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AMAH EDOH: How is Africa made to mean? How has it been made to mean, and what is associated with this idea of Africa? I mean, it's weird to talk about it as this one place, but that's exactly the point. How is it that we've come to talk about Africa as a thing, a place in the world, when in fact, it includes over 50 countries, and thousands of languages, and millions of people, right?

SARAH HANSEN: Today on the podcast, a conversation about teaching a categorically misunderstood concept, Africa. Our guest today found inspiration for bold new ways of teaching through her own experiences as a student. She recognized throughout her education the ability for teachers to empower or inhibit their students.

AMAH EDOH: What's made the biggest difference for me in the classroom as a student has been instructors who made me feel like I had something to offer. And the lack of that does a lot of damage, right? When you're having instructors who make you feel like you have nothing to offer, that's actually damaging. It's not just neutral. It's damaging. So it's really important for me to sort of valorize students' voices and to show them that they're doing it.

SARAH HANSEN: Welcome to *Chalk Radio,* a podcast about inspired teaching at MIT. I'm your host Sarah Hansen from MIT OpenCourseWare. In this episode, I take you with me to meet Amah Edoh, an Assistant Professor of African Studies at MIT. Professor Edoh's research centers around the complex array of cultures, traditions, nations, and ideas known as Africa, and how Africa as a concept is produced through material practices, things like music, ritual, performance, and dress.

We'll learn how she engages students in unpacking the concept of Africa through the very creative practices that make it. So what does it look like to challenge the meaning we've prescribed to a place as rich and diverse as Africa? We'll pick up our conversation with Professor Edoh's explanation.

AMAH EDOH: You know, we're used to speaking of Africa as a place-- and not just any place, but a place that's burdened with a lot of ideas and values that historically have been negative, to put it simply. And so what my research and my teaching centers on is about interrogating that.

So first, making visible the ways that Africa is made to mean, so that's what I mean with Africa as a category of thought. To understand that Africa means more than just this geographical space. It's also all these countries and all this very complicated history. But then to see the ways that this valence that "Africa," quote, unquote, has, the way that that plays out in all aspects of life, really.

So broadly speaking, it's like the question of thinking about Africa as category of thought is understanding the politics that are involved in engaging with the continent in an intellectual manner, politically, and so on. In this course, we use creative practices-- so the arts, popular culture-- as a way in for two reasons.

One, because there's a way that, you know, I'm not crazy about the term "popular culture" because it's a way that it seems to devalue it, and it's just kind of fun. Yet, it animates so much of our daily experiences, no matter who you are and no matter where you are in the world.

So on one hand, the purpose or goal of using this as a way into asking these more kind of theoretical and philosophical questions about Africa as a category of thought is to recognize that these everyday practices are actually extremely rich and just as political as any other form of engagement.

But then more specifically to Africa is the fact that right now, Africa is sort of having this moment where its signification is appearing to shift. Part of it is understanding whether it's actually shifting. But where all the stories we had about the continent used to be about war, and disease, and famine, and dysfunction, simply speaking, now, there is also another discourse where Africa's hot. Africa is sort of the future. Africa is where all of these new possibilities are playing out.

So whether it's within the business realm or it's within the arts, it's this idea that Africa is the last frontier. So there is a way that Africa's got a new prominence on the global stage, and that a lot of that is playing out in the realm of what I call creative practice, so the arts and popular culture.

And that's why I thought that it would be a particularly good angle to take in addressing these sort of loftier questions, and seeing the ways that they play out in the day-to-day. And also through beautiful and pleasant objects, and pleasant things to engage with, things that are moving, and that are inspiring, which I think opens us up to thinking and to processing differently when we're moved in this other way.

SARAH HANSEN: It makes me wonder how this specific case of looking at Africa as a category of thought and looking at creative practices, did it open for students new ways of seeing the world in general? Does this kind of teaching offer new pathways for critical thinking that's applicable in many fields?

AMAH EDOH: I'd hope so. I mean, my god, like, that's our dream as educators, right? That whatever we do in the classroom in this very limited setting or this limited scale manifests for our students so that they're able to take it into their experiences way beyond the classroom and beyond the specific topic of the course.

When I think about the students that I had in the class last year, it was about 12 students, and about half of them were African, so Africans of different variety. So Africans from the continent, Africans who were first-generation Americans. And then the other half were American of varying ethnicities.

And I would say that for all of them-- well, certainly for my African students, it was a way that they, I think it's safe to say were there because they were interested in engaging with this part of their experience in a different realm, to actually study it in the classroom instead of it just being kind of what they're immersed in their day-to-day lives when they're back home, and so on.

And for the non-African students, some of them were going to be working in Africa during the summer, or had just come back from being on the continent, and just wanted to kind of learn more generally about the continent.

So to what extent did being in the class broaden their perspectives or kind of give them tools that they could use beyond this specific topic after the class? I think the class might have helped them get language to articulate some of these questions about power, essentially. And if not always to find answers, to at least be able to notice patterns and sort of describe what they're seeing.

So often, we have a feeling that something's not right, or that there's something going on here, but we don't quite have the language for it. And I think that that's what a class like this aims to do is to give students the language to articulate these things that they might be picking up on in different ways.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH HANSEN: So what does it look like to empower students to follow a feeling, to develop the language to negotiate that feeling into theory?

AMAH EDOH: So we met once a week and we focused each session on a different form of cultural production, or a different theme. So we had performance. And then within performance, we had performance as dress, and then we had literature, and we had film, and we had science and technology. And so for each unit, new questions came up.

But the thread that cut across them was the same, which was a question of, how is Africa being made to mean in the world, and how are African cultural producers engaging in that process of making Africa to mean through their practice? And, of course, and the questions that come up that are, like, what are the specific issues that arise with this particular form of cultural production, right?

So for theater, what does it mean, for instance, to produce a play for an audience in Nigeria to can perform that play in Cambridge, Massachusetts? What are the politics of that? What are the questions that come up in carrying this object from one space into the next?

The goal was to both reflect through each of these cases this underlying question that the course was after, but then to show the nuances or the specificities that apply to each particular form of creative production. And then ultimately to say, what do we gain by juxtaposing these different things?

What can we learn about ideas of technological innovation in or for the continent by looking at them alongside the production of ethnographic portraits in the 19th century in South Africa, for instance? Is there a way that these two cases can elucidate one another? And I think yes. I mean, there is a reason that I did it that way.

But yeah, and I think that there was also another agenda behind it is that being at MIT in particular, where we tend to fetishize technology and consider it sometimes in the realm outside of other material practices, other ways of knowing, one of my personal missions is to show that it's no different. They're just different. They're all objects. They're all ways of doing. They're always of knowing, right?

So whether we're talking about plant healing or developing the next nano whatever, we can think about these things next to each other, no matter where they're happening. And so I think the ways that case studies are useful is that they allow you to both kind of dig deep with that particular situation, bring questions to the fore, and then next time, kind of consider the ways that those questions can apply, or when new questions arise when you look at a different situation.

SARAH HANSEN: You mentioned performance. And could you speak a little bit about how students attended performances out in the world as part of this course?

AMAH EDOH: Yeah. So that kind of has to happen serendipitously. It just so happened to be that at the time that I was teaching this class, this show came, was-- I don't even remember how I found out about it. I think from a mailing list or a friend told me. I don't know, but this play was coming to Harvard. And similarly, that Alain Gomis was going to be coming to Harvard also.

And so in the case of Alain Gomis, I had just seen his film at a conference a few months before, one of his films, and absolutely adored it, and so I'd wanted to teach it. And it was an amazing opportunity to have them here, because he would also be speaking about the film.

And so in both cases, it was an opportunity. I saw these outings as an opportunity for students to engage with these materials sort of in a more social way. So it's one thing to be in your room and to just watch a film on your laptop.

It's a different thing to be in an auditorium with various kinds of people to kind of pick up on the energy that's around you, how other people around you are responding to different parts of the film, right? That's part of the experience also. Not to mention that to hear the filmmaker tell you what they were thinking when they created this thing, and how other audiences responded to it, and so on.

And then, of course, just the experience of leaving MIT, I think, is really useful. Like, I remember when I was an undergrad, Harvard seemed far.

[LAUGHTER]

It's really not. And so I think part of our duty as educators also is to help broaden our students' horizons, both in the classroom, but also by encouraging them to just go explore a little bit beyond campus.

SARAH HANSEN: Right. Professor Edoh also has a unique way of broadening students' horizons within the classroom as well by reshaping their relationship with academic texts, all part of an intentional process to eradicate the barrier placed between academic work and life.

AMAH EDOH: So when I-- you know, I was a student for a very long time.

[LAUGHTER]

And I was very frequently frustrated by the fact that academic texts often feel like they're written to not be understood.

SARAH HANSEN: Right.

AMAH EDOH: And this made me really angry, because when I was in grad school for my PhD, I thought, OK, I've been in school for many years. How is it that this still makes no sense, right? Like, if it makes no sense to me, like, what are we doing here? What is the point of the academic enterprise if we produce work that can't be understood? And so this has been a gripe of mine for a very long time.

And it was all the more frustrating when there was no space to express that, right? Because I think the danger when you're a student oftentimes, especially at elite institutions, is that you internalize. Like, when you don't understand, you think there's something wrong with you, essentially. You're not good enough. You're not smart enough.

[BABBLING]

When it's a structural issue, and it's actually on the readers-- on the writers to write better work, write more clearly. So then that requires, I think, an infrastructure to support students in processing this often opaque work. And to me, that's how I was thinking about the reading responses.

So as a way to just when you're forced to sit down and write something about what you wrote, even if it's just like, I don't understand it. These are all the questions that are coming up for me. It already pushes you along, like, kind of your understanding for yourself, and then also gives me as the instructor a way to know where you're at and what I need to bring in the classroom discussion.

So what I asked students to do was to try to summarize the key points of the argument, and then they were free to take it in at any number of directions. They could either relate it to other work that we've read in class. They could relate it to stuff in the news that they're seeing around it,

seeing around them, and kind of use what was coming up in the readings as a way to make sense of these things they were observing around them. Or kind of relate it to their personal experience, something going on in their own lives.

And what I wanted to do there was, again, to show that what we do in the classroom is not separate. Academic work isn't separate from life, right? And it's not something that's only accessible to some people, right? We are always theorizing. Making sense of our experience is about theorizing. And so to offer possibilities for students to make these links between what they're reading for school and what they're experiencing in the world around them, if we can do that, I think we're in great shape as educators.

I really love being able to point to something that they've said and make them argue it, right? Or in presenting my lessons, if I can say, yeah, as you brought up in your paper, this thing is going on in the reading. That's exactly right. And we also see-- so to show that, one, I'm taking their work seriously.

SARAH HANSEN: Right.

AMAH EDOH: And also, that they have something to offer. To me, what's made the biggest difference for me in the classroom as a student has been instructors who made me feel like I had something to offer.

And the lack of that does a lot of damage, right? When you're having instructors who make you feel like you have nothing to offer, that's actually damaging. It's not just neutral. It's damaging. So it's really important for me to sort of valorize students' voices and to show them that they're doing it.

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SARAH HANSEN: Part of why we wanted to profile Professor Edoh's teaching of her Global Africa Class was her willingness to try things in the classroom that were new to her, such as inviting students to participate in creative production. This approach culminated in a final project assignment that, to say the least, exceeded expectations.

In the final project assignment, students were asked to examine how Africa's place in the world is negotiated through creative production. What kind of challenges did students take on in this work?

AMAH EDOH: My poor students. I say my poor students because this was an experiment. I thought it'd be really cool. I mean, it seemed like the right thing in the course where we're looking at people who are making creative work, doing creative work in different arenas. It seemed like the right way to culminate to ask students to do the same themselves.

SARAH HANSEN: Yeah.

AMAH EDOH: And yeah, I had no idea how it would turn out, because I didn't know what they were bringing to the table, what particular skills they had, like creative skills. But I want to believe-- this is something I try to enact in my own life-- that we all have creative skills. And so whatever you have, we can do something with it.

And bless them, because they were game for the experiment, because I hadn't done this before. I didn't know how it was going to go. But I asked them to pick a topic that they were interested in, either something we'd already talked about in class that they wanted to take father, or another topic altogether. And the key was to use this object, this thing that they would make as a way to think through these questions about Africa's place in the world. It's quite broad.

But I was so happy with the things they came up with. It was wonderful. It was so fun. We had anything from, like, there was one student who was interested in plants. And she picked this plant, one of these-- I think it's like the ficus plant. It's some plant that's really sexy right now in, like, the interior decorating world. And it's a plant that grows on the side of the street in West Africa, and so on.

And so she did this cool project or she took the plant and looked at the different ways that it is made to mean as a kind of luxury decoration item, versus in central Africa, where it's used for-- I forget-- like, some part of the tree's use for bark cloth. And so from there, you could talk about the circulation of objects and the way that value gets articulated, and so on.

Or other students who wanted to talk about the way that tradition-- that's kind of, yeah, related-- the way that tradition gets articulated. And they were interested in looking at wedding ceremonies sort of in the Nigerian-American context, where people are kind of walking across these different cultures, these two different cultural realms.

And to consider what you keep of a tradition and what you update. What does it mean to treat women a particular way and men in a particular way? What should you uphold? What should you resist, given when you are a Nigerian-American, and you're kind of beholden to you belong to these different cultures?

And so what they did, which I thought was so brilliant, was that they put together a picture book. Because also, one of the classes had talked about these photo novels as a genre of image and storytelling, image production and storytelling. And so they used that format that we talked about in the class and took the theme that they were interested in around the politics of tradition in Igbo weddings.

And she wrote a story that featured them grappling with these questions. So it was quite meta, because they told you-- they talked about the topic they were interested in, but then they also showed you the questions that it brought up. It wasn't the resolved thing. And it was meant to be circulated, and it was an object that could be used to spur questions, and so on.

And so it was fantastic. I so enjoyed them. We had a coffee ceremony in class, like an Ethiopian coffee ceremony, and the sort of questions that brings up about, what does it take to actually enact what the ceremony is supposed to enact when you take it out of Ethiopia and we take it into a dorm room, for instance, and you only have certain implements to use?

To what extent does it retain its value, its significance? But it was wonderful to see them start out being like, oh my god, I have no idea what I'm going to do, and then just figuring it out, and coming up with something amazing.

SARAH HANSEN: We actually have the example of the wedding conflict book on the OCW website. We've linked to it in the show notes, so be sure to take a look. To close our conversation, I wanted to see what advice Amah has for other educators looking to employ some of her techniques in their classes. What are her strategies for keeping her class engaging, thoughtful, and illuminating?

AMAH EDOH: So one key thing is being clear on what the core issue is in the class, right? So what's the core? What's the question that animates this class? And for me, it's useful to kind of know that and have that, because that helps me sort of adjust as needed, right?

So to figure out, OK, what do I need? What do I what do I want these students to come away with, no matter what? So that if what I have planned is not taking us there, then I can try something else that might get us there. So being clear on this question-- so for this class, global Africa, creative cultures, the idea was to examine Africa's place in the world as being made visible through different kinds of creative practice.

So I structured it according to things that I was familiar with from my work or interested in, and that I wanted to explore more. So that's one way to go about deciding what the different units are going to be, right? So I'm interested in dress, for instance, and so performance as dress was something I was really into doing.

So the pieces of the class can be completely different. They can focus on different creative practices. You can spend more than one week on a particular creative practice, right? So the building blocks can be different. And as long as the core question is clear, then you can sort of tailor that to your interests, but then also to what's available.

What's cool about the notion of creative practice is that it's very broad. It can be as broad as you want it to be. So it can be restructured any number of ways depending on the resources that are available and the questions that you or your students are interested in.

And tied to that is the fact that-- someone told me, a colleague told me once that-- we were talking. We're both first-year faculty, and we're both talking about how exhausted we were all the time. And she said someone told her that teaching is essentially like stand-up or improv, right? Like, you get up there, and you're on. And it's improv, because you are responding to what your students are giving you, and you have no idea what it's going to be.

No matter how well-planned it is, you have no idea where it might end up, and you have to respond. So it's not just that you're there taking it, but based on what you're getting, you have to figure out where to take it in order to come back to conclusions that you think you need to end at, and also be open to that not happening.

And when you're new, you just don't know. And when you've been a student, and you've had these professors up front who seemed to know exactly what they're doing what they're talking about, you don't fully appreciate the fact that it's a lot of intuitive and improvisational work. And so you can be surprised at how taxing it is, you know?

So at the end of a three-hour class, I mean, I was wasted. You're just so tired because it requires so much energy. So that's something to just kind of be aware of, which also then can inform your preparation. So to know, what you need to do in order to have enough to stock up, to fill up your tank so that you can then do this three-hour improv performance.

And generally, the less tightly designed it is, the better things work out. This is what I found and what I've heard other colleagues say, that the days when they were running from meeting to meeting and they didn't quite have enough time to finish their course prep were actually the days where the class went really well, because they had no choice but to be there, and listen to the students, and meet them where they were, and follow that organic progression of the conversation instead of sticking to their script.

Yeah. So I think you know the key pieces of advice I would give are kind of one, flexibility, both in the approach to teaching and recognizing the flexibility that you have in designing the course and choosing what you put in it. And tied to this flexibility, this experimental approach to building it and to adjusting it as it goes.

And then as a broader kind of teaching philosophy thing, what I said about using the time in the classroom as a time to build our students' confidence, to instill in our students a sense that they know, that they are capable of doing this work, to validate, to affirm, and to use that as a starting point for what it is that we want to impart onto them.

But really, to start to kind of undo some of the damage that academic work has done for so many peoples, which is that it's alienating. And so to try to make it less alienating, to say, we can do this, and we know how to do this, and we're learning. And it's OK to not know, because we're in school to learn, right?

SARAH HANSEN: Right.

AMAH EDOH: We're not supposed to know everything when we come here. To make that as part of the mission beyond both, beyond the content of the class itself, to just say, it's OK to not know, and to not know this particular material. But we know how to learn, and that's what we're here for.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH HANSEN: Amah Edoh is an assistant professor of African Studies at MIT. And now, you can follow her work wherever you are in the world. In the show notes, we've posted a link to her faculty page, which includes more information about her research background and scholarly works. As a bonus, we're also giving you a link to the Spotify playlist that one of her students created for the class. It is fantastic. Go take a listen.

Also, in our show notes, you'll find a link to Amah's Global Africa Course on MIT OpenCourseWare. For those of you who might be new to the OCW website, you'll find virtually all of MIT's course content for you to explore. If you're an educator, build curricula of any kind, or are just plain curious, please take a look. We are dedicated to making access to all of MIT's course content free and open for the world.

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