

Art Of Teaching Interview Series

Tricia Ebarvia and Lorena Germán

In 2018, Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia Torres created the #DisruptTexts hashtag on Twitter. Their aim was to advocate for an approach to curriculum and instruction in the English language arts classroom that is more inclusive and restorative. Since then, the conversation around this hashtag has gained tremendous interest and following. The founders continue to raise important questions, share new ideas, and expand the community of educators who are interested in anti-oppressive and culturally relevant and sustaining literacies. Now, the founders also have a column in the NCTE's English Journal, in which they invite authors to "offer insight into how the work of #DisruptTexts can be implemented" (Ebarvia et al., 2020, p. 102).

In this our inaugural interview in the *Art of Teaching Interview Series*, Tricia Ebarvia and Lorena Germán sat down with Dr. Elizabeth Bishop to share the history of their work with #DisruptTexts, their thoughts on how it fits with our current moment, and where they see it heading in the future.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

I wonder if we can begin with an explanation of #DisruptTexts - why it exists, how it started, and where you find it right now.

TRICIA EBARVIA

In the context of this moment with the global pandemic, we really have twin pandemics, which have revealed stark injustices and inequities in our school systems. Thus, the need for #DisruptTexts has become more clear. Sometimes we call ourselves a collective, sometimes an organization. Sometimes, we just call ourselves four women of color who are just trying to do the work.

Our group came together in 2018. We had already been doing anti-racist social justice oriented work in English language classrooms separately. Dr. Parker and I had known each other through The Heinemann Fellowship, and I knew Lorena and Julia through social media. We had actually been giving each other ideas for lessons and exchanging materials for months. We noticed that we were having separate conversations, but we wondered, what if we could collectively organize a conversation around a hashtag to talk about what we could do to disrupt the English

language arts curriculum with the full reality that there are some texts that teachers will always have to teach, but also recognizing the power that teachers have to bring in new texts and reimagine what you inherit. And what if we could co-construct that reimaged curriculum together?

We decided that we would start off with conversations about some of the most commonly taught books. And that's really how #DisruptTexts started. What are some of the most commonly taught books? Let's have a conversation about how we can teach them in an anti-racist culturally responsive way. And that's what really got us off and running.

But how long can you go just disrupting the canon without dismantling and rebuilding it? Our work has evolved to think about how we dismantle and rebuild in a way that is inclusive of voices and not perpetuating what has just always been. And so we came together and distilled our thoughts to create our core Disrupt Texts principles.

LORENA GERMÁN

I also want to add a little bit about the moment. We knew that there were other people doing

this work, but there was also something about the year 2018. We were in the middle of this past presidency. There was also a musical renaissance taking place. Throughout the country Confederate buildings were being renamed and Confederate statues were being taken down. We were four years into the Black Lives Matter movement. The *Black Panther* movie was just coming out. So there was this entire social context to consider for the genesis of this movement. People were already noticing what, for most folks of color and folks that are marginalized, was obvious to us. So it became fertile ground for us to say, okay English teachers, let's think about what impact our curriculum is having. What work are our books and our silences doing?

This work of being inclusive in literature is not a new idea. Folks have been doing this for decades upon decades. But I think that there was something about the timing and the community that we built around the conversation. I think that was what was unique. Teaching a book about immigration ten years ago did not have the same impact it does right now in Texas, hours away from the border, for example. There is something about timing too, that plays a role in, in how

#DisruptTexts came about.

There is something to be said about where English teachers were at that time and how quickly folks were able to be like, you know what... yes! And that's kind of where we find folks, right. And there continues to be another group that believes this is censorship. They claim this re-evaluation is "cancel culture." And you know, the way I see it, they'll have to come along at some point.

I'm finding that administrators and curriculum coaches are more and more on board. It feels like a very big tidal wave of change is happening throughout the country. And I can see simultaneously how that's really scary for those folks who feel like everything they knew to be true is falling apart around them. For them it means a loss of power.

TRICIA EBARVIA

It's a different way to have power. It doesn't necessarily mean a loss; we all gain from power when it's shared.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

I want to dig in about this idea of disruption in the face of the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol, and in the face of the larger implications for the country and what it means to be doing

anti-racist pedagogical work in light of all that.

LORENA GERMÁN

While disruption can be chaotic and used with ill intent, the way that we are presenting it as an approach is constructive. #DisruptTexts is not simply about book replacement. We are in fact talking about a pedagogical shift. We're talking about re-evaluating your practices, curriculum, and what schooling is and looks like. I'm hopeful that the disruption can extend beyond the books and move into rethinking the whole project of schooling.

TRICIA EBARVIA

As a teacher, my goal is that every student should be able to show up authentically as who they are, that parts of them do not have to be crossed off or eliminated in order to be educated. As an Asian American student, I knew what that was like. I think this is a goal that most teachers have, right? So the next step then is for teachers to acknowledge and understand that the system is actually not set up to allow for all students to show up authentically and whole. The system as it exists is set up to force kids to assimilate into an ideal based on an

ideological point of view. There is a refusal to see the ways in which the system has never been neutral. Some of the earliest public schools in the country had the sole purpose of assimilating the Indigenous populations. That's the tradition upon which public schools in this country have been built. So teachers need to recognize that their place in the system has never been neutral. Never. Thus, the books we choose (and do not choose) to teach are a symptom of a much deeper, fundamental issue.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

There are many ways to look at disruption in teaching, in the classroom, in academia. The question here now is what should the classroom teachers take away? What can they take away from the power and the possibility of #DisruptTexts? How do we mobilize around the available tools that you have already created for ethical teaching and learning around the country?

LORENA GERMÁN

I think one of the struggles of doing some of this work in schools is how isolating our profession can feel, particularly for K through 12 teachers. You are in this one classroom all day, you don't always interact with colleagues.

You feel like you're the only person doing this work. One of the powers of #DisruptTexts is that we're very much a community and our approach to this is to amplify and uplift the teachers that are doing a lot of this work. That's why we opted to go on this journey, to begin the column for the *English Journal*, and to feature people who are out there doing it. This is a collective effort across the United States and other countries where teachers are saying that they feel empowered to change. And now there are resources to help teachers do this effectively.

TRICIA EBARVIA

Along with community comes accountability. Having a diverse community of people who will hold you accountable is an antidote to the buzzword phenomenon. If you're not in community with people who are going to hold you accountable, then how do you know you are not just rattling off buzzwords? Accountability matters. And not accountability in terms of teacher evaluations. While I understand it, I worry about the danger of anti-racist or inclusive practices being part of teacher evaluation. These can be weaponized in ways that are antithetical to inclusive

practices and growth. It's about being on the ground with people who are really challenging each other—that's the way to move the work forward.

LORENA GERMÁN

Accountability is something we've always centered as part of our community experience. We do that with love and respect and firmness. I think because terms are being so loosely used, people are starting to get questions such as, what do you mean by that? If you don't know what you're talking about, people are seeing through it right away.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

I love listening to you both talk about the ways in which this is fundamentally about community, and a form of accountability that is grounded in love. It makes me think of Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz and her idea of "critical love." Without critical love, you can't have critical humility. You can't do any of the rest of the work that comes next. But with love, you can. And so I have nothing but love for both of you and for this work because it's hugely powerful.

References

Ebarvia, T., Germán, L., Parker, K. N., & Torres, J. (2020). #DisruptTexts: *An Introduction*. *English Journal*, 110(1), 100-102.



Tricia Ebarvia

Tricia Ebarvia is a high school English teacher, a Pennsylvania Writing & Literature Project Co-Director, Heinemann Fellow, and #DisruptTexts Co-Founder—but above all, she is an advocate for literacy instruction rooted in equity and liberation. As a literacy consultant, Tricia presents on topics including reading/writing workshop, digital literacies, anti-bias pedagogy, and curriculum design and co-directs the Institute for Racial Equity and Literacy each summer. Tricia can be found on social media @triciaebarvia and at triciaebarvia.org.



Lorena Germán

Lorena Germán is a two time nationally awarded Dominican American educator focused on anti racist and anti bias education. She is a co-founder of #DisruptTexts and The Multicultural Classroom. Lorena is also the Chair of NCTE's Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English. She lives in Austin, Texas.



Dr. Elizabeth Bishop

Dr. Elizabeth Bishop is an educator, researcher and youth advocate who has served in teaching and leadership roles across K-12, higher education and community-based organizations. She currently serves as Director of Strategic Initiatives for the CUNY SPS Youth Studies program where she teaches on the faculty. Bishop is the author of two books, *Becoming Activist: Critical Literacy and Youth Organizing* (2015) and *Embodying Theory: Epistemology Aesthetics and Resistance* (2018) and has been featured in articles on youth voters in Good Morning America Digital, PBS NewsHour, Business Insider and PolitiFact. Find her online @DrBishopDigital