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Introduction

Another year has passed filled with issues that touch us as educators, scholars, and global citizens. From debates about testing in the public schools and other national discussions of teaching K-12, to the formation of the new CUNY community college; from ongoing attention to assessment and retention at BMCC and CUNY-wide, to discussions of how to grow distance learning classes in the soundest ways, intellectually and pedagogically; from widespread debates about general education and Pathways, to questions about how to build community in our shape-shifting departments, we have filled our hours outside of the classroom. Working on a diffused campus nestled up against Wall Street and Occupy Wall Street, both of which continue to capture our students' imaginations, each of us teachers engaged in our various debates about learning, nestled within our departments, within a college, within a university, we have had yet another dynamic and busy year.

Colleagues have participated in workshops on Reading across the Curriculum, we've intensified our Writing across the Curriculum program, and we've celebrated the collaboration between colleagues and students on environmental issues, theater, music, and art. We have continued to hold faculty book discussion groups, joined yoga and symba classes open to faculty and staff, and the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship, even as we struggle to recall the words that yield its acronym, has reshaped a pivotal forum for cross-disciplinary faculty and staff discussions about the things that get us out of bed each day. We've held vital conferences bringing in educators from far outside of CUNY to discuss teaching literature and English as a Second Language in the community colleges, and we have given form and content to our commitment to environmental issues and to cultivating global citizenship in by bringing over a dozen local and regional environmental organizations together to share in the first annual Sustainability Fair. And this is to name but a few of our many conversations and engagements and accomplishments, all of which challenge and inform how we learn and how we teach, and re-shape what we say and do for our students.

This nineteenth volume of *Inquirer* includes three sorts of constructive commentary on our many preoccupations. First are four *pedagogical-practical reflections*: on the intimate relationship between reading and writing; on the challenges of retaining online students; on the nature of teaching writing to ESL students; and on teaching Homer to students of varied skills and interests. Second are four *pedagogical-personal recollections*: of influential teachers from childhood; of a first class taught at BMCC; of a professor who understood that students are not

all the same; of a professor born of two worlds who migrated to a third to write poetry and teach it, too. And third, gathered into the first of *Inquirer's Teachable Moment Symposia*, are seven *pedagogical-political interventions*: on two types of public conversation; on the political economy of global inequality; on the fantasy of color-blind ideology; on the new technologies of political resistance; on the connections between recent strands of public dissent; on intimations of a New Deal for these times; and on warping of reality by the media. Each of these—reflections, recollections, and interventions alike—are offered as grist for our thought and action as teachers and learners. And, if it needs to be said, each is offered as an indirect gift to our students, without whom what we say and do around here would hardly matter.

This gathering of articles, predictably eclectic in both content and form, indicates once again the energy and thought and enthusiasm that goes into teaching and learning here at BMCC. Each of the authors reminds us, in his or her own way, of our engaged commitment to our students as we play our meager but crucial role in preparing them to be active and global thinkers and doers in this 21st century. Each article offers us food for thought and practical resources to add to our pedagogical and intellectual toolkits. And each provides grist for discussion to help us re-imagine our manner of thinking about learning and develop our manner of teaching. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we have enjoyed editing them.

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How Do I Know What I Think Unless I Read What I Write

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Developmental Skills

Reading and writing are both complicated and dynamic cognitive processes. They both require background knowledge, vocabulary in relevant fields of study, familiarity with social and psychological references, and an understanding of contextual clues. Although conventional instructional methods have separated these two language skills in our schools, psycholinguistic research has convincingly demonstrated that there is a deep interrelationship between reading and writing. Readers get meaning from text using their linguistic, contextual, and background knowledge; writers create meaning using their syntactic and semantic knowledge, as well as their general knowledge. Research also indicates that, generally speaking, good readers are better writers than poor readers.

In the context of a community college like ours, as faculty we need to be aware of the latest educational research with regard to the close connectedness between reading and writing. This realization will help us modify our instructional approaches and focus on the most effective ways of teaching our students to be readers, writers, and thinkers. There is convincing evidence to show that reading and writing in combination are more likely to prompt critical thinking than when reading is separated from writing or when reading is combined with answering comprehension questions alone. Furthermore, in the content areas essay writing was found to be more beneficial than answering questions or taking notes regardless of students' prior knowledge. It is the cognitive process of combining reading and writing that helps students to think critically and to ask consequential questions. Janet Emig, one of our own language researchers, put it eloquently when she said, "Writing changes brain into mind."

This article offers a brief review of research conclusions, some teaching strategies that enhance student performance in the classroom, and some reflections on teaching CATW that lend support to the Writing Across the Curriculum program in our college. Taken together, these observations will hopefully encourage faculty to assign more writing in all content areas.

First, some research

There has been substantial research done in the last few decades on the interconnectedness between reading and writing. Holt and Vacca (1984), for example, conclude unequivocally that reading and writing are "mutually beneficial," interdependent processes that are essential to each other. Thus in literacy development both skills are essential. Stotsky (1983) and McGinley (1992) reviewed decades worth of research and concluded that better readers produced more syntactically mature writing and better reasoning than poor readers. Further-

more, Tierney (1992) reviewed a broad array of research on reading and writing and concluded that when the two language tasks were combined in the classroom, both thinking and learning were enhanced. Not surprisingly, in the area of children's literacy development Barrs (2000) found that reading and writing go hand in hand and should be taught in combination.

That reading and writing should be integrated in the curriculum is further confirmed by Shanahan & Lomax (1986), who found that when the two skills are taught separately, children miss a great deal of knowledge sharing and learning experience. With regard to critical thinking and analysis, Tierney & Soter et al. (1989) discovered that the students who were engaged in both reading and writing at the same time demonstrated more evaluative thinking and fresh perspectives than those who just wrote or those who just read. Similarly, Fitzgerald & Shanahan (2000) explain that reading and writing are dynamic overlapping cognitive processes that demand of the reader and writer a high level of engagement, which, if taught and dealt with as separate skills, do not bring forth the same optimum results. One of the most widely read and prolific authors in the field of writing and writing for learning is Peter Elbow (1994), who eloquently argues in favor of using writing not only for demonstrating knowledge but also for learning.

Nor are these conclusions based solely on observational and cognitive studies; the value of writing as a process has some biology behind it. The gist of the neuroscience of writing is that writing stimulates regions of the brain and other cerebral processes that filter information and lend significance and importance to the task at hand.

Clearly, research on the relationship between reading and writing is abundant. The core message of all the research is clear: writing in any subject area helps students focus on whatever they are studying. All we need to do as teachers is to be curious, to explore and discover the wide range of theories and approaches that are available for us to learn and use in our classes. Good practice should be informed by the latest research in a field.

What's in it for the teacher? What's in it for the student?

What are the advantages of taking writing seriously in every subject area? Effective teachers are those who keep up to date with research and strive to improve practice. Our teaching approaches and techniques become more effective as we read and reflect, and, in turn, as we try out and modify our teaching in the light of what we have learned. With regard to the inclusion of writing in all content areas, research has unequivocally concluded that isolating language skills (to make them "easier" to teach) goes against the grain of psychological, cognitive, and educational research conclusions, which clearly come out in favor of integrating language skills in elementary schools and high schools, as well as colleges.

To say that writing needs to be incorporated into every content area does not mean that teachers need to read and mark every piece of student writing. We have high-stakes writing and low-stakes writing (see Elbow, 1994); teachers do not have to read every word students write. But having students write on a regular basis, even for some short minutes, works wonders.

First and foremost, since writing in any content area requires reading, re-reading, reflecting, picking and choosing, summarizing, evaluating, revising and

rethinking (and sometimes sharing), it follows that students will be thoroughly engaged in myriad cognitive and meta-cognitive processes that will enhance knowledge, understanding, and organization of thought. We all know that the brain seeks to create order from chaos; and writing helps us do just that—to create an organized and succinct version of a wide range of ideas, which, in turn, leads to better comprehension, better retention, and better access to knowledge.

Secondly, writing is a more effective medium to evaluate students' comprehension and knowledge construction than multiple-choice or yes-no questions. Writing is a task that pulls together all the other cognitive skills onto the page. Writing is also a vehicle through which students can share ideas and perceptions in a more engaged way—and, hopefully, in a more engaging way. Writing teachers and researchers continually emphasize that fluency in writing comes only with frequency in writing. In other words, writing should be a part of every class period regardless of the content (from math to biology to art). The more students write, the more chances they get for learning.

In addition, writing can not only demonstrate how well or how badly students understand the course content, it can also reveal students' specific confusions and misunderstanding of the subject matter. It is always a struggle to write, for novices as well as experts, but when thoughts are written down, the writing becomes a mirror that shows the extent to which students have mastered the topic and also the limits of that mastery.

Another advantage of incorporating writing into every content class is that the writing task liberates students from fear and silence in large groups of peers. When the class is asked to write prose responses to questions, everybody is engaged in thinking and connecting, unlike in general, oral class discussions in which a few dominate and many are withdrawn (we have all observed class discussions where the majority choose silence). Learning, as we all recognize, happens when the learners are engaged mentally; writing guarantees that engagement, and for every student.

Writing is not less important, however, for the teacher. Among the most effective ways for the teacher to tune in to students' thought processes and help them acquire new learning strategies is by doing the same writing task or similar writing tasks. When teachers go the extra mile and engage in writing their own responses to questions, issues or content segments, they become more adept in creating a summary of their thinking and in conveying that to their students. And there is nothing more useful to students than seeing models of writing in any class. (A caveat: students ought to have a chance to share their written responses with one another before they hear or see the teacher's written response.)

Yet another extremely important advantage of incorporating writing in every class is the reduction in teacher talk in favor of student critical thought and expression. A hallmark of teaching is talking, which can sometimes extend far beyond the students' capacity for listening. When teachers dominate the discussion in any subject area, students tend to become passive listeners and very often end up tuning out. Interspersed, short, low-stakes writing assignments will go a long way in changing the pace, giving students some cognitive space and making learning more effective and long lasting.

A few words about WAC and CATW

At the university-wide level, CUNY's decision to institute a writing test based on Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum is a step in the right direction. Both programs make a lot of sense since they are grounded in educational research, some of which was reviewed above. As an ESL teacher, I find the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) a more effective instrument of educational measurement than the earlier ACT Writing Exam. Unlike its predecessor, the CATW encourages students (as well as remedial writing teachers) to read and reflect on a range of general-interest topics that might be contained in the test prompts. Ever since CATW replaced ACT, I have seen more variety in my own teaching approach and more intellectual engagement on the part of our ESL students. My ESL semester is filled with a wide range of ideas and issues that have positive impact on expanding students' background knowledge, as well as strengthening their reading and writing skills. While ACT was an artificial medium for testing some artificial and concocted knowledge, the CATW is a more authentic medium that encourages reading, reflection, and critical response to various kinds of real-world social issues. This is, after all, a culture in which "letters to the editor" are a routine, and the CATW format encourages students as well as teachers to think of responses to everything they read. Of course, there might occasionally be the temptation for the students to recycle and rehash the ideas in the test prompt in their written responses, but this is just one of many places where the teachers' input and feedback can play a crucial role.

As teachers, we are called upon to help students read, reflect, and respond by speaking to, writing about, and analyzing whatever it is they are learning. And so I will conclude this reading, writing, and thinking process of mine with a quote from Peter Elbow:

Students understand and retain course material much better when they write copiously about it. We tend to think of learning as input and writing as output, but it also works the other way around. Learning is increased by 'putting out'; writing causes input. (Elbow, 1994)

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Addressing online student retention issues at the start of the semester: Challenges and rewards

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Introduction

This article will focus on the challenges of student retention at the start of online classes from the perspective of a faculty member, who is the first author, and the e-learning director, who is the second author. The first author was a first-time Blackboard user, who attended all e-learning training sessions in person to learn from colleagues and instructional designers in the e-learning cohort. The first author mastered Blackboard and earned certification in online teaching pedagogy from the E-Learning Center's instructional designers, but felt some changes could be made to the e-learning training to better prepare faculty for dealing with student retention in online classes. Due to space limits, this article focuses on student retention strategies at the beginning of the semester and not on teaching strategies. This article addresses a topic of interest to new online faculty or those currently participating e-learning development.

A brief review of the literature

Online courses offer convenience to both students and faculty who have children, work, and/or live far away from the college. Although online courses employ pedagogical methods to create a student-centered learning environment, the literature reports online classes have lower completion rates compared to face-to-face classes (Brown, 2011; Jenkins, 2011). Attrition rates can be as much as 10-20 percent higher than face-to-face classes (Bart, 2012). Lower completion rates in online courses have also been found among community college students (Brown, 2011).

Reasons for students not completing online courses include a combination of technical problems, isolation, lack of structure, and time management issues with balancing responsibilities of school, family, and work (Brown, 2011). In first-time online students, a "cognitive" overload was reported due to multiple tasks of learning technology, course content, and peer interaction (Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Solutions to preventing online dropouts include carefully screening students (Jenkins, 2011; Harrell, 2008; Norwin & Wall, 2010; Stanford-Bowers, 2008); carefully selecting the types of courses taught online (Jenkins, 2011); providing increased technological support for students (Beyrer, 2010; Harrell, 2008); and providing increased training for faculty and students (Brown, 2011; Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Hayek (2012) pointed out the ways in which an instructor's use of Discussion board is a key in student retention.

Other solutions focus on the importance of personal contact with on-

line students prior to the start of classes (Achilles, et. al, 2011; Ammendolia, 2011; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Bart, 2011; O'Keefe & Newton, 2011b, Tyler-Smith, 2006), which can be done by e-mail, texting, telephone calls, or face-to-face meetings. In terms of e-mail, Bart (2010) discussed that it should be an "informational message" that tells students how to log in, what materials are needed, and who to contact for technical assistance. Sull (2011) says the welcome e-mail or announcement should show "enthusiasm and interest."

Here at BMCC, the attrition rate of online courses is 20.5%, which is lower than the national average of 25-30%. In hybrid online courses, those meeting face-to-face between 33% and 67% of the time, the results are even better. Data collected by the Office of Institutional Research indicated after piloting hybrid courses for one semester the attrition was an average of 11.9%. The reason for better results at BMCC, compared to other colleges, is likely because faculty interested in teaching online are screened and participate in a semester-long faculty development workshop series. Faculty are recommended by their program chairs and adjunct faculty must have six consecutive semesters of teaching experience at BMCC before they are eligible. Before students can enroll in an online or hybrid course, they must complete an online tutorial and readiness self-check to screen students. Additionally, they must to have a 2.0 GPA to enroll in one and a 2.5 GPA to enroll in two or more e-learning courses.

At BMCC, e-learning design workshops consist of three in person required group meetings, three hours each; two in-person group meetings, three hours each, or online option; two individual progress meetings with a course designer for individual consultation; and course approval presentation to the Dean or representative from Academic Affairs. Between meetings, Discussion Board is used. Topics include using the tools in Blackboard, the importance of communication in an e-learning course, and organizing the week-by-week calendar (the Course Guide). Learning modules were provided on adding course content, the Teach Act (copyright regulations for an online course), student support services, assignment submission, testing, grade center, learning outcomes and assessments, and grading rubrics.

This paper will now address challenges of student retention faced by the first author when teaching online for the first-time at BMCC. Challenges during the pre-course stage, with technology, and with student anxiety, will be discussed. Next, the paper will discuss the rewards experienced by the first author. The aim of discussing the rewards is to inspire other faculty to take on the challenge of online learning. Finally, the second author will present information and a conclusion section about how BMCC plans to address some of the challenges faced with student retention in online classes in the future.

Challenges: Pre-course outreach

About three weeks before classes started, I made the course available on Blackboard, with a welcome message containing information regarding the Blackboard orientation schedule and e-mail assistance. I used the Performance Dashboard daily to see log-ins, but I noticed only a few students had actually entered the course two weeks before classes, I tested BMCC e-mails, asked students to

practice logging in to Blackboard, informed students about Blackboard orientation schedule, and asked students to look over the course to see if the online environment was right. The break time between semesters is the best time to reach students because they have not yet started their classes and have some free time to take Blackboard orientation. Once classes start, it is hard for them to find the time to take a Blackboard orientation with a full course schedule and often full-time or part-time employment.

The following is a sample e-mail I wrote that you may adapt to your classes:

Hello and welcome to XXX, the online course you registered to take in the XXX semester! My name is XXX. As you know, the semester starts on XXX. I want everyone to be computer ready to start at that time. I am writing to let you know that this online course runs on the CUNY Internet-based computer program called BLACKBOARD. Please go to the CUNY Portal to log in at: <http://www.cuny.edu> and click on Blackboard. I made this course available to you, so click on the course name XXX, read the course announcement page, and follow the directions to learn your way through the course. For example, see if you can locate the course textbook, the Course Guide, the Course Syllabus. If you have problems finding these items, if this is your first online course, and/or you need a refresher in how to use Blackboard, it is very important that you attend one of the following Blackboard Orientation workshops as soon as possible in BMCC's E-Learning Center (Room # S-501a) at BMCC's main campus, 199 Chambers St., from 11:30am-12 noon, on these dates: XXX Please contact XXX in the E-Learning Center for more information about Blackboard Orientations or to schedule a workshop at another day or time. You also can find out more about Blackboard Orientations by going to this website: http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/elearning/announcement_detail.jsp?id=1040

I also want to inform you about the importance of BMCC e-mail in an online course. BMCC e-mail is the primary way that other students and myself can reach you, as well as for you to receive updates on what your classmates are writing on the Discussion Board. Please take the time to set up and activate your BMCC e-mail account by going to this link: http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/email/student_email.html If you are still having problems with activating your BMCC e-mail, please contact the BMCC HELPDESK: Room # S-170 (new location in the basement of the South building at 199 Chambers St.) Hours of service: 8am-8pm, M-F and 9am-5pm on Saturday & Sunday. Phone: (212) 220-8002, helpdesk@bmcc.cuny.edu

If you have any questions, please contact me by e-mail XXX or cell phone XXX; daytime hours are best, but you can leave a message at any time. Please be patient for a response, if you leave a message at other times. I am looking forward to the start of Spring, 2012 classes on January 27th.

Sincerely, Prof. XXX

As a result of the first e-mail, many BMCC e-mails bounced because students had not activated their e-mail accounts. I also had some students from John Jay and City Tech whose e-mail accounts were not yet functioning at BMCC. At my request, technicians at the E-Learning Center were able to assist me by contacting students who did not have working BMCC e-mail addresses; they reported back to me that students had activated their e-mail or planned to do so. I used the Performance Dashboard feature of Blackboard, which allows professors to monitor student log-in and participation, to find out many students had not logged into the course even after receiving an e-mail from me and after being contacted by e-learning support. In my opinion, the Performance Dashboard plays a key role in early outreach.

When it was closer to the start of classes and the BMCC e-mails were still not working and/or they were not logging in, I asked the E-Learning Center staff for student home phones and personal e-mails so I could contact them. I eventually received contact information for my entire class. When I called students who had a working BMCC e-mail, but did not log in, I found out many students had not used Blackboard in prior classes and/or did not check their BMCC e-mail regularly. I assured students I had just learned Blackboard myself, they could learn it too, and I was here to help them. When students had not logged in, I said:

Hello, this is Professor XXX from your online class at BMCC that you will be taking in Spring, 2012. How are you today? Do you have a minute to talk? I am calling because I want to be sure that everyone is computer-ready to start the class on January 27th. Have you taken an online class before? I noticed that you have not yet logged into the course. Do you know how to use Blackboard? Have you been to the E-Learning Center? BMCC is having Blackboard orientations on...

When BMCC e-mails bounced back, "mailbox not available," I called them and said:

Hello, this is Professor XXX from XXX at BMCC, the online course that you will be taking in Spring, 2012. How are you today? Do you have a minute to talk? I have been trying to reach you by e-mail, to make sure everyone is ready to start classes on Jan. 27th, but your BMCC e-mail is not working. Do you know that your BMCC e-mail is not working? Do you have another e-mail address that you use? You need to set up your BMCC e-mail so I will be able to communicate with you once the classes starts, other students will use this e-mail to communicate with you, and you will receive updates from the discussion board at your BMCC e-mail address. Here is information about the website to set up e-mail and/or go to the Helpdesk...

The week before class, I tested student BMCC e-mails again, with a similar message, and I added textbook availability at the BMCC bookstore. E-mails continued to bounce back and students were still not logging in. I called more students. My goal was to have 100% log-in by the first day of class. My point in calling

students was not to ask them to do work in the course before the start of the semester, but rather to let them know someone in a big institution has noticed them and cares about their readiness to start an online course. A few students did seem surprised to have a professor call them. One student said, “I never had a professor call me before.” I explained:

I always call my students, but not this early in the semester. But this is different. You are taking an online class. You are not the only one I called. I have been talking to students all week long to help them get computer ready for the online course and today is your turn. I want to know if you are ready to start the course or what you need help with...

The first day of classes, I e-mailed and called many students to help them learn their way around Blackboard. All but a handful of students had logged into the course at least once and a few were still having e-mail problems. I came close to my goal of 100% log-ins and 100% working BMCC e-mail addresses. The first week, I was still hard working to get everyone started in the course.

Another student I eventually helped with activating her BMCC e-mail, wrote a message saying:

Good morning Prof. Gleicher. Thanks for looking out for me in terms of my e-mail and blackboard status. I wanted to update you on my e-mail status which unfortunately has not made much progress. I will forward you the e-mail message that the eHelpdesk sent me. Also, I wanted to tell you that, I logged into Blackboard this morning. I read your messages, assignments, and course info. etc., In addition, I will try to purchase the book required for this course between today and tomorrow. Thanks!

Another e-mail from the same student a few days later had the subject line of an e-mail reading: “Successfully accessed student e-mail account. Yay!” I knew this would be good news and when I opened the e-mail and it read:

Good Morning Prof. Gleicher, Happy official first day of class! As you can see, I was finally able to access my student e-mail account. I will submit my first online assignment later today via Blackboard. Thank you for your support and have a wonderful day. Yours truly...

Several students who had logged in were not Blackboard ready and needed help—how to find things, post things in the right place, find their grades, etc. Many of the things I had asked students to do during the week, perhaps too many objectives for students just getting acquainted to Blackboard, created questions and answers about the learning environment. I had to take them through the course by phone, with step-by-step instructions on the e-learning environment. Many students did not know about the My Grades tool, the scroll button, or about how to attach files with the Browse tool.

Ideally, faculty should refer students to the E-Learning E-Support staff for as-

sistance with issues of a technical nature, rather than struggling to resolve these issues on their own. In fact, the E-Learning Center staff encourages faculty and students to report their issues directly to the E-Learning Center to facilitate faster resolution of problems. It is very important for both faculty and students to connect with e-support technicians so they can provide high quality support. As a new online faculty member, I tried to resolve most issues myself, as I wasn't sure what issues to refer to the e-learning technicians. I was also certain that the technicians would be too busy helping all of the many online students at the start of the semester. The good outcome of helping students with their technical issues was that it helped the students connect with me, and some of these students ultimately became the best ones in the class.

For me, the "best students" are students who are independent workers who don't need reminders to complete assignments or submit them extra early, students who go beyond what is asked in an assignment (ex. gives extra information), students who go beyond what is asked in a discussion board posting (ex. quotes an article or the textbook when making his/her opinion), students who make more Discussion Board postings than what is required, students who try to help others or make nice comments to other students on the Discussion Board, those who email questions about the readings, students who let me know when a web-link that I have provided is not working, students who e-mail me about articles in the news that relate to the class or provide a resource related to the topic we are discussing, and students who e-mail me when he/she notice something in his/her work, internship, or personal life that relates to this class.

A student who received help from both me and the BMCC E-Learning Center wrote this e-mail:

Thank you Professor for all your encouragement! Best regards and I will continue to do my best. Wasn't it just perfect timing that I was at BMCC this morning. It worked out great...

The rest of the first week and second week of classes, I continued watching the Performance Dashboard closely to see who was logging in and who was not, going to Grade Center to see who was completing assignments and who was not, and notifying students of things needing to be done by e-mail. If I saw a few missing items and a log-in date a few days old, I called the student and said something like this:

Hello. This is Professor XXX from XXX, the online course you are taking at BMCC this semester. Do you have a minute? (wait to find out if the student is at work or home.) I am calling because I am concerned because you have not logged in since XXX and you have not done assignment XXX. What's happening?

Call, e-mail, text, or Skype students to let them know their professor cares about them. This cannot be understated.

Challenges and rewards in dealing with student anxiety

Eventually, students did learn Blackboard, BMCC e-mail problems declined, and students started introducing themselves and participating in the Discussion Board. There were a few students who were so eager to get started in the class, they had posted Discussion Board introductions the night before classes began; while I was so busy calling students who were having problems, it took me a day or two until I even noticed their responses were there. Hayek (2012) wrote an excellent article comparing the instructor's use of the Discussion Board to being a host at a dinner party, which I recommend.

What surprised me when reading some of the early Discussion Board postings, was how students talked about their fears of taking an online course in their introductions. Students are very adept at using computers for social networking, playing games, and other personal uses, but they are often not required to use them to the same extent for academic work. It was beautiful to see students trying to encourage each other. This kind of peer support is rare in the face-to-face classroom. Since this interaction happened during a busy weekend, I didn't get a chance to read it and respond right away. Next time, I will put a question in the Discussion Board asking students about their prior online experiences so they can all talk about it. Here is an example of a nice helping interaction between students (all names have been changed):

Susan: Hi. everyone, I am XXX. My major is Human Services. I am really scared doing an online class. I prefer face to face contact, however my kids need me, so that's why I am doing e-learning. Good luck to everyone and a successful semester.

Tammy: Hey, Susan. You are not alone in your fears of being a part of an online class. I prefer being in the classroom as well, but circumstances have put me in this position. I often get distracted by the chaos at home, but I feel optimistic about this semester and I look at this experience as a challenge towards something great! Good Luck,

Susan: Hi Tammy. Thanks for your encouragement and all the best to you this semester. I can feel your optimism and I totally understand your past experiences. Thanks for the positive energy.

Linda: Hi Susan, I understand your feelings about an online class. A year or so ago I took my first online class, I was a little pessimistic about it but at the end it was great. Timing is perfect because you do it at your own time and you still have time for your kids. This will be a good class as I read that some people have experience in working with people that have disabilities.

Susan: Hi, Linda, thanks for your encouragement. I really hope that I can do this. Good luck to you.

Wendy: Hi Susan. Human Services is my major as well and just like you I

too have children. I agree that this can be scary but it will be great!!! Looking forward to this very important class with all of you. Best of luck!!!

Professor: Hello. I am sorry for the delayed response for such a beautiful interaction here. I am just catching up with reading all of your discussion postings and I want to point out that I've noticed this conversation going on here that I've really enjoyed reading. Susan and Wendy discussed concerns and fears about taking an online class, and received support and encouragement from fellow-students, Tammy and Linda. I think this is a good thing that experienced online students are encouraging first-time online students. This is really wonderful to have read something like this and I am sorry for the delay in writing a response. Online classes can be stressful at first until you learn to use Blackboard, but it will get better with practice. To anyone still struggling with Blackboard, I am just a phone call away at my cell# XXX and we have the E-Learning center at BMCC. Keep up the good work. Best wishes, Prof. Gleicher

Rewards: Positive comments made by the students to each other and myself

Student introductions on the Discussion Board were among the first rewards of the semester. I was impressed right away as they made nice comments to each other, still strangers, and showing empathy, as they will do as social workers. This kind of student support is much more noticeable here in an online class than in a face-to-face classroom. Here is an example of it.

Martha: I am very excited about this course. My dad suffered from Polio most of his life but was still able to serve his country. I was always so proud of his contribution. I look forward to learning more about disability and hope that some day I can make a contribution in helping people with disabilities.

John: You must and should have a tremendous amount of pride in your father. Just to have served his Country is admirable, but to do so with a disability is even more noble. It sounds like you are dedicated to helping those that you can and with good motivation as well.

Martha: Thank you John. I do take pride in my dad. Polio left him walking a limp in his right leg. He never let it bring him down. He is no longer with us and I miss his strength. I do look forward to learning more about disabilities. So far I am really enjoying this class.

I also received a lot of positive comments from students that I assisted with e-mail and Blackboard throughout the course. Towards the third week of the course, I received this e-mail from another student:

I love this course is going great. I am so into reading the book, I am a chapter ahead maybe this is why am having a hard time with the homework but I

just love reading everything you give us plus the chapters. The students are a great group they have a lot to say. I enjoy reading the discussion board. You have done a great class ...

Despite the time commitment, I encourage other faculty to try online teaching, due to rewards. The rewards of online teaching are growing daily during my first-semester online teaching experience. Students who were once struggling with Blackboard are now doing well. Students support each other through Discussion Board postings. Students take risks of expressing different opinions. The course is helping students view things in a new perspective. With more experience, I hope to learn better strategies for online teaching. Right now, I am looking forward to the rest of the semester. I am hopeful students will not only enjoy the course and learn a lot, but hopefully they will take another online course.

New interventions for student success

In the past, semesters often started off in confusion due to technology issues, such as the need for students to learn how to use the tools in Blackboard, and problems they experience with activating their BMCC e-mail accounts. Time and patience, prior to, and at the start of classes, is necessary to explain Blackboard to students over the phone and/or e-mail, and to give students reassurance about their ability to learn Blackboard. In order to deal with these issues and to avoid losing time for academic work at the beginning of the semester, an early start to the semester is critical. By asking students to log in and complete a new interactive e-learning tutorial, students will be able to resolve technical issues before the semester begins to ensure they are able to log in, read e-mail, and manage the expectations of an online class.

BMCC's e-learning administrators have tried different techniques for screening students to determine how to achieve the best student persistence, measured as students who complete an e-learning course, and success, defined as those earning a grade of A or B. Originally, students were required to complete a PowerPoint tutorial and an e-learning readiness quiz. Students had to answer all of the questions correctly to enroll in either online or hybrid courses. Staff in the E-Learning Center enhanced information on the website, created a video tour of an e-learning course, and revised the readiness self-check. Beginning in the Fall 2012 semester, students will be able to self-register once they have completed this tour of the e-learning website and readiness self-check.

Upon registration, students will have access within 24-48 hours to the interactive e-learning tutorial. It will cover all of the tools in Blackboard including how to use the grade center, submit assignments (comments box, filling in a form and attaching it, and attaching their own files using the browse tool), complete assessments, post and respond on discussion board, and activate BMCC e-mail. Plus, it will provide modules with information and activities on the following topics to prepare students for success: basic computer skills, time management, study skills, online plagiarism, and online communication. Prior to the start of classes, a staff member in the E-Learning Center will contact students identified as "at risk" in e-learning persistence studies to inform them of the rigorous

requirements for e-learning courses. This specialist will also strongly encourage students to log in, complete the tutorial, and activate their e-mail as soon as possible. Faculty may choose to make the tutorial mandatory for all of their students or not.

In addition, a more in-depth Blackboard orientation will be offered to students in person. In the past, when students attended face-to-face orientations offered by the E-Learning Center, students could not experiment with the tools in an actual class if their professor had not yet made the course available to students. The tutorial will give students access to an actual course shell in Blackboard so they may try using the tools before the semester begins.

BMCC's Title V E-Learning Grant has enabled the college to hire technicians and advisors to support students. Online and face-to-face e-support is now available seven days a week during the regular semester. During the weekday, support hours have been extended until 7pm and students are guaranteed a response within 24 hours. It is not possible for the e-learning center staff to resolve every technical problem within 24 hours; however, most of the issues students experience are not due to real technical problems, but to a lack of understanding about how to utilize the technology faculty require.

Improvements and changes will also be happening with e-learning training with faculty. Future e-learning training sessions with e-learning staff will also include a module on the performance dashboard, a tool allowing professors to monitor their student activity to ensure they are logging in regularly. Topics to enhance future e-learning workshops may include a review of the literature advocating for the benefits of early contact with students as a way of increasing student retention or decreasing early online dropouts. Participants could discuss ways to ease student anxiety about taking an online course and strategies faculty can exercise to improve student persistence, such as reaching out to students before the semester begins. Such strategies are proactive and help to ensure students are able to log in to their courses and they have completed a tutorial in Blackboard. Faculty who complete E-learning training will be given a survey about their experiences teaching their first e-learning course, so adjustments can be made in the course for training future e-learning faculty.

After teaching an online course for the first time, faculty will be encouraged to participate in a peer-mentoring program to create an e-learning community of practice. Faculty in course design cohorts will be invited to reunite with their fellow cohort participants to discuss and reflect on their experiences teaching online. BMCC's e-learning director will facilitate pairing online professors who wish to establish mutually supportive relationships with each other to share teaching strategies.

Conclusion

It is clear some intervention is needed in order to ensure student success in e-learning courses. This paper briefly reviewed the literature on student retention in online classes, gave real life examples of challenges and rewards of student retention at the start of online classes, and outlined a variety of ways in which faculty and staff can be effective in helping students, including enrollment screen-

ing, tutorials, orientations, regular communication from the professor, and the assistance of staff dedicated to supporting students in the e-learning environment.

The course we presented has in fact had great success regarding student persistence. At the mid-point of the semester when this paper was written only two students had withdrawn within the first few days of the semester. Both withdrawals were due to factors unrelated to the learning environment (ex. financial aid and transferability of the course to another degree program). Most of the students are doing well and keeping up with the coursework. Data on the final results of student performance will be tracked in this and other e-learning courses. After the semester is over, more conclusions may be drawn about the effectiveness of early intervention with students. Further research is needed to compare the strategies of this professor to others who do not reach out to students before the semester begins. We must evaluate whether new training modules have improved faculty teaching. Additionally, we need to study whether the new interactive tutorial and registration procedures have been effective at improving student readiness for e-learning. While this paper focused on improving student retention at the start of online classes at BMCC, future articles could focus on effective teaching strategies used by BMCC faculty in online classes and retention strategies used later on in the semester.

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Vocabulary and ESL Writing

Mary Sepp & Gabriella Morvay
Developmental Skills

Achieving a competent level in college writing is a hurdle that many students must overcome when they begin their college careers. This is especially true for English as a Second Language (ESL) students whose first language literacy skills range over a wide scale. As writing instructors, we strive to come up with a winning formula for our students. In doing this, we try to find the right balance of what seem to be the obvious tools for good writing. One of these tools is vocabulary.

When speaking of vocabulary in the context of writing, it is necessary to acknowledge the receptive/productive dichotomy of lexical knowledge. Receptive or passive vocabulary generally refers to the lexical knowledge that allows us to read or hear a word and understand the word in that context. Productive or active vocabulary is needed in order to speak and write. Most studies assess receptive vocabulary knowledge, for the obvious reason of being easily administered to a group of participants and easily scored by researchers. There are fewer tests that measure a student's productive vocabulary in written form precisely because to measure it is more labor-intensive and entails meticulous analysis. Furthermore, productive vocabulary inevitably involves receptive knowledge as well. The discussion here presents some of the challenges of assessing productive vocabulary, specifically that of English language learners, as well as a summary of the authors' research on the relationship between the assessment of productive vocabulary and writing competence. While there is a well-established correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension, the relationship between lexical knowledge and writing is more complicated. First of all, cloze tests (where a word is omitted, and the student is asked to fill in the word) in addition to assessing productive knowledge also involve receptive knowledge given that students need to understand surrounding contexts in order to correctly produce the item. Secondly, having a clear picture of a student's written productive ability would mean collecting a sample of writings of considerable length.

In order to help students build on their vocabulary, we need a way of assessing their lexical knowledge. This might seem at first to be a straightforward task. But if the vast amount of literature on the subject doesn't dispel the misconception, we need only ask ourselves the following question: "What exactly does it mean to know a word?" Is it enough to know its definition? It would make sense that to claim knowledge of a word, one should know its meaning - but which meaning? Polysemy is a very common feature of English words. Furthermore, a person can look up a word's definition and perhaps not know how to use the word in a sentence. Thus, it must also be necessary to know a word's syntactic behavior (e.g., part of speech, phrase structure), its semantic properties (e.g.,

male/female, animate/inanimate), and its potential semantic contexts. There are numerous other requirements that might be considered, such as morphological properties (e.g. plural form), pronunciation and spelling. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), knowledge of vocabulary is part of grammatical knowledge that involves knowledge of syntax as well as phonology and orthography. Clearly, this is a complex and somewhat controversial issue. Thus, it is critical for anyone involved in the assessment of lexical knowledge to establish a consistent set of criteria for determining word knowledge.

As part of a recent study examining, among other things, the relationship between vocabulary knowledge, reading, and writing proficiency, the authors created a series of tests for vocabulary measurement. Taking into consideration two contrasting perspectives on the role of vocabulary in language assessment, we measured whether learners know the meaning and usage of a set of words, taken as independent semantic units. This was done by means of a multiple choice test and a cloze test. The third assessment instrument was an essay prompt, designed to assess their lexical knowledge in the context of a language-use task, namely the productive skill of writing.

In measuring the productive vocabulary of ESL learners for this research, we decided to focus on a certain type of vocabulary, more precisely, academic vocabulary. Rather than choose the target words randomly, a popular and highly regarded resource known as the Academic Word List (AWL) by Coxhead (2000) was used. This list contains 570 word families from a 3.5- million-word academic corpus. The AWL includes words occurring at least 100 times in the corpus that are not part of the General Service List (GSL) (West 1953), a list of roughly 2,000 of the most commonly used words in English. According to Schmitt (2010), "the AWL is the best list of academic vocabulary currently available, and is widely used in vocabulary research."

Each of the three tests targeted the same set of vocabulary items, which were drawn from the AWL. The tests were administered to 95 advanced ESL students at BMCC who were enrolled in ESL095 (intensive writing for advanced ESL students) during the spring 2011 semester.

Another goal of the research was to ascertain the most effective way to measure the productive vocabulary of ESL students in advanced developmental writing courses. To that end, the investigators compared the results of the three test types in order to determine whether there was a significant correlation between any of the tests and the outcome of the standardized writing test, the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW). ESL095 students are required to pass the CATW in order to exit the remedial writing course sequence, so it is a high-stakes test. It is also a formidable challenge for many of our students. The CATW is a reading-based essay test and it is scored analytically for content, structure, grammar, and language use. Since reading is a component of the writing exam, we also looked for correlations between vocabulary and reading in our dataset.

Once the tests were collected, they were scored and checked by the two investigators. Scoring criteria were established prior to administration of the tests. Scoring the multiple choice tests was straightforward. For the cloze vocabulary test, the first letter of the word was provided, so in many cases there were a number of non-target words that fit the context. Such words were accepted as correct.

In addition, while the response in general should match the syntactic category of the target word, if an adverb form were used instead of an adjective—e.g., appropriately instead of appropriate—and it fit both the structural context and the meaning, then it was accepted.

Scoring the essay required more elaborate guidelines. Thus, the criteria below were followed:

1. Scores were calculated as the percentage of the 10 target words the writer was able to use correctly (using each correctly once was sufficient)
2. Correct responses had to be globally and locally appropriate. The vocabulary item also had to be written in the form of the appropriate syntactic category, with the exception of adjectives and adverbs, in which case either form was accepted as long as it was deemed appropriate to the context. Errors in tense and/or number were tolerated.
3. Credit was given for target academic words only.

Average test scores were compared based on both developmental writing and reading outcomes. In addition, Pearson Correlations were calculated to determine the relationship between test scores, vocabulary range, essay length, and reading and ESL course outcomes.

With regard to average scores, the results showed slightly higher average scores on the three vocabulary tests for students who failed ESL095 at the end of the semester (by failing the CATW). The essays were used to calculate two additional measures related to vocabulary size: type-token ratio (TTR), which measures the range of vocabulary used in a text, and essay word count. The average TTR was also higher for students who failed ESL, while the average word count was considerably higher for passing students at 417:310.

The Pearson Correlations showed a similar pattern. There was a significant ($p < .01$) correlation between essay length (word count) and ESL095 outcome. But there was no correlation between the results of the vocabulary tests and the ESL outcome. Moreover, there was a negative correlation between ESL writing outcome and TTR. This type of result, however, is not unusual when measuring TTR, as shorter texts would normally not repeat as many words as longer texts. For this reason, we decided to analyze a subset of the data which contained essays of 400 or more words. There were 26 essays in this dataset. Pearson Correlations were recalculated and the same pattern emerged. The correlations are represented in the table below.

400plus N=26	ESL P/F
Multi V	-.324
Cloze V	-.076
Essay V	-.170
essay word count	.459*
type-to-token ratio	.079

Pearson Correlations
based on ESL outcome

The data revealed a significant correlation at the .05 level between essay length and ESL writing outcome but no correlation between range of vocabulary and ESL outcome. The 400plus essays were also analyzed based on reading outcomes, and while essay length showed no correlation here, the correlation between range of vocabulary (TTR) and reading was significant at the .05 level.

The fact that reading correlates to a broader vocabulary is not surprising. Likewise, the connection between relatively longer essays and better writing skills also makes sense. On the other hand, the notion that a broader vocabulary does not necessarily correspond to competent writing may seem counterintuitive. In fact, a previous study conducted by one of the authors (Sepp 2010) revealed that TTR (vocabulary range) did significantly correlate ($p < .05$) to a positive outcome in ESL095. However, the latter research was based on a different standardized test (CUNY ACT), which was scored holistically. The CATW is scored analytically, meaning that readers assign individual scores for different aspects of structure, content, grammar and language use. Language use is scored for sentence variety, vocabulary, and sentence mechanics. Thus, it might be surmised that readers who are scoring analytically pay more attention to clarity of expression than range of vocabulary. Of course, this cannot be claimed with certainty until further studies have been carried out.

In the end, the relationship between vocabulary and competent writing is intrinsically linked to what the assessors are looking for and how “competence” is perceived.

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Odysseus on Chambers Street: Reflections on Teaching Homer in the Two-Year College Composition Classroom

Joyce Zonana
English

I learned a new word from my students last semester: “swagger-jagger,” applied to a person who steals or copies someone else’s “swag.” The word, my students assured me, was a fine way to describe Queen Penelope’s boorish suitors, those “reckless,” “insolent” men who seek to usurp Odysseus’s place. “I would be afraid, if I were Penelope,” one student said, and others agreed with her – especially after I pointed out that, in fact 108 men were after her, occupying her home and eating her food. Telemachus needs to “man up,” they agreed, and several of them applauded when, after his inspiring little conference with Athena in Book 1 the young man firmly asserts himself, if only against his mother:

“And as for giving orders,
men will see to that, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house.” (1.412 – 414)

“That’s a little cold,” one young woman said; “Yeah, but he needs to do that,” one of the boys responded. We paused to think about it. As the class drew to a reluctant close, I wrote on the board the names of the characters Athena chooses as her disguise: “Mentes,” and “Mentor.” “Sound familiar?” I asked. “‘Mentor,’ that’s the word we use for a role-model or a teacher,” several of them said. “Right,” I said, “and guess where we got it from?” “Wow, that’s almost eerie,” one student burst out. “It’s like everything is connected.” “And it’s the same word in Spanish,” another student pointed out. “‘Mente’ means ‘mind.’” Another new one for me.

So this was my developmental writing class, what we call English 095 here at BMCC, a six-hour, non-credit-bearing course for students whose writing skills are deemed insufficient for Freshman Composition, English 101. I had been in near despair after a horribly frustrating semester in Fall 2011, when I had used a publisher’s workbook for readings and grammar exercises, along with topical Op Ed pieces from the *New York Times*. I had been bored and so had my students; the class had no unifying ideas or structures other than to prepare students for the exit exam, and all my exhortations had little effect on their engagement or progress. Only three out of a class of fifteen passed the CATW exam, which asks them to read, summarize, and respond to a brief passage. So, in the Spring 2012 semester, I knew I had to change my approach. We began the term with a spirited reading of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. “It’s the first book I’ve ever read straight through,” several of them admitted to me. “It’s way better than the film,” they all agreed after I showed them Spike Lee’s movie. Having exhausted

ourselves talking and writing about race and class and self-transformation, we plunged immediately into *The Odyssey*. I wasn't sure how these students would do on their exam but I was certain of one thing: they were learning to love reading.

I was trusting Wayne Booth here, who, in "The Ethics of Teaching Literature" asks:

What kind of student scores high in vocabulary? Obviously, it's someone who has learned to love reading and writing and has thus learned hundreds of new words each week . . . Who are the students who score high in grammar? Well, that depends on whether what you test is mere terminology for grammar, or actual usage. The ones who learn to use effective grammar are the ones who have learned to love reading and writing and speaking. (46)

What I was most impressed by, with this group of "typical" BMCC students – African American, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, and Slavic—is how beautifully and naturally they read aloud Homer's lines in Robert Fagles's contemporary idiomatic translation. Just a few weeks earlier, these same students were stumbling over Malcolm X's language, intimidated by his Latinate words and complex syntax. Yet Homer's long, rhythmical sentences carry them along; they read with ease and pleasure: the ancient poem makes sense to them, and they are pleased to find themselves reflected in this mythic story recorded so long ago on the other side of the world.

This was the first time I had ventured to teach Homer to developmental students, and I regret my delay in doing so. And it was, in fact, only a few years ago that—against the advice of colleagues—I began teaching it to the "regular" community college students in our second-semester Freshman writing course, a course that also functions as an Introduction to Literature. Even with that course, I had hesitated, assigning *The Odyssey* first to an Honors class before introducing it into my regular English 201 syllabus. It's now become a fixture there; we begin with Book 1 on day two, and stick with it as long as it takes—usually about four to five weeks—before moving on to *Huckleberry Finn* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.

I must admit that I started teaching *The Odyssey* to my BMCC students largely to please myself, and not for any serious pedagogic reasons. For fifteen years before joining the faculty at BMCC, I had taught at the University of New Orleans, where one of my regular assignments was Freshman Honors, an interdisciplinary team-taught course that focused on ancient Greek literature and philosophy. During each of those fifteen years, nearly every semester, I, along with a group of distinguished colleagues from Philosophy and History, delivered carefully crafted lectures, on Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, and Aristotle. But it was always Homer who was my favorite, always *The Odyssey* I most looked forward to talking about with my students. Among the things I mourned, when I left New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, were these semiannual encounters with the ancient poem.

Yet one of the things Katrina brought home to me was the very *personal*

relevance of this poem I knew so well and loved so much. The weekend before the storm, I had planned to stay home to work on a new lecture on Books 9 – 12, the account of Odysseus's fantastical adventures; the last class I had taught, the Friday before the storm, was a small discussion section in which our topic had been the portrayal of guest-friendship, *xenia*, in the early part of the poem. "This was how a civil society was maintained," I had explained, "Even if you didn't know who a traveler was, you welcomed him or her with food, clothing, even a warm bath." "No way," my skeptical students had exclaimed.

But in the days after the storm, while I camped out in one friend's home after another, with no idea of what had become of my own home or my colleagues and neighbors, I kept thinking about *xenia*, wondering what I would have done without it. I thought also about my students. Were they and their families safe? Had any of them succumbed to the storm? I worried for them; I dreamed of them. Like the Greek warriors dispersed by wind and wave after the Trojan War, my travelling companion and I sought news of our friends and neighbors. The returning Greeks had relied on tales told by other travelers, people who might have briefly glimpsed—or heard stories about—their companions. I had no news about my students. Had they stayed in New Orleans, to be overtaken by the winds and waters of the storm? Or were they scattered throughout the South, sleeping in strange beds? Were they, like me, thinking obsessively about Odysseus?

For in those tumultuous days after Katrina, when I wasn't watching TV in horror or driving in panic, I was, in fact, thinking about *The Odyssey*, thinking that now I understood, now I knew what it was to be at the mercy of Poseidon and Zeus, gods of sea and storm; now I knew what it was to need to tell my story, to listen to those of others; now I understood why Odysseus sat on the shoreline "wrenching his heart with sobs and groans and anguish, / gazing out over the barren sea through blinding tears" (5.94-5).

Thus it was that when I began teaching *The Odyssey* again after a break of several years, it was with a new sense of how a literary text—*this* literary text—could help make sense of a life; of how the ancient story could indeed have contemporary relevance and value. I decided to commit myself to bringing it alive for my community college students; to my astonishment and delight, what they have taught me are even more ways in which Homer continues to speak to so many of us. As Martha Nussbaum eloquently argues, "To produce students who are truly Socratic, we must encourage them to read critically . . . and this means cultivating an attitude to familiar texts that is not the detached one we sometimes associate with the contemplation of fine art" (100). Our approach was nothing if not detached.

I am not trained as a classicist: I bring to Homer an ecofeminist, postcolonial, anti-imperialist, anti-racist sensibility, along with a commitment to Jungian archetypal psychology and a delight in acting out in almost broad terms the outlines of the narrative. I do not teach Homer as a doorway into "Western civilization" or values; rather, I use Homer as a means towards engaging students with what Nussbaum calls "the world of story."

For, first and foremost, *The Odyssey* is a great story, wonderfully told. And it is of course, itself in part about the *power* of story: even the suitors, raucous and

undisciplined as they are, are held “spellbound” by the force of a bard’s song. So it often is for my students: “I stayed up all night reading,” they tell me, “I couldn’t wait to find out what happens!”

When teaching *The Odyssey* at BMCC, I generally begin with a broad overview that puts the relationship between Penelope and Odysseus firmly into the context of two other important marriages gone wrong: the marriage of Menelaus and Helen and that of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. I stress (as does Homer) the fate of Agamemnon upon his return to Argos—“that’s messed up” as one of my students said last semester about his murder at the hands of his wife’s lover; “but maybe she had her reasons,” another student offered. I pose the questions: “Why does Penelope remain faithful to Odysseus? Why does Odysseus so long to return to her?” That they are each somehow worthy of one another’s love, that they are a good match for one another, that their relationship is characterized by freedom and a remarkable androgyny as they each violate conventional gender norms are interesting things to discover as we make our way through the poem.

Young students—particularly women—are charmed by the love story; they long to believe in true love and this tale reassures them that it is possible. One of my students last semester, a young Albanian woman, wrote about her own long-distance love with a boy in her homeland. They see one another only intermittently, yet she is certain that they are each other’s true partners and that they will be able to be reunited.

For many years I never really understood the function or purpose of the first four books of the poem, the “Telemachia” recounting Telemachus’s awakening and journey. Classical scholars have debated whether the Telemachia belongs in the Homeric text, and I initially was impatient with those books that delayed our meeting with Odysseus. But my BMCC students immediately understand its relevance; the struggle of a young man growing up without a father is keenly real to them, and they take pleasure in following Telemachus’s growth as he travels to Pylos and Sparta. When we begin to explore the parallels between books 1 – 4 and 5 – 8 (Odysseus’s “awakening” on Calypso’s island and his voyage to a royal court), we begin to enter into an exploration of Homer’s extraordinary design in this poem; it is an introduction to what Matthew Arnold celebrated as the Greeks’ *architectonike*, and opens the way for us to begin our own exploration of literary style and structure; these are, after all, writing courses, and I want my students to grasp important aspects of composition. That Odysseus—powerful war hero and much-desired lover—is also extraordinarily good with words is not lost upon my students, who admit they want to be like him.

It is, of course Books 9 – 12 that form the “heart” of *The Odyssey*, or at least so most people who don’t know the text well believe. In my class we spend a good deal of time on the adventures, beginning with the Cyclops and ending with journey to the Land of the Dead. One informal writing exercise I often assign asks students to select which adventure they think is the most “significant,” and to explain why. To my surprise, several of them recently chose the voyage to the Kingdom of the Dead, writing eloquently about the significance of Odysseus’s encounters with his dead mother and with Agamemnon and Achilles.

I also often ask students if they can discern a pattern in the adventures, and

after some discussion we generally agree that the problems Odysseus encounters fall into two categories, what I sometimes present as hyper-passivity and hyper-activity, or stereotypically “feminine” and “masculine” behaviors:

- The temptation to languor – sleep, indulgence in food and wine, sex, forgetfulness (The Lotus-Eaters, what happens after the visit to Aeolus, Circe, the Sirens, Calypso, etc.)
- The temptation to pride and aggression – the boasting response to the Cyclops, the fights with the Laistrygonians and the Cicones, the initial “raping” of the altars in Troy.

As Tiresias puts it to Odysseus, “you and your crew may still reach home, / suffering all the way, if you only have the power / to curb their wild desire and curb your own” (11. 117-119). It’s a subject on which we can talk for hours: what are the external and internal obstacles that keep us from reaching our goals? how can we best manage ourselves when beset by problems that arise both from our own nature and actions and the nature and actions of others?

The title of one contemporary Buddhist reading of *The Odyssey*, Norman Fischer’s *Sailing Home: Using the Wisdom of Homer’s Odyssey to Navigate Life’s Perils and Pitfalls*, says it all: Odysseus’s journey is a powerful metaphor for our navigation through life. All of us, including our community college students, are on perilous journeys, beset by temptations and difficulty. Like Odysseus, we sometimes get off course (that year with Circe, for example) or become over-inflated (that boasting to Polyphemus); yet, with determination and luck, we can continue on our paths. As one of my English 201 students wrote last Spring:

The Odyssey stands as an in depth characterization of human beings, their urges and weaknesses. While the epic poem may seem bizarre and at times full of completely unrealistic exaggerations, it also offers a sense of relation to personas today. . . . The book also succeeds in underscoring an internal struggle that resides in us all. . . . Homer leaves us contemplating our own thought processes, determined to examine the choices we will make and the temptations that will inevitably deem us weak mortals.

Reading and interpreting Odysseus’s magical adventures together, we learn first-hand the power and function of metaphor, the way “story” can figure life.

Samuel Butler, writing in 1892, claimed that he could not find, “in the whole range of literature,” a “work which can be decisively placed above” *The Odyssey*. I have to agree with him. Of the many texts that I have taught over my thirty years of teaching, I cannot find any work I more enjoy returning to, again and again. If only because of my own enthusiasm for it, I know it is a valuable text for me to teach. Yet I am also haunted by Butler’s words in the same essay: “*The Odyssey* . . . has been a schoolbook for over two thousand five hundred years, and what more cruel revenge than this can dullness take on genius?” I like to think that my community college students, reading Homer with unabashed eagerness and wonder, save me from the dullness that might otherwise be my pedagogical

fate. And I am happy to report that of the fifteen students who took the CATW last spring in my English 095 class after reading *The Odyssey*, ten passed easily. The others will be continuing their voyages.

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Sweetest Candy—Education!

Margaret Barrow
English

When I was a child, my brother, Carl, who was a few years older than I, introduced me to his third-grade teacher, Mr. Shendell and his wife, Mrs. Shendell, who was a fourth-grade teacher at our elementary school. The school was located in Randolph, Massachusetts, a few streets from where we lived. Before Carl introduced me, I had seen my brother with his teacher after school on a few occasions while I was on the basketball court shooting hoops with my friends. I didn't like school, and I certainly didn't like the idea of my brother hanging out with his teacher. However, I promised Carl I would give them a chance. I found out after spending some time with them that they were pretty nice people. They didn't have any children of their own. The Shendells immediately took to Carl and me and befriended our foster mother, who allowed the two of us to spend time with them at their home in Braintree.

I remember thinking when we first visited that they were rich because they had a home full of beautiful things. The furniture wasn't soiled from too many dirty fingers touching it; the rooms were made up and the smell of sweet flowers filled the air. My favorite room was the kitchen. Unlike our kitchen, the Shendells' looked like a display kitchen in a magazine with its dark green marble countertops. Jars of multicolored dry foods stood out brightly against the white tiled walls. The cherry wood colored cabinets with their golden knobs shone in the dusk light that filtered through the white lace curtains. In their kitchen, they had what we children referred to as "the golden drawer"—full of sweets that made our mouths water just thinking about them. Each visit, we were allowed as many treats as we wanted. I could hardly contain myself thinking about the moment when I would slip a Mary Jane into my salivating mouth. Carl always took the Razzles—another favorite of mine, and the Good & Plenty. We often sang parts of the commercial jingle as we ate them. "*Charlie says I love my Good & Plenty.*" Then, there were mounds of butterscotch candy that found their way into my empty pockets. While we sat in the living room eating sweets, Mr. and Mrs. Shendell talked to us about school, learning, books, places to visit, and films they watched. We were fascinated with their lives. They went places and did exciting things. In our foster home there were 12 kids and not a lot of money to do all the fun things the Shendells enjoyed. With our foster mother's permission, they were allowed to take us around Boston to visit museums, art galleries, and book stores. While I enjoyed these outings very much, I didn't think much about them. My mind was somewhere else. I always looked forward to the end of each visit when we were allowed a few sweets from the drawer to take home with us.

Many years later, I realized that the sweetest gift they had given Carl and

me was education—all those hours of talking and visiting interesting historical places. The questions they asked that caused me to want to learn more. It wasn't so evident back then; however, I did start to pay more attention in class rather than distract the teachers with my shenanigans in the classroom. Little did we know back then, but the Shendells taught us to care about learning, to use it as a vehicle to change our lives, to move out of poverty both physically and mentally. In our foster home and in our neighborhood young girls were getting pregnant and depending on welfare to support their families—in our own home three teens were pregnant, one raped. Young boys were becoming fathers, and some were arrested and sent to jail for committing crimes. We saw a lot of kids turn to drugs in our suburban neighborhood. There weren't a whole lot of role models around us until these two Jewish teachers in their mid-thirties drew our attention away from what could have been our future and toward one that promised a better outcome, even though we didn't excel in school at the time. I was much more interested in playing sports with the boys, showing them that I was just as good as they were at sports. My report cards were a major disappointment to my foster mother, the Shendells, and eventually to myself. In the sixth grade, the Shendells spoke to me about studying. They taught me to create flashcards to memorize information. They called on evenings when we had tests the next day to ask if we were studying. Their caring developed a love for learning in us.

The spark that these two teachers ignited became a roaring fire within us both as years later each one of us turned our passion for education into becoming teachers. My brother is an early education teacher in Sacramento, California, where he is also the director of a childcare center. I am an assistant professor in the Department of English at Borough of Manhattan Community College. The Shendells taught me that a good teacher cares about her students, sees their weaknesses as temporary, supports their efforts and inspires their potential. My challenge is to spark an interest, a responsibility in my students to reach beyond their personal doubts and discover a love for learning, indeed, to offer them the sweetest candy—education.

Keynote Address: Annual Writing and Literature Awards Ceremony

Bhisham Bherwani
English

I first taught at BMCC in 2008. With the English 201 section assigned to me I began my relationship with the college's student body. Writing and literature courses—which invariably involve some combination of reading, writing, and discussion—allow faculty a glimpse into the hearts, minds, and lives of students in ways other courses might not naturally enable or facilitate. Through students' critical and personal essays, feature articles, stories, and poems—not to mention in-class discussions—writing and literature faculty develop an awareness of their students' anxieties, their interests, and often their personal and all-too-human struggles, sometimes practical (not uncommonly economic, requiring students to juggle employment and education), sometimes emotional (stemming from any number of conceivably difficult circumstances), and sometimes physical.

These anxieties, interests, and struggles, personal as they are, mirror those of a generation and a society. The students' challenges, inevitably, are everyone's, collectively, as school, as community, as city, as state, as country. If we are—as we unhesitatingly claim to be—progressive citizens of an efficient, vibrant, functional democracy, the narratives that these challenges evoke need to find their way into everyone's lives: through novels, short stories, plays, and poems, through intellectual and scientific treatises, through legal opinions, through newspaper editorials. They are too vital to our shared existence to be relegated to some untapped part of some individual's private experience as we go through our lives together. Rather than being cordoned off, they need to be visited, and revisited, and interpreted, and reinterpreted—and to infuse our narratives, again and again—as often as necessary.

So, a few weeks into my first semester teaching, I thought it might be effective to motivate my students by drawing their attention to the fact the skills they acquired in that English 201 class transcended the course; that, especially given how much they had to say, and how important what they wanted to say was to them (and not solely to them), the skills of written communication they were honing in the classroom were necessary if they wished to be heard by a larger audience. If they wished, for example, to have a letter they might write to an editor at the *New York Times* be taken seriously.

This example, while suggesting a plausible situation, was hypothetical. It was motivational hyperbole. I conjured it. I didn't disbelieve it, but I made it up.

And I presented it to students in subsequent semesters.

After several semesters away from teaching, when I was in the process of speaking with BMCC's English Department about the possibility of being reap-

pointed, I turned one morning last December on the subway to the editorials in the *New York Times*, and began reading a piece, a letter, titled “Why is the N.Y.P.D. after me?”

The letter began: “When I was 14, my mother told me not to panic if a police officer stopped me. And she cautioned me to carry [an] ID and never run away from the police or I could be shot. In the nine years since my mother gave me this advice, I have had numerous occasions to consider her wisdom.” Already, I was engaged with the letter, with what—though I had more than an inkling—it might be about. As I read on, I became completely absorbed by the author’s candor and clarity, by his daring in his willingness to discuss a painful subject—his unprovoked and unwarranted frisking by the local police. The police of *our* city.

The descriptions were vivid, but tempered. The rhetoric was matter-of-fact, yet eloquent. As much as the piece was a letter, it was also a personal essay. And it was also a work of journalism, presenting statistical facts to corroborate a larger statement exemplified by bitter personal experience. While the author’s rage was masterfully contained, he didn’t shy away from an interpretation and a cold assessment of facts. He invited us to understand, if not to be sympathetic.

I knew, as I read the piece, that it was significant, a personal testimony to a topic in the headlines then. I didn’t know, until I neared the end of the letter, that its author was a BMCC student. I didn’t know it would be sadly prescient, echoed as it is by the recent incident in Florida.

“I was stunned,” wrote the BMCC student in the letter, before recounting being held at gunpoint, “and I was scared.” Later, after describing another incident, he wrote, “I was deeply shaken.”

Maybe the hardest things to say, once said, seem the easiest.

II

Humiliation is just one of the outcomes of communal ignorance, of social inequality, of religious—and political—fundamentalism, of abuse of administrative authority. These realities pollute the well from which one might choose not to drink, but from which writers, if they have a sense of purpose, *must* drink. Embarrassment, shame, and fear—the things that most propel our impulses to be heard, to write—are also the toxins that stifle us. Writing is the process by which we inoculate ourselves against them—if not purge ourselves of them. Our vaccines are our words.

Thankfully, we live in a society, which, despite its imperfections and shortcomings allows us to freely express ourselves, to freely write. It offers us podiums from which we can be heard, channels through which we can be read. While these may often seem out of reach, they exist, and we should reach out for access to them.

This semester, when I gave the example of how a student might use the skills acquired in the classroom to a congressperson or a newspaper editor, the scenario was no longer hypothetical. I referred the students to the December 17, 2011 issue of the *Times*.

When I encourage students responding to literature to embrace current events, they can be very resourceful in marrying poems and plays and stories to

racism, gender inequality, gay rights, post-traumatic stress disorder, and so on. Our creative world offers poems, stories, and plays teeming with these themes, which are well complemented by good, valuable journalism.

But what shall I tell the student—such as one this semester—who'd like to write about international human trafficking? Journalists, public policy institutions, and human rights organizations have been there. But my textbook—a contemporary American literature anthology—offers this student no point of departure. For this subject there is no truth to be found in fiction, no affecting anaphora in a lyric, no dialogue for the visceral enactment of victims' horrors on the stage.

If the journalistic treatment exists for some subject or another, the creative treatment may well be inadequate, or entirely missing. And if the creative treatment exists, its intellectual, critical counterpart, informed by scholarship, may be missing. There are, regrettably, voids in the document that is the evolving chronicle of our human experience, our irrefutable testimony of the human condition.

These voids are awaiting your words.

Seeing Non-Traditional Students Clearly

Robert Lapidés
English

I shudder when I hear colleagues say they employ “tough love” in the classroom. I know students do their best when they stretch themselves to meet their instructors’ high expectations, and that they won’t usually stretch themselves unless they feel they have to. But I also know that many thoughtful, well-intentioned students have serious learning problems that “tough love” makes worse. What they need most of all is to be seen clearly and addressed with gentle curiosity and respect.

I was a terrible student when I was at Brandeis more than fifty years ago. I wanted nothing more than to do well, but I couldn’t. I was smart and intellectually inclined, but I was blocked. I had been traumatized as a boy and, for that reason, was deeply depressed. Plus, I had ADHD. Not that I or anyone else understood either problem. I thought I lacked will power.

I had a hard time with assignments I wasn’t fully in charge of, which meant almost everything except term papers. Since I found every point an instructor made equally stimulating, I couldn’t take notes. I was too anxious to ever speak in class, and I did very little reading: most texts bored me or else started trains of thought I couldn’t stop. I liked being in class, but I shared my thoughts only back in the dorm or the dining hall. I was intimidated by my professors and everything they represented.

In those days hardly anyone spoke about personal difficulty (unless it was to deride someone else’s), and I was too shy and unsophisticated to be honest about mine. Unlike what sometimes happens today, no one on the faculty tried to help me, although several saw I was in trouble. And because only one of them gave me any understanding, let alone validation, I was left alone with my problem, concealing my feelings of shame as best I could.

That one instructor was John Van Doren, who made the issue of shame the focus of his year-long American Literature course, from the Puritans and *The Scarlet Letter* to *Winesburg, Ohio* and Hemingway. This was a subject I was an expert on, and I came alive in that, my senior, year. A member of an illustrious family, Van Doren may have had shame of his own that let him understand me, for again and again he looked me in the eye and waited for me to speak.

He saved my life. What I cared most about—intellectual work, tenderness, and beautiful, deep, complex writing—had always scared me. The majors I’d chosen, first science, then social science, let me stay detached and anonymous—and alienated. But literature, I now discovered, asked me to feel, to be insightful, to use the ways I was different without shame. It was a recognition I wouldn’t have come to had not an impressive instructor let me know he took me seriously

and valued what I had to say.

My point is this: it's easy to misunderstand students who don't relate to the work the way we'd like them to. Until I learned better, I often saw students' missed assignments as symptoms of laziness, attempts to "get over," indifference. Those descriptions were accurate, but only superficially. What I didn't bother thinking about was why interesting young men and women would be so self-destructively cynical. To be honest, I didn't think unresponsive students were interesting.

For years I imitated the hierarchical teaching style I'd been exposed to in college. I liked being an exciting performer. I liked having people listen to me and respond. Although I glimpsed early on that community college students might need more than a brilliant lecture, it was hard for me to change. Without thinking about it, I'd talk down to students or at them, instead of getting down with them and listening—so they might work as partners with me.

Only gradually did I come to see the lost boy I once was in my students. I recognized that more than anything else they need to be seen and valued, as I had needed it years earlier, as I still do. They need to believe they aren't only consumers of knowledge but already its possessors and, if they'd try, its creators. Really, they need to be loved for being who they are.

Many of our students are conflicted about school because school has not usually taken them seriously. Many haven't discovered that being true to themselves is a requirement for thinking clearly. Actually, many, probably most, don't know what in themselves they should be true to, so busy have they been absorbing or rejecting other people's ideas about them.

I don't think community college teaching can be done well unless we look all of our students in the eye, and let all of them know that we see and value them, and encourage each and all of them to come forward as complex, unusual individuals.

Community and Inspiration: Visits to the Writers' Guild

Lara Stapleton
English

A friend of mine who studied Russian literature taught me the term *raznochintsy*, which means a group of people from various social backgrounds. The term's origins lie in a description of impoverished noblemen who had received an education and had left their former social milieu; and later, in common speech, it referred to people of non-noble origin who, due to elite education, could apply for personal distinguished citizenship. The *Raznochintsy* were important members of the intelligentsia. This may mean the son of a minister who studied among the most affluent youth of the nation. I imagined, upon hearing this, also, a son of the bourgeoisie who fights for the Revolution, a la Ché Guevara, but I am told the term is not really transferable across culture and time; it is too certainly a part of this nineteenth century Russian experience. I envied this term, the phenomenon it described, because such ambiguous class status was and is a fascination of mine, and we have no clear terminology for such a person in American English, though we imagine the American dream, which is a rise in social status. After hearing the Russian term, I realized that most of my friends were such people, people who were not intended by the machinations of society to be well-educated, but somehow became so, people who were of strongly varied milieu in more ways than one, and that in a sense, I was such a person myself. As a matter of fact, the Russian Lit scholar and I soon determined that we came from an entire *raznochintsy*-like community, East Lansing, Michigan. It took me many years and much distance to realize what was unique about the community I came of age in, but in short, I'll say that it was a college town, with good public schools, and it was also a Rustbelt town with a crystal meth problem, at least in the circles I traveled in. The sons of professors and the daughters of factory workers broke bread together, knew each other closely; I did not know this was unusual. When people ask me about where I grew up, I say I came of age with people like Michael Moore (the healthiest in my close knit peer group, the proletariat leftists) and Courtney Love (the unhealthy sister, the brawling white girls).

The death of the auto industry left big empty houses and desperate landlords rented to teenagers paying \$100 a month. We sat on the porches night after night, and did the things reckless youth do. It was often exhilarating, often humiliating and painful. We lost some beloved friends to things that made everyone feel a guilt that will last the rest of our lives. As difficult, as dangerous as it was to come of age in such resolute reckless bohemia, I think it gave me some of my happiest qualities: I have, since the age of fourteen, lived in strong communities, naturally gravitated toward *groups* of people, and I hope to live my entire life that way. I dream of an old age in which I live within a five block radius of many friends, so-

cializing almost daily with family and friends when the writing is done—always when the writing is done, and then, of course, the reading. I would like old age to be a little like the college years, if the body can take it. Since I have always found networks in a way that seemed natural, I expect that I have some instinctive ability to locate such phenomena, and I feel very lucky to have this.

I am also, as much as I am from the Rustbelt, of the Third World. My mother is from the Philippines, I lived there as a child also, and this may seem a stretch, but there were similar qualities to the two cultures in which I was raised; part of this is a byproduct of the resignation of ruinous economies, but it's not all bad. In Tagalog, a common word for sad also means lonely. In the Philippines, and in her exported communities, there are parties every week, and anyone who has been a friend of your parents is called aunt or uncle, even if he or she is a once-a-year friend. Both the cultures I came of age in also are relatively non-judgmental (with strong exceptions, of course), and I think the group needs to be that way to spend so much time together, or no one will be drawn to it, no one will want to remain so many long hours just being together. A strong sentiment in the melodrama of the Philippine family: *all is forgiven, come home*.

When I got to New York in 1990, I felt at home immediately. Here is a city where one can be an immigrant and an American at the same time. We can find niches where no one would call us a foreigner because they're all foreigners too. Another of the most fortunate events of my life: I became a bartender at the Nuyorican Poets Café, considered home of the spoken word, in the mid-nineties, a very exciting time to be there. I would say some of the most talented young writers in the country were hanging out there, many writers of color, and even many writers of color from working-class backgrounds. It was multi-cultural, gay and straight, old and young, a place where people treated each other with relative kindness and respect, a dream environment to a bi-racial person, well, to all the members of that community who believed in the potential of America. Seriously, how the hell did I get so lucky? It was really a dream come true, and I am still reaping the benefits of that experience today.

I have a theory that an art form is in its heyday before the industry takes a hold of it. In the mid-nineties, there were no nationally televised poetry slams. The artists led in that packed-to-bursting, fire-hazard theater, and the audiences went with them. While I was twenty-six years old, I watched brilliant young writers like Carl Hancock Rux, BMCC alum LaTasha Nevada Diggs, Liza Jessie Peterson, Tish Benson, Paul Beatty, Saul Williams, Mike Ladd, Craig "mums" Grant, Tony Medina, Willie Perdomo, Sarah Jones, Jessica Care Moore, and on and on, come of age. They faltered; they were brilliant. They went on to make films, found organizations, win prizes, and write many, many books. Our own colleague, Lois Griffith of the English Department was one of the early founders and active participants in the Café. The scene was *raznochintys*-like. Poets may have gone to nightmare high schools where hour upon hour was wasted, or magnet high schools where college prep was drilled in to their brains. The Nuyorican poets may have never gone to college at all, perhaps didn't even finish high school, or may have gone to ivy league schools. But here was the thing: they built a national phenomenon out of their own creative energy, a decision to

make something *happen*. A byproduct of this is a kind of class climbing.

A friend of mine recently took a job at Prep for Prep. This brought me to realize how many people I knew had done that program, which sends low-income urban youth of color to some of the top prep schools in the country. I have always been drawn to self-made people. Honestly, there aren't a great number of such people in the world; most of us stay in our lanes; middle class people break bread with middle class people; working class people are often intimidated by elite institutions, but "class-climbing" is the essence of the American dream. As a leftist, a social critic, I strongly believe that such an experience is wrongfully and far, far more difficult than most admit, but it exists. And moving from working class life to middle class life, or better put, moving to an education once fully and now all-too-much denied to working class and poor, is part of the goal of community colleges. It is part of the essence of who we are. So we fit into my understanding of that Russian term. And if we are opposed to such movement, we won't last long at BMCC.

Other interesting ways I have seen people move from a life of thwarted ambition to a life of high education, of the mind: the bohemian hang with its subsets, skateboarding (where the rebellious sons of lawyers may meet the sons of welfare recipients and write poems or make films together), or the spoken word scene. There is the hard left (I can think of two friends who say the rigorous intellectual training of Socialism or Communism saved their lives), and on the other end of the political spectrum, the military, of course. Community colleges are an intrinsic part of the too-rare move from low to high expectation. It doesn't happen here as often as we'd like, as a matter of fact, it happens rarely, but it happens.

I was asked to write an essay about inviting writers to visit the BMCC Writers' Guild, of which I am advisor. I could think of no other way to discuss these writers' visits outside of personal experience: who they are, their inspirational relationship to our students, and how I was lucky enough to bring them in to visit the college. Another one of the most fortunate events of my life, was when my officemate, friend and colleague Claire Pamplin invited me to co-advise the club. I did not even think about my time at the Nuyorican, and how that arose out of my own experience or belief system, but I jumped at the chance, and soon found that it was certainly the most fun of my administrative work, and something I hope to do for years to come. It's a place where some of the work I do as an educator has been most palpable. Some of this is because some of the most confident and ambitious students join the club, and some of this is because some of the less confident grow in confidence through the club.

Most of the writers I've been able to bring in have been people I know from my years at the Nuyorican. These writers have been especially inspirational to the students because many of them come from the same neighborhoods and educational backgrounds our students come from, and even at times, more extreme situations. Carl Hancock Rux was raised in foster care and graduated from Columbia with a detour at the Sorbonne. Lee Stringer (who was brought in by our colleague Robert Masterson), a very kind and Zen man, spent six years as a homeless person. After I saw Stringer, I thought: whatever I feel whiny about,

I'd be wise to let go. If Stringer can fight his way back from homelessness and a crack addiction, the rest of us can climb our meager mountains. Our students felt likewise inspired. Both Liza Jessie Peterson and Craig "mums" Grant described their first time getting on stage at the Nuyorican: they were frightened, they admit. It was intimidating, they shared: I didn't know what the hell I was doing, but I was more alive than ever. They'd begun trajectories that led to nationally recognized acting and writing gigs. They started with stumbles and a great deal of fear, but moved forward: this is what young artists do in finding their paths.

I do not know if the Guild attracts particularly ambitious students or if we are inspiring ambition through the club. Of course, it is probably a combination of both, but I was told last year by a transferring student that Columbia had let her know they currently had eighteen students from BMCC. I knew that five of them had been Writers' Guild officers; two more have applied this semester. Another was at Amherst on a full scholarship. Writers' visits have also evolved into more opportunities for club members. Alum LaTasha Diggs, one of my favorite writers in the world, has been helping students get internships, including short gigs at Cave Canem, the foremost African-American poetry organization in the country, and at Dixon Place, the theater where another BMCC attendee, Vernon Reid (founder of the Black Rock Coalition and Grammy-winning member of Living Colour) put up his first dramatic work, *Artificial Africa*, which Ms. Diggs directed. One of our members was a stage hand. Through other friends, we've come up with a number of other internships, and the students are getting some nice lines on their resumes. To actually see working artists as human inspires a belief in their own possibilities.

I have no idea what all of this means in the long run, but I hope the students of the Writers' Guild continue in the community they've built, or some manifestation of such a thing, as their lives go on. I hope that, if it is what their hearts desire, that they live a life of curiosity, letters, and publications, and if their hearts desire, they make a living doing it! I know that the artists I met at the Nuyorican, at offshoot circles, or through my colleagues' recommendations feel great about inspiring young writers, giving back. I also know that the lonely isolation of writers is not a necessity; it's an unhealthy myth. We can sink into darkness like Poe or Hemingway, sure, but we can just as surely love our neighbors like Rumi, invest in social justice through love like Arundhati Roy. The BMCC Writers' Guild has been one of the most fortunate experiences of my life, where as a writer and an educator, I get to practice my belief in the former.

Teachable Moment Symposium:

11 November 2011, Occupy Social Science!

Introduction: Two Kinds of Public Talk

Geoffrey Kurtz

Social Sciences & Human Services (Political Science)

The main campus of the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) sits twelve blocks north and a few blocks west of Zuccotti Park, within New York City's second-most-expensive ZIP code.¹ BMCC's students are predominantly young working-class people of color. Two out of three come from homes with annual household incomes under \$25,000—that is, less than half of the national median. More than four out of five are African-American, Latino, or Asian.² Many are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Given the juxtaposition of BMCC and its neighborhood, the divide between the wealthiest one percent of the country and the other ninety-nine percent is not news to anyone here.

The Occupy Wall Street protests that brought new attention to that divide, however, do seem to mark the beginning of something new. What, though? On November 11, 2011, professors representing seven academic disciplines within BMCC's Department of Social Sciences and Human Services offered a public forum on the meaning and significance of Occupy Wall Street. We asked each of our ten panelists to offer a perspective that was not a mere opinion, but was rather an idea informed by his or her scholarly work—an idea the rest of the panelists and audience members, with our different experiences and areas of knowledge, would be unlikely to come up with on our own. Each panelist spoke for about five minutes. The audience of almost 200 students, faculty members, college staff, and visitors was then invited to ask questions or make comments, to which the panelists could respond.

Several of the panelists' remarks, in edited form, are printed below. As you read them, you will see that they are fragmentary, exploratory, suggestive. This is not a bad thing. It is an essential characteristic of one kind of public conversation about matters of public concern. For an attentive listener or reader, fragmentary public talk demands to be followed by another kind of public talk, a kind that concludes with a comprehensive analysis and a plan (or plans) of action. That second conversation needs to include large numbers of people. It involves work that is more political than intellectual; it is typically initiated by organizers rather than by scholars. And so while the people who begin such a pair of conversations may want to participate in the second conversation, they cannot (and should not) do so alone, and to some extent they may want (or need) to pass the work on to others.

Public talk is properly the work of all citizens. But the first of the two kinds of public talk I have described, the kind that explores more than it plans and suggests more than it concludes, is the kind in which scholars and other intellectuals might usefully specialize. One public contribution intellectuals can make, in other words, is to practice and model the kind of public talk that opens up wider conversations among citizens. That opening-up, it seems to me, is what the panelists at our forum achieved.

¹ Megan Brennan, "America's Most Expensive ZIP Codes," *Forbes* (online), October 12, 2011. Available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/morganbrennan/2011/10/12/americas-most-expensive-zip-codes/>.

² *BMCC Factbook, 2009-2010*. Available at <http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/iresearch/factbook/>.

The Great Recession and the Occupy Movement

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After three years of economic crisis that has caused increasing economic hardship for most of the world's population, the year 2011 started with a blast of hope in the form of a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests in the Arab world. This wave swept through more than 15 countries in northern Africa and the Middle East and inspired similar uprisings throughout Europe. The *Indignados* movement in Spain and the popular uprising in Greece during the summer were followed on October 15 by one of the largest global protests against economic and social injustice in history, throughout 951 cities in 82 countries. This worldwide protest was part of a growing global uprising known as the Occupy movement that had begun less than a month earlier in New York City and which called itself *Occupy Wall Street*. In the context of popular struggles that preceded it—like the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s, the occupation of land by the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement in the early 1980s, the indigenous uprisings in Latin America that emerged in the early 1990s, and the occupation of factories in Argentina after the 2001 crisis—the Occupy movement can be seen as the latest and most effective form of popular resistance to capitalism's latest crisis, called this time around the "Great Recession." In what follows I discuss how the Occupy movement can be interpreted as the "natural" outcome of a system of global capitalism that in the process of overcoming a deep crisis, a system unleashing a self-adjusting mechanism consisting of powerful forces that are threatening the social and natural fabrics of our societies.

In my classes here at BMCC I like to emphasize from day one that the study of economics is in reality the study of the historically most recent social system of organizing economic life that we call *capitalism*. Over the years I have found that presenting capitalism as a historical stage in the ongoing development of human society provides me as an educator with a powerful pedagogical tool while at the same time allowing students to overcome the ahistorical and ideological approach found in most economics textbooks that present the capitalist system as the final stage of development of human society. Using this historical approach to the study of economics allows my students to think of themselves as both actors within the economy and also agents of change of the economy by being part of the continuous evolution of human society. The study of the capitalist system then becomes more "objective"—although I warn my students that all economic analysis can never be fully objective and always involves a level of subjectivity given by our political views and the dominant ideology—as students are now able to identify positive aspects of capitalism compared to previous social systems like feudalism, as well as negative aspects of capitalism and ways that these

might be overcome by future systems of organizing our economies. This historical and critical methodology to teaching economics also opens the door to the discussion of major thinkers in the history of economic ideas like Thorsten Veblen and Karl Marx. Marx's analysis of capitalism, in particular, is very attractive to the student population at BMCC and even though he wrote in the 19th century his theories remain as relevant as ever today.

According to Marx the capitalist system is based on the production, expansion, and appropriation of value by a capitalist class through the unlimited exploitation of a working class and nature.¹ In this social system, the surplus value obtained in the production process is appropriated by the capitalist class in the form of profit. Profit thus becomes the life-blood of capitalism, and capitalists in their obsession to maximize it face a violent struggle on two fronts: against the workers in the production process, and against other capitalists in the marketplace.² In this two-front struggle, those capitalists who are able to introduce labor-saving technology will prevail. On the one hand, this technology allows capitalists to control workers more efficiently by increasing their productivity, by threatening them with layoffs, and by periodically implementing this threat. On the other hand, in the struggle against other capitalists, labor-saving technology lowers the unit cost of the commodities produced, which in turn allows those who have introduced it to cut their selling prices and thus drive competitors out of the market. But labor-saving technology at the same time carries a very high cost to capitalists, as it forces them to adopt a self-destructing strategy of survival in which they reduce the profit-creating component of production (labor), negating in the process the ability to create value and the profit engine that drives the system. This self-destructive mechanism, which Marx identified as being the driving force of individual capitalists, is also present in the workings of the system as a whole. The capitalist economy moves over time in cycles: periods of expansion are followed by periods of contraction (recessions). During recessions the competitive struggle among individual capitalists intensifies and the general destruction of capital becomes the mechanism for generating new periods of accumulation. At this macro level the destructive mechanism operates at two levels: that of the *social* environment (by creating high levels of unemployment and weakening the economic status of workers, so as to reduce the cost of labor) and that of the *natural* environment (by intensifying the exploitation of natural resources, so as to reduce the cost of raw materials and energy).

If we apply Marx's insight regarding the self-destructive mechanism activated by capitalism during recessions to the working of the U.S. capitalist system, we can see the disastrous effects of this mechanism on America's social and natural environments since the so called "Great Recession" started in December 2007. During these last four and a half years the social destruction included the increase in unemployment to a record level of 10% (the highest point reached

¹ The following discussion of Marx's theories is based on the three volumes of *Capital*.

² In Marx's own words: "The production of surplus-value, or the making of profits, is the absolute law of this mode of production." *Capital*, Vol. 1, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, 769. See also Anwar Shaikh "The power of profit," *Social Research*, Vol. 71, No 2, summer 2004, for a discussion of how the profit motive and the war-like struggle for profits among capitalist firms have been "pacified" in the economics literature.

on October 2009) of the labor force or approximately 14 million people unemployed. The social tragedy created by contemporary capitalism also includes the worsening of economic conditions for those who remain employed. This is vividly illustrated in the evolution of household income. In the U.S., income for the top 1% of households increased by 234% between 1970 and 2010, while the income of 99% of households remained constant, fluctuating between decreases of 3% and increases of 6% throughout most of this period. The increasingly unequal distribution of income can also be seen by comparing the average pay of chief executive officers (CEOs) with that of US workers. The ratio went from 24-to-1 in 1970 to 243-to-1 in 2011.³

Capitalism's destructive impact on the social fabric is complemented by its devastating effect on the natural environment. To take just one recently prominent example, the adoption of a new drilling technique known as hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," by energy companies has led to an economic boom in the natural gas industry and to the reduction of energy costs based on natural gas to historically low levels.⁴ Celebrated by capitalist firms as a great technological breakthrough that has lowered the cost of energy used in production, fracking has also caused an environmental catastrophe with fatal health consequences throughout poor rural communities in the U.S.⁵

Although it seems unthinkable that any human society will tolerate this ongoing attack on its social fabric and natural environment, the destructive logic of the capitalist system continues to be implemented in the U.S. and worldwide without any major obstacles simply because it benefits a corporate minority in power that continues to place the drive for profit maximization over anything else. An example of the dual destruction of the social *and* the natural environment by corporate power, is given by U.S.-based Caterpillar Inc. which on January 1, 2012, locked out about 450 union workers at a locomotive plant in Ontario, Canada, pressuring them to accept a cut of 50% in their wages and benefits by citing lower wages, *not* in China or Mexico but in the United States.⁶ The U.S., with its loss of 2.3 million manufacturing jobs during the latest period of general capital destruction (especially during the 2008–9 period), complemented by "more-flexible" work practices and an increase in automation, has become the new pool of cheap labor. As a result, U.S. manufacturing labor costs

³ Lawrence Mishel and Josh Bivens, *Occupy Wall Streeters are right about skewed economic rewards in the United States*, Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper #331, 2011.

⁴ Fracking is a process of injecting large volumes of water, sand, and chemicals into deep shale formations to free trapped natural gas. The major risk of fracking is contaminating groundwater with fracking fluid. Other risks include air pollution, destruction of roads and bridges, seismic activity caused or exacerbated by the hydrofracking process's underground detonations, contamination of farmland, and over-extraction of fresh water from lakes and other sources.

⁵ Mary Beth Adams "Land application of hydrofracturing fluids damages a deciduous forest stand in West Virginia", *Journal of Environmental Quality*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2011. This two-year study concluded that hydrofracturing fluids are so hazardous to forest life that they should be treated as toxic waste. A separate study by Stephen G. Osborn et al, "Methane contamination of drinking water accompanying gas-well drilling and hydraulic fracturing" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, Vol. 108, No. 20, 2011, provides evidence that links fracking with patterns of drinking water contamination so severe that some faucets can be lit on fire.

⁶ James R. Hagerty and Kate Linebaugh, "In the U.S., a cheaper labor pool," *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2012.

per unit of output in 2010 were 13% below the level of a decade earlier and far below the unit labor costs in Canada, where they increased by 18%. Along with lower wages, Caterpillar Inc. also benefited from cheaper energy as a result of the unrestricted adoption of fracking by U.S. energy companies. The destruction of the social environment (higher unemployment and lower wages) and the natural environment (hazardous effects on soil, forests, and fatal health consequences of fracking throughout poor rural communities) led to such a drastic reduction in the total cost of production in the U.S. that a month after the Canadian workers were locked out, Caterpillar Inc. closed the plant and relocated operations to Muncie, Indiana.

At the worldwide level even conservative global institutions like the International Energy Agency (IEA) are warning “that dangerous climate change caused by capitalism’s addiction to fossil fuels will be irreversible within five years”⁷ and urged governments to do what they could to prevent this outcome. Yet governments have shown, as recently as the December 2011 U.N.-sponsored Climate Change Summit in Durban, South Africa, that they are not willing to contradict the logic of capitalism. In fact, even the left today finds itself adopting and supporting a destructive model of development based on the unlimited exploitation of fossil fuels and other natural resources, as is the case with the self-identified socialist governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. As it responds to the worldwide economic crisis, capitalism shows both its ugly face and its continuing strength by facing no resistance to the activation of its own destructive mechanisms necessary for the renewal and advance of profit accumulation.

While this process continues unabated, an increasing number of people are finding that the Occupy movement has the power to unleash what is probably the only force capable of stopping this ongoing destruction: the force of masses of people rejecting a brutal and unjust system while working together to build a more humane and sustainable society. In the words of the occupiers themselves:

Fueled by anger at the growing disparities between rich and poor, frustrated by government policies that benefit a tiny elite at the expense of the majority, and tired of the establishment’s failure to address fundamental economic inequalities, Occupy Wall Street offered a new solution. We built a People’s Kitchen to feed thousands, opened a People’s Library, created safer spaces, and provided free shelter, bedding, medical care, and other necessities to anyone who needed them. While cynics demanded we elect leaders and make demands on politicians, we were busy creating alternatives to those very institutions. A revolution has been set in motion and cannot be stopped.⁸

⁷ International Energy Agency *World Energy Outlook* of November 9, 2011

⁸ From <http://occupywallst.org/>

Post-Civil Rights Racism and OWS: Past Triumphs and Current Challenges in Dealing with Color-Blind Ideology

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Many racism theorists believe that color-blind ideology is the dominant racist ideology of the twenty-first century, becoming prominent during the late 1960s, early 1970s. Unlike racist ideologies of the past, color-blind ideology rests on the seemingly positive belief that we should not judge one another by the color of our skin. In fact, we should not notice skin color at all. This kind of thinking has a way of translating into racism-evasiveness so that not only do we try to deny differences in skin color; we deny the existence and significance of racism. In 2004, I examined how this ideology influenced the strategies of progressive grassroots social movement organizations. In this essay, I will address how Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was affected by color-blind ideology and how they successfully challenged it in a way few other organizations have. I will also address new challenges the larger Occupy movement is facing where racism and color-blind ideology is concerned. Before I examine these issues, I should first provide a background on color-blind ideology and social movement organizations.

Unlike organizations of the 1960s that tackled a more overt form of racism, movements in the post-Civil Rights Movement era must battle a less tangible, subtle form of racism, one upheld by ideologies of denial. Thus, in my work, I struggled with a paradox: How could progressive organizations challenge racism in a society that denied its existence? Or, as Robert Smith wrote about color-blind ideology, "How can one propose specific policies or programs to deal with what cannot be seen or what one refuses to see or acknowledge even when it is seen?"¹

My study drew on three years of ethnographic data collected on an interracial social movement union organization and its corresponding community-labor coalition in a northeastern city. My findings suggest that members of interracial organizations strategically deploy a racially unified, color-blind identity; one that minimizes the significance of racism in order to maintain solidarity. Even though activists in these organizations saw working against racial injustice as part of their agendas, they feared addressing or discussing it explicitly. These findings differ from much of the past work on color-blind ideology, which looks at what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls "race-talk"² or clever rhetorical strategies conservatives and liberals alike use to deny the importance of racism in contemporary society. The people in the organization and coalition I studied understood the importance of racism and never tried to deny it. In fact, people of color made up the majority of these groups and many of the members had sophisticated

¹ Smith, Robert C. 1995. *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Now You See It, Now You Don't*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

² Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2001. *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

knowledge systems on racism.³ However, members avoided explicit discussion on racism for the sake of solidarity and felt that they did not *need* to talk about racism, because they addressed it in their actions. In other words, since they “walked the walk” they did not need to “talk the talk.”

The avoidance of explicit talk on racism is influenced partially by internal organizational culture and partially by external racist culture. But it is also fueled by anti-intellectualism and American ideologies of pragmatism that devalue talk. There is an attitude in the U.S. that we should not waste time talking; we should just fix the problem. We saw this in the media’s handling of OWS. Early on reporters asked, “What do you want?” “What are your demands?” The roots of the systemic problems OWS was fighting could not be eradicated by taking action with some quick list of demands. The kind of systemic change this country needs and that activists continue to fight for requires serious talk. With OWS, we have seen the importance of talk in their ability to avoid color-blind approaches. Specifically, we saw this with the development of their declaration.

The General Assembly at OWS originally put out a declaration that stated, “As one people, formerly divided by the color of our skin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or lack thereof, political party and cultural background, we acknowledge the reality: that there is only one race, the human race, and our survival requires the cooperation of its members.” Manissa McCleave Maharawal, one of the people who blocked the declaration, writes in *Racialicious* that she felt uncomfortable especially with the language on being one human race. When she and what she calls a “radical South Asian contingency” approached the person who originally wrote the declaration, he argued that this part of the statement was “scientifically true.” She writes, “No we needed to tell him about privilege and racism and oppression and how these things still existed, both in the world and someplace like Occupy Wall Street.”⁴ After the declaration was blocked, the group went back to work on it. Now, the declaration reads, “As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members” and goes on to name discrimination based on ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and age as a significant issue. Sticking to the color-blind declaration might have been the quick and easy route to take, but OWS chose not to follow that path.

Recently, we have seen new challenges for OWS. Some indigenous people originally enthused by Occupy Wall Street felt betrayed by its uncritical celebration of Thanksgiving, especially since activists in seemingly more conservative areas, such as Louisville, Kentucky, used Thanksgiving Day to acknowledge a history of imperialism and colonization in the U.S. Occupy Louisville’s meeting minutes indicate that members wanted to send a letter to OWS stating that they disagreed with the celebration of Thanksgiving. At the meeting, one member implored the General Assembly to “Keep in mind the origins of Thanksgiving and that we are living on previously Occupied land.”⁵ Other groups, such as

³ Essed, Philomena. 1991. *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁴ McCleave Maharawal, Manissa. 2011. “So Real, It Hurts: Notes on Occupy Wall Street.” *Racialicious*. Retrieved October 8, 2011 (<http://www.racialicious.com/2011/10/03/so-real-it-hurts-notes-on-occupy-wall-street/>).

⁵ Meeting Minutes from Occupy Louisville, November 24, 2011.

Occupy Boston, shared Louisville's perspective. In fact, Occupy Boston recognized Columbus Day as a national day of mourning and ratified a memorandum of solidarity with indigenous people on October 28th.

There have also been several other movements by indigenous people to rename Occupies. In Occupy Oakland, for example, a proposal to change the name to Decolonize Oakland failed, receiving 68% of the vote. A consensus of 90% was needed for the proposal to pass. Afterwards, disappointed supporters of the name change began chanting "Decolonize Oakland!" In support of the name change, one woman argued, "If this conversation has made you uncomfortable, welcome to my fucking world!"⁶

What happened at Occupy Oakland and the response by indigenous people to OWS' Thanksgiving celebration exemplified one of the central dilemmas of taking a racism-evasive or color-blind approach. Emphasizing that "we are all in this together," while well-intentioned, can actually promote exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness. The color-blind identity of "The 99%" is powerful and necessary to move a large base, but the reality is that not everyone in that 99% is affected equally by Wall Street's greed. Conversations about how current arrangements affect people differently need to be had as do talks about potentially exclusive language. That will not be easy. As one member who challenged the original OWS declaration asserted, "Let me tell you what it feels like to stand in front of a white man and explain privilege to him. It hurts. It makes you tired. Sometimes it makes you want to cry. Sometimes it is exhilarating. Every single time it is hard."⁷ Likewise, it will not be comfortable for European Americans in the movement to talk explicitly about white privilege and white racism. But OWS captivated the world with their non-hierarchical, horizontal approach that respected everyone and refused to shut down discussion. It is arguably the best-prepared organization to successfully battle against the color-blind ideology that has immobilized many other organizations.

The avoidance of color-blind language in OWS's declaration was promising. Now, activists must be careful as the Occupy/Decolonize Movement unfolds. Will there be a serious re-evaluation of the presumably racist language used to describe the movement? Or as one Oakland member suspected, will European Americans in the movement remain emotionally attached to the capitalist idea of branding?⁸ This movement is dynamic and that is its advantage. Scholars and activists interested in the success of the movement will need to understand the naming debate and how the larger racist culture of color-blind ideology affects it. In the long run, it is my hope that members in this movement will have the courage to resist the comfort that comes with racism-evasiveness, and they will continue to have the painful, but necessary racism-centered talks that are essential to true equality.

⁶ From The Open Letter to the Occupy Movement, a proposal to change the name of Occupy to Decolonize, Oakland, California, December 4, 2011.

⁷ McCleave Maharawal, Manissa. 2011. "So Real, It Hurts: Notes on Occupy Wall Street." Racialicious. Retrieved October 8, 2011 (<http://www.racialicious.com/2011/10/03/so-real-it-hurts-notes-on-occupy-wall-street/>).

⁸ From The Open Letter to the Occupy Movement, a proposal to change the name of Occupy to Decolonize, Oakland, California, December 4, 2011.

Occupying Social Media

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The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement is embedded within and transverse the technologies of the 21st century. Much of what the movement protests stems from a social and economic environment facilitated by new technologies. Wall Street, the physical and metaphorical site of the U.S. stock markets, is a global interconnected enterprise, and as one sociologist put it, is a place where vast sums of money are wired around the world in seconds “at the click of a mouse.” (Giddens) Furthermore, we know that the economic crises of the last four to five years have had a global impact because the world’s economies are interconnected, and that interpenetration is firmly grounded in digital technologies.

In addition to acknowledging the role of technologies at the roots of the crises it protests, OWS itself also employs and benefits from new media technologies. On a regular basis, OWS is rendered #OWS, its letters preceded by the “hashtag” or numeral sign, to signify a subject tag on Twitter. This regularly integrated referent suggests that the Occupy movement itself acknowledges and affirms its investment in social media.

In the last several years, prior to the advent of OWS, there has been a conversation about the importance of social media in uprisings and protest movements. I can briefly define social media as including internet-based media platforms that make it possible for people to interact and communicate in new ways. Websites like Facebook and MySpace, applications like Twitter, photo sharing programs like Flickr, and blog sites such as WordPress or Tumblr now make communication faster, and make it possible to converse and share information with large groups of people at once. The speed of sharing and transmission between these platforms has intensified with the development of mobile, hand-held devices, especially smartphones.

Dominating the discussion about the role of social media in movements have been two well-documented perspectives—one articulated by Media Studies Professor Clay Shirky of New York University, and another by journalist and writer Malcolm Gladwell. These two thinkers do not agree on how important a role social media plays in creating social change; but their disagreement is helpful in thinking through the perspectives, and tracing some of their conversation through the past few years assists us in seeing three issues that I believe are crucial in analyzing the role of social media in protest movements in general, and OWS in particular.

In 2008 Clay Shirky published *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. In it he argued that social media were creating novel types of connections between people, and explained how the new forms of interrelation were challenging older media. For instance, the music industry

has had to adapt to music sharing and mp3s, the newspaper industry has had to adapt to blogging and people's increased preference for online news sources, and professors and students have had to deal with the development of Wikipedia as a collaborative form of knowledge production. Flickr is a particularly interesting example because it shows a way that people can organize around something horizontally, without Flickr telling the participants how to organize. To every photo you upload on Flickr you can add a descriptive 'tag.' Thus everyone who takes a photo of, for example, the OWS protest at the Brooklyn Bridge and tags it becomes part of a group.

In 2009 protests broke out in the Eastern European country of Moldova and the media debated how much of a role Twitter played there. The next year even more people protested against Iran's authoritarian government, protests which were also partly facilitated by Twitter and Facebook. That same year, Gladwell wrote an article for *The New Yorker* magazine called "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." His argument was that platforms of social media are built around "weak ties." Twitter is just a way of following (or being followed by) people you may not even know and Facebook is a tool for managing all your acquaintances, for keeping up with the people you couldn't keep in touch with otherwise. He claims that what mattered most during the 1960s Civil Rights movement was a close personal connection to someone else involved in the movement. As an example he offers that volunteers even provided a list of personal contacts to the organizations they participated in, of the people they wanted kept aware of their activities. In fact, his analysis of the Civil Rights movement is that it was actually like a successful military campaign, in that when sit-ins spread to new cities, it was because they already had some kind of activist movement installed there. Gladwell has no trouble acknowledging that the kind of organization he describes is hierarchical—with someone making decisions at the top and dictating those decisions to the people down below. To this point, he counters that the kinds of network that exist through social media are too loose; they won't survive difficult challenges (such as a cold winter!). He thinks they won't last for extended periods of time in the way they might need to if they are to be effective vehicles of change. (Gladwell 2010)

Two years after Gladwell's article, on December 17, 2010, a Tunisian fruit vendor set himself on fire to protest police abuse and corruption in the Tunis marketplace. The uprising that developed in response spread to Egypt, where the young protester, Khaled Said, was taken and tortured by police. In reaction, Wael Ghonim, a young Google employee, created a Facebook page called "We Are All Khaled Said." Two months later Shirky published a new article in the January/February issue of the journal *Foreign Affairs*. He was writing, in part, because Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had made news by saying that the U.S. needed to support the growth of social media and the kind of infrastructure it requires in other countries, for the sake of democracy. Shirky's article asked whether or not the US should provide actual tools that would help citizens of countries who were protesting against repressive governments.

Several ideas from this article are useful for thinking about Occupy Wall Street. Shirky suggests that opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues. He claims that it is in this second social step that political opinions are formed. Partially in response to

Gladwell's argument about hierarchy, he goes on to say that disciplined and coordinated groups, both businesses and governments, have an advantage over undisciplined ones in directing group action. But he believes that social media can compensate for the disadvantages of undisciplined groups by reducing the costs of coordination. He cites the example of the anti-Estrada movement in the Philippines, which used text messages to organize a massive group without any real managerial control. As a result of social media, Shirky argues, larger and looser groups can now take on some kinds of coordinated action, such as protest movements and public media campaigns, that were previously reserved for formal organizations like large unions (Shirky 2011).

Shirky and Gladwell's debate about what is really necessary for a movement to succeed, and the role of social media in that success is helpful in thinking through questions about what makes a movement effective. We know communication is key—this argument goes back at least to Marx's belief that it was the change in means of production that brought workers together and allowed them to organize. It was the new manufacturing technology that brought them to the same physical location. Today the question has often been whether the technology facilitates improved communication. In any case, we are certainly impressed by the changes social media have wrought in communication and social relations. Things are certainly different, if not better.

Shirky's arguments clearly fit with OWS's non-hierarchical, anarchist-influenced model of decision making. If Gladwell's claim that people need to be willing to take big risks, and that those risks are better facilitated by personal connection, is hard to ignore, still, it seems unfair to relegate those who are using social media to the armchair role of "slactivist". And finally, Shirky rightly points out that governments (and corporations likely) are already intervening and co-opting social media, as Hosni Mubarak did by shutting down the internet altogether in Egypt for a period of time. In fact Occupy Wall Street has very recently begun taking steps to develop its own social networking site. Sometimes referred to as OWS's own Facebook, this new open source platform is called the Global Square. This suggests OWS is clearly aware of both its dependence on social media and the limitations of those media—including, for OWS, issues raised by the underlying technologies in relation to energy use and the need for alternative sources of energy. This latter concern takes us beyond the communicative scope of social media, but further discussion of it is useful. It provides an essential part of the answer to the question of the importance of social media, since it might be fair to say technological infrastructure and their energy sources are the elephant in the room when new technologies and social media are discussed. That is, how are new technologies drawing on our natural resources, and who controls those sources and their transmission or conduction?

Though a detailed response to this question lies beyond the purview of this essay, the importance of the issue of natural resources and power production for social movements is amply illustrated by events in Zucotti Park. In late October 2011, the city of New York had firefighters and police officers take OWS's generators and fuel from the park. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's argument was that these tools and resources were a threat to public safety and therefore illegal. Activists quickly recovered from that setback and installed stationery bicycles rigged to car batteries. The batteries were then used to charge laptops and cell phones. Un-

fortunately, the entire OWS encampment was removed from the park just a few weeks later. These same energy sources, silent bicycles and non-volatile batteries, were referred to simply as “generators, and other installations” in New York State Supreme Court Honorable Michael D. Stallman’s ruling that the owners of Zuccotti Park had the right to have OWS removed in order to clean the property.

The movants have not demonstrated that they have a First Amendment right to remain in Zuccotti Park, along with their tents, structures, *generators, and other installations* to the exclusion of the owner’s reasonable rights and duties to maintain Zuccotti Park, or to the rights to public access of others who might wish to use the space safely. [italics mine] (Waller v City of New York 2011)

Though the tents were probably considered more problematic by the city (they were mentioned repeatedly by the city and media), the fuel sources were claimed as a safety hazard. Yet generators were what powered the links to the rest of the world, to other Occupy Movements in hundreds of cities here and abroad, and among activists throughout New York City itself. Whatever view one takes of the significance of Occupy Wall Street, one thing is clear: though we may debate what type and how much of a role social media can and should play in social protest movements, the speed with which Occupy Wall Street created alternative energy sources, and the very fact that they brought in generators in the first place, suggest that they, at least, considered having ready access to the mobile phones, notebooks, pads and laptops that are the hardware for social media, an absolute necessity.

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Global Justice and OWS: Movement Connections

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“This is what democracy looks like!” – Protest chant in Seattle (1999)

“We are the 99%!” – Protest chant in New York City (2011)

Many observers have rightly drawn parallels between Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and previous social movements. The Anti-Globalization or Global Justice movement, which came to world attention with the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization, is most akin to OWS. As Naomi Klein put it at Zuccotti Park on October 6, 2011, “That was the last time a global, youth-led, decentralized movement took direct aim at corporate power.” Mass protests and direct action shut down the WTO meeting in Seattle. Comprised of different groups—anarchists, radical unionists, environmentalists, peace activists (across borders)—anti-globalization activists organized creative and militant protests at meetings of the World Bank, IMF and G8. They challenged neoliberal policies that were decimating labor standards and the environment, took on corporations that were becoming more powerful than governments, and made the case that another world is possible.

Similarly, direct action is the *modus operandi* for today’s OWS activists, many of whom come directly out of the Anti-Globalization movement.¹ By targeting Wall Street—a fixed place and reviled symbol of capitalism run amok—Occupy activists have fingered the role of the 1% in creating inequality and as culprit of the 99%’s collective ills. In a few short weeks, OWS made a burning issue what everyone already knows: unregulated financial capitalism crashed the global economy and caused immiseration of millions. Most importantly, OWS has given everyday people a sense that they can do something about their conditions. By reclaiming public space for the common good, OWS has captured mainstream political discourse and sparked radical imagination, giving many people renewed optimism about the possibility of progressive change.

New social media and participatory decision-making have been key tools in organizing both these movements, which have been jet-propelled by young people. Just as young people pushed leadership in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements forward, so they did for the global justice and OWS movements, which in turn, have compelled established “liberal” institutions (unions, NGOs,

¹ Writers for the 99%. *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America*. New York: OR Books, 2011. *Voices from the 99 Percent: An Oral History of the Occupy Wall Street Movement*, ed. Lenny Flank. St. Petersburg, FL: Red & Black Publishers, 2011.

elected officials) to take action alongside or in support of movement activists.

To be sure, both the Anti-Globalization and OWS movements have been largely white and middle class. Accordingly, they have been challenged by people of color and the poor to find ways to be truly inclusive and representative. To their credit, both movements from the start have been consciously committed to being deeply democratic, employing strategies designed to achieve such praxis.² The general assembly, working groups, spokes-councils, the people's mic, and leaderless (leaderful), "horizontal" (not hierarchical), consensus-driven, transparent decision-making are their hallmarks. They aim, through prefigurative practice, to create a radical egalitarianism. In short, they live at the intersection of democracy and socialism.

This essay traces linkages between the Anti-Globalization movement and OWS, focusing on the United States. In so doing, I point to parallels regarding origins, members, targets, tactics and challenges.

Parallels between 1999 and 2011

After November 1999, any reference to Seattle immediately conjured up images of protesters shutting down meetings of the WTO. Seattle became shorthand for a "new" social movement. Today, Zuccotti Park and OWS have blazoned themselves into the public mind, setting another new benchmark.

Movement activists may not have a well-formulated program but they certainly know their opposition, and they have helped to expose a dirty secret: Capitalism is a global system that benefits the rich and keeps the majority of the world's population mired in poverty and pain. As they have gained public attention, they have helped debunk the lie that unregulated markets would be the tide that lifts all boats. Instead, movement activists assail the trickle-up economics practiced by the 1% at the expense of the 99%.

Seattle was sparked by—and subsequently sparked—protests in dozens of cities on every continent. Anti-Globalization activists attacked the corporate-led version of globalization and also worked to build a different kind of "global village," one that prioritizes human need and the environment over corporate profits. So too, the occupation of Zuccotti Park, undertaken for similar reasons, followed the "Arab Spring" and the "European Summer" and quickly spread to dozens of communities.³

Origins

The Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Zapatista uprising were important precursors to the Anti-Globalization movement. The Zapatistas explicitly challenged neoliberalism, launching their movement on January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA took effect. The Zapatistas articulated a sharp critique of the impact these policies had on indigenous peoples in Mexico. In response, they organized a powerful community-based and egalitarian revolt using innovative tactics and sophisticated

² Writers for the 99%. *Occupying Wall Street*.

³ *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder. San Francisco: BK Books, 2011. *The 99%: How The Occupy Wall Street Movement Is Changing America*, ed. Don Hazen, Tara Lohan, Lynn Parramore. New York: Alnet Books, 2011.

communications technologies. The Zapatistas and other groups in the Global South convened meetings of organizations similarly opposed to neoliberal policies, creating People's Global Action (PGA), a network to facilitate organizing across borders. PGA grew out of a 1998 meeting in Geneva of over 400 representatives of grassroots organizations and NGOs from 71 countries to launch "a world-wide co-ordination of resistance against the global market."⁴ PGA was the simultaneous counter-party/protest to the 50th-anniversary ball in Geneva celebrating the multilateral trade system that established the IMF and World Bank, and to the second anniversary of the WTO. The self-described "hallmarks" of the PGA include a "confrontational attitude," a "clear rejection of the WTO and other trade liberalization agreements," a call for "non-violent civil disobedience and the construction of local alternatives by local peoples as answers to the action of governments and corporations" based on a philosophy of decentralization and autonomy, and a clear rejection of "patriarchy, racism, religious fundamentalism and all forms of discrimination and domination." Protests against similar policies—including GATT (which created the WTO) and the IMF and World Bank, which help manage global corporate capitalism—erupted in Indonesia, India, Brazil, Caracas, Geneva, London, Australia, Zimbabwe, and numerous other places. These events indelibly changed the meaning of both globalization and the movement, positioning them on the larger political map, particularly in the Global North. The protests in Seattle were merely the next in an increasingly long string of actions.

The parallels to OWS are as numerous as they are unmistakable. Mass protests and rebellions in Europe, the Arab world, Latin America, and Africa bear a remarkable resemblance to the precursors to and catalysts of the Anti-Globalization movement. OWS activists repeatedly make explicit connections to Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Italy, Greece, and so on. As the "official" OWS website states, "We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants."⁵

Another parallel precursor is seismic change in the political economy. The economic change wrought by neoliberal globalization during the decades preceding Seattle and during the decade leading up to OWS—particularly the Great Recession—elevated and exposed key targets (WTO, banks) in new ways, and also galvanized progressive groups in the struggle for global justice.

Technology and convergence

Changing technology is another lens to see parallels and connections. New communications technologies proliferated and facilitated the rapid mobility of capital and people across borders; waves of corporate mergers consolidated industries and market shares among fewer and more powerful multinational conglomerates and banks; supra-national institutions and international trade agreements were established with new powers that usurped national and state sovereignty (such as NAFTA, the European Union, and the WTO). These changes provided iden-

⁴ People's Global Action, "What Is PGA?" <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/en/>.

⁵ "OccupyWallSt.org is the unofficial *de facto* online resource for the growing occupation movement happening on Wall Street and around the world."

tifiable targets for movement activists. These new macro-forces and institutions highlighted the power of elites and the lack of available mechanisms for grassroots participation in decision-making. Movement activists strategically focused attention on these institutions precisely because they have significant impact on local conditions.

At the same time, the new technologies—Internet, video, digital media transmission, cellular phones, pirate radio—provide activists better means to communicate, which facilitates “do-it-yourself” organizing for new generations of movement activists.

These changes encouraged convergence among protest movement organizations. Labor, civil rights, feminist, gay and lesbian, environmental and traditional left groups—as well as national liberation movements—were deeply affected by economic restructuring, and forged alliances within the Anti-Globalization and OWS movements. Established organizations gained traction via the movements. Movement activists acquired legitimacy and funding, for example, from alliances with labor unions and existing NGOs. Tactics and skills of earlier social movements—from nonviolent civil disobedience to militant direct action—are transferred and adapted to new conditions. A similar adaptation of moral and democratic arguments takes place. Established organizations re-examine their goals and explore fresh ways to achieve them. Coalitions in name only have taken on life, and dozens of new coalitions have been formed, with new energy.

Democracy

Both movements have employed and developed innovative forms of participatory decision-making, which they see as intimately linked to achieving radical democracy. OWS has drawn from several methods popularized in the Anti-Globalization movement, such as the general assembly and “spokes-council” models, which were pioneered in Porto Alegre, Argentina, Chiapas, and Seattle. Everywhere, they seek real democracy.

For the Anti-Globalization movement, “spokes-councils” allowed coalitions of groups to meet at “convergence centers” to strategize and coordinate actions, but with the close support and frequent input of members of each group. The spokespersons—or representatives—from each group attend coalition meetings to exchange information and plans. In general, only the spokesperson is empowered to speak on behalf of a group, but members of each group may sit behind their spokespersons to help assure accountability. While joint plans may emerge, not all groups are bound by any “decision.” Groups may choose between different levels of participation in any common action. This model allows groups to collaborate while at the same time remaining autonomous. Spokes-councils may meet frequently to continue dialogue and provide updated information to their constituent groups, often by means of new communications technologies. The decisions of spokes-councils have a high degree of input and support, which facilitates rapid and effective action. Proponents of the spokes-council model contend that it is better designed than were the consensus models of the 1960s and 70s to make quick consensus-like decisions during shifting protest conditions.

Democratic practice in movements is crucial but not easily achieved. As

seasoned activist L.A. Kaufman cogently put it, “The consensus process has considerable virtues, but it also has flaws. It favors those with lots of time to spend in meetings. Unless practiced with unusual skill, it can lavish excessive attention on the stubborn or disruptive.”⁶ The same can be said of the general assembly (GA) which lies at the heart of the Occupy Movement. Brooke Lehman, a founder of the Direct Action Network and participant in both the Anti-Globalization and OWS movements, described the general assembly in Zuccotti Park this way: “It is an exercise in prefiguring the world we are all struggling to create. It awakens us to our potential as political beings and reignites our faith in humanity. And yet those most intimately involved with the day-to-day realities of the occupation find the functionality of the GA as the sole decision-making structure to be severely limited.”⁷

The Occupy movement organizes itself into working groups that are connected via the GA. The types of working groups, which vary from location to location, can range from legal, food, medical, media to facilitation, art, and education. Essentially, they seek a means where all can have a say without privileging those who have time and skills; to balance access with efficiency. As Marina Sitrin put it: “Our communication between and among the working groups is not yet seamless, but we continue to work at it, and as we grow and change, our forms of organization necessarily will change as well. New structures are constantly being explored, so that we may create the most open, participatory, and democratic space possible. We all strive to embody the alternative we wish to see in our day-to-day relationships.”⁸

Challenges and promise

The Anti-Globalization movement won important if modest gains—from discrediting neoliberal ideology and promoting notions of global justice, to the enactment of debt reduction, anti-sweatshop policies, and environmental regulations. But it faded as an organized force for a number of reasons. Global summits are transient, and chasing them proved burdensome. The frenzy of hyper-patriotism and militarism that followed 9/11 sidelined it, especially in North America, and changes in police technologies and tactics have further hampered activists. In Latin America, however, the Anti-Globalization movement bore greater fruit, contributing to the rise of several progressive regimes.

Both the Anti-Globalization movement and OWS have comprised a broad array of individuals and groups—which has been a source of both strength and fragility. Various groups in the movements hold different ideologies, posit different goals, target different institutions, and employ different tactics. Some of these differences can be quite divisive. Conflicts have also occurred along cultural, ethnic, racial, class, gender, and sexual orientation lines.

The potential of OWS is huge, but its challenges are formidable. Internal conflicts are sure to grow. Periodic street clashes with police can produce battle

⁶ L.A. Kaufman. “The Theology of Consensus.” *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America*. London: Verso, 2011.

⁷ Brooke Lehman (aka Brook Muse). “From GA to Spokes-council.” N+1, *Occupy! #2 Gazette*. <http://www.nplusonemag.com/GAZETTE-2.pdf>.

⁸ Marina Sitrin, “One No, Many Yesses.” *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America*.

fatigue and do not always lead to the development of ongoing relationships, common agendas, and community-building. If OWS can overcome the “free-rider” problem—non-active “members” who currently do not actively participate but gain benefits from the actions of active members—it may become a mass movement with considerable clout. But if the divisions persist or broaden, its potential will sputter and evaporate like that of many before it.

Moreover, because OWS poses the most serious challenge to elites in decades, the swift and sustained attacks on it will likely continue. Repression is an effective deterrent. Infiltration and disruption have a proven track record. Cooptation—by unions, NGOs, Democrats—remains a challenge. The list goes on.

Nevertheless, if OWS and sympathetic organizations can broaden their constituency bases, if marginal groups and potential coalition partners can be brought into the movement, OWS has the potential to be one of the most transformative movements in history.

As Benjamin Shepard has written, OWS is reclaiming public parks for the common good.⁹ OWS has created space for victims of the current crisis of capitalism, to find solace, to heal, to support each other, to build community, and to hope. There is a spirit of care inside these liberated zones that is infectious. Peace and love are back on the agenda. OWS insists that we can afford to build a decent, inclusive society—while at the same time respecting the real limits to what the earth can take. OWS is creating the change it wants to see. It may be inefficient, frustrating, even a bit dangerous, but it also allows for the emergence of something in the act of protesting which otherwise would not be possible. Like the Anti-Globalization movement, OWS essentially posits a sustainable egalitarianism.

Anti-Globalization activists often quoted Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos, who stated, “The future’s name is autonomy; its route is struggle; its engine is youth; its brain is experience; and, it has a heart with an indigenous history.” OWS may turn out to be what real democracy looks like.

⁹ Benjamin Shepard. Blogs on OWS at <http://www.benjaminheimshepard.com>; Writers for the 99%. *Occupying Wall Street*.

Occupy Wall Street and the Strikes of 1933-34

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It has been a common criticism of President Obama that he raised hopes for fundamental change only to compromise too readily with conservative forces. Since he took office amid the financial crisis that began in 2008, banks and corporations have received massive bailouts while programs for homeowners and the unemployed have seemed to fall short. Underlying these criticisms is perhaps an implicit comparison to the New Deal of the 1930s, in which Franklin Roosevelt adopted programs of mass employment in response to the Great Depression. As historian Gary Gerstle has observed, however, Roosevelt's initial programs were not so favorably disposed toward working people, and his most far-reaching reforms came only in response to significant grassroots pressure, including a series of militant strikes in 1934.¹ Other historians have pointed out that Obama did not initially face the kind of grassroots pressure that affected Roosevelt—or that the pressure that had emerged had come from the right, in the form of the Tea Party.² More recently, Gerstle has drawn an analogy between Occupy Wall Street and the protests of the 1930s.³ I would like to support that case by examining more closely the strikes that began in 1933 and 1934.

Militancy can take time to grow. As in 1933, we are now in the fourth year of an economic downturn. Roosevelt, who like Obama was elected to change course from a Republican predecessor, had enacted an initial set of reforms, but unemployment remained high.⁴ The First New Deal, as this phase of Roosevelt's policies is usually described, included several programs to boost employment, such as the Civil Works Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps, but many of these jobs were temporary.⁵ In keeping with its origins in early twentieth

¹ Quoted in Elaine Tyler May, "Reflections on the Great Depression," *OAH Newsletter* 37, no. 4 (November 2009): 6, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

² On the comparison to Roosevelt, see Thomas J. Sugrue's review essay (on H. W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, and Adam Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Modern America*), *The Nation*, April 27, 2009, 28. On the Tea Party, see Michael Kazin, "Whatever Happened to the American Left," *New York Times*, September 24, 2011.

³ Jim Patterson, "Historian: Occupy Wall Street Movement Right on Time in New Gilded Age," *Vanderbilt News*, October 11, 2011, <http://news.vanderbilt.edu/2011/10/occupy-gerstle/>. Gerstle compares the Occupy movement to the strikes of 1933 and 1934 in Justin Elliott, "Occupy Wall Street: A Historical Perspective," *Salon.com*, October 8, 2011. Michael Kazin has also made some comparisons to the general strikes of the 1930s, "Anarchism Now: Occupy Wall Street Revives an Ideology," *The New Republic* (www.tnr.com), November 7, 2011.

⁴ Robert A. Margo, "Employment and Unemployment in the 1930s," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (spring 1993): 43, table 1.

⁵ Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 710. Roy Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's History*, Vol. 2: *1877 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 420. On CWA, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-40* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 121-22.

century progressivism, the thrust of the First New Deal was in large part regulatory. The centerpiece was the National Recovery Administration, which set codes by industry to try to stabilize wages and prices. But NRA was both voluntary and byzantine, and proved largely ineffective.⁷

Roosevelt started coming under fire from radio personalities who were impatient with the progress of the New Deal. Louisiana Senator Huey Long called for confiscation of large fortunes and a guaranteed minimum income, while the Detroit priest Father Charles Coughlin called for expansion of gold currency, use of silver, and replacement of the private Federal Reserve System with a national bank⁸. Though these proposals in some sense consisted of a critique of the wealthy, they envisioned a society of widely dispersed property ownership and power, not an activist national state.⁹ In this sense I liken them to the Tea Party rather than to Occupy Wall Street.

But there was also an increase in strikes, of which the Occupy movement is more reminiscent. The increased strike activity is somewhat surprising because unemployment in the twentieth century has usually discouraged strikes as workers feared losing their jobs.¹⁰ But for several reasons worker militancy rose in 1933. Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which established NRA, stated that workers had the right to form labor unions of their own choosing. The United Mine Workers took advantage of this provision to mount a massive organizing drive, and as workers in other industries attempted to organize and obtain recognition, strike activity rose to a higher level than in any year since 1921.¹¹ Important to this ferment was the leadership of unionists such as John L. Lewis of the miners and Sidney Hillman of the clothing workers, who sought to organize all workers within their industries, including unskilled workers and immigrants.¹²

1934 was one of the greatest strike years in American history. Nearly one and a half million workers engaged in over 1,800 strikes. Workers were frustrated with the failings of NRA and suffering under a Depression that was now entering its fifth year.¹³ In Minneapolis, thousands of teamsters under Trotskyist leadership fought a bloody street battle against 500 members of the businessmen's Citizens Alliance.¹⁴ Striking longshoremens shut down ports across the West Coast, and in

⁷ Brinkley, *Unfinished Nation*, 707-708. Brinkley, *End of Reform*, 18, 38-39. For difficulties with enforcing NRA, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal*, vol. 2 of *The Age of Roosevelt* (1988; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 120-21.

⁸ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 72-73, 111-114. Brinkley, *Unfinished Nation*, 712-14. Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America*, 437.

⁹ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 281-82. Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America*, 438.

¹⁰ Bruce E. Kaufman, "The Determinants of Strikes in the United States, 1900-1977," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 35, no. 4 (July 1982): 479, 487, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2522662>. For an overview of these strikes, see Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America*, 429-35.

¹¹ Dubofsky, *State and Labor in Modern America*, 112-116.

¹² Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 40-41, 66-67. Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 43.

¹³ Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 217-18.

¹⁴ William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903-1947* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), xxvii-xxxii. Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America*, 431.

San Francisco unions staged a general strike in response to a brutal attack by the city's police.¹⁵ In the textile industry, 350,000 workers engaged in an enormous strike "from Maine to Alabama."¹⁶

Labor unrest, ongoing unemployment, and criticism from populists were some of the factors spurring the Roosevelt administration to enact the reforms of the Second New Deal, which emphasized measures to address the lack of purchasing power among the masses of workers.¹⁷ Among these reforms was the Wagner Act, which made it compulsory for employers to negotiate with labor unions chosen by their employees.¹⁸ The Works Progress Administration sought to make the jobs of the Civil Works Administration into steady employment, and enact them on a much larger scale, with a budget of nearly \$5 billion.¹⁹ And the Social Security Act provided old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and aid to poor women with dependent children.²⁰

The key contention here is that these programs did not come about because Roosevelt was simply more liberal than Obama. Roosevelt adopted the Second New Deal in response to grassroots pressure, in part as an effort to find a solution to the disorder and labor unrest that he was faced with. Perhaps Occupy Wall Street signifies the initial stirrings of such a grassroots insurgency, and will help spur a new round of efforts to alleviate unemployment and rectify the imbalance of wealth and power in our own time.

¹⁵ Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 263, 274-78, 284, 290-93. Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America*, 431-32.

¹⁶ Gary Gerstle, *Working-class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127 (updated number in Lichtenste in, *State of the Union*, 33).

¹⁷ Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America*, 445-46. Rosenzweig and his co-authors stress the role of labor.

¹⁸ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 303-304, stresses the role of workers in bringing about the Wagner Act.

¹⁹ Harry Hopkins, who would direct WPA, stressed coming up with a solution to ongoing unemployment as a motive for CWA, which led to WPA. T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes, 1874-1952* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 391-97. Rosenzweig et al., *Who Built America*, 446.

²⁰ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, stresses the influence of Long and Coughlin, and also the physician Charles Townshend, who advocated old-age pensions, 222-24, 247.

Occupying The New York Times?

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If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? This is an age-old philosophical question. A similar question might have been asked of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement: if a collective of demonstrators inhabit a public park to protest social and economic inequality, and no mainstream news media report it, has it happened? While such an event might, in the past, have gone unnoticed beyond a small circle of people if not reported by the mainstream news media, today the growth of social media such as Twitter and Facebook has made the question almost irrelevant. With or without them, the event can be recorded and broadcast by its participants, and not just locally, but around the world.

For anyone who hasn't heard—if that's possible—Occupy Wall Street is a protest movement that began on September 17, 2011, in Zuccotti Park, a private-public park in New York City's lower Manhattan financial district. The occupation, partly inspired by the Arab Spring, especially the Egyptian protests in Tahrir Square in January 2011, was proposed by Adbusters Media Foundation, a Canadian activist group critical of corporate and consumerist culture. At its heart, OWS is a social phenomenon; a lone individual could never have initiated or executed this event. This social movement raises important questions about the nature of public space, about basic human rights, about what constitutes a decent quality of life, and about the need for human connections. It offers a critique of capitalism. It is a rich, multifarious, and complex event.

This article takes a closer look at the mainstream news media's coverage of the movement as expressed in the *New York Times*, especially during the first two weeks of the occupation. While the *Times* describes itself as covering "all the news that's fit to print," and is considered within the industry as the "newspaper of record," its coverage of OWS was seriously lacking and included significant misrepresentations. This helps explain why many people distrust the corporate news media, and look to alternative sources and social media for information.

First, the *Times'* coverage was spotty and limited. While the event was covered on its opening day by writer Colin Moynihan, the story was published in the City Room blog, which does not appear in the print edition. A reduced version of the story appeared in print the next day. The next two stories (9/19, 9/24) also appeared only in the City Room blog, and focused primarily on the arrest of demonstrators by police. The mainstream media's limited coverage of the event, especially after video of police pepper-spraying peaceful protesters circulated widely on the Internet, drew the criticism of political commentator Keith Olbermann on September 21. Two days later, nearly a week after OWS had

started, the *Times* presented its first major story, but it appeared in the New York and Region section, rather than on the front page or National section. The story's headline mocked the movement, reading, "Gunning for Wall Street, With Faulty Aim." In the lead paragraph, writer Gina Bellafante furthered the dismissive, condescending picture of the protest movement, describing it thus:

a noble, but fractured and airy movement of rightly frustrated young people, [which] had a default ambassador in a half-naked woman who called herself Zuni Tikka. A blonde with a marked likeness to Joni Mitchell and a seemingly even stronger wish to burrow through the space-time continuum and hunker down in 1968, Ms. Tikka had taken off all but her cotton underwear and was dancing on the north side of Zuccotti Park, facing Liberty Street, just west of Broadway.

The article inaccurately characterized the movement as consisting of "frustrated young people," even though the initial report in the City Room blog had included Bill Steyart, 68, from Forest Hills, NY, and quoted organizers as saying the rally included a diverse assemblage of groups. And in a tone that was more editorial than reportorial, Bellafante wrote, "The group's lack of social cohesion and its apparent wish to pantomime progressivism rather than practice it knowledgeably is unsettling in the face of the challenges so many of its generation face. . ." Bellafante's article did not mention the police assault on the protesters, even though a separate story about it appeared in the City

Room blog the same day. It is noteworthy that there were two stories, rather than a single, unified article.

Second, the *Times* failed to present a full picture of the origins and historical parallels of the movement. While the second blog entry on September 19 mentioned Adbusters Media Foundation, Bellafante's story in the print edition did not. The initial blog entry also reported that some organizers called it the United States Days of Rage, an apparent reference to a violent protest against the Vietnam War in Chicago in 1969, yet Bellafante's story referenced instead 1968, a year more generally associated with the counterculture of the 1960s. Finally, the September 19 blog entry quoted organizers as saying "the protests were inspired by demonstrations in Egypt and Spain," yet Bellafante's story in the print edition made no mention of this important global connection.

Third, while the *Times* drew comparison to the social unrest of the 1960s, the movement's tactics of direct action and occupying public spaces were more evocative of the 1990s' anti-Free Trade movements, such as the anti-World Trade Organization protest in Seattle in November 1999, an event that targeted unfettered global capitalism with resonance around the world. When the newspaper finally mentioned this connection, it deflected the violence of globalized capitalism onto the protesters, describing them as "a visible example of lawlessness akin to that which resulted in destruction and violence at other anti-capitalist demonstrations, like the Group of 20 economic summit meeting in London in 2009 and the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999."

In short, from the start of the occupation, the *New York Times* ignored and

diminished the movement by relegating it to its blog pages, and then mocking it in the print edition. In the early months of the protest, and even today, it is common for people to say, “I know they [meaning, the occupiers] haven’t achieved anything concrete, but...” And this idea that the protesters have not achieved anything concrete was and remains a constant refrain in the mainstream news media. However, it now is clear that the protesters have achieved a great deal by shifting the dominant discourse from an obsession with the national deficit to the topics of social inequality and of meeting human needs. I think this discursive shift is powerful, and I’m grateful to the protesters for having created it.

Before I became a sociology professor, I worked as a reporter at *New York Newsday*. As a general policy, most newspapers do not cover citizen protests or demonstrations. An editor I admired made it clear to me that “news” only happened when social institutions with established power—such as the Mayor, the Board of Education or the Police Department—did or said something. A gathering of disgruntled people, publicly airing their grievances, was not considered to be inherently newsworthy...unless someone got pepper-sprayed or arrested by the police. It was only later when I went to graduate school that I critically questioned how the mass media functioned and even questioned what my old editor had said.

We should bear in mind that this is not just a national phenomenon; it is global. Recently, on a friend’s Facebook page, I saw a poster of hungry, emaciated children, with the words, “For much of the world, we are the one percent.” These words echo Occupy Wall Street’s best known phrase, “We are the ninety-nine percent!,” and are a painful reminder that this struggle is not just about each of us getting a bigger piece of the pie. Rather, it’s about really questioning the nature of the pie itself, this economic system of we live in, and not just nationally, but globally.

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