

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Well, good morning. It is such a pleasure to be joining you today, Charlie Thomas and José Torralba, in different parts of the globe right now, I think, to talk about core text and curriculum, the liberal arts, and even some aspects of the international context for liberal arts education. I personally and the team at ACTA I work with, the academic affairs team and I, had the pleasure of meeting Charlie Thomas, as well as other faculty and leaders at the Association for Core Texts and Courses, as well as some students presenting and mingling at a couple of the conferences that ACTC organization hosted this year. So I'm hoping this morning we can start off by your introducing yourselves briefly, a little bit about what you do at your institutions, a little bit of your academic background and your role with ACTC.

Charlotte Thomas:

Okay. So, I'm Charlie Thomas. First of all, thank you so much, Veronica, for setting this up. I am a big fan of ACTA. I've been to several Oasis of Excellence conferences and just admire the work that ACTA does, and so I was very excited to have this opportunity to talk to you guys about some of the things that ACTC is doing, especially in this international context. So I am the executive director of the Association for Core Texts and Courses, ACTC. I'm also a professor of philosophy at Mercer University. As the director, I've been in the role... I role as director, executive director of ACTC for about three and a half years now. One of the first things that I really wanted to do in this position was lean into the international work that we're doing because ACTC has been an international organization for many years, but it really seems like we're having a moment, especially in the Spanish-speaking world.

So I was really excited about working with José and others to think about what ACTC could do to support core education in Spanish-speaking places, or also to bring Spanish-speaking events to North America, well, to Canada and the US where we have most of our conferences, and so we've just been really trying to do that. I mean, everybody who does core text education knows that there are lots of different ways of thinking about the core. There are a lot of different books that can sustain close reading and can support serious discussion of enduring questions. But tradition matters too. It matters that books are in conversation with each other and a lot of core programs are organized according to those conversations.

Famously, there's this wall at Wabash College that has all of the books that Pierre Goodrich, the founder of Liberty Fund, thought went together. It culminated at the Declaration of Independence. It's very self-conscious sense in which all of these books were in conversation together and culminated. It's culminated somehow in the American experiment. But of course, books talk to each other in other traditions as well. So even though some of the books that are a part of the Hispanic canon are also a regular part of... Or the Hispanic core, there's no real canon to speak of, but Hispanic core, the books when they're read together in that context just have a different kind of... They spur different kinds of questions and have a different kind of power in conversation with each other.

So while we want to bring lots of those books into lots of different curricular arrangements, I'm also really excited about building programs that put those books from the Hispanic core and texts from the Hispanic core into conversation with each other. So that's a long way of saying that I'm excited about this project and being here and having a chance to talk to you all about it.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

That's great.

Jose Torralba:

Hi. Yeah. So thank you so much for having me here today. It's a pleasure. Yeah, my name is José Torralba. So I am professor of moral philosophy at the University of Navarra in Spain, Northern Spain, and I'm the director of the great books program that we have developed at the university recently in the past 10 years. So it all began when I was a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago. There I learned about the Great Books Movement and the actual courses that they still teach there. And then when I came back to Spain to my university, I became also the director of the Core Curriculum Institute, so I had the chance to do something new and we began a great books program, which is now fully developed and any student can choose it. Of course, that wouldn't have been possible without the support we received from ACTC.

I personally attended some of their summer seminars back in 2014, I believe, and many other of my colleagues have done so. So with the aid, support and advice of people at ACTC, we've developed the great books program, which has become popular. I mean, for us, it's optional, so it's around 15% of the students take it, but those who take it really love it. Apart from that, I've been involved in the European Liberal Arts and Core Text Education Conference. We have organized, so far four conferences. The first one was in 2015 in Amsterdam. The second one in 2017 in Winchester. After, one at my own university in 2019. The last one was again in the Netherlands at Tilburg one year ago. So I would say also that great books, core texts are gaining momentum also in Europe. I mean, at this conference, typically we'll have around 100 attendance, which is a lot for a humanities conference that you may know.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Yeah, that's great. Actually, let's start with the observation you just made, José, about the gaining of momentum in great books or core text, although perhaps before starting with that, we ought to define our terms. So ACTC uses the term core text. In the US, traditionally, we do tend to use that term that you just used, José, great books to refer to what some people also call a canon, so approved preselected lists of works. That's my understanding as somebody who did go to the University of Chicago actually is an undergraduate. So I'm not exactly professional in it like y'all, but I do have an extensive personal experience. If each of you could define what you perceive to be core text and if there is any difference between it and what some people understand to be great books, could you clarify that? But a lot of our audience might not even know what either of these terms mean, so it would just be helpful to have that clear for everybody.

Charlotte Thomas:

Well, unfortunately, clarity on this point is a hard fought question, but we can make some progress here. I think the way people tend to tell the history of these sorts of programs is that they began in Columbia, Columbia University, not in Columbia, at Columbia University, and that there was a program called war studies that was designed to try to make sense of World War I basically for, I believe... We'll have to get somebody from Columbia in here to straighten me out on all the details, but I understand that it was originally intended for students who actually might find themselves serving in the military and to have a sense of what was at stake in the war for these people, obviously, at University of Chicago who are going to be in positions of authority and influence.

Almost immediately the war studies program was renamed and rejiggered within a year to the Peace Studies Program. And then the professors at Columbia continued to argue and about what should be in that program and what its purpose really should be for their students, and that developed into the core, the Columbia core. The reason I tell that story is because the very first story we have about a program like this is defined by the question of what it is, that is it war studies? Is it peace studies? Is it for a particular set of students? Is it for everybody? What does it mean to have a core in the sense of having

books that somehow have core relevance to culture or to a tradition as I was talking about earlier, or books that come together to define a community? That might be a community at a particular institution, like a program where every student comes in and they read the same book as a first year student and then that book becomes a touchstone, a topos for the students at that university. Lots of universities do that.

So ACTC's approach has been to play pretty fast and loose with that terminology because... I don't want to speak for anyone else, but because I actually think that is central to what these programs are. If you are happy in a core program or a great books program or an enduring questions program or a great traditions program, there's so many names for these things right now, but if you're happy in those programs, you're probably happy to talk to your colleagues about what should be in those programs and you probably disagree with your colleagues about what should be in those programs.

So from my perspective, it can be really enjoyable to sit around and have very serious conversations, I don't mean to make light of this, about the kinds of books that belong in this kind of curriculum and the ways that they can be put together to become more powerful or how much should be read versus how much time should be spent in discussion based on what your priorities are for these courses. I think those are all extraordinarily important questions, foundational questions, but I actually think that in large part, it's the questioning and the conversation that makes them the important questions. The longer that these texts or the more that these texts have been a part of those conversations, the likelier, it seems to me they are to survive those debates. I don't want to say that this is all just process oriented or there's just something simply formal about it. Some books can sustain scrutiny and close reading better than other books. Some movies can. It's true of texts and not just books.

In order for texts to function well in curricula like this, they need to be good enough to sustain close reading by smart people and they need to spark conversations about important enduring questions. If they're not doing that, then they're not the right texts for these programs. But I do think the set of texts that could be right for these programs is quite large and that a lot of the time decisions that are made to include one text or exclude another one appear to have more ideological motivation than they actually do. Many times in my experience talking to my colleagues and also people in other programs that the conversation begins with, "All of these books are great. Now, what are we going to do in a semester?"

Jose Torralba:

Yeah, I agree. I would say that in Spanish, when we were thinking about the name of the program, so core text will be translated as something like essential texts, and that sounds very deterministic or something very philosophical. Whereas great books, if you avoid the connotation of big books or large books, that's fine, great, because in English has these two translations to Spanish. And then for instance, there's this university in Chile, they have a wonderful core text, great books program, Adolfo Ibáñez, they decided to use great books, so grandes libros. So in Spanish, I think it sounds better. People will understand it quickly. But I do know about the story of the term and the culture wars that were around the core curriculum and the great books, so I'm familiar with that and I'm fine with...

I would say I'm a philosopher. Medieval philosophers use this dictum, *de nominibus non est disputandum*, so it really doesn't matter, I mean, the name. It's a word. In this case, it's a word. So what's important is that we agree on which books are relevant, which books really help to have an enduring conversation on enduring questions. Of course, I would say not all books do that, or not all books, any book will do that equally well and that's the point. I will just add that our program, even though we followed most of what they do in the States and Columbia or Yale actually, but we do not have a chronological list of readings like they have there. One reason is that we have only four semesters. So that's one reason.

But the other reason is that since it was new for our faculty, we decided to... We had to select the faculty with which we began the program and asked them, "Which books would you like to read in class?" So we gave them complete freedom. The only condition was that there were, say, classics in its term in the sense we've discussed and they all came with very good books and the usual suspects. We're open. We change them a little bit every year and we are open too, so there is no close list of reading in our university, even though I see the point of like in Colombia that they have a list of reading.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Right. Yeah. So it sounds like we have a consensus that whether the term is great books or core text or the program name might be enduring questions and so on, well, these texts, whether they're written down in a book form or even maybe film, it sounds like possibly-

Charlotte Thomas:

I'm open to that, good film.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Right. Well, exactly right. I believe you both said, they have to sustain high level questions that are of enduring importance through time. I'm not sure if you said this, but I'm sure I think you would agree, across people's lands, across the globe, it's almost transcultural the relevance of these books or texts more broadly and the questions they ask and maybe try to answer or address at least. Does that sound right to both of you?

Charlotte Thomas:

Absolutely. I am very interested, for example, in the ancient Indian epics. I know it's heresy to say this out loud because I've taught Homer for decades and decades have always thought that the Iliad was probably the best book there is. I think the Mahabharata might be at least as good. I mean, it's that kind of good. Yeah, it blows my mind, that book. It's too big. I have taught excerpts of it and I've taught retellings. There is no standard official Hindu version of Mahabharata, so you can kind of get away with that, but radically reduced versions. Anyway, so I'm interested in that stuff and I'm really interested in putting it in conversation with texts from the Western tradition, but this is another kind of world enough in time question.

There are programs like the Eastern Classics programs, which is a master's program at St. John's College where they do that. They can actually take the time to really dive into non-Western texts. But for most of us, that's a very difficult thing. I mean, José was talking about having four semesters. The program that I've taught in for many years, we have seven semesters, but still people love the books and love the texts and love the conversations they've been having about them. So saying we're going to get rid of Kant, so we can read, I don't know, Yoga Sutra, not because there's prejudice against those texts exactly, but just because many of my colleagues don't know them and the choices are too hard.

We have all these practical problems when it comes to core text programs. But myself, certainly speaking for myself and also for most of the people that I talk to and work with, there's a real openness to bringing in texts from other cultures, texts that we don't know, texts that are much more distant from our education and say, the Hispanic core text that we're going to talk about today, which are many of them very, very close to our familiarity and our education, even if we may not have spent as much time with them as we'd like to, but they're practical problems involved with expanding things in those way.

Just last thing I'll say there is actually ACTC is committed to helping people face some of those practical problems. One of the things we do is José talked about was he attended some summer workshops. One of the things I would like ACTC summer faculty workshops to do is to give core faculty members an opportunity to read some of these books that they're in principle open to, but really aren't in a position to add to their courses or add to their programs because they just don't have the familiarity with them. That's not just Eastern text, that's all kinds of marginalized voices, mathematics and science, all the things that we don't tend to read in these programs, not because they're not great or they don't belong, but just because they haven't been a part of our experience in the same way and so there's a steeper learning curve. But I really do think that's where ACTC, one of the ways that ACTC can come in and if there is an interest in broadening that sense of the books that can be included in a curriculum, that we can help support those ambitions.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

That's great. Expanding briefly on that at least, so ACTC supports individual faculty members perhaps in their development of syllabi or curricula that they might individually work on. But then I assume perhaps also at the program level, we'll talk a little bit more about that in a few minutes, you also support institutions with their programs. Is that right?

Charlotte Thomas:

Yes, that's right. Yeah. So our flagship program is a big conference in the spring that you attended at Memphis this year, Veronica. So there's a lot of networking and informal relationships that are made that generate decentralized support. I actually think that's a really important part of this to focus on because we do a lot. I try to do a lot, but the network also is full of people supporting each other, and that's probably at least as important, maybe more important than anything that I could do. But yes, we support programs.

We'll do consulting. We'll help with curriculum. We're launching a new core administrators workshop for people who are new to those positions, who want to spend time with people who have experience in those positions to think about the best ways to support their programs within the context of a larger college or university. We support individuals obviously by giving them opportunities to develop work for the conference and for publications, but also by offering faculty development workshops in the summer. We support undergraduates too. We have an undergraduate conference and we're also developing undergraduate study abroad programs. We try to support core education from every angle we can.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

That's great. So in fact, I did want to ask about core education more broadly, right? So ACTA, as you know, has this flagship project called What Will They Learn? This is more relevant for US universities, but I think the principles can be understood anywhere. What Will They Learn? identifies seven key subject areas within general education programs that generally occur within the first two years of students undergraduate programs in the states at over 1,100 institutions nationwide.

What Will They Learn? is flagship project at ACTA wherein we evaluate over 1,100 institutions across the United States who have a stated liberal arts mission in their general education programs on the strength of those programs in seven subject areas that ACTA's council of scholars have deemed essential. Going to the point you made as philosopher who say earlier, we do formally consider these subject areas to be essential. Certainly, there are other ones that are important.

I guess I'm bringing this up today because core text often feature in a traditional core curriculum, what used to be called a core curriculum, but as you may have noted, I use the term general education program because the vast majority of institutions in the United States where we do have this split between general education and then specialized education over the years of your undergraduate education, this is the model that has been followed of a general nonspecific education that does not dictate any particular material that you have to cover in that general education. In other words, there is no core, right? I do mean core just in a general sense. There is no subject matter, no content that you have to cover. It's more skills-based, frankly. So you learn the methodology of a social science researcher in the vast majority of cases, say, and you learn how to think like a philosopher, but you don't have to learn any particular philosophy or any particular economic content.

So do you think that core text can be well supported in the context of an institution where there is no particular content mandated by the institution? In your experience, how have you seen that work out in schools that are, say, different from the St. John's College, which is purely everybody takes the same curriculum, something at the complete opposite under the spectrum or almost at the complete opposite under the spectrum where the curriculum is pretty open for general education and how do students manage to get access to core text? Do you think it's important that all students get access to core text, that it should be mandated in the way that What Will They Learn? project is advocated for?

Charlotte Thomas:

Yeah. Well, it's a very difficult question. I have strong opinions about it, and I do think that every student should confront these wonderful books, not just texts but books. When I think about some of the things that my students haven't read, even get it when they arrive at college, it just makes me sad because when I came through high school, I was a reader. I was an early reader, and so some of it was on my own. Reading was important in my family, so some of it came from there. But I had read so much, so many novels, especially before I came even to high school and had done so much through high school. I didn't go to a fancy East Coast prep school. I went to a public school in Florida, but I had great teachers and read lots of really important books.

I sought out Mercer's great books program as an undergraduate there because I was an undergraduate there before I came back to be on the faculty. I sought out that program. So I am a strong advocate for curricula that take on books and classic books in the sense that José was talking about before. I mean, I also like books that were written in the time of classical Athens, but that's not what I'm talking about books that have been considered classics and seminal for education. So personally, that's where I sit. The kinds of things that ACTA is looking for and the values that are implied by the What Will They Learn? program, I think I share... I'd have to look back at that literature, but I've looked at it before, but I think I agree completely.

But from the ACTC perspective and honestly also from my own perspective, for me and again, applauding the work that ACTA does, but I do think it's a little bit different work because I want to support faculty members who want to teach these courses and want to bring students into these conversations and teach these texts. Sometimes the faculty members who want to do that and are passionate about it end up at St. John's or Notre Dame or Chicago or Yale, and sometimes they end up at a community college. One of the ACTC's board members, Ted Hadzi-Antich, runs an amazing program in Texas at Austin Community College. He didn't walk in with a core program that would... I can't imagine that Austin Community College would make it through the standards of What Will They Learn? or would've when Ted got started, but he found space at that school and sort of a pied piper.

There was a course that was one of these amorphous shells that people were doing whatever they wanted within it and he said, "Well, if I can do whatever I want," this is St. John's, he's a Johnny, "I'm

going to do this." And then he brought other people on board, and then he got some grants so that people could get support to learn these books, and here, in this curriculum that didn't look like from a core text perspective, that would be an enviable place to land. It might be a great school in other ways, but for those of us who want to do this education, one wouldn't seek out that job, I don't think, and yet it's become this remarkable program both for the students and the faculty of that school.

So when faculty members come to ACTC, some of them are again coming from St. John's and Notre Dame, wherever, and some of them are coming from these programs like Austin Community College or a bigger... I don't even know. Maybe it's not bigger. I think it's bigger. The program at Purdue that Melinda Zook has designed, which this is a STEM school, and yet she's created this core program within it. And then some of them come, they're just sort of lonely at their institutions with one or two friends keeping a little flame alive and reading important classic books and asking important questions of a small group of students who probably find their way to those classes and conversations voluntarily. They don't have any curricular or institutional support except when they come to ACTC and then they find their people.

So there's kind of a gap between my professional commitment, which is to support anybody who wants to do this kind of education regardless of the kind of curriculum they're doing it within, and then this kind of sense of what would be best, which would be that every student who wants to have this conversation and maybe who don't have it and see the value that comes from being a part of that kind of education, our kind of education.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

That's helpful. I think it would be interesting to get, yeah, José's perspective too. You had mentioned, José, that Navarra, I think you said Navarra students, 15% of them go through the great books program or the Core Curriculum Institute. Is that right?

Jose Torralba:

Right. Yeah.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

I was just going to say a lot of those students are not planning on getting a degree in philosophy, I would assume, or in literature or in Hispanic philology for example. So I would assume, but perhaps not. Do you end up teaching a wide range of students with a wide range of career interests?

Jose Torralba:

Yes, absolutely. Yeah. So out of this 15% of the students of the university that take the great books program, probably 90% are not majoring in any humanities degree. So they learn medicine. I teach to science, medicine students, psychology, economy, economics, whatever. Yeah. So that's so nice and impressive about the program. I would say, so going back to your question to Charlie is that... So my understanding or what I see in the students when they get to the university, and I think this is similar in the States, is that the students are kind of lost with regard to life, with regard to our culture in the sense that where do we come from? Why are we here? Why are these the dominant values? And then enduring questions, what should I do with my life? What's justice? I think this is a problem. So because if you think about the reason why they feel lost or disoriented, perhaps that word is because they do not have access or easily access to the roots of our culture.

I mean, reading these books, I agree with Charlie too, it's a must not because the books are like something that's obligatory, something like that special status or a totem or anything like that. It's just because they help you to understand who you are in the 21st century and also who you are as a human being. That will be a very common expression. So the content is important because if you don't read how the notion of freedom has developed through the centuries or the role of society or whatever, it's difficult that you understand where we are right now and where we should go from here. That will be my second point.

You did ask that so will these schools where they have the general education programs where no content is required? Well, I mean, good core text have a place, something like that. I do think that you can make the case for the following is that by reading core text in seminars, you are not just opening the gates to the past, and that's the culture or the roots of our culture, but also developing what some people called intellectual habits or even intellectual virtues. Those are skills. I mean, it's not nothing different, and I'm completely into that. So I agree that, and this was my final comment, if you want to assess what kind of learning outcomes this course is achieve, certainly one of the most important is that they develop these intellectual habits or capacities, and there are tons of scholarship on that. Yeah. So I wouldn't say that there is incompatibility between content and form or methodology.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Yes, thank you for saying that. I think people get concerned that by focusing too much on content, we lose sight of skills. Certainly in the foreign language education field, which is where I spent quite a number of years, most recently, we tend to focus very much on skills in more recent teaching methodology because in the past there was this focus on drilling, as we call it, and that was maybe the content was overemphasized. So we have perhaps reached a point of overcorrection institutionally. To, I think, José's early point about the gaining of momentum on about core text, it does seem like, as you were saying, José, I think Charlie was too, students do seek some sort of structure or at least some sort of backbone for the questions that they inevitably ask themselves about who they are and why they are, where they are and where they're coming from.

So I did want to ask both of you also about the question of how core text teach students in fields like economics, health sciences, you even mentioned, José, the STEM fields, but also in... Sorry, I'm going to restart. I did want to ask both of you about how the core text can teach students in a course such as STEM, STEM-related field, computer science, data science, health sciences, these areas. Is there a place for core text, not just for students that end up majoring in those fields, but actually in a course that teaches that content and how have you seen that work well? It doesn't have to be just technology focused.

Charlotte Thomas:

Do you want to go first this time, José?

Jose Torralba:

You are asking what do they find in the courses, these kind of students that are majoring in STEM-related fields? What do these does to them?

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Okay. Maybe I'll reframe the question. So perhaps there are two things I want to know. The first thing that you just said. So in the first place, what can core text teach students of non-humanities fields or

non-traditionally humanities fields or even non-liberal arts fields, such as business, data science or something, applied science, applied math, engineering, education even? And then secondly, in the second place, have you found a successful use of core text within a course that is focused on something like STEM education, engineering, like I said, non-traditional humanities or liberal arts fields? So can you teach a core text within the context of a course that doesn't mostly focus on humanities or core text? How can you do that?

Jose Torralba:

Thank you. So to the second question, I haven't had the experience myself. I've never done that because I teach in philosophy majors and then in the great books program, great books courses, but I do have some colleagues. I was actually this year coaching a group of faculty at the state university in southern Spain, and they were in law, economics, health sciences, and actually their plan is to use core text in their courses. So no special course offering on great books, but in the course of the history of economy, for instance, or introduction to whether health science to read, for instance, Ivan Illich, and to reflect on death and life. They were very interested because they feel that the students do not have a space to reflect on those issues that are essential for anyone who will be working on health and science, health. So that's happening, but I don't have the result that will happen next year.

And then to the first question is that certainly, I mean, I've been teaching non-humanities students for the past 10 years, I would say, two courses per year. So what do students learn? What do they tell us that they've learned? Because of course, we run surveys and things like that. I have to say that in Spain and general, in Europe, degrees are even more professionally oriented in the States. So for instance, an economics major would almost only have courses in economy apart from the corporate. The corporate group is like 7% of the group. So what they tell us is that, "Yeah. I mean, I find these questions about human being justice, et cetera, so important that I'm so grateful I had opportunity to have this class." That's what they say. I mean, that's what you would expect, but it happens. That's my answer.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Thank you. Charlie?

Charlotte Thomas:

Yeah. So the first question about can students who are doing degree programs in professional or technical fields benefit? I think we all know the answer to that, and that's of course yes, because they're still human beings. In fact, in my experience, I imagine José faces this too, even students that are deeply committed to a very technical course of study and feel very much comfortable and at home with that being their future, there's something important to them about having the time to think about these big human questions to get to know themselves and others and to read books and to have these important conversations. So that's an obvious one, I think. I mean, maybe it's not obvious to everybody, but I think it's probably obvious to everybody in this conversation and maybe to most of the people who have listened to this podcast.

The other one is harder, I have to say. I think that the sort of assessment industry creates a lot of boundaries for disciplinary and interdisciplinary education. I think assessment can be a good thing. I am involved with it at my university, so I'm not just here to critique assessment, but it does often kind of handcuff people within the disciplines and programs that they teach in. So for example, one of my best friends is a biologist who's recently retired but taught in Mercer's great book program for 35 years or something. We routinely would actually hire people in science disciplines, chemistry in particular, who

would take the job at Mercer because in addition to teaching chemistry, they'd be able to teach great books, people who wanted to have these conversations.

So even these people who are making career decisions based on those opportunities or are completely devoted to this kind of education will tell you that if they're going to prepare their students for the MCAT or if they're going to teach classes that will keep their department viable for the highest level of accreditation within their professional accreditor, that there is just not time for them to do anything but run their students through these content area and skills achievement curricula. I think it's because of that perhaps. I really haven't seen models of this. I'm excited to hear what José's talking about that people in health sciences and law are going to engineering, maybe I think you said, are going to try to work this into their curriculum. I am really excited to see how that goes because I think in principle it could be great.

But if you are given this very difficult task, which is to try to get, I don't know, 50 students in an organic chemistry 1 class to the place where they can successfully complete that class and be ready for organic 2 so that they can... Maybe that's not a good example, but so they can be ready for the MCAT and they can get into a good medical school, that it's very, very... To use an economic term, the opportunity cost of condensing that information or running through it more quickly in order to experiment with what we all know is important and good things, but it's very, very tricky. I think something more than just a particular committed faculty member or even a department that has a strong commitment, at least in the American education system, there would have to be structural changes to make that sort of thing possible. I think it could be great, but the structures are so fixed at this point, I don't even really know how we experiment with it, but I'd love to be shown wrong about it.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

I guess in my experience in ACTA, there might be two types of programs in which I've seen that work well, something like the Cornerstone program at Purdue, to which you alluded earlier. Again, I can really only speak at this time to American institutions with my apologies, José, that something like the Cornerstone program at Purdue, and there are many iterations of this, a general education program or really a core curriculum, even if it's an option in which you... Some students, not all students fulfill their general education requirements through something like a great books or core text program and some students may not choose that path to fulfill their general education requirements. That seems to be one route wherein STEM students, for instance, that do have these heavy requirements for their specialization can be exposed to those texts, but again, it's not in their specialization so much, and then another... Yeah, sorry Charlie, you're speaking.

Charlotte Thomas:

I'm sorry, I was interrupting you and muted. Terrible. I was just going to say that completely, I think there's plenty of room in curricula to have courses outside of someone's major, and I don't see any prohibitive structural problems with that. It was that second question that I had issues with, it's not that I have issues with, that I have a hard time envisioning that is to do it within the disciplinary courses.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Oh, it's very difficult. Well, so I think we've come across some honors colleges or honors programs at ACTA that do have a great books focus with a science, say, set of content that's included. A few of these are geared towards students that are not going into your traditional liberal arts disciplines. For that reason, they perhaps have at least introductory level content that may be more relevant for those

students. I could see that type of program really taking off if it were to get more support and all that, but the higher level specialization in non-liberal arts will be difficult. Yeah.

I did want to ask you before we closed a little bit more, Charlie, about the types of institutions that are non-traditional, like you mentioned Austin Community College was the one I was thinking of from my experience with your conferences. How is it that you can, or excuse me, how is it that instructors can teach core text and courses in an institution... No, I'm going to resay that sentence, Doug. How is it that instructors can teach core text or core courses in an institution that does not necessarily require liberal arts at the four-year level or just a non-traditional liberal arts institution? How do you see instructors implementing it? You talked briefly about how that happened at Austin Community College, but I'd love to hear more examples if you have them outside of that particular one, or just if you could name a few key ways that faculty can achieve that goal of core text and courses, that would be very helpful for some of our faculty audience.

Charlotte Thomas:

Thank you. That's a great question. I do think it's very challenging, especially if you are alone at your institution with this ambition. ACTC definitely has members who find themselves alone at their institutions. I feel like we are as an organization probably as important for them as... Or maybe I should put this the other way, the fact that those people exist make our existence even more important that we can support people who are alone or practically alone at their institutions with these commitments and ambitions and I think that's very, very, very challenging. I think it becomes much, much less challenging if you have at least one or two friends in this work, that there's a qualitative difference between doing it alone and doing this kind of work with one or two friends with whom you can have conversations and strategize together.

I think that the way that this gets done is varies wildly situation to situation. I think every institution has openings. The very courses that come under rightly so, some of the most intense scrutiny for people who love text-based education and core text education are these that have absolutely no shape and no commitments and anything can be done in those courses, but honestly, that's also an opening. If you face a course in which anything can be done, you actually have the freedom to do something good and interesting and maybe beautiful. So that's one way that it gets done.

I will say, I mean, it's a little awkward to name names of people who are in this situation, so I might just not give the particular institution names, but I'm thinking of a school that just is not just neutral about what they perceive to be a kind of Western-centric approach to education, which that's not what ACTC is about at all, but as a perception, sometimes that there's a prejudice for the West and against everyone else. I can be a fan of Western institutions and not be against other ways of being in the world.

So I'm thinking of one person at one school that is sort of hostile, but she still, in her classes, she is very... This one faculty member I think about, very, very affable and very, very smart and just by her own commitment and force of personality, she does this with her students. I think over time that sort of can erode some of those hostilities and it can make real institutional change and I've seen that happen. Again, if you have one friend who's doing it with you, then it's infinitely easier and it's also more likely that people look at you and say, "Huh, those students seem to be really enjoying what they're doing, and you guys seem to be really enjoying what you're doing. I have to teach this amorphous class and I'm not enjoying what I'm doing, so can you talk to me about what you're doing?" And that happens. So that's one path is just to take the opening and ideally do it with a friend so you're doing it in conversation.

Another way is to seek external funding. I mean, this is just the way of the world and probably the whole world, but certainly in higher education. If you can show even a hostile dean that you have external

funding to try something, you will likely be given the opportunity to try it. So I think, again, probably not a surprising answer for the listeners to this podcast, but if you don't find local support, go look for support elsewhere that you can bring back to your institution because it exists. Not only will such support make it possible for you to teach these sort of courses, but it will make other people at your institution look at you differently because you were able to get external funding and that can grow momentum as well. So those are two ways that I think in institutions that don't appear to be minimal to this kind of work that you can create those opportunities.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

That's great. I think you've touched on certain aspects of prospective or future-looking questions, but I would like to ask one more about that I think for both of you just by way of closing. So what do you both see as the future for core text, for core courses in higher education and how can not just faculty but indeed campus leaders ensure that students have the opportunity to be exposed to core text in coursework?

Jose Torralba:

Yeah, I would like to say that... So I'm part of the board of ACTC. I've been there for three, four years and I have witnessed what Charlie's talking about that. I mean, even though in these colleges where they don't have the program or the support from the leadership of the college through run core text seminars, there are faculty doing it. I remember, I would say, the most special moment in ACTC conferences I've been to was a panel with four or five professors from community colleges in New York and they were running a project for adults. I mean, people in the 30s, they didn't have any degree and they were not the best condition educationally and connected to Columbia. They had some kind of support from Columbia University.

They were having these core text seminars and they said, I remember, that the power that it has for someone like this kind of students reading Shakespeare and being able to read Shakespeare, which I know is in English, that they empower these people. It's not what they learn in terms of literature or English or whatever, but the self-confidence, that dignity it gives them. I was impressed by that. So I think that's key because sometimes core text and so on are seen as from elite institutions or whatever, but that's not the real case.

So in answering your question, I see the future of great books also going in that direction. I mean, of course, I would say I'm all for elites. That's a big topic in the sense that we need to educate elites so that when they are in the position of leadership, they really look for the common good and great way of doing that is by means of core text education. We need to do that. But of course, we also need to offer this kind of education to anyone because anyone who's human is able or has a capacity to enjoy these books, to learn from them. I think we need to make the case because most people will say, "No, this is just for kids who've gone to very fancy schools and things like that." No, no, no, no, no. Anyone can, of course, adapt it. Maybe you read less and in Columbia where they read three books per week or so, but that's fine. I mean, it's not a matter of how much you read, but how you read them these books and what kind of conversation you have after them.

And then from the European perspective, briefly, so I said at the beginning of the Great Books Movement, so to speak, is gaining momentum, but very slowly. So I think there is much work to be done because yeah, our universities and the degrees are too specialized and too much career oriented, and that's not good for the education of the new generation, so not the best education we can provide.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Very helpful insights from you, José, thank you, and to Charlie, of course as well. I think that we can close out with a pretty good sense of some ways that campus leaders, faculty, maybe even students can find opportunities to educate or be educated in core text, core ideas both in the United States and internationally. Sounds like we have this European Liberal Arts and Core Education Conference. Is that the name, José?

Jose Torralba:

Yeah.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Of course, we have the Association for Core Text and Courses. We have ACTA's supportive faculty and campus leaders as well. All of us here would love to support anyone that is looking, sorry, to shore up, to review, to start up even a program in core text or courses. So we would love to hear from you. Regardless, I've had a great conversation with you guys today. Thank you so much for joining us.

Jose Torralba:

Thank you. My pleasure.

Charlotte Thomas:

Yeah, thank you, Veronica. Thanks for the opportunity. This has been great. So nice to talk to you both and to have this chance to talk about liberal education. It's great.