

# Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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## Early College Pedagogy Intellectual Development in Community

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**EDITORS' NOTE:** *This is one of several responses to Elizabeth Blodgett Hall's "[The House of Education Needs Overhaul](#)." Hall was the founder and president emeritus of Bard College at Simon's Rock, the only full-time, four-year, residential college of the liberal arts and sciences designed for students ready for college after the 10th or 11th grade. Hall's article is published alongside these responses by early college leaders in this first issue of Early College Folio.*

### INTRODUCTION

Looking out at the educational landscape in 1967, Betty Hall observed that the schooling of adolescents centered on competition and the attainment of discrete skills. The focus of much secondary education was preparatory in nature, getting students ready for academic success *later* in college.

As the former headmistress of a boarding school for girls, the expectations and practices of traditional K-12 schooling were very familiar to her. She saw this approach to education as being "compendably concerned with every activity engaged in at the various levels" while simultaneously "wasting" the time and talents of its students.<sup>1</sup> In "The House of Education Needs Overhaul: The Theory Behind Simon's Rock," Hall proposed "a liberal education . . . for young adults" as an early college model to engage the intellectual talents of adolescents.<sup>2</sup> The liberal education that Hall envisioned not only accounted for the academic subjects that students would study, but it spoke to a whole approach to education including both its content and academic structure but also a revived pedagogical approach and an attention to personal development through freedom of choice during these formative years.

With her New England boarding school background, young people from affluent families were central to Hall's vision for Simon's Rock.<sup>3</sup> Yet as an educator at Simon's Rock today, the students I see in my classrooms represent a vast array of ethnicities, racial identities, nationalities, and social, economic, and educational backgrounds. Despite the significant demographic differences between Hall's Simon's Rock in 1967 and the Simon's Rock community that I am a part of today, her model of liberal education remains relevant for teaching diverse

young people 54 years later and offers a skeletal vision for building equitable structures in the education of adolescents. Here, I place Hall's vision for Simon's Rock in dialogue with contemporary educational theory around equity and student achievement as I reflect on my own experiences in teaching at Simon's Rock.

## INTERROGATING COMPETITION

At multiple moments, Hall challenges “the race to the top”<sup>4</sup> mindset in much traditional schooling. Often, when I encounter students for the first time as new members of the Simon's Rock community, they explicitly and implicitly demonstrate all of the ways that they have been trained to see themselves in competition with others. They sometimes get stuck in binaries with the pursuit of the “A” on one hand and a preemptive disengagement from the task at hand based on their presumed lack of talent in the subject on the other. When a student struggles or even feels average in a subject area, competition can feel like a closed door.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when they arrive in my classroom with my focus on process, reflection, informal writing, and universal engagement within a community of learners, students may experience culture shock. In lieu of a “race to the top,” I guide students to try their best, trust their thought process, value their voice, and hold space for the voices and perspectives of others. In my classroom, there is no “top” to race to. There is only continual process and growth, both for the individual and for the collective. Such a classroom model fosters an ethics of equity and mutual care. As a non-competitive site of learning, it is fundamentally inclusive; all voices are valued and each individual is expected to take their unique place in the process of intellectual development. Rewiring themselves to engage in the classroom space, students come to know that the learning and insight of their neighbors and peers is inextricably linked to their own.

In her work on culturally and historically responsive frameworks of literacy, Gholdy Muhammad touts historical models of literacy learning within African American communities. In her book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Muhammad explores historical literacy development among free Black people in the nineteenth century. Within these literary societies, “Members of different ages and experiences with literacy gathered around meaningful and significant texts to encourage and improve reading, writing and speaking skills [. . .] to meet the greater end of elevating their minds and social conditions.”<sup>6</sup> “Rather than learning being competitive and individualistic, it was collaborative and socially constructed. Learners had a social responsibility to one another.”<sup>7</sup> The author cites William Whipper's 1828 address before The Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia which illustrates this idea well. “It shall be our whole duty to instruct and assist each other in the improvement of our minds, as we wish to see the flame of improvement spreading amongst our brethren, and friends.”<sup>8</sup> Within a framework of mutual assistance, the significance of the individual is deeply embedded in the progress and advancement of all. At the foundation of Black historical

literacy development lies an ethics of equity and mutual care. In a classroom space where “social responsibility” is the governing ethos, students are able to learn freely, organically picking up the tools that have been shared in direct instruction as well as those skills that their peers demonstrate as they engage the tasks of the day. In such a space, all students are invited and ultimately required to see themselves as knowledge-bearers and as practitioners in the field, alongside their peers and professors.

## ENGAGING “THE WORLD OF NOW”

Students at Simon’s Rock encounter this radical reorientation towards education from the very first moment they arrive on campus. Betty Hall’s explicit invitation for young people to take part in a liberal education that “would involve him in the world of now . . . impos[ing] upon him an adult responsibility for the views he holds by fostering in him a capacity for considered judgment on those matters which, above all, he wants to judge.”<sup>9</sup> Recognizing the innate intellectual capacity of young people is at the heart of what we do at Simon’s Rock, whether in our academic orientation or in our classes each day, we “challenge traditional pedagogy.”<sup>10</sup> Our cross-disciplinary writing curriculum “disrupt[s] a student’s misperception that a curriculum is independent of [their] needs. It encourages the student to be an active learner on terms that she helps design.”<sup>11</sup>

The young people I teach have a deep passion and curiosity about the world in which we live. As we study literature, whether Ancient Greek plays or 19th century transcendentalism or contemporary writing by African American writers, the goal is to see the text, to see the characters, and also to see themselves and their world. As we read representations of history, emotion, and experience in our course texts, I invite students to take up their own perspective as a lens for engaging the human experience that the author has constructed as well as the one that is unfolding in their own lives. In this way, we use the process of literacy learning in our classroom to support our collective development as intellectuals and as people while also building their capacity for “criticality,” defined as “the capacity to read, write, and think in the context of understanding”<sup>12</sup> power and social dynamics in the world.

Last semester, I challenged myself by teaching Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in the last weeks of the semester. As I approached this course, I had to reckon with the fact that this would be my first time teaching Morrison’s work. As an African American woman who teaches African Diasporic literature, I recognize the value of Morrison’s work on a visceral level as much as I understand it on an intellectual level. So to begin to engage her work for the first time during a pandemic while finishing the semester remotely—all of this combined left me constantly second-guessing my decision to take on this challenge. However, the novel added an important lens to our semester-long exploration of fragmentation and synthesis through magical realism, so I chose to follow my first mind and not my rising anxiety. When I asked my students on the first day of reading the

text whether they were familiar with the Nobel Prize-winning American author, the vast majority of them had never heard of her before. That fact, combined with the essential contribution that the novel would make to our course, reaffirmed my decision to teach the text.

Yet to engage such a text, it was essential to build connections on a human level, inviting students to place themselves in dialogue with the characters and the events and holding space to better understand the characters' choices and experiences. As we developed a practice of reading—reading and annotating this challenging text together, sharing our annotations, and then each of us responding creatively to the day's reading, the students found themselves building a deeper awareness of the text, its characters, and of the nuances and texture of memory and American history and the palpable impact it has had on individuals, communities as well as ourselves.

Through sharing our annotations and our accompanying poems, drawings, and music, we saw in each other's work the meaning and challenge of freedom for Morrison's protagonist Sethe as well as her historical muse, Margaret Garner. We also saw the ways that our diverse approaches to the text represented not only the diversity in our classroom but also the diversity in our world. As we learned to hold space for each person's intellectual journey as informed by our reading of *Beloved*, we shaped and experienced a version of community and mutual growth that fueled and inspired us throughout the learning process.

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## NOTES

1 Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, “The House of Education Needs Overhaul: The Theory Behind Simon’s Rock,” (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Elizabeth Blodgett Hall Manuscripts Collection, Simon’s Rock Archives, Bard College at Simon’s Rock, reprint 1973). Quotations are on pages 2-3 of the reprint edition.

2 Hall, “Overhaul,” 5.

3 Hall specifically refers to the presumed affluence of the young people her vision focused on: “the young adult of today, with his affluence and far-ranging automobile (4).” Though it goes unmentioned in the essay, the adolescents in Hall’s vision were likely equally monolithic in terms of their identities and backgrounds.

4 Hall, “Overhaul,” 2.

5 Simon’s Rock Professor Emeritus Joan DelPlato describes the writing prompt as a tool to “chip away at writer’s block challenging a student’s self-perception as a poor writer”(2). See Joan DelPlato, “Pedagogy of the Writing Prompt” in *Early College Teaching Seminar* (Great Barrington: Bard College at Simon’s Rock, 2009). DelPlato’s piece, published as part of a teaching resource guide at Simon’s Rock, is a talk from the conference of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), which took place on January 26, 2006.

6 Gholdy Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, (New York: Scholastic, 2020), 25.

7 Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 34.

8 Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 25.

9 Hall, “Overhaul,” 3.

10 DelPlato, “Pedagogy,” 2.

11 DelPlato, “Pedagogy,” 2.

12 Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*.