Twitter Thread by David Withun



David Withun
@DavidWithun

After spending a couple of days engaging with #DisruptTexts and its most vociferous Twitter defenders, here is what I've learned:

1. Many of its most outspoken defenders are also outspoken racists. Almost every one that I spoke to focused on my skin color and whatever stereotypes they could fabricate from it in their responses.

2. On a related note, their primary means of argument seems to be largely ad hominem. There was very little discussion of the actual issues. Instead, insults, insinuations, and mockery seemed to be the rules of the game.

3. I think this need to focus on ad hominem arises from the ideological rather than evidential nature of #DisruptTexts itself. There's a lot of social justice jargon and feeling used to support it, but no talk that I saw about student outcomes or efficacy.

4. Relatedly, there is a religious feel to the whole thing. Heresy is not to be reasoned with but rooted out and destroyed. Only the truly initiated understand the secret gnosis. The plain meaning of words is disregarded in favor of a mystical interpretation.

5. The practitioners of #DisruptTexts seem to have a very low opinion of children's interests and abilities. The word "easier" was actually used several times to refer to the YA novels they want to replace the classics, and the implication was that easier is better.

6. Interpreted charitably, #DisruptTexts seems to be little more than the age old pedagogical practice of pairing texts thematically and encouraging students to engage with them critically, albeit with a social justice bent.

7. More problematically, the notion of social justice at the heart of it seems to be misplaced and layered in jargon, resulting in an unintentional replication of the historic denial of liberal education to working class children and children of color.

8. One valid critique that #DisruptTexts might have for those of us in classical and Great Books education is a certain caution about how we teach the texts and talk about "Western civilization." Often, Great Books folks have a tendency to approach the texts with a certain...

reverence and to make excuses for or ignore their shortcomings. They're "great" after all, so it's easy to slip into thinking they're perfect. Aristotle's defense of slavery, for example, should not be treated as incidental and minor. It should be grappled with seriously...

as central to his philosophy and highly problematic. Similarly, there is a tendency in classical education to treat the narrative of Western civilization as a long series of triumphs in an inevitable trajectory of ascension. This triumphalism needs to be discarded--

or at least mitigated--by seriously grappling with the fact that the culmination of the Western tradition in the Renaissance coincided (though not coincidentally) with the beginnings of racism, the Atlantic Slave Trade, and global imperialism. It's easy to dismiss ...

this with a wave of the hand and "oh, but people have always conquered and enslaved each other." That's true, but the scale of the atrocities coupled with their justification through the very terminology of transcendent truth and virtue that we replicate calls the whole ...

project into question. This concern needs to be prioritized in our discussions of Western civilization, classics, Great Books, and virtue.

9. Final thought: of all the challenges to liberal education over the centuries from John of Salisbury to Du Bois/Washington #DisruptTexts is the least cogent and thoughtful that I have encountered. With that said, there is always something to learn from everything.