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# INQUIRY

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# Introduction

The semester is over. A new one begins, and some of you who pick up the *Inquirer* 24 are new to BMCC this fall 2017, while many others are veterans of the good teaching fight. We co-editors both attended May's morning graduation, and thrilled to see so many students walk past us, with their grandparents, parents, children, partners (and more) in attendance cheering them on, and then cheering us, the faculty on. It makes us think of who our students are, and what we do—so this issue seems fully appropriate.

First of all, we want to thank all those who submitted—for beyond the hard work of (ab)normal workloads, research, & writing, and extra time with students for mentoring and advisement, and addressing their times of peril and extreme concern—the colleagues represented here have also pulled together articles for this issue. As always, we think these are articles that can not only inform our community at BMCC, but can make their way—some fully formed, some in the process of coming into existence, into peer-reviewed and editor-reviewed journals. That is one of the things we encourage and commit to as editors of this journal.

No. 24 is heavy on reflections about, new thinking about, and new practices of teaching. While these matters are often the stuff of *Inquirer* offerings, this past academic year, Fall 2016/Spring 2017, has been particularly rich in colleague-, department- and college-wide discussions of teaching. We have attended to other issues as well—our long-deserved contract settled, the creation of an honors program, events and resources outside of the classroom, the complexities, dangers, and opportunities of being a sanctuary for our undocumented students, the ongoing throes of a Middle States evaluation, and the excitement of new programs and majors, including Gender and Women's Studies, Youth Studies, Sociology, Psychology... But our concerns about who we teach, and how we teach, are central to much of our thinking as BMCC and urban, American, internationalist professors, and that is evident here.

While the university has been rethinking developmental classes, and encouraging additional support for student success, local college faculty have also been organizing and creating new ways of student-centered teaching that can lead to a stronger sense of students' "belonging" in the classroom and in the college, to borrow a phrase from the collaborative article by Tracy Bealer and Chris Vinsonhaler. Cross-fertilization and idea sharing have been recurrent practices, along with an eagerness to rethink, to experiment, that is, to put new ideas that might seem theoretically sound, but still challenging or untested, into practice. And needless to say, we have been shaken by the political shift—a shift that threatens public education, public discourse, and our national and global communities.

We have bookended two groups of articles—and it is fitting to use the trope

of books in an era where books are so very contested, yet when some books have been renewed bestsellers, Orwell's *1984*, Hannah Arendt's *On Totalitarianism*, and we've heard our students express interest in these texts—two groups of articles which explore political and philosophical perspectives on teaching. We open with two contributions that look at teaching in the new political era, one by Cheryl Comeau-Kirshner (on reading/ using tweets) and Ewa Barnes (on teaching in the era of Trump). Added to this is an article that contends with differing views about teaching the history of the Dominican Republic, by Daly Guilamo

We wind down with three exciting public presentations and two discussions of books: first, two professors' formal presentations in the college, articles from colleagues honored for their teaching: Chamutal (Tali) Noimann offers her comments at the 2016 Teaching Awards event, and John Beaumont (also a recipient of the 2016 Teaching Award) offers his presentation at the 2017 Faculty Convocation. These articles explore the hard-earned rethinking of how, why, and what to teach. Then, a third presentation, Hollis Glaser offers her paper on faculty governance, in particular the Faculty Senate, its ties with the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), tensions with the administration's programs and plans, and academic freedom, which she presented at the June annual conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in Washington DC. Playing off these insightful discussions, we move into micro and macro attention to books: Daniel Torres reviews a book about teaching STEM students. Then Lane Glissen provides an extensive list of the BMCC library's offerings on global literature, "counter narratives, and diversity," which arose out of the Balancing the Curriculum seminar in spring 2016. It seems fitting to end with this article as a way of pointing forward to expanding our knowledge and skills for addressing diversity, global issues, and what we and our students might read.

### ***In between***

The articles in between offer more queries on rethinking how we teach: Bealer and Vinsonhaler present a lively work in progress on challenging our old ways, as they focus on retention in Eng 101 classes, a result of their participation in the Gateway Initiative, which addresses the college-wide problem of D, W, F (drop, fail, withdraw) grades. Their solution: to make our students feel they belong in these classes and in college. Carole Gregory, in a bind about how to get her students engaged, writes of borrowing ideas from her colleagues that she then refitted into her own writing classes. Both Dominique Acoccella and Adele Kudish address the essay assignment. Acoccella stresses the importance of short free-writing assignments to get students engaged in the classroom, and to be used as the basis of more effective essays. Kudish suggests we rethink the comments we give our students on their essays; she explores the possibility that they have not been helpful, and points to what we might be doing instead. Crystal Cunningham and Rose Gleicher in their separate articles look more closely at whom we teach, and ways that we can be more empathetic and aware. Cunningham focuses on her extensive experience with non-traditional students. Gleicher contrasts students from earlier decades at BMCC to those who attend now. And Yeghia Aslanian points to the important issue outside the classroom, that is, how

to encourage students to meet faculty in conference time, whether one or more students at a time.

We've closed our introduction with the "In between" articles because they are the inside of the book, the stuff of our re-examined, self-conscious, and engaged teaching. We look forward to your responses, our readers' future contributions—disagreements, elaborations, reversals, and advances in Issue 25 for the academic year fall 2017/spring 2018.

Page Delano  
Meghan Fitzgerald-Raimundo

# Critical Thinking One Tweet at a Time

Cheryl Comeau-Kirschner  
*Academic Literacy and Linguistics*

The 2016 Election gave us the first so-called “Twitter President.” Many other political figures also use social networking platforms to communicate directly with the American public. In turn, Americans have increasingly taken up this medium for political interaction too. According to the Pew Research Center (2016), nearly two-thirds of American adults use social media sites as a resource for political engagement. While Facebook may have more overall users, Twitter reigns when it comes to users having a broader range of connections to political content; furthermore, a large portion of Twitter users indicate that they follow people they do not know and those connections often represent a mix of political views, information, and actions.

Yet with a 140-character limit for each Twitter message, it might seem unlikely that meaningful interaction can occur among its users. Such is the wonder of Twitter. As Navneet Alang, in a recent *New Republic* article, aptly put it: “Twitter’s particular contradiction is its pace and brevity, which lends itself to memes, wit, and breaking news but also breeds misunderstanding, acrimony, and outright hate. It is as much a tool for harassment as it is for solidarity.”

The contradictory digital space that Twitter occupies in American discourse is exactly why it has become so useful in my Critical Thinking (CRT) 100 course. Often, concepts related to thought, language, and logical fallacies can often be esoteric or abstract for many of my CRT 100 students. The in-depth, jargon-filled nature of many popular critical thinking textbooks do not always make those concepts more tangible either. Consequently, I have spent a lot of class time scaffolding and/or revisiting material in an attempt to create “aha!” moments that enable students to grasp the material in more meaningful ways.

Knowing that 24/7 news coverage would maintain a prominent position in the 2016 election cycle and corresponding current events, I planned my CRT 100 course to explore critical thinking concepts through the lens of media inquiry. Students would be tasked with connecting those concepts to an exploration and analysis of various print and/or online media sources. The semester began with some students being more media savvy than others, and I had to provide a gentle nudge to get the whole class deeply thinking, reading, writing and connecting course content to media analysis.

My gentle nudge pushed many of them in the direction of curiosity. They were seeing a lot of political posts, news (Or was it fake? They weren’t always sure), and partisan fighting whenever they went on social media. This contentious political climate began to generate student interest in how and why everything had become so tense nationally and locally, which meant among their family and friends too. We started each day with a news headline or two to get

their perspective on an issue and understand the perspectives, potential bias or stereotyping, arguments, reasoning, and evidence—or lack thereof—within a particular source. On one of those days, a student wanted to look at a tweet because he started following Bernie Sanders on Twitter, but he didn't really understand the premise of the message. Another student chimed in with, "You gotta follow Trump. He says some crazy stuff!" Then, other students wanted to know what Bernie Sanders was referring to in his tweet or know what was "crazy" in Trump's tweets. My students' impromptu Twitter discussion became the catalyst for my own "aha!" moment that day.

So I was going to have them tweet. The brevity of a tweet could make it a quick, beginning-of-class activity in which students would test their own understanding of course content, and I could quickly assess that understanding (or lack thereof). First, I wanted students to read about the rise of new media, especially social media platforms, and how this new media has changed our societal and political discourse. Then, I had small groups consider whom they wanted to follow on Twitter, and why they wanted to follow particular public figures, publications, or other organizations; essentially, how would following certain entities provide awareness from a macro or micro perspective within the world of politics, current events, and so on? Each group reported their choices to the whole class. We discussed those choices together, which actually turned into a lively debate, and came up with a list. The sorting and listing process also provided an outlet for a number of interesting tangents. For example, we touched upon the notion of media bias/slant, participating in an "echo chamber" to confirm a specific worldview.

After we culled our list of Twitter entities to follow, I signed up for a class account. I did not require my students to sign up for their own account, but some of them already had one, while others decided to sign up for their own based on our class discussion. From that point on, the "Tweet of the Day" was a semi-regular class activity throughout the semester.

Sometimes, I showed the students a Tweet of the Day that enabled us to discuss the choice of words, the premise(s) and conclusion, and if there was any logical fallacy involved in the tweet. Other times, students suggested that we check in on a particular public figure to see how they were initiating discussion or responding to an event. A number of students also used Twitter as a personal library of sorts for their evaluating online resources and media analysis assignments. Perhaps the overarching strength of the "Tweet of the Day" for my CRT students was the ability to strip away all of the complexity of course content. Essentially, the pace and brevity of tweets removed the layers of information that sometimes impeded comprehension, retention, and real-life applicability of the material. Who knew that 140 characters at a time could do all that?

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# Teaching in the Era of Trump

Ewa Barnes

*Academic Language and Literacy*

Since November 9th of this past year, when we woke up shell-shocked to learn that Hillary Clinton was not the new president of the United States, and that, what is worse, the new president was a businessman with no experience in politics, a man who aired contempt for the long-standing American values of liberty, equality and justice, and who instead promoted white supremacy, misogyny and hatred for immigrants—that day many of us educators woke up grappling with the same dilemmas: How to teach in the era of Trump? Do we remain neutral for fear of being accused of trying to indoctrinate our students? Or do we discuss current events and risk pushing our own political agenda onto them? Do we act like the Trump era is politics as usual, as if education can be separated from politics? Or do we let the students know, openly and straightforwardly, that we've been depressed since November 9th, and insist that it is a part of our job to speak out?

I myself had, initially, fallen somewhere in between those two positions. Outside the classroom, with friends and colleagues, I despair every time President Trump speaks, tweets, and signs laws. I am a liberal, but I also strongly believe that the role of an educator is to inform, not to indoctrinate. To ask open-ended questions, not to lecture on how to answer them. Politics is important, as is awareness of what is happening in the world, but there is a fine line between explaining the differences between our two political parties and between suggesting that Democrats are better than Republicans. Consequently, in the classroom I teach as I always did—with an ongoing effort to appear neutral. Or so I thought.

This semester, after the election, I decided I had to continue incorporating current events into my Critical Thinking course's curriculum. After all, BMCC's mission statement says that we prepare students for, among other things, "lifelong learning and civic participation." And in which course can we better promote lifelong learning and civic participation than in CRT, the sea of inquiry and informed decision-making? Plus, one of the course's main objectives is to teach students how to recognize biases, including stereotypes and fallacies in thinking, with regard to personal, academic, and contemporary issues. President Trump appeared to provide all the necessary materials to achieve all those objectives.

I decided that, instead of letting the students know what I really think of our new president, I would show them bits and pieces of current events, say of President Trump's speeches, and let the students decide if they included any bias or misleading information. I would also portray other politicians, including former President Obama, in a critical light, so as not to appear biased myself.

Accordingly, when we talked about the use of rhetorical devices, I flashed examples of both Obama and Trump, to demonstrate how politicians can use



language to manipulate. Obama's euphemism for innocent people killed by drone strikes was the phrase "civilian casualties." Trump announced that more people attended his Inauguration than his predecessor's, although the numbers quoted by the National Park Service revealed otherwise. In the lesson, I made a distinction between rhetorical devices and straight out lies. A student pointed out that while Obama sugarcoated a truth that we would rather not acknowledge, Trump told lies. I found myself agreeing with the student.

In a follow-up lesson, when I showed a skit from Saturday Night Live in which a shirtless Putin, the Russian president, pays a surprise visit to Trump and, unbeknownst to the latter, installs a camera in Trump's living quarters, I asked the students to identify the rhetorical devices the media employed. I also wanted to know if those devices were effective. The students discussed the power of sarcasm and hyperbole. One student said that, sure, SNL makes fun of Trump, but there is truth underneath all the humor. Several others agreed. While I continued to make an effort to appear objective, I couldn't help but nod in agreement.

And then, in a lesson on moral choices, I introduced two variants of the trolley problem, the infamous thought experiment in ethics. And it wasn't going to be a lesson on Trump.

Imagine, I told my students, that you are on a trolley heading down the tracks. Up ahead on the tracks are five people. They are tied up and cannot move. You realize that if you pull a lever, it would cause the trolley to veer off to a side track, and the five people would be saved. But there is a catch: on the side track is a man, unaware of the danger. If you pull the lever, he will die. What do you do?

Most students in the class, like most people surveyed over the past several decades, decided that they would pull the lever. Saving five lives, they reasoned, while causing one person to die makes sense, mathematically and morally speaking.

Now let's move to the second scenario.

You are on a bridge as the same trolley is about to pass under. You can stop it by putting something heavy in front of it. As fate would have it, there is a fat man standing next to you on the bridge. You realize that your only chance to stop the trolley is to push the man down onto the tracks. Do you do nothing, allowing five people to die? Or do you push the fat man down, thereby killing him, but saving the others?

Most students in the class, like most surveyed people, said that they would not push the man down the tracks. The idea of intentionally causing another person's death is too difficult to bear. This, of course, reveals a distinction we tend to make: even though in both cases we can save five lives and lose one, there is a difference between pulling the lever, which, in turn, causes a death, and between actively committing a murder.

One student asked what if... the fat man on the bridge was one rather unpopular politician. A few students enthusiastically said that they would change their mind: him they would push down the tracks.

Was I supposed to tell the students that their comments were inappropriate? As I tried to frame the comments as another variant of the trolley problem—what



if the fat man on the bridge was your enemy—I felt proud of my students: they not only added a new complexity to the moral dilemma, and thus demonstrated the ability to think critically; they also, out of their own initiative, showed a civic awareness that happened to coincide with my own and everyone else’s who appeared sane to me. Of course, as I pointed out to the class, a fantasy of assassinating a public figure is never a desirable option; however, an open discussion about why Trump should be removed from office, and how this can be done, should be a good workout for the brain.

And then it dawned on me. What if, among my CRT students, there was a Trump supporter?

Given that BMCC, as it proudly announces on its website, “enrolls more international students than any other community college in the Northeast,” the chances that an anti-immigrant president might have a fan lurking around the classroom body was unlikely. And yet, I worried, because it was possible. What is more, I feared that my mysterious Trump supporter was feeling isolated, unwelcome, silenced by the anti-Trump majority, to which I myself now openly belonged.

And yet, it felt good to pick a side, to find common ground with students in the light of the disastrous first few weeks of Trump’s presidency. In addition, Trump seems to be on an ongoing pathway to committing all the faux pas of critical thinking. To justify the repeal of The Affordable Care Act, Trump calls it a disaster and cites evidence that confirms his stance when, in fact, the health care law has decreased health care spending and increased the number of people with insurance: that’s what we call a confirmation bias. When a federal judge in Hawaii blocked the administration’s revised travel ban because the bill discriminates against Muslims, Trump accused the judge of “judicial overreach” and of political motivations: that’s called *ad hominem* fallacy. When reporters ask Trump about his team’s ties to Russia, Trump responds that everyone, except for the “dishonest journalists,” knows it’s “fake news”: that’s the bandwagon approach. In other words, Trump is the perfect case study for... what not to do as a critical thinker.

And then it happened: I discovered that there was a Trump supporter in my classroom.

The assignment, on Blackboard’s Discussion Board, was to select a controversial topic, write a paragraph using emotive language and rhetoric supporting one side of the issue, rewrite the paragraph using neutral language, and evaluate whether your argument depended on emotive language and rhetorical devices rather than reason.

The student, whom I will refer to as Student X, wrote that Trump will improve our lives. That he knows how to get what he wants. That America desperately needs him. That if he can win the presidential election without any political experience, he can do anything.

I was shocked. In my head, I replayed all the conversations we had had over semester, and remembered that this particular student did not laugh when I showed the SNL skit of Trump; and he was silent when we discussed the trolley problem. He was excluded. And he was excluded not only by his classmates, but,

most of all, by me. And if he was excluded, then I wasn't doing my job very well.

I was also anxious that other students, upon seeing X's post, would attack him. After all, most, if not all of the other students were against Trump. I imagined an online fight, accusatory statements, offensive language. Instead, another student responded that her friend, a Trump supporter, is afraid to tell his own friends who he voted for. The student added that she hoped her friend would be able to say who he voted for without having to fear retributions.

That, of course, is what I also want in the classroom. All students, regardless of their race, gender, country of origin, and regardless of their beliefs—all students should be comfortable expressing their viewpoints. No one should come to the conclusion that if they speak up, they will be laughed at, or, worse, bullied.

I am not suggesting that we stop debating controversial topics because there might be one or two students whose opinions differ from the rest; but I do think that, as educators, we must exert an air of objectivity that will allow all students to feel comfortable expressing their viewpoints. Moreover, even if a majority of students believes that, say, electing Donald Trump as president of the United States was a grave mistake, we should make it clear to the class that opposing viewpoints are welcome, as I reiterated to my students the other day. To prepare students for lifelong learning and civic participation, we must let them know that, while being in the minority can be isolating, it doesn't mean they should remain silent. It's easy to discuss a controversial topic if everyone agrees with us; the ability to have a respectful discussion about an issue we care about with someone who disagrees, now that is an important skill, both in a critical thinking course and in life in general. After all, one of BMCC's strategic goals says that we aim to "improve student experience." And the only way to do this is to include all students in the conversation. And that, invariably, means to also listen.

# Reflections on Teaching Dominican History at BMCC

Daly Guilamo

*Center for Ethnic Studies*

This paper reflects on teaching an introductory level history course, LAT 131, The History of the Dominican Republic, to primarily Dominican born and Dominican American students at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. When teaching Dominican history in the US to Dominican students, professors run the risk of encountering ultra nationalism transferred from the formal and informal educational experience on the island, and this is complicated by Dominican history professors at CUNY having the reputation of being ‘illegitimate’ authorities who disrupt the grand narratives fabricated in the Dominican Republic.

Most professors can agree that at times students find themselves at odds with what they encounter in the classroom, most likely due to their familial backgrounds and/or socialization. As a result, some students take the classroom material back into their homes to engage their families, and from here they import back into the classroom anecdotal stories. Sometimes, unexpectedly for the student, such actions expose him/her to their families’ ideas and prejudices. In various instances, Dominican students have confessed to me that their parents look down on the course material and shun the idea that Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jean Pierre-Boyer, anti-colonial Haitian revolutionaries of the 19th century, for instance, abolished slavery in Santo Domingo. Both historical figures fought European colonial powers to free Haiti from slavery. In turn, both occupied the Dominican side of the island importing anti-colonial policies, historical events that Dominicans are socialized to abhor until this day. As such, my class constantly interrogates students as to why the Dominican Republic celebrates its independence from Haiti and not Spain or another European colonial superpower. The Dominican Republic’s history is replete with anti-Haitian intellectuals and social engineers that have forged the Dominican nation as anything but black. The course, in turn, forces the student to confront this reality.

One student, upon showing her mother the course text, *The Dominican People* authored by Ernesto Sagás and Orlando Inoa, reported that her mother told her to “cleanse her blood.” Another students’ grandmother told him that reading such a text would “turn him into a Haitian.” In other words, the ideas they encounter in the classroom are met with resistance at home to the extent that family members find them physically contaminating. While some students side with their parents, most do not. Yet, as a professor I find myself a stranger to these students competing with their families that have loved, nurtured, and financially maintained them. Concomitantly, I do find that my Dominican background and age allows Dominican students to easily relate to me in spite of all of the resis-

tance they encounter at home. I constantly ask myself, how can a professor best navigate such sensitive and complicated terrain without turning the Dominican student off or losing his/her interest?

My struggle as a professor consists of encouraging students to rely on objective evidence, particularly through the direct analysis of historical documents. Silvio Torres-Saillant, in *Introduction to Dominican Blackness*, clearly argues that the damaging effects of the DR's conservative intelligentsia that has controlled Dominican public education in cahoots with the Dominican State are to blame, stating that:

We at this point have no way of knowing the extent to which future Dominican governments would be willing to embrace educational and social agendas aimed at repairing the cultural damage perpetrated by the scribes of the conservative power structure. Nor would it be advisable...to place the nation's cultural future in the hands of the State. But we can be certain of the pivotal role that the Dominican diaspora in the US will play, with or without the assistance of any government, in the configuration of a humanely inclusive conceptualization of racial identity in Dominican society. (50)

Because Dominicans have historically been socialized to see themselves as the extension of the European colonial project and not its resistance, it is possible that they transmit their values onto their children. There is only but so much that a professor in the US can do to challenge the colonial narrative already embedded within the migrant or Americanized Dominican student, but as Saillant notes, the students here make learning a more objective history possible. One advantage of students entering BMCC and enrolling in LAT 131, is that many of them are still young, in their early 20s, born and /or raised in the US and distanced from the Dominican Republic's elite persistent negrophobic discourse, and familiar with people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. They often attend classes with Haitian students their age, enroll in ethnic studies courses that teach anti-racist history and theory, and are intellectually more open and resistant to anti-racist ideas.

Some students' ideas change throughout the semester upon encountering new information that contradicts what they encounter at home and in other familial spaces; while others remain unaffected. Yet, throughout the course, when Dominican students are asked about their history many mention that they are completely unfamiliar with any of it with the exception of family stories of the Trujillo dictatorship. Interestingly, students end up speaking of themselves in terms of pride in their Dominican heritage while admitting that they know next to nothing of Dominican history. When asked about their reasons for their national pride, emotionally laden physical reactions emerge. They provide reasons such as "it's where I come from" or "we're funny" or "I love the food and music." When asked what makes them Dominican they exclaim "*mangú*." Not to trivialize their identity, but *mangú*, one of the oldest dishes of the DR, is made of mashed green plantains often eaten for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Dominican

migration to NYC has made *mangú* a transnational dish preferred by working class Dominicans (Marte 59). Dominican students, articulate, in their own way, state that they are mainly familiar with Dominican popular culture more so than history.

Many Dominican students have reported to take the course not only to fulfill graduation credits, but also because they figure it would serve them well to actually take time out to learn about their country's history since they probably will never be afforded the opportunity again. Because BMCC has such a high Dominican population, the Center for Ethnic Studies created a course specifically to address the Dominican population, a course that they can actually use to major in if they decide to enroll at City College's Dominican Studies Institute.

Recently, a Dominican history professor in the Dominican Republic, Jaime de Jesus Domingues, wrote an opinion piece in the Dominican newspaper *Hoy* complaining that Dominican students only enroll in the course because it is a requirement, not because, having lived in the Dominican Republic, they need to learn Dominican history. Silvio Torres-Saillant in the City College's *Bluebook* responded to this arrogant approach toward their history, both for those in the DR and those of Dominican descent, stating:

But you cannot rely on your bloodstream to learn the complex experience and cultural production of any human population, especially not the one you regard as 'your own.' You have to study the thing. I did not know the Dominican heritage before studying even if I thought I was 'it.' Young people need to keep themselves reminded that it takes as much intellectual engagement to learn 'their own' as it does to learn the Napoleonic era or the ancient Mediterranean. Assuming knowledge of a people you have not bothered to learn about is a classical definition of prejudice, the thing that racism depends on.

Teaching students the value of being open and receptive to new information and ideas that may make them uncomfortable is a task a professor must always engage in throughout any course, but especially in the beginning. I find that explaining the syllabus at the beginning of the course, as in any other course, serves as the safest entryway to inform students as to what they are going to encounter. In this way, they can decide whether to remain enrolled in the class. First, asking students what they know about Dominican history while posing trivia history questions, showing them a brief breakdown of a Dominican history timeline, presenting the map of the island in its entirety and in the Caribbean, eases tensions and discomforts and opens the class for discussion. Many students confess their unfamiliarity with the geographical areas of the Caribbean and confront the fact that being of Dominican descent does not automatically or naturally or magically grant one an all-encompassing knowledge of the DR, demonstrating intellectual humility that in essence is personal growth.

Some students rely on word of mouth as factual sources of information. While others rely on pride and blind nationalism. History courses may make fanatics of certain ideologies uncomfortable—take nationalism as an example.

I often give students the example of a religious fanatic taking a history course on the History of the Spread of Said Religion. I warn students that the fanatic may end up either detached from the religion or an atheist by the semester's end upon discovering the atrocities committed by historical figures and institutions. In other words, one must not be blinded by loyalty to anything and especially to something one is not fully knowledgeable of. In fact, one must not pledge blind allegiance to anything. Benedict Anderson contends that the idea of a nation is illusory for "it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6).

Yet, the professor's opinion piece in *Hoy* becomes problematic when he uses history to promote ultra nationalism. In his view, professors of Dominican history "[s]hould show as they teach: the great heroic accomplishments that our country has achieved in maintaining the independence of the Dominican Republic, with the objective to reinforce [students'] patriotism." At this point I cannot help but ponder as to whether focusing solely on "great heroic accomplishments" in "maintaining" independence is an undercover form of suggesting that Dominicans continue to justify anti-Haitianism? I have to question how much emphasis he will place on African maroon Sebastian Lemba's guerrilla resistance against the Spanish, Gregorio Luperon's revolution against the Spanish, or the anti imperialist gavilleros' resistance against the US marine invaders, and the 20th century anti US imperialists Constitutionalists that fought to restore democracy to the DR? I cannot help but question as to how much attention he will place on anti-heroes such as Pedro Santana and Buenaventura Baez that profited off of selling the Dominican Republic?

The professor goes on to write, "[The history professor] should instill faith in the future of the country uplifting its positive values, and not denigrating heroes for their personal defects that we all, in one way or another, have. Our heroes are our principle ideological wall of protection of our sovereignty." This is another problem US professors of Dominican history encounter in classrooms when the Dominican student transfers their nationalist learning experience into the classroom. Prohibiting students from critiquing heroes because we all have flaws is problematic. For heroes are imperfect, as the professor argues, and although we too are imperfect how can we learn from history without a full critique of even the aspects we most revere? Intellectual maturity requires that we swallow and accept truths that make us uncomfortable; accepting otherwise is to live in illusion. One cannot approach Dominican history with a nationalist approach based on romanticism. For flawed individuals that did contribute to the formation of the Dominican Republic did exist and to not acknowledge them with their flaws is to also not acknowledge the flaws of the Dominican Republic that do exist and are still linked to those characters. Critically analyzing historical figures, pinpointing flaws and all, will only allow us to see reality in its full rawness.

Romanticizing history is an anti-intellectual endeavor. In properly analyzing history, there is no room for protecting frail emotions since that would block both



proper analysis of the past and where the country finds itself situated in present times. I always end my course by asking students to define the Dominican people through their explanation of the Dominican people's historical development. Most reports indicate their comprehension of Dominicans as a people that struggle with blackness especially as it relates to Haiti. I have found that students' attention piques in discussion of Columbus, plummets during the Haitian occupation, and piques once again during the dictatorship of the Trujillo era of the 20th century, almost as though students are looking for a gangster to admire only to learn that Trujillo is the farthest thing from a Dominican Robin Hood. Upon encountering the April 1965 revolution, most students relate and constantly comment that their generation has no leaders and no purpose or anything to fight for.

Dominican ultra nationalism blinds the student with what I call a pseudo flawlessness complex where the Dominican sees his/her country and people through a rosy lens encapsulated in pure flawlessness wrapped up in utopian illusions and then finding the lens fogged through history, via historical documents, that contradicts what s/he wants to believe. I believe this fog unleashes a pulling-the-rug-from-under-your-feet effect. I find that placing extra emphasis in analyzing historical figures and events ultranationalists constantly cite to justify their xenophobia is/was one way to arm students with a thorough non-blinded approach to Dominican history. Those figures and events consist of: the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, the 1937 Haitian massacre, and Jose Francisco Peña Gomez presidency, and the lie of the fusion (international conspiracy to merge both countries as though Haitians are envious of Dominicans and have nothing to contribute to Dominican society, nationalist arrogance used to politically manipulate the popular class).

Unfortunately, encountering students that praise Dominican dictator Trujillo is too common a phenomenon, an actual contradiction when clinging to the pseudo flawlessness complex. On numerous instances students enter the classroom with pathological conceptions of Dominican society to the extent that their proposed antidote to all Dominican social problems is the Trujillista iron fist. When these students are interrogated at length about their familiarity with the regime, their sources are their grandparents that romanticize the so-called good old days when "the streets were clean" and "no one stole anything." Silvio Torres-Saillant in "Afro-Latinas/os and the Racial Wall" reports on two instances where students clung to Dominican heads of state that were monumental in oppressing the Dominican people, Balaguer and Trujillo. In one incident, Dominican students at Cornell University wanted to invite Balaguer to speak simply because he was the president of the DR at the time, completely unaware of his ties to Trujillo and his oppressive 12 years. In another instance at Syracuse University, Dominican students held an exhibit of Latinx pride presenting Trujillo as a source of pride for the reason that he "served as president of his country for 30 years and ...brought stability and order to Dominican society" (373). When Torres-Saillant confronted the students, presented them with a plethora of facts of Trujillo's reign of terror and the 1937 Haitian massacre, they simply dismissed him as having "an opinion." Distinguishing fact from opinion is an endeavor all scholars engage in. For this reason, I would like to make the call for Dominican



intellectuals to come together more frequently and engage in consciousness raising more often in places frequented by laypersons of Dominican descent using the language of the masses, selling books at affordable prices, or even gifting reading materials to those non-academics interested in Dominican history. We must also begin translating Spanish works into English and encourage Dominicans on the island to do the same. Although I'm quite sure that there are old ideas, I believe that it is one way to encourage Dominicans to break free from ultra nationalism, since it is a form of ignorance based on illusion-based perceptions of self, nation, and country. I have found some ultra nationalists begin to attack CUNY professors for teaching Dominican history from an anti-colonial stance that dethrones Dominican anti-Haitianism. Some have made phone calls to deans, others have created social media memes and online articles. In a 2015 Dominican book fair at Gregorio Luperon High School, I witnessed militant ultra nationalists protesting City College's Dominican Studies Institute for publishing a book on the Dominican founding father Juan Pablo Duarte. One Dominican woman, in particular, stepped up to me and ranted against the Dominican Studies Institute table for selling well-researched material on the Trujillo dictatorship on the grounds that they "wrongfully" vilify the dictator.

My conjecture is that the ultra nationalists now find the illusion they have been promoting challenged. We must continue to decolonize Dominican history and its narrative. For what will the Dominican people be remembered for aside from anti-Haitianism? I always advise students that demeaning others is not a requirement for celebrating oneself.

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# “I Belong!” Empowering Students to Thrive in Academic Communities

Tracy Bealer and Chris Vinsonhaler  
*English*

Every semester we see them: students with dreams and aspirations, enthusiasm and vibrancy, high hopes and boundless energy. But too often, these same students, so capable and full of promise, fall by the wayside. And this devastating loss may occur despite our most devoted efforts to reach out one to one.

This essay presents a pro-active intervention that made a remarkable difference for our English 101 students. The intervention was easy to implement, and the pay-offs were impressive. Not only did it increase retention rates, it also improved performance outcomes, heightened student responsiveness, and enhanced classroom community.

We developed the project for the Gateway Initiative, which was created in response to the high DFW (Drop, Fail, Withdraw) rate, particularly in the courses that students first encounter. At BMCC, the Gateway DFW rate fell between 19% and 62% in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Equally important is the research that demonstrates a link between the Gateway DFW rate and failure to graduate. To put it in plain terms, students who fail or drop a Gateway course are statistically less likely to persist in college than those who pass their Gateway courses.<sup>2</sup> The long-term impact is devastating. Nationally, far too many students show up to college but never earn degrees: “More than 40 percent of American students who start at four-year colleges haven’t earned a degree after six years.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, with a total collegiate drop out rate of greater than 50%, the national record is “worse than any other country except Hungary.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the BMCC Gateway Initiative was begun—to support faculty as they investigate specific interventions and share assessments for improving student success.

## ***I Belong!***

Our project generated impressive results. Before implementing our project, our four English 101 sections averaged a 43% DFW rate, roughly the average gateway DFW rate at BMCC. After the intervention, our English 101 sections averaged an 18% DFW rate. In addition, the percentage of students performing above C rose as well.

Our project combined two different interventions. The first was an adaptation of an intervention initially developed at the University of Texas at Austin in

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1. Borough of Manhattan Community College, “Reaching Greater Levels: Strategic Plan 2015-2020.”

2. Tough, Paul. “Who Gets to Graduate?” *The New York Times*. May 19, 2014.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

response to the strong socio-economic bias in graduate rates. To put it simply: Rich students almost always graduate; poor and working class students too often do not. Whereas poor students from the bottom half of income distribution have roughly a 25% chance of graduating by age 24, rich students from the top 25% of income distribution enjoy a 90% graduation rate. Moreover, this success ratio occurred even when students with the same standardized-test scores were compared.<sup>5</sup>

The research team identified psychological barriers as a significant explanatory factor. They determined that economically disadvantaged students within academic communities often experience profound alienation—a feeling of “not belonging.”<sup>6</sup> Put another way, economically advantaged students inherently feel a sense of “privilege,” which is in fact the psychological assumption, “I *do* belong.” And this crucial sense of belonging, of “privilege,” is precisely what low-income students lack.

Of the several programs that emerged from the study, we elected to implement a peer-mentorship intervention, as a means to enhance a sense of belonging within the academic peer group. Accordingly, we assigned students to write a letter to the advancing cohort of students—reporting the challenges they encountered and the strategies they used to surmount those strategies. All told, the exercise of drafting, editing, and revision took just 30 minutes. And the positive effects were immediately obvious: First, the letters generate peer-to-peer “welcome” to the next cohort of students, who are in effect mentored by the previous cohort. Secondly, the intervention enabled the letter-writing cohort to articulate and confirm their own expertise as successful members of the academic community. We propose that this simple intervention could be implemented in virtually every Gateway Course here at BMCC, regardless of content.

### ***Optimizing Performance***

Our second intervention augmented peer-mentorship by developing a Community of Practice based in metacognitive strategies. As we explained to the students, “metacognition” represents “the higher-order thinking that enables understanding, analysis, and control of one’s cognitive processes, especially when engaged in learning.”<sup>7</sup>

Our goal was to augment student success by engaging the entire community (ourselves included) in strategies that would optimize performance and provide a foundation for future success. This content was also a natural choice, given that the English 101 course specifically emphasizes critical thinking, along with analytical reading and writing. Throughout the semester, metacognition formed a substantial content base. Accordingly, students engaged with an array of research-based topics:

- 1) Growth Mindsets. Neurological research now demonstrates that intelligence is not “fixed” as formerly assumed, but can be grown. And psychological re-

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5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7 “Metacognition.” *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/metacognition> (accessed October 10, 2016).

search demonstrates that those with a “growth mindset” demonstrate higher perseverance, what Angela Duckworth aptly calls “grit,” when encountering difficult tasks.<sup>8</sup>

- 2) Positive Psychology. Research not only demonstrates the ways in which performance is optimized by focusing on positive vs. negative life experiences, it also provides specific interventions to enhance positive mindsets and interventions.<sup>9</sup>
- 3) Learning Strategies. Writing is a way of thinking, as well as a mode of communication. We incorporated the Write-to-Think process within the students’ writing Portfolio.<sup>10</sup> In addition, we emphasized the importance of incremental learning, encouraging students to break assignments into hour-long segments, rather than cram at the last minute.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, following research on the performance benefits of Time Management and Organization, we supported students in keeping a well-organized set of notes, handouts, and written projects in a Portfolio.<sup>12</sup>
- 4) Multiple Intelligences. Research demonstrates that most academic instruction engages only two forms of intelligence, linguistic and logical. Nevertheless, intelligence encompasses an array of other modalities: kinesthetic, visual, auditory, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Our methods thus encompass these other modalities to incorporate different learning styles and heighten engagement.<sup>13</sup>
- 5) Body-Mind Strategies. Research demonstrates that variables of diet,<sup>14</sup> exercise,<sup>15</sup> sleep,<sup>16</sup> social isolation,<sup>17</sup> prolonged sitting,<sup>18</sup> and prolonged stress<sup>19</sup> generate profound impacts on cognitive performance.

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8. For information on the growth mindset, see Carol Dweck. *Psychology of Success*. Ballantine Books, 2007. For information on perseverance and “grit,” see Duckworth, Angela. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Scribner, 2016.

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### ***Methods and Outcomes***

We also used different methods to engage our students with this information:

- 1) The Info-Bite. In this method, the teacher opens the class with a brief nugget of information as “food for thought.” Students were invited to engage with this information in a free “Write-to-Think” reflection or in discussion.
- 2) Readings, Audio and Video Resources. We incorporated these three media inside and outside of class, with students engaging in written and spoken reflections.
- 3) Personal Essays on Resilience. In one course, students wrote “This I Believe” essays following the NPR “This I Believe” format<sup>20</sup> about a life experience in which they struggled and ultimately triumphed. Students then offered a public reading hosted by the BMCC Library with “This I Believe: True Life Stories.”
- 4) Research Paper. Students chose topics from the metacognitive information to develop in a research paper.

The Community of Practice created through this approach definitely gave students (and teachers) exciting new tools to optimize performance. And as learning was enhanced, the sense of camaraderie and companionship was enhanced too—increasing engagement and motivation among all participants. Lastly, the exciting performance outcomes created through our Community of Practice certainly found a voice in the mentoring letters that our students wrote at the end of the semester to the next cohort. As one student explained, “When I first came into the class, I was scared because I didn’t know what to expect. However, all of the texts and videos helped me a lot. The life skills I used was [sic] eating, getting enough sleep, and making sure I did my homework as soon as I went home. A positive attitude was important in this class too because it helped me share my ideas... This semester in English 101 was the best.”

In other words: “I *belong* at BMCC... and you can too!”

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20. See [ThisIbelieve.org](http://ThisIbelieve.org) for information on the “This I Believe” program.

# If A Tree Will Not Bend, It Will Break

Carole Gregory

*English*

To pass a final exam in English while in my senior year of a public school that had been zoned “private,” my college preparatory English class read all of Shakespeare’s sonnets, comedies, and tragedies. Our strict teacher, Mr. Wilson, permitted three errors, and when he reached this number a paper received the mark of “C.” I earned a “B” in that class, and proudly typed out an application to three colleges on a typewriter my mother had purchased for me. Half of our kitchen table served as my desk, and the other half of the table held my mother’s ironed clothes. Earlier, as a straight “A” student in the sixth grade, my teachers made me believe I could succeed although I lived in a housing project just up from “The Monkey’s Nest” where Negroes with high school drop-out parents strained to eke out an existence on food stamps. After sending off applications although my parents could not afford college, a committee of English teachers at an Ohio university read my 500-word essay, and accepted me in 1963. My hours of erasing my teenage slang like “everything is uptight” to mean “fine” had been rewarded. Yet I felt a loss of witty language my dictionary and thesaurus had replaced. Alice Walker once said she was suicidal, going from a poor family to a wealthy women’s college. However, my writing revealed that I was an insider who belonged, and I could write papers identical to Mr. Wilson’s work.

When I arrived with my letter to register, a Faulkner scholar told me that English departments did not hire “Negroes or women,” and I secretly registered at night when part-time students were accepting letters. Next, a composition teacher assigned as required books Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and a dictionary. At the same time, many college teachers joined this liberal teacher to protest the war in Vietnam, and when the lives of young men were at stake, traditional obedience to authority broke down. Feeling like I was walking on the fault line of an earthquake in our lily-white English department, my writing reflected a command of both creative thought and grammar. For example, R. B. Shuman of Duke University published my poetry in an anthology called *Nine Black Writers* before I had graduated. Satisfying teachers while working a typing position in the local NAACP, I earned a B. A. degree in English in 1968. Prior to those radical days of the Sixties and the women’s Seventies, the social purpose of writing was communication. The academic goals were primarily argumentation and a research paper on the due dates.

In contrast to my Ohio experience, at the CUNY community colleges students from poor neighborhoods in New York were attending English classes without any knowledge of grammar. This method had been removed from the K to 12 curriculum. Evidence of this policy was that students could rarely write a coherent sentence or paragraph in an essay. Also, the enriching ESL and reticent



international students filled the classrooms beside many students who had not acquired college readiness. A historical wind swept in these mixtures. In 1965 there was an “open admission” for Black and Puerto Rican graduates due to student activists who literally took over the campus of City College. Facing angry police and scared parents, Black and Puerto Rican activists overturned high test scores, college preparatory classes, and a high scoring Regent diploma as entrance criteria.

When slang, profanity, patois, and idiom had become the main English most students spoke, their clashes with standard English at the colleges landed these unprepared students in remedial English classes. Many of these students speak what I have called “spoken word profanity” for descriptions, and they refused to open a dictionary to find synonyms, adjectives, or adverbs. (As the students would say, “This is messed up!”) With an ongoing conflict between my academic background and the students’ lack of college readiness, this turmoil forced a major teaching change. *My transformation went from an emphasis upon working primarily with the writing process to teaching by the method of “groups” and by using a community of teachers as resources.*

### ***What I Used To Do***

I once passed out the course syllabus, went over the four essay and one research paper requirements with students, and expected drafts of essays on the due dates. Lecturing on the writing process, I would explain the section on the writing process from Gardner’s *Literature: A Portable Anthology* and Professor Margaret Barrow’s “Valuing the Writing Process” (4) along with my main points. In all English 201 classes, the students had submitted a first draft of an essay on Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, but no one had written a thesis statement. *My mind was searching for a change.*

### ***How Did My Method Change?***

One day I was passing Professor Barrow’s composition class, and I entered the room. She allowed me to watch how her students participated in two groups. Convener of the “Transition and Transactions” conferences and an Associate Professor of English, Professor Barrow has specialized in pedagogy. Also, as a deputy chair, she has listened patiently to endless complaints from teachers who stated that too many students were not buying books, and were not reading the assignments. Then, these students were submitting unacceptable papers. Sadly, plagiarism was also rampant, and off the hook. During this semester, Spring 2017, I observed Professor Barrow’s method of creating a community among students. Her students had read Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” and there was a contest to define vocabulary words. Two separated groups exchanged words, and then the opposing groups defined them. Prof. Barrow, the referee regarding acceptable answers, assigned a number value to their answers. One side would score higher than the other. We all laughed, and as a reading teacher I observed a deep comprehension of the article. Thus, the students’ comprehension would make it possible to pass an examination.

Telling the class that to improve thesis sentence writing, I planned to ex-



plore group work. To understand Professor Barrow's method, I read her article "Developing Discussion as a Learning Resource: Discussion Practices in the Community College English Classroom," (203–204 *Inquirer* 22) and I wanted to experiment. Consequently, my lessons changed by dividing the English 201 classes into two competing groups. Then, students were required to compose a second draft of their essay on Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* with a coherent thesis sentence. They had contests on the effectiveness of their sentences, and fought for the highest score.

All classes were receptive to this approach of competition. One important concept influenced my change. *This was Professor Barrow's idea of allowing students to lead the discussions of the lessons* ("Developing" 203). For example, students wrote down their definitions of the literary symbol of a "doll" from Ibsen's play. Prior to the change in my teaching, one student, whom I shall call "David Liu," had never spoken. However, he wrote about a symbol, and his grandmother in Mainland China. He said, "She was told no education. She like Nora. A doll. My grandmother woke up, and become a teacher." Then, Mr. Liu defined symbol correctly. Next, his group gave literary terms to the other side, and they joyously competed for the rest of the semester. As the referee, I assigned points for answers from two groups. Quiet and aggressive students now wanted to win the competition, and they diligently prepared for each class. *Students wanted their voices to be heard.*

Other examples of students finding their own voices were in response to Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" and Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Mother." The themes of "walls" and "abortions" were explored through definitions of literary terms and theme. I recalled that in a norming English 101 grading session, Michael Gillespie, then Dean of Academic Affairs, had made a suggestion that students keep an "error log" to keep track of mistakes in sequential papers. Most of my students employed this technique as we moved from the play to the short story and then poetry. In "Mending Wall," there was a dialogue between two farmers who met every spring to rebuild a broken fence. The persona of the first farmer declared a desire for understanding. In the first farmer's opinion, a fence only alienated people, but the second farmer wanted the fence yearly repaired based on a family tradition. Repulsed by blind conditioning, Frost wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

One student, who identified himself as a Mexican immigrant, wrote freely in response to this quotation. He was another student who had never spoken in class. I shall call him "Juan Gonzales." He felt a sense of betrayal by President Trump's wall proposal. He wrote, "People who feel hatred for immigrants are ignorant. If they were in my shoes, they would be rioting and protesting the building of a wall." His Xeroxed paper had an "error log" page, and stimulated conversations about barriers between people of different ethnic groups, religions, and creeds. Through reading out his error logs and dialogue with his fellow students, Juan exercised his voice.

After the classroom was open to the notion of active student involvement, the theme of barriers was analyzed from the perspective of American unions. One student said that his father had worked for a construction company, and

that his parent had earned a living wage before large numbers of Mexicans were hired at the same company. Oblivious to the American labor unions' struggles for worker's rights, these undocumented workers had accepted a lower pay. In two drafts with error logging included, this student wrote, "If the companies can pay \$100 to hire someone, why should they pay \$150 to hire others? So legal residents like my father are having difficulties finding jobs nowadays." Recognizing that many students will enter the college without knowledge of American history, I applied a method that one of the deputy chairs of the English department, Zhanna Yablokova, suggested. In a workshop on the usage of the Internet, she emphasized the usefulness of technology in the classroom. I followed up my students' exchanges by using the Internet to look up the history of labor unions and added a virtual trip to Ellis Island.

Professor John Beaumont, Director of the BMCC Teaching Academy, was another proponent of technology, and I came away with a perception about the importance of visual images. After viewing Diego Luna's "Cesar Chavez," which dramatized the struggles of the United Farm Workers, students were surprised to learn this history. Also, Prof. Beaumont increased my awareness of the fears ESL students held "regarding writing in English" (Beaumont 92). Consequently, writing about difficult themes such as abortions called for concentration on what essential ideas a student wanted to express in a paper—the *thesis sentence*.

The students in all classes reflected upon Gwendolyn Brooks's theme of abortion in "The Mother." Reading aloud her lines of response to Brooks's "The Mother," one student feared that President Trump would repeal "Roe vs." Wade," the legal right to an abortion. At the same time, this student said, "I have friends who said an abortion is traumatizing, and unforgettable." On her own, this student found Anne Sexton's "The Abortion," and composed a thesis for an essay on these poems. In addition one male student said, "Women poets—Brooks and Sexton—revealed the conflicts about abortions though imagery." *Consequently, the long abandoned thesis sentence emerged in the writing process!*

Since the teacher was no longer the most dominant discussion figure, students actively examined writings independently and in groups. With these poignant examples of the benefits of students' self-directed learning, I shall continue to work in groups and encourage students to be the main discussion leaders in the classroom.

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# Communication through Writing

**Dominick Acoccella**  
*English*

That a sociologist or economist should consider himself a writing teacher and a guide to close textual reading would embarrass most professors in these fields, except some who understand that the reading and writing are properly learned at all levels of the academic system.

–Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory* 142)

Once upon a time, I imagined myself a professor of anthropology, entering the classroom with students seated at tables, ready to discuss the problematics of gender construction in the age of information or Orwell's significant contributions to social science research. The plans changed as I found myself more fascinated with the voice Clifford Geertz modeled with his seductive, wildly winding sentences, almost every one of them a marvel of syntactic mastery. When I learned that Geertz had been an English major, I heard my calling and did not finish the master's degree (for many reasons that time, space, and pain do not allow me to elaborate) and instead moved on, haphazardly, almost blindly, to teaching composition. Years later, I would start teaching composition at The City College. Two years after graduating, I was hired by BMCC's English Department. I was (and still am, just ask my colleagues) excited that I had landed the position I had finally understood had been crafted for me even after a former professor asked me why I had not decided to pursue a doctorate in English, the program to which she promised she'd happily write me a recommendation, so that I could then teach what I wanted to teach rather than teach writing.

A little more background. Several years ago, at The City College, a fresh-faced creative-writing major, I took a chance, submitted a letter of interest, enrolled in a critical practice course called the Teaching of English Composition and Literature at The City College, was accepted to teach as an adjunct, and slowly moved away from being a teacher and toward becoming an enabler. To answer my professor's question, I smiled and said that at BMCC I was doing the good work I had wanted to do when I enrolled in the MFA in creative writing. The work is not easy but so what? Since when are easy and I daresay constantly a pleasure requirements for what we really want to do with ourselves?

This of course does not mean I am sans moments of tremendous temptation to pack up and move to a cabin in Vermont. When confronted with writing that seems to have been poured desperately and aimlessly onto the page, the reader who has to grade the essay might write "work on grammar." And I do this, at times, and have done so in the past. I have further mutilated lines and lines of grammatically and syntactically challenged prose with the aim of improving clarity only to later have the student wonder where to start. Is this bad teaching?

Perhaps. But the message I had been imparting was that good writing is knowing the grammar rules. And those rules are important, crucial to clarity, but these are also low-order concerns—and we know this but the students hear something else, I think. The message is writing is grammar. Correctly arranging the paint on a palette is not quite creating art, and so neither is knowing who versus whom and whether the comma go to avoid the fused sentence writing. But these matters are what so many emerging writers learn. My students, whether I tutor them or run the class for which I am responsible for selecting a letter with or without a mathematical symbol at the end of the semester, tell me that they are not good writers and often one of their reasons is their grammar needs work. Where do these ideas come from?

(And, yes, again, I do still line edit. But not as often. And I am learning to contain myself. I do I make strong suggestions and sometimes, even, will rewrite something for a student who I think has something really important to write down but needs modeling to learn, on his or her own at his or her own rate, how to do it. But I still cringe when students feel that their writing would be better had they paid more mind in school when grammar was, if grammar was at all, taught.)

(And, yes, a grammar moment, as one friend put it once, every so often, does not hurt. And he taught first-year law students.)

(Do you know how many of my students' circuitous sentences have been cast incorrectly into that vortex, percussion section-like vapidness of "run-on" merely because the sentences might have, as this one will—just watch—exceeded three typed lines when, really, what they did manage to write had music and passion but was merely in need of a comma here and a comma there but not, as the run-on designation means, a comma and a coordinating conjunction?)

But seriously. At the beginning of each semester, I look at my notes from the last semester, an eye on using what worked and discarding (or at least removing to the deep freezer) what had looked great until reality—that is, I brought the plan to the class, shared it with the class, it flopped in front of the class, and it died in the class—corrected my hypothesis. We plan. The gods laugh. What has been happening each new semester is what I had used the prior semester has refused to fit the present semester. The younger teacher used to make the students fit the plans. The younger teacher fancied himself to be that professor who espoused on this or that concept, like the seasoned anthropologist, crucial to the life of the mind, while some students understood, some did not understand, and others did not know where to begin caring. Even as I was learning under Mark McBeth's guidance and reading list, (now deputy chair of English at John Jay, he was then teaching a course at CCNY), I was sure that this reading I had chosen was helpful. I was sure that this new exercise I had worked out would benefit some students, and I was willing to accept that there would be those who just could not do what other students could do. I used to think that some students were not ready—or worse, cut out—for college. They acted in ways that told me that, at least at the moment, they were not ready.

But what do the students who are ready for college look like? Who are these persons at BMCC? They needed more of something—time, care, focus, interventions—and as I took that teaching of composition course and started to read the

ideas of Peter Elbow on free writing and Ira Shor on the acephalous classroom, I started to reconsider my views and how these ideas that I was to teach something (rather than students might also play a crucial role in deciding what they needed to learn) affected the quality of the classroom. I thought perhaps I should stop teaching and starting helping.

And this I wish to humbly extend to all professors. We all, no matter our discipline, can help students improve a crucial component of their education: how they communicate. And they should communicate through writing. And it does not have to be thousands of pages. And you don't have to take my word for it. So many others have said as much. Indeed, discussing effective writing across the curriculum strategies, David Hennessy and Ruby Evans argue that it is quality and not quantity that matters (270). Students in remedial courses past told me they were also taking other courses that required a ten-page paper. As much as I adore the idea of writing in every class, I had to ask what support for such an undertaking were they given in class. And they told me that they had a due date for the paper (I recall almost fondly three students who were in the same class telling me that the paper had been assigned a week in advance—though I am sure the syllabus gave ample warning) and that the paper had to be in APA format and then they always asked me what that—what APA—meant. Did their professor, I wondered very out loud, explain the process? No, not really, not at all. But these students would always report back that they pulled it off. Red Bull, Wikipedia, no sleep for two days, and in one shot, the paper was over.

Would that ten-page paper be more meaningful if it were five two-page papers? A paragraph carefully crafted and revised travels the long road to good communication far better, at this level, than a ten-page essay on Milgram's obedience experiments. Write an abstract for a lab report for Introduction to Biology. Write possible questions for an algebra exam. Have students work in dyads or triads to select a reading list for a hypothetical course on Shakespeare or Junot Diaz. Have students collaborate in small groups, writing a paragraph to persuade the professor that the exam should be in multiple choice or short answer or take-home or in-class format.

Each student has unique needs. And so these past years I have stopped teaching and started listening to the students. What do they really care about, I try to find out, so as to help them bring those interests into the work they produce. I have my confederates and my teachers. Gerald Graff's "Hidden Intellectualism" tells me that I need to do what I always had suspected I ought to do: let the students perform inventory and select the topic (22). Now in freshman composition here at BMCC, this student choice is tricky. They have a final essay they are to write in ninety minutes using two committee-selected essays and so I—given my own personal dread of timed writing—use those two readings' themes to act as the semester's theme. This spring's theme is civil disobedience. So just about every discussion in class and all readings are focused somehow—some directly and some indirectly—on challenging norms set by authority and by using ourselves to express our outrage at the system. And here is another something I offer to my colleagues across the curriculum that I know works because I have seen it

work. Use free writing. Have the students write something each class before or after it begins.

This idea to use free writing which I have known to use all along but never quite found the time to fit it into my classes has been a long time coming. This present semester, after having recently observed a wonderful colleague's class in which every student had contributed to the class discussion within a half hour, I have made to the way my classes begin what I think is a significant change. Each class now begins with five to ten minutes of free writing, some guided and some not, during which I repeat that the pen or pencil does not stop writing and the id is neither restrained from within by the ego nor from without by the superego. I don't actually say this—but I think it. I say what Elbow says to me so I can improve my expression:

Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. (Teachers 3)

As Elbow has taught me, I encourage only that they write and guarantee that the only reader of what they write on that page is the same one writing on that page. Students by and large initially have several reactions: hate, bafflement, delight. These feelings are not mutually exclusive. A look around the room reveals the smiling student who slowly shakes her head or the emboldened student who nods and frowns. When we begin, I usually do not ask for volunteers. I start at one end of the room and we verbally travel to the other end. Some summarize what they wrote; others read most of what they wrote (and I love it when they choose to read directly) or a line or two they are especially proud of. But all participate. Think about that for a second. I know I had to when I sat and marveled during that observation—every student by the twenty-minute mark had contributed to the discussion.

Whatever the students' reactions may be—I swear this one student in my 8 am class has nothing but vile for me in those eyes—what I see is success. Not my success as a lecturer fortunate enough to teach in a wonderful community college; not my success as that professor who hears each student say something each class, not mine at all; but their success as writers, so many of whom confess that they do not like to write or cannot write. They are writing. They are providing evidence that challenges the hypothesis crafted but never proven by past teachers and doubting internal voices who had suggested and perhaps continue to suggest another path.

BMCC is a school for students to come take a chance on and learn about themselves, their proclivities and poisons, and we faculty—whether we lecture on C Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* or the ethical dilemmas of the capitalist profit credo, no matter the pedagogical approach—are here to help them realize these expectations. And a good place to start is with writing.



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# Constructing Criticism: How Students and Professors Perceive Written Comments Differently

Adele Kudish  
*English*

Like many English professors, I meet with students in one-on-one conferences at least once a semester. In these meetings, I like to ask my students whether the (often extensive) comments that I write on their papers are clear to them. More often than not, the answer is yes; but I have felt on many occasions that that “yes” is a perfunctory response, not supported by true comprehension or engagement with the feedback. This semester, a class discussion about professor and peer-written feedback in my developmental writing course, and a subsequent informal survey that I asked my students to take in the same class, served to complicate my view of what kinds of written feedback students view as constructive or not constructive. While the student responses about what constitutes a helpful comment on their papers are not particularly enlightening in and of themselves, the exercise should function as a call to rethink the way we teach students about receiving, giving, and implementing feedback.

Below are the results of the in-class responses to the following prompt: “write down three examples of written comments from professors that you find constructive and three that you find not helpful.” Eight students out of the 12 who were present that day turned in their surveys. Since students did not necessarily have any graded papers in front of them (I did not notice that any students took out any other papers from their folders or notebooks), the responses were drawn from memory and the students’ own ideas about what would be helpful or not. I did not specify whether students should write their names on the surveys, but all of them had when they turned them in. Students also labeled their responses in various ways: “constructive,” “helpful,” and “negative,” “not constructive,” and “not helpful,” or failed to label the columns. One student only came up with positive comments, and a few students only could think of two responses in either or both categories.

Not Helpful:	Helpful
What is the point? Your essay is too short Need more practice	Not enough work You can do better Try harder
This is a terrible essay This poor [sic]	Need [sic] more work This is not bad, but it you [sic] need to express of [sic] ideas more

Not Helpful:	Helpful
This is not good No not at all [sic]	Nice try—keep practicing You're getting there Review next time You could make it better than it is You are improving keep working on it [sic]
This was poorly written This is wrong do it again [sic] This wont [sic] be enough to pass	Your peers say you have a strong thesis Your essay is short add more details [sic] ?
Your [sic] wrong, fix it Missing some details Need to explain more	I feel this is incorrect please double check your facts Your'e [sic] missing some details about _____ Please elaborate more on this part (arrow to specific spot)
Its [sic] too short/long Went off topic Needs more info	Good details Needs more body paragraph [sic] Cite author [illegible]
Lacking details Off topic Bad organization	Add more details to specific area Try to improve on... Revise

The sample yields some interesting observations. In some cases, the “constructive/helpful” comments were not so different from the “negative/not-constructive/not helpful” comments. In the case of one student who did not label which category was which, I had to pause to consider whether he had intended “what is the point?” or “not enough work” to be the helpful comment. Some comments, including one that two students both marked as “negative,” “off topic” and “went off topic,” do not strike me as particularly unhelpful. In some cases (“review next time” and “revise”), the ambiguous wording would not strike me as the most constructive comment. That “too short” and “short” appear in both the positive and negative columns is puzzling. The question mark for a third constructive critique on one student’s paper shows that the student either has not received much positive reinforcement (this particular student has demonstrated that he is highly self-effacing and not particularly self-motivated) or that he genuinely cannot think of a comment that would help him.

For some students (“your [sic] wrong, fix it” versus “I feel like this is incorrect...”), the question of whether a comment is constructive or not seems to have become confused with a matter of tone and politeness, because the content of

the feedback is basically equivalent. Other confusion stemmed from students not fully thinking through where the comments would appear (for example, the “unhelpful” “need to explain more,” as any professor would presumably use it, would appear next to a passage that lacked explication), or else from an inability to link marginal comments to the text next to which they are found.

In the discussion part of the class, students reported feeling attacked or mocked by professors in written feedback. The survey confirmed this, as students included the words “bad,” “terrible,” “poor,” and “wrong” in their examples of negative critique. Surprisingly, however, only one student included the word “good” and another wrote “not bad” (“better” also appeared, but only in conditional constructions) in the positive critiques. It is unclear whether the students had ever actually received feedback from a teacher or professor that utilized the hurtful vocabulary, or whether this was based on their own fears. But I can be sure that I write at least one truly positive and encouraging comment (“I like that you...” “good...,” “this shows a lot of improvement”) in each paper to which I respond. I am surprised that more of these types of comments did not make it into the students’ lists. Two possible interpretations of this phenomenon are that students are either not processing or absorbing what professors perceive as and write as positive feedback in papers, or that the amount of truly negative feedback that students received in high school or elsewhere blinds them to the positive elements in our “sandwiched” responses.

In this way, students and faculty members seem to have very different views of what constitutes constructive and helpful written feedback. How can we bridge this gap? Simply asking students to articulate what they feel is helpful and unhelpful to them is probably a good start. Realizing that some students tend to shut out any kind of written feedback—positive or critical—on their papers is frustrating for faculty members, but should be taken as a “teachable moment” to help get the conversation going. Next semester, I am going to spend more time going over my grading rubrics with students, and will also add a column for examples of feedback that I tend to write. I also would like to continue gathering data on student perceptions of written feedback, since working with a considerably larger sample could potentially yield different results.

# Teaching in the Non-traditional Classroom: What Works and What Doesn't

Crystal I. Cunningham  
*English*

No one ever said delivering academic instruction was easy, but teaching in the non-traditional classroom setting has its benefits, aside from its challenges, believe it or not. According to research by Cross (1980) a non-traditional student is defined as an “adult who returns to school full-or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life” (Benshoff 2). Traditional students generally range from 18-24 years of age and have less responsibilities.

Seven years ago, I started my career as a GED instructor for a community center in the Bronx with The State University of New York. I was a new teacher, oblivious to my young and older adult learners and their needs. At the time, I was in my mid-twenties, a recent graduate student and excited to embark on a new professional career in pedagogical instruction. I never taught GED before but I did have prior experience as an English instructor with a four-year private college in the Bronx, so I knew what strategies to use as a college instructor. The subjects I taught for the GED were Reading, Writing, and Social Studies. I planned my lessons methodically and devised all my course syllabi to meet the educational needs of my learners. Since I was fairly new to teaching GED, I submersed myself in GED content books and visited the New York Public Library. I researched information on the examination and I mentally placed myself in the position of my potential students—or so I thought!

The first day I entered the classroom, my adult learners were sitting in a conference like environment with tables and chairs. There was a large Smartboard in the room with a built-in DVD and stereo system. The floors were carpeted and the walls freshly painted. My students were all minorities. Here I was a young African American teacher now facing Hispanic and African American students from impoverished backgrounds. Some older, younger, and either my age or a few years younger or older than me. Since I thought I could reach my students even more because I am a minority myself, I didn't view it as a problem. I discussed the various elements of the preparation program, passed out my syllabus, and went over the course goals and expectations. Everything went smoothly in my eyes from the inception of the first day to the following weeks to come. But I was blindsided by my own hopes and aspirations to teach the course and I didn't realize the difference between the traditional classroom learner versus the non-traditional classroom learner.

My students hated taking the course, loathed me as an instructor and felt like I was teaching “too much.” I started to reevaluate my teaching strategies and then I recognized that the curriculum needed to be adjusted to meet the differ-

ent needs of my adult learners. I realized several of my adult students hated the course because they were receiving government assistance and the State was forcing them to take the GED preparation class. This obviously made it difficult because they were already unhappy. Some of the learners hated me because I was young, a minority, and teaching them. It was a complete culture shock to experience this from adults; however, the mentality of my students was similar to teaching high school and even middle school. It's as if their bad experiences with education left a permanent stain on their lives and this hostility altered my expectations that there might be solidarity and compassion between different minority groups. In contrast, I couldn't see my suburban upbringing in Buffalo, New York as a problem or that my mother was a teacher and a nurse who was strict with education and established boundaries for my life at such an early age. She was similar to the author, Amy Tan's mother from China. Only my mother wasn't a tiger mom, but a Black woman who had an impervious desire to be highly educated. My mother was a former teenager who shook Dr. Martin Luther King's hand after being thrown in jail on a yellow school bus for marching for freedom in Selma, Alabama. She was a civil rights worker at the age of 15 and courageous in the plight of oppression. No, my mother wasn't an immigrant from China, like Tan's mother; however, I viewed my mother as an immigrant, always striving for better. Her desire to partake in The Great Migration was part of the dream. Like Tan's mother, her hopes in achieving 'The American Dream' was through education. My own ideals of achievement for my students became personal for me. I couldn't understand how other minority students could be so disenfranchised. Perhaps they were cheated out of a decent education? I had strict nuns to report to and sentences to dissect while I attended Catholic School upstate. However, this demographic barely knew how education could enlighten, inspire, and alleviate the perils of poverty. This is where I evaluated not only my teaching, but the projection I was giving off as an educational elitist who assumed that the GED course should automatically be revered. I wanted to share my experience in a new light and have the adult learners feel comfortable in an educational, college-like setting.

Adapting to all of the details of the learning process seemed overwhelming and crippling to many of my adult learners and it was very taxing in the non-traditional classroom for me as their instructor. Some have a fear of learning and some have a fear of not being able to keep up with the class because they have been away from the classroom setting for so long. Some are petrified of just walking into a classroom setting. For the non-traditional learner, this can be very traumatic; so it's imperative that you, the professor, be able to put the student at ease at the beginning of the first class or first few class sessions because you want the students to look forward to coming back to your classroom. If you don't create this bond, you will lose many of your non-traditional students. The adult learner should be acknowledged and praised for taking that risk to come back to the classroom. The instructor can use traditional methods of teaching, but they should not be the only methods. You need to bring new and innovative things to the classroom such as technology, or if you are teaching drama, such as *Twelve Angry Men*, you can have the students read the play first, write about it, and view

the film for further discussion and analysis. All these techniques help to increase their writing and critical thinking capacities. All of these things play an integral part of the learning process. Non-traditional students get bored very easily, that's why it's important to use innovative methods along with traditional.

The educational needs of non-traditional students consist of many stressors. James M. Benshoff and Henry A. Lewis state, "non-traditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. Evidence expounds on the issue that 'both [sexes] have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member' (Muench qtd. in *Nontraditional College Students* 10). Often times, engaging adult students in a non-traditional setting can present challenges; however, these learners are dedicated to the learning process once reentering higher education. Once I assessed student learning and active engagement, I decided to make adaptations of my teaching style so that the adult learners could acquire the skills needed for higher education.

The strategies I used to engage my non-traditional learners consisted of higher order thinking questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy theory, processing activities such as planning, outlining and brainstorming and collaborative group assignments. I also incorporated differentiation within the newly revised curriculum in the non-traditional classroom to help many of the diverse learners. The majority of the students in the class struggled academically and writing was very difficult for many students. I scaffolded many lessons to reach my core learning objectives for the week. My students were very kinesthetic and visual learners so I had them participate in groups and I assigned roles. We also watched educational documentaries and I had them compose a five-paragraph essay on the short documentary.

When I changed my curriculum and teaching strategies as well as classroom management style, I started to see a vast difference in what I could bring as an instructor to the non-traditional classroom setting. A year or two later, I started teaching College Prep courses in the content areas of GED Language Arts Reading, College Writing, and Critical Thinking with BMCC's Manhattan Educational Opportunity Center to a group of 18-20 adult male incarcerated students at Rikers Island. I was in my mid-twenties teaching GED in a low-income neighborhood and now teaching at the most infamous jail in New York City. My career path followed another venue for teaching in a non-traditional classroom. Over the years, I managed to teach teens to young adults, ages 16-24 for HSE instruction, which was formally known as the GED with the YMCA.

As for my current teaching career with BMCC's English Department, I am encountering a majority of non-traditional students seeking associate's degrees. Research by Schuetze and Slowey (2002) supports the increasing demographic of adult non-traditional learners in higher education. "The change from an elite to a mass system of higher education occurred in the last decade of the twentieth century in virtually all developed societies" (309). It's also noted this dramatic change has "...occurred with little or no strategic planning." Schuetze and Slowey further state, "as part of this process of expansion and heterogenization, new groups of students who, for a complex range of social, economic, and cul-



tural reasons were traditionally excluded from, or under-represented in, higher education, have come to participate in higher education in increasing numbers” (312). With this increase in enrollment, it is imperative that educators, administrators, and staff know how to approach this demographic. I am thankful for my experience with non-traditional learners because it has taught me how to teach all types of students at the college level. Many of my English Composition and Introduction to Literature students have told me about their experience as a former inmate, obtaining a GED, or not attending school for decades. Evidence shows that “adult students need help in building their self-confidence as students, in acquiring or refreshing study skills, and managing their time and other resources while in school” (Nontraditional). As an instructor, I empathize with them and I understand their struggle. It’s no longer a culture shock to me because I know what to do. As educators at BMCC, we cannot assume that all our students are advanced critical thinkers. Educators should be compassionate towards the educational needs of the non-traditional student.

I have experienced many continuums of academic instruction for the non-traditional learner and one requirement remains the same: empathy. Although I concur that it takes understanding to teach traditional learners, it takes a considerable amount of empathy to truly reach the non-traditional learner. Before you can get students to engage as critical philosophic thinkers, as an educator, you need to have strategic planning and most important—patience.

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# Teaching at BMCC: Thoughts from Both Sides of the Desk

**Rose Gleicher**  
*Human Services*

Before I started teaching at BMCC, I experienced what it was like to be sitting on the other side of the desk. The first time I attended BMCC was as a kindergarten child, when I was taking classes with my mother, in the late 1970s-1980s. When I began full-day kindergarten, my mother found the time to go back to college at BMCC part-time. When my elementary school was closed for holidays or vacations, I went along with my mother to take classes at BMCC, went to BMCC's library, and used labs to type papers. I always looked forward to days off from school, and I was always proud to tell all my elementary school friends about what I did on my days off: "I was going to college."

## ***The 1970s-1980s at BMCC***

In the late 1970s, BMCC had many locations, which were usually a floor or two in office buildings in the mid-town Manhattan area. There was the "A" building, "B" building, "C" building, and many others named like that. I remember having to walk up and down the stairs when the elevators were not working. Many classrooms did not have windows. A few years later, in the early 1980s, I was in awe at the opening of the new campus at 199 Chambers Street. Everything was new, clean, and conveniently located all in one building. I was impressed with the new big beautiful library, cafeteria, escalators, and gym, and having river views from many of the classrooms. The gardens nearby were blooming. No more running around from building to building in the rain and snow.

I attended all kinds of classes with my mother at the old BMCC and new BMCC campuses. For example, I attended science class laboratories, for example, chemistry, where there were showers in the classrooms. I remember having attended a self-defense class and enjoyed watching the moves. I attended health education classes, and learned about sex education at a young age. I particularly enjoyed taking psychology and sociology courses. I did homework with my mother.

The professors were memorable. I remember one professor who walked around with a cardboard box to rest his papers on when he gave lectures. Some professors wanted to know their students and seemed to care, but some did not care. For example, I remember some professors who took attendance at the start of each class, calling out the students' last names, and did not even make eye contact to notice the names that went with the faces. Some professors posted the grades to exams on bulletin boards in the hallways by students' social security number, which was allowed at that time.

In contrast, some professors were extra nice to me. For example, some professors learned my name, called my name when they took attendance, called

on me to answer questions in class, gave me handouts of class materials, let me participate in class surveys, and let me take tests. A few professors joked that I had earned higher grades on tests than some of the “real” students in the class. When I was around 10 years old, I completed a survey in a health class. It was an anonymous survey, but the professor was very concerned about someone in the class who had reported having had six abortions. Finally, I confessed that it was mine; I had picked the number six, which was one for each boy that I had a crush on at school.

I also remember what registration was like at BMCC. For example, I remember waiting on a line with my mother outside the building to get inside. Once inside the gym, each department had a table. On the table, there were boxes of cards for each course section. If you wanted to register in a certain section, you were given a card; if there were no more cards, that meant that the course was full, and you had to pick something else. Once you collected enough cards, you went to wait in the next area of registration where someone would put the punch cards through a computer. Then, you had to go sit in another room and wait for hours for your name to be called so you could pick up a printout of your bill. Then, you had to go on another line at the bursar’s office to make arrangements to pay your bill.

At that time, there was no option for online registration or phone registration. You needed to allow nearly an entire day to complete the registration process. It was an exhausting process. My mother and I usually brought snacks to eat and magazines to read to make the waiting go faster. We tried to remember to wear our most comfortable sneakers because of all the hours spent standing and waiting around. The worst part was that if you wanted to make changes to your course schedule, you would have to go through all of that process again.

### ***BMCC Today***

Today’s BMCC students continue to face challenges to pursuing higher education. For example, being first in their family to attend college, lacking support from their families for attending colleges, working full-time, having families, facing language difficulties, needing remediation for English or math, being homeless, having immigration issues, disabilities, and struggling with economic/financial hardship, among many other complex situations. However, the college has changed in ways to benefit these students.

Community college students continue to need caring professors who spend time inside and outside of the classroom to encourage them to reach their educational goals, and to help them address the challenges that they are facing by putting them in touch with relevant services available at BMCC and outside of BMCC. Over the years, BMCC developed a wide variety of student support services to meet student needs and the challenges students face in pursuing their education, such as the college career center, tutoring center, writing center, office of accessibility, counseling center, one-stop center, women’s center, and veteran’s center.

Today’s students are also lucky to benefit from changes due to technology. Students don’t spend all day standing on lines trying to register, but rather are

able to register in minutes online from the convenience of their own home computer or laptop. In addition, BMCC now offers hundreds of online classes, which aim to save students time and money on their commute. Online classes are especially convenient for working students, students with families, students with disabilities, students who are pregnant, and students who live far away from the college.

### ***Conclusion***

In this paper, I reflected on my early childhood experiences of attending classes with my mother at BMCC in positive ways. It was a very memorable experience to be a youngster in a college classroom learning together with adults. Not only did I learn about the importance of attending college at a young age, but my experiences brought me back to BMCC many years later to be on the other side of the desk, teaching BMCC students. I am enjoying teaching Human Services courses at BMCC for eight years, especially doing mentoring, career counseling, and helping students to reach their dreams.

# Teacher-Student Conferencing—One Student at a Time, or Two

Yeghia Aslanian

*Academic Literacy and Linguistics*

The student walks into my office during my office hour and asks me to read a CATW [CUNY Assessment in Writing] essay that she has written. Then she immediately goes on to say (after my help with the correct rendering of the past conditional sentence), “I wouldn’t have written this essay if you had not called me at home yesterday.” I had called her because she had missed two classes and I wanted to make sure she was on task.

My purpose in this writing is to make a case for the importance of one-on-one teacher-student interaction in a college setting. Teaching is admittedly a very complex skill (shall we say akin to art?) and as teachers, we are all struggling to make our teaching as effective as possible. We use different strategies from our tool box—we lecture, we do lab projects, we assign group work, we conduct Q&A segments, we give and correct quizzes, we hand out written feedback, we teach half online and half face-to-face, and many other approaches. But one strategy that, in my judgment, never collects dust and always brings the teacher closer to the student’s understanding and perspective on the course is one-on-one interaction between teacher and learner. This relationship can take myriad forms: a phone call to the student when the student has missed a class or two, a friendly chat with the student in the hallway, a brief purposeful conversation in the office, a quick exchange of comments, commendations or questions right in the classroom, a short conversation at lunch if you eat your lunch at the student cafeteria, an email encouraging the student to keep up the good work or to focus on a certain area that needs strengthening, and so on. We all remember well, fondly or not, little acts like these in our own school years and beyond.

Of course, the most formal and required way of keeping contact with our students is by scheduling office hours during which students can drop in when they need individual help. I have observed over the years that many faculty actively use these hours to the maximum, helping students solve problems and cajoling them into honing their academic skills whenever they have an opportunity. But we would probably agree that more could be done to improve the efficacy of our office hour use. We could, for example, post a schedule of the office hours on our office door (at intervals of, say, 15 minutes) and regularly remind students to sign up for individual conferencing. The idea here is that when teachers take the first step, students will appreciate the invitation and take action. I personally take my office hours seriously and do my best to devote them to students for face-to-face interaction, one-on-one or in groups of two or three. Although routinely I put my office hours on the syllabus, distributed on the first day of the semester, I

know from my experience that the information generally gets buried and forgotten! For this very reason, at the end of each class period I remind my students of my office hours and, if my office hour is after the day's class, I ask for two or three students who might be free then and would like to sit with me in the office for a few minutes (15-20 minutes) to tell me how they are doing in the course and what kind of help they need from me. Of course, I am cognizant of the fact that some students need teachers' help more than others, and I also understand that our office hours are not always convenient for our students. In such cases, the teacher can strategically plan to briefly meet with several students who might need individual help over the course of each class period, unobtrusively, while others are busy with class assignments. The fact is that when students find the faculty accessible and open, and when they benefit from those brief interactions, they come back for more and also encourage fellow students to take advantage of the opportunity.

Clearly, individual academic give-and-take between teacher and student does not have to take place in the office solely. I often see faculty engaged with their students at various places on the campus—from classroom to hallway to laboratory to learning resource center to student activities center to the cafeteria, and so on. This kind of culture creates a community of teachers and learners whose purpose is to educate and be educated freely without formal barriers.

I run into a student at the BMCC Cafeteria, say hello and tell her that the CATW essay she had written in class the day before was a good one with an appropriate response to the passage and that she just needed to make some minor corrections. She beams at me, thanks me and leaves for her class visibly excited. (The essays she had written during the previous weeks were not as developed.)

Obviously, the assumption here is that the teacher goes around in the college with some mental notes of his or her students.

### **Some research**

Below, briefly, is some research that I have reviewed while searching for the importance of one-on-one teacher-student interaction and academic relationship. The first source is Lerner (2005) in *College English*. This comprehensive article recaptures the history of individual teacher-student conferencing in writing particularly. He reviews the socio-political and educational forces in the last hundred years, starting in the 1890s, that came to play a crucial role in establishing the availability of tutoring and individual conferencing in colleges, especially community colleges. In the article, quoting Warner Taylor, who had surveyed 225 institutions, Lerner writes: "No aspect of the first-year course is more vital than the fifteen or twenty minutes assigned to personal conference with each student twice or more a semester. No phase of the course should be more stimulating to the person taught" (p. 194). Further into the article, Lerner argues that one-on-one and small group conferencing counters and improves "the impersonality and ineffectiveness of mass instruction" and helps "formal barriers break down"



(p. 192), which then leads to a free flow of ideas and expertise.

A second source that I found enlightening with regard to teacher-student relationship inside and outside the classroom is Pianta et al. (2012). In their book chapter entitled "Teacher-Student Relationships and Engagement: Conceptualizing, Measuring and Empowering the Capacity of Classroom interactions," the researchers remind us that classrooms are complex social systems and teacher-student relationships are complex, too. They go on to say that in order to understand the nature of the engagement, there needs to be one-on-one interaction with the students (p. 365). The bitter fact, however, is that according to their research, 85% of the opportunities for academic activities and learning take place in the context of teacher-directed whole-class instruction or individual seatwork in contrast to individual or small-group interaction. Another revealing insight they provide is that students say "they would learn more if their teachers cared about them" (p. 370). A "good" teacher from the students' perspective is one who is sensitive to their sensibilities, attends to their individual academic needs, and has regard for student perspectives. The overarching conclusion is that our classrooms are dominated by teacher talk. And this needs to be reevaluated.

A third source that has stimulated my thinking about teaching comes from an American Public Media radio documentary called "Teaching Teachers." Available online, it chronicles the teacher training that goes on in some Japanese junior high and high schools. These master teachers, mentors, and educational group leaders studied at institutions of higher learning in the U.S. but have devised their own technique, which they call in Japanese "Kikan-Shido," which means "teaching between the desks" in English. The focus of their approach is to look at student learning, not teacher teaching. Their objective is to attentively listen to student talk, student reasoning, and student thought processes while solving a problem individually or in small groups, in order to come up with more effective ways of helping students discover and expand their potential for learning. They have come to understand that, generally speaking, good teaching is not about teachers but about students.

Finally, and in the interest of space, I would add one more of my recently discovered sources of online educational programs. It is called Top Hat ([www.tophat.com](http://www.tophat.com)), a webinar that addresses important educational issues in American colleges. So far, I have participated in two of these webinars and I have noticed that the guest speakers who participate in the program are recognized educators and researchers who share their life's learning and research with online audiences. What I have learned here speaks to the heart of the central point of this piece, which is that mentor-mentee one-on-one relationship with students is pivotal for student success. In the research done by James Lang mentioned in the first webinar, researchers asked college students what the most important issue is for them with regard to faculty. The majority of the students responded that they would like to see the faculty acknowledge them and talk to them on a personal level. The question asked by teachers was how to maintain contact in large classes, and the answer was through small group work and through fostering student-student relationship in the classroom. In the second webinar, the main theme, presented by Dan Chambliss, was again centered on encouraging consis-

tent individual interaction as a motivator for learning (a simple example would be learning students' names as much as possible and addressing them by name, a psychologically powerful tool for raising the level of student commitment and participation). The webinar guest speakers concluded that the main function of college should not be imparting information; it should be motivating students to discover themselves and shape their own intellectual path.

I am walking out of the Learning Resource Center after my class in the Lab when all of a sudden I feel a gentle tug on my arm. I look back and see a student of mine from the previous semester. She wants me to help her with her essay. I have some time to spare so I sit down with her at a desk and answer her questions, and help her practice some corrections and revisions. She appreciates my help tremendously, and we part.

### ***Some gains from one-on-one conferencing***

With some research as background and my own experience with students over many years, I have become totally convinced that individual interaction with students, be it in office, in the classroom, outside the classroom, in the hallway, and other academic venues, is one of the most powerful methods for us teachers to effect change in our students' attitudes as well as their learning habits. This idea is so much part of my teaching now that I do not consider my teaching successful unless I plan to speak to several students during every class day. In a nutshell, here are some common sense but research-based outcomes that students (and teachers) can gain when they meet for individual conferencing. If done well, this is what it does: It

- Breaks down barriers and establishes rapport between teacher and student so that student feels at ease to engage in a conversation with teacher.
- Fosters a unique teacher-student interaction in a non-judgmental atmosphere.
- Hands the meeting agenda and control over to the student
- Allows the teacher to sit silent (No Smartphones, please!) while attentively listening to student comments and thought processes.
- Turns the focus from teaching to student learning.
- Gives teacher a chance to work on student, not only on student's work—which is a more powerful type of feedback.
- Provides confidential space for the student to share certain issues with the teacher (such as certain disabilities or challenges).
- Informs the teacher's whole-class teaching (after all, a class is made up of individuals).
- Builds confidence and self-reflection in students.
- Keeps the teacher self-reflective and student-oriented.

The list can go on.

My ESL 94 class is busy writing an in-class essay. One student is typing the essay on her laptop. About half an hour into the period, I see the laptop user step out of the classroom. So far, nothing out of the ordinary. But when 15 or so minutes pass and she does not return to the classroom, I begin to suspect something is not right. I step out of the classroom and see her sitting on a bench texting. I approach her and ask her what's going on. She says to me that she hates writing and anytime she is assigned an essay, she freezes because she hasn't done much writing in her school years. I sit with her near the classroom and we talk for about 10 minutes. I am able to encourage her to talk to me and brainstorm about the topic first and then go back to the classroom and begin writing. She follows my suggestion and at the end of the class, she walks up to me and says, "Thank you, Professor, for talking to me."

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(About elementary and high school students, but still relevant to us)

[www.Tophat.com](http://www.Tophat.com)

[www.americanradioworks.org/segments/a-different-approach-to-teacher-learning-lesson-study/](http://www.americanradioworks.org/segments/a-different-approach-to-teacher-learning-lesson-study/), American Public Media radio documentary, teaching teachers. (In Japanese, the method is named "Kikan-Shido, i.e., "teaching between the desks,")

# Teaching Philosophy Statement for BMCC Distinguished Teaching Award 2016

**Chamutal Noimann**  
*English Department*

*This is a version of the comments Professor Noimann offered at the Spring 2016 reception which honored the three recipients of the 2016 Distinguished Teaching Awards.*

The great experimental educator and father of Louisa May Alcott, Bronson Alcott once wrote, “ the true teacher defends his pupils against his own personal influence. He inspires self-trust. He guides their eyes from himself to the spirit that quickens him.” Alcott was miles ahead of his time. He is, I believe, still ahead of our time, but I do try my best to be the educator he believed I could be. Alcott was a transcendentalist who believed that self-examination and experience were the most effective forces for education. He, like many Romantics, believed that children, much more than adults, were capable of accessing those innate human qualities of imagination, observation and awe that propel their most valuable attribute—curiosity. Like Alcott, Maria Montessori knew that all children need is an environment that is open to them to pursue their passions to any direction they choose. The classroom environment should be a balanced combination of structure and order that allows the students freedom and choice. The teacher is not there to impose a set of predetermined standards or curriculum, but to be their guide and facilitator as they explore and play to learn.

As a teacher, I try to provide my students with an environment within which they can explore, uncover and be amazed. With every class session and assignment, I try to create meaningful, thought-provoking and memorable experiences they will be able to draw on in all aspects of their lives. I firmly believe not only in a student-centered classroom, but in a student-controlled and student-led learning environment, where I am but a guide and facilitator. I think of the classroom community as a collective brain and each individual student to be a neuron capable of communicating and making new paths to knowledge for all.

My first job teaching English was right out of college. Despite my complete lack of experience and training, I was hired as an ESOL instructor at the NYU-Lutheran Community Based Programs, which is an incredible out-reach organization bringing free English classes to recent immigrants. Teaching this class was the best teacher training I could ever have had because it showed me every day, honestly and brutally, just how unprepared I was. One of the more valuable experiences I had came when I asked my students, who were from Russia, the Middle East, and China, to choose one of the children’s books in our library, take it home and then return to the class to report on it. The next time we met, the class was tense and agitated. I couldn’t understand why, until Manya, an elderly Russian woman, stood up, and, shaking, began reciting the entire *Frog and*

*Toad Are Friends*. I was stunned. I never meant to make her this stressed about her reading. I never asked her to memorize the entire book. But there she was, constantly being encouraged by her classmates, reciting every word and chapter. I realized then that I didn't lack the ability to teach an ESOL class. I lacked the ability to teach. There is a big difference between these two. I plowed through the year, careful with my words and directions, while trying to make the class as fun and engaging as I could. I thought I was doing well.

On the last day of class, something happened that showed me I was not the kind of teacher I wanted to be. The only Chinese student in my class was always very quiet. I used to always try to coax her to join. So when she approached me on the last day and started speaking of her own accord, I was startled. She asked if I would teach during the summer. I said I could not. She looked at me with terror in her eyes and said "But when I'm in your class, I can't hear the voices." I was stunned. I thought my presence in class address my students' educational needs. I never even imagined being in my class influenced them in such deep psychological ways. I knew I had to understand my role as a teacher in more than one sense. Help came from an unexpected source: a book entitled *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey.

Gallwey was a sports guy. He wrote the book to help readers teach and learn how to play tennis. What he inadvertently did was create a new way of approaching ESOL, Non-Judgmental Awareness. In the book, Gallwey distinguishes between teaching the outer game, which addresses the physical skills, performance, goals and outcomes of the training, and the inner game, which addresses the emotional state of the student, self-confidence, focus, acceptance, and openness to the learning experience. Gallwey argues that teaching the outer game is impossible without non-judgmental awareness of the struggles of the student's inner game. This was the missing piece for me. I determined never to neglect, but rather to nurture the inner game.

I knew that in order to be able to teach to the inner game, I needed to understand, really understand what student-centered pedagogy meant. Alcott and Montessori's methods worked wonders in pre-school and primary school education. Gallwey worked well in tennis. What should student-centered pedagogy look like in the college classroom? In *Learner-Centered Teaching*, Maryellen Weimer explains that the practice does not simply require the teacher to think of activities and assignments that keep her students' interests or needs in mind. Learner-centeredness requires that the teacher relinquish her absolute power in the classroom. Weiner suggests allowing students to help design the syllabus, the classroom policies on lateness and due dates, for example. She offers ways to allow students more choice in selecting which type of assignment they feel is more suitable for their learning style and the kind of assessments by which their performance should be measured. In short, learner-centered pedagogy suggests that the less I do the more my students will learn. I had a plan. I spent my years as a graduate student adjuncting at various CUNY colleges, experimenting and creating different ways to allow my students to take charge of their own learning, honing my skills as their guide and facilitator.

I began using games and game theory in my ESOL classrooms in 1998,

with the masterful guidance of James Paul Gee's groundbreaking work on video games in higher education. I have been excited to be able to contribute to my colleagues' efforts in establishing this agenda at BMCC and CUNY. At BMCC, I have introduced game design into my pedagogy, allowing students to create their own games based on texts we have discussed in class. In my Eng 201, for example, one of the assignments involves designing and creating board games based on one of the short stories or novellas on the reading list. The results are breathtaking. Not only do the students have the opportunity to be creative and imaginative, they are also experiencing a level of deep learning that no lecture or class discussion alone can ever achieve. The results have been amazing in terms of comprehension, content retention, engagements, and course completion.

My efforts to excite students about learning and ensure that I address the needs of every learning style in my classes can mean using technology, off campus trips, invited speakers, movement, games, music, even food. When I teach the poem "Goblin Market" by Christina Rossetti, for example, I always bring in tangerines. I ask my students to eat them, while I read aloud the first stanza, which is a luscious and sensual description of various fruits in the market. The room fills with the citrus scent as their hands and palates feel and taste the juicy, sweet fruits. They never forget this poem.

Another activity is one where I describe at length in my article entitled "Empowering Nonsense: Reading Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" in a Basic Writing Class" (*The CEA Forum*, Winter 2014). "Jabberwocky" teaches vocabulary, reading skills, and literary literacy. Furthermore it teaches self-esteem because it allows students to lower their defenses, relax into learning and build upon their strengths. Students in remediation are not only scared, they are also angry and frustrated because they were placed in remediation and told too many times their writing and reading skills are incompetent. I use this poem as part of my Non-judgmental Awareness agenda in remediation courses. Using "Jabberwocky" as part of this program is a clear and natural choice, as it is filled with empowering creativity of thought and process. In many of my classes, learning is achieved in ways that further engage by making classes unforgettable. I try to utilize my status in the world of children's literature by bringing in guest speakers, authors, and illustrators that brings the content of the class to life and connects the theoretical with the real. I believe that a large part of what makes a class memorable is the community that is created in the classroom. I do my best to foster an atmosphere of support and camaraderie. In my special topics class entitled "Banned Books and Censorship," my efforts were so successful that the students created and managed their own Facebook page dedicated to the class and have kept in touch, talking about censorship and other political topics long after they graduated.

Social and political awareness is a cornerstone in all my classes, especially the promotion of children's rights and the prevention of child abuse. Some of my proudest achievements as a teacher invariably happen in my Children's Literature courses. Over the years, I have had students contact me, sometimes several years after this class, just to tell me that the way I asked them to think about children and their literature has changed the way they behave and interact with



the children in their own lives, be they their own kids or their students. One particular student made me realize the impact of my course when she told me, with tears in her eyes, that since my class she has “not laid a finger” on her children. This encounter prompted me to become more engaged in the field of Children and Youth Studies where the education about and the prevention of child abuse is one of the more important agendas. With the establishment of the Children and Youth Studies program at BMCC, I hope I will be able more vigorously to promote this important issue.

My ultimate goal is to use my role model Alcott’s words, to make myself as inconsequential to my students’ learning process as I possibly can. My hope is that they will become passionate and independent about their own education and have acquired ways to satisfy their curiosity on their own. In order to accomplish these goals, I have been constantly looking for exciting ways to present content with creative activities to allow for independent learning and discovery. As a Romantic at heart, I believe in sensual learning; learning through all five senses. Sensual and experiential learning is deep and lasting.

# Labeling Student Success: “That was really \_\_\_\_.”

John Beaumont

*Academic Literacy & Linguistics*

*This article is adapted from an address given at the 2017 Faculty Convocation.*

At the 2017 Faculty Convocation, Provost Karrin Wilks focused our attention on the theme of student success. Specifically, she challenged the faculty to think about what we can do to help our students become successful. In this brief article, I would like to highlight one way to stay tuned in to our teaching and our students’ learning, which may advance student success. I’m also going to tell you about a teaching strategy I use to get students to interact in class—but this strategy is not the point. What matters is how and what you *think about* the strategy.

On any given day, my teaching typically weaves in and out of four basic teaching modes: from teacher-fronted explanation, to teacher-led discussion or practice, to paired or small-group work, to individual student work. To move from teacher-fronted to paired work, I often use a teaching strategy that quickly gets students oriented away from me and toward each other. In essence, this strategy is an icebreaker. First, I give the class the instructions for the task they are going to engage in. Before they begin the task, I ask them to pause, look directly at the person next to them, and say, “Hello” or “Hey, what’s up!” or “Happy Tuesday!” or “You look lovely today!” Typically students laugh, smile or roll their eyes, but they do it. While that commotion is going on, I prompt them to begin the assigned task with that partner. As a teaching strategy, you might label this icebreaker: *interactive, effective, amusing, light-hearted, non-threatening, engaging, silly, undignified, noisy, and/or chaotic*.

As the semester goes on and students know each other a little better, I vary what students to say to each other. For example, I might prompt them to look at the person next to them and say, “Hey, I like your \_\_\_\_!” They say the sentence filling in the blank. They might complete the sentence with, *t-shirt, shoes, hairstyle, eyes, smile, socks, and/or notebook*. As an icebreaker, you might label this version of the activity with many of the same words you labeled the earlier versions: *interactive, effective, amusing, light-hearted, non-threatening, engaging, silly, undignified, noisy, and/or chaotic*. In fact, the “Hey, I like your \_\_\_\_!” activity can be described by several of these labels simultaneously.

But remember that this article is not about icebreakers themselves. It is about how and what you think about this activity—or anything instructors and students do. This discussion is about the labels—the nouns and adjectives—that we use to describe teaching and learning. Achieving student success hinges greatly on how we think about and describe what we do in the classroom. We cannot begin to meet the needs of our students if we are not actively aware of what we say and do as teachers and of what our students say and do. One important way we can enhance this awareness is to mindfully acknowledge and challenge the labels we

assign to our teaching, to ourselves, to the students, and to their learning. Think about various labels we use to describe our classes: *interactive*, *communicative*, *engaging*, *student-centered*. Students are *Asian*, *Latino*, *non-native speakers*, *motivated*, *successful*, *lazy*, *overcommitted*. What do these terms mean? How adequately are they? How limiting?

If we want our students to be successful, we need to look at our labels, cast them into question, play around with them, and, ultimately, settle on an informed course of action—what to say or do in class. Ultimately, the goal of this mental exercise is to disrupt our habits of thought by questioning the labels we use every day.

For example, if I think today's lesson was "*interactive*," I can play with that label:

- How do I define *interactive*?
  - Talking?
  - Eye contact?
  - Exchanging information relevant to course content?
- How was the lesson interactive? How was it not?
- What evidence do I have that it was interactive? That it was not?
- Was it interactive for everyone? Just for some? For which students specifically?
- What or whom were they interacting with? The teacher? Classmates? Course materials?
- What was gained from it being interactive? What might be lost?
- How could the lesson be more interactive? How could it be less?
- How did this interaction impact students' reaching the intended learning outcomes? How did it detract from this?

And, ultimately:

- What kind of interaction do I want to try in future classes?

Was the "Hey, I like your \_\_\_" icebreaker *interactive* when I tried it out in class? After I prompted them, students appeared to be looking at each other, talking, smiling and laughing. Was everyone talking? The evidence suggested yes, to varying degrees, and this interaction did help me to achieve my teaching goal—to shift the mode of learning from the teacher to student pairs. Success! However, when I was planning, I also thought about how the activity could potentially be *fraught* (What if a student says something insensitive or inappropriate?), *ineffective* (What if they don't establish a relationship in this moment?), or *embarrassing* (How will the more reserved students feel while doing this?).

In fact, the labels I used to describe this icebreaker might all be appropriate on one level or another depending on the context, the students, the weather, or even the politics of the day. Certainly, the activity has several benefits and pitfalls. What's vitally important, however, is the mental exercise of playing with labels

which helps the instructor to see the activity in light of the learning goals and the population and, ultimately, to decide what to do.

What labels do you use to describe your teaching and your students? Here are some statements I have collected from teacher discourse over several years, followed by some playful questions aimed at challenging our perceptions.

- **Group work is useful.**

Ask: What do I mean by useful? Useful for what? In what ways is it useful? For whom? In what ways is it not useful? Do I always want group work to be useful? What happens if let them go off task for a while? ...

- **Calling on students by name is important.**

Ask: What happens if I don't call them by name? Do they feel good? Bad? Indifferent? What name do I call them? How do I say their names? How do they hear it? Is it better to mispronounce their name or not say it at all? ...

- **Lecturing is old-fashioned.**

Ask: What is lecturing? Do I lecture? How much do I lecture? How can I lecture more effectively? What other modes of teaching do I use? ...

- **Asians are shy.**

Ask: Why else might Asians not talk? Is it about language, culture, personality, interest? Passivity? Fatigue? Life issues? Do other students in class behave the same way? What is an Asian anyway? ...

- **Students should use proper English.**

Ask: What is proper English? Is it the English I use? Do I expect them to use the English I use? What English have my students learned? Why is their English different? What's another reason their English is different from mine? ...

As we think about student success, we need to examine, question, and actively play around with the labels we use to describe our teaching and our students. Doing so can open our eyes and unlock our assumptions that may be limiting our view of our teaching and of our students. As instructors, our starting point for advancing student success is ourselves. We need to be aware, to be agile, and to stay tuned in. To do this, we need to continually challenge our perceptions of what we say, do, and think so that we are better able to choose the best course of action.

# A Flurry of Committees: Helping the Faculty Union and the Academic Senate Work Together

Hollis Glaser

*Speech, Communication and Theater Arts*

*Note: Hollis Glaser delivered this paper at the annual meeting of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in Washington, D.C. in June 2017.*

## **Introduction.**

If you were to look up “cuny’d” in the urban dictionary, you would find this definition: “What happens when some bureaucratic, unreasonable, convoluted and highly idiosyncratic procedure prevents one from achieving a simple, commonplace goal” (Urban Dictionary). The Borough of Manhattan Community College is the largest community college in the City University of New York system with 544 full-time faculty, 952 part-time faculty and about 26,000 students. The system is highly bureaucratic and centralized. It is very difficult for the faculty’s voice to be heard and it often feels that we are fighting the administration without getting anything done

Within the morass of these regular bureaucratic frustrations, our faculty is constantly trying to carve out a place where our students are served well and our faculty are thriving. It has become increasingly clear to many of us that we are not operating in accordance with AAUP’s principles and practices of shared governance and academic freedom, and that these principles and practices could go a long way in helping us create the college we want and that our students deserve. Toward that end, we are trying to help our faculty union and our academic senate work together in a more consistent and powerful way.

Our current governing structure consists of two bodies, an Academic Senate (AS) chaired by an elected faculty member and a College Council chaired by the college President. The Academic Senate consists of nine committees (Executive—Chair, vice-chair, secretary, representatives from standing committees; Committee on Committees, Admissions, Curriculum, Academic Standing, Instruction, Faculty Development, Academic Freedom, and Elections). The College Council consists of five committees chaired by administrators and assigned by the President: Executive, Budget, Campus Facilities and Security, Campus Life and Student Issues, Technology. In addition, we have our faculty union, the BMCC chapter of the CUNY-wide Professional Staff Congress (PSC) that is a unit member of the AAUP.

## ***The Overlap and Gap of the Separate Realms***

Historically, the PSC and the Academic Senate have worked on different areas

and issues of the college. To quote our current PSC chair, Geoff Kurtz, (personal communication, May 29, 2017) “[T]o some extent, the two forms of faculty organization have separate spheres of concern—the union with working conditions and the governance bodies with the content of academic policy.” So the two faculty bodies have different agendas, different meetings and unless the leaders decide to talk to one another there is no inherent mechanism by which they work together.

Paradoxically, issues of shared governance and academic freedom both overlap the union and senate, and fall in a gap between the two. While both bodies are officially in support of shared governance and are in charge of protecting it, neither body has it on their agenda in a regular and predictable way. The PSC actively works on the contract and labor issues. The Senate ensures that the faculty’s voice is heard on academic affairs. The issue of shared governance, however, has gotten lost along the way.

There was one shining moment where both bodies came together to defend shared governance and academic freedom: when the CUNY administration decided to institute a program called “Pathways.” Briefly, Pathways was an administrative initiative intended to make articulation and transfer across CUNY colleges easier for our students. While faculty did not disagree with this goal, the faculty strongly opposed the manner in which CUNY administration pushed Pathways forward. They created the rules and the process for Pathways, which required every college to restructure their general education requirements. In this case, the PSC and the University Faculty Senate (both CUNY-wide) came together to try to stop it. Similarly, on the campus level, both the PSC and Academic Senate coordinated their opposition. However, even in this case, the coordination depended on the chairs of each unit deciding to do so. There was no organizational structure that would have automatically been activated to initiate a conversation between the two bodies.

### ***The New Committee***

In order to help fill this gap, if you will, our PSC created a new committee, The Committee on Shared Governance and Academic Freedom. At the first PSC meeting of the 2016-2017 academic year, we announced this committee and asked for volunteers, letting them know that members of this committee would have individual membership to the AAUP. Ten faculty volunteered, the majority of whom are seasoned, well-known and active faculty. One of our main tasks is to educate the entire faculty about what shared governance and academic freedom is as defined by the AAUP. Toward that end, we have a regular column in the PSC’s monthly newsletter. In our first column, we introduced our committee, explained what the AAUP is and what it stands for. We also introduced the faculty to its “primary responsibilities” (AAUP, Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities) as defined by the AAUP:

Our committee believes it is crucial that BMCC acts in accordance with those practices and principles of shared governance and academic freedom that are widespread, long established, and abided by at the best of the colleges and universities in the United States. For example, the “Statement on Government of



Colleges and Universities,” written with the American Council on Education and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, states that the faculty has primary responsibility for curriculum, subject matter, methods of instruction, research, faculty status and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process. Further, the administration should reverse the decision of the faculty only in exceptional circumstances and must explain that reversal to the faculty. Our committee is beginning the discussion of how this tenet plays out (or not) at BMCC.

The notion that our faculty should be deferred to in their areas of responsibility, and that the administration should explain to the faculty why they override the faculty’s decision in the (supposedly rare) times when they do so, is not well-known among BMCC faculty.

In our second column, we explained how shared governance and academic freedom are entwined, that we cannot have academic freedom without true shared governance. The American Association of University Professors has long considered shared governance a necessary partner of academic freedom (AAUP, *On the Relationship of Faculty Governance to Academic Freedom*). In order for faculty to teach freely and do their research unencumbered by political or administrative pressures, we must also have a meaningful voice in how the college or university operates. We further wrote about the best practices for faculty senates, according to the AAUP (AAUP “Making Senates Effective,” workshop.) and delineated three practices which BMCC is NOT engaging in: 1) Have an active budget/finance committee that reviews the institutional financial statement and makes recommendations; 2) The Senate chair should report to the entire faculty regularly. The Academic Senate chair should be able to e-mail the faculty as he or she sees fit, so that the faculty know exactly what is going on in the Senate. Otherwise, meaningful representation is diminished; 3) The Senate should have institutional support in the form of office space, administrative assistance, and release time for the Senate chair.

As an example of why these columns and this committee are necessary, recently the administration refused the Academic Senate chair’s request to e-mail the entire faculty about AS business. At the end of the year, the committee met to discuss our priorities for the following academic year. We identified five issues that impede shared governance and academic freedom:

- 1) The rushed way administration often throws AS committees work, thwarting careful analysis and deliberation;
- 2) The ambiguity with which service work for faculty is evaluated, thereby empowering department chairs at the expense of new faculty;
- 3) The way the administration populates committees outside of AS without proper faculty representation;
- 4) The inability of the AS chair to e-mail and communicate with the entire faculty;
- 5) The Governance Plan and the process through which it will be changed (more on this below)

In addition to these five issues, I brought up the continued use of “collegiality” as a dimension by which faculty are evaluated for reappointment, promotion, and tenure. The AAUP is clear that this is not a proper category and is ripe for abuse (AAUP, *On Collegiality as a Criterion for Faculty Evaluation*).

### ***The Governance Plan***

In addition to our standing priority to educate our faculty regarding shared governance and academic freedom as defined by the AAUP, the committee decided to focus on the Governance Plan. The reasoning was if we can institute meaningful changes in the governance plan that reflect proper practices and structures, many of our other long-standing issues will be taken care of. For example, it is possible to write into the Governance Plan that AS committees must have a certain amount of time to work on issues, and that the AS chair must be able to communicate with the entire faculty, and so forth.

The college has embarked on a major re-write of its Governance Plan, specifically those articles which regulate the Academic Senate and the College Council. One impetus for this project stems from the COACHE (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education) survey in which our ratings for governance were low. The poor ratings came down to faculty being dissatisfied with communication with the administration and the lack of collaborative decision-making. Many faculty believe that we have too little influence and that the administration ignores the Academic Senate.

Our original plan was for the Academic Senate to initiate and organize an ad hoc Governance Plan Committee. However, the President’s cabinet created a committee before the Senate could and, as is typical, structured it in a way that does not respect shared governance. They insisted that the committee consist of seven people: the Vice-President of Legal Affairs as chair, three administrators of his choosing (all deans as it turns out), the Senate chair and two faculty of her choosing. The AS chair pointed out that the Governance Plan is a faculty document and quoted from the preamble, “The purpose of this document is to codify the rules and regulations under which the faculty of the Borough of Manhattan Community College operates (BMCC Governance Plan). Given this very clear charge, the AS chair argued that the committee to change the Governance Plan should be dominated and run by faculty. Nevertheless, the President would not budge and went forth with his committee as planned.

The AAUP has clearly stated that any committee, ad hoc or standing, that addresses one of the primary responsibilities of the faculty should have faculty representation. And the AAUP clearly defines “representation” as the faculty voting on who is on that committee (AAUP, *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*). Heretofore, the administration has taken “faculty representation” to mean they appoint a faculty member to serve on the committee. (This difference in interpretation is one of the five issues that the new committee plans to bring to the forefront.)

Subsequent to the discussion between the AS chair and the President, the Academic Senate created their own committee to re-write the Governance Plan. This committee is chaired by the AS chair, and populated by nine tenured faculty

including three department chairs, the President of the CUNY-wide University Faculty Senate, the Chair of BMCC's Professional Staff Congress, and a former Academic Senate chair. Fortunately, these two committees are communicating with one another, aided by the three faculty who are on both committees. If the PSC's Shared Governance and Academic Freedom Committee also tackles the Governance Plan, we'll have two faculty-led committees focusing on it, increasing the chances that the new Governance Plan truly represents the faculty's interests and serves our needs. There are also two members on this new committee that are on the AS Governance Plan committee and so we are hoping that this will facilitate communication between the two.

### ***The Academic Freedom Committee of the Academic Senate***

Finally, I must talk about yet another committee. In 2008, a few members of the Senate joined together to study and formulate an Academic Freedom committee as a Standing Committee of the Senate in order to embody the principles of the AAUP, (P. Delano, personal communication, June 9, 2017<sup>1</sup>). It has been more or less effective depending on who is chairing it, but there have been a number of years when it was seen as largely ineffective. Yet it need not be that way. If this committee embraces the AAUP's conception of the way academic freedom is tied to shared governance, then it can also tackle the same issues as the new PSC committee. In this way we have two committees to work on Shared Governance and Academic Freedom, representing both faculty bodies, both of which can vote on motions. The PSC can vote on issues and bring them up in Labor-Management meetings. The Academic Senate can bring motions to the floor for a vote and request that the President respond. Looking forward, we may bring to both bodies those issues identified by the new committee (see above), as well as addressing improper behavior by the chairs and administrators, and tackling issues with CUNY central.

### ***The Ideal Process***

As an example, let's take the issue of administrators evaluating faculty on their "collegiality." This is something that is common at BMCC and clearly violates AAUP principles. However, it still happens and most faculty seem not to know that it is an improper category for evaluation. It is as if there are four legs to be assessed, not three. Ideally, the new committee and the Academic Freedom com-

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<sup>1</sup> The working committee that helped usher in the AS's Academic Freedom Committee put together a proposal for the summer AAUP session for 2008: "A newly formed Academic Freedom Committee on Borough of Manhattan Community College's Academic Senate is grappling with local issues of academic freedom. These include the pressure on a large number of newly hired tenure track faculty to be visible but not controversial, the limitations on a disproportionately large number of part-time faculty with minimal rights, and the growing tensions that come from a central university administration which is growing its power, coupled with a severe economic crisis on the horizon. Part of this crisis means an ever-increasing enrollment; this year we have 21,000 students, which may also mean greater pressure to toe the line in the classroom, and lower our sights about independent thought, research and publications. A more centralized administration also means more rules and restrictions about computer use, in particular concerning ownership of our own work produced on university networks and programs, and curtailed free speech. Members of our committee would like to join in the dialogue about academic freedom in these various interrelated strands." -- P.Delano notes, 2008..

mittee of AS coordinate their agendas and decide which issues to address and when. So, the new committee writes about collegiality in the PSC newsletter and more faculty are educated. Then they bring it up at the PSC meeting, noting that it is improper and make a motion that the PSC executive committee talk about it with the President and Vice President at the next Labor-Management meeting. That same month, the Academic Freedom Committee of the Academic Senate brings it up at the Senate and makes a motion that the Senate affirms the AAUP's statement on collegiality. We then have the administration twice in the same month or semester hearing from both faculty bodies speaking in union about this issue. This same process, of course, could happen with any number of issues that directly affect shared governance and academic freedom.

### ***Conclusion/Limitations:***

To summarize, the processes and principles of shared governance and academic freedom as defined by the AAUP which we are using and finding (for now) to be most powerful are:

- 1) The primary responsibilities of the faculty;
- 2) The way shared governance and academic freedom are interrelated;
- 3) Best practices for faculty senates;
- 4) The meaning of faculty representation.

But all of these ideas are theoretical for now; it is how we are hoping everything will work. There are a couple of major stumbling blocks in the committees' effectiveness. First, there is still no structure that requires the PSC and AS to confer and there probably will never be one. The only way to make that happen would be to change the by-laws in both bodies. So the actuality of the two faculty bodies working together is still dependent on the members of these committees and/or the leadership taking the initiative to talk to each other. However, there is now a PSC committee whose charge it is to address issues of shared governance which the Academic Senate is directly concerned about. And there is a corresponding committee on AS. The expectation is that these conversations between PSC and AS are more likely to happen.

Second, the other major limitation is that ultimately, both bodies rely on the good will of the President and the administration. He can say no or ignore us if he wants. Would this structure have made a difference in the face of Pathways? Most certainly, no. For all of our work on the Governance Plan, ultimately, it is institutionalized by the President taking it to the Board of Regents. If he doesn't like it, he does not have to take the revised Governance Plan to them. The advantage is we now have two bodies that can pressure the administration simultaneously on the same issue, which might make a difference. But I must end looking toward our next steps. Where is our power? We are the voice of the faculty trying to have a conversation and rightfully take responsibility for the academic life of the college and its students and faculty. If our president decides to ignore both bodies, what is our next move?

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# Teaching and Learning STEM: A Book Review

Daniel Torres

*Science Department*

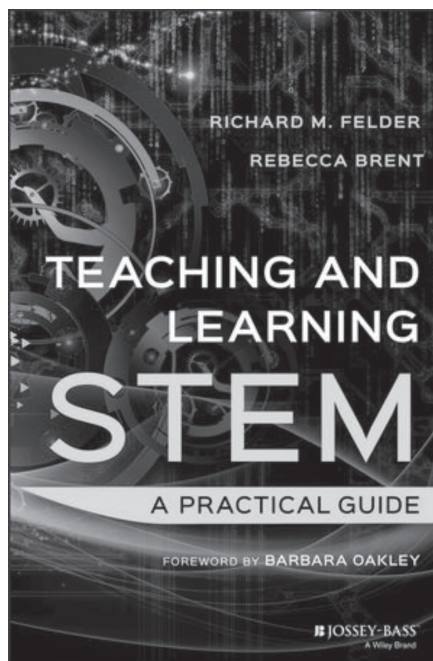
Trial-and-error is the most primitive form of learning: toddlers learn through perseverance and trial-and-error helps species evolve (Thorndike 1931). It also plays a key role in college teaching, as some of us arrived at BMCC as research experts with limited experience. We adapted to a sink-or-swim teaching job playing solo, without an insider's perspective.

It does not have to be that way. The Teaching Academy at BMCC provides us with insightful master teachers, ready with guidance and wise advice. On top of that, a new book has recently emerged that is a perfect companion to the Teaching Academy.

*Teaching and Learning STEM* by Richard Felder and Rebecca Brent is a practical guide to teaching in the STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). This helpful guide is full of advice to design engaging new courses and deliver classes more effectively, and all backed by extensive educational research and hands-on examples.

The first chapter serves as an introduction in which the authors welcome us to college teaching with a didactic handholding: "there is your office, good luck." And what a poignant greeting! Ours is the only skilled profession in which new hires are assumed to have acquired previously, in graduate school, all the skills necessary to function as faculty, including effective teaching (Boice 2000). Unfortunately, this is not necessarily true, and for many of us teaching is like "being handed the keys of a car without being taught how to drive," as the authors describe. The authors devote the rest of the book to breaking down in three parts and 12 chapters the latest advances in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) applied to STEM.

Felder and Brent use the first part of the book to lay down the foundations of effective teaching, addressing course preparation and class planning. "Effective instructors clearly communicate their expectations" and the authors exten-



Teaching and Learning STEM: A Practical Guide, Richard M. Felder and Rebecca Brent, 2016, ISBN: 978-1-118-92581-2. \$37.50 in Amazon. Also available at the CUNY library.



sively support the use of “learning objectives” as cornerstones in our courses in alignment with our lessons. The authors also warn us about the “three steps for disaster” when preparing a brand new course. Who has not done things such as overloading students with course material or overestimating what students know? Disasters can be avoided, as the authors suggest, by creating “down-to-earth classes” that clearly link content to learning objectives.

The second part of the book promotes the active engagement of students during class session. Old-fashion lecturing—deductive teaching, as the authors suggest—does not work efficiently. The authors describe how the attentiveness of the students drops after 15 minutes of lecture. The use of active learning activities—anything that students might be called on to do in class—in intervals can help keep the students awake, hence improving learning. Active learning exercises presented in the book range from simple tasks such as summarizing a lecture to more complex activities like pairing problem-solving activities. The second part of the book also presents assessment and evaluation strategies, answering questions such as: what to do when the grades of a test are abnormally low?

The process of learning results from trial-and-error followed by reflection; it does not come from passively receiving information. The final part of the book introduces the pedagogical framework of inductive teaching. Inductive learning is indeed also the essence of the Teaching Academy, and by means of peer observation, non-judgmental feedback, and experimenting with small changes we can improve our teaching skills. The book provides numerous examples of inductive exercises such as answering conceptual questions, explaining observations or making predictions about an experimental outcome.

One of the strongest points of the book is the extensive set of tables summarizing ideas, graphic organizers to help the reader visualize content and the numerous educational references. The authors also use “Interludes” in the form of short stories, bringing the student’s point of view in a book that is mainly targeted for educators; and aren’t our students’ points of view important? On the other hand, one of the major flaws of the book is that it is mainly targeted towards the STEM disciplines, and it addresses some of the material perhaps too briefly, as it covers a myriad of topics.

Overall, this book is a useful practical guide for college instructors trying to progressively improve classroom practice, and a great supplement to the Teaching Academy. It is a must-have book for STEM educators, veteran and neophyte alike, wanting to create a more student-centered and effective teaching environment. The book draws on the authors’ well-known workshop on learner-centered teaching that might also be of a general interest among the BMCC faculty.

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# Balancing the Curriculum at BMCC Library: Counter-narratives and Diversity in Book Collections

Lane Glisson  
*Library*

In Spring 2016, Lane Glisson participated with other BMCC faculty and staff in a semester-long Balancing-the-Curriculum seminar. Each participant was asked to write up a commentary, reflection, or curriculum suggestions.  
–the Editors

Since coming to BMCC five years ago, one of my primary objectives was to diversify literature in our collections. I request books and videos from other countries in English translation and in languages that are currently taught at BMCC. I also frequently request books that serve gender studies, human rights and social justice topics and issues of inequality. The library has a good budget for books and we welcome requests from professors for books that you would like to see in our collection, for your students or for your research. We are also interested in collecting the books that you have written. Here is a sample of some recent books that I requested that can serve our goal to diversify the curriculum.

- Anthony B. Atkinson's highly regarded and much discussed book *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* Atkinson is a pioneer in the study of economics of poverty and inequality. Recently touted at the CUNY Luxembourg Income Study Center's panel discussion on inequality featuring Janet Gornick, Paul Krugman and Branko Milanovic.
- *The Great Divide: Unequal Societies and What We Can Do about Them*, by Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz.
- *Meursault, Contre-enquete*, in French and its English translation *The Meursault Investigation*, are written from the point of view of the brother of the Arab Man whom Meursault murdered in Camus's novel.
- We have three of middle eastern women's studies scholar Leila Ahmed's books: *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey*; *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence in the Middle East to America*; *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*.
- Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy: Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire*. We also have his other novels.
- *La Historia de mis dientes*, by Mexican novelist Valeria Luisella. (We also have the English translation, *The Story of My Teeth* and her book *Faces in the Crowd*.)

- *Simone* (Spanish Edition) by Eduardo Lalo (also requested the English translation.)
- *Blood Drenched Beard*, by Daniel Galera, one of Brazil's best-known novelists and translators, a novel about a young man's search for the truth about his grandfather's death, translated into English.
- *Latino America: How America's Most Dynamic Population Is Poised to Transform the Politics of a Nation*, by Matt Barreto and Gary M. Segura.
- *The Latino Generation: Voices of the New America*, by Mario T. Garcia.
- *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, by Natalia Molina.
- *Mexicans in the Making of America*, by Neil Foley.
- *A Nation of Nations: A Great American Immigration Story*, by Tom Gjelten.
- *In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play*, by Lynn Nottage.
- *The Clean House and Other Plays* by Sarah Ruhl.
- *House Arrest, Piano, Fires in the Mirror, and Twilight Los Angeles* by Anna Deavere Smith.
- *The Laramie Project and the Laramie Project: Ten Years After*, by Moises Kaufman and The Tectonic Theatre Project.
- *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, by Esther Lee Kim.
- Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels, *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Stay and Those Who Go*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*. We also have her other books.
- *L'Amour, La fantasia*, by Assia Djebar (Also requested the English translation; *Fantasia and Algerian Cavalcade*.)
- *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants are Building a New Empire in Africa*, by Howard W. French.
- *A Thousand Miles to Freedom*, by Kim Eunsun, a memoir of the author's nine-year journey from North Korea with her family that led to her current life in South Korea.
- *Under the Same Sky*, by North Korean Joseph Kim, about escaping the great famine that killed his father, a migration story that led to life in China, and eventually the United States.
- *Queer African Reader*, edited by Hakima Abbas and Sokari Ekine. As homophobia and transphobia threaten to silence the voices of African lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people, this book brings together academic writings, political analysis, life testimonies, conversations, and artistic works by Africans that engage with the struggle for LGBTI liberation.
- *The Moor's Account*: In this award-winning novel, Moroccan-American

author Laila Lalami brings us the imagined memoirs of the first black explorer of America, a Moroccan slave whose testimony was left out of the official record. We also have her other novels *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and *Secret Son*.

- *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*, by Masha Gessen. Drawing on her extensive access to the members of Russian rock band Pussy Riot and their families and associates, Gessen reconstructs the fascinating personal journeys that transformed a group of young women into artists with a shared vision and endowed them with the strength to endure their time in prison for challenging Putin's government.
- *Limonov: The Outrageous Adventures of the Radical Soviet Poet Who Became a Bum in New York*, Emmanuel Carrière's wildly entertaining biography of a Russian activist and author, who fled to New York in the 1970s to live down and out in New York, re-emerging in Russia after Perestroika to criticize both Russian and US repression. (John Lambert, English translator).
- *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, by Veena Das. Das examines case studies of the extreme violence of the Partition of India in 1947 and the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In a major departure from much anthropological inquiry, she asks how this violence has entered "the recesses of the ordinary" instead of viewing it as an interruption of life to which we simply bear witness.
- *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes*, by Anand Gopal. A finely researched and devastating look at how we mismanaged the war in Afghanistan. Pulitzer Prize finalist, National Book Award finalist, Winner of the Ridenhour Prize.
- *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, by Annabele Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh. Comprehensive chapters on historical background, women's movement, social and cultural change, gender identity and many other topics.
- *Digest*, African American and New York poet Gregory Pardlo's new book, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2015. Pardlo read in the Writing and Literature Program's reading series.
- *Bright Dead Things*, new book by poet Ada Limón, who appeared at BMCC in 2015.
- *How to Be Drawn*, by Terrance Hayes. National Book Critics Circle award. Best Poetry Books of 2015 NY Times.
- *Voyage of the Sable Venus: And Other Poems*, by Robin Coste Lewis, winner of the National Book award for poetry 2015.
- *Loving Day: A Novel* by Mat Johnson, about being from a multiracial family in America, got rave reviews in 2015.

- *The Wall Creeper; and Mislaid*, two novels by Nell Zink. Smart, edgy, super-acerbic novels; *The Wall Creeper* was named one of the best 100 books of 2014 by the New York Times.
- *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, by Edwidge Danticat. We also have her novels.
- *Books on Haitian traditional culture: Haitian Vodou: an Introduction to Haiti's Indigenous Spiritual Tradition* by Mambo Chita Tann and *Haiti, History and the Gods*, by Joan Dayan the scholar who also goes by the name Colin Dayan.
- *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-hop*, by Justin A. Williams, the first full-length study in musical borrowing in hip-hop music.
- *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practice in the Middle East and North Africa*, by Anthony Downey. We also have three other of his books: *Contemporary Visual Culture* and *Contested Narratives in the Middle East, Art and Politics Now* and *Yinka Shonibare*.
- *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present*, by art historian Deborah Willis.
- *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present*, by Deborah Willis.
- *Flash Afrique! Photography from West Africa*, edited by Thomas Meissgang and Barbara Schröder.
- *Artemisia Gentilleschi: The Language of Painting* by Jesse M. Locker, and *Artemisia Gentilleschi* by Mary Garrard.
- *Hold Still: A Memoir, with Photographs* by Sally Mann, her much talked-about memoir—she made her name and notoriety from photographing her own children.
- *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, by Lisa Lowe, examines the relationships between Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, exploring links between colonialism, slavery, imperial trade and Western liberalism. She juxtaposes the liberal narrative of freedom overcoming slavery, in the context of the expansion of the Anglo-American empire.
- *The Law is a White Dog*, by Colin Dayan. Tracing the legacy of slavery in the US to the structures of the American prison system and supermax facilities, legal scholar Dayan also demonstrates how contemporary jurisprudence paved the way for abuses in Abu Ghraib prison.
- *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, by Michael Gunter. One of the first analyses of the momentous development of the Kurdish autonomy in “Western Kurdistan” and essential reading to understand Kurdish politics in Syria.
- Two books by journalist Anjan Sundarum who works in Africa: *Stringer: A Reporter's Journey in the Congo* and his new book *Bad News: Last*

*Journalists in a Dictatorship.*

- *Beyond Individualism: The Challenge of Inclusive Communities*, by George Rupp. Examines relations between ethnic and religious groups that co-existed for centuries more or less amicably but now experience increasing aggression and violence amongst themselves.
- *Mental health issues: The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of War*, by Yochi Dreazen. The story of a military family that lost two sons, one to suicide and one to combat—and channeled their grief into fighting the armed forces' suicide epidemic.
- *Demon Camp: The Strange and Terrible Saga of a Soldier's Return from War*, by Jennifer Percy, beautifully written and researched account of post-Iraq and Afghanistan veteran's PTSD issues and a program to prevent veterans' suicides through psychological counseling and spiritual practices.
- *Negroland: A Memoir* by cultural critic Margo Jefferson. She examines her own life and times as a child of the rigid and nearly invisible world of the black elite in pre-Civil Rights, mid-century America.
- *Fire Shut Up in My Bones: A Memoir*, by *NY Times* columnist Charles M. Blow about overcoming childhood sexual abuse.
- *Giving Up Baby: Safe Haven Laws, Motherhood and Reproductive Justice*, by Laury Oakes. Safe haven discourses, she argues, promote narrow images of who deserves to be a mother and reflect restrictive policy.
- *The Color of Christ: The Son of God & the Saga of Race in America*, by Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey. How Americans remade the Son of God visually time and again into a symbol of their own aspirations, terrors, and strivings for power and justice.
- *Sharing the Dream: White Males in Multicultural America*, by Dominic J. Pulera. The author examines the man dimensions of white male experience, from politics, to business, and guns to sports, entertainment, religion, and sexual orientation.
- *Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation*, by Laura Kipnis. Erudite and funny.
- *The Dead Ladies Project: Exiles, Expats, and Ex-countries*, by Jessa Crispin. A literary meditation on migration and breaking free to start afresh.
- *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men*, by Jane Ward.
- *On Immunity: An Inoculation*, by Eula Biss. A book about the controversies and anxieties surrounding inoculation. Combines science journalism with cultural criticism. Widely admired.
- *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, surgeon and author Atul Gawande's ideas about medicine and end of life issues.
- *Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises: A Species Guide*, by Annalisa Berta.



The most complete overview ever published on these fascinating aquatic animals.

- *Math books: Knots and Borromean Rings, Rep-Tiles, and Eight Queens: Martin Gardner's Unexpected Hanging*—the latest Martin Gardner book of mathematical games to engage students.
- *How Not to Be Wrong: the Power of Mathematical Thinking*, by Jordan Ellenberg.
- *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*. Distinguished historian Geoffrey Parker examines first-hand accounts of men and women throughout the world during the political, economic, and social crises that occurred in the Seventeenth Century and the link between climate change and worldwide catastrophe 350 years ago.
- *1946: The Making of the Modern World*, by Victor Sebestyen. He reveals the events of 1946 taking place around the world that shaped our current world.
- *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, by Tim Whitmarsh. Although we think of atheism as stemming from the European Enlightenment, when science and secularism challenged the power of the Church, in fact it originated in a far more remote past, in the ancient Mediterranean.





# CALL FOR PAPERS

*Inquirer* is a journal devoted to teaching, learning, scholarship, and other concerns that touch upon our work with our students at BMCC. The editors welcome manuscripts on any number of topics for Issue 25, including but not limited to the following:

- Successful and innovative classroom activities
- Special teaching themes and units
- New pedagogies in theory and practice
- Ways to enliven the classroom
- Teaching challenges faced and resolved
- Disciplines and skills across the curriculum
- Classroom-based research
- Assessment and evaluation of students and teachers
- Impacts of syllabus, curriculum, new programs, and policy changes
- Teaching about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class
- Teaching about globalization and global citizenship
- Teaching about sustainability and environmental awareness
- Fiction, poetry, and narratives related to teaching
- Book reviews
- Proposals for Teachable Moment Symposia (four or more papers on a shared theme)

Please submit a 250-500 word proposal or working manuscript to the editors by February 1, 2018. The deadline for completed manuscripts is April 1, 2018.

Authors should aim for a finished manuscript of roughly 2500 words, though the editors will consider longer and shorter submissions. Works in Progress will also be considered for our new section on this topic.

All submissions should be in Microsoft Word, doublespaced and in 12 point font, with text, notes, and references formatted in a recognized style (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago) or in the conventional style of the author's discipline.

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