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# INQUIRY

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# Introduction

Many of us have begun to feel that we live in a world of assessment, a boiling down of our teaching and practices in order to quantify the quality of our teaching and the projects we undertake, part of a hyper-rationalized world where facts and narrative can be weaponized to support a reality of one's own making. In balance, when we wear our hats as instructors and practitioners we look toward questioning and inquiry, to a space just short of final understanding. To this sense of inquiry, we dedicate this issue of *The Inquirer*.

At heart, most of us know that to approach our teaching as if we were the masters in the room is to miss the point. Teaching begins with inquiry, the inquiry that we search for in ourselves and that we hope to pass on to our students. This sense of inquiry is one of the most important things we as teachers can give to our students, and at our best, we too enter the classroom as a place of inquiry: into our subject matter, into our students, into our practices, into ourselves.

We begin this issue with statements from two who received the Distinguished Teaching Award for this year, 2019. Kathleen Offenholley writes about the joy we and our students might find when we bring a sense of gaming into the classroom. Sam Sloves writes about what he discovered when he went to learn what it was like to be a student in the New York public school where he was the principal. His discovery, among other things, was the danger students undertook every morning to get to school when they crossed a dangerous section of road that drivers used as a shortcut to the BQE. He got a stop light put in. Wouldn't have discovered it if he hadn't put himself in the students' shoes. His teaching with BMCC students continues this practice of questioning what the experience in the classroom is for the students. Finally, Rifat Salam writes about the curiosity she cultivates in order to consistently improve herself as a teacher, asserting that "good teaching [is] something you [need] to learn how to do well." As such, she lays out four elements essential to keeping that curiosity open.

Our distinguished contributors continue this sense wonder and inquiry in the classroom and outside it. Darryl Brock writes of the curiosity and community that arises each year when he travels for grading AP exams, claiming that the questions that arise from this practice inform all the rest of his teaching. Many of our contributors are faculty who are experimenting with different pedagogical techniques in the classroom: Susan Licwinko and Elisabeth Jaffe write about the pedagogical frustration in developmental algebra that led to practices that will support students' move toward deeper understanding of algebraic concepts. This work by a team of BMCC professors and instructors in Mathematics has earned a \$1.5 million NSF grant under for the EHR Core Research project, which in the end will help evaluate curriculum to support conceptual, as opposed to surface, understanding of underlying algebraic concepts.

Continuing this theme of support for deep inquiry, Patrick DePaolo writes about his experimentation with Pattern Interruption techniques within his lectures

and classroom in order to engage students more with the concepts in his chemistry courses; Deborah Gambs shares with us a conversation on student note-taking that grew organically from a Facebook post. Listening to the many diverse voices, she concludes, “This conversation on Facebook did not fully answer my question, but it did lay out much of the scope of the challenges around student note-taking in class. No single comment here provides a best answer, but taken together, they form an interesting discussion.”

Hollis Glaser’s frustration with the interactions she was having with students in Speech 100 ends for her not in despair but in questioning and experimenting with new ways of grading students and giving feedback; Anthony Naaeke is led in his pedagogical inquiry by questions of social justice and equity, pushing his Speech 100 students toward deep thinking about the connections between ethics and speech. Van Havercome continues the discussion about social justice by exploring the ways that a diverse faculty and student body both inform and inspire the rich fabric of ideas within higher education.

Of course, we cannot lead our students into these spaces of curious inquiry if we are burned out by the systems and grind of the practices within the college and the heavy load of teaching we carry. To that end, Page Dougherty Delano, usually one of the co-editors of this journal, reflects on her year’s sabbatical and defends the importance of it to restore our sense of joy and excitement, the self-guided days that reinvigorate her desire to reimage the ways she lives and creates.

Finally, in Kimo Reder’s piece, we have only questions, a delightful romp within an atmosphere of curiosity and possibility. As your editors thought about Reder’s piece, we found the etymological link between the word *erotisi*, which is to question, and the word *erotias*, which at its root is a word that dwells between love and passion, mind and the body, a tension that the other contributors to this issue float between. This connection between questioning and desire is an invincible urge toward something better, something more truthful, more just, toward something difficult to define. In Reder’s classroom experiment, he and his students are not analyzing in order to boil something down. Instead, their questioning restores life and wonder; it is a tracking without trapping, a joyful unmapping in the space between *erotisi* and *eros*. In this era of increasing clamping down, may we all remember this alternative space is there for us when we’re willing to take the risk.

—The Editors

Holly Messitt (acting editor)  
Elizabeth Wissinger

# The Joy of Math

**Kathleen Offenholley**  
*Mathematics*

## **I believe**

I believe in active and inclusive learning. I believe that the classroom can and should be a place of joy. I believe that everyone can do math.

## **Interactive, Joyful Classrooms**

I teach remedial math—fractions, decimals, basic algebra—stuff that reminds my students of the horrors of bad grade school math experiences. I also teach math for elementary education; these students are future elementary school teachers, the most math-phobic students you can imagine, who, without my intervention, would probably go on to influence their students to think that math is awful. (I am not making that up—see for example <https://www.futurity.org/girls-learn-lesson-in-math-anxiety/>.) The anxiety and misery *stops* at my classroom.

In all my classes, my students spend a large amount of classroom time working in pairs or groups. I often use learning games to begin an activity and get students primed to start thinking. My own classroom research (with my colleagues from the English department) shows that when students enjoy a class more, their ability to learn more *deeply* increases (Crocco, F., Offenholley, K., and Hernandez, C., 2016). There is something about joy and laughter that allows us to open up to new ways of thinking.

In my course evaluations last semester, one of my Math 214 (Math for Elementary Education) students wrote, “Professor Offenholley is a great math teacher and actually helped a ton especially when anyone in the class was struggling and would make sure everyone understood. ... The use of her projects actually allowed for interaction with other students and allowed for each other to help when we needed help.” A Math 8 (Arithmetic and Pre-Algebra) student told me, “This is the most interactive class I have.”

## **Innovative Pedagogy**

I started using games in the classroom well before the current trend to “gamify” everything. I have created games for my students that aren’t just “fun” (although fun is important all on its own), but that also actually teach deeper concepts. For example, the counting game, Bizz Buzz for Base Systems, teaches students about base 5. Even the simple game, paper cut-ups, teaches students how multiplication and factoring are related, or how logarithms and exponents are related. The game I modified from Mad Libs, Mad Math, doesn’t teach deeper concepts but does interweave storytelling and grammar into math. These and other math games can be found on my blog on the CUNY Academic Commons, <https://mathgames.commonsc.gc.cuny.edu/>.

I also started teaching online before it was fashionable, about 14 years ago. The math department where I worked at the time didn't believe it could be done, particularly for math. I had taken an online education class that I thoroughly enjoyed, and was convinced that the degree of online interactivity that was in that class could be done in math as well. I ended up doing my PhD research on what kind of interactivity in online math class discussions makes for better online discourse (Offenholley, 2012). I have since written (with Glenn Miller, in press) a chapter on how to create good, interactive discussions in math classes.

Finally, I recently created my own OER for math for elementary education: an online, free textbook, with videos and interactive questions, so the students can read, watch and interact with the book: <https://collegemathforelementaryeducation.wordpress.com/> I also worked on the math 56 Algebra OER (with Jenna Hirsch and Eugene Millman), also replete with videos and an interactive online homework system: <https://math56oer.wordpress.com/>.

### **What's the Real Secret?**

As good and as important as all of those cutting-edge things are, I don't think they embody the secret of what works, which is much more old-fashioned than those now-trendy things I do. What works is love. Writer bell hooks (2000) says that love is a combination of six ingredients: care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust. Those are the real things that underlie and inform all the other things I do.

In both my online and face-to-face classes, I reach out to my students to connect, to praise them for their hard work and their willingness to persevere. I show them I care, and that I am committed to helping them learn. The students who wrote letters of support my Distinguished Teaching Award application show how much that means to them. Sam, one of my online students last year, writes, "because of Mrs. Offenholley's continued guidance and mentorship, I feel seen. I have a path laid out in front of me, and it helps encourage me when it gets tough to continue. When I am in front of my students one day, I hope they feel the same way I did in her classroom."

My former student Ivana, who is now teaching math at Hunter, writes, "At the beginning of every semester, as I am walking into my class of about thirty-five students, I often think of Professor Offenholley. I wonder if I could help at least one of my students the way that my professor helped me—if I could direct them to the path they should follow to discover themselves." Phoo, who also worked as my SI leader after she was my student, wrote, "I drew a picture of Professor Kathleen as my inspiration in mathematics in my mathematics for elementary education (2) class at CCNY. That's how much she has inspired me and I want to become a teacher like her because I as a student and a future educator, believe that we need many more teachers like her."

### **Mentors**

I want to take a moment to acknowledge a few of the amazing teachers I have learned from. Alyse Hachey, formerly of the BMCC Teacher Education department, taught the first online course I ever took, at Columbia Teacher's College. Without

her to inspire me, I would not have gone on to teach math online. Gay Brooks and Holly Messitt were amazing teachers for the WAC trainings, and Leslie Craigo, also in the Teacher Education department, taught me so much about diversity and inclusion. Finally, Brenda Jones, one of my first karate teachers, taught me by example how to love my students and listened with endless patience as I described my teaching in my early days at BMCC.

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# Friction

Sam Sloves

*Media Arts and Technology*

I was recently reminded of my greatest achievement as a high school principal. I was a big fan of the film *Brubaker*, so my first day on the job, I entered as someone simply visiting the school (I will leave it to a more eloquent social activist to tease out the analogies several layers thick between a film about incarceration and the conditions at the NYCDOE). Turns out it is not that pleasant to go through a metal detector every morning. I also noticed that getting to the main student entrance from the subway involved crossing a long stretch of Brooklyn street that could be used as a short cut to the BQE—and there was nothing to slow cars down on the corner where most students crossed. Once I settled into the job, I wrote a letter to the DOT. I didn't figure I would get an answer, but to my delight, I got a fairly swift response. And soon enough there was a stoplight. Now I would like to think that I inspired a few teachers and students in a manner that resulted in a positive outcome here or there, but I know you can't learn much if you are pinned under the tires of a speeding car. Walking back to the subway after a long day at school, I swear that light winked at me—sometimes yellow, sometimes green—but it always winked.

This comes to mind as I reflect on the question, "What have you done lately?" Well, I got my students to use their phones. It was a struggle as you can imagine, but I've got what they now call grit. In screenwriting class, we workshop student scripts. Students would make up to 20 copies of a script that could run as long as 20 pages. We would pass out the scripts, assign roles, and read. After a discussion, we would move to the next student—a ream of paper would go into the recycle bin, and a new ream of paper would circulate the room. And repeat. It struck me as a gratuitous waste. What about reading electronic copies of the scripts? I had students upload their completed script to a shared folder and bring their favorite electronic device. I was worried they would sneak off to illicit sites reading fake stories created by Hostos Community College about student elections or read email. I needn't have worried. If anything, student focus increased. Incidents of students missing cues or finding themselves on the wrong page went down. In my ecowhiner-ist (like an eco-warrior but takes on very trivial battles) effort to save a tree, I had stumbled onto an effective practice.

At first, I felt a certain shame—my big innovation at best merited an eye roll. And yet, I kept coming back to it. Sure, I spent hours designing clever lessons and coming up with fascinatingly innovative approaches to the curriculum. I formulated mind blowing assessments. And yet, "we read scripts on the phone," just haunted me like a congressional subpoena. I was fooling myself trying to find some greater accomplishment.

So, I'm stuck with it. I overcame my fetishistic obsession with the printed word and learned to love the electronic bomb that is the interwebs and phone culture. Sure, I had some Proustian tactile connection to the look and feel of the

printed word. But that was *my education*. And I am old! Heck, I'm old enough to remember *Brubaker*. I grew up in a world of books. Most of my student grew up reading and working on phones and tablets. This is their tool for exploration and learning. I gave up the Sisyphean battle of getting rid of the phone in the classroom and embraced an element of contemporary culture that I could leverage to my class's advantage. Now don't get me wrong—you will not soon see a project that involves students using Facebook, Instagram or any other program that flirts with bringing our culture to an Orwellian precipice, but I'm pretty comfortable with this ridiculously mundane adjustment.

And it fits with my primary pedagogic principle—Friction and Where to create it. I want students focused on thinking, struggling, wrestling, MMA-ing with the concepts in class—not with bureaucratic, financial, and access issues. Any step I can take to minimize the bureaucratic friction allows the class to spend more energy creating academic friction.

So, stoplights and cell phones. As I roll my own eyes, I remind myself: it's not just the paper; it's the mindset. Teaching isn't about my imposing; it's about finding ways to bolster engagement in a way that increases student learning. To paraphrase many an old girlfriend as I was getting the kiss off, "It's not about me, it's about them." Each day—and I wish it was everyday but I'm a work in progress—I can remember that phrase is a day I become a bit more effective.



# On Crafting and Recrafting a Teaching Life

Rifat Salam

*Social Sciences, Human Services, Criminal Justice*

My professional identity as a teacher, scholar, mentor, and faculty leader has been shaped by the transformative experiences I have had with my students and colleagues at BMCC since I joined the faculty in the fall semester of 2005. As a sociologist, I am well-situated for understanding the social, structural, cultural and educational contexts that our students bring to the classroom. Teaching at a community college led me to become well-versed in the research on higher education, especially as it relates to the experiences of first generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students to develop a scholarly understanding of where our students are coming from and how best to address their learning needs and challenges. One of my biggest challenges has been to go beyond my teaching “accomplishments” and the language of effectiveness and what the institutions we work within expect of us. Ultimately, teaching is part of who I am, my sense of identity and as such I have learned that I need to cultivate that teaching life not just for my students, but also for myself. If there is anything useful to be shared in my accomplishments, it is to express they ways in which I reflect on my teaching and ways to renew and reinvigorate my teaching life.

When I think back to my first experience teaching as a graduate student, I had two contradictory feelings about it. The first was, I had no idea what I was doing and how was I going to get through the semester? The second was this odd confidence that I could be and would be a really good teacher, believing that my ability to perform and my passion for my discipline would help me succeed. Looking back, I think both feelings were valid. I probably made a lot of mistakes and at times felt like I was flying by the seat of my pants, but I think overall my students thought I was a pretty good teacher. And if I was, it was probably because of my overall attitude and approach. I believed good teaching was something you needed to learn how to do well, and you should always keep learning. Reflecting on twenty years of teaching, I’ve learned a few things that I’d like to share.

When I started teaching as a grad student in sociology, we never talked about teaching philosophies. We knew what good teaching looked like and what didn’t from our perspective as students. How we approached teaching and the teaching personas we crafted varied widely, as you would expect. As a young (and even younger looking) instructor, I knew I needed to establish my authority in the classroom and I would have to work to earn their respect in order to accomplish that. As a budding sociologist, I was keenly aware of Erving Goffman’s concept of the presentation of self. But I wanted my teaching to be more than a performance, because being inauthentic is exhausting. More than anything, I wanted to enjoy teaching. Before they immigrated to the United States, my father was a university professor and my mother lectured at a women’s college. When they talked about their former careers,

there was always this sense that they genuinely enjoyed teaching. Beyond that though, or perhaps a key to that was revealed in their interactions with former students—at heart, that enjoyment comes from connecting with students and witnessing their learning. But how do we make that happen? For me, the following four elements have been essential: 1) having mentors and a circle of people who support your teaching 2) being willing to try new things, and retry some “old” things, 3) thinking of teaching, like writing, as a process open to revision and finally 4) (and possibly most important), having compassion for your students and your teaching self.

### **Find Your Mentors and Your People**

Our earliest mentors are probably our favorite teachers—the ones who inspired us to learn and were skilled at facilitating that learning. My graduate school mentor, who refers to herself as my teaching “parent” did something really simple but made a huge difference—she made us summarize our class readings in advance. Everyone was always prepared for the seminar and our discussions were meaningful as well as lively. Even if we start with the assumption that grad students do their class reading, I can attest that doing something as simple as summarizing helped me to read more deeply and critically and I had pages of notes beyond the assignment.

While that might seem like a big ask for our students, this “old” technique works well for them too. At the end of the semester, I give students a combined survey and reflective writing activity and ask about the activities that they found helped them learn the material and the most frequent response was writing about the readings before class. At various points, I’ve experimented various ways of doing this activity—on Blackboard, as discussions, as journals, etc.—but the key thing seems to be the focused reading and writing that helped me so much.

In addition to my own former teachers, I look for and find teaching mentors in all kinds of places, from my activities on campus or professional organizations and the wider world. Some of them I don’t even know in person. An inspirational writer like Parker J. Palmer, whose book *The Courage to Teach*, has gotten me through some tough times in the course of my teaching life without ever having met him in person. I found a rich community of teachers in the wider world of social media, within my own discipline, but also outside of it, and even outside of higher education teaching. In my active life on social media, I have deliberately sought out people who inform and inspire me. As part of that, I have sought out and compiled teaching strategies, insights and techniques on Pinterest, where I have several boards related to teaching. Perhaps my favorite is my K-12 Pedagogy board where I save all kinds of great materials created by teachers—I find that innovative teaching often comes from K-12 and “trickles up” to higher ed. This community of teachers across disciplines and levels who write and blog about their teaching experiences and strategies are always a source of renewed enthusiasm and energy, especially when I’m experiencing a teaching setback or challenge.

In addition to cultivating a virtual community and library of resources, I have actively fostered my primary teaching community of colleagues at BMCC. I try to think of every workshop (whether I am a participant or a facilitator) as a place to make connections. We are very lucky to have several faculty development opportunities at BMCC. In my case, Writing Across the Curriculum grew from

a one semester workshop to a place where I found a mentor and colleagues who informed (and continue) to inform and stimulate me. But bear in mind that “workshops” are what we make of them and for me, it’s the people and the connections I’ve made that have been most valuable. During those tough teaching moments that inevitably come with the territory, whether it is teaching challenge I’m currently experiencing or whether I’m experiencing a teaching “identity crisis,” my community is there for me and I’m there for them. There well-trodden paths from my office to certain colleagues’ offices (or their digital equivalents) is a two-way street. When junior colleagues come to me and feel a little badly about “bothering me,” I try to remind them that I’m only passing along the advice and support that I received and continue to receive from others. If anything, crafting a fulfilling teaching life demands that we cultivate our teaching community and give back to it whenever we can.

### **Try New Things and Always Revise**

Can I confess that every time I hear the words “effectiveness” and “innovative” I cringe? That doesn’t mean I don’t think those things are unimportant. But how we define those things in our teaching and the constant institutional hammering of those ideas have not only become meaningless but enact a kind of symbolic violence on our inner life as teachers. These buzzwords can produce a nagging sense that we will never be effective or innovative enough in the face of all the constantly changing challenges we are presented with in the classroom and within the context of our institutions. I’ve had to work hard to use that language when needed, but also recognize the need to distance myself from corporatist language and focus instead on practical strategies and reflecting on what has worked and what I need to seek out to create better teaching and learning in the classroom.

To move away from this kind of limiting language, we need to think of teaching as our craft and we need to create teaching toolkits that work for us and work for our students. So instead of thinking about “innovative” pedagogy, I think in terms of building up a pedagogical toolkit where the latest technology is on equal footing to “old school” techniques like journaling and reflective writing. And if things don’t work out, instead of blaming students or blaming myself, I look to my toolkit to help me craft a solution. And if I don’t have something that will work, it’s time to seek out some new tools which I can find through professional development or from my teaching community. If I’ve learned anything, it’s to not to toss things out of my toolkit when I’ve acquired a shiny new one. Like any real-life crafter knows, it may still come in handy and I can always share it with others. Practically speaking, I can tell you it’s a good idea to organize and reorganize your toolkit. Much like my own semi-(dis)organized craft room, I go through my pedagogical toolkit often—digital and otherwise and find it to be an endless source of ideas.

My conceptual and otherwise toolkit is always evolving, and in fact has been strengthened by some of my teaching failures over the years. Teaching fails are a not a bad thing, and if you’re not failing, you’re probably not working at being a good teacher. My favorite recent teaching fail involved an assignment where I asked students to do an ethnography of a New York City neighborhood. I thought I had constructed a great assignment with lots of scaffolding and feedback

but in the end, I found that the work that the students had done didn't meet the criteria very well, and even the best papers fell short of my expectations of learning and intellectual development. The students had fun doing the project and had done their best, but I realized I needed to go back to my toolkit. The conceptual tool of Bloom's Taxonomy told me that I was asking them to employ higher order skills without having mastered the ones before it--I had not sufficiently taught them ethnographic skills which involve not only writing but a particular way of seeing and observing the social world. After using different assignments for a couple of years, I revised and resurrected my assignment to include a hands-on activity to help students acquire the skills of ethnography and I borrowed from and adapted activities from other assignments I'd created over the years. From their feedback, students had even more fun with this one and from the papers, I could see that they learned much more from this new version of the assignment. The lesson here is that we can "fail" in teaching without seeing it as a setback but rather like writing, as a process, and using the tools we've gathered, make it even better.

### **Conclusion: Compassion for Students and Your Teaching Self**

I want to end this with what I think is most important to crafting a fulfilling teaching life. Having compassion both for students and ourselves is the most important thing, especially when we choose a career at an institution that serves students with as many challenges as ours. Doing so requires that we develop empathy for our students but also that we take care not to drain our mental and emotional reserves in service to them and the institution. There is much more to say and to write about this and I hope that my robust teaching community at BMCC will do chime in. I caution us not to think of compassion and "mindfulness" as more than something innovative and effective that we can exploit to improve our numbers, as there is always that danger. Crafting a teaching life that feels true to our sense of purpose and consistent with our values as educators is ultimately what is best for our students, our institutions, and ourselves.

# Scoring the AP Exam: Toward an Enhanced Student and Faculty Classroom Experience

Darryl E. Brock  
*Center for Ethnic Studies*

As a Reader (or scorer) for the Advanced Placement (AP) exam over the last half dozen years, I am struck by how little academics typically know about this professional service gem and developmental opportunity. First, unlike conferences and other valuable service programs that scholars might pursue, these short summer programs actually offer compensation. In fact, Readers receive quite respectable professional remuneration while working in their discipline. This alone is great news for BMCC professors, especially contingent faculty who struggle financially to make it through the lean non-teaching summer (as I well remember myself, a former adjunct). Second, and even more important, BMCC professors can enhance their teaching and career positioning as a result of the AP Reader experience. A recent AP survey found “over 72% of returning Higher Ed AP Readers said that they made changes to the way they teach or score work because of their experience at the AP Reading.” This article intends to better acquaint BMCC faculty with the AP exam process, and how to participate as an AP Reader for one of the thirty-eight examination tests, subjects ranging from English to Government to Physics. While U.S. History grounds my experience, the other AP Reading disciplines (held in various cities across the nation, all-expenses paid) share essentially the same process.

An enterprise comprising the scope of the AP exam engages many stakeholders while impacting the future of America’s youth; accordingly, it is not surprising that some controversy exists, as covered by the media. There are detractors who raises questions as to whether or not the AP exams are too Eurocentric, while others ask if exam designers have tilted too far toward the cultural turn (particularly in history) in efforts to de-emphasize American exceptionalism. Such issues, however, seem remote during the AP Readings process. Further, the broader population’s enthusiasm for AP also seems undiminished by such concerns. *Inside Higher Ed’s* analysis of 2018 data from AP Central concluded that not only did more students take the exam over the previous year, but minority engagement demonstrated higher performance. Considering the lowest score possible for college credit, the category Black/African American increased 7.2% over 2017, while Hispanic/Latino increased 8.8% and Asians increased 10.9% (compared to a 2.2% increase in scores for the category White). These are key student demographics for the CUNY system. Indeed, BMCC professors can readily perceive a resonance in these AP outcomes and elements of BMCC’s educational focus.

## Who’s on First?

For the college professor arriving at the AP Reading as an Acorn (a first year “newbie” reader, the term derived from The College Board logo), the jargon-laden

communications embraced by the hundreds of Readers swirling about can be daunting. References to APUSH abound, and conversations like: “I did the DBQ and FRQ last year, but now we have a new rubric to come up to speed on with the SAQ and LEQ.” But, one quickly comes up to speed, recognizing APUSH as one’s own exam, the Advanced Placement U.S. History test (other disciplines claim their own acronyms). As for the various “Q” acronyms, they are types of questions to be scored, such as the Document-Based Question (DBQ).

The culmination of a year-long high school course, AP exams are taken by these secondary students in hopes of securing college credit for the university survey course in history and other subjects. In fact, AP reports for 2018 inform that 2.8 million students took over 5 million exams, each of which requires just over three hours to complete. The exam for U.S. History comprises a 55-question multiple choice section as well as a constructed response component in typically three categories: Short Answer Questions (SAQ), the Long-Essay Question (LEQ), and the Document-Based Question (DBQ). A recent DBQ: “Explain the reasons why a new conservatism rose to prominence in the United States between 1960 and 1980.” The supporting documents included excerpts from Senator Barry Goldwater’s 1960 book *Conscience of a Conservative*, as well as other references related to economist Milton Friedman, televangelist Jerry Falwell, and the 1980 Republican Platform.

Universities vary in their utilization of the AP exams. While over 3,000 U.S. colleges accept AP exams, they may not give credit for certain disciplines. This can occur, for example, when a university offers an introductory history course not following standard survey models. It thus makes sense they would instead insist students benefit from their own unique institutional approach to history and not bypass such courses in favor of the AP option. Acceptable scores also vary by institution, with some schools providing AP college credit for a rating of 3 (“Qualified”), while others require a 4 (“Well-qualified”) or even a 5 (“Extremely well-qualified”). Twenty other nations beside the United States award college credit for AP courses and exams, with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) standing as a particular growth area.

The nonprofit College Board and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) manage the AP exam program. The College Board, headquartered in New York City, also owns the widely-used SAT test that it contracts with ETS to develop and administer. The ETS, headquartered in New Jersey near Princeton University, stands as the world’s largest nonprofit private educational test and assessment organization. As explained by Bill Polasky, an AP U.S. History Table Leader teaching at Stillman Valley High School (near Rockland, Illinois): “Contracted by The College Board, the ETS builds the AP exam, handles grading, and compiles the statistics based on the results. The College Board administers the actual test.”

Potential new Readers apply online at AP Central, an internet site easily located by searching “Become an AP Exam Reader.” Readers work as ETS employees during the eight days of the AP Reading. From the webpage: “Readers are provided with an honorarium of \$1,639 and their travel expenses, lodging, and meals are covered.” During the 2018 Readings—always held in early June—over 17,000 teachers and college faculty scored AP exams. Taking U.S. History

alone, 2,337 Readers evaluated more than 505,000 exams. Considering there are a number of specific exam components, this represents nearly 4 million discrete scoring actions in just U.S. History to be assigned, tracked, and compiled by ETS and The College Board, while conducted by Readers. A daunting process, to be sure, but also an invigorating one.

### **An AP Reader's First Day**

So, what is it like to be an AP Reader? Your impression begins on the final leg of your airline flight when you realize most of the passengers are engaged in AP conversations. When they identify you as an Acorn, friendly advice commences immediately. The sense of the camaraderie of the Readership begins to dawn on you. As you arrive at the airport, you cannot help but feel a bit like a visiting dignitary when uniformed greeters with College Board placards meet you at baggage claim. They direct you to large Greyhound-style buses waiting outside and you are quickly and efficiently whisked to your hotel in comfort. You realize the world seems to be converging on Louisville and Tampa (and other cities around the United States during the AP scoring season). That is, ETS and The College Board are tracking the 17,000 educators arriving in various cities down to the flight number, minute, and hotel. You relax and enjoy the marvels of exceptional managerial efficiency in support of education.

Arriving the next morning for duty, the AP Reader seeks out his or her assigned table, inscribed on a large wall chart located outside of a breakfast dining hall that seems the size of a football field. Meandering around dozens and dozens of scoring tables throughout the massive conference center, one spies in various nooks and crannies the stations of clerks who manage the document packets of essays and scoring forms. One tries to imagine the beehive of activity that must have preceded in the days before the AP Reading as fleets of eighteen-wheeler trucks delivered hundreds of thousands of essays. Throughout the week, Readers will engage an impressive regimen of color- and number-coded scoring folders, pre-printed scoring forms and process controls, an elegant organizational matrix masterfully orchestrated by this support staff.

Settling in at your table of eight Readers, you learn that most of the morning will comprise training on grading essays. A seasoned college professor might naturally wonder why she would need to be “trained” to score. “Don’t they realize I’ve already graded thousands of papers at my university?” Soon, however, the *logic* of the training becomes evident—and the *value* to the academic scholar. The logic, of course, is that each student deserves to be scored according to the same rubric—and application of that rubric. There is no room for personal preference in scoring the student’s handling of evidence or in presenting conclusions. The exact same standard must be applied to all students. This process requires effective teams, not the valorization of individuals. The Acorn experiences great team training as the first AP element!

The “value” of the training to the academic also quickly becomes evident. Just what are reasonable expectations for a (high school) student given 40 minutes to write a sophisticated essay while consulting numerous unfamiliar historical documents? Where is the threshold for arguments and evidence that merely

“support” the thesis versus those that “extend” the thesis? For an LEQ, the Long-Essay Question, does the student employ periodization appropriately? That is, does he incorporate historical references to relevant events prior to and after the time period of the exam question? Essentially, how does a Reader differentiate between a “well-qualified” and an “exceptionally well-qualified” essay? The nuanced parsing of these parameters hones the professor’s assessment skills in a unique new way, one that can be applied directly to BMCC classes. Further, the sample benchmark essays used as models for scoring can also be brought back to campus for assisting one’s own students in their analytical writing and critical thinking skills.

Aside from this formal training, many informal opportunities for evening workshops and programs on pedagogy also abound during the AP Reading. Further, a major keynote speaker typically presents at one evening gathering, as with the eminent American historian Eric Foner who recently discussed his new Underground Railroad book *Gateway to Freedom*.

### **The Undiscovered Country: AP Students and AP Teachers**

What about the students themselves? In terms of scholarship, there are the fascinating and even amusing revelations all teachers encounter when students do not quite get their history right. On balance, though, even students who do not score high enough for college credit generally display a competent understanding of history. And then there are those who truly astonish as you read their essays. “Wow. This student—no doubt a future Pulitzer Prize winner—raises a novel point about FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy. Perhaps I could incorporate this into my next class, or explore it in the book I am writing.”

Aside from rubrics and student engagement, one of the greatest values of the AP process resides in networking with the other AP Readers. By way of analogy, historians acknowledge that one of most profound impacts of the 1860s American internecine conflict resided in actually perceiving the vastness of one’s country for the first time. That is, Maine Union soldiers in exploring Florida’s beaches and Georgia Confederates as they encountered rural Pennsylvania. Similarly, the opportunity for bicoastal scholars to meet high school AP teachers and fellow academics from the Midwest, South and West broadens one’s horizons and respect regarding other regions of the nation, and other domains of scholarly engagement. Of course, one will also meet scholars from the tri-state region, thereby facilitating more local networking. This is another enrichment that educators can bring back to BMCC.

The perspectives gained from interacting with high school AP History teachers can also be valuable. Alta Sonya Rinehart, a Reader from Edenton-Holmes High School in Edenton, North Carolina, values “intense AP analysis” with college professors as providing professional development “that surpasses any workshop or one day training.” Secondary educators and college professors indeed have much to offer each other due to their differing situations. AP teachers command an impressive knowledge base related to their discipline, undistracted by research and engaging in publication. But those distractions for academics reveal exceptional insights to AP teachers, enriching their courses.



AP teacher and Reader Krista L. Mullen, a Social Studies Department Head at Tri-City Christian School in San Diego, takes advantage of the wider range of historical inquiry academics are able to pursue. “Not only have I learned content that will improve my classes—for example, Spain as a forgotten U.S. ally during the American Revolution—but my firsthand information regarding what college professors expect from their students improves my credibility with sometimes skeptical high school students.” Bill Speakman, a Reader from Waynesburg Central High (Waynesburg, PA), agrees: “While an AP U.S. teacher must cover the course framework within the time allotted, the professor can narrow the scope of a course and delve more deeply into the content. This allows specialization in a particular area, knowledge that can be shared.” In short, the AP process provides an opportunity for BMCC professors to enhance secondary education around the nation. Further, they can better appreciate the high school environment that essentially produces BMCC freshmen. In doing so they also help understand and even strengthen the pipeline leading to future BMCC students.

Academic participation stands vital to the AP exam process in order to serve American youth. Kristina Bobo, an Assessment Specialist at ETS who speaks as a long-time Reader, observes that academics are involved in test development and preparation, so it makes sense that they score the exams as well. “This is beneficial for both college and high school teachers in terms of networking, a valuable encouragement in bringing scorers back year after year.” Long-time past chief reader Dr. Jonathan Chu agrees that the collegial and collaborative approach of AP teachers and academic faculty is critical: “We are a collective of people trying to accomplish a task that is difficult, if not almost impossible: to provide an equitable assessment of every student submission.” He essentially declares that all hands are needed on deck to face this challenge. As a new prospective AP Reader, the opportunity to strengthen the AP process also represents a significant possibility for enriching your own teaching effectiveness at BMCC!

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# Developing an Algebra Concept Inventory ... and Securing a 1.5 Million Dollar NSF Grant

Susan Licwinko and Elisabeth Jaffe  
*Mathematics*

## Introduction

As educators, we see the same mistakes repeated, over and over again, by student after student from one year to the next. The problem is often that students have learned by rote how to accomplish a task for one situation, and then generalize this method incorrectly to many others. In mathematics, this takes the form of students knowing processes and formulas for solving problems, without knowing why these procedures work or how to use them in new types of problems. In many cases, our students have memorized a set of procedures and surface-level similarities, without making connections and without a deep understanding of the underlying concepts (see e.g. Givvin, Stigler, & Thompson, 2011; Stigler, Givvin, & Thompson, 2010).

As faculty who teach developmental algebra, one of the more painful examples of this lack of understanding occurs when students try to solve an equation such as by adding 2 to both sides of the equation. Here, they have incorrectly generalized to “add 2” whenever they see “negative 2.” The correct step, to divide both side of the equation by -2, takes a deeper understanding of algebraic structure—that  $-2x$  is really “negative 2 times  $x$ .”

Similarly, students generalize to “cancel” whenever they see the same numbers in the numerator and denominator of a fraction. They do not realize that it is okay to cross out the  $x$ 's in the fraction  $\frac{x}{x}$ , but not in the fraction  $\frac{1}{x}$ . To understand why takes a deeper conceptual understanding of what “cancelling” actually means, that is equal to 1, and that it is only when we *multiply* by 1 that we get the same answer.

Our students' lack of conceptual understanding becomes a great barrier to their academic success at BMCC. It is often the first obstacle they face in their quest to obtain a college degree, and failure of their first mathematics class significantly affects retention and transfer rates for all students. One way to address this issue is to be able to see what concepts the students come to class understanding, and which conceptual areas need to be addressed indirectly in our classes. Yet there is currently no validated assessment to assess conceptual understanding for developmental college algebra. As a result, instructors do not have a way to systematically find out which incorrect or underdeveloped algebraic concepts are preventing students from understanding and passing basic algebra, and cannot target instruction to address these conceptions explicitly.

Understanding fundamental algebraic concepts is critical not only to successfully completing developmental algebra, but also for success in subsequent credit-bearing

mathematics and science courses. Many of the most common algebra errors exhibited by students in higher-level mathematics courses reveal a tendency to use procedures and symbolic notation without a clear understanding of the concepts that underlie them (see e.g. Stewart & Reeder, 2017).

### Developing an Algebra Concept Inventory

To address the need to assess algebra competencies, the process of creating an algebra concept inventory began with a team of professors from the BMCC mathematics department in the winter of 2014. Claire Wladis headed up the team, with Kathleen Offenholley, Susan Licwinko, Dale Dawes and Jae Ki Lee. Elisabeth Jaffe and Audrey Nasar joined the team in 2018. An initial, pilot assessment was created during the Spring 2015 semester. In summer 2015, the team reviewed the assessment and offered feedback. Each person then created their own conceptual questions to add to or replace questions on the survey. Each question was analyzed by the team to ensure it would provide insight toward student thinking and address common algebra misconceptions. If the team decided it did not meet these requirements, that question was removed from the survey.

The 22-question assessment took many months of tweaking and discussion to ensure we had a product that was conceptually based and non-repetitive in assessing content. Conceptual understanding is often intertwined with procedural knowledge, so we defined an item as procedural if, to solve it, a student could use a memorized set of steps to solve it without a deeper understanding of the mathematical justification behind the steps. An item was considered to test conceptual understanding if, in order to answer it correctly, a student had to use logical reasoning grounded in mathematical definitions and would not be able to arrive at a correct response solely by carrying out a procedure or restating memorized facts.

Here is the evolution of one question on the survey, as we navigated our way toward creating a more conceptually oriented item. (The underlining indicates the correct answer choice or choices).

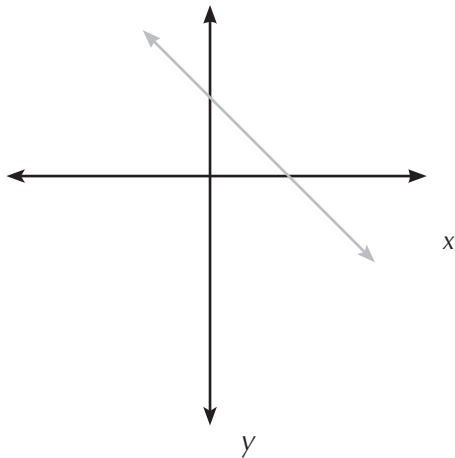
#### Winter 2014

The slope of a line is  $-4/3$ . Which of the following statements is true? There may be **more than one** correct answer—select **ALL** that apply.

- a. Every time that  $y$  increases by 3,  $x$  decreases by 4.
- b. Every time that  $y$  increases by 3,  $x$  increases by 4.
- c. Every time that  $y$  decreases by 3,  $x$  decreases by 4.
- d. Every time that  $y$  decreases by 3,  $x$  increases by 4.
- e. Every time that  $y$  increases by 1,  $x$  decreases by  $4/3$ .

#### Summer 2015

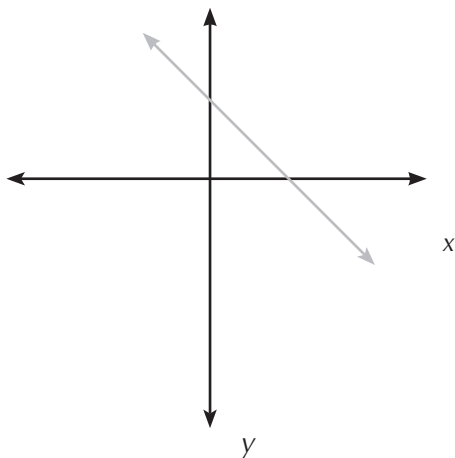
If a line has a **negative** slope (like the line in the picture below), which of the following statements must be true?



- a. When  $x$  decreases,  $y$  increases.
- b. When  $x$  increases,  $y$  increases.
- c. When  $x$  decreases,  $y$  decreases.
- d. We need to know whether the negative sign belongs to the top or the bottom of the slope fraction in order to determine the relationship between  $x$  and  $y$ .
- e. Without knowing the exact value of the slope, it is impossible to say anything about the relationship between  $x$  and  $y$ .

**Final version, Summer 2016**

If a line has a **negative** slope (like the line in the picture below), which of the following statements must be true?



- a. When  $x$  increases,  $y$  increases.
- b. When  $x$  increases,  $y$  decreases.

- c. The value of  $y$  doesn't depend on the value of  $x$ .
- d. Without knowing the exact value of the slope, it is impossible to say anything about the relationship between  $x$  and  $y$ .

After the first draft was created, the team decided not to include numbers, so that the line was not only representing the one specific instance of a negative slope. We also wanted to ask more generally what it means for a line to have a negative slope. A picture of a graph showing a line with negative slope was included in the second draft for students who are visual learners.

From the second draft to the final draft, the group decided to eliminate answer option d (We need to know whether the negative sign belongs to the top or the bottom of the slope fraction in order to determine the relationship between  $x$  and  $y$ ). The team wanted to include it, as the placement of a negative sign in a slope is a common issue that students have when graphing or interpreting a slope, but ultimately, and after much debate, this option was rejected as more procedural than conceptual and was removed.

In addition to pooling our own knowledge of concepts in algebra, we sent our initial pool of questions to mathematicians and mathematics educators to make sure they could solve the problems, and that they felt that what we were testing was indeed important to an understanding of algebra.

The surveys were administered to students in elementary algebra beginning in the Fall 2015 semester. Data were collected and analyzed.

In the Fall 2016 semester, "think aloud" interviews were conducted with a subset of students who previously took the conceptual algebra concept inventory. The five team members each interviewed students. Each student spent about one hour with their interviewer, first taking a shorter version of the survey which contained eleven questions. The student then discussed their answers for each question with the interviewer. The interviewers asked the student about his or her thought process for each question and asked the student to explain why he or she did or did not choose *each* possible answer option. The interviews were audio recorded. The experience of conducting some of these student interviews was unique because it is rare to hear the student explain their thought process on an assessment. However, the vast procedural knowledge and limited conceptual knowledge many students had was not surprising.

As a result of all our background work, the team was able to demonstrate that we had the ability to work on a larger version of the small item pool we had started. It is often the case that funding agencies like the NSF prefer to fund research projects that have essentially already been started – because they want to see evidence that the researchers are capable of doing the work. In the fall of 2018, Claire Wladis, who headed up our team's work, received a 1.5 million-dollar NSF award to enlarge upon the work the team had started, with many members of the initial team being able to continue the work with her. The grant is the largest ever received by a BMCC faculty member.

The EHR Core Research Project at Borough of Manhattan Community College will ultimately build a pool of 200 questions to assess conceptual understanding and then test and validate the database at seven different colleges and universities.

As a result of our work, researchers will be able to reevaluate curricula so it effectively addresses the lack of conceptual understanding in algebra. They will also be able to determine teaching approaches that will improve understanding. Educators will be able to generate diagnostic tests, and in their practice, use the results to target their instruction to these specific misconceptions. The project will also produce a conceptual framework for college students' understanding of elementary algebra.

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# The *Pattern Interruption* Method: Improving Content Retention in the Chemistry Lecture

Patrick DePaolo

*Science*

## **Introduction:**

Investigators have posited that the increasing use of electronic devices among students at all levels is adversely affecting learning because these devices are employed, predominantly, for social and recreational purposes rather than restrictively as resources for study. Recent studies support this idea. As of 2017, the average age at which a student receives a smartphone was just 10.3 years old.<sup>1</sup> This statistic suggests that, for a large segment of the student population, a smartphone has displaced the classroom and the library as primary informational resources. Rather being a means of supplementing traditional learning and print media, smartphones have become, for many high school and undergraduate students, a readily-accessible substitute for traditional learning; in effect, it has removed the student, emotionally and intellectually, from the interactive environment essential to the develop of intellectual and social skills. It is having an insidious effect, inhibiting concentration, self-discipline, and critical thinking, and providing instantaneous gratification in game-playing and in social activities.

If one argues for the merits of a smartphone as a learning tool, one is assuming that a student in the 12-to-22-year-old range is mature enough to understand and avoid its distractive and even addictive potential. As of 2016, 100% of people, ages 18–29, a cohort encompassing the undergraduate population, own a smartphone.<sup>2</sup> This fact has alarming public-health implications. Mobile technology, so widely available and alluring, not only distracts students from their work in school and at home, but may even lead to cognitive dysfunction. A 2015 Microsoft study, for example, concluded that the average attention span of all people in the United States has decreased from 12 seconds (2000) to 8 seconds (2015); this is less than the attention span of a goldfish.<sup>3</sup> Further investigating the issue, a 2006 study concluded that, prior to 2006, 25% of adolescents (n=299) exhibit some sort of cognitive disruption and technology-induced perceived stress.<sup>4</sup> This statistic, if extrapolated to the present day, is likely to have increased. Constantly bombarded by flashing lights, LED screens, videos, and acoustics, the modern college student has become numb to educational material conveyed in lectures and in presentations. The logical conclusion is that students today do not retain information during traditional lectures to the degree that their predecessors could when mobile technology was neither fashionable nor pervasive. This trend has been especially evident in chemistry courses I



have taught at BMCC. The pedagogical objective is to maximize a promising classroom methodology which may offset the impairing, cognitive effects of technological overuse.

### **Methodology:**

Modern educators must find a way to remove or remediate the effects of mobile-phone interference, which chronically distracts students, reduces attention span, and impedes participation. In order to mitigate these conditions in the classroom, I have routinely employed a psychological-engagement technique known as *Pattern Interruption*. Mainly implemented in sales and marketing, Pattern Interruption is a broadly identified technique that aims to modify the listener's thinking, re-directing attention to the presentation through kinetic and aural prompts. Tactical variations in tonal quality (pitch, intensity, volume), body language, rhetoric (e.g., the use of anecdotes and analogues), visuals (e.g., brightly-colored graphics and PowerPoint font and imagery), and tactile stimuli (a three-dimensional molecular model) are employed in Pattern Interruption.<sup>5</sup> This technique operates by refocusing the audience on the subject matter, especially when abstract and quantitative reasoning is required. According to the aforementioned 2015 Microsoft study, refocusing is needed at 8-second intervals.<sup>3</sup> Researchers who have arrived at this value believe the Pattern Interruption technique is an effective modality at the elementary school level and in sales; however, until now, the technique has not been systematically applied to higher learning.

A college instructor can incorporate the following higher-education Pattern Interruption techniques into the lesson:

- **Vocal pattern interruption:** modulations in instructional tone of voice and in inflection; changes in tempo, punctuated by emphasis on important points.
- **Topical sidebars:** a student's question, answered analogically or anecdotally, and with humor; the intention is to encourage questioning and to suggest ancillary strategies to students who express the need for further help (e.g., office hour instruction, supplementary tutorial, or peer reviews).
- **Kinetic body language:** moving in the foreground and between rows, gesturing for emphasis, a chemistry instructor may use hand gestures (as rudimentary "signing") to reinforce the presentation of biochemical reactions.
- **Diversification of tasks:** group worksheets in the lecture or lab, essential to chemistry and physics courses, eliminate the spatial partition between the lecturer and his or her audience.
- **Informal Cognitive Reaction Development (ICRD):** creating an informal environment by use of elementary terms, personal anecdotal descriptions, or pop-culture references to reduce the cultural partition between student and instructor.

Employing Pattern Interruption as a pedagogical method may reduce the tendency towards electronic distraction in the classroom and, to some degree, remediate the damaging effects of off-campus cyber dependency.

The techniques described above can engage the students in the lesson, even in a quantitatively-abstract lecture; recondition their preconceptions of STEM; and, for the humanities students, foster an appreciation of natural phenomena. The so-called bystander student who retreats into a cyber world of games and gossip whenever intellectual challenges arise may recognize innate talents, reviving his or her natural inquisitiveness. My experience with Pattern Interruption techniques, though partially anecdotal, is nonetheless empirical. With the improved examination results and classroom participation, the effectiveness of this method has been quantitatively revealed to me. For one thing, after experiencing this teaching method, students demonstrated a better understanding of course material during their conference sessions. If applied effectively, the student-instructor relationship can become less rigidly defined, mitigating stress and increasing motivation. Students who are welcomed, treated with respect, and given the academic attention they deserve may even attend class more regularly, be better prepared, and feel confident enough to ask questions.

### **Pedagogical Features of Pattern Interruption:**

#### **Vocal pattern interruption**

This involves modulating vocal pitch, speed, volume, and other vocal parameters to regulate auditory stimuli during lesson. Monotone instruction diminishes subject retention and interest. Vocal pattern interruption aims to eliminate monotone vocalizations by frequently changing at least one of the following vocal parameters every 8–10 seconds:

Frequency (pitch)

Loudness and Intensity

Tone

Speed

Modulating frequency may increase active engagement, and this can be achieved with the humorous or light-hearted explanations of difficult concepts. For example, when explaining that an ionic bond occurs due to the transfer of electrons from metal to nonmetal, the instructor can, through personification, humanize physical phenomena. By humanizing an otherwise inanimate object, one can differentiate between the inherent properties of natural elements and their interactions: that is, between metals (iron, gold, copper, etc.) and nonmetals (elements such as oxygen, nitrogen, fluorine, etc.). The physical reactions between metals and nonmetals can be rhetorically personalized for easier understanding. An additional Pattern Interruption technique, such as *kinetic body language*, can help convey electron transferal gesturally.

Loudness and intensity are extremely effective and natural to conversation. In the context of a lesson, loudness fluctuations stress the importance of certain definitions, phrases, and concepts; and it has practical value, signaling to students that the stressed point is central to an examination. Fluctuating volume helps bring principles to the foreground of attention, allowing students to grasp more readily that different kinds of chemical reactions exist, that each is apprehensible, and that all are interconnected by common physical characteristics.

Tone can be used in several ways to promote student engagement. Even the necessary assertion of authority can be systematized. An example would be speaking authoritatively to a latecomer or to one who violates a class rule, to wait until everyone is made aware of the impropriety (< 2 seconds), and to satirically lighten the tone quickly; thus, the conditions of the learning environment will be reset, and the admonished student brought into the mainstream.

Vocalization speed, crucial in dictating lesson flow, is difficult to regulate effectively. In any classroom, learning aptitude can vary greatly from student to student. Aware of this fact, an instructor has two objectives: to cover the curriculum to satisfy requirements set by the department and to accommodate students who are struggling to keep up. Students in the latter category, especially in STEM areas, risk losing ground progressively, leading to failure and frustration. Varying lesson speed can and should be adjusted to respond to questions without stalling the lesson. Deceleration for Q & A mid-lesson, however, should be carefully gauged. One-on-one explanations during office hours are essential, especially for students who are unsure of themselves and reluctant to ask questions publicly. An excellent way of dealing with this problem is for an instructor with the technology and training to create his or her own online lessons, which would concisely present the essentials. With this resource, a student can watch the video repeatedly in the comfort of home and jot down specific questions which can be discussed further during office time.

### **Topical Sidebars**

Segueing to a topical sidebar, even if justified to assist a slow learner, must be delicately enacted. Some students who are not necessarily slow may raise questions tangential to the topic at hand. Managing these instances requires tact, for dwelling on a mid-lesson question too long disturbs the rate of communication. The requisite skill for the sidebar digression, similar to that prescribed for the latecomer or phone-user, is to address individual academic concerns briefly, remind the student about extra-session conferrals, and to move rapidly back to the mainline exposition. During first-session orientation, the instructor will have briefed students on this modality, perhaps using a colloquial term such as “backburner,” to signify that the student’s question or concern will be answered more fully in an ancillary context. In addition, an effective instructor utilizes availability to his/her advantage, by diverting complicated questions to the end of class or during office hours. This strategy will make the student more willing to remain engaged during the lesson to see if their question is answered during class. Topical sidebars provide a further streamlined lesson flow without risking the integrity of the learning environment. It also may encourage the self-conscious student to question more freely and, in time, to become less anxious about exposing his or her intellectual concerns publicly.

### **Kinetic Body Language**

This technique can be utilized throughout the lecture by moving around the front of the room, switching to different sides of the board, and most importantly, using a variety of hand gestures to portray chemical scenarios and to “act out” reactions. For example, to describe the binding of a drug molecule to a protein in biochemistry, an instructor using kinetic body language would pantomime,

kneading an invisible, large gelatinous object (representing a protein) with his or her hand; using their other hand to represent a small molecule, the instructor sticks it to the kneaded mass, thus changing its shape and inhibiting the protein. Kinetic body language is an essential tool for conducting an interactive lecture by making your own imagery with your body that students can more easily process and remember on test day.

### Diversification of Tasks

Most instructors effectively utilize this technique by including group worksheets, small in-class assignments, short breaks for refreshment or lavatory, or even taking a break to have a conversation with the instructor about topics in pop culture. Direct immersion of the instructor into the learning environment is essential, as these actions not only increase cognitive engagement, but also give students encouragement to learn in a stress-free environment.

### Informal Cognitive Reaction Development (ICRD)

This technique is difficult to quantify since it implies the cultivation of an atypical learning environment. The implicit role of the instructor is that of an authority figure and the students as subordinates. An ideal environment would be one in which the instructor's perceived role was diminished and the students' perceived role enhanced. Balance must be maintained, of course. ICRD aims to reduce the gap between students and instructor while avoiding familiarity. If an instructor reconfigures the classroom into something akin to a seminar, where ideas can be openly and respectfully shared, both the instructor and the students will become more intimately involved in the learning process. As a result, student self-confidence may increase and performance may improve.

### Pattern Interruption Techniques: Results

Using Pattern Interruption techniques in the classroom in the Fall 2017, in the Spring 2018, and in Fall 2018 semesters has been promising, judging from specific student feedback which reflects the desired outcomes of the method. Student course evaluation comments, tabulated below (Table 1) and in bold print, suggest that the employment of the method can have tangible results. To acquire quantified evidence, of course, would require a long-range, statistical evaluation of standardized test scores in chemistry:

Student	Semester	Course	Pattern-Interrupt Feedback
A	Fall 2017	CHE-121	"I enjoy being in his class, I learn a lot, <b>you can ask questions freely and he will explain it clearly. Nice professor and no time to get bored in his class. Also, it was because of the great environment of the class.</b> "
B	Fall 2017	CHE-121	"He is a great professor. He explains everything clearly. He is very helpful. <b>He creates a great environment so that students can gain proper knowledge.</b> He's the best professor I had so far."
C	Fall 2017	CHE-121	" <b>He's great and enthusiastic professor that engages the whole class into all the lessons!</b> "
D	Spring 2018	CHE-121	"He is a great professor. Really explains well gives you everything you need to know. <b>Understands the students and creates a great educational atmosphere</b> "

Table 1 continued on next page

E	Spring 2018	CHE-121	"_____ is a very good professor, <b>he is always excited to teach us</b> . He would always be on time to class always! <b>He would always ask if we need help! He made me feel very comfortable in class</b> , not like most professor who would like put fear in students ..."
F	Spring 2018	CHE-121	"He did an amazing job in <b>teaching the material in a way students understood it the easiest yet effective</b> . <b>Great atmosphere. So easy to engage with professor with trust that he would help ...</b> "
G	Spring 2018	CHE-121	"Professor _____ is always available for any questions of concern I might have with a homework or lab work. <b>The class is always engaging and participating and enjoying being in class</b> "

Figure 1: Student Feedback Using Pattern Interrupt<sup>6</sup>: Figure displaying selected student feedback received from the course evaluation system that demonstrates specific terms propagated in the idea of pattern interrupt in bold.

These data are gathered using the CUNY course evaluation system. The aspects that will be focused on in this statistical analysis correlate to those comprising the Pattern Interruption method. Students were able to select their agreement level on a scale of 1–5 (5 being strongly agree, 4 being agree, 3 being neutral, 2 being disagree, and 1 being strongly disagree) to the following statements:

- Comfortable asking questions
- Course engaging
- Course material effective
- Treated students with respect

These four statements, selected from eleven statements rating instructor performance, can be utilized as a rubric for pattern interruption in the classroom. For example, the statement "Comfortable asking questions" suggests that they experienced a stress-free environment conducive to learning, a property discussed in **Topical Sidebars** and under **ICRD**.

Students who found the course engaging implied a course of instruction where anecdotal explanations, tone fluctuations, in-class assignments, and hand gestures were employed to convey concepts, all of which are key components of the sections **Topical Sidebars**, **Vocal Pattern Interruption**, **Diversification of Tasks**, and **Kinetic Body Language**, respectively. Those who agree that the course material was taught effectively also observed that the instructor "treated students with respect," suggesting that they participated in a stress-free learning experience, one in which the instructor placed the student's needs first. This concept is presented under **IRD**.

The tables below suggest that Pattern Interruption strategies in science education are conducive not only promoting student engagement, but also with igniting interest in the subject matter. Transforming the course from a time-consuming obligation into an enjoyable exercise directly applicable to vocational aspirations warrants continuing effort. Table 3 compares six separate chemistry classes with respect to final grade average and Pattern Interruption percentile (PIP).<sup>a</sup>

Question Text	N	RR (%)	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Average (/5)						
Comfortable Asking Questions	114	63%	104	91%	9	10%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%		4.89
Course Engaging	112	62%	94	84%	15	17%	1	1%	1	1%	1	1%		4.79
Course Material Effective	112	62%	91	81%	18	25%	1	1%	1	1%	1	1%		4.77
Treated Students with Respect	113	62%	101	89%	11	14%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%		4.87
ALL (400 students)	451	62%	390	86%	53	12%	2	0%	2	0%	4	1%		4.83

Class	N	Final Average	PIP
A	13	88.7	94.7
B	15	75.2	95.8
C	17	79.8	94.6
D	22	85.2	94.3
E	21	86.4	98.3
F	15	76.8	100.0
Average	17	82.0	96.3

Table 2 and table 3 data can be utilized in several ways. Taking all student responses for qualities of a Pattern Interruption-utilizing instructor, it can be stated that 97% of all students either agree or strongly agree with statements that exemplify the beneficial outcomes of using these techniques. In addition, it can be stated that the results from the student perspective are grade-independent, meaning that, regardless of their earned letter grade, the feedback of a Pattern Interruption-utilized classroom environment has virtually no bias from students whose final grade was less than was desired. For example, classes B, C, and F had final averages in the C-range while the PIP scores were 95.8, 94.6, and 100, respectively. This shows that if this technique is implemented correctly, it can benefit every student, regardless of aptitude and history. For those who do not meet personal goals, the method will indicate precisely where improvement is needed or where deficits persist. Student engagement and desire to learn is paramount in the Pattern Interruption environment aims.

### Conclusion:

These results present multiple facets of the Pattern Interruption methodology and how a cohort of students valued their experience. **Vocal Pattern Interruption, Topical Sidebars, Kinetic Body Language, Diversification of Tasks, and Informal Cognitive-Reaction Development** can be used in tandem to create an academic atmosphere in which the students are relaxed, energized, cognitively active, and unintimidated about posing questions, and engaged with their peers and with the instructor. The artificial student-teacher dichotomy may be modified through the method described here. In STEM classes, especially, instructors should apprise students of the dangers of electronic dependency and that electronic media are vital to research and learning.

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# Factors Influencing Note-taking Experiences: A Facebook Conversation

Deborah Gambs, et. al.

*Social Science, Human Services & Criminal Justice*

Early on at the beginning of the spring 2019 semester, I found myself struggling with helping my students get into a routine around note-taking. For a number of years I have instituted a planned discussion of academic skills, so on the second day of class we discuss note-taking, reading a difficult text, and annotation. On the first day of class as listed in the syllabus, I provide links to a different site for each topic, which they are to read before our second day of class. Then in class we spend time brainstorming around each one. I frame this as an opportunity for students to share strategies for success they have found helpful in the past. I also tell them that they likely come from a variety of academic backgrounds and experiences and that this conversation will help to get us all closer to being on the same page. The process may or may not actually bring us closer to being on the same page but it does give us shared reference points to build from for the rest of the semester and that is quite useful.

I feel quite confident in speaking to students about reading difficult texts and annotation, partially because they are connected to one another in the same process—reading. My participation in Reading Across the Curriculum and Writing Across the Curriculum have developed my understanding of how to help students be better readers, and how to use writing to improve reading. Note-taking is another matter.

As we often do these days, when frustrated with a particular topic, I posted a question to *Facebook*. All combined my question about note taking received 63 comments from 32 people, more than I expected on a post about taking notes in the classroom! A number of helpful comments and suggestions were offered, but also fascinating was the range of experiences and backgrounds. One of the last commenters, BMCC colleague Associate Professor of English Page Delano, suggested that this discussion would make a good *Inquirer* article and fortunately the editors thought so as well.

I contacted all the commenters, initially through *Facebook* Messenger though a number required further follow-up, to ask their permission to use their name, their comments, and to note a brief word about who they are or our relationship. Most gave full permission to quote from the original post. Fourteen of the responders are not academics. A couple of those have completed just some college. Sixteen have PhDs, and most of those who do are BMCC full-time faculty. Unless it was needed for clarification, I have not changed the language or format of the original post.

This conversation on Facebook did not fully answer my question, but it did lay out much of the scope of the challenges around student note-taking in class. No single comment here provides a best answer, but taken together, they form an



interesting discussion about whether note-taking is necessary, why some students don't do it, what is beneficial about it, some cross-cultural/national differences, resources, and strategies for helping students improve it.

### **Deborah Gambs**

February 8

Here's an issue that is frustrating me more at the beginning of this semester than usual. Do you do anything about this?

When beginning college students don't know what to write down during a class/lecture discussion—what is that about? Why don't they know that they should be writing? Why can't they distinguish what is important? Why do they sometimes sit transfixed after you've just said something, staring at you and not writing it down? I literally say: write that down.

Part of my frustration stems from my own style as a student—I took a lot of notes and took good notes and I believe it helped me learn and remember a lot. So it gets under my skin when I see students who are really uncertain about it, or just write what's printed on the screen. The longer I teach the more I try to address helping students build skills, but this feels like a hard one.

Thoughts?

**Sandra Lee** I have students like this and have asked other (good) students to explain. More than one has explained that the high schools pass them thru ... that they can make little effort and still get by, so they continue to do what they've been doing. [Tenure-track Sociology faculty at a state university.]

**Jonathan Lerner** For me, I really don't take many notes during class. I really try to understand the conceptual ideas behind the lecture. If a teacher says that it's important, I usually will write it down though. A lot of my engineering classes have the same principles they are teaching from. So for me understanding the principle is most important and the math is just busy work. I feel if I sat there and just copied the lecture, I wouldn't understand anything. [Returning Bachelor's student in Engineering.]

**Kirstin Oberg Bengtson** I don't think I learned how to take notes in high school. I did a lot better when there was a power point and as time went on I learned how to take additional notes.

Some classes/Professors were easier to take notes [with] than others. Sometimes students don't know what is important. I'm sure I would write something else down and then miss something else that was important.

While at CBC [Covenant Bible College, one-year Bible school] I had papers to follow the lecture but didn't write a lot in it. I'm sure later in my college career I would have done that differently. [Bachelor's in History, retail store manager.]

**Andrea Perry Lerner** I think the muscle memory of writing helps you learn important things, but sifting out what's important ... [Regional staff for the Unitarian Universalist Association]

**Wade Stephens Sick** I do what you do. I know it's math in my case, but I will tell them flat out to write certain points down. It does keep them engaged and I would like to believe it teaches them how to take notes as well since obviously up to that point, no one has. [My high school Pre-Calculus teacher]

**Anthony O'Brien** In some countries students copy the lecture down and the lecturer paces their speech to the students' writing speed. It can be combined with breaks for class discussion. I'm not recommending that. But your comment shows what inspires it, for learners who have never had the training to discern the main points of an argument and write them down as lecture notes. Despair. You can't seem to fix one thing without fixing everything ... [Retired Queens College English Department Faculty]

**Anthony O'Brien** P.S. One CUNY teacher I know used to have a quiz the first class on a book chapter, and the question was always the same: "Summarize the argument of the chapter." At the end of the course the class was still very imperfect at this skill, no matter how painstakingly the teacher modeled it. I throw up my hands.

**Stephan Edel** I had very different experiences of note taking in different classes and schools. Is it that students don't take notes, or don't know what notes to take? They're two different skills and habits. [J.D. and Administrator at political organizing group]

**Alex Lozupone** I rarely took notes in college. After a semester, I'd have at most 3 or 4 handwritten pages per class. I actually find it hard to write and listen to something else at the same time. [Musician]

**Monica Foust** It's a skill that many of us take for granted, and we need to give students some support around it. There's some scholarship of teaching and learning on this. Cognitively, it's a lot to process (as Alex pointed out) and most people don't get taught how to take notes (as someone else noted). Some research suggests that it's most effective to provide outlines of your slides (not full notes) to help relieve some of the cognitive strain. You can gradually wean students off as they get the hang of it. I haven't yet moved to the outline but I would like to. Right now, I acknowledge why note-taking is difficult and how they should approach my lectures and slides (i.e., they need to write more than my bullets and stop me if they need time or have questions). [BMCC Colleague]

**Yuan Chen** How are the grades? Do you think the grades correlate with how well a student takes notes? Personally, I would want to be more engaged during lecture and try to understand the concepts, instead of busy taking notes. I don't think I was ever a good note taker. [Investing firm; Former high school student in my mother's English Language Learners class]

**Liz Gruenwald** I had that problem a lot! The issue for me was that it felt like *everything* was important and therefore needed to be written down. I couldn't keep up with both writing everything (didn't help that I'm bad I at shorthand) and absorbing what was being said, would get really overwhelmed, and stop writing down anything. Which obviously wasn't helpful at all. [Chemical analyst in a laboratory]

**Liz Gruenwald** To the point of you telling students "write that down," if a professor did that, I'd try to ... However, if I was really overwhelmed, it felt like "what's the point, I'm missing so much other stuff/context anyway," if that makes sense.

**Manolo Estavillo** I do not believe you can take notes and pay attention at the same time. And when they feverishly try to do that I stop them. They are not stenographers. I hear that your experience was different. [Sociology faculty at Marymount Manhattan Community College]

**Deborah Gambs** Yes, I'm trying to acknowledge that my own past experience is shaping my current experience!

**Elaine Douglas-Harrison** You do just as you're doing—you tell them to write it down. When I teach Spanish I say, "If you're not writing this down, I'll assume you know it already!" I also do a little blurb on different learning styles, telling them that mine—like yours—is to take notes of important stuff, even when I'm reading. I actually learn *while* I am writing—I often don't even need to read my notes! I stress to them the importance of uncovering their individual learning styles, whatever those are. Bonne chance! [Graduate school colleague, college Spanish teacher]

**Deborah Gambs** Yes—it felt to me like writing them down seared them into my brain!

**Gay Brookes** It's not uncommon. There are a few simple things you can do to help. 1) Tell them that the point you're going to make is important and to write down what they hear. 2) Then have them compare what they wrote down. 3) Have a couple of [students] write it on the board or develop a summary of what you're saying on the board. Review at the end. 4) Ask them what key words to listen for e.g. first second third or most important. There's lit on this in advanced ESL books.

Like everything guide them and let them guide each other. It will help everyone, not just ESL or first gen students. [BMCC Emeritus faculty]

**Gay Brookes** Make no assumptions. Some articles suggest that teachers who found learning process easy don't understand what helps students.

**Deborah Gambs** I currently spend the second day of class discussing three academic skills: notetaking, reading a difficult text, and annotation. They read a writing site website for each of those in advance of the discussion. The notetaking one has felt most ephemeral for me and I think it can be improved.

**Crystal McFarland Beckman** Some are auditory learners and writing can distract ... me ... not so much (especially now) ... but I have a daughter with dyslexia who really cannot write and listen and absorb all at the same time. This is likely a very few though. I think note taking should be a college prep class! [Fellow undergraduate alumna]

**Grace Cho** I incorporate note-taking exercises as part of their grade. I have them practice Cornell notes on lectures, triple entry notes on readings, and give a lecture reflection assignment once a month. Even in classes with all seniors, they're still totally clueless about what to write down. [CSI-CUNY Sociology Faculty]

**Deborah Gambis** This is fantastic Grace. Did you create these on your own or draw on an article?

**Grace Cho** I had a Master's student tell me how useful she found lecture reflections, then tried them (just made it up incorporating some aspects of the Cornell notes). I also browse a lot of YouTube tutorials on note-taking. The triple entry is a holdover from my days as a writing fellow.

**Judy Cooper Heiser** This is so interesting to me because I have felt during my life that I do not know how to take good notes. However, I always did well in the college courses I took. [Mother of close friend, some college, administrative assistant]

**Kelly Rodgers** I'm really intentional in pointing out really important things - things they should make note of for the exam because they, sadly, don't know how to take notes. Taking notes basically involves them trying to write down everything on a slide, so I've really cut down on what I put on slides, to force them to pause and listen to me and write it down, so that they're not just trying to copy everything without processing anything.

Taking good notes involves being able to synthesize information, to think critically about what's being offered in order to suss out what would seem to be the most important. These aren't skills that a lot of students come out of K-12 with, especially given the drill and skill testing approach many K-12 teachers, particularly in underserved districts, feel sometimes pressed to take. [BMCC Colleague]

**Hilary Parkinson** It's a good skill later in life when you are in meetings and you need to take notes (either for yourself or officially) so that you can go back and check yourself.

I always took notes—the trick is not to transcribe but to note what catches your attention! [Friend of a friend, Social Media Manager at National Archives]

**Arthur Vincie** I figure some students learn by listening, others by writing, others by asking questions and debating. One of my best students took photos of my whiteboards. I try to have handouts for most of the classes. I worry more about the students who are clearly just on their phones. They're cheating themselves out

of an education & they don't know it. [Film producer and spouse of my spouse's graduate school colleague]

**Jennifer Rosine** Welcome to Neurodiversity! You may have undiagnosed executive function disorder running rampant. Its why [neurodiverse] kids to adults take 6–8 years to get a Bachelor's. A lot of learners with [executive function disorders] are visual or kinesthetic. I can discuss offline with you but outlines help. There is also working memory to take into consideration and processing speed. [Neighbor and speech pathologist]

**Brandi Young Taylor** There is a *huge* difference between how they teach in high school [and college]. Emma took all Pre-A.P. and A.P. classes and they really taught them how to prepare for college. They taught them how to take notes, had lots of homework (not that that specifically is great), and really taught them how to study. Spencer is in regular classes (down here it's called Academic). They are just the normal classes everyone has to take. He rarely has homework and they don't teach them anything about how to prepare for tests or how to study. They are just passing them on through. It's really sad to see. Especially in my own home. Just because you aren't in AP classes, doesn't mean you're not bound for college and could use a little help preparing. [Cousin, comparing her children's experience]

**Rifat Anjum Salam** I have a lot of thoughts and strategies. Some of which I hope to address as we work on the curriculum for the proposed first year student course. [BMCC Colleague]

**Kelly Rodgers** Yes! Our [planning] group discussed curriculum and note taking was on that list. I'm always worried that, in our regular courses, spending too much time teaching them to learn means teaching them less of the actual material. At the same time, what's the worth of the material if they don't know how to learn it? Say nothing of the fact that they just went through 13 years of schooling without knowing how to learn. Then again, teachers think there are "learning styles," so there's that ... [BMCC Colleague]

**Rifat Anjum Salam** They've likely been given worksheets or notes, some even told me they learned the Cornell method in high school. We can give them strategies and instructions but we have to still remind them to do it and have them practice. When students "complain" about a professor, I often start by asking them questions about how they take notes or study. You should see the look they give me when I send them packing with a lesson in note taking and how to effectively study for exams. They're like, wait what just happened ...

**Kelly Rodgers** I've always believed that this should be a part of course evaluations. Have students also think about their own efforts and practices in a course because we are only part of the equation.

**Jackie Lund** I don't know for sure but I suspect it has to do with depending on devices rather than writing on paper. Being able to write things down in a notebook or paper is important for so many things besides school—for meetings at work, or if you happen to be a therapist and need to make notes of the session after the patient has left, or if you're in a situation at work where you'll need to recall exactly what happened and what was said to you if you need to report it, or are interviewing a prospective employee and want to recall impressions. I've often tried various digital approaches—Apple Pencil etc. but always fall back on paper. If students have always used devices for everything it will be very hard to introduce them to actual writing. Just my opinion. [Social worker and friend of a college friend]

**BMCC Faculty** This is why BMCC accelerating our reading classes is an absolutely problematic idea. These are basic skills that get lost that many/most of us teach in our reading classes. But if they're going to accelerate and combine the courses with content topics (combining with content I don't think is a bad idea but acceleration ...), then some of those critical skills may get lost in the shuffle. Discerning what is important has a *lot* to do with being able to outline, to discern a main idea, etc. [BMCC Colleague]

**Amy Christine Stiner** I'm going to throw this out there ... I don't think high school and even middle school teachers 'lecture/take notes' anymore. Every class I've been in or volunteered for [my] nephew or even [my son] Grant ... uses PowerPoint slide decks. They probably do it like I would if I taught in person instead of online ... I'd hand out the printed slide deck and suggest making notes next to the slide. I have no idea what Cornell method looks—like—I'm curious now. I'll have to look it up.

I just don't think teachers are lecturing and expecting note taking like I used to in college with the overhead projector ... I think they are emailing or handing out the slide deck. [Health care administration advocate, college friend]

**Amy Christine Stiner** Also, they have student portals now where the teacher (even elementary school) posts the materials covered in class.

**Page Dougherty Delano** Throw this conversation together for an article for the Inquirer—see Holly or Betsy!!!

**Alan R. Takeall** In high school I had a great A.P. European History teacher who systematically taught us how to take notes from his lecture (outline method). He would then collect our notes every week and actually grade them on their quality. It's an invaluable skill that college professors expect but few people ever actually teach ...

That said, as a graduate student, I doodled in class. I still do when I'm in meetings and talks—alternating between drawing and sparse keywords and comments. I found that doodling helps me to listen and focus even though I was accused of not paying attention several times. When in meetings with my advisors, I alternated between writing comments and arguing with them, lol.

Today, I prepare my own lectures using the outline method that I learned in high school, but I feel that I can tell when students are present whether they are

studiously taking notes, doodling, actively listening, or arguing with me. [Urban Studies Lecturer, Queens College]

**Shiraz Biggie** My A.P. US History teacher did something [similar]. He was also the one to teach me how to take notes on reading and how to write concisely. Unfortunately, I think that the number of teachers equipped to do this is decreasing. Teaching education majors today is, sadly, one of the most depressing things. [CUNY Doctoral student, adjunct and private school teacher]

**Shiraz Biggie** I'm also a doodler, but what I really wish is that during conference presentations especially, I could knit. It helps with listening so much.

**Robin Gayle** This is such a great thread!! I just contributed a chapter in a book edited by Michelle Lee Kozimor-King and Jeffrey Chin, *Learning from Each Other: Refining the Practice of Teaching in Higher Education* (University of California Press). I mention this as there are a few chapters in there that speak to several of the comments made here, and I'm pretty sure they are interested in putting out a second edition. [BMCC Colleague]

**Lisa Hale Rose** Great responses to a problem that we all see. But I also think that this no-note taking is a symptom of something larger that I've yet been unable to wrap my head around. So many of my students seem like deer in the headlights about college experience and expectations. I'm concerned that if we focus too much on note taking strategies without understanding the larger issues, we'll be spinning our wheels. [BMCC Colleague]

**Jacob Kramer** I have found that most students basically think it is unfair to expect them to take notes on something you say, and also not to provide access to any PowerPoint slides I prepare. I assumed this was because they had not been required to take notes before (I have had some students from abroad who took incredible notes, which reinforced this impression). I only had one HS teacher who required us to take notes, and I always took too many notes in college. [BMCC Colleague]

# The Goal Is Not to Grade, but to Teach

Hollis Glaser

*Speech, Communications, and Theater Arts*

## I. Introduction

It all started because I was tired. I was tired of feeling more like a police officer than a teacher and tired of awarding (or not) points for every little piece of an assignment and then seeing my students come up short at the end of the semester. I just didn't feel like I was teaching well; I needed a different way to tackle the basic public-speaking course.

My old way of teaching was standard: 3 main speeches, each with a detailed evaluation sheet that had points assigned for every element I could think of. Fifty points for 10 different delivery aspects, 50 for the outline and so on. I also had mini-speeches, mini-assignments, all intended to keep the students moving toward completing the semester by accumulating points every week, each assignment building on the previous ones.

But here was one of the main problems. If a student stumbled on an assignment early on, or missed mini-assignments, it was very difficult for them to get their footing again, and the failures accumulated (instead of the points). So I often had a fairly bifurcated class—those who kept up and moved smoothly toward a B or an A, and those who couldn't make up for early problems and dropped or earned a D or worse.

Plus I was getting incredibly frustrated. It didn't matter how much I emphasized to them that they had to just plug along every day, every week and they'd do fine. Many didn't or couldn't and I ended up feeling like I was punishing instead of teaching. I also came to see my detailed point system as arbitrary and tyrannical. One student gets three points for eye contact and another gets four. Really? The activity of circling those numbers was becoming more ludicrous every year.

Our basic public speaking course has a very high DFW rate (Ds, Fs and Withdrawals) and I was sick of it. So I came up with a different way to teach the class and to "grade" the students. I'm not saying this will work for every course or subject, but I'm happy with how it has worked in my public speaking class.

## II. The Plan: Teach more and grade less

I changed two main components of the class: how they earn their semester grade and how they earn credit for a speech. First, they earn their semester grade by deciding how many assignments they will complete. Completing five assignments earns them an A, four a B, three a C and so forth. Second, each assignment is credit/no credit, the credit earned by achieving a basic level of competence and writing a reflection paper.

The assignments: there are two required traditional face-to-face in-class speeches that are standard across the department's 180 sections, one informative and the second persuasive. Then I offer them six assignments from which they can choose



one, two or three (depending on the grade they want), some of which can be completed in the public realm of the web, some in other face-to-face situations or in our classroom.

The “grade” sheet: No more points attached to every single thing they are supposed to do. While I thought that was giving them specific instructions on how to get a good grade, it was also giving them a whole lot of ways they could fail. Instead, I give them eight things they must do in order to get credit for that speech. I’m not giving them points according to how well they do each element, but I do give them written feedback. So if they give me a typed outline but the grammar is poor, I will mark their outline to teach them, but not penalize them for poor writing. However, if the outline has no citations, they have to rewrite it with proper formatting

The goal is not to grade but to teach. Teaching is helping the students improve their performance or increase their knowledge or change their thinking. Students learn by doing (writing, creating, speaking), reflecting and getting feedback. Grading is poor feedback. Plus grading stresses the teacher-student relationship. We can be having a great time in class, laughing, having lively conversations, encouraging one another, giving everyone a chance to shine. If the class is really going well, I have a couple of students who make fun of me. And then I hand back the speeches. Eyes lower, energy falls. It is a big energy suck. And there is absolutely no good reason for that to happen.

Now, instead, the students receive a lot of feedback from their peers and me. First, immediately after they have presented, we tell them what we liked about the presentation and what they can work on. Second, they get written feedback from their peer group in the form of a sheet with ten items rated as Unsatisfactory, Satisfactory, Excellent. The students get into these groups at the end of each presentation day. Before giving the sheets to the speaker, the group asks the speaker what they think they did well and need to improve on. Then they verbally respond and give the speaker their sheets. Third, they get my written feedback the next class session, the kind of feedback I give professionals when I do professional coaching. “Good eye contact, try not to touch your hair, could speak a little louder” and so forth. There are no points attached to this feedback. That means they are focusing on the content of the feedback not the grade.

### **III. Giving more control to the students**

Besides deciding on what grade they want (or can reasonably attain) by the number of assignments they do, the students also have control over some of the assignments. Other than the two in-class speeches, they have a lot of options:

1. Read at Trump Tower with Learn as Protest
2. Twitter: Get in on a discussion early and continue to respond in a meaningful way.
3. *New York Times* online discussion: Respond to an article as soon as it is published and continue the discussion with other readers.
4. Post a video on YouTube of yourself talking about something or explaining something—about 3 minutes long.

5. Give a third speech in class or lead a 10-minute discussion with the class, on a topic of your choosing (approved by me), research required.
6. Open-ended: come up with your own assignment, must be okayed by me, must engage in the public realm somehow, either face-to-face (may be in class) or online in the web.
7. Johari Window: Talk to 5 people close to you and ask them your three strengths and three weaknesses. Summarize in a paper and tell me what you learned.
8. Go to a live talk outside of class and write about it. Describe who spoke, where, what they said then evaluate how they did and how the listeners responded.
9. Give a live talk somewhere outside of class, record it, write about it. Where did you talk, why, what did you say, how did the listeners respond, how did you do. (Counts as two assignments.)

The sixth option (come up with your own assignment) is the epitome of my teaching philosophy for this course. It gives them the opportunity to create their own learning, to think about what they need to know, what situation to apply this course to. I tell them that it must engage others in some way, either digitally or in person. The students have come up with a huge variety of presentations. One needed to ask her boss for a raise. She role-played the request in front of the class with other students taking part, then asked her boss for a raise a few days later, reported back and wrote a reflection paper. Many students displayed their art work or read poems they had written, then answered questions from the class. Students organized debates, led discussions, taught us how to meditate, make Nigerian rice, deal with a health emergency. The students are excited both about presenting what they want and listening to their classmates. And I've been very moved as to how personal some of these presentations have been and the openness and kindness with which the class received them.

In other words, the students are taking more control over the course and I am happy not to have the entire burden on me.

#### **IV. Fewer details, more meaning**

There are a number of benefits to having the students meet a minimum requirement to get credit for each assignment, rather than issuing points and grades. For one, the students feel they can meet those requirements and it takes pressure off. Second, the students do more re-writing in order to get credit if they missed one of the requirements. They were less likely to rewrite in order to get more points. Third, evaluating the assignment is much easier. I simply check off the short list of requirements and give them feedback.

But the biggest benefit is this system creates meaningful assignments. Here's why. The endless precision and awarding of points focus the students on details and checking off boxes or making a checklist (hello rubrics), instead of the deeper more meaningful aspects of the assignment. It also brings their attention to the surface details and atomizes the assignment, instead of allowing them to approach it in a more holistic way. Yes, I want them to write grammatically and stand up straight and use proper formatting. But breaking down the assignment into its most

minuscule parts does not necessarily engender those actions(not to mention that writing properly is a multi-semester endeavor).

We often think that specificity is good. But in some cases it's not. It's oppressive. I spent many years being more and more detailed in my assignments, being clearer and more precise about exactly what was expected of my students.If they didn't do whatever exactly that way (which they hardly ever did), I was fully justified in giving them a lower grade.I even had a great little mini-lecture about why it was so important to do the outline precisely the way I instructed: "Hey, we all have to fill out forms according to precise directions. Otherwise, we don't get paid, or don't get our taxes back, or get in trouble with the police, etc. etc." See? I'm doing them a favor by preparing them for faceless irrational stubborn bureaucracies. But you know what? CUNY does that part just fine.

So I've become more open and I focus them on the meaning of the assignment, on creating a speech or paper that expresses what they want it to. I'll give them feedback on the details. And they'll learn those specifics over time. But it's much more interesting to pay attention to what the student is actually saying than it is to pay attention to the minutia of grammar or paralinguistics. It's much more fun to talk to the students about what they are saying and why, rather than how they are saying it. We have much better conversations when we're all talking about what the student wants to talk about, instead of preordained categories of evaluation (goodbye rubrics). Specificity traps the teacher as much as it traps the student.

What this looks like then is fewer evaluation categories, fewer required assignments, and more freedom for the students to create their own assignments. How do I know if the assignments are meaningful? Certainly, I evaluate by deeply subjective measures: the extent to which the students seem to care about their performance and whether the speech engages their classmates and me, the degree to which the speech seems to strike an emotional chord with the students, and whether or not the assignment is personal, unique to that student.

We've had lots of these criteria met, many more than in my traditional semester where I give them fewer options. The poems were all personal as were the presentations of their creative work, and obviously so was the explanation of the "23 and me" results. This came from a student who had always thought she was simply Dominican. She displayed the chart that showed us she was made of DNA from three continents. She had just received the results the day before and was still stunned.

And the student who read her aunt's letter to her mother from 20 years ago was amazing. It could have been on NPR. Her aunt had just married, was sent to live with her husband's family as is traditional in that culture, and was terribly lonely and upset. She wanted to go back home to her mother and eat her mother's food. I was deeply moved by this beautiful and heart-breaking letter.

I also deemed the student-led conversations as quite meaningful. One was on the effects of technology and children, one on the ethics of zoos, another on cryptocurrency. While not necessarily personal, they did a good job of getting their classmates to engage in the conversation and a number of students had excellent questions and insights.

Ultimately, however, the assignment is meaningful if the student finds it meaningful. And the only way I know if that is true is by asking the students to reflect on their experience. These reflections work on at least two levels. The obvious first level is that it allows me to see how they understand the assignment, what they got out of it, if they took it seriously, etc. For example, many of the students wrote about how nervous they were expressing themselves in this new way in front of the class. Exposing something they cared about (the poems, the art work) felt very risky to them and they all wrote about how relieved and grateful they were that the class responded to them so positively.

But the next level is that the reflection creates the meaning. It's one thing for them to present a poem or read at Trump Tower and then go on with their lives. It's something else altogether for them to stop, get clear about how they understand the experience and then explain it to me. They could very well do the assignment, find it meaningful and then not look back. And so that meaning can be lost in the hustle of their days. But if they write about it, that reflection anchors the meaning deeper into their consciousness. Or better yet, they may not have even realized their understanding of the assignment, until they have to write about it.

## **V. Conclusion**

As of spring 2019, I've only done this for two semesters and the second one isn't finished it yet. I'm not sure if this has made a big difference yet in the DFWs of my sections. But I do know that the students are more confident that they are able to earn the grade they want and more relaxed in this very anxiety-ridden course. For my part, I feel like I am doing more teaching and less grading and am treating the students like they are professionals.

# Enabling Critical Thinking and Promoting Civic Responsibility in the BMCC Classroom

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My philosophy of life and education have always revolved around issues of social justice, equity and diversity. When I encountered Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it further opened my eyes to the fact that the students in our educational system are human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity, respect and given every opportunity to develop their potentials academically, socially, spiritually and morally. In that light, my philosophy and practice of teaching and pedagogy is woven around striving to make connections between course material and social or political realities so as to open the minds of my students and challenge them to think critically and engage themselves and their communities in civic discourse and acts of empowerment. In this paper I will share one of my classroom activities and draw some lessons from it in the hope that my reflections will inspire other faculty who are similarly concerned about the education of our students at BMCC.

I use the "I Have a Dream" speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to teach ethics in my public speaking class (SPE 100). I know that discussion about ethics is often contentious because of the subjective nature of the topic. As McCroskey (2001) observes, the problem about ethics is how to determine whether a person who "uses good means to achieve a bad end or uses a bad means to achieve a good end" is ethical (p. 292). Because of the difficulty involved in assessing a means-centered and ends-centered ethics, McCroskey suggests that a "viable system for evaluating the ethics of rhetorical communication must be based upon the intent of the communicator" (p. 294).

In *The Art of Public Speaking*, Lucas (2015) defines ethics as "the branch of philosophy that deals with issues of right and wrong in human affairs" (p. 30). When this definition is applied to any sector of human affairs, such as business, government, and interpersonal relationships, one encounters a problem of who determines what is right and what is wrong. On account of the challenges posed by issues of ethics, I decided to teach the topic in the public speaking class by using the "I Have a Dream" speech to help guide students in evaluating and deciding what was right and what was wrong within the political and social contexts that resulted in this speech and the lessons they can learn from the speech about current events in America, especially as they relate to minoritized groups. I particularly focused on minoritized groups because many of our students at BMCC see themselves as falling into one or the other category of minority either based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion. Although I am aware that many public speaking instructors use this speech to teach the effective use of language, especially rhetorical tropes, I choose to focus on the ethical aspects of the speech.

My goal in using this speech to teach ethics in public speaking is fourfold.

1. To guide students to decide whether the speech was ethical or not in its time (of course, it was ethical and is celebrated as an exemplar of American rhetoric but I want students to discover what is ethical about it).
2. To give students an opportunity to enhance their critical listening and analytical skills.
3. To immerse students in the tradition of American public address so that they can appreciate the heritage of the discipline.
4. To guide students to see that they also have agency in shaping the nature of our democracy by actively participating in civic discourse, especially in the wake of movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the continuing incidences of gun violence across America.

### **Lesson Plan:**

In preparation for the class, I ask students to listen to the “I Have a Dream” speech prior to coming to class.

We begin by exploring the meaning of ethics from the students’ perspective. Then I proceed by:

- Asking students to share their views and understanding of ethics. I write down the contributions of students on the board. Then, I comment on the views of the students, pointing out areas where we agree and clarifying areas where they were not very accurate.
- Asking students why it is important to be an ethical person or to make ethical decisions in life. I write down the answers of students on the board and expand on them or ask them to give specific examples to illustrate the importance of ethics in the areas they mentioned.

I conclude this section by giving a more formal definition of ethics and show students how ethics is actually about the choices and decisions we make on a daily basis at the workplace, in public service, or in interpersonal relationships and relate it to the need for ethics in public speaking. In the next step of the lesson, we watch the “I Have a Dream” speech together, and I ask students to take notes on the ethical issues King addresses and the circumstances or contexts in which those issues arose, the evidence he provides, the logic and orderliness of his ideas and any other observations they note. After listening to the speech, I ask students to share ideas on the purpose of the speech and ethical issues raised in the speech.

Students in my class have come up with the following points about the purpose of the speech:

1. To remind Americans to keep their promises of freedom, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to their “negro” citizens.

2. To stop discrimination against black people.
3. To give black people rights equal to those of white people.

Ethical issues raised in the speech:

1. The “negro” not being free 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln.
2. Dominant White society not keeping the promises made in the Constitution (that all men are created equal, yes, white men as well as black men), and in the Emancipation Declaration.
3. Discrimination shown by signs saying “for whites only” or “negro not allowed” in the motels of the highways and hotels of the cities.
4. Police brutality and incarceration of the “negro.”
5. The “negro” living in poverty in the midst of material prosperity, etc.

Next, we discuss the evidence he uses to support his claims.

1. He quotes from the Constitution of the United States
2. He references the Emancipation Proclamation
3. He references the Bible
4. He uses a “negro” spiritual, etc.

At this point I guide students in a discussion where they realize that the texts King references (except for the “negro” spiritual) are texts either written by white people in America or texts they respect, such as the Bible. By using these texts, King is engaging in culture-centered rhetoric and meaning. He uses the values of the white community (freedom, equality, liberty, fairness, pursuit of happiness, etc.) that are enshrined in texts that white people respect, to point out the hypocrisy and unethical actions of the white community against the “negro” community.

- I ask students to identify issues in our contemporary society that resemble the issues Martin Luther King, Jr. was addressing at his time. Students mention police brutality, senseless killing of black and brown people by police, lack of justice and fairness in the courts, discrimination in the immigration system, lack of jobs and housing for poor black and brown people, etc.
- I ask what they think are the causes of these problems and how they can be agents of change. Our discussion on this results in the frequent mention of discrimination and the need for young people to register to vote and let their voices be heard.
- I remind students of the need to always be ethical as a speaker by having an ethical purpose, being audience-centered, using and crediting their sources when they prepare and deliver speeches, and to answer questions from their audience honestly.

**Student reactions and takeaways:**

The responses I get from students by asking questions reveals to me that they are able to see connections between what we discussed in class and topics they have come across in other classes. Some students say, “we came across this in my ethnic studies class” or “my philosophy professor explained ethics differently using words like objective and relative ethics.” Others ask why repetition is good when King uses it whereas their writing professor does not encourage repetition. These responses show me that students are seeing connections between the different courses and not compartmentalizing them, and I am gratified to see students express a desire and commitment to some form of activism in pursuit of social justice. These expressions of commitment to social justice often come from students who publicly identify their sexual orientation and some female students who see how King stood up to the injustices the “negro” community suffered as an encouragement not to give up on their own struggles for empowerment and recognition of who they are.

**Lessons:**

I believe that with a supportive and understanding faculty, students can channel their experiences in the classroom into knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish their goals academically and humanly. Through class activities, I have come to have a greater appreciation for students and the potential they have. I see the wealth of experiences they have and how a well-designed class activity can guide them to understanding course material and the sometimes complex concepts or theories we teach. I realize that students are exposed to all sorts of ideas, treatment, and perceptions by various groups of people. Some students believe that some people look down on them because of their race or ethnicity or the neighborhood they live in. Others feel discriminated against because of their religion or how they dress. Others still suffer food insecurity and homelessness and are ashamed to publicly seek assistance. While many students endure these challenges, I see their resilience and effort in the choices they make to break the barriers that are in their way. For some of them, these choices include making a commitment to stay in college and work hard to obtain a college degree, while for others, the choice is the way they see themselves and the potential they have to become whoever they want to be in life.

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# Diversification in Education

Van Havercome

*English*

To what extent do lower numbers of minority students in college impact students' lives? Thinking about diversity in college is crucial in terms of today's concerns over having individuals becoming more productive citizens and keeping the philosophy of "college-for-all." The "college-for-all" debate became truly meaningful because of former President Obama's initiative. By pledging \$100 million dollars in grant funding to assist in making community college free, President Obama sent a message about the value of higher education in the United States of America (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). However, Desmond and Emirbayer (2016) reveal that according to the U.S. Department of Education, the dropout rate in 2012 for public high school was 24 percent for Hispanics, 32 percent for Native Americans, and 32 percent for African Americans. Roughly, about 7 percent of the dropouts are Asians, with only 15 percent being white. Hendrickson et al. (2013) report there are 4,495 accredited institutions of higher learning in the United States, yet minorities historically have had challenges with getting accepted in various colleges and universities, and combined with these dropout rates the situation is made more extreme. Carr (2013) reports only eight percent of low-income children in American earn a bachelor's degree by their mid-twenties, compared to more than 80 percent of students from the top income quartile.

Let's face it, the educational pursuit for hundreds of thousands of students from marginalized group exists in a context of disproportionately underrepresented African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and women. Given the state of higher education in today's society, we must look at how institutions present themselves to potential students. What we see is that marginalized groups are often overshadowed by whiteness in higher education. To wit, the main purpose of looking at the lack of diversity within institutions must be to navigate the type of exposure both faculty and students have to said whiteness, which DiAngelo and Sensoy (2017) describe as "a set of [behaviors] that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of White racial domination" (p 560). In this environment, whiteness is accepted as the academic standard.

For all students, there is a clear social benefit to racial and ethnic diversity within institutions. When institutions such as BMCC are racially sensitive,

more students who are marginalized may find themselves more deeply embedded in sociocultural practices found on campus. As an African American male teaching for the English department, my presence on the faculty has reshaped my students' expectations across the board. I, therefore, argue that the deciding factor for a race-conscious environment in higher education is the diverse population of students *and* faculty. Considering the growth of diversity, I think the closing of the academic achievement gap at BMCC has a lot to do with minority enrollment and employment of more people of color at the institution.

Some colleges have tried to commit to a mission for diversity, with mixed results. As DiAngelo and Sensoy (2017) observed:

As the pressure to diversify faculty has increased, the response has often been to ensure that a person of color serves on the hiring committee. Given the demographics at most institution, there are typically one or two colleagues who are repeatedly tapped to provide "diversity cover"... being tokenized and overworked, members of color must also deal with ongoing macroaggressions. (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2017, p. 565)

The main purpose for faculty diversity is to combat the underrepresented group in various positions in the institution. By increasing the number of employees of color, students would experience more minority professors, minority deans, minority provosts, and potentially a minority president. Here at BMCC, there's a critical need for more minorities to be hired to work in higher education, because it can extend the potential scope of minorities leaders in society.

Although personally, I still wrestle with being among the few African American faculty members, I embrace the notion that the BMCC administration has made a firm commitment to increasing diversity. I'm surrounded by fantastic students all the time. In fact, it's at BMCC students feel that sense of inclusion. This has to be true because there are students from over 155 countries on campus. Coupled with this, they communicate with various languages that reflect the institution's population which actual excesses 26,000 students.

Yet even while the college experience is actually represented by a diverse population of students at Borough of Manhattan Community College, I wholeheartedly believe there is another way in which we can legitimately look at the more wide-spread disparity of representation within higher education by considering that former President Obama's initiative for making community colleges free is the intervention that is needed. By promoting diversity within the ranks of students, faculty and administration we will

contribute to the central goal of higher education at BMCC and beyond. To this end, it is important to understand that exposure to racial and ethnic diversity at the level of higher education is a benefit to institutions at large, for it fosters social justice. It is my sincere hope that diversification in colleges and universities will become inevitable in our nation.

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# Field Notes from the Sabbatical

Page Dougherty Delano  
*English*

A sabbatical is a time to focus on a writing project. A sabbatical is a time to let the mind grow fallow. A sabbatical is a time when an idea comes to you from what you are reading, watching, thinking—that all of a sudden appears to be material for a multifaceted essay. It's a time to be mobile in ways that are not doable during a normal academic year.

For me it's all of these, and then there is of course the complexity of balancing these aspects—the book project on American women in Europe in World War II that I've been focused on for years and has at last fallen into shape; the need to let the mind wander and elude the duties of teaching, department, and college activities; and to begin an essay about “The Americans,”<sup>1</sup> the FBI, my own political past, and a student I advised. Her parents had been arrested and jailed for spying. The idea for this essay was triggered by a few nights of bingeing on Amazon Prime. Then, something else came up, a good thing, but one that demanded immediate attention: an article to be included in an anthology needed to be finalized, to submit for peer-review. Deadline met.

Through the spring of 2018, my department P & B, the college P & B, the president, and then the Board of Trustees approved my year-long sabbatical based on my extensive proposal, its quirky bibliography which mixes history, memoirs, newspaper articles, and a map for the year. Needless to say I was thrilled, and felt again the privilege of having a full academic year to work on my writing. I thank CUNY, and the PSC-CUNY who negotiated the 80 per cent pay for this year's release.

One of the pleasures of being on a sabbatical is reading without the question: how will I teach this? I have during my years of teaching, and the summers in between, found myself always assessing how much a novel or an essay might be part of my revised curriculum. Of course *now* my reading is directed toward: how can I incorporate *this* into my writing project? Actually, since my colleagues returned to their classrooms at the end of January, I did begin to think again about teaching, and I find myself cutting out news articles that I might use in the fall for my Literature of Genocide course, or an Intro to Literature or Composition class. But most of my energy goes toward the ‘sabbatical’—the project.

One feels competent about one's project. Then, one realizes how much more there is to know. At least that's how I operate; a colleague told me, “just write,” and while I appreciate the advice, I guess I'm a little like Pig Pen in the Peanuts cartoons, just always gathering up more dust. For example, I've been writing about an American woman who was a nurse in the Spanish Civil War, then ended up in France with the Austrian she married. He had been a political commissar in the International Brigade. Their son was born as they lived an illegal life in the Pyrenees; then in

Marseille they each infiltrated the German army, she in a hospital, he in a supply office, seeking to find anti-fascist soldiers as well as information of military use for the Allies. It turns out that the French had for decades been silent about these German/Austrian resisters as they sought to make the French resistance seem a fully French event—so, I had to read more about this. Should I include some details about German and Austrian women who after being arrested were guillotined in Germany? A noticeable number of women were involved in this dangerous work. Why is it that Irene Goldin Spiegel (who took a French passport for this work) and her husband Harry Spiegel, *nom de guerre* Henri Verdier, do not appear in the memoirs and histories I've read of those involved in the *Travail Allemande* (those who infiltrated the occupiers' army and navy)?<sup>2</sup>

One might also finally accept one's writing and research methods—I am an eclectic writer and researcher. I work on different projects at the same time. I bring together strings of information, and varied readings into my essays. I have not published extensively—I'm a slow writer, but when I finish an essay, and it appears in print (or on line) I think I've done a good job. I've contributed to the world of ideas—so perhaps this is the function of the sabbatical, to feel that we have made some ongoing contribution to the world of literature, and to the methods/arguments/new experiences by which we teach it.

I spent six weeks in Paris in the fall—visiting some locations that are important in my book project, and writing, and more reading: I read through Kay Boyle's letters at the American Library in Paris, finding out more about her last months in France, her attempts to get Varian Fry<sup>3</sup> to help her family leave France ... and spent hours in the American University of Paris's library listening to a tape of Irene Spiegel's life in France during the war.

But life intervenes. My oldest brother had been involved in a car accident that resulted in horrendous internal injuries, and when I returned in November I spent weeks in Philadelphia where he was hospitalized. I wrote in his hospital room, but we also spent time talking, and when he slept I went on errands. My family thought that being on sabbatical meant I wasn't working, thus I should be available for babysitting. And I was free at other times to make lunch dates. There was, in this mix, always a conflict between how others perceived me—that I was not working, thus available, and my own needs to use my time however unorganized fruitfully.

Halfway through I consider assessing how this sabbatical is going. Of course I'd like to be getting more done, but I also like the way my mind ranges, the reach of my concerns that I expect to shape into written projects. The college never quite leaves me: in the past few months I have written two letters of recommendation, spent some time reading a very late essay, far beyond the INC deadline, by a student whom I finally had to deny a passing grade. I testified at the CUNY Board of Trustees meeting about their proposed budget. I've tried to stay away from the department's list serve—the sharp debates about how to address remediation/developmental courses, the congratulations for grants won and babies born.

And now, I have spent April in France, as good a place to write as any, with options for tying up loose ends. I've found a loft on rue Faubourg Saint Antoine, a new neighborhood for me, the 11<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, where there used to be numerous furniture-making shops. I find out there was a march of 50,000 people (led by the

Communist Party) in July 14, 1939 from the Bastille to Nation on this street, to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution, 1789. Then, in a perhaps more daring and dangerous moment,

at 3 P.M. on 27 June 1942, with the Occupation at its height, a remarkable event took place at the corner of the avenue Ledru-Rollin and the rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Some 200 women, mostly Communists, gathered to the strains of the Marseillaise and distributed tracts to passers-by.<sup>4</sup>

And I find out that in July 1942 the area was also a site of the terrible “rafle,” or roundup, of foreign-born Jews—I’d thought this roundup was relegated to Belleville and the Marais, but no, the French police stormed homes in the street where I’m living. And there are three cafés on one intersection. From one, I watch the mothers and fathers having picked up their children from the daycares, and people, couples, families, single, elderly, crossing the streets with their groceries and baguettes, while I take in a coffee. Women riding bicycles. Women with canes. It is something for my writing, I tell myself, all this.

I come home via Barcelona (after a stop in Toulouse where I hoped to find out more about the Spiegels; it’s where the Austrian Communist Party in exile gathered until they moved to Lyon. I only come upon the Hotel de Paris which is in a central part of town, near a bank whose windows are boarded up due to the Yellow Vest demonstrations, and I experience just how wide the Garonne River is, which flows to Bordeaux and then into the Atlantic). I have had a fruitful lunch with a scholar who has written about topics we share, and we’ve discussed the default prejudice of anti-Semitism of pre-war France, among other things, and the problems of taking memoirs and even histories as ‘fact.’ I’ll devote May and June to finalizing .... And returning to the stack of books I’ve been working with in the Wertheim Room at the New York Public Library. And a late, rainy spring in New York.

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1 *The Americans* is a series originally on Netflix that ran for six seasons. One of its writers worked for the CIA, and the CIA has vetted each show. The central figures of the series are a married couple whom the KGB trained and sent to the US to serve “their country” most often in disguise, and with bloody results. In suburban Virginia, their next-door neighbor happens to be an FBI agent—unaware that his good friends are “illegals.”

2 I am grateful to the New York Public Library that has allowed me to be a Wertheim Scholar, with a shelf full of books readily available, including numerous ones on *étrangers/foreigners* in the French Resistance.

3 Kay Boyle was an important modernist writer who spent many years in Europe, and returned to the US with her three children to spend the war years. Her brilliant collection of short stories, *The Smoking Mountain*, which explores her years as a “dependent” American wife in occupied Germany with her Austrian born husband, is the subject of my book project’s final chapter. Varian Fry, American, was the head of the International Rescue Committee located in Marseille. He and the amazing group he worked with helped hundreds of men and women escape from the clutches of the Nazis in occupied France.

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# Interrogative and International: Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions* in the Global (De-)Composition Classroom

**Kimo Reder**  
*English*

## 1

This paper is a composite based on several semesters of teaching an experimental class session with my English 201 students on Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions*. During this session, my students and I agree to pose nearly all of our remarks as interrogatives, and to try to avoid declarative statements at every turn.

We behave here as if the *terro* in *interrogate* were related to the *terra* in *terra firma*, as if asking questions were a matter of excavating an idea's subsoil. This approach shifts the epidemic uncertainty of a first-year composition course from an ailment to an asset.

Curiosity is "cure-seeking" etymologically, but less literally it can also refer to a sustained ability to do without a cure for each and every mental quandary. The word "answer" has its own roots in a shortened version of the compound "anti-swear," and since many incoming students have little they will swear by in terms of absolute certainty, reveling in questions becomes an exercise in empowerment.

One reason a class conducted almost entirely in questions works especially well in a global classroom is our glad lack of shared cultural consensus. My informal surveys tend to reveal that somewhere near two dozen languages are spoken in the typical CUNY classroom, from Albanian to Zulu and from Bengali to Yiddish, with every sub-dialect, inter-regional patois, island creole, and contact pidgin in between.

## 2

All cultures question of course, but in widely different moods, cases, and voices:

Several Caribbean dialects turn a statement into a query with a sentence-ending, upward-tilting "hey," converting the flat land of a declarative into a runway for inquisitive takeoff. The Irish language lacks specific words for "yes" and "no" and requires a partial rewording of a question to provide an answer, allowing for a more elastic sense of Response and Response-Avoidance.

Somersaulting question marks are used as interrogative brackets in written Spanish, where such marks are used in pairs to both announce and end a question, like pillars elevating the interrogative above the common fray

of mere declaratives. The Jamaican “wh’appen?” can mean “what is happening” or “what has happened” or “what is about to happen” depending on the surrounding context, demonstrating how a patois often questions with finer shadings than a more “official” language does.

While riddles can serve as subversions of accepted logic, as in the tradition of Zen Buddhist koans, several African traditions use riddles as an educational means for implementing values. Bantu riddles like “Who can whistle with another man’s mouth?” or “What do you look at with one eye but never with two?” offer miniature parables on humility and perspective.

The Greek word for question—*erotisi*—shares a root with “erotic,” suggesting a sensual play inherent in the act of asking. Suitably, the Greek question mark is essentially a semicolon, that same semicolon that is used as an ironic or flirtatious wink in emoji-coding.

Questioning is so fundamental to human expression that a non-vocal means of communication like American Sign Language devotes several facial expressions ranging from a squint to a jutting of the head to accentuate the act of asking. This suggests a kinetic grammar to the interrogative mood residing beneath the near-randomness of mere vocabulary.

### 3

As well, questions, like literary creations, come in genres:

Presuppositional questions that attempt to head off unwanted answers at the proverbial pass. Polar questions that pull the rhetorical rug out from under any neutral stance. Questions-upon-questions that cut binaries in halves and then quarters and then eighths. Filter questions that narrow the range of possible answers, and presumably unfiltered questions that allow all those answers back in. Intonational questions like “Where are you from?” that can be four subtly different questions depending on which of its words we stress.

In class, all of the factoids above encourage us to question even the most literally monumental and iconic objects:

As most of us know, outside BMCC, a beheaded and dismembered statue of Icarus’ torso looms over the main entrance, and we ask whether a figure punished for his overreaching ambition sends out the best message to incoming community college students. Similarly, BMCC’s logo is a visual pun playing on the resemblance between a rising-sun’s rays of hope and the royal spikes on the Statue of Liberty’s crown, which leads to a series of questions concerning class mobility and the classroom as a place of classification. David Foster Wallace’s 9/11 essay “Just Asking” is composed entirely of accusatory questions, suggesting that the grammar of disaster



is primarily interrogative—in the geographic shadow of that event, my students and I engage in questions of a more celebratory nature.

#### 4

Accordingly, we begin this session by engaging in an Esperanto of interrogatives via some questions about questions themselves:

Why might our voices generally rise in pitch during a question, even though they remain fairly steady in tone when making a statement? Is this a matter of blending uncertainty with ascent, and making a higher principle out of our lack of sureness? What might be symbolically significant about a question mark resembling a high-arched human footprint? Is this resemblance why such footprints are emblems of enigma on beaches and snow-fields across the globe?

Why did Gertrude Stein find the shape of the question mark unnecessarily ugly, when it so clearly resembles a plume of beckoning smoke curling from the dead ember of a period?

What might be telling about our outer ear's fleshy whirlpool looking like a question mark? Does this piece of anatomy allow us to swirl and spiral incoming questions like brandy in a snifter?

Why might a question mark look like an exclamation point with scoliosis? If the question mark indeed has its origins in an icon for a lightning flash, is that because a well-posed inquiry has the power to ignite and inflame?

Why is it suitable that a question mark is shaped like sickle, a piece of harvesting equipment? Isn't this ironic considering that "ask" was pronounced "axe" in many Old and Middle English dialects?

#### 5

With these riddles in mind, our class proceeds to use several of Neruda's more pivotal questions in order to question the act of questioning itself:

Neruda subverts the logic of pollination when he asks *What do they call a flower that flies from bird to bird?* This question not only reverses the fertilized and the fertilizer, it uproots one of the primal symbols of poetry itself. We in turn ask of ourselves: "Who is the bumblebee and who is the blossom in a scenario where direct statements have been artificially forbidden?"

The Spanish word for question, *pregunta* only *sounds* related to the English word *pregnancy*, even though other languages *do* compare question-answering to a metaphoric form of fertilized gestation. Relatedly, one student asks why a "seminar" room isn't an "ovular" room and why the

metaphor of insemination prevails over the metaphor of ovulation in the general discourse of learning.

This in turn leads to some talk on the emptiness and hollowness needed for learning-intake. The suffix “ka” added to a final verb signals questioning in Japanese— “ka” as a prefix also forms the idea of “emptiness” in words like “karate” and “karaoke” and evokes the Zen proverb that compares a full teacup to a closed mind.

For some reason, the soothing, reassuring bilabial *m*-sound that signals “motherhood” in most world languages is also, ironically, a syllable that signals a question in the Chinese and Arabic *ma*, the Thai *mai*, the Turkish *mu*, and others.

Neruda’s question *Tell me, is the rose naked or is that her only dress?* gives us further opportunity to ask a few questions of our own:

Does a question often disrobe a statement of its declarative window-dressing? Is nudity more deliberate and controlled than nakedness, since we refer to an unclothed model in an artist’s studio as a “nude” and not a “naked”? If James Baldwin is correct and the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers, is a Comp classroom one of our culture’s prime places for this laying-bare process to be luxuriated in?

## 6

In Neruda’s question *Why doesn’t Thursday talk itself into coming after Friday?* we find the poetic urge to personify applied to measurements of time as well as to inert objects. This leads to questions of our own creation, such as: “If Wednesday is a metaphoric pinnacle, is Tuesday a ski-lift and Thursday an avalanche?” and “If Monday is moon-day, how many of us are werewolves by Wednesday?” and “If half of Saturday’s urges weren’t acted on, would Sunday need to kneel on both knees?”

Neruda also bends temporal logic with a question like *How many weeks are in a day and how many years in a month?* We respond with inquiries like “Can one celebrate the April Fool’s Day and the Chinese New Year that sometimes occur during Easter week without dislocating one’s sense of reverence?” and “Can we treat our Monday morning like Friday nights without being accused of hedonism?”

An absurdist question like Neruda’s *And what is the name of the month that falls between December and January?* similarly invents a conundrum to insert into the leaves of a calendar. One very gifted student asks “What would happen if financial aid deadlines were announced in the same way that snow days are?” Another asks “Would a midterm spread evenly across an entire semester be called a trans-term or a pan-term or an omni-term?” And yet another, “If the same river can’t be stepped into twice, can a student be four times as present in one class session to make up for being absent twice last week?”

## 7

When Neruda poses *In what language does rain fall over tormented cities?* he extends the very notion of “language” not only to all communication but apparently to all sound. This again leads to a series of questions of our own, from “If rain is a language, is snow a form of whispering and hail a form of profanity?” to “If rain is a vocabulary, do both lakes and clouds serve as its dictionary?” to “If a sunny day is the rain’s mute button, is a tsunami its volume knob turned up to ten?”

Neruda continues to personify the elements with riddles like *Who ventriloquizes through an ocean’s waves?* and *Why do the waves ask me the same questions I ask them?* We in turn ask: “If every wave spoke a different language, would a life-guard station carry a decoder ring in its first aid kit?” and “If Walt Whitman was right and the ocean laughed ironically at every word he ever wrote, how does the Hudson River feel about our freshman comp papers?”

## 8

Just as interrogatives blur the line between syntax and semantics by using word-order to alter word-meaning, Neruda also delights in blurring sound and semiosis with a question like *Are there two fangs sharper than the syllables of ‘jackal’?* “Jackal” as a mental concept entails the *idea* of fangs, and the word “jackal” as a kinetic action *requires* canine teeth to form its *j* and molars to grind out its *k*, thereby fusing this question’s inner intent and its outer, anatomic requirements.

This notion of a word’s kinetic form being as meaningful as its “inner” denotation is intensified in Neruda’s question *Does a word sometimes slither like a serpent?* Indeed, Shakespeare often stuffs the soliloquies of his villains with sibilants to underscore their snakelike subversions with a sustained and nearly subliminal hiss.

We in turn wonder “Does the letter *w*, a primeval icon for ocean waves, ripple a subliminal tide across at the onset of the words *What*, *Why*, *When*, and *Where*, in distinction to the dry land of a declaration?” and “Is *Q* the alpha-star and *u* the beta-star in those constellations we call *Question*, *Quizzical*, and *Query*?”

Neruda also explores the shapes and contours of not only words but emotions with a question like *Is it true that sadness is thick and melancholy thin?* During this course’s opening session, we analyzed the iconography of the alphabet and discovered that we universally agree that the vowels *e* and *i* are sharper and shinier than the dull heaviness of *o* and *u*. This suggests that the color and weight we associate with a particular phoneme often reflect which part of the oral apparatus it is formed on, with light pastels in the front of the mouth and deeper shades back toward our gullet.

Elsewhere, Neruda asks if the *o*’s in the word *locomotive* blow smoke, which inspires questions of our own concerning the thing and the word-for-the-thing: “Do the doubled vowels in words like *look*, *see*, *peer*, and *peep* gaze back at a reader like pairs of eyes?” “Is it a pure coincidence that an upper-case *B* resembles a pair of bilabial lips in profile?” “Does the upper-case *A*, with its upward-pointing steeple, resent having to stand for *Abyss* and does the letter *C*, as an incomplete orb, resent having to stand for *Circuit*?” “Why does the letter *y* appear at the end of the word *why*, and why does it appear to be a stem branching into dual options or a human figure spreading its arms in quizzical exasperation?”

## 9

More politically and less alphabetically, when Neruda asks *Why wasn't Christopher Columbus able to discover Spain?* Some of my Dominican students discuss Columbus' current status on their home island. The very name "Columbus" means "white dove" (a Colombian student informs us), despite the dark villainy now associated with that name in anti-imperialist circles.

To interrogate such imperialism, we ask: "Would Iroquois Indians landing their canoes in Europe have been said to have made a discovery, a detour, or a defilement?" "How many Old Worlds need to be ignored or extinguished for a so-called New World to come into existence?"

"If Asia is the East to the United States despite being west of its westernmost edge, why isn't Africa regarded as west of its Atlantic seaboard?"

In terms of the politics of the classroom itself, we use Neruda's *Is today's sun the same as yesterday's or is this fire different from that fire?* to ask questions about our coursework: "Is a final draft the child of a first draft despite its presumably being more 'mature' than its predecessor?" "Is a syllabus a final contract or a first proposal, or does this depend whether the semester in question is recovering from a summer just past or looking forward to a summer to come?" "If papers were graded with colors or fragrances rather than letters or numbers, would we rather be scored with water-colors than acrylics and with rosewater than with cologne?"

We then use Neruda's *Between the orchids and the wheat whom does the earth love more?* to question the practical "utility" of the Humanities themselves: "Is a poetry class an orchid compared to the wheat of a more 'pragmatic' Accounting class?" "Is a creative-writing class the 'joker's wild' in the deck of curriculum's playing cards?" "Is a Modern Art History class a less-utilitarian breather from an Anatomy class, or just a more abstract version of an Anatomy class?"

Similarly, when Neruda asks *And what did the rubies say standing before the juice of pomegranates?* we are confronted with a question concerning a red gem's exchange value and a red fruit's use value. Our academic rejoinders include: "If an MBA is a ruby in the contemporary market of degrees, is an MFA a glass of pomegranate juice?" "Why a Master's Degree instead of Mistress' Degree? Why a Bachelor's Degree instead of a Debutante's Degree?" "Why does Associate precede Bachelor for students in terms of degree but Associate follow assistant for Professors in terms of job title?"

## 10

Confronting more karmic issues and peering toward our human finale, Neruda poses *In the end, won't death be an endless kitchen?* In response, a Tibetan student asks us if we are familiar with the "sky-burial" Himalayan tradition of having ground-down human corpses fed to vultures and asks why Westerners prefer to be eaten by worms than by creatures higher up the evolutionary ladder? When Neruda asks *What will your disintegrated bones do, search for your form?*, we ask if a time will come when we can custom-order bodily "forms" from a DNA database, or put our "minds" in digital storage just like we do our Word documents.

We tend to end this "discussion" by widening back out to more general (but still interrogative) concerns:

Have cell phones changed our collective attitude toward answering questions now that so many ready responses reside in those massive databanks we keep in our pockets? In a heated classroom discussion, is the phrasing of “*Why do you say that?*” less offensive than “*How can you say that?*” because it questions motive rather than morality?

Is “*Can someone pass an attendance sheet around?*” really a question, a request posing as a question, or an imperative masquerading as a request? Is “*What do you want?*” generally ruder than “*What can I do for you?*” because of its shift in pronoun polarity? If a shrug is a kinetic question-avoider, is a raised hand in a classroom a kinetic flare-gun fired from the shoulder of a question-asker?

## 11

When Friedrich Nietzsche claims that “He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*,” he is reifying question-forming words into motivational objects, just as Abbott and Costello turn Who, What, and Why into the names of baseball players in their “Who’s on First?” routine. We in our turn have used this class to revel in the voltage of a What, the enchantment of a Which, and the fine apparel of a Where.

The “quire” in “inquire” is a homophone of “choir,” but a well-posed question certainly does not preach to said choir but poses a moment of dogma-doubting. The Socratic method taken to this behavioral extreme allows us to undo our opinions’ syntactical scaffolding for an hour and a half, and to submit the inertia of our assertions to the quantum gravity of our questions.

The questions-only format temporarily turns a composition course into a de-composition course. This de-composition allows us to compost our collective mindset even as we risk the whiff of pedagogical manure. Down deep in the molten core of Indo-European proto-languages, the words “quality” and “question” eventually converge, and accordingly the *quality* of our thinking can be made stronger by being made less-firmly rooted.

## In Memoriam

Briefly, while the college loses beloved people every year, *The Inquirer* does not usually eulogize. However, with the passing of Sadie Bragg, Scott Anderson and Olivia Cousins this year, the editors wanted to note the passing of these three who directly affected the teaching and learning community with which the journal engages. Vice President/Provost Sadie Bragg had such influence in and commitment to the BMCC community during her many years here. Many faculty may remember her for her lively talking sessions held in the CETLS room and for her attention to so many areas of BMCC's life. She gave full support to *The Inquirer*, never interfering with editorial choices, and for that we are grateful.

Scott Anderson, among his many hats at BMCC, was an unflinching supporter of greening the campus, of making environmental issues teaching issues, and of reaching out broadly to all members of the BMCC community and beyond. If you want to know more about BMCC's green initiatives, you can start here, <https://www1.cuny.edu/sites/sustainable/2017/12/14/bmcc-now-home-to-manhattans-largest-solar-project/> —a brief piece but with links to many of CUNY's sustainable issues.

Olivia Cousins was a fierce warrior for social justice. At BMCC, among other contributions, she was integral in founding and maintaining the BMCC Women's Resource Center and Women's Studies program and was integral to establishing the current BMCC Women's Conference, which has run yearly since 2015. Follow this link to learn more about the history of the Women's Resource Center and Olivia's role in helping to create it, <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/womens-resource-center-celebrates-25-years-of-serving-the-bmcc-community/>

Students and colleagues alike were greatly impacted by the work of Sadie, Scott and Olivia. They will be deeply missed.

# CALL FOR PAPERS

*Inquirer* is a journal devoted to teaching, learning, and scholarship at BMCC. The editors welcome manuscripts on any number of topics for Issue 27, 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, 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 11, 2020.

The deadline for completed manuscripts is April 13, 2020.

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, double-spaced 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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