

## “Teaching Global Issues through Public Intellectuals”

In 2011 and again in 2014 I taught an Honors course that focused on George Will, Thomas Friedman, Joseph Stiglitz, Fareed Zakaria, Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky and a few others. If you are over 35 or so you’ve probably heard of nearly all these people. If you are under 25, I wouldn’t be surprised if you haven’t heard of any of them.

No, these aren’t rock stars of the 60s or comedians who used to be on the Johnny Carson Show. They are “Public Intellectuals,” people who write and talk about political and social issues of our day. While most of them do appear on television they don’t scream on the TV like Sean Hannity and Ed Schultz. Nor do they write 600 page books that can only be understood by Harvard college professors. Rather, they examine our world’s problems and present possible answers using language and analysis geared toward the interested people of our society often writing in short, easy to follow, articles that can be quickly read and understood. For many different reasons, however, they are people who are well-known to people who remember reading newspapers and news magazines but almost entirely unknown to the vast majority of typical undergraduate students.

Since we’ve been thinking about the future of General Education and the larger questions about what our students need from their college education, I believe that we can inform our students about these people and the arguments they make in order to give them the opportunity to become broader-thinking World Citizens. By focusing on individual writers who are both thoughtful and easily accessible—rather than reading about these broader topics in textbooks—students learn about many of the same important issues while pointing them to specific

individuals who they can turn to in the newspapers and political web sites whenever political conflicts and debates arise long after they leave college.

First and foremost, studying public intellectuals provides a broad and effective strategy for looking at liberals and conservatives, hawks and doves, fiscal conservatives, supply-siders and liberal spenders. Their editorials provide us with well thought out arguments and therefore exposes students to articulate explanations for ideas they both agree with and oppose. Yet, even as many of the writers make strong opinionated arguments that may fall within the broader outline of one of our two major political parties, in my class I made an attempt to stay away from the writings of politicians or any articles or books that specifically called for readers to vote for or against any one political party or politician.

And in this way, we were able to discuss the economy, the environment, and foreign and domestic policies without most of the personal attacks found in politics that too often hide more than they reveal. For example, we read Bill McKiddens' book *Eaarth* that describes the coming of climate change and then compared his ideas with articles written by George Will, the conservative commentator who openly proclaims himself a climate change denier, and recent articles by Bjorn Lomborg who believes that climate change is not as important as most environmentalists believe. We similarly compared Friedman's plan for addressing climate change that promised new avenues of capitalist growth with Naomi Klein's suggestion that ending the crisis might require nothing short of the dismantling of the capitalist system. We also examined Friedman's idea that "the world is flat," by which he means that in this computer age poor countries can compete with the United States for high-wage jobs like never before. At the same time we looked at the economist Joseph Stiglitz who believes that more government investment in education will help the working classes compete on the global stage and the

conservative commentator Thomas Sowell who argues that our colleges are so inundated with political correctness and weak thinking that our students are failing to gain any of the important skills they will need. Yet even as these people had very different answers for the world's problems they rarely criticized each other directly. And when they did call out other thinkers they reliably maintained the respectable tone of intellectuals rather than the polemical voice of political hacks.

Moreover, these public intellectuals are writing nearly every day and their work includes not only discussions of general issues of concern but also debate the immediate problems as they are happening. I found it particularly useful to bring in YouTube clips of the authors whose articles or books we were reading because it really brought a face to a name. Almost every week we watched a clip of George Will from one of the Sunday morning programs as he talked about the important issue of that week. Students came to know who Will was in a way few of them had ever known about any political thinkers in the past. Also, in 2011 as we were reading Klein's book—a journalist's account that argues that conservatives are imposing their will over the needs of the poor—we watched an interview she had given five days earlier about how her book helped to explain the crisis in Wisconsin in which the Republicans voted to weaken government employee's unions. We read several articles by Christopher Hitchens, the liberal firebrand, and then watched a *60 Minutes* interview with him about his bout with cancer, a struggle he eventually lost. And this spring we read several articles by Robert Reich and then saw part of his new documentary *Inequality for All* showing students yet another way that these thinkers can put forth their ideas. We also watched McKibben, the Middlebury, Vermont environmental scholar, being interviewed on "The Late Show with David Letterman" and then read his description of the road he takes to work being flooded nearly every year due to climate

change—all the while many of us had driven to Burlington and were aware that the road was at that very moment partially under water due to an especially snowy winter and a hard spring. Articles and books that examined global issues of war and peace, environmental degradation, and labor/management struggles were more interesting and real as in the spring of 2011 we watched these same people talking from Cairo as Mubarak was falling or this past spring as we watched Friedman talking about climate change and its role in the current Syrian Civil War. In all of these YouTubes and news clips the students learned of the quirks and the personalities of each of the Public Intellectuals. These people became more than the authors of the books and articles they read. They were individuals with human foibles and stellar intellects.

A particularly useful plus for this class is that most of these authors tend to be wonderful writers and clear thinkers. It is always the case that reading good writing is the best way to learn to write well and think effectively. But rather than looking for well-crafted prose exclusively in the tomes of fiction, examining the works of public intellectuals allows students to read clear and even entertaining narratives on topics of current social and political importance. George Will is considered by many to be among the best writers in modern political thought. It was interesting to see that all of his articles were between 742 and 748 words, showing a professionalism and skill level that we could admire. Even Friedman, a quirky writer who is often criticized for his analytical style, is an articulate communicator—both in his writings and when he is interviewed on such TV shows as *Charlie Rose*—and the students clearly related to him and understood his arguments. We did find that some books were confusing and not well organized. In 2011, I used a book by Fareed Zakaria—one reportedly liked by President Obama— and in 2104, I assigned one by Nail Ferguson. Both turned out to be exasperating and hard to follow. This problem itself became an issue of discussion in the class as it brought to light the pitfalls of the public

intellectual who must constantly write books and articles with new ideas and clever solutions even when they are not as well thought out or as well written as they should be.

Lastly, I designed this class to provide a broad outline of some of the most important issues of our day while helping students to think about the many different approaches people have attempted. When I proposed this course to the Honors Program I boldly stated that “We will study the ideas of liberals and conservatives, Neo-Cons and Greens, and people who think globally and those who act locally. Thus, students will be asked to break out of the confines of any one discipline or ideological construct while integrating and comparing the experiences of peoples from throughout the globe. In this way, this course is the essence of what General Education should be about.” Perhaps that statement is over the top but I think the course as I put it together—and I think, as it ultimately came off—proved that most of my boastful promises came true. For example, near the end of the semester in 2011, I asked Dr. Gary Kroll of the Department of History to come in to the class and talk about some of the issues we were investigating. During the conversation he asked them to describe how Friedman would examine the problems of the environment and compare that with the approach that McKibben and Lomborg would take. The students took on this question with vigor, talking about people they had never heard of prior to the semester. What I found most important and exciting is that they were discussing these authors as people rather than talking about conflicting views of topics in vague terms. Similarly, in the spring of 2014 several of the students’ papers told of the impact this class had on them. Each assignment called on students to compare and contrast the works of two or three of the writers and then end with a paragraph providing their own thoughts on the issues they address. In these final paragraphs, one student, after examining the banking crisis as explained by Matt Taibbi, wrote “the more I learn in this class the more I question why I wasn’t

taught this before.” Similarly, one student explained that “The sense of urgency in McKibben’s writing is entirely necessary to give us some incentive to make changes. In fact, after reading his passage on small agriculture, I was inspired to plant my own garden and compost this summer. I can’t see any disadvantage to growing my own vegetables and take myself out of the scary agribusiness cycle.” And in yet another paper, a student confessed that “I was never interested in anything that mentioned the words ‘government’ or ‘politics’. However, after learning about the current issues in global politics, I am aware that things happening in our world are soon to be in the hands of my generation.” In fact, almost two years after the first offering more than one student walked up to tell me about something they had read by Friedman or Chomsky. They were more aware of the importance of current politics and now had a means for personal investigation.

Even as we argue that students need to develop hands-on skills in their fields as well as oral and written capabilities to articulate what they have learned, we should also ask “what should they think about?” We want our students to become adults who can use their education to understand that there are real problems we—actually, they—must address and that there are many possible answers that we must pick apart and select with focus and forethought. The hopes and fears of our world will soon be in their hands. Let’s help them to see the possible paths to future success.

### **Partial Bibliography**

Ferguson, Niall. *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die*. New York: Penguin Press, 2013.

- Friedman, Thomas L. *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why we need a Green Revolution and How it can Renew America*. New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.
- Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007.
- Klein, Naomi. "Capitalism vs. the Climate." *The Nation* November 9, 2011.
- Lomborg, Bjorn. *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2007.
- McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010.
- Reich, Robert. *Inequality for All*. DVD. The Weinstein Company, 2014.
- Sowell, Thomas. "The 'Education' Mantra." *Real Clear Politics* May 10, 2011.
- Sowell, Thomas. "Undoing Brainwashing." *Real Clear Politics* May 21, 2013.
- Stiglitz, Joseph E. *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*. New York: W. W. Norton Co., 2013.
- Taibbi, Matt. *Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con That is Breaking America*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010.
- Taibbi, Matt. "Looting the Pension Funds." *Rolling Stone* October 10, 2013.
- Will, George F. "March of the Polar Bears." *The Washington Post* 22 May 2008.
- Will George F. "The Climate-Change Travesty." *The Washington Post* 6 December 2009.
- Will, George F. "Climate Science Tantrums." *The Washington Post* 21 February 2010.
- Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American World*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008.

Dr. Jeff Hornibrook is a professor in the History Department at SUNY Plattsburgh where he has been for 16 years. He teaches courses in East Asian and global history as well as history

methodology. When he is not enmeshed in reading news stories and opinion pieces his research focuses on Chinese mining and early industrialization.