students, the ideas intermingle with relationships and activities in the classroom (Roschelle, 1992; Tochon, 1991). The structures and fruits of classroom life are *accomplished* there—as emergent products of sociocultural norms, roles, curricula, activities, and relationships (Kantor and Green, 1993; Langer, 1987; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). So any thorough evaluation of great-books curricula should include studies of classroom life.

This article examines one way in which a great-books curriculum can get transformed as it enters the relational world of actual classrooms. This relational, on-the-ground analysis shows that the arguments of great-books proponents and opponents both have merit, although a more subtle account is required to see exactly how. It turns out that great books do have power, but also a certain kind of risk. The findings reported here represent only one aspect of great-books curricula. Nonetheless, they establish the promise of a relational approach. Attention to the empirically occurring, relational realities of great-books teaching might make the canon dispute more productive.

To summarize, the central finding concerns a particular kind of example often given in great-books classes. These examples involve students by drawing instances from their own experience to illustrate the text. The data show that such examples, given in great books discussions, do generate student involvement. Sometimes, however, teachers and students get involved in ways not intended by theorists or practitioners. Students sometimes actually *experience* events portrayed in the text, because they literally act, in the classroom, in the same way that characters in the text and the example do. That is, the text takes over the classroom interaction, as teachers and students not only discuss the text, but also act out events described in it. As elaborated below, the tendency toward this sort of enactment illustrates both the power and some of the risks of great-books teaching.

Paideia and Participant Examples

Mortimer Adler has identified various books that should be considered great, and, together with the Paideia Group, he has developed methods for teaching these texts (Adler, 1982). Paideia “seminars” in particular—a method for discussing classic texts—have been adopted by many schools over the past decade. The research reported below took place in classroom discussions of this sort. Paideia seminars center around a text students and teachers read beforehand. The teacher directs the class by asking “genuine questions”—questions about the meaning of the text that the teacher herself is not certain how to answer, because they address the “essentially contestable” issues raised by great books. The discussion proceeds with the teacher drawing out students’ ideas about the meaning of the text. Students explore and defend their conjectures and work toward more comprehensive interpretations.

But why should we expect students to involve themselves in seminar discussions of great books? According to Robert Hutchins—a close colleague of Adler’s and one of three to whom *The Paideia Proposal* is dedicated—these texts engage students because they address “all the most important questions of human existence. What is a good life? What is a good society? What is the nature and destiny of man? [etc.]” (Hutchins, 1953, p. 79). By raising such fundamental issues, classic texts can provoke and sustain discussion.

All students should find these larger questions engaging, because the great books raise universal issues and experiences which speak to the common human nature possessed by all. “The function of

a man as man is the same in every age and in every society, since it results from his nature as a man" (Hutchins, 1953, p. 68). The Paideia Group agrees that "children are all the same in their human nature" (Adler, 1982, p. 42). Because of this commonality, certain texts and certain questions can reach all children. "Paideia," glossed broadly, means "the general learning that should be the possession of all human beings" (Adler, 1982, p. v). Adler and others suggest lists of classic texts, which raise universal concerns that should be part of everyone's education. Education in a democratic society should offer all students "the common heritage of all mankind"—the opportunity to reflect on these central texts and central questions (Hutchins, 1953, p. 89).

Here, then, is a justification for teaching great books even to students from diverse backgrounds. All students will see their own fundamental concerns illuminated by these books, because really great books address universal issues. Teachers and students will read great books "for the sake of their relevance to problems that anyone must face in today's world" (Adler, 1983, p. 29). Seminars motivate students, in part, because of the texts' relevance to their own lives. In a good seminar, it should "become clear that each participant, leader or student, has a responsibility to face those issues [discussed] as they affect himself or herself" (Adler & Van Doren, 1984, p. 19). Participants become most involved in seminars when they consider themselves in light of the issues raised by the text.

Teachers use various techniques to help students connect great books to their own lives. This article focuses on one: "participant examples" (Wortham, 1994). A participant example describes some actual or hypothetical event that *includes* at least one person also participating in the classroom conversation. Participants with a role in the example have *two* interactionally relevant identities: as a student or teacher in the classroom, and as a character in whatever event is described as the example. Neither Adler (1982) nor Hutchins (1953) mentions participant examples specifically, but their philosophy seems to favor this sort of classroom activity. Participant examples help students see in their own lives the larger truths portrayed in classic texts. By connecting the text to students' experience, participant examples can help students both understand and apply the great insights to their lives.

Paideia and great books advocates, of course, did not invent the idea of bringing school knowledge closer to students' experience. Dewey (1916) discussed this at the beginning of the century. Theorists from various traditions have wanted to make instructional settings more contextualized, more like everyday practices (e.g., Langer, Bartolome, Vasquez, & Lucas, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). And various instructional techniques have been devised for connecting subject matter to students' lives (e.g., Mason & Au, 1986). But Adler and Hutchins add a particular twist: the connection to students' experience is basic, because here the fundamental ideas from great books can inform contemporary lives. Because the connection to experience is central to the great books philosophy in this way, a study of participant examples given in seminar may show us whether great books curricula have the effects their proponents claim.

Overview of the Study

The research described here comes from a larger study of participant examples given in seminar discussions of great books (Wortham, 1994). By looking beyond the ideas presented in these classroom discussions, to the relational events occurring there, the study provides insight into certain strengths and risks of teaching great books. For this project, I observed eight English and history classes, led by six different teachers, over three years. All classes were in one inner-city public high school—"Colleoni High"—which has an ethnically mixed student body (about 50% Black, 25%

Hispanic, 15% White, and 10% Asian). I spent 128 hours in the school, observing classes and interviewing teachers, students, and administrators. In the final year I observed and audiotaped 81 class sessions—about half of them seminars—in one ninth-grade English class, one ninth-grade history class, and one twelfth-grade English class. The statistics and examples below come from eight hours of transcribed conversation selected from these 81 classes. Details about the methodologies used and the population studied are available in Wortham (1994).

Colleoni participates in desegregation by offering a special educational program to students from all over the district. The classes I observed were within this program, which is run according to the philosophy outlined in Adler (1982). About one quarter of the students at Colleoni participate. Students must apply to this program, and motivated parents and students shop around at various schools. They generally consider Colleoni's program to be desirable, but not the best. The program accepts all students who could realistically do the work. They do not believe in tracking, but administrators do exclude those students who would be overwhelmed. To teach in the special program, teachers often have to do extra reading and go to extra meetings. Most of them do it willingly, because they find the program rewarding. The staff claims—and my observations support them—that Paideia students became more inquisitive, and that as teachers they have become better listeners through leading seminars.

Because participant examples help students see in their own lives the larger truths portrayed in classic texts, and because they help involve students by making the text relevant, teachers and students commonly give participant examples in seminars. The exact rate depends on what counts as an example: Are analogies examples? Should examples in a series be counted separately? When does new information added to an old example count as a separate example? Using strict criteria, I found an average of one example (participant or not) every five minutes. Using broad criteria, I observed one example every two and a half minutes. About one-third of the examples involved teachers or students themselves as characters, and are thus participant examples. See Wortham (1994) for a statistical overview of example use in the classes studied.

Giving good examples was important to the teachers and students I spoke with. They recognized and admired particular teachers' ability to give examples. Several people at Colleoni singled out one teacher for his skillful use of this pedagogical device. Teachers spent time before class preparing examples to use with certain general points they planned to present. I heard teachers asking their colleagues "what worked for that text," searching for examples that would connect with the students. Teachers also got excited when they presented an example that "worked." More than many other pedagogical devices, a good example gave them a sense of success.

Teachers recognize, however, that examples involve risk. Discussions of examples tend to drift away from the subject matter toward telling stories about the example itself. Teachers present this as a dilemma: you need examples to make the material relevant, but once the class starts discussing something more relevant no one wants to go back to the subject matter. It turns out, according to my research, that participant examples lead to such digressions more often than other types of examples.

My data contain a strong association between participant examples and "denotational discontinuity." In a case of denotational discontinuity, speakers do not get back to the topic that led them into the example. Instead, they move out of the example into a new topic—often one inspired by the example. I found the following distribution for participant examples and denotational discontinuity:

	CONTINUOUS	DISCONTINUOUS
PARTICIPANT	80	31
NONPARTICIPANT	99	4

These data show that participant examples are strongly associated with denotational discontinuity.¹ Further analyses, reported in Wortham (1994), provide evidence that it is the interactional reactivity of participant examples that leads to discontinuity. In analyzing specific participant examples, I discovered that the discontinuity often happens because the example generates interactional events which disrupt class discussion. Participant examples provide rich resources for classroom interactional activity. By looking in detail at how participant examples do this in seminars, we can gain some insight into the strengths and risks of teaching the great books.

Enacted Participant Examples

To explain participant examples' interactional richness, we need a more sophisticated understanding of their structure. The analysis below follows Kantor and Green (1993) and others in attending to the ongoing construction of relationships in classroom discourse. I have borrowed the methodological emphasis on deictics as central to textual structure from anthropological linguistics (Silverstein, 1984), and the emphasis on participants' construction of interactional events from conversation analysis (e.g., Goodwin, 1990).

Jakobson (1957/1971) distinguishes between the "speech event"—the interaction among participants in a conversation—and the "narrated event"—what those participants are talking about. Because most sociolinguists follow Hymes (1972) in using "speech event" to refer to a *type* of verbal interaction with a typical interactional structure, like narratives or participant examples, I will use "narrating event" for Jakobson's "speech event." I mean "narrate" here in a broad sense, to refer to all language use and not simply storytelling.

All speech talks about or denotes something, and all speech takes place in and contributes to some interaction. The linguistic forms actually uttered simultaneously send messages about both narrated and narrating events. Speech about participant examples describes a particular type of narrated event: some actual or hypothetical event which includes at least one person who, as it happens, is also participating in the (narrating) classroom discussion.

Participant examples have rich interactional implications because they *double* participant roles. Participants who become characters in the example have a role within the example, as well as their ongoing role as teacher or student in the classroom. For example, the following segment introduces the example analyzed below. This ninth-grade history class has read a story from the *Upanishads* (ancient Hindu theology written about 2000 years ago). The story illustrates the positive sense of "discrimination"—as in a "discriminating mind." The teacher, Mrs. Miller (T/M), gives an example: "Do they still give out checks for lack of self-control? Is that still on those report cards in grammar school?" She goes on to nominate a particular student, William, as an example:²

75 T/M: did you ever get a check in self-control? for talking too much?
WIL: yeah
CAS: he used to talk a lot
T/M: what did you- what did you- what did you do that- that
got you the check in self-control?=
CAS: talk a lot
80 WIL: played around too much
T/M: you played around too much.=
CAS: and you talked too much
T/M: you talked too much.
WIL: she talk too much
85 STS: heeheehee
T/M: Cassandra talked too much
ST?: no..
CAS: I did not talk but he bothered me, he sat right in
from of me, he was always turning around and bothering
90 me.

The students, William and Cassandra, now have two interactionally relevant roles: as students participating in the classroom conversation; and as their former selves, William-in-elementary-school who showed his lack of discrimination by bothering Cassandra-in-elementary-school.

In discussing a participant example, speakers often give ethically loaded descriptions of participants' within the example. For instance, Cassandra claims that William-in-elementary-school inappropriately bothered her in class. Although the speakers may be overtly talking about the example, their characterizations of participants in the example can have implications for these same participants' roles as teachers and students in the classroom conversation. In talking about someone's character in the example, a speaker may be implying something about the actual participant. When these implications become salient, discussion of the participant example can lead to interactional activity in the classroom. For instance, as we will see, characterizations of William-in-elementary-school become relevant to interactional issues in the (narrating) classroom event. Implicit interactional messages sent through discussion of the example lead the classroom discussion off track.

In several of the cases I have looked at, the interactional instability of participant examples takes a particular form. Teachers and students do not just get *distracted* by the participant example's implications for their own interaction. The examples have more systematic effects. Events described in the participant example can function as a sort of *script* for interactional happenings in the classroom itself. Teachers and students can literally act, in the ongoing classroom interaction, the same way as characters that they are discussing as the content of the example. In this way, the denotational content of a participant example can take over the interactional event that speakers are participating in. Speakers literally experience the text.

The example of William-in-elementary-school, for instance, describes the following interactional structure (see Table 1, opposite).

TABLE 1: The Textual Schema and the Example

SCHEMA	TEXT	EXAMPLE
Actor	The Self	William-in-Elementary-School
Uncontrolled	Giving in to Desire	(Sexual) Interest
Object	Objects of Desire	Cassandra-in Elementary-School
Consequence	No Enlightenment	Failure to Learn

In the text, a wise being presents a parable. He describes the self as a charioteer, and uncontrolled behavior as unruly horses that pull the self in all directions. Uncontrolled behavior, he says, is caused by desire. The individual who lets his desires control his behavior will fail to reach enlightenment, just as the charioteer with unruly horses will fail to get where he should be going.

As the teacher intended, the example casts William and Cassandra in roles drawn from the schema in the text. William-in-elementary-school loses control of himself when he pays too much attention to Cassandra-in-elementary-school. Because he spends his time bothering her, he fails to learn what he should. Note that this example has the potential to achieve Paideia goals. It connects students' experiences with a central idea from the great book. If they were to focus on the ideas from the text, and rationally apply them to planning their lives, the students might achieve what Hutchins hoped.

But, as classrooms are relational as well as intellectual settings, the teacher and students do not consider the ideas dispassionately. The schema from the text and the example gets *transferred* onto participants in the narrating conversation, in two ways. First, Mrs. Miller and several of the girls describe William-in-high-school as a *continued* failure in school because of his uncontrolled behavior toward girls. Second, in teasing William, Mrs. Miller and the girls *themselves* act out the same pattern they are accusing him of Table 2 (next page) presents this second set of role relationships. In this classroom conversation, William himself does not act out the example. Mrs. Miller and the girls characterize his current behavior as uncontrolled. He does in fact bother the girls and daydream in class, and, using conventional measures, his prospects are not good. Mrs. Miller and the girls tease him about the parallel between his behavior in elementary school and his current state. In doing so, they present William-in-high-school's situation in the same categories laid out by the schema. Table 2 represents this parallel in the column labelled "tease."

It is Mrs. Miller and the girls who genuinely *enact* the schema from the text. The third column in Table 2 represents the interactional event in which they do this. I have labelled this column "script," because the participants in the conversation act out the roles described in the text and the example—as if the text and the example served as a script for the classroom interaction. By looking in detail at the classroom conversation, we can see more clearly how this scripting works. It ends up having undesirable social consequences, though not those feared by opponents of great books curricula.

TABLE 2: The Textual Schema and the Classroom Interaction

SCHEMA	TEASE	SCRIPT
Actor	William-in-High-School	Mrs. Miller and the Girls
Uncontrolled Behavior	Bothering Others	Teasing
Object	The Girls	William-in-High-School
Consequence	Failure in Life	Failure to Learn

Speakers organize the (narrating) classroom conversation in two ways that alternate during discussion of the example. In one mode, Mrs. Miller questions William, getting information from him that forms the content of the example. In this mode, the teacher uses *you* to refer to William and *she* to refer to Cassandra. In the other mode, the teacher excludes William from the conversation and discusses his behavior with the rest of the class. Here the teacher uses *he* to refer to William and *she* to refer to Cassandra. The switch from *you* to *he* marks William's switch from participant to object of discussion. During the seventeen minute discussion of this example, the conversation switches back and forth from one of these modes to the other fourteen times. The seven segments with William as *you* are on the average three times shorter than the seven segments with William as *he* (12 and 36 lines of transcript, respectively).

I interpret this pattern of pronoun use as follows. Mrs. Miller interviews William in short interchanges, soliciting information from him about the facts of his behavior toward Cassandra. Then she turns toward the class, excluding William, and takes more time interpreting and commenting on his behavior. In the narrating conversation, William serves primarily as an exhibit, not an interlocutor. Although William's story is dialogically elicited, he has no control over its use in the classroom conversation.

The segment below shows Mrs. Miller switching from one mode to the other:

190 T/M: well that was- that was- he: had this
thing where he wanted to get her attention_ *maybe
because he liked her_ * and (2.0) but then he had- the
teacher was reminding him_ that he had a goal what was
the goal the teacher said you had_ not to bother
_Cassandra

195 STS: _((* 3 seconds unintelligible comments and laughter *))
T/M: and why did you have to do all the spelling_
WIL: to learn
CAR: to reach a goal
T/M: what was the goal that he was a:- aiming at_

200

ST?: to be a Brahmin
CAR: to get Cassandra's attention
T/M: a:h well eventually if he was living in India we'd say
he wanted to be a Brahmin but I think his teacher was a
little bit more short-sighted than that_

At the very beginning of this passage, Mrs. Miller is talking about William, as *he*. She says "maybe because he liked her" under her breath, as an off the record comment to the other students. It would be difficult for William to respond to this, for two reasons. He has been excluded (as *he*, not *you*), and the teasing was done as an aside.

At lines 191-195, Mrs. Miller switches back to calling William *you*. She wants to elicit further information from him about his past behavior, which provides the content of the example. Both William and Carmen answer (at lines 196-197), but Mrs. Miller switches immediately back to *he*. She does not pursue the conversation *with* William, but instead turns back to the class and talks *about* him.

Although teachers and students also refer to Cassandra in the third person and talk about her, she plays a different role in the narrating interaction than William does. Cassandra plays an accuser or an informer: she gives evidence about William's behavior that the class uses in their examination of him. Because of this, Cassandra can participate in the conversation in a way William could not. William speaks only when asked, and he gets excluded again as soon as he provides information. Cassandra can join the group in their examination and teasing of William, while he must sit and take it.

Gender plays an important role in this interaction. In general, these ninth-grade girls and boys often fight with and tease each other: they seem both repelled and attracted. Females dominate the interaction surrounding the William example. Only girls participate in the discussion of his behavior with the (female) teacher. The females form their own group, and exclude the males. Among themselves, they examine and tease William.³

By excluding and teasing William in this way, the girls are turning the interactional tables on him. In his treatment of Cassandra in elementary school, and in other interactions outside the classroom in high school, William often pushes the girls around. He is much bigger physically than all of them, and he generally dominates confrontations in which no authority figures restrict him. In the classroom, the girls succeed in putting William in the same position he sometimes puts them in: he is forced to be passive and accept their abuse. The girls can do this in the classroom because of their greater verbal skill, and because Mrs. Miller licenses their actions.

As they turn the tables on William in this way, Mrs. Miller and the girls *act out* the role that William occupied in the example. This happens most colorfully in the following segment:

125 T/M: can anyone tell me why William was bothering Cassandra_
ST?: attention_
ST?: he probably liked her
T/M: he LIKED her_
ST?: _no
130 STS: _hahahaha
T/M: OK, so his liking her, might have done what
STS: ((* 6 seconds unintelligible comments *))

JOC: got him out of control, he couldn't help hisself_
 STS: HAHAhahahahahaha _haha hahaha
 135 T/M: he liked Cassandra so much he _ couldn't help himself_
 ST?: _so much he couldn't control
 STS: _heeheee heehee HAHAHA _hahahahahahahahaha=
 T/M: _so there he- there-
 STS: hahahaha _ha ((* 7 seconds sustained laughter *))
 140 T/M: _there- there was William, and he knew he was
 supposed to be doing his spelling workbook, right_
 STS: heeheeheehee
 T/M: and fill in those ten pages of spelling due this week_,
 and there's Cassandra_ _ sitting behind him
 145 CAR: _doing her work and all he
 can think _ of is-
 T/M: _and he- he: had one thing he was supposed to
 do and he had something else that he:
 ST?: wanted to do_

Here the girls get carried away by their desire to pick on William. And, even though the teacher reins them in at the end of this segment, Mrs. Miller herself participates in the teasing at several points. Note the parallel between the content of the example and the narrating interaction: while discussing William-in-elementary-school's lack of control, Mrs. Miller and the girls clearly lose control of themselves. Thus, in the narrating interaction, Mrs. Miller and the girls act out the text.

In this participant example, an extra step intervenes between the denotational content of the example and the interactional events generated by the example. William and the girls switch roles from the narrated to the narrating event. In the example *he* lost control, but in the classroom he becomes the object of the *females'* uncontrolled behavior. The other participant examples I have analyzed do not involve this sort of reversal. In general, the participant in the classroom directly acts out his or her role in the example.

For example, in one case (analyzed in detail in Wortham, 1994*), a lower-class Black student presents herself as an example of an underprivileged Spartan, in order to clarify Lycurgus' account of Spartan life. The teachers end up casting her as, in fact, a member of an underprivileged group that burdens productive members of society. The interactional struggle over the actual students' worth takes over the conversation, as the student acts out her role in the example.

In general, then, participant examples provide a mechanism whereby an event described in the text can come to be acted out in the narrating interaction. This process has two components. First, interactional roles and events described in the text get represented in a participant example. Second, this interactional structure gets transferred from the example onto the narrating event, as participants act out the roles assigned to them in the example. Thus participants can literally experience the text.

Implications for Practice

We cannot, of course, assess the entire great books tradition based only on a few enacted participant examples. But participant examples are an important device teachers use to carry out the central mission of great books curricula—to connect the universal truths in great books with

contemporary students' lives. So the rich relational events sometimes associated with participant examples should lead us to reexamine the canon dispute, in light of the relational side of classroom life. We can begin this process by reflecting on enacted participant examples, but more work also needs to be done on other relational consequences of great books teaching.

Hutchins and Adler claim that great books can illuminate the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, because these texts contain fundamental insights about the human condition. My data show that the great books may have even more power than Hutchins and Adler thought. The fundamental issues raised by these books can not only provoke continuing reflection, but also generate continuing reenactments. The texts seem to portray such important human events that they can lead contemporary teachers and students to act them out. This finding is even more striking, given the cultural mismatch between the students and the texts in the example presented above (and in each of the three other enacted participant examples analyzed in Wortham, 1994 as well). A Hindu great book contains sufficiently fundamental insights that the text can inspire both Black and White Americans to enact it.

Other proponents of great books—like Bakhtin (1935/1981), Shweder (1991), and Tracy (1987)—define “classics” as texts that resist univocal interpretation. Great books engage with fundamentally contestable issues, and present nuanced viewpoints, such that they support more than one reading. Bakhtin, Shweder, and Tracy applaud such texts, because they generate continuing reflection and conversation. This article reports that great books have the power not only to provoke reflection, but also to generate reenactment. To see their full power, we must look at the relational consequences of great books as well.

We should not rush to conclude that great books' power makes them ideal curriculum materials, however. The power to generate reflection seems good, as reflection has clear pedagogical value. But does *enactment* of a text have pedagogical value as well? Almost all teachers would welcome greater student involvement in cognitive activities, like interpreting the text and reflecting on its implications. But should we welcome enactments of the text, in which students become so involved that cognitive activities recede and students act like characters in the text—by, for instance, losing control of themselves and teasing others? Interactional enactment of the text takes involvement further than reasoned discussion could, but does it go too far?

It seems to, in the example given above and in the other enacted participant examples analyzed in Wortham (1994). The content of the example can take over the classroom interaction, and push aside more productive classroom activities. Instead of interpreting the text and giving evidence to support their claims, students and teachers tease, fight, collude, or engage in another non-intellectual activity.

Enacted participant examples tend to get out of hand. This happens partly because of the richness of the text, and partly because students and teachers get so involved in the interaction. In some cases, as in the example of William-in-elementary-school, the interaction takes over such that teachers and students do not reflect on the commonality between their experiences and those represented in the text. Without such reflection the students' experiences will probably not help them learn about the subject matter, although they may have had a new experience that they will recognize and reflect on in the future.

So, precisely because of their power, great books involve risk. Teaching the great books—especially by connecting them to students' own experience—risks that students will get so involved

in enacting the text that they will not reflect on it. As elaborated in Wortham (1992), these enactments can also have negative social consequences. When the roles represented in the great book parallel unjust relationships present among teachers and students themselves, enactment of those roles can reinforce social inequalities. Thus, as opponents of great books curricula predicted, teaching these books can reinforce social inequalities. Note, however, that we must attend more carefully to the relational side of great books teaching to see how this social process works.

When the enactment leads to stereotyping and discrimination, as in the case presented by Wortham (1992), it clearly should be stopped. But should we conclude that enactment never has pedagogical potential? Dewey (1916) and others have emphasized the role of students' experience in learning. On Dewey's account, we cannot neatly separate the cognitive and the interactional aspects of classroom life. Relational events and emotional involvement in the classroom, in and of themselves, are not pollution that taints cognitive processes. Although we still struggle to specify exactly how, it has become clear that cognition is intrinsically social (e.g., Roschelle, 1992; Vygotsky, 1934/1986; Wertsch, 1991). So—quite the opposite of pollution—classroom activities that have the potential to involve students in enactments of fundamental issues can have pedagogical promise.

Participant examples' interactional implications might be pedagogically useful, if they were more tightly controlled. If a teacher wanted students to experience certain interactional events and emotions—like the lack of control caused by desire, as described in the *Upanishads*—a participant example might help, if it encouraged students to lose control in the classroom interaction. But then the class would have to *step back* from this experience and reflect on it in light of the text. If a teacher recognized the possibilities and dangers of participant examples, he or she might be able to pull students out of the classroom enactment and into a discussion of it. Then teachers and students could systematically consider how their experience with the example illuminates the text. In this way, a teacher might combine enactment and reflection as pedagogical strategies. The class could act out the text, and then reflect on its own experience. Thus classic texts' power to generate reenactments could provide pedagogical opportunities.

This type of pedagogical strategy would follow recommendations by Vygotsky (1934/1986) and his followers. Tharp and Gallimore (1988), for instance, urge that teachers start with more *contextualized* activities—in which students begin to learn skills and concepts while participating in an activity closer to their own experience. Then the teacher should assist students to move beyond more familiar uses of the skills and concepts, to master their use in more decontextualized academic activities. Tharp and Gallimore recommend “weaving” students' contextualized experiences into more distanced use of academic concepts and skills. This follows Vygotsky's metaphor: “scientific [decontextualized] concepts grow downward through spontaneous [experiential] concepts; spontaneous concepts grow upward through scientific concepts” (1934/1986, p. 194). By providing a more experiential side to great books discussions, enacted participant examples might help this “growing together” that Vygotsky describes.

To use enacted participant examples in this way, however, would demand considerable skill. The example-generated interactions analyzed in Wortham (1994) are extremely complex and largely out of participants' awareness. More research needs to be done on how we could help teachers become more sensitive to (example-generated and other) relational events in their classrooms, and how these relational events could be artfully woven into more reflective consideration of the concepts being taught. Progress along these lines would help students benefit from the strengths and avoid some of the risks associated with great books.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

'-'	for abrupt breaks, stops (if several, stammering)
'?’	for rising intonation
'.’	for falling intonation
'_’	(underline) for stress
'CAPS’	for heavy stress
(1.0)	for silences, to the nearest second
'_’	indicates simultaneous talk by two speakers
'='	interruption or next utterance following immediately, or continuous talk represented on separate lines because of need to represent overlapping
'[...]’	doubtful transcription or conjecture
'((*... *))’	transcriber comment
'.'’	elongated vowel
'° ... °’	segment quieter than surrounding talk
'.’	pause, breath without marked intonation
'(hh)’	laughier breaking into words while speaking

Notes

I would like to thank Judith Green, Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, Philip Jackson, Rick Shweder, and Michael Silverstein for their contributions to this article. I would also like to thank the Spencer Foundation for supporting the initial write-up of the project.

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¹ Chi-square (df=1, N=214) = 20.85 (p<.001). A cluster analysis showed that participant examples which lead to denotational discontinuity also tend to be analogies in their logical structure (as opposed to counter-examples or examples illustrating an established generalization), and they tend to be discussed for long periods of time. Please note that this table presents an artificially inflated ratio of participant to non-participant examples. Participant examples represent more than one-half of the total number in this table because it includes the entire sample—both those classes selected randomly and those selected for a high density of participant examples. A more accurate general estimate, drawn only from the randomly selected sample, has about one in every three examples as a participant example.

² Transcription conventions are in the Appendix. Names and identifying details have been changed. The criteria for selecting this particular case from the sample are given at length in the larger study (Wortham, 1994). The other cases presented there provide evidence that participant examples do tend to have systematic interactional effects of the sort illustrated by the case of William and Cassandra.

Note also that the text discussed—although unarguably a great book, from a great cultural tradition—is not Western. I use this case here for two reasons. First, it illustrates that the teachers at Colleoni, and in fact the Paideia Group itself, do not limit themselves to classic Western texts. Great books are “any works of lasting value” (Adler,

1983). Second, the use of a Hindu text, taught by a White teacher, in a class of primarily Black students, provides an interesting test of great books' power. As we will see, even this "alien" text does move the teacher and the students. Furthermore, discussion of the text has some undesirable social consequences, despite its non-Western origin.

³ Please note that this is an interpretation of one particular instance, and is not meant to reinforce stereotypes about corrupting women who lead men off track. Empirically, I claim, this is what happened in the interaction in question. Looking at more data would undoubtedly reveal instances of men harassing women as well.

⁴ The analyses given in Wortham (1994) provide more detailed illustrations of examples systematically providing a script for classroom interaction, and they more fully illustrate the textual mechanisms central to participant examples' systematic interactional effects. That monograph also contains a more detailed analysis of the William and Cassandra example.

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